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What is This?
Rural geography: multifunctional rural geographies – reactionary or radical?

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1 Introduction

Recent developments, empirical and theoretical, call into question the geographic categories and concentrations of rural geography. This review is written in a world in which, for the first time ever, the urban population exceeds the rural. Davis (2004) emphasizes that this watershed marks not a mere proportional shift in population between static categories, but the continuation of global dynamics in which the rural and urban are mutually constituted by processes that span both. Murdoch and Lowe (2003) make a similar point from a Latourian perspective, showing that attempts to draw and maintain sharp boundaries between the rural and urban actually accelerate processes that transgress those boundaries and link the two. Yet, while such processes are at work around the world (see Zimmerer, 2000; Robbins, 2001), ‘rural’ geography as such continues to focus overwhelmingly on the rural areas of industrialized Anglophone countries, leaving investigation of most of the rural world to scholars of development, postcolonialism, natural resource industries, and other areas of the discipline (Adriansen and Madsen, 2004). The few efforts to apply theory from ‘rural geography’ directly to rural areas and processes in the global South (e.g., Wilson and Rigg, 2003) are all the more notable precisely because they are so rare. ‘Rurality’ thus remains at least as much a product of divisions of labor within the academy and social contexts as a category defined by particular sectoral mixes, land uses, densities, or other empirical descriptors.

Progress continues on several topics that have become central to rural geography in recent years. Thus, new work examines insights produced by the cultural turn in rural geography (e.g., Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004a; Phillips, 2004), exclusions in rural societies (e.g., Parr et al., 2004; Woods, 2004), alternative food networks (e.g., Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004b), and issues of governance in rural areas, particularly with respect to the role of communities (e.g., Edwards and Woods, 2004; Seymour, 2004). The empirical and analytical validity of ‘postproductivism’ continues to be a major topic of debate, as discussed later in this review. Recent overviews and examples of work on all of these themes can be found in Beesley et al. (2003) and Holloway and Kneafsey (2004a).

This review will focus on a single important theme in recent rural geography, that of ‘multifunctionality’ in rural landscapes. Multifunctionality, the idea that rural
landscapes typically produce a range of commodity and noncommodity use values simultaneously and that policy ought to recognize and protect that entire range of values, has received substantial attention in the field in recent years. It figures in the debates concerning governance and postproductivism referenced above, for example (see Roche, 2003). It has also been widely debated in cognate fields, including rural sociology, agricultural economics, and environmental economics. Recent work has examined multifunctionality’s robustness, coherence, and geographic applicability, while also proposing competing theoretical framings of it. The review also suggests potential connections to current work on the neoliberalization of environmental governance and environmental indicators (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Liverman, 2004). Situating research on multifunctionality in this way begins to bridge the surprising gap, identified by Milbourne (2003), between the literatures on social nature and on rural geographies. It also responds to Little’s (2001: 98) call in these pages to link ‘specific policy areas [to] broader trends and processes in the relationship between the economy, the state, policy, and society.’ Finally, areas for future research are identified.

II From postproductivism to multifunctionality
Multifunctionality seems poised to succeed postproductivism as a framework within which to interrogate contemporary rural dynamics. Productivist rural landscapes supposedly centered on high-intensity production of a relatively small range of primary commodities. Increasingly, though, demands on rural areas extend beyond such production and include demands for the provision of ecosystem services, amenities and aesthetics, and preservation of cultural landscapes. Many rural geographers have characterized these trends as a shift towards postproductivism, a framing that has been criticized on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Critics have pointed out, for instance, that rural commodity production remains substantial, that the thesis fits countries outside western Europe poorly if at all, and that the areal differentiation at multiple scales presumably central to any geographic inquiry would seem to be glossed over in a theory framed in terms of an epochal shift (Wilson, 2001; Evans et al., 2002; Goodman, 2004; Wilson, 2004). In response, a number of authors have begun to interpret the trends identified in work on postproductivism as a shift towards multifunctionality in rural areas instead (e.g., Wilson, 2001; Lowe et al., 2002; Holmes, 2002; Wilson and Rigg, 2003; Wilson, 2004). As Potter and Burney (2002: 35) summarize it, ‘agriculture is multifunctional, producing not only food but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and contributing to the viability of rural areas’. This framing has several advantages over ‘postproductivism’: it offers a positive characterization rather than a negative one; it recognizes the continued importance of commodity production in rural areas; and it is inherently sensitive to spatial and social differentiation, the fact that different rural areas clearly can and will produce very different, even unique, combinations of use values.

A genealogy of ‘multifunctionality’ makes clear that it is a product of neoliberal reforms. The term emerged out of the 1994 Uruguay Round Agreement on Agricultural Trade, which integrated agriculture into the ongoing liberalization of international trade (Losch, 2004). Member countries committed to reducing agricultural subsidies, but those deemed ‘non-trade-distorting’, or not linked to commodity production, were exempt, protected in a new ‘green box’ safe from liberalization (Potter and Burney, 2002; Hollander, 2004; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004). The EU and a few allied countries first advanced the notion of multifunctionality in this context, arguing that their payments to rural producers were not direct subsidies of commodity production, but rather payments
for the range of noncommodity goods and services jointly produced in the process of commodity production, or support for broader national goals such as food security and rural development. The concept thus emphasizes the positive externalities produced by agriculture rather than the negative ones (Hollander, 2004), and many would say it applies to other natural resource industries as well. Some have argued that these positive externalities are disproportionately produced by more marginal producers – for example, that farms that are less intensive and more diverse are more likely to provide wildlife habitat and valued cultural landscapes. Since such producers are precisely the ones most threatened by trade liberalization, policies to protect multifunctionality often disproportionately enroll economically marginal producers. This has been done in part by making payments more area-based, for example (Bills and Gross, 2005). Still, payments are not entirely decoupled from commodity production, the usual standard for inclusion in the ‘green box’ (Potter and Burney, 2002).

Multifunctionality has been elaborated in the context of policy struggles over ongoing liberalization. It has become a major issue in reforms of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy, in OECD policy, and in recent WTO negotiations, with coalitions of countries forming to support or oppose it. It is thus not surprising that debates about multifunctionality and its uses have proliferated rapidly in rural geography.

III Other geographies of multifunctionality
Notions of multifunctionality are rooted in discussions about agriculture in western Europe. Many advocates of multifunctionality assert a version of geographic exceptionalism, arguing that agriculture’s long history in much of rural Europe has produced distinctive cultural landscapes, species adapted to niches in those landscapes, wildlife dependent upon habitat and corridors provided by traditional agriculture, and a central role for agriculture in the provision of ecosystem services (e.g., Huylenbroeck and Durand, 2003; Yliskylä- Peuralahti, 2003; see also Potter and Barnes, 2002; Hollander, 2004; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004). Disruption of those landscapes would thus threaten everything from biodiversity to territorialized identities. This is an exceptionalist argument – one claiming a single deviation from a rule – rather than merely one about every place being unique, because its point is precisely to claim an exception from an otherwise global set of rules: if all rural landscapes were multifunctional, then multifunctionality would not be grounds for exceptions in a global trade regime (see Hollander, 2004).

Recent research has challenged this exceptionalism, asking whether, and how, multifunctionality might apply to other rural geographies, and what the implications might be for theory and policy. Several examples are illustrative. The core ideas of multifunctionality are circulating in the United States, often under the label ‘working landscapes’ (e.g., Daniels, 2000; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004; Bills and Gross, 2005; see also Hall et al., 2004: 221). Variants such as ‘working forest,’ and ‘working waterfront’ are also common, signaling that many rural areas there are dominated by nonagricultural primary industries. Dobbs and Pretty (2004: 225) argue that ‘[t]he basic concept of multifunctionality is the same on both sides of the Atlantic, although it manifests itself differently’. One critical difference they note is that different ideas of nature shape how multifunctionality is operationalized in policy. Following many others (Williams, 1980; Cronon, 1995), they argue that Americans tend to focus on ‘wilderness’ when they think of environmental protection, whereas Europeans are more prepared to see ‘nature’ in the managed countryside – a difference that ultimately affects which policy measures trade negotiators admit into the green box. Still, Dobbs and Pretty (2004: 233) contend that recent US farm policy is moving in the direction of multifunctionality, arguing that the Conservation
Security Program, created in 2002, ‘constitutes an attempt to foster multifunctionality’. The critical difference between it and the earlier Conservation Reserve Program is that the latter paid farmers to take land out of production for environmental reasons, while the new program pays them for greater environmental protection on lands kept in production, while also adopting ‘whole-farm’ approaches. A shift from ‘postproductivist’ to ‘multifunctional’ policies could scarcely be clearer.

Yet, the logic of enacting rural multifunctionality through such centralized agricultural policies has been questioned. First, such policies often reinscribe the tautology that since farms, particularly small farms, constitute the rural, policies to help such farms must be policies to help rural areas (Potter and Burney, 2002). Such flawed reasoning is documented in Lowe et al.’s (2002) comparative examination of agri-environment schemes in the UK and France, for instance. Farms and the rural are not always equivalent, of course, particularly outside Europe (Wilson, 2001; Holmes, 2002; Marsden et al., 2003; Stedman et al., 2004). Other natural resource industries, even if still predominantly rural, bring very different combinations of positive and negative externalities, with different implications for broader rural development and multifunctionality (see Stedman et al., 2004; Bridge, 2004). Secondly, even in rural areas dominated by agriculture, farms may not be the best way to achieve many of the stated goals of multifunctionality. In fact, proponents of liberalization contend that eliminating agricultural subsidies and decreasing the number of marginal farms would be environmentally beneficial (Potter and Burney, 2002). Indeed, marginal producers are those most likely to enroll in voluntary conservation schemes, limiting the extent to which such measures actually mitigate the worst impacts of intensive commodity production (Wilson, 2004; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004).

Bills and Gross (2005) take a more bottom-up approach, comparing stakeholder attitudes towards multifunctional policies in agricultural areas in the UK and New York state. They conclude that substantively ‘multifunctional’ policies are widespread in the USA, but much less coordinated than in Europe, often occurring at state or local levels instead of through national programs. Similarly, they note that land regulation in the USA is far more decentralized, meaning that housing development and fragmentation are often the major threats to rural landscapes. Many efforts in the contemporary USA to attach prices to the positive externalities produced by primary production are motivated precisely by the desire to bring the latter’s market value up to the point where it can compete with real-estate development. Finally, Bills and Gross found (echoing Marsden et al., 2003) that rural residents in the UK articulated a clear, positive vision of an intentionally managed countryside, while those in New York emphasized the prevention of negative externalities and outcomes but were uncomfortable with advancing a more positive vision.

Hollander (2004) argues that multifunctionality’s defining elements are all present in sugar cane production in Florida’s Everglades. It is a counterintuitive argument: although the regional industry is certainly under pressure from trade liberalization and rising environmental demands, it is also only decades old and the epitome of industrial monocropping. Labor is exploited. The Everglades ecosystem was massively transformed to allow sugar production, and it is widely assumed that ‘agriculture [is] the main ecological problem in south Florida’ (2004: 307). It would thus seem to be precisely the standard against which a ‘European model’ of multifunctional agriculture is defined (see Huylenbroeck and Durand, 2003). Yet Hollander combines ecological and ethnographic data to show that sugar plantations have taken on important ecological functions and that industrial agriculture is thoroughly interwoven with local livelihoods and cultures.
Recent research has also reinterpreted changes in rural Australia in terms of multifunctionality, often in direct engagement with ‘postproductivist’ framings. Holmes (2002: 381), for instance, argues that ‘multifunctional rural occupation’ is a far more useful and accurate characterization of changes in contemporary Australian rangelands than those suggested by theories of a postproductivist agricultural transition. Wilson (2004), in contrast, implies that postproductivism and multifunctionality are essentially synonymous, and interprets Australia’s much-discussed Landcare program in terms of both. He concludes that it is ‘the most innovative rural programme in advanced economies’, largely because of its success in building multi-stakeholder coalitions and changing attitudes, both of which, Wilson argues, are preconditions of genuinely multifunctional rural policies and practices in the future (2004: 461).

Hollander (2004) and Losch (2004) both raise larger-scale questions regarding multifunctionality, asking what it might mean for challenges to neoliberalization and for countries in the global South. Countries in this obviously heterogeneous and problematic category have for the most part opposed multifunctionality defined in terms of exceptionalist understandings of European agriculture, which can only work against them. This version of multifunctionality is indefensible: much of the world has agricultural landscapes as old as, or older than, Europe’s, while the imbrication of production with social and environmental considerations is universal (Potter and Barnes, 2002; Hollander, 2004). Pretending otherwise allows industrialized countries to continue subsidizing their own agricultural producers while espousing free trade and imposing liberalization on other countries (Losch, 2004; see also, for example, Huylenbroeck and Durand, 2003). Such tensions were central to failure of the 2003 WTO meeting in Cancun. Yet Losch and Hollander both point out that the core ideas of multifunctionality, centered on geographic distinctiveness and the inseparability of economic, social, and environmental considerations, could provide developing countries a rationale for challenging the strictures of standardized neoliberal policies and reclaiming as legitimate nontrade goals such as rural development and food security. In other words, the ‘green box’ could merge with a new ‘development box’.

**IV Preferences, indicators, and environmental science**

The fact that multifunctionality is being applied to such a wide range of locations and goals indicates the promise of the concept, but it also raises questions regarding how to evaluate proliferating claims regarding landscape functions. The institutionalization of multifunctionality demands metrics. Strong claims regarding net positive environmental externalities, for example, must be supported. Since broad ecosystem functions, very difficult to disaggregate, are often at issue, indicators must be selected and measured. Also, since payments are being made for them, it seems inescapable that they must also be weighted and ranked. All of this points in the direction of current work on preferences and indicators in the areas of sustainability and environmental science.

Arguments regarding multifunctionality and postproductivism routinely assert that the public now demands greater environmental services, amenities, food safety, and other public goods from rural areas in exchange for payments and protections. Hall et al. (2004) point out, however, that relatively little is known about how most people actually weight or rank these often conflicting demands, although the answers could point towards very different policies and land uses (see also Potter and Burney, 2002). They review a range of surveys from the UK and USA that demonstrate the enormous range of use values the public desires from rural areas and evaluate methodologies for rendering these commensurable, advocating multicriteria analysis in particular. They then argue
that, even if we did know what people want, much work is needed to show that particular policies or payments actually produce the desired noncommodity goods. Demonstrating such direct linkages is exceedingly difficult, but critical in arguing that particular policies are non- or minimally trade distorting (Potter and Burney, 2002; see also Yliskylä-Peuralahti, 2003) — hence the demand for indicators.

The demand for, and use of, indicators of environmental status, change, and quality offers a critical point of linkage between the economic and social discussions of multifunctionality emphasized thus far, and environmental science. In most cases, demonstrating, evaluating, and valuing the environmental functions of landscapes requires the expert knowledge of environmental scientists. Such encounters, demanding the articulation of what are commonly held to be positive (scientific knowledge) and normative (public valuation) frameworks, are fraught for scientists eager to inform policy but hesitant to help assign monetary values to species or ecosystem services. Yet their very inescapability seems to be spurring the growth of a more reflexive and politically engaged ‘sustainability science’ (see Forsyth, 2003; Liverman, 2004; O’Riordan, 2004). Research on relationships between land use and ‘sustainability indicators’ that fits this description is burgeoning (see Haberl et al., 2004). Yet there are tensions inherent in the fact that indicators simplify, standardize, and quantify complex information and relationships (Yliskylä-Peuralahti, 2003; Haberl et al., 2004), when much of the point of multifunctionality is to emphasize the heterogeneous and synergistic aspects of landscapes. Robertson (2004: 367), for instance, lays out the difficulties in using ‘easily measured site characteristics (e.g., plant diversity or water levels) to make inferences about harder-to-measure “wetland functions” (e.g., habitat provision or peak flow attenuation)’. Still, the reliance of states and capital on such expert knowledge gives environmental scientists significant power in articulations among these domains: once the door is opened to the internalization of ecological data, farmers and states lose some measure of control (Robertson, 2004).

V Theorizing multifunctionality

That land use is necessarily multifunctional is hardly a novel idea; the challenge is rather to theorize the emergence and significance of contemporary articulations of ‘multifunctionality’. Space permits only a very brief review of recent attempts to do so, but several clear themes and alternatives emerge, along with connections to other recent work in geography. Most authors seem to accept that articulations of and struggles over multifunctionality all turn on the rapid revaluation of rural natures in the context of trade liberalization during the neoliberal era. Losch (2004: 339), for instance, is explicit that his goal is to put debates about multifunctionality ‘back into the context of an international economy that has been profoundly restructured’. What stone walls in Scotland and food security in developing countries, to use the examples Hollander (2004) gives in questioning the concept’s coherence, have in common is precisely the fact that both are threatened by the liberalization of agriculture. There is substantial debate, however, over how multifunctionality relates to the neoliberalization of rural governance.

Multifunctionality as it currently operates in policy could easily be read as part of the ongoing neoliberalization of nature, another route by which ‘invaluable and complex ecosystems are reduced to commodities through pricing’ (Heynen and Robbins, 2005: 2; see also McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). As Liverman (2004: 734) summarizes the neoliberal consensus with respect to environmental governance: ‘Across a wide range of countries and institutions there is now widespread acceptance that the way to protect the environment is to price nature’s services, assign property rights, and trade these services within a global market.’
Multifunctionality’s insistence that the non-commodity goods jointly produced by natural resource industries ought to be disaggregated, priced, and paid for surely falls within this consensus. So, for that matter, does the faith that such valuation, pricing, and partial or complete commodification is possible and desirable. As much recent work in geography has demonstrated, though, the ‘commodification’ of nature’s use values is a highly complex, arbitrary, and unstable process (Harvey, 1996; Castree, 2003; Bakker, 2004).\(^3\)

Protecting public goods via such strategies would seem at best an accommodation with neoliberal hegemony, minimizing damages without inquiring into the structural causes of environmental degradation (Yliskylä-Peuralahti, 2003). Indeed, many elements of multifunctionality schemes – disavowal of protectionism per se, devolution of governance, increased use of public-private partnerships, voluntary participation in conservation programs, a shift from prohibiting pollution to paying property owners for providing ecosystem services, the growing use of audits to ensure that farmers are delivering those services, and so on (see Huylenbroeck and Durand, 2003; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004; Wilson, 2004) – seem entirely consistent with what Tickell and Peck (2003) characterize as ‘roll-out’ forms of neoliberalism. Such an interpretation seems implicit in Lowe et al.’s (2002: 1) characterization of multifunctionality as a ‘third way’. When such measures are used to reinscribe ontological differences and perpetuate inequalities between the global North and South, ‘multifunctionality’ can begin to appear downright reactionary.

Nearly the opposite interpretation is offered by Hollander, who sees multifunctionality, at least ‘strong’ versions of it, as an explicit form of resistance against neoliberalism. Trade liberalization attempts to disembend markets from their environmental and social contexts; multifunctionality insists that production is embedded in and inseparable from a ‘more than human world’ (Polanyi 1944; Whatmore, 2002; Murdoch and Lowe, 2003). While the WTO and other organizations cling to the fiction that social and environmental goals can be pursued through measures that have no effect on the production or trade of commodities (see Potter and Burney, 2002), advocates of multifunctionality attempt to ‘integrate environmental and productive objectives into a single management plan’ (Lowe et al., 2002: 14) and insist that public goods are decided politically, not by markets (Losch, 2004). Those resisting liberalization can hardly be faulted for strategically couching the other values they seek to defend in monetary terms, the nearly universal language of value in our society (Harvey, 1996). This is at least a plausible interpretation of the argument that payments to farmers ‘are not subsidies, after all, but payment for services which Europe’s farmers have so far provided free of charge’ (quoted in Potter and Burns, 2002: 42).

Somewhat of a middle road between these extremes is charted by several authors who argue or imply that multifunctionality is essentially ecological modernization in the countryside (Wilson, 2001; Evans et al., 2002; Marsden et al., 2003; Marsden, 2004). Ecological modernization theory has been applied mainly to manufacturing industries, but its core elements are present in multifunctionality: internalization of externalities, increased efficiencies, a clear role for the state, consideration of the rights of future generations, and a high degree of reflexivity among rural actors. Finally, a few authors offer very different theoretical framings inspired by Foucault or Lefebvre, suggesting that some of the developments reviewed here can be understood as new forms of rural governmentality (Higgins and Lockie, 2002; Wilson, 2004), biopower (Robertson, 2004), or the production of space (Yliskylä-Peuralahti, 2003).

VI Research directions

At least three areas in urgent need of geographically specific research emerge from this
review. First, more data are needed on public preferences regarding rural areas. As Bills and Gross (2005) note, much of the literature on multifunctionality operates at a highly abstract level. Secondly, more information is needed on the physical consequences of land moving out of primary production (Potter and Burney, 2002): do invasive species thrive and endemic ones decline, as advocates of multifunctionality assert? Do abandoned fields become forests or suburbs, and what are the consequences for water quality or carbon sequestration? Thirdly, many discussions of multifunctionality seem to assume that rural producers will choose whatever is economically rational or ecologically sustainable. Yet this may not be so (see, for example, Marsden et al., 2003). If Morris and Evans (2004) are correct that the cultural turn in rural geography has largely bypassed research on agricultural producers specifically, we are in urgent need of ethnographies of multifunctional rural areas, along the lines of Bohnet et al. (2003), in order for ‘strong’ versions of multifunctionality to become realities.

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Notes

1. The ‘Friends of Multifunctionality’ (the EU, Norway, Switzerland, Japan, and South Korea) have continued to advance stronger and more codified versions of multifunctionality in recent WTO negotiations, insisting that they belong in the green box (Goodman, 2004). The United States, rhetorically committed to free trade, has criticized the concept while continuing to subsidize its own agricultural producers. The strongest critics of multifunctionality, who charge that it is mere protectionism, have banded together as the Cairns Group, 17 agricultural exporting countries mostly in the global South (Potter and Burney, 2002; Lowe et al., 2002; Huylensbroeck and Durand, 2003; Losch, 2004; Hollander, 2004; Dobbs and Pretty, 2004).

2. Indeed, Daniels (2000: 262) notes that ‘as many as a million acres of farmland are converted to nonfarm uses each year’ in the United States, meaning that Wilson and Rigg’s assertion (2003: 683) that, in industrialized countries, ‘[d]uring the current post-productivist era, the main threats to the countryside are generally perceived to be agriculture itself rather than urban or industrial development’ is certainly an overgeneralization.

3. Nor are all of the elements of commodification (per Castree, 2003) present in multifunctionality schemes: jointly produced noncommodity goods are privatized, individuated, abstracted, and valued, but not alienated or displaced.

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