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Narratives of transition/non-transition towards low carbon futures within English rural communities☆

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A B S T R A C T

Drawing on Anderson's (2010) identification of calculative, imaginative and performative modes of anticipatory action where futures are made present in the present day, this article explores how rural studies have explored futures before focusing its attention on the degree to which residents in four villages in England make evaluations of rural futures linked to issues of low carbon lifestyles and climate change. Particular attention is paid to the role of imaginative constructions of rurality in influencing anticipatory actions associated with carbon dependency and climate change. The study reveals the presence of disjunctures between expressed concerns over energy consumption and climate change, and associated mitigative and adaptive actions. It is noted that such disjunctures have been widely observed in previous studies and interpreted through some variant of a 'deficit model of public understanding'. It is argued, however, that such models ignore the presence of cultural and material constraints on action, the presence of pre-existing imaginative and performative interpretations of futures, and the degree to which people are aware of such disjunctures and construct narratives for the self that seek to resolve, deny or displace dissonances between beliefs and actions. The paper outlines five narratives that promote stasis as well as three narratives of transition, considering how they make a range of futures both present and absent.

1. Introduction

> "peak oil is but one of the crises humanity will encounter over the coming 20–50 years … Solutions to any of these problems, taken in isolation, might well exacerbate others … For example, a technologically-optimistic reading would suggest that long term price rises associated with peak oil might well make currently uneconomic petrochemical resources like tar sands exploitable, given existing or in-the-pipeline technologies, … But we cannot afford to release the carbon locked up in high emission alternatives like tar sands, … Greater use of biofuels will lead to food shortages"
>
> North, 2010, p. 586

> "I … argue for a 'resource turn' in sociology, whereby societies should be examined through the patterns, scale and character of their resource-dependence and resource-consequences. Rather than a Post-Fordist or post-modern sociology, a *post-carbon sociology* is elaborated. This emphasises how modernity has consisted of an essentially carbonised world, but that this carbonisation has been obscured and ignored by most social thought. Such social thought, we might say, was carbon blind, never interrogating the resource and energy bases of economic life. I seek nothing less than the development of a post-carbon sociology and, much more importantly, a post-carbon society"
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> Urry, 2011, p. 16

> "The politics of climate change has to cope with what I call 'Giddens's paradox'. It states that, since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late"
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> Giddens, 2009, p. 2

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These three quotes set the context for this paper, which explores the degree to which rural life in England, and indeed elsewhere, may be facing a series of inter-locking challenges related to its reliance on carbon-based energy and the degree to which people in these communities are willing to accept or even recognise these challenges, or whether, in part because of prevailing imagined geographies of rurality, they are likely to undertake few of the transitional activities required to address them.

Recent expansion in the use of production techniques such as fracking has thrown doubt on the calculative predictions associated with concepts such as peak-oil and post-carbon societies (see Chapman, 2014). However, the claims of North about the interlocking character of contemporary challenges is clearly evidenced in both contemporary resistance to the employment of such techniques, which have often sought to highlight how they may adversely impact on water and other environmental resources, and by calculative predictions concerning the continued growth of carbon consumption and the impacts of its combustion on climatic conditions (e.g. see Verbruggen and Al Marchohi, 2010). As a consequence, for many people the notion of a transition towards a low carbon future is as significant, pressing and challenging as ever, not least because, as highlighted by Giddens' self-entitled paradox, people may remain resistant to actions that could realise such a future until a point in time whereby such a future cannot be attained. In a sense, therefore, the future is both a very active presence for some people – as Brown et al. (2012, p. 1607) note, the term 'transition' often "implies a pressing sense of temporality" – but for many others such a future may be a presence that they prefer to keep absent from their everyday consciousness.

Anderson and Adey (2012, p. 1529) have recently claimed that the present time is a "geohistorical moment" in which questions over the future overshadow events in the present. The folding of the future into the present is, they suggest, an issue that warrants detailed empirical investigation, not least because it is achieved through a range of modes of practices, has significant effects on the present, and is "folded into the making of subjects in the present". As Brown et al. (2012, p. 1608) have noted, such practices can be clearly discerned in relation to notions of transition, which has become a term deployed "in policy discourses, everyday lives, and socio-scientific research". This deployment, they suggest, has significant impacts in the present and on the future, acting, for instance, to draw "together diverse groups, ideologies, and visions of the future" (p. 1619) in a way that is open to change but also quite conservative in that much of the future is constructed as a continuation of the present. They further suggest that notions of transition often imply compulsion in the sense of "a mode of affective governance that uses barely spoken inevitable threats in order to rewire the psyche of individuals and communities" (Brown et al., 2012, p. 1619). One might add that such affective modes of governance may well be resisted and that social integration does not necessarily have to be achieved through affective governance: even those who might be sceptical of futures associated with notions such as post-carbon and climate change may well be affected through the actions of people and agencies that have come to orientate their actions to avoid, adapt to or align with such futures.

The present paper seeks to illustrate the significance of such arguments, which have hitherto been largely absent from rural studies, by drawing on a research project conducted as part of Research Council UK's *Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU)* programme.[1] This research investigated how people in rural communities respond to issues of climate change mitigation and adaptation, focusing on four rural villages located in three contrasting English rural districts: East Lindsey, Harborough and West Berkshire (see Fig. 1). These districts were chosen to reflect some of the diversity or differentiation of rural England, being, for example, local authority Districts respectively classified as 'deep rural', 'transient rural' and 'dynamic commuter' in the classification created by the '*Rural Futures*' project commissioned by Defra (see Future Foundation, 2002; Lowe and Ward, 2009, Table 1).

This classification was created as a base-line from which projective scenarios of rural futures could be created (Future Foundation, 2002; Lowe and Ward, 2009). As such it represented an instance of the long-running, albeit far from extensive, series of rural studies that exhibit some explicit future orientation (other examples include Coughenous and Busch, 1978; Blunden and Curry, 1985; Lockhart and Ilbery, 1987; Marsden, 1999; Countryside Agency, 2003; Dockerty et al., 2006; Future Foundation, 2006; Amcoff and Westholm, 2007; Moseley and Owen, 2008; Soliva et al., 2008; Shucksmith, 2012). For Ray and Ward (2006) the growth of these studies in the mid-1990s reflected governmental requirements for risk management and the 'engineering' of public discourses, along with a neoliberal 'modernisation imperative' which sought to reconfigure both governance and rurality, with the latter being increasingly viewed as "in large part, an outcome or artefact of the forces of change in wider society" (p. 4). Rather more generally, Anderson (2010, p. 777) has argued that "acting in advance of the future is an integral, yet taken-for-granted, part of liberal-democratic life". He adds, that such 'anticipatory action' has often been relatively ignored in academic studies, although suggests that there are at least three 'modes of practice' through which futures are made present in the present: the calculative, the imaginative and the performative.[2] This paper will outline these three modes relating them to the study of rural futures before focusing attention on the imaginative one, detailing how rural residents were able to fabricate visions of the future of their place of residence and whether these did, or did not, imply change from the present. Attention is then paid to exploring the explanations, or narratives, given by people as to the degree to which they could foresee transition or non-transition. The paper concludes by briefly considering the significance of the study to attempts at fostering transitions to rural low carbon futures.

2. Modes of practicing rural futures in the present

2.1. The calculative: calculating probable/plausible rural futures

The first mode of practice identified by Anderson is 'calculation', which he identifies as the making present of futures "through the domain of numbers". Such a mode of practice is enacted in many of the rural future texts cited previously, which make use of a series of empirical-analytical analysis techniques based on measurements of some present and/or past extrapolated into the future through use of some form of trend analysis (such as linear, non-linear or stochastic modelling). Such an approach is clearly evidenced in the Defra commissioned *Rural Futures* project, which made use of a Monte Carlo simulation techniques to propose 'probable futures' based on the variables used to construct the typology of contemporary rural areas (see Lowe and Ward, 2009; for details). The use of the phrase 'probable futures' is, as Gidley et al. (2009) note,

[1] Further details of the programme are available at www.relu.ac.uk. This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number RES-240-25-0025], with the project being entitled 'Adaptations to rural communities through living with climate change'.

[2] Anderson also identifies styles and logics as part of his 'conceptual vocabulary' for understanding anticipatory actions, but for the present purpose his identification of practices is deemed to suffice.