

Still surprises in store. Revisiting the ordinary in rural geography

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Abstract

Since at least the early 1990s, one of the most exciting and productive areas of work within rural geography, notably in Britain but also elsewhere, has been in «neglected rural geographies». Such work, influenced prominently by postmodernism and the «cultural turn», seeks to build up a fuller picture of the diversity and variety of lives and experiences found in rural areas today. The present paper, whilst being highly sympathetic to this work, argues that it must not lead to the neglect of the more «ordinary» in the countryside today, or what Chris Philo (1992) famously caricatured as «Mr Average». Although the lives and experiences of Mr Average may initially appear mundane, in the spirit of Henri Lefebvre's critical engagement with the everyday, we can often find within this ordinariness more engaging, even extraordinary truths. The paper develops this argument for the study of «ordinary rural geographies» by examining the ordinary, extraordinary, and extraordinary ordinary within counterurbanisation. However, as reiterated in the conclusion, it advocates the search for the extraordinary within the ordinary across the breadth of rural geography.

Key words: everyday, rural geography, ordinary, counterurbanisation, Lefebvre.

Resum. *Encara hi ha coses per descobrir: revisitant allò que és ordinari en la geografia rural*

Des de, com a mínim, a principis de la dècada de 1990, una de les àrees de recerca més interessants i productives de la geografia rural, especialment a la Gran Bretanya però també en altres llocs, ha estat la constituïda per les «geografies rurals oblidades». Aquesta recerca, influïda especialment pel postmodernisme i el «gir cultural», procura apropar-se a la diversitat i a la varietat de vides i experiències que avui en dia trobem a les àrees rurals. El present article, proper a aquests tipus de treballs, defensa que no cal menystenir el que és ordinari de la vida rural o, el que és el mateix, allò que Chris Philo (1992) ha anomenat irònicament «Mr Average». Encara que les vides i les experiències de Mr Average poden semblar mundanes a primer cop d'ull, segons l'esperit del compromís crític d'Henri Lefebvre amb allò que és quotidià, podem trobar sovint, dins d'aquesta ordinarietat, compromisos i veritats fins i tot extraordinaris. L'article desenvolupa aquest argument a favor de l'estudi de la *geografies rurals ordinàries* examinant allò que és ordinari, allò que és extraordinari i allò que és extraordinàriament ordinari dins el context de la contraurbanització. Tanmateix, i tal com l'autor reitera a les conclusions, es defensa la recerca de l'extraordinari dins del que és ordinari a través de les possibilitats que ofereix la geografia rural.

Paraules clau: quotidià, geografia rural, ordinari, contraurbanització, Lefebvre.

Resumen. *Todavía quedan cosas por descubrir: revisitando lo ordinario en la geografía rural*

Desde, por lo menos, a principios de la década de 1990, una de las áreas de investigación más interesantes y productivas de la geografía rural, especialmente en Gran Bretaña pero también en otros lugares, ha sido la constituida por las «geografías rurales olvidadas». Este ámbito de investigación, influido principalmente por el postmodernismo y el «giro cultural», intenta aproximarse a la diversidad y a la variedad de vidas y experiencias que hoy en día encontramos en las áreas rurales. El presente artículo, próximo a este tipo de trabajos, defiende que no podemos menospreciar aquello que es ordinario de la vida rural o, lo que es lo mismo, aquello que Chris Philo (1992) ha apellidado irónicamente «Mr Average». Aunque las vidas y las experiencias de Mr Average pueden parecer al principio mundanas, según el espíritu del compromiso crítico de Henri Lefebvre con aquello que es ordinario, podemos encontrar a menudo, dentro de esta ordinariidad, compromisos y verdades incluso extraordinarias. El artículo desarrolla este argumento a favor del estudio de las «geografías rurales ordinarias» examinando tanto lo que es ordinario como lo que es extraordinario y extraordinariamente ordinario en el contexto de la contraurbanización. Sin embargo, y tal como el autor reitera en las conclusiones, se aboga por la búsqueda de lo extraordinario en lo que es ordinario a través de las posibilidades que ofrece la geografía rural.

Palabras clave: cotidiano, geografía rural, ordinario, contraurbanización, Lefebvre.

Résumé. *Il y a encore des choses à découvrir: revisitant l'ordinaire dans la géographie rurale*

Depuis au moins le début des années 1990, une des aires la plus intéressants et productives du travail dans la géographie rurale, notamment en Grande-Bretagne mais aussi ailleurs, a été dans des «géographies ruraux négligés». Ce travail, influencé de façon prééminente par le postmodernisme et le «tour culturel», cherche à construire en haut d'une image plus pleine de la diversité et variété de vies et expériences trouvées dans des régions rurales aujourd'hui. L'article, pendant qu'étant extrêmement prochain à ce travail, affirme que cela ne doit pas conduire à la négligence du plus «ordinaire» dans la campagne aujourd'hui, ou ce que Chris Philo (1992) caricaturait comme «Mr Average». Bien que les vies et les expériences de Mr Average puissent initialement paraître banales, dans l'esprit de l'engagement critique d'Henri Lefebvre avec le quotidien, nous pouvons souvent trouver dans ce qui est ordinaire plus d'engagement et des vérités même extraordinaires. L'article développe cet argument pour l'étude de «géographies ruraux ordinaires» en examinant l'ordinaire, l'extraordinaire, et l'extraordinaire ordinaire dans le contexte de la contre-urbanisation. Pourtant, et comme l'auteur réitère à la conclusion, on défend la recherche de l'extraordinaire dans ceux qui est ordinaire à travers des possibilités qui offre la géographie rurale.

Mots clé: quotidien, géographie rurale, ordinaire, contre-urbanisation, Lefebvre.

Summary

Introduction	Ordinary, extraordinary, extraordinary
The legacy of «neglected rural geographies»	ordinary: the example of counter-urbanisation
The importance of Mr Average	Conclusion: still surprises in store
	Bibliography

Introduction

The [...] everyday still has some surprises in store for us. (Lefebvre, 1988, p. 78)

The ordinary can become extraordinary not by eclipsing the everyday [...] but by fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it. (Gardiner, 2006, p. 207)

This paper reflects sympathetically but critically on the legacy of one of the main developments that has taken place within rural geography following its at least partial embrace of the so-called cultural turn in the 1990s. Its central argument is not that the direction that rural geography has taken has been in any sense erroneous or regrettable, although there are still concerns with this trajectory, most originally voiced a decade or more ago, but that we need to reflect more carefully on the research consequences of this new direction. Specifically, the paper argues that the understandable fascination with «neglected rural geographies» —and the acknowledged importance of this area of work— must not lead to the neglect of the more «ordinary». Although the latter may at first come across as mundane, obvious and even boring, there is often much duplicity within this ordinariness, penetration of which enables us to see more engaging, even extraordinary truths.

The rest of this paper has a simple structure. It begins by introducing and reflecting briefly on the legacy of work on neglected rural geographies over the last 15 years. It then proceeds to argue the case for the continued study of Philo's (1992) caricatured «Mr Average». The major section of the paper elaborates on this proposal by examining what it terms the ordinary, the extraordinary, and the extraordinary ordinary within one widely studied rural phenomenon, namely counterurbanisation. Finally, the brief conclusion reiterates a more general advocacy of seeking this extraordinary within the ordinary across the breadth of rural geography.

The legacy of «neglected rural geographies»

A review of British rural geography by the present author a decade ago (Halfacree, 1997) argued that there had been a strong revival in the sub-discipline since the mid 1980s. It suggested this had been spurred on by factors such as the general population's increasing engagement with and interest in rural areas through residence, leisure, media, etc.; a growth in «green» consciousness, which almost inevitably takes a «rural» focus (Halfacree, 2003a); and a degree of positive feedback, whereby growing work and popularity in the subject spurs on more work, increases its popularity further, etc. On top of this, it could have noted the intellectual impetus provided by an accelerated rural restructuring in the global North (Woods, 2005). More than all of this, though, it was through embracing new ideas from social theory, initially quite «slothful and grudging» (Cloke, 1989, p. 164) in the case of political economy but then

much more enthusiastically in the case of postmodernism, that transformed rural geography from a dowdy and unloved «Cinderella» (Cloke, 1980, p.192) to becoming arguably one of the belles of the geography ball.

As suggested, one of the key elements of this revived British rural geography was its embracing of postmodernism. This can be seen as a part of the cultural turn that took place within human geography generally at that time, which Cloke (2000, p. 143) summarises as «a shorthand highlighting how human geography in the 1990s has seen a number of attempts to address the neglect of cultural processes apparent in the political-economic approaches of the 1980s». The assemblage of this enhanced cultural sensitivity, a sub-discipline looking for a metaphorical handle to boost itself forwards, and a set of willing and enthusiastic researchers and writers, synergised strongly in recognition of and response to the idea of «neglected rural geographies».

The key naming, shaming, framing and catalysing document here was something as modest as an extended 1992 book review published by Cloke's then colleague at St David's University College, Lampeter, Chris Philo. Through this review of the radical planning academic Colin Ward's (1990) *The Child in the Country*, the social-cultural-historical geographer Philo was able to reflect upon rural geography from the more lofty perspective of a relative outsider. Sensitised by the cultural turn, he concluded that «the treatment of rural people [...] all too rarely allows more than a "pallid skeleton" to emerge of these people and of their worlds» (Philo, 1992, p. 200). Specifically:

[...] rural studies in general and rural geography in particular have all too rarely taken as *an explicit point of departure* the variegated human constituents of rural areas... nor sought at all systematically to reconstruct their associated geographies. (Philo, 1992, p. 200, my emphasis)

Consequently, in what is now a seminal passage:

[...] there remains a danger of portraying British rural people [...] as all being «Mr Averages»: as being men in employment, earning enough to live, white and probably English, straight and somehow without sexuality, able in body and sound in mind, and devoid of any other quirks of (say) religious belief or political affiliation. This is to reduce the real complexity of the rural population to the «same», and to turn a blind eye to the presence of all manner of «other» human groupings within this population. (Philo, 1992, p. 200)

Although Philo acknowledged «numerous works of rural sociology and maybe too studies of rural geography [...] which effectively enquire into the "otherness" of "other" rural lives» (Philo, 1992, p. 202), the challenge was to consolidate and develop this material under the postmodern umbrella of irreducible diversity and difference. Moreover, this difference was not to be seen as necessarily «problematic», as with material inequalities by class highlighted through the political economy approach, for example (Cloke, 1989), but as a cause for celebration as neglect is turned into engagement (Philo, 1992, p.202).

Philo's paper, reinforced by subsequent reworkings by himself (Philo, 1997) and others (Cloke, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, 1997), had an immediate impact on rural geography, realigning ongoing PhD theses and other research, stimulating numerous conference sessions, and rapidly leading to publications documenting the «neglected rural geographies» that Ward's book had pioneered (see the collections Cloke and Little, 1997; Milbourne, 1997a). An indication of the range of these studies is given in table 1. Note that this table embraces work undertaken prior to 1992, acknowledging how the spirit of Philo's call was, as he recognised, active well before his review was published; particularly notable here was feminist work in rural studies (see Little, 1986).

Table 1 also tries to suggest that the wheel of rural geography may have moved a metaphorical full turn, as it ends with the suggestion that the lives and experiences of Mr Average may itself now be something of a «neglected

Table 1. The range of rural others

Women

Ethnic minorities

Travellers

Children / youth

The elderly

Gay people

The disabled

Religious minorities

Psychopaths

«Indigenous» people

Homeless

«Low impact» settlers

Crofters

...

Animals

...

The poor / working class

...

(Small) Farmers?

Hunters?

...

«Mr Average»

N. B.: For one indicative reference for each example, see original article.

Source: simplified from (Halfacree, 2003b). Table 7.2.

rural geography», with so much interest and attention having been directed elsewhere over the past 15 years. This builds on worries voiced loudly early on by Cloke (1993, 1997a) that the previously key theme in British rural geography of poverty or deprivation had become less fashionable a topic of research, in spite of it being as prevalent and debilitating in rural areas as ever (Cloke, 1997b; Milbourne, 1997b).

The remainder of the present paper does not seek to review the «neglected rural geographies» canon nor to adjudicate on whether Mr Average has indeed been abandoned by British rural geographers but instead reflects on why any neglect of Mr Average should certainly be regretted. It does this on top of the immediate (and obvious) retort that any such neglect would clearly be grossly negligent, given the supposed commonplace of Mr Average in rural areas and the usual academic desire for comprehensiveness of coverage.

The importance of Mr Average

There are at least two more conceptual reasons why the lives of Mr Average necessitate ongoing close scrutiny by researchers.

1. Power

Whilst being sympathetic to Philo's call for greater recognition to be given to the diversity of rural lives, a subsequent paper by Jon Murdoch and Andy Pratt (1993), calling more generally for a thoroughly postmodern rural studies, argued that just concerning oneself with outlining and exploring «diversity» ran the danger of overlooking and ignoring the constitution and playing out of power relations within rural areas. This is because «Some rural experiences [...] work powerfully to subsume others» (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, p. 425) and thus merely (*sic*) to construct a *bricolage* (Murdoch and Pratt, 1997, p. 55) of «rurality» from various Others would fail to recognise this «topography of power» (Murdoch and Pratt, 1997). Instead, we must consider *which* rural experiences are dominant in a particular place and at a particular time, *how* dominance is achieved (power is seen as an outcome not as an inherent property), and the *consequences* of such dominance (Halfacree, 2003b).

Although there are extensive and ongoing debates about the nature of power in our society that cannot be considered here, accepting that we presently live in a capitalist society immediately suggests one of the main axes through which power is expressed: class. On top of this, the continued pervasiveness of forms of patriarchy and racism within society implicate gender and ethnicity in this expression, too. So, Philo's Mr Average —*inter alia*, a middle class, male, white person— can be expected to be a key agent in subsuming Other rural experiences: «Middle-class power plays the lead [and] the “others” are bit part actors in this scene» (Cloke, 1997a, p. 375). Very simply, therefore, Mr Average is much much too large an «elephant in the room» to be discounted in any perspective concerned with the expression of power in rural areas.

2. *The ordinary*

The association of Mr Average with issues of power is largely recognised and accepted by most rural researchers. However, the constitution and expression of power is not the only thing of importance for such researchers and is not the sole issue at the root of rural lives and experiences. There is much more to be said for the study of the most «ordinary» of everyday lives in the countryside.

Rewinding my argument slightly, recent years have seen an upsurge in studies of the ordinariness of everyday life generally (for example, Eyles, 1989; Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). The reasons for this are wide-ranging but include a perception that the ordinariness of ordinary lives actually has much more to tell us than just what seems obvious and banal. In other words, elements of everyday life are *duplicitous*, with much of their seeming openness and lack of guile being profoundly misleading. For some analysts, these elements can be seen not (only) to reinforce the status quo —as is the commonplace, even commonsense, interpretation (and as might be assumed from the linking of the ordinary with power, for example)— but to express an implicit social critique. In this spirit, as long ago as 1947, Henri Lefebvre, in his challenge to the alienation of everyday life in capitalist society, asserted that we must:

[...] search documents and works [...] for evidence that a consciousness of alienation is being born, however indirectly, and that an effort towards «dis-alienation», no matter how oblique and obscure, has begun. (Lefebvre, 1991 [1947], p. 66)

In short, we should acknowledge multiple, quite often contradictory, readings of the most mundane of phenomena —«leisure» for Lefebvre, for example (Gardiner, 2006). Patrick Wright (1985, p. 78) expressed this claim especially well with respect to «heritage»:

Like the utopianism from which it draws, national heritage involves positive energies which certainly can't be written off as ideology. It engages hopes, dissatisfactions, feelings of tradition and freedom, but it tends to do so in a way that diverts these potentially disruptive energies into the separate and regulated spaces of stately display.

In summary, focusing only on Others, the «exotic» or the *extraordinary* within the rural —some of which may, of course, express a fairly explicit radical agenda (Halfacree, 2007a)— runs the danger that any potentially radical messages within the much more commonplace mainstream may be missed. Therefore, a focus on the *ordinary*, not so much for its ordinariness, although this in itself is worthwhile and interesting, can reveal signs of any potentially radical *extraordinary ordinary* contained therein.

The remainder of this paper narrows the focus in making the case for the study of the ordinary and extraordinary ordinary of Mr Average within rural

geography by concentrating on «his» (*sic*) expression in the widespread and diverse phenomenon of «counterurbanisation» (for example, Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Champion, 1989; Halfacree, 2006c). Whilst the general argument made here also applies to other aspects of rural life and change today, counterurbanisation is an excellent example to focus on as it is so central a dynamic for the population restructuring that rural areas are experiencing, both in Britain and, of course, much further afield (Cloke and Goodwin, 1992; Woods, 2005).

Ordinary, extraordinary, extraordinary ordinary: the example of counterurbanisation

Ordinary perspectives...

There are two ways in which we have «ordinary» perspectives on counterurbanisation. First, there is the way in which it is typically understood, even within academia, which has made it something of a fixed category. Second, and in many ways challenging the latter's (implicit) stereotyping, there is evidence that suggests how those involved in counterurbanisation are very «ordinary» people.

An established, accepted category

Nearly a decade ago, the leading British researcher into counterurbanisation, Tony Champion (1998), talked of «the counterurbanisation story», a tale that was now entering its third decade. This story had developed to try to account for the negative correlation between settlement size and population growth (Fielding, 1982) that had emerged from the 1960s in many European countries and replaced the previous opposite urbanisation relationship (Champion, 1989). Champion went on to conclude that the unevenness of counterurbanisation today in a number of dimensions (geography, involvement, motivation, etc.), in particular, «would seem to ensure the continuation of the [...] story» (Champion, 1998, p. 25). However, although this metaphor of the story suggests an inherent openness for plot development, as I have argued in a number of places (Halfacree, 2001, 2006c, 2007b), there is also a sense in which the tale can all too easily come across as having all been told and is now subject merely to endless re-telling.

For example, in October 2006, the first report of England's new Rural Advocate pinpointed the role played by migration in a rural England in transition. Specifically, he noted how the «net flow of people [into rural England] is changing the nature of rural society in some significant ways, primarily because many of the people moving in tend to be more affluent than local residents» (Burgess, 2006, p. 5). This almost taken-for-granted presentation of wealthier people moving to rural areas is by far the dominant image (Halfacree, 2006c), certainly in Britain, of the process of counterurbanisation. Indeed, this relatively passive interpretation of counterurbanisation is also

reflected in academic publications. For example, in the marker-setting *Handbook of Rural Studies*, Murdoch (2006, p. 177) spoke generally of «a propensity on the part of more and more households to leave the city in search of a better life in the countryside [...] [a process that has] changed the character of rural communities and rural society».

Overall, counterurbanisation is now typically seen as a process that reached its zenith in the late 20th century but, in spite of frequent rumours of its substantive demise (Champion, 1998), it has carried on as a major demographic trend into the present period. Thus, in Mike Woods's (2005) *Rural Geography*, of the 19 page chapter on «social and demographic change», 13 pages directly concern themselves with counterurbanisation and the rest focus on the closely related topics of class recomposition, gentrification and second homes. For population geography, too, counterurbanisation shifts from no explicit attention in Huw Jones's original *Population Geography* (1981), to a section of its own in the second edition (Jones, 1990), to assuming a key role in texts such as Boyle, Halfacree and Robinson (1998), but down-shifting to a declining or perhaps taken-for-granted status in Adrian Bailey's (2005) *Population Geography*.

Elsewhere in the academic literature, the once fervent effort to try and converge on a more precise empirically-rooted definition of counterurbanisation (for example, Dean *et al.*, 1984; Robert and Randolph, 1983) —notwithstanding Fielding's (1982) neat empirical relationship of a negative correlation between settlement size and population growth— charts a similar course. Debates about the importance of deconcentration versus decentralisation, spillover versus clean-break, etc. are still replayed but lack of any conclusive resolution (*cf.* Halfacree, 1994) vindicates, if only by default, the clear and plausible but not that academically precise definition given by Burgess and others. Thus can counterurbanisation now be seen as something very «ordinary».

Ordinary people

Counterurbanisation can also be seen as ordinary through consideration of the people involved in moving to rural areas to live. For example, in spite of a strong intellectual struggle to link counterurbanisation to social class constitution issues —notably service class identity (for example, Urry, 1995)— a short paper in *Town and Country Planning* in 1989 made the telling point that the authors' research had found counterurbanisers to be «ordinary» people, such that, in a telling phrase, «counterurbanisation is a phenomenon of the masses» (Bolton and Chalkley, 1989, p. 250). This was reiterated in my own PhD research in England (Halfacree, 1992): although there was a clear middle class bias, plenty of more working class people clearly fitted into the category «counterurbaniser», and class generalisation was consequently unsatisfactory and elusive. This diversity in the social and economic characteristics of people moving to the countryside was also found in the comprehensive 1990s Rural Lifestyles Project (for example, Cloke, Milbourne and Thomas, 1994; Cloke,

Goodwin and Milbourne, 1997). Thus, once again, can we see counterurbanisation as something fundamentally ordinary.

Of course, this second ordinariness perspective, at first sight, challenges the previous one, which retains the class character of counterurbanisation often quite explicitly. This paradox can be resolved by noting that whilst all social groups *are* reflected in counterurbanisation, actually being able to become a counterurbaniser —having the various requisite resources— is much more of a practical option for those from more middle class backgrounds, due to their generally greater assets, not least financial, and their often pro-rural cultural dispositions (Thrift, 1989).

Extraordinary perspectives...

Extraordinary perspectives on counterurbanisation challenge both of its ordinary dimensions in that they reject the narrow characterisation of the phenomenon that has come to predominate in the counterurbanisation story and instead pull out more «unusual» counterurbanisation experiences. They pick apart its Mr Average veneer. There is an attempt to open up what is commonly meant by counterurbanisation and challenge our taken-for-granted understandings. Thus, we may see what may be termed «neglected counterurbanisation» in such groups as international labour migrants moving to rural areas of Britain to undertake agricultural work (Halfacree, 2007b) or various attempts to «drop out» of contemporary society represented either by more communal living —religious (Talbot, 1996), «alternative» (Halfacree, 2006a; Meijering, Huigen and van Hoven, 2007), sexuality based (Valentine, 1997)— or through more individual expression (Holloway, 2000; Smith, 2007). Even groups such as the controversial militia movement in the USA (Kimmel and Ferber, 2000) could be included here. All of these counterurbanisers (*sic*) may be included, for example, within statistical accounts of counterurbanisation but their experiences, intentions, etc. tend to become overwhelmed by those of the majority, simply because they are few in number. In adopting extraordinary perspectives, in contrast, we try to draw these Others out.

For example, my own work has focused on one of these extraordinary counterurbanisation groups, namely the «marginal settlers» (for example, Halfacree, 1999, 2001, 2006a, 2007a) who seek to «create their own livelihoods by taking over marginal land for new farming ventures, by living in temporary housing or by starting up sustainable communities» (Chapter 7, 2000, p. 2). Such groups fit very well the idea of a neglected rural geography, not least in terms of their presentation, through both ideas and actions, of a very different vision for the countryside than that expressed either by more mainstream (ordinary) counterurbanisers or other rural groups, such as intensive agriculturalists (Halfacree, 2007a). Indeed, adapting a dialectical perspective, such is their extraordinariness that it is sometimes best *not* to see them in the counterurbanisation category at all, not least because keeping this group outside can be used explicitly to «contradict “counterurbanisation”’s class character, its association

with the material practice of house purchase, its belief in the privatised ideology of the rural idyll, etc.» (Halfacree, 2001, p. 407). A strategy such as this is typical of the political way in which neglected rural geographies in general have been deployed politically: from feminist perspectives challenging rural androcentrism, to ethnic minority experiences challenging hidden racism.

Extraordinary ordinary perspectives...

The extraordinary groups and individuals, albeit to a greater or lesser extent—as it must be noted that not all have the clear and predominant radical ideological, political or lifestyle focus of the marginal settlers—challenge the «comfortable» ordinary perspectives on counterurbanisation directly. However, this dualistic perspective of ordinary versus extraordinary can itself be challenged if we look again and this time slightly differently at the ordinary counterurbanisers. In particular, we can focus on them via the topic which has for a long time been a key interest in my work, namely what lies at the heart of migrants' desires to live in a rural area. When we consider this, we can get a sense of the extraordinary ordinary within counterurbanisation, which, from earlier, speaks both of Lefebvre's desire for disalienation and of Wright's quasi-utopian hopes, dissatisfactions, traditions and freedoms. It also positions the rural as a space of «freedom» (Jones, 1997; Neal and Walters, 2007), instead of it inhabiting its more usual conventional conformist conservative location.

Although such material factors as the changing spatial division of labour (Fielding, 1982, 1998) have essential and explicit roles to play in explaining counterurbanisation, what Moseley (1984) simply but usefully termed «people-led» explanations are apparent within most counterurbanisation moves (Halfacree, 1994). This is because, especially given the prevalence of often quite long-distance commuting, counterurbanisers—especially if middle class, and the majority are, as already noted—usually have considerable locational leeway in deciding exactly where to live. Within these more agency-centered explanations, the perceived attractions of the rural environment, as expressed through both rural representations (Halfacree, 1994) and more embodied encounters with rurality (Halfacree forthcoming)—involving physical, social

Table 2. Summary importance of the rural character of destination to urban-to-rural movers

	Percentage citing
Extremely important	48
Important	29
Somewhat important	15
Unimportant	9
n =	103

Source: Halfacree (1994), table 7.

and emotional aspects— are integral. Somewhat crudely but directly illustrating this point, from work on counterurbanisation in 1980s England, table 2 summarily shows the perceived importance of «the rural character of the destination» to the 103 urban-to-rural migrants interviewed.

From evidence such as this —and such material is really only the tip of a much larger iceberg— it seems very clear that rurality, however understood (Halfacree, 2006b, forthcoming), somehow speaks both strongly and deeply to many people in many different societies today. It has clearly not been effaced culturally even if its more abstract explanatory legitimacy is more problematic (Hoggart, 1990). Indeed, representationally, it has such vitality that it is even deployed «beyond» the rural space on the ground to which it might be said to connect normatively. For example, we quite generally see associational elements of the rural increasingly being brought into the city, with the introduction of «nature» into otherwise sterile, super-urban retail environments, such as Canada's West Edmonton Mall (Shields, 1989), and planners striving to make rural village values such as community, local place and identity integral to urban (re)development (Franklin and Tait, 2002).

The clear vitality of rurality as representation can be taken still further to suggest that there is more to the rural than just such (social) representation (Halfacree forthcoming). Within non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007), a core concept is that of affect, or the feelings, emotions and even actions brought about through our engagement with the materiality of the world (Thien, 2005). Thinking affectively, we leave the «discursive idealism» (Dewsbury et al., 2002, p. 438) that concentrates on the rural's expression through representation to focus on what it is like to be «in» the rural, to take the rural's own forces seriously; to go from viewing the rural to being-in-the-rural. This is an area that has yet to be developed significantly within rural studies (but see Cloke and Jones, 2001), reflecting, I suggest, the predominance of representation issues within its cultural turn and an anti-materialist pro-social bias, itself partly reflecting a fear of espousing some form of environmental determinism.

To understand and explain the affective dimension of rurality inevitably implicates and engages with what has become the seemingly indelible association that rurality has with *nature* (Halfacree, 2003a, forthcoming). Notwithstanding the geographical ubiquity of nature (Smith, 1984), coining a phrase, it is the «nature of rurality» that holds the key to its affective power. The sensual manifestation of the physical world, notably its sights, smells and feelings, but also a sense of the mystical, unchained and unexplained, seem paramount, which is why these elements go on to feature so strongly in rural representations. The land —soil, rocks, water, animals, plants, insects, weather, temperature, even supernatural forces— bodily and biologically, with its earthy living sensuality, is affectively strong (Halfacree forthcoming).

Actually trying to explain the significance of this nature/rural affect refers us ultimately to the importance of «nature» for our human be(com)ing (Holloway and Halfacree, 2006), here not placing humans «outside» nature of

course. Although detailed exposition is beyond the scope of the present paper, a number of recent studies indicate some of the existential values congealed around nature: renewing our ecological bond with the natural world and the land; accessing (an authentic (*sic*) grounded sense of) dwelling and (ecological) community; presenting therapeutic potential for both physical and psychological ailments; providing a capacity for inspiration, long widely appreciated by artists; having an ability to surprise and enchant us; and even expressing politicised resistance, notably to dominant aspects of the social world (for example, Bonnett, 2003; Halfacree, 2003a; Holloway and Halfacree, 2006; Mabey, 2005; Pretty *et al.*, 2003; Wilson, 1984).

So, lastly in this section, we return to counterurbanisation and the extraordinary ordinary. From the brief discussion above I suggest that the importance of rurality, both representationally and affectively, to counterurbanisation is in part indicative of something quite *extraordinary* that lurks within the seeming ordinariness of, for example, a middle class family deciding to go and live in the country «for the sake of the children» (Bushin, 2005). The potency of nature/rurality is both mundane —and hence ordinary— and yet goes beyond the mundane with the (still not completely clear) messages it provides us on the human condition. Within these messages there may well be a hidden or obscured critique of contemporary society / progress / (post)modernity / industrial society at least as «radical», if not potentially still more profound, than that performed overtly by such groups as the marginal settlers. Hence, to neglect such «ordinary» groups as these mainstream counterurbanisers in our work would be, in some respects, a clear case of failing to see the wood for the trees, or of throwing an extraordinary baby out with the ordinary bathwater.

Conclusion: still surprises in store

Through the springboard provided by «neglected rural geographies», and drawing mostly from British work, this paper has argued that for all of the excellent studies that have emerged so far out of the combination of the cultural turn and postmodern insights within rural geography, we should at least pause for some (re)consideration of those Philo labelled Mr Average. *Solely* concentrating on Mr Average will indeed give us only a «pallid skeleton» of the rural but such studies still remain critically important.

Whilst, specifically, I have advocated work to recognise, describe and ultimately explain the extraordinary ordinary that lies within ordinary, mainstream counterurbanisation, a more general argument for Mr Average is being made here because the ordinary in any arena of (rural) life is of clear academic interest. This is, firstly, because of its very ordinariness and, secondly, because beneath a seemingly bland exterior there can lie obscured, constrained and latent, but also challenging, irrepressible and potentially politically fecund, existential expressions. Rurality, and our understanding of it, remains, in Neal's and Walters's (2007) term, «unfinished», with the rural much more heterotopic than is often appreciated. I conclude, therefore, that there are plenty of

surprises still in store for us in our study of even the most ordinary of rural geographies and that, consequently, we should expectantly and enthusiastically show the ordinary to be truly extraordinary.

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