



Exploring the uneven geographies of 'Rural Geography' Commentary on M. Kurtz and V. Craig, 'Constructing Rural Geographies in Publication'

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Introduction

How do we account for the geographically uneven development of a sub-discipline of Geography? That is the intriguing question that is raised by Matthew Kurtz and Verdie Craig's stimulating paper on "Constructing Rural Geographies in Publication". Kurtz and Craig examine the differences in the practice of rural geography in Britain and in the United States. They observe that British rural geography has over the course of the last quarter century experienced a number of critical engagements with social theory that have shaped both the subject matter and the frame of analysis employed in the field. In contrast, they suggest, engagements with social theory are less pronounced in American rural geography, which has instead continued to be characterised by "more applied analyses of land use, more empirical studies of agriculture, and more Sauerian landscape interpretation" (Kurtz and Craig, 377). This divergence of approach, claim Kurtz and Craig, has afforded British rural geography a higher degree of visibility in the discipline than that achieved by American rural geography.

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Kurtz and Craig acknowledge that the divergent trajectories of British and American rural geography have been influenced by a wide and complex range of factors, including “research funding regimes, cognate disciplines, classroom teaching practices, and the nature of the phenomena under study” (Kurtz and Craig, 378). However, they focus on the role of the publishing industry, and the different publishing strategies adopted by rural geographers in Britain and in the United States, as key factors in explaining the differential development of the sub-discipline in the two countries. In particular, they argue that the publication of edited collections by rural geographers in Britain has accelerated the dissemination and uptake of new ideas and encouraged innovation, whilst the dominance of regional monographs in American rural geography has limited opportunities for new scholars to publish and establish themselves in the field. As such, they call on American rural geographers to adopt new publication strategies to re-shape the sub-discipline and achieve higher visibility within US geography.

I have considerable sympathy with this critique. It is evident to anyone familiar with Anglo-American rural geography that the sub-discipline is practised differently on either side of the Atlantic. From my own experience, British rural geographers tend to be more preoccupied than their American counterparts with establishing the theoretical context of their work and more inclined to employ political-economic or post-structuralist analytic frameworks, as well as more open to pursuing new areas of enquiry, especially if following trends in the broader discipline. American rural geography, meanwhile, appears to emphasize more the regional context of its work, to continue to be more strongly influenced by traditional models and by positivist methodologies, and to make more use of quantitative techniques and mixed-method approaches. These are situated observations and are open to subjective interpretation, but it is not difficult to see how they could support the conclusion that British rural geography is in a healthier condition, and more central to geography as a whole, than American rural geography.²

Similarly, Kurtz and Craig’s detailed discussion of the importance of publishing to the differential development of rural geography echoes points that have been made elsewhere in geography. Publishing is a key part of the production and reproduction of an academic sub-discipline such as rural geography, first because it is through publications that the ‘discourse of rural geography’ is created and maintained, setting the boundaries of acceptable ideas, interpretations and

² Kurtz and Craig explicitly focus on rural geography in the United States and Great Britain, and ‘American rural geography’ here refers to the US. As I have noted elsewhere (Woods, 2009), Canadian rural geography arguably occupies a position that is somewhere in between British and US rural geography, sharing with US rural geography a strong regional dimension and history of engaging with local communities, but also being more open to critical engagement with theory and occupying a more central position within broader Canadian geography.

practices (cf. Painter, 1995, on the discourse of ‘political geography’), and second because publications facilitate the dissemination, discussion and contestation of information and ideas converting individual scholarship into academic knowledge. Yet, I have some reservations about the weight that is given to publishing in Kurtz and Craig’s argument. In choosing not to examine the wider institutional factors that they recognise exist, Kurtz and Craig present only a partial explanation for the uneven development of rural geography and as such, offer only a partial solution for redressing the balance.

I expand on these points in the remainder of this commentary, which concludes by proposing a strategy for reinvigorating a critical transatlantic rural geography that includes but goes beyond Kurtz and Craig’s initiative. However, before doing so, I feel that it is necessary to briefly posit a number of qualifications to the basic argument about the differential development of British and American rural geography that underpins Kurtz and Craig’s paper, and which I have broadly supported in the discussion above.

First, there is a danger of over-generalising the characters of both American rural geography and British rural geography and the differences between the two. There is exciting, critically engaged and theoretically informed rural geography research being undertaken in the United States. Some of this is being done by established figures in the field, but more by new and emerging rural geography researchers. Much more still is being done by individuals who may not readily identify themselves as ‘rural geographers’ but who as cultural geographers, social geographers, economic geographers and political ecologists are working on rural geography research—a point that I will return to later. By the same token, there is much rural geography research in Britain that is not critically engaged, makes only superficial reference to theoretical frameworks at best, and is conducted in isolation from the concerns and excitements of broader British human geography.

Second, although Kurtz and Craig refer to the greater visibility of rural geography within British geography compared with American geography, I would suggest that the experience of British rural geographers is that rural research continues to be positioned towards the margins of the discipline. There was a period in the late 1990s when the wave of interest in rural ‘others’ that followed Philo’s (1992) article on “neglected rural geographies” briefly moved rural geography closer to the centre of intellectual development in British geography, attracting social and cultural geographers to work set in a rural context, as well as generating a significant number of PhD theses. This excitement has, however, passed. It is my perception that there are fewer postgraduate students working in rural geography now than there were ten or twelve years ago, and that British rural geographers have become concentrated in a more limited number of universities.

Moreover, rural geographers in Britain, as elsewhere, continue to struggle to get their work read and noticed by geographers outside the sub-discipline, in part

because of the prevailing reification of the city in human geography, which treats advances in the theorisation and critical exploration of urban space and place as major contributions to the discipline of human geography as a whole, but fails to afford the same significance to similar statements in rural geography. This is an unsupported observation, but I would suggest that a quick browse of publishers' catalogues, the contents of major journals such as *Transactions* and *Society and Space*, and the themes of plenary sessions at recent RGS-IBG conferences, would bear it out. The bias persists in spite of an argument made by Peter Jackson in an editorial for *Urban Geography* that "rural studies has clearly undergone a revival in recent years and, if the citation data are to be believed, may now be outstripping urban studies in terms of academic impact" (Jackson, 2005, 1).

Third, in so far that British rural geography can be seen to be more critically engaged and more highly visible than its American counterpart, it is British rural geography, not American rural geography, that is the anomaly. Many of the concerns raised by Kurtz and Craig about American rural geography were echoed in a discussion at a recent British-German Rural Geography conference in June 2008, which asked why German rural geography lacked the perceived critical and theoretical engagement of British rural geography. Madsen and Adriansen have similarly commented on the different 'fashions' in Danish rural studies and British rural studies, noting that "Danish rural researchers are not engaged with the cultural turn that has marked British rural geography for more than a decade now" (Madsen and Adriansen, 2006, 467). As such, in seeking to understand the uneven development of rural geography we should start by examining the reasons for the distinctive evolution of British rural geography.

Putting Rural Geography in Context

The Context of British Rural Geography

In an excellent review and discussion of the development of rural geography in Britain, Philip Lowe and Neil Ward refer to Ron Johnston's studies of human geography since 1945 as a reminder that "the content of an academic discipline cannot be understood without reference to its context" (Lowe and Ward, 2007, 1). Through an exploration of the context in which British rural geography has developed since the 1970s, Lowe and Ward argue that "British rural geography has been a successful sub-discipline of human geography, in large part because of its openness and responsiveness to wider intellectual currents and public concerns" (Lowe and Ward, 2007, 1). Lowe and Ward are primarily interested in examining why rural geography succeeded in Britain where other rural sub-disciplines failed, but their observations provide a useful counterpoint to the experience of rural studies in the United States.

As Lowe and Ward describe, the dominant rural sub-discipline in Britain up to the 1980s was agricultural economics. Agricultural economics had emerged as a

discrete field in the inter-war period and had become institutionalised, with agricultural economics departments established at a number of British universities, an academic association, the Agricultural Economics Society, founded in 1926, and a journal, the *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, first published in 1928. Initially, agricultural economists had a state-sponsored role in advising farmers, but as this function was internalised within the Ministry of Agriculture after the Second World War, academic agricultural economists turned their attention towards teaching and research and became engaged in the conceptual innovations of the quantitative revolution in social science. As Lowe and Ward observe:

Many of the younger agricultural economists in post in the 1960s and 1970s did graduate training in American universities, where they were subjected to a more rigorous theoretical and mathematical training than had been available in the United Kingdom. Back home, they re-established agricultural economics on a stronger basis of neo-classical welfare and trade theory and, in particular, a thoroughgoing and highly quantitative pursuit of inferential econometric methods. As a cohesive and well-institutionalised discipline, agricultural economics thus dominated social science research on agricultural issues throughout the post-war period (Lowe and Ward, 2007, 5).

Indeed, for early British rural geographers in the 1960s and 1970s, agricultural economics was the place to look for theoretical inspiration and inter-disciplinary collaboration, and the influence can be seen in the attempt to shape a systematic agricultural geography. Yet, Lowe and Ward proceed to argue that agricultural economists planted the seeds for their own demise with their enthusiasm for neo-classical economics. Critiques by agricultural economists had helped to drive Thatcherite free-market reforms in agricultural support in the 1980s, but in doing so they undermined the traditional core function of agricultural economics as a sub-discipline. Moreover, Lowe and Ward suggest that the dominance of neo-classical economics isolated agricultural economics from other rural research in Britain, limiting the opportunity for agricultural economists to diversify into other more critical fields of study, and leaving them little option but to turn as refugees to mainstream economics as student numbers dwindled, degree programmes were discontinued, and agricultural economics departments closed or merged.

Crucially, though, the traditional strength of agricultural economics had militated against the development of rural sociology in Britain. The focus on economics in agricultural policy denied the political recognition of rural social issues that had been important to the consolidation of rural sociology in the United States and Europe. Although rural issues were studied by individual sociologists, including several key figures in British sociology, 'rural sociology' in Britain struggled to find a distinctive foothold and never became institutionalised with its own society, journal or conferences. It was squeezed from one side by the

preoccupation of British sociology with urban and industrial concerns, and from the other side by the 'exclusionary practices' of agricultural economics (Hamilton, 1990), which resisted the encroachment of sociologists into agricultural research (Lowe and Ward, 2007).

The contrasting trajectories of agricultural economics and rural sociology in Britain conditioned the development of British rural geography in two key ways. Firstly, they meant that as agricultural economics declined, rural geography was left as the only significant rural social science discipline. Secondly, they have allowed rural geography to reinvent itself as the nexus of interdisciplinary rural studies, incorporating aspects of rural sociology and rural economics. Lowe and Ward (2007) attribute the openness of British rural geography—both to influences from other disciplines and to innovations from within geography—to its continuing embeddedness in human geography as the parent discipline:

That continuously posed the issue of what or who constituted rural geography. While the former—the what—caused much anguish at times, the latter—the who—was basically a matter of assumed or attributed identity. Becoming a 'rural geographer' is largely a question of self-identification (and might be one of a number of overlapping identities). As a consequence, rural geography could be much more fluid and flexible not only in its exchanges with the parent discipline but with neighbouring sub-disciplines too (Lowe and Ward, 2007, 16).

The Context of American Rural Geography

In contrast, the context in which American rural geography has developed is framed by a very different disciplinary landscape, in which both agricultural economics and rural sociology have been, and continue to be, strong, institutionalised fields. Rural sociology in particular might be argued to have overshadowed rural geography in the United States, not least because its formation pre-dated that of rural geography by several decades. The first university course in rural sociology was taught at the University of Chicago in 1894, and the discipline became institutionalised as separate to mainstream sociology in the inter-war period, including the establishment of the Rural Sociology Society and its journal, *Rural Sociology*, in 1936. American rural sociology hence was able to carve out a distinctive field of study focused on the social aspects of farming and rural life long before rural geography came on the scene. Consequently, as I have commented elsewhere (Woods, 2008), rural geography in the United States was compelled to differentiate itself by focusing on questions associated with rural 'land'—from the geographies of agricultural production and the exploitation of natural resources to analysis of the rural landscape and land-use planning.

The positioning of social research in the disciplinary landscape is significant to understanding the differential trajectories of British and American rural

geography. Although land-based research on agriculture and planning constituted the majority of early work in British rural geography in the 1970s, social issues were addressed by the sub-discipline from the start (Woods, 2009). Moreover, social research became the arena in which inter-disciplinary connections were forged by British rural geographers, and through which theories and concepts were introduced into the subject—from the application of political-economy approaches to issues of class, power and social differentiation in the 1970s and 1980s, through to later borrowings from feminism and cultural studies. For example, the wave of studies of ‘rural others’ in the 1990s may have plugged the gap of ‘neglected rural geographies’, but there was little question that they were rural geography, recognizably fitting into an established pattern of research on rural social groups.

The basic grounding of rural sociology in classical sociological theory also arguably made it more attuned to theoretical engagement than American rural geography, hence more open to new theoretical influences. Certainly, it was more American rural sociologists than American rural geographers that adopted political-economy approaches in the 1970s and 1980s and forged connections with British rural geographers and sociologists in the new “critical rural studies” (Lowe and Ward, 2007). This is not to suggest, however, that American rural sociology is dynamic and theory-rich whilst American rural geography is pedestrian and theory-poor. Critical research in rural sociology has commonly occurred at the margins of the discipline, and much of American rural sociology today is as staid and as unadventurous as Kurtz and Craig accuse rural geography of being. Hence, both rural geography and rural sociology in the United States might be argued to have been constrained by the disciplinary compartmentalization of rural research.

Translating Context into Practice

The context of the disciplinary landscape is not itself sufficient to explain the differential development of British and American rural geography. We need also to explore the processes by which the opportunities and challenges presented by this context are translated into the actual practices of rural geographers. Several factors can be considered to be important in this respect.

First, the size and structure of rural geography as a sub-field has played a significant mediating role. Madsen and Adriansen identify size as a factor in explaining the different characters of Danish and British rural geography, noting that whilst Danish geography is too small “to afford the luxury of division” (Madsen and Adriansen, 2006, 466), British rural geography is large enough to accommodate a range of interests and approaches. Whilst this is true, it is also the case that the British rural geography community is still relatively small by comparison with many academic fields, and that the intensity of personal and professional networks linking its members has been important in facilitating the amicable dissemination of new ideas. Similarly, small numbers and geographical proximity aided the coalescence of an interdisciplinary ‘critical rural studies’

network of rural geographers, sociologists and economists in the late 1970s, focused on the Rural Economy and Society Study Group (RESSG) (Lowe and Ward, 2007). Initially formed to promote political-economic perspectives and to challenge the dominance of applied positivism in British rural geography at the time, critical rural studies and the individuals and concerns that it involved moved from the margins to the mainstream of British rural geography during the 1980s.

By comparison, the large size of the American rural studies field—across the various sub-disciplines—and its dispersed geographical pattern, with individuals scattered at institutions across the continent, has made it far more difficult to build momentum behind new conceptual movements. The tendency towards inertia has been further encouraged by the compartmentalization of American rural research, not only between the different disciplines of geography, rural sociology, agricultural economics and planning, but also within geography, with two AAG (Association of American Geographers) specialty groups—the Contemporary Agriculture and Rural Land Use Specialty Group (CARLU) and the Rural Development Specialty Group—co-existing until recently. Compartmentalization has been accompanied by boundary-marking and thus has tended to push research along established tracks and discouraged diversification.

Second, the small size of the British rural geography community has been reflected in its concentration at a limited number of university departments, which have acted as the engines of the sub-discipline. Significantly, some of these departments have also been important sites in the intellectual development of British human geography as a whole, including University College London, Lampeter in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and Bristol in the 1990s. The interaction of rural geographers in these departments, with their human geography colleagues and their exposure to and engagement with cutting-edge ideas from beyond rural geography, has been fundamental in shaping British rural geography. Paul Cloke (1994), for example, discusses the influences of colleagues in Lampeter in introducing him to new literatures and shaping the development of his political and conceptual perspectives and their articulation in his work.

I am sure that there are geography departments in the United States where similar interactions occur, and American rural geographers who could tell a similar story to Cloke. Yet, the geography of the discipline in the United States again suggests that these opportunities are more limited than in Britain. Rural geography tends to be present in American universities and colleges that are located in rural regions, which in turn tend to have smaller faculties. Rural geography has not had a significant presence in the departments with the largest graduate schools, or those that have most commonly been identified with leading conceptual debates in human geography.

Third, the different conditions of academic labour in British and American universities further shapes the opportunities available to individual researchers. The

American system of tenure encourages caution among new academics and reinforces the patronage of senior sub-disciplinary figures; whilst the absence of scrutiny post-tenure favours long-term, large-scale studies that lead to the weighty research monographs discussed by Kurtz and Craig. By contrast, the culture of research assessment that has prevailed in Britain since the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1986 encourages innovation and small, short research projects. The perception, right or wrong, that the RAE places more value on theoretically-engaged work than on empirical or applied research has additionally created an imperative for British geographers to write theory into their work and to be seen to be keeping up with new trends.

Related to these differences in working culture are differences in the generational profiles of British and American rural geography. At one point in their article, Kurtz and Craig observe that five of the six monographs featured as key texts in Duram and Archer's (2003) review of rural geography in *Geography in America at the Dawn of the 21st Century* were written by authors who obtained their PhDs between 1950 and 1969. As such, these influential figures in American rural geography completed their graduate training and secured academic positions before the excitement of Marxist political-economy and other theoretical innovations spread through geography in the 1970s.

In Britain, however, the shaping of the sub-discipline was influenced by a cohort of scholars who either started their academic careers in the early 1970s, or who were attracted as graduate students to the 'new' and exciting rural geography in that decade and subsequently pursued academic careers. These individuals, including Richard Munton, Keith Hoggart, Terry Marsden, Henry Buller, Paul Cloke, Brian Ilbery and others, were among those who critiqued the applied positivism of established rural geography and championed political-economy approaches, and whose influence is evident in the openness of British rural geography to critical theory. Moreover, the churning effect of the RAE on the staffing of university departments has repeatedly created opportunities for new researchers to enter the sub-discipline, as did the expansion of British universities in the 1990s, which coincided with a 'resurgence' of rural geography, including a 'boom' in the number of graduate students (Cloke, 1997). The progression of many of these graduate students into academic jobs helped to further enhance the position of rural geography in British geography.

Publishing and the Strange Matter of Transatlantic Knowledge Flows

Kurtz and Craig acknowledge that the institutional and contextual factors discussed in the previous section are part of the explanation for the difference between British and American rural geography. However, their analysis focuses more specifically on the publishing strategies employed by British and American rural geographers. Their reasoning for this focus is strategic, arguing that whilst few of us are able to influence funding regimes or institutional structures, we do as

academics have the capacity to adapt our approach to publishing. Moreover, the focus has the advantage of highlighting the critical function performed by publishing in reproducing disciplinary discourses, with books, journal articles and review essays both communicating the knowledge constructed through academic research and forming performative spaces, in which ideas and arguments are assembled and ordered to give sub-disciplines shape and substance.

The crux of Kurtz and Craig's argument is that American rural geography and British rural geography have favoured contrasting publishing strategies, and that these different strategies have influenced the respective development of rural geography in the two countries. In particular, they note that reviews of American rural geography have emphasized research monographs, often with a specific regional focus and commonly written by established scholars drawing on long-term work, but crucially lacking in critical theoretical engagement. They observe that the same tradition does not exist in British rural geography and suggest that British geographers have tended instead to publish in edited volumes. The format of the edited book, Kurtz and Craig contend, is more inclusive, offering a publishing outlet for new researchers and enabling the more rapid dissemination of new research and conceptual ideas.

Once again, I have considerable sympathy for Kurtz and Craig's analysis, but find myself wanting to add qualifications. To follow-up their focus on edited volumes, it is certainly the case that more edited books appear to have been published in British rural geography over the last three decades than in American rural geography; however, this imbalance is perhaps not as straightforward as it initially seems. Many of the edited volumes published in Britain have resulted from conferences or from research collaborations, and many have included contributions from non-geographers—including sociologists, agricultural economists and planners—as well as from scholars based outside the UK, including in North America. As such, the apparently pivotal position of British rural geography in this publishing enterprise is largely a consequence of the contextual factors discussed earlier. Edited volumes published in American rural geography, in contrast, tend to be more parochial, with contributors mostly restricted to North America, but can be similarly inter-disciplinary with contributions from rural sociologists and planners, whilst rural geographers have also contributed to volumes edited by US rural sociologists and planners.

In several cases, edited volumes have captured the spirit of innovation in British rural geography and have served to propagate new ideas and approaches. Bradley and Lowe's (1984) collection *Locality and Rurality: Economy and Society in Rural Areas* was the first of a number of edited volumes emanating from the inter-disciplinary Rural Economy and Society Study Group that helped to promote political-economy perspectives in rural geography (see also Cox et al., 1986; Lowe et al., 1987; Bouquet and Winter, 1987; Buller and Wright, 1990; Marsden and

Little, 1990). Similarly, the series of edited books published by David Fulton in the early 1990s (Lowe *et al.*, 1990, 1994; Marsden *et al.*, 1990, 1992; Whatmore *et al.*, 1991, 1994) advanced the political-economic analysis of agriculture and rural change, whilst the edited volumes by Cloke and Little (1997) and Milbourne (1997) both illustrated the opportunities for research on rural ‘others’ applying post-structuralist and cultural theory.

However, it can be argued that such publications followed rather than led debates, and that the real engines of theoretical development in British rural geography have been journal articles. These include the annual progress reports on rural geography in *Progress in Human Geography*, which have frequently not only reported developments in the sub-discipline, but have agitated for engagement with new theoretical perspectives, as well as editorials in the *Journal of Rural Studies*. Indeed, the opening editorial in the first issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* in 1985 called for a broadening of theoretical engagement in rural studies, warning that “rural studies as a framework of study may be threatened if social science continues to espouse structuralist epistemologies with their aspatial connotations” (Cloke, 1985, 1), thus positioning the journal as a forum welcoming conceptual debate and critique. Important interventions have also come from research and discussion papers published not only in the *Journal of Rural Studies* but also in journals such as *Area*, the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Progress in Human Geography*, and the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. For instance, the most important catalyst for the renaissance of British rural geography in the 1990s admired by Kurtz and Craig was arguably the review paper by Chris Philo on “Neglected rural geographies”, published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* in 1992, and the subsequent exchange between Philo, Jon Murdoch and Andy Pratt (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, 1994; Philo, 1992, 1993).

Whilst most of the authors of the key articles mentioned and alluded to above are British, it is worth noting that the journals in which they published are not exclusively British spaces and are subscribed to and read around the world, including in the United States. Yet, it appears that these interventions failed to have the same influence in stimulating US rural geography as they had on British rural geography. This observation points us away from the focus adopted by Kurtz and Craig on the conditions of the production of rural geographical knowledge towards the conditions of the reception of rural geographical knowledge.

In comparison with other sub-disciplines of human geography, the transatlantic exchange, circulation and co-construction of rural geographical knowledge has been remarkably limited. There are very few examples of British and American rural geographers writing together, and where more recent edited volumes have sought to engage international contributors (usually to fit publishers’ marketing strategies), the American rural scholars recruited have tended to be sociologists not geographers. For example, only one of the ten US-based

contributors to the *Handbook of Rural Studies* (Cloke et al., 2006) was located in a geography department, compared to ten of the nineteen British contributors. There are similarly very few examples of collaborative research projects involving British and American rural geographers, or even comparative studies of rural Britain and the rural United States. Transatlantic mobility in the academic labour market has also been more restrained in rural geography than in many other geographical fields, especially at a senior level. Neither has the internationalization of major conferences resulted in greater dialogue. The last five annual meetings of the AAG (2004-2008 inclusive) have included 59 organized sessions on rural geography topics, 55 of which were organized by US- or Canada-based scholars and four of which were organized by UK- or Ireland-based scholars. Participants in the American-organized sessions have included 375 US- or Canadian-based presenters and 18 UK- or Ireland-based presenters. Participants in the British- and Irish-organized sessions have included 25 UK- and Ireland-based presenters, and just seven US- or Canada-based presenters.

The degree of separation is ironic in that the British Rural Geography Research Group has been one of the most active groups within the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers in international links. For three decades it has organized periodic meetings with rural geographers in a number of other countries, including six quadrennial meetings with US and Canadian rural geographers. However, in diplomatic terms, these meetings have tended to be bilateral summits rather than attempts at creating genuinely supranational structures. Rather like Soviet and US scientists showcasing rival technologies during the Cold War, British and American rural geographers have politely listened to each other's research, but have rarely been moved to change direction.

The explanation of this lies in the unrelenting parochial nature of rural geography research. Whereas urban geographers have understood urbanism as a universal phenomenon—with differentiations in processes, systems and outcomes explored in different contexts by a plethora of comparative studies—rural geographers have tended to be more regionally-focused in their work and more circumspect about producing general models. This is especially the case in American rural geography where, as Kurtz and Craig note, a strong regionalist legacy still casts its shadow but also reflects the recognition that rural space is highly differentiated.

Hence, research in American rural geography has been primarily driven by empirical questions formulated in a regional context and perhaps have been skeptical about the relevance of conceptual ideas developed in the very different context of rural Britain. Equally, British rural geographers have often been dismissive of empirical studies from elsewhere that have lacked a conceptual framework, one consequence of which is that some of the conceptually-informed

rural geography that has been produced from Britain and taken up by geographers elsewhere has been based on a very narrow Anglo-centric evidence base.

Conclusions

Matthew Kurtz and Verdie Craig have delivered a valuable prompt to rural geographers to reflect upon the practice of our sub-discipline. In drawing attention to the differences in the practices and concerns of American rural geography when compared to British rural geography, they raise challenging questions about the construction and circulation of rural geographical knowledge, and particularly about the production and promotion of a 'critical rural geography'. Their prescription, that American rural geographers need to adopt new publishing strategies, is to be welcomed. As they propose,

Ideas might include, but are not limited to: the editing of 'special issues' in existing journals, and perhaps the founding of a new journal, devoted to rural geography; publication in open-access venues in order to make rural research more readily available to those who lack sufficient academic library resources; publishing in online journals to facilitate timely dissemination of research findings and disciplinary dialog; where, appropriate, the inclusion of 'rural geography' as keywords in more articles submitted for journal publication; and not least, the discussion of other tactics and objectives, at conferences and in print (Kurtz and Craig, 2009, 388)

These are each appropriate and exciting ideas. However, as I have tried to suggest through this commentary, these initiatives need to be enacted within the context of a far more wide-ranging reappraisal of practice in rural geography, if progress is to be made towards forging a truly international critical rural geography.

Indeed, the time is right for such steps to be taken, as there is much to be optimistic about at present when considering the scope for an international critical rural geography, especially with respect to rural geography in the United States. Firstly, the formation of the Rural Geography Specialty Group (RGSG) of the AAG in 2004 has transformed the institutional framework that previously hindered the development of critical rural geography in the US. By dismantling the divide that had existing between CARLU and the Rural Development Specialty Group, which had helped to enforce the fragmentation of rural studies in the United States and encouraged a narrow definition of rural geography, a space has been created in which a more open and ambitious US rural geography can be constructed. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the new leadership of the RGSG is drawn from a generation trained in critical human geography, and that several RGSG committee members have engaged in their research with critical perspectives and concepts, particularly from political ecology.

Secondly, there is increasing recognition that the processes shaping rural space and the lives of people in rural areas need to be examined at a global scale, thus moving away from the traditional parochialism of rural geography (see McCarthy, 2008; Woods, 2007). The globalization of trade in agriculture and other rural resource commodities, the dissemination of global environmental values, the global reach of amenity migration, and the importance of global tourism to many rural localities have all helped to prompt this development, among other trends, but from a geographical perspective the key observation is that such globalization processes have not produced a homogenous global countryside but that globalization processes have had a differential impact in different rural localities (Woods, 2007). Hence, a focus on the global does not mean abandoning empirical geographical case studies, but rather developing international comparative research and taking account of a broader range of empirical evidence when developing concepts in rural geography. This includes breaking down the barrier between rural research on developed world and developing world contexts, acknowledging the inter-connectedness of the global north and the global south (see Adriansen and Madsen, 2004; Korf and Oughton, 2006; Murray, 2008).

Thirdly, there are signs of a growing interest in aspects of rural space and rural life from geographers outside of 'rural geography'. In part, this is driven by political concerns with food security, energy resources and the effects of environmental change, but it also reflects conceptual developments in human geography that are often best explored through 'rural' examples, for instance interest in the 'non-human' and in the neoliberalization of nature. The Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) programme in Britain is one expression of this trend, engaging geographers from a range of backgrounds in inter-disciplinary research examining the social, economic and environmental dimensions of rural land use. Yet, the trend can also be observed in North America, albeit in more piecemeal fashion. Indeed, I would argue that some of the most exciting rural research in geography is currently being done in North America, but not by individuals who would call themselves 'rural geographers', or who have been trained in rural geography, or who are active in the Rural Geography Specialty Group.

I am thinking, for example, of Richard Walker's study of the political-economy of Californian agriculture (R. Walker, 2004), and Scott Prudham's political-economic analysis of Pacific Northwest forestry (Prudham, 2005); the work of James McCarthy, Becky Mansfield, and others on neoliberalism, nature and rural resources (e.g. McCarthy, 2006; Mansfield, 2007), and the wider engagement of McCarthy, Mansfield and Prudham, along with Bruce Braun, Peter Walker and others, in developing a first-world rural political ecology (e.g. Braun, 2002; P. Walker, 2003); David Lulka's work on more-than-human geographies, especially through study of bison (Lulka, 2004); the concept of "rural cosmopolitanism" developed by Jeff Popke and Rebecca Torres in their work on

Latino migrants (Torres et al., 2006); and studies by Victoria Lawson and Lucy Jarosz on rural poverty (Lawson et al., 2008).

The flourishing of wider geographical interest in the 'rural' potentially presents both opportunities and challenges for rural geography. On the one hand, there is an enormous opportunity to move rural research more centrally into the mainstream of human geography. On the other hand, there is a risk that as rural research is undertaken by social geographers, cultural geographers, economic geographers and so on, the distinctiveness of 'rural geography' will become blurred. This is a dilemma that has been faced by political geography over the last decade or so. The 'political turn' in human geography in the 1990s had been led by cultural geographers, feminist geographers and economic geographers, not political geographers, such that although a concern with politics came to permeate much human geography research, the sub-discipline of 'political geography' itself began to look diluted and incoherent (Jones et al., 2004). A debate ensued between political geographers who wanted to reassert the distinctiveness of political geography by returning to key concepts such as territory and the state, and those wanting to celebrate the diversity of the new political geography (see for example, Agnew, 2003; Cox, 2003; Kofman, 2003; Low, 2003; Painter, 2003). In one contribution to the debate, John Agnew (2003)—who favoured the latter approach—compared contemporary political geography to Canada or Italy, a diverse and complex entity in imminent danger of collapse under its internal differences, but more interesting because of these tensions than a small, homogenous state such as Luxembourg. Rural geography must take the Canada/Italy route and reach out to other scholars—in geography and beyond—engaged in critical rural research, if it is to re-energise and remain relevant.

I therefore wish to conclude by proposing three further steps in addition to the strategy outlined by Kurtz and Craig. First, American rural geography needs to create spaces and opportunities for dialogue and debate with other scholars engaged in critical rural research, including those working elsewhere in human geography as well as in rural sociology and other disciplines. Some opportunities would be provided by the publishing strategy suggested by Kurtz and Craig, but there is also a proactive role for the RGSG to play by adopting a more strategic approach to its sponsored sessions at the AAG conference. In short, we need not yet more sessions with titles such as 'Rural and Small Town Dynamics' or 'Contemporary Issues in Agriculture', but more agenda-setting sessions focused on cutting-edge themes such as, for example, more-than-human rural geographies or rural cosmopolitanism, along with the more imaginative use of formats such as panels, lectures and author-meets-critics sessions to facilitate external interventions from outside rural geography.

Second, in developing a new strategy, American rural geographers should be careful not to neglect the strengths of traditional rural geography in the United

States, and should seek to build on these foundations. The tradition of regional monographs, critiqued by Kurtz and Craig, for example, could be reinvented as a model for empirically grounding new conceptual perspectives. Recent books by Scott Prudham (2005) and Richard Walker (2004) have demonstrated the potential for rigorous, critically-informed regional analyses in rural geography, which might find favour with regional publishers and university presses. Equally, edited volumes framed around regional comparisons might provide a marketable vehicle for advancing critical engagement with new concepts around issues such as rural governance, resource conflicts or economic restructuring.

Third, in working towards an international critical rural geography, we need to recognize the lessons that rural geographers in Britain and elsewhere can learn from US rural geography. The strength of mixed-method research combining quantitative and qualitative techniques in the US, for example, provides American rural geographers with tools for critical inquiry that have been largely lost in the UK, where qualitative approaches alone predominate. Moreover, the embeddedness of many US rural geographers in their region, and the emphasis placed on applied research and building connections with local communities, government agencies and NGOs, can provide an example to British rural geographers excited by the development of participatory geographies, and who are becoming increasingly interested in undertaking research that is critical politically as well as intellectually.

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