

# Rural Change: Structured Coherence or Unstructured Incoherence?

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This paper discusses the conceptualisation of change in rural areas using aspects of regulation theory which have been developed in more urban and regional contexts. It examines in particular the notion of ‘structured coherence’ which can be used to make sense of what characterises specific rural areas at certain times, and argues that rural places may be characterised according to the specificity of place and people without divorcing that place and those people from wider sets of changing relations. These suggestions are illustrated by reference to current political, economic, social and cultural transitions in rural Europe.

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In this paper we want to draw on some recent conceptual work on the political economy of rural areas (Cloke 1989) and on the application of regulation theory to rural areas (Cloke and Goodwin 1992) to present some ideas about how change in rural areas might be conceptualised. We do so in the context of recent academic discourse which shuns meta-theoretical narratives, preferring to deconstruct these such as restructuring, recomposition and rurality. So when we suggest that the structuring of political, economic, social and cultural relations can result in a form of localised ‘coherence’, we shall discuss just how unstructured and incoherent such coherences might seem from different discursive standpoints. We also discuss rural change in the context of the seeming universal trends of the internationalisation of capital (especially finance), the growth in the frequency and distance of travel, and the inexorable development of telecommunications. It is now commonly perceived that we are in the age of the global village, with the effects of time-space compression being to make anywhere reachable from anywhere else. Thus rural areas, now being reachable or ‘in touch’ with more mainstream spaces, might be assumed as having significant potential for new and radically changed functions; no longer mar-

ginalised but perhaps even core territories in new economic or social conditions.

We want to suggest that an understanding of these actual and potential changes in the functions performed in and by rural areas can be gained from addressing two important questions:

- (i) What is causing the different degrees of mobility which are being influential in our changing views of particular spaces?
- (ii) What place does ‘rurality’ have within these changes, and what is the nature and scope of internal variations in rural areas?

Answers to these questions will help unravel the potential futures of rural areas as being either new core arenas, or like islands which are relatively untouched by modern trends of time-space compression.

## Changing constructs of rurality

Before proceeding to discuss particular concepts for the understanding of rural change, and the potential components of that change, it is important to reflect briefly on the idea that rurality itself is a notion which is subject to changing perception, social construction and representation. Such changes might be viewed as occurring

in four phases. The first phase equates rurality with particular functions. Here, a *negative* functionalism will regard rural as synonymous with anything that is non-urban in character, for example:

"the focus of *rural* planning activity includes all jurisdiction outside the incorporated limits of urban responsibility" (Lassey, 1977: 5–6)

and a *positive* functionalism specifies important elements of a rural identity, for example:

rural geography may be defined as the study of recent social, economic, land-use and spatial changes that have taken place in less densely populated areas which are commonly recognised by virtue of their visual components as 'countryside' (Clout, 1972: 2).

Such functions are also subject to varying perceptions, so an amalgamated definition of this first phase rurality might suggest three principal criteria: rural areas are dominated (currently or recently) by extensive land uses, such as agriculture and forestry, or large open spaces of undeveloped land; rural areas contain small, lower-order settlements which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and surrounding extensive landscapes, and which are thought of as rural by most of their residents; and rurality engenders a way of life which is characterised by a cohesive identity based on respect for the environmental and behavioural qualities of living as part of an extensive landscape (see Cloke and Park 1985).

The second phase in the changing construction of rurality began to replace functional definitions with rather more *pragmatic* conceptions of the rural. What had previously been recognised as functional rural areas were increasingly linked into the dynamics of the national and international political economy with the result that economic and socio-cultural activities were viewed as being organised on a relatively spatial basis. Thus the "causes" of rural change usually stemmed from outside the rural area concerned. The *localities* debate appeared to confirm that although certain places achieved a uniqueness derived from local society within broader processes of rural restructuring, rural places did not represent distinct localities:

"various critical notions – of different, overlapping spatial divisions of labour, of all localities as sites for the reproduction of labour-power, of variations in local social structures etc. – render problematic the notion that there are distinct 'rural' localities (Urry 1984, 1989).

There were at least three ways forward from this dilemma. Firstly many rural researchers ig-

nored these challenges from political economic concepts and carried on as before using at least quasi-functional conceptions of rurality. Secondly, the category rural was retained as a pragmatic investigative unit, suggesting that the usefulness of 'urban' and 'rural' was largely as analytically convenient concepts (see Phillips and Williams 1984). Thirdly, researchers were invited to "do away with rural" as a category (Hoggart 1990) and to seek out sectoral research which spanned areas which were previously conceived of as urban and rural.

Part of the gap between functional definitions of the rural and the pragmatic or 'do away with' viewpoints involved the changing nature of countryside areas over time. Mormont (1990) heralded a third phase in the constructing of the 'rural' when he identified five aspects of the changing relationship between space and society in relation to the countryside:

- (i) the increasing mobility of people and messages, which has eroded the autonomy of local communities,
- (ii) the delocalisation of economic activity, which renders it impossible to define homogeneous economic zones,
- (iii) new, specialised uses of rural spaces (for tourism, parks, development, etc.) have created new specialised networks in the areas concerned, many of which are no longer localised,
- (iv) the people who inhabit 'rural' spaces represent a diversity of temporary visitors as well as residents,
- (v) rural spaces now tend to perform functions for non-rural users, and exist independently of the action of rural people.

He concludes that it is no longer possible to conceive of a single rural space. Rather, there are a multiplicity of social spaces which overlap the same geographical space. Accordingly, rurality has become a *social construct* and the 'rural' represents a world of social, rural and cultural values.

The idea of rurality as a social construct thereby allows 'rural' to become an important research category again, because behaviours and decisions will be influenced by the social construct(s) which indicates that a place is rural. The cultural domain thus becomes a crucial research area, and contemporary rural research has become very interested in the way in which the *meanings* of rurality are constructed, negotiated and experienced (see Cloke and Milbourne 1992; Mingay, 1989; B. Short 1992; J. Short 1991). It is important to stress, however, that this interest in the



ways in which culture and rurality are mapped out is not a search for *the* rural or *the* idyll. There are a multiplicity of versions of rurality in policy, lay and academic discourses and each version will have different forms of social relations naturalised within them.

In many ways, the emphasis on rurality as a social construct is in line with current themes in post-modern and post-structural thinking. The post-modern countryside might be deemed as a fourth phase in the changing construction of rurality. Here the emphasis is on deconstructing macro-categories such as 'rural' and on interpreting different discourses and representations of rurality. According to Halfacree (1993) the emphasis on social constructions of rurality is prompting academic discourses on rurality to be increasingly routed through lay discourses, with a far greater emphasis than before on allowing 'ordinary' people's own voices to be heard in and to inform academic and policy debates. Again, there is no expectation here that people's constructions of rurality will all fit neatly together into a unitary thing called rural, since people do not hold clear, well-defined and well-structured images of the rural.

Drawing on the work of Baudrillard, Halfacree suggests that there are divergent meanings of 'rural' at three levels. The *sign* (= rurality) is being increasingly detached from the *signification* (= meanings of rurality) as social representations of rurality become more diverse. Equally, sign and signification are also becoming more divorced from their *referent* (= the rural locale). He points out that it is a characteristic of post-modern times that symbols are becoming ever more detached from their referential moorings, and therefore that socially constructed rural space is becoming increasingly detached from geographically functional rural space.

These phases reflecting the changing constructs of rurality pose key questions for those of us seeking to offer an interpretation of the changing nature of rural areas. Phase 1 suggests that the previously characteristic functions of rural areas are changing in many developed nations (although perhaps more so in a densely populated nation such as the UK than in the Nordic countries). Can the future of these areas, perhaps based on new socio-economic functions, be equally 'rural' in nature? Phase 2 led rural researchers to question the category of rurality. Are political-economic interpretations therefore necessarily contrary to the survival of the category 'rural'? Phase 3 reinstated the importance of rurality, but as a social rather than a geographical construct. Is it possible to interconnect these of

economic restructuring and social recomposition with socially constructed attitudes and behaviours? Finally Phase 4 suggests an increasing distance between the sign and signification of 'rural' and their locational referent. Post-modernism as a way of thinking eschews the meta-narratives of (amongst others) political economic concepts, but can some middle ground be explored in which conceptual accounts of rural change can be interwoven with acknowledgements of the significance of the increasing detachment of sign and signification from their rural referent?

In what follows we attempt a small step in this direction of interweaving different strands of constructing rurality, by drawing together elements of political economic theorisation with elements of the symbolic importance of notions of the rural idyll. In so doing we trace some of the characteristics which represent potential components of the future mix which will probably still be called 'rural'.

## Conceptualising structured coherence

We have suggested elsewhere that the concept of structured coherence can be a useful way of understanding some of the characteristics of new short-term stabilities in rural areas (Cloke and Goodwin 1992). By drawing on the growing use of political economy concepts in rural studies we can both deny that rurality is itself a deterministically causal mechanism and yet suggest that entrepreneurs, residents, leisure-seekers and the like behave as though *rural* is real to them and is influential in their locational decisions.

In particular, it is possible to employ segments of the regulationist literature which has charted the apparent "sea change" (Harvey 1989) of urban industrial restructuring from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Alternative descriptions of this change, with which we have more sympathy, suggest that there is *not* a new Post-Fordist epoch, but rather that the latest in a series of constant revolutions has been reached. Regulation theory appears to offer useful concepts which aid our understanding of some of the economic, social, political and cultural changes, and the *interconnections between them* which are wrapped up in the wider notions of rural change and rural futures. Three middle-ground concepts appear to be especially relevant:

### (i) *Mode of Regulation*

Lipietz (1988) has written of the ways in which the contradictions of capitalism are over-

come or regulated, and has sought to uncover the mechanisms of conflict resolution which guarantee not only the potential for the continued reproduction of capitalism but also its actuality. He suggests not only that each moment in the circuit of capitalism is regulated but also that regulation includes the incorporation of social elements into individual behaviour so as to establish norms, habits and customs suited to the reproducing regulatory system. It should be stressed that such regulation can only ever be partial and temporary, subject as it is to contestation and conflict. However, the notion of a mode of regulation suggests to us that there is an ensemble of institutional forms, networks and norms which works to ensure the reasonable compatibility of behaviours in periods of stability between production and consumption. In the context of understanding rural change, therefore, it will be important to acknowledge any changes in the mode of regulation affecting rural areas. Any change in regulation, whether by state intervention or by means of social struggle and opposition will in turn lead to changes in the experience of rural places and lifestyles of rural people. We can thus interpret not only changes in rural production but also changes in "the living and thinking and feeling of life" (Gramsci 1971) in rural areas, which occur alongside economic change.

### (ii) *Societalisation*

If mode of regulation suggests some form of partial stability, then societalisation can help to identify some of the practices which support the regulation of that stability. Societalisation, according to Jessop (1990) is the process of regulation at a societal level via a complex ensemble of social practices which operate to integrate diverse social structures and to secure some form of cohesion among competing forces. Jessop suggests that when societalisation is successful in bringing about temporary stabilisation it is possible to recognise both on *historic bloc* and a *hegemonic bloc* in operation. The idea of a historic bloc draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of a historically constituted and socially reproduced correspondence between the economic base and the political and ideological structures of social formation. A hegemonic bloc suggests a durable alliance of class forces able to exercise political, intellectual and moral leadership. Particular forms of societalisation in rural areas will to some extent influence rural society and politics although it is important to ensure that an understanding of cultural leadership is also added

to the portfolio of interest in rural change. We have suggested elsewhere (Cloke and Goodwin 1992) that what we are witnessing in the UK is the appropriation of cultural values from previous historic and hegemonic blocs in order to promote a commodification of the countryside which itself underpins the emergence of new blocs.

### (iii) *Structured Coherence*

The regulatory practices and procedures associated with mode of regulation and societalisation constitute just some of the processes and relations which together characterise the changing specificity of a particular place. It is however *places* which represent the essential meeting point of social relations, communications and movement. As Massey (1991) puts it:

"what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus..... each place is a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations (p. 28–9).

Given the importance of place in these processes of change, we suggest that Harvey's (1985) idea of structured coherence can help us to look at the interlinking of mode of regulation and societalisation through particular relations and institutions which apply in particular places at particular times. Any such coherence will be structured not only by the prevailing form of production, but also by innovations in standard of living, lifestyle, social hierarchies, and sociological and psychological attitudes towards working, living, enjoying, entertaining and the like.

We are not suggesting here that some form of overarching grand theory can instrumentally dictate the structural conditions under which places always achieve a recognisable coherence at any particular time – far from it. Rather we believe that despite the messy and complex nature of contemporary society and the present propensity to emphasise difference and to deconstruct 'sameness', rural places may be characterised according to the specificity of place and people *without* divorcing that place and those people from wider sets of changing relations. It is this connection between wider and more local social relations that Massey speaks about and which Harvey sees as sponsoring localised coherences. Some areas will of course be more coherent than others, and we need to recognise that struggles over production and consumption will greatly influence the nature of coherence achieved. Equally, place-related complexities may lead some



commentators to focus on the unstructured or incoherent nature of particular localities. Nevertheless it is our argument that important elements of rural change can be understood in terms of a series of movements between the differing practices and procedures of various strategies of regulation operating at overlapping scales. Localised coherence can emerge in the midst of partial and contested temporary stability. Using these concepts, therefore, we can see rural areas undergoing a series of diverse and contested changes, all of which are socially constructed, and such a view helps us to interpret the changing functions and circumstances of different rural areas.

### Rural change: new coherences in rural areas?

It is possible to make use of these concepts in an historic analysis of rural change in any particular nation. In the UK, for example, recent times have seen changes in the mode of regulation brought about by a mix of force and persuasion. There has been a forced restructuring of central-local relations in government, shifting power to the centre, and of public-private sector relations, favouring the private sector. Regulation has also occurred by persuasion, with an increasing commodification of the rural idyll including the colonisation of particular rural locales by powerful service classes. This has been linked with what some see as an emergent historic bloc of new middle classes in some areas of Southern England, and more widely with the emergence of new coherences of economy, society, politics and culture in some rural areas (see Cloke 1990; Cloke and Thrift 1987, 1990; and Phillips 1993 for more details). In this paper, however, we want to review some of the more important *contemporary* components of coherences in rural areas, so that these can be applied to particular places where relevant. Although these components are itemised as something of a checklist it should be remembered that the main benefit of using elements of regulation theory is the appreciation of interconnectivities between different components and different scales. Three main groups of components can be discussed:—

#### (1) *The Area's Attractiveness to Capital Accumulation*

In many rural areas in the developed world there have been major economic changes during the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's which have contrib-

uted to the breakdown of localised rural coherences centred on primary production in agriculture, forestry and fishing. Where such coherences remain, the functional definitions of rurality discussed earlier in this paper continue to apply. Elsewhere, the economic restructuring in rural areas depends on commuting to urban labour markets. There are, however, a series of elements of economic restructuring which concern rural areas themselves, and in discussing these we are seeking to understand both the relations which exist between the fractions of capital and the rural areas concerned and the roles of state agencies in regulating or deregulating these relations.

One important element of restructuring is the commodification of rural areas. This involves the exploitation of rural environments, and even of forms of rurality which are distanced from those environments, in order to match or create contemporary demands of consumption. Commodification might entail a profiting from new forms of organising leisure, recreation and tourism — each of which are increasingly being sold in a more privatised form of pay-as-you-enter rural environment (see Cloke 1993). It might entail the development of particular styles of living through special niches in the housing market, for example to meet the needs of the service class or the retirement boom. It might also entail new activities in the craft sector, focussing on rural motifs and symbols which could well be detached from their referent rural environments and activities as Halfacree has suggested. These different forms of commodification are likely to be accompanied by a reorganisation of labour requirements, not only to service directly new forms of commodity production but also to maintain the required cultural backdrop which is an essential context for these commodities. If the new countryside is to be a theatre of leisure, then the scenechangers have an important part to play (Newby 1988).

A second element of rural restructuring is the technology-led exploitation of rural labour and rural places. The surge in information technology has opened up possibilities for a form of time-space compression in rural areas whereby previously untapped labour forces can be brought into mainstream service sector activities such as the computerised processing of air tickets, credit card transactions, insurance claims, wages, etc. Such activities are usually motivated by an exploitation of cheap labour and are thus susceptible to sudden closure as were the branch factories during the halcyon days of manufacturing. Indeed these information technology outposts could be termed the *branch lines* of the 1990's. Alongside

these, there are smaller-scale exploitations of new technology in the form of homeworking and telecottaging. Although these too can be used to exploit cheap labour, they do allow some individuals the opportunity to live a desired rural life-style while concomitantly "hooked-in" to the new service sectors.

Rural restructuring may also involve further forms of industrialisation. Some rural areas, particularly those sited close to good access routes, will be attractive to hi-tec and other industrial plants without the need for state subsidy. Elsewhere, state agencies have sought to subsidise inward investment and in so doing they attempt to achieve the same effect as the technological compression of time and space. Their goal is to make more peripheral areas attractive to some elements of capital, but the efficiency and success of this task is highly dependent on the regulation of public spending and the survival of planning and policy mechanisms in an era of state deregulation.

A rather more worrying trend in rural areas, and yet an increasingly important aspect of inward capital investment, has been the siting of dangerous, polluting, or politically sensitive operations in remoter rural areas. The actual distribution of such operations will depend on the degree of local protest, especially by the elite groups in particular areas, but it is clear that some peripheral areas are now being sought out and used for the siting of nuclear installations, the dumping of waste materials, the treatment of industrial residues, military training including low-flying air training routes, prisons and so on. Such functions are often state aided, and will be 'sold' to local people in terms of providing local jobs, and overriding safety considerations in the national interest. However, particular places could become dumping-grounds for unwanted processes and these processes in turn could become their major economic function. This has already occurred in the siting of hazardous waste dumps on Indian reservations in the USA (Sandefur and Tienda 1988).

Finally, rural areas will continue to be attractive to those fractions of capital involved with the exploitation and maintenance of rural resources. The exploitation of the agricultural resource base in Europe has been changing rapidly with restrictive price policies, structural adjustment and the polarisation of holdings. Vast surpluses of agricultural land – the EC estimate a surplus of between 6 and 16 million hectares by the year 2000 – and of labour will mean that a considerable restructuring of agricultural activity is still to come, with levels of pluriactivity likely to in-

crease even further, and the role of farmers as "landscape minders" becoming more prominent. Exploitation of other resources – forestry, coal, oil, fishing and so on – have witnessed boom – bust conditions in the past (see Cloke 1988) and in each case, the capital fractions concerned will be seeking to serve more complex and competitive markets in future years.

The geography of rural restructuring is extremely complex and localised. At present there are activities and functions in rural areas which are attracting capital fractions to them, but the impact of this development is extremely uneven. Any major changes in the mode of regulation – for example more privatisation, erosion of welfare states, new labour laws within the E.C. context and so on – could disturb these emerging coherences, as too could the contestation of change by elite blocs. It is to these social issues that we now turn.

(ii) *The Area's Attractiveness to those seeking a Rural Experience*

Many areas of rural Europe (although certainly not all areas) have been experiencing widespread population increases in recent decades. This in-migration has itself challenged previous coherences and helped to establish new forms of coherence. In-migration has taken different forms, but can be differentiated between job-led and people-led migration (Moseley 1984). Job-led trends should be linked with the various aspects of economic restructuring discussed above. People-led migration has arisen from increasing levels of retirement to rural places; from people's choice to be self-employed in a desirable environment; from higher levels of long-distance commuting; from the highly variegated search for 'alternative' lifestyles; from the wish for proximity to kith and kin or to an especially valued place; from the availability of less expensive property or land in some rural places; and so on. It is increasingly suggested that underlying most of this reshuffling of rural society lies the cultural notion of some form of *rural idyll*. Certainly, the wish for a rural lifestyle within counter-urbanising processes does suggest some predisposition about the object of desire which 'rural' represents.

Here, then, we can begin to see the interweaving of social constructs of rurality and actual changes in actual places. As was emphasised earlier, people do not have a well-defined and well-structured unitary image of the rural idyll. Indeed, the idea of idyll is highly ethnocentric. We will have different experiences of particular



dwelling in particular landscapes, of specific senses of community and of strong ties to land and nature which are variously constructed. At the national level within Europe for example there are significant differences in the idylled landscape and community. In the UK the idyll tends to reflect a sense of a manicured agricultural landscape as handed down through pastoral literature and art. Elsewhere, forestry, mountains, water and other landscape features have quintessential importance. So far as community is concerned there are differential reflections of peasantry, yeomanry, squirearchy and so on. However, idyll does appear to be an important prompter towards rural location and rural lifestyle and cannot be ignored in the search for understanding rural growth. A place does not itself have to be ideal for the search for idyll to be relevant to its actual and potential residents. Some places do reflect idyll without modification; others require commodification to develop a sense of idyll; still others will represent an anti-idyll and therefore repel in-migration. Cultural notions of idyll appear crucial in understanding the question of why some rural places are attractive to people, and why others are less so.

Where social recomposition occurs a series of contests and conflicts can take place. For example, contests occur between new class fractions and existing ones. This is often painted as "new-comers versus locals" but should be regarded as much more complex than this as layers of new migrants are sedimented into a community over time, experiencing different levels of belonging and acceptance. There is no doubt however that rural places can consist of "two nations", with existing residents being marginalised by the swift processes of gentrification and being unable to cope with the changing economic, political and cultural context.

There can also be a contesting of local *power* as the historic and hegemonic blocs of previous coherences will variously hold on to their elite status, forge alliances with in-coming social fractions, or relinquish their hegemonic position. Changing societalisation is thus vital to our understanding of new coherences as is the associated contesting of local cultural leadership. The 'idyll' culture sought by new residents is often sanitised and commodified in a rather different way to that of some longer-term residents whose cultural image of rurality is seasoned with realism and pragmatism. Sometimes traditional cultural attributes are reproduced in only slightly different form by new residents. Elsewhere, existing cultures can be hijacked by newcomers – a situation which has occurred in minority lan-

guage areas such as rural Wales (see Cloke and Davies 1992).

The geography of socio-cultural composition in rural areas is not a straightforward matter of a place being accessible or peripheral. To know whether a place is 'within reach' or not we need to account for social and cultural access as well as physical access. Equally, the social and cultural attractiveness of a place is related to that of alternative places. New forms of urban idyll may well reverse counterurbanisation at some stage in the future, with the socially constructed meanings of desirable place, desirable environment and desirable lifestyle switching away from the rural as currently constructed.

### (iii) *The Area's Attractiveness to State Intervention*

A changing mode of production does reflect shifting relations between state and capital, and suggests a desire to see new social contracts introduced to suit changing economic circumstances. The role of state activity remains crucial in different parts of rural Europe, but there are signs that this role is changing both in nature and scope alongside more general trends of privatisation and deregulation. The state's activity occurs at different scales, of which we will briefly discuss three.

The *local* state performs a series of different functions. Its powers to control or zone the development of housing and industry has strong links with localised societalisation in rural areas, especially where dominant social blocs wish to preserve, or at least conserve, their rural areas. There are also links here with national-level societalisation, with the often close links between central governments and housebuilding capitals sometimes engendering a move towards flexibility in the control of development which in turn can conflict with elements of the local state who are wishing to protect their own backyard. Shifts in central-local relations, with power being centralised, can exacerbate such situations.

The local state also has a strong past record in its involvement with and participation in positive forms of rural development. However, the nature of that participation is tending to change, with the previous top-down policies of direct subsidy of inward investment, often for example through the direct development of land and advance factories, giving way to a reliance on developing an *entrepreneurial culture* involving seemingly bottom-up (but actually market-led) strategies of fostering local enterprise through training, advice and marketing. Such changes will

have significant impacts on localised coherences in rural areas.

At the nation state level, central governments have an essential function in establishing, maintaining and changing the mode of regulation. Shifts in these modes of regulation have been closely linked with the creation by governments of new 'cultures' which impact on previous coherences. Two examples may be used to illustrate these new cultures.

The first is that governmental policies of deregulation and privatisation have been linked with a broader culture of anti-public-sector and therefore anti-planning. In the UK, for example, moves to deregulate parts of the planning process have begun to allow much more leeway to capital fractions which are interested in exploiting the potential resources and commodities vested in rural areas. The second example is that recent emphases in government policy on diversification and training have been linked with a broader centralised promotion of an "enterprise culture". In rural areas, such schemes have directly sponsored the establishment of businesses whose 'product' has involved the buying and selling of rural life, lifestyle, culture and landscape.

The 1980's have shown how actions by nation states can radically affect the current coherences in rural areas. Revisions to the scope, efficiency and geographical distribution of the welfare state, reductions in the power of the local state, alterations to industrial regulation, reductions in the power of planning, will all potentially impact on rural areas just as much as urban areas, and have the potential to cause the ensemble of relations therein to shift.

Finally, following the dissolution of trade barriers in 1992 and given the queue of nations seeking to join its ranks, the European Community and its institutions must now be regarded as a third tier of state action. Until recently, EC action in rural areas has been synonymous with agricultural policy and dominated by debates over the Common Agricultural Policy. Now, there is an obvious necessity to reform expensive and wasteful agricultural support policies, and this realisation has brought about the beginnings of change in the prioritisation of agriculture. Such change should not be overstated, as agriculture will continue to play a significant role in the future development of rural areas in Europe, particularly in central and eastern Europe and in the Mediterranean regions.

There are, however, clear indications that non-farm sectors will become increasingly important in rural economic development policies. Indeed, existing E.C. action in non-farm economies is

having very important spatial implications in different rural areas. For example, in 1988, expenditure on structural programmes was doubled, and new policy objectives were agreed by the European Council. Two of these objectives – Objective 1 for least developed rural areas, and Objective 5B dealing with local schemes for integrated rural development – have become crucial in terms of the levels of state expenditure going into particular areas. The drawing of the boundaries of eligibility for funds under these objectives has become a fundamental cause of change in parts of rural Europe, directly impacting on current coherences in particular areas. If an area is designated inside the boundary of an Objective area, then it will receive a very high level of public subsidy for its non-farm economy. Areas outside the boundaries, however, will be deprived of the major source of state funds for such purposes. These issues of European policy boundaries will become even more complex in the future, particularly if Nordic and Eastern European nations were to join the community because in relative terms many such areas would be immediately eligible, under current boundary-setting rules, for financial aid under these policy objectives. This would indeed prompt potentially radical changes to the coherences of those rural places currently receiving such support.

## Conclusions

Earlier in this paper we posed some troublesome questions about the possibility of bringing together different approaches to the understanding of constructions of rurality and rural change. Specifically, is it possible to interconnect political economic concepts with the idea of socially constructed attitudes and behaviours, and can such conceptual accounts be interwoven with acknowledgements of the increasing detachment of sign and signification from their rural referents? In the paper we have tried to bring together the particular conceptual apparatus of mode of regulation, societalisation and structured coherence with a more general appreciation of the likely components of rural change over the next decade or so. Those components relating to state activity, and to processes of accumulation and exploitation by capital are readily compatible with the concepts proposed. However, of equal importance as potential components of rural change are the cultural issues of attractiveness and idyll. These issues appear vitally interconnected to processes of restructuring and recomposition and are likely to be important in the characterisation



of particular rural places, whether they change or remain the same. Therefore, although it is important to stress that the changing functions of rural areas are by no means uniform or predictable and that it is certainly important to avoid overgeneralisation, there do seem to be grounds for suggesting that the idea of a socially constructed rurality need not be incompatible with concepts which locate specific places and people in wider sets of changing relations. Indeed it may be crucial that the contracts and strategies of capital in altering institutional forms, networks and norms, the impact of the contesting of change in social-political spheres, and the role of cultural factors as a glue in establishing locally coherent characteristics are *brought together* in our analyses rather than be regarded as belonging to separate philosophical domains.

The second question is more problematic. The rural referent in terms of functionally distinct geographical space is fast disappearing in many, but certainly not all, parts of rural Europe. Yet new forms of rural living and lifestyle clearly remain both in terms of space which is socially constructed as 'rural', and in terms of cultural symbolism, abstracted at various distances from its rural roots. The degree to which regulation theory can "connect" with the detached signs and significations of rurality is arguable. There certainly seems to be scope for using, for example, different concepts of commodification to bridge this divide, but we suspect that it comes down to different ways of thinking. Thus while some will continue to interpret structuring and coherence, others will continue to interpret unstructured incoherence.

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