

ESRS Congress 2009, Vaasa

Thematic Symposium III: What is the Agency of the Rural?



# Identity, protest and the agency of the rural as meeting-place



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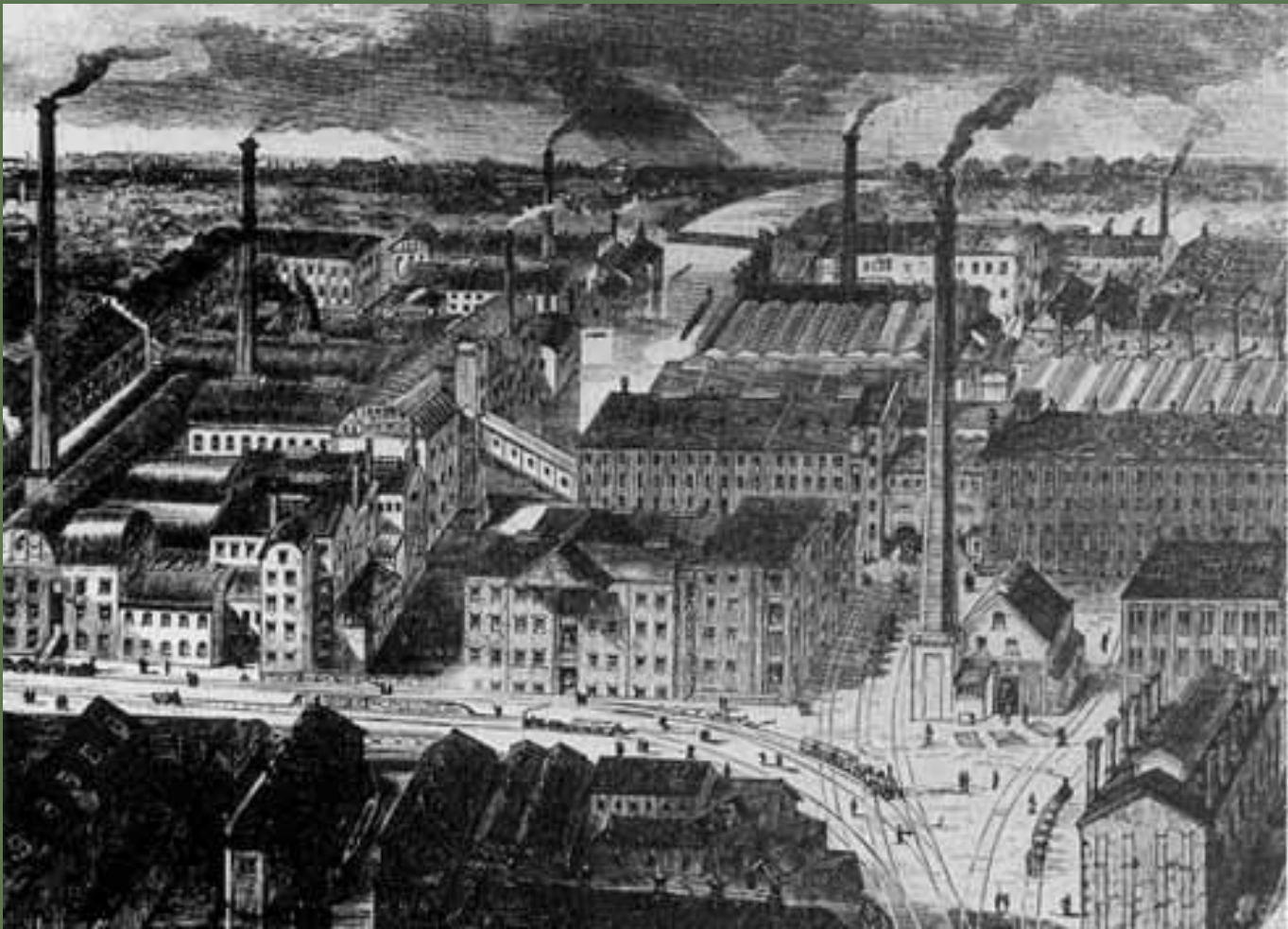
**Do you remember  
what you were doing  
on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007?**





## Chinese Government No 1 Policy Documents:

- Increasing Farmers' Incomes (2004)
- Improving Agricultural Production Capacity (2005)
- Advancing the 'Building a New Countryside' scheme (2006)
- Developing Modern Agriculture (2007)
- Resolving Rural Problems (2008)
- Stabilizing Agricultural Prices and Increasing Farmers' Incomes (2009)



“the countryside is in urban hands already, as it has been since the city generated its trade and capital” (Barnett, 1998)

# The political resilience of the rural

- 1930s-40s:** Rural preservationist movement takes on unregulated urban expansion and wins protection for rural landscapes
- 1940s-50s:** Farm unions secure massive financial support for agriculture through CAP etc
- 1970s-80s:** Rural community movement fights for the right to develop
- 1990s-2000s:** New rural identity politics?









# Neglect of the Rural?

“There is a hell of a lot of distrust about the political decision making process, a lot of people are quite disturbed about that and a lot of people feel that government, central government particularly, has little understanding of rural communities. A lot of them display very little understanding about how rural communities are being changed. A lot of people think rural communities are just forgotten about.”

Windfarm campaign leader, Devon



# Neglect of the Rural?

“This initiative arose as a response to the frustration and concern felt by country people against the threats posed to the countryside and their jobs, by politicians and urban influence, through prejudice, ignorance and diminishing rural representation”

Countryside Rally Mission Statement 1997

On September 22nd the countryside  
came to Westminster.



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# The Politics of the Rural

- Countryside protests not an expression of rural-urban conflict
- But the 'politics of the rural' in which the meaning and regulation of rurality is the central issue of debate (Woods, 2003, JRS)
- Builds on Mormont (1987, IJURR)
- **It is the centrality of this struggle over the meaning and regulation of rurality that constitutes the agency of the rural today.**



# The agency of the rural

- Rural protests and movements demonstrate the agency of rural people to organize and mobilize politically
- And to sometimes have an impact of policy outcomes
- But this is the agency of rural citizenship, not the agency of the rural per se

# Rural as motivation

“The countryside has given to me so much in my life; I want to give something back.”

Anti-windfarm campaigner, Powys

“We cannot and will not stand by in silence and watch our countryside, our communities and way of life destroyed forever by misguided urban political correctness.”

Baroness Mallalieu addressing  
the Countryside Rally 1997

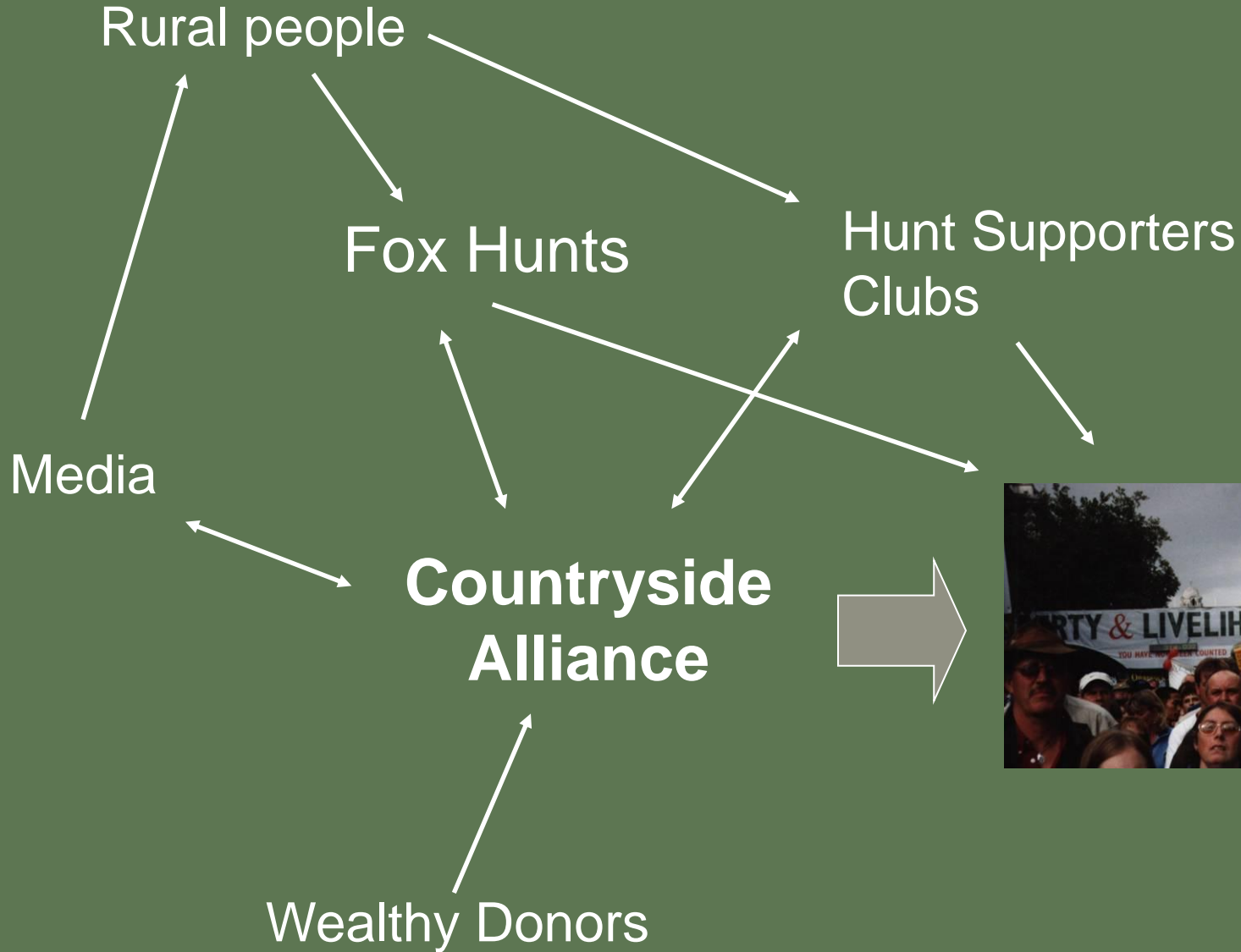
# The agency of the rural

- Ideas of rurality have agency in motivating rural citizens to mobilise on their behalf
- But – ideas of rurality would have no agency without citizens to act for them
- Rural citizens would not mobilize on these issues without the influence of a perceived rural identity
- **The agency of the rural lies in the combination of discourses of rurality as inspiration and mobilized rural citizens in action**



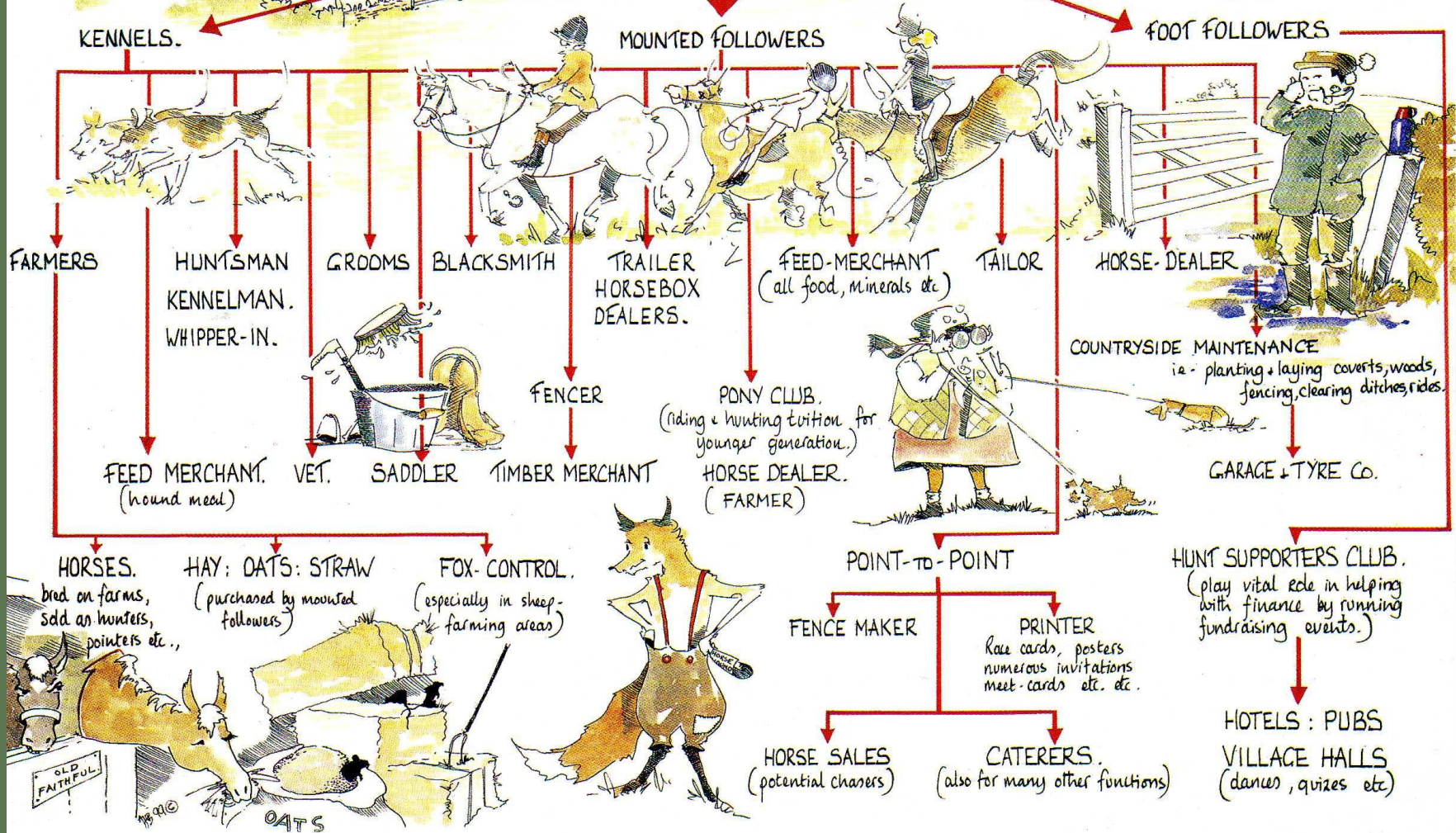
# Translation approach

- Corresponds with concept of agency advanced by translation sociologists, e.g Latour, Law, Callon
- Agency, or power, only exists through associations that are fixed in actor-networks or hybrid collectifs
- Agnostic stance that does not differentiate between human and non-human actants



# HUNTING

and its Importance to the rural community





# Rural configurations

- Certain discourses of rurality gain purchase because they involve the configuration of social, cultural, environmental and moral components in a unique way that is attractive to particular social groups
- Rural idyll as discursive configuration of environmental factors (peace, tranquillity), social practices (community interaction), landscape features and moral principles
- Individual components may not be exclusively rural, but specific configurations only occur in the countryside

Social processes

Economic processes

Labour relations

Family relations

Cultural conventions

Landscape practices



# The rural as 'meeting-place'

- The hybrid countryside: “defined by networks in which heterogeneous entities are aligned in a variety of ways” (Murdoch, 2003)
- “these networks give rise to slightly different countrysides: there is no single vantage point from which the panoply of rural or countryside relations can be seen” (Murdoch, 2003)
- “thrown-togetherness” of place (Massey, 2005)

# The rural as meeting-place

- Rural change occurs by modifying individual components in rural configurations, substituting them for different components, or re-arranging existing components in new ways
- Rural restructuring has brought rural configurations closer in form and character to urban configurations
- But urban forms have not been wholly replicated
- Given rise to new hybrid forms (cf Lacour and Puissant, 2007)



“The reconstitution of rural spaces under globalization results from the permeability of rural localities as hybrid assemblages of human and non-human entities, knitted-together intersections of networks and flows that are never wholly fixed or contained at the local scale, and whose constant shape-shifting eludes a singular representation of place. Globalization processes introduce into rural localities new networks of global interconnectivity, which become threaded through and entangled with existing local assemblages, sometimes acting in concert and sometimes pulling local actants in conflicting directions. Through these entanglements, intersections and entrapments, the experience of globalization changes rural places, but it never eradicates the local. Rather, the networks, flows and actors introduced by globalization processes fuse and combine with extant local entities to produce new hybrid formations. In this way, places in the emergent global countryside retain their local distinctiveness, but they are also different to how they were before.”

(Woods, 2007, *Progress in Human Geography*).

# The agency of the rural

- As altering just one component in a discursive or material configuration can affect its unique character as an expression of the rural, mobilizations in defence of the rural can be triggered by seemingly small-scale actions and changes
- As rural change proceeds through a process of negotiation and hybridization, rural communities are active in their own transformation and have agency to influence their own futures

# DERREG

- **Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalisation**
- European Commission Framework Programme 7
- January 2009 – December 2011
  
- Aberystwyth University (UK) (Lead partner)
- Leibniz Institut für Landeskunde (Germany)
- LAEI (Lithuania)
- Mendel University (Czech Republic)
- National University of Ireland, Galway
- Nordregio (Sweden)
- Universität des Saarlandes (Germany)
- Univerza v Ljubljana (Slovenia)
- Wageningen Universiteit (Netherlands)

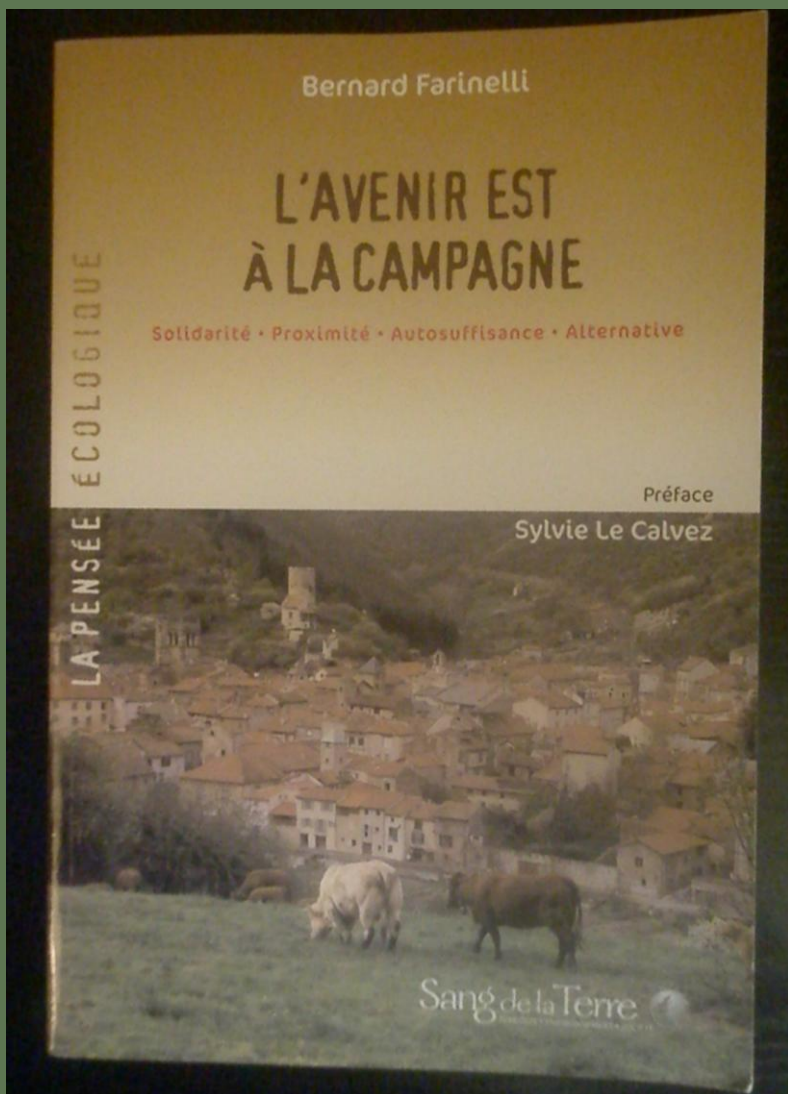


[www.derreg.eu](http://www.derreg.eu)

# The agency of the rural

- We can also think of the agency of the rural in terms of the outcomes that result from configurations and associations
  - Food
  - Fuel
  - Energy
  - Water
  - Relaxation and recreation
  - Ecosystem services





The future is  
in the  
countryside?

# The future is in the countryside?

- The resolution of many key challenges for the world today rely on rural agency as enacted through existing and new configurations of social, economic, environmental and cultural components
  - Food security
  - Protecting biodiversity
  - Limiting global warming
  - Producing renewable energy

# The future is in the countryside?

- In an ever more urbanized world, the agency of the rural to produce supplies of food and water and clean energy will become ever more critical
- The shape of the rural-as-meeting-place, and the form of configurations constituting the discursive and material being of the rural, will be significant questions for both urban and rural populations

# The role of social scientists

- The role of rural social scientists is to disentangle the rural, to see how it works
- Requires methodological and theoretical creativity
- New methods for following connections and examining micro-politics and micro-actions
- New theories as existing concepts and definitions are destabilised
- Reaching out across disciplines (social-natural science) and spaces (rural-urban)