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From Ambridge to the World? Class Returns to Rural Population Geographies

As I write, a storyline is developing in the long-running rural radio soap opera *The Archers* (BBC 2017) demonstrating the still active and contentious place of class within the population geographies of the contemporary British countryside. Specifically, business tycoon Justin Elliott, a recent arrival in the fictional village of Ambridge where the drama is set, is proposing to build new housing on the edge of the village. Whilst the estate will mainly comprise 'executive' style homes, some will be 'affordable' social housing targeting a perceived need from 'local' people unable to afford the former. Yet, Elliott's proposal has proved highly divisive. For example, local working class caterer and cleaner Emma Grundy argues passionately **for** the proposed housing so that her young family will be able to have one of the affordable properties and no longer lodge with her parents. She rails against their anticipated inability otherwise ever to be able to afford one of the few existing houses in the village that ever become available. Furthermore, she perceives an ingrained class prejudice to exclude families like hers, shared by middle class incomer (e.g. Lynda Snell) and long-established resident (e.g. Jennifer Aldridge) alike.

Whilst *Archers's* storylines may not, of course, always accord with rural 'reality' (Courage *et al.* 2016), debate around supply and affordability of rural housing rings very true (Somerville 2013). Put differently, **rural gentrification** and, moreover, rural gentrification expressed and articulated in (urban) gentrification's original critical class displacement terms (Glass 1964), is widely acknowledged as a very salient feature of today's British countryside. But to what extent is it also a significant phenomenon elsewhere? If we can identify 'rural gentrification' fairly conclusively in the UK, can we also see it manifest across the Global North (at least)? Or is it more an artefact of rurality's peculiarly-exalted position within British culture, with gentrification as a meaningful international concept largely only applicable in (selected) urban centres, as widely outlined in a broad existing literature? Hence the need, as Phillips and Smith argue, for development of comparative approaches. Yet, to understand what this project entails and, frankly, why it has not been substantively enacted before, we need not only the insights laid out in Phillips's and Smith's excellent paper but to (re)iterate some contextual framings and considerations.

I focus on three such issues in the rest of this commentary, approached – as with Phillips and Smith – primarily through a British lens. First, I comment on the very late coming of age of research expressively focused on 'rural gentrification'. Second, I reinforce the significance of one major challenge for comparative studies that British scholarship has been poorly appreciative of, that of geographical transferability of concepts and terminology. Third, in part self-reflection on my own work, I endorse Phillips's and Smith's call for explicitly badged critical rural gentrification scholarship with its reiteration of the central role played by class in the contemporary countryside. Yet, I end by cautioning against focusing always on class, with a brief return to Ambridge.

'Rural gentrification' has only fairly recent notable presence within British scholarship, in particular since Phillips (2002) and notwithstanding Phillips (1993). Indeed, it still 'remains a minor motif within rural geography' (Phillips and Smith 2017: ???). Nonetheless, class-based 'upscaling' of much of rural Britain has been widely noted since the latter half of the 20th Century. As I still do with undergraduate students, we can initiate this appreciation via Ray Pahl's seminal *Urbs in Rure*

(1965). This study painted a picture (unrecognisable today) of a still mostly non-gentrified rural Hertfordshire. Largely bracketing out from his analysis the widely noted 'drift from the land' – then an overwhelmingly dominant image of rural populations throughout Europe abandoning land work for urban working and living – Pahl's Weberian lens identified eight social groups in the countryside. Four were characterised as historically well-established, largely in composition either working class (council tenants, tied cottagers) or upper / middle class (large property owners, small business owners), and four were regarded more as relative newcomers, again largely either working class (limited income or capital, retired) or middle class (salaried, 'spiralists').

Pahl's complex picture did not present any clear suggestion of gentrification occurring in terms of the explicit class-based displacement of 'working-class quarters... invaded by the middle classes' (Glass 1964: xviii). However, numerous subsequent studies through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s – often going under the title of 'counterurbanization', in reflection of their emphasis on population migration (Barcus and Halfacree 2017) - indicated the numerical residualisation of Pahl's established groups and working class incoming groups, the working class retired within the latter moving largely across the class divide. In summary, from 'feet on the ground' residential population perspectives, rural Britain was increasingly recognised as becoming 'gentrified' by the middle classes, whether or not the term was used. This general impression was notwithstanding the need to appreciate frequent exceptions to any middle class incomer 'rule' (e.g. Bolton and Chalkley 1989), as well as early appreciation of the rural 'middle class' as neither homogeneous nor necessarily representative of the whole middle class (e.g. Cloke and Thrift 1987).

In clear parallels with city centres, much of the British countryside has now become a very middle class space, albeit one - as suggested - that needs careful scrutiny to avoid oversimplification and overstatement (Hoggart 1997; Phillips 2007). So, why was the term 'rural gentrification' not more centrally deployed? A number of reasons suggest themselves. First, displacement of the rural working class – drift from the land – was well underway before the advent of substantial counterurbanization and so the latter could hardly be seen as any encompassing cause of the former. Instead, employment issues held more sway, notably the decline of the agricultural workforce. Subsequently, supply issues such as lack of housing and/or services in general all helped suggest a strong overdetermination of rural working class exodus. Second, and related to the last point, early counterurbanization can largely be seen as repopulation of an already depopulated and still depopulating countryside, newcomers often resurrecting long-abandoned properties, for example. While this can fit articulations of gentrification, one has a more dominant sense of (re)filling 'empty spaces' rather than (immediately) displacing the working class. Third, by the time empty rural properties were scarce, as is the case today, postmodernism and the 'cultural turn' had impacted strongly on rural geography, arguably reinvigorating the sub-discipline. Whilst rural gentrification can be examined through such a lens, postmodernism's relativizing of class did little to bring it to the fore. Fourth, simply to appropriate 'gentrification' from urban studies in the latter 20th Century, where it was by then a powerful concept, would be rather to presuppose its appropriateness and even suggest a 'colonising' attitude towards the rural. It was perhaps therefore necessary that a clear sense of the detailed contours of rural population change be

mapped out before measured engagement with the gentrification concept in a rural context could be undertaken.

My second textual framing takes me (briefly) away from the British case to reiterate one central challenge for comparative analysis that Phillips and Smith note. This concerns the ability to 'translate' a set of concepts and processes delineated principally within one context into another. On the one hand, it was observed above how 'counterurbanization' within Britain conceptually worked to block-out 'rural gentrification' from analyses. On the other hand, terminological battles develop considerably in intensity and scope at an international geographical scale. Language, understood broadly, is central. If we are to get beyond Maloutas's (2012) effective resignation that 'individualising comparison' is the best we can hope for, we have challenging linguistic hurdles ahead. There is not space to develop these but they are line with concerns expressed around perceived Anglophone social science hegemony (e.g. Desbiens and Ruddick 2006; Kitchin 2005). For example, from an explicitly rural perspective, Gkartzios (2017: np) notes how: 'discourses of rurality internationally differ not only due to socio-cultural differences, but because language itself constructs and frames the rural in diverse and even unimaginable ways'. Unpacking and extending this quote, does the 'rural' we seek to examine as a possible site of gentrification 'mean' the same in different countries? Does it even have significant meaning at all? Likewise, is 'gentrification' a robustly understood and significantly expressed concept everywhere – Phillips and Smith (2017: ???) note it as 'largely absent' within France – or even the central idea of 'class' within it? To assume *a priori* (which Phillips and Smith do not) that we can simply relocate and then test a British (or US) specification of 'rural gentrification' elsewhere is, at very best, risky.

My third framing is to reiterate a clear academic and political need to fertilise and promote explicit investigation of gentrification within rural places. This is in tune with what I see as an emerging development within rural geography and beyond to reassert the importance of class. It is probably non-contentious to suggest that neo-liberal political-economic forms continue to predominate across the Global North. One notable feature of this is ongoing renewal of class polarisation within society as a whole. This is manifest in many forms, delineated by scholars such as Danny Dorling (2017): from divergent life expectancy, to ability to access suitable shelter and even basic nourishment, to the likelihood of finding stable, remunerative and rewarding work. Of course, class remains a very slippery fish to define conclusively (Dorling 2014) but this should not prevent us examining its manifestations, not least through such specific practices as rural gentrification. In short, as noted gentrification scholar Tom Slater (2014: np) asserted for the urban, for rural areas:

'there is [also] much to gain from a new wave of scholarship that understands gentrification as the neighbourhood expression of class inequality, and as structural violence visited upon working class people living in contexts boosted by some as "regenerating" or "revitalising"'.

Nonetheless, talk of 'regenerating' and 'revitalising' prompt a final qualification to advocacy of class-foregrounded rural gentrification scholarship. As Slater (2014: np) also noted, a strand of urban gentrification research focuses on articulating 'gentrification [as] a middle class strategy of "coping" with the demands of metropolitan life'. Likewise, a theme within my own work on rural

in-migration has been how the (everyday) consumption of the rural that this pro-rural relocation normatively entails is similarly a means chosen by people who can - **and** who recognise it as a strategy, **and** who want to follow it... - to cope with some challenging life course demands posed by 21st Century neo-liberal existence (Barcus and Halfacree 2017). Within this 'coping', as autonomist John Holloway (2002: 205, 211) asserts, 'People have a million ways of saying No... [and] we are all revolutionaries, albeit in very contradictory, fetishised, repressed ways'. From this perspective, rural gentrification may indeed be strongly class defined, and have negative consequences for working class people such as Emma Grundy, but to leave interpretation of rural population change there is too one-dimensional. Instead, we can also draw out expressions of everyday resistance embodied **within** rural gentrification – whilst never failing to see them inevitably entangled in and compromised by the very society critiqued. These can then be added to a rural-based prefigured heterotopic alternative to predominant 21st Century life (Halfacree 2010). Indeed, as in the fictional *Archers*, class does not always divide - the Ambridge fete or Christmas play, for example, usually eventually brings Emma, Lynda, Jennifer and Justin together! Rural gentrification as class experience is thus one central dimension but not the only one of interest within ongoing rural population geographies.

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Abstract

Phillips and Smith make a powerful case both for investigating rural population change within much of the Global North from a class-foregrounded gentrification perspective and for undertaking this investigation in an internationally comparative manner. Neither aspect has been sufficiently developed within scholarship to date. Whilst endorsing such a call, this commentary briefly presents three additional contextual framings: describing and explaining the very late coming of age of explicit 'rural gentrification' research; reiterating the challenge that geographical transferability of concepts and terminology presents; and insisting on the central but not exclusive role class must play within critical discourse on populations in the contemporary countryside.

Key terms: Rural gentrification; Class; Counterurbanisation; Language

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