

# The discourse of the rural idyll masks poverty and social exclusion



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‘ There is a danger that in the future there will be literally thousands of areas in Europe with a population over the age of 60 and no services: no post offices, no banks, no shops, no bakeries, nothing ..

. Without specific measures to combat exclusion, to promote rural development and improve public services we risk seeing rural desertification on an unprecedented scale’ (Delors, 1993). It is a popularly held perception that living in the countryside is an ‘ Idyll’ (Newby, 1980) of friendly, close-knit individuals who are generous, healthy, affluent and happy people (Williams & White 2002) This idyll contrasts sharply to the much more hostile media representations of life in the city with its associated crime, poverty and social defragmentation (Wainer and Chesters, 2000). In the UK, representations of the ‘ rural idyll’ are frequently portrayed in numerous media formats such as magazines and television shows like ‘ Country Life’ and ‘ Escape to the Country’, ensuring that the imagery of the rural idyll is allowed to dominate popular discourse (Neal, 2006). Research also found that both urban and rural dwellers both believe that the countryside environment provides a higher quality of life, particularly for children (Neal, 2006).

The powerful draw of the rural idyll is further evident in national statistics which show higher rates of migration from urban to rural localities than vice versa (Commision for Rural Communities, 2006 Commision for Rural Communities 2006. State of the Countryside report. Commission for Rural Communities, London, CRC 22. Commission for Rural Communities, 2006).

Research has ended its previous obsessions with “ Gemeinschaft social relations” in rural life by offering a more critical analysis of ‘ the rural idyll’.

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It now attempts to recognise the different experiences and varying implications for different social groups to be found (Parr et al. , 2003). These critical investigations have helped highlight previously unreported marginalities, power relations, poverty and exclusions that fragment allegedly harmonious *Gemeinschaft* communities' (Parr et al. , 2004). Poverty is often regarded as outcome where people cannot share in the everyday lifestyles of the majority because of a lack of disposable income or other resources.

Disadvantage is essentially similar but considers other aspects like culture and not just income or expenditure (Townsend 1979). There is also a relative aspect. German entrepreneur Adolf Merckle reportedly worth \$9.2 billion committed suicide when he lost a large part of his fortune during the current economic crisis. He was still worth hundreds of millions of dollars but by his high standards he was finished (The Timesonline, 09/01/09). At the opposite end of the scale a single mum struggling to pay the rent might feel quite flush if she were to inherit a few hundred quid from a distant relative.

A third aspect may be that some people choose to live sparse lifestyles, my father-in-law a retired tenant farmer on a decent pension now lives in a privately owned small cottage in a rural village in Cumbria. The cottage is basically a wreck it needs dampproofing, new windows, has no central heating, and the wall paper is hanging off the walls. He believes the cottage is fine and will not spend any money on improvements. He certainly doesn't feel that he is deprived in any respect. Deprivation is slightly different from poverty and social exclusion, concentrating on the lack of core life aspects such as food, housing, mobility or services. In contrast, social exclusion is <https://assignbuster.com/the-discourse-of-the-rural-idyll-masks-poverty-and-social-exclusion/>

seen as a more multi-faceted process which refers to the dysfunction of the major systems in society that should increase the social integration of communities and individuals (Berghman 1995).

It implies a more macro rather than micro approach focusing more upon the processes which cause social exclusion whilst acknowledging the importance of the local context in such processes (Shucksmith, 2003). The notion of poverty therefore tends to be mainly distributional, while the concept of social exclusion focuses primarily on relational issues like labour markets, social isolation, lack of services and especially the broader political and structural barriers to opportunity (Shucksmith, 2003). It is generally agreed that social exclusion provides a broader and more critical means of understanding social problems relating to poverty (Millbourne, 2004a). The concept of social exclusion is contested and therefore no single agreed definition exists.

Levitas 1999 cited in Shucksmith (2003, 1) argues that there are three competing approaches. Firstly there is? an “ integrationist” approach whereby work is seen as an integral force, both through work based identities and self worth, earnings and networks. Secondly a “ poverty” approach in which social exclusion is related to benefit dependency and low income. The final method is an “ underclass” approach whereby the excluded are perceived as uneducated deviants lacking the morals and cultural norms of society. They are viewed as having a lack of aspirations and are blamed for their own poverty which results in cycle of deprivation that can last many generations.

Levitas (1998) summarises these approaches as ‘no work’, ‘no money’ and ‘no morals’ respectively. Reimer (1998) cited in Shucksmith (2003, 2) believes that it is important to separate the differing dimensions of social exclusion through the varying ways in which resources are distributed. He observes four different systems which distribute these resources. The first system is private businesses; the second is state systems, including local and national government. The third way is voluntary systems including the church and community support organizations. The last system is family and friends.

Reimer (1998) argues that one’s ability to access these resources is fundamental to one’s sense of belonging in society. Indeed some have argued that these form the basis of citizenship. Research into areas of rural England, Scotland and Wales (Shucksmith et al, 2000a, 2003; Cloke et al, 1997; Millbourne 2004, b) have uncovered many examples of social exclusion and poverty living amongst seemingly affluent rural locations. One of the main issues identified by Millbourne’s study of rural Wiltshire was the effects of urban to rural migration. Millbourne (2004b) believed that middle-class movements to rural spaces compounded the issues of poverty and exclusion.

Wiltshire has reflected most parts of the UK which over the last twenty years has seen significant increases in rural property prices and rental values. These increases have unsurprisingly occurred in those areas within a commutable distance from urban centres. Large sections of the rural housing market have become attainable only to higher earners which tend to be the professional middle classes who are willing to commute to their places of  
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work. Also there has been a growth in people wanting a second home for weekends or longer breaks (Bevan et al, 2005). Pressure has also been placed on the housing stock have been from people wishing to retire to a rural environment.

Many of these retirees are quite affluent after selling their urban dwellings. Other commentators have also suggested that there is a growing preference for investment in property rather than pensions or stocks and shares. Also it possible to use a holiday home as a loss making holiday let for tax avoidance (Paris, 2007). Milbourne's (2004b) research discovered two important motivating factors behind middle-class movements to rural areas. Firstly rural space appeals because it is anti-urban. It is distanced both spatially and socially from the negative aspects of urban living and the perceived social disorder of drugs, crime and anti social behaviour.

In another sense, the rural space is a pull factor with the positive perception of the ' rural idyll' with clean air, green fields and traditional close knit lifestyles. Second home ownership can lead to strong feelings of exclusion and resentment in rural local communities (Paris, 2007). In 2005 a local protest group with the legend ALL1 began vandalising holiday homes in the Cumbrian seaside village of Haverigg echoing problems in Wales in the 1980s, when the group Meibion Glyndwr burned down holiday homes owned by people from outside Wales (The Times. co.

uk, 23/05/05). Other groups have such as PLAW2 have also threatened holiday homes in the Kendall area. A recent letter from the group to the local paper stated ' The Popular Liberation Army of Westmorland hereby pledges

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that we will one day see an end to the occupation of Westmorland by incomers, holiday home owners and the encroaching leech-like scum of that ilk' ( The Telegraph. co. uk, 23/06/07).

The reduced levels of social housing have also contributed to the housing problem. Since 1980 the Conservative introduced ' right to buy' scheme has significantly reduced social housing stock levels in both urban and rural areas of the UK. This popular but perhaps short sighted policy has left a legacy of long waiting lists particularly in rural areas (Bevan et al, 2005). Wales now has more than 80, 000 people on waiting lists for social housing. It has now restricted the right to buy policy but since 1980 half of its social housing, around 140, 000 homes was purchased by tenants (BBC Wales 04/12/07).

Increasing the current levels of social housing is a complex process with many rural areas subject to stricter planning laws than urban areas. Other problems can include local opposition to new developments and funding problems due to many developers reluctance to become social landlords. Also the people in need of social housing are often under represented on planning committees, with councillors more likely to be from a different social status (Paris, 2007). Some council's have adopted policies enforcing developers to provide a percentage of affordable housing in new developments and some have gone further by introducing local occupancy clauses (Paris, 2007). These policies have however brought there own problems.

Even in a rising market some developers were unwilling to develop some of these sites as the risk reward ratios became marginalised (Graham, et al, 2009). Becoming a social landlord can affect cash flows and be financially restricting over a medium to long period. However even if housing associations are willing to purchase the social housing from developers the social housing on a development can effect the marketability of the remaining private dwellings (Graham, et al, 2009). A solution to these problems has been to develop schemes which largely incorporate just social housing (Graham, et al, 2009). Examples include Cerne Abbas, Dorset, Hovingham, North Yorkshire and Barraclough Fold, Glenridding in the Lake District National Park<sup>3</sup>.

The pattern of second home purchases and affluent commuters moving to rural settlements has also placed pressures upon the rural businesses and services like post offices, pubs, public transport and village shops which have become increasingly unviable as commuters have the ability to shop elsewhere (Paris, 2007). A survey of rural services in Wiltshire revealed that 50% of rural parishes in Wiltshire lacked a post office, 56% a general store or shop, 73% a general practitioner surgery, 73% a daily bus service, 91% a bank or building society, 90% a cash dispenser and 93% a community internet facility (Millbourne, 2004b). These premises previously functioned as social gathering places for the local community and the removal of such opportunities for social interaction contributes further to social exclusion (Millbourne, p 3. 1, 2004b). It should however be mentioned other significant factors are also contributing to the demise of rural services like globalisation, increases in car ownership and the internet expansion. The housing problem

becomes increasingly exacerbated in 'honey pot' locations like Coniston, Lowick and Troutbeck in the Lake District where almost half the village dwellings are second homes.

This can also make local rural schools unviable due to a lack of students. Lowick finally closed its primary school in 2004 despite a legal battle decided in the high court (The Guardian Online, 23/01/04). Recently the government has announced the trial of a scheme where by second homes will require planning permission in high demand rural areas (The Times Online, 02/03/08). The decline in services has had negative consequences upon people who cannot afford to run a car. The need for transport in rural areas is clearly very important and the lack of public transport or private vehicle ownership is very much a barrier to opportunity which can exacerbate social exclusion in many rural areas (Hine, 2000). Church et al.

2000) studied rural households who lacked reliable transport links. They perhaps unsurprisingly found that rural households that can no longer afford to maintain a car may be seriously disadvantaged in terms of available level of services such as shopping, banking, health and education that they have access to. Opportunities for employment were also severely restricted (Hine2000; Shucksmith 2003). Church et al (2000) also found that the welfare state was seemingly failing to reach potential recipients and the take-up of benefit entitlements was lower than in urban areas. Like other services access to advice and information in distant urban centres was difficult, and respondents were often confused about the benefits available and their entitlement.

To mitigate these failings of markets and state, there was a greater reliance on voluntary organisations and on friends and family (Church et al, 2000). Voluntary organisations were themselves under threat as volunteer levels were diminishing. This was partially due to migration and the loss of young people which in turn was also related to housing and labour market processes. This migration also ruptured informal support networks and left elderly people socially isolated (Shucksmith, 2003). Research by Breeze et al (2000) found that many rural based jobs in sectors like agriculture and leisure were more likely to have a non-unionised workforce and lower levels of regulation. This tended to lead to increased casualisation, low wages and job insecurity.

The research also found that the low wage levels that many of the rural jobs provide contributed to a benefits trap culture whereby people of working age with children would be financially worse off by taking work at minimum wage levels. People not only have to calculate the loss of means tested benefits like housing benefit and free school meals, but also the additional costs that work can bring like transport and if any can be found, child care costs. This creates significant disincentives for this group of people to accept low paid work. This type of work has become more viable for single people living with parents and also migrant workers (Milbourne 2007). To help alleviate this benefits trap it is inadequate to focus solely on the supply side of the labour market: the creation of better quality and higher paid jobs in rural areas is required (Breeze, et al, 2000).

This short essay has attempted to include many of issues that can lead to poverty and exclusion in rural areas particularly for the unskilled, elderly, <https://assignbuster.com/the-discourse-of-the-rural-idyll-masks-poverty-and-social-exclusion/>

children and young families. Many of the issues are a fluid process which is invariably linked to the changing face of the world economy and the affects that it places upon employment in both urban and rural areas. Many of the rural areas that once relied on the mining industry and other primary industries are reliant on government intervention to reinvent themselves and form new identities and economic opportunities. The Rural White Paper (2000) placed greater emphasis on enabling and empowering rural people to take greater control over their own destinies through ‘ bottom-up’ development approaches.

Some of these schemes included rate cuts for rural businesses and services, increased investment in rural public transport, increasing the powers of parish councils and increasing the number of farmers markets. These approaches however have been hampered by the changing governance of rural areas (Shucksmith, 2003). This change has led to a lack of integration between the host of agencies involved in rural governance, drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors, in a “ nobody in- charge-world”. Without more integration, planning and focus the various strategies will continue to be effective only on a case by case basis rather than produce a long term solution to rural poverty and social exclusion.