

Mobilizing the Countryside: Rural Power and the Power of the Rural

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Abstract

I distinguish here between *rural power*, the politics of the rural as a point of contradiction, from the *power of the rural*, the politics of the rural as a constituency. Against the current moment of rural doubt, I argue that rural power and the power of the rural continue to be articulate voices in the conversation of the world. My case is that we have confused their rearticulations for their disarticulations. I apply this framework to a critique of contemporary theory, especially mobilities research, which I argue typically speaks with a *rural passive voice*. I argue for recognizing the *rural active voice* of rural power and the power of the rural.

In 1996, Abdel Bari Atwan, editor of the London pan-Arab daily *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, arrived in Peshawar with little more than a scrap of paper to go by. On it was scrawled the phone number of a man purportedly named Faisal. Late that night he called Faisal and heard this cloak-and-dagger response (Bari Atwan, 2006: 11): “Be ready at 10 am tomorrow morning. Nothing else. The phone is not safe.” Click. Two days later, just before midnight on November 23rd, dressed in the traditional Afghan clothing Faisal gave him, having crossed 90 miles through the Kyber Pass to Jalalabad and then 25 miles south towards the White Mountains at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, ashen from the wild driving of his cheerfully fatalistic chauffeurs, exhausted from one bone-rattling ride after another through pitted tracks and checkpoints armed by various men of various

military allegiances, Bari Atwan entered an artificial cave at 10,000 feet in which a bearded, smiling figure sat cross-legged with a Kalashnikov across his lap.

Thus began Bari Atwan's three-day interview of Osama bin Laden in his camp at Tora Bora. At the time, bin Laden did not have anything like the infamy he was later to achieve. But his standard of infamy knows no parallel today. Nor were the Tora Bora caves then familiar to the wider world. By the Battle of Tora Bora in December of 2001, though, the caves had become as widely known a rural location as any on the planet. Some say the CIA began the digging there, in the 1980s, building a vast underground system of ventilated caves capable of harboring thousands. Others, more sensibly, say this James Bond image of an evil mastermind in his high-tech lair, secretly connected to the CIA, was a hoax played on a media eager for hype. Bari Atwan at any rate found only small, single-room-sized caves with rough conditions and appalling food, including where Bin Laden worked and slept and what he ate. There were no toilet facilities and only wood stoves for heat. Bari Atwan shared Bin Laden's six meter by four meter cave for two nights, sleeping on an old mattress propped off the ground on several crates of hand grenades. There were phones, computers, the internet, and wire services from world newspapers, however, powered by a small generator.

Despite these connecting technologies, Tora Bora was tremendous in its inaccessibility. From here, of course, Bin Laden organized the horrifically successful attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in a Yemen port. Here he operated a series of training camps, attracting followers from across the Arabian peninsula and Egypt, as well as a good deal of the rest of the world, much as he had earlier done in the Sudan before being forced to leave there in May of 1996, a few months before he invited Bari Atwan to Tora Bora for an interview, and much as he had done before that in Afghanistan itself, during the Mujahideen resistance to the Soviet occupation, when Bin Laden founded Al-Qaeda. This same inaccessibility allowed Bin Laden to hold off the "biggest manhunt in history," as the tabloids called it, long enough to slip away who knows where, but rumored to be the even more inaccessible Waziristan region of northwest Pakistan, an area so beyond control that it effectively remains a state-less region to this day, although

designated as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, a face-saving fiction for the Pakistani government.

Bad roads. Rough conditions. Beyond control. Small caves at 10,000 feet. What I am suggesting here is a rural reading of the power of Al-Qaeda. What I am suggesting here is a reading of September 11 as a stunning triumph, however appalling (and triumph so often is), of the rural over the urban. What I am suggesting here is that the horror of the fall of the Twin Towers, and the resulting hole in New York and the civilized world, was in part a rural horror that derived from the successful deployment of the material, symbolic, and relational politics of the rural as a point of contradiction—from what I will term *rural power*.

This is awful way to begin a rural argument, and I will not linger much longer on it. But I ask the reader to lend me a bit more patience while I briefly detail the material, symbolic, and relational qualities of rural power at Tora Bora. The material I have already strongly suggested in my references to its well known rugged and remote features, so distant from urban and Western control. There is as well strong symbolic power in deliberate rejection of urban comforts, which bin Laden impressed upon Bari Atwan during his visit, apparently taking particular delight in Bari Atwan's write-up of the poor quality of the food, when he later read it. This is an anger that is willing to suffer such rural deprivation for its release, hard men forged in a hard, masculine environment. Plus it is the anger of rural tribalists and traditionalists, riding the desert on their camels, dressed in kafias and flowing robes, as the publisher of Charles Allen's 2006 *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* saw fit to play up in the book's cover photo. No matter that most of bin Laden's inner circle were actually from urban backgrounds. Moreover, the inaccessibility of Tora Bora was in large measure a relational one. Without support from the Taliban and from local Pashtu tribes, bin Laden would have never been able to make Tora Bora's ruggedness count for so much. After all, you could drive there, right to the mouth of bin Laden's own cave, if only with difficulty. You could even email bin Laden. The astonishing relational tenacity of the Wazir, a Pashtu group, has continued to ward off state control, as it has done for centuries, and reputedly now gives bin Laden cover.

These are not unmixed advantages. The remoteness of Tora Bora certainly complicated Al-Qaeda's operations. The symbolism of angry rural tribalism has been a ready source of racist fantasies that have oppressed many Muslims. The relational tenacity of the Pashtu has been coincident with rampant blood feuds and terrible oppression of women. Power is like that, recursive and entangling. So too with rural power.

Nor are these singular advantages. Al-Qaeda is far from the first to use rural power for such sharply defined political ends, of course. Think of FARC, Shining Path, the Sandanistas of Mexico, the Contras of Nicaragua, the Maoists of Nepal, Fidel and Ché in the Sierra Maestra. Think of the Vandals and Visigoths, the Picts and the Gauls, and the walls that the Emperor Hadrian felt obliged to build clear across Britain and Germany. Equally of course rural power is far more than a means of terrorism. Indeed, discussions of the rural in academic circles virtually never even discuss terrorism.¹ There is plenty more about the rural for scholars to explore, as I will come to. Moreover, this fecund power has been made use of by urban peoples as much as rural peoples. Rural power is spatial but not spatially limited.

So why begin with such a melodramatic narrative ploy?

The Death of the Rural

Because there is melodrama aplenty about the rural and the supposed demise of its power and significance in contemporary life. Writers have opined on rural demise, from various perspectives, for centuries, as Raymond Williams (1973) wonderfully showed us. But the volume of opining seems to have ratcheted up quite a bit of late. Try typing "death of the rural" into Google, with quotation marks to get hits on the exact phrase. I got 201,000 of them when I tried it.² Right at the top was a reference to Wendell Berry's 1999 piece in *The Ecologist* on "The Death of the Rural Community." On the first page of returns were references to "death of the rural lifestyle," from a review of Jorge Sánchez-Cabezudo's 2006 "rural noir" film *Night of the Sunflowers*; "death of the rural federations," from an article on women and rural development; "death of the rural world," from a history of Algeria; "death of the rural way of life," from an account of Irish novelist John McGahern's last book, the 2002 *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in his 2006 obituary

in the British paper *The Telegraph*; “the slow death of rural culture,” from a review of a 2005 CD of Italian rural music field recordings made in the 1950s by the famous folklorist Alan Lomax; and “the death of the rural pub trade,” from a 2006 account in an Irish paper of the closing of 14 percent of rural pubs in County Mayo in the previous two years.

Other search terms picked up more dark talk about the rural. “End of the rural” returned 311,000 hits. Many or even most of these were admittedly other uses of the word string, like “at the west end of the rural road” and “at the delivery end of the rural information chain.” But it also turned up bits like the Australian Sociological Association’s 2003 public forum on “The End of the Rural?”; a 1999 lament on “the end of the rural church in India” from the Presbyterian Overseas Ministries; a 2002 discussion of the role of the “degradation of rural culture, and the end of the rural universe” in giving impetus to the rise of the MST, the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil; and a rather unwieldy chapter title “Agriculture's Place in a Diversifying Economy; Rural Industry and the Farmers in the City; the End of the Rural?” from the on-line table of contents for a 2000 book titled *More Than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia*. Related phrases like the “end of rural life” got me to the “personal statement” of Helen Reddout, co-founder of the American advocacy group CARE, the Community Association for Restoration of the Environment, which was the “featured organization” for people to donate to if they really liked *The Meatrix*, the popular series of anti-factory farm spoofs of *The Matrix*; Reddout concludes her statement by saying that a factory farm “is the seeds of destruction of any rural community and the end of rural life as we have known it.” A search on the “death of rural life” got me to the Canadian Organic Growers’ 1999 presentation to Canada’s House Standing Committee on Environment and Development, in which the group argued that “the current model of agribusiness results in the death of rural life.”

In other words, this talk of rural demise is coming in from all over the world. Academics have been getting in on it too. There is the 1998 book by the American agricultural economist Stephen Blank, *The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio*. The American sociologist William Friedland (2002) lays out a related case in “Agriculture and Rurality: Beginning the Final Separation?” The Brazilian sociologist

Arilson Favareto (2006) observes that we are seeing “The Rationalization of Rural Life.” I’ve written about it myself (Bell, 2007), I confess, in “The Two-ness of Rural Life and the Ends of Rural Scholarship.”

In the last few years, a feeling of institutional crisis has developed among rural academics, as they have pondered the declining membership of the Rural Sociological Society and European Society for Rural Sociology, the closing and renaming of departments of rural sociology in the United States and agricultural economics in Britain, and the annual threats to the Hatch Act that has long been the main source of Federal funding for rural research in the US. Lionel Beaulieu (2005) tries to find a way out of the impasse in “Breaking Walls, Building Bridges: Expanding the Presence and Relevance of Rural Sociology,” his 2004 presidential address to the Rural Sociological Society. Richard Krannich (2008) continued this theme in his 2007 presidential address on the subject of “Rural Sociology at the Crossroads.” The Rural Sociological Society’s council has recently set aside \$150,000 of its endowment for grants for people who have good ideas of how to revitalize the organization.

Academic institutions aren’t the only ones who are worried. There is the rural health care crisis, touched off by the closing of rural hospitals and clinics. There is the rural commercial crisis, due to the shuttering of rural banks and main streets. There is a rural educational crisis, as rural schools continue to be amalgamated into the larger towns. There is the rural faith crisis, due to the similar amalgamation of rural church districts. There is the rural organizational crisis as long-time groups watch their membership roles shorten. And there is even a rural naming crisis, as rural organizations struggle to rebrand themselves, as in the FFA’s decision a few years ago to rename itself simply “FFA,” dropping any explicit connection to being an acronym for Future Farmers of America.

In short, morbid thoughts about the rural abound.

Three Ways to Kill the Rural

What has led to these feelings of rural loss, doubt, and even panic? The arguments are likely all familiar by now. From a material point of view, little remains of rural geographical distinctiveness anymore, it is often said. Ways of life in rural areas closely

resemble those of anywhere else. In the richer countries, rural folk watch television, browse the internet, shop in chain stores, and drive for most of their trips. In the poorer countries, they may watch, browse, shop, and drive less than their city cousins, but the differences are fast disappearing. Plus community—that Hallmark card understanding of the rural—can be found anywhere, or not, it now appears. There can be no special rural claim on it. Industrial agriculture has made the rural landscape of the rich countries into a vast open-air assembly line, little different from what goes on in cities, aside from the lack of a roof. And now industrial agriculture is making widespread inroads in the poorer countries too. The best claim for the rural is that there remain extensive areas of the world where population density is considerably lower than in cities, and that this does present some special challenges in getting services. But roads and satellites reach pretty much everywhere now, and with your Blackberry or your XO laptop Google does too, or soon will. The fact is, we all live in an urban world nowadays, whether we live in areas with high or low population density, or countries rich or poor, aside from a few remaining remote and forgotten corners of the landscape. Moreover, sometime this year we will become an urban world in terms of density as well, according to the UN Population Fund (2007), which estimates that by year's end more of the world's population will live in urban areas than in rural ones.

As a result of this new connectedness, the very idea of the rural is becoming at best passé, it seems. The vogue term is hybridity. Any remaining difference in the world is just the basis for the collection of bookmarks on the toolbar of life that each individual assembles in a lifetime of existential browsing. However you put it together is however you put it together. We each make, remake, and unmake the boundaries and connections, albeit guided by the shadowy webmaster of power-knowledge. And quite evidently, the webmaster is no longer maintaining the rural web sites. You can find them only in the cached pages of your Google search of culture, or as a myth to be marketed to the unsuspecting and romantic.

There are many more nuances to these arguments than my qualitative factor analysis, as it were, immediately suggests. But in broad strokes, such are arguments that in one form or another have been often intoned about the rural. Rural thought, as I discuss in my afore-mentioned article (Bell, 2007), has long oscillated between two conceptions

of the rural, one materialist and one idealist. First in our minds, particularly in realist North America, is the materialist conception that I have termed “first rural.” This is the rural of low population densities, and the forms of social relations and economy found in such settings. This is the rural as farming, as community, as rural areas and people, as primary production, as regions poorly served by the organizational apparatus of modern life. And typically one hears that this rural is vulnerable, disadvantaged, under threat, and disappearing, either suggesting a politics of defense to maintain the stability of its boundary or a politics of abandonment to celebrate its demise.

Second in our minds, again particularly in realist North America, is the idealist conception that I have termed “second rural.” Here I mean the rural of categories and constructions, of the power relations of culture, of the associations we make and do not make when we call upon the rural. Second rural may reference space, but is not itself spatially confined. This is the rural of the novel, the children’s tale, the TV show and advertisement, the farmers market, and the forms of social relations we justify or contest thereby. Second rural has a politics too, and it is most typically nowadays a politics of discourse, deconstructing the inclusions and exclusions of ideas and their boundaries. This view sees the rural as holding continuing power that we need be wary of, given the venerable lines it draws and does not draw, but it also typically sees this power as lapsing in the face of the rural’s declining material significance. For some writers, a second rural is the only rural that remains, and that perhaps ever existed. But it is nonetheless epistemologically a secondness that we know from moving across and beyond the old boundaries of first rural, leaving in their place what Murdoch and Pratt (1993) called the “post-rural.” In this view, “the rural is a category of thought,” as Marc Mormont (1990) wrote, nothing more.

Either way, materialist or idealist, the rural is a dead letter. Indeed, all letters are now dead, or dying, increasingly undeliverable in a world of mobility and flow, ever restless with no fixed senders or receivers. It’s a peripatetic planet, awash with fluidity, circulation, motility, and automobility, in the lingo of the new mobilities paradigm advanced by John Urry, with some close kinship to (but also substantial differences with) the flows perspective of Manuel Castells, and as well now many others. “Mobilities, as both metaphor and process, are at the heart of social life and thus should be central to

sociological analysis,” proclaims Urry (2000: 49) in *Sociology Beyond Societies*. There is a “new spatial process, the space of flows, that is becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies,” contends Castells (2000 [1996]: 409) in *The Rise of the Network Society*. This flowing, this mobility of what Urry (2000) calls “global fluids,” is where we experience both freedom and power today in a globalizing world of “translocal subjectivities” (Conradson and McKay, 2007) and “cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2006), washing over boundaries of society and nation-state into a “global civil society” (Urry, 2000), a mobile union of the things, ideas, and peoples of the world. So join up with the “cosmobilities network.”³ Might as well, because if you’re reading a paper like this you’re already part of it.

What place for the rural here? Evidently very little. Castells (2000 [1996]) doesn’t contain an entry for “rural” or “countryside” in the index, although there is a substantial one for “cities”; plus he devotes most of one chapter to a discussion of urban form. Urry, whose earlier work often examined rural matters in detail, finds quite a bit more to say about rural matters in *Sociology Beyond Societies*, particularly in his discussion of the Heideggerian notion of “dwelling.” But again, the analytic weight lies with the urban.

Take the new journal *Mobilities* founded by Urry and his colleagues. It has been up and publishing for less than three years, so perhaps it is a bit too soon to wonder. Still, the word rural does not appear in its statement of aims. It barely appears in its opening editorial (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006: 11)—just one passing adjectival mention that references other work. And the list of subjects covered by the journal that its website proclaims includes the categories “urban communications and technology,” “urban sociology-urban studies,” and “urban studies.” It does not list “rural studies” and related concerns—although perhaps glints of the rural are intended in the categories “housing and land economy,” “tourism,” and “tourism and leisure.” The word rural registers in only one abstract of any of the 58 articles from the first seven issues that have, at this writing, appeared, and not at all in any title or list of keywords. The word “urban” shows up in 9 titles, abstracts, or keyword lists. Plus there are plenty of discussions of “the city” and locations like London, Mecca, and Singapore. Perhaps that’s just bad luck in the roll of the dice of submissions, and it is too soon to rush to put much weight on this 9 to 1

ratio. (I took enough statistics courses years ago to recognize that with a single additional rural piece the ratio would drop immediately to 4.5 to 1.) Perhaps.

And what place for place, a concept long linked in our imagination more to the rural side of life? Some, but only with a radically loosened ontology. “The emerging mobilities paradigm thus argues against the ontology of distinct ‘places’ and ‘people’,” writes Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006: 13). “Rather there is a complex relationality of places and persons connected through both performances and performativities.” We would do better to see that “Places are like ships, moving around and not necessarily staying in one location. . . . Places are about relationships, about the placing of peoples, materials, images and the systems of difference that they perform.” In short, place is what we make of it, and wherever we make it.

In this, the mobilities school draws together both first and second rural visions, killing the rural both ways, and thus constituting a third rural death. The new technologies and ideologies of mobility and flow are part and parcel of the collapse of rural boundaries, in the mobilities viewpoint, all seemingly reconfiguring and undermining where we have been. Materialities have unleashed new connectivities that cut loose our performances from their old dockages. You can still use the word “rural” if you want to, but that’s just your performative positioning in the emerging global civil society.

And why bother? Surely there are other more powerful performances to try.

Leaden Echoes of the Rural

Enough. Let me turn the narrative around, beginning with mobility research’s take on the rural.

True, things and ideas do seem to be on the move at rates, and along trajectories, unprecedented. And it is important think about why and what the consequences are and will be. Yet there is a curious passivity to how the rural is considered under such a framing: The rural stays put while the flowing tides of urbanization wash over its remaining traces in the sand. Moreover, we understand these mobile flows as ending the rural, but never as an end to the urban. When the boundary between urban and rural

collapses, the urban is somehow still left standing. Indeed, it is now everywhere. It is the urban which is globalized, not the rural—a tautology of space.

Now, to be sure, there is some talk about immobility in the new mobilities research. Adey (2006) worries that “if mobility is everything then it is nothing,” to quote the title of his article, and he wants to underline the importance of the politics that underlies immobility. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006: 3) usefully present the notion of “moorings,” writing that “mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities.” But the point of analytic entry nonetheless is overwhelmingly on the mobile side of things and ideas. After all, the phrase is “mobilities” research, not “immobilites” research or, perhaps “im-mobilities” research.

Mobilities research’s evident distaste for the rural—its third (and double-barreled) killing of it—seems to be of a piece with its distaste with immobilities, and with the immobile characteristics many find in place. To the cosmopolitan progressivism of mobilities, rural moorings are just a few remaining anchors, still dragging the bottom of the deep, bumping along, occasionally catching on a reef or snag, in the face of a rising tide of global fluids. So let’s just do away with it, shall we, mobilities research seems to ask.

But I would ask in return that we inspect the reductionism and the dualism that has resulted in the imagination of what I will call the *rural passive voice*, in preparation for what I will call the *rural active voice*.

The reductionism of taking a first rural materialist view alone, or a second rural idealist view alone, seems plain enough. Either is absurd apart from the other. Take for example the categorical arbitrariness of how a material fact like population density is defined. If we consider the unit of analysis the stretch of floor or ground taken up by any human, we all live in a realm with a population density of one, equally urban or rural. Population density is always the same wherever there are people. Of course, we always refer to some stretch greater than one person when we discuss population density, and, of course, there are varying distances between people. But, as social creatures, we generally live with others wherever we live. And as I drive around my own region—the state of Wisconsin in the United States—I see people generally living with much the same

proximity to others, whether it be in villages, small towns, or cities. The main predictor of density on a house by house, building by building basis, is not whether the structures are in a village or a town or a city but the era in which a given location was developed. Of course, in the countryside there are farms that are widely separated from other residences and for which the principle of eras of density does not apply. Is this, then, the real rural? But there are also isolated residences inside the industrial districts of cities—perhaps an apartment for a night watchman, or a makeshift shelter for a homeless person—and we do not call those rural. The point: We have to come up with some way to draw the boundary that we will use to measure density—we have to come up with some categorical fix—and thus the material is always dependent upon the ideal.

The ideal without the material is equally absurd. It is true that one could say anything one wants about whatever one wants. One could, perhaps, point to the end of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose and call it his "rural" extremity, distanced as it is from the rest of his person, and it might be good for a laugh. Watch out for his sword, but one could say it. But even here, you would be referencing a material logic: that of spatial distance and density. You could also call his quill pen "rural" because of the feather, or even his pocket watch "rural" for no reason at all—just because you want to. But in the former case I doubt anyone would find the point very interesting, and in the latter I doubt anyone would get it at all, for, after all, there was nothing to get. Without a material reference, second rural equally lapses into blah-blah-blah.

Mobilities research too runs the risk of reductionist absurdity. In its rush to emphasize the spatiality of social life, something that social scientists outside of geography had long neglected, as well as to emphasize the evident fact that things and ideas move around more and faster nowadays, it has considerably over-simplified its case and, as Favell (2001) complained, has taken its metaphors far too literally. Reductionism is an epistemological necessity; the only perfectly adequate way to portray some aspect of existence is with that aspect itself—which would not be a portrayal at all. But any research tradition needs to keep this inevitability firmly in mind. Quite usefully, mobilities research unites material and ideal dimensions, going a long way toward overcoming this overlong opposition in rural and much other thought. But then it goes on to anchor its own categories.

One result of this anchoring is dualism. Now, by dualism I am not complaining about binary categories. Any statement about anything has an is/is-not, something/something-else quality, and in this sense binaries are neither escapable nor deplorable. The issue is how we handle them. By dualism I mean when our use of a categorical distinction freezes and segregates difference. The conventional opposition of first rural and second rural is an example of such frozen segregation, in which neither entity in the binary affirms its dependence upon, and mutual constitution of, the other. The “mobilities/moorings dialectic,” as Adey (2006) phrases it, seems another example. Mobilities research typically only makes passing reference to moorings and immobilities, and how moorings are constitutive of mobilities. In this sense, this dialectic is not handled very dialectically.

Plus there is something askew in the basic distinction of this dialectic, however dialectically or not it is handled. Moorings is a passive, even a resistive metaphor, something which ties up the otherwise mobile. Although the *Mobilities* editors state that moorings “configure and enable mobilities,” the implication is that action is on the mobilities side of the dialectic. Although a mooring may configure and enable action, in this formulation, it is not action itself. As well, mobilities research has little considered the ways that mobilities configure and enable immobilities—mobile capital maintaining the viability of fixed capital, for example—perhaps due to the perspective’s general disinterest, or at least impatience, with immobility.

Moreover, the rural is far from only an immobility. The rural is on the move too, as is the urban. There is, then, a double assumption of passivity at work: the assumption that rural immobility is not action, and the assumption that the rural stays put and tries to hang on amidst the raging torrent of the urban fluid. Here again is what Raymond Williams (1973) once called the “leaden echo” of the rural, or what I will call the leaden echo of the *rural passive voice*.

The Rural Active Voice

Our moorings, then, are neither necessarily passive nor necessarily immobile. To change to the dialogic metaphors I tend to favor in my own work, a word has both a history and a future. From its history we give it future, as it gives both history and future

to us. The recognizable is not of necessity the unchanging. The stable is not always static. And from recognizable stabilities we speak out differences that create our dynamisms. In this way, recognized stabilities are constantly moving, shifting and reshifting as we sift and resift the conditions of our experiences.

Nor is the rural necessarily only a mooring. The assumption that the world flows out from the urban completely neglects the origin of the urban itself. The rural is the mouth of the urban. It sustains the moored capital of the urban corpus.

At least I would like to take some time to consider the rural in this way—what I will call the *rural active voice*. Or, to put it in the metaphors of mobilities research, I would like to consider the rural as a *mobile mooring* and a *mooring mobile*, as process and performance that both moves as it grounds and grounds as it moves, actively reshaping both movement and grounding.

Central to this active voice, this mobile mooring and mooring mobility, is an interactive onotology of living. The three deaths of the rural descend, most fundamentally, from efforts to reduce and capture it, to pin it down as a thing or an idea, coherent and complete. Complete coherence, though, we cannot find in anything except through the ontology of the monad, living an imagination of solipsistic denial where faces are interchangeable. We need instead an ontology of constant interchange and unfinalizability, engaging difference and creating it too, finding ourselves in the otherness of the world and finding the otherness of the world in ourselves. For that is how we actually live, and one day die—in incompleteness, making death itself unfinalizable.

What can make the rural thus unfinalizable is what I have termed the “rural plural”—which is to say “a conception of rural that equally embraces the epistemology and ontology of both first rural and second rural, and as well sees them both as moments in plural dialog, spinning out in time into other rurals—rurals without number or priority—ad infinitum” (Bell, 2007). In so doing, the rural becomes not a static, immobile, reductionist singularity, but “a many-ness that can develop into ever-greater multiplicities of epistemologies and ontologies of knowing and being, and of practical politics, in a constant dialog of difference, connection, and change: an unfinalizable pluralism of engagement” (Bell, 2007). What I have understood since then is that such a conception of a rural always in the plural is also a conception of the rural as an active

voice, even as it grounds and stabilizes. To return to the metaphors of mobillities, the rural can be a mobile mooring that does not drag anchor but rather lifts it and re-anchors in new settings. And as well, the rural can be a mooring mobile that flows outward and gives moorings the ability to stay put and stay alive, changing them in the process as it is itself changed.

Such is a voice of the rural I believe we can, and often do, hear.

The Active Voice of Rural Power

We can and do hear the rural active voice because it is a voice of power. It is not the only voice of power, of course. But if we mean by power our scope for action—the conceiving, shaping, and taking of action—as I will take it to be here, articulations of the rural widen and constrain our scope, and thus are active in our lives.⁴ These articulations speak to the material and symbolic qualities of social life that first and second rural modes have long described, but also to the relational qualities of our lives that the mobilities turn is, in its best moments I think, most centrally about. And not just in minor ways, I will try to show.

Material Articulations of Rural Power

We are all rural three times a day, and perhaps more, if you're like me. When I take my fork to my mouth, I am taking the rural to my mouth, and the social and environmental conditions and histories of the food there on the tines. This is a rural that moves, and moves more today than perhaps it ever has, as I must readily appreciate as a citizen of both the world's largest food exporter and largest food importer. This control and this dependence both grant the United States what we ought to recognize as the activeness of rural power. The United States is a mighty rural power—which is to say that much of its world authority is a rural authority, something that the US government is not above playing political games with from time to time. If a significant proportion of a country's food comes from the US, it gives the leaders of that country greater pause in considering contradicting US power. So too if a significant proportion of a country's food exports go to the United States. Either way, by exporting or importing food, the US gains and maintains power.

Then there is the rural power of corporations, which is, of course, tightly intertwined with the rural power of the state. Quite a little flap occasioned the appearance in the British daily *The Independent* of a report on an internal 1999 Monsanto strategy document that noted that “Population growth and economic development will apply increasing pressure on natural resource markets. Those pressures, and the world’s desire to prevent the consequences of those pressures if unabated, will create vast economic opportunity” (Lean, 1999). The document also notes “that these are markets in which there are predictable sustainability challenges and therefore opportunities to create business value” (Shiva, 1999). And not just for Monsanto, of course. Many a company and many an investor has noticed that we are all rural not just three times a day but whenever we make use of water, wood, minerals, and energy—which is likely all day. The circulation of capital is, very often, the circulation of the rural.

I’ve said enough about terrorism already, but let me briefly sketch out the use of the rural in militarism more generally. Much of military power is the articulation of material rural power. Military reach depends in significant measure upon success in mobilizing the rural: the frontier, the DMZ, the bunker, the hilltop lookout post. But this military rural is not only defensive, an active mobilization of moorings. It can also be offensive, the rural on the move. Consider the siege and the blockade, or the ancient military tactic of torching and salting fields. Destroying supply lines threatens by ending rural movement. It can also threaten by bringing the rural into high population density areas as residents find that their technologies of holding the rural at bay collapse with the cutting of energy supplies and the bombing of waste treatment facilities. Military advantage is often rural advantage, even when the conflict is urban.

Ideal Articulations of Rural Power

I could go on with material examples. But more important is to raise immediately that there are ideal dimensions to these material mobilizations of rural power. Take the power of the mobility of food. Is anything more symbolically freighted? This freight of symbols is not always specifically rural, of course. Much food today is presented as products that spontaneously arise, say, “from McDonald’s kitchens,” to quote a recent McDonald’s ad campaign, or “from Nabisco”—not entirely placeless but

with a certain image as originating from the forehead of some corporate Zeus. But much food still gains meaning, and market, through rural referents, sometimes remote and sometimes strongly marked politically, as much recent scholarship has explored. Country ham. Farmhouse cheese. Shepherd's pie. Country cooking. Farmers markets. Community supported agriculture. The "farm to table" or "farm to fork" imagery of local foods. "Outdoor reared," "free-range," "pasture raised," and "freedom foods." The "fresh from the field" slogan of Organic Farm Foods, Britain's largest independent supplier of organic produce. The "real food, real farmers, real community" slogan of Local Harvest, an American on-line store and nation-wide on-line listing of local food sources. Protected geographical indications. Appellation d'origine contrôlée. Terroir.

The active power of rural ideas also manifests itself in the continuing fascination for rural life and images among both rural and urban people alike. A vast range of rural scholarship has explored these themes of late, especially from the stance that I have termed second rural. In my own work, I have looked especially at the cultural power of rural identity and the desire to be a "country person" (Bell 1994), as well as the cultural power of ideas of rural masculinity (Campbell, Finney, and Bell, 2006), from George Bush's cowboy boots to SUV and beer ads to army recruitment campaigns. I won't attempt to detail this scholarship here. But I do want to point out that these ideas represent an active and creative rural that transcends boundaries, reshaping itself and what it encounters in the process. Plus cowboy boots have considerable material consequence, as anyone influenced by the material realities of the United States in the past seven years must confess, however regretfully.

Relational Articulations of Rural Power

The activeness of rural power is not always about movement and the crossing of boundaries. The mobilities research take on place—that "places are like ships," relational performances that can be restaged wherever the people are there to restage them—by no means everywhere applies. Some places simply do not move, and could not move, without changing how they are performed. The character of performance that mobilities research universalizes perhaps is the way the cosmopolitan mind of global civil society

understands place. But lots of people do not regard place as drifting commitments, or at least not all places. And they articulate action on this basis.

For my own part, there is no substitute for the graveyard on Grenadier Island in the Thousand Islands section of the St. Lawrence River, where my five-greats grandfather and four-greats grandmother are buried on a sandy spit pointing south, nor for the density of relationships and people and their performances that two centuries of family and cross-family ties have built in the Thousand Islands region, nor for the destiny of those relations. Yes, I can photograph the graveyard, and bring that photograph to my residence in Wisconsin. And, yes, in that sense, the relations move as I move. Rural relations are mobile. But, I protest, it is different to be *there*, in the islands, among its people. Rural relations are also moored. Yes, all these people could migrate to Wisconsin with me, and we could have performances of place there. But they would be different performances. In short, what I have termed the *ghosts of place* are deeply specific, often terrifyingly so and often to great joy, and often with great power for both individual and collective action (Bell, 1997).

Perhaps politically we should regard such relational specificity as a reactionary resistance. Perhaps we should argue that all places *should* be like ships, because boundary construction is always exclusionary and therefore regressive. Or perhaps I could counter that lack of exclusion is not what makes for justice in place or in anything else; it is a question who is being excluded, why, and with what consequence, and thus is always a deeply complex politics. But resolving these issues does not matter for the question at hand, for in either case we are admitting the rural power of relations.

From Rural Power to the Power of the Rural

Rural power—the politics of the rural as a point of contradiction, as I earlier put it—does not, however, ensure the power of the rural—by which I mean the politics of the rural as a constituency. Contradiction, progressive or not, does not necessarily translate into a constituency, progressive or not. From Monsanto to McDonald's to the military, rural power is routinely activated with little attention or concern for rural constituencies. Rural power does not necessarily imply a constituency of the rural. Nor does a rural constituency necessarily imply rural power.

Indeed, one way to read the evidence is that while rural power continues to speak loudly in our world, the power of the rural is slipping away. It is not rural constituencies which are now the main mobilizers of the rural, but rather the state, the corporation, and the urban. We can easily tick off some cases in point. The failure of the 1980s “farm crisis” in the US to lead to an invigorated farmer’s union or farm lobby, as opposed to commodity lobbies. The recent weakening of farmer’s unions in Britain and other countries that long had relatively strong ones (Reed, 2008). The continued inability of agrarian parties to make significant headway in national politics, and the fading away of some recent attempts, like France’s Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Tradition Party and the Independent Smallholders’ Party in Hungary (Woods, 2008: 135). The failure of Britain’s Countryside Alliance to prevent fox hunting with dogs from becoming illegal and to deliver an electoral margin to the Conservative Party, despite being able to mobilize large and widely noticed protest actions, including 400,000 in London on September 22, 2002, and the September 15, 2004, “storming” of Parliament, as the media put it, which forced Parliament to suspend its activity briefly before going on to ban fox hunting with dogs (BBC, 2004; Branigan, 2002). The collapse of miners unions. The inability of loggers unions to gain national prominence. The continued weakness of farmworkers unions.

And it is not hard to see why. The sharp decline in the number of farmers, loggers, and miners presents a huge challenge for organizing and for political clout. The number of farmworkers may be on the rise, but their poverty, enforced transience, political disenfranchisement, and weak access to communication technologies have prevented their gaining a significant voice in Washington, London, Berlin, and Brussels. The growth of international trade in food, fiber, timber, and minerals helps ensure that strikes by farmers, farmworkers, loggers, and miners remain locally significant only. Plus the regional specialization in agriculture has encouraged farmers to identify with the particular commodities they produce, and not as much with farming more generally. Commodity identification also encourages identifying with the interests of the corporations in the supply chain that keeps a commodity moving off of the farm. Associated with commodity identification has been a decline in the symbolic power of farmers in the face of rising demands for environmental protection and widespread accusations that farmers have neglected stewardship in the single-minded pursuit of

profit. Plus there are the traditional problems that have long beset rural collective action and continue to do so: the dispersed population, conservatism, and typically more hierarchical social relations.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence of just the contrary. Plenty. There is the MST and the 22,000 hectares it has redistributed to 218,000 families in Brazil (Caldeira, 2008: 150). There is the Confédération Paysanne of France, founded in 1987 by José Bové, who has since gone on to stand for election for president of France (albeit garnering only 1.3 percent of the vote in 2007) and has become notorious enough that he was refused entry into the United States in February of 2006. There is the Coordination Paysanne Européenne, a confederation of 19 farmers organizations in 12 countries—organizations like Germany’s Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft, Britain’s Family Farmers’ Association, Belgium’s Fédération Unie de Groupements d’Eleveurs et d’Agriculteurs, Portugal’s Confederação Nacional da Agricultura, and Italy’s Associazione Rurale Italiana. And, of course, there is La Vía Campesina, the global confederation of 149 farm organizations in 56 countries, north and south, east and west (Desmaris, 2008). Writing in the *New Left Review*, Bové (2001) has even called these new movements a “farmers international.”

But not only farm organizations. Issues of environment and place have led to a huge variety of new rural organizations, many of which involve urban residents as much or more than rural residents, and the revitalization of some old ones. Most of these are small and local, in keeping with their place-based approach, and because large organizations are of necessity fewer in number. The Thousand Islands Area Residents Association is one whose board I serve on myself. In our area, there is also the Thousand Islands Land Trust, the similarly named Thousand Islands Watershed Landtrust, and the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve. (The Thousand Islands are in a geologic terrain known as the Frontenac Arch.) These are all Canadian groups. On the American side of the St. Lawrence in New York State is Save the River. There is also the Thousand Islands Association, which works on both sides of the river. The number of such local environmental advocacy groups, of varying levels of formalization, is beyond what anyone could likely count. There are as well an increasingly great profusion of local rural cultural development groups like Wisconsin’s Wormfarm Institute, or the “pearly

bouquet” and “dance-house” movements to revive rural music and dance in Hungary (Gorlach et al. 2008).

And there are also regional organizations like Oregon’s Rural Organizing Project (Stephen, 2008), a statewide rural social justice group which hosts an annual “rural caucus,” or Hungary and the Czech Republic’s Friends of the Danube (Gorlach et al., 2008), or the “1000 friends” landscape and land use groups that emerged in at least 9 US states, with slogans similar to that of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, which is “perfecting the places we live and protecting the places we don’t.” Plus, of course, national and international environmental organizations like Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, the Worldwide Fund for Nature, and the Nature Conservancy have strongly rural agendas.

Something is happening. As Woods (2008: 129) argues, “social movements are an increasingly prominent feature of rural politics and social action in both the global north and the global south.” His view is that this growth of rural organizations constitutes a new “rural identity movement,” and he uses new social movement theory, with its emphasis on identity issues, to understand it (Woods 2003 and 2008). Woods organized a 2008 special issue of *Journal of Rural Studies*—which I have been citing with abandon—on this theme, and it only scratches at the surface, given the vastness of the range of groups involved.

Reed (2008: 209), however, takes issue with Woods’ characterization of this range and diversity as amounting to “the emergence of a distinct and mobilised rural identity.” Reviewing three case studies of the diversity of rural protest in contemporary England, Reed (2008: 217) finds that they “were not about rurality alone but with the question of rurality as part of a complex of interconnected concerns that were simultaneously global and local, personal and public.” But this, it seems to me, is a debate about degree not kind. Woods (2008: 131) himself observes that “such is the variety that the proliferation of rural social movements cannot be read as a single phenomenon, but rather should be seen as the product of a number of different trajectories.”

As Mormont (1987) earlier argued, rural conditions in the late twentieth and early 21st century have been undergoing widespread social, economic, and technological restructuring. One result, noted by Mormont (1987: 562), is that rural politics have

expanded beyond a “focus on specific aspects of the situation of the rural population” but rather also increasingly “pose the problem of rural space.” The relational qualities of the rural are configuring into new identities—new political alliances and contradictions—based on new understandings of the material and symbolic qualities of the rural. The result is a host of new constituencies of the rural. In the global north, most of these new constituencies do not themselves live a life of farming, forestry, mining, and other pursuits that we still sometimes call “primary production,” or have work that supports those pursuits, or even live in rural areas. But there is no less potential power of the rural therefore. The material possibility of rural activities to, say, pollute the water and food supply of urban residents, or to help clean up the exhaust of their automobiles, rearticulates the lines of the power of the rural; it does not disarticulate them. So too does the symbolic potential of the country home, the mud-splattering SUV, the moose and the owl, and other aspects of what I like to call the “idyll-ology” of the rural (Bell, 2007).

What we’re seeing emerge may not look much like the once-familiar rural unions, commodity groups, villages, and other long-time configurations of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, of sentiments and interests, of affects and effects. But the scene is no less rural, and no less powerful, because of it. Maybe even more so.

Conclusion

So why is there all this talk about rural demise, then? Let me conclude by briefly sketching out three kinds of reasons: institutional, political, and theoretical.

The rearticulation of rural power means that many of the older institutions that the power of the rural once supported are gone, going, or much diminished. I’ll just take my university as an example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It has been many years now since our College of Agriculture, like many others, was renamed, in our case to the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. Agriculture wasn’t dropped entirely, but the old line agriculture departments have either tried to ride out the changes by precariously aligning with ever-narrower commodity group interests, or have seen positions, programs, and students disappear; generally, both have occurred. This is alarming. No wonder academics are worried. And no wonder that people at other older rural institutions are worried too.

But some faculty and staff at my college have sought to broaden their base of support by appealing to environmental, food, and nutritional constituencies, sometimes by linking older agricultural concerns to these new constituencies. One example is our new masters program in Agroecology, which enrolled its first cohort of students in the fall of 2006, and which links traditional agricultural skills and people food and environmental networks. In 2000, Iowa State University founded a similar graduate program in Sustainable Agriculture. Both programs are flush with applicants.⁵ Dozens of universities in the United States are considering similar programs, and 2007 saw the founding of the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association to facilitate this growth. Of course, there is no guarantee that these new programs will be successful in the long-term. But the initial enthusiasms indicate that these constituencies are there at least.

Another reason for the dark talk about rural prospects is precisely to build these constituencies and create their politics. Talk of rural demise is symbolic power that helps shape identities and alliances. I wouldn't call this necessarily a deliberate device, or at least not always a deliberate device. But consider the "talking points" the Estancia Basin Resource Association publishes on its website for its members to use in public presentations. This association is a New Mexico group formed to stop Santa Fe from drawing water out of the Estancia Basin to support further urban growth. Their agenda is defensive and I would judge Quixotic and quite possibly regressive. Nonetheless, they advise their members to argue that drawing water from the basin would "end of the *rural way of life* that the residents of the Estancia Basin have chosen," and to declare that "we will *fight to protect our way of life*" (Estancia Basin Resource Association, n.d.; italics original). With language like this, the site declares the group's hope to link together "residents, farmers, ranchers, businesses, and other entities" in the extensively exurbanized basin just an hour's commute—fifty miles—to Albuquerque, mostly via interstate highway. (Santa Fe is actually 70 miles away, mostly by back roads, and probably few local residents work there, no doubt contributing to the lines of identity the group tries to draw.) This is much of the reason why talk of rural demise is as old as the rural itself, dating back to the epistles of Horace at least. Even when not reduced to strategic talking points, such a feeling can be a powerful motivation to rearticulate a politics of the rural.

Theoretically, finally, we should not confuse these rearticulations with the end of either rural power or the power of the rural. The changes in the rural do not denote its waning strength in the face of the urban torrent any more than urban change denotes its own waning strength. Both urban and rural are modes of action and flowing activeness. Nor is immobility of either the rural or the urban necessarily dead weight. We act and constitute as much by moving as by not budging, as much by creating motion as by creating persistence. There are politics—contradictions and constituencies—in both. There are both in our politics, no less now than in former times.

Such confusions are linguistic slights of the theoretical tongue. No, the rural is not dead, inert, or deactivated, a passivity in the face of urban action and movement. The rural is not silenced in our world. Rather, it is we who are sometimes tongue-tied in the face of its articulate power.

Endnotes

¹ I could find no mention of terrorism in a keyword and abstract search of *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Rural Sociology*, or *Sociologia Ruralis*, using the *Sociological Abstracts* database.

² On March 14, 2008.

³ Cf. www.cosmobilities.net.

⁴ Contra postmodern functionalism, I offer here what I hope is a fairly direct account of power.

⁵ I have to confess considerable partiality here, as I helped found both these programs and currently co-chair the one at Madison.

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