

International Conference Meanings of the Rural – between social representations, consumptions and rural development strategies

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Theme 1

***MORE-THAN-REPRESENTATIONAL KNOWLEDGES
OF THE RURAL***

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Defining ‘rural’ is a task fraught with difficulties. As a concept, rurality has, in recent decades, often been represented as a social construction (Cloke, 2006). The rural thus becomes what Mormont calls a ‘category of thought that each society takes and reconstructs’ (1990, pp. 40–41). Representations of rurality have become sites where popular knowledges, or indeed lay discourses, have ‘very real material geographical and socio-political consequences’ (Halfacree, 2012, p. 390). At its very centre, representations of the rural as an attractive alluring space accord with ideas embodied in the term ‘rural idyll’. Cloke (2003, p. 2) terms this as a powerful ‘centripetal force’ that highlights the appeal of the rural in everyday discourses.

The rural idyll is a cultural device and construct that reflects certain ingrained characteristics, or discourses, of what is believed to ‘be in’ rural areas. Rural landscapes – physical and social - are most commonly associated with constructions of the rural idyll, particularly the characteristics of ‘happy, healthy, and problem-free experience in communion with both close-knit social community and an unsullied and therapeutic natural environment’ (Cloke, 2013, p. 229). This narrative of rural life serves to instil a bucolic view of the countryside, and a ‘rural idyll’ has been researched, and identified in a number of western contexts, from the UK (Horton, 2008; Phillips, Fish, & Agg, 2001), Europe (Baylina & Berg, 2010) North America (Bunce, 2003) and Australasia (Krivokapic-Skoko & Collins, 2014; Swaffield &

Fairweather, 1998) to name but a few. These views, however, serve to silence alternative discourses of the rural, including problems such as crime (Somerville, Smith, & McElwee, n.d.) homelessness (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2000), deprivation and poverty (Cloke, Goodwin, & Milbourne, 1997), disease and slaughter of animals (Convery, Bailey, Mort, & Baxter, 2005) and demographic change (Wenger, 2001), that might puncture the bucolic views the rural holds in cultural imaginations.

Cloke has asserted that more ‘needs to be known about [the rural idyll’s] precise importance in relation to how people perceive, practice, and experience being-in-the-rural’ (Cloke, 2013, p. 229). Yet, despite recent engagement by Rural Geographers into more-than-representational theory¹ (Carolan, 2008, 2009; Halfacree, 2012; Phillips, 2014; Woods, 2010; Wylie, 2002, 2005), conceptions of affect have yet to be brought together with the rural idyll in an attempt to further develop our understanding of what ‘rural’ and ‘rural life’ comprise. This is particularly surprising as the rural idyll presents an example of where a concept, that has been subject to academic scrutiny and which has been engaged with on a representational level, might be furthered by considering its relational nature. Here I hope to identify conflicting views and narratives on the rural and rurality, particularly within everyday lived realities of those living in the rural.

To date, research on the rural idyll has not explicitly engaged with more-than-representational theory, and my aim here is to point to where research could be illuminated by such an engagement. These gaps point towards the development of an understanding of the rural that does not reject, but perhaps enhances, other views of the rural idyll because more-than-representational theory does not dismiss representations (Anderson, 2014; Halfacree, 2012; Lorimer, 2005). Alternative views and narratives might entwine with and provide an interesting foil for the understanding of the ‘rural idyll’ as a ‘collective affect’ (Anderson, 2014).

Here, I would like to relate back to my own work on older people in rural communities, and highlight how an engagement with more-than-representational theory might offer a way to uncover the ‘hidden geographies of ageing’ (Skinner, Cloutier, & Andrews, 2014, p. 9). By focussing on the experience of older people in rural communities, there is an opportunity to ‘inform understanding of the processes and outcomes, performances and representations of

¹ Non-Representational theory is what Thrift (2007) refers to, however here I follow Lorimer (2005) and Carolan (2008) in preferring to use the term more-than-representational, although use of more-than-representational or non-representational are still contested in the discipline (Phillips, 2014).

ageing' (Skinner et al., 2014, p. 2), specifically an understanding of the ways that the rural idyll is experienced, understood and performed by older people. More-than-representational theory has enlivened rural studies, and here I identify a way in which it can continue to do so in contributing to the understanding of older people's perceptions of rural living, framed around the cultural imagination of the rural idyll. This general issue has been engaged with previously (Wenger, 2001), but not in relation to more-than-representational theory. The benefits of this I see as twofold. First, it continues to bring contemporary theoretical developments within Geography into rural studies (Woods, 2012). Second, it will also provide engaging ground for the study of older people as today 'almost no geographical research on ageing has openly adopted more-than-representational theory...[and] [t]his is a regrettable absence as older people are no different from any other social group. They are as involved with immediacies in life, and life's little moments happen to them as they do to anyone else' (Skinner et al., 2014, p. 16). Indeed, within a context of demographic ageing in western countries that is most pronounced in rural areas (Davies & James, 2011; Philip, Brown, & Stockdale, 2012), this gap in the research can help to inform our understandings of, first, how ageing is experienced in rural communities in relation to this larger demographic shift currently emerging, and, second, how the rural idyll comes to be known in this context.

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