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POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE POSTMODERN COUNTRYSIDE

REPORT TO THE COMMISSION FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

By the

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1. INTRODUCTION

The terms postmodernism and postmodernity represent a highly, complex, contested, and controversial set of ideas. Collectively these ideas form a profound challenge to how we understand the world. This can initially be split into two areas. Firstly the idea of postmodernity suggests that the world (seeing it as a single unit for now) has entered a distinct phase (*postmodernity*) after the previous era of modernity. Secondly the ways in which we claim to know the world (as in the natural and social sciences) have also gone through transformations (*postmodernism*). More will be said of these two distinctions below, but put together they render a highly fluid and complex scenario of an increasingly uncertain world viewed though increasingly uncertain lenses.

Both elements of this movement share certain characteristics. To boil these down to a few key points is in a way to swim against the tide of the postmodern. This is because postmodernism could be argued to be about fragmentation. This idea of fragmentation can be seen in various areas of culture and its interpretation. In one sense postmodernism represents the breaking up of various trajectories of the Enlightenment that developed into the dominant forms in modernity. These are the trajectories of classical science, the great ideologies, the notion of the self, the primacy of rationality, the idea of progress, the triumph of culture over nature, the unified nation state, and so on. Many of these, which have formed the structure of modern knowledge have either crumbled away in the highly corrosive history of the 20th century (world wars, industrialised genocide, nuclear weapons, ecological break down, technological changes, scientific advances, rapid social changes) or been challenged by alternative philosophies which have questioned the notion of self, state, power, language, knowledge; most obviously structuralism, post-structuralism but also pragmatism and other so called ‘relativist’ approaches. Of course one very famous way this idea of fragmentation has been expressed in postmodernism is the ‘end of meta narratives’ as set out in a key statement of postmodern theory (Lyotard 1979).

It is important to note that in either of these areas (postmodernity, postmodernism) there is not a sharp, clean break between before and after, although to say ‘modernity’ then ‘*post*modernity’, sounds as though that it is the case. Rather it is better to think of postmodernity and postmodernism as a related set of fragmentations, disintegrations, transformations and proliferations which have

created a degree of uncertainty and turbulence in the 'flow of history' and the 'flow of knowledge (of that history)'. Despite there being many continuities and residues from the past, the present feels different enough to be call something new, or something post!

In terms of postmodernity it is perhaps too easy to be nostalgic and render the past as simpler and singular. But it does seem clear that the conditions of contemporary society involve, in many respects a great degree of complexity; and within that complexity there are degrees of risk, uncertainty and conflict. For example globalisation, increased movements of peoples, the advent of the Internet and satellite communication, the development of nuclear and genetically based knowledges and technologies has rendered culture, politics and economy into much more complex forms. This is one obvious challenge of postmodernity, of grappling with this increased complexity of collective everyday life, and grasping it a way which can cope with the increased speed and flux of this complexity which is another key aspect of the postmodern vision. This certainly applies to rural areas.

But the twist that postmodernism offers, the irony almost, is that as we face that task, the tools we might use, the knowledges and methodologies of modernity have lost must of their supposed sharpness – their certainty. The challenges in this respect are perhaps yet more profound. For it is not the case, for those wanting to know and act upon the postmodern world, of doing knowledge in the same old ways but somehow adapted to see and keep up with the complex fluxes of postmodernity (as is post-positivist epistemologies); it is a case of having to revaluate and redesign the tools with which we understand and try to shape the world. Put at it simplest, objective notions of knowledge which can describe the world efficiently and then be used to adjust it are thrown into doubt. This has been, in some senses, a hard pill to swallow for some academics and academic disciplines, as it is a refutation of certainty and power with knowledge and also an accusation that 'objective knowledge' was often, in fact, a pernicious form of power. For those in the business of government and governance this perhaps presents even greater challenges, for if decisions are not to be made on the principle of certainty (as best possible) then on what grounds?

The rural as an object of study has been an area in which postmodern knowledge has been operating (in academic terms) since at least the early 1990s. This is when post-structuralism and postmodernism really began to penetrate the social sciences and academia more generally. It should be said at this point that to some extent the

academic debate has moved on. But this is not to say that postmodernism has been abandoned as a passing fad. Rather many of its lessons have been quietly absorbed into the fabric of academic practice. Perhaps an example is the best way to illustrate this. Modernist rural studies would have had a dominant set of foci which included a somewhat narrow focus on political-economy, traditional land use analysis, and so on. Postmodernism challenged these views to bring in many other versions of the rural and this notion of multiple rural in terms of experience and space persists.

Although there has been much hype surrounding postmodernism, and some shrill reactions against it, some of its central insights are hard to gain-say. The work of writers such as Michel Foucault that underpinned postmodern philosophy shows how many seemingly inevitable, even natural orders, be they the idea of the individual, the idea of the state, power, gender, truth, were in fact complex historical constructions which could have been, and which can be, different.

2. PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research was to conduct preparatory work by reviewing academic literature in preparation for a presentation at a joint CRC and CCRI seminar on the implications of these changes for rural policy. The review interpreted the literature and translated appropriate concepts and terminology so that it could be understood and discussed by the seminar audience of academics and non-academic policy makers.

The review of literature considered the debate and discussion that has surrounded postmodernity and postmodernism over the past 20 years, in particular those discussions within rural studies, rural geography and rural society. The research team sought to cluster relevant phenomena and issues that have relevance to the ‘postmodern countryside’ before setting out the implications for policy and, in particular, the ‘connecting rural communities and the land’ programme. The report considers the impact of these changes on the countryside as well as on people’s relationship to the land and the challenges that this presents for the policy process.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Characteristics of Postmodernism

As we have suggested in the introduction, the scope of the term postmodernism is very wide and the scale of the debate, with an accompany literature, is huge. Therefore we are only able to present a fragment of that debate, that focuses on topics that we think are germane and may act as a bridge to further debate and discussion. Very loosely, postmodern refers to the present era, 'postmodernity' to the social, economic and cultural condition of contemporary society, and 'postmodernism' to a philosophical, political, and aesthetic of literary system of thought. Postmodernity is a term that first surfaced within the social sciences during the 1980s and within in 10 years some were wondering what there was left to say about it (Ley 1993). What is clear is that postmodernity continues to have an impact on discussions and has given rise to such issues as post-structuralism, post-colonialism (Ley 2003) as well as post-productivism (Ilbery and Bowler 1998). Ley (2003) suggests that it is 'an exercise in boundary formation' and to some extent this requires a 'trashing of the past' while being excited by the 'shock of the new'. It is fair to say that while postmodernity is not a central factor in current discussions there is plenty of evidence regarding its influence. Often quoted works include those by Dear (1986) and Harvey (1987 and 1989) on the impact of postmodernism on architecture and design suggesting a strong link between social sciences and the arts. Here we see a movement from highly structured, very rational forms often in concrete, 'machines for living' to new forms of building that emphasise curves, a wide variety of materials and playfulness.

In relation to the postmodern countryside, the countryside of the present era, we will try and identify what signifies change within society and in our understanding. In order to provide an overview of postmodernity, we outline three interconnected characteristics. First, that changes in society suggest the breaking up of belief in what Lyotard (1979) calls the 'metanarrative', or the broadly accepted categories of understanding or 'central truths and institutions' of society (Ley 2003). An alternative but related view is that these structures are devices to enable one group of people to gain power over others. Thus there has been a move from a small number of large 'structures' towards recognition of a more diverse and complex collection of structures that might be flexible and interactive, hence the rise of terms such as 'network' – a flexible structure. A connected development to the movement away

from structuralism has been the increased focus on 'complexity' and 'culture'. On an economic front, the experience of working life has changed as businesses responded to these changes, along with this people's experience of life has been transformed. It is increasingly uncommon that people have one career, continuous employment, one marriage, a nuclear family, but a portfolio career and a series of relationships. Within those changes are constants, the persistence of forms of moral authority, social norms and practices. Likewise it is increasingly the case that the countryside is subject to a wide range of policies (Ward and Lowe 2007) and that rural communities interact with the land-based industries in varying social and economic circumstances (Courtney *et al* 2007).

A second characteristic is that society no longer believes that science, and other types of rational-based knowledge, will tell us all that we need to know. This spelt the end of the 'search for truth' as every culture shapes its own reality. As a result there cannot be scientific certainties and this suggests that we need to be both careful and humble in our interventions. This change came about partly as the end of the 20th century gave us a number of examples where science was responsible for a number of un-intended consequences as the 'unknown' aspects returned to have a negative impact. Examples would include the impact of PCBs on sheep farmers, pesticides in water and the 'creation' of prions that caused BSE. All of these technologies came back to causing problems in ways that were never intended and as a society we now doubt the scientific information saying products are 'safe'. However, to some extent as members of society we are happy to accept some other truths, primarily those that 'work for us'. This may be the effectiveness of alternative medicines, the quality of organic food or the benefits of retail therapy. The result is a range of interconnected diverse, and at times conflicting, groups.

A third characteristic is relates to the issue of globalisation, which is implicit in all that has been said thus far. Moynagh and Worsley define globalisation as 'the world becoming more interdependent and integrated (2008:1), implying a multiplicity of networks and interdependent links that will transform well connected local areas, such as rural England but also increase fragmentation and diversity. This can be seen in NIMBYism and a range of local protests (Reed 2008) and well as the way land is managed (Meizen-Dick *et al* 2006 and Short 2008a). Here the importance of the network society is crucial as is the collective sense of identity from living within

the same physical space (i.e. communities of interest replace communities of place[1]). It is clear that information flows have increased in both speed and quantity and this has increased the level of interaction between individuals, groups and organisations. As a result groups tend to form, change and break up more quickly than before and this is evident in some recent rural protests (Reed 2008).

The importance of postmodernism is that it has placed a spotlight on changes within our society and in particular how areas that had been considered cornerstones have become undermined. However, it is important to note that the world has moved on and as Ley (2003) points out discussions now take place without the 'post'. Within rural studies[2] there has been considerable debate about the impact of this wider debate and refocusing (Philo 1992, 1993, Murdoch and Pratt 1993 and 1994). By following a debate within rural geography we can provide an example of how the 'rural' has been re-thought because of the advent of postmodern perspectives.

3.2 The Philo, Murdoch and Pratt Exchange 1992-1994

This exchange really begins with a book review by Gilg in the Journal *Area* (1991). It was a rather brief and somewhat dismissive review of Colin Ward's *The Child in the Country* (1990). This prompted Chris Philo to write what became quite a famous and oft referenced article 'Neglected Rural Geographies: a review' (1992). Philo was aware of the high quality of Ward's earlier, and highly regarded, book *The Child in the City* (1978), and was thus surprised that Ward's work on rural childhood should get such a response from a rural geographer.

On reading Ward's later book, Philo built an argument that Gilg's dismissal was symptomatic of modernist rural geography. The argument was that only certain narrow ranges of discourses, issues and types of experience were visible to rural geography. This 'gaze', to use a favourite term of that time, was generally white, middle class, male adult academic 'gaze' which missed out on the palpable multiplies of rural lives. Philo used this to point out that all manner of rural 'others' were invisible to the narrow modernist gaze.

[1] See Adams (2003) and Whatmore (2002) for contrasting perspectives on society's connections with nature.
[2] We use the term rural studies to include rural geography, sociology and other related disciplines.

This invisibility of the other in rural studies was linked to a specifically postmodern view at the end of the article. A postmodern perspective would entail a rejection of grand theory (meta-narrative) which over-writes all the difference and otherness of rural lives. As in another article, where Philo develops this theme much more fully (Philo, 1997) the argument draws upon the ideas of 'same' and 'other' from postmodern/poststructuralist theory. The same is the world rendered in the image of the (powerful) viewer. The power and centrality of the knowing academic is challenged. Thus postmodern knowledge of rurality would spring from multiple positions and would emerge from careful research. Consequently there was a surge of ethnographic/qualitative research in rural studies in the 1990s - giving voice to other experiences of rural as imagined by Philo.

Murdoch and Pratt (Murdoch went onto be on of the leading poststructuralist geographers in the UK) took up and responded to Philo's arguments. In some respects they largely concurred with his development of postmodern rural studies based around the idea of introducing the other and breaking up meta or grand theory. However they did not feel Philo went far enough in two other ways. The first of these was destabilizing the very idea of the 'rural' itself, and any notion of rural as fixed static space in a stable dualism with similarly fixed urban space. They argued that the rural might be practiced in different places and in different ways (say rural lifestyles in urban locations) and that it could have multiple local manifestations. Harking to the idea of postmodernity being 'modernity reflexive of itself', they suggested the term 'post-rural' where ideas of practices of the rural were being reflexively conjured.

Secondly, they felt postmodern rural studies, to be worthy of the name, needed to be much more critical and reflexive of its own practice. Indeed a substantive task for postmodern rural studies would be the study of academic practice and the meanings and practice of rurality it might create (along side other voices).

In response Philo (1993) welcomed Murdoch and Pratt's article and felt overall the exchange was responding to the fact that

> "*consideration surely is overdue on the implications of the 'postmodern challenge' for inquires into the rural scene*" (1993, 429)

Philo reviewed Murdoch and Pratt's arguments, stressing that they placed more emphasis on the academic gaze turning upon itself and the whole process of

knowledge creation, rather than 'merely' expanding the range of voices, perspectives and issues present in the academic process. He identified the issue of unequal power relations between academic and 'ordinary people' being key point for such reflexive study. Who frames and creates the very concepts being worked with?

But Philo argued that once Murdoch and Pratt have made this manoeuvre of reflexivity and the questioning of basic epistemological assumptions, their postmodern rural studies would look much as he envisaged. Given that their approach could not simply stop at considerations/questioning of academic rural discourses, they would have to bring in other rural voices. Thus ending up where Philo began. Also Philo suggested that Murdoch and Pratt's more radical restructuring had in fact a tinge of modernism in its assertiveness and grand(er) ambitions.

Murdoch and Pratt had argued that Philo's recipe for postmodern rural studies was the equivalent of 'adding extra ingredients' to the existing modernist pot. They felt this was problematic and the modernist foundation had to be dismantled more radically.

In their second response Murdoch and Pratt set out to clarify some of the key points of the debate. To some extent they seek to massage away certain points of difference and to draw out the more important areas of convergence between themselves and Philo. They make the point that the multiplicity of 'other' rural lives and (local) spaces that they and Philo highlight is, and always has been, (although differently so) a condition of rural life. The shift away from modernism has opened academic eyes to this previously invisible landscape. It was not a response to changed nature of rurality. They end by saying that they hope the exchange

> '*will result in an enhanced sensitivity amongst rural researchers to issues of "otherness", "difference" and "power" in rural studies*. (1994: 87)

4. A POSTMODERN COUNTRYSIDE? ECONOMY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

In the background to these discussions and often informing parts of them has been a very profound change in the economy, from one that we could talk about a national economy to one that is increasingly globalised. As part of that process many parts of the British economy have ceased to make any physical product, but rather are based on the provision of services such as banking, advertising and professional services. The bulk of those businesses that still produce physical outputs are focussed on high value and often high technology products, with little mass production of standardised products left in the UK. As a short hand term this has been described as the movement from Fordism to post-Fordism. The Fordist model, named after the now struggling car manufacturer, is based on the idea of single company integrating all parts of the manufacturing process to produce a fairly standard product. Post-Fordism looks to the example of Honda or Toyota which produce a wide range of models for different markets, They also have a host of small suppliers that are separate companies and the effort of the car manufacturer is as much co-ordination as the actually manufacturing. The end product is highly customised; for example each mini is made to the customer's specific order, or the 'new' Fiat 500 offers customer's over 100,000 possible combinations - a long way from Henry Ford's 'any colour you like as long as it is black'.

Unlike in previous times where a single power was apparent, such as the agricultural sector from 1960 to the late 1980s or large estates in the early part of the 1900s, there does not seem to be a dominant player within the countryside at the moment. In many ways the postmodern characterisation of the countryside would be multiple and fragmented while sharing the same space. There is little doubt that these same economic, cultural and social trends have had huge impact on the countryside. We might see the trend towards food products as being identified with specific localities as part of that broader post-Fordist development. There is an emphasis on the non-physical aspects of the product, which it is different from the bulk of other similar products and that it is addressed to the consumer more directly. These developments have re-shaped peoples' experience not just of consumption but also of work, their communities and their sense of identity. To a degree many rural communities have not been as directly effected by this as urban ones, but if we consider the rise of commuting and remote working, closely associated with these changes, then we can see they have not been immune (Courtney *et al* 2007).

4.1 The impact of postmodernism on policy

The policy process is commonly understood as a rational process (Miller 2002). This entails setting and objectives and devising means of implementation and evaluation. Of course setting objectives is a political act, but in modern democratic society this has been seen as a relatively benign process of evidence and consensus (or majority) based judgment of the problems facing society, and the aspirations of society and how those can be addressed or achieved. In ideal form the policy process can be seen as a linear process, a rational process, and in democratic states a relatively benign expression of that democracy at work (Hill 2005). Postmodernism challenges the conventional policy process in a four interconnected ways.

First, postmodernism is much more suspicious of power, both in terms of the state and the hegemony of dominant forces (such as capitalism, also whiteness, maleness, colonialism). The policy process would be seen as an instrument, or sets of instruments, of oppressive subjugation, which does not just (violently) impose certain orders on society but actively shape the very subjectivities and spaces of everyday life. This is a similar argument to that on the impact of modernist knowledge itself. A response from those involved with the policy process, assuming they want to respond, would be to recognise that it needs to be as open as possible and critically self-reflexive in order to go some way in deconstructing it's built in biases and power orientations.

Second, the impact of postmodernism challenges the idea that rationalism is a dominant logic of society. The challenge here is profound to policy process as there is no other principle to underpin the policy process. Just as with the second challenge the answer is to see policy as limited, modest interventions while at the same time being ready to admit things are not turning out like expected.

Third, postmodernism challenges the idea that world is straight forwardly readable and mappable. For example, the sheer complexity and flux of life exceeds the scope of effective knowing. Since society is an unfolding process, static or retrospective knowledges are always off the pace and looking at old configurations and therefore will have limited success. Also even if it was 'known', the social as a process might not lend itself to coherent accounts because it is inherently messy, disjointed and contradictory. Therefore the assessments or base line studies of society's problems and needs, which underpin the policy process, are very unreliable. In order to work

with this assumption is to accept that we are always working at best half blind and to see policy as a means for limited, modest interventions, and always to be ready to admit things are not turning out as expected. This suggests the need for pragmatism, flexibility and incrementalism in the policy process.

Finally, postmodernism challenges linear and universal models because generally things are more messy, complex and multidimensional as well as multidirectional. So we would be suggesting that there is now a crack in any linear connection between policy and science. However there are examples where the link remains linear, but these are now viewed as unsafe and poor practice. Hinchliffe (2007), for example, highlights the central role of science in the development of biosecurity regulations and policy.

As Alcock *et al* (2003) outline if one is to take a 'strong postmodernism' approach when thinking about the policy process, there are problems in application concerning it's relativism radical stance on power as well as subject and agency. However they suggest that 'weak postmodernism' holds out much more promise. This is because it raised questions of power, of admitting other discourse and perspectives and thus opening up the policy process to alternative analysis and course of action. In terms of how these challenges have worked out already, it is fair to say that the policy process has not changed that much and continues to be influenced by political ideology, personalities, power and money, lobbyists and advocacy groups. It could be argued that the growth of lobbyist and advocacy groups could be seen as postmodern, certainly in an area such as agriculture and the environment the number of stakeholders has grown considerably and there is no 'metanarrative' in the way that there might have been 30 years ago with the NFU president being the main source for MAFF consultation.

In terms of how the policy process can react, it is worth considering issues of flexibility and how policy can be more reflexive with perhaps more modest ambitions. This might require a more decentralised or localised approach with a greater emphasis on the development of policy through networking and individualisation. A move to more pragmatic, incremental outlook would also be considered by many as a reasonable response to postmodern developments.

4.2 What is the impact on Rural?

The social historian Alun Howkins concluded that rural England died at the end of the twentieth century (Howkins 2003). Howkin's was perhaps a little slow in realising this; generally British sociology gave up on the notion of a separate rural society in the UK in the early 1980s. Rather the view has been increasingly taken what was exists in rural areas is a network of different groups or societies that weave together urban and rural ways of life (Hillyard 2007). At the same time the idea that rural societies are defined solely by the productive or working activities that are undertaken in them has been under constant criticism. Consequently, as the study of a separate rural community has disappeared, what we have is the study of agriculture – an agricultural sociology of farming families, businesses and ways of life, and accounts of other ways of life in rural areas (see for an excellent example Elder *et al* 2000).

There are those who argue that 'rural' as a social category has collapsed, as with commuting, mass media and modern communications that urban and the rural are woven very tightly together, with various claims made that in the UK rural areas are actual ex-urban rather than rural (Hoggart 1990). Others prefer to suggest that the 'traditional' and 'progressive' elements exist side by side in range of diverse rural economies (Ward 2006). At the same time the idea of the urban is not quite as strong as it once was, as suburbs blur the boundary and rurality becomes about attitude and lifestyle as much as spatial location. In the past few years of course this has been represented by the historic shift, that most of the world's populations live in urban areas as part of globalisation (Moynagh and Worsley 2008).

The divide between 'traditional' and 'progressive' suggested by Ward does beg the questions, whose rurality? Some people, such as the pro-hunt lobby identify themselves with a particular idea of rurality for cultural or political purposes. This enthusiasm to look at life in rural areas outside of the ways pursued before has led to a focus on the role of women generally and specifically in farming families, the travelling and gypsy communities, as well as political protests and the role of those living welfare or who are experiencing homelessness. The story being told by the social sciences is less of rural areas being about villages as communities and farming as an industry but of difference, struggle, conflict and isolation. Obviously this is not the whole story but it has been in part an attempt to disrupt the dominant view of rural life that the social sciences had conveyed. Therefore it is fair to say that

rurality is a construct that varies according to whoever is doing the ‘construction’. Nevertheless, as soon as someone constructs their version of rurality, others will try to knock it down leaving many uncertain as to who the 'rural' people are and whether they count. Or as Woods (2003) argues, it is ‘no longer rural politics but politics of the rural’. Rural is also about space and therefore it is fair to ask where rural begins and where urban ends. This will depend on issues concerning distance, accessibility and tranquillity. Rural has seen some dramatic changes in terms of the reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (Lowe and Ward 2007 and Gaskell *et al* 2008) as well as changes in society’s perception of property (Brown 2007).

4.3 Impact for Rural Policy

Given this picture of diversity and difference it is very hard to argue that a single sector exists in rural areas, or that agriculture is the only or most important function of rural areas. Rather the discussion is about the different claims being placed about what the rural is in terms of its use for food production and the possibility of it being used for industrial inputs, the value of it as a wildlife zone and reserve of natural resources, as well as recreational, aesthetic and spiritual uses. McCarthy (2008) characterises this as the globalising of the countryside with the spread of amenity related activities penetrating right across the world to varying degrees. Rural areas also however remain saturated with symbolic importance; they retain a great deal of social prestige particularly in British society. So alongside these debates about what uses there are for rural areas is the question of whose uses, a distinction often in implicit in the first discussion but less regularly discussed openly.

With this background the move from the sectoral towards the territorial appears to be a more logical and rational response. By addressing the question of an area, it allows a diversity of opinions and positions to be incorporated into the policy process. However, three-quarters of the land is managed by primarily by agriculture, with an impact on other land-based functions such as conservation, recreation, heritage and landscape as well as rural communities. In this sense rural can be something that is consumed (e.g. for pleasure) and protected (e.g. conservation). It is important not to detach agriculture from the other land uses as it is clearer heavily embedded in issues of conservation and heritage as well as shaping the local culture and sense of identity (Short 2008b). This suggests a triangular relationship between production, protection and consumption as suggested by Holmes (2006), although in reality it is

more complex as the nature of the relationship will vary in different spaces and between different communities, interest groups and individuals. For example whose pleasure in terms of consumption and protection of what and for whose benefit?

4.4 Challenges for future rural policy

We suggest that future rural policy can respond to the changes in the postmodern countryside by being more territorial than sector based, or about space as much as about place. As we outlined above, future policies might benefit from being less precise and framed so that it there is greater opportunity for local and regional shaping. This will require a combination of both standardisation and customisation (Moynagh and Worsley 2008). Any guiding principles may revolve around a need to state more clearly what the countryside provides to both rural and urban areas. This needs to go beyond the current land uses and functions, perhaps including areas such as the provision of clean water and carbon sequestration. It is possible that through this process people, both rural and urban, will increase their understanding of, and affinity to, land and land management practices. One approach that is being considered by Defra, among others, is the ecosystem approach or, more broadly, the provision of environmental services (Defra 2008a&b). It is interesting to note that among the guiding principles that accompany the ecosystem approach is the promotion of management at the lowest, most appropriate local level.

The challenge for all policies is that since they are working towards an end they rely heavily on the assumption that they know what the issue is and can introduce some control over society. Clearly what has been outlined above undermines this to some extent. The objective-style evidence base is still necessary but it may not be sufficient. It might be better to see policy as a relatively more modest process of intervention into existing processes that are considered ‘positive’, rather than introducing new structures.

Future rural policies may have to promote connectivity, and acknowledge fragmentation, between sectors and possibly between territories, between people and the land and between urban and rural areas. This clearly requires a greater need for flexibility, partly because a wider range of people and organisations will be looking to influence and inform the policy makers and providers as well as seeking to benefit from developments in policy. Due to the changes outlined above traditional

'one size fits all' policy is likely to generate less overall change, and some of that change will not be positive. When developing some, largely reactive, policies it will be a case of knowing that action is required but at the same time being aware that there will be unintended consequences. When developing proactive policy, greater flexibility and opportunity for local interpretation means a greater level of risk but with a greater chance for wide and positive local impact.

5. FURTHER SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS

The CRC:CCRI discussion was very positive and indicated that this is an interesting area that warrants further attention in a range on discussions. The issues might include but should not be restricted to:

- **Affordable housing issues** – in the discussions of the postmodern, issues of equity and justice have often been missed, yet questions of basic social need remain pressing for many people living in rural areas.
- **Access to services** – there is little doubt that the services provided by the State and its agencies will remain important, but they are being pressed from two intersecting pressures. Firstly, the experience of many citizens is of private services that are customised to their needs, whilst the state services tend towards the uniform or standardised, a conflict of expectations that may undermine support for, and effectiveness of services. Secondly, in many areas the state has chosen to re-prioritise its efforts, managing these strategic changes will have an impact on the role of the state in rural areas.
- **Green infrastructure planning** – currently being developed by the community forests and being led by the Great Western Community Forest around Swindon, this approach aims to plan for a more sustainable development around the edge of expanding cities and towns. The approach involves looking at the social, commercial, access and biodiversity aspects of the territory surrounding any development so that it links together with existing developed areas as well as the surrounding countryside.
- **How we understand the rural** – for many years the rural was viewed as something that was behind the curve of contemporary social developments, and in popular discussions this is often still the case. Yet it is evident that most rural areas and lives are as dynamic and in flux as any other part of contemporary society. These changes are not however as well understood or discussed as many other changes in British society. For example, the presence of resilience

to chance and the adaptations that result based around culture and custom are relatively little known. As the discussion that fed into this report demonstrates, policy makers and academics need to be engaged in a constant dialogue about how we understand the rural.

- **The Role of Science** - new technologies and scientific insights are having increasing role in determining policy about the rural be it a 'Carbon Neutral' programme, conservation measures or the impact of ICT in rural areas, the physical sciences are having an increasingly important role. At the same time policy is increasingly said to be 'evidence based' which brings forward questions of what counts as evidence and who can present it. How this science is understood, the role that policy makers and citizens can play in not only responding but also shaping it and how accountable it is, are central questions in understanding the trajectory of contemporary rural policy.

6. WAYS FORWARD

We would recommend that there is scope for a wider discussion about both policy and rural change, possibly focused around the topics outlined above. It might be beneficial for people who specialise in these two areas to come together for an interactive conference or seminar so that the issues raised here can be discussed more deeply.

The role of the CRC is to 'provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England' with the aspiration that 'rural communities should be diverse, thriving and sustainable'. Clearly the changes we have outlined in this report have an impact here and the CRC can respond in a number of ways. In particular, those involved in the 'connecting rural communities and the land' programme might find it worthwhile to considering the development of policy that builds on the connections between rural communities and land-based industries. Such initiatives should encourage the active engagement of rural communities with the land, either in terms of management or through other sustainable forms of community development.

We would suggest that a starting point for any policy discussion is recognition of the sheer complexity of contemporary society, as it undergoes a number of profound transformations – particularly the impact of globalisation and information

communication technologies. These flows of change are altering the social, economic and cultural role of 'the rural' in ways that are yet to stabilise but make it hard to discuss a homogenous rural but rather the need to focus on the particularities of places. However, it is clear that there are strong cultural and custom based characteristics within the term 'rural' depending on place and identity and some places have appeared resilient to widespread change.

We would recommend that the CRC considers how it can have a territorial voice, perhaps linking into the regions or at a more local level. Linking with ACRE, or other similar networks, might be one way forward. It is important that the CRC hears about local initiatives and developments within rural communities and the land-based sector, especially in the ways that rural residents and visitors engage with the land and rural activities. The issue of climate change is all pervading and has a role to play in all parts of the country in the areas of mitigation, adaptation and vulnerability within issues such as local food, health, well-being and technology. Climate change also enables the connections between local and global to be explored as the scale of interaction varies in each place. For example the connections between food, sea and coast or with flooding, land management and rural economy.

Among its ways of achieving the achievements the CRC says that it will 'establish the facts and strengthening the rural evidence base'. We suggest that this might be changed to 'widen our understanding of rural and strengthen the rural evidence base'. Many of the discussions around postmodernism have emphasised the need to recognise the diversity in our midst, to allow those who are often passed over or ignored a voice. This to us would appear to correspond very closely with the core mission of the CRC to speak of, and for, the diverse people who make their lives in rural areas.

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