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The Cultural Turn and Finnish Rural Research

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Introduction

The purpose of this review essay is to consider the challenges posed for Finnish rural research and rural geography by the British trend in rural research that has been influenced by what has come to be known in the social sciences as the 'cultural turn'. It will set out from ideas expressed in one collection of articles that would appear to sum up well the direction in which Anglo-American rural geography is proceeding at present under the influence of the cultural turn, namely the volume *Country Visions* edited by Paul Cloke (2003a), which represents one train of thought in the discussion on the cultural turn that began in British rural geography in the early 1990s (see Rosenqvist 2000: 8–12). One consequence of the cultural turn was that researchers in this field began to consider the meanings of the countryside and rurality for modern society in more explicit terms. Thus *Country Visions* can be seen as continuing and updating in the spirit of the cultural turn the work previously summarised in *Contested Countryside Cultures. Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, edited by Cloke together with Jo Little (1997).

Country visions

The book *Country Visions* attempts to provide a survey of different ways of knowing and understanding rurality (Cloke 2003b: 1). New ways of understanding it are indeed necessary, as it has become a more complex and more chaotic concept in recent times and the representations that are offered us in the fields of education, the arts, entertainment and traditional practises can even have the effect of stifling our creative understanding of it.

The volume consists of 16 articles in addition to the introduction by Cloke (2003b), and these are divided by the editor into three groups, the first of which deals with ways of representing or envisioning rurality. These papers make use of various action metaphors for knowledge: reproducing, gazing, mapping, representing and viewing. The second group of papers presents ways in which rurality can be known and understood through practise and performance, like embodying, performing, spiriting, sexing and adventuring, and attempts to outline ruralities that are inaccessible to representations.

The third group proposes new ways of carrying out rural research. Some of the papers go into questions of power, by evaluating critically the theoretizations connected with governance, governability and social capital that are so trendy in rural research, as elsewhere. Two of them are concerned with applications of Actor Network Theory (ANT) to rural research, in the spirit of which rurality can be viewed as a hybrid concept composed of social, technological and environmental actors and networks of relations between them. In the last paper in the volume, Nigel Thrift (2003) considers the possibility of understanding rurality as a complex virtuality in which alternative forms of rural life are sought through activities that lie on the edge of the economic system. These may provide alternative *biopolitical* opportunities for conceptualizing and experiencing the countryside in the future.

The present state of rural research in Finland

The theoretizations put forward in Country Visions pose serious challenges not only for Anglo-American rural research but also for such research in Finland. Both internationally and nationally, this research generally relies on the traditional concept of the countryside and its ontological content, regarding the countryside as a physical space that can also be perceived in terms of place and area, whereas in the spirit of the cultural turn this ontological constraint can be relaxed so that the countryside can be understood as a cultural construct that is relatively independent of physical space and need not necessarily have a referent in physical reality.

In the thinking of social scientists in general (e.g. Hänninen 2004) and in that of laymen (e.g. Rosenqvist 2003) the countryside comes implicitly to be defined in terms of agriculture, as a physical space characterised by the practise of agriculture, and agriculture also occupies a powerful position in EU rural policy. In terms of phase theory, however, the 'agricultural countryside' can be regarded as representing the agrarian society of the past, which has in the course of time made way for the industrial society and more recently for the information society. The scholars and rural developers who are searching for the *new countryside* are engaged in an attempt to find new opportunities for it outside agriculture, although usually still within the framework of a physical space. Thus those studying the countryside and those studying agriculture can be seen as competing with each other over the definition of the countryside (e.g. Rosenqvist 2000: 18–19), a battle in which they have also been joined in their own way by urban researchers and urban developers, who have offered development of the regional centres as one means of achieving balanced regional development with which the countryside can keep pace. The developers of the new countryside have nevertheless condemned the regional centre policy as the wrong way to develop the countryside.

Finnish rural research has to a great extent been forced onto the defensive and has become alienated both from agricultural research and from the social sciences and urban research. One exception to this is formed by a number of individual, unaffiliated rural researchers who have succeeded in working autonomously with respect to the prevailing rural policy practise, which in the name of governability has held on firmly to the physical and spatial definition of countryside, maintaining that rural researchers are 'obliged' to seek solutions to the problems affecting the welfare of *rural inhabitants*. This, however, would be an artificial and scarcely justifiable constraint in the context of modern society, for rural inhabitants nowadays are of very many kinds and do not necessarily have any interests in common, in addition to which the countryside is an important cultural construct for many urban dwellers.

The discussion of the justification for rural development in Finland has led to the discovery of three types of argument (Valtakari 1999: 98–112): (1) economic arguments, (2) social equality arguments, and (3) ecological and ethical arguments. The inhabitant-centred perspective of current rural policy does not fit in very well with the arguments for rural development that are connected with economic growth or with ecologically and ethically based arguments, for it is difficult to imagine economic growth being achieved in the physical and spatial countryside without support from urban areas. Growth occurs in networks of regional economies that involve both urban and rural areas, while the arguments for ecological and ethical development are universal in character and apply to all people, whether rural or urban dwellers. On the other hand,

the maintenance of agricultural production, or of the productivity of the land, can be justified on ecological and ethical grounds, as a means of ensuring the availability of foodstuffs. The perspective places one population group among the inhabitants of the physical and spatial countryside in a privileged position relative to the others, namely the farmers. All in all, there is a danger that the only comprehensive argument for the current inhabitant-centred rural policy is that which appeals to the constitution and the demand for social equality. Under the constitution the state must ensure that people can freely choose where they wish to live, an argument which would seem inadequate in an individualized, competitive society.

Opening up the concept of countryside

Gerald Creed and Barbara Ching (1997: 8) maintain that a cultural hierarchy exists in western culture and science in which urbanity mostly emerges as a positive trait and rurality as a negative one. This hierarchy is in many ways culturally valid, as it is fairly easy to turn upside down, in the form 'urban – bad, rural – good'. Creed and Ching (1997: 17) claim that where it is difficult to lump all urban dwellers together into one group, there are a large number of collective terms in English for rural inhabitants: crackers, rubes, hayseeds, hicks, hillbillies, bumpkins, peasants, rednecks, yokels and white thrash. Likewise, the urban researcher Taina Rajanti (1999: 51) claims, contrary to the assumptions of most rural researchers, that from classical times onwards the city has always been used as a metaphor for a human community, a community that 'is composed of people who are strangers to each other and share this situation in common'. Quoting Aristotle, she proposes in a thought-provoking manner that a person who fails to blend into the urban community is either 'a useless person', 'a super-person', 'a wild beast' or 'a god' (Rajanti 1999: 52).

The English word city is directly related etymologically to notions of citizenship and civilisation (Online etymology dictionary 2006), from which it is not a long way to overtones of importance, progress and modernity, although Rajanti (1999: 51) understands 'modern' as implying a radical change both in the use of the city metaphor and literally in the nature of a city: 'in modernity a person becomes a creature of nature, who is of her or his own nature at home no longer as a member of a city or civilization but as an individual being, born as a pure instance of life and a citizen of a given country and state by virtue of that birth'. She sums up these 'rural policy' conclusions of hers in the following words (Rajanti 1999: 51):

'One could even claim that human beings became "rural" in origin only during modern times, and that all the historical efforts at creating separate, homogeneous communities and a distinct "countryside" were always the ideology or achievement of some political interest or ambition.'

Of the various terms in the English language referring to the countryside, the word *country* as such denotes a state, a nation, an area relatively far removed from a town, or more indeterminately an area with the characteristics of such. The word itself is derived from the Latin *contra*, and thus implies a contrast, something that is in contrast to the town in which the speaker is located. This contrast is emphasised still further in the word *countryside*, implying a choice of side, as it were. The adjectives *rural* and *rustic* refer to open land or an open space. The two words originally meant

the same thing, but nowadays rural is applied mostly to the physical space and rustic in a pejorative sense to uncouth or primitive characteristics or manners of behaviour (Online etymology dictionary 2006).

A form of rural research that has gained new wind in its sails from the cultural turn can make abundant use of the notions of *contrast* and *open space* implied in these terms, especially if the notion of open space is interpreted not only in a physical sense but also in a metaphorical one, as a social or cultural space (see Rosenqvist 2004: 38–44). In an increasingly complex and individualistic society we need new, alternative ways of perceiving reality, and it seems quite inadequate to conceptualise our present-day society unambiguously as an information society, or information economy, and demand that individuals should adapt themselves to this (cf. Vähämäki 2004). Could the countryside not be diversified to become, to borrow the phrase used by David Harvey (2000), a ‘space of hope’ for our society of the future?

What should we be studying?

The countryside is an ever-changing social concept, and any attempt to examine it should focus on the whole of society and the changes taking place in it. Society, in turn, is composed of individuals, and in fact one major trend visible in modern society is towards an increase in the significance of individuality. Thus, when studying society we need to concentrate on both structures larger than the individual and what is taking place ‘inside individuals’. From the perspective of the cultural turn there would seem to be plenty left for rural research to study, both internationally and nationally, especially in connection with what is happening inside individuals as society and the countryside change.

Under these conditions of individualization, social research that is geared towards attaining a better society than ever before should attempt to identify as great a variety of ethically acceptable alternative policies for life as possible for individuals to evaluate and consider for adoption. The outlining of these will nevertheless mean calling our existing representative and naturalized ways of thinking into question, learning to reject ‘reproductions of received meaning, of hand-me-down identity, of acceptable practice and conventional attitude’ (Cloke 2003b: 1). In this connection the central themes for consideration become differences, otherness and marginality (see Cloke and Little 1997).

Working life in late modern society has become so complex and unmanageable as far as the individual is concerned that people have begun to an increasing extent to look for a meaning in their lives outside their work, in their leisure-time activities (Cater and Smith 2003: 195–196). One major form of leisure-time activity to have emerged is travel, through which individuals hope to find excitement and experiences. David Sibley (2003: 219) also speaks of ‘nomadism’, in which people and groups of people live wandering lives in defiance of the conventions of organized society. The carceral society, as he calls it, has difficulties in coping with nomads and tourists who are constantly crossing its strategic physical and spatial boundaries (see Sibley 2003: 222), and the preservation of these boundaries by legislative means would seem to be one of the most alienating practises in our western societies, as it has become important nowadays to recognise the political nature of areal classifications and to test them by means of arguments based on social justice (see Sibley 2003: 229).

The cultural turn has also raised the questions of the human body and its non-cognitive aspects to constitute a further challenge for rural research. It has been estimated that as many as 95 per cent of our thoughts go unrecognised by us (Thrift 2003: 314), so that the human body can be interpreted as a huge carrier of instincts that contains within it myriads of biopolitical possibilities (Thrift 2003: 310, 313). The body can in principle be studied in a number of ways, for example, (1) as an origin (the operation of the psyche in the body produces meaning concerning the self and others), (2) as a medium (the body provides the means by which access to the world is negotiated), and (3) as a destination (the disciplinary techniques of society are 'inscribed' onto the surface of the body) (Dixon 2003: 118–119).

Mark Lawrence (2003) proposes liminal geography as a means by which we can try to understand our experiences of the countryside. If the rural is understood as a 'space of representation', in the terms of Henri Lefebvre (1991), then it must be typically located between the uninhabited wilderness and the city, as the forefront, on the scale of prevailing spatial practises of civilization. In normative terms, the countryside is in a liminal space, being in the process of moving from the wilderness towards civilization. On the other hand, the countryside also has its non-normative dimension, which includes unexpected phenomena such as people who retreat from the treadmill of city life to the peace of the countryside or the peculiar popular entertainments to be found in Finland and other countries that are said to be of rural origin, such as sitting on anthills, wife carrying or boot throwing (Figure 1; see also Etelämäki and Maximus 2006). Liminal experiences of all kinds can help us to understand not only the rules governing social interaction but also ways in which these rules, almost unnoticeably, come to be treated as natural (Lawrence 2003: 96).



Figure 1 Boot throwing – a rural sport – is popular among the Finns, whether rural or urban dwellers. All you need are a rubber boot, an open space and an open mind. (Photograph: Tomi Hirvinen)

The concept of simulation introduced by Jean Baudrillard (1983) can similarly help us to understand the problem of experiencing the countryside. Its meanings are not necessarily representative of the reality of a certain place alone but can be connected with simulations in which both real and hyperreal meanings (ones without any concrete referent) are mingled together (see Lawrence 2003: 95; Luoto 2006).

Simone Abram (2003: 35–36) is of the opinion that the concept of countryside has no analytical meaning and is useful only in the sense that it means something to people. This would seem to be a defective starting point, for if the concept has no analytical meaning it ought to be replaced by another more precise, more analytical concept, such as wilderness or remote area. I would prefer to set out from the assumption that an analytical meaning must be found for the countryside, which is quite possible if it is conceptualized not as a physical space but as a relatively independent social or cultural construct.

The countryside should continue to be studied both as an area and as a cultural construct. The most interesting challenges from the point of view of the cultural turn lie in the outlining of new biopolitical possibilities for action and the conceptualisation of the countryside in terms of otherness relative to the mainstream of social development. Swimming against the tide is nothing new for actors of a rural disposition. It was common in western countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for instance, to oppose industrialization and urbanization on the grounds that they infringed human values and the peasant tradition (see Morris 2004), and nature conservationists have always been ready to defend the countryside as the last refuge for wildlife (Bunce 2003: 19; see also Nash 2001).

In order that cultural rural research should not remain simply a utopian dream, we must be able to concretize its usefulness to society far more clearly than is being done at present. The lesson to be learned from the book *Country Visions*, for instance, is that cultural rural research should continue to explore modes of knowledge regarding rurality and to define the connections between these. These analyses can then be made more concrete by combining them with power analyses and discussions of the ethics of differences and otherness (Cloke 2003b: 13). Viewed in this way, the cultural countryside may gain a chance to justify its existence as an open 'space of hope'.

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