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# Activating the Countryside: Rural Power, the Power of the Rural and the Making of Rural Politics

Michael Mayerfeld Bell,\* Sarah E. Lloyd and Christine Vatovec

## Abstract

Against the current moment of rural doubt, we argue that the material, symbolic and relational practices of the rural continue to be articulate aspects of our politics. We term the material practices 'rural power' and the symbolic practices 'the power of the rural'. The relational practices we term 'rural constituencies' when relations are bounded materially and 'constituencies of the rural' when they are bounded symbolically. We apply this framework to a critique of contemporary theory, especially mobilities research, which, we argue, typically speaks with a passive rural voice. We argue for recognising the active rural voice in the mobilisation and stabilisation of the rural.

The rural still causes trouble. In our supposedly modern and urban age, when we have grown accustomed to thinking of the rural as something old and tired, too exhausted and passive to resist and get out of the way of cities and city people, we still find repeated reminders of the alertness and vigour of rural places, ideas and lives. These reminders are not necessarily cause for romantic celebration. Afghanistan, Waziristan and Sudan nettle the world, showing us the continued stark military challenge of the rural. Everyone is talking about food again, worried about its dearth, its excess and its quality and lack thereof. Diseases from swine flu to avian flu to West Nile virus bring the rural into the streets of everyone's concerns. People move from countryside to city, from city to countryside, and from countryside to countryside and the results are not always conflict free. The rural also pleases us, soothing our worries through book and film and song, and rewarding our ambitions through walks and weeding and woodcutting. In all these ways and more, the rural remains an active feature of our lives, continually confronting us and our politics materially, symbolically and relationally.

And yet many writers from many quarters have argued that the rural is declining in consequence. Others have objected to or qualified such a take on the rural. This is an old and seemingly endless debate, one that more than a few scholars are weary of,

1 and wary of (Sorokin and Zimmerman 1929; Sorokin *et al.* 1930–1932; Asleson 1958;  
2 Pahl 1966; Copp 1972; Williams 1973; Friedland 1982, 2002; Gilbert 1982; Mormont  
3 1990; Bell, 1992, 2007; Halfacree 1993; Marsden *et al.* 1993; Murdoch and Pratt  
4 1993). But the very existence of the debate indicates that the status of the rural,  
5 empirically and conceptually, remains at issue. Moreover, the debate seems to have  
6 increased in volume recently, as we will describe, which provides occasion for the  
7 intervention we wish to make here: to argue for an active understanding of the many  
8 powers of the rural with all its materiality, symbolism and relations. In this way, we  
9 hope to provide an account of the rural that is based not on an a priori definition but  
10 rather on practice. The powers of these practices make the rural and its politics an  
11 active part of the practice of all our lives.

12 In the pages to come, we term material practices ‘rural power’ and symbolic  
13 practices ‘the power of the rural’. We term relational practices ‘rural constituencies’  
14 when relations are bounded materially and ‘constituencies of the rural’ when bounded  
15 symbolically. Rural power and the power of the rural grant power from the rural, and  
16 rural constituencies and constituencies of the rural grant power over the rural. Of  
17 course, like all practices, these combine and mutually constitute each other in the  
18 actual politics of actual lives. Indeed, their plural powers gain their greatest strength  
19 through their combination and mutual constitution. Moreover, these plural powers  
20 are made use of by urban peoples as much as rural peoples. Rural activeness is spatial  
21 but not spatially limited.

22 We develop our active perspective on the rural in dialogue with the rise of interest  
23 in mobilities as a theoretical perspective for, and an empirical account of, the rural.  
24 Perhaps the most prominent sign of this rising interest is that mobilities was one of  
25 the themes of the 2007 meetings of the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS),  
26 which was entitled ‘Mobilities, vulnerabilities and sustainabilities: new questions and  
27 challenges for rural Europe’, which in turn gave rise to this special issue. The empiri-  
28 cal recognition of rural mobilities as phenomena worthy of note and concern, as  
29 documented by the other articles in this special issue, potentially helps us envision the  
30 activeness of the rural. But we have to look more sharply than we sometimes have, for  
31 there is a potential to see rural mobilities as yet more signs of the draining, the  
32 wasting and the dying away of the rural in the face of urban strength and vitality. We  
33 have some concerns that the ‘mobilities turn’ in scholarship could lead us to repeat old  
34 homilies about rural passivity and death, as we shall argue, missing the active sig-  
35 nificance of the rural in our lives and in our politics. Indeed, early writings empha-  
36 sising a more mobile conception of social life have echoed this passive rural tone, at  
37 least implicitly, as we discuss. We try to amend this tone by recognising that stabilities  
38 are just as significant as mobilities, that stabilities help constitute mobilities and vice  
39 versa, and that stabilisation is as much an active political act as is mobilisation for the  
40 life of both the town and the country.

## 41 42 **The death of the rural**

43  
44 Writers have opined on rural demise, from various perspectives, for centuries, as  
45 Raymond Williams (1973) thoughtfully showed, dating back to the Roman poet  
46 Horace (1983 [c. 20 BCE]), if not earlier. But the volume of opining seems to have

1 ratcheted up quite a bit of late. We typed 'death of the rural' into Google, with  
2 quotation marks to get hits on the exact phrase, and got 201,000 hits – an illustrative  
3 total, if not a quantitatively significant one.<sup>1</sup> Right at the top was a reference to Wendell  
4 Berry's 1999 piece in *The Ecologist* on 'The death of the rural community'. On the first  
5 page of returns were references to 'death of the rural lifestyle' from a review of Jorge  
6 Sánchez-Cabezudo's 2006 rural noir film *Night of the Sunflowers*; 'death of the rural  
7 federations' from an article on women and rural development; 'death of the rural  
8 world' from a history of Algeria; 'death of the rural way of life' from an account of Irish  
9 novelist John McGahern's last book, the 2002 *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in  
10 his 2006 obituary in the British paper *The Telegraph*; 'the slow death of rural culture'  
11 from a review of a 2005 CD of Italian rural music field recordings made in the 1950s  
12 by the famous folklorist Alan Lomax; and 'the death of the rural pub trade' from a  
13 2006 account in an Irish paper of the closing of 14 per cent of rural pubs in County  
14 Mayo in the previous 2 years.

15 Other search terms picked up more dark talk about the rural. 'End of the rural'  
16 returned 311,000 hits. Many or even most of these were admittedly other uses of the  
17 word string, like 'at the west end of the rural road' and 'at the delivery end of the rural  
18 information chain'. But it also turned up bits like the Australian Sociological Association's  
19 2003 public forum on 'The End of the Rural?'; a 1999 lament on 'the end of the  
20 rural church in India' from the Presbyterian Overseas Ministries; a 2002 discussion  
21 of the role of the 'degradation of rural culture, and the end of the rural universe' in  
22 giving impetus to the rise of the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil; and a  
23 rather unwieldy chapter title 'Agriculture's place in a diversifying economy; rural  
24 industry and the farmers in the city; the end of the rural?' from the online table of  
25 contents for a 2000 book titled *More Than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia*.  
26 Related phrases like the 'end of rural life' got us to the personal statement of Helen  
27 Reddout, co-founder of the American advocacy group, the Community Association  
28 for Restoration of the Environment, which was the featured organisation for people to  
29 donate to if they really liked *The Matrix*, the popular series of anti-factory farm spoofs  
30 of *The Matrix*. Reddout concludes her statement by saying that a factory farm 'is the  
31 seeds of destruction of any rural community and the end of rural life as we have  
32 known it'. A search on the 'death of rural life' got us to the Canadian Organic Growers'  
33 1999 presentation to Canada's House Standing Committee on Environment and  
34 Development, in which the group argued that 'the current model of agribusiness  
35 results in the death of rural life'.

36 In other words, this talk of rural demise is coming in from all over the world.  
37 Academics have been getting in on it once again too. There is the 1998 book by the  
38 American agricultural economist Stephen Blank, *The End of Agriculture in the American  
39 Portfolio*. The American sociologist William Friedland (2002) lays out a related  
40 case in 'Agriculture and rurality: beginning the final separation?' The Brazilian sociologist  
41 Arilson Favareto (2006) observes that we are seeing 'The rationalization of  
42 rural life', by which he means the loss of its culture.

43 In the last few years a feeling of institutional crisis has developed among rural  
44 academics, as they have pondered the declining membership of the Rural Sociological  
45 Society (RSS) and the ESRS, the closing and renaming of departments of rural  
46 sociology in the USA (Bell 2007) and agricultural economics in Britain (Lowe and

1 Ward 2007), and the annual threats to the Hatch Act that has long been the main  
2 source of Federal funding for rural research in the USA. Lionel Beaulieu (2005) tries  
3 to find a way out of the impasse in 'Breaking walls, building bridges: expanding the  
4 presence and relevance of rural sociology', his 2004 presidential address to the RSS.  
5 Richard Krannich (2008) continued this theme in his 2007 presidential address on  
6 the subject of 'Rural sociology at the crossroads'. Recent meetings of the RSS have  
7 included sessions with titles such as 'The death and rebirth of rural sociology' (in  
8 2006) and 'Transformation of rural society and the Rural Sociological Society' (in  
9 2007). With this sense in the background, but in a more optimistic register, Philip  
10 Lowe (2009) offered the opening keynote to the 2009 meetings of the ESRS on the  
11 topic of 'Reinventing the rural: between the social and the natural'.

12 Academic institutions aren't the only ones who are worried. There are a number of  
13 rural crises afflicting everything from rural hospitals, main streets, schools, churches  
14 and organisations as the population size of rural places shrinks. There is the rural  
15 healthcare crisis, touched off by the closing of rural hospitals and clinics. There is the  
16 rural commercial crisis due to the closure of rural banks and main streets. There is a  
17 rural educational crisis as rural schools continue to be amalgamated into the larger  
18 towns. There is the rural faith crisis due to the similar amalgamation of rural church  
19 districts. There is the rural organisational crisis as long-time groups watch their  
20 membership rolls shorten. And there is even a rural naming crisis as rural organisa-  
21 tions struggle to rebrand themselves, as in the FFA's decision a few years ago to  
22 rename itself simply 'FFA', dropping any explicit connection to being an acronym for  
23 Future Farmers of America. In short, morbid thoughts about the rural abound.

### 24 25 **The passive rural voice**

26  
27 What has led to these feelings of rural loss, doubt and even panic? The arguments are  
28 likely to be all familiar by now. From a material point of view the standard account  
29 runs something like the following. Little remains of rural geographical distinctiveness  
30 any more. Ways of life in rural areas closely resemble those of anywhere else. In richer  
31 countries, rural folk watch television, browse the Internet, shop in chain stores and  
32 drive for most of their trips. In the poorer countries they may watch, browse, shop and  
33 drive less than their city cousins, but the differences are fast disappearing. Plus  
34 community – that Hallmark card understanding of the rural – can be found anywhere  
35 or not, it now appears. There can be no special rural claim on it. Industrial agriculture  
36 has made the rural landscape of the rich countries into a vast open-air assembly line  
37 little different from what goes on in cities aside from the lack of a roof. And now  
38 industrial agriculture is making widespread inroads in the poorer countries too. The  
39 best claim for the rural is that there remain extensive areas of the world where the  
40 population density is considerably lower than in cities, and that this does present  
41 some special challenges in getting services. But roads and satellites reach pretty much  
42 everywhere now and, with your Blackberry or your XO laptop, Google does too. The  
43 fact is, so the argument goes, we all live in an urban world nowadays, whether we live  
44 in areas with high or low population density or in countries rich or poor, aside from  
45 a few remaining remote and forgotten corners of the landscape. And, in addition, we  
46 have become an urban world in terms of density as well, according to the UN

1 Population Fund (2007), which estimated that by the end of 2008 more of the world's  
2 population would be living in urban areas than in rural ones.

3 From the point of view of ideas, the standard account goes more or less as follows.  
4 As a result of this new material connectedness the very idea of the rural is becoming  
5 at best passé. We live in a hybrid world now and anyone can put together the identity  
6 they choose. We each make, unmake and remake cultural boundaries and connec-  
7 tions, albeit guided by discourse and power-knowledge. The rural is now little more  
8 than a cultural trick, a fading myth to be marketed to the unsuspecting and romantic  
9 or a desperate grab for political power.

10 There are many more nuances to these arguments than our qualitative factor  
11 analysis, as it were, immediately suggests. But in broad strokes, such are the argu-  
12 ments that in one form or another have been often intoned about the rural. As Bell  
13 (2007) contends, we have long oscillated between two conceptions of the rural, one  
14 materialist and one idealist. First in our minds, particularly in realist North America,  
15 is the materialist conception that Bell terms 'first rural'. This is the rural of low  
16 population densities and the forms of social relations and economy found in such  
17 settings. This is the rural as farming, as community, as rural areas and people, as  
18 primary production, as regions poorly served by the organisational apparatus of  
19 modern life. And typically one hears that this rural is vulnerable, disadvantaged,  
20 under threat and disappearing, either suggesting a politics of defence to maintain the  
21 stability of its boundary or a politics of abandonment to celebrate its demise.

22 Second in our minds is the idealist conception Bell terms 'second rural'. This is the  
23 rural of categories and constructions, of the power relations of culture, of the asso-  
24 ciations we make and do not make when we call upon the rural. We find second rural  
25 in the novel, the children's tale, the TV show and advertisement, the authenticity we  
26 feel we encounter in the farmers' market and the forms of social relations we justify  
27 or contest thereby. Second rural has a politics too, and it is most typically nowadays a  
28 politics of discourse, deconstructing the inclusions and exclusions of ideas and their  
29 boundaries. This view sees the rural as holding some continuing authority that we  
30 need be wary of, given the venerable lines it draws and does not draw, but it also  
31 typically sees this authority as lapsing in the face of the rural's declining material  
32 significance. For some writers, a second rural is the only rural that remains, and that  
33 perhaps ever existed. But it is nonetheless epistemologically a secondness that we  
34 know from moving across and beyond the old boundaries of first rural, leaving in  
35 their place what Murdoch and Pratt (1993) called the post-rural. In this view, the rural  
36 is a category of thought, as Marc Mormont (1990) wrote, nothing more.

37 What concerns us theoretically about such popular and academic views is the  
38 curiously passive imagination of the rural they manifest, what we will term the  
39 passive rural voice. This imagination sees the rural as largely defeated, washed over  
40 and worn out, its sell-by date exceeded, with little independence as a source of change  
41 in its own right. Change happens to the rural; the rural does not create change. It is  
42 passive in the face of the real sources of activeness: capital, technology, globalisation,  
43 and the urban as the embodiment of all of these.

44 But this is a passiveness that stems from reductionist views that see the rural in  
45 either first rural or second rural terms, and not both together, forever developing into  
46 a pluralism of new rurals (Bell 2007). Either first rural materialism or second rural

1 idealism is absurd apart from the other. Take, for example, the categorical arbitrariness of how a material fact like population density is defined. If we consider the unit of analysis the stretch of floor or ground taken up by any human, we all live in a realm with a population density of one, equally urban or rural. Population density is always the same wherever there are people. Of course, we always refer to some stretch greater than one person when we discuss population density and of course there are varying distances between people. But, as social creatures, we generally live with others wherever we live. Indeed, people generally live with much the same proximity to others, whether it be in villages, small towns or cities. The main predictor of density on a house-by-house, building-by-building basis is not whether the structures are in a village, a town or a city but the era in which a given location was developed. In the countryside there are often farms that are widely separated from other residences and for which the principle of eras of density does not apply. Is this, then, the real rural? But there are also isolated residences inside the industrial districts of cities – perhaps an apartment for a night-watchman or a makeshift shelter for a homeless person – and we do not call those rural. The point: we have to come up with some way to draw the boundary that we will use to measure density – we have to come up with some categorical fix – and thus the material is always dependent upon the ideal.

2 The ideal without the material is equally absurd. It is true that one could say anything one wants about whatever one wants. One could, perhaps, point to the end of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose and call it his rural extremity, distanced as it is from the rest of his person, and it might be good for a laugh. Watch out for his sword but one could say it. But even here you would be referencing a material logic: that of spatial distance and density. You could also call his quill pen rural because of the feather, or even his pocket watch rural for no reason at all – just because you want to. But in the former case we doubt anyone would find the point very interesting and in the latter we doubt anyone would get it at all, for, after all, there was nothing to get. Without a material reference, second rural equally lapses into blah-blah-blah.

3 Reductionism is an epistemological necessity, of course. The only perfectly adequate way to portray some aspect of existence is with that aspect itself, which would not be a portrayal at all. But we need to keep this inevitability and its potential for dualism firmly in mind. Now, by dualism we do not mean binary categories. Any statement about anything has an is or is-not, something or something-else quality, and in this sense binaries are neither escapable nor deplorable. The issue is how one handles them. By dualism we mean when our use of a categorical distinction freezes and segregates difference. The conventional opposition of first rural and second rural is an example of such frozen segregation, in which neither entity in the binary affirms its dependence upon, and mutual constitution of, the other.

4 But mutually constituting dependences do not make each side of a binary the same. Rather it means that their differences are constantly in flux, forever seeking balances and accommodations that they never quite reach. This flux leads to what Bell (2007, p. 413) termed the 'rural plural', which he described as

5 a conception of rural that equally embraces the epistemology and ontology of both first rural and second rural, and as well sees them both as moments in plural dialog, spinning out in time into other rurals – rurals without number or priority – ad infinitum.

1 In so doing, the rural becomes not a static, immobile, reductionist singularity that is  
2 easily and permanently defined, but

3  
4 a many-ness that can develop into ever-greater multiplicities of epistemologies and ontolo-  
5 gies of knowing and being, and of practical politics, in a constant dialog of difference,  
6 connection, and change: an unfinalizable pluralism of engagement (Bell 2007, p. 414).

7  
8 Our contribution here is to suggest that such a conception of a rural always in the  
9 plural is also a conception of an active rural voice that has considerable powers in the  
10 world, mobilising and stabilising the practices of human politics. This is a voice of  
11 the rural we believe we all can, and often do, hear.

### 12 **The active rural voice and the mobilities paradigm**

13  
14 One potential aid to this hearing is the mobilities paradigm, which has gained much  
15 critical attention among scholars in recent years, as we noted earlier. Our world is  
16 awash with fluidity, circulation, motility and automobility, in the terminology  
17 advanced by John Urry, with some close kinship to (but also substantial differences  
18 with) the flows perspective of Manuel Castells, and as well now many others. 'Mobili-  
19 ties, as both metaphor and process, are at the heart of social life and thus should be  
20 central to sociological analysis', proclaims Urry (2000, p. 49) in *Sociology Beyond*  
21 *Societies*. There is a 'new spatial process, the space of flows, that is becoming the  
22 dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies', contends  
23 Castells (2000 [1996], p. 409) in *The Rise of the Network Society*. This flowing, this  
24 mobility of what Urry (2000) calls global fluids, is where we experience both freedom  
25 and power today in a globalising world of translocal subjectivities (Conradson and  
26 McKay 2007) and cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006), washing out boundaries of society  
27 and nation-state and creating a global civil society (Urry 2000), a mobile union of the  
28 things, ideas and peoples of the world.

29  
30 We share the view that the mobilities paradigm is a helpful and important theo-  
31 retical intervention, one that provides a much-needed correction to the static views  
32 associated with modernist reductionism while at same time giving us a place to stand,  
33 something that postmodernism seemed to deny was possible. We particularly applaud  
34 the active voice of the mobilities perspective, so much in tune with our argument for  
35 recognising the activeness of the rural. In the pages to come, we hope to demonstrate  
36 that a mobile understanding of the rural helps makes sense of rural politics.

37  
38 But before we get to that, we also must take mobilities research to task a bit, on two  
39 grounds. Firstly, its early incarnations engaged the rural very little – although we hope  
40 this special issue represents a change and broadening of heart – and indeed at times  
41 seemed to echo the passive rural voice, at odds with the activeness of the mobilities  
42 perspective. Secondly, we share the complaint that others have raised that mobilities  
43 research privileges mobility over stability. What we hope to add to this complaint is an  
44 argument that stability is just as active a phenomenon as mobility.

45  
46 Take the new journal *Mobilities* founded by Urry and his colleagues. The word rural  
47 did not appear in its statement of aims. It barely appeared in its opening editorial  
(Hannam *et al.* 2006, p. 11) – just one passing adjectival mention that references other  
work. And the list of subjects covered by the journal that its website proclaimed as of

1 this writing included the categories urban communications and technology, urban  
2 sociology-urban studies and urban studies. It did not list rural studies and related  
3 concerns – although perhaps glints of the rural were intended in the categories  
4 housing and land economy, tourism and tourism and leisure. Moreover, the word  
5 rural registered in only one abstract of all the 58 articles from the first seven issues  
6 that had, at the time of writing, appeared, and did not appear at all in any title or list  
7 of keywords.<sup>2</sup> The word urban showed up in nine titles, abstracts or keyword lists.  
8 Plus there were plenty of discussions of the city and locations like London, Mecca and  
9 Singapore.

10 Perhaps that was just bad luck in the roll of the dice of submissions, and it is too  
11 soon to rush to put much weight on this 9:1 ratio. (A single additional rural piece  
12 would drop the ratio immediately to 4.5:1.) But combined with the way that the  
13 journal describes itself and makes a case for itself, we can't help feeling that most  
14 mobilities researchers share the view that the rural just isn't where things of sig-  
15 nificance happen. Castells (2000 [1996]) isn't any better. There is no entry for rural  
16 or countryside in the index, although there is a substantial one for cities; and he  
17 devotes most of one chapter to a discussion of urban form, with no equivalent  
18 discussion of rural form. Urry, whose earlier work often examined rural matters in  
19 detail, finds quite a bit more to say about rural matters in *Sociology Beyond Societies*,  
20 particularly in his discussion of the Heideggerian notion of dwelling. But again, the  
21 analytic weight lies with the urban. The image one gets reading most mobilities  
22 research is the familiar one of urbanism and all its associations with capital, tech-  
23 nology and globalisation, flowing out and over a passive rural, washing it steadily  
24 away.

25 Such a passive reading of the rural is not necessary to mobilities research, as Mol  
26 and Dieu (2006) show in their analysis of the environmental flows associated with  
27 tapioca farming in Vietnam. Moreover, the 2007 meeting of the European Society for  
28 Rural Sociology had rural mobilities as its theme, as we noted, and many of the papers  
29 in the meeting took a more active view of the rural. The active voice of the rural can  
30 also be heard in the articles in this special issue, especially Danaher (2010). But a  
31 passive reading of the rural is still the dominant one in the mobilities literature at this  
32 point.

33 The passive rural voice of most mobilities research resonates with the way it  
34 typically constructs activeness through motion, not stability. As Adey (2006) observes,  
35 'if mobility is everything then it is nothing', to quote the title of his article. He urges  
36 us to underline the equal importance of the politics that underlies immobility.  
37 Hannam *et al.* (2006, p. 3) usefully present the notion of moorings, writing that  
38 'mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastruc-  
39 tural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities'. And there is  
40 increasing talk about a mobilities/moorings dialectic in much of the mobilities litera-  
41 ture. Similarly, Castells distinguishes between the space of flows and the space of  
42 place. But the point of analytic entry nonetheless is overwhelmingly on the mobile  
43 side of things and ideas. After all, the phrase is mobilities research. Similarly for  
44 Castells, to reprise the quotation from above, the emphasis is on the space of flows, for  
45 it is 'becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our  
46 societies' (Castells (2000 [1996], p. 409).



1 And while the note the importance of moorings, Hannam *et al.* (2006) say that  
 2 their role is to 'configure and enable mobilities'. In this view, moorings are secondary 1  
 3 ary to mobilities and are not themselves an active accomplishment. But it requires  
 4 as much action to hold something in place and maintain a configuration as to move  
 5 things around. Much of our politics and our physics come about through the  
 6 organisation of resistances. Indeed, much of what stays in place does so only  
 7 because movement supports its obduracy. Movement configures and enables  
 8 staying in place as much as the other way around. Thus we prefer the terms mobili-  
 9 sation and stabilisation, words that imply activeness in the accomplishment of  
 10 either movement or staying put. With these caveats, we now turn to the political  
 11 powers of the active voice of the rural, mobilising as it stabilises and stabilising as  
 12 it mobilises.

13  
 14 **The rural and its active powers**

15  
 16 We can and do hear the active rural voice because it is a voice of power. While it is not  
 17 the only voice of power, if one means by power our scope for action – the conceiving,  
 18 shaping, and taking of action – as we take it to be here, articulations of the rural widen  
 19 and constrain our scope and thus are powerfully active in our lives.<sup>3</sup> These articula-  
 20 tions speak to the material and symbolic practices of social life that first and second  
 21 rural modes have long described, but also to the relational aspects of our lives. (See  
 22 Fig. 1.) And not just in minor ways, we will try to show.

23  
 24 *The material: rural power*

25  
 26 We are all rural three times a day, and perhaps more, if you are like us. When you put  
 27 a fork into your mouth, you are taking the rural to your mouth and the social and  
 28 environmental conditions and histories of the food there on the tines, whatever you  
 29 may or may not know of those conditions and histories. This is a rural that moves, and  
 30 moves more today than perhaps it ever has, as US readers must readily appreciate as  
 31 citizens of both the world's largest food exporter and largest food importer. Both this  
 32 control and this dependence grant the USA what we ought to recognise as the

33

stabilisation ↘	material	symbolic	stabilisation ↙
power-from	<b>rural power</b>	<b>power of the rural</b>	realisations
power-over	<b>rural constituencies</b>	<b>constituencies of the rural</b>	relations
↗ mobilisation	first rural	second rural	↖ mobilisation

34 **Figure 1: The plural powers of rural politics**

1 material activeness of rural power. The USA is a mighty rural power – which is to say  
2 that much of its world authority is a rural authority, something that the US govern-  
3 ment is not above playing political games with from time to time, such as when  
4 President Jimmy Carter embargoed grain shipments to the USSR on 4 January 1980.  
5 If a significant proportion of a country's food comes from the USA, it gives the leaders  
6 of that country greater pause in considering contradicting US power. So, too, is the  
7 case if a significant proportion of a country's food exports go to the USA. Either way,  
8 by exporting or importing food, keeping the rural mobile, the USA gains and main-  
9 tains power.

10 Then there is the rural power of corporations, which is tightly intertwined with the  
11 rural power of the state. Quite a little stir was occasioned by the appearance in the  
12 British daily *The Independent* of a report on an internal 1999 Monsanto strategy  
13 document that noted that

14  
15 Population growth and economic development will apply increasing pressure on natural  
16 resource markets. Those pressures, and the world's desire to prevent the consequences of  
17 those pressures if unabated, will create vast economic opportunity. (Lean 1999)  
18

19 The document also notes 'that these are markets in which there are predictable  
20 sustainability challenges and therefore opportunities to create business value' (Shiva  
21 1999). This was not just business value for Monsanto. Many a company and many an  
22 investor have noticed that we are all rural not just three times a day but whenever we  
23 make use of water, wood, minerals and energy – which is likely to be all day. The  
24 circulation of capital is very often the circulation of the rural.

25 Let us also sketch out the material use of the rural in militarism, which we touched  
26 on in the introduction. Much of military power is the articulation of the material rural:  
27 the military frontier, the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the bunker, the hilltop lookout  
28 post. But this military rural is not only defensive. It can also be offensive. Consider the  
29 siege and the blockade or the ancient military tactic of torching and salting fields.  
30 Destroying supply lines threatens by ending rural movement. Militarism can also  
31 threaten by bringing the rural into high population density areas as residents find that  
32 their technologies of holding the rural at bay collapse with the cutting of energy  
33 supplies and the bombing of waste treatment facilities. Military advantage is often  
34 rural advantage, even when the conflict is urban. Note too how rural power manifests  
35 itself militarily as both mobilisation and stabilisation and their intertwining. The  
36 military frontier, the DMZ, the bunker and the lookout post are all stabilisations of the  
37 material rural. These stabilisations then enable mobilisations such as the siege and  
38 the advance of the military front. But in addition, military stabilisation requires  
39 material movement as well; in order to cut someone else's supply lines with a military  
40 front you need your own. Mobilisation entails stabilisation and stabilisation entails  
41 mobilisation.

42 Other intertwining of stabilisation and mobilisation underpins the rural power of  
43 US agriculture. Food exports are mobilisations of the material rural but these depend  
44 upon the active stabilisations not only of US borders but also on the stabilisation of  
45 the requirement that others take this food, as in the Bush administration's policy of  
46 putting exports ahead of funds for local agricultural development and local provision-  
47 ing during hunger relief efforts (Dugger 2007), stabilisations that also entail many

1 mobilisations. Corporate control of the movement of food, wood, water, minerals and  
2 energy require myriad stabilisations in the distribution of access and production of all  
3 of these or there would be no way to convince others to purchase them for they would  
4 have them already. And yet these stabilisations necessitate mobilities too, very often  
5 amounting to removing people from their prior access to the productive capacities for  
6 food, wood, water, minerals, and energy, as in the privatisation of rural water supplies  
7 in India (Sainath 2006).

8  
9 *The ideal: the power of the rural*

10  
11 Immediately we must also recognise that rural ideas also mobilise and stabilise,  
12 what we call *the power of the rural* – its symbolic power. Take the power of food. Is  
13 anything more symbolically freighted? This freight of symbols is not always specifically  
14 rural. But much food still gains meaning, and market, through rural referents,  
15 sometimes remote and sometimes strongly marked politically, as much recent  
16 scholarship has explored (Hinrichs 1998, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman 2005;  
17 Jordan 2007). Country ham. Farmhouse cheese. Shepherd's pie. Country cooking.  
18 Farmers' markets. Community supported agriculture. The farm to table or farm to  
19 fork imagery of local foods. Outdoor reared, free-range, pasture raised and freedom  
20 foods. The 'fresh from the field' slogan of Organic Farm Foods, Britain's largest  
21 independent supplier of organic produce. The 'real food, real farmers, real community'  
22 slogan of Local Harvest, an American online store and nation-wide online  
23 listing of local food sources. Protected geographical indications. *Appellation d'origine*  
24 *contrôlée*. Terroir.

25 The active power of rural ideas also manifests itself in the continuing fascination  
26 for rural life and images among both rural and urban people alike. A vast range of  
27 rural scholarship has explored these themes of late, especially from the stance that  
28 Bell (2007) termed second rural. Researchers have explored the power of the rural  
29 manifested in rural identity, literature, cinema, advertising, planning, gender, schooling,  
30 health, diet, drinking behaviour, military campaigns and more (for example,  
31 Marsden *et al.* 1993; Cloke and Little 1997; Campbell *et al.* 2006; Cloke *et al.* 2006).  
32 We won't attempt to detail this scholarship here. But we do want to point out that  
33 these ideas imply an active rural that transcends boundaries, having consequence and  
34 reshaping what it encounters in the process.

35 The mobilisation of this power of the rural depends simultaneously on its stabilisation  
36 and vice versa. Without a way to claim that a Bordeaux wine comes from  
37 Bordeaux there is little basis for the export sales of Bordeaux wine, as the vintners  
38 and other interests behind the recognition of protected geographical indications  
39 have long recognised. Conversely, if there were no exports of wine with such labels  
40 carrying this power of the rural out of Bordeaux there would be no need for the  
41 stabilisation of such labels. As with rural power, the power of the rural depends  
42 upon the interaction of mobilisation and stabilisation. Moreover, the power of the  
43 rural interacts with rural power. The labels on Bordeaux wine are affixed to actual  
44 material bottles containing the material products of the rural. The power of the  
45 rural thus facilitates rural power just as rural power gives impetus to the power of  
46 the rural.

1 *The relational: rural constituencies and constituencies of the rural*  
2

3 The forces of rural power and the power of the rural manifest the two dimensions of  
4 what we term power-from, by which we mean realisations of the rural, its powers and  
5 the social and economic advantages these realisations grant – powers conveyed from  
6 the real consequences of the rural. Ontologically, we contend (with Bell 2007) that  
7 ideas are no less real than material matters in that all have consequences for how we  
8 live. Both convey advantages to those who are able to utilise them and very often (but  
9 not always, if we hold out hope that power might not be a zero-sum game) subject  
10 others to disadvantages.

11 That utilisation, however, implies a measure of control of these manifest realisa-  
12 tions of the rural, what we term ‘power-over’. By power-over, we mean the relations of  
13 the rural and their manifestations in constituencies that afford such control – powers  
14 acquired from the relational consequences of the rural. These may be constituencies  
15 that manifest materially, for example in the traditional sense of rural voters who live  
16 in areas of low population density, what we term ‘rural constituencies’. But they may  
17 as well be constituencies held together by ideas of the rural, for example advocates of  
18 cheap food or of organic agriculture, which may or may not live in areas of low  
19 population density, what we term ‘constituencies of the rural’. In practice, the effective  
20 mobilisation and stabilisation of power-over depends upon the interaction of both  
21 these forms of constituency.

22 Farmers, miners, loggers and other potential rural constituencies gain some of  
23 their power from their material location with regard to the rural. Their material  
24 location both provides the opportunity for controlling the material of the rural itself  
25 but also for organising the social relations of an active constituency through proximity  
26 and pre-existing spatial, social and economic ties. Miners have been perhaps the most  
27 effective, albeit frequently quixotically, organising strikes to close down mobilisations  
28 of the rural, actively stabilising coal, iron and copper so that it does not flow for a time.  
29 Mining companies are potential rural constituencies too, however, and have used  
30 their material location in the rural with great effect as well, mobilising to stabilise a  
31 mobile rural with dogs, fences, Pinkertons, scabs and appeals to politicians. A recent  
32 instance was the successful \$3 million ad campaign by Massey Energy, the fourth  
33 largest coal mining company in the USA, to ensure the election of a coal-friendly  
34 candidate to the West Virginia Supreme Court in 2004. (The elected Judge, Brent  
35 Benjamin, later ruled in favour of Massey in a 3–2 decision throwing out a \$50 million  
36 jury verdict against the company. At the time of writing, the US Supreme Court is  
37 reviewing whether Benjamin should have recused himself [Liptak 2009]).

38 But one does not have to have a material location in the rural to mobilise to gain  
39 power over it. Environmental groups, recreation interests, organic food activists,  
40 lobbyists for industrial grain and industrial food, public health movements, develop-  
41 ment agencies and more all organise to gain control over the shape of the rural  
42 landscape, what flows from it and what does not. Ideas of what that shape should be  
43 bring them together into efforts to become effective forces in the active politics of the  
44 rural.

45 Many of the most effective of these constituencies of the rural gain their power-  
46 over by drawing as well on rural constituencies, building political forces that cross the

1 traditionally material understanding of the rural and its interests while at the same  
2 time appealing to that understanding and those interests. One example is the '1000  
3 Friends' landscape and land-use advocacy groups that emerged in at least nine states  
4 in the USA in recent years. The slogan of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin is telling for  
5 what it says about the group's sense of constituency: 'perfecting the places we live and  
6 protecting the places we don't'. Such a slogan appeals equally to a material sense of  
7 residence as the locus of constituency and to an ideal sense of generalised care for the  
8 land as a constituency which knows no spatial boundaries.

### 9 10 **The rural and its active politics**

11  
12 There are thus many bases for rural action and politics, action and politics that affect  
13 us all. We have offered a conceptualisation of these active politics as the interaction of  
14 the material rural and the symbolic rural as sources of both power-from and power-  
15 over the rural, sources which activate the rural through both mobilisation and stabi-  
16 lisation. But none of these ensures an active politics of the rural. Power-from does  
17 not necessarily translate into power-over, nor does power-over necessarily imply  
18 power-from.

19 Indeed, one way to read the evidence is that while rural power-from – whether in  
20 the form of rural power or the power of the rural – continues to speak loudly in our  
21 world, many traditional rural constituencies are finding they have little rural power-  
22 over. We can easily tick off some cases in point. The failure of the 1980s 'farm crisis'  
23 in the USA to lead to an invigorated farmers' union or farm lobby, as opposed to  
24 commodity lobbies. The recent weakening of farmers' unions in Britain and other  
25 countries that long had relatively strong unions (Reed 2008). The continued inability  
26 of agrarian parties to make significant headway in national politics and the fading  
27 away of some recent attempts, like France's *Chasse, pêche, nature et tradition* Party and  
28 the Independent Smallholders' Party in Hungary (Woods 2008, p. 135). The failure of  
29 Britain's Countryside Alliance to prevent fox-hunting with dogs from becoming  
30 illegal and to deliver an electoral margin to the Conservative Party, despite being able  
31 to mobilise large and widely noticed protest actions, including 400,000 in London on  
32 22 September 2002, and the 15 September 2004, 'storming' of Parliament, as the  
33 media put it, which forced Parliament to suspend its activity briefly before going on  
34 to ban fox-hunting with dogs (Branigan 2002; BBC 2004). The collapse of miners'  
35 unions. The inability of loggers unions to gain national prominence. The continued  
36 weakness of farm workers' unions. And so on.

37 It is not hard to see why. The sharp decline in the number of farmers, loggers, and  
38 miners presents a huge challenge for organising and for political clout. The number  
39 of farm workers may be on the rise, but their poverty, enforced transience, political  
40 disenfranchisement and weak access to communication technologies have prevented  
41 their gaining a significant voice in Washington, London, Berlin and Brussels. The  
42 growth of international trade in food, fibre, timber and minerals helps to ensure that  
43 strikes by farmers, farm workers, loggers and miners remain locally significant only.  
44 Furthermore, specialisation in agriculture has encouraged farmers to identify with  
45 the particular commodities they produce and not as much with farming more gen-  
46 erally. Commodity identification also encourages identifying with the interests of the

1 corporations in the supply chain that keeps a commodity moving off the farm, thus  
2 contributing to different constituencies. Associated with commodity identification  
3 has been a decline in the symbolic power of farmers – a decline in the power of the  
4 rural available to them – in the face of rising demands for environmental protection  
5 and accusations that farmers have neglected stewardship in the single-minded  
6 pursuit of profit. There remain as well the traditional problems that have long beset  
7 rural collective action and continue to do so: the dispersed population, conservatism  
8 and typically hierarchical social relations.

9 But these political losses should not imply that the rural is lost, too. Rather, we are  
10 seeing the effectiveness of other constituencies in gaining power over the rural and  
11 being able to wield power from the rural. One major form of effective constituency we  
12 have in mind here is the corporation. We recognise that some may be uncomfortable  
13 with thinking of a corporation like Monsanto as a ‘constituency’, a term more typically  
14 reserved for coalitions of the citizenry. Yet we are confident that any politician would  
15 instantly understand our use of the term.

16 For those who seek a more progressive politics the rural is not lost either. Issues of  
17 environment, food, place and recreation have led to a huge variety of new rural civil  
18 society organisations, many of which involve urban residents as much or more than  
19 rural residents. In this sense, these organisations are organisations of the rural, for  
20 they are based on ideas of the rural, on the power of the rural, not necessarily on  
21 material location in the rural. Most of these are small and local, in keeping with their  
22 place-based approach and because large organisations are of necessity fewer in  
23 number. Indeed, many localities have more than one such organisation. Take as one  
24 example the Thousand Islands region of the St Lawrence River, a 40-mile stretch of  
25 the river dotted with rocky islands that runs along the US border with Canada. On the  
26 Canadian side is the Thousand Islands Area Residents Association, a group of mainly  
27 but not exclusively second-home owners in this popular tourist area. There is also the  
28 Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust and the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve  
29 (the Thousand Islands are in a geological terrain known as the Frontenac Arch). These  
30 are all Canadian groups. On the US side of the St Lawrence in New York State is Save  
31 the River and the Thousand Islands Land Trust. There is also the Thousand Islands  
32 Association that works on both sides of the river.

33 The number of such local environmental advocacy groups across the world, of  
34 varying focus and levels of formalisation, is beyond what anyone could probably  
35 count. One estimate (Hawken 2007, p. 2) came up with one to two million such  
36 groups worldwide – albeit perhaps with some optimism and generosity (Bell 2009).  
37 There are also now vast numbers of regional organisations like Oregon’s Rural  
38 Organizing Project (Stephen 2008), a state-wide rural social justice group that hosts  
39 an annual rural caucus, or Hungary and the Czech Republic’s Friends of the Danube  
40 (Gorlach *et al.* 2008), or the ‘1000 friends’ landscape and land use groups. There are  
41 also national and international environmental organisations like Sierra Club, Friends  
42 of the Earth, the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the Nature Conservancy, which have  
43 strong rural dimensions to their political agendas.

44 Add to these the profusion of local rural cultural development groups like Wiscon-  
45 sin’s Wormfarm Institute working to ‘re-enchant agri-culture’, or the ‘pearly bouquet’  
46 and dance-house movements to revive rural music and dance in Hungary (Gorlach

1 *et al.* 2008). Or local and Slow Food advocacy organisations, which now must run into  
2 the thousands or even tens of thousands, across the world. Or recreation groups  
3 advocating fishing, hunting, off-road vehicles, boat racing, ballooning, hang-gliding,  
4 rock climbing and a myriad of other interests. These too have their regional, national  
5 and sometimes international umbrella organisations of the rural.

6 Meanwhile, new rural organisations mainly serving rural constituencies – that is,  
7 serving populations located in the material rural – have arisen, often with notable  
8 impact. There is the Landless Rural Workers' Movement of Brazil and the 22,000 ha  
9 it has redistributed to 218,000 families (Caldeira 2008, p. 150). There is the *Con-*  
10 *fédération paysanne* of France, founded in 1987 by José Bové, who has since gone on  
11 to stand for election for president of France (albeit garnering only 1.3 per cent of the  
12 vote in 2007) and has become notorious enough to have been refused entry into  
13 the USA in February 2006. There is the *Coordination paysanne Européene*, a confeder-  
14 ation of 19 farmers' organisations in 12 countries – organisations like Germany's  
15 *Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft*, Britain's Family Farmers' Association,  
16 Belgium's *Fédération unie de groupements d'éleveurs et d'agriculteurs*, Portugal's *Confed-*  
17 *eração nacional da agricultura*, and Italy's *Associazione rurale Italiana*. And, of course,  
18 there is *La vía campesina*, the global confederation of 149 farm organisations in 56  
19 countries, north and south, east and west (Desmarais 2008). Writing in the *New Left*  
20 *Review*, Bové (2001) has even called these new movements a 'farmers' international'.  
21 But given their increasing support from urban and non-farm residents in terms of  
22 solidarity, contributions and coordination with other groups, a 'rural international' is  
23 perhaps a better term – a rural international that is becoming as much an interna-  
24 tional of the rural.

25 Something is happening. As Woods (2008, p. 129) argues, 'social movements are  
26 an increasingly prominent feature of rural politics and social action in both the global  
27 north and the global south'. His view is that this growth of rural social movements  
28 constitutes a new rural identity movement, and he uses new social movement theory,  
29 with its emphasis on identity issues, to understand it (Woods 2003, 2008). Woods  
30 organised a 2008 special issue of *Journal of Rural Studies* – which we have been citing  
31 with abandon – on this theme, and it only scratches at the surface, given the vastness  
32 of the range of groups involved.

33 Reed (2008, p. 209), however, takes issue with Woods' characterisation of this  
34 range and diversity as amounting to 'the emergence of a distinct and mobilised rural  
35 identity'. Reviewing three case studies of the diversity of rural protest in contemporary  
36 England, Reed (2008, p. 217) finds that they 'were not about rurality alone but with  
37 the question of rurality as part of a complex of interconnected concerns that were  
38 simultaneously global and local, personal and public'. We concur that the new rural  
39 politics is complex, and is not about a single identity alone, and it is constituted from  
40 a politics that engages both what we have been calling rural constituencies and  
41 constituencies of the rural. As Woods (2008, p. 131) himself also observes, 'such is the  
42 variety that the proliferation of rural social movements cannot be read as a single  
43 phenomenon, but rather should be seen as the product of a number of different  
44 trajectories'.

45 As Mormont (1987) earlier argued, rural conditions in the late twentieth and  
46 early twenty-first century have been undergoing widespread social, economic and

1 technological restructuring. One result, noted by Mormont (1987, p. 562), is that rural  
2 politics have expanded beyond a 'focus on specific aspects of the situation of the rural  
3 population' to also increasingly posing 'the problem of rural space'. The relational  
4 practices of the rural are configuring into new identities – new political alliances and  
5 contradictions – based on new understandings of the material and symbolic practices  
6 of the rural. In the global North most of these new constituencies do not themselves  
7 live a life of farming, forestry, mining and the other pursuits that we still sometimes  
8 call 'primary production', or have work that supports those pursuits or even live in  
9 rural areas. But there is no less potential power of the rural as a result. The material  
10 possibility of rural activities to, say, pollute the water and food supply of urban  
11 residents or to help clean up the exhaust of their automobiles rearticulates the lines of  
12 power; it does not disarticulate them. So too does the symbolic potential of the country  
13 home, the mud-splattering sport utility vehicle, the moose and the owl. What we're  
14 seeing emerge may not look much like the once-familiar rural unions, commodity  
15 groups, villages and other long-time configurations of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, of  
16 sentiments and interests, of affects and effects. But the scene is no less rural and no  
17 less powerful because of it.

18 Corporate mobilisations to gain power over the rural do not make the rural less  
19 powerful either. In other words, the new rural politics is not only a politics of civil  
20 society. Whether they are based on rural constituencies or constituencies of the rural,  
21 the common political losses suffered by rural civil society groups to corporate rural  
22 interests do not diminish rural power or the power of the rural. Rather, what has  
23 changed is who holds those powers.

24 Corporations have achieved their rural victories in large part by combining all  
25 these forms of power. They have used power-from to gain power-over, and they  
26 have mixed the material and symbolic origins of the rural's powers to build rural  
27 constituencies and constituencies of the rural. Oil companies' widely suspected  
28 manipulations of supply (a material move) and their undermining of concerns  
29 about global warming (an ideological move) are forms of rural power and  
30 power of the rural. With these powers they garner the political support of Texas,  
31 Alaska, the Mideast and other oil-producing regions (material constituencies) and  
32 the support, however unwilling, of those who are car-dependent everywhere (con-  
33 stituencies not limited by the material boundaries of the rural). These constituen-  
34 cies in turn lead to their continued power-over power-from. Civil society groups  
35 might take instruction from the success of this plural understanding and activation  
36 of the rural.

### 37 38 **Conclusion**

39  
40 The plural activation of the rural is a creative activation of the rural, mobilising and  
41 stabilising the new, as well as making the new old and the old anew. The result is that  
42 the politics of the rural are polymorphous, polysemous and polyvocal, making the  
43 rural hard to pin down. As scholars, we need to articulate the active voice of the rural  
44 in order to understand its constant articulation and rearticulation through mobilisa-  
45 tion and stabilisation, however progressive or deplorable these articulations and  
46 rearticulation may be.



1 We should not confuse these articulations and rearticulations with the end of  
2 either rural power, or the power of the rural or their constituencies. The changes in  
3 the rural do not denote its waning strength in the face of the urban torrent any more  
4 than urban change denotes its own waning strength. Both the urban and the rural are  
5 modes of activeness, mobilising and stabilising the material, the symbolic and the  
6 relational. Nor is the stabilisation of either the rural or the urban necessarily a matter  
7 of dead weight. We act and constitute as much by moving as by not budging, as much  
8 by creating persistence as by creating motion. There are politics in both. There are  
9 both in our politics, no less now than in former times. Such confusions are linguistic  
10 slights of the theoretical tongue. No, the rural is not dead, inert, or deactivated, a  
11 passivity in the face of urban action and movement. The rural is not silenced in our  
12 world. Rather, it is we who are sometimes tongue-tied in the face of its articulate  
13 power.

### 14 Notes

15 \* Corresponding author.

16 <sup>1</sup> On 14 March 2008. Google is constantly continuing its web crawling, and a later search on  
17 17 January 2010 turned up 'about 8,740,000 hits'.

18 <sup>2</sup> We made this count in September 2009.

19 <sup>3</sup> Contra-postmodern functionalism, we offer here what we hope is a fairly direct account of  
20 power.

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**Michael Mayerfeld Bell**

Department of Community and Environmental Sociology  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, WI 53706 USA  
e-mail: michaelbell@wisc.edu

**Sarah E. Lloyd**

Department of Community and Environmental Sociology  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, WI 53706 USA  
e-mail: slloyd@ssc.wisc.edu  
and

**Christine Vatovec**

Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, WI 53706 USA  
e-mail: vatovec@wisc.edu

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