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Re-imagining the Rural:
from Rural Idyll to Good Countryside.

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"Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread." (Butler 2004, 29, quoted by Mackenzie 2013)

"Sociology is opposed to all those who rely upon the shadow of misrecognition." (Duncan 1990, 184)

Introduction

Rural studies have highlighted rural idylls as something which rural inhabitants and 'armchair urban residents' (Bunce 1994) aspire to, perhaps as a vision of a good place to live or as a repository of values. Williams (1973), Marx (1964) and Short (2006), amongst others, demonstrated how in many countries rural life has been portrayed for centuries as simple, innocent and virtuous as part of a pastoral myth of a lost Eden, divorced from harsher realities of rural life and masking exploitation and oppression. Such rural idylls are now recognised amongst academics as normative and power-infused, in so far as they seek to construct rurality in certain ways: indeed, authors such as Halfacree (1993) have argued that the rural idyll is a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture, imposed on rural residents. Such constructions are spatially and historically contingent. While there is nothing wrong with nostalgia per se, studies commonly blame discourses of the rural idyll for exacerbating many aspects of rural poverty and disadvantage in the UK and elsewhere (Shucksmith 2000; Milbourne 2004, 2014, 2016; Lagerqvist 2015), while others question to what extent such an idyll is (or ever was) attainable. Moreover, does the rural idyll represent nostalgia for an imagined golden age of indeterminate date (Short 2006), a search for enchanted places with idealised qualities today (Savage 2010), or a vision for a desired future?

As Ward and Ray (2004, 4) have pointed out, referring to the future and the rural in the same breath may appear to be something of an oxymoron when rural areas are so often "cast as inherently traditional and conservative", lying in the domain of the past. Shucksmith et al (2012, 297) found that "a view of rural areas as idyllic places of peace, as repositories of national identity and yet also as backward areas in need of modernisation continues to dominate popular perception and policy in both the US and UK." Furthermore, as well as being perceived as rooted in the past, rural areas tend to be seen as passive recipients of modernity despite abundant evidence of the endogenous or neo-endogenous potential of rural areas and of the agency of rural dwellers.

Amongst a number of formal futures studies in the UK, a few focused specifically on the future of rural areas (eg. Henley Centre 2001), and it is noteworthy that the drivers of change identified were all exogenous. The agency of people in rural areas went unacknowledged, and instead they were viewed as acted upon, whether by environmentalists, big business or by the Government Chief Scientist's perfect storm of food shortages, scarce water and insufficient energy. This is curious when the policies of successive UK governments have encouraged people to engage in place-shaping,

parish planning, community planning, neighbourhood planning and now Community Led Local Development (CLLD), in pursuit of a shared vision of how collectively they would like their place to be in the future – a collective imaginary of (particular) rural.

But what imaginary should this be? A rural idyll? Pre-capitalism? Or some futuristic vision of what might constitute a good countryside? The purpose of this paper, then, is both scholarly and practical. It is to begin, and indeed to provoke, discussion of what might constitute appropriate visions for rural futures, of our collective imaginaries of rural places into the twenty-first century. What morality might underpin such imaginaries? And how might we (both scholars and publics) approach such a task? This paper refers mainly to the UK, although it is hoped that the issues raised have broader international relevance.

Utopia as method

One approach might be to build upon recent interest in reviving Utopian thinking as a means of identifying and imagining desired alternative futures, despite the dominant political and intellectual cultures being anti-utopian. Thus, in Levitas' work (2007; 2012), utopia is seen as both prevalent and necessary, though understood as a method rather than as a goal, and accompanied by a recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure.

Levitas' (2007, 290) starting point is that utopia may be understood, following Bloch (1986), as "the expression of the desire for a better way of being." In his book, *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch talks of utopia as a form of anticipatory consciousness – the *not yet* – which we may contrast with the essentially nostalgic, backward looking, *has been,* rural idyll (paradise lost). "For Bloch, utopia as forward dreaming is not an esoteric byway of culture nor a distraction from class struggle, but an indispensable element in the production of future" (Levitas 2007, 291).

Utopian thinking has been widely critiqued, largely on the grounds that it is unachievable and diversionary, or for its supposed anti-democratic (or totalitarian, socialist or elitist) tendencies. For example, in relation to spatial planning, Gunder and Hillier (2009) warn of a dominance of professional elites relying on expert knowledge and technique, supposedly free of ideological bias; and even where citizens are themselves enlisted through community planning approaches, the discursive power of elites and citizens' misrecognition may mean that participation is self-serving and self-deluding. Thus, "utopias are unachievable ideal objects that stimulate and tease us with their desirability, yet seldom if ever, materially or otherwise, successfully deliver" (Ibid, 43), "serving mainly to suffocate immanence and stifle a potential for moving forward" (Ibid, 50).

On the contrary, Levitas (2007, 298) argues that it is anti-utopianism which serves the interests of powerful elites, not utopianism. The rejection of utopianism as unrealistic, she argues, is a means of neoliberalism (and neo-conservatism) asserting that there is no alternative to their implicit and hegemonic utopias of market and elite power. "All political positions have embedded in them ideas of the good life, and consequently the good society and the principles on which it should be based," and therefore the right's anti-utopian call to pragmatism serves clandestinely to reject all "challenges and alternatives as 'utopian', while placing the ideological/ utopian claims of one's own position beyond scrutiny" (Ibid, 298). Instead, engaging in utopian thinking "enables the content of different utopian visions to be brought within the sphere of democratic debate, in a manner that anti-utopian utopianism blocks. Contemporary politics is less utopian than it should be, since it

represses and obscures images of the good society and removes them from the realm of public debate and imagination" (Ibid, 299-300).

It is a central argument of this paper that challenging the neoliberal hegemony and encouraging the collective imagining of alternatives is especially necessary during this crisis of neoliberalism. Antipathy to utopian thinking serves to reinforce the status quo, while a strategy of deliberatively imagining the good countryside could help to dislodge that status quo. This is a challenge both for rural studies and for those who live in, or care about, rural places.

It is also important to note that Levitas is not arguing for utopia as *goal*, but as *method*, which she terms the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS). Her intention is to imagine the world otherwise, as a means of informing actions and priorities today: there is an intention to change the real world, but with no specific expectation of realising an ideal end-state. "The recognition of necessary failure leads us to the insistence on the provisionality of utopia. It is a method of considering the future, not the stipulation of a goal" (Ibid, 303). To an extent this embraces Gunder and Hillier's call to foster immanence and the potential for moving forward (indeed in later work Hillier argues for a form of strategic navigator), but it is Levitas' argument that this can be assisted by utopia as method (as distinct from utopia as goal). "The advantage of utopian thinking is that it enables us to think about where we want to get to, and how to get there from here…" (Levitas 2007, 300). While recognising the argument that the piecemeal approach might be safer, she maintains that utopianism assists more radical thinking, allowing us to escape from mere extrapolation, and also promotes more holistic, joined-up thinking. Moreover, utopianism implies a political commitment to transformation.

Amin (2006, 1010) also suggests that utopian thinking may be transformative, enabling us to "look at the contradictions and possibilities of our times as the material of a politics of well-being and emancipation that is neither totalising nor teleological. Such an approach accepts that utopia is not a dream of the attainable, but an impossible place following Foucault, expressing a 'hope in the not-yet'" (ibid) through "an anticipation of alternative possibilities or potentialities" (Anderson 2005, 11).

The method of IROS has two modes. "Its first, archaeological mode involves reconstructing from fragments the implicit good society embedded in political positions, and thus facilitating critique, engagement and dialogue about these implicit utopias. In its second, architectural, mode, it involves the construction of alternative models of how society might be" (Ibid, 300). As a method for the collective construction of a "provisional hypothesis of a transformed future world, [this] entails a demand for wider engagement, dialogue and responsibility" (Ibid, 304).

Often we tend to think about future worlds less in the abstract but rather in terms of a specific place, perhaps the place where we live or work, or where we would like to live. Indeed, this is now encouraged by planning theorists and governments under the label of place-shaping. Place-shaping may be understood, according to Healey (2004, 46), as "self-conscious collective efforts to re-imagine a city, urban region or wider territory and to translate the result into priorities for area investment, conservation measures, strategic infrastructure investments and principles of land use regulation". The activity of planning highlights the connection between the past and the future, focusing on how action now can shape future socio-spatial relations. But in the context of new modes of governance and a relational perspective on spatiality, Healey argues, this activity must be re-organised around deliberative processes and collective imagination and action – in contrast to

centralised or top-down practices of planning informed by elite visions and impositions. Forester's earlier work (1999) on deliberative processes in planning asserted the need to combine practice with vision and ethics. The question of who is to participate in generating a utopian vision is important, and both Forester and indeed Habermas (1984), in relation to the ethics and structures underlying a discursive public sphere, offer foundational principles on how to approach public deliberation. How to make such a process both visionary and genuinely inclusive remains a thorny question.

Place-shaping can therefore be seen both as utopian, in Levitas' architectural mode of IROS, and as participatory and deliberative. Healey herself distinguishes place-shaping from earlier utopian traditions "of imagined societies, complete with spatial and physical morphologies", related for example to the work of Howard or Le Corbusier, and now resurfacing "in concepts of compact cities, urban networks, gateways, nodes, concentrated deconcentration, polycentric development and development corridors" (Healey 2007, 28). But Healey's distinction may also be understood, following Levitas, as a distinction between *utopia as goal* (eg. Garden Cities of Tomorrow) and *utopia as method* (place-shaping), collectively re-imagining and acting with a recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure.

Place-shaping is conceived as agentic, deliberative and democratic, in the context of new modes of governance and of relational space whereby place is viewed as a contested social construct where territorial forces and relational forces meet – the intersection of multiple geographies in which "near and remote intimacies intersect" (Amin 2010, 3) in "soft spaces" (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, 619). Moreover, development is viewed as multiple, non-linear, continually emergent trajectories in the changed context of a network society and multi-scalar governance. Under this paradigm, the state acts less through *authoritative* power, but rather through exercising *generative* power to stimulate action, innovation, struggle and resistance – in Healey's words (2004,160), "to release potentialities and to innovate, and perhaps even to generate new struggles and a different level of politics." Consequently, "what is identified as important in policy terms about place and territory is an emergent property of multiple imaginative efforts mobilised through political processes of coalition building and discourse formation." (Healey 2005a, 19). This is a polyphonal utopian method for an uncertain world.

This may seem far-fetched to some readers, and it is not without difficulty, but this sort of approach has recently transformed feudal estates in the Scottish highlands and islands into "Places of Possibility" (Mackenzie 2012). A growing communitarian[1] movement together with an enabling state has developed a shared vision of collective ownership of land, not only to address historical grievances but primarily to remove landlord obstructionism as an obstacle to rural development. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gave "communities" a first option to purchase the landlord's interest in feudal estates of which they were a part (The Community Right To Buy). A Community Land Unit was established by the state to assist these place-based communities in drawing up their plans and in the purchase and management of land; and a Scottish Land Fund was set up with UK Lottery Money to assist communities to acquire and develop land and buildings. Such communities are required to establish a democratic and locally controlled body to acquire the land, draw up a

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[1] The contested concept of community has been well-rehearsed in the rural studies literature (see Crow and Mah 2012 for a comprehensive review). A distinction is often made between communities of place and of interest, but this still leaves many problematic aspects, not least concerning boundaries and their symbolic construction (Cohen 1985; Liepins 2000). In the specific context of Scottish community-based land reform discussed here, the legislation defined communities as all those resident on the relevant landed estate (Mackenzie 2012).

business plan, and raise funds from gifts and loans to buy the land. More than half the land area of the Western Isles is now in community ownership, with the majority of those islands' residents having come together to debate the merits of collective ownership, under the terms of the legislation, and then to develop strategic plans for place-based development– including how to pay back the loans. This has given people a new confidence in their abilities and potential, while at the same time requiring them to take collective responsibility for their future – with crucial help from a mostly supportive governance framework. Mackenzie (2006; 2012) sees this community-centred land reform not only as a movement towards collective ownership with strong historical resonances but also as the removal of land from circuits of global capital, in turn permitting a re-visioning of the political possibilities of place and a commitment to social justice and sustainability. This experience also stirs the post-neoliberal imagination elsewhere, as an example of real utopias (Wright 2013).

Utopia as method may therefore offer an approach to collectively imagining a good countryside, and utopianism certainly evokes a political intensity. But such collective imaginaries of rural, or other, places must necessarily be underpinned by morality[2] (Stedman-Jones 1998, 56). What should this be, and how do we agree this? Who is involved in agreeing this? Even if we agree on social justice and sustainability, for example, as underlying goodness, these each have contested meanings and would need to be contextualised. What characterises a good place and for whom?

Good Places

In the academic literature, there is a voluminous literature on rurality (reviewed in Halfacree 2006, Woods 2011, Heley and Jones 2012), but there appears to be remarkably little discussion of what might constitute a *good* countryside, in this sense of desired alternative futures or underpinning morality. Instead we find debates on sustainability or sustainable rural communities, reflecting perhaps a taken for granted assumption that these are already good places which only need to be preserved or sustained, in line with discourses of the rural idyll. Perhaps the moral superiority of rural communities and places is readily assumed by residents and researchers alike? And perhaps it suits the powerful in rural societies for the status quo to be celebrated rather than scrutinised?

Brox (1995; 2006) is one exception. Recalling how Norwegian planners drew up a blueprint for post-war Finnmark around a table in London, he concludes that attempts at creating utopia (as goal) are bound to fail in rural areas as elsewhere. However, as a *method*, Brox argues that given the difficulties of defining the good society, it is easier for people to agree which evils (eg. poverty, hunger, unemployment) we should attempt to eliminate and then to work towards addressing these. Thus, "while a conventional, utopian plan puts most emphasis upon the properties and qualities of the end result, planning towards negative goals mainly involves studying the process that it tries to influence. The planner will have to find out how these processes are generated, in order to address the problems that he or she wishes to avoid" (Brox 2006, 126). The important issue of addressing such underlying processes is returned to in discussion below.

More recently, a few authors have considered rural futures through their rejection of neoliberal values and explicitly considered what values and practices might challenge neoliberalism and offer more hopeful alternative futures for rural societies (eg. Gray and Lawrence 2001; Mackenzie 2013).

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[2] "Morality concerns some fundamental conceptions, like goodness or welfare or even happiness, that are not reducible to the private choice of the individual…" in contrast to values which are tied up with personal judgement and subjectivity. (Stedman-Jones, 1998, 56).

Gray and Lawrence (2001) imagined a more hopeful future for Australian rural areas through restoring "the confidence for endogenous collective action" (p. 195), to create the conditions in which they can move their society towards greater equality and sustainability. This required building their social, economic and human capital; developing their reflexive capacity; and building the institutions which would afford them the agency to challenge and subvert global capitalism. Mackenzie (2013) studied places of possibility in rural Scotland "to make visible a narrative that searches for an alternative to a process of neoliberal globalisation" and associated "global processes of enclosure and privatisation" (p. 219). She sees community land ownership as just such a counter-narrative, with transformative potential to offer in its place a "more socially, environmentally and economically generous postneoliberalism (see Peck et al 2010, 110)" (see also Skeggs 2014). Through community land ownership, the process of privatisation and individualisation at the centre of the neoliberal project is disrupted, and "a space of hope and potentiality is prised open" as new ways of seeing emerge. Interestingly, while resonating with a loss in the past (the Highland Clearances), this becomes something new and as yet unknown and provisional, as the meanings of property held in common are continually reworked through practice, opening up the possibilities of "new, more sustainable, socially and environmentally just, imaginaries" (Mackenzie 2013, 225).

While there may have been few academic papers addressing the good countryside, there is a substantial literature on what constitutes the good city. In a US context, for example, Friedmann (2000) identified housing, health care, fairly paid work and social provision as the essential elements of a good city. Interestingly for rural studies, Amin and Thrift (2002, 4) suggest that injecting a sense of the virtual and agonistic into urban theory "allows us, at the very least, to move on from a politics based on nostalgia for a lost past of tightly knit and spatially compact urban communities – which still so often crops up in writings on the good city – to something different." They argue that community must be rethought in the context of a world of propinquity and flow. "Though we are still the heirs of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, we are moving towards a different, more restless and more dispersed, vocabulary through a constant struggle over the three Rs of urban life: new social relationships, new means of representation, and new means of resistance" (ibid, 48).

This poses many challenges, not least for forms of action and democracy. Young (1999) has proposed a typology of action/ orientation, related to ideas of deliberative democracy, but Amin and Thrift (2002, 139) argue that while these are wonderful ideals, we cannot ignore the fact that they "are riddled with power inequalities of one sort or another," whether considering radical democracy based on agonism or deliberative democracy. Amin and Thrift proceed to suggest some substantive ideas – capabilities, entitlements, civic duty, etc - emphasising institutionalised actions which can enhance individual and social capabilities while also building solidarities across the society of difference. Their aim is to "articulate a politics of the commons centred around universal rights to citizenship" (ibid, 142), underpinned by normative goals which mitigate to some degree the power differentials and inequality which runs through societies.

Subsequently, Amin (2006; 2010) returned to the question of the nature of the good city, arguing that "for the vast majority of people, cities are polluted, unhealthy, tiring, overwhelming, confusing, alienating" (Amin 2006, 1009), with citizenship and good government displaced by national and global institutions and movements. As an alternative imaginary, Amin "outlines the elements of an urban ethic imagined as an ever-widening habit of solidarity built around different dimensions of the

urban common weal. It offers a practical urban utopianism based around four registers of social solidarity" (ibid): Repair; Relatedness; Rights; and Re-enchantment.

Amin's practical urban utopianism presents the good city "as an expanding habit of solidarity and as a practical but unsettled achievement," in accordance with Levitas' utopia as method. Like Gray and Lawrence, and Mackenzie, he hopes for greater social justice, sustainability and collective action. He asserts that his articulation of the good city as an ethic of care, incorporating principles of social justice, equality and mutuality, avoids "shibboleths of community and neighbourhood", or governance by an enlightened urban elite. Instead he emphasises the role of an active and distributed democracy based around these four registers of solidarity.

Towards a Good Countryside

This paper turns now, in the light of this urban literature, to consider what might constitute a Good Countryside? As a starting point, while also bearing in mind Mackenzie's and Gray and Lawrence's work, we might seek to translate Amin's four registers from the urban to the rural as follows.

Repair

In the urban context, *Repair* is seen predominantly in technological terms as maintaining the invisible systems which enable the complexity of everyday life in the city to proceed - a technological unconscious (Thrift 2005) or the life support system of cities (Gandy 2002), with a potential dark side as a means of social control and surveillance (Graham 2010; Graham and Marvin 2001). Amin's concern is to subject such systems to democratic scrutiny, such that the good city "is the city of continual maintenance and repair, underpinned by a complex political economy of attention and coordination" (Amin 2006, 1015). It must guard against inequality by ensuring universal and affordable access to the basics of shelter, sanitation, food, water, communication and mobility.

In the rural literature there is a preoccupation with maintaining ecosystems rather than with social systems or physical infrastructure. Yet public space, infrastructure and buildings, not to mention social networks, institutional capacity and trust (sometimes loosely referred to as social capital), are also vital to the wellbeing and prosperity of people in rural areas (Atterton 2007; Arnason et al 2009; Magnani and Struffi 2009; Shucksmith 2010). Both Mackenzie (2013) and Gray and Lawrence (2001) emphasise the importance of people's social, economic and human capital along with their institutional capacity and reflexivity. Moreover, studies suggest that where social capital brings positive benefits, it is likely to be associated with a plurality of cultural identities, a mixing and interweaving of spatial scales, and strong links to the multiple historical themes that often characterise rural areas (Lee et al 2006; Arnason et al 2009). Alexander (2006) has also argued that the civil sphere/ public sphere is in constant need of repair. However, these social dimensions to rural wellbeing tend to be taken for granted, with little recognition of any role for the state in supporting or repairing and maintaining these. Thus, when the Commission for Rural Communities argued that the public value of the uplands depends on their social sustainability (CRC 2010), the UK Government ignored this in its subsequent uplands policy (DEFRA 2011), partly because such an admission might risk diverting funds from its principal clients - (lowland) farmers.

The maintenance of infrastructure is as important to the countryside as it is to urban living, notably good quality telecommunications infrastructure and transport links. The relatively poor state of rural broadband provision and the likelihood that market forces alone would not allow rural areas to catch up has been acknowledged by both the EU and the UK government. Despite current initiatives it is likely that much of the rural population of the UK will be left with broadband speeds of less than a tenth of those enjoyed by the rest of the country (EFRA Committee 2013). At the same time, transport costs are higher in rural areas (Smith et al 2010) and public transport services are being cut back as part of the austerity measures imposed following the banking crisis. Centralisation or closure of other essential services, including schools, health care and post offices, further erode the systems which support rural society, with rural communities increasingly being expected to devise self-help solutions to maintaining these essential systems (Cheshire 2006). While welcoming community engagement and control of assets and services, there are dangers if this is open only to those with capacity to mitigate a withdrawal by the state, leaving others without essential services and infrastructure. An *absent state* in this sense is a recipe for a two-speed countryside, underpinned by the values of neoliberalism (Shucksmith 2012a). Instead we need a more complete account of sustainability and resilience which encompasses social systems as well as the well-championed environmental and economic systems, and which recognises the responsibilities of an *enabling state* to all its citizens.

Relatedness

Relatedness may be understood in terms of social justice, an ethic of care to insider and outsider, so encompassing provision of welfare, education, health care and shelter as of right. Amin (2010, 8) accepts that such "a rights-based approach to urban inclusion is far from straightforward", raising fundamental questions about whether entitlements can be delivered and about the balance between the needs of new arrivals and the expectations of settled majorities. Nevertheless he maintains (ibid, 10) that "the prospect of a solidarity based on sensing the urban as a public good still remains open, if we are to build public recognition of common resources and spaces, work on shared concerns and intimacies in the public sphere and cultivate stewardship of the urban commons."

Different countries display contrasting approaches to social justice, depending on the welfare regime (Milbourne 2016). Shucksmith and Schafft (2012, 115) pointed out that "the US and UK are sometimes painted as examples of contrasting welfare regimes, the US operating a residual welfare model in which poverty is treated as self-induced with the UK welfare state regarded as closer to a universal model founded on structural explanations of poverty and social exclusion." In reality, the picture is far more nuanced and complex (Esping-Anderson 1990) with ongoing tensions between the left's tendency towards structural, systemic explanations, a strong role for the state and universality and the right's tendency towards individual-cultural explanations, a minimal state role and selectivity. Moreover, recent studies place more emphasis on the welfare mix, according to the balance of support coming from labour market, state or family (Antonucci et al 2014).

What therefore might be our vision for relatedness in the Good Countryside? Poverty in work because of lower pay is typical of rural areas in many countries, and this is compounded by poor access to transport, services, employment and training. Improving skills is important, but the introduction of a national minimum wage or even a living wage is also effective. As in cities, relatedness must imply welcoming

difference and diversity, something which is not always associated with rural communities despite their claim to neighbourliness and virtue. For example, Shucksmith (2012b) has argued that the lack of affordable housing in rural England is no accident but arises because power is exercised on various levels to exclude middle and lower income groups from rural areas, through a planning system which provides an arena for overt opposition to new housing. Power is also exercised in more covert and insidious ways in the form of discursive power (Sturzaker and Shucksmith 2011), which shapes people's perceptions and understandings of rurality and of the world. The social construction of countryside, in accordance with dominant ideologies of the rural idyll, is a pervasive influence on perceptions of rural life. The majority of respondents to researchers in the UK present rural society as inherently good, caring, safe and advantaged, while presenting urban society as inherently degenerate, dangerous and disadvantaged (Shucksmith et al, 1996). The potential influx of people from elsewhere is therefore something to be feared as a threat. And here is a paradox: rural values are proclaimed as inclusive and neighbourly, and yet these can only be protected from corrosive urban values through being exclusive and drawing tight bounds. The dominant discourse asserts that, to retain their caring and neighbourly character, distant or different neighbours must be kept out lest their alien values and ways of life disturb these caring values. So what are the bounds of rural social solidarity and how are these constructed?

Interestingly, opposition to new housing in rural areas tends to be less when residents come together to consider the future of their village in a more holistic way through place-shaping exercises. By collectively imagining their future, residents are more likely to recognise the contribution additional houses can make towards the sort of place they hope for, and so become more disposed to support such initiatives, albeit perhaps hedged around with locals only restrictions (Satsangi et al 2010; ARHC 2006). This underlines the importance of the structural and ethical foundations of deliberative processes, while still leaving aside the thorny question of who is entitled to be part of that process.

Rights

Rights include the right to participate in the public realm, to shape and to enjoy urban life and to respect others' rights. Amin (2006, 1017) notes that this right presumes having the means and entitlement to do so, something which he sees as threatened not only by growing inequality and intolerance but also by commoditization, homogenization and privatization of public space.

Again, this can be related to literatures on rural disadvantage, exclusion, participation, citizenship, governance and power. Swindal and MacAreavey (2012) note that in recent years civic participation has been claimed to deliver on many counts: as a means of enhancing local decision-making; of addressing the democratic deficit; of fostering social engagement and social capital; and of promoting economic development. They warn, however, that "civic participation is a notoriously complex dynamic that can empower some individuals at the expense of others." As Cheshire and Woods (2009, 113) have argued, "while, in legal terms, citizenship is considered a universal entitlement for members of a nationality, experience shows that citizenship rights have not been extended to all members of a society even when they hold formal citizenship status. For some social groups- women, indigenous peoples, and homosexuals – the granting of their citizenship rights has not occurred without significant struggle; but there are others too for whom their ability to participate as active and autonomous members of society is circumscribed by conditions of unemployment, poverty and general social exclusion." Citizenship is therefore not automatic, but is enacted, performed and conditional, negotiated according to regimes of governmentality.

Under neoliberalism, states have withdrawn increasingly from their commitment to universal social rights, introducing conditionalities and withdrawing public services and entitlements from rural areas. Meanwhile citizenship rights are redefined in terms of the rights of consumers, notably through a choice agenda. In the EU and elsewhere social inclusion has been reframed in terms of activisation rather than citizenship (Armstrong 2010), while concepts of active citizenship have been advanced. For example, a rural leadership course in Australia "seeks to create economically productive but politically docile rural leaders through its efforts to enhance their entrepreneurial disposition while simultaneously directing their efforts toward embracing, rather than resisting, the changes they face" (Cheshire and Woods, 2009, 117), and academics are found to be complicit in this. Furthermore, in many cases, the state appears to decentralise and devolve power but, in fact, retains control through hidden managerial technologies such as audit, performance targets, conditionality and associated sanctions.

Critical questions emerge both over the effectiveness of these new styles of governance, in whose interest they operate, and over who has been involved, who has not, and why. The implication is that it is insufficient (though still vital) to work to ensure that all voices are heard in deliberative democratic institutions at local level; there must also be challenge to neoliberal hegemony itself and to the associated outsourcing of morality to the market (Sandel 2013).

Re-enchantment

Amin's final register is *Re-enchantment.* The good city, he maintains, "celebrates the aspects of urban life from which spring the hopes and rewards of association and sociality" (ibid, 1019). Amin is particularly keen to highlight the contribution to urban public culture of gatherings in public spaces such as associations, clubs, car-boot sales, restaurants, libraries and parks, arguing that these are sites which combine pleasure with the skill of negotiating difference. "These are the lungs of social respite in the fast city, but also the prosaic spaces of civic inculcation" (ibid, 1020). However, Amin laments the neoliberal erosion of public spaces, together with the increasing surveillance and ejection of undesirable social groups; the displacement of informal association by consumerist spectacle and commoditized forms of socialization; and by the stretched geographies of association enabled by virtual media, travel and diaspora which rival urban association.

This speaks to many studies of rural life and to the rural idyll: in rural areas some may find enchantment in public spaces and association, as in Amin's cities, but others find it in solitude and being an elite apart (Savage 2010, Smith and Phillips 2001). Savage found that those with greater mobility seek out "enchanted landscapes" where place has particular resonance for them and where they can elect to belong to somewhere "embodying magical qualities" (Savage 2010, 23). Interestingly, "the landscape evoked is one which is defined by physical, rather than social, markers. Visual and other sensory perceptions are crucial, whereas the values, attitudes and interests of other local residents seem less important, unless they intrude unduly. People bracket out those who live in the place as irrelevant to their own apprehension of it" according to Savage (2010, 25), although in another study of Hebden Bridge local social history and the pleasures of association were found to be important to the elective belonging of artists, craftsmen and teachers who moved to the settlements in contrast to professional elites who sought the individualised solitude of the moor-tops (Smith and Phillips 2001).

Savage emphasises the link between mobility, stratification and elective belonging to place. "People's ability to talk of an enchanted landscape is premised on a contingent relationship to place. It is mobility between different places which allows people to use abstract aesthetic, ethical and pragmatic criteria to evaluate them," though this in turn lifts social groups out of the landscape (Savage 2010, 22). In direct contrast, others exhibit quite different, but similarly strong, relationships to place. "These, it turns out, are people living in the midst of a location in which they were born and bred, and who are strongly vested in their current location in which they are irredeemably thrown. This is a different way of experiencing place and belonging from that which the culturally privileged exhibit… They present themselves in passive terms, not choosing their location, but literally placed by it" (Savage 2010, 32-3).

These findings do not necessarily mean that only those with high levels of cultural capital, who choose and are vested in place, feel the joy and wonder of enchanted places, heritage and sociality. It is much more likely to mean that research has not sufficiently investigated and revealed the ways in which other social groups enjoy rural places and societies. By extension, this also suggests that elites' re-enchantment is more likely to have been recognized and privileged in rural policy (for example, in constructions of cultural and natural heritage and of sustainable communities). This echoes some of the critiques of the creative class argument (Florida 2002) which is said to advocate remaking cities as "bohemian talent magnets" which privilege elite imaginaries (Peck 2005). Might arcadia rather than bohemia be a "talent magnet" for such elites in Britain? There are important research agendas here, both in terms of exploring the ways in which re-enchantment is enjoyed by less privileged groups, and in revealing their differential purchase on rural policy. Which groups' re-enchantment should inform visions of the Good Countryside?

Discussion: Approaching the Good Countryside

Having considered how ideas of the Good City might inform re-imagining the rural, what then might characterize the Good Countryside? What morality might underpin this, and who should decide it, how and at what scales? The question also arises of how to proceed in practice, both in eliminating evils (Brox 2006) and in pursuing collective and inclusive forward dreaming and anticipatory consciousness, as suggested by Levitas. What roles might academics play in these processes?

Moral questions

Discussion of Amin's four registers suggests a Good Countryside that is socially inclusive; networked rather than insular; agentic rather than passive; reflexive and resilient; with the support of an enabling state. Specifically, a Good Countryside should be socially sustainable and resilient, as much as environmentally and economically, and this should be recognized as a shared responsibility between citizens and state, not just a matter for self-help or an invisible hand. A Good Countryside should be welcoming to others, raising similar questions to those Amin poses in urban contexts about "the balance between the needs of new arrivals and the expectations of settled communities", and more generally about citizenship and social inclusion. Notwithstanding the difficulties noted above in setting the boundaries of deliberative democracy, a Good Countryside must ensure that deliberative fora are inclusive, enabling all to shape and to enjoy rural life. In addition, as emphasised by Forester and Habermas, there must be continual challenge to the

exercise of discursive power (including symbolic violence) with necessary ethical and structural foundations. Finally, a Good Countryside will admit multiple meanings of re-enchantment, recognising more than merely elite experiences of joy and wonder of enchanted places, heritage and sociality.

The morality of a Good City and a Good Countryside, on this reading, are consistent with one another, as might be expected, but they present different challenges. In urban studies, repair and maintenance of the physical infrastructure is emphasised, whereas in rural contexts a concern for (and a neglect of) social sustainability sits alongside the challenges of ICT and transport provision. Difference and diversity tend to be less evident in rural settlements, again making the challenge of relatedness qualitatively different from that in more mixed (socially and ethnically) urban settings. The challenges of participating in the public realm may be shaped by different social relations, for example of feudalism, paternalism or clientalism (Murdoch et al 2003) as well as by distance and a loss of public spaces. And, of course, the rural idyll may offer quite a different idea of enchantment in rural places to the bohemian talent-magnets of the city elites.

But a crucial question is who should decide the morality which underpins the Good Countryside, and how should this be determined and debated? This is surely a matter for public deliberation and debate, though academics do have a role in informing such debates in the public realm, as discussed further below. Sandel (2012) argues strongly for public debate on values, specifically to consider whether market values have spread into spheres of life where they don't belong, so corrupting our selves, our society and our environment: too often, he argues, we are out-sourcing morality to the market. Moreover, Brewer (2014) contends that public social science has a duty to contribute to such debates through a value-infused, problem-oriented, post-disciplinary approach to "the fundamental problems of culture, the market and the state in the 21st century".

The mechanisms for achieving agreement on what constitutes a Good Countryside must be attuned to context. Often, the tendency towards new styles of governance and claims to localism have relied on area partnerships as a central component, along with advocacy of citizen participation and stakeholder involvement, even if these have been unevenly realised in practice. One difficulty is that such partnerships may lack legitimacy and accountability to the area's population, instead reproducing established power differentials (Shortall and Shucksmith 1998). Another is that research reveals a "highly uneven geography of partnership working" with successful areas becoming partnership rich while others become partnership poor (Edwards et al 2000): such inequalities between places will widen unless an enabling state intervenes to build capacity where needed (Shucksmith 2012a). The state has a further vital role to play in ensuring that wider, non-local interests are represented where appropriate – for example, in relation to global warming, national parks, homelessness and so on (Shucksmith and Talbot 2015). Deliberation on what morality might underpin the Good Countryside must therefore enable not only all those who live in the area to participate, but must also reflect legitimate wider interests, and articulate with parallel national and global debates and interests. The challenge to promote public deliberation about morality is multi-scalar, and not only an aspect of localism, even if the practical aspects of how to enable deliberative processes at multiple scales remain (Forester 1999).

How to move towards a Good Countryside?

Assuming that there is agreement on what morality is to be pursued, what is the next step? How might we proceed in practice towards the Good Countryside? One avenue is to seek to eliminate evils, as Brox put it, by focusing on the processes which cause hunger, poverty and suchlike, and this is precisely the rationale behind the concept of social exclusion with "its focus on the multidimensional, dynamic processes underlying inequality and poverty" (Shucksmith 2012c, 379). The concept of social exclusion remains contested but, at its best, it does highlight causes rather than symptoms, as evidenced in a number of rural studies in the UK and Europe (eg. Shucksmith 2000a, 2004; Phimister et al 2000a; Dax & Machold 2002; Milbourne 2004; Jentsch & Shucksmith 2004) and related studies in the US (eg. Brown & Hirschl 1995; Duncan 2014; Lobao et al 2007; Rank et al 2014), potentially informing policy and practice across a range of domains. Many other studies have revealed the exercise of power in rural societies, both overt and covert. Whether employing the concept of social exclusion or not, there is an important role for academics to study and reveal the processes underlying evils, and to inform public debate, policy and practice accordingly.

Beyond addressing the processes underlying evils, how might we positively pursue a utopian vision of the Good Countryside? Ideas of place-shaping have already been mentioned in this regard, and rather than bottom-up (endogenous) approaches critiqued above as 'self-help', models of networked (or neo-endogenous) rural development are more appropriate (Shucksmith 2010, 2012a). The idea behind networked rural development is that development processes inevitably include a mix of bottom-up and top-down forces, as the local necessarily interacts with the extra-local, but that the key issue is the balance of internal and external control of development processes (Lowe et al 1995). Rural areas are no longer seen as playing a passive, dependent role in the global economy but are able to generate innovative processes and shape future development, drawing on assets within *and* outwith the locality. Critical to this process are those institutions, actors and networks that have the capacity to link businesses, communities and institutions involved in governance at a variety of scales. Networked development therefore advocates an emphasis on local capacity-building by an enabling state, not merely self-help (Shucksmith 2012a).

The earlier discussion highlighted the danger that bottom-up and networked rural development approaches can risk exacerbating inequality, both between places because of the uneven capacity of local place-based communities to pursue development from within (Cheshire 2006), and also because internal power relations are often ignored or obscured such that powerful elites capture the benefit (Shucksmith 2000a). These risks should be moderated by the state engaging in capacity-building and investment, and sharing not abdicating responsibility. It is emphasised again that this requires an enabling state, not an absent state (Shucksmith 2012a).

The networked rural development approach may therefore be seen as offering possibilities for social actors to collectively and deliberatively imagine their future and the future of their places, in accordance with the architectural mode of Levitas' Imaginary Reconstitution of Society method. It offers a practical approach to place-shaping, argued above to be utopian in method with a recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure, while also offering scope for pursuing the values articulated in the preceding section. However there is no guarantee of the values that will inform the application of networked rural development, or the IROS method, in any given place by autonomous social actors. Newby (1979, 497), for example, has argued that the

English countryside had even by the 1970s become so socially exclusive that "policies which systematically disadvantage the rural poor can now be assured of local democratic support," and that action to address rural poverty and promote inclusion must therefore come principally from national, not local, policy. This reminds us again of the thorny issues of setting the boundaries of deliberative processes and how to mitigate discursive power: these issues, even though well-rehearsed (Forester 1999), are recognised as problematic and require a fuller discussion than is possible in this paper (but see, for example Elstub and McLaverty 2014).

This is one reason for seeking to start a debate about what might constitute a Good Countryside in our imagined future, and to displace the rural idyll as our anti-utopian utopia. Networked rural development, place-shaping and IROS can all be employed for good or ill: it is in the public arena that we must debate what values to pursue and how these might be re-imagined as a Good Countryside to work towards for the future.

The role of academia.

Finally, what contributions might academia make to the pursuit of a Good Countryside? A crucial role for academia is, of course, to gather research-based evidence with which to inform action, and to foster deliberation and debate in public about what we understand to be a good life and a good society (Brewer 2013, 2014; Burawoy 2005, 2011). Brewer (2013, 14) argues that the social sciences, in particular, "are the way in which society can find out about itself and in so doing generate the idea of society itself," helping in the development and dissemination of key social values that render society possible, such as trust, altruism and tolerance. "The social sciences help us understand the conditions which both promote and undermine these values and identify the sorts of public policies, behaviours and relationships that are needed in culture, the market and the state to ameliorate their absence and restore and repair them" (ibid, 15).

One way in which researchers can hold up the mirror to society is to engage in the archaeological mode of Levitas' IROS method, reconstructing from fragments the implicit good society embedded in political positions, so facilitating critique, engagement and dialogue about these implicit utopias and values. As Levitas (2013, 154) explains, this is not necessarily hostile but "can be undertaken in the spirit of unmasking or in the spirit of restitution – in Ricouer's terms a hermeneutic of suspicion or a hermeneutic of faith." Levitas (2013) illustrates the method in relation to books on meritocracy, civil society and economic growth, such as her own earlier deconstruction of New Labour's use of the term social exclusion (Levitas 1998). Recent rural studies offer further examples, such as Cheshire's (2006) examination of discourses and practices of self-help in Australian rural policy; Mackenzie's (1998) study of debates around a proposed superquarry in Harris; and Murdoch and Lowe's (2003) work on the ecologicalisation of the urban-rural divide in England. In a similar vein, revealing the hidden processes which confer social advantage and disadvantage can be immensely powerful, as Bourdieu (1982, 19) argues: "one can understand the extreme violence of the reactions of the holders of cultural capital to those analyses which bring to light the conditions of production and reproduction..." Accordingly, "sociology is opposed to all those who rely upon the shadow of misrecognition to carry on their trade" (Duncan 1990, 184) and must focus upon "the struggle for the monopoly of the legitimate representation of the social world" (Bourdieu 1982, 9). In this way, the social scientist can contribute to action "by unveiling the unknown mechanisms of the

established order, of symbolic violence, and sharing this knowledge in a reflexive and political alliance with the dominated – the downtrodden – as a counter-power" (Deer 2008, 208).

Beyond such unmasking, Bourdieu argues that academics should make their voices heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent, promoting intellectual argument rather than the ubiquitous "slander, sloganisation and falsification" of political life, so fulfilling academics' "function of public service and sometimes public salvation" (Bourdieu 1998, 9; see also Sassower 2014). On this basis, academics may engage with social actors in such processes as networked rural development or place-shaping, and indeed some would regard such engagement beyond the ivory tower as a public service obligation. "Those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the stdy of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake" (Bourdieu 2003, 11). Brewer (2014, 13) emphasises the ethical responsibility on social scientists "to help realise the social good and reduce social suffering through our teaching, research and civic engagement." Such practical engagement also accords more with Foucault's conception of the intellectual's role, not as a figure who preaches from above and who incites political action in the name of truth, or who reveals to the masses their social conditions, but as someone who provides expertise and technical knowledge to assist in local or specific struggles (Foucault 1980).

There are numerous examples of rural scholars engaging with rural communities, sometimes even in processes of co-creation of knowledge (eg. Messely et al, 2013; Homsy and Warner, 2013; Brunet et al, 2014). But, as noted above, the engagement of academics in processes of rural development may not always be for the best: Cheshire (2006, 141) has shown, for example, how rural scholars may be enlisted in promoting neoliberal discourses of self-help. "The relationship between the state and the individual is mediated, in practice, by a hierarchical layer of experts [including academics] who perform the activity of government on the state's behalf. These experts range from charismatic, national and international authorities who motivate rural people with passionate and inspiring tales of how bottom-up development works best, to locally-based agents of the state who are employed to provide direct forms of support and assistance to self-help groups." Hadjimichalis and Hudson (2014) similarly argue that regional studies' preoccupation with learning regions, social capital and networks to the neglect of structural processes at macro scales, such as globalisation, deregulation and monetary union, have unwittingly served a neoliberal agenda. It follows also that academics' role cannot be confined to the local sphere, when hegemonic ideologies and the pervasive force of global-local relations operate across multiple scales.

Even though experts are necessarily enmeshed in networks of power (Bourdieu 1998), academics in such roles need not be complicit, but retain the agency to mediate, contest, negotiate and transform power (Cheshire 2006, 128). Their ability to do this depends crucially on academics' individual and collective critical reflexivity, as well as on the funding and other conditions surrounding their work. Bourdieu argues strongly that research cannot properly proceed without the researcher reflecting on and acknowledging the social conditions that shape and condition their own observations, discourses and theories. Sociologists should ensure they understand "both what is at stake for them [as actors in the academic field] and for the implicit conditions and structures of their practice. For Bourdieu, this *objectivation* of the knowing subject is the *sine qua non* of any scientific attempt at making sense of the social world" (Deer 2008, 201). Encouragingly, Bourdieu suggests that academics may still retain, through the durability of their habitus, a strong commitment to

academia's inalienable ideals, imperatives and values even in the face of the increasing marketization and neoliberalisation of this and other fields (Bourdieu 1988).

Conclusion

The rural idyll is something to which many aspire, perhaps as a vision of a good place to live or as a repository of values, but how far should this power-infused discourse of an imagined golden age of indeterminate date inform a vision for a desired future? This paper has sought to begin, and indeed to provoke, discussion of what might constitute visions for desired rural futures - our collective imaginaries of rural places into the twenty-first century and of a Good Countryside to work towards. What morality might underpin such imaginaries? And how might we approach such a task?

This paper has suggested that one approach might be to employ Utopian thinking as a means of identifying and imagining desired alternative futures, drawing upon Levitas' (2007; 2012) argument for utopia to be understood as a method rather than as a goal, and accompanied by a recognition of provisionality, responsibility and necessary failure. Utopia as a form of anticipatory consciousness – the *not yet* – may then be contrasted with the essentially backward looking rural idyll. This approach is helpful both to challenge the implicit utopias of neoliberalism and to assist more radical thinking beyond mere extrapolation. It implies a commitment to transformation, and it carries an appropriate polemical intensity. As a method for the collective construction of a future transformed rural imaginary through engagement, dialogue and responsibility, it is argued that this finds expression in agentic, deliberative and polyphonal place-shaping approaches to networked rural development, as exemplified by community-based land reform in northern Scotland.

This paper sets out the author's thoughts on the character and morality of a Good Countryside, but this should be a matter for public deliberation and debate, not expert pronouncement – albeit informed by scholarly enquiry. In this sense this paper presents a call to action. It is suggested that networked rural development offers possibilities for social actors to collectively and deliberatively imagine their future and the future of their places, in accordance with the architectural mode of Levitas' Imaginary Reconstitution of Society method. It offers a practical approach to place-shaping, argued above to be utopian in method. However there is no guarantee of the morality that will inform the application of networked rural development to visioning rural futures. Networked rural development, place-shaping and IROS can all be employed for good or ill: it is in the public arena that we must debate what values to pursue and how these might be re-imagined as a Good Countryside to displace the rural idyll and to work towards a better future for rural people and places into the 21st Century and beyond. Academics have roles to play in this process, unmasking the hidden mechanisms of the established order, engaging with publics in our teaching and research, and contributing to debates and deliberations at multiple scales. This paper ends therefore with a call for rural scholars to encourage and assist deliberation and debate on rural futures amongst people in rural areas and beyond, while also engaging and reflecting critically on these processes.

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