

The two-ness of rural life and the ends of rural scholarship

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Abstract

I analyze the current return of academic rural doubt in the US in terms of an old intellectual quandary: what is the rural? I argue that scholars have two dominant epistemologies of the rural, what I term *first rural* and *second rural*, and correspondingly different political visions. By first rural I mean the *material moment* of the rural, to which we typically grant priority. By second rural I mean the *ideal moment* of the rural, which we typically regard as secondary, even when we argue that it is the only remaining rural. I analyze the origin of this priority of the rural in terms of the modernist/postmodernist divide, which I trace through the current American emphasis on first rural and the current European and Antipodean emphasis on second rural, noting how each emphasis often develops to the exclusion of the other. I trace as well the association of first rural with a modernist *politics of defense* of the rural boundary, and of second rural with a postmodernist *politics of discourse* that engages by deconstructing the rural. I argue for a *rural plural* vision that embraces first rural and second rural equally, stimulates a correspondingly more inclusive and practical politics of the rural, and keeps our understanding of the rural forever moving on.

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1. Introduction

It is back again: the recurrent onset of academic rural doubt in the US. It is been 20 years or so since the last onset, in the early to mid 1980s, when Bill Friedland engaged a debate about the end of rural society and the future of rural sociology. But recent discussions indicate that US rural scholars are once more in the midst of this uncertain mood.

At least such is the case among the rural sociologists in the US. Take the 2005 paper by Bo Beaulieu, based on his 2004 presidential address to the Rural Sociological Society (the American professional association for rural sociologists) and entitled “Breaking Walls, Building Bridges: Expanding the Presence and Relevance of Rural Sociology.” A worried title by someone who feels “a sense of unease” at “the current state of our organization and discipline,” as Beaulieu states in the first line of his paper. He goes on to detail the worries. The 30 percent drop in the membership of the Rural Sociological Society between

1997 and 2004.¹ The drying up of the governmental grant stream. The declining numbers of applicants to rural sociology graduate programs. Even the shuttering of departments of rural sociology.

Beaulieu might also have mentioned the relatively low place of *Rural Sociology*, the society’s flagship journal, in the impact factor league tables of *ISI Journal Citation Reports*: number 20 out of 90 sociology journals in 2005, and 19th in 2004. He might have mentioned the several discussions in recent years that the Council of the Rural Sociological Society has held about whether the society should change its name, or the name of its journal. He might have also mentioned that most American

¹The drop turned out not to be quite as bad as Beaulieu reported, when the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) finalized its figures for 2004; Beaulieu had the membership drop as going from 1101 in 1997 to 767 in 2004, instead of the actual total of 827 for 2004, for a decline of 25 percent. But the trend is the same either way, and the drop continued in 2005, as calendar year membership fell slightly to 817. In 2006, there was a modest recovery to 833 members, but only after considerable mobilization by the RSS to increase membership (Figures from *Rural Sociological Society*, 2006).

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departments of rural sociology have already taken this step. There is the renaming (or is it the re-branding?) of some of the remaining departments into constructs like Development Sociology at Cornell and Community and Rural Sociology at Washington State. There is the amalgamation of departments into various hodge-podges like the Human and Community Resource Development at Ohio State. There are the universities—Auburn, Idaho, Penn State, and Puerto Rico-Mayaguez—with a Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology (never the reverse, and perhaps for more than alphabetical reasons). These latter are four out of the seven places where the word “rural” appears in a department name of any kind in the US. As for straight out departments of Rural Sociology, there remain only two in the US at this writing, at the University of Missouri-Columbia and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The fact that there are a few US departments of sociology with strong rural programs, such as Iowa State, Utah State, and Colorado State, can do little to lessen the sense of an academic endeavor at risk.

The situation in Europe, and similarly for the Antipodes, is quite different. Rural scholarship there is “hot,” to quote one prominent European scholar (N. Ward, 2006, pers. commun.). European rural scholarship was never so institutionalized in department names, as in US rural sociology, preventing a direct comparison of department closure rates. But other evidence shows the institutional strength of European rural research. Europe has two major rural studies journals, not one, and they are both doing well. *Sociologia Ruralis* ranked 11th in impact factor among 90 sociology journals in 2005, and as high as 5th in 2004. The *Journal of Rural Studies* ranked as number one among 37 planning and development journals in 2005, and 2nd in 2004. In Britain, the government research councils recently carved out a combined £24 million from their budgets to fund the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme, an interdisciplinary research project in sustainable rural development, and the word “rural” was put in the name of a government ministry, the new Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. The word “rural” also now appears in the name of an EU commission, the European Commission for Agriculture and Rural Development, and Australian government includes the Bureau of Rural Sciences. The journals are strong, there is government interest, and there is money around to support rural research (although inevitably less than rural scholars think there should be).

Plus, European and Antipodean rural scholarship is far more interdisciplinary than in the US. In the latter, the rural geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, economists, and historians comparatively rarely write with, meet with, or cite each other. Certainly, there is no US parallel of the explicitly interdisciplinary *Journal of Rural Studies*, and the current situation at *Sociologia Ruralis* in which a geographer edits a sociological rural journal is unthinkable for *Rural Sociology*. In the minds of

most American rural sociologists, rural sociology and rural scholarship are pretty much one and the same—albeit with something of a nod toward the agricultural economists. Some of this lack of interdisciplinarity stems from the overwhelming dominance of sociology and economics in US rural scholarship, which is in turn due to the historical relative lack of incorporation of other social sciences and the humanities into the colleges of agriculture in the US land grant system. Consequently, there has never seemed much need for these disciplines to connect with, say, rural geographers and anthropologists; it has been up to these others to connect with the intellectual metropole in the land grants. As for dialog between sociology and economics, the divide there is a deep disciplinary one that extends well beyond the confines and quarrels of the rural.²

American rural sociologists are starting to worry that they are provincialist, however. At least Beaulieu argues that the way forward for American rural sociology is through building new partnerships with other professional societies, foundations, and government agencies, and through increasing the policy relevance of rural sociological work—the “breaking walls” and “building bridges” of his title. Freudenburg (2006, p. 3, 28) makes a similar case in his 2005 presidential address to the Rural Sociological Society, in which he encourages “reaching out, reaching ahead, reaching beyond,” to quote the title of the theme he established for the meeting, and warns against “ivory-tower isolation” and “disciplinary navel gazing.” And they both ask rural sociologists to remember why they got interested in their professional work to begin with, and to recommit themselves to those values. Beaulieu argues that “the issues affecting the welfare of rural people and communities today are no less difficult or complex than in the past” and that it could even be said “that today’s rural areas are faced with an unprecedented set of challenges.” His list of these rural challenges include in-migration of new cultures, out-migration of talent, changes in rural labor markets, persistent poverty, decaying infrastructure, poor healthcare and schools, declining community engagement, government devolvement, urban encroachment, and being left behind by technological change. A familiar list. He argues that rural sociologists should try to provide the “scientifically sound information” needed to “better articulate how policies are likely to impact rural people and places.”

In short, Beaulieu sees American rural sociology’s challenge as almost entirely an organizational one. The problems of “rural areas” are still important, as they have always been. Rural sociologists just need to do a better job of “articulating” that importance, especially through finding new partners.

²Still, the two big players in US rural studies have made some institutional efforts at rapprochement, and even convened a joint meeting in 2003 between the Rural Sociological Society and the American Agricultural Economics Association; unfortunately, it turned out to be mostly parallel play, and there has been no call since to repeat the effort.

But I hear at the heart of this renewed confrontation with rural doubt an old intellectual issue as much as a new organizational one. It is an annoying question, if not an alarming one, that American rural sociologists have never comfortably resolved for themselves: what is the rural? This is just the question that Friedland tried to get American rural sociology to focus on 20 years ago, and as well the question that lies behind his 2002 article in *Rural Sociology*, “Agriculture and Rurality: Beginning the Final Separation?” Friedland too, I think, was hearing the return of this intellectual nub of rural doubt in his 2002 piece (or was perhaps trying to cultivate it). And occasionally, American rural sociologists have indeed tried to maintain their focus on these questions, but have shortly lapsed into various squabbles, the results of which are strewn along the historical roadside of rural sociological writings.

I will contribute to renewing that focus in this paper, engaging the current climate of US rural sociology, but in a way that I hope will also engage rural scholars elsewhere—in other disciplines and other countries. My brief, in brief, is that we need to acknowledge that there are two rurals, and potentially more, that each has a range of politics, and that the ends of rural scholarship are to engage all these ranges of politics through scholarly work. We have two eyes at least, not one alone, and by keeping all our eyes open our endeavors gain the depth of their perceptions. But we do not now keep our eyes equally open, at least not at the same time, with one eye most characteristic of American scholarship and one eye of both European and Antipodean scholarship, as I will describe. The result is a flattening of the intellectual and practical significance of what we might do. In what follows, I trace the epistemological issues underlying why we tend to focus with just one eye, and with corresponding differences in political vision, in hopes that recognizing these issues will help us to watch out for such monoscopic tendencies. My point will not be to offer a final definition of the rural but rather to provide analytic depth to how we consider the question of what the rural is, and to what its practical significance for our politics and how we live might be.

2. First rural

2.1. Finding it

Let me begin by describing the rural that we are most aware of and that currently dominates rural scholarship in the United States, especially among rural sociologists. I will call this rural *first rural* for it is first in our minds both as what we recognize the rural to be and, as I'll explain, the manners of thought that are typically intellectually prior in modernism, from which the notion of first rural most directly descends. For both these reasons, it seems appropriate to discuss first rural first. Plus, as I am an American scholar, it also seems appropriate to begin with where American scholarship currently has its focus.

Not long ago, I found myself accidentally conducting a poll on how American rural sociologists currently define the rural: a poll with an n of 1. I was confused by something the well-known American rural sociologist Jess Gilbert had said in a conversation with me, and I asked for his definition. As Gilbert is the author of a classic article from the early 1980s debate about the rural (Gilbert, 1982), he seemed a particularly salient n of 1. Gilbert's response was that “basically, at the end of the day it's just low population density.” I was struck by the compelling crispness of Gilbert's view, with its clear categorical distinction from the urban, and came to wonder how widespread this take on it was. Very, I found, as I put my accidental poll into the context of government definitions and of recent literature in US rural sociology.³

There is, for example, the rural as it is currently described by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the US Department of Agriculture, to wit, “rural areas comprise open country and settlements with fewer than 2500 residents” (ERS, 2006). Although this is, as Gilbert described, basically a population density-based view, the ERS here struggles with a rather simple critique: what unit of analysis do we use to define low population density? If we take as our unit of analysis the square footage taken up by one human body, then wherever we encounter a person we encounter the higher population density of the urban, for this is as high a population density as could ever be encountered. And wherever we do not encounter a person we encounter the lower population density of the rural. Under such a dichotomous view, I suppose, the most urban thing you could do is to give someone a hug. Or perhaps become an acrobat or a cheerleader. To avoid such apparent *reductio ad absurdum*, the ERS says “open country” as long there is no settlement with 2500 or more souls—nor with a population “core” of 1000 or more souls per square mile, it elsewhere stipulates—allowing that we must mean by “rural” low population density in the context of some larger stretch of ground than where you or I individually stand. Figured this way, using the US Census's calculations of population density in census blocks (Bureau of Census, 2002), the US population was 21 percent rural in 2000.

The US Government, courtesy of the Office of Management and Budget, also offers a second approach for identifying the rural: the concept of “metropolitan” versus “non-metropolitan” counties (Office of Management and Budget, 2000). The heart of this county-based method is whether or not a county has both an “urbanized area” of 50,000 or more people in it, and one of those population cores where the density in a census tract gets up to at least 1000 persons per square mile. Identifying metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties allows for a precise spatial distinction that plots nicely on a national map, even at the small scales allowed by professional publications; the

³I thank Jess Gilbert for his good-natured and generous forbearance in letting me cite this personal conversation here.

census block approach is simply too fine-grained for such scales. A county basis for the rural also has immediate connection with governmental jurisdictions, making the results more readily applicable, I believe scholars hope. It also immediately resolves the question of unit of analysis by handing the issue over to the practical concerns of governmental planning. Recent issues of the journal *Rural Sociology* are full of articles that use this county-based language, and related phrases like “metro,” “non-metro,” “metro/non-metro,” “micropolitan,” “core,” “non-core,” and “outlying” counties. With it, rural scholars have done many a study on rural–urban differences in migration, immigration, education, marriage, non-marital conception, economic development, population change, adolescent guardianship, community life, and ethnicity—just to cite the topics covered in what are, as I write, the last year or so of issues of *Rural Sociology*.⁴

But for the reflective scholar and planner, it is no easy matter to draw such lines, and the latter phrases in the county-based lexicon derive from these troubles. What if that urbanized place has 49,999 persons in it—is it really still fully rural? To deal with this problem of dichotomous thinking, since the 2000 Census US government statisticians have been identifying what they term “micropolitan areas” for such liminal places that have an urban center of 10,000–49,999 residents. What if a county is non-metropolitan in terms of the size of its largest urban center, but many of its residents commute to a metropolitan county to work? That’s what the US government now calls an “outlying county,” in which at least 25 percent of the workers commute to a “core” county (that is, one with an urbanized area of 50,000 or more, and with that 1000 or more persons per square mile core)—no matter how few, or how sparsely, people live in that outlying county. What if a county with a micropolitan area is adjacent to one with an urban core? These the official statistics call “micropolitan adjacent.” Or if a county without even a micropolitan core is adjacent to one with an urban core? That’s a “non-core adjacent” county. And so on. It’s all laid out in the 12 categories of the “urban influence codes,” based on what the US government calls the new “core-based statistical area” system (ERS, 2006; Office of Management and Budget, 2000). Or if you prefer, you can still use the 9 categories of the “rural–urban continuum codes,” an updated and government-sanctioned version of an older scheme, which uses different population cut-points, and a few other re-parsings of the issue (ERS, 2006).

A lovely appreciation of the numerical possibilities of gray-ness, one might exclaim. But there is still a dichotomous skewer sticking straight out of the statistical picture. Despite all this expansion in number of categories, the government enumerators are clear as to which county goes where across the urban–rural divide. Got an urban core? You’re metro. Don’t, and don’t have at least 25 percent of

your working folks coming to a county that does? You’re non-metro. Consequently, the US government can state, based on the urban influence codes, that precisely 49,158,673 people lived in non-metro counties in 2000—which was 17.4 percent of the US at that time (ERS, 2006). A similar laying down of the line structures the rural–urban continuum codes, yielding a few hundred thousand less residents of non-metro counties for a smaller total of 48,841,966 persons, but still rounding to 17.4 percent of the US (ERS, 2006). Thus, the skeptic may have room to wonder if there is perhaps less appreciation of gray-ness here than there is an attempt to paint right across it, albeit in a more informed way than in the past. If such a conclusion seems too strong, even the non-skeptic must at least admit that the recent advances in computerized demographics have not prevented the digitizing of the rural and the urban.

Well, sure, OK, one might respond. Every category looks absurd at its boundary. We still need to draw a line someplace so we can talk about things. These notions of how to draw the rural line are first in our minds because they work really quite well in allowing us to talk about rural concerns. So what’s the trouble?

Before I get to that, let me identify some basic orientations that currently underlie what I am calling “first rural,” and what others have similarly critiqued in it, especially European scholars such as Cloke and Little (1997), Halfacree (1993, 2004) and Mormont (1990). One, it is fundamentally materialist, seeking an objective, anyone-can-count-it-and-count-on-it determination of the rural, rooted in the material presence, or lack, of persons on the material foundation of the land. Second, it is fundamentally spatial, finding the rural to be something we can map. Third, it is all fundamentally dichotomous, no matter the unit of analysis, still seeking an in-or-out view of the rural that we can draw across the gray continuum of the micropolitan, the adjacent, and the outlying. And fourth, first rural is a fundamentally relative view of rurality, in which the rural is always understood with respect to, and immediately implies, the urban. As Gilbert (1982, p. 609) noted, “the concept ‘rural’ implies its complement, ‘urban.’” But it is not currently an even-handed implication. As Brown and Swanson (2003, p. 3) observe, referring to the US government’s two methods of delineating the rural, “In both instances, the categories are dichotomous, with urban/metropolitan areas defined first, leaving rural/nonmetropolitan areas as residuals.” Dichotomous ideas are often like that, epistemologically loaded onto one side of the split—a point I will return to.

There is, however, a deceptive clarity in such a material, spatial, dichotomous, and relative view of the rural, a trouble that has been with first rural since it was so famously laid out by Sorokin and Zimmerman in their 1929 *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology*, and quite likely long before that as well. They distinguished between “simple” and “compound” definitions of what they called the “rural and urban worlds.” The kind of rural that I have

⁴I refer here to the March, June, and September issues of 2006 and the September and December issues of 2005.

been describing thus far is what they would have termed a “simple” definition. They would have immediately pleaded with us to recognize that “neither the size of a community, nor the density of population, nor official qualification of some communities, as ‘the city’ or ‘town,’ and others, as ‘village or open country,’ nor any of these usual criteria are sufficient by themselves to give a sound and scientifically acceptable definition of the city and the country, or of the rural and urban social world” (Sorokin and Zimmerman, 1929, p. 13). They argued instead for rural sociologists to focus on the compound approach, and enumerated a list of the elements to be taken into consideration: occupation, environment, community size, population density, population homogeneity, social mobility, territorial mobility, interoccupational mobility, migration, social stratification, and systems of social interaction. Population density (and size) was still in there, but only part of the compound story. And they led with occupation, going on to proclaim the next year, in their classic three volume *A Systematic Sourcebook in Rural Sociology* (Sorokin et al., 1930–1932, p. 188), that “the principal criterion of the rural society or population is *occupational*—the collection and cultivation of plants and animals.... In this aspect, rural sociology is in the first place a sociology of an occupational group, namely the sociology of the *agricultural occupation*.” This compound view was, for a time, widely influential, and versions of it were repeated in numerous rural sociology textbooks and other works (for example, Smith, 1953 [1940], Smith and Zopf, 1970, and as recently as Chitambar, 1997 [1993]).

In making this pitch for a compound definition of the rural, Sorokin and Zimmerman were advancing a claim, whether scientific or not, that in many respects corresponded more closely to the popular imagination of the rural than the simple view does. If I may be forgiven another poll with an *n* of 1, and this time a very personal one, let me present as some sort of evidence a conversation I had with my then 6-year old daughter a few years ago. As I had been with Jess Gilbert, I was confused by something she had said about the “countryside,” as we drove along in the car. So I asked her, the unfortunate child of an academic, to define her use of the term and she responded, “trees and grass, few people, where there’s lots of nature and animals.” In this definition, she presented density issues—“few people”—along with other elements, principally environmental, and possibly occupational as well, if I had probed her about the origin of all that “trees and grass” and the kinds of animals she meant. Despite my *n* here, I do not believe she is alone in this use of a compound view, which one can find documented in any of a number of studies of popular conceptions of the rural (Bell, 1992, 1994; Cloke, 2003; Cloke and Little, 1997; Halfacree, 1995).

But as the scholarly debate unfolded, the compound view of the rural unfolded too, and proved to be something of an embarrassment. Sorokin and Zimmerman presented their “typological” or “index” approach, as it was variably also called, as a first rural take, just as material,

spatial, dichotomous, and relative as the “simple” definition of the rural. To do otherwise, would not have been “sound and scientifically acceptable,” in their view. They just added more elements to the material basis of these spatial, dichotomous, and relative distinctions. It was, in this sense, an equally modernist view. But it did cause considerable trouble, especially the idea of putting an agricultural occupation in lead view, as well as stressing the community differences that Loomis and Beegle (1950) later crystallized into rural *gemeinschaft* and urban *gesellschaft* in their spatialization of Tönnies’ much-abused distinction. The number of farmers began to plummet after World War II, and shortly became a frighteningly small basis for constituting an academic endeavor of the stature American rural sociology hoped to attain. With only 1 percent of the labor force in the US in farming today, and similarly small numbers in most other rich countries, rural sociology had better be more than the study of the agricultural occupation. Moreover, as scholars went out to try to measure the other elements of the compound definition of the rural, from Loomis and Beegle’s *gemeinschaft* to homogeneity to mobility, they did not find much (Fischer, 1982; Gans, 1962; Hummon, 1990; Pahl, 1965, 1966; and many others). Although the fight over *gemeinschaft* and the association of agriculture with rurality extends right up to Friedland’s (2002) “beginning the final separation?” piece, already by 1958 Lowry Nelson, once a prominent rural sociologist at the University of Minnesota, was being reported as follows in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* (Asleson, 1958) on the occasion of his retirement:

“The farmer can no longer be considered as a different breed,” maintains Lowry Nelson, eminent rural sociologist. “He is no more individualist, fatalistic, conservative, democratic, puritanical, thrifty, frugal, suspicious of strangers, outspoken or susceptible to mass hysteria than any other segment of society.”

“It is doubtful,” he added, “if there is any American sociologist studying rural people today who would agree that the farmer collectively differs from other residential groups to any degree.”

As for the environmental distinction, who after the attack of the postmodernists on the comfortable categories of the modern—and hang on for more on this—can believe in something like “nature” anymore?

And so, American rural sociology has largely fallen back on the simple view of first rural, at least as what we can still point to “at the end of the day” when the conceptual chips are down. That one we can still be sure of, and it still accounts for 17.4–21 percent of the US, depending on which counting method one uses, at least as of 2000. If we include the whole world, we’re up to 50 percent or so, at least as of 2005, the United Nations Population Division was estimating in 2004 (UN, 2004). Not too bad, maybe, despite modernization and urbanization. We’re still important.

Yet tensions remain. There is something desperately thin about basing an academic endeavor on low population density. If that is the basis, then maybe the endeavor needs to be renamed “low-density studies,” and a rather insubstantial name that would be. Plus the old fights over *gemeinschaft*, and over whether rural sociology is agricultural sociology, may still be embarrassments, but US rural scholarship has not escaped them yet. Take for example the US government’s inclusion of “outlying” counties as metropolitan, because 25 percent or more of the population works in an urban area. That has at least an echo of an occupational definition of rural, it seems to me: those who are not engaged in metro pursuits versus those who are. Then consider all the fuss about which county is adjacent to which. Who cares... unless the concern is about mobility, homogeneity, migration, stratification, and interaction? First rural today still wants the rural to be a different breed.

2.2. The politics of first rural

The biggest source of the tensions, though, I think stems from the kind of politics such a vision of first rural encourages. As a sample, I’ll consider the politics Beaulieu (2005) suggests to us. Beaulieu’s is, I think, a clearly first rural language, with his constant reference to “rural areas” and “rural people and communities.” He tacks here between a simple and a compound first rural, as do many US rural sociologists, falling back on the thin yet confident materialism of the purely spatial phrase “rural areas,” but reminding us of a thicker, more compound, first rural with references to “rural people and communities.” This latter could be read as merely a simple first rural claim, in that he may be referencing only people who happen to live in such spaces and the population concentrations they sometimes live in there, without raising the ghost of *gemeinschaft*. But this ambivalence nonetheless allows him the rhetorical positives of words like “people” and “communities.” And he asks us to be concerned with the problems of these rhetorical positives, such as the issues of migration, service provision, resources, community, and urban encroachment he lists.

Beaulieu is not alone in such a politics. Take the 2003 *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*—other than the journal *Rural Sociology*, the largest publishing venture of the Rural Sociological Society in recent years, including over 50 authors, numbering among them many of the best-known names in American rural sociology. This is a great book, and it justly won an Outstanding Academic Title award from the American Library Association. It represents as clearly as anything the continuing commitment of American rural sociologists to be useful—which I applaud. But let us consider its politics. Its purpose is “to examine what sociologists have learned about rural life during the previous ten years, to identify high-priority knowledge needs that remain unfulfilled, and to suggest how sociological knowledge about rural people

and communities might be brought to bear on the nation’s critical policy decisions” (Brown and Swanson, 2003, p. 4). The language of first rural is everywhere here, from the phrase “rural America” in the title, to the phrase “rural people and communities” in the sentence I just quoted, to the vocabulary of “rural areas,” “rural society,” and “rural families” that can be found elsewhere in Brown and Swanson’s introduction to the volume, and throughout the 30 chapters that follow. In those chapters, we learn about the troubles of rural population and family change, rural economic change, rural community change, and rural environmental change, and we learn about how better policies could improve rural well-being in the US.

Both in Beaulieu and in the *Challenges for Rural America* volume we see a *politics of defense*, wrought in clear confrontation with the urban realm, which Beaulieu says variously ignores, exploits, and encroaches on the rural. The rural here is small, weak, challenged, and vulnerable, in need of our protection. And yet it is from government policy makers and academic scholars that Beaulieu and the *Challenges* authors mainly ask for this help—that is, in the main, from denizens of urban places. The urban thus encroaches, and yet is also the source of rural protection. The rural is relative to the urban; we only know we are in rural areas because there are urban ones with which to compare them. And yet the rural is dependent upon the urban too.

There is, I think, a kind of unconscious patriarchy of the spatial in such a politics. The construction of rural as a relative being to the urban, and as a subordinate relative being, echoes strongly of the common construction of woman as relative and subordinate to man. Feminists have been asking us for many years now to be wary of such lopsided dichotomies. But there it is right in the terminology of current first ruralism. Where the word “woman” originates as “wife of man,” and where we mark out women’s marital status but not men’s with terms like Mrs.—some of the most basic observations of the feminist eye—we hear the same subordinate relative status in first rural categorizations like the urban influence codes, with their “non-metropolitan” counties, not “non-micropolitan ones” ones. Similarly, the “adjacency” of counties is always in reference to an evidently masculine urban, instead of categorizing urban regions as rural-adjacent or not. There are no “rural influence codes.” The concern is with “urban influence” on a feminized rural, encroaching on, and in other ways potentially violent toward, what is weak and in need of paternal protection.

This feminized victim narrative of the rural resonates as well with a first rural politics of loss. The urban influences and encroaches, and the rural diminishes thereby. Here are echoes of the loss of traditional ways of life, associated with the industrialization of agriculture and other wounds of the modern. Rather than finding that “causal properties do not stop at one side of the rural–urban divide,” as Hoggart (1990, p. 36) argued, the rural here is a victim, passive and weak in the face of the urban’s modernist causal action and

strength. Such a first rural thus both finds its academic and political strength through modernism's materialism, allowing it to scientifically establish the realm of the rural and its distinction from the urban, and finds in modernism the source of the crisis of the diminishing rural, with its diminishing distinctions, diminishing communities, and even its diminishing academic departments. A politics of defense requires a boundary, and modernist materialism gives first rural that needed ability to draw a line.

Thus, such a first rural is also a politics of 17.4 percent. It is an oppositional politics that demands that the 82.6 percent care for the outcome of the 17.4 percent, and not the other way. It may not preclude this other way, but common cause with the urban is not in the list of concerns that Beaulieu asks rural sociologists to recommitment themselves too. It is, then, a politics that 82.6 percent of Americans are unlikely to get very fired up about, given the plenitude of their own troubles—unless they happen to be rural sociologists, perhaps.

The paradoxes of this flavor of first rural have much in common with the paradox of wilderness. As Cronon (1995) has observed, the modern notion of wilderness is of a remote region that we ruin by coming into, or even by drawing a line around it so we may protect it, for such only makes the wild a human, urban pet. Currently dominant first rural language similarly resounds with a feeling of nature and social exclusion, and asks for a similarly impossible politics of caring for what the urban, by definition, must keep at a distance from itself.

There other potential politics of first rural. For example, one could conceive of a first rural that rooted itself in the dynamics of capital as that which creates variations in population density. The focus of such a politics would be less upon maintaining the barricades against sprawl and rural neglect, at least as its first political effects, but upon contesting capital's power, a power that creates misery in both low- and high-density locations, as it shapes the spatial development of human organization.

The political economy school of rural sociology has tried to advance just such a conception and political focus. For my part, I find much to admire in this other politics of first rural. It presents a much more compelling account of wrongdoing, I think, locating it not in the conceptual fuzz of urbanism but in the motives of money. It also provides an account of the origin of variations in population concentration, lending some theoretical gravity, as it were, to low-density studies. Plus it helps account for the spatial differences in how people gain their livings—what Gilbert (1982, p. 623) called the “spatial effects of the division of labor in society,” shaped by “the dominant mode of production.”

But reducing all social life to an effect of capital—if that is, or should be, the goal of a political economy of first rural—is still a strikingly materialist and modernist spatial vision. It also retains some of the ill-effects of dichotomous thinking, as in its continued externalization of what moves the rural. The urban is now similarly moved by this

functionalism, but there is still a victim narrative, a weakness in the face of the external: capital. In effect, this politics handles the unfortunate opposition of rural to urban by making it as conceptually thin and “simple” as can be, scraped down to only relative population density, as required by the capitalist whole.

There are thicker ways.

3. Second rural

3.1. Finding it

Although it is not well developed in US scholarship, there is another major epistemology of the rural, what I will call *second rural*. Let me begin giving an account of second rural by offering a summation of what I mean by first rural. By first rural, I mean the rural everyone knows as rural, and that we typically regard as prior: the epistemology of rural as space, as lower population density, as (at times) primary production, as nature, as the non-urban which is so plain to see—the *material moment* of the rural. By second rural, then, I mean the rural we often have trouble knowing, and that we typically regard as a secondness, even when we do know it: the epistemology of rural as place, as unconfined to lower population density space, as (at times) consumption, as socionature, as meanings which we may never unambiguously see—the *ideal moment* (in the philosophical, not the evaluative, sense) of the rural. I have in mind here a distinction closely related to what Halfacree (1993, 2004, 2006) has called “rural locality” versus “representations of the rural,” the former a “material” and the latter an “ideational” mode of the rural which, as Halfacree (2006, p. 47) notes, drawing on Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), “intersect in practice.” But I approach the question of “what is the rural” with a less ontological purpose, focusing most on the epistemological question of differences in how we come to know what is the rural, and the politics that these differences embody and cultivate.⁵ I do engage ontological questions eventually, but I am particularly interested in the epistemological secondness with which we most typically regard the ideal moment of the rural, despite as Halfacree argues—correctly, in my view, as I take up later—its equal ontological priority. I highlight this epistemological secondness we grant to the ideal moment because I hope that recognizing it will help us guard against it, both in our epistemology and in our politics.

Despite its typical epistemological secondness, there is nothing new about the ideal moment of the rural. As Williams (1973) showed in his classic review of the long centuries of writing on the rural and the urban in the

⁵There are more divergences between Halfacree's arguments and my own, but as Horace wrote to his friend Fuscus 2000 years ago concerning their different orientations to the rural, “why drag out our differences?” (Horace, 1983 [20 BCE], pp. 215–216; Epistle I, 10). We are firmly together on the ontological basic point.

English language, it has long been with both academic and popular thought. Second rural does not seem to come quite as readily to either turn of mind, at least consciously, but we must admit its social and sociological power, a power that commonly crosses out of first rural space. Take, for example, the common commitment to neighborhood that leads people to speak of living in “a little village.” This is just as likely an occurrence in a large settlement as a small one, Fischer (1982), Gans (1962), Pahl (1965, 1966), Wellman (1979), and many others since have tried to point out in criticizing the rural–urban continuum. Precisely so. Take, for another, the acquaintance who speaks of her garden as “my little piece of the country.” Or take, for a third, the marketing of agricultural products as “local,” or produced on “family farms,” or from ever-rustic “Vermont” (Hinrichs, 1996). Or take, for a fourth, the marketing of the entire state of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Madison, and all—as “America’s dairyland.” Or take (please do) the politician who dons cowboy boots and belt buckle to pitch a message of earthy authenticity and masculine power to an entire nation (Campbell et al., 2006). These are ways that understandings of the rural influence the lives of people living in places with population densities high and low alike.

Second rural, then, is a rural of associations. It calls upon the connections we have long made between rural life and food, cultivation, community, nature, wild freedom, and masculine patriarchal power, and the many contradictions we have also so long associated with the rural, such as desolation, isolation, dirt and disease, wild danger, and the straw-hatted rube. It is the rural of what Williams (1973) called the “golden echo” of rural goodness, as well the “leaden echo” of the rural we fear and reject. It is romantic. It is terrifying. It is empowering. It is imprisoning. It is *Never Cry Wolf*. It is *Deliverance*. It is *The Wizard of Oz*. It is *The Grapes of Wrath*. Second rural, the rural of ideas, is by no means always ideal.

Nor is second rural necessarily weak and disappearing, no more than the human concern for food, community, and appropriate ecological relations are disappearing. Indeed, as the occasional instance of disaster reminds us—the latest great earthquake, hurricane, flood, or disease outbreak—it is perhaps the urban which is weak and in need of protection from the rural, the second rural of our associations. Second rural equally afflicts rural space at times, as tornados take out another small town, and as well equally gives both rural and urban space grandeur and delight, as we relish the community feeling of local people pulling together in times of trouble. Second rural, then, is not necessarily epistemologically relative to the urban. It crosses space and turns it into place.

This crossing, I think, is what the compound vision of first rural was clumsily trying to get at. Compound first rural was right that something else was going on in our thoughts about the rural and the urban than mere notions of density. But compound first rural confused place for space, mind for matter, culture for environment and

economy, second rural for first rural. And it sought difference, not connection and transgression, in its efforts to give the rural presence. It sought boundaries in the boundless. Such, I fear, is the quixotic faith of modernism.

It is this quixotic faith that the postmodern turn in scholarship and social life has had such a field day with over the past couple of decades. Rural social science has by no means been immune to this turn, especially in Europe and the Antipodes. Where in the US the early 1980s critique of the rural followed a largely political economic course, as in the work of Gilbert, Friedland, and others, trading one materialist position for another, in Europe and the Antipodes the critique of the rural ran along a more cultural track. Indeed, in some of this work, second rural becomes the only real rural—that is, that the rural only exists as an idea.

Howard Newby and Keith Hoggart were important transitional figures in this debate. Newby, who has worked on both sides of the Atlantic, argued from a largely political economic starting place that “There is now, surely, a general awareness that what constitutes ‘rural’ is wholly a matter of convenience and that arid and abstract definitional exercises are of little utility” (Newby, 1986, p. 209). A few years later, Hoggart, writing in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, similarly despaired of the spatial understandings of first rural. Structural conditions such as state, capital, and civil society that “are not distinctive in rural areas” have far greater salience in understanding the empirical findings of rural scholars than the “undifferentiated use of ‘rural’”, argued Hoggart (1990, p. 245 and 249). “Let’s do away with rural,” Hoggart advised, even giving his article that title, as it is “obfuscatory” (Hoggart, 1990, p. 245).

But it was the Belgian rural sociologist Marc Mormont (1990, p. 40) who brought the rural fully into postmodernism with his pithy line “The rural is a category of thought.” In fact, this category is all academics can ever study, Mormont (1990, p. 41) says in the same article, arguing that “the rural is a category that each society takes and reconstructs, and that this social construction, with all its implications, defines the object of a sociology of the rural.” Once this association of the rural with social constructionism had been made, the postmodern floodgates were open in the European and Antipodean journals and monographs. Murdoch and Pratt (1993) were perhaps most decisive with their call to move from rural to “post-rural” studies that would “entail a focus on ‘power’ as certain actors impose ‘their’ rurality on others.” Not only was the category rural fundamentally political, a cultural grab for power, but rural studies itself was an exercise of power, they went to argue in a later paper (Murdoch and Pratt, 1994). Or as Murdoch and Marsden (1994, pp. 231–232) put it,

class formation does not take place on the head of a pin; it takes place in *specific places* as actors come together, using the assets at their disposal in order to impose their conceptions of space upon others. The rural thereby

becomes an expression of power, of the way sets of relations are drawn together and used to impose a whole variety of goals.

But although this account of the ideal moment of the rural seems in some work to obliterate the material moment, as in Mormont's suggestion that the social construction of the category rural should be the object of rural scholarship, it also retains the material moment, and even grants it implicit epistemological priority. Take the suggestive phrase "post-rural." Such language implies that understanding the rural as a category depends upon our prior act of understanding the rural not as a category but as a material obviousness. Such a vision of a second rurality may immediately set about deconstructing the power relations of first rural, but, understood this way, requires first rural as well. The same could be said of postmodernism: that it needs the modernism it denies.

3.2. *The politics of second rural*

This connection of language to power is at the heart of a distinctive second rural politics—a politics which, at this writing, is as vigorous in Europe and the Antipodes as the kind of first rural politics of defense I earlier described currently is in the US. The second rural *politics of discourse* is what has made the rural "hot" in Europe and the Antipodes, opening up room within rural scholarship for a host of disciplinary innovations aimed at critiquing the power relations of the category rural. The rural constructions of farmers, environmentalists, politicians, exurbanites, tourists, development agencies, and more all came under scrutiny for their political and ideological origins and implications—in a host of mainly European and Antipodean publications, but perhaps the three most prominent have been the edited volumes *Constructing the Countryside* (Marsden et al., 1993), *Contested Countryside Cultures* (Cloke and Little, 1997), and *Handbook of Rural Studies* (Cloke et al., 2006). By the late 1990s and 2000s, second rural scholars began to engage the politics of gender and sexuality, as in the rural masculinity studies of Brandth and Haugen (1998, 2000), David Bell's studies of rural gay imagery (Bell, 1995; Bell and Holliday, 2000), Jo Little's work on rural heterosexuality (Little, 2003), or Smith and Holt's (2005) work on lesbian rural in-migration. These are matters that, only a few years previously, rural scholars did not discuss in public. Much of the politics of the second rural, as conceived by the postmodern rural turn, consists in such open discussion of that which was previously considered beyond the cultural pale, making visible invisible othernesses, giving voice to that which had been silenced or ignored. This line of analysis is now sometimes combined with a "critical political economy" (Cloke et al., 2006, p. xi) that interrogates the intersection of culture and power in the rural, and thus sees itself as moving beyond the first rural political economy of an earlier generation of rural scholars.

In short, where a first rural politics of defense finds epistemological reason in a modernist materialization of a boundary, a second rural politics of discourse finds epistemological reason in the postmodern deconstruction of that same boundary. Much of this work has focused on deconstructing what came to be known in the literature as the "rural idyll"—the "popular imagination" of "bucolic tranquility and communion with nature," as David Bell (1997, p. 94) phrased it. Mingay's (1989) edited volume, *The Rural Idyll*, opened wide this line of thought, which had been presaged by Williams's 1973 identification of the "golden echo" of rural life. A number of studies subsequently investigated what might be termed the "idyllology" of the rural (Bell, 1992, 1994; Cloke and Little, 1997; Halfacree, 1995; Little and Austin, 1996; Valentine, 1997), and articles in recent issues of *Journal of Rural Studies* continue to interrogate what it excludes and avoids (Blackstock et al., 2006; Neal and Walters, 2006; Rye, 2006; Winchester and Rofe, 2005).

A post-rural take on the ideal moment of the rural is thus now arguably the foremost strand of rural research in dominantly European and Antipodean journals like *Sociologia Ruralis*, *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Antipode*, and *Gender, Place, and Culture*. The politics it embodies, however, continues to grant an epistemological priority to the rural that came before it, focusing on opening up its pre-existing categories. Of course, any critique of anything must proceed from the proposition that there is something there to critique. But a central strand of the post-rural critique of discourse has been that of rural enfranchisement—a we-are-here-too claim that demands recognition of that which we had silenced in the idyllology of the rural—rather than the wholesale disenfranchisement of the rural that some have perhaps feared in the second rural argument.

Here too, I find much to admire in such a politics. Indeed, I believe I have contributed to it in my own work. Nor would I suggest that disenfranchising the rural should be the goal of post-rural studies, nor of any rural studies, as I trust will be plain by the end of this article. But we do need to recognize the typical secondness of both the epistemology and the politics of the post-rural case.

The post-rural vision has not been entirely absent from the US scene, however. (And again, I believe I have contributed to it.) The year 1996 saw the publication of the explicitly culturalist *Creating the Countryside* by a US press, and edited by the US-based rural sociologists Melanie Dupuis and Peter Vandergeest. Year 2000 saw the publication in *Rural Sociology* of a special issue devoted to rural masculinity, albeit with mainly non-US-based contributors (and not without controversy); an edited volume following on from that special issue was released by the Rural Studies Series of the Rural Sociological Society (Campbell et al., 2006). One of editors of the *Handbook of Rural Studies* is Patrick Mooney, an American rural sociologist, and there are a fair smattering of US authors in its table of contents. Plus as well, one of

the earliest articulations of a second rural vision—well before postmodernism was in fashion—came from Copp (1972, p. 519), then president of the Rural Sociological Society:

There is no *rural* and there is no *rural economy*. It is merely *our* analytic distinction, our rhetorical device.⁶

But nonetheless, it would be safe to say that US rural sociology has had relatively little enthusiasm for second rural—especially a post-rural vision of it—and this remains the case in recent issues of *Rural Sociology*. Or take the pragmatic first rural vision of the *Challenges for Rural America* volume. It is hard to imagine such a tone in a book coming out of Europe or the Antipodes today.

This lack of enthusiasm has been rarely explicitly addressed by American rural scholars. If I may be allowed some speculation, it may be in part because, in a way, the American politics of first rural worries that the second rural argument might be right. Such a worry follows from the victim politics of first rurality—that it is in dire trouble and in need of spirited defense. To openly engage the second rural argument and its politics is to engage the possibility that it is too late for the rural, for it is already gone, and maybe never even existed. And who would need rural scholars and departments then?

Whatever the origin of its response, American rural scholarship has passively resisted a post-rural second rural vision and the politics it encourages. And perhaps not entirely without cause. As so many have complained of postmodernism, it is hard to disagree with it analytically, but it is also hard to do anything with it practically without reigning it in quite a bit. Such a vision of second rural seems better suited to deconstruction than reconstruction, for any proposed reconstruction of social life must, in the end, be nothing more than another effect of power, another imposition of conceptions of space onto others, another—at best—muddled moralism. The result is a politics with no polity, no category to advance or defend.

So what do you do with the post-rural, if there is nothing to defend, the impatient first rural scholar therefore asks? It is all very well to point out that categorical boundaries are always arbitrary effects of discourse and the power relations that shape it, but does that mean that there is no difference in the world apart from power—that all knowledge is just gray twilight over the smoky, ruined scenes of a war of all against all? Cannot we try to find more positive bases of difference and a politics based on these recognitions? Moreover, is it not just another singular vision to reduce all social life to an effect of discourse, just as singular as reducing everything to an effect of capital or an effect of population density?

⁶Copp's now-famous line was first unearthed by Newby (1986), who mis-cited the page number as 159 instead of 519. Several authors since then have repeated Newby's error here, evidently taking their quotation straight from Newby (1986).

4. The rural plural

4.1. Finding it

Such are the epistemological and political problems of conceiving of second rural as the only remaining rural—problems that are equaled in their troubles when we conceive of first rural as still the first and only rural. A singular second rural wants to keep first rural from now on in quotation marks, fear some, calling into question its continued reality. A singular first rural, for its part, wants to keep second rural in quotation marks too, calling its reality into question as well, for it is too subject to the whim of the definer to be the real stuff of the rural, the material truths of first rurality. But we mistake what makes real the real if we understand the matter either way. Thomas's (1951) dictum about the social being “real in its consequences” applies equally well to beliefs and to the material world most of us feel to be unproblematically real. What makes anything real—any material-thing or any idea-thing—is its consequences.

My daughter, I have belatedly come to recognize, was trying to point this out to me in a way during that conversation where I wound up asking her to define what she meant by “countryside.” In fact, it was the following comment of hers that started the conversation.

“Dad,” she had called from her car seat in back, “why are all the farms in the countryside?”

“Well, that's where there's room for them,” I had answered, without thinking the matter through, and falling back on a first rural position I thought she would readily understand. “There are too many people in the cities to fit them in.”

But my daughter was thinking it through. “No, that's not right, Dad. You could have the people live closer together on the edges of the farms. Like in our neighborhood. You could put all the backyards together and make a farm.”

Now, one can easily make too much of the innocence of children, especially one's own; besides, my daughter was likely picking up on something she had heard at the dinner table. But she was right that such a thing could be done. In fact, sometimes it has been, as in the establishment of “allotment” gardens in cities across Britain during the “dig for victory” movement during World War II, or the Cuban urban agriculture push that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the current enthusiasm for community gardens in the US. Many have gotten excited by these successes, and urban agriculture is now an extensive movement in many rich countries around the world. (It has a long presence in most poor countries.) Ideas, then, can have consequence, both material consequence—the new urban gardens that are springing up so widely—and consequence for ideas—the new social movements that are promoting urban agriculture.

Material matters have consequence too, of course, both material consequence and consequence for ideas. And in

this sense, there is no cause for banishing first rural. Indeed, as I have said, we generally regard the material rural as prior. Modernism demands this priority. Post-modernity may not demand it, but it does implicitly accept it, as I noted earlier—even as postmodernism asks us to be done with this priority of the rural. But we need here to disentangle ontological and epistemological priority. When I call first rural “first,” I am trying to capture the epistemological direction of how our thought on the rural has developed, not to assign it an ontologically greater or prior role in rurality. For in their ontological contribution to the constitution of rurality and its realities, my argument is, with Halfacree, that first rural and second rural are equally first—and equally second—in the lived experience of the rural. I might wish that there were no epistemological firstness of either (and perhaps any) rural. Indeed, I very much wish that. Yet the record of debate shows that, alas, to date there is.

May we one day get our rural ontology and rural epistemology together and be done with these priorities. But when we do, we should not view this as license to blend all material and ideal matters into a dull sameness. While both are equally real, there is a different character to their realities that long has stumped our best efforts at description. I will not be over-long in making one more necessarily feeble attempt here. I will merely suggest that we may find it easier to give these two realities their equal due if the construction of our words invited this balance. Therefore I find it helpful to think of what we might call the *mater-real* and the *idea-real*. First rural, then, is a mater-real category, and second rural is an idea-real category.

At least in their most immediate analytic presuppositions: If we look more closely, we find much of the ideal in first rural and much of the material in second rural, both in terms of where first rural and second rural come from and where they are headed. When I earlier described first rural as the “material moment” of the rural, and second rural as the “ideal moment,” I meant something of a conceptual pun, which it is now time to highlight. “Moment” in English refers both to an instance in time and to a rotational torque. While scholars may as their contribution to debate make a statement that takes a material or an ideal stance, that instance of professional speech will have its origins in, and consequences for, the constant turning of both the material and ideal dimensions of our thought. This conceptual torque turns us ever from the mater-real to the idea-real and back again, in the development of our thought and in our ways of setting up, and re-setting up, our lives. But such interactive turning is never a returning, for in interaction there is change. Thus first rural is only materialist in our first imagination of it, and correspondingly with the idealism of second rural. They both enter the circle of the material and the ideal at a different point, but then immediately rotate into the other, changing thereby—if we allow ourselves epistemological permission to recognize it.

Let me briefly illustrate the equal moments of the material and the ideal in the constitution of rural reality. Take the notion of the “urban village.” The fact that we find it necessary to add the qualifier “urban” indicates that urbanness is not immediately called into mind when we say “village.” Which sounds like the ideal moment is secondary: rural material space first gave rise to the village, and ideas of place later carried it beyond that space. Or did it? The decision to initially associate village-ness with particular material settings depended upon our idealization of village-ness as the typical way of life of those settings. Otherwise, we would say “rural village” as much as we say “urban village,” and not see “rural village” as a redundant phrase. Indeed, critiques of the presence of *gemeinschaft* in rural areas might be taken as saying that rurality, in the sense of village-ness, is not a necessary feature of rural areas, in the first rural, low population density sense of “rural areas.” Rather, the *gemeinschaftlich* village-ness of life in low population density areas is an association we make, or do not make. A similar implication underlies the common complaint that agriculture is turning into “factory farming”—an urban image that suggests there is nothing inherently rural about farming, as Friedland (1982, 2002) has long argued. “Farming is just farming,” says Friedland (pers. commun., 2006). Thus, even to constitute a material sense of the rural as farming and low population density we need to constitute the rural as an idea, lest it all lapse into blooming, buzzing confusion.

Is, then, the rural just a “category of thought”? But to leave the matter there, and to give priority to idea-reality, is to walk away from the question of where particular categories of thought come from. Only from other categories of thought? But turning back still further (and later turning forward again—where, we know not) we can recognize, with Gilbert (1982), that material relations of capital and technology shape the distribution of population density and the spatial placement of farms.

Which does not mean that rural is fundamentally a material category either. The interplay of the material and ideal does not stop, in either direction. Take the very word “farm” in factory farming. Today we generally recognize it as referencing a particular set of material socio-environmental relations, the violation of which the phrase “factory farming” protests. Some version of these material relations date back 10,000 years at least, to the first scratchings in the topsoil, the archeologists assure us. Therefore one might reasonably assume that the word “farm” has its origins in those material scratchings. But it turns out that the English word “farm” originally had nothing to do with cultivating crop and animal increase, as an ideal moment in the rural dialog might well recall to us. “Farm” entered the language in Middle English times, says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a borrowing from the French *ferme*, it seems. *Ferme* in turn came from *firma*, a Latin word meaning not cultivation nor anything like it, but rather a “fixed payment,” and later in the development of Latin a document ratified by a signature. This latter sense of

ratifying comes down to us in the words “confirm” and “affirm,” and the sense of a signature lives on today in the idea of a named business organization, or business “firm.” The sense of a “fixed payment” is what became “farm,” and in Chaucer’s day that meant a generally annual sum that pretty much every household, whether in town or country, had to pay the Feudal masters. If you grew crops, you could pay your farm with a portion of that, instead of with whatever meager store of coin you might have secured. Indeed, that was the most common way a farm was paid, until it became sensible to people to think of the source of paying the farm as the farm itself. And when that became sensible, an originally non-spatially confined idea became that *sine qua non* of first rural spatial materiality, the farm.

Of course, there is another materialism behind the notion of the fixed annual payment, Gilbert and other political economists would immediately remind us: the materialism of money, flowing from periphery to core. That’s why cities are such sites of capital concentration, that’s why spaces with relatively low population density exist, and that’s why we now have factory farms, argues the political economy school of the rural material—and not without reason. But would capital exist without the ideas that make it an imaginable source of the human organization of materiality? Perhaps one day those ideas may change, and the material relations of capital with them, rotating into new futures of the mater-reality and the idea-reality of the rural.

In short, mater-reality and idea-reality each announce, and reannunciate, the rural—and each other.⁷

4.2. The politics of the rural plural

It is this equal annunciation that is at the heart of the politics of what I will call the *rural plural*—a conception of rural that equally embraces the epistemology and ontology of both first rural and second rural, and as well sees them both as moments in a plural dialog, spinning out in time into other rurals—rurals without number or priority—ad infinitum.

But let me repeat for the materially nervous reader, likely American, that I am not advocating that we turn tables on first rural, in all its confident one-ness about the world, and what is and what isn’t. I do not wish rural scholarship to replace first rural with a second one-ness, the one-ness of ideas alone, free to associate as they may, with little regard for the mater-real. I do not wish to throw out the politics of first rural for pure deconstructionism. That would only lead to a different disconnectedness: solipsism. And we must confess that we do not want to contest all power. We

want to defend, and extend, some powers—even if we may come later to regret and reframe that defense. And we must use mater-reality as much as idea-reality in effecting that defense and its constant reframing.

Admitting this interactiveness can give us a far more dynamic politics of the rural. Because we are not post-rural. And that is precisely why a first rural anti-urbanism that only defends the 17.4 percent should not suffice for the politics of rural scholarship either. To be more concrete: a first rural politics might be a politics of the disappearing 17.4 percent. A second rural politics might be a politics that disputes any special claim for that 17.4 percent, and makes claims for the 100 percent that will always be there, always rural at least three times a day, if not more, as it draws the fork, and thus the field, to the mouth. A politics of the rural plural is potentially both of these—and more. It advocates better conditions for those who live in the rural areas of first rural-ness, just as it argues how those better conditions can better everyone else too, and how that which we consider rural is of significance to everyone, wherever they live. The rural plural defends and it extends. It finds boundaries and it overcomes them. It constructs categories and it reconstructs them. It is a politics of land tenure, of labor markets, of community and neighborhood development, of agricultural change, of food sheds, of good food for school lunches, of forest fires and environmental disasters, of refugees, of resource control and management, of pollution, of national parks, of the city park and the over-grown lot, of sprawl and smart growth, of use values and exchange values, of production and consumption, of science and technology, of the local and the global, of gender and sexuality, of class and heritage, of age and life course, of education and healthcare, of policing and the courts, of the military, of religion, of social ties weak and strong, of the instrumental and the sentimental, of the social power and social knowledge involved in all of this, and of so, so much more. It is political economy. It is political culture. It is economic justice. It is environmental justice. It is gender and heritage justice. It is just justice, as we constantly define and redefine it, work for it and rework it.

Which is a pretty huge list, one that engages virtually every contemporary social and political debate. And perhaps every one. Does this mean that everything is rural, or potentially rural? Yes and no. The epistemological point of the rural plural is not to gobble everything into the rural, and to say that is all that is, whatever our urban pretensions to the contrary may be. But rather, its argument is that like all really big social concepts—power, capital, gender, race and ethnicity, class, for example—the rural is something we can see pretty much everywhere in social life, and maybe indeed everywhere. The political implications of such an epistemology are vital. To say that everything in society potentially has a rural dimension is not to say that everything in society is only rural. It is to say that our professional and practical endeavor is potentially much larger than we generally think from

⁷Although I do not consider it here, a closely parallel argument could be made for the importance of recognizing a mater-real “first urban” and an idea-real “second urban,” which similarly announce each other. I leave that to others to trace. There is only so much that can be accomplished in any one paper.

either of our currently dominant singular rural conceptions.

The importance of this larger endeavor is the message that I believe we should take from the work of Halfacree and other scholars of what I hope is an emerging rural plural vision. I have been trying to support this ontology by giving it an epistemological foundation and a political vision, a foundation and vision that help us heal the modernist/postmodernist divide. For our world is neither modernist nor postmodernist. It is not a one-ness. Nor is it only a two-ness. Our world is a many-ness that can develop into ever-greater multiplicities of epistemologies and ontologies of knowing and being, and of practical politics, in a constant dialog of difference, connection, and change: an unfinalizable pluralism of engagement.

Engaging this multiplying many-ness is where we find the ends of rural scholarship, not the end of it, for when we are plural we have no one end. It is also where American rural scholars might find both intellectual reinvigoration and common cause with the world beyond American rural areas—including with European and Antipodean scholars. And vice versa, for first rural and second rural scholars equally neglect the other at their intellectual, political, and even institutional peril. Indeed, it is that neglect that keeps them in such singular scholarly positions. Perhaps Teddy Roosevelt said it best in a 1908 speech establishing the Country Life Commission: “the great rural interests are human interests.”⁸ Let this be the only one-ness of a rural plural.

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⁸The full sentence is “The great rural interests are human interests, and good crops are of little value to the farmer unless they open the door to a good kind of life on the farm,” showing that even Teddy Roosevelt was not as plural in his rural as I think we should strive for. Cited in Roosevelt (1913).

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