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Activating the Countryside: Rural Power, the Power of the Rural and the Making of Rural Politics

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Abstract

Against the current moment of rural doubt, we argue that the material, symbolic and relational practices of the rural continue to be articulate aspects of our politics. We term the material practices 'rural power' and the symbolic practices 'the power of the rural'. The relational practices we term 'rural constituencies' when relations are bounded materially and 'constituencies of the rural' when they are bounded symbolically. We apply this framework to a critique of contemporary theory, especially mobilities research, which, we argue, typically speaks with a passive rural voice. We argue for recognising the active rural voice in the mobilisation and stabilisation of the rural.

The rural still causes trouble. In our supposedly modern and urban age, when we have grown accustomed to thinking of the rural as something old and tired, too exhausted and passive to resist and get out of the way of cities and city people, we still find repeated reminders of the alertness and vigour of rural places, ideas and lives. These reminders are not necessarily cause for romantic celebration. Afghanistan, Waziristan and Sudan nettle the world, showing us the continued stark military challenge of the rural. Everyone is talking about food again, worried about its dearth, its excess and its quality and lack thereof. Diseases from swine flu to avian flu to West Nile virus bring the rural into the streets of everyone's concerns. People move from countryside to city, from city to countryside, and from countryside to countryside and the results are not always conflict free. The rural also pleases us, soothing our worries through book and film and song, and rewarding our ambitions through walks and weeding and woodcutting. In all these ways and more, the rural remains an active feature of our lives, continually confronting us and our politics materially, symbolically and relationally.

And yet many writers from many quarters have argued that the rural is declining in consequence. Others have objected to or qualified such a take on the rural. This is an old and seemingly endless debate, one that more than a few scholars are weary of,

and wary of (Sorokin and Zimmerman 1929; Sorokin *et al.* 1930–1932; Asleson 1958; Pahl 1966; Copp 1972; Williams 1973; Friedland 1982, 2002; Gilbert 1982; Mormont 1990; Bell, 1992, 2007; Halfacree 1993; Marsden *et al.* 1993; Murdoch and Pratt 1993). But the very existence of the debate indicates that the status of the rural, empirically and conceptually, remains at issue. Moreover, the debate seems to have increased in volume recently, as we will describe, which provides occasion for the intervention we wish to make here: to argue for an active understanding of the many powers of the rural with all its materiality, symbolism and relations. In this way, we hope to provide an account of the rural that is based not on an a priori definition but rather on practice. The powers of these practices make the rural and its politics an active part of the practice of all our lives.

In the pages to come, we term material practices ‘rural power’ and symbolic practices ‘the power of the rural’. We term relational practices ‘rural constituencies’ when relations are bounded materially and ‘constituencies of the rural’ when bounded symbolically. Rural power and the power of the rural grant power from the rural, and rural constituencies and constituencies of the rural grant power over the rural. Of course, like all practices, these combine and mutually constitute each other in the actual politics of actual lives. Indeed, their plural powers gain their greatest strength through their combination and mutual constitution. Moreover, these plural powers are made use of by urban peoples as much as rural peoples. Rural activeness is spatial but not spatially limited.

We develop our active perspective on the rural in dialogue with the rise of interest in mobilities as a theoretical perspective for, and an empirical account of, the rural. Perhaps the most prominent sign of this rising interest is that mobilities was one of the themes of the 2007 meetings of the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS), which was entitled ‘Mobilities, vulnerabilities and sustainabilities: new questions and challenges for rural Europe’, which in turn gave rise to this special issue. The empirical recognition of rural mobilities as phenomena worthy of note and concern, as documented by the other articles in this special issue, potentially helps us envision the activeness of the rural. But we have to look more sharply than we sometimes have, for there is a potential to see rural mobilities as yet more signs of the draining, the wasting and the dying away of the rural in the face of urban strength and vitality. We have some concerns that the ‘mobilities turn’ in scholarship could lead us to repeat old homilies about rural passivity and death, as we shall argue, missing the active significance of the rural in our lives and in our politics. Indeed, early writings emphasising a more mobile conception of social life have echoed this passive rural tone, at least implicitly, as we discuss. We try to amend this tone by recognising that stabilities are just as significant as mobilities, that stabilities help constitute mobilities and vice versa, and that stabilisation is as much an active political act as is mobilisation for the life of both the town and the country.

The death of the rural

Writers have opined on rural demise, from various perspectives, for centuries, as Raymond Williams (1973) thoughtfully showed, dating back to the Roman poet Horace (1983 [c. 20 BCE]), if not earlier. But the volume of opining seems to have

ratcheted up quite a bit of late. We typed 'death of the rural' into Google, with quotation marks to get hits on the exact phrase, and got 201,000 hits – an illustrative total, if not a quantitatively significant one.¹ Right at the top was a reference to Wendell Berry's 1999 piece in *The Ecologist* on 'The death of the rural community'. On the first page of returns were references to 'death of the rural lifestyle' from a review of Jorge Sánchez-Cabezudo's 2006 rural noir film *Night of the Sunflowers*; 'death of the rural federations' from an article on women and rural development; 'death of the rural world' from a history of Algeria; 'death of the rural way of life' from an account of Irish novelist John McGahern's last book, the 2002 *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in his 2006 obituary in the British paper *The Telegraph*; 'the slow death of rural culture' from a review of a 2005 CD of Italian rural music field recordings made in the 1950s by the famous folklorist Alan Lomax; and 'the death of the rural pub trade' from a 2006 account in an Irish paper of the closing of 14 per cent of rural pubs in County Mayo in the previous 2 years.

Other search terms picked up more dark talk about the rural. 'End of the rural' returned 311,000 hits. Many or even most of these were admittedly other uses of the word string, like 'at the west end of the rural road' and 'at the delivery end of the rural information chain'. But it also turned up bits like the Australian Sociological Association's 2003 public forum on 'The End of the Rural?'; a 1999 lament on 'the end of the rural church in India' from the Presbyterian Overseas Ministries; a 2002 discussion of the role of the 'degradation of rural culture, and the end of the rural universe' in giving impetus to the rise of the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil; and a rather unwieldy chapter title 'Agriculture's place in a diversifying economy; rural industry and the farmers in the city; the end of the rural?' from the online table of contents for a 2000 book titled *More Than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia*. Related phrases like the 'end of rural life' got us to the personal statement of Helen Reddout, co-founder of the American advocacy group, the Community Association for Restoration of the Environment, which was the featured organisation for people to donate to if they really liked *The Matrix*, the popular series of anti-factory farm spoofs of *The Matrix*. Reddout concludes her statement by saying that a factory farm 'is the seeds of destruction of any rural community and the end of rural life as we have known it'. A search on the 'death of rural life' got us to the Canadian Organic Growers' 1999 presentation to Canada's House Standing Committee on Environment and Development, in which the group argued that 'the current model of agribusiness results in the death of rural life'.

In other words, this talk of rural demise is coming in from all over the world. Academics have been getting in on it once again too. There is the 1998 book by the American agricultural economist Stephen Blank, *The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio*. The American sociologist William Friedland (2002) lays out a related case in 'Agriculture and rurality: beginning the final separation?' The Brazilian sociologist Arilson Favareto (2006) observes that we are seeing 'The rationalization of rural life', by which he means the loss of its culture.

In the last few years a feeling of institutional crisis has developed among rural academics, as they have pondered the declining membership of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) and the ESRS, the closing and renaming of departments of rural sociology in the USA (Bell 2007) and agricultural economics in Britain (Lowe and

Ward 2007), and the annual threats to the Hatch Act that has long been the main source of Federal funding for rural research in the USA. Lionel Beaulieu (2005) tries to find a way out of the impasse in 'Breaking walls, building bridges: expanding the presence and relevance of rural sociology', his 2004 presidential address to the RSS. Richard Krannich (2008) continued this theme in his 2007 presidential address on the subject of 'Rural sociology at the crossroads'. Recent meetings of the RSS have included sessions with titles such as 'The death and rebirth of rural sociology' (in 2006) and 'Transformation of rural society and the Rural Sociological Society' (in 2007). With this sense in the background, but in a more optimistic register, Philip Lowe (2009) offered the opening keynote to the 2009 meetings of the ESRs on the topic of 'Reinventing the rural: between the social and the natural'.

Academic institutions aren't the only ones who are worried. There are a number of rural crises afflicting everything from rural hospitals, main streets, schools, churches and organisations as the population size of rural places shrinks. There is the rural healthcare crisis, touched off by the closing of rural hospitals and clinics. There is the rural commercial crisis due to the closure of rural banks and main streets. There is a rural educational crisis as rural schools continue to be amalgamated into the larger towns. There is the rural faith crisis due to the similar amalgamation of rural church districts. There is the rural organisational crisis as long-time groups watch their membership rolls shorten. And there is even a rural naming crisis as rural organisations struggle to rebrand themselves, as in the FFA's decision a few years ago to rename itself simply 'FFA', dropping any explicit connection to being an acronym for Future Farmers of America. In short, morbid thoughts about the rural abound.

The passive rural voice

What has led to these feelings of rural loss, doubt and even panic? The arguments are likely to be all familiar by now. From a material point of view the standard account runs something like the following. Little remains of rural geographical distinctiveness any more. Ways of life in rural areas closely resemble those of anywhere else. In richer countries, rural folk watch television, browse the Internet, shop in chain stores and drive for most of their trips. In the poorer countries they may watch, browse, shop and drive less than their city cousins, but the differences are fast disappearing. Plus community – that Hallmark card understanding of the rural – can be found anywhere or not, it now appears. There can be no special rural claim on it. Industrial agriculture has made the rural landscape of the rich countries into a vast open-air assembly line little different from what goes on in cities aside from the lack of a roof. And now industrial agriculture is making widespread inroads in the poorer countries too. The best claim for the rural is that there remain extensive areas of the world where the population density is considerably lower than in cities, and that this does present some special challenges in getting services. But roads and satellites reach pretty much everywhere now and, with your Blackberry or your XO laptop, Google does too. The fact is, so the argument goes, we all live in an urban world nowadays, whether we live in areas with high or low population density or in countries rich or poor, aside from a few remaining remote and forgotten corners of the landscape. And, in addition, we have become an urban world in terms of density as well, according to the UN

Population Fund (2007), which estimated that by the end of 2008 more of the world's population would be living in urban areas than in rural ones.

From the point of view of ideas, the standard account goes more or less as follows. As a result of this new material connectedness the very idea of the rural is becoming at best passé. We live in a hybrid world now and anyone can put together the identity they choose. We each make, unmake and remake cultural boundaries and connections, albeit guided by discourse and power-knowledge. The rural is now little more than a cultural trick, a fading myth to be marketed to the unsuspecting and romantic or a desperate grab for political power.

There are many more nuances to these arguments than our qualitative factor analysis, as it were, immediately suggests. But in broad strokes, such are the arguments that in one form or another have been often intoned about the rural. As Bell (2007) contends, we have long oscillated between two conceptions of the rural, one materialist and one idealist. First in our minds, particularly in realist North America, is the materialist conception that Bell terms 'first rural'. This is the rural of low population densities and the forms of social relations and economy found in such settings. This is the rural as farming, as community, as rural areas and people, as primary production, as regions poorly served by the organisational apparatus of modern life. And typically one hears that this rural is vulnerable, disadvantaged, under threat and disappearing, either suggesting a politics of defence to maintain the stability of its boundary or a politics of abandonment to celebrate its demise.

Second in our minds is the idealist conception Bell terms 'second rural'. This is the rural of categories and constructions, of the power relations of culture, of the associations we make and do not make when we call upon the rural. We find second rural in the novel, the children's tale, the TV show and advertisement, the authenticity we feel we encounter in the farmers' market and the forms of social relations we justify or contest thereby. Second rural has a politics too, and it is most typically nowadays a politics of discourse, deconstructing the inclusions and exclusions of ideas and their boundaries. This view sees the rural as holding some continuing authority that we need be wary of, given the venerable lines it draws and does not draw, but it also typically sees this authority as lapsing in the face of the rural's declining material significance. For some writers, a second rural is the only rural that remains, and that perhaps ever existed. But it is nonetheless epistemologically a secondness that we know from moving across and beyond the old boundaries of first rural, leaving in their place what Murdoch and Pratt (1993) called the post-rural. In this view, the rural is a category of thought, as Marc Mormont (1990) wrote, nothing more.

What concerns us theoretically about such popular and academic views is the curiously passive imagination of the rural they manifest, what we will term the passive rural voice. This imagination sees the rural as largely defeated, washed over and worn out, its sell-by date exceeded, with little independence as a source of change in its own right. Change happens to the rural; the rural does not create change. It is passive in the face of the real sources of activeness: capital, technology, globalisation, and the urban as the embodiment of all of these.

But this is a passiveness that stems from reductionist views that see the rural in either first rural or second rural terms, and not both together, forever developing into a pluralism of new rurals (Bell 2007). Either first rural materialism or second rural

idealism is absurd apart from the other. Take, for example, the categorical arbitrariness of how a material fact like population density is defined. If we consider the unit of analysis the stretch of floor or ground taken up by any human, we all live in a realm with a population density of one, equally urban or rural. Population density is always the same wherever there are people. Of course, we always refer to some stretch greater than one person when we discuss population density and of course there are varying distances between people. But, as social creatures, we generally live with others wherever we live. Indeed, people generally live with much the same proximity to others, whether it be in villages, small towns or cities. The main predictor of density on a house-by-house, building-by-building basis is not whether the structures are in a village, a town or a city but the era in which a given location was developed. In the countryside there are often farms that are widely separated from other residences and for which the principle of eras of density does not apply. Is this, then, the real rural? But there are also isolated residences inside the industrial districts of cities – perhaps an apartment for a night-watchman or a makeshift shelter for a homeless person – and we do not call those rural. The point: we have to come up with some way to draw the boundary that we will use to measure density – we have to come up with some categorical fix – and thus the material is always dependent upon the ideal.

The ideal without the material is equally absurd. It is true that one could say anything one wants about whatever one wants. One could, perhaps, point to the end of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose and call it his rural extremity, distanced as it is from the rest of his person, and it might be good for a laugh. Watch out for his sword but one could say it. But even here you would be referencing a material logic: that of spatial distance and density. You could also call his quill pen rural because of the feather, or even his pocket watch rural for no reason at all – just because you want to. But in the former case we doubt anyone would find the point very interesting and in the latter we doubt anyone would get it at all, for, after all, there was nothing to get. Without a material reference, second rural equally lapses into blah-blah-blah.

Reductionism is an epistemological necessity, of course. The only perfectly adequate way to portray some aspect of existence is with that aspect itself, which would not be a portrayal at all. But we need to keep this inevitability and its potential for dualism firmly in mind. Now, by dualism we do not mean binary categories. Any statement about anything has an is or is-not, something or something-else quality, and in this sense binaries are neither escapable nor deplorable. The issue is how one handles them. By dualism we mean when our use of a categorical distinction freezes and segregates difference. The conventional opposition of first rural and second rural is an example of such frozen segregation, in which neither entity in the binary affirms its dependence upon, and mutual constitution of, the other.

But mutually constituting dependences do not make each side of a binary the same. Rather it means that their differences are constantly in flux, forever seeking balances and accommodations that they never quite reach. This flux leads to what Bell (2007, p. 413) termed the 'rural plural', which he described as

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 plural dialog, spinning out in time into other rurals – rurals without number or priority – *ad infinitum*.

In so doing, the rural becomes not a static, immobile, reductionist singularity that is easily and permanently defined, but

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 (Bell 2007, p. 414).

Our contribution here is to suggest that such a conception of a rural always in the plural is also a conception of an active rural voice that has considerable powers in the world, mobilising and stabilising the practices of human politics. This is a voice of the rural we believe we all can, and often do, hear.

The active rural voice and the mobilities paradigm

One potential aid to this hearing is the mobilities paradigm, which has gained much critical attention among scholars in recent years, as we noted earlier. Our world is awash with fluidity, circulation, motility and automobility, in the terminology advanced by John Urry, with some close kinship to (but also substantial differences with) the flows perspective of Manuel Castells, and as well now many others. 'Mobilities, as both metaphor and process, are at the heart of social life and thus should be central to sociological analysis', proclaims Urry (2000, p. 49) in *Sociology Beyond Societies*. There is a 'new spatial process, the space of flows, that is becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies', contends Castells (2000 [1996], p. 409) in *The Rise of the Network Society*. This flowing, this mobility of what Urry (2000) calls global fluids, is where we experience both freedom and power today in a globalising world of translocal subjectivities (Conradson and McKay 2007) and cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006), washing out boundaries of society and nation-state and creating a global civil society (Urry 2000), a mobile union of the things, ideas and peoples of the world.

We share the view that the mobilities paradigm is a helpful and important theoretical intervention, one that provides a much-needed correction to the static views associated with modernist reductionism while at same time giving us a place to stand, something that postmodernism seemed to deny was possible. We particularly applaud the active voice of the mobilities perspective, so much in tune with our argument for recognising the activeness of the rural. In the pages to come, we hope to demonstrate that a mobile understanding of the rural helps makes sense of rural politics.

But before we get to that, we also must take mobilities research to task a bit, on two grounds. Firstly, its early incarnations engaged the rural very little – although we hope this special issue represents a change and broadening of heart – and indeed at times seemed to echo the passive rural voice, at odds with the activeness of the mobilities perspective. Secondly, we share the complaint that others have raised that mobilities research privileges mobility over stability. What we hope to add to this complaint is an argument that stability is just as active a phenomenon as mobility.

Take the new journal *Mobilities* founded by Urry and his colleagues. The word rural did not appear in its statement of aims. It barely appeared in its opening editorial (Hannam *et al.* 2006, p. 11) – just one passing adjectival mention that references other work. And the list of subjects covered by the journal that its website proclaimed as of

this writing included the categories urban communications and technology, urban sociology-urban studies and urban studies. It did not list rural studies and related concerns – although perhaps glints of the rural were intended in the categories housing and land economy, tourism and tourism and leisure. Moreover, the word rural registered in only one abstract of all the 58 articles from the first seven issues that had, at the time of writing, appeared, and did not appear at all in any title or list of keywords.² The word urban showed up in nine titles, abstracts or keyword lists. Plus there were plenty of discussions of the city and locations like London, Mecca and Singapore.

Perhaps that was just bad luck in the roll of the dice of submissions, and it is too soon to rush to put much weight on this 9:1 ratio. (A single additional rural piece would drop the ratio immediately to 4.5:1.) But combined with the way that the journal describes itself and makes a case for itself, we can't help feeling that most mobilities researchers share the view that the rural just isn't where things of significance happen. Castells (2000 [1996]) isn't any better. There is no entry for rural or countryside in the index, although there is a substantial one for cities; and he devotes most of one chapter to a discussion of urban form, with no equivalent discussion of rural form. Urry, whose earlier work often examined rural matters in detail, finds quite a bit more to say about rural matters in *Sociology Beyond Societies*, particularly in his discussion of the Heideggerian notion of dwelling. But again, the analytic weight lies with the urban. The image one gets reading most mobilities research is the familiar one of urbanism and all its associations with capital, technology and globalisation, flowing out and over a passive rural, washing it steadily away.

Such a passive reading of the rural is not necessary to mobilities research, as Mol and Dieu (2006) show in their analysis of the environmental flows associated with tapioca farming in Vietnam. Moreover, the 2007 meeting of the European Society for Rural Sociology had rural mobilities as its theme, as we noted, and many of the papers in the meeting took a more active view of the rural. The active voice of the rural can also be heard in the articles in this special issue, especially Danaher (2010). But a passive reading of the rural is still the dominant one in the mobilities literature at this point.

The passive rural voice of most mobilities research resonates with the way it typically constructs activeness through motion, not stability. As Adey (2006) observes, 'if mobility is everything then it is nothing', to quote the title of his article. He urges us to underline the equal importance of the politics that underlies immobility. Hannam *et al.* (2006, p. 3) usefully present the notion of moorings, writing that 'mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities'. And there is increasing talk about a mobilities/moorings dialectic in much of the mobilities literature. Similarly, Castells distinguishes between the space of flows and the space of place. But the point of analytic entry nonetheless is overwhelmingly on the mobile side of things and ideas. After all, the phrase is mobilities research. Similarly for Castells, to reprise the quotation from above, the emphasis is on the space of flows, for it is 'becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies' (Castells (2000 [1996], p. 409).

And while the note the importance of moorings, Hannam *et al.* (2006) say that their role is to ‘configure and enable mobilities’. In this view, moorings are secondary to mobilities and are not themselves an active accomplishment. But it requires as much action to hold something in place and maintain a configuration as to move things around. Much of our politics and our physics come about through the organisation of resistances. Indeed, much of what stays in place does so only because movement supports its obduracy. Movement configures and enables staying in place as much as the other way around. Thus we prefer the terms mobilisation and stabilisation, words that imply activeness in the accomplishment of either movement or staying put. With these caveats, we now turn to the political powers of the active voice of the rural, mobilising as it stabilises and stabilising as it mobilises. 1

The rural and its active powers

We can and do hear the active rural voice because it is a voice of power. While it is not the only voice of power, if one means by power our scope for action – the conceiving, shaping, and taking of action – as we take it to be here, articulations of the rural widen and constrain our scope and thus are powerfully active in our lives.³ These articulations speak to the material and symbolic practices of social life that first and second rural modes have long described, but also to the relational aspects of our lives. (See Fig. 1.) And not just in minor ways, we will try to show.

The material: rural power

We are all rural three times a day, and perhaps more, if you are like us. When you put a fork into your mouth, you are taking the rural to your mouth and the social and environmental conditions and histories of the food there on the tines, whatever you may or may not know of those conditions and histories. This is a rural that moves, and moves more today than perhaps it ever has, as US readers must readily appreciate as citizens of both the world’s largest food exporter and largest food importer. Both this control and this dependence grant the USA what we ought to recognise as the

stabilisation ↘	material	symbolic	stabilisation ↙
power-from	rural power	power of the rural	realisations
power-over	rural constituencies	constituencies of the rural	relations
↗ mobilisation	first rural	second rural	↖ mobilisation

Figure 1: *The plural powers of rural politics*

material activeness of rural power. The USA is a mighty rural power – which is to say that much of its world authority is a rural authority, something that the US government is not above playing political games with from time to time, such as when President Jimmy Carter embargoed grain shipments to the USSR on 4 January 1980. If a significant proportion of a country's food comes from the USA, it gives the leaders of that country greater pause in considering contradicting US power. So, too, is the case if a significant proportion of a country's food exports go to the USA. Either way, by exporting or importing food, keeping the rural mobile, the USA gains and maintains power.

Then there is the rural power of corporations, which is tightly intertwined with the rural power of the state. Quite a little stir was occasioned by the appearance in the British daily *The Independent* of a report on an internal 1999 Monsanto strategy document that noted that

Population growth and economic development will apply increasing pressure on natural resource markets. Those pressures, and the world's desire to prevent the consequences of those pressures if unabated, will create vast economic opportunity. (Lean 1999)

The document also notes 'that these are markets in which there are predictable sustainability challenges and therefore opportunities to create business value' (Shiva 1999). This was not just business value for Monsanto. Many a company and many an investor have noticed that we are all rural not just three times a day but whenever we make use of water, wood, minerals and energy – which is likely to be all day. The circulation of capital is very often the circulation of the rural.

Let us also sketch out the material use of the rural in militarism, which we touched on in the introduction. Much of military power is the articulation of the material rural: the military frontier, the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the bunker, the hilltop lookout post. But this military rural is not only defensive. It can also be offensive. Consider the siege and the blockade or the ancient military tactic of torching and salting fields. Destroying supply lines threatens by ending rural movement. Militarism can also threaten by bringing the rural into high population density areas as residents find that their technologies of holding the rural at bay collapse with the cutting of energy supplies and the bombing of waste treatment facilities. Military advantage is often rural advantage, even when the conflict is urban. Note too how rural power manifests itself militarily as both mobilisation and stabilisation and their intertwining. The military frontier, the DMZ, the bunker and the lookout post are all stabilisations of the material rural. These stabilisations then enable mobilisations such as the siege and the advance of the military front. But in addition, military stabilisation requires material movement as well; in order to cut someone else's supply lines with a military front you need your own. Mobilisation entails stabilisation and stabilisation entails mobilisation.

Other intertwining of stabilisation and mobilisation underpins the rural power of US agriculture. Food exports are mobilisations of the material rural but these depend upon the active stabilisations not only of US borders but also on the stabilisation of the requirement that others take this food, as in the Bush administration's policy of putting exports ahead of funds for local agricultural development and local provisioning during hunger relief efforts (Dugger 2007), stabilisations that also entail many

1 mobilisations. Corporate control of the movement of food, wood, water, minerals and
2 energy require myriad stabilisations in the distribution of access and production of all
3 of these or there would be no way to convince others to purchase them for they would
4 have them already. And yet these stabilisations necessitate mobilities too, very often
5 amounting to removing people from their prior access to the productive capacities for
6 food, wood, water, minerals, and energy, as in the privatisation of rural water supplies
7 in India (Sainath 2006).

8
9 *The ideal: the power of the rural*

10
11 Immediately we must also recognise that rural ideas also mobilise and stabilise,
12 what we call *the power of the rural* – its symbolic power. Take the power of food. Is
13 anything more symbolically freighted? This freight of symbols is not always spec-
14 ifically rural. But much food still gains meaning, and market, through rural ref-
15 erents, sometimes remote and sometimes strongly marked politically, as much
16 recent scholarship has explored (Hinrichs 1998, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005;
17 Jordan 2007). Country ham. Farmhouse cheese. Shepherd's pie. Country cooking.
18 Farmers' markets. Community supported agriculture. The farm to table or farm to
19 fork imagery of local foods. Outdoor reared, free-range, pasture raised and freedom
20 foods. The 'fresh from the field' slogan of Organic Farm Foods, Britain's largest
21 independent supplier of organic produce. The 'real food, real farmers, real commu-
22 nity' slogan of Local Harvest, an American online store and nation-wide online
23 listing of local food sources. Protected geographical indications. *Appellation d'origine*
24 *contrôlée*. Terroir.

25 The active power of rural ideas also manifests itself in the continuing fascination
26 for rural life and images among both rural and urban people alike. A vast range of
27 rural scholarship has explored these themes of late, especially from the stance that
28 Bell (2007) termed second rural. Researchers have explored the power of the rural
29 manifested in rural identity, literature, cinema, advertising, planning, gender, school-
30 ing, health, diet, drinking behaviour, military campaigns and more (for example,
31 Marsden *et al.* 1993; Cloke and Little 1997; Campbell *et al.* 2006; Cloke *et al.* 2006).
32 We won't attempt to detail this scholarship here. But we do want to point out that
33 these ideas imply an active rural that transcends boundaries, having consequence and
34 reshaping what it encounters in the process.

35 The mobilisation of this power of the rural depends simultaneously on its sta-
36 bilisation and vice versa. Without a way to claim that a Bordeaux wine comes from
37 Bordeaux there is little basis for the export sales of Bordeaux wine, as the vintners
38 and other interests behind the recognition of protected geographical indications
39 have long recognised. Conversely, if there were no exports of wine with such labels
40 carrying this power of the rural out of Bordeaux there would be no need for the
41 stabilisation of such labels. As with rural power, the power of the rural depends
42 upon the interaction of mobilisation and stabilisation. Moreover, the power of the
43 rural interacts with rural power. The labels on Bordeaux wine are affixed to actual
44 material bottles containing the material products of the rural. The power of the
45 rural thus facilitates rural power just as rural power gives impetus to the power of
46 the rural.

The relational: rural constituencies and constituencies of the rural

The forces of rural power and the power of the rural manifest the two dimensions of what we term power-from, by which we mean realisations of the rural, its powers and the social and economic advantages these realisations grant – powers conveyed from the real consequences of the rural. Ontologically, we contend (with Bell 2007) that ideas are no less real than material matters in that all have consequences for how we live. Both convey advantages to those who are able to utilise them and very often (but not always, if we hold out hope that power might not be a zero-sum game) subject others to disadvantages.

That utilisation, however, implies a measure of control of these manifest realisations of the rural, what we term ‘power-over’. By power-over, we mean the relations of the rural and their manifestations in constituencies that afford such control – powers acquired from the relational consequences of the rural. These may be constituencies that manifest materially, for example in the traditional sense of rural voters who live in areas of low population density, what we term ‘rural constituencies’. But they may as well be constituencies held together by ideas of the rural, for example advocates of cheap food or of organic agriculture, which may or may not live in areas of low population density, what we term ‘constituencies of the rural’. In practice, the effective mobilisation and stabilisation of power-over depends upon the interaction of both these forms of constituency.

Farmers, miners, loggers and other potential rural constituencies gain some of their power from their material location with regard to the rural. Their material location both provides the opportunity for controlling the material of the rural itself but also for organising the social relations of an active constituency through proximity and pre-existing spatial, social and economic ties. Miners have been perhaps the most effective, albeit frequently quixotically, organising strikes to close down mobilisations of the rural, actively stabilising coal, iron and copper so that it does not flow for a time. Mining companies are potential rural constituencies too, however, and have used their material location in the rural with great effect as well, mobilising to stabilise a mobile rural with dogs, fences, Pinkertons, scabs and appeals to politicians. A recent instance was the successful \$3 million ad campaign by Massey Energy, the fourth largest coal mining company in the USA, to ensure the election of a coal-friendly candidate to the West Virginia Supreme Court in 2004. (The elected Judge, Brent Benjamin, later ruled in favour of Massey in a 3–2 decision throwing out a \$50 million jury verdict against the company. At the time of writing, the US Supreme Court is reviewing whether Benjamin should have recused himself [Liptak 2009]).

But one does not have to have a material location in the rural to mobilise to gain power over it. Environmental groups, recreation interests, organic food activists, lobbyists for industrial grain and industrial food, public health movements, development agencies and more all organise to gain control over the shape of the rural landscape, what flows from it and what does not. Ideas of what that shape should be bring them together into efforts to become effective forces in the active politics of the rural.

Many of the most effective of these constituencies of the rural gain their power-over by drawing as well on rural constituencies, building political forces that cross the

traditionally material understanding of the rural and its interests while at the same time appealing to that understanding and those interests. One example is the '1000 Friends' landscape and land-use advocacy groups that emerged in at least nine states in the USA in recent years. The slogan of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin is telling for what it says about the group's sense of constituency: 'perfecting the places we live and protecting the places we don't'. Such a slogan appeals equally to a material sense of residence as the locus of constituency and to an ideal sense of generalised care for the land as a constituency which knows no spatial boundaries.

The rural and its active politics

There are thus many bases for rural action and politics, action and politics that affect us all. We have offered a conceptualisation of these active politics as the interaction of the material rural and the symbolic rural as sources of both power-from and power-over the rural, sources which activate the rural through both mobilisation and stabilisation. But none of these ensures an active politics of the rural. Power-from does not necessarily translate into power-over, nor does power-over necessarily imply power-from.

Indeed, one way to read the evidence is that while rural power-from – whether in the form of rural power or the power of the rural – continues to speak loudly in our world, many traditional rural constituencies are finding they have little rural power-over. We can easily tick off some cases in point. The failure of the 1980s 'farm crisis' in the USA to lead to an invigorated farmers' union or farm lobby, as opposed to commodity lobbies. The recent weakening of farmers' unions in Britain and other countries that long had relatively strong unions (Reed 2008). The continued inability of agrarian parties to make significant headway in national politics and the fading away of some recent attempts, like France's *Chasse, pêche, nature et tradition* Party and the Independent Smallholders' Party in Hungary (Woods 2008, p. 135). The failure of Britain's Countryside Alliance to prevent fox-hunting with dogs from becoming illegal and to deliver an electoral margin to the Conservative Party, despite being able to mobilise large and widely noticed protest actions, including 400,000 in London on 22 September 2002, and the 15 September 2004, 'storming' of Parliament, as the media put it, which forced Parliament to suspend its activity briefly before going on to ban fox-hunting with dogs (Branigan 2002; BBC 2004). The collapse of miners' unions. The inability of loggers unions to gain national prominence. The continued weakness of farm workers' unions. And so on.

It is not hard to see why. The sharp decline in the number of farmers, loggers, and miners presents a huge challenge for organising and for political clout. The number of farm workers may be on the rise, but their poverty, enforced transience, political disenfranchisement and weak access to communication technologies have prevented their gaining a significant voice in Washington, London, Berlin and Brussels. The growth of international trade in food, fibre, timber and minerals helps to ensure that strikes by farmers, farm workers, loggers and miners remain locally significant only. Furthermore, specialisation in agriculture has encouraged farmers to identify with the particular commodities they produce and not as much with farming more generally. Commodity identification also encourages identifying with the interests of the

corporations in the supply chain that keeps a commodity moving off the farm, thus contributing to different constituencies. Associated with commodity identification has been a decline in the symbolic power of farmers – a decline in the power of the rural available to them – in the face of rising demands for environmental protection and accusations that farmers have neglected stewardship in the single-minded pursuit of profit. There remain as well the traditional problems that have long beset rural collective action and continue to do so: the dispersed population, conservatism and typically hierarchical social relations.

But these political losses should not imply that the rural is lost, too. Rather, we are seeing the effectiveness of other constituencies in gaining power over the rural and being able to wield power from the rural. One major form of effective constituency we have in mind here is the corporation. We recognise that some may be uncomfortable with thinking of a corporation like Monsanto as a ‘constituency’, a term more typically reserved for coalitions of the citizenry. Yet we are confident that any politician would instantly understand our use of the term.

For those who seek a more progressive politics the rural is not lost either. Issues of environment, food, place and recreation have led to a huge variety of new rural civil society organisations, many of which involve urban residents as much or more than rural residents. In this sense, these organisations are organisations of the rural, for they are based on ideas of the rural, on the power of the rural, not necessarily on material location in the rural. Most of these are small and local, in keeping with their place-based approach and because large organisations are of necessity fewer in number. Indeed, many localities have more than one such organisation. Take as one example the Thousand Islands region of the St Lawrence River, a 40-mile stretch of the river dotted with rocky islands that runs along the US border with Canada. On the Canadian side is the Thousand Islands Area Residents Association, a group of mainly but not exclusively second-home owners in this popular tourist area. There is also the Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust and the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve (the Thousand Islands are in a geological terrain known as the Frontenac Arch). These are all Canadian groups. On the US side of the St Lawrence in New York State is Save the River and the Thousand Islands Land Trust. There is also the Thousand Islands Association that works on both sides of the river.

The number of such local environmental advocacy groups across the world, of varying focus and levels of formalisation, is beyond what anyone could probably count. One estimate (Hawken 2007, p. 2) came up with one to two million such groups worldwide – albeit perhaps with some optimism and generosity (Bell 2009). There are also now vast numbers of regional organisations like Oregon’s Rural Organizing Project (Stephen 2008), a state-wide rural social justice group that hosts an annual rural caucus, or Hungary and the Czech Republic’s Friends of the Danube (Gorlach *et al.* 2008), or the ‘1000 friends’ landscape and land use groups. There are also national and international environmental organisations like Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the Nature Conservancy, which have strong rural dimensions to their political agendas.

Add to these the profusion of local rural cultural development groups like Wisconsin’s Wormfarm Institute working to ‘re-enchant agri-culture’, or the ‘pearly bouquet’ and dance-house movements to revive rural music and dance in Hungary (Gorlach

1 *et al.* 2008). Or local and Slow Food advocacy organisations, which now must run into
2 the thousands or even tens of thousands, across the world. Or recreation groups
3 advocating fishing, hunting, off-road vehicles, boat racing, ballooning, hang-gliding,
4 rock climbing and a myriad of other interests. These too have their regional, national
5 and sometimes international umbrella organisations of the rural.

6 Meanwhile, new rural organisations mainly serving rural constituencies – that is,
7 serving populations located in the material rural – have arisen, often with notable
8 impact. There is the Landless Rural Workers' Movement of Brazil and the 22,000 ha
9 it has redistributed to 218,000 families (Caldeira 2008, p. 150). There is the *Con-*
10 *fédération paysanne* of France, founded in 1987 by José Bové, who has since gone on
11 to stand for election for president of France (albeit garnering only 1.3 per cent of the
12 vote in 2007) and has become notorious enough to have been refused entry into
13 the USA in February 2006. There is the *Coordination paysanne Européenne*, a confedera-
14 tion of 19 farmers' organisations in 12 countries – organisations like Germany's
15 *Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft*, Britain's Family Farmers' Association,
16 Belgium's *Fédération unie de groupements d'éleveurs et d'agriculteurs*, Portugal's *Confed-*
17 *eração nacional da agricultura*, and Italy's *Associazione rurale Italiana*. And, of course,
18 there is *La vía campesina*, the global confederation of 149 farm organisations in 56
19 countries, north and south, east and west (Desmarais 2008). Writing in the *New Left*
20 *Review*, Bové (2001) has even called these new movements a 'farmers' international'.
21 But given their increasing support from urban and non-farm residents in terms of
22 solidarity, contributions and coordination with other groups, a 'rural international' is
23 perhaps a better term – a rural international that is becoming as much an interna-
24 tional of the rural.

25 Something is happening. As Woods (2008, p. 129) argues, 'social movements are
26 an increasingly prominent feature of rural politics and social action in both the global
27 north and the global south'. His view is that this growth of rural social movements
28 constitutes a new rural identity movement, and he uses new social movement theory,
29 with its emphasis on identity issues, to understand it (Woods 2003, 2008). Woods
30 organised a 2008 special issue of *Journal of Rural Studies* – which we have been citing
31 with abandon – on this theme, and it only scratches at the surface, given the vastness
32 of the range of groups involved.

33 Reed (2008, p. 209), however, takes issue with Woods' characterisation of this
34 range and diversity as amounting to 'the emergence of a distinct and mobilised rural
35 identity'. Reviewing three case studies of the diversity of rural protest in contemporary
36 England, Reed (2008, p. 217) finds that they 'were not about rurality alone but with
37 the question of rurality as part of a complex of interconnected concerns that were
38 simultaneously global and local, personal and public'. We concur that the new rural
39 politics is complex, and is not about a single identity alone, and it is constituted from
40 a politics that engages both what we have been calling rural constituencies and
41 constituencies of the rural. As Woods (2008, p. 131) himself also observes, 'such is the
42 variety that the proliferation of rural social movements cannot be read as a single
43 phenomenon, but rather should be seen as the product of a number of different
44 trajectories'.

45 As Mormont (1987) earlier argued, rural conditions in the late twentieth and
46 early twenty-first century have been undergoing widespread social, economic and

1 technological restructuring. One result, noted by Mormont (1987, p. 562), is that rural
2 politics have expanded beyond a 'focus on specific aspects of the situation of the rural
3 population' to also increasingly posing 'the problem of rural space'. The relational
4 practices of the rural are configuring into new identities – new political alliances and
5 contradictions – based on new understandings of the material and symbolic practices
6 of the rural. In the global North most of these new constituencies do not themselves
7 live a life of farming, forestry, mining and the other pursuits that we still sometimes
8 call 'primary production', or have work that supports those pursuits or even live in
9 rural areas. But there is no less potential power of the rural as a result. The material
10 possibility of rural activities to, say, pollute the water and food supply of urban
11 residents or to help clean up the exhaust of their automobiles rearticulates the lines of
12 power; it does not disarticulate them. So too does the symbolic potential of the country
13 home, the mud-splattering sport utility vehicle, the moose and the owl. What we're
14 seeing emerge may not look much like the once-familiar rural unions, commodity
15 groups, villages and other long-time configurations of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, of
16 sentiments and interests, of affects and effects. But the scene is no less rural and no
17 less powerful because of it.

18 Corporate mobilisations to gain power over the rural do not make the rural less
19 powerful either. In other words, the new rural politics is not only a politics of civil
20 society. Whether they are based on rural constituencies or constituencies of the rural,
21 the common political losses suffered by rural civil society groups to corporate rural
22 interests do not diminish rural power or the power of the rural. Rather, what has
23 changed is who holds those powers.

24 Corporations have achieved their rural victories in large part by combining all
25 these forms of power. They have used power-from to gain power-over, and they
26 have mixed the material and symbolic origins of the rural's powers to build rural
27 constituencies and constituencies of the rural. Oil companies' widely suspected
28 manipulations of supply (a material move) and their undermining of concerns
29 about global warming (an ideological move) are forms of rural power and
30 power of the rural. With these powers they garner the political support of Texas,
31 Alaska, the Mideast and other oil-producing regions (material constituencies) and
32 the support, however unwilling, of those who are car-dependent everywhere (con-
33 stituencies not limited by the material boundaries of the rural). These constituen-
34 cies in turn lead to their continued power-over power-from. Civil society groups
35 might take instruction from the success of this plural understanding and activation
36 of the rural.

37 38 Conclusion

39
40 The plural activation of the rural is a creative activation of the rural, mobilising and
41 stabilising the new, as well as making the new old and the old anew. The result is that
42 the politics of the rural are polymorphous, polysemous and polyvocal, making the
43 rural hard to pin down. As scholars, we need to articulate the active voice of the rural
44 in order to understand its constant articulation and rearticulation through mobilisa-
45 tion and stabilisation, however progressive or deplorable these articulations and
46 rearticulation may be.

We should not confuse these articulations and rearticulations with the end of either rural power, or the power of the rural or their constituencies. The changes in the rural do not denote its waning strength in the face of the urban torrent any more than urban change denotes its own waning strength. Both the urban and the rural are modes of activeness, mobilising and stabilising the material, the symbolic and the relational. Nor is the stabilisation of either the rural or the urban necessarily a matter of dead weight. We act and constitute as much by moving as by not budging, as much by creating persistence as by creating motion. There are politics in both. There are both in our politics, no less now than in former times. Such confusions are linguistic slights of the theoretical tongue. No, the rural is not dead, inert, or deactivated, a passivity in the face of urban action and movement. The rural is not silenced in our world. Rather, it is we who are sometimes tongue-tied in the face of its articulate power.

Notes

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¹ On 14 March 2008. Google is constantly continuing its web crawling, and a later search on 17 January 2010 turned up 'about 8,740,000 hits'.

² We made this count in September 2009.

³ Contra-postmodern functionalism, we offer here what we hope is a fairly direct account of power.

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