

COMMENTARY

The Continuing Significance of Rural Landscapes in the Urban Century

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I write these reflections from the British Institute of Eastern Africa (BIEA) in Nairobi, Kenya, after a symposium that examined the ways landscapes in the region are being reconfigured. My location seems relevant as the last time I was at a symposium at the BIEA was in 1998, working with colleagues investigating ‘islands of intensive agriculture’ in the Rift Valley. Presenting work from geographical, archaeological, historical and anthropological perspectives, we explored how and why historic landscapes of intensive agriculture had been produced, and the processes through which they were, or were not, maintained. The studies of Konso terraces in Ethiopia, Marakwet irrigation in Kenya, Engaruka terraces and Iraqw intensive agriculture in Tanzania, demonstrated the importance of understanding the connections between the past and the present; the significance of historic wars, epidemics and migrations to landscape patterns; the connections between environmental parameters and social, cultural and political relations at different scales; the role of inter-regional and urban–rural connections; the nature and role of landesque capital; and the significance of these ‘islands of intensive agriculture’ for increasingly pressing questions of food security and sustainable development (Widgren and Sutton, 2004).

The themes examined more than ten years ago have become more, not less relevant as rural landscapes in much of the Global South are undergoing processes of rapid and profound transformation. In Eastern Africa, new tarmac roads are being built across vast rural territories, connecting people and rural resources to urban areas and to markets (Copeland and Kvelland, 2013). New oil discoveries are being investigated, and new oil pipelines constructed (Anderson and Browne, 2011). New hydroelectric power dams are being built and new billion-dollar electricity grid links are planned (Turton, 2011; Manson, 2014). Such developments are clearly highly desirable for many: improved domestic energy supply can provide schools, hospitals, homes and businesses with electricity; the all-too-frequent power cuts should become a thing of the past; and revenues from energy exports should provide much-needed income for national treasuries. But, needless to say, there are also multiple risks attached: the

dams are transforming the landscapes and livelihoods of people all around them. In Ethiopia, the Gibe III Dam means that flood retreat agriculture, long-practiced by peoples in the Lower Omo Valley, is becoming impossible, and grazing areas and wildlife reserves are being replaced by large-scale commercial sugar cane plantations (Turton, 2011; Fratkin, 2014). And the changes are crossing borders: it is predicted, conservatively, that the level of Lake Turkana, Kenya’s largest lake, may drop more than 20m as a consequence of the developments, potentially resulting in two smaller lakes (Avery, 2013). The biodiversity of the lake, the Lower Omo Valley, and the surrounding regions, is likely to be devastated.

Other examples could be added to illustrate the scale of changes to landscapes that are under way. Arguably, after years of structural adjustment and reduced funding for infrastructure, a new era of development has begun, supported by new donors, or through new processes: ‘investment, trade and speculation’ (Sullivan, 2013: 201). ‘Land grabs’ are a further reflection of the new frontier of capitalism in rural landscapes (Cotula, 2013), as is ‘green grabbing’, the ‘commodification of nature, and its appropriation ... in the name of “sustainability”, “conservation” or “green” values’ (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012: 238). Forest and wildlife conservation projects are changing how landscapes are used and by whom. In short, rural landscapes are not just undergoing rapid processes of change: they have become the battleground between competing uses—food production, fuel production or extraction, conservation (to name but a few)—and between different and competing would-be users. Developing strong empirical understandings of who shapes these new landscapes, of who benefits, and of the new society–environment relations they encompass, is an urgent and political task.

Despite the dramatic processes that are unfolding in rural landscapes, these landscapes are still often imagined as dull, conservative ‘backwaters’: ‘country cousins’ to their dynamic and sophisticated urban contemporaries. In geography at least, there is a new ‘buzz’ about ‘the urban’ and urban landscapes (Jones and Corbridge, 2010). Heynen, and others, describe the current moment as the ‘urban century’ (Heynen, 2013: 1) and Amin summarizes: ‘With the majority of the world’s population living in cities, it seems fair to argue that the human and the urban condition have become one and the same’ (Amin, 2012: 63). Cities have long been seen as nodes

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of economic growth, as sources of creativity and cultural innovation and as foci of political agency. In studies of the Global South, new attention has been paid to the urban in attempts to redress what has been viewed as a 'rural "Third World" trap' (Heynen, 2013: 1), and recognise the large numbers of poor living in cities (Jones and Corbridge, 2010). Significant and rich theoretical innovations have also recently been made to theories of landscape in urban settings, stressing the ways in which the human and non-human (including matter, nature and technology) are co-produced (see Amin, 2012; Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006; Heynen, 2013), and arguing that urban political ecology can be a particularly fruitful field of research (Heynen, 2013).

It may seem strange to invoke a discussion of urban landscapes at the inception of a new journal focusing on rural landscapes, but I do so for two reasons. Firstly, because, although the research on the urban is imperative, it is often accompanied by an exaggeration of the 'death' of the rural. As Potts explained: 'for much of sub-Saharan Africa, the foreseeable future will remain predominantly rural' (Potts, 2012: 15). As such, there is still a role for research that examines the connections between societies, environments and cultures, which does not see the rural inhabitants merely as a homogeneous group of hapless 'village' 'peasants' who resist innovation and have little agency (Collier, 2008), and that does not see rural landscapes as a residual hinterland, a less important category, in contrast to the 'real' business taking place in the urban. Secondly, the reference to urban research makes the point that the scholarship on urban landscapes has developed a theoretical sophistication which could revivify research on rural landscapes, especially if these theories could be drawn upon without losing the valuable empirical depth that has always characterised rural landscape research.

Studies in rural and urban settings have long contended that landscapes are hybrid phenomena: nature and culture, material and social (Cline-Cole, 2000; Mitchell, 1994). But old habits die hard. There is an enduring and problematic suspicion that rural landscapes are more 'natural'—the preserve of ecologists, and that rural culture is more 'traditional' and should be the preserve of anthropologists. Urban landscapes, by contrast (and notwithstanding the recent research on cities' hybrid nature), are often considered more cultural—and that culture is more vibrant and changing (the preserve of postcolonial cultural studies, perhaps). However, the simple dichotomies associating rural–urban with nature–culture (and their attendant meanings and values) have always been a myth, used to uphold a particular social order (Williams, 1975). Jones and Corbridge (2010) remind us also that the urban–rural divide is far from clear-cut. There is, and long has been, country in the city, and rural landscapes are significantly shaped by urban actors (such as policymakers, investors or 'mobile phone' herders who coordinate rural activities from an office in the city, to name only a few kinds of urban–rural connections). Research into rural landscapes has an exciting agenda before it: to come to grips with

the rapidly changing landscapes, empirically and theoretically; to draw on insights from different disciplines, rather than associating different settings with particular disciplines; and to understand the ways in which those rural landscapes are produced through processes operating at different scales—local, national, international—and through multiple and blurring connections between rural and urban contexts.

Finally, much recent talk of rural landscapes is also characterised by notions of crisis and catastrophe that invoke fear in the face of uncertain futures (Swyngedouw, 2010). Dominant discourses suggest that society–environment relations are about to be transformed beyond recognition by climate change, population growth, urbanization, frontier capitalism and associated environmental degradation, competition and conflict. Teasing out what is likely to happen from what is scare-mongering and hyperbole is a vital research task, as is understanding the present changes in the context of dramatic social and environmental changes that have taken place before. At least where sub-Saharan Africa is concerned, all-too-often there is still the assumption that the current challenges are disturbing a baseline that has been stable and static for centuries. Improved understanding of historic environmental changes, ecosystem dynamics, disease patterns, migrations and institutional structures, and the ways these have unfolded and have been responded to, can provide valuable platforms for improved engagement with contemporary processes (Widgren and Sutton, 2004).

I have written these comments largely from the perspective of a researcher in geography examining rural landscapes in sub-Saharan Africa. In this context there are multiple questions to answer: will rural landscapes come to resemble the ways they have often been imagined—spaces almost 'empty' of people (now used for large-scale food production, leisure or wildlife conservation) that serve the economic and cultural needs of cities? Are scholars who take seriously livelihoods in rural landscapes merely 'romantics' who see 'peasants [as] like pandas ... to be preserved' (Collier, 2008: 71)? A journal that promotes more politically-engaged, historically-informed understandings, that engages with the detail of variation in landscapes across space and time, that is alive to urban–rural and other connections, can bring much-needed nuance and depth to understanding rural landscapes that are in processes of great transformation, in Africa, but also in Europe, Asia, Americas and beyond.

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