Handbook of Rural Studies

Edited by
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Preface

Until the 1970s, the domain within which contemporary social science was being practised was increasingly urban. The role of the city as political and economic hub, and the construction of the urban as ostensibly the archetypal site of cultural distinction and social deprivation, meant that rural areas were being left behind and often ignored. Since that time, however, there has been something of a revival in rural studies. Not only has the changing nature of the rural been comprehensively charted in different contexts, but there has also been an upsurge in rural theorization and conceptualization. Rurality, we might argue, has been put back on the map through a revitalized rural studies.

Such a picture, however, is only partially accurate. In truth rural studies are often pursued within disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries, and the publications of rural researchers tend still to be placed in diverse and dispersed locations. These literatures are also often constrained within subdisciplinary boundaries, leading to poor dialogue, both practically and intellectually, both amongst rural researchers and between rural specialists and other social scientists. Indeed, we face a significant challenge not only to articulate and expose rural research to a wider audience, but also to enhance the interdisciplinary ‘stock’ of its creative theoretical and empirical endeavours over recent years. We have created this Handbook as an attempt to contribute to both of these goals, to progress a true reflection of the vitality and theoretical innovation displayed in the rural studies of advanced societies.

Our objective for the Handbook then is to encapsulate the intellectual excitement which has arisen from the application of new theorizations of rural life, landscape, work and leisure over the past decade. This has involved engagements both with critical political economy and the ‘cultural turn’ in social sciences, both of which have led to very significant insights into the assemblages of power, process, practice and change which have (re)produced and (re)encultured rural areas over recent years. The Handbook will reveal, moreover, not just one-way traffic of ideas into rural studies, but also key moments in which the theorizations of culture, nature, politics, agency and space in rural settings are transmitting significant ideas into wider social science debates. The Handbook attempts, then, to deal with both the substantive components of contemporary theorized research in rural areas and the emergent trajectories of theory/research and practice.

In seeking to achieve this objective, it is important to acknowledge the continuing significance of barriers to truly interdisciplinary and internationally relevant studies of the rural. Not all rural areas are the same, even within particular nation-states. Not all rural researchers adopt the same theoretical, philosophical and methodological frameworks for their work, even within particular disciplinary boundaries. Not all substantive issues cropping up in rural areas will show the same face, even where contexts appear similar. In the Handbook we have brought together authors from different national and disciplinary backgrounds but, even so, many of the perspectives offered will appear too narrow and constrained by their contexts. Any such response to the Handbook represents a welcome affirmation of the diversity and differentiated excitement of rural studies, and we hope that
the material presented here will act as a springboard for further discussion of those differences and excitements.

As with other Sage Handbooks, the aim here is to present a retrospective and prospective overview of rural studies that focuses on critical discussions of the role of theory in the development and contingency of rural research. In order to engage with the interdisciplinary nature of rural studies, the Handbook emphasizes the theoretical and empirical diversity of research in the field, and the interconnections that may be made between the different movements in this diversity. We have attempted to map out and problematize the development of rural studies, exploring the key terrains of coherence and incoherence in the theorizations which have been brought to rural studies, and the critical pathways taken by new research that seeks to develop a range of theoretical resonances from, and to, wider social sciences. In this sense we hope the Handbook will be read by non-rural researchers as well; those interested in the macro-concerns which emanate now from environmental, economic, social and political uncertainties.

The Handbook is divided into three parts. The first, ‘Approaches’, presents a retrospective cartography of rural studies. It charts how rural knowledge, and in particular how the notion of rurality, has been informed by different theoretical strands and impulses throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, and through the transitions between modernization and postmodernization. It also deals with key routes into the rural – the spatial, the social, the economic, the resource base and planning problematics. These chapters provide a foundation for the systematic accounts that follow, and present a welcome basis for assessing how far rural studies has progressed over the past three decades.

The second part has been compiled as a series of key theoretical coordinates, each of which is given detailed treatment in three chapters dealing with different forms and foci of research. This is the most extensive part of the Handbook, representing a state-of-the-art survey of different facets of rural studies. Each group of chapters presents a critical assessment of the different ‘packages’ of theoretical and empirical issues around what we regard as the key research avenues for existing and future development. These are necessarily intersectoral, and they highlight key clusters of creative endeavour in rural research, as well as linking this to wider social science debates – cultural representation, nature, sustainability, new economies, power, new consumerism, identity and exclusion.

The third section, by way of conclusion, attempts to focus on the question of new formulations of rural relations. These we suggest are only beginning to be developed in the rural studies field and are therefore more tentative treatments of imaginative engagement. Nevertheless, it seems crucial to explore new ways of thinking and practising the rural. We do not regard the four contributions as an exhaustive treatment of this new agenda; but they are in our view important new traces, ones which require further theoretical and empirical concern.

Rural studies has reached a stage of maturity which deserves to be mapped out and pored over. It is our hope that this Handbook adds to the resources with which such necessary tasks are undertaken. However, we also appreciate the urgent need for rural studies to remain innovative and dynamically critical. This may involve importing the most recent theoretical and philosophical insights being developed in urban domains, and it may also mean a patient re-excavation of previous approaches to maximize their potential for insights into changing rural relations – insights that are sometimes trampled over in the rush for the fashionable and the supposed cutting-edge. Mostly, however, we hope that rural researchers will increasingly be able to export their theoretical insights, rather than merely accept urban-centred dictates. Were this to be the case, we would soon be needing another Handbook to express another exciting period of innovation.
Acknowledgements

The Editors want to thank Robert Rojek and David Mainwaring, both for believing in the idea of this Handbook and for their enthusiastic efficiency in dealing with it. The process of bringing the Handbook to fruition has been complex and iterative. We want to thank the authors of chapters for their patience and expertise in producing high-quality contributions. Finally, Joek Roex has undertaken very significant editorial support, and has in no small measure been the catalyst for the completion of the manuscript. We are enormously grateful to Joek for his efficiency, diligence and general good humour – he is the unsung hero of the Handbook of Rural Studies.
This book raises the theoretical level of rural studies to new heights... the Handbook of Rural Studies will likely become a key resource on the bookshelves of the next generation of graduate students...'

Gary Paul Green, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

'This Handbook powerfully demonstrates that rural spaces, rural societies and rural natures are at the very forefront of critical social science endeavour. Read this book, become a rural social scientist.'

Henry Buller, University of Exeter, UK

'...an outstandingly comprehensive review of theory, research and the study of rural questions ... an essential reference for students, scholars, politicians, developers and rural activists.'

Imre Kovach, Institute for Political Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

The Handbook of Rural Studies captures the vitality and theoretical innovation at work in Rural Studies. It explains new theorisations of rural life, landscape, and work and leisure over the last ten years.

In three sections, it provides comprehensive and systematic overviews of:

- Key Approaches to the Rural: the sociology of rural knowledge; spatial; social; economic; resources; planning
- Key Theoretical Coordinates in a survey of the state of the art: nature; sustainability; new economies of rural restructuring; power and rurality; consumption; identity; exclusion; and cultural representations of rurality
- New Ruralities: new formulations of rural citizenship; social movements and performing rurality

A rich and textured interrogation of rurality from multiple theoretical perspectives, the Handbook of Rural Studies will be a much-cited, much-discussed and much-used research tool.

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