

12 Ongoing challenges

For a resurgent rural in post-Brexit,
post-Covid times

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Introduction: challenging rural times beyond the classroom...

Having taught a final year undergraduate module on Contemporary Rural Britain at Swansea University for longer than easily recalled, the last few years have thrown up unanticipated challenges to a well-established routine that extend far beyond engaging with subtle changes in EU rural support packages, new planning initiatives or appreciating the latest leisure activity making its physical mark on our countryside. Specifically, teaching has had increasingly to engage with and bring in the emerging and potential impacts on rural Britain of both the 2016 vote in favour of the UK leaving the EU – Brexit – and the ongoing Covid-19 “apocalypse” (Eggel *et al.*, 2020). Just as with its relations to all the major impactful currents shaping UK society, my module’s “rural Britain” cannot raise a metaphorical drawbridge, keep change out and simply carry on as before. As Hoggart (1988: 36) so effectively observed half a lifetime ago: “Causal processes do not stop at one side of the urban-rural divide”.

The present book’s chapters have certainly noted and made clear something of the chore I face in keeping teaching up-to-date and engaging substantially with how the rural UK is being impacted significantly by the twin challenges of Brexit and Covid-19’s “jolt[ing] rural areas onto the centre stage” (Heron *et al.*, Chapter 1; McAreavey Chapter 2) for much of the UK public. Trying to collate some perspective on both is thus the subject of this chapter. However, from the start – again reinforced by the tone of much of the writing in the book – it must be noted that the chapter must remain far from conclusive. One key term underpins, underlines, even undermines much of what can and will be said: “uncertainty”. The future is never pre-written, even seemingly permanent statues fall, and the unfolding consequences of both Brexit and Covid-19 both emphasise this strongly for the rural UK and ultimately feed into this chapter’s ultimate conclusion.

The chapter is structured as follows. Following this introduction, it engages with some of the emerging consequences Brexit has for the rural UK, inspired explicitly by both insights from the present book’s chapters and other studies and evidence. The chapter then overlays this ultimately still uncertain but seemingly bleak picture with a tentative initial summary, culled not least from news stories – notably from the *Guardian* newspaper but other broadsheet papers or the BBC

could equally have been used – of some of the social impacts on rural areas of Covid-19. This latter tale seemingly starts more brightly than that for Brexit but soon becomes overcast again. Nonetheless, the chapter’s concluding section seeks out the positive, drawing on how both the rural’s Brexit and Covid-19 experiences need not take what I term the “revanchist rural” path but can be seen as practical elements within the utopian Good Countryside dream (Shucksmith, 2018). It is a call for the UK rural to be actively and defiantly alive today, not a withdrawn and resentful reactionary space.

Brexit: setting back diversity across rural space

When just over one-third of the UK population voted for Brexit in 2016,¹ the potential fate of the rural UK did not attract the same immediate attention as that of Prime Minister Cameron, those seeking to travel to and from mainland Europe for holiday or work or, a bit later, the political situation of Northern Ireland within the UK. However, it has subsequently become a noted area of attention (Halfacree, 2020), not least from recognition of the imminent loss of substantial EU financial support primarily to farmers. Later, this has been joined by rural UK inflections on almost all the immediate post-Brexit headline-grabbing subjects. Brexit, in short, is now widely acknowledged as being far from peripheral “detail” for the rural UK.

However, as I write, Brexit remains very much still an emerging experience for the UK overall (cf. UK Parliament, 2022) and the assessments given below must all be recognised as being quite tentative. Recognition of this qualification has also been apparent throughout the present book, illustrated not least through many chapters outlining a range of possible futures for a post-Brexit rural UK. Such sense of a degree of openness is also reiterated elsewhere by presentations on post-Brexit futures as diverse as Little (2021), Ojo *et al.* (2021) and Rebanks (2021). The benefits of such openness will be engaged explicitly in the chapter’s conclusion but analysis now turns to the consequences of something that has been very much decided: the UK’s loss of EU agricultural support.

Funding and directing post-CAP futures

It must be noted from the outset that the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), generally through its associated priorities and policies but most obviously and directly through the huge funds it has provided to farmers – over four billion Euros in 2015, 76 percent directly paid to farmers (Institute for Government, 2021) – has been a major player in the long-term and everyday shaping of the rural UK since the 1970s. Indeed, as Heron in this volume reiterates, rural governance overall in the UK – focused on later – has long been intimately tied up with the development of agriculture policy. The UK’s exit from the CAP, therefore, unless of course simply replacing it with a (near) identical domestic version, is thus of absolutely critical significance (Ojo *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, besides CAP policy and funding, we should also recognise, again with Heron (Chapter 3), how

numerous EU directives and regulations more generally have worked to determine the economic, social, environmental and cultural make-up of the UK rural and how such places have also benefitted from EU funds not specifically reserved for them. There is thus a tremendous amount at stake and to play for with the system including the amount of UK rural financial support that is to supplant all of this EU input.

The big player coming onto the field here, at least across rural England, is the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) (Institute for Government, 2021; Little *et al.*, this volume), emerging from the post-Brexit Agriculture Act's (2020) attempt to drive forward a politically heralded "once in a life-time opportunity" (Attorp and Hubbard, Chapter 5) to reshape farming support fundamentally. Through its seemingly firm prioritising of and focus on "public payments for public goods" (Chapter 5) over private enterprise (Chapter 2), ELMS is seeking to take the ongoing shift that was occurring within the CAP from Pillar 1 (direct support) to Pillar 2 (rural development) funding to a whole new level. Tied in with the government's wider EU objectives (Chapter 4), ELM optimistically heralds a "green Brexit" (Burns, 2021), even a vision of a new rural governance centred on environmental priorities as the state expands further into rural areas predominantly as a response to the global environmental crisis (Chapter 3). Furthermore, benefits here may impact not only on farming but on other areas of rural land use, notably forestry. Thus, Wynne-Jones *et al.* in this volume suggest, Brexit's end of CAP provides the forest sector with an opportunity to increase still further its growing focus on the ecosystem services that can be delivered by trees and, consequently, calls for it to seek fuller integration of trees within agricultural landscapes.

Yet, notes of caution must be noted before heralding any clear-cut bright new green dawn for the rural UK. As Heron goes on to note in Chapter 3, any true green governance for the rural UK after Brexit must disentangle fully agricultural policy from a complex web of rural governance and repair any tears made. Signs here are not so good, for example, when it is observed that the UK government has so far refused to commit to aligning environmental standards and their change over time with (rising) EU standards or even simply not to lower them through a non-regression clause (Reid, 2021). Even for ELM, some environmentalists now fear that the scheme is already losing its environmental vanguardism and becoming closer to previous less ambitious agri-environmental schemes (Chapter 4).

Moreover, if UK agriculture consequently loses its longstanding "exceptional" position within rural policy support (Chapter 2; cf. Monbiot, 2020), there are then lots of questions raised orientating around likely impacts on farm profitability and viability (Chapter 5; Ojo *et al.*, 2021). The NAO (2019) have noted that nearly half of the farms would have made a loss in recent years without receipt of direct payments. Reflecting this, farmers' unions, for example, have already expressed strong concerns about the consequences of a proposed agricultural free-trade deal with Australia undermining UK food prices (*Guardian*, 2021a) or of a longstanding "no deal Brexit" choking-off Welsh farmers' considerable reliance on food sales to the EU (Nation Cymru, 2021). As Little (2021) observed in evidence for

the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, agriculture’s “biggest change in 70 years” suggests four scenarios for farmers: intensify production to make up for loss of direct payments, which “could be detrimental to the environment”; exit the industry; “just hang on” but with possible “environmental disbenefits”, as the everyday priority has to be farm survival; or take up new ELM schemes smoothly. Of these four possibilities, the first three all raise considerable doubts about both many farming families’ continued existence and, specifically, the ability of these families to cope not just with food production but also to help counter ongoing environmental crises. The fourth possibility, a smooth and commonplace transition into ELM, is seen to require major efforts to engage practically and motivate farmers, with Little, Lyon and Tsouvalis warning in Chapter 4 that the scheme’s “harder to reach stakeholders... could represent a substantial portion of the agricultural sector in [ELM’s] codesign process”.

International in-migrant labour consequences

Whilst supposed resentment about the number of migrants coming to the UK appears to have been a major stimulus for the pro-Brexit vote (Clarke *et al.*, 2017), it should be noted how greater legal controls on such flows nationally is not just something that will impact on UK cities. Rural economies, most notably the UK agri-food sector but also more widely, are highly dependent on EU migrant labour (Harris, 2021; House of Lords, 2017; Milbourne and Coulson, 2021). For example, the UK’s second chamber of Parliament, the House of Lords (2017), noted horticulture’s 80,000 seasonal workforce, 90–98 percent coming from the EU; poultry’s 60 percent of meat staff, 50 percent of egg-packing centre staff and 40 percent egg farm personnel being migrants; and EU migrants’ prominence amongst vets and abattoir workers, with 48 percent of newly registered vets in 2016 having qualified elsewhere in the EU/EEA.

Brexit’s impact on the employment of these migrants was near instantaneous, a survey for the National Farmers’ Union for 2017 suggesting horticulture had over 4,000 (12.5 percent) unfilled labour vacancies (rising to 29 percent at harvest), not least due to a decline from 41 percent in 2016 to 29 percent in 2017 in workers returning to the UK for the harvest (*Guardian*, 2018). Whilst the press soon picked up on imagery of strawberries left to rot in the fields (*ibid.*), the situation has remained severe ever since and “unpicked berries are rotting on the bushes...there are not enough workers to pick it” (*Guardian*, 2021h). Government attempts to interest “our graduates and domestic workforce [in working in] this vibrant [agricultural] industry” (DEFRA, 2018: 10) have thus far not come to much, perhaps unsurprisingly given the physical and other challenges of work often paid only minimum wage plus bonuses (Abboud 2019). Thus, in 2022, the National Farmers’ Union (NFU, 2022: np) headlined a “perfect storm, [with] a shortage of workers bringing to a halt the UK’s just-in-time supply chains in some places”.

The loss of working-age international labour migrants to the rural UK which followed the Brexit vote is not just of concern to the agricultural community,

however (Chapter 2), as already suggested. Migrants have also been widely employed in service employment in rural places popular with tourists, such as the Scottish Highlands (*Guardian*, 2021i). Crucially, this is a major potential economic growth area for the rural UK, not least in the light of Covid's positive "re-branding" of rural areas, discussed later. Migrant workers are also important for caring for the ageing rural population, to some extent – at least demographically – countering the continued loss of young people from rural areas. With an ever-ageing rural population, the caring challenges this throws up can only increase, compounding the need for rural investment and support for areas such as the social entrepreneurship discussed by Steiner *et al.* in Chapter 11. International migrants surely have a role to play here (see Halfacree, 2008) but, even if admitted in the near future, how essential experiments in managing the ageing countryside will be supported is unclear. Thus, Steiner *et al.* demonstrate how the EU-funded Older People for Older People O4O scheme facilitated productive rural social entrepreneurship but similar such innovative support will clearly be required in the near future to catalyse further necessary innovation. Where this will come from remains very unclear.

Furthermore, even if sufficient international migrants do arrive to work in rural areas of the UK again, when – one assumes – robust international labour migrant agreements have been implemented, a greater sense of "temporariness" in their destinations than in the EU's right to reside anywhere in the community context, when long-term settlement often occurred, also has rural place consequences. A sense of transience will potentially do little either for the migrants' sense of place security (see Flynn and Kay, 2017; Guma and Jones, 2018; MacKrell and Pemberton, 2018) or their potential to form a stable part of a diverse settled new rural geography for the UK (Halfacree, 2020). As Milbourne and Coulson (2021) sharply observe, post-Brexit UK agricultural policy seems to be "normalising" further a *migrant* labour-dependent system, which gives little consideration to the often far from "idyllic" working and living experiences of the migrants, rather than seeking a more holistic and experientially benign alternative model. This concern is clearly of relevance to the ongoing challenge of making the UK countryside a socially diverse space, an issue returned to throughout this chapter. Overall, reiterating Guma and Jones's (2018: 7) conclusion drawn from the experiences of European migrants living in Wales, Brexit instead signifies "an ongoing process of "othering" and unsettling".

Overall rural governance issues

If, as Heron (after Sørensen and Torfing, 2018) observes in Chapter 3, governance is primarily concerned with the "solving of problems" then – as previous sections of this chapter already attest – this is a topic meriting sustained attention by all those with an interest in promoting a comfortable future for the rural UK. Central here will be finding the "right" balance between state and non-state elements in the playing out of power. Within this, as Heron also usefully notes, the role of the state is far from negligible. It has, in fact, expanded its rural presence recently,

not least due to it having to respond to the diverse (global) environmental crises (Chapter 4). Yet, how much both the UK state plus the devolved authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – but, of course, absent for England – will focus on rural governance matters is, however, uncertain. Clearly, in the context of CAP loss, some attention has been given but emerging (as of February 2022) national political crises, such as fuel and food poverty and reanimated inflation, are perhaps understandably diverting state eyes from the rural governance ball.

One illustrative example of concern regarding future rural governance comes from Northern Ireland, developed by Cirefice *et al.* in Chapter 6 in the context of that country's present "mining bonanza". This bonanza's expanding extractive frontier has pushed particularly into the under-invested west and border areas, rural areas exhibiting strong legacies of conflict and colonialism. However, in spite of these areas' marginalised geographies, the mining bonanza has not always been welcomed with open arms or simply not been resisted (Chapter 6). Instead, in a far from "empty countryside", groups from both Northern Ireland and the Republic have worked tightly together in campaigns against these extractivist projects. This campaigning could be at least disrupted by the currently uncertain issue – resurgent once again – of Northern Ireland's governance. On the one hand, as Cirefice *et al.* note, Brexit will remove for the anti-extractivist groups the whole matter's supra-national and neutral oversight by bodies such as the European Commission and European Court of Justice, undermining a legal approach emphasising the protection of the environment that involves EU environmental directives. On the other hand, and furthermore, ongoing tensions and disputes about the status of the border between the North and the Republic, a longstanding "wicked problem" (Chapter 5) and a key governance question, could also hinder cross-border unity shown to date. This is equally true, of course, of cross-border initiatives seeking to engage with *any* negative rural challenges that are already present or subsequently arise following Brexit.

A number of chapters in the present book also suggest how the state, both the UK and devolved, will have been firmly awake to rural matters and take the baton from the EU if ongoing progressive developments are not to stall or even reverse. If Monbiot (2018) is correct, however, the UK has a collapsing "administrative state", no longer kept at least animated by the demands of EU law. Clear concern here covers everything from helping the rural UK deliver the increasingly broad demands being placed on it for recreation, protecting its environmental resources and promoting its biodiversity (Chapter 5), to progressing more specific demands, such as for the sometimes contentious community-based renewable energy developments that have in part to date been shaped through EU rhetoric (Tolnov Clausen and Rudolph, Chapter 8).

Another specific challenge for progressive rural governance is to keep taking forward the still significant challenge of tackling the urban-rural divide in broadband access (Philip and Williams, 2019) – which is still favouring the urban – without being able to make helpful recourse to EU regulations promoting and seeking to harmonise community electronic communications (Gerli and Whalley, Chapter 9). Recent press stories suggest noted challenges, such as

from imminent loss of the now-residual 3G network that nonetheless remains a critical resource in some remote rural locations (*Guardian*, 2022a). Strong rural governance clearly needs to counter powerful “market distortions” but it is at best uncertain how well this can be achieved if, in the restrained words of Gerli and Whalley in this volume, “promotion of the digital economy and society is left to the enthusiasm of domestic political parties”.

Further concern for rural diversity and inclusivity is reflected in the issue of retaining not just young people across rural areas generally but young rural women in particular. Both are necessary requirements for rural communities to remain viable in terms of “balanced” demographic and gender structures. As has already been suggested, both have also not been helped by the loss of working-age international migrants arriving in the rural UK. The gender-balance challenge is well observed through Budge and Shortall’s dissection of the ingrained patriarchy underpinning Shetland’s otherwise celebrated Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival in Chapter 10. The authors fear that efforts to make this festival more gender inclusive, challenging deeply historically engrained gender roles, will not be helped by UK withdrawal from the oversight of strengthening EU legislation and consequent potential dropping of “bureaucratic” requirements to adhere to the EU’s minimum gender equality standards. On the ground, strong equality advocates, required generally across remote rural areas, in particular, need high profile, clearly justified and suitably resourced positions to bring about positive change. This is a situation most uncertain to be sufficiently filled, certainly in the immediate post-EU context, without closer attention being paid to the whole state / non-state mix and the working of 21st-century rural governance.

Post-Brexit rural revanchism

All of the consequences from Brexit for the rural UK noted above – still emerging, mostly still quite uncertain, and with some possibly having been missed – can be brought together to consolidate this section under one theme. This key overarching theme is of how some degree of an initial promise of and certainly a suggested potential for increased diversity in jobs, people and experiences across rural UK – a countryside freed from the “shackles of Brussels” (if one runs with the pro-Brexit language) – is actually being significantly set-back practically by the playing-out of the UK’s going-it-alone political stance. Put slightly differently, any momentum towards a more diverse UK countryside that would foreground and celebrate many of the rural UK’s now long recognised and generally celebrated “neglected rural geographies” (Philo, 1992), for example, is at the very least likely to be slowing and will require substantial work from all interested bodies to get it back up and running. Instead, a version of the seemingly still ubiquitous “rural idyll” (Bunce, 2003; Halfacree, 2015; Yarwood, 2005), with its “power-infused discourse of an imagined golden age of indeterminate date” (Shucksmith, 2018: 171), appears as if it is being resurrected once again, with all of its experiential selectivity notably to the fore.

An overall sense of the challenge ahead for advocates of any richly diverse UK countryside face with the reanimation of the idyllic (*sic.*) rural can be glimpsed through observations of the debate on the desired future for the UK that built up to the 2016 Brexit referendum. Within this often torrid and bitter debate, “the British countryside” as a socio-spatial imagination or representation (Halfacree, 1993) renewed itself, sometimes more implicitly than explicitly, as some kind of post-Brexit UK “ideal”, a strongly conservative or even reactionary goal for a re-born “post-European” UK (Halfacree, 2020). As Calhoun (2016: 56) acutely observed, on the day of the Brexit ballot, voters “went to sleep in Great Britain and woke up in Little England”, an England (and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) that dreamed to be at least imaginatively or metaphorically rural. Going still further, what I have termed elsewhere, drawing on Smith (1996), a “revanchist rural” has been able to feed well on Brexit rhetoric to become still more alive across the rural UK. Revanchism in this context seeks to reassert a relatively narrowly “traditional” rural geography against the pushes for diversification sought, somewhat ironically, by *both* more liberal and more neo-liberal rural futures (Halfacree, 2020). And whilst the Covid-19 disaster’s consequences for the rural UK at first may seem to challenge this narrow and exclusive essentialist momentum, the chapter will now argue that, in fact, it has helped this reactionary project still more through its negative impact on widening access to the rural UK within a newly resurgent and increasingly dominant political divide of rural versus urban (drawing on Niven, 2020).

Covid-19: setting back access to rural space

Writing in 2022 rather than 2016, the uncertainty and possible retrenchment Brexit has stimulated for the rural UK’s fate is further enhanced via the also very much still-ongoing experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Eggel *et al.*, 2020). As with Brexit, however, its full rural significance has taken a little while to be noted, with Reed (2021: np) observing how “The pandemic has been framed too often through the urban experience of locked down and deserted cities, of people leaving urban life for a rural sanctuary”. A key immediate direction of enquiry to take from this observation, which leads away from simply staying in these deserted (*sic.*) cities, is to follow these “urban exiles” and consider both their subsequent rural experiences and then those of the UK’s pre-Covid rurally located people. Much more so nationally than for Brexit, the predominant urban UK world has seemingly once again “discovered” the rural as something very much to be experientially engaged with. But, as with matters of the heart, the joys of the resulting entanglements vary considerably between the parties involved.

Of urban recuperation beyond the city

As McAreavey notes (Chapter 2), Covid-19 quickly brought to centre-stage the values of rural as a low population density, clean air and supposedly, at least initially, almost virus-free space (on the latter, see Malatzky *et al.*, 2020). This particularly

emerged from a commonplace response to one of the themes that quickly became an absolutely defining feature of the pandemic, namely that of the stress, anxiety and general mental ill health that was especially associated with experiencing lockdown conditions (e.g., *Guardian*, 2020a). Moreover, this was a condition also clearly spatial(ised), being overwhelmingly urban. And, as is frequently the case, when the urban becomes associated so strongly with something, our commonplace dualistic thinking soon associates the rural with its opposite. Specifically, pandemic news reports quickly switched attention from bemoaning urban mental stress to observing and celebrating how the rural UK was coming across strongly and effectively as a source of feelings of rejuvenation, connection and inspiration in these troubled times. This was true both for those urban residents visiting temporarily for their fix of “green Prozac” (Barkham, 2020) to those seeking more permanent reduced urban lockdown stress via residential relocation.

For the short-term fix seekers, the therapeutic experience of the rural UK was soon linked more specifically with being able to engage with “nature” first-hand. The supposed benefits of doing so are well summarised by Jones (2020a: 4; also Jones, 2020b; *Guardian*, 2021b) as how:

[t]ime spent in nature is linked to lower stress, restored attention, a balanced nervous system, increased levels of cancer-fighting “natural killer cells”, the activation of neural pathways associated with calm, and decreased levels of anxiety and depression.

Or, as McCarthy (2020: 9) equally confidently summarised it:

[the] natural world is there for us, even in pandemics, even in lockdowns; it is there to console and repair and recharge us, often unrecognised and unacknowledged, but still giving life to every one of us, regardless.

Clearly linked with this general contextual relational (re)connection to nature, also seen as a balm for loneliness (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021f), was a resurgence in walking (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021j), with a resultant “walk in the woods” further saluted for having the potential to save the UK’s National Health Service much money (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021b).

For others of Reed’s (2021) urban refugee population, however, simply going for a walk in the country was insufficient. Instead, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a resurgence in declared interest in more permanent counterurban residential relocation. Evidence for this resurgence also came through quickly, with estate agents celebrating early in 2020 the considerable interest urban people were showing in possibly moving to rural areas or small towns (e.g., *Guardian*, 2020b). Whilst we must be wary of this source² and await the results of more academic investigations, the potential relocation trend was soon widely noted. A key standout feature within it was of younger adults that the usual counterurbanisation cohort expressing distaste for the “metropolitan life”. As one intending rural relocater put it, many young adults seemingly now have “a lot more faith in the countryside

since the pandemic hit” (quoted in *Guardian*, 2021c: 3). Promises of less stress and more space seemed to have been crucial here (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021d, 2021e).

As will be developed in the next sub-section, this interest does seem to have stimulated at least some counterurbanisation, which soon came to be associated with rising rural house prices. Indeed, the latter may be one of its most enduring legacies, since emerging research is now suggesting that the “Covid exodus” has not been anything like as noted as it seemed it would become a couple of years earlier (e.g., *Guardian*, 2022b). Perhaps some potential new rural residents have taken heed of experiences that warned them that the rural UK “isn’t a blank slate for restless urbanites; nor... [reducible] to an amenity for leisure and recreation” (Ware, 2022: np)?

In summary, in spite of the latter qualifications, for Reed’s (2021) urban refugees overall, the Covid-19 pandemic saw the rural UK widely celebrated as a highly desirable place to experience, a recuperative heterotopic space “outside” the city (Halfacree, 2018). Under the menacing shadow of Covid-19, the “urban” shift[ed] from places of sophistication to places of threat[,] while “rural” shift[ed] from rustic to safe’ (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020: 3). Or, put slightly differently:

The country in the city discovers the country outside the city. With all the advantages of urban life removed – culture, other people, internationalism – many people decide they’d rather not be there.

(Bathurst, 2021: 217)

However, this seemingly positive experiential position for an emerging post-Covid rural – as with Brexit – again all too easily bypasses and overlooks the experiences and reactions of people already living in the UK countryside. It is to them the chapter now turns.

Of rural experiences “at home”

First, there was the feared potential of “outsiders” bringing Covid-19 into rural communities, whose previous isolation had often meant they had experienced little of the pandemic (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020). In this context, one may perhaps be understanding of residents requesting that, for example, owners of second home and caravanners did not come to their area to self-isolate (BBC, 2021). However, a desire to exclude “outsiders” could soon manifest itself in much more negative ways. For example, it was argued to stoke rural racism (Taylor, 2020), including a targeting of Gypsies and other Travellers, exemplified by ethnic tensions rising in a small town with a Covid-19 outbreak following an engagement party on a Travellers’ site (*Guardian*, 2020c).

Second, more permanent in-migration of “urban refugees” in the wake of a (post-) Covid-19 “race for space” (for example *Guardian*, 2021d, 2021e) has also potentially amplified the “classic” challenge for many rural families to find affordable housing when financially out-competed by wealthier in-migrants, and that is when any rural housing is even available! A further spin on this broad historical and

geographical challenge has been the parallel resurgence of the equally “wicked problem” (Chapter 5) of the fear of “cultural genocide” in some rural Welsh-speaking communities from the rise of second-home purchases by non-Welsh-speakers (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021g).

All together, and in the wake of possibly rather premature talk of “degentrification” impacting large cities across the global north in the wake of Covid-19, we can usefully reposition the rival concept of “disaster gentrification” (Hyra and Lees, 2021) to apply to the rural in reflection of the exclusionary potential of any intensification of the already well-established gentrification of much of the rural UK (see Phillips and Smith, 2018). Clearly, analysis will need to get beyond the already-noted vested interests seeking to “talk up” rural in-migration. However, from the perspective of this chapter, an enhanced gentrifying consequence, even if more imagined than apparent on the ground, will again do nothing to promote human geography diversity for the rural UK.

Again as with Brexit, experience of Covid-19 also presented opportunities to rethink and ideally then remodel some rural UK practices along more diverse and egalitarian lines. Results have been patchy to date, however. For example, from the agricultural sector, as a result of Covid-19’s dramatic acceleration of the loss of migrant labour that Brexit had set in play, a national attempt to persuade unemployed British people – often as a result of Covid-19’s job shakeouts – to take up jobs in the fields or food packing plants failed spectacularly (Milbourne and Coulson, 2021). *Pick for Britain*’s desire to recreate World War Two’s widely celebrated *Land Army* fell at the first hurdle as potential recruits soon noted the harsh working and living conditions they were expected to endure (ibid.). A chance was seemingly missed to at least improve an historically highly exploited group’s working conditions (Harris, 2021) as the Covid-19 experience ultimately failed to open-up the rural to new actors or improve a lot of its existing workers. The pre-existing severe system simply strove to keep going and re-establish itself with a failed and still unresolved attempt to recruit different frontline workers.

Post-Covid-19 rural revanchism

Reflecting on the admittedly still far from certain post-Covid-19 situation, an overall consequence of *both* the seemingly positive offers emanating from rural areas to urban Britons and the contested experienced reality on the ground for the rural population has been a further reassertion of the post-Brexit revanchist rural. In the shadow of Covid-19, in line with the revanchist rural’s representation, rural “[h]omogeneity has become safety, simplicity... freedom, and resistance to change... predictability” (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020: 2). It is further manifest, for example, in perceptions of “rural locations as places of “whiteness” [that] may have been an unspoken driver for the movement of city people to rural locations” (ibid.). Both the agents of a new “colonial countryside” (Ware, 2022) *and* those challenging such a rural fate on the ground may together be complicit in pushing forward further the post-Brexit revanchist rural UK. And yet, as the chapter’s

conclusion will now suggest, such a fate should not be regarded as inevitable and a counter-narrative is also there to take forward.

Conclusion: for a counter-narrative to inspire a defiantly alive and richly diverse rural

This chapter began with a reference to Keith Hoggart's sharp critical observations on the state of the rural today. For Hoggart (1988, 1990), "rural" was largely "dead" as a legitimate category within scholarship. In contrast, this chapter has suggested that whilst both Brexit and Covid-19 herald uncertain, problematic and probably often hard times ahead for the rural UK, they also paradoxically express just how "alive" the rural actually still is in 2022. As noted in this chapter's introduction, they have pushed the UK rural centre-stage (Chapter 2), with it certainly meriting some post-Hoggart academic spotlight. More broadly, the present book's chapters have revealed how often well-embedded and taken-for-granted processes that have sought to shape or produce a more-or-less distinctive rural the UK now strive for new lives without, *inter alia*, their EU former companion. Moreover, they are seeking to do this in the light of additional pressures an unwanted Covid-19 fellow-traveller has frequently brought to them. Put a little differently, Brexit and Covid-19 both have more-or-less distinctive "rural geographies", all surely more than enough to reinforce how "rural" is defiantly alive. It is also from the point of view of very many – myself included – a category well worth fighting with and for. And here specifically, we do not have to accept the hegemony of the revanchist rural that this chapter has suggested both Brexit and Covid-19 have nourished.

In terms of the challenge ahead in forging a fully active counter-narrative to rural revanchism, first consider celebrated Lake District farmer, rural campaigner and writer James Rebanks's reflections on Brexit when a guest on the online interview programme *A Drink With...* (Rebanks, 2021). Rebanks summarised the situation for his largely urban-based audience by saying that Brexit presented the UK rural with a choice of "three doors". Going through the first, we can simply reproduce and duplicate European policy, in which case he asked what was the point of Brexit for rural areas? This route certainly does not seem to be the way things are going, as this chapter has suggested. Second, we can get "in bed with gangsters" – as he delicately put it – and drive through free trade policies that leave little protection for rural people and places that cannot or will not compete at this level. Such a route bodes well neither for the UK's farmers, as this chapter has also noted, nor for the UK engaging significantly with global challenges such as reducing long-distance dependencies and energy use. Third, Rebanks argued that we can do something better and different for rural areas that, extending his argument a little, supports its people and places within an alignment also highly beneficial for the environment and humanity's wider futures. He called for this latter path to be chosen, a similar routing to that expressed through Mark Shucksmith's (2018) *Good Countryside*.³

Entering the battle once again over rural representations (Halfacree, 1993, 2015; McAreavey, Chapter 2), the Good Countryside is set up by Shucksmith as a rival to the seemingly ubiquitous “rural idyll”. The latter he describes as “a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture” (Shucksmith, 2018: 163), riddled with nostalgia and working to exacerbate rural inequality and disadvantage. As noted in this chapter, such a representation works excellently with and for rural revanchism. In contrast, the Good Countryside expresses a utopian alternative through four Rs (*ibid.*: 166–168, adapted a little):

- Repair: keep in good condition all dimensions of the rural “infrastructure”, from the physical/ecological to the humans living and experiencing the area;
- Relatedness: recognise, support and promote diversity and difference across the rural population;
- Rights: create more widespread and diverse empowered participation across all those with a rural living;
- Re-enchantment: explore, recognise and celebrate the diverse “magic” that is expressed by and through rural place(s).

Striving for a Good Countryside for the rural UK, it is critical to note somewhat paradoxically that whilst Brexit and Covid-19 may have promoted a revanchist rural of inwardly-focused reactionary selectivity, this occurred, in part, as a countering reaction to Brexit’s opening-up of debates on the future of the countryside and Covid-19’s promotion of “green Prozac” for a multiply “locked-down” urban population. Both these dimensions allow advocates of a Good Countryside into the debate, through *not* accepting their effective ongoing suppression that this chapter has outlined and warned of. Instead, inspired by the four Rs, Good Countryside proponents must take the numerous cues, expressions and experiences that have been exposed via Brexit and Covid-19 to promote a UK rural that cares for people and place, celebrates diversity and connections, empowers its people from multiple directions, and marvels at the defiantly alive 21st century rural UK. Brexit’s “window of opportunity” for novel and progressive changes in rural policies and practices must be grasped and Covid-19’s diverse celebration of rural experience carried forward. There is still time for this as nothing is yet firmly set in stone, as the present overall book makes clear. From living rewarding and inspiring everyday lives to engaging with more global human existential questions, the rural UK has many roles to play. And, yes, if successful, this will certainly require substantial revision of Contemporary Rural Britain once again...!

Notes

- 1 Whilst 52 percent of the votes supported Brexit, turnout was 72 percent, so only around 36 percent of the eligible adult population actively voted for the UK to leave the EU (Electoral Commission no date).
- 2 Estate agents clearly had a vested interest in talking-up this trend, with Ware (2022: np) noting how *Rightmove*, the property-listings website, had a prominent billboard outside London’s Finsbury Park underground station which ‘depict[ed] the English

countryside as one big meadow – a grassy landscape devoid of people, buildings or roads, imprinted with the words “Explore the life that could be...”.

- 3 Both Rebanks’s and Shucksmith’s ideas also resonate with a range of other ‘radical rural’ manifestos, such as calls to promote an ‘alter-rurality’ (Versteegh and Meeres, 2014) but the present chapter does not have the space to develop these connections.

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