

## **Why the Search for a Definition of Rurality may be a Fool's Errand.**

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### **Abstract**

*Within the United Kingdom the rural prefix is firmly established in both the scientist's and the layman's vocabulary. However, the use of 'rurality' as a discriminatory variable has been criticised by numerous authors. This paper proposes to further develop this criticism by arguing that any use of the term 'rurality' prevents a more complete understanding of the economic environment being realised. It is suggested that the term 'rurality' creates limitations in the understanding of both the content and context of rural and urban economic and social environments whilst offering little in terms of its power as an explanatory variable. In addition, trends in both domestic and commercial behaviour are examined and shown to further compound the difficulties inherent in the use of 'rurality' as a discriminatory variable.*

### **Introduction**

The rural prefix is well established in both the layman's and the economist's vocabulary. It is used to evoke the quintessential rolling hills and water-meadows of unspoilt countryside, the rural idyll, peace, tranquillity and a more humane pace of life. At the same time it is used to describe the collapsing economies of hamlets and villages struggling to survive against rising unemployment and the decline of traditional industries.

That one word is used to describe such opposite extremes creates a danger for the researcher (Hoggart, 1990). What exactly is the rural problem and, more fundamentally, what is 'rural'? A clear definition is required if rurality is to be used as a discriminatory factor or explanatory variable. This paper aims to suggest why such a definition is not necessarily useful and may in fact be a hindrance to greater understanding of economic and social environments.

### **What is the rural economy?**

To be of use to economists or any researcher working within a 'people based' social field, any definition of rurality would need to contain a description of the rural economy. Errington (1997) suggests two separate definitions of a rural economy: a) definition by economic activity (e.g. the activity may be viewed as 'land based') b) the economic activity that occurs within areas which could be described as rural.

The first definition avoids all mention of rurality - any industry that is land based is rural. This provides an intuitive and simplistic classification. For example, agriculture is land based and agricultural areas are therefore rural. However, how is the researcher to classify the small specialist grower either within or on the outskirts

of an urban area? What is to be made of the 'patches of rural' created by allotments? More significantly, all industries that are not land based are removed from the rural economy. This leaves areas traditionally referred to as rural with large sectors of their economic activity unaccounted for and, in many cases, creates a false picture of the industrial stratification of these areas (further discussed below). As Errington (1990: 51) himself states; "*Apart from agriculture and forestry, there are few industries which can claim to be uniquely rural and indeed, some may challenge even this claim*".

Similarly, the second definition, *the economic activity that occurs within areas which could be described as rural*, still leaves the researcher with the difficulty of defining rurality. Although there are relatively simplistic quantitative measures relating to land use and population size which can be applied (for example, Cloke's (1983) index of rurality), the rigidity of these measures provides us with little added insight. To illustrate, Cornwall which is rural both intuitively and by classification (Cloke, 1983), relies on tourism, public services and retail for the majority of its employment<sup>1</sup> with farm-related employment only constituting approximately 5% (excluding those in self-employment) (C.C.C., 1997; Gripaios, R, 1996). Wealth is created by a similar division: sector contribution to GDP; Manufacturing 27.4%, Tourism 22.5%, Services 14.2%, and Agriculture 8.1% (C.C.C., 1997). This does not differ from the South West of England as a whole which employs less than the national average of agricultural employees<sup>2</sup> (Field, 1997), and yet both contain significant areas classified as '*extreme rural*' (Cloke, 1983).

For Cornwall (and to a similar extent Devon) to rely so heavily on retail and manufacturing and, in addition, to have such a labour intensive tourist industry, would suggest, if we did not 'know' otherwise, a relatively industrialised or post-industrial area. However, we may be *correct* in this assumption, if what prevents us from labelling it thus is a combination of aesthetics and prescribed definition rather than economic reality.

Alternatively, urban areas can be classified by identifying land use that is uniquely urban (OPCS, 1981). In many ways, this is the reverse of the methodology outlined above and presents similar problems. Developments are designated as urban or as belonging to an urban area depending on various criteria (population size, distance between nodes, etc.). This definition of 'belonging to an urban core' is continued outward into the hinterland with acknowledgement being given to those areas where 15% of the workforce commute to the specified urban centre. This wider urban area is referred to by Peter Hall as a "*standard metropolitan labour area*" (quoted in OPCS, 1981). However, this concept has been criticised for its inability to account for differing commuting patterns between social classes, between work and leisure and for the rather arbitrary cut-off point of 15% (OPCS, 1981). In addition, the method does of course present problems when places of work are relocated outside of urban core areas (OPCS, 1981).

### ***A Definition of Rurality***

The prescribed definition of rurality stems from classification based on indicator variables. One of the most famous of these classifiers is Cloke & Edwards' (1986) 1981 Index of Rurality for England and Wales (based on Principal Component Analysis - PCA). However, this index, like many others, contains variables that are somewhat difficult to justify. While the model accurately identifies those areas that the authors perceive to be rural as rural<sup>3</sup>, could it not simply be a case of the statistics

identifying aesthetic rural? What are these variables, and ultimately the classification, telling us? The inclusion of such variables as *distance from urban node of 50,000 population*, *percentage of the population over 65 years old*, and *percentage of the population that are female and aged between 15-45* raise some concerns over the validity of the index<sup>4</sup>.

The selection of 50,000 population, for example, may be questioned. The loading of this variable is certainly significant (PCA Loading Score, -0.78654) but the choice of, say, 40,000 or 30,000 population would have considerable impact on the loading (when reanalysed) and on the distance measured. In addition, the fixation with 'distance to urban node' also needs to be questioned. The use of travel time would certainly have greater relevance. It is a fallacy to "*assume travel costs are proportional to distance*" (Chorely and Haggett, 1978) and it is often cost which influences, or explains, location decisions. By investigating isochronic differences between nodes, more accurate travel costs can be calculated. In addition, the individual or firm's perception of distance can be better appreciated by focusing on time as opposed to geographical distance.

Consider, for example, the case of the M4 corridor. As the M4 travels from London to Bristol the distance from nodes increases and decreases accordingly and almost any location along the corridor represents an important growth point. More importantly, if a wider interpretation of urban is adopted, these locations are perhaps more 'urban' than locations closer to other major nodes. Hall, Breheny, McQuaid and Hart (1987) have questioned the importance accredited to this corridor, preferring instead to suggest that a Western Crescent has formed around London. However, Hall *et al* (1987) focus specifically on high-tech industry and admit that, even in this sector, growth since 1981 has occurred, strengthening the corridor thesis.

To return to Cloke & Edwards, the inclusion of the percentage of women in the population as an indicator of an urban area (PCA Loading Score, 0.67725) lacks face validity. Additionally, the use of the percentage of the population over 65 as an indicator of rurality (PCA Loading Score, -0.65414) is also questionable. Whilst there exists a tradition of 'retiring to the country' in Britain, this generally means retiring to coastal resorts (such as Bournemouth) or small market towns and villages. However, the present model suggests that as the number of retired citizens in the population increases, the area becomes increasingly rural and remote. This is, however, contradicted by a recent EC working paper which suggests that general population growth and decline are *both* common in rural areas (EC, 1997).

Of the remaining variables, the PCA Loading Scores are sometimes counter intuitive. Population density, for example, has a loading of only 0.58588 making it the least significant variable in the index. In addition, occupancy rate and percentage employed outside the district both have higher loadings than the percentage of the population employed in agriculture.

Such problems with classification have not gone unnoticed. Cloke, in a recent editorial for the *Journal of Rural Studies*, describes the geographers' fascination with numbers as a 'fetish' (Cloke, 1997). This sentence echoes a wider debate currently underway within social science with many researchers beginning to question the validity of using quantitative techniques in the study of human behaviour. However, the movement away from quantitative classification is not yet universally accepted, with many authors preferring either an adjustment of existing techniques or a mixed methods approach (e.g. Hoggart, 1990, Harrington & O'Donoghue, 1998).

### ***Does development and industry structure provide a key?***

As difficulties exist in using demographics as a classifier, attention could instead be turned to differences in rates of economic development and variance in industry structure (this follows Hoggart (1990: 255) who suggests we look at “*theoretically significant markers...competition or monopoly employment sectors, poor or rich local councils...*”). By discussing the ‘rural problem’ it is suggested that rural areas are in some way disadvantaged and as such may be identifiable by their economic output, or lack of it.

Given that geographic areas are often divided into countries, as well as counties, area descriptions could be ‘borrowed’ from inter-country analysis. It is common in this type of analysis to describe countries as post-industrial, industrial or developing. Arguably industrial countries could be said to represent ‘urban’ areas whilst developing countries represent ‘rural’ areas (similar use of the words developing and developed can be found in Blunden, Pryce & Dreyer, 1998).

The difference between wealthy and poor countries has been explored by Viner (1953: 52). Viner comments that the problem, and differentiation, has not always been one of an absence of industry but rather a problem of “*poverty, backwardness, poor agriculture and poor industry*”. It would be difficult to suggest that, given modern education and media, any area of the UK was ‘backwards’, however, poverty and poor existing industry and agriculture<sup>5</sup> are common to many areas.

Whilst this provides a partial definition of the problem it cannot be generally adapted to define rurality. There are rural areas that are prosperous and advanced (e.g. the ‘top’ of the South West England, Kent, Silicon Glen in Scotland, the Western Crescent around London, etc.). Many rural areas are now seen by investors as new and exciting investment opportunities (Marsden, Murdoch, Lowe, Munton & Flynn, 1993). In addition, there are numerous urban areas, particularly inner-city areas, which could be described as having “*poverty, backwardness, poor [no] agriculture and poor industry*”. Yet is this not the way that many more readily perceive rural areas, as areas that are backward, underdeveloped and lacking sophistication? Recent studies by Keeble and Vaessen (1995) on growth orientated small to medium enterprises (SMEs) suggests that not only would this interpretation be unfair, but that in many instances it would also be inaccurate. SME growth is often shown to be greater and more innovative in areas traditionally defined as rural and peripheral (Keeble & Vaessen, 1995; Keeble, 1997; Potter, 1993).

Indeed, the notion that a generalisation regarding economic structure can be based on rurality alone has been discussed by Errington (1990: 58) who found that “*rurality was not a good predictor of industrial structure*”. It may be that the mindset which clearly separates rural from urban is preventing a more accurate understanding of rural industry and communities being developed (Hoggart, 1990).

### ***Alternative approach***

The difficulties outlined above highlight the major weakness of any attempt to define rurality. Rurality is merely a construct that does not stand-up to empirical testing. Whilst there is an obvious difference between open countryside and developed cityscape, any generalisation beyond this aesthetic differentiation may hinder our understanding of economic and social environments. This does not mean to say that the aesthetic has no relevance in the marketable value of location. This could not be further from the truth. However, what makes these locations desirable is

the *perception* of rurality, a variable that may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accurately measure. As Cloke (1997) suggests, rurality is perhaps one of the best examples available of what the post-modernists refer to as a 'hyper-reality'. The thrust of this argument is based on the belief that the classification of areas as either 'urban' or 'rural' is overemphasised and given discriminatory properties that do not, in reality, exist.

Klaassen (1970) states that "*urbanisation is, in fact, nothing more than a rational process for the creation of activity bundles that can operate efficiently as bundles at a smaller distance from each other*". The key here is the term "*at a smaller distance*"; in other words, the spatial distance between 'activities' has contracted to form 'bundles' or urban areas. This suggests that these activities already exist (or would have existed if this is to be a theoretical argument) and have merely relocated for cost rationalisation. Thus, the urban is simply a spatially contracted rural. Alternatively, as isochronic distance is reduced by improvements in all forms of communication and as people, and the companies they work for, increasingly place value on relocating in or near *environmental assets*, rural becomes an expanded urban - a *dispersed urban*.

Whether the urban is encroaching on the rural or the rural on the urban is, of course, open to debate. What is clear, however, is that "*cities have become relatively less distinctive entities*" (Urry, 1984: 55). With this reduction in one of the entities' distinctiveness, it is also implied that the other has become less distinctive. Urban and rural are increasingly merging into one homogenous whole (Cloke, 1997).

### ***Reasons for increased homogeneity***

There already exists a growing electronic communication infrastructure, much of which utilises existing communications technology. This technology has meant that the "*tyranny of geographical distance and remoteness are considerably reduced*" (Blunden, Pryce & Dreyer, 1998). In addition, from a social perspective, families increasingly live in isolated units, shopping not in city centres but in 'out of town' retail parks for example. With communications improving both in terms of electronic and road transport, with non-urban areas perhaps benefiting more greatly from road transport improvements than congested urban areas, the situation arises where the physical distance between villages, towns and cities becomes less relevant and "*peripherality*" is reduced (Potter, 1993, Mormont, 1990). This is particularly true if the trend towards commuting<sup>6</sup> continues.

As distance becomes less relevant to economic transactions, so too does the distinction between urban and rural. Indeed, Moseley (1974: 113) suggests, when discussing possible regional locations for growth poles, that "*there seems no valid reason why such an urban concentration might not take the form of a number of settlements close enough to form a single labour market.*" This sentiment is echoed by Hansen (1972: 122) who states that a "*system of cities or towns linked by adequate transportation and communications might serve as well, or better [than a single city]*". Clearly, this stems partly from the fact that smaller towns with growth potential will often demonstrate superior marginal returns on (public) investment than cities near or at their development potential. However, if this was the situation in the 1970s when these authors were writing, how much more realistic is the situation in the early 21st century?

Private transport has increased, 'out of town' shopping has been introduced, telephone communication and television are now national and the concept of e-mail

and e-business has been introduced and continues to expand. With regards to business 'networking', spatial considerations have also reduced. The relocation and creation of firms outside urban areas has led to a migration of senior managers and owners (*entrepreneurs*) to the countryside. This has generated an expansion of the social and business circles within which these economic agents operate (Keeble & Tyler, 1995). Problems of isolation from 'business contacts' in rural and peripheral areas are thus being reduced still further as are associated transaction costs.

Part of the homogenisation of rural and urban stems from attempts to preserve the rural. For example, if we were to use land availability as an indicator of rurality, urban areas could be characterised as areas within which further development is made difficult by the unavailability of large tracts of land. However, what is to be made of the small rural town surrounded by green belts. Is this not also an area suffering from the "*unavailability of large tracts of land*"? More importantly, the common response to this restriction is to build on the other side of the green belt (for example Knutsford on the outskirts of Manchester has become as much of a suburb as Altrincham). Depending on the size of this green belt, new developments will either be classed as belonging to the original urban area or as separate entities. However, as the new development must almost certainly exist largely to serve the existing centre, it is only a function of the planning regulations and academic classification that prevent it from physically being part of the centre<sup>7</sup>. Should there happen to be good communications links, which there almost certainly will be, the new area is as much part of the old as any other suburb. When other towns with their corresponding green belts and developments are included, the 'patchwork quilt' of the countryside begins to contain far fewer colours.

The reverse of the above argument is also true. Urban areas containing sites that are no longer occupied or have been levelled ('brown field' sites) offer "*the availability of large tracts of land*". Thus, adopting a 'blind' categorisation such as land availability appears to offer us only more confusion

Attention must finally be paid to the changing social and domestic behaviour of rural/urban inhabitants. The growth of both commuting and dormitory towns in Britain appears to be continuing. In addition, the shopping and leisure activity of those within rural and urban areas is also changing. The very term 'out of town shopping' implies rural shopping. Furthermore, the continuing popularity of the car encourages rural residents to shop in neighbouring towns (see for example Keane's (1990) three town model) and urban dwellers to utilise the countryside for leisure. Many rural residents may now find that their travel to work and 'shopping' areas encompasses considerable geographic distance, and more than one town. This area, if viewed as a whole, can often be as large and functionally diverse as any major urban area and may in fact include one or more cities and several towns within its border. It could be suggested that now, more than ever, the countryside is in many instances merely a city with a lot of grass.

### ***Conclusion:***

Whilst it has been shown that rurality is difficult to classify, this alone does not form a justifiable reason for abandoning it. However, the relevance of such a concept and its definition in modern, particularly post-industrial, societies has been questioned. Marsden *et al* (1993) found that much of the empirical research conducted to date had failed to engender rurality with any explanatory powers. When using rurality as an explanatory or discriminatory variable the researcher or

practitioner runs the risk of embedding themselves in a mindset that may actually impair their objective understanding of the situation (Hoggart, 1990). Alternatively, by accepting the multiplicity of roles and formations now present in 'rural' areas (Cloke, 1997; Marsden *et al*, 1993), and the merging of rural and urban space (social, economic and actual), the researcher is free to identify and investigate social and spatial relationships within both a micro and macro context.

If a classification must be used, it may be preferable to consider areas as differing shades of urban as opposed to degrees of rural. We should accept, as Cloke (1997) suggests, that we are now living in a 'post-rural' age. This allows us to view the continuum as moving from urban, via dispersed urban to extreme non-urban instead of the traditional (e.g. Cloke & Edwards, 1986) urban to extreme rural. In addition, attention must be paid to the importance of isochrones, including the new, zero width, isochrones created by information technology.

In conclusion, Cloke (1983) provides us with the two arguments: that a) a definition is useful, and b) a definition is not useful. As society moves towards an increasingly information orientated age and relative communications distances fall, it follows that "*any attempt at ... a definition [of rurality] is steeped in futility and sterility*" (Cloke, 1983: 9).

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Note 'employment' excludes those in self-employment which, whilst being difficult to measure, brings agriculture to over 8%. Nevertheless, this is still less than the

other sectors mentioned; Tourism - 13%, Public Services - 25%, Retail - 9% (Gripaios, R., 1996; Sincock, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Agriculture, forestry and fishing combined.

<sup>3</sup> When the index was applied to 1981 Census data and compared with a similar study conducted using 1971 Census data, rurality was seen to diminish. Although this was partly due to alterations in census data collection, it led Cloke and Edwards to revise the index in an attempt, apparently, to return to their previous findings.

<sup>4</sup> These represent three of the eight variables used, the others being occupancy rate, commuting out pattern, household amenities, population density, and occupational structure.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Compare small farms in Devon and Cornwall and Welsh hill farms with the intensive agri-businesses found in Kent.

<sup>6</sup> Commuting in England began early this century with the spread of electric trains and motor busses and continued after the Second World War with expansion of motor car ownership (Hall, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. perhaps Peter Hall's *standard metropolitan labour areas* should be reconsidered and redefined (see earlier discussion).

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