Editorial

Whither Rural Studies?

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Abstract — To mark the launching of *Journal of Rural Studies*, this paper briefly reviews the increasing importance and volume of rural studies throughout the developed world. The rise in popularity of rural environments within some disciplines of study has been due to a steady progression of concept and technique resulting in academic maturity. In other disciplines, previous bias towards urban areas and consequent patchy and sectoral study of the countryside has only been overcome, in part, through a relatively unplanned but nevertheless effective multi-disciplinary perspective. Rurality has proved very difficult to define in an all-embracing manner, and indeed rural studies as a framework of study may be threatened if social science continues to espouse structuralist epistemologies with their aspatial connotations. At present the divide between the 'environmental' and 'socio-economic' element of rural studies is certainly not unbridgeable, although by the same token the existence of an integrative and commonly cherished body of subject matter which will satisfy both elements may be more apparent than real. These conceptual issues, and related questions of technique and method require further emphasis in rural studies as does the analysis of planning and policy-making, where a cross-fertilization of concepts with rural development strategies in underdeveloped nations would be beneficial.

**Youth to maturity?**

The role of rural studies within the broad ambit of science, social science and neo-science is currently experiencing a remarkable and significant period of flux. A major characteristic of recent years has been a steady upsurge of interest in rural areas, particularly in Britain, Europe, North America and Australasia, accompanied by a similar but time-lagged trend elsewhere in the developed and developing worlds. Every now and again particular subject areas appear to develop bandwagon effects whereby they become especially attractive both to new generations of scholars, and to that element of the academic world which prefers to remain footloose and able to pursue a variety of subject areas in their lifetime rather than dedicate their efforts in one constant direction. It appears that rural studies has been subject to just such an effect, with increasing numbers of educational courses and research programmes being devoted to studies of the rural environment.

It is tempting for those with recently developed rural interests to perceive this trend of increasing importance as the onset of greater experience and maturity in a previously juvenile subject area. Certainly, the explicit and growing focus on rural studies is likely to result in a much greater bulk, and hopefully depth, of investigation leading to a more detailed understanding of rural environments. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that rural areas have been studied for many centuries in one form or another. In geography, for example, the core of both historical geography and the geography of contemporary conditions right up to the mid-1950s was unquestionably centred on rural areas. This was partly due to the dominance of agriculture within the economic sector and partly because of the regional bias of geographical study 'which, with the exception of the Midland industrial areas and the coalfields, was based either on rural areas, or on regions defined in terms of physical features and the agricultural responses to these, or on the characteristics of rural life in the broadest sense' (Proudfoot, 1984, p. 11).

With the demise of regionalism during the 1960s in favour first of systematic study and then of 'applied' and 'relevant' systematic study, rural areas tended to be overshadowed by the visibility and scale of urban phenomena. It is therefore possible to recognise a
fallow period of 15 years or so when rural geography became entrenched in its agricultural roots and lost considerable ground to the theoretical and methodological strides being made within the context of urban studies. The upsurge of the mid-1970s, way-marked by Clout’s (1972) perceptive synthesis of prospective subject areas for rural geographers, was superimposed on this foundation — not of youthful superficial knowledge but of a mature understanding of highly constrained facets of the rural environment largely concerned with agriculture. The most significant change, therefore, experienced by rural geographers over the last decade has been a direct and compelling exposure to other perspectives on rural areas, which has widened their horizons way beyond the bounds of traditional geographic study (see Cloke, 1980).

Other disciplines have followed different routes to the culminating general increase in the status of rural studies in recent years. The fallow period described for geography has been less marked (if at all) in anthropology, agriculture, agricultural economics and rural sociology which have all to varying degrees retained a centrality of focus on rural areas. Yet it is again clear that the sum of the individual contributions of these and other disciplines to rural knowledge does not account for the total increase of importance recently attached to rural studies. The acceleration has come from a growing multidisciplinary perspective through which a jumble of method, theory, approach and other distinctive disciplinary attributes has been thrown together in a bubbling cauldron of study which has simmered and sometimes boiled to produce significant gains in our knowledge and understanding.

It seems fair to suggest that some disciplines have been more ready to jump into this cauldron than others. Geography, that magpie of academia, has been most willing to search out techniques and concepts from its social science counterparts, such that the recent overview text by Pacione (1984) recognizes rural geography as a ‘multifaceted phenomenon’ which ‘interacts with a host of other subdisciplines within geography and has strong linkages with related fields of interest in economics, sociology, politics and planning’ (p. 1). Workers in other disciplines, although perhaps less explicit in their acknowledgement of the multidisciplinary perspective, nevertheless do indicate the widening range of sources for their information. Whitty and Willis (1978), for example, recognise ‘vast gaps in our knowledge of the rural scene’ which are tackled by a broad search for inspiration:

We thus find ourselves reading the works of politicians and journalists in the hope of clarifying and identifying social objectives; from the scientists we may learn the technological constraints within which we must operate. The planners and bureaucrats will provide raw information for the analysis and will indicate some of the choices which are worth evaluating. The market fanatic will be the angel sitting on our shoulders, but we shall not allow him free-rein (p. 7).

One further indication of the growth of multidisciplinary studies of rural areas is found in the stated aims of mainstream texts written from within specific disciplines. A revealing example is afforded by Carlson et al.’s (1981) text on American rural society which is firmly sociological in parentage, yet seeks to widen the debate to include the dynamic environmental setting within which rural society is placed. The authors outline five goals for their work:

(i) to describe the contemporary status of society;
(ii) to develop an environmental perspective from which to examine rural social issues;
(iii) to examine the impacts of rural change;
(iv) to suggest procedures with which to resolve conflicts and deal with impacts;
(v) to consider a future for rural areas in which public policies and procedures can effectively respond to contemporary and emerging social and environmental opportunities.

These goals can only be achieved through the contemporaneous usage of material from economics, agriculture, environmental science, planning, policy studies and so on in extension of the sociological source.

Clearly, multidisciplinary study can take different forms. Veldman (1984), for example, has attempted to differentiate between the central questions to be tackled by diversified rural science. *Rural geography* is thus seen to focus on the interaction between the ‘physical–material’ structure of rural areas (the environment?) and the socio-spatial system therein, presumably a function of settlement and community. *Rural sociology* by the same token is deemed to offer expertise on social problems, such as the viability of small villages and active and passive forms of rural deprivation. Veldman views *agricultural economics* as the study of agricultural prosperity, dealing with the returns to agricultural production systems in relation to farm size, the degree of mechanisation and rationalisation, and land management. *Ecology* deals with the problems of the natural milieu and the scientific value of landscape, and the *administrative science* looks at the spatial division of power, with the ruling force of small communities being considered too weak to fulfil many community tasks.

This type of polemic, in this instance from a Dutch geographer, demonstrates the parochialism of place
and perspective to which we are all prone. Almost any such description of the supposed core of other disciplines is guaranteed to raise the hackles of other rural researchers and is hardly the most productive platform for multidisciplinary study. There is, however, a need for self-examination within disciplines and Journal of Rural Studies will welcome submissions on the nature of rural studies within individual subject areas so that several such submissions can eventually be cross-tabulated and overlapping foci highlighted.

Rather than attributing a specific role to individual disciplines and subsequently seeking co-ordination between these roles, proponents of rural studies have, in a relatively unplanned fashion, wandered into other disciplinary territory in search of a deeper understanding of rural phenomena. Despite these latent multidisciplinary leanings, there is some evidence to suggest a continuing lack of communication between researchers of the rural environment, who, although willing to transcend subject boundaries in order to use concepts and methods offered elsewhere, remain closeted within institutional constraints so far as teaching and research are concerned. There are very few 'rural environment studies' departments or degrees within higher education in the developed world, and although the bulk of rural studies appears to be on the increase it often may be taking place in different departments within the same institution with little or no mutual recognition of a common purpose.

Rural studies, then, have benefited from advances within disciplines and some interaction between disciplines although the latter trend is relatively informal and will prosper greatly from initiatives such as the Rural Economy and Society Study Group in Britain which provides a multidisciplinary caucus for students of the rural environment. Progress in rural studies is evident. A spate of texts on rural topics has appeared and a self-styled referencing and review system — the Countryside Planning Yearbook — is now in its fifth year. It is intriguing, then, to question why studies of the rural environment have become more popular, important and interactive. Progress has certainly been hampered by two major factors outlined by Lassey (1977) in the context of rural planning:

The rural regions have not (at least until very recently) been overtly recognized as having distinctively different characteristics and planning requirements. The consequence of this urban bias has been a serious neglect of professional preparation for planning in rural regions. This situation is further aggravated by the tendency to divide the rural environment into sectors — such as agriculture, forest, water, parks, etc. — with very little provision for an adequate overview of how the total rural ecological system functions as part of an interrelated whole and in the context of the various human populations inhabiting (either permanently or temporarily) each of the sectors (pp. 8–9).

How these major barriers of urban bias and narrow sectoral perspectives have been overcome is a matter of surmise. One contributory factor must certainly be the nature of changes occurring in rural areas themselves. The declining importance of agriculture as a means of rural employment, and the consequent increases in non-farm populations (see Bunce, 1982) have brought turmoil to many rural communities and have demolished the cosy notion that rural events have rural causes. Rather, the demographic, economic, social and political links between rural and urban areas have been increasingly recognised, and this has led rural specialists to seek broader perspectives on their work, as well as persuading some previously urban-centred researchers to become interested in the events taking place in rural areas. The burgeoning debate on counterurbanisation (see, for example, Beale, 1977; Fielding, 1982; Robert and Randolph, 1983; Vining and Kontuly, 1978) illustrates these trends, with the significant increases in peripheral rural populations representing both an intriguing phenomenon to be explained by rural specialists, and a compelling stimulus for urban and regional level researchers to investigate decentralisation processes involving previously urban people and jobs.

Changes in the balance of rural environmental resources have also attracted interest in rural studies. The environmental and landscape impacts of industrialised farming, intensive recreation and extensions of urban land use have all received media coverage throughout the developed world and have thus become popular subjects for study. Rural studies have benefited here from a 'resource consciousness' in various disciplines, and it is again relevant that those seeking an understanding of such issues are unlikely to have much success within sectoral confines, and have thus widened their academic horizons because of the all-embracing nature of environmental and landscape topics.

One further catalyst for rural studies has been a growing interest in policy and planning in rural areas, stemming from a wish to apply academic research to real world problems and their potential amelioration. The idea of public sector intervention or control in rural affairs provides a central focus for the studies taking place in widely differing disciplines. Discussions of policy for agriculture, landscape, recreation, land use, economic development and social welfare will tend to congregate the applied aspirations of most rural researchers into varying degrees of common ground, and indeed a
whole new breed of academic study has emerged, the central function of which is to study and evaluate planning systems and decision-making processes in the countryside. This policy orientation has again tended to sponsor multidisciplinary perspectives within rural studies.

Whatever the reasons behind the growth of rural studies, there is broad agreement that the contemporary position is a healthy one. Beyond this generalised impression of well-being, however, there is no clear consensus as to how rural studies compare with other academic counterparts. Wood and Smith (1982) suggest that rural studies within geography are no longer the poor relation of urban studies, and that the rural specialism has come of age. Munton and Goudie's (1984) review of geography in the U.K., however, suggests that rural geography has lagged behind urban geography (p. 34), and Phillips and Williams (1984), in the context of their treatise on rural social geography, recognise that 'it will be some time before we can hope to achieve the levels of specialization achieved by urban social geographers' (p. 1). The idea of rural studies evolving from youth to maturity over recent years is thus demonstrated to be a rather simplistic view of proceedings. What is true for rural studies in these geographical examples may not be tenable as a reflection of the position in other disciplines. Nevertheless we do appear to have reached a stage at which a more formalised multidisciplinary approach to the study of rural areas would be beneficial, and Journal of Rural Studies seeks to fulfil a modest role in this process by providing one publication forum which is open to international and interdisciplinary discussion of rural research, planning and policy-making.

**Rurality**

The words 'rural' and 'countryside' trip very easily off the tongue yet we often lack an adequate understanding of how the concepts underlying these words should be defined, and the extent to which other phrases such as 'urban' and 'suburban' should be differentiated from them. This problem of definition has received considerable attention within rural studies and the resultant conceptualisations have the potential to steer rural research down very different paths in the future. A full analysis of rurality definition is available elsewhere (Cloke and Park, 1984) but several salient factors are relevant in the context of a new journal focussing on rural studies.

First, it is interesting to note that attempts to define rurality have adopted very different perspectives and foci. Table 1 outlines a selection of the numerous definitions which have been suggested, and three main themes are apparent:

(i) Rural is synonymous with anything non-urban in character. This approach suggests that the rural environment has no specific character or qualities of its own, and thus characterises rural studies as residual rather than sharply focussed.

(ii) Rurality can be positively defined in either univariate or multivariate form.

(iii) User perception is the principal agent of rural—urban definition.

Of these three, it is the second group of definitions which has been most successful in sharpening the focus of rural studies. At least in this area there have been attempts to make positive statements about what rurality is rather than what it is not or what various groups perceive it as. An all-embracing and long-term definition of rurality is, however, very difficult to achieve for three important reasons.

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Samples of rural definition</th>
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<td><strong>Negative definitions</strong></td>
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<td>It is the area covered by the nine-tenths or so of Britain's non-urban land surface with which this book is concerned.</td>
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<td>(Gordon Cherry, 1976, p. 4)</td>
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| **Positive definitions** |
| 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 recognized by virtue of their visual components as 'countryside'. |
| (Hugh Clout, 1972, p. 1) |

| **Perceptive definitions** |
| The village can be described as a place where the countryside meets the town and where distinction between rural and urban lies very much in the eye of the beholder. |
| (Graham Moss, 1978, p. 101) |

A village is any place which most residents think of as a village. |
| (Andrew Thorburn, 1971, p. 2) |
First, rural definition depends on the functions designated to the countryside by those creating the definition. Second, rural areas are undergoing considerable temporal change due to social, economic and technological developments. Rurality definition itself must therefore be dynamic in order to cope with these changes. Finally, rurality is subject to considerable intra-national, international and cross-cultural variation. Rurality definition has also to take account of spatial and cultural differentiation at every scale.

These three forbidding factors have caused the rural environment to be subdivided conceptually into functional elements in the hope that a series of functional definitions, for example of rural land use and economy, rural settlement and rural society and community would, in summation, provide an approximation of the overall concept. The combination of definitions offered by Chris Park and myself in our introduction to resource management in the countryside (1984) was that the countryside should be viewed in terms of an area which:

(i) is dominated (either currently or recently) by extensive land uses, notably agriculture and forestry;
(ii) contains small, lower order settlements which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and extensive landscape, and which are thought of as rural by most of their residents;
(iii) 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.

Doubtless this definition is as arguable as any other which has been produced, but it does provide an introductory statement of the scope of rural studies as relevant to the activities of Journal of Rural Studies. Further analyses of rurality definition, either conceptual or quantitative, would be encouraged as welcome contributions to the Journal.

Even these pitfalls of definition are overshadowed by the problems inherent in attempting to throw light on the rural–urban relationship. Previous analyses of this issue (see, for example, Cloke and Griffiths, 1980) have outlined a number of conceptual stages in the attempts to differentiate between 'rural' and 'urban'. Far from being a temporal evolution from a traditional viewpoint to a modern one, contemporary rural studies are conceptually scattered over the entire spectrum of rural–urban relations. The rural–urban dichotomy, for example, stems from Tonnies' (1952) theorization of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society) which have been taken to indicate the intimate rural and impersonal metropolitan polarities respectively. Although rapidly superseded by continuum models, the dichotomy concept is still kindled in contemporary rural studies. Pacione (1984, p. 1), for example, stresses that:

It is important to appreciate that rural-based investigations are not simply regional applications of some wider perspective. The rural environment poses new conceptual and methodological questions, and presents unique problems for investigation.

This theme of uniqueness can also be detected in the analysis of 'sparselands' which, Holmes (1981) argues,

remain below a critical threshold level of economic and social attractiveness, which precludes them from benefiting from contemporary and possible future social trends which may help to sustain and revive rural areas with adequate populations (p. 4).

These characteristics are such that sparselands are not considered merely as extreme cases of rurality (perhaps at one end of a conceptual continuum) but as deserving specific consideration on their own account.

The rural–urban continuum (Redfield, 1941) favoured a sliding scale rather than an abrupt halt between rural and urban poles as representing a more accurate reflection of the real world distribution of society. Despite strong warnings to the contrary (see, for example, Lee and Newby, 1983) this sociological model has been widely adopted to reflect environmental distributions. In its proper sociological context, the idea of a continuum between rural and urban extremes continues to be espoused in rural studies. Carlson et al. (1981), for example, reject the stance that it is no longer possible to distinguish rural people from urban people, or rural environments from urban environments. They insist that 'formal studies of the rural–urban continuum reveal persistent divergencies in attitudes, values, levels of income, social services and cultural attributes' (p. 6) and that 'rural social and cultural systems are distinguishable from urban systems, in part, because of stronger interdependence between people and the environment' (p. 8).

As suggested in the above defence of the continuum, there have been suggestions (for example by Bailey, 1975) that the defining parameters of social problems manifest in urban areas are no different from those occurring in rural areas. Thus, the criteria of poverty, immobility, powerlessness and arbitrary bureaucratic control are prevalent in all environments and need no rural–urban distinction. Dun-
leavy (1982) has been prominent in arguing that both economic and socio-cultural activities in post-war Britain are organised on the same basis regardless of spatial characteristics. Therefore to study 'rural' anything (as indeed 'urban' anything) is falsely to represent the prevailing socio-economic structures. Moseley (1980) tests this hypothesis and indeed finds that:

the inner city and outer rural areas share certain problems relating to a declining or static population and economy and to the selective loss of certain kinds of people and jobs (p. 26).

He also suggests, however, that structural problems common to urban and rural areas are often manifest differently in the countryside because of a 'rural dimension', made up of three basic characteristics:

(i) a pleasant environment which will attract the willing or unwilling unemployed;
(ii) a 'spaced-out' geographical structure — leading to accessibility problems and costly public services;
(iii) a distinctive local political ideology — favouring the market, the volunteer and the self-helper rather than public sector intervention.

In this type of analysis lies a conundrum which threatens to create significant and far-reaching divisions within rural studies. Two broad positions have emerged. First, it appears entirely legitimate to suggest that despite the existence of a set of characteristics which may be termed rural, the social, economic and environmental problems in the countryside are localised manifestations of aspatial processes. Therefore, rural studies may be viewed as adopting an anachronistic frame of reference which emphasises secondary spatial factors to the detriment of the primarily important structural problems which underlie them. The opposite reaction is either to reject the original premise that rural society, economy and environment is not substantially different from its urban counterpart, or to suggest that the identifiably rural characteristics are sufficiently significant to maintain a rural-based framework of study.

The dilemma presented by these two options has been repeatedly side-stepped within rural studies, but Phillips and Williams (1984) have summarised various suggested reasons why rural areas be maintained as a unit of investigation:

(i) the need for rural studies to counterbalance the predominance of urban studies;
(ii) the pragmatic requirement for analytically convenient categories such as rural and urban;
(iii) the need to expose many of the romantic rural myths which have been fostered by an historically anti-urban social science;
(iv) the basic belief that rural areas have distinctive characteristics distinguishable from those in urban areas.

Whether or not these reasons are sufficient to legitimise a justifiable future for rural studies is currently the subject of some debate, although the institutional cohesiveness of any existing structure of study should not be underemphasised. Contributions to this theoretical debate are solicited for future issues of Journal of Rural Studies. It would certainly appear that the future directions for rural studies are at least in part dependent on the outcome of these conceptual conflicts.

New emphases in rural studies

In 1972, Hugh Clout recognised the application of academic skills to the problems of relevance in countryside management as the major priority for studies of rural areas. By 1980, the call for applied studies had been answered at least in part, but three further elements were recognised as problematic to the future of rural studies in a review of applied rural geography (Cloke, 1980). It is worth quoting at length from the concluding paragraph of this review because many of the new emphases for rural studies in 1985 may be subscribed to the failure to address issues which were characteristic at least five years previously:

The need for a conceptual framework for the subject has been long recognised but is becoming increasingly important. If rural researchers intend to develop the study and planning of the countryside as a separate element within the environment as a whole, then a body of rural concepts and theories is required on which these studies may fruitfully be founded. Similarly, the analytical techniques used . . . should be suitable for the rural scale. It would be all too easy simply to recognise these deficiencies as inevitable results of rural under-emphasis, and continue to struggle along borrowing off-the-peg techniques from other areas of study. However, progress in the rectification of these deficiencies is vital, and every rural research programme should include some attempt to advance rural concepts and methodology. The final new emphasis . . . concerns the need for further integration with the priorities, processes and practice of rural planning. This is not to say that all rural research should be of a strictly applied nature, but rather that we should recognise the increasing importance of policy-making and plan implementation in rural areas (p. 207).

These three areas of underemphasis remain important foci for progress in rural studies. The issue of an appropriate conceptual framework for the study of
rural areas hinges significantly on the variations of rurality definition and rural–urban differentiation summarised above. Veldman (1984), for example, has argued that:

socio-spatial research in rural areas has to accept a multi-disciplinary approach to prevent the conclusions from being disadvantageous for the rural physical–spatial structure and for the rural communities by accentuating its own facets too strongly.

Stripped of its geographical jargon, this statement suggests that the ‘environmental’ and ‘socio-economic’ elements of rural studies have been pragmatically united for fear that one would gain dominance over the other. Although further substantiation of these expressed views would be required before the suggested state of, and reasons for, unity can be accepted as valid, the isolation of potential conflict between environmental and socio-economic themes is very important. Physical, and to a substantial extent environmental science has retained its positivist roots and has shunned the epistemological debate which has raged within social science. Thus, acceptance of the rural environment as a unit of study remains largely unquestioned by those whose view of rural studies is focussed on landscape, land use and environmental resources. Dichotomy and continuum models are perfectly legitimate in this context.

The situation within social science is more confused, with considerable uncertainty emerging as to how best to proceed. The positivist paradigm has been the subject of extensive criticism, although the suggested replacement approaches of ‘structuralism’ and ‘humanism’ have proved to many incapable of providing a complete alternative to positivism. As a consequence, combinations of positivism and structuralism, and (more commonly) structuralism and humanism — resulting in the structuration and realism approaches — have emerged, which in turn have been rejected by some as inadequate compromises.

In their summary of these trends, Munton and Goudie (1984) refer to the mixed response of academics to epistemological change:

> Although the critiques of positivism are widely acknowledged throughout the literature of human geography and the roles of values and ideology, both implicit and explicit, in the conduct of research are generally recognized, acknowledgement of these changes should not be equated either with their endorsement or with their ready translation into programmes of research. Much empirical research retains a positivist frame of reference, even if its practitioners make less exorbitant claims for its explanatory powers than they did ten years ago (p. 34).

The danger of a rift between environmental and socio-economic study in rural areas may therefore be more apparent than real. Nevertheless, danger there is, particularly if structuralist approaches gain increasing credence in research and aspatial perspectives gain ground as a consequence.

This matter of the integration of ‘physical’ and ‘human’ elements is discussed at length by Johnston (1983) who undertakes a careful survey of available geographical literature in search of common ground between the two. His conclusion is that ‘much work falls in the middle ground; it contains very little which requires a detailed understanding of physical processes and not a great deal on the processes that drive human-created mechanisms’ (p. 132). He does isolate four areas of overlap:

(i) resource application;
(ii) people in the physical environment;
(iii) conflict over the environment;
(iv) human demands on the environment;

...which are of obvious relevance to those seeking a ‘core’ for rural studies. On reflection, however, he concludes that these ‘core’ areas are relatively underdeveloped, and cannot be considered as well integrated with either the ‘physical’ or the ‘human’ elements of the discipline. Although this analysis relates specifically to geography, Johnston’s concluding remarks have particular relevance to the position of rural studies:

> They [geographers] sit in an archipelago, with bridges linking them — some more firmly than others — to other disciplines. In an academic community which, for pragmatic reasons, must be sub-divided, this type of situation is highly desirable. But to emphasize certain bridges at the expense of others, particularly if this is done because of disciplinary paranoia rather than to advance scientific understanding, is potentially dangerous. The case for stronger links across the human/physical geography divide than, say, across those separating human geography from sociology and political science has yet to be proven, even for the study of resource analysis and management (p. 143).

The moral for rural studies is this: even though the danger of a split between environmental and socio-economic elements may be more apparent than real at present, the concept of an integrative and commonly cherished body of subject matter able to satisfy the requirements of all rural students, whatever their disciplinary background, may also be illusory. This conceptual conundrum requires far greater emphasis within rural studies, and should certainly not be ignored by rural researchers as has been the tendency thus far.

The issue of suitable analytical techniques for the
rural environment largely mirrors the various epistemological directions described above; that is, to what extent do we require specific techniques for rural areas studies? Scale questions are obviously important here, as analytical techniques (particularly of the positivist paradigm) which have been developed at the urban and regional scale may be inappropriate when dealing with the small and dispersed phenomena inherent in most definitions of rurality. Also of importance in this context are the particular disciplinary preferences of investigative method. The basic questionnaire techniques which have in the past offered one area of integrative method in cross-disciplinary terms, now have to vie with the fundamentalist participant-observation techniques of sociology and anthropology, and their close cousins the investigative semi-structured interview techniques which are becoming increasingly linked with studies of decision-making. There seems to have been very little cross-disciplinary methodological debate over the relative merits of different techniques, particularly in the case of assessing the accuracy of non-quantitative methods of investigation. More emphasis should certainly be given to these issues.

The final area of re-emphasis concerns the study of rural planning and policy-making. Ironically, although rurality itself may not be a sufficiently strong focus to withstand differential paradigmatic demands, the distribution of power and the operation of allocative mechanisms which impact on rural areas do offer some scope as an integrative focus for many rural studies. This will involve not only scrutinization of public sector agencies and the implementation of their policies, but also, crucially, an equally strong move towards understanding the actions of private sector decision-makers and their impact on rural communities and landscapes.

In Europe at least there appears to have been an unbridged divide between studies of rural planning in developed nations, and studies of rural development — the planned interventions by the central state in the economies of underdeveloped nations. Harriss (1982, p. 15) notes that:

this [rural development] strategy came to be formulated as a result of the general disenchantment with previous approaches to development planning at national and sectoral levels, and it is defined by its concern with equity objectives of various kinds — especially the reduction of inequalities in income and employment, and in access to public goods and services, and the alleviation of poverty.

Although the absolute difference in poverty levels and other inequalities between developed and developing nations should not be understated, there is nevertheless a striking resemblance between these objectives of rural development and those often prescribed for planning and policy-making in developed rural areas. It would certainly seem that a greater cross-fertilization of these themes is called for in the mutual interests of understanding policy constraints and possibilities in different rural environments.

Conclusion

Rural areas in all parts of the world face a somewhat uncertain future. In developed areas the traditional wisdom of depopulation has been swiftly and suddenly halted as counterurbanisation trends have become apparent. There is certainly as yet no broad consensus as to what post-industrial society has in store for these areas, either socio-economically for the communities concerned or environmentally in terms of landscape, land use and other conservation issues. In underdeveloped rural areas, the indecent persistence of poverty appears to defy all current attempts at amelioration, and concurrent environmental problems are only just receiving the emphasis achieved in developed areas. A proper understanding of these trends will require high levels of expertise from rural area studies.

This paper has emphasised three themes — concept, technique and policy/planning — which it has been suggested require considerable attention if rural studies are to sustain their current impetus. The arguments used have unashamedly been those of a geographer, and indeed many of the examples cited above are bound by the geographical discipline. Such bias is inevitable as there are very few super-scientists around who can of themselves achieve the true multidisciplinary status which would be required to discuss rural studies from all viewpoints. It is therefore recognised that some of the analysis and prognostication offered here will not be readily applicable to the situation as perceived within other disciplines. Indeed, Journal of Rural Studies warmly welcomes potential contributions expressing differing perspectives on these matters. It is to be hoped that by providing a forum for such international and multidisciplinary discussion and study we can all learn from each other and rid rural studies of at least some of their current parochialisms.

References


