

Rural Citizenship

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Citizenship, like rurality, is a highly contested term. Yet emerging research has suggested that distinctive forms of citizenship are becoming associated with the global countryside. This chapter examines the significance of citizenship to rural geography and how understandings of rurality contribute to our knowledge of citizenship. It explores how rural citizenship is imagined, performed and contested in different spatial settings, from local villages to transnational rural communities. It explores how the language of rights and duties has been applied to rural areas. The chapter concludes by examining the significance of rural activism in developing new forms of transnational citizenship.

Main Text

Rural Citizenship

*“It's up to you. Which will it be
Good citizen or poor campesino?”*
Fishing, Richard Shindell

Citizenship, like rurality, is a highly contested term. It has widely been used to describe a person's relationship with a nation-state and, in particular, the rights and duties that are associated with it (Smith 2000). Of late, this idea has been challenged by geographers who have pointed to the importance of spaces above and below the nation-state in the formation and practice of citizenship (Desforges, Jones and Woods 2005, Yarwood 2014). The concept of transnationalism, for example, recognizes that the practice of citizenship may cross national boundaries and engage citizens with political and cultural processes at a global level. At the same time, local spaces provide an important context for engagements such as voting in local elections, writing to councilors, volunteering to provide local services, staging protests or simply living out daily life as a citizen. Citizenship is therefore fluid and multi-scalar and much more than just a person's relationship with his or her nation-state. Anderson et al (2008) contend that:

“Citizenship is increasingly organized and contested through a variety of non-state as well as state institutions. This extends citizenship in the cultural sphere, to describe people's senses of belonging in relation to places and people, near and far; senses of responsibility for the ways in which these relations are shaped; and a sense of how individual and collective action helps to shape the world in which we live.”

Investigations of citizenship have tended to focus on urban areas, perhaps reflecting that its etymology refers to the inhabitants of cities. Yet, emerging research has suggested that distinctive forms of citizenship are becoming associated with the countryside and deserve closer scrutiny.

It is widely acknowledged that rurality does not shape social relations *per se*. Distinct forms of economic development and political conflict, together with different ways of imagining rural space, influence how citizenship is imagined, contested and performed in rural places. Although significant differences exist within and between rural spaces in the majority and minority world, it is possible to discern a “global countryside” that has common characteristics (Woods 2011). These include the presence of:

- globalised commodity chains and agri-food systems;
- the growth of transnational corporate investment and networks;
- the supply and employment of migrant labour;
- flows of global tourists;
- non-national property investment;
- the commodification of nature;
- large-scale exploitation of primary resources;
- social polarization;
- new sites of political authority;
- political contest.

Halfacree (2007) argues that rural space has three facets. It is simultaneously a *locality* that reflects the outcome of productive and consumptive economic activities; it is *represented*, for example through the much contested the rural idyll; and something that is played out and given meaning through the performance of *everyday* lives. Significantly, political contest means that these three elements do not always sit easily with one another meaning that rural space may be disjointed or chaotic in nature. These three aspects of rurality have the potential to shape, and be shaped by, different practices of citizenship.

The Imagined Countryside and Citizenship

As Halfacree’s (2007) model recognizes, social constructions of rurality have significant bearings on rural society. Hegemonic views of the countryside have been enrolled into discourses of citizenship and national identity. Heritage and folk traditions have been appropriated to evoke the idea that a nation is somehow more authentic if it has “rural roots”. This is evident in museums that link imagined folk cultures with nationhood and in folk songs that associate rural landscapes and people with national identity. In the UK, nature studies and rural folk lore were used to instill a sense of national identity in the early 20th Century. By contrast, those unable or unwilling to appreciate these hegemonic views of the countryside were positioned as “anti-citizens”. The *active* exploration and understanding of the countryside was seen as important in developing these forms of citizenship. In the 1930s, the Scottish Youth

Hostel Association sought to develop a sense of national identity by encouraging working class youths to engage physically and bodily with the Highlands.

Indeed, the countryside has often been viewed as a training ground for citizenship. One contemporary example is provided by The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, a voluntary scheme undertaken by young people in Commonwealth countries. Participants are required to undertake an "unaccompanied, self-reliant expedition with an agreed aim" in rural or "wild" setting. The countryside is seen as a testing ground in which young people *perform* skills that are deemed to make them good citizens, including team-working, leadership, self-sufficiency, fitness, enquiry, resolve and confidence. Organisations such as the Scouts and the UK's National Citizenship Service also draw on rurality to test and shape future citizens through camps and residential projects. The annual Ten Tors Challenge uses Dartmoor National Park (UK) to test skills specifically by soldier-citizens (Yarwood 2014). Rural settings are seen to provide opportunities for citizenship to be embodied and performed, although there is an expectation that the skills learnt will then be applied in everyday (perhaps urban) settings.

These kinds of practices reproduce dominant views of the rurality and certain expectations of citizenship. At the same time, hegemonic and conservative visions of the countryside combine to exclude some groups of people from full participation in society. Thus, the discourses of heritage and citizenship discussed above often imply a white history, contributing to a sense that rural space is white space. Equally, indigenous people, such as Native Americans or Indigenous Australians, are curiously absent from both the imagination and reality of rural space. Indeed, Aboriginal Australians were not granted full citizenship until 1968 and, until then, were only allowed limited access to rural towns.

Women are also expected to conform to particular gender roles, especially in farming; gay people may hide their sexuality due to conservative values; racial and ethnic minorities may feel isolated; nomadic lifestyles may be illegal; young people may be barred from public space; and disabled groups may find it harder to access rural places. At the same time rural areas can also be seen as a place to which 'others' can be banished: rural places have been used to house prisoners, asylum seekers, the mentally ill or indigenous people, who are kept out of sight and mind in remote reservations and institutions.

Although in many countries legislation has been enacted to ensure equality, there is often a gap between *de jure* (legal) rights and whether these are manifest in daily life (*de facto*). Painter and Philo (1995) state that if people cannot be present in public spaces without feeling "out of place", then it is hard for them to consider themselves full citizens at all. While these issues are not confined to rural areas, they are nevertheless exacerbated in rural settings due to greater visibility, the hegemonic imagination of rural space and a lack of support services. The following section examines how the language of rights and duties has been deployed to understand and resolve some of these issues.

Rural Localities, Rights and Duties

There are significant differences in the standard of living between urban and rural places. According to the United Nations, 71.6% of rural people at a global scale live in extreme poverty, including 1,801 billion who live lived below \$2 a day and 1,010 million on below \$1.25 a day. In the USA, the most persistently poor counties are non-metropolitan; in Australia infant mortality rates in remote communities (12 per 1,000) are significantly higher than in major metropolitan areas (6 per 1,000) (Tonts and Larson 2002). Tonts and Larsen (2002, 135) frame the differences between urban and rural areas in the language of human rights: “as governments withdraw, or fail to provide, certain services and infrastructure the human rights of rural people are diminished.” By implication, rural people are unable to achieve full citizenship as they are unable to access the welfare rights afforded to their urban counterparts.

In some countries, this reflects a form of local rather than national citizenship (Smart and Smart 2001). In post-war China, for example, there was a formal divide between urban and rural hukou. In the countryside welfare was place specific, whereas urban welfare was based on particular enterprises. This has meant that citizens have only been access welfare in specific parts of the country, limiting their ability to travel and seek work. Outside their home areas they have been treated as ‘second class citizens’ and tolerated only if the state did not need to provide for them. This has not only limited their ability to travel to urban areas but more prosperous rural ones too. The situation is similar to the experiences of international migrants seeking work outside their own country.

The example illustrates Cresswell’s (2009) assertion one has to be mobile to be a citizen. In the West the development of national systems of welfare untied people from their home localities by offering welfare based on universal rights rather than a reliance on local charity. Yet poor or non-existent transport networks render many people living in rural areas, especially the old, young, poor, disabled and women, into immobile, semi-citizens trapped by rural localities. Cresswell (2009) argues that citizenship relies on “prosthetic” materials, such as shops, services, employment and transport, to achieve full social and welfare rights. The daily trek for clean water or the closure of a local post office suggests that many rural citizens lack the supports needed to enable them to participate fully as citizens of their wider society.

There have been various efforts to develop rural places that have had important implications for rural citizenship. Forms of endogenous development have been associated with the ‘modernisation’ of rural places. These include state-led (or quasi-autonomous) development agencies that may not be directly accountable to local people as well as forms of private capital, such food processing plants of global corporations, that are powerful by virtue of their position as monopolistic employers. In terms of citizenship, exogenous development is frequently associated with the imposition of new forms of political authority that cut across and restricts existing networks of governance. These centre on economic productivity rather than social and political equality, re-enforcing existing structures of inequality. Thus, efforts to modernize rural China have improved per capita incomes and led to a boom in consumer spending but, at the same time, have contributed to a growing gap between country and city.

In an effort to counter these effects, more endogenous forms of development have been encouraged that rely on forms of ‘active citizenship’ that emphasize the duty of citizens to contribute to their localities. Citizens are increasingly required to fill gaps left behind from the neo-liberal roll-back of the state by, for example, running their own services and working as a community to supplement state provision. There are three reasons why this form of development has been favored in rural areas. First, rural areas have been more likely to suffer from the withdrawal of the state services (witnessed by the decline and closure of public services) and are therefore more likely to rely on citizen action to fill gaps in state provision. Second, there has been a long-standing obligation, evidenced in many countryside policies, that rural areas *should* provide their own needs. Examples include community-run shops, voluntary policing, locally built housing and health care. Finally, rural areas are perhaps better placed to engage in this form of local participation. The lowest tier of formal government, such as parish councils in England or *Mairies* in France, are found in rural places, perhaps offering greater opportunities for citizens in rural areas to engage with government than their urban counterparts. Many rural policies have encouraged partnership working between the state, private and voluntary sectors, offering further opportunity for citizenship engagement in local decision making and action. The European Union’s LEADER programme is one such example that has not only encouraged local action but a form of transnational citizenship that links rural localities to other places in the wider EU supra-state.

Yet, rural communities are far from autonomous and local action in them is usually scrutinized and managed by government agencies, especially where it draws on state funding. Local organisations act as a proxy for government and, rather than empowering communities, these schemes simply aid the roll-back of the state.

Furthermore, the idea of community is frequently used to impose unity and obscure diversity beneath a banner of communal identity. Notions of community can exclude as well as include and often imply a rather bounded, insular view of rural space that seems oblivious to the significance of outside connections. Often “community views” are those of the elite or wealthy: powerful farming interests still dominate local politics in some places and in others the interests of new rural elites are to the fore. In South Africa, McEwan (2005) has argued that established gender roles made it difficult for women to participate in consultation exercises, rendering the practice of citizenship “a meaningless concept”.

Marginal/Third Space

Although policies of active citizenship fail to transform the countryside profoundly, rural places can offer space for new, more radical forms of citizenship to emerge. The imagined and literal edges of rurality (Halfacree 2007) have provided spaces for new utopian communities to emerge that are based on faith, gender, green politics, political extremism, nomadism or a desire to live sustainably. These have their own forms of membership, structures of decision-making and, by implication, forms of communitarian citizenship that seek to disengage their members from the state. Although these groups strive towards new forms of citizenship, they are prone to disintegration as a result of internal tensions or state legislation to counter them. As the following section explores, people have been more successful when they have adopted transnational, rather than isolationist, stances.

Transnational Ruralities

One of the characteristics of the global countryside has been a ‘depeasantisation’ of rural places (Woods 2011) by neo-colonial, exogenous and exploitative forms transnational capitalism. This has led to landlessness, loss of rights and the suppression of local cultures, contributing to migration from rural places to urban ones or, more significantly, across borders to work (legally or illegally) in spaces of primary production. At best, these denizen workers have few or little rights and can be subject to exploitation or even slavery. Despite this, many countries have focused on tightening their borders and placing ever more stringent requirements migrants who have sought to gain citizenship¹. Such actions remind us that *de jure* notions of citizenship are still closely regulated by nation-states.

At the same time, transnational actions have been launched to support those marginalized by global capitalism. The Fairtrade campaign emerged in the 1980s to connect Western, urban consumers more closely with “distant”, “other” producers of food in the third world. The movement seeks to develop non-exploitative trading relations by paying producers a guaranteed price to ensure the sustainable production of crops as well as a social premium to be invested in social, environmental and economic projects. By acting as “consumer-citizens”, those in the west are encouraged to use their purchasing power not only to make personal ethical decisions but also to support a politics of change. These types of transnational coalitions have the potential to empower the most excluded rural citizens. Thus, co-operatives of female artisans have not only used transnational opportunities to develop trade, but have provided an important and alternative platform for local women’s voices.

“Depeasantisation” has also prompted local resistance and the emergence of transnational networks aimed at empowering poor rural populations. In South America, peasant movements have successfully mobilized indigenous identities to address common concerns. Building on social networks left in place by prior rounds of political and religious organizing, indigenous groups have used unions, churches, nongovernmental organizations and even state networks to mobilize across communities in order to demand rights and resources (Yashar 1998). As well as linking local sites of resistance, crucially networks have been used to foster transnational support.

One of the most prolific have been the Zapatistas, a Mayan resistance movement from Chiapas, Mexico that emerged in response to unfair trade, exogenous exploitation of resources and the loss of power and land. The movement gained international support through the effective use of the internet and collaboration with activists at a global scale. Another example is the Via Campesina (International Peasant’s Movement), which was formed in Belgium in 1993 to defend small-scale agriculture against corporate and transnational companies. It aims to bring together ‘peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world’ and claims to have 164 organisations

¹ The quote at the start of this chapter is from Richard Shindall’s song ‘fishing’ in which an illegal worker in the USA is given a choice between informing on other migrants in exchange for citizenship or deportation and a return to life as a poor *campesino*.

in 73 countries representing 200 million farmers. These forms of “New Social Movements” are autonomous, pluralistic and transnational; occasionally crystallizing in particular (and often urban) protest sites. Their actions represent a form of transnationalism that is concerned with global rather than national citizenship.

Conclusions

This chapter has used the lens of citizenship to examine a range of actions in rural areas. Based on this evidence it is possible to draw two broad conclusions. First, citizenship is beneficial to rural studies and, second, better understandings of citizenship can be gained by a focus on rural places.

Within rural geography, Paul Cloke (2006, 26) has argued that there is a need for “theoretical hybridization which can combine, for example, the concerns of the cultural turn with those of political and economic materialism”. Thinking more closely about rural citizenship is one way of fulfilling this call. Citizenship is concerned with understanding how broader political structures that shape, and are shaped, by wider changes in society. At the same time it is concerned with individual identity and performance. It offers a chance to bridge the personal and performative aspects of the cultural turn with the structural and institutional foci of political and social geography within variously and fluid spaces and places. As Susan Smith (2000, 83) argues, the concept of citizenship “marks a point of contact between social, cultural and political geography.”

Whether there is a distinct form of rural citizenship is open to debate and reflects the way in which rurality is conceptualized. Using Halfacree’s (2007) model, it can be seen that rural localities have been subject to distinctive but differentiated forms of social, economic and political restructuring that, on the one hand, are leading to a “global countryside” with common characteristics but, on the other, are producing very different experiences of rurality. Nevertheless, these wider structural change provide the context for citizenship action (or inaction) in rural places. Social constructions of rurality have also been deployed to fix the identity of and mobilize citizens, be it “country people” in the UK or landless campesinos in South America. Thus people who consider themselves “rural people” may be coerced to engage with a variety of issues and rights that are broadly associated with the countryside. Recognising the diversity of identities and actions under the banner of ‘rural’ contributes to understandings of citizenship as multi-layered and fluid. Rural citizenship is also performed in a variety of different ways. These range from overtly political actions, perhaps campaigning for rural issues, to more everyday performances required by rural citizens simply trying to live out their lives in rural societies. Closer investigations of citizenship therefore have the potential to improve understanding of rural areas.

A closer focus on rural places can benefit understandings of citizenship. Rural citizenship in the west has often been associated with rather parochial concerns and small-scale disputes concerning the impact of development on the rural setting (Woods 2011). Very often these debates revolve around different ways in which rurality is represented (idyll or productivist work place, for example) that in turn reflect changes in the social structure of a locality. Too often

rurality has been associated with “community” and, as a result, has been rather inward looking and concerned only with local places.

Yet, as this chapter has shown, rurality in the developing world has the potential to frame more radical transformative forms of citizenship. As the example of the Zapatistas shows, rural space, often considered peripheral, offers a site for radical, transformative actions that have the potential to ‘jump scales’ to impact on wider society. Transnational rural actions represent an attempt to develop a global civic society and, with it, citizenry that challenge the conventional association of citizenship with the nation-state. It is perhaps significant that campaigns such as Fairtrade are rural campaigns, aimed at supporting and transforming the lives of people in rural places. Although urban areas often provide the setting for rural protests (the Zapatistas for example first occupied cities in Chiapas) it is from and within rural places that some of the potentially most transformative citizen actions are occurring. Far from being peripheral to citizenship, rural places have the potential to develop truly radical forms of citizenship.

SEE ALSO:

[Include cross-references here. See the cross-references list of other entries on the homepage of ScholarOne.]

Citizenship; Environmental citizenship; Rural policy, politics and citizenship; Globalization and Rural Areas; Rural Geography; Rural Society (in global north)

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Key Words

Rural, citizenship, activism, national identity, nations and nation states, transnationalism, folk practices, political geography, social geography, globalisation