

RURAL GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR NORTH CAROLINA

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Introduction: Bringing Theory into the Picture

Rural geography has a long and worthy tradition within Geography, focusing on the emergence of particular rural-based regional complexes, and the trials and tribulations of agricultural industries (Gilig, 1985, 1991; Hart, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1986, 1991; Hart and Chestang, 1978; Napton, 1989). There has also been a tendency, however, to privilege empirics at the expense of theory. Such empirical analyses often fail to consider the complex of social processes that are at work in the transformation of the social landscape, as well as the interrelation between them. Explanation has tended to consist of the in-depth description of a few phenomena, categorized according to observable criteria, or an outright voluntarism.

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I would suggest that it is through a theoretically informed rural geography that the diversity of problems associated with rural areas can be addressed. As a whole, rural communities suffer not only from high levels of outmigration and illiteracy, but also low levels of affordable housing, institutional and organizational infrastructure, and credit. Thirteen percent of rural Americans have incomes below the poverty line, while persistent poverty is concentrated in particular areas such as Appalachia, the Atlantic Coastal Plain, the lower Mississippi Delta, and the US-Mexico border. It has become clear that such poverty is not the inherent quality of such places and their inhabitants, but is rather the culmination of various economic, political and social processes — it is very much a (re)produced complex of diverse social relations of power reaching well beyond the confines of locale to the halls of Washington D.C., the headquarters of multinational corporations, and the film and TV production stations of California.

*The author argues
in favor of a firm
theoretical founda-
tion for much
needed North
Carolina rural
research*

The complexity of crises facing many rural communities has provided an impetus to those research initiatives that provide theoretically and empirically-informed analyses of the economic and political processes transforming these communities. Within the last few years rural geographers have begun to specifically address issues of economic and political restructuring in rural areas (Cloke, 1980, 1985, 1989, 1996; Cloke and Little, 1995; Gilig, 1991; Harvey, 1993; Lowe, Marsden and Whatmore, 1990; Marsden, Lowe and Whatmore, 1990a, 1990b). In view of the volume and importance of this work and the rapid rate at which it is being produced, the time has come to take stock of progress in research on the transformation of ruralities.

The Relevancy of Research on Rural Transformation

The question arises, however, as to whether the “rural” constitutes a distinct area of study for geographers? While the definition of “rural” as an economic system has been much transformed over recent decades I would suggest, however, that the term still captures a distinct mode of living and, as such, remains a legitimate site of study. “Rural” is no longer synonymous with “agricultural,” as family farms continue to disappear off the map and manufacturing, services and retirement centers gain in economic significance as well visibility (Swanson, 1990). Defining rural geography on the basis of a distinctly agricultural mode of production is clearly inappropriate. While new industries offer employment opportunities in areas previously dominated by tobacco, for example, the repercussions of this shift for labor, residential and public services, must be considered. Indeed, it is this same transformation of the meaning of the term “rural” that becomes an extremely relevant avenue for research. Within recent years we have witnessed a proliferation of programs and initiatives designed at all levels of the state to ameliorate economic decline and/or promote economic development in “rural” areas (Farrington and Babbington, 1995; Galston, 1992; Radin et al, 1996; Sears and Reid, 1992). We must consider not only how ruralities are being *reshaped* by these initiatives, but also the reasons why the term “rural” continues to evoke a high level of concern and debate within the political realm. Furthermore, even though agriculture is no longer the primary determinant of what is to be considered “rural” this particular economic sector continues to provide challenging research avenues. The increasing significance of the poultry and hog industries to regional economies, for example, is an area ripe for research. With the addition of a new layer of female and Hispanic workers into rural labor markets, questions arise as to the social transformation of rural communities (Cravey, 1996). Similarly, with the decline of the family farm questions arise as to the place of this economic unit within particular agricultural industries. While the fate of such farms has become something of a *cause celebre*, we need much more careful assessments of the specific geography and history of this “crisis.”

Theorizing Place, Structure and Process

Economic transformations of rural areas are fed by the decline of the family farm, the rise of corporate agriculture, and the global marketplace

It is largely through the work of Harvey (1985a, 1985b) that theorizations associated with political economy have entered, and transformed, the Geographic discipline. While Harvey’s work focuses primarily on urban areas as the locus of production, his theorization of the space produced by capitalism has had a tremendous impact on rural research (Kelli and Dixon, 1996). The current problems associated with rural areas can be divided into two categories, namely economic and political restructuring. Economic problems have usually been contextualized within a broad political economic framework that link economic recession in particular locales to shifts within the national and international political economy (Cloke, 1989; Harvey, 1993; Marsden, Lowe and

Whatmore, 1990a, 1990b). Particular places are not conceived of as independent entities, but are caught up in universal processes of financial flows, international divisions of labor, and the operation of global financial markets. This global system, and thereby the places which constitute it, is undergoing constant economic restructuring, as capital is dis-invested and reinvested from sector to sector, firm to firm, and place to place in an attempt to maintain profitability. The plight of rural manufacturing, for example, can be laid at the door of wider economic restructuring processes, as industry relocates to areas with cheaper, less unionized labor, frequently overseas. The service industries coming into rural areas tend to offer less skilled, lower wage, jobs than their predecessors. As capital moves out of one place and into another the impacts upon local communities, especially those dependent on one industrial sector, can be tremendous — impacts which exacerbate the uneven development of the social landscape. As a consequence of falling state and local tax revenues, for example, the social and physical infrastructure of rural areas becomes increasingly obsolete. Banks continue to avoid high risk agricultural ventures, while canals, irrigation streams and sewers slowly deteriorate. Rural schools remain chronically underfunded, while interstate highways and local routes await repairs.

The state has usually been conceptualized as an agent of capital, in that government plays a key role in both facilitating the process of economic restructuring noted above. Political programs and subsidies for agricultural industry have facilitated the transition from family farm enterprises to contract farming or conglomerate farming. Part and parcel of this 'transformation' is a reconfiguration of the image of an area and its inhabitants, as associations with the 'old', "traditional," "backward looking" family farms are put aside, and "progress" revolves around the "high-tech," "profitable" agribusinesses and their accompanying consumption-based life styles. The state ensures the accumulation of profit, but also ameliorates its impacts, thereby ensuring some measure of social welfare. As a whole, federal spending in rural areas has been a matter of transfer payments, such as welfare payments and pensions, rather than investments — a form of funding that does not usually increase income generating capacity.

Social transformations of rural areas are conditioned by a changing labor market increasingly attractive to female and Hispanic workers

So far, the overwhelming opinion of rural geographers has been that these economic and political restructuring processes have proven detrimental to the local communities within which they are embedded. While corporate farming, for example, has been much touted within the private sector as the potential "savior" of rural jobs, and indeed has been facilitated by the emergent "new governance" state apparatus" (Meadows, 1995; Radin et al, 1996), the prevailing opinion on behalf of rural geographers is that increasing vertical integration in the economic and political arenas has exacerbated economic inequalities in rural areas, and has led to a democratic deficit (Cloke, 1989; 1996; Harvey, 1993; Marsden, Lowe and Whatmore, 1990b). This vertical integration, for example, may consist of the grow-

ing dominance of a small number of firms over all aspects of hog farming, and the establishment of new agencies (combining state personnel from all levels of government and members of the private sector) concerned solely with issues of rural development.

A broadly conceived of political economic framework, then, allows for a consideration of the underlying social processes at work in the reconfiguration of places such as rural North Carolina. Economic restructuring has certainly been a major factor in the recent shifts in capital investment away from manufacturing and toward more postindustrial industries and services, as well as the changing relationship between capital and labor (Oakey and Cooper, 1989). Case study research has identified the historical and geographical emergence of corporate and contract farming within agri-business as well as the increasing significance of *non-agricultural* employment in rural areas (Marsden, Lowe, and Whatmore, 1990a). Researchers have also undertaken: an analysis of the comparative success rate of corporate as opposed to family farm enterprises in the region (Meadows, 1995); a comparison of the economic effects generated by corporate and family farm enterprises; and an evaluation of the pros and cons of the shift toward large-scale agricultural industrialization within particular regions (Furuseth, 1996; Lands and Leigh, 1996). Furthermore, in the face of rising unemployment and decreasing income, local governments have indeed joined with centrally funded development agencies in aiding this transfer. More often than not, the local state has proven willing to enter into partnerships with local business to attract capital through the aggressive promotion of place (Mackenzie, 1992; Sprouse, 1996).

The theoretical framework thus presented has not gone unchallenged, however. One of the most prevalent critiques of political economy has been that it is too deterministic in its conception of social relations (Jackson, 1989, 1991; Williams, 1973, 1980). In response, researchers working within this approach have explored the contributions that can be made from the incorporation of cultural materialism. Such an approach differs from a more rigid political economic perspective in the belief that change in this socio-cultural matrix cannot be simply read off from changes in the economic organization of society. Rather, economic processes are themselves constituted from cultural meanings. For Jackson (1991), the goal of academic research should be:

... to explore specific intersections between the ideological and the material, the cultural and the political, regarding these terms not as separate domains but as a single field in which, to varying degrees in different times and places, the cultural is political (p. 200).

It is through the cultural materialist approach that this criticism has been most strongly articulated. The use of the term "materialism" denotes the retention of the idea that beliefs are constructed out of the social world,¹ while the term "culture" denotes the assertion of the significance of socially determined meanings and beliefs. Within this reformulation of the scope and goals of academic research the theorization of "place" has changed. Rather than view place as the residual effect

of capitalist accumulation, it is perceived to be actively constructed and invested with meaning. This reconceptualization of place can be most clearly seen in Williams' (1973) work on the city and the countryside (1973), wherein the shifting views and beliefs pertaining to these two types of places are assessed in the light of the actual material relations between them. The gradually decreasing role of agricultural labor, for example, has repercussions in the gradual emergence of a view of the countryside as a place for recreation rather than work.

The impact of cultural materialism on rural geography has become more manifest in the 1990s — this impact has, however, been limited to the work of British rural geographers (Milbourne, 1996; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1992, 1993), who have drawn attention to the ways in which social relations of power constitute meanings such as “rural” itself. In particular, attention has been paid to the attempt to mandate, or codify, the meaning of “place” (in regard to its “past,” “present” and “future”) and the “place” of inhabitants within it, such that those meanings in turn serve, or maintain, social relations of power. This is the “framing” of a discursive site, and is reliant on the institutional complex from which various positions are articulated. Research, then, becomes a matter not of “exposing” the original intent behind various messages, but rather of deconstructing the ways in which the message itself articulates particular notions of the “real.” As Philo notes:

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... the rural is not some stable, pre-given even natural phenomena awaiting insertion in academic rural studies, but is actually something constructed in varying ways and with varying emphases in a variety of settings (1993, p. 434).

Establishing A Research Agenda

If we turn our attention to one particular area, North Carolina, as an arena within which rural geographers work, then we can identify numerous opportunities for theoretically and empirically informed analyses, including, but certainly not limited to, an assessment of::

(1) The relative decline of cash crops such as tobacco, and the increasing significance of livestock, particularly poultry and hogs, within the regional economy. As these two latter industries diffuse across the state from west to east, dramatic transformations have been wrought in regard to numbers of farm workers, number and size of farms, farm income and so on. Rather than be content to track this diffusion, rural geographers should examine the causal processes behind this transformation, noting the embeddedness of these industries within wider social structures such as capitalism. How is this transformation being financed? How are labor relations within these industries being reworked? What is the role of the state? The manifold repercussions of the shift from tobacco to poultry and hogs must be assessed. What accompanying changes have occurred in rural labor markets? What has been the impact on residential and service sectors?

(2) Current debates on the need to peel back governmental subsidies for various agricultural industries. With the proposed revival of a free market economy, what are the potential effects of this on farm-based industries such as peanut production? Why has this move towards free trade conditions arisen at this point in time? How would the proposed changes impact the US' international trade in farm products? and,

(3) Current debates on the need to maintain "rural community" initiated by the federal Farm Bills and maintained by the Rural Development Initiatives and Councils. How is the "rural" being defined within this political context? How will the state's resources be deployed in order to achieve this aim? What particular types of development strategies are being suggested and funded? How do these strategies support some social relations of power and undermine others?

All of the above research avenues are relevant in and of themselves to rural transformation in North Carolina, focusing as they do on economic, political and social changes currently underway, but they are also generative of *other* research

questions. This is so because they are written from within a particular theoretical framework, namely political economy. For rural geography to continue as a vibrant sub-field within the discipline, its researchers must be committed to theoretically and empirically informed analyses. In formulating actual research questions, and establishing a mode of inquiry through which answers can be ascertained, the importance of theory cannot be understated, for it is theory that informs our understanding of how the events and processes we examine are constituted, maintained or transformed. Whether that theory is derived from political economy, cultural materialism, or other strands of thought within and beyond Geography, it provides a context wherein epistemological inquiry can be formulated, carried through and evaluated. If North Carolina Geographers are to continue to make a contribution to the wider discipline, we must take advantage of cutting-

edge developments in our various sub-fields, noting what is informative, what is faciliatory and, most importantly, what gives us pause for thought.

Ideas, or attitudes/beliefs are not presumed to be immanent categories of the mind but are viewed, rather, as ensuant from the input of sensory data from a knowable world. This is the material world of experience. Social knowledge and action, then, depend on the particular socio-cultural matrix surrounding the individual. Such a matrix is composed of intersubjective meanings, consisting of inherited values, institutionalized roles and social norms. Social action depends on the agent's "definition of the situation."

Three aspects are here suggested as important for new research, the relative decline of cash crops; the decline of agricultural subsidies, and the "need" to maintain the concept of the rural community

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