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British Rural Geography: 
A Disciplinary Enterprise in Changing Times

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Introduction: Disciplines and Sub-Disciplines

Ron Johnston’s studies of the evolution of human geography since 1945 remind us that the content of an academic discipline cannot be understood without reference to its context (Johnston, 1991). The same can be said for sub-disciplines, such as rural geography which emerged in Britain in the 1970s. This chapter sets its history in the context of changing conceptual approaches and patterns of institutionalisation in human geography and other related fields (such as agricultural economics and rural sociology). It argues that British rural geography has been a successful sub-discipline of human geography in large part because of its openness and responsiveness to wider intellectual currents and public concerns.

Most social scientific work is set within disciplines and at the same time builds (or dismantles) those disciplines. The development of ideas, concepts and empirical enquiry is therefore inseparable from the act of constructing disciplines. Disciplines are structured contexts that are recreated through the efforts of scientists producing knowledge in pursuing their careers. Disciplinary structures provide exclusive access to research and career resources, and this is why boundary maintenance is so essential. Boundary maintenance occurs within a wider ‘commonwealth’ of scientific knowledge production in which boundaries between disciplines cannot legitimately be maintained simply through the exclusionary practices of a restricted trade or freemasonry but must be reproduced through recognised knowledge work. The epistemological structures of disciplines are therefore inevitably co-produced with their institutional structures, and reciprocally so with other disciplines.

A major part of disciplinary boundary work is the maintenance of sub-disciplines. Created typically at times of disciplinary expansion, sub-disciplines reflect the needs of scientists to differentiate what they produce and generate new professional niches. However, such a process may be forced into reverse. Cloke et al. (1991, p.21) recount the salutary instance of American geography — a discipline for many years in retreat. They quote the President of the Association of American Geographers who warned “We are a small discipline. To be small these days is to be vulnerable”, and his admonition that “Geography’s continual splitting into smaller clusters has become hazardous to our collective health” (Abler, 1987, p.518). Similar forebodings were heard
in UK geographical circles in the mid-1980s, but British geography proved more firmly rooted. Moreover, the outlook of young and ambitious researchers, even when the prospects for their discipline may seem unpromising, may not concur with the instincts of their seniors to consolidate. Munton and Goudie (1984, p.27), for example, dismissed the “unease expressed by some geographers about the continuing fissiparous tendencies within the discipline” and the related calls to strengthen the traditional core areas of the subject, with the confident assertion that:

geographers will continue to draw upon theory derived from related disciplines in their search for explanation or greater understanding. The search for such theory may lead to centrifugal tendencies, but there need be no concern for the core if geographers take advantage of the numerous emerging areas of research to which many believe they can make a distinctive contribution (p.39).

The dynamics of sub-disciplines thus illuminates not only centre-periphery relations in discipline building and knowledge production but also generational change within disciplines, as well as the competition between disciplines as they rub up together at the edges.

Andrew Abbott’s book, *Chaos of Disciplines* (2001), argues that disciplines evolve through essentially similar processes which he characterizes as a fractal pattern of continuous internal division and occasional external convergence. Drawing on the example of the relationship between history and sociology, he concludes that supposedly contrasting disciplinary specialisms (such as social history and historical sociology) may have more in common with each other than with the mainstream of their parent disciplines, thus allowing considerable traffic of people and ideas between them. Abbott analyses how distinctions are played out over time and shows that when lines of enquiry wither away their concerns are often subsumed by (or ‘remapped’ onto) other branches. Neighbouring disciplines and sub-disciplines therefore evolve through processes of engagement, dialogue, conflict, bifurcation and ingestion.

While Abbott’s analysis focuses primarily on the internal dynamics of disciplinary development, he recognizes that moments of differentiation and absorption can be shaped by external factors. These may be to do with newly recognized problems in the wider social or political world, which may either enlarge or reduce the resources available for disciplinary expansion. Fractal processes
expand to fill whatever space is available when disciplines expand. The emergence of environmental economics, environmental politics and environmental sociology in the 1980s and 1990s would be examples. Conversely, less diversity and more concentration is the outcome when resources are more limited. However, the processes of coming together and breaking apart regularly occur and follow a similar pattern. One side loses and the winning side then becomes characterized by further fractal development and remapping of the loser’s interests and concerns.

Abbott’s model provides a useful starting point from which to examine patterns and processes of innovation, consolidation and decline in the development of sub-disciplines, and we draw on it to analyse the way in which ‘the rural’ as a field of inquiry has been subsumed into the social sciences in the UK. We argue that the 1980s were a key decade in the emergence of the rural as a focus of social science inquiry. This was a period of considerable turmoil in the social sciences in the UK, marked by twin trends of radicalization and professionalisation amongst academic social scientists. Besides other developments, the 1980s saw the birth of a critical interdisciplinary rural studies which then and subsequently has provided fertile ground for interchange between disciplines, re-energising some but depleting others. Rural geography, in particular, was able to grow in strength at the expense of other sub-disciplines such as rural sociology and agricultural economics. In analysing the dynamic interaction of the disciplines, we start first with a brief review of the status of rurally-orientated social sciences up to the 1970s.

**Rural Studies to the 1970s**

The constitution of the rural world and the dynamics of agrarian change were major preoccupations of the classic social science disciplines – economics, geography and history. Only in economics had this been institutionalized as a distinct sub-discipline in Britain – that of agricultural economics. However, rural topics pervaded mainstream scholarship in history and geography, with considerable overlap in interests in the parallel sub-disciplines of agrarian history and historical geography.

Agricultural history had always played an important part in the syllabi of British economic and social history degrees. Questions of agricultural change, land use and settlement systems were
even more central to the discipline of geography, however. Indeed, the rural landscape was key to the main traditions of geographical research, of regional survey and historical geography. The epithet ‘rural geography’ would have smacked at least a little of tautology. It is notable, for example, that the prominent geographer, David Harvey, has never been identified as a ‘rural geographer’ (Castree and Gregory, 2006), even though his doctoral research, completed in 1962, and early publications examined agricultural and land use change in rural Kent (Harvey, 1962; 1963; 1966). Harvey, of course, went on to be a leading figure, in quick succession, in spatial science and then Marxist urban geography.

The trajectory of his contemporary, Ray Pahl, is also illuminating. Having been associated as a postgraduate with the advent of the ‘new geography’ (i.e. spatial science) (Pahl, 1965a), his PhD — the first study of the impact of counterurbanisation on a village community — would surely qualify him as a father figure of either rural geography or rural sociology (Pahl, 1965b). However, he moved quickly into the sociology of urban planning (developing critiques not dissimilar from Harvey’s) and was soon a Professor of Sociology.

If the rural was not a destination for avant-garde geographers by the 1970s, there was nevertheless a growing demand from geography students for teaching that covered rural issues. Hugh Clout produced the first rural geography text in 1972 (Clout, 1972). Recently, he has reflected that this was done “unashamedly to plug a gap in the textbook literature of the time” (2005, p.376). Most revealingly, he goes on

My cultivation of ‘rural geography’ at University College London was part of a personal survival strategy. I simply felt that I required another systematic support to complement my main interests in historical geography and France. The textbook — along with several others — was woven into a ‘personal safety blanket’ to keep me going since my part-time doctoral research advanced slowly.

Geography was still a strongly teaching oriented discipline (Stoddart, 1986). The production of undergraduate textbooks, then and now, explicated fields of study for an undergraduate audience whilst also demarcating areas of scholarly competence (see, for example, Phillips and Williams, 1984; Pacione, 1984; Gilg, 1985; Woods, 2005).
UCL Geography Department in the early 1970s was stocked with historical geographers. Once the foundation of British geography, historical geography was undergoing something of an identity crisis as the post-war American vogue for spatial science swept through the discipline. For a young lecturer trained in historical geography, a focus on contemporary rural issues provided a new distinctive niche. As Clout explained “My Rural Geography omitted any reference to the ‘less developed world’ and excluded all the historical material that I taught as rural geography to large numbers of second year undergraduates at UCL in the late 1960s and during the 1970s” (2005, p. 376). With the swelling number of undergraduate geographers in the post-Robbins expansion of the universities, there was a need to give geography teaching a more contemporary appeal. It was this requirement rather than academic fashion that drove the delivery of rural geography. As Clout himself observed at the time, with academic and professional attention increasingly focusing on the quantitative analysis of urban and regional change, the rural had been relegated from being at the core of geography to an inferior position. His proposed solution was to refocus academic skills on the problems of relevance to countryside management and rural planning. The renaming of the Agricultural Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG), two years later in 1974, as the Rural Geography Study Group should thus be seen as an effort to refurbish a field of activity that was in danger of becoming marginalized within contemporary geographical research. The focus shifted to the geographical analysis of rural problems and away from efforts to delineate the agricultural regions of various parts of the world. The Rural Geography Study Group was one of the Institute’s most popular. By 1983 its membership stood at 280 which placed it fourth (after ‘urban’ ‘quantitative’ and ‘geomorphology’) amongst the IBG’s study groups.

Agricultural economics was the only rural sub-discipline that was institutionalized in the UK, with agricultural economics departments in the universities of London (at Wye), Reading, Oxford, Exeter, Cambridge, Nottingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. These departments had their roots in the early 1920s when the Ministry of Agriculture had established provincial advisory centres in universities and colleges to provide advice to farmers. Each of these centres was equipped with an agricultural economist and they built up expertise in farm management and production economics, although some also pursued other interests including rural sociology and history (see Colman, 1990). Agricultural economics also became a
recognized specialism within government and the Agriculture Ministry’s economists maintained a close professional relationship with agricultural economists in the universities and colleges. The Agricultural Economics Society, founded in 1926, brought the two groups together and, with its Journal of Agricultural Economics (begun in 1928), the Society became an influential forum for the analysis of the state of agriculture and agricultural policy. After the Second World War, the government reorganised what had been the provincial advisory centres into a separate government research and extension service, but agricultural economics was left with the universities and colleges. With a much reduced advisory role, agricultural economists concentrated on the development of teaching and research. In some cases they were brought together with academic economics departments, but in most cases they existed in separate agricultural economics departments, often alongside departments of agriculture. Many of the younger agricultural economists in post in the 1960s and 1970s did graduate training in American universities where they were subjected to a more rigorous theoretical and mathematical training than had been available in the UK. Back home they re-established agricultural economics on a stronger basis of neo-classical welfare and trade theory and, in particular, a thoroughgoing and highly quantitative pursuit of inferential econometric methods. As a cohesive and well institutionalised discipline, agricultural economics thus dominated social science research on agricultural issues throughout the post-war period.

In the United States and most other European countries, an institutionalised rural sociology sat alongside agricultural economics, because the post-war modernisation of agriculture was seen to imply a wider transformation of rural society that went beyond improving the productivity of farm labour. No such institutionalised rural sociology, dedicated to easing the pace and effects of agrarian transformation, existed in the UK. Amongst sociologists and social anthropologists interested in kinship there was, though, a tradition of localistic studies which, in the 1950s and 1960s, had examined the cohesiveness of isolated farming communities, but whose findings had served to undermine the very assumptions on which they had been based concerning the intrinsic and abiding characteristics of rural communities (Bell and Newby, 1971). A range of British scholars, including many who were not sociologists, but who took an interest in the social aspects of farming or village life, belonged to the European Society for Rural Sociology, founded in 1957, and contributed to its journal Sociologia Ruralis.
The predominance of agricultural economics in the UK left little scope for the institutional development of rural sociology. Often through American graduate school experience, many UK agricultural economists had been exposed to rural sociological ideas and some showed a professional interest in social analysis of farming and rural communities (see, for example, Wibberley 1960; Gasson 1971; Jones 1973). Agricultural economics departments, however, were accused of “exclusionary practices” by the sociologist, Peter Hamilton, in not appointing professional sociologists and in allowing issues which might have been the subject matter of rural sociologists (such as agricultural labour mobility or farm management) to be “hived off into strange cul-de-sacs by agricultural economists and given obfuscatory names such as ‘agricultural adjustment’” (1990, p.229). More generally, he lamented the fact that there had been no demand in post-war Britain for a broader rural sociology “either from the agricultural sector or rural society, but more significantly …. from the profession of sociology itself” (Hamilton, 1990, p.229). This was a function of the fact that sociology as a discipline had only a limited intellectual purchase in Britain and, seen as a science for understanding and resolving social problems, it was preoccupied with urban and industrial issues.

**The 1980s: The Birth of Interdisciplinary Rural Studies**

The 1980s were a pivotal decade in the evolution of rural studies and more generally as critical social theory swept across the social sciences. This was a period of a polarised and ideologically-charged politics following the breakdown of the dominant post-war social consensus. The empiricism and positivism that had marked most British social science fell out of favour. A new generation of young researchers radicalised by the student politics of the late 1960s looked to professionalise their work. However, the lack of secure career prospects within academic departments detached them from allegiance to established disciplinary perspectives and traditions. In response to the attacks from the New Right they sought to institute a notion of independent academic study as a critical conscience within society and found inspiration in European structuralist and post-structuralist theorists. One of the thrusts of critical social theory was to challenge academic conventions, which gave licence to those wanting to transcend academic boundaries.
In the rural sphere, interdisciplinary dialogue between the social sciences was facilitated by the activities of the Rural Economy and Society Study Group (RESSG). Established in 1979 as “a forum for all those studying the social formation of rural areas in advanced societies [and] to encourage theoretically informed investigation and analysis of rural issues” (Bradley and Lowe, 1984, p.1), the RESSG brought together isolated rural scholars and previously diffuse networks from across the social sciences. It soon grew to include more than 100, mainly younger, researchers and went on regularly to attract research council funding for organizing major conferences on rural themes. Its work can be traced through a series of edited volumes (see, for example, Bradley and Lowe, 1984; Cox et al., 1986; Lowe et al., 1987; Bouquet and Winter, 1987; Buller and Wright, 1990; Marsden and Little, 1990; Milbourne, 1997).

A major outlet for interdisciplinary rural studies in the UK has been the *Journal of Rural Studies*, edited by the geographer Paul Cloke since its launch in 1985. The Journal has become a focal point for the publication of rural studies research, across a range of disciplines, and has a strongly international reach. In his opening editorial, Cloke reflected on how rural geographers had been drawn out of a “fallow period” by “a direct and compelling exposure to other perspectives on rural areas, which has widened their horizons way beyond the bounds of traditional geographic study” (1985, p.2).

The first wave of theoretical development drew upon concepts and ideas from political economy, such as the centrality of capital accumulation and restructuring in social formation and uneven development. Howard Newby’s studies of the 1970s of the social relations of capitalist farming were particularly influential. They broke from the tradition of rural community studies and established theoretical interest in the power relations between rural social groups. Starting with his PhD work on the deferential behaviour of farmworkers, Newby’s researches opened out into a wide ranging analysis of the changing social structure of lowland Britain — encompassing the social and economic status of farmworkers, small farmers, ‘agribusiness’ farmers and the ex-urban middle class — based on an analysis of rural property relationships and the rationalising tendencies of a state-sponsored capital-intensive agricultural industry (Newby, 1977; Newby et al., 1978). This encompassing analysis, drawing on and exemplifying general and ascendant
sociological concepts such as class and power, transformed the standing of British rural sociology or perhaps more precisely the sociology of rural Britain. More broadly, in embracing new issues such as the social and environmental impacts of agribusinesses and the urbanisation of rural social structures, Newby’s work demonstrated how the study of rural change could illustrate and illuminate general processes of social and economic change in contemporary Britain (Newby, 1980). Freed from a sense that ‘the rural’ was an archaic backwater isolated from the contemporary world, rural studies became fashionable, led by Newby’s self-proclaimed “New” or “Critical Rural Sociology” (Newby and Buttel, 1980; Newby, 1983).

The impulse of the new rural sociology, however, was felt more strongly outside of British sociology than within. Noticeably, none of the leading sociologists — such as Ray Pahl, John Urry, Ian Carter and Howard Newby himself — who so strongly influenced social science understandings of contemporary rural Britain, spun off ‘schools’ of rural sociology amongst their graduates. Looking back in 1990, Graham Crow, one of Newby’s former postgraduates commented “Since Newby’s research of the 1970s, few sociological farm studies of any sort have been undertaken, reflecting the fact that British sociology continues to have an overwhelming urban orientation” (Crow et al., 1990, p.253). To Peter Hamilton, the failure of rural sociology to achieve an academic foothold was due to the fact that “the lack of institutional locations at a time when the university sector in the UK, and sociology in particular, are contracting has proved a formidable handicap to the formation of a coherent grouping” (1990, p.230).

Of course, institutionalised rural sociology existed outside the UK and some of the pioneers of critical rural sociology did find chairs abroad in the 1980s: for example, Ian Carter in Australia and Howard Newby in the USA. In the UK, their ideas were picked up by others. As Crow et al commented, “because of the paucity of institutional support and sponsorship for rural sociology in Britain, much work which is clearly influenced by ideas from sociology is produced within other disciplines with a strong tradition of rural studies, for example rural and social geography, planning and social anthropology” (1990, p.254).

Mainstream sociological attention moved on, and indeed was encouraged to do so by the very figures who had trailblazed the sociology of rural Britain and who, in dismissing the notion of a
distinctively rural economy and society, had incidentally also deconstructed the rural as a sociological category. Pahl had concluded from his study of commuter villages that “in the sociological context, the terms rural and urban are more remarkable for their ability to confuse than for their power to illuminate” (1966, p.299) and argued that “any attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise” (p.322). For his part, John Urry, having characterised the rural as an historically-contingent and descriptive category which lacked explanatory power, then dismissed it as a “chaotic conception” (Urry, 1984). Newby too had berated an ultimately “futile search for a sociological definition of ‘rural’” which he ascribed to “a reluctance to recognise that the term ‘rural’ is an empirical category rather than a sociological one … it is merely a ‘geographical expression’” (Newby and Buttel 1980, p.4). Significantly, though, by the early 1980s, Newby was addressing an international (mainly American) rural sociological audience and he indicated to them a way forward out of the theoretical impasse:

it is not only apparent that rural sociology cannot operate without an acceptable theory of society, but that it also requires a theory of the spatial allocation of the population (since ‘rural’ is a spatial, geographical category) which is also sociologically relevant. In other words, rural sociology demands a theory which links the spatial with the social (Newby and Buttel, 1980, pp.5-6).

Newby recognised this as “fruitful – if contested – theoretical and empirical terrain” (ibid p.27) but saw it as the way to build a comparative rural sociology of advanced capitalism.

Compared with other social science disciplines, such as linguistics, economic and social history, anthropology and sociology, critical social theory came late to geography, and in many cases came via these other disciplines. This lag effect reflected the strength of positivist and empiricist traditions in geography. However, the vogue for spatial science had run its course and was encountering mounting criticisms not only of a methodological but also of an ontological kind. A counter movement developed to promote “post-positivist” approaches to human geography and this systematically reconstituted the discipline through the 1980s and 1990s as a self-consciously theoretically-orientated social science. In the words of one participant, “theoretical sophistication has replaced quantitative/analytical sophistication as the guarantor of geography’s legitimacy” (Robert Lake, quoted in Cloke et al., 1991, p.207). The transformation of geography from a
discipline with little if any tradition of reflexive epistemology to one with a “high degree of theoretical plurality” (Hubbard et al., 2002, p.6) involved an eclectic borrowing of ideas and methods from other social sciences, as described by Hubbard and colleagues:

Often, [geographical] theorizing involves adapting theories developed in other disciplines, such as social theory, economic theory or political theory. Ultimately, this ‘borrowing’ of ideas from other disciplines serves to make the strange familiar, and helps geographers to conceive of the world in new ways (p.4).

This is not the place to document or account for the rise of human geography to be such a prominent social science in Britain in the 1990s. Central to any fundamental explanation would be the contradictory position of the social sciences in the UK in the 1980s — on the one hand, facing ideological opposition and funding cuts from the government; on the other hand, under pressure to expand to fulfil society’s continuing requirements for social engineering and to support the mass expansion of higher education. While other social sciences (except for economics, business studies and management) were actively disfavoured, geography in the UK was able to weather the challenge of the ‘New Right’ thanks to its entrenched position in the UK educational system and its apolitical public image.

Writing in 1984, Munton and Goudie captured the sense of insecurity and uncertainty but also of intellectual opportunity felt by UK geographers at the time. They recorded how government funding cuts in the early 1980s had marked an end to geography’s post-war growth, but that neither the range of research activity nor the level of publication had diminished. However, human geography was in the grips of an “unresolved epistemological debate” (p.27), subjected to wide ranging structuralist and humanist critiques, but with much of the profession resisting the implications of the debate:

Although the critiques of positivism are widely acknowledged throughout the literature of human geography and the roles of values and ideology, both implicit and explicit, in the conduct of research are generally recognized, acknowledgement of these changes should not be equated either with their endorsement or with their ready translation into programmes of research (p.34).

Noting in passing that rural geography was one of the last redoubts of an unreconstructed positivism (pp.34-5), Munton and Goudie warned nevertheless that wider epistemological
developments had “attenuated the traditional content of sub-areas of the discipline” (p.30) and ineluctably were “drawing rural and urban geographers into more general discussions on macroeconomic and social processes” (p.35). The following year Richard Munton began his influential series of studies of the political economy of British agriculture (conducted with Terry Marsden, Sarah Whatmore and others) which revealed the different degrees of capitalist subsumption of family farming in different parts of rural England (Marsden et al., 1986; 1987; Whatmore et al., 1987). The work was recognised internationally as showing how it was possible to explain the specificity of agrarian structures in time and place and thus to move theoretical debate beyond an overly deterministic structuralism (Buttel et al., 1990, pp.173-4).

With geographers increasingly looking beyond their discipline for theoretical inspiration, they turned to various sources. Rural geographers could draw on rural sociology and other areas of rural studies in the UK and abroad, and for a period these became important avenues for critical social theory to enter geography (through such channels as the RESSG and the European Society for Rural Sociology). British rural studies were host in the 1980s to lively debates on the relationship between agricultural organisation and rural social structure, the diversity of agricultural production forms, the recomposition of rural society in the face of capitalist restructuring, and the courses and consequences of rural deprivation, informed by Newby’s work and various structuralist theoretical frameworks. At the same time, the revival of interest in the ethnography of rural Britain was informed by different schools of postmodern and interpretive thought on the construction of identities (Cohen, 1990). For its part, North American rural sociology in the 1980s was taken up with the political economy of agriculture and the historical causes of uneven capitalist development, as reflected in agricultural structures and technological developments, and informed by classical Marxism (Buttel et al., 1990). Finally, European rural sociology was interested in the differentiation of rural social structures, processes of rural

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1 Reviewing the RESSG’s first volume, *Locality and Rurality* (Bradley and Lowe, 1984), the American rural sociologist Fred Buttel (1985, p.190) commented: “one can observe that in all of the articles, save two, … reference is made to the work of Howard Newby, whom many outside of the UK see as having been synonymous with UK rural sociology over the past decade. But there is only a scattered representation of Newby’s major theoretical ideas in this volume (nor an article by Newby himself). I am still puzzling over whether this volume can be seen as the beginning of either a neo-Newby or post-Newby phase of British rural sociology”.
development, the governance of agrarian change and the regulation of food chains, informed by structuralist and post-structuralist theories (Bodiguel and Hervieu 1990)

Ideas and approaches, subsequently absorbed into mainstream human geography and as diverse as regulation theory, international regimes, actor-network theory and ethnographic method, found application first in rural contexts in other disciplines. Through the avenue of interdisciplinary rural studies, rural geographers were exposed early to these diverse traditions. This not only revitalised rural geography but also changed its standing within geography. Of all the rural sub-disciplines, therefore, rural geography was most influenced by interdisciplinary rural studies.

Critical social theory poured into human geography in the late 1980s through many other channels, but interdisciplinary rural studies was a crucial bridgehead specifically for rural geographers. There are various ways to chart how the sub-discipline was reoriented consequentially. The journal *Progress in Human Geography* is and was one of the main means of discipline building, and through the mid-1980s Ian Bowler contributed the annual review of agricultural geography. His first review – for 1984 – was divided into two sections: the shorter devoted to the work of “a minority of researchers [who] continue to explore traditional themes in agricultural geography, although often with the appearance of working under conditions of diminishing marginal returns”; and the longer section devoted to “a number of agricultural ‘issues’ which attract interdisciplinary attention”, including an increasing proportion of geographers, but for which “the distinction between geographical and non-geographical research becomes arbitrary” (Bowler, 1984, p.255). Bowler referred to “fruitful exchanges with rural sociologists” but looked forward to building stronger links with industrial economists to strengthen understanding of developments ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ of the agricultural sector (ibid p.259). Traditionally, the external influences on agricultural geography had come mainly from agricultural economics, and in his 1986 review Bowler included 21 references from economics or agricultural economics, three times as many as the seven from sociology. The following year, however, the situation was reversed, with more than twice as many rural sociological references in his bibliography than economics, and Bowler opened his report with the observation that “Marxist political economy, either implicitly or explicitly, underpins much of
the recent literature on the processes of change operating in agriculture” (1987, p.425). The next year, 1988, Bowler opened his review with the following wry reflection:

For some years the subfields of agricultural geography and agricultural economics have appeared to lie on converging paths of development. Increasingly, their subject matters and modes of analysis have been interchanged …. But the situation seems set to change with the growing application of political economy approaches in agricultural geography.

With Brian Ilbery he set out a programme in the journal *Area* to overcome the myopic nature of teaching and research in agricultural geography and to provide it with new stimuli by refounding it to embrace political economy perspectives, adopt the organising concept of the food chain, and analyse agriculture within the context of the wider rural economy (Bowler and Ilbery, 1987). Terry Marsden responded with a note of caution to Bowler and Ilbery’s manifesto which he deemed “diversionary” (Marsden, 1988, p.315). He argued that the adoption of political economy approaches had not so much increased the coherence of the subfield of agricultural geography as broken down disciplinary boundaries and encouraged greater dialogue with the work of non-geographers, particularly rural sociologists. He specifically rejected any attempt at disciplinary closure arguing instead for “an interdisciplinary effort whereby the boundaries of sub-disciplines are progressively weakened” (p.320). There was evidently more at stake than giving British rural geography a facelift, including the question of who rightly could claim the mantle of the “new rural sociology” and what their international standing would be. Sarah Whatmore, a research colleague of Marsden, took over from Bowler in producing the annual agricultural geography reports for *Progress in Human Geography*. Indicating the shape of things to come, she looked to the influence not only of political economy perspectives but also of international “poststructuralist perspectives and feminist scholarship … filtering through from anthropology, rural sociology and other fields to geography” (Whatmore 1991, p.308).

Symptomatic of this intellectual maelstrom was a continuing, and sometimes agonised, debate about the epistemological status of the rural. The rise of political economy approaches had raised questions about the distinctiveness of rural societies and economies and, as we have seen, sociologists had dismissed the ‘rural’ as an interpretive concept. To set rural sociology back on track, Newby and Buttel had argued, “demands a theory which links the spatial with the social”
In responding to this challenge, Bradley and Lowe (1984, p.7) argued for a return to the question of “the social meaning of local diversity in the advanced societies” and suggested that the key to this would be a combined understanding of “the specificity of local social processes and the social distinctiveness of localities” (p.5) — essentially drawing together the political economy of localities and the ethnography of localism, operationalised through a comparative study of localities. They accepted that the notion of the rural had “no heuristic value” (p.13).

Such a perspective posed a particular challenge for traditional rural geography. In his opening Journal of Rural Studies editorial, Paul Cloke had echoed Richard Munton’s warnings about ‘aspatial’ social theory. He argued that “rural studies as a framework of study may be threatened if social science continues to espouse structuralist epistemologies with their aspatial connotations” (1985, p.1). Later he wrote of how “such axioms as social relations being as important as spatial differentiation, and the category ‘rural’ being of low importance as an explanatory device” were “potentially destructive to the institution of rural geography — an institution which had been carefully nurtured into an important position within geography” (Cloke, in Cloke and Moseley, 1990, p.125). Cloke thus diagnosed “the issue of rurality” as “the focus of a perpetual identity crisis for rural geographers” who faced a “major conceptual hurdle … to place rurality in the context of critical social theory” (p.128):

After all, their professional niche has been predicated on an ability to exploit the explanatory power of rural characteristics, to point up differences about rural environments, to promote rural courses within geography and to sustain a flow of rural literature (p.128).

**The 1990s: Redefining Rurality and Refounding Rural Geography**

The discipline least affected by the rise of critical social theory and interdisciplinary rural studies was agricultural economics. During the 1980s, the New Right attack on the social sciences had exempted economics which allowed it to assume an even more unrivalled status in government and academia than it had previously occupied. To a certain extent, agricultural economics could bask in a reflected glory. However, the Thatcherite approach to the support of University science was to emphasise basic and fundamental research rather than applied and ‘near-market’ research.
At the same time, Thatcherism sought to roll back the state, and New Right politicians became increasingly critical of state intervention in various economic sectors including agriculture. Agricultural economists themselves contributed powerful critiques of agricultural policy, but in supporting free-market reforms they also undermined the very rationale for their own subject, which had come into being to underpin the state management of agriculture. The sub-discipline staved off any sense of identity crisis by reinforcing its identification with pure economics.

Agricultural economists were therefore even more anxious to distance themselves from the practical and commercial orientation of their farm advisory predecessors which had attracted the disdain of fellow academics. Those interested, for example, in farm management, agricultural marketing or farm extension were increasingly marginalised and set up their own specialist groups separate from the Agricultural Economics Society. Leading agricultural economists were keen to identify themselves as (or at least with) academic economists. This led to a strict emphasis on rigorous and abstract quantitative analysis employing the tools and concepts of mainstream economics – particularly micro-economics, neo-classical welfare theory and econometrics – to the agricultural sector. Colman explained that, to succeed, “aspiring economists of agriculture have to have an aptitude for abstract and quantitative analysis in order to be able to communicate to general economists and statisticians and to select the appropriate tools of analysis to apply to the agricultural sector” (1990, p.170).

The 1990s saw a profound decline in agricultural economics in the UK. The reasons for this decline would warrant a study in themselves. Certainly, the political economy of university teaching was an important factor, with the shrinking economic, social and political role of agriculture in the UK. With fewer and fewer students choosing to study agricultural economics, degree programmes were closed down, and departments were merged or disbanded. Undergraduate degree programmes in the subject are now practically absent from the British scene.

Neo-classical economic theory gave a strong theoretical underpinning to British agricultural economics, and while this provided a powerful set of tools for working within disciplinary conventions, it also contributed to what Colman (1990, p.174) called “a degree of insularity from
some other disciplines”. The increasing interest in environmental issues prompted some limited diversification of research questions, but also offered younger agricultural economists a chance to escape to the more fashionable fields of environmental or resource economics. Intellectually more radical calls for a conceptual repositioning of the discipline with respect to wider currents in social and economic theory fell on deaf ears (Midmore, 1996).

The difficulty with their self-defined secondary status is that agricultural economists regarded themselves as irredeemably second-class citizens to mainstream economists. Indeed they had a preference to appoint young theoretically-oriented and quantitatively skilled pure economists without any background in agriculture to “maintain and refresh the academic standing of the profession in the eyes of colleagues in related disciplines” – i.e. economics and statistics (Colman 1990, p.170). They also shunned options to diversify that might seem too tarnished by their practical or policy orientation. Gradually, it seemed, they ran out of respectable topics to study. As Ken Thomson commented in his 2001 Presidential Address to the Agricultural Economics Society:

> The decline in agricultural economics as a separate academic sub-discipline in Britain has been considerable in recent years. There have of course remained many problems in the core area of farm business management, agricultural commodity trade, and agricultural policy. However, these problems have become so complex or routine (or both) that they have been left largely to the tender mercies of government economists or private consultants (2001, p.8).

Thomson (2001) identified the lack of a national institute of agricultural economics as another reason for the subject’s weakness and vulnerability, but also pointed to the reluctance of agricultural economists to engage with new policy debates, such as those around rural development. In going on to propose rural economic development as a fresh focus he himself seemed to provide the kiss of death in identifying “economic geographers as our main colleagues or competitors [with] mainstream economists usually being rather spectacularly uninterested” (2001, p.8). With an air of decline and dejection pervading the discipline, agricultural economists have been unable to defend their professional territory. Several established chairs have either ceased to exist or have been reallocated to non-economists. The withering of this
previously dominant sub-discipline has thus opened up new territory for colonisation by other disciplines.

In contrast, rural geography in Britain experienced a renaissance in the 1990s. Expanding research activity and scientific horizons increasingly defined the sub-discipline rather than teaching and textbook authorship. Paul Cloke in a *Journal of Rural Studies* editorial in 1997 captured the sense of expansion and optimism. He wrote: “Rural geography, and rural studies more generally, seems to be undergoing something of a resurgence in Britain at the moment” (p.367). The number of papers submitted to the journal was rising. The ranks of ‘rural geographers’ were expanding. There was a “boom in excellent and challenging graduate research studies associated with the rural” (p.371). Above all, there was “a resounding shake-off of any rural inferiority complex, as some of the brightest (and often younger) human geographers and other social scientists have taken a theoretical interest in rural societies and spaces” (p.371).

An important, indeed crucial, development was the reclaiming of rurality as an appropriate scientific object. This came in large part through an influential exchange between Chris Philo (1992; 1993) and Jonathan Murdoch and Andy Pratt (1993; 1994) about the implications of postmodernism for rural studies in general and rural geography in particular. Philo called for greater consideration in rural geography of marginalised groups and communities, introducing the so-called ‘cultural turn’. Murdoch and Pratt’s response was to formulate a broader sociological analysis of rural studies that incorporated the social construction of ‘the rural’ (see also Halfacree, 1993). Their argument was in keeping with Massey’s line that although space may be a social construct, social relations are clearly constructed in and through space and therefore to ignore space is to ignore the arena of social construction (see Massey, 1985). This rescuing of the rural as an object of analysis opened up a rich seam of new research on representations of rurality, rural identities, and processes of social and cultural marginalization (see, for example, Milbourne *et al*., 1997; Cloke and Little, 1997).

**Conclusions: A Disciplinary Enterprise in Changing Times**
Rural geography in Britain has thrived over the past two decades in part due to its openness to interdisciplinary influences. Its fortunes contrast starkly with those of agricultural economics which has declined largely because it was closed to such influences. The question arises of how one sub-discipline could be so much more flexible and open than the other. Here we draw together our reflections and conclusions around this question, comparing the experience of the obvious winner and loser in the competition between the sub-disciplines we have described.

Viewed externally, the changing fortunes of rural geography and agricultural economics present a paradox. Agricultural economics began the Thatcher period as a very strongly institutionalised sub-discipline, with its own departments. Dominated by a single, strong and confident paradigm — that of neo-classical economics — it had a clear sense of purpose and intellectual direction. In contrast, rural geography as a sub-discipline of human geography had little institutional expression beyond a study group of the IBG and lacked intellectual dynamism. Rural geographers could not even be sure of the epistemological status of the defining object of their analysis — the rural. Moreover, the political climate of the 1980s was much more favourable to agricultural economics, with the New Right attack on the social sciences exempting economics. Agriculture may have been a shrinking sector of the economy, but there was no shortage of other topical research agendas that agricultural economics was well placed to pursue, including environmental economics and the economics of rural development.

To explain the changing fortunes of these two sub-disciplines through the 1980s and subsequently, we must therefore look to internal factors, including the relationship between each sub-discipline and its parent. Here, it seems the separate institutionalisation of agricultural economics served to limit its flexibility and presented an obstacle to sub-disciplinary renewal by segregating it from mainstream economics, just as it was isolated from other social science disciplines. Rural geography, on the other hand, benefited from not being an institutionalised sub-discipline whilst being and remaining fairly central to its parent discipline. That continuously posed the issue of what or who constituted rural geography. While the former — the what — caused much anguish at times, the latter — the who — was basically a matter of assumed or attributed identity. Becoming or being a ‘rural geographer’ is largely a question of self-identification (and might be one of a number of overlapping identities). As a consequence, rural
geography could be much more fluid and flexible not only in its exchanges with the parent discipline but with neighbouring sub-disciplines too.

With loose kinship rules, rural geography was open to the flux of people and ideas in critical interdisciplinary rural studies. Agricultural economics, on the other hand, had tight kinship rules based on econometric competence — rules which perversely were negatively disposed towards agricultural economists themselves (in deference to pure economists). Agricultural economics was seen by pure economists as a poor relation and indeed felt itself to be so. Even the most eminent academics within agricultural economics had little profile in the main discipline. In contrast, leading rural geographers could be prominent figures in human geography.

Given its loose kinship rules, it was imperative for rural geography to have a clear and defensible epistemological status. Rural geography thus had a continuing preoccupation with what constitutes the rural, achieving a certain settlement on this question (for the time being, at least) in the mid-1990s. As a separately institutionalised sub-discipline, agricultural economics exhibited no equivalent compulsion towards epistemological self-reflection. Indeed, its preoccupation with applying theory and methods from mainstream economics led it systematically and routinely to downplay the distinctiveness of its subject matter — agriculture. As agricultural economics has ‘given up the ghost’, so rural geography has been able successfully to redefine its terrain of activity to transcend the problem of the declining social and economic importance of farming.
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