Comment

Rural Studies: Modernism, Postmodernism and the ‘Post-rural’

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Abstract — In response to Philo [(1992b), Neglected rural geographies: a review, Journal of Rural Studies 8, 193–207], who calls for rural studies to take the study of ‘others’ more seriously, we argue the need to take postmodernism more seriously. The paper focuses upon the production of knowledge about rural areas by academics. In the narrative that we provide here, the ‘rural’ had a strong presence until Pahl’s critique of the rural-urban continuum which both diminished the status of the rural and emphasised the role of class in shaping particular spaces. Newby and his colleagues applied class analysis to agriculture, likewise undermining the significance of the rural. Further applications of general social theory, such as the political economy and restructuring approaches, show how modernist rural studies seem to be fighting a losing battle to posit the indispensability of the urban-rural division as an explanation; articulating and re-articulating the divide within a whole range of processes: economic, social and cultural. Rural social scientists have woven this modernist narrative, but, as Philo shows, one effect has been the neglect of certain social groups, cultures and identities. However, in contrast to Philo, we argue that a rather fundamental reassessment of social scientific approaches to the rural is required if these ‘neglected others’ are to be satisfactorily considered. We believe a ‘sociology of postmodernism’ would offer a more reflexive perspective on the processes which give rise to ‘the rural’. We thus call for an end to the use of universal or global concepts such as ‘rural’ (or the ‘urban’) and for a concern with the way places are ‘made’. This will entail a focus on ‘power’ as certain actors impose ‘their’ rurality on others. We term this the study of the ‘post-rural’.

Introduction

We should perhaps say, at the outset, that the thinking behind this paper was prompted by a recent article by Chris Philo (1992b). This was a review of Colin Ward’s book The Child in the Country (1990), which Philo uses as a platform to call for a rethinking of the rural studies project. In particular, he refers to a consideration of ‘others’ or marginalised groups and communities within rural areas — such as women, children, the elderly, the ill, the homeless, etc. — those who do not fall into the category of white, middle-class, middle-aged heterosexual men of sound mind and body.² It seems to us that Philo is making an important point, one which merits a more extensive treatment. Philo’s review seems to amount to a call for a more ‘postmodern’ rural social science, where diversity and plurality are put at the forefront of analysis and where the task of social science is to comprehend this ‘otherness’. He urges rural studies,
and rural geography in particular, to be aware of developments in social and cultural geography concerned with ‘recovering’ the geographies of these other human groupings:

This is not to claim the need for a dramatic ‘paradigm shift’ to a new orthodoxy; merely to suggest the possibility of stirring some additional ingredients into the mix of rural studies through conducting new inquiries into the situations and (particularly) the geographies of other rural peoples and also through deploying ‘other’ philosophical and methodological devices in the process (Philo. 1992b, p. 193. emphasis added).

Let us say at the outset that we are broadly supportive of Philo’s call. However, we would argue that this ‘stirring some additional ingredients’ is indicative of a changing focus for rural social science research, one which could be described as ‘post-modern’. This postmodern ‘turn’ would — contra Philo involve a dramatic ‘paradigm shift’ — though we would not use the term ourselves: within rural social science. Given the significant debate concerning postmodernism currently raging in the social sciences we felt that such a step should not be taken lightly. Like most contemporary social scientists we are keen to explore the implications of the postmodernist challenge more generally; specifically we are concerned with the implication for rural studies. In this case we are even less sure of the implications; a view which we suspect is shared by our colleagues. While abstract debates about postmodernism have caused difficulties in and of themselves, their application in particular contexts poses further problems. This, of course, is not unique to postmodernism.

Our starting point could be summed up as follows: to take the ‘other’ more seriously implies taking postmodernism more seriously too; we are uncertain as to what the practical consequence of such a task might be for rural studies, but it seems to be worth exploring. In a sense this paper represents a first attempt to think through this issue. Significantly, our initial response to write a ‘reply to Philo’ quickly broadened out into a sociological analysis of rural studies. We felt that in order to understand how and why Philo has called for this ‘new mix’ in rural studies we need a clearer understanding of how social science has traditionally approached the study of the ‘rural’. As the reader will see from our paper this has resulted in, first, an attempt to recast our understanding of our own (and the rural social science community’s) conception of knowledge about ‘the rural’; and second, a questioning of the construction of ‘the rural’ as an object of interest and analysis in itself. We make some attempt to situate these issues within wider social scientific debates.

We would also like to sound a note of caution. While we are broadly supportive of a call for a sociology of postmodernity we are keenly aware of the range of different interpretations of postmodernism that are in currency. Furthermore, there are also key tensions within each of these versions of postmodernism. We would like to oppose the attempt to simply dress up rural studies in some new postmodern, clothes. This is our ‘knee-jerk’ reaction to how we suspect many may well read Philo’s call for the additional ingredients: in short, we believe it should not mean ‘business as usual’. We do not think that such ‘façadism’ will benefit our understanding; in fact it is most likely to bring a nascent sociology of postmodernity within rural studies into disrepute. Rather, we would like to focus on the strands of the postmodern debate that highlight questions about knowledge. These accounts invariably stress a crucial issue: reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to an awareness of the contingency of individual concepts, but the constructed nature of analysis itself (see Woolgar, 1988a). In short, we are sceptical of claims that we have recently entered a ‘postmodern society’ and that what is needed is a ‘postmodern social science’ to examine this ‘society’. What we are much more sympathetic to is the endeavour of developing a ‘sociology of postmodernism’ which explains the appearance of postmodern explanations within their social context.

Postmodernism: some definitions

Before we develop this analysis, we will try to clarify our terminology. Authors seeking to draw upon postmodernism often seem to assume that there is a coherent and generally agreed ‘position’; however, this is not the case. In order to avoid confusion we aim here to root our analysis in one particular interpretation, one which stresses the continuities between modernism and postmodernism (there is no clear break between the two) and which thus allows sociological interpretations of this shift to be made. Other starting points may well yield different arguments; however, we must begin somewhere.

Our first task is to highlight and define some key concepts. Categories such as modernisation, postmodernisation, modernity and postmodernity are often subsumed under the headings of modernism and postmodernism. ‘Modernisation’ generally refers to stages of social development based upon industrialisation, science and technology and the
growth of the nation-state; while post-modernisation has come to be associated with the work of writers such as Baudrillard who portray the triumph of culture 'saturating' social relations with cultural signs signifying the 'end of the social' (Baudrillard, 1982; see Featherstone, 1991, for a useful commentary). Modernity and postmodernity are associated with different epochs with modernity characterising dominant social formations in the post-Renaissance West while postmodernity suggests a new social order relatively distinct from modernity. In passing, it is worth stressing that the debates about postmodernism have demonstrated that little attention has been paid to the analysis of modernity. This adds to the problem, in that commentators, if they are not to assume a common understanding of modernity in a particular context, have to say as much about modernity as about post-modernity.

Modernism and postmodernism can be characterised as cultural movements in particular historical periods; modernism in this sense can be traced back to the nineteenth century and is associated with the work of Joyce, Yeats, Proust, Picasso, Matisse, etc. The term postmodernism gained its cultural resonance during the 1960s amongst artists such as Cage, Burroughs and Sontag, mainly as a reaction against the institutionalisation of modernism (Featherstone, 1991, p. 7). More recently, writers such as Jencks (1987) have discussed postmodernism with respect to debates within architecture providing exemplars of the work of architects like Robert Venturi and counterposing them to modernists such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Jencks (1987, p. 6), who is often accredited with popularising the term postmodernism, defines postmodern architecture as being 'doubly coded'; ... half modern and half conventional, in its attempt to communicate with both the public and a concerned minority, usually architects. In talking about double-coding, Jencks is coming close to the concerns of contemporary 'continental philosophy', namely post-structuralism. Jameson (1984) takes a different position; he argues, like Harvey (1989), that postmodernism is a cultural expression of late capitalist accumulation. Such an argument allows some writers to locate the shift towards postmodernity in the very recent past; Cooke (1988, p. 482), for instance, argues that a 'definite break' has occurred during the 1980s, but 'prefiguratively' from 1975 in the socio-economic dynamics of the U.K. In what follows we adopt the modernity/postmodernity couplet but we will not be concerned here with modernism as either a cultural movement or an expression of economic organisation. We wish to characterise modernity as 'a perception of the world' (Bauman 1992, p. 12). The perception of the world that most interests us is that found in social science, particularly social theory. The implication is that our analysis is pitched as an abstract level; it is primarily concerned with the nature of knowledge and its production. We will demonstrate that the exploration of such questions has considerable implications for practical research into the 'rural'.

Specifically, we are concerned with social scientific approaches to the rural (principally in the U.K.). This amounts to more than simply rural studies, which is a recent perspective, and we are broadly concerned with sociological and geographical studies of the rural. As such, we are taking a rather unusual step; we are exploring how academics have produced meaning and explanation. The full significance of this twist is that we are exploring our own production of knowledge: this is usually termed 'reflexivity'. Clearly, an option open to us would also have been — as Philo suggests — to explore the production of knowledge of 'others' in the 'rural'. We are not against this, but we want to offer an even more radical step by highlighting how the manner in which 'we' (social scientists interested in the rural) produce our knowledge at one and the same time marginalises groups or places: it constructs these 'others' as 'others'. In what follows we will chart the development of the social scientific study of the rural areas of the U.K. Firstly, however, we outline the main points of Bauman’s analysis of the modernity/postmodernity shift.

Toward a sociology of postmodernity

A key text in the debate about postmodernity in a sociological context is Zygmunt Bauman’s recent book Intimations of Postmodernity (1992), and we have used this as the general framework in which to
situate our analysis of rural studies. 7 Bauman (p. 93) asks the question, 'why do we need a concept of postmodernity'? His response is that it is not to capture or to articulate what is novel at the current stage of history; other concepts — such as 'post-industrial' or 'post capitalist' have already done this. Rather, Bauman argues, it is only valid if it generates a social scientific discourse which theorises different aspects of contemporary experience, or theorises them in a different way' (p. 93). Bauman traces the origins of modernity from the entrenchment of the modern absolutist state, ushered in by a crisis in the traditional vehicles of social control. This meant 'first and foremost the centralisation of social powers previously localised' leading to 'the transformation of control into a consciously administered, purposeful activity conducted by specifically trained experts' (p. 6). This state-led control prompted supra-communal uniformity: 'Universality as an ideal and a measure of social improvement was born of this need of the modern state' (p. 7).

This was bolstered by the Enlightenment ideals of 'rational government': the role of the modern state was to make society and this was now to be a society of rational individuals. The universalistic ambitions of the modern state weakened localised mechanisms of social reproduction. 'Diversity was seen as a temporary phenomenon on the way to a true and universal way of life. Ultimately these states, in the north of Europe, would rationally administer their own territories and, in the colonialist phase, other 'local' territories as well

According to Bauman, intellectual reflection on the

7Clearly, we could have taken other interpretations of the sociology of postmodernity; however, we felt that it would avoid a prolonged review of the various approaches if we rooted our argument in one particular source and our reasons for alloying ourselves with Bauman should become clear later. Nevertheless we also feel Bauman’s thesis has some shortcomings. Not least of these, particularly for a newcomer to the postmodernism debate, is the term itself. Bauman lays great store by the continuities with modernism, but — and this is crucial — the condition of postmodernity has distinctive features of its own. Bauman (1997 p. 188) goes on to stress that a theory of postmodernity can only be constructed from a different set of assumptions to those of modernity.

It is worth noting that Giddens (1990, p. 41), writing about the same phenomena, roots his analysis in modernity claiming that features which accord with Bauman’s sociology of postmodernity are already present — in fact quintessentially so — in the sociology of modernity. One interpretation of this confusing situation lies in the narrative structure of the two accounts and the faith that intellectuals found a world reluctant to conform to the modernist model and attempted to explain away the gap between the model and the predominant features of social life. Nevertheless, intellectuals have sought to re-establish their social function. They have begun to abandon modernist conceptions such as Weber’s ‘ideal type’ of rational behaviour or Marx’s project of universal emancipation, which had evaluated all varieties of social action as derivations from the unstoppably rising norm (p. 39). The social as a cohesive totality has come under scrutiny; the hierarchy of power existing prior to the interaction of individuals and groups through the concept of structure has been questioned. There is a new concern with process whereby ‘solid’ realities are construed and reconstrued in the course of interaction. The concept of agency has been expanded and it is now situated within a fluid and changeable social setting, kept in motion by the interaction of the plurality of agencies. The ‘new paradigm’ for sociology, then, looks to ‘systemic indifference, cultural plurality and, indeed, to the

appropriate infinity of power became the major characteristic of the West European mental climate known as modernity:

The remarkable resilience of purpose so typical of the modern mentality was grounded in the unshakeable belief that the efforts have history and invincible reason on their side and that the ultimate success was not just attainable in principle, but a foregone conclusion. The conviction had in turn all the backing of social, economic and political realities (pp. 12–13).

Sociology was born into this ‘modern mentality’, from which it derived its central characteristics. It concerned itself with the processes of socialisation, hegemony, control, civilisation, etc., all the processes whereby seemingly random agents were integrated into the social whole. Within sociology the universalising ambitions of modernity were turned into an analytical framework for making sense of reality. By concerning itself with ‘structure’ and ‘system’ it created pre-individual forces which brought order to free agents. ‘Society’ was the largest analytical totality and this became identified with the nation state.

Importantly for Bauman postmodernity does not constitute a sudden break with modernity; rather it represents a reflexive turn: it is ‘modernity conscious of its true nature’ (p. 187). Hence, the irony that the characteristics of postmodernity — institutionalised pluralism, variety, contingency, etc. — have been produced by modern society. In the struggle for universality, homogeneity, etc., these features were viewed in the modernist project as ‘signs of failure’.

Post-marxist socialism and post-Enlightenment intellectuals found a world reluctant to conform to the modernist model and attempted to explain away the gap between the model and the predominant features of social life. Nevertheless, intellectuals have sought to re-establish their social function. They have begun to abandon modernist conceptions such as Weber’s ‘ideal type’ of rational behaviour or Marx’s project of universal emancipation, which had evaluated all varieties of social action as derivations from the unstoppably rising norm (p. 39). The social as a cohesive totality has come under scrutiny; the hierarchy of power existing prior to the interaction of individuals and groups through the concept of structure has been questioned. There is a new concern with process whereby ‘solid’ realities are construed and reconstrued in the course of interaction. The concept of agency has been expanded and it is now situated within a fluid and changeable social setting, kept in motion by the interaction of the plurality of agencies. The ‘new paradigm’ for sociology, then, looks to ‘systemic indifference, cultural plurality and, indeed, to the
waywardness of constitutive agencies’ (p. 54). There are now an indefinable number of meaning-generating agencies all ‘subject to their own respective logics and armed with their own facilities of truth generation’ (p. 35).

The concept of ‘society’ must now be reworked for it no longer exists as a sovereign totality prior to its parts, or as one bestowing meaning upon its parts. Instead, Bauman proposes the concept of ‘sociality’ which expresses the processional modality of social reality: relationships are made and remade — they are not determined by some overarching entity (i.e. society or mode of production). Bauman (p. 190) argues that all structures are ‘emergent accomplishments’ and this focuses our attention on the way that identities, relationships and societies are constituted and assembled.

Thus, Bauman characterises the emergence of a ‘postmodern sociology’ in much the same terms as he describes the emergence of a postmodern condition. His objective is to argue for something different — a ‘sociology of postmodernity’ — a sociology that is reflexively aware of its own constitution. His argument is that certain tendencies and strands were produced within (modernist) social theory — the work of Garfinkel and Schutz, for instance — which undermined the ‘orthodox consensus’ of Parsonsian structural functionalism and certain strains of structuralist Marxism. While it was ‘a postmodern world which lent animus and momentum to postmodern sociology’ and while this sociology ‘took impetus from dissatisfactions with visions born of the universalist aspiration of the western, capitalist form of life’, nevertheless this sociology still conceived of itself in ‘universalistic, extemporal and exspatial (sic) terms’ (p. 41). It saw itself as a rectification of previous blunders, as a finding of the right direction, ‘rather than a self-adaptation to the transformed object of study’ (p. 41).

What Bauman tries to develop is an analysis of sociology as itself an event in history. A history, furthermore, located in a local as opposed to a universal setting. This activity he terms a ‘sociology of postmodernity’ (as distinct from ‘postmodern sociology’). Following Bauman, we would characterise our enterprise in this paper as a ‘sociology of postmodernity’; one that is specifically concerned with the social scientific studies of the rural in Britain. In order to carry out this task in full we recognise the need to take account both of the institutional context of rural studies and the development of the institutions in which it is practised. Such a comprehensive task is beyond the scope of this paper. We limit ourselves here to an analysis of the social scientific discourse on rurality. By tracing through the recent history of this discourse we can put current calls for a postmodern perspective in rural studies into a broader context.

An archaeology of social scientific rural studies in Britain

(a) Modernism, order and the urban–rural distinction

It is tempting on a first reading to associate modernism with urbanism; and by implication the rural with the pre-modern. Implicit in such a construction is a narrative of progressive modernisation. We want to argue that the rural is bound even more closely to the urban than simply through a diffusion of modernisation: in fact it is just as ‘modern’ as the urban. For example, Raymond Williams’ (1973) work offers a very nuanced and sensitive interpretation of industrialisation and how the distinction between the ‘country and the city’ is made. It can perhaps best be argued that the process of industrialisation was distinctive; distinctive in the way that it ‘rewrote and fixed’ the rural within the ambit of the urban. In this sense it could be argued that it is the distinction between the urban and rural as opposites that gives meaning and power to both. We can also see this formulation in Marx and Engels’ German Ideology, where the urban and the rural are linked dialectically, not as separate realms (Arthur, 1970, p. 69).

We would argue that the desire to hold the rural and the urban as separate is a characteristically modernist impulse. A good illustration of this can be found in the work of Matless (1990, p. 187), where he discusses modernism and preservation in England in the 1930s. Matless believes that the distinction between order and disorder was far more significant than other oppositions such as new–old, or rural–urban. Thus, it is possible to redefine the tidy image of the rural with the urban within modernisation and this is contrasted with the pre-modern, disordered, countryside. The salience of order was both the active creation and maintenance of the neat urban and rural landscapes, and a clear demarcation between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’. Matless (1990, p. 186) also quotes Abercrombie, a key figure in the emergent Town and Country Planning movement, to the effect that ‘the essence of Town and Country Planning consists of the frank recognition of these two elements ... as representing opposite but complementary poles of influence’. Such a conception of planning implied — or internalised — the necessary and clear division of urban and rural. Thus, we might conclude that the modernist
tendency was for tidy and clear divisions: urban and rural. This could be, and was, contrasted with the perceived threat to modernist sensibilities created by the sprawl of suburbia and the blurring of the urban–rural divide.6

Despite the universalising tendencies of modernity, within particular territories the divide between the urban and the rural has been seen as a source of differentiation in social life. This is partly linked to received conceptions of urban and rural space. To the ‘romantics’, for instance, the rural epitomised nature, fresh air and purity and the countryside seemed to embody a nostalgic past, a simpler purer age. In this ‘anti-urban’ tradition it was the city which was the ‘wilderness’ — ‘a place of base instincts’ (Short, 1991, p. 31). The countryside came to represent everything the city was not; it offered rustic peace and tranquillity, an escape from the ‘dirty utilitarian logic of industry and commerce’ (Chambers, 1990, p. 33).

These conceptions of the rural have also been bound up with national identity. Howkins (1986) has examined how, in the early years of the twentieth century, rural images came to represent a ‘real England’, where ‘men and women still live naturally ... an organic society, a ‘real’ one, as opposed to the unnatural or ‘unreal’ society of the town’ (p. 63). It is worth noting Weiner’s (1981, ch. 4) analysis of created traditions and the rural. Here he situates the late-nineteenth century efforts of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement with respect to the cultural and built environment as the creation of an oppositional pole to urban industrialisation.

Hence, this impulse to re-inforce the identity of the rural and the urban is a theme in the modernist sensibility. This is the ‘England in the mind’ (to paraphrase Pahl), for the lived experience was a country where four-fifths of the population were located in urban areas, where a commercial agriculture was coming into being, shedding labour to industry and expanding output to meet the demands of the urban population (Lowe and Buller, 1990). The cultural significance of the countryside seemed to be increased by these developments; it offered an escape from, but was at one and the same time contained within, the onward march of modernity.

We believe that it is instructive to consider how this ‘discourse of order’ underpins the social studies of the rural which emerged from this overall context. Part of our intention here is to point to the way in which academic discourses on the ‘rural’ reinforce or undermine discourses emanating from elsewhere. The academic discourse is not closed, it draws in elements from elsewhere and is itself drawn into other discourses. Following Foucault, we believe that the construction of these discourses must be seen as the practice of power. Thus academics, like policy-makers, pressure groups, etc., must be seen as actors who, through their discursive practices, attempt to make themselves powerful.9

In the following sub-sections of this part of the paper we attach labels, such as modern, early modern, etc., to the different approaches. These are at times a little overdrawn, but they are meant to be indicative of the completion or rupture of a modernist discourse; they are not meant to refer to specific time periods. To the extent that they are arranged historically they may be considered as an aid to the narrative structure of the paper; it should be pointed out that many of the approaches are co-existent and current.

(b) Community studies: early modern rural studies

Most accounts of the development of social studies of rural Britain begin with community studies and we take these as our starting point (for an overview see Harper, 1989). According to Newby (1986), community studies developed from two traditions. The first was structural-functional anthropology, as developed in the United States of America during the 1930s; the other was the British conception of rural culture as distinct and somehow ‘natural’. This was evident in some of the earliest examples of the rural community study. Arensberg and Kimball, for instance, in their inter-war study of small scale farming in County Clare (published in 1940), saw economic activity as bound up with kinship networks. Country people were different, with characteristics and relationships distinct from those of urban dwellers. Further studies of this kind by Williams (1956) and Rees (1950) highlighted the

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6 In this way it is possible to make sense of groups such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England who were formed during this modernist period and who initially sought to support rail and road building and the construction of electricity pylons. They tried to ‘tidy up’ by supporting clear transport routes, thus leaving country lanes ‘rural’.

7 Bauman uses the term ‘discursive formation’ (derived from Foucault) to assess the sociological enterprise. He believes that the ‘fuzziness of its boundaries is the major and decisive circumstance preventing the sociological discourse from ever turning into a fully-fledged formation (1992, p. 74). Yet the efforts to elevate sociology to the status of ‘formation’ cannot stop; it must continually justify its existence. Thus, right from its (modernist) beginnings it has sought to effectively intervene in the world; it sought to rationally administer society, and provide solutions to ‘social problems’. Its practitioners, in other words, sought to wield power.
relationship between family and economic activity which was deemed to give continuity and stability to the village communities. Nevertheless, there was a recognition that these social systems were threatened by 'alien', 'urban', 'modern' processes of change. For instance, Williams (1963) saw patterns of development as reflecting an urban way of life. These were dynamic, while the traditional way of life was characterised as static and unable to replace the loss of community that development inevitably entailed. Alwyn Rees (1950, p. 170) in his study of Llangihangel saw the community as virtually a 'closed system'. He stressed 'the completeness of the traditional rural society — involving the cohesion of family, kindred and neighbours — and its capacity to give the individual a sense of belonging'. He contrasted such a 'timeless' unit with the rootless, alien English culture which encroached on Llangihangel, and threatened its existence. Change and disruption were somehow 'unWelsh', imposed from the outside on the 'real' Welsh community. In the view of one critical commentator 'there was a limited sense of process and, more importantly, no examination of internal contradictions or tensions which might fuel or amplify future change' (Day, 1979, p. 449).

What this approach sought to understand was how rural community cultures and traditions were sustained in the face of externally imposed social and economic change (usually characterised as modernisation). Rural communities were portrayed as stable and static, harmonious and consensual, underpinned by close (kinship) relations and an ethos of co-operation. The threat to these communities came from urban society: 'the community . . . became perceived as essentially undifferentiated, harmonious and wholesome, fighting a rear-guard action against external encroachment' (Newby, 1986, p. 212).

In these studies, social science came to accept two assumptions: first, that rural communities represented a space that lay outside the influence of modernity; second, that the forces of modernity were 'closing in', threatening the future of traditional social systems. Often this was overlain with a desire to preserve a national culture — as in the Welsh studies of Alwyn Rees — which was bound up with the rural.

These assumptions were formalised in the concepts (derived from Tonnies) of 'gemeinschaft' and 'gesellschaft': the former referred to 'close human relationships developed through kinship linked to place through a common habitat, and sharing co-operation and co-ordinate action for a common good' (Harper, 1989, p. 62), while the latter referred to impersonal ties and relationships, where the common good resulted from the individual actions of individuals who were part of a much larger social body. For Newby (1986, p. 212) 'a cultural convention (romanticism) became a theoretical proposition (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft) which often defined the research 'findings' of these community studies'.

What undermined this approach was Pahl's critique of the rural–urban continuum. Pahl conducted a series of studies in Hertfordshire during the early 1960s. Most post-war community studies (as Pahl notes — 1965, p. 5) had been conducted in 'traditional' settlements in peripheral areas relatively untouched by the 'pernicious' effects of urbanism. Pahl wished to examine the 'urban' characteristics of rural areas, particularly in what he called the 'metropolitan' villages of South East England. In short, he wished to provide an answer to the question 'where is the city and what is its effect?' (1970, p. 270, emphasis in the original). Pahl concentrated on the effects of middle-class incursions into village life. He showed how a mobile middle class was able to move into attractive village surroundings while at the same time maintaining its connections to urban society. So the middle class conducted much of its life outside the village; work, friendship networks, leisure activities, shopping, etc., all take place elsewhere. However, 'unlike, say, the suburbs, the village situation involves interaction with other status groups' (1970, p. 274). And this interaction was likely to take place within an imagined 'real community'. Yet ironically:

The middle class people came into rural areas in search of a meaningful community and by their presence help to destroy whatever community was there. That is not to say that the middle-class people change or influence the working class. They simply make them aware of national class divisions thus polarising the local society (1965, p. 18, emphasis in the original).

The close relationship between the middle and working classes within villages seems, for Pahl, to be the distinguishing characteristic of rural communities. It is only in rural villages, he argues, that 'groups which, in the 'normal' urban situation, would be socially distant are forced into an unusual consciousness of each other' (1970, p. 275) thus helping to 'crystallise a class situation' (1970, p. 277 fn). What is sociologically interesting about such communities is the extent to which 'national' influences (such as class) come to shape the character of the 'local'. Thus Pahl concludes 'the rural sociologists' main concern, as I see it, is to explore the impact of the national on the local' (1970, p. 294).

For Pahl, the gemeinschaft/gesellschaft dichotomy could not be maintained. He found that within
metropolitan villages there existed a range of 'urban' values and lifestyles. Furthermore, within the city could be found urban villages: thus 'the gemeinschaft exists within the gesselschaft and the gesselschaft within the gemeinschaft' (1970, p. 10). The practical effect is that the 'rural' is brought more fully within the ambit of modernity. The fears of the early community study authors are realised: the 'modern' overcomes the 'traditional' and the distinction is lost. In Pahl's view there are no rural people, just people who, for various reasons, happen to live in rural areas. In contemporary terms, there is no distinctive 'rural identity'.

(c) Rural class structures: modernist rural studies

Pahl was willing to admit the presence of urban and rural differences, however, suggesting that low population densities could restrict access to facilities and occupational choice. But this did not amount to any necessary correlation between such styles of living and 'rurality'. Subsequently, Newby argued that the 'rural' was of no explanatory significance; it was essentially an empirical category (Newby, 1980, 1986).

However, while the distinctiveness of rural communities had been effectively challenged, Pahl had emphasised the need for the study of the effect of the 'national' on the 'local', stressing in particular the role of class. This theme was taken up in a series of publications by Newby and his colleagues during the 1970s. In our terms, their work can be characterised as a more full-blooded 'modernist' rural social science.

Books such as The Differential Worker and Property, Paternalism and Power were an assessment of the agricultural community, and were concerned with the positions of the farmer and agricultural worker within the class structure. Furthermore, this work utilised general sociological concepts, such as class, to understand agrarian social relations. At first sight this new approach came close to replacing a rural sociology with a sociology of agriculture (Newby, 1986). Perhaps a more appropriate taxonomy is suggested by Newby et al.'s (1978) book Property, Paternalism and Power, that is, a focus on class.

Property, Paternalism and Power was an analysis of capitalist farmers in the class structure. Newby et al. were concerned to show how farmers maintained their dominance within rural areas particularly in the face of the threats posed by urbanisation and industrialisation. The challenges to farmer/landowner dominance took a variety of forms — economic, social, political and cultural. Property rather than occupation was seen as the defining principle of the rural class structure so farmers and middle-class incomers could both line up on the side of conservation — farmers to keep out other employers who might drive up wage costs and middle-class incomers to preserve property values. According to the theoretical analysis in Property, Paternalism and Power this alliance went against the 'real' interests of farm workers who, unfortunately, did not seem to be conscious of this state of affairs, as they were trapped in the 'ideology' of localism. In this analysis, the 'local' and the 'community' are seen as components of the dominant ideology, thus lining up farmers and farmworkers on the same side. This allows for the maintenance of traditional class relations.

The approach adopted in this work derives from the application of class analysis to the farmer/landowner/farmworker/middle-class categories identified in the case study. A set of pre-existing categories are brought to bear on the 'lived experiences' of these social groups and are used as analytical tools to arrive at logical purifications of phenomenal forms (Saunders, 1981, p. 25). This work is profoundly 'modern' in the sense we identified earlier. It places agriculture quite firmly within the national class structure and identified property as the defining characteristic of agricultural class relations. Analytically, the modernist distinction of the 'rural' — which has broken down — is only rescued by its articulation to a new category: class. Tellingly, 'localism' is identified as a mystification of the more fundamental class relations.

(d) The political economy of agriculture and the restructuring of the rural: high modernism

Newby's work in the 1970s came close to identifying the rural and the agricultural as synonymous and in so doing further diminished any distinctiveness that the 'rural' might have possessed. While class had been deployed (after Weber) to maintain the modernist version of the 'rural' within Newby's analysis, the political economy approach used agricultural modernisation to achieve the same end (after Marx). We might see this as a full flowering of modernist social science in the rural context in the sense that the changing economic organisations (seen as a complete break from past — pre-modern
Agriculture was conceptualised from the perspective of political economy as a distinct sphere of production, one characterised by certain (pre-modern?) peculiarities — obstacles — to fully fledged capitalist development (see, for instance, Mann and Dickinson, 1978). According to Marsden et al. (1986, 1990), in a summary of this perspective, the theoretical and empirical concerns of the political economy approach revolved around four main themes: first the ways in which capitalist penetration of agriculture took place and the reasons why it was unsuccessful; second, the distinctive nature of agrarian class structures; third, the transformation and resistance of the family farm and its role in advanced capitalist agriculture; and finally, a concentration upon the relationship between agriculture and the state. Hence:

The distinctiveness of the rural community that was so apparent in the early rural sociological literature was now largely replaced by a focus on the distinctiveness of agriculture and its links with other parts of the agro-food complex. Arguments centred particularly on either the integrative or exceptional nature of agricultural production (Marsden et al. (1990), p. 3, emphasis in original).

The modernist assumptions of these concerns are apparent with the focus very much on how agriculture was integrated into the capitalist economy. As the analysis of agri-business also included international concerns this focus threatened to obliterate the distinctiveness of the 'rural': agribusiness is global, the 'rural' is local. Perhaps it was only in the concern with the marginal or exceptional — the 'small family farm', the crofter, farm households, etc. — and those localities dominated by these forms that the rural could still be found. Whatmore (forthcoming) has argued that the emphasis on 'global' institutions has sometimes portrayed these as 'all encompassing' yet much of European agriculture lies outside their ambit. Thus while, on the one hand, the political economy approach has rejected the analytical separation of agriculture from wider processes of industrial change, on the other, there is an acknowledgment that much agricultural production is far from integrated into the global economy. Following van der Ploeg (1992), Whatmore warns against a unilinear, deterministic model of agricultural development. Thus the 'exceptional' status of agriculture seems to remain intact.

For a while rural studies came to be associated with the analysis of agriculture and this seemed to offer another lifeline to those who wished to maintain the urban-rural distinction. However, from within the 'restructuring approach', Rees (1984) argued that there is nothing particularly distinctive about agriculture. The predominance of agricultural production in rural areas simply reflects historical patterns of investment; it is just one instance of more general trends and future patterns of investment may be quite different. He even doubted Newby's view that land and property relations are distinct within agriculture. For Rees agriculture is simply another instance of capitalist production.

Throughout the 1980s the restructuring approach gained ground in rural studies, becoming perhaps the most influential perspective by the end of the decade (Marsden and Murdoch, 1990). In outlining the main points of this approach we have drawn heavily on John Lovering's (1989) excellent review of the restructuring debate.

The roots of the restructuring approach lie in Marxist political economy. The Marxist view of capitalist production highlights the 'underlying logic', the 'hidden rationale', of uneven development under capitalism. Here production is governed by profit-seeking; the aim of economic activity is the generation of profits by individual firms. In the course of seeking profit, capital will attempt to dominate labour to allow the capture of surplus value. Thus capitalist development is characterised by social conflicts. Lovering identifies three uses of the term 'restructuring' in the literature:

First, it refers to the way capitalist enterprises respond to changing competition by altering their products or services and the way production and distribution are organised. Periodically, these changes will significantly alter the number and kinds of jobs these firms provide. Second, it refers to the way that these changes result in consequential changes in the way economic activity is organised across geographical space, through the creation and destruction of spatial divisions of labour... Third, the restructuring approach is concerned to explicate some of the links between the spatial division of labour and the geographic pattern of social relations (p. 100).

These concerns led to a consideration of the most appropriate spatial unit of analysis. The types of changes that the restructuring literature identified led to the adoption of 'localities' as the most meaningful units for research as 'most people live, work, and form their immediate social relationships within a restricted geographical area' (ibid.). However, the concern with capitalist production relations and the market means that these local areas are tied into general patterns of change.

Initially the debate was couched in terms of 'uneven
development' where regions and nations were
typically characterised by levels of capitalist
penetration (echoes here of political economy
approaches to agriculture). According to Lovering
there were some inherent problems with this type of
analysis, notably that 'theory was pitched at a very
general level, throwing little light on specific
empirical cases' (p. 206). These weaknesses derived
from the political economy approach upon which
the restructuring approach was based. Firstly, the
abstract categories of Marxist analysis were necess-
arily at some remove from identifiable empirical
categories: 'This means that abstract analysis in the
Marxist sense does not really say very much that is
useful in researching concrete situations' (ibid.).
Secondly, the restructuring approach put a lot of
emphasis on the reproduction of labour power but it
was becoming evident, through the work of feminist
writers, that this reproduction was the result of a
wide number of processes dependent on complex
sets of social relations. Focusing on the demands of
capital was simply reductionist. 'A more sensitive
kind of analysis was needed, one which still started
from the analysis of capitalist accumulation, rather
than from a description of given spatial units . . . but
which could also provide new purchase on the
specificity of individual nations, regions, and local-
ities' (Lovering, lY89, p. 207).

The central tension in this work was the desire, on
the one hand, to identify the causal mechanisms
which gave rise to specific spatial effects while, on
the other, trying to retain the specificity and unique-
ness of particular places and sets of social relations:
as Massey (1984, p. 300) put it, 'the challenge is to
hold the two sides together; to understand the
general underlying causes while at the same time
recognising and appreciating the importance of the
specific and the unique'. This would mean holding
on to the central tenets concerned with capitalist
production while incorporating other (non-
economic) social relations. For Lovering (1989, p.
207) the 'maturing' of the restructuring approach
consisted of its ability to confront the non-economic
dimensions.

Again, within this work the status of the rural is
downplayed. Rural areas figure as distinctive only to
the extent that they could be seen as important
locations for capital investment. One significant
consideration in location decision-making is the
availability and quality of labour power. As Urry
notes (1984, p. 55) notes, 'provided there is or could be
sufficient labour in a 'rural' area then expansion may
well take place in that (green field) site rather than
in alternative urban areas'. Moreover, 'the organisa-
tion of the resulting local civil societies assumes a
particular importance in the response of individual
localities to economic restructuring and change'
(ibid.). The (re)location of manufacturing or service
industries in rural areas was likely to further
diminish any rural urban distinction. Again, what
was of importance was the specific development
trajectories of localities. These could not simply be
'read off' from some underlying logic of capital, yet
neither could they be seen as simply unique and
indeterminate. Rural localities were bound into the
(uneven) processes of restructuring.

(c) Localities, identities and difference: late or post-
modernism?

A note of caution was sounded by some writers in
the mid-1980s. The concern was now expressed that
the distinctiveness ascribed to individual localities
was being obscured by the global patterns of
development; the processes of restructuring seemed
to ultimately determine the shape of the local (and
the rural). The emergent problem with explanations
of uneven development in general seemed to be the
sheer difficulty of holding the big, totalising, stories
together while allowing the little stories to be told.
This 'tension' threw up the following questions: what
is the nature of the system which the approach is
concerned to explicate? And, how determinate is
this system of particular outcomes in particular
places? It seemed that the study of localities might
be a useful way of approaching these questions.
Localities were of interest because they were places
where wider processes could be observed and also
because the interaction of various social processes in
particular places may create combination effects
which would feed back into these general processes
thus generating 'new causal entities' [Lovering
(1989), p. 213; see also Savage et al. (1987)].
Furthermore, research should be concerned with
causes 'because this will reveal points of potential
change' (Lovering, 1989, p. 214).

An impulse for locality studies also came from social
theory — especially the work of Giddens on struc-
turation and time-space distanciation — as well as
mainstream political economy (see Giddens, 1984,
p. 132 et seq.). It is from this source that the term
'locale' comes: the physical setting of institutions
within which certain social practices are contained.
A locality is a place where there is a distinctive
institutional mix giving rise to an identifiable local
economy and culture (see Thrift and Williams, 1987,
postmodernity. On one hand Cooke (1989) - the
Again, there are tensions within this movement to
of motifs that once appeared fixed. The latter he
courses; an emphasis on 'difference'; and, a reversal
contemporary social science. Cooke characterises
this 'fault-line' in terms of: a weakening of universal-
opens a retrospective on locality research with a
ment. On the other, in dealing with the specificity
and contingency of social relations in particular
places, a retreat was made to a (localised) 'weaker',
more indeterminate, position. In terms of the
tenereal analysis being presented here it is a shift
from late- to post-modernism.

This latter form of analysis has been pursued, in
different ways by Massey (1991a) and Cooke (1989),
amongst others. These authors have — in stages —
taken locality studies away from the 'strong'
version of the restructuring approach: one characterised as 'strong'
and the other as 'weak'. On the one hand, the
literature rests on strong theoretical claims associ-
ated with (global) patterns of (uneven) develop-
ment. On the other, in dealing with the specificity
and contingency of social relations in particular
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Again, there are tensions within this movement to
postmodernity. On one hand Cooke (1989) — the
co-ordinator of the ESRC Localities programme —
opens a retrospective on locality research with a
discussion of the geological 'fault-line' opening up in
contemporary social science. Cooke characterises
this 'fault-line' in terms of: a weakening of universal-
sing discourses and the revaluation of local dis-
courses; an emphasis on 'difference'; and, a reversal
of motifs that once appeared fixed. The latter he
discusses in relation to economic restructuring
(Cooke, 1989, p. 15) At the end of the article
Cooke pulls back from the strong version of post-
modernity (and in stress on relativism) by explain-
ing the 'fault-line' as a consequence of 'the creative
destruction' implicit in capitalist development
(Cooke, 1989, p. 25). We would characterise this,
after Bauman (1992, p. 188), as an attempt to see
post-modernisation as a corruption or crisis of
modernity.

On the other hand, in what must represent a
significant step, Doreen Massey now sees the local-
ity as 'constructed out of a particular constellation of
social relations, meeting and weaving together at a
particular focus' (1991b, p. 28). Places have multiple
meanings and 'multiple identities'. Just as 'indivi-
duals' identities are not aligned with either place or
class' — they are 'probably constructed out of both,
as well as a whole complex of other things, most
especially race and gender — so places are con-
structed out of the juxtaposition, the intersection,
the articulation, of multiple social relations' and
therefore do not have single pre-given identities
(1991a, p. 276, emphasis in the original). This, we
would argue, is more closely aligned with a post-
modern sociology.

Like Philo, Massey places contingency and identity
at the centre of her analysis and would, therefore,
seem to have shifted into a postmodern frame-of-
reference. However, in Massey's text there is no
acknowledgement of what the implications of such a
move might be. Our key argument here is that there
is a need to acknowledge and confront such a shift in
its full complexity.

At this stage we return to our point of entry into this
debate: Philo's (1992b) call for a new research focus
for rural studies. His concern with 'other' groupings
and communities has an affinity with Massey's
approach to the multiple identities of places. How-
ever, there is some indication that Philo does not
fully acknowledge the shift that has taken place
here. In another publication he seems to feel that a
straightforward splicing together of approaches
might be sufficient. Hence:

on some occasions it will be appropriate to employ
either humanistic or Marxist concepts to guide sub-
stantive inquiries whilst on other occasions (and
especially when theorising in structurationist terms) it
will be appropriate to find ways of combining both
88).

In a co-authored piece it might be unfair to attribute
this directly to Philo but there is some evidence in
'Neglected Rural Geographies . . .' that he endorses
this view. In his review of The Child in the Country
Philo argues that Ward examines both 'the geog-
raphy of children' and 'children's geographies'. For
Philo this illustrates, on the one hand, 'the forces of
spatial change impacting on their lives 'from
without' and, on the other, 'the encounters with
everyday spaces shaping their lives from within' (p.
196). The former refers to structure (notably the
restructuring of capitalist agriculture into larger
units and the 'over-ordering of the landscape' by the
land use planning system) and the latter to agency
(how children seek out and use 'their' spaces).

The question that is not posed is how these two
perspectives are to be brought meaningfully to-
gether; a dualism remains between the two geographies generated by structure or agency. This effectively ignores any consideration of the relationship between modernist perspectives — such as political economy — and the call for a (postmodern) form of analysis associated with ‘difference’ and the ‘neglected others’. By drawing a veil over this problem Philo is able to claim that a new paradigm is not necessary; we may just stir in ‘some additional ingredients’ (p. 193). These ‘ingredients’ will seek to overcome the ‘neglect of others’ which has characterised much geographical endeavour to date . . .’ (p. 199). In Philo’s view rural geography has been too concerned with ‘Mr Average’ and has ignored the way ‘social life in rural areas is indeed fractured along numerous lines of difference constitutive of overlapping and ‘multiple forms of otherness’ . . .’ (p. 201). Philo identifies the need to consider the structure and experience of gender relations; the working out of age relations; the ‘geographies of sickness’; the absence of gay and lesbian ‘ghettos’; the lifestyles of ‘wandering’ peoples (tramps, new age travellers, gypsies), and asks: ‘Where are all of those ‘other’ human groupings in the texts of rural geography particularly in those supposedly painting a more sociological portrait of contemporary Britain’ (ibid.).

Leaving aside the issue of whether rural studies have entirely neglected these ‘other’ groupings (and there are many exceptions to the caricature presented in Philo’s analysis12), this ‘new mix’ seems to us to clearly signal the arrival of postmodernity in the field of rural studies. Consider Bauman’s description of the postmodern sociologist:

[a] postmodern sociologist is one who is ‘securely embedded’ in his [sic] own ‘native’ tradition, penetrates deeply into successive layers of meanings upheld by the relatively alien tradition to be investigated. The process of penetration is simultaneously that of translation. In the person of the sociologist, two or more traditions are brought into communicative contact and thus open up to each other their respective contents which otherwise would remain opaque. The postmodern sociologist aims at ‘giving voice’ to cultures which without his [sic] help would remain dumb or stay inaudible to the partner in communication’ (1992, p. 42).

When Philo speaks of opening up rural studies to the ‘voices of ‘other’ peoples in ‘other’ places’ he conforms perfectly with Bauman’s description of a postmodern sociologist. Specifically, in this piece Philo uses Ward’s account of ‘children in the country’ to show the ‘possibility of uncovering something of the worlds inhabited by rural children, particularly the geographies of these worlds as structured ‘from without’ and as experienced ‘from within’. . .’ (p. 198). This would be part of ‘a new form of human–geographical inquiry open to the circumstances and to the voices of ‘other’ people in ‘other’ places: a new geography determined to overcome that neglect of ‘others’ which has characterised much geographical endeavour to date . . .’ (p. 199). The aim is surely to ‘give voice’ to cultures which would otherwise ‘remain dumb’.

In our view, what follows from this concern to ‘give voice’ are a set of issues which Philo does not really consider. For instance, which culture or identity is dominant and how is this dominance achieved in particular places at particular times (Massey, 1991a, p. 278)? Or, put slightly differently, ‘which or whose spaces matter and what power relations are embedded in these particular discourses of space and locality’ (Pratt, 1991, p. 264). In short, we need to understand how particular identities, cultures and communities come into being and how certain of these are able to impose themselves on others. Simply ‘giving voice’ to ‘others’ by no means guarantees that we will uncover the relations which lead to marginalisation or neglect. This raises a whole clutch of issues relating to difference, space and power in relation to the ‘rural’. In the remainder of this paper we turn to consider these.

12 It is useful to refer here to the literature on social anthropology. Cohen (1990, p. 204) reflects on how the study of rural communities in Britain was initially resisted by British anthropology because such communities were lacking in ‘otherness’. He suggests this was for two erroneous reasons: first, the confusion of ‘otherness’ with manifest difference; second, a narrow focus on ‘otherness’ to the neglect of the ‘self’. Both matters are high on the anthropological agenda and thus British communities are now legitimate objects of study.

13 There is no space here to explore this in any detail; useful introductions and reviews can be found in Clegg (1989), Rose (1989). Law (1986, 1991) and Burchell et al. (1991). Philo has also considered ‘power’ elsewhere (1989, 1992a) and it would be interesting to see how he would relate insights drawn from his work on Foucault to his concern for the ‘neglected others’ in rural studies.

Power, postmodernism and the place of rural studies

Postmodernist and post-structuralist writers — especially those drawing upon the work of Foucault — see the analysis of power as a central to any understanding of social life.13 In modernist sociology, power — where it is confronted head-on — is conceptualised as a ‘cause’; something located in and imposed by social structures. From the postmodern perspective power is conceived of as an ‘effect’; the result of the exercise of particular social relations

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This argument is similar to that already outlined above (by Bauman) with respect to 'society' (society itself is an outcome or an accomplishment and not a cause). In conceptualisations of both power and society there is an analytical shift from the 'universal' to the 'specific'. For post-modernist writers the power 'effect' is dispersed or localised: there is not a 'core' or centralised source of power. Importantly, power cannot exist in the abstract; it is always situated. Furthermore, power cannot be 'stored'; it is an outcome, an effect of social relationships. Latour (1986, p. 273) calls this the 'performative definition' of power where power is made. The term representation, on the other hand, is often associated with hermeneutics (see Duncan and Ley, 1993). We believe the latter to be more nuanced than the former (see Clegg, 1989, ch. 2).

In fact we would argue quite forcibly — after a suggestion by Mark Goodwin — that the same approach could similarly be applied to urban sociology. In post-structuralist analyses the term signification is usually utilised as the means whereby these constructions are made. The term representation, on the other hand, is often associated with hermeneutics (see Duncan and Ley, 1993). We believe the latter to be more nuanced than signification. It allows us to consider the representation and that which is represented as a complex relationship. While not being particularly sympathetic to the hermeneutic method we endorse Duncan and Ley's (1993, p. 9) description of representation as 'a partial truth, a transformation of the extra-textual world, rather than something wholly different from it'. This is 'not a mirroring of the extra-textual within the text, but rather re-presentation, the production of something which did not exist before outside the text' (ibid., emphasis in the original). Such a definition of representation has something in common with the notion of 'transition' employed by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987), neither of whom would fall very readily into the hermeneutics camp.

It is interesting in this light to consider Halfacree's (1993) account of representations of the rural. While endorsing the view that representations are 'partly a description of the material world' but are 'irreducible to it' (p. 29), Halfacree also seems to believe (using a shift in terminology) that 'the sign and its significant are ... becoming divorced from their referent' and that this might be 'symptomatie of a turn towards socio-cultural postmodernism, where the symbolic assumes precedence over the material' (p. 33). It is unclear whether Halfacree sees the representation and the represented as somehow becoming detached from one another (which on the above definition is not possible) thus signalling the emergence of a postmodern rurality or whether representations now more accurately reflect that which they purport to represent: that is, 'the 'chocolate box' countryside may not be (come) such a myth after all' (p. 34).

If we link this concept of power to our earlier discussion of the co-existence of different versions of 'the rural' we can see how the attempt by academics or policy-makers to impose a 'definitive' rural domain is itself an exercise of power, privileging one definition of society, and thus one set of social relations, over another. We would suggest that the way out of this dilemma is that, rather than trying to 'pin down' a definition of rurality or the rural, we should explore the ways in which rurality is constructed and deployed in a variety of contexts.

We have examined how the rural was constructed in the discourse of rural social science. In the story we have told here, the 'rural' had a strong presence until Pahl's critique of the rural-urban continuum diminished its status. This was followed by Newby's concentration on class and agriculture as the only defining characteristics of the rural really worthy of attention. Then came the restructuring literature which further undermined any significance it might have. All of these positions we characterise as modernist. A particular conception of society and social change is intrinsic to these analyses. Furthermore, this view is so endemic that it is often left unexamined. Our point is that these (modernist) conceptualisations construct the (urban and) rural, or different versions of 'rurals', in ways which exclude the differences that Philo rightly seeks to explore. But we believe 'difference' cannot be just 'added in' like some additional ingredient to a cake for, to extend the analogy, we do not just need new ingredients but rather a completely new recipe. A new concept of knowledge would allow us to think again about what the rural is and what significance it has. It is this, we would argue, that is the potential value of post-modernist and post-structuralist writing; it opens up the possibilities of other conceptions of knowledge. Yet what we wish to retain is the value of the social scientific method and the form of analysis it engenders. If we are to speak of 'power'
we must have the analytical tools and methods to show how power relations are made and sustained. In order to effectively give 'voice' to 'others' we cannot simply cast social science or sociology away as a legacy of an outdated modernism. In order to speak we speak from the vantage point of sociology or social science. However, we wish to do this reflexively [and reflexivity is not new in sociology — see, for instance, Garfinkel (1967)] in the full knowledge that we ourselves are actors building society and thus power relations.

In a sociology of postmodernism Philo's call can be seen as a useful starting point, for instance, sensitising researchers to issues of empowerment. However, and this is our key point, in an unreconstructed rural social science it may simply lead to a 'pick and mix' approach; a multitude of perspectives all as useful or useless as any other. This is our concern and this is why we object to a simple 'adding in' of Philo's valuable suggestions. Strategically, as it stands, Philo's call leaves him 'at the margins' calling for differences to be taken into account. Only in a reconstructed sociology of postmodernism will the voices of the 'neglected others' be heard.

A further important point that we would like to make concerns the bounding and naming of particular spaces. We have already noted the importance of the stretching of social relations in space and time; however, we would argue that there is no necessary spatial analogue to this process. This is a common error both in 'locality studies' and in the related discussion of 'rurality'. The creation and maintenance of particular bounded spaces is an important, though often ignored, moment in the reproduction of social relations (see the discussion in Pratt, 1991; or, for an institutional focus, see Day and Murdoch, 1993). Two points can be made with regard to rural studies: the durability of the terms 'urban' and 'rural' and the fact that they are forever locked into a dualism. It is precisely this dualism that could be broken open by a sociology of postmodernity; from such a perspective the 'rural' and the 'urban' can be conceived as practised, or selectively deployed, by individuals and collectives in the production of new forms of social relations. But, we would argue, the rural and the urban are not necessarily bound to contiguous spaces. Where they are linked to specific places then this is a clear expression of the dominance of one construction (and the social relations so practiced) over all of the others. Of course we would argue that such a closure is never completely made; there is an ongoing struggle to redefine social relations. But we are under no illusions that, by simply 'giving voice' to these others, change will occur; rather, we argue that being sensitive to diversity offers a better understanding of the way in which power relations stabilise the 'rural'.

Conclusion

We began this paper with a consideration of Philo's call to include neglected 'others' in rural social science. Through our analysis of rural studies, which we have characterised as being dominated by concepts of modernisation and explored through the meta-narratives of modernism, we have concluded that if the impulse of Philo's call is to be taken seriously then some rethinking of rural studies will be required. We have drawn upon arguments advanced by Bauman who characterises his perspective as a sociology of postmodernity. Bauman stresses that postmodernity is modernity conscious of itself; it is knowledge cognisant of its own localised production.

In attempting to think through the implications of a sociology of postmodernity for rural studies we have drawn the conclusion that the object of our interest — the rural — is itself implicated in a re-conceptualisation. Hence, we do not call for a rural sociology of postmodernity; we want to stress the importance of drawing back from the universal concepts such as 'urban' and 'rural'. Rather we prioritise the exploration of the local production of
these ‘universal’ concepts using the tools of social science. We would like to point out the variety of ways in which the ‘rural’ may be practised in the ‘urban’, or in any other place; it does not essentially lie anywhere, it is locally produced. We would caution that there is a spatial element to the rural, but that it is not a necessary one: it is an effect.

In this vein we draw upon Urry’s (1990, p. 93 et seq.) use of the term ‘post-tourist’: that is, someone who is reflexively aware of her/his identity as a tourist and ‘plays’ with the ‘tourist experience’. We would offer the term ‘post-rural’.21 The aim of introducing this term is to highlight the reflexive deployment of ‘the rural’. We would not want to give the impression of periodising ‘the rural’. We are not suggesting that we have just entered the post-modern period; hence all of our experiences of places are ‘post-rural’. Rather, we are trying to foster a sensitivity to the production of meaning that makes possible particular ‘rural experiences’. For example, one concern of ‘post-rural’ research might be long-standing and ‘powerful’ phenomena such as country houses,22 country gardens, villages, the ‘country gentleman’ (sic), and the panoply of ‘rustic artefacts’ that litter ‘rural’ landscapes. Consider ‘country parks’: these offer the rural experience to urban (or rural) dwellers. Whilst it is quite clear that it is a packaged experience of the countryside, it is, at the same time, taken as ‘true’. We would suggest that all ‘rural’ experiences are of this nature. This is not to suggest that we have a definitive ‘rural experience’ tucked away somewhere; the point is there is not one but there are many. Some ‘rural experiences’, however, work powerfully to subsume others (see Pratt, 1989, for a consideration of competing versions of the rural). It is in this ‘play’ of ruralities that we can situate Philo’s call for the analysis of ‘otherness’. But before we get carried away, we would caution the reader on the import of the reflexive nature of such research. We must fully recognise just what ‘we’ are doing when we undertake this work; it is — at turns — to recognise, reinforce and to undermine the boundaries that divide the social world: this is not, and can never be, a neutral activity.

Finally, we feel that it is important to stress that we are not suggesting — after the relativism commonly associated with many writings on post-modernism — that all, or any, of these versions of ‘the rural’ are the same; they are the outcomes of practices, and, as such, the selection (or imposition) of a particular version in a particular place is a demonstration of power: an effect. An analysis grounded in a sociology of postmodernity would offer an epistemological opening for those interested in the rural to escape from the modernist trap of marginality and provide an opportunity to transcend the stultifying division of the academic and the ‘real’ world into the urban and the rural. It should simply make it possible to explore the construction of ‘difference’ and to go wherever those constructions take us. It is this dimension that we, following Philo, would urge fellow social scientists interested in the ‘rural’ to examine.23

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References


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