

11 Some Final Reflections on Rural Social and Spatial Theory

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Rural transitions and the web

When compared to the overall situation in the countryside during the previous decades, the current rural development processes undoubtedly represent a *transition*. They thoroughly change the morphology and dynamics of Europe's rural regions, and especially, though not exclusively, its agricultural sectors. Indeed, as we have seen in this analysis, agriculture begins to re-invent itself as a transcending powerhouse for and of rural and regional development. This is changing the patterns that shape and reshape these regions as well as the wider relations in which rural regions and their agricultures are embedded. To be precise: rural development processes create and reproduce the specific patterns in which they are embedded, as much as they stem from (and are in their turn reproduced by) these patterns. Perceived in this way, rural development is a specific mode of (re-)patterning the countryside and the many activities entailed in it.

Throughout this book, we have referred to these patterns as *rural webs*. A rural web is the more or less coherent whole of rural resources, actors, activities, linkages, transactions, networks and positive externalities that results from, and in its turn, supports and strengthens the rural development process. On a more abstract level, the rural web, whatever its specific architecture, might be understood as a more or less integrated whole of different forms of 'capital': ecological, economic, social, cultural and human capital. If, within this specific whole, ecological capital (and the associated forms of co-production, landscapes, bio-diversity, etc) plays a prominent, region-specific and integrating role, we might collectively summarize these different forms as territorial capital (see especially Chapters 1 and 8 of this Volume).

Of course, rural webs are only a *part* of what more generally are denoted as 'multiple structures'. The rural web is one out of several, often mutually contrasting structures that operate simultaneously within rural

and urban regions. It is the part (the particular ‘substructure’) that follows from and results in rural development processes. The impact, scope and dynamics of this particular ‘substructure’ are highly dependent on the contingencies of time and place. Indeed, its contours and magnitude can only be assessed through careful empirical research, as expressed in earlier chapters.

The characteristics of the rural web are closely linked to the *transitional* nature of rural development processes. Alongside the latter, rural regions are also characterized by contrasting processes, such as (at least in some regions) a spurred scale-enlargement and specialization (in agriculture and/or other economic sectors), and/or a process of overall marginalization and/or depopulation. Other regions witness a conversion into new ‘spaces of consumption’, in which leisure, nature and second homes become dominant. Processes such as spurred specialization and scale-enlargement, ‘post-productionist’ conversion and rural development (characterized in Marsden 2003:3, with the ‘agro-industrial model; the post-productionist model and the sustainable rural development model’); and, alongside these, processes of marginalization and suburbanization, are all present in Europe’s green regions. Their relative weight and specific combination, however, change from region to region, thus contributing unevenly to the specificity of the web in each rural region.

The rural web as counter-structure

These broader differential development processes are all grounded in specific patterns (or ‘substructures’) that together compose the complex ‘multiple structures’ we have referred to. The crucial point is that these multiple structures are far from being ‘seamless’ constellations. On the contrary: they are characterized by multiple frictions, contradictions, delicate interfaces and, sometimes overt, sometimes covert, social struggles. For instance, whilst we have witnessed in the preceding analyses attempts by rural webs to create coherence and platforms of action which produce new synergies and mutually reinforcing interactions (see Chapter 9), it also needs to be recognized that, taken as a whole, these coherences are in many ways counter-movements against prevailing (and often failing) macro-structures. Let us explore what, at least at first sight, might seem to be this contradiction.

Within each and every complex and contradictory constellation, the rural web might be considered as a ‘counter-structure’, in as much as it relies for its energies upon creating a *rupture with prevailing structures*. A ‘counter-structure’ is the recognition of the fact that ... reality is not

absolutely predetermined ... but proceeds open-endedly, dialectically' (Crosbie 1982:82). As a 'counter-structure it is radically opposed to the dominant structure' (*op.cit.*: 74). It 'manages to surface' at those points where 'the faults of the dominant structure occur' (*ibid.*). Thus, 'the hegemony of the dominant structure is denied by the counter-structure' (*ibid.*). The counter-structure thus represents, to borrow the metaphor developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1997), a set of 'subterranean interrelations'. The latter explain the unexpected, that is, what initially emerges as a *deviation*. These deviations, if they are able to grow, can start to give birth to new realities, and a new rural web is formed.

A rural web can thus be seen as a counter-structure in as far as it links that which initially was separated¹, and in as far as it gives momentum to phenomena that initially seemed to be nothing but deviations². We especially refer to the rural web as a *counter-structure* because rural development processes (that are grounded upon and resulting from this web) are essentially *transitional*: they represent a major shift that takes many years to occur and which proceeds through changing conditions of invisibility and confusion. Visibility, coherence and comprehension only occur during, and as an effect of, this transition. We also refer to the rural web as a counter-structure because it increasingly helps to deal with *complexity* (especially Chapter 8 of this Volume), creating simultaneously new patterns of *coherence*. All this relates to the contested nature of rural development: what might be highly meaningful in terms of the rural web, might be insignificant or even ludicrous at the level of the dominant structure. What we are beginning to conceptually explain here, therefore, are the particular dynamic qualities (both new coherences and contestations) of web formation. These are, indeed, built out of the seeming contradiction between creating counter-structures to prevailing conditions, at the same time as re-creating new coherences out of these very deviations and ruptures. In parts of South-west England, for example the BSE crisis in 1996, followed by the Foot and Mouth outbreak and its government response in 2002 (both symptoms of the agro-industrial food system), created the conditions for some areas to begin to create a rupture with this conventional system; indeed to create a deviation which then led to new web developments as counter structures.

This raises questions about what exactly are the dominant structures currently at work in rural Europe? And, then how and by what means do rural webs begin to deviate from these? The strong, persistent and often somewhat camouflaged focus of the State on the agro-industrial model, the desire to maintain a tight regulatory control over the countryside, and the unwillingness (or incapacity) to redress processes of marginalization clearly compose, together, what we might call the dominant structures in

most rural regions of Europe. Combinations of these structures explain ongoing processes of scale-enlargement and specialization, marginalization and the limited creation of particular 'hot spots' for post-productionist consumption. Almost by definition such hot-spots also recreate 'cold spots' as well. These are places which increasingly lose their people and resources, and their abilities to generate collectivities of territorial capital. To these dominant structures, the rural web relates as a counter-structure, a deviation which begins to build a new social and spatial capacity for rural development. It follows here that rural webs can just as frequently arise out of severe and recognized conditions of adversity, as they might out of recognizing their often hidden assets and known advantages.

Clearly these web developments are far from static phenomena. Currently, rural webs are *unfolding* (and sometimes being unfolded actively) in many places. Activities, networks, resources and actors are being linked, at different levels and along different dimensions that, as this book shows, increasingly translate into each other. These same webs increasingly spur rural development as an essentially *endogenous* process that coincides with the well-understood self and collective interests of the many actors that are actively engaged in it. All this implies that, in some places and at some moments, the unfolding of webs is even challenging the dominant structure. We see this clearly in the results of Chapter 9 and Chapter 10.

The more the rural web reflects and expresses endogeneity, results in novelty production, creates and builds on social capital, ensures sustainability, and starts to govern particular markets and to create adequate institutional arrangements (i.e. the more it occupies all of the six dimensions), the more rural development will become a *self-propelling process* that reshapes the rural, enlarges its competitiveness, and augments the quality of life. This ongoing process tells us, therefore, that it is far more appropriate to induce extensions of, and improvements in the underlying rural webs, than in trying to intervene directly in rural development activities as such. Rural development is not to be equated with 'injecting money into the countryside'. It is not a linear process, but a widening, deepening and mutually engaging process of the domains outlined in the preceding chapters of this volume. As indicated, it can very well be a self-propelling process, provided that the required conditions and points of departure are present (or actively created).³ A key consideration thus becomes, how can these mutually-reinforcing web processes become activated and sustained in ways which allow overall rural development to flourish in the face of the prevailing (and often

devalorising) dominant structures? Why do these web processes occur in some places and not others?

The web as reconstituting space/time.

It is clear from our foregoing analysis that particular regions can be highly conducive to the creation and unfolding of rural webs, whilst others might run counter to this. This might be due to the reigning politics, class formations and associated constellation of land-based property rights. The comparison, for example, between England on the one hand, Wales and Scotland on the other is, in this respect very telling. Marsden and Sonnino (2008), for instance, demonstrate how the politics and differential governance of the devolved regions of Wales, and to a lesser extent South-west England, are providing a more fertile basis for endogenous rural development based upon more multi-functional principles, than in the more agricultural productivist English lowlands. Similarly we see significant differences in the political and economic 'framing' of rural development in The Netherlands and Italy, with the latter adopting a far more endogenous rural development approach based upon fostering local and regional production and marketing. Strong agriculturally productivist property rights with their attendant monopolistic/oligopolistic market support and state structures, bolstered by a continued faith in agri-industrial technologies, often leave little room or power for the creation of deviations from prevailing structures. As we have seen in our analysis of over sixty cases, however, spaces are opening up all over Europe to reduce, or at least ameliorate, these productivist and welfarist monopolies and their particular class and property- right constellations. Many key players begin to work within the interstices of these prevailing structures; they literally create *spaces of deviation and resistance* in which web developments and their different but interlinked domains can occur. As Marsden and Smith (2005: 442) argue, the local and the regional in this sense can be seen as a form of spatial and social contingency: 'that is a space for rearranging possibilities which attempt to counter the prevailing forces in the agrarian landscape.' Local' then becomes potentially a social space (a place to share some form of disconnection) for the re- assembling of resources and of value: a place for evolving new commodity frameworks: a place of defence from the devalorisation of conventional production systems'.

Moreover, it might also be the redefinition of regional ecologies, the demographic structures and/or the nature of regional institutions, that make particular regions supportive (or otherwise) to an unfolding of the web and its associated strengthening of rural development processes. The presence of, for example, peat soils, high water levels and meadow birds

that are highly appreciated by rural dwellers and society at large, might imply that a central role is to be attributed to ecological capital and those forms of co-production that are in line with the particular environment and simultaneously 'feed' and 'protect' birdlife (or, more generally, biodiversity)⁴.

Thus, the *spatial* dimension enters into theory and analysis. Not as a 'secondary' or consequential type of variable, but as a causal category that is central to the understanding and redefinition of rural development processes. Space, or more specifically, the rural region, enters the analysis as a set of malleable endowments, complex and embedded geographical and ecological conditions, and demographic processes that can then be more prohibitive or more conducive to web formation. This is why any movement towards a new social theory of rural development must also engage a spatial theory. A theory that is sensitive to the spatialities within and between regions and between rural web developments themselves. The self-propelling unfolding of the web – that engages the domains of endogeneity, novelty, sustainability, social capital, new institutional arrangements and the re-governance of markets – involves the ability to reshape spaces, both locally, and possibly regionally and ecologically. The social ability to reconfigure these spatial elements away from the dominant structures is a key feature of the rural web.

This applies even more when space-time is taken into consideration. Rural development processes and web formations are also flows through time. These result, as demonstrated in Chapter 9, in specific spatial constellations, i.e. in regionally specific rural webs. Through the different pathways, specific space-time constellations are created. In this sense the dominant 'laws' of comparative advantage between rural regions can be significantly rearranged and circumvented. For instance, former marginal rural regions – for instance in much of upland Britain – can now become more central places for sustainable rural development, displaying redefined combinations of territorial capital.

Managing social cleavages

Understandably, the significance of co-operation is stressed in many academic and policy papers on rural development. Nonetheless, the practice of rural development is characterized as much by conflicts as by co-operation. And alongside coalitions there are as many cleavages and divisions (between e.g. 'locals' and 'newcomers') – several of them not simply prior to but indeed stemming from the processes of rural development themselves. This is also a constant process in the complex unfolding of rural web development. It involves the skills and capacities

of how to minimize and redirect conflicts into meaningful resolutions such that they do not forestall the web development itself. It requires careful management (around territorial capitals) and new forms of innovative governance, not only of markets but of internal network arrangements associated with new institutional structures (like alternative food initiatives, agri-tourism projects and other consortia arrangements). It requires actors to develop new negotiating skills as well as technical capabilities, and it relies upon the building of trust relationships which are bound up with new and often highly risky ventures involving the innovative pooling of expertise and capital. It involves the management of individualism in ways which create new collective gains at the same time as fostering entrepreneurship and the abilities to operate outside as well as inside prevailing regulatory structures. The abilities of actors to operate both inside and outside of the web (say between the urban and the rural) are also critical, and this is part of the relationships between social capital and the governance of markets.

We believe that understanding the rural web as an essentially dynamic counter-structure allows for slotting in both sides of the conflict/collective equation. Between the emerging rural web and the contrasting substructures there will be, as argued above, many points where frictions emerge, as well as many interfaces where complex processes of translation and negotiation are needed. The different associated perspectives and prospects will frequently enter into competition, be it materially and/or symbolically; (what are, for instance, the practices that bring forward and promote the area?). Cleavages and divisions might weaken the rural web, and thus paralyze or even abort rural development activities; just as coalitions and alliances might strengthen (and further unfold) the web. In short, theorizing about rural development (or practicing it) does not imply naivety about the presence and significance of social cleavages and conflicts. Web development is about both coping with co-operation and struggle, divisions and coalitions. And it is especially about the need to forge those alliances and coalitions (through new networks) that help to unfold the rural web further. A key question for further research is, therefore, about *web resilience*: how far does the web have to unfold in order for it to be self-sustaining, both internally and externally? We can further hypothesise that the web is only as sustainable as its capacity to be resilient. How is this resilience constructed and maintained both within the web itself and beyond?

The social and spatial bases of territorial capitals and their markets.

Finally we would like to posit what the main conceptual added value is of our approach here. What we have attempted to do is to reconceptualise

rural development as a contingent but patterned social and spatial process and, consequently, as a process that might best be understood (and represented) within the framework of interdisciplinary social sciences. It goes far beyond (applied) political or economic sciences and the questions of how certain schemes and policy initiatives are functioning; or how the most efficient private or public interventions can be designed. It also goes beyond the lethargy of neo-classical economics in recasting both new competitive and market constructions as social and spatial phenomenon; indeed as a part of territorial capital in its widest sense.

Our social science approach acknowledges the relevance of markets, but asks at the same time how new markets can be constructed and reconfigured, and how existing ones can be governed in more adequate and sustainable ways. Equally, our approach recognizes existing cleavages between, for example, different economic sectors; but simultaneously asks how social mobilization around particular key domains might result into new combinations and alliances. It understands and explains the often existing and uneven nature of social and economic deprivation, but refers at the same time to the inherent social capability of actors to become *both* competitive and sustainable. Equally, it does not set the 'natural' (and the 'material') apart, but recognizes that through co-production - i.e. the active combination and mutual transformation of the natural and the social - new constellations might be forged that are both materially and socially different from previous ones, while they simultaneously contain higher levels of competitiveness and sustainability.

Finally, the approach, once and for all, begins to tackle the real social and spatial bases of the rural economy, (i.e sets of constructed production and exchange relations), as a real ecological and territorial economy. Economic exchange and production are based upon the social, spatial and ecological reconfigurations explored here. In this sense the emphasis needs to be placed upon a re-interpretation, not only of the role of the State in rural development, but also the very social and spatial constitution of competitive and market relations. What we begin to witness in Europe's green regions are the beginnings of a more embracing set of production and consumption factors; ones which begin to productively internalize what has long been externalized in narrowly defined cost-based markets and their associated metrics. The rural regions of Europe are becoming new heartlands for this revised social and spatial reconstitution; and it is up to social scientists to provide both further and more refined theoretical and empirical *etudes* for this new and rich 'music' to be heard.

Notes

1 Rural development processes link, for instance, different economic sectors as well as the link initially 'footloose' activities to specific territories.

2 Here we refer to the many expressions of multifunctionality that two decades ago were exceptions, but which today are omnipresent (see e.g. van der Ploeg, Long and Banks 2002).

3 The creation of particular 'food hubs' (nodes in local or regional food infrastructure) and/or the definition of schemes for public procurement (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008) that favour local supply might be far more effective than e.g. schemes to finance particular conversions at farm level. This in turn raises some important questions regarding the future direction of CAP reform either pre or post 2013. We could envisage a more rural development oriented, as opposed to agri-environmental, direction for CAP funds that aims to support further unfolding of rural webs.

4 This even applies in a literal sense. Farming is to produce a specific kind of manure that, after breeding, contains the insects, worms and other (micro-) organisms that feed birds and especially the chickens. It is to entail as well particular mowing techniques, i.e. those that do not cause massive slaughter of birds and chickens (see Swagemakers 2008).