

From crisis to sustainability: The politics of knowledge production on rural Europe

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Abstract

What does it mean to study places in ‘crisis’ and how does that affect the research done on the ‘rural’? To be considered to be in crisis is not really new as any literature review of rural studies indicates. And yet, we live now in a new context, with new challenges for ‘rural’ research, in particular that of sustainability. Sustainability is the new policy focus and is increasingly reflected in research on rural Europe. Although scholars are beginning to theorize on what is sustainable in and for rural areas, our intention is to take this further. We theorize on what the focus on crisis and, increasingly on sustainability, means for the research we do and the knowledge we produce on rural Europe. Our aim is to bring attention to the politics of past and present knowledge production on the rural to be able to imagine just and sustainable futures. In an analysis of literature primarily from Sweden and the UK, we argue that two construals, that of a rural crisis and that of rural–urban polarization, have set the tone for rural studies and may have overshadowed a more plural approach. We outline what might be needed from rural research to meet future challenges and what the notion of sustainability, with its emphasis on the entanglements of the social, economic and environmental, might mean for the future of rural research.

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KEYWORDS

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European rural areas, and Nordic in particular, have often been depicted as being in a state of crisis. Rural research has brought to our attention a range of crisis-related issues, such as depopulation; marginalization by central governments; or exploitation of land, waters and resources with little returns to the places themselves. To be considered to be in crisis is not new as any literature review of rural studies indicates. It has been applied in a range of topics, including Dutch rural society (de Haan, 1993), British agriculture (Drummond et al., 2000), farm succession (Fischer & Burton, 2014), territorial dynamics in rural Spain during the economic crisis (Sanchez-Zamora et al., 2014), Swedish rural areas (Emanuelsson et al., 2008) and the impact of the Greek financial crisis on rural Greece (Papadopoulos et al., 2019). It was in fact the call for the Nordic Studies Conference in 2016¹ for which this article was originally written and recurs in the Rural Sociology conference in 2023.² And yet, we live now in a new context, with new challenges for ‘rural’ research, in particular that of sustainability.³

Sustainability is the new doxa and policy-speak, especially in relation to rural development, and is increasingly reflected in research on rural Europe. At its core, as laid down in the 2030 *Agenda*, sustainability demands an integrative approach where the environment, economy and society need to be addressed in one frame. Critical approaches in a range of disciplines have made it clear that for us to be able to meet current societal and environmental challenges, we can no longer address societal/economic and environmental relations separately⁴ and that the new policy focus on sustainability calls for transcending geographic and disciplinary boundaries. Further, research (e.g. Askins, 2009; Pigg, 1996) has shown how translocal relations and discourses (i.e. scalar connections) have an important role in constructing rural place, policy measures and notions of sustainability (Florin, 2023), even when these connections are not immediately obvious. They can manifest themselves in ways that are discordant, not easily visible and yet can have very material effects for rural areas and everyday lives (Arora-Jonsson, 2009). This is particularly visible in relation to climate change and the environment that go beyond national or rural boundaries, such as water catchment areas or environmental catastrophes, neither of which respect neat administrative boundaries.

Although there have been various strands of rural research examining a range of issues, the underlying ‘tone’ (Derrida, 1993) of a rural in crisis has and continues to pervade much rural research. More recently, this is being overlaid by the theme of sustainability, in response to what is seen as the larger climate and societal crisis. Even in policy discourse, the rural is presented as the solution to current crises. In this article, we examine what it has meant to study places in ‘crisis’ and how that affects the research done on the ‘rural’ in Europe? What might the new focus on sustainability imply for the politics of knowledge production on the rural in Europe? Although scholars are beginning to theorize on what is sustainable in and for rural areas, our intention is to take this further. We reflexively think about and theorize on what the focus on crisis and, increasingly on sustainability, means for the research we do and the knowledge we produce on rural Europe. Our unique contribution is to bring attention to the politics of this past and present knowledge production on the rural to be able to imagine just and sustainable futures.

Through our relational analysis of Nordic countries and the UK, we make a case that addressing sustainability, that is the entanglements of the social, economic and environmental, allows researchers and policymakers to move beyond a deficit approach and better recognize material assets, and ground knowledge production on the diversity of the rural. Recognizing the entanglements of environmental, social and economic challenges affords us a wider gaze that pays attention to intersecting issues, such as race, ethnicity and gender, while also acknowledging different scales of governance. We develop our case by exploring how the rural is represented in rural studies; whose interests are advanced as a result; and how employing a sustainability gaze can shift beyond rural representations to focus attention on environmental, social and economic challenges.

Although we acknowledge the drawbacks of an all-encompassing rhetoric on sustainability (see introduction to the special issue), here, we focus on what we see as the openings that taking sustainability seriously, as ‘fundamentally integrative’ (Drummond & Marsden, 1999:10), might bring to our thinking on rural Europe. In the introduction to the special issue, we point to how sustainability is often equated with the environment, whereas the political and social contexts entangled in environmental relations have generally been ignored. Here, we also study how the entanglements of the environment and its governance in everyday politics and social relations are addressed within rural studies.

Our starting point is the Nordic countries where the rural environment is considered central – for the national economy (see Blömström & Kokko, 2003), for people’s livelihoods (e.g. Leu, 2019), for recreation and key to how the rural and, by extension, the nation are imagined both culturally and symbolically (see Arora-Jonsson & Ågren, 2019). This focus has intensified as rural areas have become the sites for climate interventions. Although tracing how social science research in the Nordic countries and particularly in Sweden took shape, we were struck by the importance of concepts imported from rural research in the UK in much literature, despite the many differences in empirical contexts. This article, thus, follows the trajectory of our discussions on rural studies and what we identify as certain construals, that is mental representations of the ‘rural’, that have dominated European rural research.

We found that two construals, that of rural–urban polarization and a rural crisis, have been the point of departure of a great deal of thinking. Representations of the rural are inseparable from the urban – whether in research that criticizes notions of the urban gaze, of the rural idyll or in work that has brought attention to their marginalization in comparison with the urban.

Policy-making too has had an important relationship with rural studies and in shaping these construals. We analyse how policy may be based on the ‘misrecognition of the rural’ (Arora-Jonsson, 2017), as part of creating certain construals, but also how research might contribute or challenge these ‘construals’ in their work.

The point of our analysis is not to contest or corroborate these construals. Our point is to examine how a focus on these construals, accompanied by discursive methodologies, overshadowed other material and environmental approaches in rural studies (on the periphery of rural studies and found in other fields) and obscured a wider and more plural approach essential for sustainability. Examining these trends and construals in the literature, we reflect on what the new focus on sustainability might bring for the present and future. We argue for the need to ground knowledge production on the rural in its material and representational specificities, while simultaneously paying attention to multiple connections beyond urban–rural relations for just and sustainable rural relations.

APPROACH AND OUTLINE OF THE ARTICLE

We trace connections in thinking across the Nordic countries with Sweden in particular and the UK in a ‘relational analysis’ (Arora-Jonsson, 2009)⁵ that examines the literature in relation to its own contexts and analytic lineage⁶ and also traces connections between the literature from the two contexts (and sometimes more broadly in European research), using themes from one context to ask questions of the other (Ibid). The point is not to undertake a comparative study, that is to compare the bodies of literature in a conventional comparison but rather we pay attention to the connections and the ‘tone’ (Derrida, 1993) of rural studies that has resulted in certain trajectories and excluded others. Thus, we are not interested in quantifying either the frequency of the terms used, or the number of articles, rather our relational analysis allows us to illustrate some key debates that have evolved over time and how particular debates have closed off conceptual underpinnings rooted in empirical research.

Our review draws on our combined knowledge of researching rural areas and working with policymakers (nearly three decades each). It also draws from literature primarily from flagship English language journals on the rural such as *Sociologia Ruralis* and the *Journal of Rural Studies* (1995–2022)⁷ but we also draw on wider literature on the rural in Sweden and the UK (some of which also sits outside this timeframe).⁸ We identified recurring themes and approaches in the journals (e.g. crisis, the rural idyll, discourse analysis of the rural, (lifestyle) migration and poverty) and continued to use these as keywords for the next round of searches. We also conducted searches for the less mentioned, though increasingly appearing, keywords of sustainability, environment and climate. Using these same keywords, we also undertook digital searches on Google Scholar to analyse wider rural literature beyond these two journals. We focus on two key themes that emerged from our review: construals of rural–urban polarization and of a rural crisis.

In the following section we begin by outlining what we mean by construals and the role of policy in rural research. Next, in the section on *rural studies and the new spotlight on the rural*, we go on to reflect on what the ‘rural’ has meant in policy as well as in rural studies, highlighting the political attention to the rural today. In the section on *lost in representations*, we go on to analyse the construal of ‘the rural in crisis’ that emerged in the 1990s in parallel with the discursive turn that directed research focus on representations of rurality. Building on this, in the *crisis of rural research*, we show how such construals drew boundaries around the field of rural studies and rural policy-making, narrowing the understanding of the ‘rural’. Following that, in *going beyond the crisis*, we analyse how the current policy imperative as well as the discourse on sustainability has the potential to bring attention to important approaches needed to confront environmental, social and economic challenges in the future, not only for rural areas but also beyond. We end by turning to research that addresses the entanglements of the material environment and society in rural areas as well as importance of scalar connections.

CONSTRUALS, POLICY AND RURAL RESEARCH

Construals are ‘mental representations of situations or phenomena’ (c.f. Trope & Liberman, 2010). Drawing on this notion by Trope and Liberman and following Mayblin (2019) who examines policy construals in UK migration policy-making, we use the notion of construals as a heuristic device to examine representations of the rural in the rural studies literature from the 1990s. As we write above, two overlapping construals were evident in the literature – the urban

shadow over the rural and its flip side, the notion of crisis and decline. An examination of these construals brought to light the connections of rural research with policy-making as well as the discursive methodologies that have dominated a great deal of rural research.

The linguistic turn in the 1980s and 1990s drew attention to language and symbols, and rural studies were no exception. A strong trend since the late 1990s, especially in rural studies journals, has been an attention to discourse and especially policy discourses. The narrative of a discourse helped to explain why certain perceptions of a problem became dominant and authoritative, whereas other points of view received weak support. Discourse analysis was used in a variety of ways including through a Foucauldian approach (e.g. *Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish*) that went beyond formal linguistics aspects to analyse institutionalized patterns of knowledge that become manifest in disciplinary structures. Discourse analysis was particularly fruitful in rural studies to describe and explain the production of story-lines and narratives, which often functioned as a (counter) power to the policies of the political administrative system (Goverde et al., 2004:14).

Rural policy-making has also played an important role in the trajectories taken by rural studies. Rural development studies have taken shape at the interface between research and development. Policy attention to tourism and entrepreneurship from the 1990s directed a great deal of research focus and correspondingly rural business emerged as a field of study (c.f. Ceccato et al., 2000). Further, rural researchers are desired actors in rural and regional development projects and programmes both at the national and regional level. The challenge has been to fulfil both academic standards of their background research organization and the often very practical needs of local and regional rural development actors (Ceccato et al., 2000; Muilu, 2010) often through evaluations, fulfilling research briefs and sitting in on expert panels and advisory boards. This invigorates rural research in ways other fields do not experience. But it can also be a liability – in the tacit need to show the rural as special, as different and as needed, especially when compared to the urban and in justifying much needed attention to the rural. This is also even more so today with the focus on the need to show impact in relation to research, thus making long-term ethnographic work desperately needed to understand rural lives, all the scarcer.

Policy can also narrow the understanding of what is rural by ‘misrecognizing’. In a study in Sweden, Arora-Jonsson commented on the tendency of large rural development projects, that in trying to create a unique identity for particular rural areas, afforded special treatment to dominant groups such as rich, white, male landowners whom they saw as symbolizing an idyllic notion of the rural.⁹ Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), she argued that in such cases, policy and development practice ‘misrecognize’ the rural by focusing on certain privileged economic and political interests and paying insufficient attention to the plurality of social relationships, values, habits, material landscapes or the wider impact of global forces in rural spaces. Striking in such policy discourses is an ever-present shadow of the urban whether in relation to nostalgic ideas of an idyllic rural or as backward and lagging as well as the faith in business (mostly urban) interests to reinvigorate rural areas (Arora-Jonsson, 2017). Atorp and McAreavey (2020) showed this narrowing of viable rural actors in the case of Northern Ireland where policy attention to business got translated to policy exceptionalism and support to agri-food corporate actors by the government left little space for the inclusion of wider and local interests in rural development.

That policy and mainstream representations have often rested on an urban gaze, which has been highlighted by a great deal of critical rural research that has relied on discursive analyses of representations of the rural (Chakraborti & Garland, 2004; Eriksson, 2010; Lagerqvist, 2014; Little & Austin, 1996). This research has been vital in revealing how certain representations became dominant. The reproduction of theoretical concepts from the UK in wider European research,

especially the assumption of a rural idyll, is evident in a great deal of this research. In this article, however, we analyse the exclusions that such an approach also engenders. We argue that the focus on such discursive approaches has also led to narrow construals of the rural, in two ways. First, we show in contesting idyllic representations of the rural, such research by emphasizing rural marginalization and poverty, reproduced notions of a rural crisis. This is not to say that rural poverty does not exist, but these became the dominant representations of the rural. Second, it tended to focus attention on certain groups of people or policy-making seen as reproducing ideas of the idyll and the heterogeneous present of rural environments, their governance as well as global and translocal relations took a backseat. Next, we address the thorny question of what is rural, a question at the heart of a great deal of rural studies.

RURAL STUDIES AND THE NEW SPOTLIGHT ON THE RURAL

An empirical field draws rural researchers together. 'Rural' research has persisted on the periphery of disciplines, especially sociology and geography. Its proponents have built up a community at conferences on rural studies, a field of study in journals on rural sociology but also under other names within mainstream disciplines. Rural research can be seen to fall within what could be called 'area studies'.¹⁰ It is area studies in that the point of departure for area studies is the place itself. Yet, as opposed to area studies with geographical settings such as Africa or Middle East studies, the rural has been more difficult to situate. Calls for defining the 'rural' have been ubiquitous, though clearly not an easy project. In this section, we unpack how rural has been understood over time and what has been obscured in those framings.

For a long time, the 'rural' has been an ambiguous category and the question of what is 'rural' has engaged scholars and policymakers. Discussions have ranged from formal definitions relating to the size of the population or its distance to urban centres, to population potential and population density (see for instance Gløersen et al., 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018) to a focus on constructions of rurality that we go on to discuss ahead. Several European countries in the post-World War II period sought to erase differences among different parts of the country as they aspired to bring welfare to all equally. The ambiguity of the rural was reinforced by the rationalization in agriculture and forestry that reduced their importance as occupations in rural areas. Especially in Sweden, as agriculture, often identified with the rural took a backseat to industrialization, what was rural and urban was difficult to distinguish and increasingly debated as scholars argued that what one had now was an urban countryside (e.g. Johansson et al., 1989).

In the UK, scholars (Cloke, 2006; Murdoch & Pratt, 1993) highlighted how theoretical framings of the rural changed/moved between the 1970s and 1990s, first fixing rural space according to its functions, then moving to the political-economic perspective (focussing on capital accumulation and economic restructuring as a driver of change), before identifying the socially constructed nature of rurality influenced by social, cultural and moral values. They criticize the focus on such constructions as a deterritorialized perspective that overlooks conditions that have a real impact on people's experiences of living in rural spaces.

The urban became the norm for the delivery of a range of services, including housing and schooling, and places where this was not so came to define the periphery and a place of deficit. Rural areas began to be identified with words such as periphery, the region, signifying places that needed to be 'developed' as opposed to urban places that needed 'investments' (e.g. Forsberg, 1997a; Månsson, 1996). The 'rural' became an object of politics largely due to the EU and rural

policy. An important moment was the publication of *The Future of Rural Society* by the Commission in 1988 where emphasis was placed on promoting 'balanced rural development'. This policy aspiration was evident in the European Commission's Cork Declaration in 1996 which led to funding streams that reflected this policy shift from sector to territory and linking agriculture to the rural. This significantly shaped policy in the UK.

In Sweden, the rural or 'landsbygd' and 'landsbygdsutveckling' (rural development) gained currency with Sweden's entry into the EU in 1995. Accordingly, research since the 1990s began to highlight the wider interests beyond agriculture that constituted the rural. Rural development began to be identified with activities including community development, farm diversification and small-scale enterprise outside of agriculture such as tourism (Svendsen, 2004). Rural development was a 'natural response' to the modernization paradigm and crisis in agriculture (Marsden et al., 2003; van der Ploeg et al., 2000).

According to Goverde et al. (2004:4), it is significant that as strands of academic discourse have increasingly rejected the usefulness of 'rural' as a scientific concept given the problems of distinguishing what was rural (see for instance Hoggart, 1990; Pateman, 2011; Shellabarger et al., 2019), it has begun to go through a phase of revival at all levels of political and popular discourse. The rural is increasingly an object of politics, as could be seen since the Swedish elections in 2018 where for the first time in many years, it was a major political issue. It could also be seen in the flurry of activity on social media that allowed rural inhabitants to organize themselves (such as the Facebook pages 'landstormen' or 'Norrlands paradox'). In an analysis of the printed news press in Sweden, Lundgren and Johansson (2017) showed how the trend is visible in the increasing number of articles with the word 'countryside'. In the party-political sphere, Swedish government bills containing the word almost doubled since the 1990s (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2018). In the UK, recent decades have demonstrated increased interest and a sense of the rural under threat. Lobby groups, as well as rural networks, have stepped up to put pressure onto government to respond to rural life in crisis.¹¹

Climate change and sustainability have brought rural areas and its development centre-stage. Rural areas are spaces where such programmes and projects are to be implemented and have become *the sites* for a green transition. Rural areas in Sweden are the prime sites for mining, wind-power parks and large battery factories for renewable energy. In the UK, nature-based solutions are increasingly advocated to transform agriculture while protecting more land for nature (see Dobbs, 2022, Little et al. 2022). English rural areas are perceived by DEFRA, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as being, not only innovative and dynamic, but also as a key solution for the transition to net zero, playing a key role in carbon capture and nurturing a cohort of 'environmentally sustainable land managers'. A range of activities, such as Local Nature Recovery, Landscape Recovery and Sustainable Farming, are regarded as a win-win situation for both farmers and the environment (DEFRA, 2021). The imperative of sustainability suffuses Swedish food strategies and policy-making as well as the forestry sector. Conversely, rural policies and programmes are increasingly meant to consider ecological foundations of their work.

Rural research is still catching up. Even though the environment (in the form of nature for tourism or agriculture) forms the background for many studies, the entanglements of the environment and its governance in everyday experiences, including the emergent politics and social relations have often not been addressed. The dominant thrust of research until recently has been on the other facet of the rural, 'the replacement of the productivist landscape with the emergent landscape of consumption' (Goverde et al., 2004:173) and what Svendsen (2004) called the non-agriculturalist approach of community and 'rurality' that dominated rural research in the last two decades. This is linked to a focus on representational and discursive approaches that still

predominate in a great deal of research to the exclusion of material practices on the ground. It is to this that we now turn.

LOST IN REPRESENTATIONS

Key themes in rural literature on Sweden and the UK are recurring references to the polarization between the urban and rural as the urban norm that dictates life in rural areas; and the marginalization of the rural. A great deal of that research, in line with the focus on discourse and representations, also turned to the notion of the rural idyll and/or gentrification as a point of departure – whether describing lifestyle migrant choices, tourist dreams, urban residents moving to the countryside to ‘revive’ the countryside and live sustainable lives or when deconstructing the rural idyll, especially in policy-making.

The rural idyll in the urban shadow...

A recurring theme in the literature centres on how notions of the rural idyll colour policies and perceptions of rural spaces. The dominance of the notion of the rural idyll in European rural research can be traced to scholarship from the UK and to the claim, made by Bunce (1994) nearly 30 years ago that mainstream ideas about the countryside have been dominated by an urban-based nostalgia. This notion continues to retain currency today (as pointed out by e.g. Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015; Woods, 2005). Scholars have brought attention to how middle class, urban identities are evident in the formation of such ideas as well as how this notion of the idyll has distinctly gendered and racial dimensions, aligned with constructions of Englishness and cultural norms (Little & Austin, 1996; Chakraborti & Garland, 2004; Neal, 2002; Agyeman & Spooner, 1997).

Research in other countries, including in Sweden, followed suit as researchers identified media representations of a rural idyll and/or the reproduction of urban–rural imaginaries (e.g. Eriksson, 2010; Lagerqvist, 2014). This research was in tandem with others that responded to the policy focus on tourism and enterprise in rural areas. A slew of rural research focussed on lifestyle migrants, primarily Germans and the Dutch, who had moved to the Swedish countryside and in some cases started tourist enterprises as well as resource rich migrants with second homes, some arguing for the vital importance of bringing in second home ownership (of urban residents) as a vital part of rural studies (e.g. Eimermann, 2014; Helgadóttir & Dashper, 2021; Müller, 2011, 2021; Stenbacka, 2001). Following British scholarship, a great deal of this research drew on notions of the idyll, gentrification and counter-urbanization.

In parallel, a stream of ‘structural analytic’ research (see Ceccato et al. (2000) for the definition of such research) pointed to how an urban ideal in a range of fields such as women’s work, housing, gender relations and much else became the model also for life in rural areas (e.g. Forsberg, 1997a; Månsson, 1996). One stream of such research came under the rubric of regional research that was based on quantitative studies that sought to model change and looked for general rural processes rather than to the diversity of rural places and areas (Ceccato et al., 2000:7).

Based on these studies, we argue that the urban shadow continued to haunt rural research, either when bringing attention to how the urban norm organized life in rural areas, how rural change took place in contrast to the urban or when writing about the rural idyll (including research critiquing and deconstructing the notion). Ironically, in Sweden, much of the discussion on the rural idyll in research was in contrast to journalistic accounts (e.g. articles by Po Tidholm)

or to the rare texts written by rural residents themselves (e.g. Halvarsson, 1999:10) who, rather than an idyll, highlighted the ubiquitous images of backwardness that characterized mainstream imaginations about rural Sweden.

Research attention became directed to a gaze from the outside – of policy, lifestyle migrants or tourists. This gaze from the outside that such representations indicate has been a starting point for considerable rural research. Here, we do not imply that this gaze from the outside is not valid. We want to emphasize that this point of departure and focus of rural research also created other exclusions, closing off other conceptual underpinnings arising out of the empirical contexts.

... and the crisis of marginalization and poverty

The flip side of the focus on conceptions of the idyll was one of rural crises and declines, arising from a desire to show how the rural was not exactly an idyll and that rural areas had been consistently marginalized in relation to the urban. Research brought attention to rural vulnerabilities and rural poverty. Research in Sweden brought attention to how the creation of the welfare state policy-making in the 1950s onwards created what became known as the *glesbygd*, the sparsely populated areas (Arora-Jonsson, 2013:56–59). The *glesbygd problem*, that is, the notion of areas lagging behind and needing support got cemented (Johanisson et al., 1989). The correlate to this sense of rural marginalization and polarization between the urban and rural was the notion of rural poverty in the UK. Imaginaries of lagging rural areas continue to be powerful and entrenched also within contemporary rural scholarship (see for instance Klärner & Knabe, 2019; Kluvankova et al., 2021; Shucksmith et al., 2021). Policy-making was certainly a part of creating these spatial differences. But the notion of the marginalized or poor rural in relation to the urban became the main and often the only way to understand the rural that also went beyond the economic.

In the Nordic contexts, scholars showed how women's flight to the cities was an escape from patriarchal relations that characterized agricultural and rural settings (e.g. Almås & Haugen, 1991; Dahlström, 1996). Research also argued that the cutback of services in rural areas in Sweden from the 1990s had the potential to trap women, who were most often care-givers, in unequal relationships (Friberg, 2004). This led others to also point to how this approach tended to present rural women as victims instead of highlighting their different activities in rural areas (Brandth, 2002; Forsberg, 1997b; Whatmore, 1991) and drawing attention to a broader systemic understanding of urban-rural relations. Missing here were narratives of the women who chose to live and return to rural areas with their families (see Bergelin et al., 2008). Research brought attention to masculinities in rural areas, while contesting the macho image of rural men as rednecks in mainstream imaginations, resulted in rural/farm men being pictured as backward, lonely, vulnerable and marginalized (Stenbacka, 2008).

To contest images of the rural as victim and devoid of agency, several pointed to vibrancy in rural areas and local mobilization building on a 'sense of place' (e.g. Herlitz, 2002; Ronnby, 1995), especially as notions of community participation and partnerships began to be encouraged both by the European Council and in national policies. This was also evident in the UK context where research showed how social networks and local infrastructure can be powerful tools for contributing to vibrant rural communities (see for instance Beaumont & Brown, 2018; Day, 1998). This has been theorized in a variety of ways including as neo/endogenous development where local resources are mobilized and external resources harnessed (Lowe et al., 1995; Bosworth et al., 2016). Scholars in Sweden pointed to how this local vibrancy was often more imagined than actual and ignored the many local conflicts (Ceccato et al., 2000) as well as structural obstacles that confronted local rural groups (Berglund, 1998; Shortall, 2015). As the call for the Nordic rural conference (2015)

held in Akureyri in northern Iceland stated, vulnerability and crisis continued to be a point of departure in the literature of rural areas, even as local groups were shown as contesting it.

Some research points out how this is not necessarily reflected in how rural residents feel about their lives (e.g. Bernard et al., 2019; Bergelin et al., 2008). A recent nation-wide survey in Sweden (Erlingsson et al., 2021) that analysed attitudes and values on urban–rural polarization and anti-establishment feelings found that the differences between the rural and urban were insignificant. Surprisingly, neither were there major differences in the satisfaction/dissatisfaction with welfare and service provision between the centre and the periphery, even in places where the authors most expected them. However, the authors caution that one could not discard the possibility of a political party working strategically to foster animosity against the centre, a possibility that in fact did materialize to some extent in the 2022 elections that brought a conservative-right wing coalition to power.

To be clear, *contemporary rural research draws attention to important issues to do with urban and rural polarization and rural marginalization*. Representing the rural was a conscious strategy to counter notions of the idyllic rural and to make visible power-laden urban normativity and privilege. We argue that when this becomes the predominant construal of the rural within scholarship, it is problematic as it obscures the full story as we go on to discuss below.

CRISIS OF RURAL RESEARCH

Here we turn to examine what it has meant to study places in ‘crisis’ and how obscuring a wider and more plural approach that is essential for sustainability that might have laid boundaries for rural research – in three inter-related ways.

First, as much of the research cited above has shown, constructions of the rural idyll always hinge on a *gaze from the outside*, in particular from an urban middle class perspective. Although the intention has been to unpack these constructions, the focus on those who are central to the constructions of the idyll – second homeowners, tourists or wealthy immigrants welded to lifestyle migration practices such as tourism or policy-making – results in a research focus on those from the outside. As scholars have pointed out, notions of gentrification and the in-migration of the middle class are more an idea borrowed from British scholarship rather than actual empirical practice, tourism forms only a small part of rural activities to warrant the attention it has in policy and research (Amcoff, 2000; Hedlund, 2016; Hjort, 2009). This was also linked to the research that is close to policy concerns. The focus on entrepreneurship and economic growth in rural areas seldom addressed its environmental consequences. Although the importance of place has been recognized, the conceptualization of how economic distributions of resources and wider economic structures limit these conceptualizations has been less common (for an exception see Kitchen & Marsden, 2009).

The focus on the idyll as a conceptual framing also reflects the disproportionate and problematic impact of British scholarship within rural studies and the often uncritical borrowing of British concepts to explain other contexts (Gkartzios et al., 2020). In contrast, outlining typologies of the rural in Sweden, Hedlund (2016) revealed heterogeneous areas, demonstrating the need for context-based empirical research and theory development on rural change. This is also a point argued by scholars in the UK who contest notions of rural poverty. Shucksmith et al. (2009) observed that rural scholars often discuss inequality and social exclusion but without supporting these observations with empirical data and that the prevalence of ‘poverty among affluence’ needs further discussion (see for instance, Milbourne, 2004; Shucksmith & Schafft, 2012:111). Much research in

England and Wales tends to compare urban with rural, but '[e]ven the biggest rural/urban difference can obscure there being more variation within areas than there is between them' (Pateman, 2011:4). Scholars from other fields both in Sweden and the UK also show how poverty affects certain social groups more than others (often a result of the intersections of class, gender and/or ethnicity, education) with increasing prevalence of in-work poverty to be found regionally – for instance the North of England and Wales, as well as in urban areas, including the suburbs of Stockholm and London, especially those with migrant populations (Molina, 2005; McNeil et al., 2021).

To be sure, there are particular vulnerabilities for families living in a rural area with low incomes, not least the challenge of accessing services such as high housing, childcare costs and low salaries that need to be properly understood (McNeil et al., 2021). However, preconceived ideas about the needy rural can create powerful discourses of deprivation. Thus, what gets lost in a focus on representations of the rural in crisis are the details of life in different spaces and a focus on the grounded experiences that some have shown (Bergelin et al., 2008; Bernard et al., 2019; Heley, 2011) as well as empirical material guiding theory (Hedlund & Lundholm, 2015). This is not to say that these are not valid or important but that they are only a small part of the larger context that makes the rural.

Second, the discourse on the idyll and of the marginalization of the rural in comparison to the urban tends to reinforce the rural–urban binary, obscuring other changes on the ground crucial to the future and sustainability of rural spaces. *Less attention has been directed to the many different rural environments and the lives of those who live there already* – including indigenous groups who seldom enter discussions on rural studies or rural development (e.g. Elenius et al., 2017; Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). In short, rural studies' focus on 'ruralities', and the focus on discursive representations has restricted focus on the environment itself and the people living there already, limiting attention to the differentiated material and environmental practices on the ground. Questions of the entanglements of the environmental, social and economic have been slow to be addressed although central to questions of rural change and development.

Third and relatedly, the reiteration of rural marginalization and urban–rural polarization has tended to divert attention from *how rural areas connect to places beyond the national and urban*. The specificity of place and the assets and opportunities that rural areas present is obscured due to the preoccupation with comparisons to urban centres. As questions of sustainability are showing increasingly, rural areas are connected through their resources and the movement of people as well as policy-making that transcends the nation. They are central to national as well as global economies and politics. The overriding comparison with the urban and the focus on discursive representations that has dominated rural studies has limited addressing the translocality of rural spaces itself. Questions of the exploitation of natural resources and climate interventions have largely been in the domain of disciplines such as geography or political science that rarely theorize the 'rural' and its development, although central to rural development and contingent on the entanglements of the social, economic and environmental factors in the place itself.

In sum, academic discourses such as the assumption of rural marginalization in relation to the urban as well as assumptions about poverty in rural studies are significant and greatly influence messages communicated to the policy community. Rural areas are at the centre of global economies and politics in relation to their resources, agriculture and active civil society (and indigenous) networks (Hedberg, 2013; Marsden et al., 1990; McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Waldenström & Westholm, 2009; Woods, 2007). Yet, these have been divided up in different policy sectors and rarely addressed in a rural frame. Rural policy approaches have instead been underpinned by a sense of needing to invigorate lagging rural areas in a variety of ways, not least with the ultimate

objective of reducing disparities between growth areas that is purportedly 'lagging behind' (with the implicit comparison of the lagging rural with the urban norm), a matter originally articulated in the Lisbon Treaty and that persists in European policy approaches.¹²

An example is that of 'rural proofing'. Rural proofing is a broad term often used to incorporate rural mainstreaming, championing rural policies and auditing to ensure that mainstreaming has occurred. It is something of a 'feel-good' idea and thus hard to see why anyone would be against it (Shortall & Alston, 2016). Rural proofing is found in different western European countries including the UK and Sweden as well as Canada and Australia (Sherry & Shortall, 2019). According to Sherry and Shortall rural proofing in Northern Ireland 'entirely stands on an assumption of rural disadvantage, the nature of which is never articulated' (2019:336). Their study questions the connections between how rural is understood, the lack of appreciation of social change and wider public policy development. Given this close relationship to policy, we go on to examine what the new policy focus on sustainability might then entail.

Going beyond the crisis

We argue that the focus on representations and move away from land and resources reinforced the separation of nature–culture that sustainability discourses are (ostensibly) trying to overcome. The environment is often conceptualized as an idyllic background but has seldom been at the centre of European rural academic discourse. Exceptions such as work on environmental and rural politics and power (Arora-Jonsson, 2013; Hedberg, 2013), that take weather seriously (Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021; Osborne & Evans, 2019) as well as non-human assemblages (Gristy, 2019), do exist. An analysis of such entanglements of society in their environments has the potential to shift the focus of policy away mainly from the economic and from a human centric and solely representational approach in social inquiry, which is needed for sustainability. It also brings a sharper focus to relations that connect rural areas beyond the urban and away from the urban centre-rural periphery divide that can limit our conceptualizations. Here, we look to how such an approach can redirect as well as widen rural studies: by addressing environmental politics and rural development in one frame, by bringing back and reinvigorating material questions of ownership, class, gender and indigeneity and by decentring the rural (periphery)–urban binary.

Environmental politics and rural development

Questions of climate and sustainability have been placed front and centre of new agricultural and rural policies. The ecological foundations of rural policy have been strengthened in recent times by discussions on climate change as well as sustainability and through initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork or the UK's Green Recovery. This focus on sustainability calls for new approaches where rural development and environmental governance demand attention as two parts of a larger whole.

The exploitation of natural resources (forests, water, land) and conflicts over land, agriculture and resources have tended to be within the purview of other disciplines, often within the natural sciences or within political science (and increasingly within geography and planning) but seldom in relation to conceptualizations of rural development. Yet, environmental governance restructures rural lives as well territory, especially that of indigenous groups (see Boonstra & Frouws, 2005; Gustavsson, 2020; Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022; Yliskyla-Peuralahti, 2003). The

everyday work of care and wellbeing in environments, crosscut by dimensions of gender and power need to be studied for an understanding of sustainable development (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2019; O'Flynn et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2021).

In studies in two of the most fertile agricultural areas of Finland and Sweden, Juhola et al. (2017) examined the extent to which Nordic farmers were engaged in transforming their farming systems. They criticize the lack of interest shown by research to identify climate adaptation measures and how transformative they may be at the farmer level. Clearly environmental governance is also rural development, and we need to understand the messy realities, the plural contexts and fractured identities that surround these processes (Arora-Jonsson, 2013:230) as we discuss further below.

Ownership, class, gender and indigeneity

The new focus on sustainability raises once again as crucial, underlying questions of ownership, citizenship, class and indigeneity – of who owns, who has rights and who can access rural environments as well the recognition of the material relations that underpin these questions. There is a need to direct focus to the multiplicity and plurality of relations, gendered, racialized and power laden, natural and cultural, in producing the rural. Debates over access and who 'owns' the countryside prevail in England (see for instance Hetherington, 2021; Shrubsole, 2020)¹³ but only some of that debate makes it to the academic literature. Class is closely connected to land ownership in England where there are many farms are owned by large landowners such as the Dukes of Westminster and Northumberland or Lord Barnard and farmed by tenant farmers. In Sweden, the questions of land ownership and access have come increasingly to the fore in large part due to resistance by indigenous groups as land customarily used by them has successively been taken over for large infrastructural projects (Elenius et al., 2017).

Feminist scholars have directed attention to the gendered ownership of agricultural land, but the question has tended to remain on the periphery of the field of rural studies and rural policy, although questions of gender-equality are otherwise espoused by policy (see Bock, 2015; Shortall, 2015). With some exceptions (see Baxter et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2019; McAreavey, 2022), few debates exist in relation to community assets and community ownership and these tend to be confined to environmental and spatial planning, even though there are significant movements in different rural contexts in this area. Community buy-in is more readily achieved when there is wider community ownership, this is not always straightforward and can lead to conflict as illustrated in the case of wind energy at Fosen in Norway when wider understanding of sustainability is not incorporated from the outset (Lingaas, 2021). Better understanding of the tensions among environmental, social and economic interests will prove invaluable as the compromises made by different social groups are negotiated during policy driven green transitions (Karlsson & Hovelsrud, 2021; Morén-Alegret et al., 2018).

Decentering the rural (periphery)–urban binary

Notions of crises or idylls tend to ignore the material ways in which rural areas, especially in Nordic countries, contribute to the global economy through their resources, how they are in fact, global as well as hybrid, translocal and contested spaces (Arora-Jonsson, 2009; Askins, 2009; Pigg, 1996; Woods, 2007). As research is showing increasingly, it is difficult to demarcate between

local and cosmopolitan, as in real life, the local/rural wellbeing merges various groups together (Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2021). Rural areas have, in recent decades, become the primary sites for green transitions. These aspirations go beyond nation state, connecting to international bodies, where priorities include enhancing biodiversity and addressing climate change.

Environmental questions more so than others highlight attempts to fix locally – at the farm level or in a forest, something that has been created with external forces, both in relation to time and space. For example, Yliskyla-Peuralahti (2003) showed how, in the case of the Finnish Agri-Environmental Scheme, biodiversity creates scaling problems. Agricultural and rural policy deals with administrative units at the scale of a nation state or universal economic space, or on individual farm level. Environmental policy instead often operates with critical areas, ecosystems or river basins – drawing boundaries on a map based on the needs of the environment. These boundaries often transcend administrative boundaries. The example of the Finnish Agri-Environmental Scheme proves that these two scales do not easily fit together. The Water Framework Directive is another example. It attempted to shift river basin management from a series of fragmented policies into an integrated and holistic approach that has so far been difficult to think in terms of rural development (e.g. Francésa et al., 2017; Green & Fernández-Bilbao, 2006). Environmental policies are no longer the sole purview of the national state. Grassroots rural groups and especially indigenous groups are increasingly turning to supra national bodies such as the UN to adjudicate land and environmental issues that were previously dealt with within the nation (Arora-Jonsson, 2019). Climate policies make this evident. Thinking about the rural has always been within a national frame (in relation to the urban) perhaps accounting for the lack of a discussion on environmental relations in rural academic discourses.

In other words, there are fundamental problems of scale. This points to the need to conceptualize rural place in relation to the urban but also in relation to categories beyond the urban and the nation (see Stenbacka & Bygdell, 2018). Rural studies on migration have been most active in this regard. Drawing on Askins' work on translocality in the UK, researchers in Sweden have discussed the cosmopolitanism brought about by new migrants to rural areas and opportunities for not only addressing population decline but also to contributing to a 'dynamic and transnational countryside' (e.g. Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014). Critical research has, however, pointed to the systemic and racial challenges faced by such groups (Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Søholt et al., 2018). The extent to which international migrants contribute to the productivist countryside and how that process is often exploitative beyond the rural space itself (Hedberg, 2013; Lever & Milbourne, 2017; McAreavey & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2019; Papadopoulos et al., 2019) needs further attention.

As Dufty-Jones (2014) pointed out not quite a decade ago, labour migrants' experiences of the labour market in OECD countries remain far less explored than of those in metropolitan areas. Research does not always connect agri-food workers to wider patterns in the sector such as the increased power of multinationals that not only exploit individual workers but are dislocated from environmental and sustainability concerns. Poultry production in the UK and US is a prime example of how individuals within a very local context are part of a vertically integrated and global production process which impacts not only on food supply but also has significant environmental impact due to the waste products produced from what is effectively a global process (Attorp & McAreavey, 2020).

There is thus a need to consider a plurality of interests beyond national and rural actors to recognize the importance of far-flung connections in defining the rural. To our minds, the lack of attention to how plural material contexts constitute rural lives and politics also accounts for the sense of crisis of rural areas and an inadvertent reinforcement of policy 'misrecognitions of the rural' (Arora-Jonsson, 2017). It is important to be able to see the small and particular but also

how those fits within its larger context, beyond the urban – rural binary. Not only are there many countrysides, but also many connections make up a countryside – making the ever-present binary of an urban centre and rural periphery inadequate.

SEEING MULTIPLE FOR SUSTAINABILITY: GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE MATERIAL AND SCALAR

As we show, construals can frame the scope of rural research agendas. The construal of a crisis has created a certain *tone* (see Derrida, 1993) for rural research – often that of the underdog, where a sense of the rural as marginalized from the mainstream is strong. It has prioritized issues of lifestyle migration over resource extraction or dynamics of social cohesion over environmental justice or rural poverty over inequalities in land-use and management. Not only in policy but also in research, the urban has often been the frame of reference and has delineated objects of study.

In some instances, this tone has to do with a sense of crisis of what was but is no more. This, despite the fact that research clearly shows that rural is a social construct. There are people, in particular circumstances who live precarious lives, but as we have shown already, typically this is not to do with the fact that they live in a rural area, but more about an intersection of class, education, age (c.f. McNeil et al., 2021; Molina, 2005). Additionally wider structural forces influence economic opportunities in an area, creating a spatial effect. However, by focusing on the needy rural, or rural as a marginal space, we confine the limits of what we believe is possible in rural areas and this in turn influences our imaginaries of what the rural is. We believe this is important if we are to solve pressing environmental, social and economic challenges.

Although what is the ‘rural’ – given its many differences has long been debated, there is a fair amount of consensus that the environments and often dependence on its resources or agriculture make a place ‘rural’ (c.f. Marsden et al., 1990; Westholm & Amcoff, 2003). It is surprising then that the environments are not more central to thinking on the social and to the actual role it plays in rural areas but beyond them. Attention to the governance of resources and questions of sustainability highlights the mobility and dynamism of the rural. Rather than segregating environmental governance and agrarian change from rural development framings, it is imperative that interconnections are made to fully reflect the richness of the material reality on the ground. Such a perspective takes as its starting point the assets of the rural, establishing space for more positive interactions and narratives. At the same time, paying attention to the entanglements of sustainability decentres economic aspects, undermines traditional urban–rural polarization and in so doing presents a more balanced framing for reinvigorating the rural.

Like others (Gkartzios et al., 2020), we emphasize the need to embrace multiple realities and knowledges of the rural. To do so, it is important to acknowledge but also look past hegemonic narratives in rural research – its backward and patriarchal relations, its marginalization in mainstream discourses or its vibrant local lives. Although all have merit and are important, we argue that if not taken within a wider context and the material relations organized by intersecting dimensions of power such as class, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, they can limit closer attention to the specificity of place, peoples and its environments as well as its connections to the outside, matters that are important in thinking about sustainability.

We have made a case to conceptualize sustainability when researching the rural as this would better ground knowledge production through recognition of the entanglements of the social, economic and environmental as well as the material and centre questions of social justice and future generations. We have argued in this article for the need for discursive and quantitative work but

also of extending the frame of the rural. Therefore long-term ethnographic approaches are needed to delve into the plurality of rural space, into bread-and-butter issues that implicate the materiality of the rural, cognizant of a plurality of interests and contexts as well as how it is tied to constructs, emotions – and draw parallels across Europe, keeping in mind how research on the rural from the UK has dominated thinking. Even where research is focused on such materiality, it is often on the margins of rural scholarship, although less so now. We believe that if rural areas are to be sustainable, it is essential that more dynamic rurals are recognized, policy misrecognitions critically analysed, and the politics of knowledge are grounded in the specificities of, and are responsive to, the plurality of the rural.

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ENDNOTES

¹<http://www.ruralsociology.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Nordic-ruralities-call-for-working-groups.pdf>

²<https://esrs2023.institut-agro-rennes-angers.fr/calls-working-groups>

³We are not claiming that sustainability has not been debated in rural studies, but that the pressing issue of sustainability and the entanglements of environmental, social and economic issues has come to the fore in recent years.

⁴This huge literature spans both the social sciences and to some extent the natural sciences and is especially evident in environmental journals as well as those on what is increasingly called sustainability sciences.

⁵Although previously we have used this methodology to trace connections across geographical contexts and discourses over different geographies, we are building upon it to apply it to bodies of literature.

⁶Identifying the research question being asked, what has been said about that question, and what the current author is contributing to the analysis.

⁷Our initial review stretched to 2018 and was then complemented by analysing the literature from 2018 to 2022. Thanks to Jonathan Rahn and Emma Sahlström for their invaluable help in systematising the literature in the latter period and contributing to thinking through these trajectories. A quick overview of the latter period (2018–2022) appears to indicate that the construals that we identify continue, especially in *Sociologia Ruralis*, whereas the *Journal of Rural Studies* tended to have more quantitative as well as ethnographic research. The focus on the rural idyll and work on lifestyle migration appear to be waning in the latter period.

⁸We reiterate that our study is not a quantitative analysis of the literature. It is, however, an analysis of key themes relating to issues arising in a context of Sweden and the UK.

⁹This thinking is also reinforced in mainstream ideas of the rural idyll in popular culture such as TV shows like *Downton Abbey* in the U.K or *La Cocinera de Castamar* in Spain, documenting the lives of a benevolent aristocratic family and their servants during the 20th and 18th centuries.

- ¹⁰We are aware that there is a huge discussion on area studies especially in geography as the spatial is central to the notion of area studies. Although research has pointed to the hierarchical relations in various disciplines where area studies (and the rural) have been relegated to the margins of disciplinary purity, we do not go into that discussion here. For us, the point is to understand that some central concepts have come to guide rural studies.
- ¹¹See for example CPRE <https://www.cpre.org.uk/>; <https://www.rsonline.org.uk/the-government-must-develop-a-rural-strategy>
- ¹²<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/integrated-approach-eus-rural-areas-particular-emphasis-vulnerable-regions-own-initiative-opinion>
- ¹³Hetherington is a journalist, and Shrubsole is a researcher, writer and campaigner.

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