



WHAT IS RURAL ENGLAND FOR?

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My original title was to have been “Learning from Rural Communities” and I should declare an interest. I have lived in small, rural places for most of my life but I would be reluctant to claim that the terms “communities” and “places” amount to the same thing. I shall return to this later. I am similarly suspicious about the term “countryside”, which the OED defines as “the land and scenery of a country”. The assumption in the dictionary appears to be that all countries have this. However, not all countries do “countryside”. Russians refer to the area outside the towns as “the forest”: other countries refer simply to “the outback” or “the bush”. I suggest that the term “countryside” is a cultural concept as much, if not more than, a geographical one. The French “pays” is also as much cultural as geographical. A further point in my pedantic introduction is that we may also have a culturally specific way of imputing moral virtue to rural as opposed to urban ways. An author in ancient Rome is attributed with the saying “God made the country, man made the town” but

since, for most of the world, rural has for long been synonymous with poverty, ignorance and disease, one is entitled to ask what God was up to.

I think that these preliminary remarks about the significance and considerations of the words we use is not mere academic pedantry, since they are often at the root of the massive confusions that consistently underlie the sporadic attempts of our Governments at devising appropriate policies for something apparently distinctive called “rural England”. I may illustrate the roots of some of these confusions by mentioning certain paradoxes. I discovered the first during my doctoral work on “Urban Influences on Rural Areas within the London Metropolitan Region” (later published as *Urbs in Rure* Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965). One of my conclusions was the paradox that middle class people moving into rural areas in search of community, very often, by their very presence, destroy what they are seeking. Another contemporary paradox is that the Government claims to have a priority to generate economic growth in rural areas and requires such areas to take their share of new house building, with an emphasis on affordability for the indigenous low-wage earners working in rural services and industries. In order to reduce out-migration of young workers and to encourage “regeneration” through immigration of entrepreneurs and managers of new small and medium enterprises (SMES), a basic infrastructure is surely essential. Yet at the same time as the Government is urging growth, it is aiding decline by conniving in the closure of primary schools and libraries by cash-squeezing local authorities and by closing rural post offices for lack of existing demand. This is precisely the kind of thinking that led to the dramatic

reduction of our rail network by Dr Beeching in the early 1960s. The very people needed to invigorate rural economies are those most likely to be attracted by small, efficient primary schools and attractive local libraries for their children.

My third paradox relates to English Heritage, which has successfully persuaded the Government that old buildings, certain kinds of landscapes and ancient monuments provide honey pots for tourism and place-making – as long as the number of tourists doesn't grow to such an extent that their very presence leads to the destruction of what made the places attractive initially. However, the real paradox is that, by all objective criteria, the most outstanding part of our architectural heritage, namely our parish churches and cathedrals, get no direct government support, leaving those whose main qualification is in theology to become fund-raisers, marketing managers and amateur PR consultants. As Simon Jenkins has so eloquently argued, much of our finest architectural heritage is being neglected – partly, again paradoxically, because there is so much of it.

It is not difficult to adumbrate many more similar paradoxes and confusions which are inevitable, given the elusive and ambiguous interpretations politicians apply to what one might refer to as “rural England in the mind”. Muddled thinking is easier to understand than to dispel. One possible excuse, that is now very hard to sustain, is that policy needs to be evidence-based and it is the empirical support for the variety and complexity of rural experience that has previously eluded the understanding of successive

ministers. Without wishing to probe too deeply into the wider causes of this lack of understanding, lack of evidence cannot now be held responsible. There is truly an astonishing amount of quantitative and qualitative research material on rural England now available in a number of Institutes and Centres, so much so that we have almost got to the situation of information overload, so that diligent policy makers may be forgiven for losing sight of the wood for the trees. It is certainly the case that analysis of large-scale aggregate data sets can conceal as much as it can reveal and the use of proxy variables can provide a misleading clarity. Aggregating data sets may lead to scrambled up results, concealing significant empirical diversity. Furthermore, qualitative case studies, reflecting that diversity, may be dismissed as not being truly representative. These are familiar issues and conundrums for researchers.

I now want to draw on some of this material to make some general points on rural reality, before making some final sociological conclusions and commentary. Firstly, there is the important set of evidence that dispels the notion that rural areas are somehow a drag on the dynamism of the economy as a whole. A number of studies undertaken by and for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) suggest that “rural areas” have 30 per cent of the country’s enterprises and that rates of employment and economic activity are often higher and growing faster in rural England than in the urban areas. Indeed, the number of employees in firms in rural local authorities grew at more than twice the increase generated by urban businesses between 1998 and 2003. Nearly 12 per cent of the economically active residents in rural England work from home and this trend is increasing sharply with the

expansion of broadband and IT technology. Arguably, the de-centering effect of modern technology will provide a key driver of economic development in the future. Detailed research in specific sub-regions has demonstrated the synergies arising out of similar industries clustering in areas of dispersed settlements. Examples would include the so-called “pharma-land” in the south east quadrant of what is referred to as the “Cambridge City Region” or the concentration of home-based financial and business services in West Sussex.

These general statistics on their own can be misleading and it is understandable that CRC should have asked RERC to devise a typology of rural areas as a practical step to getting a closer understanding of aggregate distinctiveness. Whilst 55 per cent of households in rural areas have an income that is above the median household income, and 28 per cent are in the top quartile, this clearly masks substantial local even “hidden” deprivation which, when aggregated across the country, comes to a large amount.

The RERC research was based on principal component analysis, adopting a layered approach, involving a geographical typology largely based on the 2001 census, a complex analysis of forms and levels of journeys to work, and direct indices showing increases of disadvantage and deprivation. This complex model was applied to the 2728 rural wards in England and 8 significant clusters emerged. As might be expected, the ex-mining areas of Northumberland and Durham, South Yorkshire, the East Midlands and some coastal areas each emerged as a cluster of clear disadvantage. Lumping such areas in aggregate with pharma-land or West Sussex would clearly lead to a

reduction in understanding. I do not need to elaborate the point, but it is surely self-evident that the beginning of a sensible evidence-based rural policy must start from the basis of such a rigorous and empirically well-grounded typology.

In RERC's detailed analysis of Eastern England some other new and innovative research tools were created for coming to terms with the diversity of rural areas. One such is the notion of *geographical alignment*. Basically this is an indicator of how far a given place deviates from the national figure of "mixedness" of workplace destinations. Thus, for example in N E Norfolk, where the city of Norwich dominates in employment, there would have to be a 95 per cent change in TTW patterns to fit the national pattern. Where the coefficient falls below 0.9 places are deemed to be geographically de-aligned and in the RERC study the lowest degrees of alignment were in rural areas north of Hemel Hempstead. I was gratified to have such rigorous statistical confirmation of what my case study of Tewin and Watton-at-Stone demonstrated in the early 1960s. However, at that time, I was more interested in describing the de-alignment in terms of *service provision* and the collapse of simple central place theory as an adequate way of understanding the socio-economic reality of "spread" or "edge" city. Now the de-alignment demonstrated by the RERC research shows that this applies to *employment* as well. Rural areas as sources of employment in their own right generate substantial amounts of cross-commuting yet evidence of a thriving economy must be a concern in terms of sustainable travel patterns..

Other evidence supports this growth in new rural employment. A geographical analysis of SMEs by Rosie Telford of the Small Business Service Analytical Unit shows that 30 per cent are outside urban areas. Of this proportion, two thirds (or 20 per cent of all businesses) are in rural villages or in dispersed rural areas. Considering those businesses with turnovers of £1 million or more, it appears that urban and dispersed rural areas have a higher proportion of such concerns than rural towns and villages which have a higher proportion of businesses with turnovers of less than £250,000. Rural dispersed areas also have the highest proportion of businesses that have been established for more than ten years. Now clearly this may not be telling us any more than that large landowners are richer and have been at it longer, but it is a useful corrective to the notion that the need for regeneration is necessarily positively correlated with low density of settlements. Nevertheless, and unsurprisingly, transport issues figure more strongly as an obstacle to recruitment in rural areas, especially those most dispersed, and the lack of broadband connection is also cited as an obstacle to success. Businesses in dispersed rural areas have the highest growth aspirations but, perhaps for the reasons mentioned, are the most likely to have stayed the same size. Mostly these businesses are small with no employees and 82 per cent of these are family owned. This presumably explains their longevity.

There are clear limitations on what can be learnt from these analyses of large-scale aggregate data that are most likely to have been commissioned by Government Departments and Quangos. I suggest that they are more useful for raising interesting questions to investigate than for providing answers.

However, more focussed research by Annibal and Boyle on “Economic Performance in Remote Areas” highlighted the issue of “*Two Speed Economies*”, where traditional modes of employment are juxtaposed against newer, higher value activities. This combination of deprivation and growth was a key element in my account of the Hertfordshire villages of the 1960s when I wrote of *The Two Class Village*. Now this phenomenon is spreading across the country, albeit unevenly. The arrival of a new, professional, mobile workforce masks the more needy, lower-paid, local workforce. However, in the tension between encouraging and supporting the successful wealth creators and addressing the difficulties of the disadvantaged, the former tends to win out over the latter. Where everyone is more or less in the same situation, as in abandoned mining villages such as Aylesham in Kent, the problem, if not the solution, is clear. However, two speed economies create real dilemmas. This is well illustrated by the Cambridge Cluster Report 2007, published in November, which refers to “disaster just round the corner” caused by the high house prices and congested roads, making it difficult to attract and retain promising technicians. Those entrepreneurs in the high-tech companies in what is known as the “Cambridge city region” are driving up rural house prices well beyond the capacities of ordinary local workers. The Greater Cambridge Area extends in a twenty five mile radius round Cambridge and the Greater Cambridge Partnership aims to devise policies and action for what it sees as a city region. In this case, the term city region may be appropriate but, as the recent report by the Chief Economic Development Officers and Surveyors powerfully demonstrates, that notion

simply does not apply over much of rural England. The Welsh Marches are not in any meaningful way part of a city region and nor are Devon or Dorset. However, to return to Cambridge, CPRE has bluntly stated that the “City is full”. There is still scope for growth in the villages and dispersed rural areas but this is at the expense of acute social polarisation and the breakdown of the nebulous “rural community”.

I began my career lecturing in what are now the village and hamlets of Cambridge Bioland for the University Board of Extra Mural Studies. My research area in Hertfordshire was a completely different world from those then sleepy, if not impoverished, villages around Cambridge. The two speed economies are now advancing more rapidly across rural England.

I want now to make the transition from my very selective account of rural economic geography and the implications of the analysis of large data sets and proxy variables for rural areas, to come to one of my current research concerns about social cohesion and social capital in small places. To help me in this transition I want to refer to the CRC’s stance on sustainable rural communities, that emphasizes “a strong, healthy and just society” which, it claims, accords with Defra’s own mission statement. Strong evidence from the Cambridge region suggests that dynamic economic development carries with it social polarisation and growing inequality. *A crucial key question is whether it is possible to combine dynamic wealth creation and social justice in areas of dispersed populations living in small places.*

In order to develop my argument I want to make a crucial distinction, which is often overlooked in policy discussions of rural areas. That is, between the *economic analyses*, focussing on the buzzwords of regeneration, economic well-being, wealth creation and the like, and the *sociological analyses* focussing on social capital, social cohesion, community and social justice.

In order to make my point more sharply I am going to develop an example based on a kind of “ideal type” of rural economic development. In areas of small and dispersed settlements (SADS), problems of accessibility generally imply small establishments. It was explained to me anecdotally by Martin Garratt that the success of Pharma land depends on a degree of synergy in sharing jointly maintained laboratories, coupled with the isolation which helped to maintain business secrecy. Typically the scientists who develop new products prefer to sell out for many £millions to a large American company to market them, rather than change from being research scientists which *is* the work they most enjoy and in which they excel. *Innovators prefer to innovate rather than manage or market, and this has clear implications for employment growth.* (*The Management of Innovation* by Tom Burns and G.M. Stalker, Tavistock, 1961 is still relevant).

A focus on “business clusters” is a growing research field, although initial results are not without ambiguity. Regional entrepreneurship may be encouraged through investments in social capital, in the hope of making a significant difference to the performance of “cluster firms” or the region in which the cluster is located. Given developments in IT and broadband, it is

feasible to see regional clusters in dispersed settlements, not just in software or pharmaceuticals or components for Formula 1 racing cars but also for publishing, film making, script writing, and a whole range of knowledge-based firms together with specialized food and craft production. With this model the individual place or settlement may be less significant than the regional context in which the cluster of individual enterprises is located. Of course, “whether local contexts *are* more conducive to the creation and circulation of knowledge than connections to more distant locations needs to be established empirically, and this requires contextualised research” (V. Staber, 2007 *Contextualising Research on Social Capital in Regional Clusters International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(3) pp 505-521, page 509). Such research, admittedly, shows that sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't, but for the purposes of my ideal-typical example, I am assuming that there are more possibilities of synergies arising from clustering that could in time spread across much more of rural England. I see these clusters as being a positive response to globalization. (I am going to leave aside the question of what kinds of investment in social capital would be most productive in developing these clusters.) I must also emphasize that, in parallel with this innovative development, a whole range of other local industries concerned with maintenance and servicing of local places and primary industries will continue. The two speed economies have a second gear.

I have been very sparing in my use of the phrase “rural communities”, since my foray into economic geography really sees sets of socio-spatial economic systems (SSES) that are more significant than traditional settlement patterns

based on functional hierarchies, related to how far people could ride or walk in a day. The settlement pattern is more a matter of historical geography than a reflection of contemporary economic realities.

But, and this is an enormous *but* and provides a turning point in my argument, people do not live in SSES, they live in converted barns, hamlets, villages and small market towns. They live in places with names, a sense of continuity with the past and, most significantly, with different kinds of services and facilities. They are also near to different kinds of “countryside” – the mountains for walking, the coastal creeks for sailing or the golf courses for playing. I don’t know whether there are any English Heritage golf courses but I’m sure one day there will be. These different living environments work and connect on a different basis and are evaluated with different criteria from the sub-regional contexts of economic dynamism. Broadband connections may not make much difference to the school run, and in families with both parents in employment but without the resources of an au pair, easy access to good play groups, nursery and primary schools, managed after-school activities and so on are crucial. If a group of young creative people are considering buying a redundant farmhouse and its outbuildings to house script writers and film makers and the consequent generation of local employment in an area of declining hill sheep farming, only to find that the local authority is about to close the local primary school for “lack of demand” and the PCT is closing the local cottage hospital to make essential savings, they may well look elsewhere.

Those responsible for “economic regeneration” are likely to be based in the RDA. Those responsible for primary schools are in the County Council and those responsible for the hospital are in the NHS. The complex inter-connections between social provision and economic development are rarely thought through. A serious difficulty, of course, is that they operate at different scales. The current fashion for community-led regeneration that urges people in small places to do health checks and put their most pressing needs into plans and proposals to compete with other places’ plans and proposals for limited resources, strongly militates against the development of regional clusters and more strategic thinking. The bizarre obsession in small towns with tourism, banal branding and market “fayres” diverts from the basic goals of economic well-being and social justice.

To illustrate this point, which I see as central, I draw on a Report to Defra on *Social Capital in Rural Places* which Malcolm Moseley and I did under the auspices of RERC. Whilst strong social capital binds the Taliban and the Mafia rather more than groups in rural places, we nevertheless did find good examples of warlords in rural England! More seriously, however, we looked in considerable detail at four contrasting places to see “what made them tick” and to explore the role of social capital in making them the places that they were. In the case of Pershore (with a population of just over 7000) it had been extremely successful in bidding for resources from AWM and even had a full-time Town Regeneration Officer. This person was as energetic as most such people scattered round the market towns of England generally are. She established a new tradition of an annual *Plum Fayre* which attracted twice the

resident population of Pershore to come to spend money in the town's retailers (not all of which, of course, were locally owned). However, many local people were disgruntled. Their own indigenous Carnival which provided lots of fun for the children and the generation of local social capital collapsed, partly, it was claimed, for dreaded "Health and Safety" reasons. It is possible that local social cohesion has been undermined by the well-intentioned efforts of the external development brigade. People would more likely want to come and live in Pershore and work in the sub-region for its excellent health and education provision which had little to do with the RDA. It is also arguable whether such provision owes much to "community-led renewal". On the basis of our limited qualitative study we would give most of the credit to a very dynamic local council with an outstanding Chief Executive. The Council was elected and the Council delivered.

So what makes a good place to live in, how can the best be preserved and how can we ensure that "good places" attract the wealth and job creators to maintain the dynamism in dispersed and small settlements in England? Connected to that, of course, is how the inevitable growth of new housing will affect the maintenance of social capital, based as it is on continuous relationships of trust and reciprocity. So it is essential that we do come to understand better what makes places tick – not simply as honey pots for tourists or as clusters of retail outlets or as pleasant collectives of hanging baskets, cobbles and authentically preserved vernacular architecture – but as lived in places with people of varied ages, social backgrounds, interests, skills and capacities. We are not simply people who go to work to get the cash to

buy the food to get the strength to go to work. Nor is it simply a matter, in T. S. Elliot's glum phrase a matter solely of "birth, copulation and death". We are social animals and we make real lives for ourselves in real places. In Bethan Thomas and Danny Dorling's cradle to grave atlas *Identity in Britain* (Polity Press, 2007) we are able to see the elements of a wonderful social geography of Britain. But there are no real places. We have more than enough of marvellous aggregate data, but real places get masked by proxy variables. But what are places actually like and how can we make them better? Even the admirable CRC Report "Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities: A New Agenda?" has almost nothing to say about actual places. I find the phrase "a flourishing living and working countryside" virtually meaningless. As I mentioned before "countryside" is a loaded, largely scenic term.

Sociologists and social anthropologists have provided us with some classic place-based community studies. They have emphasized the importance of family and social networks, the intermeshing of formal and informal relationships and the cliques, cabals, factions and interest groups that help to bind places into distinctive entities. People are not social atoms and as Liz Spencer and I have shown in our recent book *Rethinking Friendship* (Princeton University Press, 2006) people live in supportive personal communities that bind them both to places and people in a subtle and complicated way. Few people would expect to be able to influence economic development without understanding how firms work – the business schools devote much time to teaching the theory and practice. Yet somehow we

expect to influence how places work without paying much attention to what really makes them tick.

In a new challenging and stimulating approach to the dilemma of what should replace the discredited liberal and conservative illusions of the past century, the American economists Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles put social capital at the heart of community governance. For them “social capital refers to trust, concern for ones associates and a willingness to live by the norms of ones community and to punish those who do not” (*Moral Sentiments and Material Interests* Edited by Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, Robert Boyd and Ernst Fehr MIT Press, 2005, p.379) They point to a new and widespread awareness in policy and academic circles of real peoples’ values so that there is a new found need to find out how they “interact in their everyday lives in families, neighbourhoods and work group, not just as buyers and sellers and citizens” (ibid. p. 380). This is to focus on what people *do* rather than what people own. The authors do not subscribe to some vague feel-good notion of community but simply refer to groups of people “who interact directly, frequently and in multi-faceted ways”. And this is precisely what the small towns and villages of rural England are about. Space prevents me from elaborating the rich and complex arguments put forward by Gintis, Bowles and their colleagues but it is clear to me that their approach to community governance is coming to dominate political and policy making thinking in Europe and America. That being so, it is significant that we can best understand and evaluate this pointer to future forms of governance in the places of rural England. According to the American theorists, they have the potential to be in the forefront of this new

form of governance. In Britain the reform agenda, such as it is, is at the level of sub-regions or unitary authorities and the smaller places, in which the new agenda for community governance could be focussed, are lamentably neglected.

I must nevertheless conclude with a warning which is also the most important policy implication of my remarks this afternoon. Research published a few years ago demonstrated conclusively that in United States localities participation in church, local service and political groups, as well as other community organizations is substantially higher where income is more equally distributed, even when a host of other possible influences are controlled (A. Alesina and E. La Ferrara, 2000 Participation in Heterogeneous Communities *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, 3: 847-904)

This strong empirical conclusion needs to be considered in the light of the emerging social polarisation that seems to be emerging in some of the more dynamically economically developing rural sub-regions. The CRC's goal of policies for a "sustainable strong, healthy and just society" may be justified not simply in terms of social justice but also, crucially, as a necessary foundation for good governance.

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