



# Relational rurals: Some thoughts on relating things and theory in rural studies

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper considers how shifts within the social sciences towards conceptualising spatiality in relational terms have unfolded in rural studies in particular ways over the past decade or so. A period in which networks, connections, flows and mobility have all established themselves as compelling conceptual frames for research, the rural has increasingly been recast in relational terms as a multi-authored and multi-faceted space, constituted through local-global interconnections and their place specific, sometimes contested, manifestations. In this way, the multiple meanings of the rural continues to be a focus of critical concern, as are the implications 'of' and 'in' rural spaces for some of the major issues currently being faced by governments and citizens around the world; including climate change and food security. Apprehending the complexity of the rural in these terms, we argue, requires not only *thinking* space relationally, but at the same time *being* epistemologically relational or theoretically pluralist. That is, recognising the co-constituent production of rural space through material *and* discursive phenomenon, processes and practices, and thus the value of existing theoretical resources (social constructionism, political and economic materialism) in relation with the critical and rigorous appraisal of 'new' concepts and ideas to better comprehend rural space in its multidimensional complexity and particularity. To this end, we identify Cindi Katz's notion of 'countertopography' as a promising conceptual and methodological addition to the rural scholar's toolkit insofar as it attends to a politics of location and differentiation in relation to global processes. We conclude our discussion by sketching out possible objects of countertopographical analysis for understanding ongoing processes of change in rural space(s).

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## 1. Introduction

Woods (2011a) notes an increasing recognition of relations and their significance in accounts of the rural. This trend has progressed in dialogue with the widespread adoption of a relational spatial ontology within human geography (and more broadly) over the past decade or so. This 'relational' understanding is premised on the shift from a structuralist 'topography' of Euclidean spatiality (height, depth, size, proximity) to a 'topological' geography of space–time relations and practices (see Massey, 2005). As such, it emphasises:

The significance of networks, connections, flows and mobilities in constituting space and place and the social, economic, cultural and political forms and processes associated with them (...) It collapses the dualisms of nature and society and human

and non-human, adopting an agnostic position regarding all entities, human and non-human as equal components within a network. (Woods, 2011a, pp. 40–41)

As with preceding 'turns' which have taken place across the geographic discipline (and here we include the 'cultural', 'scalar' and 'mobility' variety) the ascendancy of relational thinking can only be situated within the context of ongoing re-conceptualizations of space and place. As such, the point in time at which spaces of relation became a major focus for human geographers is far from clear, as are the exact parameters of constituent debates. What is certain, however, is the huge importance of 'thinking space relationally' and the value of this work in unsettling dominant spatial imaginaries (Jones, 2009). As a consequence, our understandings of spatiality have become less constrained by bounded (territory) or hierarchal (scalar) structural forms, and our spatial analyses have become more attentive to connectivity in all its forms.

'Being relational' implies not only an ontological re-envisioning of space 'but also a shift in practise and method' (Boggs and Rantisi, 2003, p. 115), and within rural studies the arrival of

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relational thinking has prompted a period of stock-taking and introspection (Woods, 2009b). This has in turn precipitated recognition of the need to embrace new theoretical directions, methodological imperatives and research trajectories. These trajectories include the critical reassertion of Actor-Network Theory, driven forward by Murdoch (1997, 2000, 2003, 2006) and others (including Donaldson et al., 2002; Enticott, 2003), whose contributions demonstrate the manner in which (rural) orders of human and non-human assemblages are accomplished across time and space, and a complementary concern with the embodied practice and performance of rurality across various sociospatial contexts (Edensor, 2006; Little and Leyshon, 2003). This, however, has not been to the extent of abandoning representation as a key component in the production of rural space. Rather, efforts to understand how different communities define and 'know' the rural are set to become more nuanced, and here we include (following Woods, 2011a) recent work on political/policy accounts of rurality (e.g. Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; Potter and Tilzey, 2005), media constructions of the countryside (e.g. Burnett and Danson, 2004; Horton, 2008) and lay discourses, which are grounded in everyday practice and patterns of cultural exchange (Munkejord, 2006; van Dam et al., 2002).

Thus if we are to talk in terms of a 'relational turn' in rural studies, we argue this has involved an increasing recognition of the intertwined and co-constituent production of rural space through material and discursive phenomenon, processes and practices. This is evident through the ongoing development of what we term *relational rural epistemologies*; that is, approaches which are seeking to ground examination of the 'reproduction of rural discourses' within and through the 'material dimension of the rural condition that have a real impact on the experiences of people living, working and playing in rural space' (Woods, 2009b, p. 851). On this premise, this paper is concerned with sketching out the emergence and advancement of a range of rural epistemologies which have (either implicitly or tacitly) grappled with the ontological condition of relational space, and with the connections and digressions between these conceptual frameworks. In so doing, we take a broadly (though not strictly) chronological approach, identifying the development of key arguments and key texts.

Our starting point is the social production of rural space, and that body of work which has characterised rurality as a patchwork derived through the differentiated ways in which global political economic tendencies work through, come up against, and shape the conditions of locally embedded actors. Following a line of critique which identified this 'differentiated countryside' model as being overly determinant of the way rural space is and could be shaped, we subsequently focus on the impacts and implications of postmodern and poststructural debates in rural studies. Reflecting firstly on the impact of network sociology among scholars of the rural, and as a counter-point the growing appreciation of Lefebvre's spatial 'trialectic' for considering the co-constitutive relations between representational, material and lived rurals, these (complimentary) spatial frameworks are shown as being integral to current concerns with the 'global countryside'.

A concept which brings together political economy, social discourse and embodied rural performance, the global countryside (Woods, 2007) is intentionally theoretically pluralistic and is, we argue, concomitant with the enhanced desire for 'minor theory' in the social sciences. A model developed by Katz (1996) and more recently taken forward in a rural context by Cloke (2006), minor theory embraces the critical perspectives of historical materialism, feminism and other regimes of knowing at once, as well as the collective practical basis of analysis that these perspectives require. As such, minor theory is a prompt for seeing and being relational, and, sensitive to the need for more substantial engagement with

how we *do* relational rural studies, we subsequently identify Cindi Katz's (2001) notion of 'countertopography' as a useful means to this end. By way of demonstrating the value of this approach, we conclude our discussion by sketching out some possible objects of countertopographical analysis for understanding ongoing processes of change in rural space(s).

## 2. The social production of rural space

The antecedents of the current turn to 'thinking space relationally' in human geography lie with the re-thinking of space firstly as *relative* as opposed to *absolute*, and then later as *relational*, across the social sciences more broadly (for a recent overview see Jones, 2009, 2010). In this vein space has increasingly been presented as the constantly unfolding product of flows and networks, alongside and in coevality with the more traditional concern of territory. The result, argues Ash Amin, is:

[N]o simple displacement of the local by the global, of place by space, of history by simultaneity and flow, of small by big scale, or of the proximate by the remote. Instead it is a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence, flow and stasis, into which location—a place on the map—has come to be relationally and topologically defined' (Amin, 2007, p. 103)

Making sense of this conceptual shift, notes Amin is not an easy task; but it is a process which is ongoing across the social sciences. In particular, the notion of relational space and what it means for our inquiries has been hotly contested in the broad and interrelated areas of economic and political geography (e.g. Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Jones, 2009; MacLeod, 2001; Massey, 2004; Sunley, 2008; Yeung, 2005) in recent times. The genesis of these debates, however, can (and indeed should) be set within a much longer critical timeframe.

The shift from an absolute conception of space as a container for objects and processes, to one where the spatial relations between objects and events—and thereby relative to them—were of significance, was understood to require a more scientific mode of capture and analysis. Yet the burgeoning project of spatial science sat unhappily with many human geographers (Olsson, 1974; Sack, 1974) who instead moved away from totalising accounts of space towards seeking to apprehend the particular spatiality of capitalist production in relation to its contingent social practices (Harvey, 1973, 1982; Soja, 1989). In developing a new spatial reading of Historical Materialism, both Harvey and Soja were to be strongly influenced by the writings of Henri Lefebvre (1974/1991) in terms of recognizing how space is actively produced by human beings to achieve their various social interests. Specifically, Lefebvre drew attention to space as now 'intrinsically linked with capitalism and exchange, rather than being somehow relatively independent of society's mode of production' (Halfacree, 2006, p. 49).<sup>2</sup> A relational perspective on space was similarly emerging through accounts of the complex interactions between spatial scales produced by geographers such as Doreen Massey (1984), Peter Taylor (1982) and Neil Smith (1984).

In light of, and contributing to, these conceptual developments, rural studies of the late 1970s and 1980s was characterised by

<sup>2</sup> Lefebvre does not explicitly address rural space because he is showing 'the universality of the production of a particular kind of space—urban and rural—under capitalism' (Halfacree, 2006: 49). Whereas the outcomes of this production i.e. the 'concrete form' through which this social practice manifests will be differentiated across different socio-spatial contexts, thus "the rural can be a significant category that emerges – and not necessarily just as a dualistic 'response' to the urban – within this differentiation (Halfacree, 2006).

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