

The Rural–Agriculture Power Play

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Introduction

Over 30 years ago, rural studies took a marked turn away from the symbolism of its rural footing. In the midst of a farm crisis, failed social interventions and misplaced support of productivism, rural sociologists recognised it was time for theoretical innovation and change in the discipline. And how better to turn the passive sociological support of technocratic agribusiness into a razor-edged refute than through the sociology of agriculture? Newby's (1983) now classic critique offered the sociology of agriculture as a counter to the failed sociology of the rural. Agriculture and its labour enabled a materialist approach rooted in political economy that classic writers like Marx and Kautsky could speak to. And although the rural may not matter to everyone, eating and the means for doing so do, ensuring disciplinary relevance. Instead of the population decline and regressive politics of the rural, which Marx famously characterised as the 'idiocy of rural life' (Marx & Engels [1848] 1972, p. 477), the sociology of agriculture offered a rebirth of the discipline through theoretical tools not specific to the rural, like commodification, mechanisation, extraction and exploitation.

Therein arose a tradition that remains strong within the discipline today, perhaps even eclipsing the language of 'rural sociology'. Considered as one hand of what scholars came to see as the 'agri-food system', the sociology of agriculture provided a means to address rural problems in concert with the potential solutions provided by urban linkages (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Carolan, 2012). This rural–urban unity of purpose and consequence is mostly positive. We note, however, an incidental contrast in positioning. Agriculture in this literature speaks of action and possibilities, while – at least implicitly – the rural falters with inaction and impossibility. While successful in its aim of thwarting uncritical rural sociology, the sociology of agriculture has helped to disarm activities of the rural that are not necessarily agricultural.

Why does agriculture hold such power over the rural? Many scholars have questioned the very meaning of the rural, and even called for the elimination of the term or predicted its demise (Hoggart, 1990; Urry, 1995). Yet despite dramatic changes in agriculture that relate closely to changes in the rural, there has been limited analytical critique of the term (Friedland, 2002).

Here, we revisit the critiques afforded to rural meaning and politics and adapt their application to agriculture. As the birthplace of the sociology of agriculture and the site of its most prevalent application, we focus attention on the United States to analyse the power play at the rural–agricultural nexus. We use Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec's (2010) analytical categories of the material – *rural power* – and the symbolic – *power of the rural* – to study agriculture. We transform these

categories into *agricultural power* and *power of agriculture* to discuss the material and ideological pre-eminence of agriculture. Ideas have material consequences as much as the other way around, in both the rural and in agriculture. We argue that the materialist focus on farming and food through the agricultural frame has prompted the treatment of the rural as a passive place of less importance. Agriculture has become material while the rural has become immaterial, or so recent scholarship seems to suggest.

Thus, where Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec (2010) argued that the rural has both material and symbolic powers, and constituencies that build around these powers, we suggest a curious orthogonal axis of conflict. Increasingly, the rural is only symbolic and agriculture is powerful material truth. Following the language suggested by ell, Lloyd and Vatovec (2010), it is as if we have only agricultural power and the power of the rural, with the former in ascendance and the latter in decline. Rural power and the power of agriculture have already slipped from view. Soon, perhaps, only agricultural power will remain.

We contend that all four powers – the material and symbolic powers of the rural and agriculture both, and their constituencies, remain analytically crucial for rural sociology. But we also call for recognising a *power play* between the two, fuelling the disempowerment of the rural and the empowerment of agriculture. We worry that the sociology of agriculture implicitly promotes the very tendency that has been its principal object of critique: productivism, reducing the rural to a narrowly economic phenomenon, a space of production and not much else.

Moving forward, we suggest that attention to the dialogue between the rural and agriculture symbolically and materially can help better reveal unfolding injustices and powerful political constituencies shaping the rural vulnerabilities of the day. The rural is as much agricultural as agriculture is rural. As the classic study by Goldschmidt (1978) pointed out decades ago, when the mechanical cultivation of the land displaces human labour, the decline of farmers takes its toll on rural viability. Rural misery, it seems, knows well the company of agriculture, and vice versa. Moreover, power plays can reverse. By identifying the existence of this power play, we hope to find the capacity to overcome it, restoring both scholarly and practical balance. Like agriculture and its people, the rural and its people matter and our ideas help ensure that both remain of concern.

The life (and death?) of agriculture and the rural in US rural scholarship

As noted in the introduction, in comparison to the rural, agriculture seems alive, well and thriving in scholarly and research circles in the USA. Academically, colleges of agriculture persist across the country, still standing on the land grant history of many public universities. Rural sociology departments no longer remain by name, shuffled into other agricultural social science disciplines like agricultural economics and agricultural education, or rebranded as environmental, developmental and community. Only four departments continue to include rural sociology in their title: Auburn University’s Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology; University of Idaho’s Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology; University of Missouri’s Rural Sociology; and – with a stretch – South Dakota State’s Department of Sociology and Rural Studies. A number of programmes also include a graduate specialisation termed ‘rural sociology’, such as Oregon State within its School of Environment and Natural Resources and Penn State within its Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education. But not much remains of rural sociology institutionally, at least by that name.

The United States also falters in terms of rural funding. The centrepiece of agricultural and rural funding is the Farm Bill, which is typically reauthorised every five years to support the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). It lists its 2014–2018 economic implications for its US\$489

billion in funding as follows: 80% nutrition, 8% crop insurance, 6% conservation, 5% commodities and 1% other (USDA, 2015).¹ The rural does not register as an economic implication. Rather, funding aims to ‘enable USDA to further expand markets for agricultural products at home and abroad, strengthen conservation efforts, create new opportunities for local and regional food systems and grow the biobased economy [and] maintain important agricultural research’ (USDA, 2015).

In other countries, terms like ‘rural’ and ‘rural sociology’ have more vitality, with a reasonable clutch of rural sociology or rural development departments showing up in developing nations, as well as a few in developed nations. More impressive is the status of the rural in government, especially in the UK, where the sense of rural space as more than a zone of agricultural production has deep cultural roots and continues to support major tourist and real estate industries, and where tight urban planning (at least compared with the USA) puts most rural space within commuting distance of cities. In 2002, the UK even changed the title of its formerly productivist-sounding Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, dropping the word ‘agriculture’ altogether. The UK government also maintains a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland, which retains the word ‘agriculture’ and a more narrowly economic framing of the rural as ‘rural development’, but does use the ‘R-word’. The phrase ‘rural development’ is also common for government departments in developing countries, such as India’s Department of Rural Development.

In terms of funding, the European Commission’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for many years has organised its funding around two ‘pillars’: agricultural production support and ‘rural development’. In the 2014–2020 reauthorisation of the CAP, €277 billion have been set aside for direct payments and market support, as well as €85 billion for the second pillar (European Commission, 2013). While rural development funding is only a third of agricultural payments, the new CAP also aims to link the two pillars more closely, which is another win for the ‘rural’, even if the language remains economic. ‘Farming is not just about food,’ an overview of CAP explains, ‘It is about rural communities and the people who live in them’ (European Commission 2014, p. 4).

So, is the decline of the rural in the face of agriculture’s ascent a US-specific phenomenon? Perhaps. Or, better put, it seems likely that this shift is most strongly pronounced in the United States, including US scholarship, government and culture. However, given the USA’s hegemonic tendencies, as well as the hegemonic tendencies of productivism more generally, we think it is of broad interest to trace the power play of the rural and the agricultural in the USA.

The shift from rural to agriculture in the USA

Ironically, in the same year that Goldschmidt (1978) published his study of the interplay of the rural and the agricultural, the US-based Rural Sociological Society (RSS) convened its first meeting of the Sociology of Agriculture sub-group – today known as the Sociology of Agriculture and Food Research Interest Group (RIG). Shortly afterwards, Newby (1983) issued a highly influential call for a new rural sociology refocused on the sociology of agriculture. Agriculture rapidly became *the* mechanism to explain rural loss through theory rooted in political economy, a popular stance that persists today. As of 2015, membership in the Sociology of Agriculture and Food RIG attracts the most members of any RIG, with 171 – 40% of RSS members who renew yearly.² Second is the Natural Resources RIG with 121, while sub-groups with ‘rural’ as part of their title file in much further behind: Rural Poverty (64 members), Rural Policy (50 members), Rural Studies (56 members), Rural Gender Issues (46 members)

and Rural Racial and Ethnic Minorities (37 members). But this shift has not staunched the bleeding of interest in the RSS. Over the last 15 years, membership numbers have dropped nearly 50%, from 1,013 in 2000 to 559 in 2014.³

While the interdependency of agriculture and the rural has been verified repeatedly since Goldschmidt's classic work, there remains an implicit danger in such thinking. The majority of US rural residents make their living through work that does not pertain to agriculture, and the percentage still in agriculture continues to decline markedly. As of 2004, only 6.2% of non-metropolitan jobs pertained to agriculture (Parker & Kusmin, 2006). As of 2013, only 3.6% of non-metropolitan jobs were related to fishing, farming, ranching, hunting, managing agricultural land, or working as a labourer related to those fields.⁴ Agriculture may feed the world, but it is not feeding the wallets of most rural Americans.

The issue of work is an important one for rural Americans, since rural people on average are poorer than urban dwellers. Rural black and American Indian/Alaskan Native residents are the poorest demographics in the USA: 37.4% and 34.4% live in poverty respectively (USDA ESR, 2015). Certainly, employment in agriculture and food production could potentially play a part in lowering these figures, improving the livelihoods and health of rural residents through better pay and better working conditions in a fair food economy. And scholars could help turn the tide. As Kloppenburg (1991, p. 520) pointed out, it is the 'task' of those who recognise that contemporary agricultural production 'is neither socially just nor ecologically benign' to reform the types of knowledge informing it. Rural sociologists produced ample evidence challenging industrial agriculture – a task little addressed by other academics in colleges of agriculture (Welsh, 1997; Constance & Bonanno, 1999; Magdoff, Foster & Buttel, 2000; Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002; Bonnano & Constance, 2006; Lobao & Stofferahn, 2007). This challenge remains of vital importance in sociology related to food, agriculture or the rural. But it also suggests a conundrum: the predominance of agriculture as *the* problem and *the* solution for the rural. Meanwhile, the focus on agriculture and food diverts attention from the many other activities that contribute to, and even potentially resolve, rural issues today.

The urban connection to agriculture via food, and the rise of urban agriculture, further elevates the position of the urban relative to the rural as the space of analysis. Although each is important in its own right, studies of food and urban farming have become ways for rural sociologists to expand the otherwise limited pools of funding and audience that they face (Hinrichs, 2000; Goodman & Redelift, 2002). The increasingly poor, hungry and disadvantaged rural population has less political representation, and less relevance in the private sector, even among non-profit organisations. Pender (2015), in a study of US foundations, concluded that only 6.3% of grants were designed with rural benefits in mind in the period of 2005–2010. 'Considering that the rural share of the U.S. population was 19% in 2010, all of these estimates suggest an urban focus of foundation grants' (Pender, 2015, p. 2). Latest estimates show the rural share of the US national population decreasing further to only 15% (USDA ERS, 2015). Even globally, a minority of the population – 46% – lives in rural places (United Nations, 2014). But 100% has to eat, so food and agriculture speak directly to urban populations. Moreover, the visual consumption of the rural (Urry, 1995) by the urban through tourism is an increasing share of the limited flows of capital back to the rural.

For rural sociology to remain viable, agriculture provides a subtle, linguistic switch in focus that many scholars – ourselves included – have found attractive (e.g., Bell, 2004; Ashwood, Diamond & Thu, 2014). But agriculture's vivacity may not be quite as strong as the comparative rural case makes it seem. In a 2015 Google search, the words 'death of the rural', registered 322,000 hits. But 'death of agriculture' garnered 11,700,000 hits: a ratio of over 36 to 1. In part, this descriptive evidence supports the general trend that more people think and care about

agriculture than the rural. But it also suggests something equally important: there is widespread concern that agriculture is dying too, just like the rural.

This is unsurprising, since the very meaning of 'agriculture' merges the materiality of the land with the people who cultivate it, mixing up the tangibility of earth with the malleability of societal norms. Agriculture begins with the field. *Agri*, from the Latin *ager*, captures the land, the soil, the terrain – those parts of a field ready to support growth; *cultura* tails *agri*, tying the meaning of a field to husbandry or the care it is afforded, a Latin noun that also means culture. Agriculture, that is, *agri* and *cultura*, is defined by three interlinked parts: (1) the land rendered a field; (2) a field made ready for growth (hoeing, sowing, tilling and so forth); and (3) growth made possible by cultivators – historically, human ones, as *cultura* suggests. When tractors replace people, and confinement buildings replace fields, *cultura* and *agri* make less sense ideologically. Friedland (2002) points to the increasing difficulty of agriculture sustaining its initial meaning as spiralling mechanisation strips people and animals from the land. Combine that with climate change, declining soil fertility and urban encroachment, and agriculture may be next up for material and symbolic grabs.

All this points to a central question for those with rural and agricultural interests, grappling with debates over content and concepts: what *power plays* pull our analytical attention towards agriculture, and away from broader rural concerns? Our question makes clear that the two are not mutually exclusive. Agriculture is not always rural and rural is not always agriculture. And the disempowerment that now plagues the rural may well face agriculture in coming years. By highlighting the play of power between the material and the ideal, agriculture and the rural, we seek to identify the pulls that try to yank all to one conceptual side or the other. In this case, we use power plays to understand the relationship between the empowerment of agriculture and the disempowerment of the rural.

The rural–agriculture power play

Agricultural power is vast. Our economy and ecology vest land and fields with abundant materiality. Even when some layers are extracted, others still follow below. This permanence of what we might, drawing on Bell (2007), call *first agriculture* – the materiality of agriculture, to which we typically grant priority over its symbolic manifestations – stands against the seeming impermanence of the rural. People move away, cultures change, but the land stays. Rural impermanence as part of mobilities research prompted Hoggart (1990) to boldly suggest, 'Let's do away with the rural', in a bout of frustration with the dramatic changes in rural places. Urry (1995, p. 229) predicted rural places becoming 'consumed, used up, wasted, dissipated'. Through its focus on land and fields, but not always people, agriculture appears immobile, rather than transient like people are. In contrast, the explicit connection of people to place as part of rural meaning, an ontological connection of environs with the constitution of people themselves, seemed to some scholars to render the rural no longer a pertinent category. Rather than simply changing, the category 'rural' appeared fundamentally and irreparably reconfigured and unrecognisable.

The land, though, stays put, even when people move away. The stability of land and fields quickly turns material agricultural power into a power of agriculture ideology, what we might also call *second agriculture* – the ideal or symbolic moment in the dialogics of agriculture, which we typically regard as secondary to the material – where immobile materiality denotes what is symbolically lasting. It's an irony in part: land can change hands quickly, and access to a field can end abruptly, dependent upon the social constructs that provide rights. Moreover, how we use land, and therefore what it materially does, can vary widely across time and culture, as in

the conflict between Indigenous understandings of how land should be used and that of European settler cultures. And how we use land shapes our symbolic values and understandings of it through a dialogue (Bell & Ashwood, 2016). Despite this interrelationship between the ideal and the material, land continues to hold lore as permanent in agricultural understandings, unlike the people upon it, with all their symbolising.

This is from where agricultural empowerment and rural disempowerment largely derive their sense. In *Gone With the Wind*, Gerald O’Hara tells Scarlett that ‘the land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it’s the only thing that lasts’. This lasting sense of land’s materiality evokes ideological passions, especially for those like Bull McCabe, lead character in John B. Keane’s play *The Field*. When an outsider threatens the continuance of his husbandry over a beloved field, McCabe kills in an enraged attempt to prevent it. A stark lesson unfolds as McCabe himself later dies after having sacrificed his own sanity and that of his family’s in the pursuit of owning a field. As McCabe so vividly experienced, what lasts is not necessarily what one can stand or sit upon. Nonetheless, the material focus of agriculture separates the dependency of what is material from the ideologies that accompany it. First agriculture trumps second agriculture. Land itself becomes coupled with ownership, a supposedly permanent pairing ideologically pre-eminent in American agriculture and its institutions. Those who live in rural spaces and do not own land, or very little of it, fade from the prevailing view. It is a power play where those outside of land ownership fare poorly in the predominant ideologies of agriculture.

Land’s material power in agriculture works down to the molecular level. Many branches of agricultural science root knowledge within the land’s materiality without reference to the human. For example, when a soil scientist establishes threshold values for phosphorus and nitrogen applications, materially there seems little reason for anyone to follow a different route. After all, soil needs only so many nutrients to produce a crop, and not any more than a particular threshold. Soil scientists may be driven to madness when carefully executed plans for nutrient management go awry in the fields of everyday life, where farmers have other concerns, other understandings, which shape their application rates: the tallest corn and the neatest rows (McGuire, Morton & Cast, 2012; Harden, Ashwood, Bland & Bell, 2013).

Another materialism tells us why they like tall corn and neat rows, say rural sociologists: the symbolism of productivism, an ideological superstructure that arises *from* capitalist accumulation. Here we see an argument where one materialism trumps another. The soil scientist’s advice that money is wasted on over-application nonetheless falls to the needs of capital. Materiality reigns prominently here, whether the particulars of nutrient application or the exploitation necessary in capitalism. Ideology comes into the analysis, but as a *result* of materialism, not mutually constitutive of it. Agricultural power thus subsumes the power of agriculture.

These explanations – the soil scientist’s recommendations, the social scientist’s political economic theories, the sense of the land’s permanence – are all symbolic understandings. Ontologically, a materialism divorced from the symbolic is itself an ideology. But these explanations are not only symbolic, or only ideological. They all arise from the interplay of agricultural power and the power of agriculture, the material and the symbolic both. But the pull of rope leans now more to the side of agricultural power, often heavily so.

The disjoining of the human from materiality, and the unloading of people issues onto rural sociologists, builds a materialist agricultural power narrative that prompts another problem. Rural sociologists’ responses can be too farmer-based, as the nutrient example suggests, where the resolution lies in the hands of a farmer applicator. Research unfortunately reverts to a small segment of the rural population. The material–ideal dichotomy this creates is part of a broader critique that Goodman (1999) makes of agri–food studies’ nature–human, modernist dualism.

In addition to this ontological separation, issues of justice abound. Returning to our example of phosphorus and nitrogen overloading, other players vested with an interest in clean water can be rendered voiceless, such as the water itself, hypoxia in the Gulf and lakes and streams across the country, dead fish and others that fall victim to toxic algae blooms, or other non-agricultural (but perhaps rural) actors contributing to overloading. The analytical focus on farmers encouraged by human-free physical science separates these broader ecological concerns from the decision making of an elite few. It empowers particular agricultural players invested in such an approach by giving time and money to a small segment of applicators and less so to the broader costs. It is a power of agriculture frame that works against lasting ecology and justice.

Meanwhile, the rural, now separated from these various materialities of agriculture, becomes a catch-all for the *cultura* of agriculture, the community, husbandry and humanity attached to the agricultural endeavour. The rural – both a component of agriculture and a place separate from it – makes little sense against an absolutist view of materiality's eminence. Considering agriculture as a part-human construction threatens the material framings that help maintain the status quo.

Agriculture and its constituencies

Here is where the constituencies that form around rural and agricultural powers become most crucial, the crux of politics. Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec (2010) distinguish between two forms of power: *power-from* and *power-over*. Speaking of the rural, *power-from* describes how power comes to exist from its rural roots, either materially or symbolically. Like the land, the animals, or the ideas of freedom either conjure, these are powerful materialities and symbolisms that come *from* the rural. But at the *power-from* stage, power has yet to be enacted into politics. It is simply potential. Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec (2010) capture the enactment of power through the term *rural constituencies* (of material power) and *constituencies of the rural* (of symbolic power) – that grant power *over* the rural. Constituencies capture the potential to turn *power-from* into an active embodiment of *power-over*. Any successful constituency is likely in part to be formed of both forms of constituency, drawing on material and symbolic rural powers to turn *power-from* into *power-over*.

A parallel set of terms applies to agriculture. For our purposes, *agricultural constituencies* form social relations of power based on the material powers of agriculture, and *constituencies of agriculture* form social relations of power based on the symbolic powers of agriculture (see Figure 54.1). To become a constituency, a power must be utilised, until which time it remains a realisation. Realisations are stable, though – they exist without being capitalised upon. When power is practised over agriculture, it becomes an actual social and political relation.

Farmers are the most obvious example of an *agricultural constituency*, manifested in farmers' organisations, based on the material argument that we are on the land and what we produce from it everyone materially needs. This is the critical moment of mobilisation that attracts much attention in sociology. Certainly, a realisation of the importance of land can exist without forming a social movement around it. But the point of collective action is a relation that achieves *power-over*. A less obvious agricultural constituency might be phosphorus mining companies and their various lobbying organisations, seeking market share and regulations friendlier to their interests, based on the argument that phosphorus is a material need of agriculture that others ignore at their peril.

An example of a *constituency of agriculture* is those who adhere to private property as a right based in Lockian and Jeffersonian land-centric ideas, and support policies that uphold them. Such a constituency might include farmers, but also many who do not work land themselves.

Stabilisation ↘	Material	Symbolic	↙ Stabilisation
Power-From	Agricultural power	Power of agriculture	Realisations
Power-Over	Agricultural constituencies	Constituencies of agriculture	Relations
↗ Mobilisation	First agriculture	Second agriculture	↖ Mobilisation

Figure 54.1 Politics of agriculture

Soviet-style collectivism would never feed us, urban Americans may contend, thus gaining a measure of their own control over agriculture, albeit far less direct than the power over agriculture such an ideology grants farmers. Other symbolic arguments, however, can form the basis of an even more powerful constituency of agriculture. Think of the neoliberal use of private property *rights* to achieve ends that ironically may lead to dispossession, as in corporate land grabs gaining power over the agricultural landscape. Key here, like in the formation of any constituency, is the development of alliances of those whose interests may differ. Given the fading of the rural, agricultural constituencies seem now to be gaining far more power over agriculture than rural constituencies are gaining over the rural.

A paradox of agricultural powers

But the strange thing is, as we noted earlier, farmers and peasants are fewer and fewer every year. As agricultural powers increase, the people who control them decrease. For power has a habit of concentrating.

Farmers and peasants remain an undeniably important piece in the agriculture puzzle. They are the cultivators, in the original Latin sense, who persist even in the face of industrialisation. A litany of research has examined this shrinking sub-group of the rural population: their movement from conventional to sustainable farming (Bell, 2004); their marginalisation in industrial agriculture (Kloppenborg, 1991; Watts, 1994; Constance, 2008); their crises (Heffernan & Heffernan, 1986); their cultural roots (Salamon, 1992); their decision-making patterns and values (Saltiel, Bauder & Palakovich, 1994; Burton, 2004); and their politics (Gilbert, 2015). This is only the tip of an enormous body of research. In a quick search of the content of *Rural Sociology*, the leading US journal on rural sociology, farmers garnered 544 related articles. Agriculture? 716. But race? 374. Poverty? 435. A small minority of rural people attracts by far the majority of rural sociology’s attention. As mentioned earlier, only 3.6% of the rural population makes its money from farming, ranching, hunting, managing agricultural land or working as a labourer related to those fields.

Our sense is that the well-intentioned analyses of farmers and agriculture, in an effort to curb the damaging consequences of industrialisation, in part advantages the frames that many sociologists are working against: big agriculture, big money and big power. Agriculture and farming carry extensive rights earned by constituencies of agriculture and agricultural constituencies that sometimes disable alternative politics in the countryside. Through narrative privileging and legal

statutes, the few making money in industrial agriculture can do so at the expense of their neighbours, as in the case of concentrated animal feeding operations (Ashwood, Diamond & Thu, 2014). Think of the activities of the infamous Farm Bureau – a dual constituency of agriculture and agriculture constituency – that has immense influence over state and federal politics. Its power-over agriculture lends to some big agribusiness ends. This is not to say all alternative rural politics outside of agricultural ones are the just ones. Rural extremism is a particularly disturbing example (McNicol Stock, 1996). But it is a disturbing example that warrants more attention.

Affording agriculture exclusive symbolic authority in the countryside can disadvantage rural frames distinct from farming and food, and push other troubling trends out of the picture. A slippery slope pervades the rural. If there are fewer farmers, then the rural warrants less attention. Agricultural transformations become inevitable, fuelling the passivity of the rural, rather than fostering recognition that it is quite active and alive. Just perhaps not with agriculture as the heartbeat of its reality.

Conclusion

The power-play between agriculture and the rural in the USA reveals some troubling trends. The materialist first, ideas second approach predominant in agricultural sciences disjoins humans from nature. It creates a power of agriculture ideology suited to agricultural constituencies and constituencies of agriculture that benefit from consolidation and productivist agriculture. In this frame, rural is an inconvenience better sidelined in research concerns. Second, materialist ideologies displace humanity from its central position in any agricultural research, and instead render people the exclusive domain of rural sociologists. Rural sociologists can face pigeon-holed research that demands human solutions to materialist problems, rather than recognising their interaction from the start. Even under the political economy view, the same trap can apply. With capitalism as the ultimate materiality responsible for agricultural consolidation, ideas equal outcomes. Third, the agriculture-first focus eclipses broader rural concerns, pulling attention away from many rural issues such as health, environment, justice, poverty, work, recreation and tourism that are not necessarily agricultural. The rural becomes only a space of production, and agriculture becomes only a means of production.

There is no inevitability or permanence to the current power pull between agriculture and the rural. This moment of agricultural power and power of agriculture may quickly change. Where the rural is displaced today, it could be the firebrand of tomorrow. Where agriculture reigns today, its constituencies could find it less useful tomorrow. As rural studies scholars, we are no exception to these power pulls. We find ourselves in them and help create them. Playing into the cards of materialist ideologies disables rural scholarship seeking reform in the countryside. What possibilities and players are we missing by focusing so much attention on agriculture? With renewed attention to the rural in all its complexity, we can better achieve goals for social and ecological justice everywhere.

Notes

- 1 It's a similar situation for US research funding.
- 2 Figures are drawn from the 2014 RSS Annual Council meeting Executive Director Report – a total of 559 members. Since RIG numbers rely on payment of yearly membership fees, to compute the percentage we subtracted Lifetime, Emeritus and Emeritus Sustaining, and Distinguished from the membership numbers, leaving a final number of 431 members. These were the most recent numbers available, and our thanks go to Scott Sanders and Cindy Struthers for guidance finding them. The RIG numbers are provided from the 2015 Mid-Year Council Meeting RIG Committee Report.

- 3 Drawn from the 2006 RSS Calendar Year Membership Report: 1988–2006.
- 4 Data were computed using the ACS 1-year estimate data set and analysing Table B24010. We totalled the following fields for men and women: (1) farming, fishing and forestry occupations, including first-line supervisors of farming, fishing and forestry workers; agricultural workers; fishing and hunting, and forest, conservation and logging workers; and (2) farmers, ranchers and other agricultural managers. A total of 700,181 men and women worked in these areas out of a total of 19,408,187 non-metropolitan workers in 2013. We thank Tim Kusmin of the USDA's Economic Research Service for guiding our acquisition of these data.

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