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Transition culture: Politics, localities and ruralities

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A B S T R A C T

Despite its high profile Transition culture is only beginning to receive academic attention. This paper contributes to this by locating Transition culture within a rural studies frame, highlighting the significance of rurality to Transition culture and reflecting on the nature of its politics. Drawing on interviews with Transition activists the paper explores these questions by focussing on Transition culture in practice. It connects activists' accounts and descriptions of Transition with debates about the changing meanings of rurality, the increasingly co-constituted relationship between rural and urban spaces and with the changing forms of political action which have been identified as radical and as post-political. The paper argues that Transition culture can be seen as a convergence of rural-urban values and practices. It suggests that this is possible because of Transition culture's avoidance of an explicitly political agenda, its reliance on more consensual driven concepts such as community and, related to this, its post-political orientation.

1. Introduction

The 'Rural Bites Back', the title theme for the 2012 European Rural Sociology XXIV World Congress, neatly captured the late 20th and early 21st century repositioning of the rural from a marginal to an animated and turbulent space characterised by conflict, argument and anxiety (Woods, 2005). These various contestations – fox hunting bans, badger culls, GM crops, food production, bio security, Avian and swine flu scares, wind farms protests – are all 'of' the rural but extend far beyond rural boundaries. Alongside this high profile unfixing of the rural is what might be thought of as the 'force' of the rural. By this I mean the ways in which rural sensibilities and practices have, at the beginning of the 21st century, very explicitly penetrated and shaped urban spaces, anxieties, ambitions and practices.

This is not a new phenomenon. Antecedents can be seen in the community gardens marked on18th century maps of New York (Thomas, 2012); in the urban community formations noted by the Chicago School sociologists (Park et al., 1925) and in Young and Wilmott's (1957) observations of the village-like social relations in London's East End. More recent formations of the rural in the urban can be seen in the urban agriculture movement e.g. Detroit's emergence as a post-industrial agricultural city (Requiem for Detroit? 2010) and while much has been made of the urbanisation of the world population rather less attention has been paid to how rural to urban migrants transfer rural practices and village social relations and traditions to the mega cities of the global South (see Simone, 2005; Robinson, 2006). In UK settings, where the rural consistently haunts national imaginaries, it is perhaps environmental politics and concerns that have most obviously delivered a ruralisation of urban spaces and practices.

Many aspects of this seem slight and small scale – for example the rise of farmers' markets; the trend to define/market certain urban localities as 'villages'; gentrified urban pubs using (and proclaiming their use of) local, seasonal produce; organic vegetable schemes and organic supermarkets; urban bee keeping, community gardening, guerrilla gardening, the increase in urban based Women's Institutes, demands for allotments; concerns about low impact living, practices of composting, reusing and recycling – but they are indicative of the recognition of social-nature proximities and the relationship of humans and to the non-human. These practices not only challenge the old modernist separation of the social and the natural (Whatmore, 2002; Hinchliffe, 2007) but also cross urban and rural binaries (Lacour and Puissant, 2007; Woods, 2009; McKay, 2011). In these crossings the rural is not the urban's poor political relation but rather a rural in ascendency, shaping and influencing urbanism and producing 'new hybrid sociospatial forms that blur the rural and the urban' (Woods, 2009: 853). Some of this hybridity can be seen in the emergence of nature writing about urban environments (Harrison, 2013b). Mabey's (1973) *Unofficial Countryside* marked an early engagement with urban nature and its reissue in 2010 has been part of a wider new

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movement of writing that attends, in different ways, to the presence of nature in urban settings (see for example Harrison, 2013a; Rangeley-Wilson, 2013; Woolfson, 2013). It is in this context of rural-urban hybridity in which convergent values, anxieties and practices circulate that this paper explores Transition culture and suggests that Transition culture particularly captures these connections.

The Transition culture story and the way in which it has emerged in the first decade of the 21st century in the UK as an environmentally concerned response to first, the concept of Peak Oil and second, the threat of climate change is now relatively familiar. Transition culture, organised around a focus on the creation of low carbon, resilient economies, has a strong geographical identity in that it is based in and organised through places. These are predominantly rurally and semi-rurally located market and small towns but some cities, e.g. Liverpool, Bristol, Nottingham, Sheffield, Plymouth and some areas of cities, such as Stoke Newington and Brixton in London, have also become part of the rapidly expanding Transition network.

While some helpful academic attention has begun to be paid to the Transition culture, examining its meanings, identities and political character (see Mason and Whitehead, 2012; North, 2010; Pollard and Barr, 2012 for example) this has not addressed the question as to what, if anything, is rural about Transition – indeed Mason and Whitehead (2012) go so far as to describe Transition as an 'urbanism' in that it is concerned with extended and co-ordinated collective provision of social goods and resource and works in settlements of around 5000 and upwards.

With the unfixing of rurality, the increasingly proximate relationship of the urban and the rural and the 'newness' of Transition culture in mind, the paper focuses on two interconnected central questions: first what is rural about Transition and second, arising from this, what is the political nature of Transition? To address these questions the paper begins by thinking about how Transition culture has emerged from the various reconfigurations of rural spaces and reflects the complex relationalities of urban and rural settings. Highlighting such Transition concepts as community, sociality, scale, localness, place, permaculture, resilience, inter-dependence the paper reflects on the extent to which Transition culture fits with a radical political tradition (Morris, 1890, 2003; McKay, 1996) and/or the extent to which it fits with a new set of consensus driven political modalities on which the post-political debates have focussed (Mouffe, 2005; Ranciére, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2010; Cochrane, 2010; Raco and Lin, 2012).

Drawing on a small study of Transition activists the paper integrates data from several interview narratives with activists in diverse rural and urban Transition localities in order to empirically examine the different political and geographical characters of Transition culture as it is enacted and practised. This enables the second part of the paper to explore the two key questions identified above. These explorations lead the paper to address the ways in which Transition culture becomes enacted in places by looking at the relationship between practices of Transition and local politics. It concludes by considering the ways in which its multiple identities mean that Transition culture particularly lends itself to being taken up in rural *and* in urban spaces, precisely because of the ways in which it draws on a wider rural social-spatial imaginary.

2. Changing and multiple rural spaces

The contested politics of the rural noted above reflect the broader sets of social, cultural and economic change that can be identified as re-shaping and re-defining the organisation of the contemporary countryside in the UK. The key features of this have been the changing forms of agricultural production and the increasing dislocation of rural populations from agriculture (see Marsden, 1998; Marsden and Sonniono, 2008; Lobley et al., 2002; Lobley and Potter, 2004). In his autobiographical book *The Farm*, which charts the changes and eventual loss of a family's Yorkshire farm, Richard Benson (2005: 228–9) makes a similar point when he notes that 'in 1939 there were 500,000 farms in Britain…the majority of these were small mixed units of less than 50 acres…There are now 191,000 farms left and of those 19,000 account for more than 50 per cent of national output. It is estimated that three out of four jobs in British agriculture have been lost since 1945.' Benson's own ambivalent and mostly ruptured relationship with his family's farm – he lives and works in London but visits and has/carries his family and their farm with him – can be read as a topological embodiment of Wood's (2009) rural-urban 'blur' (see also Neal and Walters, 2006).

While this rupture and change is taken by some as evidence of a melancholic loss of the rural (Kingsnorth, 2008 for example) this obscures the complexity of rural spaces. Highlighting the relationship between the urban and the rural allows a focus on the intensity of the restructuring processes that are taking place in the countryside but also captures the rural's 'multiple meanings' (Heley and Jones, 2012). Drawing on the Lefebvrian notion of simultaneous multiple space (see also Murdoch, 2003; Neal and Agyeman, 2006) Keith Halfacree (2007: 131) suggests that four rurals can be identified. The first of these is the industrialised rural visible in the growth of agri-business, the increasing dominance of large-scale farming and the use of biotechnology to enhance agricultural productivity. The second is a commodified rural in which the rural is a space of chosen residency, of leisure and pleasure and of consumption. This is a rural that has become reduced to what Simon Fairlie (2001) describes as a 'playground'. Halfacree's third rural is an 'effaced rural' in which rurality, hollowed out by capitalism, only exists and is sustained by *performances* of rurality, or by living in the countryside in ways which are disconnected from the previous co-dependent relationships between those living in the countryside and land, nature, locality and the environment.

Standing distinct and apart from these is the fourth rural that Halfacree identifies – that of a radical rural space. This rural can be characterised as being and seeking to be alternative, counter-cultural and anti-capitalist. While diverse and fragmentary radical rural imaginings and practices can be understood as variously focussing on the small scale, on social and nature relations, on the local, on relationships with non-human things, on the rejection of materialism, affluence, urbanism, modernity and an embracing of social practices of collectivity, self-sufficiency, inter-dependence and frugality. It is this rural that provides the framing for Halfacree's research on those sympathetic to or embracing alternative, back-to-land and low impact living.

Unlike Halfacree's three other versions of rurality the radical rural is not a recent development. For example, the Diggers movement in 17th century England, the *Rural Rides* politics of the 19th century radical William Cobbett (1830, 2001), the Swing Riots (Hobsbawm and Rudé, 1969), the pre-Raphaelite, utopian socialist politics of William Morris (1890, 2003), the mass trespass movement in Derbyshire in the 1920s and 30s and the counter-culture identities and conflicts – free festivals, Stonehenge Solistice, New Age Travellers, the Twyford Down protest and other environmental campaigns – of the 1980s and 90s (McKay, 1996; Hetherington, 2001) can be seen as antecedents and manifestations of a rurally-located and/or rurally-inflected radical political imagining in which land, nature and the countryside were the co-ordinates for thinking about how to organise social relations. The rural content of radical politics and practices may have been marginalised in dominant narratives of urban oppositional politics (see Harvey, 2012 for example), but, the convergence of environmental politics