Reading Rural Consumption Practices for Difference: Bolt-holes, Castles and Life-rafts

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Abstract

Based mostly on evidence from the UK, this paper challenges the rural's usual association with predominantly conservative politics and practices. It advocates showing awareness of ambiguity in how representations, and specifically in this paper rural representations, and their numerous associated consumption practices are interpreted. A focus is given on the possibility of interpreting these practiced rural representations in the context of responses to the negative features within everyday life identified by writers such as Lefebvre. Drawing specifically on the "postmodern Marxism" of Gibson-Graham (2006), and particularly beginning to deploy what they term "reading for difference rather than dominance", the paper introduces three "styles" of consuming the rural. These are expressed via the metaphors of bolt-hole, castle and life-raft, and it is argued that they can be read as expressing critique of urban everyday life. In the concluding section, the lessons learned from reading rural consumption practices for difference in this way are brought together to suggest that not only can the rural today be regarded as an active "heterotopia" but that this alternative status could be used to underpin an urban-focused social movement for reclamation of what Lefebvre termed "everyday life".

Keywords: Rural, reading for difference, representations, consumption practices, everyday life, social movement

Introduction: Beyond the Conservative Rural

> Apart from the sensory deprivation of nothing to do, whenever I've ventured into the rural wonderland I always seem to land up in some small-minded little England. A bad-taste, intolerant, prying land that time forgot, where everybody looks and thinks and dresses and moans and eats the same. …the fact that everybody looks the same because everybody is pretty much the same is one of the reasons why I find the countryside dreary and rather depressing. But I also fear that it's one of the reasons some people are attracted to it. Those who sing the praises of rural over urban life always point out that there is an annual exodus from cities to towns, as if all those people upping sticks to move to the sticks can't be wrong. Well, some of those people may well be moving for what I would definitely consider to be the wrong reasons. … A retreat into the uniform monoculture of old England because of an inability to accept the challenges and pleasures of genuinely multicultural cities, is, I'm sure, one of the reasons why some people choose to relocate in the laager of the shires.
>
> (Elms 2001: no pagination)

Representations of rural England as negative as that in Elms's polemic are relatively rare but tap into a popular representation of the countryside as almost irredeemably "conservative". This sense of the rural being somehow out of kilter with the urban mainstream has a long history (Williams 1973). It is, for example, one of the evaluative legacies of the dualistic spatialisation of Tönnies's developmental *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* concepts into rural and urban, respectively (Savage et al. 2003). This paper, however, mostly drawing on UK material, challenges this predominant conservative reading of the rural and its consequent disparaging by radical thinkers. It argues that many rural consumption practices, appearing at first conventional and conformist express innate critique of aspects of everyday life and experiences when read differently, making denigrations such as that by Elms one-dimensional at best.

The paper explores how one can view rural consumption practices not only through a lens set within the predominant contours of the capitalist consumer society but also through a more critical lens observing from a different topography of everyday life. The premise is that even within seemingly mundane and mainstream acts there may lurk more subversive currents:

> The ordinary can become extraordinary not by eclipsing the everyday… but by fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it. (Gardiner 2006: 207)

To develop the argument, the paper's next section advocates awareness of ambiguity in how representations – rural representations specifically – and their associated consumption practices are interpreted. It calls for deploying what Gibson-Graham (2006) term "reading for difference rather than dominance". This disposition is made relevant in the following section in respect of interpreting rural representations in the context of responses to negative features within everyday life. Bringing these previous two sections together, the paper next introduces three

"styles" of consuming the rural, expressed via metaphors of bolt-hole, castle and life-raft, that can be read as expressing critique of everyday life. In the concluding section, the lessons learned from reading rural consumption practices for difference are brought together to suggest that not only can the rural today be regarded as an active heterotopia but that this status can underpin an urban-focused social movement for reclamation of what Lefebvre termed "everyday life".

Interpreting Rural Representations and Consumption Practices

Practicing Rural Representations

Understanding the rural as (partly) representation is established within rural studies. For example, several years ago the present author defined "rural" as a "social representation of space", one of the:

> organizational mental constructs which guide us towards what is "visible" and must be responded to, relate appearance and reality, and even define reality itself. ... Social representations consist of both concrete images and abstract concepts, organized around "figurative nuclei". (Halfacree 1993: 29)

However, besides not overstating the social character of representations, their structured, thereby relatively fixed, cognitive character should be questioned (Halfacree 2006a). They are to be seen not as sitting *tout court* in the background – "out there" (Hanna et al. 2004: 477) – subsequently dictating actions but as mutable and always enmeshed with the actions they partly inform.

The danger of setting up representations and practices in binary opposition has been taken up in a study of heritage tourism, where Hanna et al. (2004: 461) depict representation as "work", with "representation and embodied practices… inseparable aspects of the reproduction of tourism spaces… not… binary opposites… but… mutually constitutive". Expressing similar sympathies, Del Casino and Hanna (2006: 36) depict "maps and mappings… [as] both representations and practices… simultaneously". Expanding this depiction but substituting "rural" for "maps", the following summarises how rural representations are understood through consumption practices (see below) in the present paper:

> the [rural] representation can always be exceeded and used in different ways as individual social actors mark the [rural] with… new objects of their own personal… interest. As such, [rural representations] are never fully complete nor are they ever completely inscribed with meaning through production. Rather, consumption is production. [Rural] spaces are processes, fluid and contested, although they find themselves temporarily fixed through certain practices of consumption that (re)produce these objects in new and unique ways. (after Del Casino and Hanna 2006: 50)

Within rural studies, the link between representations and practices is widely acknowledged (Cloke et al. 2006). Conceptually, for example, a Lefebvrian model of rural space presents rurality with three facets related to representations, practices and everyday lives (Halfacree 2006a). Reiterating, connections between the

elements should not be interpreted as representations "defining" practices but as representations providing, for example, rules and resources (Giddens 1984) implicated in actions. For example, rural walking can be linked with but not reduced to Romantic representations of the rural (Edensor 2000; Wallace 1993), in turn reproducing such representations, and counterurbanisation migration is underpinned by often unexamined "idyllic" representations of rurality (Halfacree 1994; van Dam et al. 2002).

Reading Rural Consumption

With rural representations linked to practices, how these practices are to be read comes via Bauman's (1992: 106) advocacy of an "interpretive" stance to yield "enrichment" of one's own tradition, through incorporating other, heretofore inaccessible, experiences. In other words, it is accepted that one may know – whether as academics or members of the public – a great deal about the rural practices concerned but also that this knowledge can be added to.

As a first stage in this reading, "practices" will be re-scripted and narrowed as "consumption", or the purchase and use of goods and services. Within this characterisation, emphasis will be given to usage rather than to acts of purchase. Following Miller's (1987) Hegelian perspective, consumption is not "only… an aspect of the general problem of commodities" (189), in terms of alienation especially. Instead, focus is on "the period of time following the purchase or allocation of the item… [as] the situation is radically transformed upon obtaining the goods in question" (190). Through consumption, that which is being consumed can – but, as Miller stresses, does not always – turn on and seek to negate the alienated market-based relationships within which it was originally set. This can serve positive transformative ends:

> far from being a mere commodity, a continuation of all those processes which led up to the object… the object in consumption confronts, criticizes and finally may often subjugate these abstractions in a process of human becoming. (Miller 1987: 191-2)

Talking of rural consumption *practices* rather than simply rural consumption also seeks to bypass *a priori* distinctions between, for example, (urban) consumption of the rural, (rural) consumption in the rural and other conceptual distinctions, such as the regulationist (Goodwin 2006) idea of "rural consumption regimes". This is not in any way denying that these distinctions are often extremely useful but an emphasis here on practice seeks to develop analysis more in the direction of the emotionally-charged everyday ways of living with which the consumption acts are enmeshed, rather than on the "colder" terms of the what, how, when and where of specific acts of consumption.

Although Miller's insights into consumption suggest exciting potential for rural consumption practices, reading these practices initially takes a more conventional line. This is because probable first response, and likely most commonplace, is to place such consumption within the "consumer society" mainstream (Clarke 2003).

Countryside consumption bears many of the well-known hallmarks of consumption within mature capitalist society generally. This reading, implicit or explicit, underpins the idea of the countryside as commodity (Cloke 1992) and "consumption countrysides" – where the rural "fulfils a role of socially providing a variety of marketed goods and services to non-rural people" (Marsden 1999: 508) – replacing erstwhile production countrysides.

In media terms, for example, rurality's prominent role within both advertising and popular drama merits attention, wherein idyllic representations of rurality (see below), in particular, are often vigorously deployed. Thus, in advertising, "Rural images are central to the marketing of a huge diversity of products, ranging from biscuits to home wares, weekend retreats and ecotourism" (Winchester and Rofe 2005: 269; also Bunce 1994; Hopkins 1998). Similarly, rural places that have been or still are sites of popular television series or feature films, in particular, have become very popular tourism sites (Halfacree forthcoming c), a development which in part reflects the still growing popularity and importance of explicitly mediated ruralities (Phillips et al. 2001).

Reading rural consumption practices within a consumer society rubric fits initially, for example, "mainstream counterurbanisation" (Halfacree 2008), an example which further suggests the often seamless connections made between academic, media and promotional discourses. Mainstream counterurbanisation comprises largely middle-class flows of residents to rural areas within much of the global North, drawn especially by high quality of life associations with the rural (Gosnell and Abrams 2009). It is, on the one hand, strongly represented and often satirised within the media and popular culture but, on the other hand, also badged with promotional normativity through being institutionalised in and through facilitating networks comprising agents such as banks, building societies, letting agencies, mortgage providers, removal companies, decorators, utilities companies, and further underpinned by norms of migration discourse such as quality of life, accessibility, retirement, or children's welfare (Halfacree forthcoming a).

In contrast to reading rural consumption as general consumption practice, an alternative reading places it in a reactionary light (though still involving capitalist consumption). This came through in Elms's opening quote and is linked to long-standing ideas that the rural – and associated practices – is somehow stubbornly resistant to the status quo or "progress". Presented "positively" as nostalgia, the idea of the rural as timeless runs deeply through the rural idyll, discussed below, for example, but a more negative sense of reaction is reflected in various anti-idyllic rural representations, from the imbecile British "country bumpkin" beloved of cartoonists, through the imagined Appalachian who is "white, poor, rural, male, racist, illiterate, fundamentalist, inbred, alcoholic, violent" (Stewart 1996: 119), to the "rural horror" of the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Bell 1997). From this perspective, which is also clearly highly amplified by the media, consuming the rural

can be read as somehow anti-modern and backward-orientated, if not plain unintelligible.

However, the interpretive operation now returns to Miller's (1987) emphasis on the openness of consumption to argue that reading rural consumption does not have to fit within the with-the-flow / against-the-flow binary suggested thus far. Instead, it can express a more sublatory role of superseding yet preserving what this binary encompasses. In short, one can identify within rural consumption a third set of readings neither fully complicit with the status quo nor simply a reactionary *non*; that articulate the consumer society context, whilst expressing critique of that same context. This builds on Marsden's (1999: 508) quote given earlier, which goes on to suggest consumption countrysides allow "non-rural people" to "distance themselves from the pathologies of urban life, either temporarily or permanently".

An excellent way into appreciating these other readings is through Wright's (1985) recognition of the potential for multiple, often contradictory, readings of mundane or even seemingly conservative phenomena. Wright's subject was "heritage", typically like rural often seen as underpinned by conservative or reactionary politics (Hewison 1987). Whilst not refuting this, Wright (1985: 78) also tellingly observed how:

> Like the utopianism from which it draws, national heritage involves positive energies which certainly can't be written off as ideology. It engages hopes, dissatisfactions, feelings of tradition and freedom, but it tends to do so in a way that diverts these potentially disruptive energies into the separate and regulated spaces of stately display.

Taking this perspective further connects to the work of Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006). For Gibson-Graham, the idea that capitalism in all of its dimensions is literally "everywhere" and "inescapable" is, simply, one of the great myths of the modern age since, as Holloway (2002: 187, my emphasis) expresses it, capitalism is really "a society of *non-correspondence*, in which things do not fit together functionally". Gibson-Graham (1996) criticise predominant modes of thinking that distance the economic from politics and which reify, totalise and make holistic the former. Rejecting the idea of any singular capitalist system, they call for "a new political imaginary" (Gibson-Graham 2006: xix), contributing to this left renovation with illustrations of alternative economic set-ups.

For the purpose of this paper's interpretive focus, within Gibson-Graham's (2006: xxix-xxxiii) "thinking techniques", anti-essentialism can be expressed through "techniques of rereading" (xxxi). Methodologically, one way to disrupt any ideologically inscribed totality is to undertake "Reading for difference rather than dominance" (xxxi-xxxii), which seeks to uncover "what is possible but obscured from view" (xxxi). Rejecting "masterful knowing" (6) and "refusing to know too much" (8), one can acknowledge "future possibilities [that] become more viable by virtue of already being seen to exist" (xxxi).

Returning to rural consumption practices, the insights from Miller, Wright, Gibson-Graham and others suggest the need for extreme wariness in **only** acknowledging the predominant story of human practice within a capitalist society that these practices represent – although such acknowledgement is nonetheless essential. Instead, within these practices, possibly – even probably – both highly obscured and inevitably battered and compromised, may be detected other stories that when pieced together and read express a degree of substantive critique of that society.

Rurality and the Critique of Everyday Life

Reading for difference may thus enable interpretation of at least some rural consumption practices as expressing radical critique. The target of that critique, as Marsden (1999) suggested, given that these practices are often relatively mundane and ordinary, is likely to be elements of the similarly mundane experiences of urban everyday life. Therefore, this section briefly considers everyday life and its critique, before outlining how rural representations associated with consumption also speak critically to conditions of everyday life.

Everyday Life and its Critique

An upsurge in studies on everyday life and on ordinariness and the mundane generally (for example, Eyles 1989; Gardiner 2000, 2006) is inspired in part by perception that everyday life has more to tell us than just what seems obvious and banal and is traditionally lambasted by "legislative" (Bauman 1992) voices from across the political spectrum. In other words, everyday life is duplicitous (Halfacree 2007a), with much of its seeming openness and lack of guile profoundly misleading.

One of the first to examine everyday life as crucial for understanding the contemporary human condition was Henri Lefebvre (especially Lefebvre 1991/1958, 1984/1968). He understood everyday life and the academic challenge it poses as follows:

> work, leisure, family life and private life make up a whole [everyday life] which we can call a "global structure" or "totality" on condition that we emphasize its historical, shifting, transitory nature. [In] …the critique of everyday life… we can envisage a vast enquiry which will look at professional life, family life and leisure activities in terms of their many-sided interactions. *Our particular concern will be to extract what is living, new, positive – the worthwhile needs and fulfilments – from the negative elements: the alienations.* (Lefebvre 1991/1958: 42, my emphasis)

Everyday life is so important because it is where people are constituted (Gardiner 2000).

Within contemporary "neo-capitalism" (Lefebvre 1984/1968), everyday life has been broken-up and reduced to mundane and unrewarding routines underpinned by the logic of commodities and their exchange values. Consequently, people in-

creasingly "do not know their own lives very well, or know them adequately" (Lefebvre 1991/1958: 94, emphasis removed). However, people are not passive. They seek to (re)capture what they sense is lost, especially through leisure and other forms of consumption, although this is largely unfulfilling due to the alienated character of such consumption, not least within neo-capitalism's increasing reliance on images and sign, fantasies and make believe (Lefebvre 1984/1968). However, and showing some affinity with Miller, Lefebvre had "faith in the regenerative capacity of everyday life" (Gardiner 2000: 99). Although everyday life remains thoroughly rooted within and inscribed by neo-capitalism, with its sustained class character, for example, this is never a done deal. In short, utopian expressions of "real" need continue to leak out; the system is never sealed, no matter how well lubricated its workings. For example, leisure activities "contain within themselves their own spontaneous critique of the everyday. They *are* that critique in so far as they are *other* than everyday life, and yet they are *in everyday life*, they are *alienation*" (Lefebvre 1991/1958: 40). For Lefebvre (1984/1968: 172), *desire* "refuses to be signified" as it is far too alive.

Rural Representations as Critical Resource

As a final primer for reading rural consumption practices for critique of everyday life, attention is now given to characteristics of rural representations that may be conspirators within this critique. With space tight, attention will just flag the content of two families of rural representations, although, for a full appreciation of rurality's critical potential, other representations, rural practices and embodied rural lives also require scrutiny (Halfacree 2006a, 2007b).

The first family of representations are summarised by the term "rural idyll" (Halfacree 2003), a family conventionally seen in a conservative light but of considerable significance to rural consumption practices, not least in the UK (Lowe et al. 1995) but also across much of the global North (Bunce 1994). As Bunce (2003: 14) expresses it with reference to a Canadian newspaper story:

> *Picturesque, farming, community, recreational, bucolic*: these are the words of the conventional rural idyll, of the aesthetics of pastoral landscapes, of humans working in harmony with nature and the land and with each other, of a whole scene of contentment and plenty.

Irrespective of this representation's actuality, and it is of course widely critiqued (for example, Cloke 2003), its resource potential is clear.

Looking more closely, the social aspect of this selective representation imagines peaceful, unchanging, small-scale, fundamentally communitarian landscapes, within which people experience:

> a less-hurried lifestyle [and] follow the seasons rather than the stock market, where they have more time for one another and exist in a more organic community where people have a place and an authentic role. (Short 1991: 34)

Besides this link with community, idyllic rurality is also integrally linked to a strong sense of place and placeness. Additionally, and tying community and place aspects tighter together, it is also strongly associated with a form of dwelling based on "interactive productivity" (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000: 93) and engagement. From this depiction, one can thus appreciate why Bunce (2003: 15) observed that "the values that sustain the rural idyll speak of a profound and human need for connection with land, nature and community".

The content and implied sympathies of a second family of rural representations demonstrate similarities with the rural idyll but express them in a different accent. These representations are associated with a "radical rural" (Halfacree 2007b). On the one hand, they imagine the countryside as a diverse home accessible to all but, on the other hand, such accessibility requires considerable effort within distinctive and challenging lifestyle choices.

Two anchors of radical rural representation are, first, "localisation", "a set of interrelated and self-reinforcing policies that actively discriminate in favour of the more local whenever it is… reasonable and conveniently possible" (Lucas 2002: unpaginated). Expressions of localisation tend to start with farming and food, before moving outwards to encompass normative everyday life generally. The second key anchor is the idea of rural as rooted in land-based activities. This was well expressed in a polemical pamphlet, where Fairlie (2001: 9-10) mourned the eclipse of the rural by an urban interest and asserted that:

> rural means land-based… A rural economy, if the term has any meaning at all, has its foundation in the land and what it produces – animal, vegetable and mineral. A rural culture is distinctive because it grows out of the land. … Rural culture is rooted in the earth. (Fairlie 2001: 9-10)

Other important elements of the radical rural representation include: strong "community" discourse; promotion of meanings of land beyond that of means of production; ecocentric and deep ecological beliefs; and celebration of the values of physical labour as a way of attuning to and appreciating one's humanity and place in the world (Halfacree 2007b). This illustrates clearly the overlap between the claims of both idyllic and radical representations in celebrating a particular suite of interlinked social-environmental relationships.

From this brief discussion of rural representations, one can posit the rural as "unfinished" (Neal and Walters 2007), duplicitously expressing a seemingly conservative socio-spatial imagination but one whose internal resonances may be read as critical of urban everyday life. Hence, one can begin to appreciate how rural consumption phenomena such as counterurbanisation, engaging as they do with these representations, may express such a critique by seeking an engaged dwelling within the subtle, less pacy, more distanced yet inscribed "sophisticated simplicity" of the communitarian, place-based countryside (Halfacree 1997). This is an understanding commonplace within media stories (for example, *Guardian* 2004). It can be appreciated still more by noting how community, place and dwelling have become strongly imaginatively spatialised into the rural, just as their sup-

posed expulsion from the urban is frequently mourned (Swyngedouw and Kaïka 2000; Thrift 2005).

Finally, Lefebvre muses on how his critique of everyday life could be expressed spatially. First, he talks of the desirability of a "differential space", where the "produced" difference of a counter-space relative to mainstream abstract space could thrive (Lefebvre 1991/1974: Chapter 6). Second, within his desired "city as play" (Lefebvre 1984/1968), themes such as festival and creative communities feature prominently. Taken together and playing with Lefebvre's terminology in the light of the rural representations just outlined, one can suggest that sometimes, in some places, and through some consumption practices, a quasi-counter-spatial ludic city (*sic*.) might be located imaginatively within the rural, as representations imaginatively displace out of the city and (re)place into the rural Lefebvre's desired "urban" characteristics:

> Urban society is not opposed to mass media, social intercourse, communication, intimations, but only to creative activity being turned into passivity, into the detached, vacant stare, into the consumption of shows and signs; it postulates an intensification of material and non-material exchange where quantity is substituted for quality, and endows the medium of communication with content and substance. (Lefebvre 1984/1968: 190-1)

Reading Rural Consumption Practices for Difference

Reading rural consumption practices for difference, this section sketches three metaphorical "styles" of consuming the rural that incorporate critical responses to mainstream everyday life. Their critique should not necessarily be seen as explicit, intentional or even acknowledged by those involved but as often predominantly immanent and implicit. An "external' reading and subsequent framing of a diverse set of practices (re)presents them in a new light. The three styles should also not be seen as providing complete high-order interpretations of the consumption practices concerned as this would go too far towards the "soliloquy" of legislative reason (Bauman 1992: 126), Gibson-Graham's (2006: 6) masterful knowing.

The three metaphorical styles, especially the first two, have been named with a deliberate nod to how the practices they engage with have been represented within the popular media. They deliberately hope to provoke some emotional resonance in the reader, as the practices they seek to represent need to be seen as alive, meaningful and impassioned enough both to bear and to merit a reading for difference.[1]

Moving through the three metaphorical styles, one shifts from the rural presented as some "separate sphere" from the urban to seeing it intimately connected to the urban but, crucially, not somehow the same. Moving through the styles also reveals something of a paradox. On the one hand, one seems to move away from radical resistance to the status quo to consumption practice congruent with it. Yet,

at the same time, the latter has perhaps the most radical political potential, being best attuned to contemporary everyday socio-spatial conditions.

1. "Bolt-Holes"

The first style through which rural consumption practices critique everyday experiences starts from the idea of the rural as both a relatively distinct space and as somewhere one can "escape" into: down nameless roads to be lost in the nooks and crannies of the countryside, somewhere outside of or beyond urban society. In other words, the rural is a "bolt-hole", with the practices associated with it those of flight and disappearance.

The best example of the rural as bolt-hole is that of people moving to the rural in a quest for a self-contained "back-to-the-land" lifestyle (Halfacree 2006b). Whilst those engaged in such actions usually have some normative goal of making a living from the land or gaining artistic inspiration, flight and disappearance elements are clearly strong. This was demonstrated strongly by the 1960s counter-culture, within which by as early as 1970 a back-to-the-land trend was observed in the UK (Young 1973), US (Hedgepeth 1971) and elsewhere.

The dominant reading of this trend is encapsulated in one term: "dropping out" (implicitly from the city and/or industrial capitalist society). "[O]pting out of the mainstream society and living in the interstices and backwaters of the system or in enclaves of kindred spirits" (Zicklin 1983: 26) seemingly heeded Timothy Leary's 1966 call to "turn on, tune in, drop out" (Leary 1983). Such a reading could note of course that those involved may be "pushed":

> In the light of the mounting frustration at the recalcitrance of the rest of society to embrace and support [their] vision, faced with the open hostility of those in power and the fear and contempt of much of the straight world… hundreds of young people began moving to the country to make and preserve a world of their own. (Zicklin 1983: 27-8)

Nonetheless, the reading is usually one of crisis or failure, and in conservative or even mainstream hands this easily fed into popular cultural and media stereotype of the feckless, filthy, free-loading "hippy", despoiling the countryside and consuming it in anti-social and highly irresponsible ways. It is a representation that persists, reappearing recently in popular depictions of "new travellers", for example (Hetherington 2000).

However, just as Leary's call to drop out was *not* to "'Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity'… [but] meant self-reliance, a discovery of one's singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change" (Leary 1983: 253), reading "dropping out" for difference can emphasise instead, first, how the desire for such a rural existence had a long historical and cultural pedigree and typically also formed part of a more general radical social critique, with elements of "normal" life rejected in favour of "alternative" living arrangements (Howkins 2003). Second, these experiments often attempted to consolidate a utopian rural alternative,

in both their communal and individual forms (Halfacree 2006b). They aimed to establish forms of living as models for a new social order that would gradually emerge (Rigby 1974); a paradoxical dropping-out to create a new society. As Nelson (1989: 124, my emphasis) gleaned from analysis of contemporary "alternative" media:

> communal living is not about achieving a sudden change in the nature of society, but is a gradual process with revolutionary potential, being the first essential step towards the wider, more fundamental revolution, in that communal living involves *individuals taking a firmer control… over their own lives*.

Looking at rural Wales, its current lively "alternative" character has been moulded strongly by the consequences of what at first might seem merely attempts to drop out (Halfacree forthcoming b). For example, the Selene Community that coordinated, through *Communes* magazine, the Commune Movement settled on rough land in Carmarthenshire in 1966 (Nelson 1989; Rigby 1974), before upgrading to a hill farm and becoming a key alternative magnet for fellow travellers, many remaining in the area. An even better example is the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) near Machynlleth, Powys. Now a highly respected pioneering site for "alternative technology", it was founded in 1973 on a disused slate quarry by urban drop outs. It has since spun-off companies promoting environmental technologies and forged strong links with the formal university sector (CAT 2009).

For an individual, too, dropping-out could be a constructive life experience. A good example comes from the life of singer-songwriter Vashti Bunyan. Disillusioned with her life and stalled musical career in late 1960s "swinging" London, she undertook a lengthy migration with horse, cart, dog and partner Robert Lewis to a remote Scottish island and beyond (Halfacree 2009). Although having setbacks, the experience was overwhelmingly positive personally as Bunyan got to live her dream of "be[ing] self-sufficient as possible and rear[ing] dogs, horses and children" (Bunyan, quoted in Dale 2001: 7). Furthermore, it proved inspiring through heightened appreciation of "nature":

> Living outside changed the way I saw the world to the extent that the trees, hills, roads and everything took on personality. …living close to the ground I think had this effect. I felt I was part of my surroundings. It made me more careful of them. (Bunyan, quoted in Dale 2001: 9)

Nonetheless, dropping out did not – and still does not – always take heed of what exactly a new rural life entails. Life often proved very unsatisfactory very quickly, breaking down for a myriad of reasons, from homesickness to lack of resources to being unable to cope with the rigours of an often tough rural existence. Thus, Rivers (1978: 25) stresses how potential back-to-the-landers should have no illusions about the challenges of rural living, cautioning against "the hollowness in… popular motives for 'dropping out'", whilst Nelson (1989: 130, my emphasis) drolly noted how:

> the idea of community was strong and attractive, but the reality of… harsh living conditions, and mundane labour such as hedging and trenching, had *a dispiriting effect*.

Consequently, popular cultural stereotypes of the hippie seeking "to get his/her head together in the country" all too often has as sequel the equally stereotypical "failure" of this life change and subsequent return to (urban) "straight" existence (Halfacree 2009).

More fundamentally, the underlying socio-spatial imagination behind the rural as "escape" has to be substantially critiqued. Firstly, as the structured character of the rural idyll (Bunce 2003) illustrates, rurality can be far from infinitely malleable and this must be come to terms with. More fundamentally, the idea that the rural exists as some world entirely apart from the urban is unsustainable. The conceptual and socio-cultural inseparability of urban and rural has long been a strong critical strand within debates about defining rural (for example, Copp 1972; Hoggart 1990). It is one that even populist guides to starting a new life in the countryside acknowledge:

> Much as you might like to fool yourself, you're not going to change personality just because you change locality. (Craze 2004: 88)

2. "Castles"

The second style through which rural consumption practices critique everyday experiences display initial echoes of the reactionary reading noted earlier. It positions the rural once again as both a relatively distinct space and as somewhere one can "escape" into, but this time the sense of separation is less certain and accompanied by an often intense sense of threat or challenge. In short, the rural is represented less as secure bolt-hole but as "laager" (Elms 2001) or "castle", to be fortified as (urban) threats are without, albeit possibly still not in sight. The ensuing practices are those of defence and insulation through vigilance and reinforcement.

This style, again widely reproduced within popular culture and the media, will be illustrated through consideration of counterurbanisers' association with various forms of anti-development politics. The association is widely acknowledged by the literature from which this brief sketch is drawn (for example, Murdoch and Day 1998; Murdoch and Marsden 1994; Murdoch et al. 2003; Short et al. 1986) and has developed particularly strongly since the 1980s in the UK (Woods 2005). Focus will be on opposition to house-building but resistance is also manifested towards various other forms of development (Woods 2003, 2005).

The dominant reading of the involvement of counterurbanisers, middle-class counterurbanisers specifically, with anti-development pressure group politics is encapsulated again in a popular term: "pulling up the drawbridge" having attained one's "rural idyll". People become, in the equally well known expression, NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard), resisting any development perceived as having po-

tential negative impacts on their quality of life. Ambrose (1992: 186-7) illustrates this dominant reading well:

> The group [NIMBYs] has come to these "rural areas" primarily to enjoy leafy seclusion. The last thing they want is another group of arrivals. In other words they are rigidly opposed to any more housebuilding if it will spoil their view or possibly have an adverse effect on property values. They may well be in favour of more development in the general vicinity … but they will often use their considerable expertise to organise resistance to development in, or within sight of, their particular village.

Of course, academic work has investigated more deeply the NIMBY impulse and rapidly moved on from simple status defence to detailed appreciation of how resistance to further development is linked to class identity and formation. Savage et al. (1992) asserted that class formation does not take place on the metaphorical head of a pin but is always implicated with place. This idea was developed by Lash and Urry (1994) to draw out the importance of "aesthetic reflexivity" for middle-class identity and, within this, the prominent position of the countryside as representing somewhere both rich in "the past" and, through "tradition", resonant with "community". The resulting overall thesis, itself resonant with Elms (2001) at the start of this paper, can be expressed as follows:

> The rural domain is reassuring to the middle class. It is a place where gender and ethnic identities can be anchored in "traditional" ways, far (but not far enough?) from the fragmented, "mixed-up" city. Within the rural domain identities are fixed, making it a white, English, family-orientated, middle-class space; a space, moreover, that is imbued with its own mythical history, which selects and deploys particular, nativistic notions of what it is to belong to the national culture. That this is what attracts middle-class in-migrants to the countryside is rarely made explicit. Instead, the rural is extolled for the virtues of peace and quiet, of community and neighbourliness. (Murdoch and Marsden 1994: 232)

Consequently, understanding middle-class resistance to development becomes readily apparent (Woods 2005).

Yet, within both the previous quote and this body of work more generally can be seen traces of a different reading of middle-class defence of place. Specifically, the motivational either/or between fixed conservative identity and rural tranquillity can be queried. As Woods (2005: 186, my emphasis) puts it, "the politics of development in the countryside have increasingly been framed around the consequences of middle class *investment* in the countryside under counterurbanization". This investment is fiscal *and* emotional (Woods 2003, 2005) *and* related to class/identity formation and reproduction. Staying with Woods' terminology, it is an holistic and multi-sided investment that the middle-class make through "aspirational ruralism" (Woods 2003: 318). Although class identity is vital, it does not provide the full picture. From the emotional angle, "virtues of peace and quiet, of community and neighbourliness" should not be so readily dismissed.

One gets more sense of this multidimensional middle-class investment when anti-development pressure groups are investigated in detail. For example, whilst Ambrose (1992) outlined three groups of conservationist –"genuine", "social" and

"'pull-up-the-ladder' group of recent arrivals the 'born again conservationists' or NIMBYs" (186) – these are ideal type abstractions. Powerful groups such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) in practice represent a coalition of all three groups and, furthermore, express "a trenchant critique of the neo-liberal free-for-all mentality" (Ambrose 1992: 187). Similarly, in depicting the "pre-served countryside", Murdoch et al. (2003) emphasise "preservationist networks" (81) or a "preservationist coalition" (82) and the discursive operation of these groups through "local conventions associated with neighbourhood, community and environment" (87) indicate the aspirational importance of a quasi-idyllic rural "moral geography" (Woods 2005: 171).

Overlaying this multi-stranded, entangled sense of anti-developmentalism, adopting a more affective perspective (Halfacree forthcoming c) draws attention to the lived consequences of counterurbanisers' "attempt[s] to 'escape' the social through an immersion in 'country life'" (Murdoch et al. 2003: 71). Such immersion, no matter if based initially on overtly romanticised representations of rural life, may well lead to changed priorities, awareness of place, and so on. Embodied encounters with rurality involving physical, social and emotional aspects – encounters which inevitably implicate the seemingly indelible association between rurality and *nature* (Halfacree forthcoming c) – may enhance celebration of and thus the defence of the rural for its own sake and as a bulwark against negatively experienced features of (urban) everyday life.

Articulations of rural as "castle" may contain radical critique of everyday life but, like its articulation as "bolt-hole", one must end on critical reflection. First, and clearly demonstrated by studies of rural pressure groups, defence of meta-phorical castles re-states the predominant conservative picture of the rural and its politics. Second, the metaphor of rural as castle remains rooted in a limited socio-spatial imagination. Whilst not now seen in the separatist terms of the bolt-hole, a rural separate identity to that of the city still features. Third, the links between the actions of anti-development groups and class reproduction with its consequent exclusion can never be overlooked. There is "always… a strong dose of class con-flict" (Woods 2005: 186) in rural middle-class pressure group politics and their success inevitably, if usually unintentionally, enhances rural social exclusion (Murdoch and Marsden 1994). Thus, this section ends with an ambiguous reflec-tion on "rural community" that expresses the ambiguity of "castle" style rural consumption generally:

> rural communities yield conflicting perspectives… stable arenas in which social re-lations and identities can be forged in ways which exclude, to some degree, market and economic relations, while, on the other, they exhibit defensive and exclusive tendencies which reproduce some of the most pernicious forms of social closure. (Murdoch and Day 1998: 196)

3. "Life-rafts"

The third style through which rural consumption practices critique everyday experiences again begins with the rural as both a relatively distinct space and somewhere one can "escape" into but this time connection with the urban ("rest of the world") and the everyday remains centre-stage. The rural becomes a space from which critical engagement with a dysfunctional world becomes grounded. It is represented as a life-raft in a stormy sea, with associated practices of existential and potentially critical empowerment more than flight or insulation.

This third style could be illustrated again with reference to consumption around urban-to-rural migration, as counterurbanisers might be seen as using the rural as predominantly neither bolt-hole nor castle but as a life-raft within everyday life (Halfacree 1997, 2007a). However, instead, focus is on practices of second home consumption (Halfacree forthcoming a).

Second homes are "an occasional residence of a household that usually lives elsewhere and which is primarily used for recreation purposes" (Shucksmith 1983: 174). They are found across the world (Bendix and Löfgren 2008; Hall and Müller 2004a), in urban as well as rural environments, numbers growing through the past century. In many countries, second homes are generally regarded, within popular discourse as well as academia, as an elite form of consumption and this informs strongly the dominant reading. Within British studies of second homes, for example, their consequent political sensitivity is an over-riding theme (for example, Coppock 1977). In contrast, in Scandinavia the political shadow over second homes is less intense, due to spatial separation from first home settlements and, most strongly, because second home ownership is far broader sociologically; recent estimates suggesting 40% of Norway's population have access to an estimated 420,000 second homes (Overvåg 2009).

In terms of reading for difference, Scandinavian studies of second homes reveal considerable intensity and diversity of engagements between owners and both their properties and the surrounding environments. Whilst, on the one hand, leisure use is a predominant theme (for example, Hall and Müller 2004a; Kaltenborn 1998; Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen forthcoming), on the other hand, their less controversial, arguably normative cultural position has promoted fuller investigation of everyday usage. At first sight, consumption can be read as the second home providing an "escape" or "vacation" from predominantly urban modernity (Kaltenborn 1998). This could position their consumption in the bolt-hole style. However, the adequacy of such a perspective has increasingly been questioned, with second homes being seen as an integral part of everyday existence or dwelling (Bendix and Löfgren 2008; Overvåg 2009; also Gallent 2007).

For example, Garvey (2008) and Quinn (2004) accept at one level the role of the second home as providing an "escape" but note how any nominal escape from urban daily routine is always accompanied by much of this same life; existential issues accompanying everyday life stay with the second homeowner. Desires to

"create a sense of connectedness" (Quinn 2004: 118) with people, place, and eve-ryday experiences are (imagined as being) facilitated at the second home, where one can "achieve some dimension of lifestyle that is not available at [the] primary residence" (Hall and Müller 2004b: 12). Thus, "peoples' desire to escape is strongly tempered by an attempt both to re-connect with experiences from their past and to strive for a continuity that will strengthen into their futures" (Quinn 2004: 118). The overall result is "more a negation than flight from everyday exis-tence" (Garvey 2008: 205). Consequently, life in the second home and its "appre-ciation of what is not achieved within [the rest of] daily life" (Garvey 2008: 218) can provide a life-raft to revitalise "home life in the primary place" (Quinn 2004: 117); "first" and "second" homes are mutually supportive rather than antagonistic. Significantly, therefore, second homes comprise an integral element of *home*, not somehow existing outside and independent of it (Overvåg 2009).

In an increasingly everyday condition of normalised circulation (Quinn 2004), a key component of any emerging "era of mobilities" (Halfacree forthcoming a, after Sheller and Urry 2006), "work, home and play are separated in time and place, and meanings and identity are structured around not one but several places" (McIntyre et al. 2006: 314). From this, second home consumption can be associ-ated with "double homes, double lives" (Bendix and Löfgren 2008: 7) or "dy-namic heterolocalism" (Halfacree forthcoming a, after Zelinsky and Lee 1998). This posits the idea of an emergent identity / home / dwelling routed through and emergent from everyday connections between places of diverse "everyday tex-ture" (Conradson and Latham 2005: 228). A dynamic heterolocal reading of rural second home consumption thus does not assume rural and urban to be "the same", even as it acknowledges their intrinsic entanglement. Furthermore, the recognised "need" for the everyday texture seen as provided by the rural can be read as po-tentially radical critique of the inadequacy of urban dwelling, or what this paper has termed, after Lefebvre, everyday life. The promises of consumer society are unable to deliver on needs for "things" (objects, experiences, affects, emotions, and so on) accreted to the rural environment. By accessing such things, albeit ini-tially through the market but also through more embodied, affective engagements, an increasingly dynamic heterolocal existence provides through rural consumption practices aspects of "being human" at best animated only in watered-down form within the rest of everyday life (also Garvey 2008).

In summary, rural consumption read differently in the style of life-raft presents the rural not as a fundamentally separate realm from the urban but as its comple-ment; a place where stability-within-movement (Sheller and Urry 2006) may be attainable.[2] It presents an Other to the urban, not as its opposite but as expressing qualities of difference – "different moods and modes of domesticity" (Bendix and Löfgren 2008: 14) – to the experiences of everyday life the urban offers. The lat-ter is seen as inadequate in many respects and is challenged by values ingrained both within representational expressions of the rural and within less representa-

tional, more affective encounters. Whilst this suggests a wellspring of potential radical critique, one must again end on three critical reflections. First, consumption is once again initially attained through the market, with all the economic and class exclusions and limitations this implies, even if the affective "reality" of rural living, in particular, can suggest that the eventual full consumption experience (Miller 1987) can often go on to "exceed" its commodified form. Second, dynamic heterolocalism suggests a political compromise, partially accepting the existential dilution of urban everyday life with the promise of rural "re-enchantment" (Maffesoli 1987; Thrift 2003). This accommodation, inaccessible to many, is only challenged if dynamic heterolocalism attains political form with transformative intentions, a potential considered in the conclusion. Third, as indicated recently in a special edition of *Ethnologia Europaea* (Volume 37: 1-2, 2008), "[t]he materiality and emotionality of living in two places" (Bendix and Löfgren 2008: 14) can prove immensely challenging, with the potential threat of "a double homelessness" (Bendix and Löfgren 2008: 8) a real possibility.

Conclusion: From Heterotopia to a Social Movement for Everyday Life?

> To think of opposition to capitalism simply in terms of overt militancy is to see only the smoke rising from the volcano. … People have a million ways of saying No. …being a revolutionary is a very ordinary, very usual matter, …we are all revolutionaries, albeit in very contradictory, fetishised, repressed ways. (Holloway 2002: 159, 205, 211)

Through adopting a reading for difference perspective when considering rural consumption practices, one sees that whilst these practices can be either complicit with or crudely reactionary towards the predominant, mainstream experiences of urban everyday life (arguable both examples of reading for dominance), they also speak of varied styles of resistance to these same experiences (reading for difference). Thus, something quite extraordinary can lurk within the seemingly ordinary (Halfacree 2007a). Moreover, whilst these styles of resistance through consumption may be critiqued on the basis of being rooted in the very consumer society they supposedly ultimately critique (arguably they cannot be otherwise; Clarke 2003), such as being often aligned strongly with class positions, and whilst some are also rooted in naïve ideas of socio-spatial difference, in alliance they tell a different critical story and indicate different everyday priorities. Together, they present the rural as heterotopic (Halfacree 2009; Neal and Walters 2007), with heterotopic places being "real places . . . which are something like countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault 1986: 24), especially active during relatively disjunctive "slices in time" (26), demonstrated by the life-raft reading of second home consumption, for example. (Indeed, Foucault (1986: 27) represents the "ship" as "heterotopia *par excellence*", keeping "dreams" alive as it floats across an often troubled sea.)

However, moving on from representing or even experiencing the rural as het-erotopia, as was concluded in the last section there is scope for political work to forge an alliance, possibly some kind of rural social movement (Woods 2003, 2005), that critically interrogates the urban everyday life of Lefebvre's neo-capitalism, positively engaging the "misanthropic city" (Thrift 2005: 140). Such a movement, almost inevitably "decentred, multi-leadered, amorphous and often contradictory" (Woods 2003: 324), would not be like the UK's Countryside Alli-ance, for example, with its conservative ideology of rural separatism, nor even centred on the "politics of the rural" (Woods 2003, 2005), although it necessarily also involves the latter to maintain the critical rural everyday texture. Instead, this movement can be orientated towards the politics of everyday life. In short, the everyday textures of the rural are to be deployed to turn and face the city and, ul-timately, take it back; perhaps realising Lefebvre's (1996) "right to the city", with its renewal of everyday life.

It is not easy to suggest practical terms for forging this rural social movement but relevant sensitising comes first from Miller (1987). He suggested that for con-sumption to work for dis-alienation purposes we must cultivate an appropriate cultural context. This is not guaranteed and we should not replace Romantic dis-paraging of the everyday with "an alternative Romanticism about modern con-sumption always acting to create inalienable, highly sociable communities" (Miller 1987: 206). Clearly, media representations can play a major role in devel-oping this context, just as they do in respect of representing rural consumption practices more generally, as noted earlier. There is a need both for "self-education" and for helping people become "thinkers of theorized possibility" (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxvii). This suggests a tactic of (re)iterating the readings of difference to be found within rural consumption practices so as to popularise, normalise and proselytise the movement's basis and facilitate its required coali-tion character. It also suggests the importance of especially valorising the life-raft style, rooted as it is more fully within our contemporary era of mobilities and not grounded within any, at best, redundant urban/rural dualism, whilst at the same time acknowledging that those consuming rurality may sequentially or even si-multaneously be involved with all three styles as they live their lives. A final sug-gested route for developing a sympathetic cultural context is through more fully acknowledging practical examples or lived attempts, with all their messiness, un-certainties, false starts and blind alleys, that chip away at "negating that which exists" (Holloway 2002: 23) so as to let alternatives come through (Gibson-Graham 2006). And here it is important to observe how satisfying rural consump-tion practices can be for those involved. *Contra* Elms (2001), this does not solely reflect joy at leaving behind the "multicultural city" – although this can be an element – but is indicative of the continued representational, affective and existen-tial critical vitality of the rural today.

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Notes

1   The metaphors also clearly come from the author's British background, and alternatives may be far better suited to other cultural contexts and readers are thus encouraged to develop these as appropriate.
2   Likewise, as one referee suggested, urban consumption may also act as a life-raft but this time providing a place where movement-within-stability (Sheller and Urry 2006), in contrast, may be attainable in response to a too stable rural.

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