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Rural transformations, rural futures: introduction to theme section

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ABSTRACT

This theme section editorial introduction presents a collection of papers brought together under the heading *Rural transformations, rural futures*. The papers are elaborations of work presented at a European Society for Rural Sociology 'satellite event' entitled *Transitioning Rural Futures*. Contributions to the theme section add to the emerging corpus of work that examines potentially transformative immediate and medium-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural areas, and also speak to other 'grand challenges' likely to transform rural places and shape rural futures: specifically, resilience, digitalisation, wellbeing, socio-economic inequalities, shifting rural policy landscapes and impacts of transnational economic events.

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Introduction

The European Society for Rural Sociology brings together researchers from across Europe and further afield who share an interest in rural life and how it is changing. In June 2022, in response to COVID-19 related restrictions, the society's XXIX biennial Congress took the form of eleven satellite events across Europe, in lieu of a full meeting. One of these events, entitled *Transitioning Rural Futures*, was organised by researchers from the Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences department at the James Hutton Institute, a research organisation with campuses in Aberdeen and Dundee, Scotland, and was held at the Birnam Arts Centre in Perthshire.¹ The aim of the Scottish event, as set out in the Call for Papers, was 'to pull together different perspectives and share new knowledge on how to transition to new rural futures and transformational rural resilience in a post-Covid world'. It was envisaged that contributions would consider themes including, but not limited to, changes to rural working lives, rural social innovation, place-based policy, and digitalisation. Held over three full days, the *Transitioning Rural Futures* event attracted researchers from across the UK and beyond (including the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands, Hungary and the

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Faroe Islands) whose contributions elucidated a range of challenges and opportunities associated with contemporary rural and island communities across Europe. Interest was expressed amongst the satellite event participants to bring together a collection of papers based on the conference contributions, which has now resulted in the collection of papers in this theme section of the *Scottish Geographical Journal*.

Rural transformations, rural futures

Rural areas have been, and will continue to be, directly affected by national and global events and pan-national developments which introduce a shock to communities at all scales and in all geographical locations. Notable events in the recent past that have driven change include, for example, the 2008 financial crisis, increasing concerns about the global climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the (at the time of writing) ongoing cost of living crisis affecting the UK and many other advanced economies. Contemporary processes such as digitalisation drive and are stimulated by such events, while episodes of political change and restructuring can also be important, of which Brexit is an example in the UK context. These shocks can be transformational stimuli leading to both positive and negative outcomes, having effects that drive future trajectories of rural places and societies, impacts that may differ significantly from those experienced in response to the same shocks in urban contexts. These outcomes and future effects have influenced rural studies scholarship to date and point towards topics that will indelibly influence rural futures and, by association, future rural research agendas.

Although the *Transitioning Rural Futures* meeting was held after the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were over, it is unsurprising that it framed some of the research presented at the event. The pandemic directly affected communities large and small regardless of their geographical location. Some immediate impacts on rural areas were documented early in the pandemic, swiftly followed by studies of intermediate impacts, notably the rapid emergence of new opportunities for professionals to work from home in many national contexts and an associated counterurbanisation renaissance. Contributions to the theme section add to this corpus of work but also speak to other ‘grand challenges’ likely to shape rural futures.

The now ubiquitous place of internet-enabled infrastructure, devices and applications in contemporary life means it is inevitable that digital technologies will continue to influence future trajectories of rural places. Resilience will also play a central role. These topics are considered separately and as mutually constitutive themes in several papers. Aligned with resilience, the wellbeing of individuals who live and work in rural areas is important, particularly given ongoing socio-economic inequalities in rural communities and poor mental health in farming communities in particular. Rural futures will also be shaped by policy and by what policy-makers, politicians and civil society understand ‘rural’ to be and what ‘rural’ should be for. Transnational economic events will inevitably continue to have impacts that play out at national and sub-national scales.

Introducing the papers comprising this theme section

The eight papers comprising this theme section fit into two broad thematic groups. The first group of papers are directly linked to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and

resilience. In also considering topics with salience in a post-pandemic future, they add to our understanding of how manifestations of resilience might have changed due to the pandemic and what communities and external actors could do to focus on these opportunities as well as address challenges. Hayfield's paper examines resilience processes during the early months of lockdown in the Faroe Islands. In commencing her research as the immediate impacts of the pandemic unfolded, Hayfield was able to capture people's early attempts to make sense of a time of enormous change, and her paper also highlights the important role of place in shaping responses. Currie et al.'s paper provides insights into the entanglements and interactions between 'everyday' and 'emergency' community resilience that developed during the height of the pandemic and as restrictions were eased, contributing both to the wider resilience literature and highlighting the importance of building rural-proofing into policy to support the everyday resilience of such communities. Glass et al.'s paper highlights how voluntary and community organisations in Scotland and England filled gaps left by state institutions being unable effectively to meet the needs of rural populations experiencing financial hardship during the pandemic. This paper recommends that there is a need to redistribute societal risk to ensure that future crises that emerge during what some commentators are now describing as a period of *permacrisis* do not further exacerbate inequalities in rural communities. Noble et al.'s paper considers changing relationships within crofting communities in North-West mainland Scotland associated with the rapid increase in the adoption of digital technologies and tools during the pandemic, offering reflections on what increasing digitalisation in crofting communities could mean for future community resilience.

The second group of papers considers influences other than the pandemic on rural futures, namely shifts in policy and planning agendas, influences of the media and challenges within the agricultural sector. Burnett's paper explores how media representations during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced tropes of Scottish islands as places of refuge and resilience and shone a light on tensions regarding who is entitled to access these benefits. Philip et al. consider recent reframings of how 'rural' is defined in public policy in Scotland, a process that has potential implications for future rural policy, planning and development. They identify the problematic of referring to 'rural', 'island' or 'rural and island' in policy discourse, and query whether 'island-proofing' and what the Scottish Government term 'rural mainstreaming' are aligned policy measures. Their conclusions argue that, while no territorial classification system is perfect, there is a need for consistency and clarity of purpose in the deployment of 'rural' definitions in public policy. The final two papers consider two high profile challenges facing agriculture. Kovács and Váradi illuminate factors that have led to an ethnicisation and problematic availability of seasonal agricultural labour in Hungary. Focusing on fruit production, their paper highlights changes in post-Communist agricultural production, in this case a move to larger production units and an increasing reliance upon Roma migrant labour. Finally, Rose et al. address the challenges of mental health care and support services provision in rural communities in the UK and Ireland, exploring this complex issue through the nexus of simultaneous mental health crises: impacts on young adults and impacts on those working in agriculture. Their findings highlight young farmers' subjective understandings of mental wellbeing and challenges with access to sources of support.

Rural futures: some speculative thoughts

What the future may be for rural areas in general, and for specific rural communities in particular, is uncertain. Post-pandemic related impacts and other ‘grand challenges’ considered in this theme section point to some potential trajectories. Urban and rural places are inter-dependent and inter-connected, thus the future of one will inevitably affect the future of the other. The planetary urbanism thesis posits that urban-rural boundaries have crumbled and been replaced by, for example, new spatial linkages that integrate urban and rural places or do not distinguish between urban and rural. As noted by Woods (2019, p.625), ‘the countryside hence is ‘de-ruralised’ as it loses its autonomy and cultural distinction.’ This thesis in part aligns with Hoggart’s (1990, p.245) suggestion, offered more than three decades ago, that we ‘do away with rural’ as an analytical category, a response to ‘similarities in causal processes across the rural-urban divide’ having received too little attention. Hoggart’s provocation was rebutted by rural scholars explicitly and implicitly as new ways of thinking about urban-rural linkages, spatial ordering and territorial distinctiveness emerged.

Attributes Scott et al. (2019) list as ‘emerging functions of the rural’ suggest that what the urban majority want – or need – the rural for (e.g. green energy and other means of moving to a post-carbon society, recreational spaces, ecosystem services, and a place for socially undesirable land uses such as rubbish dumps and prisons) may not align with what rural communities themselves see as legitimate land-uses and priorities for the future. This difference prompts questions around whether urban and rural needs will be met equally, or equitably, in the future. Emerging needs of the countryside by an urban majority often overlook the fact that the contemporary countryside is a living, working, culturally vibrant environment, one which is socially, economically, topographically and topologically diverse. In attempting to meet climate crisis mitigation objectives, energy security and food security needs alongside an ongoing commodification of rural places to meet leisure demands, these ‘emerging functions’ could represent a threat to rural society if they are promoted without due regard to potential impacts on the resident rural population.

Impacts of the climate crisis on the liveability of rural and island communities are also uncertain. Will more frequent and severe extreme weather events make some rural places uninhabitable and, if this happens, where will displaced rural populations relocate to? A more positive future, however, might see responses to the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and societal desires to live a more sustainable, low impact and less materialistic life all stimulating another wave of counterurbanisation, one that could profoundly shift the existing urban-rural population and political/ policy priorities dynamic. The nature of rural futures notwithstanding, there will be ample opportunities for rural studies scholars to contribute to emerging debates as they unfold.

Note

1. The satellite event was organised by Leanne Townsend, Mags Currie and Christina Noble.

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Disclosure statement

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