

The theming of the countryside

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The following article, completed in December 2005, is based on the experience of a relatively short stint living in the rural West Country. This will account for some of its limits. For example, conditions in different areas will vary. It is for others who know what is missing here to fill the gaps, for themselves and others, in their own ways.

the theming of the countryside...
...coming home to roost...

Notes on rural gentrification and class relationships in the countryside: the future of rural living

There is an ongoing debate about the future of the countryside; it is going on both in the media and behind closed doors in the corridors of power. Vested interests of all kinds have much to say on the way ahead: Government, property developers, roadbuilders, farmers, conservationists etc. But for nearly all, the question is framed within the dominant values of the society that threatens this environment; for them it is primarily an economic problem with an economic solution.

The Government sees the countryside as another resource or sector ripe for full privatisation – market forces must be able to fully capitalise; farming subsidies withdrawn, food production and supply to be sourced out to wherever it can be done most cheaply in the global economy. This looks increasingly shortsighted. Global warming and climate change make other areas of the world far more unpredictable as sites of agricultural supply. (For the moment – if predictions of melting polar ice diverting the Gulf Stream come true then the UK will apparently have a climate similar to northern Canada.) If the price of oil and fuel keeps rising this may make international transportation costs of some food uneconomical. It is this rather than the contribution to climate change of carbon emissions from transporting that may force a rethink of where best to source food from.

Once agricultural production has been run down to a low level it is no easy matter to regenerate production on a larger scale, if it becomes necessary – due to food supply disruption caused by environmental disaster or war, for example. This was a problem faced at the end of World War II. Due to labour shortages much land had been left unfarmed and it took several years to sort out the mess. But the prospects are worse today – if farming skills disappear with farming as a viable occupation, the viability of arable land will be lost, livestock bred for specific environments will go; if Government targets for development are met, much farm land will be forever lost to housing, commerce and roads.

(This is not to encourage a nationalist outlook, by thinking in terms of the long-term ‘national interest’. That is the State’s function for the ruling class and we merely point out that they even fail to do this, which is a sign of weakness. Some determinists will argue they are forced to do this by greater economic and other forces; a partial truth, but when argued too forcefully denies the facts of different possible choices and conflict within the ruling class over strategy. Nevertheless it is the poor who they will try to make pay for this failure of strategy.)

Out of town, out in the sticks

Life in today's countryside is pretty much a mystery to most of the town and city-dwelling majority of the UK population. They see the rural landscape as either some remote alien environment where food purchased in the supermarket is said to originate from; or as a place to go and use as a leisure resource for holidays, sporting activities or aesthetic appreciation of the pleasant scenery. The actual lives of the various sections of the rural population, their relationships and conflicts, remain largely hidden.

Housing is an important issue in the countryside – who owns what determines who lives where, and the present general housing crisis hits the rural young and poor particularly hard. It determines who leaves and who arrives in the countryside.

Gentrification has changed many urban areas in the UK. Though a word seldom used now – since the gentry have redefined property relationships so completely as to make their speculation the norm – the process remains the same. But the profits from this urban property speculation have led to greater investment in rural housing by those seeking quick returns. Surplus profits from house values and retirement savings have also been invested in rural retreats for the stressed-out city dweller.

So countryside is now divided into several different property owning sectors. There are also the traditional landowners – aristocrats, some of whom manage farming, and those with stately homes they run as tourist attractions. Other large land owners farm on an industrial scale, or often now, lease out the land to others. Some of these families are local dynasties, owning much housing property and dominating the business activity of the area. Some are large extended families with extended branches, with the individuals forming the larger part of the petit bourgeois/small business class both as landlords and traders.

Mechanisation drastically reduced labour needs; after World War II many rural workers returned from fighting to find their jobs and skills mechanised out of existence. The pre-industrial farms of yesteryear were often large enterprises, with many workers living on the estate. Much of this housing stock is now either rented out as slum housing at cheaper rents to the rural proletariat – or, if renovated, is either sold off at a handsome profit or let seasonally to city folk as holiday homes. Many rural areas are now covered with these holiday lets or rarely used 2nd homes, empty most of the year, while poorer locals have to move away or endure poor housing conditions.

Lords, yeomen and serfs

This rural proletariat is actually mainly self-employed. The dynastic families dominating local businesses employ very small numbers and those involved in the service industry – the largest area of employment – are the gardeners, builders, hedgelayers, stonewallers, craftworkers, mechanics, bar staff, waitresses, cleaners etc. Many turn their hand as necessary to more than one skill to get by. We must make a distinction between the true petit-bourgeois small business person and the self-employed proletarian. The proletarian employs no staff and accumulates little capital, certainly not enough to give him any economic power over others. S/he either can't accumulate sufficiently to become petit-bourgeois, or often s/he prefers self-employment because it gives more leisure time and less pressure from a particular boss. It fits in with a less materialistic

lifestyle, which is often the reason s/he has moved to or stayed in the countryside. It also often has more opportunities for cash-in-hand, tax-avoiding earnings, which goes hand in hand with the generally lower wages and seasonal economy. This kind of working is often subsidised by the State in the form of Housing Benefit, Family Tax Credit etc.

Social relations are necessarily more intimate — smaller communities means no one is as anonymous as in the big city. The fewer venues for mixing mean the various classes are more likely to drink in the same pubs (though perhaps in different bars), shop in the same places, bump into each other etc. (Though the richest rarely mix socially with the lower orders — thankfully.) As most people work alone or within a small workforce, employed and employers may also spend more time at close quarters to each other. And the gossip network ensures that word gets around about generally disapproved of goings-on. The other side of this is that most are content to live and let live and to respect each other's space.

A nation of shopkeepers?

The petit bourgeois small businessperson is sometimes a typically mean penny pinching, money grabbing character. But often the role is more ambiguous — if one is running the only shop or pub in a more remote area then it is sometimes more a case of managing a needed community resource for long hours and low-ish pay. The sociability of the role as well as the self-employed autonomy are often the main compensations that make the job worth staying in. It is also sometimes the only way for locals to both stay in the area and hang on to community resources. This often creates double-edged loyalties and resentments. The employed can be very loyal as they appreciate the social benefits of the pub, shop etc as both a resource and rare source of wages. But small resentments can accumulate and smoulder as employees with few other options remain in the job long after they are fed up with it and the generally low wages. Working and often living at close quarters with the employer may mean having to constantly bite the tongue and swallow resentment and pride.

In many areas of the West Country, there are — what some would call — long established 'hippie communities'; children of the 1960's counter-culture who settled and raised their kids, in pursuit of a different lifestyle. Often arriving with romanticised, naive views of country living, those who remain have adapted in various ways. The wealthier ones often bought up cheap properties in 'underpopulated' areas; this has sometimes resulted in gentrification (as in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire). The bohemian presence, with it's health food and craft shops etc, attracts tourists and liberal middle class types with money to buy property.

The poorer locals and settlers are obviously priced out of available housing by this process. Combined with the State policy of running down and selling off social housing (of which there has never been a lot in rural areas) this has created a chronic housing shortage. Young people find it impossible to buy or rent, so are stuck at home living with their parents for years. Or they end up living in vans and caravans on camp sites. It is sometimes possible to find winter lets; but when the profitable summer season comes around you're booted out to make way for the high-paying holidaymakers. So with no security of tenure, you've basically paid rent for the privilege of being a winter caretaker for your landlord. Many move away to the towns where housing is more available, and wages higher.

In the worst cases, whole villages become semi-ghost towns for over half the year. In Salcombe, south Devon, beautifully situated looking over a bay, 75% of properties are now holiday homes. In towns like this property prices have often risen 250% in the past ten years. Nearer to the big cities, some villages are just dormitories for commuters who bring their suburban aloofness to the place. To cater for them, more of the countryside is swallowed up and disfigured by ugly housing estates, out-of-town supermarkets and DIY superstores etc. Doing all their shopping and socialising by car elsewhere, village shops, post offices and pubs close, public transport is cut, further penalising the poorer locals. It is an understandable complaint from country dwellers that they get little for the extortionate council tax that they pay. Often there is little or no policing – some areas suffer from opportunistic snatch and grab organised crime whereby thieves will visit an area to burgle houses or steal farm machinery (here is not the place to deal with why the police are no real solution to this). There is little infrastructure such as streetlighting, public services are cut across the board, etc. The pro-hunting Countryside Alliance has been quick to opportunistically link these grievances to their own agenda. This has been easy to do, as there is a feeling that remote townie bureaucrats and politicians who understand nothing about the countryside are lording it over rural people. This ignores the fact that our political masters are as arrogant and ignorant in their treatment of townies. It also ignores the Lords and masters who, by their social status, dominate rural life and the Countryside Alliance. (Please, somebody set the dogs on Otis Ferry and co. – the Lord Snooty and His Pals of the 21st century.)

Heard The One About Race & Identity Amongst The Turnip Munchers?

The UK Independence Party has recently enjoyed some popularity in some rural areas, particularly parts of the west. They have played upon the fears of some of the imminent invasion of the countryside by asylum seekers and other dark foreign hordes. This fantasy is most ironic, as it is a rarity to see a non-white face in such places; it is a real irrational fear of the unknown. But obviously – aided by media manipulation – sufficient to penetrate the psyche of some and give them enough sleepless nights to make them vote for UKIP.

As racism has grown among the poor of the cities, so we can expect that it has in the countryside. But as there is so little physical presence of “aliens”, it remains mainly a fear of something external that will hopefully keep its distance. So there is little overt display of hostility to what is an imaginary enemy, just maybe the occasional comment or dumb joke heard muttered in the pub. This is sometimes presented as some kind of rebellion against modern political correctness, implying that to be against racism is necessarily to be approving of all the token political correctness nonsense that privileged liberal bureaucrats and politicians churn out. No surprise that it usually seems to be white (middle aged) males expressing such views, encouraging non-whites and foreigners to not take it all too seriously and to join in laughing at the jokes at their expense. But of course the jokes are never about white middle aged British males. There is such a thing as banter between trusted friends whereby people have a mutual laugh by using the racial stereotypes related to their various backgrounds and thereby defuse them. But this is very different from the local ‘comedian’ who keeps an audience’s attention by using these racial stereotypes; the audience is kept guessing as to whether the ‘comedian’ is going to go the whole way and come out with a racist punchline – or just keep it implied or ambiguous. So the audience is won-

dering how they should react if the racism becomes explicit — whether the rest of the pub will laugh along with it, or show disapproval. At least ‘political correctness’ may have made some people less confident in openly expressing their racism; but then this just submerges it, which is what the ‘comedian’ is playing on. He implies, “Come on, you know you agree with me really, and I’ve got the guts to say what you’re thinking.”

We’d rather burn the flag than fly it

This insecurity which is sometimes expressed as racism is an insecurity of self-identity. The old certainties that gave identity — settled communities of long standing, common culture, way of life and values — are threatened and eroded. The younger generation leaves the farm and village, out of economic necessity; newcomers relate to the land and community in a different way. This leads some to seek security in larger identities such as region and/or nation. In Cornwall there is an unusually large number of persons who fly flags in their front gardens, clearly as a statement of pride to their neighbours and passers-by; flags are flown in various and potentially confusing combinations. One can see Britain’s Union Jack, England’s Flag of St George and the Cornish black and white flag all flown both separately or in various combinations. So whilst some see the Cornish flag as a symbol of a desire for future Cornish national independence, others happily fly it alongside either the Union Jack or St George — or both; implying a sense of regional pride that exists contentedly as part of England and/or the UK. It is not so unlikely that a movement for Cornish independence could grow, but it would be foolish to read too much into flag-waving. It is significant that the flag of St George has regained popularity in recent years, but again, via the supporting of national sports teams, it is perhaps more an emotional need being met by this more particular and specific assertion of identity than any intended political statement. (Though it could eventually become linked to a more political stance. The fascists of the NF, BM and BNP are sometimes credited with raising the popularity of the St George, though they are also accused of ‘hijacking’ this flag by more liberal and inclusive political hacks.)

The State’s strategic game plan for the countryside is, at present, to move away from direct material production by farming towards a use of the countryside as a leisure resource and a relatively unexploited site of real estate investment. Food production is no longer to be seen as a “strategic reserve”. (This difference in outlook forms part of the UK’s conflict about food subsidies with other members of the EU.) Farmers are being encouraged by government Stewardship grants to become agents of nature conservation, to manage the land as a leisure resource rather than as a productive farming resource. This is a probably temporary compensation for the gradual withdrawal of other farmers’ subsidies. At the same time more land is being opened up for housebuilding and leisure development, with attitudes to protection of Green Belt land and Sites of Special Scientific Interest being relaxed. From the State’s point of view, and the rich landowners, the ideal rural constituency would be a mix of large scale ‘agri-biz’ intensive farming, a thriving tourist industry with all the relevant outlets, and plenty of well-heeled retirement home owners, rural-dwelling city commuters (many in gleaming new estates of ‘gated communities’) plus a decent amount of second homes/holiday cottages. Fitting in somewhere is the inconvenient necessity of a rural proletariat to man the infrastructure to keep all this profitability ticking over.

“You can’t change human nature”

But this is perhaps an optimistic outlook for some areas; particularly in the south-east, where we may see most countryside swallowed up and converted to suburban sprawl. All of this destruction is as irreversible as the destruction of the rainforests on the other side of the world; both environments are the result of a unique development over thousands of years. For many people, those who are most passive and resigned, these changes are seen as being beyond their control, as forces of nature in themselves. The dictates of Capital, whether called ‘progress’ or ‘just human nature’ are seen as consequences as unchallengeable as the weather conditions. (Ironically, there is a ‘marxist’ version of this resignation; such environmental vandalism is still claimed to be the ongoing maturation of the material conditions that will lead to a communist utopia.) This is the essential blind spot of daily life; the root of these miseries are not seen as specific to the particular social relations, but appear as an unfortunate necessity natural to the existence of humanity.

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