

Introduction

The rural future in Australia and New Zealand: mapping the terrain of rural change

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On 16 October 2006, Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, announced funding of \$350 million to assist Australian farmers struggling with drought, whose circumstances had been declared 'exceptional'. This announcement has many precedents: since 2001, \$1.2 billion worth of such payments has been disbursed to Australian farming families (Peatling 2006). What was distinctive about the announcement of the drought payments of 2006 was the assertion of national agricultural values that accompanied such routine implementation of policy. The Prime Minister, in announcing these disbursements, stressed that farming was central to Australia's psyche and that family farms should not be allowed to die:

It is part of the psyche of this country, it is part of the essence of Australia to have a rural community...Not only would we lose massively from an economic point of view [but] we would lose something of our character. We would lose something of our identification as Australians if we ever allowed the number of farms in our nation to fall below a critical mass. (Peatling 2006)

In January 2007, the Australian Federal Government unveiled its \$10 billion National Water Plan, a scheme that purported to reform systems of irrigation management. This plan sought federal control of the Murray-Darling Basin river system, formerly managed by the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The plan conceded the need for 'structural adjustment' and made provisions for relevant structural assistance, including the buy-out of water resources previously allocated to irrigators. The Prime Minister, in this case, was explicit about the need, and the political will, to 'buy out' particular agricultural interests: 'Enhancing the overall viability of irrigation districts will require structural adjustment...The Government stands ready to provide structural assistance and, if necessary, to purchase water allocations in the market' (Howard 2007). We see here a moment in which a familiar rhetoric of support for free enterprise and opposition to state intervention is submerged in an appeal to national and associated 'rural' values.

As well as underscoring the need to better control irrigation allocations, the plan devoted considerable attention to the restoration of environmental flows: water that was not allocated to commercial agricultural purposes, but was dedicated to the ecological health of the river system and its associated biodiversity (<<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/action/npws.html>>).

A third major policy announcement relating to rural Australia came on 25 September 2007. At this time, the Federal Government announced further drought assistance measures, valued at \$714 million. What was especially significant about this announcement was the juxtaposition of the established drought relief payments with the 'Exceptional Circumstances Exit Package'. This package provided a means by which farmers could receive some financial compensation for selling their farms and assistance in adapting to new business or employment. Such assistance, however, was conditional on those farmers leaving their farms and not returning to farming in an owning or operating capacity. This government-sponsored departure from farms was clearly at odds with earlier assertions of the inviolability of the rural-agricultural nexus.

The political motivations that lie behind such contradictory policy positions have been interpreted elsewhere (Cockfield and Botterill 2006; Botterill 2003; Halpin and Martin 1996). What is of most interest to us, however, are the ways in which this chain of policy events clearly reveal three things: 1) that the Australian family farm has become increasingly difficult to sustain; 2) that this is acknowledged at the level of government and bureaucracy; and 3) that the rural future is one in which the diverse and often competing social and political interests that are physically and economically vested in ruralism compete keenly at the level of political, scientific and cultural discourse.

The developed world and its rural future

These issues are not new ones. From many parts of the developed world comes sobering evidence of rapid rural change. Many rural spaces have been emptied. In Australia, Cribb (1994) asserted some years ago that the rural population had 'tipped' due to the exit from rural land to the point where rural populations were unable to replace themselves. In the United States, entire areas where there were formerly small towns and working farms have been vacated, or are only sparsely occupied, while other areas are undergoing forms of 'regional suburbanisation', reversing the twentieth-century pattern of rural exodus (Salomon 2003). There is evidence in such parts of the 'post-agrarian' rural Midwest of aggressive marketing of small-town life with different 'growth machine' trajectories. The emergent landscape is a spatial structure with economic and social differentiation among what were formerly more self-sufficient small communities.

In relation to these and other trends, there is some measure of agreement that the entire developed world is participating in yet another, perhaps intensifying, phase of what Lobao and Meyer (2001:103) have called, with reference to the United States, the 'great agricultural transition'. They describe this bluntly as the 'national abandonment of farming as a livelihood strategy' (Lobao and Meyer 2001), evidenced by the exit of many farmers and the increasing concentration and industrialisation of agricultural production. These changes are heralded in different ways. There is a dramatic and persistent discourse of rural decline, while at the same time, resistant, somewhat nostalgic urgings to return to former agrarian practices and values can be found (Montmarquet 1989). Other commentators, in describing rural scenarios, look more to the future (Bonnano and Constance 2001; DeLind 1993) and highlight the position of rural communities and spaces within densely integrated chains of mass-produced and marketed food and fibre (Wilkinson 2002; Schusky 1989). The point found consistently through these analyses is that rural areas and rural-dwelling people can be an increasingly negligible concern in the production of food and fibre (Wilkinson 2002). Set against this depiction of an industrialised and de-socialised rural landscape is the description of 'new' agricultural practices and values (DeLind 1993; McMichael 1999; Barham 2003) that stress the *necessity* of a sustainable relationship among rural people, places and products.

In all of this, it is important to recognise the ambiguity and variability of the term 'rural': take note of comments of the form, 'national distinctions between rural and urban are arbitrary and varied' (IFAD 2001:17). There is nevertheless agreement that what are referred to as 'rural' spaces are undergoing rapid and continuing change, including a continuing decline in the proportions of populations resident rurally and engaged in agricultural production, a rise in occupations that are non-agricultural in origin (though sometimes with links to agriculture) and increasing vulnerability to extra-local forces (Ray 1998).

There is no doubt about the reality of some of these trends. To adopt a 'calamity' view of rural change, however, would be to abdicate the effort to critically engage with these diverse and novel intersections of social, economic and cultural phenomena. It is in rural spaces, among rural populations, that these intersections can be tracked, charted and critically analysed. One of the intended contributions of this volume is to develop a critical understanding of the institutional vehicles by which change is being driven. Beyond the pronouncements of politicians lies a densely networked array of governmental bodies and processes, commercial interests and social institutions through which agrarian, financial and environmental imperatives are channelled. The authors of this volume are concerned to map the terrain on which these contests for the rural future are being staged.

Specifying the challenges to the reproduction of the present into a rural future requires a depth of empirically and experientially based understanding. The way that governance both enables and impinges on rural livelihoods, the challenges that demographic trends pose for succession within farming families and the commoditisation of land, labour and resources all form part of the analyses contained within this book's case studies.

The contributors to this volume came together in an attempt to stimulate collective insight into trends of rural change. We have especially attempted to build on insights that we accept as fairly well established and that also are indicative sources of unpredictability and instability in rural transition: first, that rural areas and people have been brought with greater intensity into complex and global chains of food and fibre production; second, that globalisation and neo-liberalism produce new vulnerabilities and uneven effects for rural people (Gray and Lawrence 2001); third, that almost everywhere in the 'developed' world, there are big questions about how rural spaces are to be managed and governed, and how rural populations can participate in their own governance and that of the wider societies they inhabit. There was a concentration of contributors with Australian perspectives, but New Zealand and Europe were also represented.

Most of us accept that there has been rapid agrarian change, but for that very reason we agree that it is important to transcend the customary identification of 'rural' with 'agrarian' activity, or orientation to farming and related primary production, for these developed-world countries in particular. A significant literature of the past few years proposed the phrase 'post-productivism' in order to describe the contemporary condition of rural spaces (Wilson 2001). This term denotes the declining relative importance of agriculture and signals the importance of understanding contemporary rural practices, and their regulation, in new ways. This label, however, yields to the 'post' phenomenon, in that it suggests a framework in which agrarian rurality still dominates one's thinking. Recently, Australian geographer John Holmes (2006) has used the phrase 'multifunctional transition' to refer to continuing change and diversification in rural spaces, whereby varying mixes of production, consumption and protection values underscore differing modes of rural occupancy. This phrase perhaps better captured the spirit of exploration and possible plurality of rural futures, which motivated the small conference in July 2007 at The Australian National University at which most of the following chapters were first presented.

The literature on rural transformation is vast, but remains fragmented and is often consigned to specialist publications and professional fractions (Lobao and Meyer 2001). Why should this be so? The changes that such literature attempts to chart affect us all and the spectrum of issues involved is great, so any attempt at insight must continue to be multidisciplinary. And though coming from

different disciplines—policy and political science, anthropology, sociology and geography—contributors to this volume also agreed on some of the questions that needed to be asked and answered in new ways.

1. What can we mean by ‘rural’? A vast amount of literature has probed the meanings of this word, attempting to identify ‘rurality’ as a spatial and social category. It appears, however, that the implications of the changing character and porosity of contemporary ruralism still need clearer recognition. People might live and work in what are conventionally defined as ‘rural’ spaces, but highly variable combinations of cultural and social experiences, access to information, training and engagement with policy processes converge in new ways to define the attitudes, expectations and aspirations of those who occupy rural spaces. We can assume no simple or even ‘ideal type’ of contrast between country and city, farmer and urbanite, but must understand some of the recent trends in order to appreciate increasing diversification in the formation of rural experience, and changing implications attaching to uses of ‘rural’ as a descriptive category.
2. What are some of the trends transforming and taking shape in rural areas, and how might these condition possible futures? These include, and the following chapters explore, changes in: a) demography; b) combinations of rural activities; and c) implications of greater connectedness and technologisation of rural areas.
 - a. Daniela Stehlik’s chapter and, in a different way, Lesley Hunt’s, analyse the challenge of demographic transition, a well-recognised phenomenon of developed-world societies. Farmers in the developed world are ever older as a group, not simply because those who continue to farm are ageing, but because fewer young people are entering farming.
 - b. What else is going on in relation to this trajectory of an ageing farm population? No longer can we rest content with ‘pluri-activity’ as an adequate label to describe the increasingly ‘other’ engagements of those who farm and those who decide not to. For example, it is insufficient to view participation in other forms of income earning—so-called ‘non-farm income’—as if this were simply supplementary to farming. There is evidence of more profound transitions. The very expectations of many entering farming, even at advancing age, as in Hunt’s paper, and those choosing not to enter it, have changed. Those who farm engage in new mixes of activities and are less accepting of isolated farm life. In some cases, this drives the development of niche and boutique production nearer to population centres, new blends of farming with other activities and the creation of new occupational portfolios that could eventually reshape quite substantially the demands on those who farm as one of their activities. These sorts of transitions bring about challenges to the reproduction

of rural life. If occupations and activities other than agriculture are increasingly important factors within rural communities, how do these new roles constrain or enable those striving to ensure their rural futures?

- c. What role does technology play in these transformations? Connectedness of rural areas generally continues to develop, with more roads and other infrastructure. There have been many studies that have stressed the critical importance of telecommunications in enhancing the economic competitiveness of rural-based industries (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). But what of the changes in rural communities that technological innovations such as broadband can facilitate? Rather than simply a case of technology boosting or enhancing existing economic structures, technology does have the ability to collapse distance, create markets and provide the hardware for new rural dynamics. Aitkin (2007) points the way to some of these possibilities. From the perspective of representative politics, do these changes mean new constituencies? Is the role of local government ever more critical, given that the rural is more diffuse in its political and cultural involvements?
3. What is the evidence of change and persistence in values relating to rurality? To answer this question there needs to be a consideration of the influence of long-term structural tendencies in developed-world countries. The structure and persistence of certain values could be the clearest areas of difference between 'developing' and 'developed' world rurality and its regulation. Several of the chapters in this volume (Botterill, Morris) refer to the character and persistence of developed-world 'agrarianism' and its political and cultural influence—the explicit celebration of values and social forms associated with agricultural activity, in complex but generally inverse relationship to real small-scale ownership and occupancy of rural land. Others (Peace) take as their chief focus related preservationist and restorative efforts to sustain ruralism as it is thought to have been or as it should be. Most interestingly, there is suggestion of shifts in terms of who is able to claim legitimacy in their assertion of rural values, with agrarian values encountering competition from other sources (Morris). Over a long period, farmers and farming have tended to occupy a moral 'high ground' of positive national and ethical values, even if this has been an idealised image. In the context of agrarian transformation, in which many farmers leave the land and the positions of those who remain change, this high ground is being at least claimed, if not usurped, by environmentalists advocating abstention from, or variation of, productivist land use.
4. What are the political and policy structures that have shaped rurality and the relationship between country and metropole in particular ways? Several

chapters address the question of the extent of influence of policy, its long-term effects and the power differentials between policymakers and ‘policy-takers’ (those subjected to policy). John Gray discusses the ‘policy effect’ of defining rural spaces, while Ian Gray discusses a long-term policy and practice of administrative centrism in Australia. Peace and Morris explore the contest for the legitimacy of different uses for rural spaces in Australia and New Zealand, respectively. Some of these chapters look at the lasting impacts of policy, and others at the disjuncture between policy (especially of the recently influential ‘neo-liberal’ kind) and practice. From anthropological contributors, we also receive accounts of the implementation and consequences of policy from below—from the perspectives of farmers and other rural dwellers who critically focus their relevant experience and knowledge on policy and its likely impacts. The diverse regulatory and governmental settings from which these accounts are drawn bring together points (1–4) in real ethnographic detail. These ethnographic accounts are drawn from situations that feature dynamic interactions among governmental bodies, people, values and policy.

5. For developed-world contexts in which technological change has been at the heart of agrarian and social change, when do we pay attention to ‘science’ and technology in relation to rural issues, and when do we not? What happens when rural spaces are in effect laboratories of the latest scientific technologies, but the expertise, technology and motivations for farming are being transformed at a remove from any identifiable rural population? Lyons and Scrinis detail the emerging regulatory networks that could pertain to future nanotechnological developments in Australia. The convergence of nanotechnology with already entrenched biotechnological agricultural applications has produced speculation of an impending ‘bio-serfdom’ (Rural Advancement Foundation International 1997), whereby farming livelihoods are dependent on the use of agricultural inputs that are in effect privatised genetic resources. Such scenarios are indeed future oriented, and the contribution of Lyons and Scrinis is a concrete analysis of the regulatory systems applying to nanotechnology and its potential rural impacts.

In order, the chapters, with identified central themes, are as follows.

Diversification and reorganisation of ruralism

John Gray distinguishes different attempts to define ‘rurality’, as a concrete social space definable in terms of quantifiable measures and as an imagined category or representation. He also presents a picture of the interrelationship at the level of the European Union between continuing transformations in rural areas and in policy, and underlines the significance of a ‘feedback’ relationship between these two. Gray argues that while agrarian (and especially agricultural)

activity was formerly seen as central, rurality has become increasingly decoupled from agriculture, and this has been at least partly reflected in changing positions of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Having arrived at recognition of the heterogeneity of rural spaces and types of activities, and the relative decline of agriculture among these, Gray foreshadows future research and consideration of new forms of rurality from the vantage point of his long-term field site in the Scottish Borders.

Policy and its long-term effects

Ian Gray explores the legacy of Australia's long-practiced administrative centrism. Under the label of 'administrative geography' of Australian rural development, this chapter examines grain handling, irrigation and railways as examples of administrative relations between rural areas and centres. He argues that centrism has contributed to a culture of 'rural dependency' that continues to leave rural people and areas averse to the idea and practice of governmental devolution, and implies that such aversion is a current liability for devolved governance options.

Values: persistent and changing

Linda Botterill asks for Australia in particular—but with implications for other developed-world contexts—why there is little critical public analysis of rural policy. She argues that all developed countries display forms of 'agrarianism'—that is, belief in agrarian activities as worthwhile and inherently wholesome, in greater measure than other forms of occupation. That agrarianism persists, Botterill argues, is one of the reasons for the absence of rural policy critique despite great change in the rural sector. Also, so deeply ingrained is agrarianism that it can remain inexplicit as a ground of thinking and action. Drought policy receives particular attention in her account of the influence of agrarian values on the conceptualisation of legitimate rural activity.

Adrian Peace considers the implications of, and local community objections to, the reintroduction of a vanished wallaby species to a national park in South Australia adjacent to agricultural landholders. The tammar wallaby was considered to properly belong in this area by national park managers and other environmental and heritage bodies, but was experienced as a pest by farmers and other locals. Peace argues that such institutions are ineffective in taking local perspectives into account, and suggests the 'ritual' nature of much community consultation. He thus highlights the issue of asymmetry of power between state environmental and heritage institutions on the one hand and local communities on the other, but also the pressures that have given rise to such institutions and the imperatives that they must be seen to consult and to elicit local participation. This chapter thus has implications for many other cases of

similar interaction and for questions of rural management of competing land uses.

Diversification and reorganisation of ruralism

Carolyn Morris illuminates the historical conditions under which high country farmers of New Zealand's South Island have been able to occupy the position of 'stewards' of the country they preside over as lessees, and an iconic position as the 'real' New Zealanders in the national imaginary. Neo-liberalism emerged in the 1980s as the principal ideological vehicle for the regulation of rural activities and spaces in Australia and in New Zealand (and less consistently, but nevertheless also elsewhere, in the developed world; see Pritchard 2001; Pritchard and McManus 2000). This change brought with it overt disjunctions between neo-liberal ('free market') rhetoric and practice, compared with earlier conditions. Contradictions inherent in these new relations constantly surface against the background of the global political-economic context in relation to which rural policy is constructed. And, as illustrated above by the Australian Government's buy-out of irrigation interests in the Murray-Darling system, practices under what is proclaimed to be neo-liberal policy can depart significantly from the template the theory of neo-liberalism provides.

In New Zealand, these recent dramatic shifts to neo-liberal rural policy (from 1989) were shortly followed by 'tenure review' in the South Island high country. This brought with it the possibility of privatisation of some areas—with massive rates of profit for farmers in some cases resulting from the sale of portions of privatised land, and assignment of some former pastoral areas to national conservancy. These changes have altered the position of high country farmers and farming in many ways—socioeconomically and ideologically. Morris argues that high country farmers' moral position has become more tenuous and that the positive morality of stewardship that they formerly enjoyed could be shifting to 'greenies' not engaged in commodity production on the land. This chapter illustrates and amplifies some of the kinds of openness, and instability, that neo-liberal rural policy can bring with it.

Lesley Hunt describes as a vehicle of change the increased tendency of ageing 'baby boomer' farmers to take up kiwifruit farming as an activity bridging the transition between greater activity and retirement. She considers its implications with respect to farmer subjectivities, person-land relationships and rural occupation.

Daniela Stehlik in her chapter reconfigures some of the classic considerations of 'rural sociology'. Stehlik asks what we can make of the ageing of developed-world (and global) rural populations, and of farmers in particular, from her perspective of concern with natural resource management systems in south-western Western Australia. Concerned with the question of the relationship between

intergenerational transition and sustainability, she adapts a framework for consideration of the kinds of goods that can be intergenerationally transmissible, placing emphasis on knowledge and social capital rather than on more conventional 'material' goods.

Stehlik's contribution importantly highlights two issues that relate to changing directions and plurality of rural futures: a) transmission of knowledge in an environment in which it is ever clearer that people seek 'options' and new ways in which they can engage in rural occupation; and b) the creation of governing structures that take the 'environment' as their concern, rather than necessarily being delimited by other, pre-existing political boundaries.

New technology

Lyons and Scrinis take as their point of departure the widespread observations that a nanotechnology revolution in the agri-food sector is well under way, but remains largely beneath 'policy and regulatory radars'. What are the potential impacts and risks of this technological change with particular reference to the agri-food sector? Why has nanotechnology elicited so little regulatory attention? The convergence of biotechnology, nanotechnology and technical applications such as precision farming collate unprecedented levels of site-specific information relating to land, soils, water and organic life. The ownership of such technical information, however, is largely privatised. This would seem to promote a further dependence of rural communities on so-called 'off-farm services and support'. The convergence outlined above has been heralded by some as a greater revolution than that of farm mechanisation (ETC Group 2004). The chapter explores these issues and argues that a regulatory framework is urgently required. The environmental, health and ethical controversies surrounding the cultivation of genetically modified crops and the sale of genetically modified foods have attracted widespread attention (UNESCO 2006; Lin 2007). Nanotechnology—the technical manipulation of molecular material of one-billionth of a metre—poses, however, a regulatory challenge to which no government has yet developed an adequate response (ETC Group 2004).

Given the high level of technical expertise and political cooperation demanded by the advent of genetically modified crops in Australia—even during trial stages—it would be likely that one or more regulatory bodies would be created to manage nanotechnological developments. The power invested in such bodies would flow from many areas and interest groups—business, consumers, scientific communities—all of whom have established procedures for engaging in the resolution or management of highly technical problems and challenges. Where, however, do rural people and rural lands find a place in such dialogues? Lyons and Scrinis's chapter opens up this wider anthropological and sociological question of the relationship between scientific innovation and the public. What

can be an effective modality in the management and oversight of rural technological activities?

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