Editorial

Rural realities in the post-socialist space

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades complex processes of socio-economic, cultural and political change in the post-socialist countries of Russia, Central and Eastern Europe have affected rural localities and populations in diverse and challenging ways. As for the post-socialist countries in general, new market ideologies and structural transformations, in particular macro-level economic and political reforms, have tended to be automatically accepted as a driving force, (re)defining rural space across the countries of the region. The dominance of such approaches and foci has tended to emphasise the particularities of the region, its historical legacies and contemporary processes of transformation, foregrounding the need to understand the consequences of an apparently very specific and dramatic period of change from above. This picture has also been reflected in academic discourse, where a rather monodimensional picture of rural people and places as ‘losers’ in the general context of political and economic change has tended to be taken for granted (e.g. Lindner, 2007; Wegren et al., 2003; Saarniit, 1999). A considerable volume of work has been generated, documenting and seeking to analyse the post-socialist rural condition and employing a range of disciplinary and methodological approaches to do so (see for example Hann et al., 2003; Pallot and Nefedova, 2007). Yet, perhaps as a direct result of the overwhelming focus on economic and political change in the region, these studies have primarily explored issues relating to agricultural reform, property rights and land use, with an emphasis on economic and demographic processes as the backdrop to and catalyst for (largely negative) processes of transformation (see for example, Lindner, 2007; Cartwright, 2001; Verdery, 2003; de Waal, 2004).

In contrast to the emphasis on central institutions and/or urban spaces as catalysts of change, far less attention has been paid to bottom-up political processes and issues at play in rural contexts in Central and Eastern Europe. Instead, rural places are conceived primarily as socially homogenous spaces, with relatively passive or at least politically conservative populations, and therefore, as having little of positive value to contribute to such transformations (Thelen et al., 2011). Thus, the day-to-day lives, thoughts and feelings of rural people as active agents in multiple processes of transformation, which have global and transnational, as well as local and region-specific dimensions, have tended to be ignored. As a result, the ambiguities and diversities of rural people’s lives are often missed, assumed binary oppositions between urban and rural, as well as between post-socialist and ‘western’ experiences are reinforced, and the influence of various non-agricultural institutions and structures, practices and relationships on rural lives and rural spaces are glossed over. In addition, a view of post-socialism as a radical break with the past has produced blind spots with regards to continuities, two-way processes of transformation and intersecting developments which transcend clear cut boundaries between East and West, or presumed ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’. Such binary divisions serve to reinforce the symbolic status of rural people as ineffectual speakers on the post-socialist scene and appear to legitimise their peripheral position within existing structures of political, economic and cultural power. A recognition of the need to give voice to rural people in post-socialist landscapes therefore requires investigation of both the hidden diversities of rural people’s lives and the uneven power relations and discursive mechanisms, which legitimise their neglect (Clore and Little, 1997). Research in these areas has been developing in recent years, but has tended to remain largely isolated in rather disparate projects.

By contrast, there has been considerable debate over the past decade or more, querying the straightforward assumptions of post-socialist ‘transition’ and calling for more nuanced and theoretically engaged enquiry (see for example Hann, 2002; Flynn et al., 2008; Stenning and Hoerschelmann, 2008; Thelen, 2011). Forceful arguments have been made for theorising difference within post-socialist contexts in order to better appreciate the diverse socially and culturally constructed worlds of ordinary people, which, it has been argued were often relegated to the ‘sidelines’ of academic debate (Stenning and Hoerschelmann, 2008: 315; Thelen et al., 2011: 514). In re-engaging with the subjects and subjectivities of transformation many authors moved purposefully beyond the study of the instituted order of the state and political discourses. In doing so, they underlined the experiences and the agency of ordinary people who have been much more than simply the ‘passive victims’ of either the past system or more contemporary processes of change (Rose-Ackerman, 2001; Yurchak, 2006: 5). However, even within these debates, rural people have often been represented as “objects” of transition, unable to cope with or adapt to the speed and scale of change, in contrast to their urban counterparts, who are viewed as taking a more proactive and purposeful approach to dealing with change (Schafft, 2000; Buchowski, 2006) Such critical theorising of post-socialism has coincided with increased engagement with theory in rural studies as a discipline (Halfacree, 1997: 46; Clore and Little, 1997: 284) and an upsurge in studies of the mundane and ordinary, challenging the implicit stereotyping of often ‘neglected rural geographies’ (Halfacree, 2007). And yet, scholars of post-socialist ruralities have all too often found themselves again on the margins of such work, offering an ‘interesting case study’ of rural life within wider
debates on post-socialism, or conversely a ‘unique perspective’ from the post-socialist region to broader theorisations of rurality. As discussed further below, this leads to a ‘dual othering’ of post-socialist ruralities and engagements with their diversity, which this special issue seeks to highlight and challenge. Calls have increasingly been made to move beyond a parochial view of the value of research on post-socialism and to grasp the possibilities of generating theory from within post-socialist studies (Outhwaite and Ray, 2005; Pickles and Smith, 2007; Thelen, 2011). This volume intends to encourage the work of rural scholars working in this part of the world to play a fuller part in this, and to contribute more effectively to these ongoing debates.

Whilst a special issue such as this can only play a modest part in such an undertaking, we suggest that, taken together, the articles presented here show the connections between and contribution of insights from a range of post-socialist contexts to wider debates within rural studies and beyond. In this introductory article, we explore three key themes: the role of memory and temporalities of change; the politics of identity and diversity within rural contexts; and the relationship between place-making and understandings of ‘rurality’. In three sections below, we consider some of the ways in which the empirically driven insights and arguments of our authors contribute to contemporary developments in social theory and knowledge production. In a concluding section we return to the question ‘why study post-socialist ruralities?’ and argue that insights generated here have a wider currency and relevance well beyond the region of study.1

2. The role of memory and temporalities of change

The first of our themes relates to questions surrounding the role of memory and the different temporalities through which change is experienced, interpreted and shaped. Here we attempt to unpack an accepted category of “rural change” in order to demonstrate diversity of remembering and forgetting of past and present, and to reveal conflicts and tensions in negotiations of seemingly orderly and predictable rural lives. The contemporaneous interpenetration of present, past and future has often been overlooked in political discussions of post-socialism, which instead assume a clear break between memories of the past and the present. As a result, the socialist past is continuously (re)created and constructed, with little consideration for the ways in which the empirically driven insights and arguments of our authors contribute to contemporary developments in social theory and knowledge production. In a concluding section we return to the question ‘why study post-socialist ruralities?’ and argue that insights generated here have a wider currency and relevance well beyond the region of study.1

1 At least in part as a response to a lack of more serious engagement with knowledge production in what might be termed post-socialist rural studies, a workshop “Rural Realities in the Post-socialist Space: Understanding Social, Cultural and Political Change in the Russian and Eastern European countryside” was organised by the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen in November 2010. This workshop which was the starting point for many of the articles included in this special issue, aimed explicitly to bring more careful attention to the meanings of rurality in these countries and to address the complexity of their rural societies and cultures. We would like to thank CRCEES, University of Glasgow and IRRP, University of Aberdeen for funding this occasion and the participants for fruitful discussion.


3 The unfolding of time involves its differentiation in several trajectories at once, a coexistence of “two directions, one oriented and dilated toward the past, the other contracted, contracting toward the future” (Deleuze, 1991: 52).
which simply mirror the post-socialist present and help to explain it. These are possibilities, which in every different act of remembering can be expressed through different memories and generate different interpretations and evaluations of the present, which themselves translate into dominant norms and counter-narratives as well as practices with “real” consequences. Furthermore, these relevant memories extend far beyond the immediate socialist past. For example, Thelen (2003) has pointed out that different memories of pre-socialist rural life have contributed to the fact that men and women engaged in privatisation in different ways, which lead to different economic positioning in the contemporary period.

This special issue explores the interface between memories, temporalities and “otherness” both in terms of the articulation of unfamiliar perspectives on the past and through an expression of a multiplicity of stories and affective tonalities of the present (cf. Flynn and Oldfield, 2006). Thereby memories of socialism, which make the present part of the past and vice versa, have the potential to constitute different subjects. As Al-Saji (2004) stresses, the past is recounted in multiple voices, which are not organised in line with a specific order, but often reflect dissent, dissonance and discordance of particular histories. Yurchak (2006); for example, has reflected on and critiqued narratives which associate socialism with badness and immorality, creating a uniform imaginary of the post-socialist present and fading out or dismissing alternative accounts as naïve, inappropriate or even potentially damaging. Similarly Pasieka’s contribution on nostalgia in this volume explores rural people’s multiple accounts of the past and the varied ways in which they bring the past into the present, ‘not only as a way of resisting the changes, but also a way of adapting to the new reality’ (p. 79). Her argument thus challenges monodimensional accounts of rural people’s passive role in processes of transformation and ‘inability to cope with change’. Adopting such a perspective to socialist transformation implies an engagement with different planes in the past which correspond to different intensities of memories, each with a distinctive tone and style of becoming present.

This perspective on multiple forms of remembering can also be seen as linked to forms of reflexive agency of rural people in navigating different rhythms of memory and adapting to the flux of time. This theme of reflexive agency is further developed in Kay’s article which explores the management of everyday insecurities by rural elders. Here the assumed passivity and vulnerability of rural care recipients is countered through exploring the ways in which elderly people bring both past and present moralities, contributions and expectations together to actively (re)interpret and (re)negotiate the meanings and practicalities of caring interactions. Meanwhile, Ruzicka’s article uses a re-examination of the temporalities of change to query homogenised accounts of the experiences of Roma communities and a generalised assumption that the “Roma fared better during the Communist period than afterwards” (Guy, 2001: 13). Each of these contributions highlights an interface between more recent theorisations of memory and temporality and the need to delve ever deeper into categories of ‘otherness’ so as to avoid homogenising the experiences of ‘excluded minorities’ (Cloke and Little, 1997: 5) and to challenge oversimplification of difference.

In relation to the second key dimension outlined above, we seek to contribute to broader debates on re-materialising social sciences (Philo, 2000; Jackson, 2000) by engaging with the richness of both consciously perceived and non-representational worlds4 of past and present experienced by rural people. On the one hand, we move beyond analysis of the dateable socialist past, which ignores the entanglement of people with the emotions, moods, relations and durations of events constituting their lived realities. Instead, the past is understood more expansively as a combination of material and non-representational practices, so that articulating it involves more than recollection or selective forgetting. On the other hand, we assume the existence of both tangible and intangible, or expressive, ruralities in Eastern European contexts, which provide fuller understanding of present experiences of and responses to ‘post-socialism’ and change. Linking to similar debates in urban studies (Latham and McCormack, 2004), we take seriously the importance of the immortal in these pasts and presents which gives them an expressive life and liveliness and is actively implicated in the construction of distinctive forms of sociality and rurality. As Pine (2002) has shown in her comparative study in two areas of Poland, different representations of the past are connected to diverging visions of the ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ and linked to different forms of personhood as well as mechanisms of exclusion. In this volume, Kay discusses multiple affects and relations through which social assistance for elderly people develops in rural Russia. She demonstrates that post-socialist realities for these people involve both particular ways of thinking about care and non-representational practices of feeling and being together, which connect past and present forms of care in unexpected and unanticipated ways.

This approach, attaining to the heterogeneity and becoming of the present, questions traditional distinctions between objects and subjects of post-socialist transformations and challenges simplifying tendencies of transition discourse. Shubin in his paper attempts to rethink care for the poor, which is open to the novelty of the future and possibilities created by attuned caring action. Challenging a division between caregivers and needy people, which is often created within formal frameworks of welfare provision, he explores how images of hardship, everyday memories and historic narratives of poverty develop an inter-subjective field of care, encouraging participation and co-belonging in rural worlds. Similarly, Pajot in her paper discusses the construction of hybrid memories shared between rural administrations and prison authorities in Russia, which result in shifting power geometries and transference of subjectivities at the level of the post-socialist present. These questions of power, heterogeneity and the negotiation of difference are all also key to our second theme, which concerns the politics of identity, as well as divisions and exclusions within rural contexts.

3. The politics of identity: beyond the ‘othering’ of post-socialist rural places and people

An important strand in the more recent literature on post-socialism has been the deeper excavation and closer analysis of the historical othering of societies, people and practices in the socialist region and the contemporary outworkings of this legacy. As Verdery pointed out a decade ago, the Soviet ‘other’ always played a key role in shaping identities, policies and practices closer to home (Verdery, 2002). Yet as other scholars have contended more recently, contemporary extensions of and twists in this process of othering have blocked a deeper engagement with and consideration of the lessons that could have been learned from one of the most dramatic, unexpected and academically accessible political and social transformations in history (Thelen, 2011; Stenning and Hoerschelmann, 2008).

In relation to post-socialist rural contexts more specifically, this othering is further compounded. On the one hand, historically, rural

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4 For further discussion of non-representational theory see Thrift 2000 and 2007; as well as Carolan 2008 and 2009 for an application of these theories in rural sociology.
places and people have experienced an internal othering and marginalisation, encouraged and held in place by the state socialist system’s determined focus on industrialised modernity and prioritisation of urban perspectives (cf. Shubin, 2006; Vishnevsky, 1998). Whilst the rural ‘other’ played an important role in the mythologizing of national identities and romanticised ‘folk’ cultures in many countries of the region, the realities of rural people’s lives, contributions and needs were frequently misinterpreted, ignored or willfully dismissed in policy making and public rhetoric. On the other hand, the emerging ideology and practice of neoliberalism in Central and Eastern Europe contributes to oversimplified conceptualisations of spatiality and positioning through which relations between the urban and the rural as well as the local and the global are articulated. The advancement of political-economic discourses and practices instrumentally incorporates the rural as largely subservient to the urban, with the relegation of locally-situated activities and agencies to marginal positions in the new regimes of governance (Rose et al., 1998). Integral to this is a view of the rural and the urban as stand-alone categories so that rural institutions and people are viewed as unwilling participants of political-economic change or even as the actors undermining new forms of governance and welfare state (Grancelli, 1995). Taken together this ‘double othering’ (Liljeström, 2005; Keating, 2008) leaves an impression of a homogenous and rather sorry rural other and reinforces assumptions that post-socialist rural places have little to offer, either in terms of economic and social advancement, or as a focus for academic study (cf. Buchowski, 2006; Leonard and Kanef, 2002).

In her work on the ‘double othering’ of Russian women, Liljeström (2005) calls for dialogue and ‘careful listening’ emphasising the need to explore heterogeneities within as well as similarities across categories of difference. In conclusion, she argues for the potential for new knowledge generation in a kaleidoscopic framework of communities-in-relation without suggesting that their positionings are identical (Liljeström, 2005: 40). The marginalisation and double othering of post-socialist ruralities has had the effect of delaying attention to multiple forms of otherness present in rural areas (Philo, 1992: 199). Ironically, this was being called for in rural studies more generally at precisely the point of the unexpected collapse of communist systems across Central and Eastern Europe. Yet, as noted before, the preoccupation with macro-level processes of post-socialist transformation has drawn attention away from the more complex and variegated realities of life in the post-socialist countryside. A number of studies, particularly in the disciplines of anthropology and geography, have certainly considered the ways in which rural people have experienced, interpreted and acted upon transformations in agriculture, the cultivation of land and property rights (Hivon, 1998; Miller, 2001; Heady and Grandits, 2003). However, as already noted, far less attention has been paid to other aspects of rural life and the diverse identities, forms of agency and often ambiguous aspirations, memories and interactions within and between rural communities.

In this special issue we explore a diverse range of experiences of rurality and the positioning of different subjects and ways of knowing which frame exclusion and inclusion in rural contexts. These are central to many of the articles included in this special issue, contributing to wider debates within rural studies which have yet to be extensively explored from within post-socialist contexts (cf. Bock and Shortall, 2006; Little and Morris, 2005; Keating, 2008). In this particular collection delineations relating to identities of age (Trell et al; Kay), social status (Shubin, Kovacs), as well as ethnicity (Schwarz, Ruzicka) have emerged; although interrogations of gender, social class, disability or sexuality could of course have provided equally important insight (see for example Owczarzak, 2009). As the contributions show the issues encountered by rural people and places are not the same across the entire post-socialist region. The possibilities for youth in rural Estonia (Trell et al.) are not necessarily replicated for young people in the coastal villages of northern Russia (Nakhshina). The options available to local administrations with regard to social assistance and the ways in which these interface with ethnicity and deservingness in Hungary (Schwarz) overlap in some ways, but diverge in others from the regulation of local social assistance in rural Russia (Pallot, Shubin) and the ways in which elderly Russians perform and negotiate deservingness and reciprocity (Kay). Nonetheless the issues raised here – prospects for rural youth, in/exclusion of vulnerable groups, social assistance and local governance – clearly also resonate with rural concerns well beyond the region of study. The kind of ‘kaleidoscopic framework’ proposed by Liljeström (2005) therefore, might be equally usefully applied not only in order to better understand societal transformations within the post-socialist region, but also to consider a range of identity-based and other issues in transnational comparative perspective.

Significantly, aspects of diversity within rural communities are explored here not simply with the aim of providing a more nuanced picture of life in the post-socialist countryside (although this is important in its own right), but with a concern to shed new light on the ways in which policies and practices relating to care, social assistance and local community ties interact with both claimed identities and those projected onto particular groups. Rather than assuming a pattern of state withdrawal, scarce resources and ever decreasing social security and cohesion in rural places (cf. Lindner, 2007), this approach focuses on the interplay between structures of power and practices of rural people (cf. Read and Thelen, 2007). Several papers explore social representations of rural people and networks of cultural circulation which lead to marginalisation of particular groups and creation of exclusionary spatial contexts. These contributions help to unravel questions both about how resources are distributed, how social assistance and care are experienced and (re)interpreted from both the giving and the receiving ends and how rural people, communities and institutions interact, actively shaping and contesting such processes.

In her study of social assistance in a Hungarian village for example, Schwarz engages with theorisations of the ‘ethnicisation of poverty’. In doing so, she shows how the categories of ‘Roma’ and ‘undeserving poor’ become conflated through local understandings of deservingness, which draw simultaneously from (post-)socialist and neoliberal interpretations of entitlement, reinforcing and essentialising forms of exclusion. Kovacs’ case study of a ‘school rescue’ in another Hungarian village also highlights the importance of ethnicity both as a resource facilitating tight community ties and access to specific funding (in this case for Slovak-minority education) and as a source of exclusions and reinforced boundaries (between “Roma” and “non-Roma” villagers and schools). Kovacs queries the advantages of strong community ties and identifications which underpin a campaign to rescue the village school, and yet she argues, undermine an openness to alternatives and a search for more flexible solutions. Both articles suggest the importance of examining the implications of social capital, civil society and social citizenship in rural contexts. This can help not only better to understand locally specific responses to post-socialist transformations but also to query straightforward interpretations and assumptions about such concepts and their potential from a rural perspective.

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5 Marianne Liljeström has written of the ‘double othering’ of Russian women (Liljeström, 2005). As she makes clear this double othering holds in place dichotomies of power, refires boundaries and essentialises difference along the lines of both gender and east/west divisions.
In contrast to the focus on exclusions in these two articles, Shubin, looks at the potentialities of care, as a wider set of practices, emotional and embodied engagements, for overcoming exclusions and for creating meaningful connections between diverse rural people. Finally, Kay’s exploration of the ways in which elderly people experience and interpret day-to-day (in)securities, draws out the importance of emotional and ontological aspects of social security, which also involve a certain politics of identity. Often overlooked in a focus on specific materialities of rural life such as land and productive property, the more intangible aspects of care and (in)security drawn out in these contributions are interpreted through an analysis of the interplay between performances of identity, personal interactions and prevailing social norms, as well as material contexts.

The contributions gathered in this special issue show that rural people are far from simply passive victims of social transformation. As Pallot makes clear at the end of her article on changing forms of governance in Russia’s bordering rural and penal administrations, policy changes also demand and imply shifting identities and practices. The willingness or otherwise of rural populations to accept these must be taken into account, since it will, inevitably impact on the new realities which emerge. By the same token, more effective policies to counter rural outmigration, or alleviate rural poverty might be developed if the emotional and cultural attachments to place, aspects of caring interdependencies and exclusionary discourses and practices highlighted in contributions by Trell et al., Shubin, Kay and Schwarz were more carefully considered. This also requires a closer consideration of the interactions between material, emotional and interpersonal connections by which rural places are made.

4. Rurality and the making of rural places

Questions of diversity and identity also inform our third and final theme, but here the focus shifts to questions of place-making and (dis)identifications with as well as (im)materialities of rural places, that are made and interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Following Lefebvre (1991), we explore the ways in which diverse representational (lived) spaces of the rural interrelate with specific representations of space, emergent multiple subject positions and various spatial forms and places. The interplay between everyday constructions and representations of rurality has been much explored in other contexts, challenging for example, straightforward assumptions of a rural idyll (Cloke, 1997) and exploring the relationship between personhood and place in the re-making of a post-productivist countryside (Halfacree, 1997; Bright et al., 2000; Laschewski and Neu, 2004). In post-socialist contexts the assumed characteristics of rural places and people are rather different – that these are peasant societies and culturalist places, albeit experiencing a perhaps irreversible process of disenfranchisement and decline. To challenge this simplistic view, we unpack the complex and dynamic ways in which rural spaces are perceived, conceived and lived. Several contributions to this volume consider diverse feelings of belonging (or alienation), access to and interpretations of local natural resources and attributes. Differing representations as well as material realities of life in the countryside, come together here in an active process of rural place-making. Beneath this surface however, are other more complex characteristics and aspects of place, which different rural people inherit, create and interpret in diverse, and sometimes conflicting, ways.

In this volume, Nakshina draws our attention to the dynamic interrelations between space and identity linked to the changing systems of social practices and cultural representations of the rural. She stresses that rural places are produced not only by practices of permanent rural inhabitants but also through often conflicting meanings and interpretations ascribed by more temporary, sporadic visitors as well as ‘external’ institutional, national and global influences. The local therefore, should not be reified and can never be understood in isolation but is constantly involved in a two-way interaction with wider translocal, national and global processes (Hoerschelmann and Stenning, 2008: 315).

Trell et al. follow changing identities of young people and the ways in which different rural places gain meaning and importance in their lives. They read off the feelings or atmospheres of particular places (such as the House of Culture, or a hamburger kiosk), which encourage particular activities and create a sense of belonging to the countryside. The expressive qualities of these places (cool, relaxing etc.) are crucial for the ongoing interaction between different groups of villagers and performance of a multiplicity of relations both between people and between people and place. This examination of young people’s (dis)attachment to the rural places they grow up in and the significance of particular places for relaxation, socialising, and potential alignment with local values and cultural activities complicates a fixed view of rural young people as the ‘losers’ of economic transformation and rural places as lacking future prospects. Rather, the article recognises that both individual and place identities are constructed differently through time and shifting combinations of emotional and cultural attachments to place as well as material practices.

Post-socialist transformations in Central and Eastern European countries brought about specific challenges to understanding the meaning and value of the rural and the complexity of practices making rural places. Although, as argued above, the literature on transformation remained for a long time within the former frameworks of thinking of the rural as an extension of the urban, the emergence of conflicting and competing interests producing rural spaces challenged the view of “rurality” as a space of stability and rigid stratification, established and discrete spatial configurations (specifically “rural” structures and functions). Similarly, changing perceptions and imaginations of space during post-socialist transformation led to a transgression of urban/rural divides and recognition of alternative ruralities within previously monolithic spaces of agricultural production (see Vishnevsky, 1998, for an overview). As such, the study of post-socialist ruralities has much to offer to a re-materialisation of the rural within the social sciences, which, instead of maintaining simple distinctions between material and immaterial, seeks to understand the ways by which apparently tangible and intangible aspects of rural life co-construct and co-produce each other. Instead of simply considering rurality as a set of analytic and cognitive representations, calls have been made for a redirection of academic attention to the processes composing the fabric of everyday life in the post-socialist countrysides and an appreciation of rurality as a complex construction, embracing different sets of social and cultural relations (Shubin, 2006). This approach requires the accommodation of the specificities of rural practices and originality of events instead of assigning a set of confused appearances of rurality some sort of structure and singular explanation. As noted above, in attempting to express this complex rurality, attention must be given to the interplay of multiple structures and intangible forces (including expectations, desires, emotions and structures of feeling) producing specific rural places.

An openness to these more complex processes by which rural spaces are produced and lived can open up often “invisible” spaces.

6 Latham and McCormack for example argue that “we only begin to properly grasp the complex realities of apparently stable objects by taking seriously the fact that these realities are always held together and animated by processes excessive of form and position... To speak of the material is, therefore, to have already invoked the excessive potential of the immaterial.” (2004: 705).
of contestation created by competing social and cultural practices. In this volume, Nakhshina describes the tensions in rural place-making between everyday practices of resource use and their codifications in state policy. Patterns of resource use in rural Russia redefine specific rural places and mechanisms of belonging to them. Nakhshina’s analysis explores previously unnoticed practices constructing local normative landscapes (related to rights and restrictions on how and where to catch fish), which challenge external interpretations of the rural linked to the logic of resource commodification and the legality or otherwise of resource use. The re-imagining of social values and moralities associated with post-socialist societies can offer particular insight into the ways in which alternative localities and lives emerge and new possibilities are created through both top-down and bottom-up processes of transformation. Pallot explores the emergence of hybrid rural places at the intersection of penal territories and rural administrations. She uncovers “hidden” opportunities and resources available to ordinary rural people in these contexts, which underpin their common histories and belonging in physically and symbolically divided spaces. When existing boundaries are challenged and crossed, place-related identities are disrupted, and whilst intergroup boundaries may be symbolically preserved for some time, new imagined geographies must emerge. Whilst less optimistic than some of the other contributions about the prospects of such a re-making of rural place, Pallot, nonetheless, underscores the significant interplay between formal, state-led, physical characteristics and the more personalised, identity-based and emotional aspects of rural place-making. Similarly, Shubin’s exploration of the multiple spaces of rural care, where social/cultural borders and differences are continuously (re)negotiated, brings to the fore the processes producing affective rural contexts and caring spaces through the mix of often contradictory values, alienations and attachments. “Rurality” experienced by providers and receivers of care is contested and cannot be reduced to measurable indicators (tasks, frequency and patterns of providing care) within the formal frameworks of dependency and self-sufficiency.

In this volume, we consider rurality as fluid and dynamic space, which is continuously materially and culturally restructured. Rural space is a process produced by different practices and interests (Crang and Thrift, 2000; Doel, 1999), so it is inconsistent and becoming. Due to its dynamic nature, this process involves ambiguous and contingent entanglements between different actors, ideas, technologies and objects, which produce multiple and interrelated rural spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. An exploration of dynamic and fluid ruralities opens up spaces of other “transient” practices and identities that were previously assimilated, denied or simply unknown. It involves continuous re-articulations of difference and redrawing the boundaries between self and other, local and global, revealing unexpected actors and developing unexpected trajectories. Taken together, the contributions to this special issue reveal some of the (sometimes hidden) potentialities of such dynamic rural places and the possibilities they create, shifting the question from whether ruralities are “real” or “represented” to the exploration of possibilities produced by rural place-making. This approach to understanding the rural brings to the fore the conditions that create opportunities for often unpredictable change in Central and Eastern European countryside.

5. Beyond the local or why study post-socialist ruralities?

As noted at the start of this introductory article, the point of a special issue such as this is more than simply to bring post-socialist ruralities ‘back in’ through giving prominence to a rich and varied set of local case studies. Rather, we suggest that the study of such spaces and the people that inhabit, pass through and otherwise interact with them has much to offer in terms of knowledge production. As such, we seek to move beyond localism, and the ‘othering’ that highlights apparently ‘essential’ difference, and to think instead with frameworks of transnationalism (Flynn and Oldfield, 2008: 4) and locatedness, which recognise the importance of interrogating the detail of local contexts and lived realities but simultaneously move beyond ‘an isolated, essentialized [rural] post-socialism’ to one that is always already articulated with other times and other places’ (Stenning and Hoerschelmann, 2008: 327–8). After all, whilst the pace and scale of recent transformations and the local and national histories and cultures surrounding them may have many unique features, the issues and questions explored in this special issue are also of concern to rural people and places well beyond the post-socialist region.

The explorations in this special issue suggest a number of ways in which research in rural post-socialist contexts contributes to broader debates on understanding an increasing plurality of everyday worlds, the different subjectivities that constitute these worlds and enable their reconfiguration, as well as changing systems of relationships between people and places. First, careful consideration of the fluidity and diversity of the rural open up imaginations of post-socialist worlds and their connectedness to global level processes. An appreciation of the multiplicity of forms and practices producing Eastern European countryside not only suggests new perspectives on the rural, but also expands the contexts within which we can examine global concerns such as development, change and citizenship. The focus on entanglement and interpenetration of urban and rural actors and spaces stresses proximity rather than distance and suggests openness to the novelty of the future rather than orientation towards exclusive histories. Second, attention to the processes of differentiation of rural spaces links our considerations in post-socialist countrysides to discussions on the distribution of power and status, construction and configuration of sameness and difference in local–global relations. Here we are interested in exploring further the productive potentialities often hidden within fluid rural spaces in changing social and power relations which frame perceptions, experiences and practices of otherness at both local and global scales. Re-evaluation of links between different subjects, pasts and presents in post-socialist contexts opens up opportunities to explore how particular kinds of rurality and sociality cohere at the intersections of identity, belonging and community.

The rapid and extensive nature of transformations in the post-socialist space and the ways in which ideological and structural changes have become an explicitly recognised feature of local realities, clearly interacting with values, identities and opportunities for diverse groups of rural people, is helpful in foregrounding issues and potential impacts of more gradual and implicit transformation elsewhere. As the contributions gathered in this special issue demonstrate rural people create, reflect on, respond to, incorporate, adapt and resist various aspects of change, interacting with policies and wider economic and social processes and shaping outcomes sometimes in unplanned and unexpected ways. The relationship between the past, present and future, for example, may have a particular poignancy in contexts where the legitimacy of the past has been so explicitly and publically challenged, but is also a rich seam to mine in understanding the experiences of rural people and conflicting definitions of rural life in other contexts.

7 From a poststructuralist perspective, the making of rural spaces can be interpreted as a process of uncertain emergence and becoming of a multiplicity of interconnected temporal and symbolic/spatial constructs (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005, see also the work of Vinogradsky, 1996 in Russian rural context).

8 As Mormont (1990) stresses, the rural is “no longer one single space, but a multiplicity of social spaces for one and the same geographical area” (p. 34).
The outflow of young people from rural towns and villages and the extent to which the pull of urban life styles and employment opportunities might be countered by an attachment to place as discussed by Trell et al. in this volume, is surely not only an issue for post-Socialist Estonia. Questions of rural poverty and the internal differences and ‘otherings’ which feed into local as well as national definitions of deservingness and visibility of needs, informing the local distribution of and access to social assistance, resonate with examinations of marginalisation, poverty and rurality in other contexts (cf. Cloke, 1997). Processes of restructuring in rural Britain have certainly been less sudden and overtly dramatic than in the post-socialist countries, yet they have also led to conflicts over identities, values and definitions of rurality (Halfacree, 1997: 41–2). And yet despite such similarities, the kind of kaleidoscopic framework proposed by Lijstervoot remains crucial, helping us to avoid the pull of teleological arguments for a ‘merging’ of ‘post-socialist and ‘western’ realities, and reminding us also to look to the global south and post-colonial contexts for insight. For it is precisely in simultane-ously exploring similarities and ‘taking otherness seriously that ‘new theoretical horizons will emerge’ (Thelen, 2011: 54).

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