

Discourses of rurality in a Norwegian context

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In this introductory article to the special issue of *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography*, we give a brief presentation of the tradition of rural studies in Norway. The bulk of Norwegian rural studies can be classified as rural development research where the main objective is to improve the conditions in rural areas. This is in line with the strong connection between social science and welfare state policies in the Nordic countries. Research carried out in a rural change tradition, which focuses more on differences in interests and values, identities, representations and imaginations, has been more limited, but is growing. We claim that a functionalist approach focusing on quantifiable socio-economic variables still has some degree of hegemony in the strong tradition of policy-related research in Norway. The contributions following this article, though, take on new theoretical perspectives with their discursive and social constructivist approach. The articles presented are focusing on rurality as a contested concept in the Norwegian context. They focus on how academics, politicians and ordinary people adopt different meanings of the concept, and how these different meanings have impact on policy formation, research agendas and everyday life.

Keywords: *discourse, rural imaginations, rural studies, rurality*

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Rurality discourses in a Norwegian context

In the modern Western world the creation of lifestyle and identity is, more than in the past, a product of individual choice. The place we choose to live is often part of the process of creating identity. Based on this understanding, knowledge on ideas about 'the rural' and 'the urban' plays a principal role in understanding rural-urban migration and the choices people make about where to live. Knowledge of the social construction of ideas about places, and the social consequences of these ideas, will provide valuable input for future regional and rural policy.

The rural perspective and rural values have played a significant role for both how Norwegians live their lives and perhaps more for how Norwegians *want* to live their lives. The countryside and (historically) the peasantry have had deep cultural meaning in the building of national identity. The rural way of living has been and still is more or less regarded as the hegemonic norm for 'quality of life' in Norwegian society, and this has had a severe impact on both regional/rural politics and research.

Norway, in common with Sweden and Finland, has vast areas with very low population densities. These areas have been the focus of Nordic regional policy in most of the post-war period and until relatively recently. Some researchers have described Nordic regional policy in the post-war period as 'periphery policy', which has no clear English equivalent (Mønnesland 1997). It is often more relevant to talk about 'rural policy' than 'regional policy', because of the dominant rural focus. 'Rurality' has had high prestige and rural areas have far more political power in Norway than might be expected, judging by the number of the rural population. Also in the academic arena, at least in Norway, the research field 'regional development' is regarded almost as synonymous with research on 'rural development'. Regional political discourses likewise have a rural profile, and for

almost the entire post-war period have been focused on rural problems (Berg & Lysgård 2002). Norwegian regional policy has had an overall aim to ensure equal living conditions for people in all parts of the country and to maintain the existing population pattern.

In this special issue of *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography*, articles focusing on rurality as a contested concept in the Norwegian context are presented. The articles focus on how politicians, academics and ordinary people adopt different meanings of the concept, and how these different meanings have impact on policy formation, research agendas and everyday life.

The tradition of rural studies in Norway

The research interest in rural issues dates back to the 1960s when the effects of the modernisation project after World War II became dramatic in many outskirts and for the primary industries. One of the most influential contributors to the debate and research interest was the social scientist Ottar Brox (1966), with his book *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge?* (What is happening in Northern-Norway?). He was critical of the modernisation project, which views the countryside as backward and the rural industries as inefficient. In contrast, he argued for the rationality in the way farm households combined different ways of making a living. The traditional pluriactivity in rural coastal areas was a rational mode of making the most out of the resources, resulting in welfare in rural households well above their urban counterparts.

Rural societies have often been approached along two dimensions, a vertical dimension that follows the economic value chain from the production of raw materials to the market, and a horizontal social value chain following the activities in the local communities (Almås 1999). Consequently, rural societies have been regarded as the primary

producing element in an economic value chain, or as the horizontal producer of sociality or social capital. As in other countries, Norwegian rural society has been largely equated with agrarian society, with a central focus on changes associated with farming and the farm family (Blekesaune 1991; 1996, Simonsen & Vatn 1992, Haugen & Brandth 1994). The declining competitiveness of conventional agriculture and the growing search for alternatives have led to a rethinking of the role of some rural areas as productive spaces.

Norwegian regional and rural studies have to a great extent been focused on studying people's reasons for choosing a place to live. Often, this kind of research ends in a description of public and private services available in remote areas and what measures have to be taken to satisfy the present and potential inhabitants and also the need for industrial development. This research has traditionally been quite functionalistic oriented, focusing on quantifiable socio-economic variables, such as the level of education, labour market and economic restructuring. These variables have been regarded as explanatory for migration from the rural countryside into towns and cities (Foss & Selstad 1997, Orderud 1998, Hansen & Selstad 1999, Teigen 1999). The rural has more or less been regarded as a fixed category defined on the basis of population density and mode of production (farming and fisheries) (Almås 1995).

E. Westholm (unpublished data)¹ describes two main directions in Nordic rural research: *rural development research*, where the main objective is to improve the conditions in rural areas, and *rural change studies*, which represent a more critical, distanced and analytical approach. Many of the rural studies in Norway can be classified as rural development research. The studies have traditionally been linked to the aim of improving the social and economic situation in rural industries and rural areas (Almås 1995, Aasbrenn 1996). The main focus has been on demographic changes, rural–urban migration, changes in the primary industries, access to services in rural areas, and social relations linked to family and kinship. The studies have produced insights into the effects of modernisation processes, and they have in part supplied policy-makers with premises for new paths to develop sustainable communities and societies. Research carried out within the 'rural change' tradition focuses more on differences in interests, values, life quality, and living conditions. These are aspects we find in the Anglo-Saxon restructuring rurality tradition (Marsden et al. 1990). From focusing on what can be observed, measured and mapped, rural research has been more inclusive with respect to immaterial and political themes such as constructions of rural images and identities and gender issues (Villa 2002, Wiborg 2003, Thorsen & Verstad 2004). This has given rural studies a more central position within societal and cultural studies in general.

Rural areas are experiencing highly differentiated economic, social and political changes in the context of late modernity. While some areas flourish, others are in danger of becoming depopulated. Understandings and representations of rurality itself are also continually being negotiated and renegotiated, personally and collectively. Individuals

and social groups seek to shape, mediate and perhaps resist the economic, social and political changes in rural areas. As individuals and social groups (differentiated especially by age, gender and occupation), they negotiate their own social identities as 'rural' dwellers. Rural transformation and rural policy-making might have differential effects on women and men, they might result in shifts in gender relations, and there might be gender-specific modes of realising change (Grimsrud 1999, Sørli 2002, Fosso 2004). Studies of changes in practices, households, social networks, employment systems, and recruitment to different sectors, paint a picture of contemporary rural development. Parallel to the population decline, ageing and masculinisation of rural communities, studies indicate that many rural communities change into heterogeneous, diverse and advanced societies, with new relationships, meanings and practices (Vartdal 1997, Husmo & Johnsen 2000, Berg 2002, Johnsen 2004, Brandth & Haugen 2005, Villa 2005).

Multidisciplinary rural studies have been carried out by researchers from different fields, such as sociology, geography, social anthropology, history, and political science. Contemporary research on rural communities draws on multiple theoretical perspectives. The fact that rural areas are influenced by local as well as national and global policies demands a critical and holistic perspective in order to capture what factors are important in rural development (Almås et al. 1993, Daugstad et al. 2004).

The border between town and countryside is more than blurred and is a matter of cultural construction (Lysegård 2004). Hompland (1984) describes the 'rurbanisation' processes in how the rural and the urban become more similar. The growth of information and communication technology, increased mobility and rural tourism provide new opportunities and challenges. Although people perceive and experience the countryside in different ways, many have a positive relationship with nature and the countryside. The growth of the middle class in the countryside, as well as in society as a whole, is contributing to this change (Granberg 1999). New ways of consuming the countryside, rural spaces and the landscape are emerging. People are building summer cottages, second homes, and are commuting or carrying out distance work from the countryside. Rural nature is becoming an aesthetic space for leisure consumption. In this respect, the multifunctional role of agriculture is one central theme within rural studies (Rønningen et al. 2005).

Although Norwegian (and Scandinavian) regional and rural research is relatively anglophile in both cultural and academic orientation, there are some characteristics that separate Norway (and Scandinavia) from the Anglo-Saxon research tradition (Simonsen 1999, Berg & Forsberg 2003, Simonsen & Öhman 2003). The Scandinavian tradition has, according to Simonsen (1999), a strong connection with the emergence of the Scandinavian welfare state model. Social science has had a significant role in delivering knowledge for welfare state policies, and social scientists have participated actively in producing applied research on local and regional planning, with more or less immediate utility in policy formation.

Emergence of new perspectives and approaches

Anglo-Saxon social research has experienced a 'cultural turn', in the sense that the interpretation of society and the subject as socially and culturally constructed categories has won terrain in the theoretical approaches and type of research questions raised. With a few exceptions, this has not been that much in evidence in the Scandinavian tradition until recently (Simonsen 1999). Rather, research issues such as regional development, the labour market, local and regional planning, social reproduction, and the organisation of everyday life have been dominant. By contrast, issues such as identities, representations and imaginations have been less visible (Simonsen & Öhman 2003). The strength of the Scandinavian tradition, compared to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, is that it has its starting point in people and not in representations. The spaces, the places and cultures of Scandinavian regional and rural studies are populated by men and women of flesh and blood practising everyday life (Simonsen 1999).

Although we can observe several differences concerning contextual issues between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian regional and rural studies, there is no doubt that the latter has benefited significantly from adopting and adjusting the conceptual and theoretical development of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. It is, though, important to be aware of the empirical differences between small rural communities in Norway or Sweden, for example, on the one hand, and the English countryside on the other, and concepts and theories should not be imported uncritically and without serious reflection on the contextual differences (Berg & Forsberg 2003).

The cultural turn in Anglo-Saxon rural studies has set new agendas, focusing on issues such as the meaning of representations and how they play an important part for how we imagine, create meaning in and interpret our being in society. Yet the Scandinavian tradition of regional and rural research undoubtedly has its qualities too, in its strong focus on people's everyday life. Thus, a combination of these perspectives should have great potential for future research agendas (Lysgård & Berg 2004).

Anglo-Saxon research claims that rurality may be understood as a social construction where the meaning of the term is floating, changeable and contextual (Mormont 1990, Halfacree 1993, 1995, Murdoch & Pratt 1993, Jones 1995, Pratt 1996, Cloke & Little 1997, Ilbery 1998, Valentine 2001). This kind of studies, where the aim is to understand how we come to perceive 'the rural' in a certain way, has been relatively rare in Norwegian rural research. There is little doubt that the *ideas* about what the rural represents have impact on the choices made by individuals as well as on the formation of rural policies. Problems and solutions in rural policies diverge according to different actors in different positions. An understanding of why and how these ideas are produced and reproduced and what this means in terms of formation and implementation of policy is important.

We claim that the Scandinavian and the Anglo-Saxon traditions exist alongside each other today, but that the functionalist approach still has some degree of hegemony in knowledge production, especially in the strong Norwegian tradition of policy-related applied research. The social constructivist approach is more limited, but rapidly growing (Berg & Lysgård 2004).

Analysed within the frames of a discursive approach, regional and rural research can be placed on a continuum from studying discourse as constituting for society at the one end, towards the study of already constituted discourses at the other end (Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, 29).

At one end of the continuum (discourse constituted), studies of rural communities are conducted without questioning the conceptualisation of the 'rural' or how the discourse on the rural has come into being. The rural is then treated as a fixed category and explanations are looked for in other categories, such as production forms or social inequality. This is then based on a common and underlying understanding about how rural society and processes are put together, and the focus is on how and why things are functioning and connected within this frame of understanding. At the other end of this continuum (discourse constitutes society), the whole system of beliefs about the rural is questioned. The interest is not pointed at substance, but on the representation of the substance. The rural then becomes a fluid and blurred concept, totally dependent upon context and how the concept is produced and reproduced through social action.

The collection of articles on rurality in this issue of *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift—Norwegian Journal of Geography* focuses on the negotiation of rurality in a Norwegian context. How do policy-makers, academics, and lay people perceive rural areas? We also focus on gendered aspects of how rurality is negotiated and experienced.

The studies presented have resulted from research projects questioning the concept of rurality and how different meanings applied to the concept have had impact on everyday rural life, rural-urban migration and the formation of rural policy. Related to the aforementioned continuum (Fig. 1), they can be seen to be taking a more or less dialectic position somewhere inside the continuum; on the one hand asking how and why the different conceptions of rurality have become constructed, and on the other hand asking what impacts these different conceptions have had on actions and decisions in everyday life, how rural policies are formulated and conducted, and even how they influence upon what we regard as valid research issues.

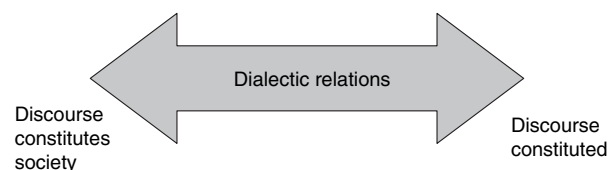


Fig. 1. Approaches to the study of discourse.

Studying the meaning of rural imaginations

The four articles on rurality in this special issue are based on two ongoing research projects financed by the Research Council of Norway.

The first project, 'Imaginations of rurality in Norwegian regional and rural policy', is being carried out by a research team at Agder Research in conjunction with Agder University College, chaired by Associate Professor Hans Kjetil Lysegård. This project is aimed at studying how imaginations about what are understood as 'problems' and 'solutions' in rural parts of Norway and in rural policy are constructed by different agents through different myths and imaginations (discourses) about the difference between the cities and the countryside, i.e. how different meanings and perceptions of the concept of rurality have influenced and changed Norwegian regional and rural policy. The overall research problem questions how imaginations of rurality are produced and reproduced in the tension between a lay or popular discourse on rural identity and lifestyle, a professional or political discourse on rights and wrongs in regional and rural policy, and an academic discourse on processes of rural change. How are these intertwined discourses influencing the different opinions of the formation and implementation of regional and rural policies?

The project is represented by two articles. The first, by Jørn Cruickshank, has the title '*Protest against centralisation in Norway: The evolution of the goal for maintaining a dispersed settlement pattern*'. The evolution of a rural identity is a study of the Norwegian rural policy analysed as a discursive field. The article raises the question of why rural policy has become a central part of Norwegian policy and especially why and how the value of a distributed settlement pattern has become so self-evident among the majority of the population. The evolution of rural policy is analysed as a hegemonic struggle between different meanings of the discourse on rurality and the author makes a close link between the production of meaning in rural policy and the evolution of rural identity as a legitimate and hegemonic aspect within Norwegian national identity. The author argues that this process, with its symbolic content, has placed rural issues as a relevant part of almost all areas of Norwegian domestic policy.

The second article is co-authored by Knut Hidle, Jørn Cruickshank and Liv Mari Nesje, with the title '*Market, commodity, resource, and strength: Logics of Norwegian rurality*'. It analyses how rural questions are treated in an academic arena and how the academic discourse on rurality has had impact on rural policy. The aim is to show how ideas about rurality in Norway are being shaped and changed through the use of taken-for-granted metaphors and concepts used by researchers and politicians dealing with rural issues. The authors argue that the traditional split between the rural and the non-rural is no longer hegemonic within politics and research, and that the conceptualisation of rural issues now follows a multitude of lines where the former categorical understanding has become dissolved. Through an analysis of programme notes from the Research Council of Norway, they conclude that the rural as a single category has become subordinated to the category of region, and

that the rural has shifted from singularity to a commodity as a result of globalisation and cultural complexity. They also conclude that this process is especially significant for the economic aspects of rurality and how these are treated in rural research and politics, while the rural as a cultural value now seems to have a more stable position.

The second project, 'Countryside between rurality and urbanity', is being carried out by a research team at the Centre for Rural Research in Trondheim, chaired by Professor Reidar Almås. The project aims to explore the social and cultural changes in the countryside and to study the consequences of the changes for daily life and people's images of the rural. The border between what is associated with rural and urban might be fluid and blurred; the rural economy is diversified and less dependent on the primary sector. Not only are rural areas increasingly heterogeneous, so too are the rural inhabitants. Some rural areas are 'periphery' while others experience growth and creativity. The rural inhabitants are a heterogeneous group with various backgrounds, interests and needs. Some people abandon rural life while others find the countryside an attractive place to settle down. The rural areas are facing new challenges, which require creativity and a will to change. Two of the questions asked are how do people understand the rural, and are there gender differences and life-phase differences in their view of the rural? How do individuals and social groups reflect on and act on contested representations of 'rurality' in the context of the ongoing changes?

The third article in this issue, '*Heading for the cities? Gender and lifestyle patterns in rural youths' residential preferences*' is written by Johan Fredrik Rye. He explores young rural people's residential preferences, and asks whether there are gender and lifestyle differences. By combining insights from qualitative migration research with a survey on young people in a mountain region in Norway, he finds discrepancies between previous findings and the present quantitative study. He argues that migration preferences should be treated empirically in terms of multiple life phases. Contrary to previous research, he finds that there are only small differences in terms of residential and migration preferences between gender and lifestyle groups. The main finding is that rural girls and boys have the same residential preferences. A large number want to live in a city when in their twenties, while later in life the vast majority want to settle down in less urban environments. The overall impression, dominated by similarities in the groups' residential preferences, also seems to apply to members of different lifestyle categories. The 'urban' mindset of some rural young people seems primarily to relate to a short period of their life; they eagerly want to explore the city for some years, but are nevertheless utterly rural in their residential preferences later in life.

The fourth article, '*Big Brother in rural societies: Youths' discourses on gossip*', is by Marit S. Haugen and Mariann Villa. This article examines the rural discourse among rural and urban youths and is based on essays and focus group interviews. The authors find that young people construct the 'rural' by contrasting it with the 'urban'. A general representation of rural life is the 'safe and good' and close relations, while city life is associated with risks, anonymity

and impersonal relations. What makes the countryside attractive is the feeling of safety, a stable community where everybody knows everybody. The dark side of the visibility is what the youths perceive as supervision, gossip and rumour. This challenges the idyllic narratives of the rural. The authors argue that the informal social control might jeopardise the freedom to act and live the way one likes. City life might be more attractive in the early risk-seeking phases of adult life. The article shows that there is a gendered dimension in young people's rural discourse. Young rural women experience the countryside as more controlling and constraining than young men do.

Note

- ¹ 'Nordic rural research at another crossroad. Rural exodus reveals divergent trends'. Paper presented at the XVIII Congress of Rural Sociology, 24–28 August 1999, Lund, Sweden.

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