CHAPTER 2

Rural sociological perspectives and problems: A potted history

Stewart Lockie

The discipline of sociology developed largely in response to social transformations associated with the Industrial and French Revolutions. Not surprisingly, this lent early sociology a distinctly urban air. While issues associated with rurality were not omitted entirely from the sphere of sociological theorising, the social relations of industrialisation and urbanisation were seen as the fundamental problem matter of sociology. ‘Rural’ issues were consequently addressed, interpreted and, at times, ignored, according to the concerns and priorities of the broader sociological paradigm, because they were not considered ‘problematic’. Industrialisation and urbanisation were identified as the quintessential features of modernity, reflected in, among others, Durkheim’s *Division of Labour*, which marked rural communities and small-scale agriculture as residual social categories (the ‘other’) marked by backwardness, conservatism and, inevitably, decline. Many ‘rural’ people will argue, of course, that this ‘urban bias’ is still reflected today in many of their experiences with governments, service providers and ‘urban’ people more generally.

The discussion presented in this chapter is an overview of what I have selected as the roots, major trends and points of debate in Australian and international rural sociology. As these perspectives are explored, what becomes evident is the close relationship between theory and the actual subject matter of rural sociology. Theory has not only been developed to help understand ‘rural society’, but has also responded and adapted to changes in rural communities and environments in order to more adequately address the changing problems and opportunities that rural people face.

**Founding perspectives: Marxism and the agrarian question**

Writing in the nineteenth century, Karl Marx expected agriculture to be transformed into an industrialised mode, or system, of production. For Marx, capitalist development was based on the tearing of men (sic) from their means of subsistence, to be ‘hurled as free and “unattached” proletarians [i.e. wage labourers] on the labour-market’. The agricultural labour process was ultimately no different, he believed, to the industrial labour process and was, therefore, subject to the same laws of capitalist accumulation. Competition forced capitalist enterprises to increase the productivity of labour in order to lower costs, thus shedding labour and placing downward pressure on rates of profit. Enterprises unable to compete were forced from business, which in turn promoted the centralisation of capital in fewer and fewer hands. Thus, small-scale peasant farmers engaged in largely subsistence production and consumption would eventually be replaced by a bourgeois class of land-owning capitalists who would extract surplus value (i.e. profit) through the labour of a rural proletariat. Kautsky, on the other hand, argued that agriculture did not necessarily ‘develop according to the same process as industry [but according to] laws of its own’. Kautsky agreed that capitalism and industrialisation had undermined subsistence agriculture, but he did not see the replacement of small-scale peasant farmers with a rural proletariat as inevitable. ‘The agrarian question’ (i.e. the fate of small producers), he argued, was unresolved, for at the same time that large holdings were able to exercise greater economies of scale in the use of machinery and other inputs, small farmers were able to
reduce their own consumption requirements so as to extract minimal surplus value from their own labour. In other words, small farmers exploited themselves by working longer hours and drawing less income than paid labour.

An important feature of this debate was its focus on the social relationships shaping agricultural production rather than on any attempt to theorise ‘rurality’ or changes in ‘rural society’. This is because, from a Marxist perspective, the social relationships involved in the production of commodities are accorded primacy in the determination of all other aspects of social organisation. Since agriculture was understood to be subject to the same laws of capitalist development as any other industry, the idea of distinctly rural cultures or problems was dismissed. Often, however, the economic dependency of many rural areas on agriculture and the high status of farmers within rural communities has simply led both theorists and governments to conflate rural with agriculture as if they are one and the same thing. Also, this often leads to the assumption that what is good for agriculture is necessarily good for rural communities; even though, as agriculture becomes more industrialised, it has been shown to shed labour, thus promoting depopulation, which in turn leads to the decline of rural towns and loss of economic, social and cultural opportunities. This is not always the case, but within unregulated modes of capitalist production there is no incentive for businesses to pay the cost of these negative repercussions, and many rural people are confronted by declining economic and social opportunity with little assistance from governments or from those industries responsible for the changes they are experiencing.

**Tonnies and the abandonment of tradition**

An influential alternative to the Marxist paradigm was based around the work of another nineteenth century scholar, Ferdinand Tonnies, who developed two ‘ideal’ types, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, to describe social relations based on natural and rational will, respectively. According to Tonnies, *gemeinschaft* relations were based on intimacy, stability, kinship and tradition, while *gesellschaft* relations were impersonal, contractual and rational. Where *gemeinschaft* relations were dependent on a clear understanding of the mutual obligations and responsibilities associated with inherited family and commu-

**The institutionalisation of rural sociology**

Rural sociology was first institutionalised as a subdiscipline of sociology in its own right within the United States, where the land grant system of state universities was established in such a way as to forge close links between education, research, the production sector and rural communities. The relationship between rural sociologists and the land grant universities was uneasy, but had major ramifications for the development of rural sociology. In particular, while these institutions saw their missions as the development and promotion of modern high-tech, high-input agriculture, rural sociology developed in such a way as to avoid taking a critical approach to the social ramifications of agricultural modernisation. One of the main areas of research was the adoption of new agricultural technologies by farmers. The failure of farmers to adopt new technologies as rapidly as they were developed by agricultural scientists was seen as problematic, and as evidence that some farmers had particular psychological or social attributes that acted as ‘barriers to adoption’. The aim of adoption research was to uncover the ‘barriers to adoption’ that slowed the uptake of new technologies so that they could be marketed more effectively to farmers. Unfortunately, this kind of research met with limited success because, by focusing on the psychosocial attributes of individual growers (for example, their attitudes toward risk or education levels), it ignored all sorts of wider social processes that in some way influenced the technological development of agriculture and the strategies deployed by farmers to pursue their own goals.

Other research focused on rural communities, surveying the characteristics and attitudes of ‘rural’ people in order to
gain practical insights that could be applied by rural planning, welfare and education agencies. This research embodied a romanticised vision of unified rural communities with clear boundaries and unquestionable moral virtue. But in so doing it ignored aspects of *gemeinschaft* relations, such as rigid gender and caste hierarchies, and the physical and economic forms of discrimination through which these were enforced. Once again, the causes and processes of change in rural communities were ignored, and thus this research often failed to implement the changes they espoused.

**Crisis and reformation: The ‘new rural sociology’**

While my comments above on the apparent failings of early rural sociology may seem harsh (and indeed I have papered over some very worthwhile early research), by the 1970s these dominant directions had led sociology into a period of crisis and paradigm shift. Leading rural sociologists — including Bill Friedland, Howard Newby and Fred Buttel — criticised rural sociology as anti-theoretical, positivist (that is, overly concerned with replicating the methods of the physical sciences by focusing on only what was quantitatively measurable), and obsessed with highly localised practical research that, due to these other shortcomings, failed to explain the social context in which these locales were based. The bulk of rural sociological research was thus seen to be inconsequential, either to the wider sociological community or to ‘rural’ people. With a more general resurgence of interest in Marx and other critical theorists, the theoretical framework was put in place for a fundamental reorientation of the rural sociological paradigm.

Proponents of the ‘new rural sociology’ argued that what was needed was a sociology of agriculture that addressed the totality of social relations within which the practice of farming was carried out — including the capitalist structure of agriculture, state agricultural policy, agricultural labour, regional inequality and agricultural ecology. Why a sociology of agriculture? Newby and Buttel argued that by itself the term ‘rural’ offered no meaningful sociological category. However, as an essentially spatial concept it did suggest the importance of theorising the spatial allocation of population, resources, production etc. within a more general theory of society. This theory of society was provided by contemporary readings of Marx, who argued that the social relationships involved in the production of goods and services fundamentally shaped the institutional structure and culture of any society. By focusing on the relations of the production of agriculture, it was possible to make links between the apparently ‘rural’ activity of farming and the restructuring of agriculture dependent communities, globalisation of trade, and a host of other social transformations. The ‘new rural sociology’ was to have quite an influence in Australia, and so it is to Australian rural sociology that we now turn.

**Australian rural sociology**

According to Geoffrey Lawrence, rural sociology is still in its infancy in Australian universities. With the exception of literally only a few early studies, rural sociology in Australia was very much a child of the 1970s and 1980s, and was thus heavily influenced by the critical turn that sociology more generally was experiencing. More than anything else, this meant a concern with power, which was explored in the context of the sociology of agriculture, the dynamics of small communities and the gender relations of both. Importantly, rural sociology has developed in such a way as to also be open to both new trends in sociological theory and the insights of researchers working in closely related fields.

**Critical perspectives**

**Community studies: Class and stratification**

The first sustained attempt to study the social relations in which Australian rural communities were embedded came from within the tradition of community studies. Although community studies were not a simple subset of rural sociology, there has been a close relationship between the two subdisciplines. Taking a similar approach to anthropologists, community studies researchers undertook detailed ethnographic studies in small communities. In particular, they examined how things like property ownership, occupation, gender and ideology provided resources that consistently gave some individuals and groups the ability to realise their own goals and interests over others — that is, resources of power. In doing
this they tried to understand how power was experienced by different members of the communities they studied; what life was like from their own point of view.

Perhaps the most well known community study of all was Ron Wild’s *Bradstow.* Wild argues that his study of Bradstow, a small rural town, treats ‘community as method’ rather than as ‘object’. By this, he means that Bradstow is not a study of the entire community, but a study of class and stratification which is based in the context of a community. Wild found plenty of evidence that status and ownership of productive resources counted for a great deal in Bradstow. In local government, for example, the interests of the higher status groups were generally considered to be the interests of the entire community, even though these groups had little direct involvement in local politics. Looking back now, however, the most surprising aspect of Wild’s study is the extent to which it ignores the relationships between power and gender, implicitly subsuming the status and class position of women within that of their male partners. Perhaps this is an accurate reflection of the way women were treated in Bradstow, but it leaves unexplored a major dimension of power and the question of how this affected the lives of women. More recent community studies, including Gretchen Poiner’s *The Good Old Rule* and Ken Dempsey’s *A Man’s Town,* have addressed this deficiency. Drawing again on Wild, community studies retain their salience because they offer a method with which to examine, in depth, the articulation of what may appear to be universal social processes in the context of discrete social spaces — that is, to integrate locality into the major theoretical concerns of sociology. By studying situated, or spatially embedded, social relationships between identifiable actors, they also avoid reifying the concept of rurality.

*‘Capitalism and the Countryside: The rural crisis in Australia’*

The subtitle of this section is borrowed directly from Geoffrey Lawrence’s study of the relationships between the restructuring of the farm sector, state policy, technological development, environmental degradation and the emergence of agribusiness as a dominant force within capitalist agriculture. *Capitalism and the Countryside* presents a paradigmatic example of the ‘new rural sociology’ as applied to Australian agricul-
the new rural sociology of the 1980s for its assumption that relationships between farmers and agribusiness are necessarily exploitative, and for overstating the extent to which such relationships have led to a loss of control over the on-farm production process. They argue the importance of examining both the processes through which knowledge about agriculture is developed and local cultural mores concerning good farming practice and the way farmers interpret their environment. Given that farmers in countries like the United States and Australia have a long history of association with state and agribusiness research agencies, many have a strong identity as technological innovators and are supportive of these trends, despite their negative consequences.

Still, the rural crisis of the 1980s melded into the rural crisis of the 1990s, and agribusinesses continue to make substantial profits while farmers continue to decline in number. Even if writers like Lawrence overstated the extent to which agricultural restructuring was driven by the structural imperatives of capitalism, they certainly did not fail to identify the key social relationships shaping the process of restructuring. The key to using their insights constructively is to think of capitalism as the outcome of these social relationships, not the causal factor behind them. More recently, studies in the 'new rural sociology' have expanded their focus to look more explicitly at processes of globalisation and the strategies used by transnational agribusiness and other actors to influence agriculture and agricultural trade according to their own interests. To the extent that the boundaries of the nation-state are challenged as the primary unit of trade regulation, immense challenges are raised for farmers, local and regional economies, and governments. These issues will be taken up further in chapters 13 and 14.

‘Invisible farmers’: The contribution of feminism

No area of sociological theory and research has challenged the neo-Marxist paradigm as convincingly as feminism. The clearly gendered nature of the on-farm organisation of labour — the labour process — demonstrates that what goes on down on the farm is not simply controlled by capitalist laws of development or agribusiness. Feminists argue that, as a feature of social structure, patriarchy is as important, if not more important, than capitalism. Despite the obvious importance of capitalism, the labour process cannot be understood without reference also to the gender relations of production. Not surprisingly then, the overwhelming focus of studies of gender relations of production in Australian agriculture has been on the invisibility of farm women in the labour process. This is not because farm women are not involved in farm work, but because their involvement is unacknowledged and trivialised.

According to Alston, the invisibility of farm women rests on the cultural construction of two separate spheres of activity. Men are understood to participate in a public sphere of production, decision-making and politics. Women, on the other hand, are understood to participate in a private sphere of reproduction, support and domesticity — a sphere that extends pretty much only as far as the gate leading from the house yard to the paddock. Men, therefore, are popularly understood to be ‘farmers’, while women are understood to be ‘housewives’ and ‘mothers’. In terms of status and importance within farming communities, the association of farm men with the public sphere of production gives them a vital resource of power over farm women that is reflected in inheritance patterns and thus access to material resources such as property. This attribution of status to the public sphere and to the men seen to inhabit it obscures two things: first, the importance of reproductive activities undertaken within the domestic sphere — such as childrearing, food preparation, subsistence fruit and vegetable growing, and bookkeeping — to the viability of family farm ‘businesses’; and second, the extent to which women do actually engage in so-called ‘productive’ activities outside the domestic sphere. Invisibility is perpetuated by describing women’s contribution with labels such as ‘off-sider’ and ‘helper’. The work is still construed as male, and women’s contribution to it as secondary.

Finally, it is important to remember that, just like capitalism, patriarchy is the outcome of social relations — a useful way to describe them — but it is not their cause. The relations of domination that subordinate women to men are also reflected in the subordination of men to other men. The ideologies that are perpetuated about the appropriate spheres of activity for women and men act in different ways on different women and men at different times and places. They are also resisted and challenged.
Poststructuralist perspectives on rurality, gender and agriculture

Over the last ten years or so it has become increasingly common to hear reference to a 'cultural' turn in the social sciences. This turn has challenged ideas about monolithic social structures that have often been seen to apply to all people in much the same way. For example, men and women experience and understand Australian culture and social life differently. But not all women, or all men, experience or understand social life in the same way, indicating that social structures do not affect all people in the same consistent ways. What becomes important is not the categories but the meanings attached to them: what it means to be feminine or masculine, white or non-white, and so on.

Poststructuralism is a minefield of competing interpretations and theoretical prejudices. Here, the term is used specifically to refer to those approaches that make a clear break with structuralist assumptions about the logic or dynamics of capitalism or patriarchy, and instead focus on the ways in which these social relations are constructed as cultural artefacts by identifiable social groups. Where a structural Marxist perspective might argue that culture is a reflection of the economic structure of a society (its 'mode of production'), poststructuralist perspectives suggest that both the relations of production and the beliefs people have about these relations are very much up for grabs. Power is not viewed in poststructuralist sociology as a one-way, hierarchical concept, but as one which is continually challenged and negotiated. The task for the social researcher is to identify the processes through which struggles over meaning are carried out and the resources different groups have at their disposal to influence them. Typically, researchers have focused on both the production of 'discourses' (i.e. frameworks for organising knowledge and ideas) through channels such as the mass media, and the ways in which these discourses are drawn on and resisted by people in different social settings.

You will see the influence of this kind of perspective throughout this book in discussions of the many ways rurality, among other things, may be experienced and understood. However, it is important to keep in mind that the poststructuralist perspectives challenges us to do more than simply examine what it is that people believe — it challenges us to investigate how these beliefs are produced and maintained over time. For example, in a study of young women entering agricultural training, Bryant found that while feminism and the rural women's movement had opened up the possibility to take on greater managerial responsibility for farms without transgressing the bounds of acceptable femininity, the understandings young women had of their own bodies still precluded the possibility of taking responsibility for much traditional 'men's work'. While these women sought, therefore, to define farming in terms of business management, they were constantly, and often physically, confronted with understandings of male and female bodies that marginalised their potential involvement in farming activities. Understandings of male/female bodies (and femininity more generally), constructed over time, becomes the important issue to address rather than 'empowering' or focusing on women's actions and identities.

According to Greider and Garkovich, the ways that people understand the natural environment and their own relationship to it are fundamental to their interactions with that environment. As McEachern points out, farmers tend to think of well cared-for landscapes as productive landscapes. This often places them in conflict with conservationists concerned more with habitat or species retention, and leads to different ideas about what environmental degradation and sustainability actually are. It is important, however, to move beyond these rather general observations to investigate the key issues and debates that are currently shaping the way Australian farmers and others construct agricultural landscapes. Through Landcare and Integrated Catchment Management, all resource users are being asked to cooperate with others in the management of resources; moves are under way to privatise previously common property or government regulated resources through, for example, the introduction of tradeable water allocations in irrigation areas; and the recognition of native title raises questions about what have often been thought of as exclusive rights to land. Chapters 7 and 21 will address these further. It is important to note that these issues speak not only to the ways in which we construct the agricultural landscape, but also to our understandings of citizenship and democracy. The ways we understand what it
means to be Australian in fact influences everything from the way we treat the land to the attitude we take to the global marketplace.

**Conclusion**

This is an exciting time for rural sociology. The new rural sociology that revitalised the discipline theoretically and empirically in the 1980s has not so much come to dominate the entire discipline as to open it up to the influences of a wide body of social theory. This does not mean that rural sociology has lost its way, rather a number of hitherto unrecognised possibilities for theorising and research have been opened up. Research has expanded beyond the direct forms of economic domination exercised by agribusiness over farmers, and men over women, to consider both resistance to domination and the less obvious symbolic aspects of these relationships. To a large extent the insights of poststructuralism have been used, therefore, to strengthen the neo-Marxist and feminist emphasis on power. In the rest of this book authors will take varying positions within the parameters of the debates articulated above. They will all, however, continue this emphasis on critical, theoretically informed inquiry.

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**CHAPTER 3**

*‘Out there’: Spaces, places and border crossings*

*Daniela Stehlik*

Space is fundamental in any form of communal life, space is fundamental in any exercise of power.

Imagine that someone who has never been to ‘rural’ Australia asks you to describe it. What is life like ‘out there’ ‘beyond the black stump’, in ‘the bush’ or the ‘outback’? You may find yourself talking about ‘wide open spaces’, the delicate balance between Australians and their environments, or even conflicts over land and water rights, development and government policy. As the majority of Australians live within 50 km of the coast, perhaps the Australia you describe is not the one in which you live. But whatever answer you give, you are part of a wider social process through which meanings are ascribed to spaces and to the identities of the men and women living in them. Sociologists call this the ‘social construction’ of space. It is the process through which spaces and their inhabitants are transformed into ‘places’ that are knowable and known, both to themselves and to others.

This book has already pointed out that the meaning of
‘OUT THERE’

This chapter seeks to extend this argument by examining how an increased focus on the social construction of space can provide more depth to social analyses. It does so as a challenge not only to rural sociologists and community members, but also to all social scientists and the concepts they use to make sense of social life. Certainly, traditional sociological perspectives can enable an understanding of communities and the issues they face. But, all too often, simplistic definitions of the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ exclude more people than they include — people such as women, non-Anglos, service workers, the elderly and the young. They are also ill-equipped to deal with different notions of community such as those, for example, established as government policy through Integrated Catchment Management. Catchment Management turns traditional sociological concepts upside down by ignoring social networks altogether and presupposing that biophysical processes associated with the movement of water establish ‘communities’ bounded by water catchments.

The concept of ‘space’ is too little developed, and rarely given serious consideration, within traditional sociological literature. This chapter argues that in order to more effectively use our sociological imaginations for the communities of the future, we need to examine the connections between power, knowledge and space as they are constructed through discourse/s and as they act on, and are utilised by, different social groups. This then provides for a more complex awareness of power and resistance within communities and of ‘how and why we hold some things true, how and why we deem some things knowledge, and how and why we consider some procedures rational and others not’.

Challenging dominant ‘spaces’: The urban/rural ‘tension’

Working within regional universities, sociologists often hear colleagues and students speak about the ‘regional/rural’ — often disparagingly, frequently with despair — as though ‘nothing happens here’, ‘everything is happening somewhere else’. Some colleagues still see the regional university as a waiting room — waiting to move to an urban university, a ‘real place’. Very often, such colleagues continue to do research that can be done ‘anywhere’, as if the rural/urban distinction is not relevant. Others may speak about the ‘rural’ knowingly, as if one rural ‘space’ is much like another — if you understand one, you can understand them all. Taking this up argues that the academic language of cultural criticism has tended to ‘solidify dichotomies’ between the urban and the rural, treating the urban as the central space from which this language, or discourse, emanates, and the rural as an abstract ‘other’, representative of particular cultural and political values. While I am not suggesting that only those of us who live outside metropolitan centres should be ‘permitted’ to ‘speak’ of them, I am suggesting that all too often those of us who live outside the city tend to use uncritically the same de/spatialised and centralised language to describe different places.

The teaching of mainstream sociology usually begins thus: first, with an introduction to the ‘founding fathers’ of the discipline; and second, with the teaching of the major variables used for analysis within a traditional form of research method — class, status, ethnicity and, increasingly, gender. Nineteenth century sociology ignored temporal and spatial variation within societies and treated them as big wholes unified by the institutional apparatus of the nation-state. Such places were scrutinised by adopting an objectifying gaze with which researchers established themselves as the centre — the norm — and those being researched as the periphery — the ‘other’. The ‘centre’ was, of course, seen as the place from which all the ‘right’ questions were being asked. Space was seen largely in terms of either urban and/or rural. Most commonly, at present, we teach it through a simplified analysis of Tonnies, where it becomes an Ur-narrative of gemeinschaft (kin, neighbourhood, stable, soil = good) and gesellschaft (isolated, separated, unstable, industrial = bad). Such simplistic approaches construct gemeinschaftlich communities as occupants of rural spaces and gesellschaftlich communities as occupants of urban spaces. Today we read of the necessity to ‘understand’ Tonnies without resorting to this kind of binary distinction. But all of us enjoy having ‘easy’ binary checklists to help us think. Thus while space/s have become named as either ‘urban’ or ‘rural’, their spatiality is often ignored in the sense that the specific ways in which space is constructed is left unexamined and the ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ left as pre-given and mythologised categories.

Much present day sociological thinking on the rural and
the urban remains influenced by the pioneering urban studies of the Chicago School during the 1920s and 1930s. These established the city as the site of study, but assumed that *gemeinschaftlich* characteristics were only to be found in non-urban environments. It was not until after World War II and into the early 1960s, as the metropolis came to be seen as increasingly morally bankrupt and close to chaos, that sociologists questioned these assumptions by exploring the city 'to see if elements of community' still existed. But the metropolis remains today as an icon of modernisation that is seen to embody an 'irreversible historical progression from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, a "zero-sum game" in which community is totally eradicated and superseded by mass society'. Along with community, space is also eradicated. Such hegemonic discourses of 'rural spaces' and 'community' inform the teaching of contemporary community analysis in sociology. Where does this lack of spatial consciousness come from? Gillian Rose argues that space has been treated as 'transparent' — something that we take for granted and thus never problematise in much the same way that 'gender' was once taken for granted. This 'illusion of transparency' reduces space to nothing more than a mental construct, a position quite at odds with the notion of 'catchment communities' mentioned in the introduction to this chapter! Where space is introduced into sociology it is most often through Bell and Newby's articulation of the difference bases for community. These include community as: (1) geographic; (2) local social systems; or (3) 'communion'. Community has since also become understood as 'ideology'. But the spatiality of all these 'definitions' is largely ignored, with 'space' only appearing in the first in the form of a geographic boundary.

The social construction of space involves far more than drawing a line across a map. British feminist Elizabeth Wilson, for example, points to connections between the dominant conservative ideology of the nuclear family and the polarity that is often drawn between those sets of qualities associated with rural communities and those associated with city life. As a result, place 'is very often characterised...through images of the domestic-material home', and while much community analysis and feminist scholarship has endeavoured to foreground such 'hidden places', 'space' as a variable continues to remain essentially missing.

All too often in rural sociological discourses, space has become 'a backdrop for...types of people, places, and social relationships' rather than something that is explicitly, or even implicitly, identified. The lack of a theoretical understanding of 'space' within mainstream sociology means that it is 'missing' within the development of sociological research inquiry. Thus, when teaching research methods, we focus on the familiar key variables — inevitably age, class, race and gender — but rarely, if ever, do we identify space as a variable for analysis. Instead, we background it, delete it or take it for granted. While we may be more comfortable with notions of 'place', this also rarely appears as a research variable. Because of the lack of 'incorporation of space into general sociological theory', sociologists cannot look to their own discipline 'to guide questions about social processes and spatial context'; we must look elsewhere.

**Crossing the borders**

My path through this complex discussion takes up the idea of 'border crossings' by looking beyond sociology to other disciplines, particularly geography, as a way of moving the debate forward. Pushing these theoretical boundaries means we also need to be taking up spatial and historical concepts in our work. These will enable us to broaden our outlooks and not continue to be tied to traditional (comfortable), urban-centric models of sociology. The metaphor of border crossings also works to open our eyes to new forms of research within communities, taking up the dimensions of space, place, power and identity. Doreen Massey suggests that the 'spatial organisation of society...is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result...It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations'.

This way of thinking about space liberates place as 'bounded...singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity', thus allowing us to consider place as constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that beyond. *Places viewed this way are open and porous.*
Derek Gregory suggests that our concept of ‘space’ has been limited largely because of our amazing capacity as human beings to ignore what does not make sense and, therefore, to ‘see’ only what we want to see. He describes the explorations of Cook, Banks and other eighteenth century ‘discoverers’ of the Antipodes (a spatial metaphor) to make his point. He describes the way in which their reports and observations were direct only in the (important) sense that they were produced by people who visited the lands they described...they continued to be mediated by European conceptual categories and European ways of seeing.

Case study: Aramac

These theoretical issues can be explored through the example of a case study. The small town of Aramac, in the Central West of Queensland, exemplifies the need to maintain a sense of the spatial in our sociology. In response to the continuing decline of population, the Aramac Shire Council in 1998 announced that it would sell home blocks for $1.00. Located 68 km north of the Capricorn Highway from Barcaldine, Aramac is over 500 km west of Rockhampton and 107 km east of Longreach.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Aramac became an important centre for wool production and developed as the administrative and commercial centre of the region. Its geographic situation provided an ideal ‘watering site’ for traffic between Queensland and South Australia, and its early settlers modelled it on the growing southern city of Melbourne. However, in the early twentieth century, the transfer of the railway line to the town of Longreach had a long-term impact on the area, and Aramac suffered diminished growth which continues today. While the town retains its wide streets and the main road bisecting the town continues to bring traffic from ‘down south’ to ‘up north’, it has been dying slowly over the past twenty years. In the late 1970s there were over 2,000 residents but now there are less than 880, with more men than women. Consequently, services have declined: there is no bank, the high school has approximately twelve students and so is under threat, and the hospital, of which the community is justly proud, is also under threat of closure. About 18 per cent of the population of the town are over the age of 60 years — half of these are over the age of 70 years, and three-quarters of these over the age of 75 years. In other words, the proportion of ‘old-old’ in Aramac is high at 34 per cent. In offering land for just $1.00 the Shire is acting out a desperate plan to stop the slow crumbling of the town’s infrastructure.

Aramac offers a site of ‘paradoxical space’, a place where there is a strong sense of community and a heightened sense of needing to challenge seeming despatialised decisions being made about its future from boardrooms in cities. It offers a metaphor for that sense of alienation, as it is a planned environment within borders — its streets are hemmed in on all sides by a stock fence, and its entrance and exit are marked by grids. Locals speak of the world ‘outside’ as being ‘beyond the grid’. The grid is a very important spatial delineator, both materially and metaphorically. Geographers have long defined spaces by ‘drawing lines around a place’. Sociologists have tended to do this as well. There is a boundary around Aramac — in a real and metaphoric sense. It also raises another dilemma — that Aramac’s boundary can be seen as a ‘mask presented by the community to the outside world...it is the community’s public face’. The importance of the multiplicity of space/s and place/s in Aramac enable us to see that it is absolutely ‘not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place that everyone shares’ and that ‘the global sense’ of Aramac needs to bring in its Indigenous past, its colonised past and its possibly fragile future. Importantly, it cannot be simply defined ‘by drawing its enclosing boundaries’.

The ‘specimen table’ was the space where such observations were made, separated from their indigenous environment and their Indigenous context, labelled in painstaking detail, connected by their difference from the European as centre/norm. Replacing the word ‘European’ with ‘urban’ or indeed with ‘sociological’ takes us closer to the point I am making. Writing of a more familiar social science, Van Maanen describes how much of the work of the 1920s was of the nature of ‘verandah’ anthropology:
Whether aboard a ship or living for a short time in a mission house or colonial outpost, the borderland ethnographers of the day sought raw, unvarnished facts of native life while maintaining a good deal of social distance from the intimacies and hassles of that life. This metaphor suggests a representation of the way in which we often undertake our research outside metropolitan spaces — as visitors, as tourists, bringing our 'specimens' back to our 'tables' to categorise and 'make sense of' them. Van Maanen describes many such 'visits' as 'armchair mode[s] of cultural investigation [effectively] ... remain[ing] at home and... reading about faraway places and peoples'. This is an approach that echoes the nineteenth century influences in the social sciences that tended toward an investigation of societies as systems 'whose social structures were viewed as consistent over space, and where there is little analysis of diverse social times or [understanding] that places and organisations are in important senses timed'.

To summarise these arguments briefly, spatialising our thinking about communities allows us to:

- consider issues of power and identity;
- incorporate difference;
- challenge 'centre/periphery' arguments;
- incorporate history and geography in our analyses; and
- recognise alternative forms of knowledge.

**Taking up a spatialised perspective**

A 'spatialised' perspective toward rural communities becomes possible when we are open to connections between power, knowledge and space — building on Foucault's point that 'space is fundamental to any form of communal life... any exercise of power'. As Soja argues:

Those who are territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilise to resist, drawing upon their putative positioning, their assigned 'otherness', to struggle against this power-filled imposition. These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the ordered workings of power in perceived, conceived, and lived spaces.

The 'spaces in which social practices occur affect the nature of those practices', and so identities and experiences in rural environments cannot with ease be 'measured' against, or compared with, urban experiences. We can, however, consider ourselves to be 'poised' in a theoretical space between the rural and the urban, a theoretical space which explores the dimensions of discourses about 'community' which shape current meanings. Such meanings can be seen as having discursive power formed socially, culturally, historically, politically and economically. There may be conflicting discourses about the same issue, but some discourses come to predominate and become the ones within which others are framed. Some discourses will support and promote the status quo, while others will offer resistance to it. In the process of such resistances, the dominant discourse/s will 'marginalise and dismiss the alternative voices'. The way in which discourses are structured also determines who is able to participate in them, and who is marginalised from them. Soja links discourse with space and power by arguing that our understanding of:

'we' and 'they' are dichotomously spatialized and enclosed in an imposed territoriality... that emanate from the centre-periphery relation. In this sense, hegemonic power universalistes and contains difference in real and imagined spaces and places.

Or, as Steve Pile more succinctly puts it, 'acts of resistance take place through specific geographies... there are, somewhat plainly, geographies of resistance'. All too often, as the readings in this collection show, we define communities by excluding difference. We tend to homogenise, universalise and, at the same time, try to remain in our comfort zones. The power/knowledge/space argument challenges not only our way of thinking about communities, but also how we conduct ourselves as sociology practitioners.

My own pathway toward a 'spatialised consciousness' and my first attempt at border crossing became more focused through a reading of poststructuralist feminism and, in a search for alternative approaches to 'difference' and 'identity', I was inspired by this sceptical, yet engaged debate within poststructuralism. In seeking alternate methodologies which supported a less structured, more intimate approach, one which allowed a 'break down' of 'the typically unequal power relationship/s between a researcher and her informants',
I came to appreciate an analysis of discourse not as language or text 'but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs'.46 Within this framework, meanings are negotiated and contested within 'fields of force' wherein power relies heavily on access to scientific or expert knowledge.47 Discursive fields 'overlap' with each other, affect and compete with each other, and rely on each other's authority to maintain their own.48 This reading of feminist poststructuralists enabled an understanding of the intersections between the dominant and marginal which allow 'spaces' for resistance to emerge. At any one time, there are only a limited number of competing discourses in circulation, and it is here that a site of struggle can be articulated. Power cannot be understood without understanding resistance and the infinite shapes and forms it may take:

the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilising groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour.49

Power itself shapes the form and nature of resistance and, at any one time, the way in which resistance is expressed is influenced by the power against which it is confronted; 'struggles are defined in relation to power, they cannot exist in a relationship of exteriority to it'.50

Pile51 takes up the 'trialectic' of power/knowledge/space to argue a case for 'geographies of resistance'. He argues that 'spatial technologies of domination' demand an understanding of resistance that is more complex and sophisticated than simple one-way models of domination and subordination. He points out how 'strategies' and 'tactics' allow for a play of resistances across spaces, and often can be seen as 'multiple, dynamic and weak...and only ever in part controlled by the practices of domination' as the 'powerful are continually vigilant of the borders'.52 Resistance can thus be seen as operating in two ways against the 'topographies of spatial domination': first, 'it moves across them under the noses of the enemy, seeking to create new meanings out of imposed meanings, to re-work and divert space to other ends'; and second, it 'seeks to appropriate space, to make new spaces'.53

How does one incorporate a newly 'spatialised conscious-ness' into research and teaching? I look here to some feminist geographers to provide helpful signposts. On the dilemmas of space and place, Gillian Rose argues that the perceived malestream 'transparency' of the one elides the gendered nature of the other,54 and points out the importance of the use of language (of power/knowledge) in our 'different geography of the future'.55 Gibson-Graham56 offers another helpful signpost, suggesting that both 'space' and 'place' need to be understood politically, and that our role/s as feminist social scientists is to perceive our collective and individual project as one of 'discursive destabilisation'.57 I am aware that all too often my previous research has maintained fixed binary opposites of urban/rural and, in describing rural communities in this way, I have fallen back into traditional/tired/reactionary narratives of experience instead of taking up ideas for a utopian vision. As Ruth Levitas suggests, these can offer a 'desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life'.58 The challenge for those of us working in rural Australia in the early years of the twenty-first century is to accept difference, understand resistances, celebrate our historical antecedents (without excluding those that 'don't fit') and maintain a high level of reflexivity (difficult to undertake, but important to attempt). The challenge for all of us thinking, researching and working in such sites is to see these material and metaphoric connections of power/knowledge/space; to recognise how we so define the 'inside' one way and 'the outside in another [that it] is yet another form of the construction of a counter-position between us and them'.59 In developing new dimensions of community, a spatial understanding of location becomes a key to moving the discussion about regional/rural beyond the 'non-urban'. Taking these ideas up to a discussion of the relationship between location/space/power/gender, Pile draws on the work of Mohanty to argue that:

Location is simultaneously about unity and difference, about definitions of who occupies the same or a similar place and who does not, which do not presume — and, further, undermine the presumption — that there is a sameness to people's location in particular oppressive power relations and a consequent sameness of their struggle...Location is a spatiality of resistance in the sense that it has to be struggled for and toward.60
How can we undertake this task? First, we need to move outside of existing discipline boundaries of sociology, and consider other knowledges such as geography, anthropology and others. Second, we need to move beyond the 'grids' that define our (metaphoric and real) borders. Third, to do this, we need to question the 'border patrollers' who continue to challenge such work as being 'soft', 'not empirical' or less than 'rigorous'. Or those who suggest that this form of research has no value because it cannot be generalised, thus again denying space. Or others who are 'not interested' in small community studies in rural Australia, but express great fascination in the mysteries and exotics of small places in, for example, China or Africa. Anywhere other than Here. Fourth, we need to take up the politics of places and join with these communities in their struggle to resist despatialising forces. Finally, in doing so, we will need to continue to challenge our colleagues who take space for granted, who believe that one place is pretty much like any other, and whose work elides the struggles of small communities as a consequence.

Conclusion

I recognise only too well that this task to realign the way we think about space and place is not a simple one. Just as it took a generation of social scientists to accept the validity of gender as a variable, I expect it to be a similar 'hard slog' in the case of space. Those of us living outside metropolitan centres have a responsibility to maintain our focus in this regard. Those of us working as researchers in regional/rural settings in Australia need to maintain our awareness of place, of landscape and of identity. We need to recognise just how important meanings of place are to people and not to just dismiss those meanings in a structural analysis which denies their own experiences and their own narratives. As sociologists, we need to be open to fluid borders and possible crossings of discipline boundaries in our endeavour to enable Australia to maintain a sustainable future, one where small communities remain essential to the mosaic of everyday life and practice.
CHAPTER 5
Beyond life in ‘the bush’:
Australian rural cultures
Ian Gray and Emily Phillips

‘Rural culture’ is not only something that is drawn on and influenced by distinctly ‘rural people’ but also an urban society which idolises rurality with help from, among others, the media and real estate developers. The inherent relativism of rurality becomes apparent when one considers its dependence on a notion of urbanity. There can be no rural without a notion of urban, and vice versa. Attempts to specify the characteristics of rurality in terms of contrast with urban society fell into dispute when both were found to be products of the forces of capitalism. Nevertheless, it is argued here that there are distinctive features of rural culture or cultures. The origins of those cultures are open to debate and clearly differ between rural and urban. But who is to say that urban constructions of rural are any more or less rural than that of farmers? One might respond to that question by identifying farmers as genuinely rural, but there are many kinds of farms and farmers.

Culture offers one potential explanation for the nature of rural society. In brief, culture consists of the ways in which
people live their lives and the values and beliefs which lie behind what they do in everyday activities. In these ways, understanding culture contributes to understanding how people interact with each other, how they interact with their economic and physical environments, and how they make sense of their social world. Cultures are not static, but subject to tensions within and forces from outside. However, culture only offers a partial explanation. It cannot be detached from the structures within which people go about their lives — that is, the hierarchies of wealth and influence, advantage and disadvantage — which place people in social relationships with others.

When applying the concept of culture to rural Australia, two important issues arise. The first is the problem of consistency over time. As cultures change, maintenance of social relationships becomes less rigid and their distinctiveness can be questioned. The second is consistency over space. Just as Australia is an ethnically diverse society, so it is culturally diverse in terms of rurality and urbanity. Rurality can also be diverse over space along with the cultures identified within it. The most obvious spatial differentiation occurs between town and country — townspeople live different lives to those of farmers. Small urban places within agricultural regions differ socially from large cities in the same regions; towns based on extractive industries may differ from both; small towns may differ culturally from each other due to the different economic and social histories of their development. However, it remains reasonable to discuss rural cultures generically, as long as diversity over space and time is accounted for and care is taken not to subsume particular cultural attributes under an assumed, singular, overwhelming culture of rurality. This chapter acknowledges diversity in rural cultures while simultaneously analysing culture ethnographically. We focus on the living experiences of rural people rather than representations of them, identifying common and distinctive features of rural cultures.

Rural ideology

There are several interweaving ideologies that impact not only on the lived experience of rural Australians, but also on the identities, cultures and constructions of rural and urban resi-
This section identifies some distinctively rural ideologies. *Countrymindedness* is the term given to the most pervasive ideological feature of rural culture across space and time. Used to refer to a set of ideas shared by rural dwellers, this ideology is based on the differentiation of rural from urban Australia in terms of both the cultural (rurality offering a better way of life) and structural (necessity to defend the rural interest against urban rapaciousness). 'Countrymindedness' has enabled rural people to understand the relationship between their communities and the cities, both places where important decisions affecting their lives are made. Similarly, the term *agrarianism* refers to the belief that farming is ennobling as a way of life, that it underpins an ideal society and, at the same time, provides the food and fibre necessary for the larger society. Australian rural culture exhibits both these sets of beliefs, which can be combined into the broader concept of 'rural ideology'.

Rural ideology has been shown to be much more than a curiosity of Australian cultural life. While not always appreciated, it forms the basis of important power relationships both inside rural communities and between country and city. It has also provided the basis for rural political organisation, notably the National (formerly Country) Party and most recently the 'Country Summit' group contesting the New South Wales 1999 state election. In this regard it may be seen as an ideological prop to the defence of rural interests. However, the extent to which the real interests of rural people have been pursued by 'their' political party is questionable. Rural ideology has long been seen as an ideological underpinning for the exploitation of farm families. As small farms have suffered the exigencies of climates and markets, so farm families have been sustained by a belief in their own nobility and the necessity of their work. At the same time, the corporations of agribusiness — among all the urban based industries which buy, process and/or sell agricultural products — have enjoyed relatively consistent growth and prosperity.

Rural ideology is also significant at the local community level. It has been seen as a political resource available to farm and business people to sustain belief in the importance of their activities at the expense of the interests of other groups, who struggle to have their concerns placed on the local political agenda. Similarly, belief in the significance of local...
community is very strong in a culture of competition among communities for achievements, ranging from sports championships to the attraction of significant economic development. However, this also leads to the exclusion of some groups (such as Indigenous people, those born overseas, the young or the old) deemed by a powerful sector of the community to be ineligible for admission as productive community members. In these ways, cultural values, beliefs and practices recreate and reinforce social structural cleavages.

Cultures and social divisions

Some social divisions have withered over time, as have cultural contrasts among communities, such as those like Griffith (NSW) and Hahndorf (SA) which have been profoundly influenced, if not created, by non-Anglo cultures. There are many other examples, including the tobacco-growing areas of northern Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. But while ethnic divisions may not be so apparent now, cultural distinctiveness can actively and visibly persist, as has occurred in Griffith and irrigation areas along the Murray River in South Australia (populated extensively by people of Italian origin) and the Sikh community of Woolgoolga (NSW) which participated in the development of the banana industry. While the culture is not necessarily so apparent in mining towns, a history of class structuration has left many with visible evidence of class relations. For example, in Broken Hill and Kurri Kurri the local communities have been basically working class; the owners and managers have tended to live in metropolitan cities, leaving a community with a strong sense of attachment and commitment to its class interests.

All rural communities — whether clearly differentiated along racial, ethnic or class lines — possess systems of social status. Clear distinctions of wealth or other attributes, such as longevity in the community or reputation for community service, bestow prestige and esteem in the most seeming culturally and structurally homogeneous communities. But such differentiation is moderated by belief in the significance of the local community among all members and often by the simple fact that they live in a small community which needs widespread support in order to maintain its institutions. Such egalitarianism based on localism can moderate even the most
seemingly differentiated community in terms of class.\textsuperscript{9} However, this may be less effective in addressing or uniting those communities divided by race\textsuperscript{10} or by a universal gender based system of inequality.\textsuperscript{11}

Perhaps the most readily apparent structural cleavage lies between townspeople and farmers.\textsuperscript{12} Local hierarchies and social status systems are associated with a long tradition of cultural differentiation between town and farm people where farmers, usually, are at the top of the local status ladder.\textsuperscript{13} These hierarchies are manifest in numerous forms. In Cowra (NSW), for example, some town-dwellers felt that farmers could be aloof, snobbish and arrogant in their belief that the town depended on them, while a farmer claimed that town business people treated farmers with contempt, believing them to be slow-witted.\textsuperscript{14} The relationship can be portrayed as one of mutual structural interdependence, with town-based small businesses dependent not just on agriculture but also on the small family-based system of agriculture. This still remains typical, although not universal, throughout rural Australia. Farm families, conversely, are also dependent on towns for their supply of inputs and marketing products. Increasingly, they are also dependent on towns as sources of off-farm employment to maintain the viability of the farm, especially in times of drought or hardship.

Beside division, rural community members can share a strong sense of belonging. This includes a strong sense of attachment among town-dwellers when a community is threatened, despite many being excluded from aspects of local social life\textsuperscript{15} and social action.\textsuperscript{16} When bushfire threatened the small NSW town of Arulan, a spontaneous and ‘heightened sense of interpersonal and district commitment’ was created. While temporary, it was, nevertheless, derived from pre-existing bonds.\textsuperscript{17} In these circumstances, and in the more mundane conditions of economic and environmental decline, the capacity of communities to rally their members to resist forces posing a mutual threat becomes very important. In such situations, ‘countrymindedness’ can be a mutual resource, as it offers a means by which to make sense of external threats while simultaneously fuelling a sense of attachment and feeling of belonging to the community. This point, alongside the ways in which rural ideology can lead to exploitation and marginalisation, should not be neglected.
Farm cultures

Farm families are sites of social reproduction as well as agricultural production. Culture is central to both. It can be seen to underpin the farm family, farming communities and the practice of farming.

Family tradition and life cycle in farming are central to the maintenance of agricultural systems, impinging on issues ranging from basic farm survival to the social and cultural division of labour within the farm family, intergenerational transfer and pooling of resources, and issues of inter- and intrafamilial decision making. Intergenerational transfer and succession of the family farm affect the workings and viability of both the farm and the family in very significant ways. Clashes can occur between the interests of family members and the farm business amid articulation with market forces. These are manifest, for example, in issues of part-time farming and off-farm work under pressures for change amid globalisation and the diminishing terms of trade for agriculture (see chapters 13 and 15). Studies have also shown how cultural values can be essential to the survival of the family farm. Farmers register a high level of satisfaction with farming work which makes them willing to forego potentially more lucrative options outside farming in order to preserve their farm lifestyle and maintain attachment to their land (see chapter 15).

Farming is constructed as a gendered and masculine practice, maintaining a form of patriarchy or male hegemony. The masculine culture of farming facilitates the definition and maintenance of farming as a masculine enterprise through cultural institutions such as farm succession (see chapter 16), family respectability and community participation. As Sachs, Whatmore and Alston have argued, the contribution of women to the running of farms is largely ignored and marginalised within the farming community. Agricultural labour tends to be narrowly defined by farmers, and thus farm work is clearly separated from domestic work, and the huge input of women to the reproduction of family labour is ignored. The gendered division of labour tends to channel women into lower status jobs which are viewed as peripheral to production. Hence women tend to be termed as helpmates, 'gofers' and hands rather than actual farmers, managers or decision-makers.
Farming communities also have specific cultural traits in the forms of moral codes which impact on their social and economic characteristics. In particular, moral obligations to families and neighbours and informal systems of exchange are common in many farming communities and can be vital to farm survival. Culture offers principles for social organisation. While wealth, respectability and farming ability are important, farming practice or being a ‘good farmer’ is perhaps the most important determinant of local status. The role that elite women play, both through community service and social networking, constructs and reproduces a ‘moral economy’ of service which structures social interaction. Women obtain status through service to the community, setting a moral code of rights and responsibilities against which community interests are seen to be served. These moral notions, by which people identify what is significant about others and so order each other into hierarchies, define an individual’s basic orientation toward life: ‘what is worth doing and sacrificing for’. Farming practice is a social and cultural phenomenon, constructed and reconstructed through a whole host of social and cultural factors operating within the farm family, local community, wider farming culture, and national and global processes. In particular, farmers work in ways that will gain them social standing according to the values embedded in their culture. They thereby recreate their own culture, asserting the significance they place on its attributes like farm family succession, community service and the other valued symbols of good farming. Ethnicity interacts with farming practice in such a way that differential farming approaches can be allocated to communities of different ethnic origin. Social stratification delimits the range of viable agronomic choices and kinship arrangements influence the adoption of agriculture conservation technology. It is notable that, despite the apparent productivism of Australian agriculture, the praised and valued characteristics of what is seen to be good farming are seldom related solely to accumulation of wealth. It has long been observed that farmers do not always respond, as others might, to economic forces. Their culture is strong enough to maintain the valorisation of the non-economic rewards of farming, such as family continuity in its relationship with the land. For this reason, the
culture of farming is a very important influence on systems of agricultural production and the lifestyle and wellbeing of farm people.

Conclusion

Consideration of rural cultures over time brings into focus an important issue related to change: Australia’s rural society is changing rapidly, restructuring amid globalisation, enduring the impacts of environmental problems and changing with the wider processes of societal change. Will rural cultures continue to offer people a means of understanding their world and prescriptions for the conduct of their lives?

The 1990s have seen rapid social change in rural Australia and many of the characteristics of rural culture are under question. Concern has been expressed that rural community institutions are losing their capacity to organise because of demographic change: the aging of rural populations and the simple depopulation of rural areas. There are fewer and fewer people available to participate in community activities and those who remain have fewer resources (time and money) to contribute. The interaction provided by local formal and informal organisations, including just having a chat with a neighbour, has sustained rural cultures. The decline of farm tradition in terms of succession has been found to threaten community values which underpin the long-term approach to farming upon which land conservation values are based. A declining capacity to organise (one of the underpinnings of traditional rural culture) further threatens that culture and simultaneously reduces community capacity to resist the forces of decline. It is therefore reasonable to question the future of rurality as it is presently perceived. The images that are popularly associated with rurality, such as the ‘battling’ (usually male) farmer devoted to maintaining farm and community for subsequent generations, are increasingly rare depictions of the Australian farming way of life. More than ever the image appears to be sustained by an urban romanticising of farm and country life.

Nevertheless, countrymindedness seems to persevere, even when some of the organisations that have historically expressed it come under question. Rural restructuring amid globalisation is furthering contrasts between social conditions
in metropolitan and regional Australia. More directly, communities are looking to assert themselves with expressions of their cultural individuality: what makes them rural and thereby different from urban and other rural communities? Ever stronger assertions of rural identity, based on differentiation, create ground for ostracism and exclusion, based on notions of cultural superiority and sometimes racism. The risks of this flowing into Australian political life have become apparent with the growth in the strength, or at least the public prominence, of fundamentalist politics. Where the real counterparts of rural idealism diminish, there is a significant danger that fundamentalist interpretations of change will promote social division, further denying the images associated with community life upon which rural ideology has been based.

There is a further issue emerging for analysts of rural culture, in terms of reconciling the images of rurality portrayed in both city and country as rural with a lived reality of rural people. Can what is put forward as rural culture continue to underpin the values and habits by which rural people conduct their lives? For rural people, the question is one of whether or not cultural change, as it accompanies social and economic restructuring and environmental decay, will continue to underpin a viable society in which a socially and economically rewarding life remains feasible. Attempts to answer the question can reverberate on the culture itself, leaving the future of rural culture even more difficult to predict. The question to be asked is not so much whether Australian rural culture can survive — more than likely urban interests will preserve it as an image for their own advantage — but rather what will be the responses of those who value rurality as a lived experience? What aspects will be abandoned, intensified or in some way seen as distorted as they seek to assert their cultural identity?
By any measure, the impact of agriculture on the environment is immense. As an activity that relies on the substantial modification of ecosystems and which covers some 61 per cent of the Australian landmass, this is hardly surprising. The key issue, however, is not whether agriculture is responsible for environmental change, but whether or not those changes are sustainable in the long term. Just what a sustainable agriculture might look like is a difficult and contentious question that we will examine further in this chapter. Nevertheless, in very general terms, sustainability is defined as the ability of current generations to meet their needs and aspirations without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same thing. So while sustainability is an inevitably slippery concept, we do know that aiming to achieve it has something to do with the maintenance of ecological processes and biodiversity, along with equity, justice and caution in relation to our use of resources. We also know that sustainability has become a popular concept, espoused in almost all areas of government policy and, together with 'the environment', a regular focus of attention for the mass media. While the language of 'sustainability' is relatively new,
the search for stable and resilient agricultural systems has been a central feature of 200 years of European agriculture in Australia. Yet the evidence suggests that sustainability is still a long way off. This chapter begins with an overview of environmental degradation associated with Australian agriculture before turning to its main task, a sociological analysis of the social relationships that are responsible for these impacts.

**Land degradation in Australian agriculture**

A report released jointly by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) in April 2000 estimates that rural environmental degradation in Australia costs in excess of $2 billion annually and could rise to over $6 billion annually by 2020. The spatial extent of salinity alone could increase from 2.5 million to 15.5 million hectares unless action is taken. Tangible costs within this estimate can be found in Table 19.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of degradation</th>
<th>Estimate ($million per year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salinity</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acid soils</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodic soils or structural decline</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigation salinity</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water quality</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,365</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


More difficult to quantify costs that are not listed in Table 19.1 include:
- degradation of riparian (streambank), wetland and estuarine ecosystems leading to loss of commercial and recreational fisheries, reduced tourism income, increased water treatment costs and salinisation of irrigation water;
- coastal sedimentation and nutrient influx and associated damage to the Great Barrier Reef and other reefs;
- general loss of environmental amenity and associated tourism returns;
- loss of biodiversity, remnant ecosystems, habitat and species, and damage to parks and reserves; and
- loss of carbon stores.

These estimates certainly paint a confronting and compelling picture. The NFF/ACF report uses them to argue that an investment of $60 billion will be necessary over the next ten years, of which $33.5 billion should come from government. A further $320 million per annum, it argues, will be needed to fund ongoing maintenance. This compares with total current Commonwealth expenditure of about $500 million per annum. These costs are based on the achievement of sustainable rural natural resource management targets proposed by the Commonwealth's department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia (AFFA) in 1999 (see Table 19.2 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>There should be an increase to 75% in the number of landholders and communities actively monitoring resource conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There should be no net loss of native vegetation within each jurisdiction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All stressed rivers and a significant proportion of other priority regulated rivers should have an environmental flow regime to ensure maintenance of ecological processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By 2010</td>
<td>15% of all agricultural produce should be from environmental accredited properties (ISO 14000 or other).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A majority of farms should be using a whole farm plan, which is consistent with regional strategies.

There should be double the number of landholders and community leaders participating in rural training and leadership courses that incorporate natural resource management. There should be an increase in levels of participation by landholders in Landcare and other natural resource management groups.

There should be a net gain in native vegetation cover and a net reduction in species and ecological communities listed as threatened or endangered.

By 2015 At least 50% of regions should have information management systems that are comprehensive, supported and accessible, including through the Internet.

There should be a net reduction in the area of productive land lost to acidity, salinity, sodicity, soil carbon loss, structure decline and soil erosion.


Specific actions for achieving these proposed goals include the widespread reafforestation of rural Australia, perennial pasture establishment, fencing, education programs and government/landholder partnerships. Additional outcomes are identified as the development of new forest industries, increased farm profitability, reduced net greenhouse gas emissions and the slowing of extinction rates.

The scale and urgency of the task identified in the NFF/ACF report is immense. Clearly, the social and environmental sustainability of rural Australia is at risk unless major changes are made in the way rural landscapes are managed. So why don’t we just get on with it?

As chapter 20 shows, many people are getting on with it. But it is important that as we do so, we keep in mind some very difficult questions. To start, the very question of whether or not a human-induced change in an environment is degrading depends on what features of that environment are highly valued, by whom and for what. As obvious as it might seem that erosion, blue-green algae and salinity are ‘bad’, there is a great deal of debate over the scale at which they actually stop being natural or acceptable and become ‘bad’. Meanwhile, debates over the goods or evils of genetically modified organisms and agricultural chemicals — both of which are ignored in the NFF/ACF and AFFA reports — are proving divisive and protracted. Such debates reflect the social complexities generated by divergent attitudes, values, aspirations and interests, but they also reflect the particular nature of many of the ecosystem processes associated with rural environmental degradation. Critical here is the largely diffuse nature of agriculture’s impact on environments — that is, both the causes and effects of agricultural land degradation are usually widely dispersed across the landscape. Tree clearing in one part of a catchment, for example, may contribute to salinisation or sedimentation in another, but these effects may be many kilometres distant and may not become apparent for some decades. The activities leading to environmental damage are thus spread through space and time, and involve potentially thousands of farmers for whom a host of more, localised problems may assume higher priority. As a consequence, strategies to address rural environmental degradation have often focused on trying to understand and change the attitudes and behaviours of individual farmers.

Do farmers have an attitude problem?

Some of the most popular explanations for land degradation on Australian farms revolve around farmers’ attitudes. These explanations rest on the belief that scientists have developed technical solutions to the vast majority of land degradation problems. In the past, many of these solutions required substantial investment in farm infrastructure. Soil conservation earthworks, for example, such as dams and contour banks, were designed to control water flow and reduce soil erosion but provided few immediate productivity benefits and were not necessarily reflected in property values. Recent years, however, have seen more emphasis on land management prac-
behaviours (financial constraints, lack of knowledge or experience, skilled labour shortages and climatic variability all come easily to mind), but it is more important to ask some questions about the assumptions that underlie discussion of this apparent contradiction. The first question relates to what sustainable farming practice might be and who defines it as such; while the second asks why debate about the adoption of different farming practices is focused almost solely on farmers, rather than on all those involved in the complex relations of the production of agricultural commodities.

Critics of the notion that technical solutions currently exist for most land degradation problems range from those who question the extent to which technologies such as minimum tillage have actually been adapted to the full range of environmental conditions and crops grown in Australia, through to those, such as organic farmers, who question the basic premise that lasting solutions to land degradation lie in this kind of technology at all. Either way, in the absence of a universal consensus regarding the environmental claims of current technical solutions to land degradation, it is nonsensical to accuse anybody of either a lack of an environmental ethic, or a contradiction between their attitudes and behaviour, simply because they do not adopt the conservation farming package. This is simply a circular argument. From farmers’ points of view, a cautious approach to the adoption of any new technology is highly rational. Many technologies developed by scientists in the past have failed to live up to expectations in the long term, and so may the current crop of recommended and ‘best-bet’ practices.

From a sociological point of view, it is also important to note that new technologies do not evolve in a social vacuum, but reflect the priorities and interests of particular social groups. To put it crudely, it is in the interests of scientists to define ‘problems’ and to develop ‘solutions’ based on what they are likely to receive funding to support; it is in the interests of those who sell farm inputs that such solutions be based on the use of still more inputs; it is in the interests of governments faced with trade deficits to promote high productivity in order to maximise export earnings; and so on. Even though the vast majority of land management decisions made on Australian farms may be made by individual farmers, the options available to these land managers are profoundly shaped by the networks of social relationships within which they, and the technologies they have at their disposal, are enmeshed.
What does 'sustainability' mean anyway?

The understanding of sustainability embodied in ideas like conservation farming is that farmers must aim to balance the inputs and outputs of their farming operation as efficiently as possible. This understanding supposes that while inputs should not be wasted, high levels of production cannot be maintained unless they are balanced with appropriate farm inputs. Agricultural chemicals, fertilisers and biotechnologies are seen to help ensure optimum conditions for plant and animal growth by controlling pests, ensuring nutrient needs are met, and maximising the efficiency with which these are converted into saleable produce. Together, these serve to both maximise productivity and minimise environmental damage caused by the loss of nutrients, chemicals, water and soil. This high input vision of sustainability has achieved such wide acceptance within Australian agricultural research bodies and industry groups that the maintenance of fertiliser applications is listed as a key 'indicator' of sustainability in a recent report detailing Australian agriculture’s performance in moving toward sustainability. At first glance this appears to make a lot of sense, but it is not an uncontroversial view. According to their critics, agricultural chemicals pose significant dangers to farmers, nearby communities and consumers, and offer only short-term solutions to pests which inevitably develop resistance to them. This is to say nothing of the environmental impacts associated with the manufacture of agricultural chemicals, fuels and fertilisers, a factor that must also be taken into account in any genuinely holistic assessment of the sustainability of agriculture. Among farmers, the high input vision of sustainability is most openly rejected by a small, but growing, number of organic producers who stress the minimisation of synthetic inputs and place greater importance on the enhancement of biological processes to control pests and maintain fertility. Many so-called 'conventional' farmers are also uneasy about chemical use in particular, but feel that they have no choice but to continue using them if they are to maintain financial viability.

What we see, therefore, in these competing ideas about sustainable farming practice is a range of ways of understanding the environment and the relationship of humans to it. This suggests that the key sociological question is not so much what shapes farmers' attitudes to the environment (like motherhood, just about everybody is ‘for’ the environment), but what it is that shapes their ideas about what a healthy agricultural environment might look like, and what their own role within that environment might be. So why do farmers, on the whole, pursue the high input path to sustainability? Now in very general terms it is possible to say that, despite their cautious approach to the adoption of technological innovations and given that most farmers associate looking after their land and being a good farmer with high levels of productivity, they are also generally accepting of high input models of sustainability that promise consistency with this self-understanding. But this is an altogether too general statement, and one which highlights the potential danger of focusing too much on what farmers believe, rather than looking to more direct constraints on their actions. Ultimately, what farmers do on a day-to-day basis as they interact with their environment is shaped by a variety of social relationships. It is toward an understanding of these relationships that the rest of this chapter is devoted.

Shifting the focus: The political economy of land degradation

The political economy of agriculture developed by proponents of the new rural sociology offers a powerful critique of explanations for land degradation that focus on individual attitudes or attributes. Political economists argue that it is impossible to understand agriculture without understanding its location within capitalist networks of production and exchange. According to O'Connor, there are two basic contradictions within capitalist systems that ultimately undermine their economic and ecological sustainability:

- **Demand crises** — The first ‘contradiction of capitalism’ is based on the tendency for individual enterprises to attempt to increase their market share by raising productivity and lowering costs (for example, by shedding labour). When multiple enterprises do this, however, it results in overproduction relative to consumer demand and declining prices.

- **Cost crises** — The second ‘contradiction of capitalism’ is based on the need for individual enterprises to reduce costs in order to remain competitive relative to other producers. Where the social and environmental costs of production can be exter-
and the introduction of conservation farming technology, much of this increase in productivity has been based on

Squeezed by rising costs and declining profits, individual farmers do to enhance their profitability undermine their ability to maintain those profits in the longer term. Declining terms of trade have been faced by producers since the 1950s. Squeezed by rising costs and declining profits, individual farmers have responded by adopting technologies that increase labour productivity but contribute to further overproduction and downward pressure on prices. Since the 1980s, and the introduction of conservation farming technology, much of this increase in productivity has been based on increasing rates of input use and land use intensity. Altogether, this suggests that in the absence of some form of direct incentive it will continue to be very difficult for farmers to engage in environmental protection that does not provide short-term returns.

Now, as the political economy literature has also highlighted, farmers are not the only actors involved in agriculture. Government policies and programs are obviously of great importance, but beyond this, many sociologists argue that there has been a trend toward the transfer of control over on-farm decision-making away from individual farmers and toward corporate agribusiness. Through relationships with firms supplying farm inputs and trading in farm outputs, family farmers’ decision-making is both directly and indirectly shaped in the interests of corporate capital. Direct forms of control, such as production contracts and the ownership of genetic material, are discussed in more detail in chapters 13 and 22. While these appear to be of increasing importance, it can be argued that indirect forms of influence may be more extensive due to the current variety of marketing and input-sourcing options available to producers within most broadacre agricultural industries. Indirect forms of influence include a variety of practices that attempt to attach symbols representative of environmental responsibility and good farming practice to the specific practices and products promoted by agribusiness. Examples include:

- **Advertising** — which attempts to construct chemical use as, above all, effective, and fertiliser use as grounded in a scientific and factual base. While fertilisers are represented as inputs that — through the application of science — can be applied in exactly the right form and amount for maximum effectiveness and productivity, chemicals are sold on the basis of farmers’ placing trust in the established track record of proprietary brand products with slogans such as ‘It’s got to be the season for Glean’. A combination of trust and science is thus represented as necessary to safeguard productivity, reduce risk, protect the environment and maximise the efficiency of labour.

- **Sponsorships** — especially of field days, trials and other activities used by farmers to gather information and to discuss farming practices. Sponsorship of the National Landcare Program, for example, enables firms to both represent themselves as responsible corporate citizens, committed to supporting the
efforts of communities to address environmental problems by providing funding to Landcare groups, and to represent their products as potential tools in these same efforts by providing them to Landcare groups and government agencies for use in trial and demonstration projects.31

Farmers are not, of course, fooled into following the prescriptions of agribusiness firms simply because they advertise a product or provide it free of charge to a Landcare group. Much of the influence of these representations lies in their reinforcement of the idea that healthy landscapes are productive landscapes; something already accepted by the majority of Australian farmers. But this is not the whole story. The embodiment of the high input model within both public and private research agendas also plays a substantial role in shaping what people ‘know’ about environmental problems and how to deal with them.

Risk minimisation, knowledge production and agricultural intensification

The overwhelming bulk of Australian agricultural research is directed either straight into increasing production, or into supporting the high input model of sustainability described above.32 By contrast, organic alternatives have frequently been ridiculed and discredited33 due to the belief by governments that productivity cannot be maintained without the judicious use of synthetic inputs.34 The significance of this research agenda lies in the ways in which it embodies particular problem definitions and the possible solutions that are made available to farmers. Despite the unease which many farmers feel toward high input agriculture, ignoring or rejecting the ‘knowledge’ created by agri-science agencies is a risky strategy. For many producers, farming is risky enough due to the uncertainties of weather and market conditions without adding to that risk by adopting a fundamentally different approach to their farming to that of their neighbours and the agri-science agencies that support and advise them.35

One of the ‘solutions’ to unsustainable farming practices that has emerged over the last decade, for example, is known as property planning or whole farm planning. This has developed as a technique for the integration of information related to land use capacity, land degradation, farm infrastructure, farm financial characteristics and the goals of individual farmers into a plan to address degradation issues and manage land within its capability. On the surface, such attempts to identify and prioritise land use issues and strategies would appear unambiguously positive. On closer examination, however, it is possible to see how the development of such plans is dependent on data collection and interpretation techniques established by agri-science agencies committed to the high input model of sustainability. To give meaning to what may appear to be objective data, such as soil test results, farmers must rely on agency research that is often little more than ‘input-requirement’ trials. It is not surprising then that the solution to almost any soil problem almost invariably appears to involve, among other strategies, the addition of farm inputs. One study thus found that farmers in South-West NSW who had undertaken property planning applied more than three times as much lime ($t = 2.24, p = 0.030$) and spent twice as much per hectare on chemicals ($t = 2.47, p = 0.017$) as farmers who had not undertaken property planning.36 In relation to practices which had less direct production benefits, such as tree planting, there were no significant differences between those farmers who had participated in property planning and those who had not.

Conclusion

This chapter has not directly evaluated the environmental claims of the high input vision, or orthodoxy, that dominates the discourse of agricultural sustainability in Australia, but it has argued that such systems ultimately undermine their own conditions of production. Dependence on a ‘technological treadmill’ of increasingly expensive off-farm inputs may boost production and efficiency (and even reduce soil erosion!), but it also promotes declining commodity prices and terms of trade, and thus further pressure to intensify land use. Adding more trees, perennial pastures and fences to the landscape — as promoted in the NFF/ACF and Commonwealth government reports referred to above — will help deal with the symptoms of this intensification but they will not, in themselves, promote a fundamentally different kind of agriculture. In the meantime, it remains difficult for most farmers to address any environmental problems that cannot be dealt with in a manner
that also increases short-term productivity. Alternatives are available. About 2 per cent of Australian farmers are certified organic, many participate in Integrated Pest Management programs that attempt to eliminate unnecessary spraying with chemicals, and many simply adopt a cautious approach to the use of inputs more generally. But, at the same time, there are significant cultural and political economic pressures that suggest these farmers will remain in the minority for some time. If fundamental challenge to the high input model of sustainability is likely to come from anywhere, it seems most likely that it will come from outside agriculture — from consumers concerned about food safety or from importing countries seeking to establish 'green trade barriers'. Either way, conflict over the safety and sustainability of the food supply is likely to escalate and create new opportunities and threats for Australian agriculture.