

Given current trends, the death of the rural is inevitable, a debate staged by the College of Social Science at the University of Lincoln.

The debate began with Chair, Dr Gary Bosworth, introducing the motion and reading an extract from a paper by a Dutch geographer, E.W. Hofstee where many of the salient issues about the spread of urban lifestyles and influences into rural areas were raised. The extract also highlighted the fears that this spread was not leading to “interaction between the urban culture and the traditional rural culture” but the movement of city dwellers to rural areas was instead “an intensification of the exposure of the rural population to the cultural influences of cities”. This paper was written in 1958 but many of the issues remain pertinent today. Gary went on to suggest that the resilience of rural areas was perhaps associated with their cultural and almost spiritual meaning, encouraging the debaters to consider the countryside not just as space but also as an emotional attachment that is integral to society’s wider wellbeing.

Opening the debate for the proposition, Prof. John Shepherd began by arguing that there is no such “thing” as rurality, but it is merely a rhetorical device. As a descriptor, “rural” can only exist in contrast to “urban”. In material terms and based on counting things, the rural describes those spaces with fewer things to count – whether that is businesses, households, services, recreational facilities or communications for example. As such, for somewhere to remain rural it is “moribund”, continuing to have fewer people and other attributes in relation to urban places. Its death may not be inevitable but its moribund status is destined to persist.

Continuing on the material view, John also presented the case that rural areas, spatially defined, are already showing many characteristics that are very similar to urban areas. Business failure rates are almost identical, the economic composition of rural areas in terms of business sectors is very similar and the majority of people living in rural areas are working and carrying out a range of other activities in urban areas thus the division between “urban” and “rural” is increasingly blurred. If there is no distinction, we could argue that BOTH urban and rural are dying but the death of the rural will be more evident in such circumstances.

As well as material understanding of rurality, John discussed the notion of the rural as ‘ideational’. One might imagine that the rural idyll is widely enjoyed but John cogently argued that this idyll is increasingly the preserve of the few who can afford rural house prices, have the capability to commute, or live, elsewhere for work and whose actions tend to exclude others from that space, as a result of protectionist attitudes towards both the natural and built environments and the inflationary pressure on house prices combined with stagnant rural wages and declining rural services. The outcome is that indigenous rural people cannot afford nor access the necessary services to continue living there. For younger and older people, this can lead to isolation and, for minority groups, the rich, white and often masculine perception of rural communities is certainly not seen to be idyllic.

John was supported by Prof Nigel Curry who argued that the functions of rural areas will continue to change, something we also hear from the opposition. The key to this argument is that the changes are increasingly influenced by urban centres and urban culture, thus, while the spaces will remain, their rural character will not. As the need for spatial concentration declines due to diseconomies of agglomeration and the spread of technology, “urban” economic activity can, and will, happen anywhere. Not only does this remove the urban-rural distinction (and so remove any meaning for

rural) but he also asserted that the outcome is inevitably urban in character. Nigel also drew our attention to two other trends to support his argument – firstly the declining attractiveness of rural spaces for leisure, arguing that “green” spaces near to urban areas are being provided as a sanitised version of the rural for the consumption of urbanites. Secondly he identified the growth of urban agriculture which threatens to remove one of the few remaining features that are considered fundamental to rurality. Even if production levels remain low, the urban focus of food supply chains, the integrated land uses on the urban rural fringe and the intensification of “factory farming” all question whether there is still anything special about this industry that makes it rural.

As a town and country planner by training, Nigel concluded apologetically by explaining that it was this profession that had really brought about the inevitable death of the countryside. Since the Second World War, the pressures to preserve farmland for food production in the Scott Report and the further restrictions against development in the Barlow Report each led to the situation touched upon by John where rural wages stagnated due to a scarcity of local employment and house prices escalated. More than fifty years on and we are at a point where a response in either direction will be detrimental to the countryside – we allow more development and rural land is lost, sparking protectionist outrage, or we continue to prevent growth of rural settlements and we see the continuing exclusion of many sections of society, the decline of key services and the “protection” of a moribund rurality with little life-giving energy. Some may argue that stasis is not death and we heard audience comments for the need to balance development that is perceived negatively at a very local level with development that achieves positive outcomes more broadly; however, the spirit of the debate would indicate that stasis at a time when other places are advancing and urban cultures are growing in influence will “inevitably lead” to the death of the rural.

Additional comments from the audience in support of this arguing suggested that rurality died at the outbreak of the industrial revolution as this led to power shifting from the land to the factories and the influences of urbanisation were inexorable. In contrast to this, it was suggested that the industrial era created a stronger need for rurality as the counterpoint to the new cities. We also heard that politicians overlook or even marginalise the rural yet the rural has not gone away – some may argue it is stronger than ever, particularly from the perspective of community cohesion, the need for attachments to nature (a term that was not debated in the time available!) and the growing pressures on resources such as food and energy, which are abundant in rural areas.

The motion was opposed by Dr Keith Halfacree who began by arguing that we must avoid being sucked in by modernist accounts that assume newness, change and innovation are essential. Such views could lead us to mistakenly assume that the rural is dying – an anachronistic relic of a surpassed past - but this overlooks the plethora of functions that rural areas play and how, more generally, history should not be considered as somehow following a neat sequence of discrete stages. In this respect we might note, argued Keith, just how frequently the demise of the rural has been prematurely heralded.

Keith also argued that one of the main reasons we might describe the rural as dead is because we have an under-developed conception of what the rural or ‘rurality’ actually comprises. He referred us to his triadic approach to interpreting the rural, based on the influential work of Henri Lefebvre. Taking the rural as “material”, “representational” and “experiential”, he made the case that rurality as we understand it emerges from the interrelationship between these three dimensions, that is,

from the busy and complex interactions between the fabric of rural space, the ways in which it is represented and the ways in which we live it. As a totality, this complexity can never really die, although individual elements within it may at times appear to be ailing. Keith also added that the representations of rurality within mainstream cultures are perhaps more powerful today than ever, although one might question whose representations these are and the consequences that they may have for rural places.

Supporting Keith, Prof. Peter Somerville argued that rurality will only die if we stop interacting with nature, landscape and environments that we currently call rural. The fact that such interaction already occurs in urban spaces could be taken as an indication that the value of rural attributes is already embedded into today's urban culture in ways that ensure their future survival. Moreover, the growing interest in sustainable environments offers further grist to the rural mill. These areas are capable of hosting more sustainable forms of development, with appropriate design, well-planned communications and sensitive construction – so long as the aforementioned planners do not obstruct “good” development.

His second argument concerned the nature of the interconnectivity and interdependence between urban and rural. Pete used the notion of sublation to explain that as the rural becomes more urban, so the urban becomes more rural. In the long term, processes of urbanisation and counter-urbanisation will result in a world of places that contain features of both urban and rural but are not distinctively either urban or rural. Agreeing with Nigel to some extent about the ‘loss’ of the rural but rejecting his prediction of stasis and moribundity, he argued that the key attributes of rural spaces will continue to be valued and so survive, but within qualitatively new formations. He concluded that even if it is just a piece of heritage, it will certainly not “die”, hence the motion has to be opposed.

In summary, we learned that rurality comprises a great diversity of meaning, thus the motion rather oversimplified the issues at heart. Each of the participants agreed that the rural was continuing to experience considerable change but there was disagreement about what these changes would lead to: would there be a tragic loss of the rural, a new conservation of the rural, or a more positive transformation of the rural?

One of the contributions from the floor noted that much of the debate failed to mention trees or people. Perhaps this indicates that, as academics, we focus on the concept of the rural rather than its materiality. Consequently, we run the risk of under-valuing attractive landscapes, strong communities, heritage and culture. We need to showcase success stories in economic terms and promote positive messages about how sustainable development can be achieved. We also need to be concerned about loss of services, degradation of the environment and unbalanced communities. All of these issues are about people, animals, plants, buildings and communities that are specific to rural areas. The debate began with a statement that rural exists only in opposition to urban but perhaps we need to move beyond that assumption. Yes, we should accept that relationships between urban and rural are important but the rural has existed alongside the urban for long enough now to have found its own distinctive and characteristic trajectories.

The audience of 35 voted 10 in favour of the motion and 21 against – good news for those of us working in rural research!

From the initial trial run of the experiment, which I plan to take to a number of different audiences in the coming year, we found that rural is still strongly associated with images of agriculture. By contrast, preferences for where people would like to live were very much oriented towards images with more evidence of social activity. Interestingly, given the current issues around HS2, the image of the viaduct was considered by 3 people to be “most natural” and by 2 people to merit protection, By contrast, no-one perceived wind-energy production to be “natural”.

Moving forwards, it is clear that there are many issues that have a direct impact upon people's lives and the way that we as researchers or policy-makers frame the meaning of rural will affect the ways in which we attempt to address them. Therefore, we would like to invite a wider range of rural people and stakeholders from across Lincolnshire to attend a follow up event early in the new year where the floor is very much opened to them to tell us what they consider to be the most pressing issues. Hopefully, this will provide us with the opportunity to carry out some new research and build stronger relationships with a range of people across the County. We would like people to view the University as a resource for the region and to tap into our research, our students' expertise, our wider networks and our access to external funding sources that can support rural communities.

If you are interested, please make a note for 12th February when we will arrange a lunchtime meeting - further details and venue etc to be confirmed.