

Editorial: Rurality, Modernity and National Identity between the Wars

JEREMY BURCHARDT

Department of History, The University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading, RG6 6AA, UK

The articles in this special issue of *Rural History* address aspects of the multifaceted and often very intense relationship between rurality, modernity and national identity in the 1920s and 1930s. They derive from a conference organised in January 2007 by the Interwar Rural History Research Group. The conference, ‘Rethinking the Rural: Land and Nation in the 1920s and 1930s’ brought together forty-nine papers on fifteen different countries and concluded with a plenary session in which it became clear that there were some striking commonalities to the interwar experiences of the countries in question. In particular, the three-way relationship between the countryside, modernisation and national identity seemed to be prominent almost everywhere. Bound up with these was the rise of international trade and its close corollary, the agricultural depression, which affected rural areas on a literally global scale. While there were also some intriguing and unexpected differences between countries, the broad context seemed to be similar enough that it would be fruitful to collect those papers that related most closely to these core themes and publish them together. In this editorial, I will briefly outline the articles that follow, pick out what seem to me the most interesting connections, and then consider some of the wider questions this raises.

Catherine Lynch’s paper on ‘The Country, the City and Visions of Modernity in 1930s China’ focuses on the work of a leading Chinese social thinker and activist, the philosopher Liang Shuming. Social and economic thought in 1930s China was dominated by modernist assumptions. Marxists and non-Marxists agreed that economic development was progressive, unilinear and urban-driven. In contrast to early patterns of Chinese thought, it was widely held that there was a sharp distinction between the modernised urban sphere and a backwards countryside. Furthermore, the social problem was framed in terms of the nation: the crucial question was how China could catch up with the dominant western powers.

Liang Shuming rejected almost all of these assumptions. He argued that China would not and could not develop along western lines. The gap between the level of industrialisation in China and in the United States, the United Kingdom or Germany, for example, was simply too wide to bridge. China would do better to draw on its deep-rooted rural traditions. Whilst these had been damaged by economic imperialism and the associated rise of commodity production in Chinese agriculture, more communitarian values and practices were still widespread. Liang believed that these could be revitalised through the development of rural ‘schools’, in effect village-level producer cooperatives

that would engage in a process of continuous self-development and improvement, leading to a benign form of non-capitalist, rural-based economic growth. The important unit here was the small-scale one of the village. Although Liang envisaged that, for some purposes, villages might group together on a voluntary basis and that there might be ascending tiers of such voluntary associations, the nation was merely one tier amongst many, neither the largest nor the smallest, and certainly not the most dynamic.

Liang's desire to decentre the nation was distinctive and unusual. However, his endeavour to find a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism, whilst formulated in a specifically Chinese social context and influenced as much by Confucian as by Marxist modes of thought, can be paralleled from many other parts of the world. Agricultural cooperation was a distinctive feature of the rural economies of many northern and western European states, notably Denmark, the Netherlands, and Eire.¹ One of the principal influences here was Sir Horace Plunkett, the Irish politician and writer. Plunkett's catchphrase of 'Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living' won adherents not only in Europe but also in the United States, South Africa, India and elsewhere. The cooperative movement was one of the most widespread and successful responses to agricultural depression, and is interesting too as a self-consciously democratic, 'progressive' attempt to escape the unappealing dichotomy of tradition and modernisation, where tradition implied debilitating poverty and modernisation meant rural depopulation. This is an aspect of interwar rural history that deserves more research (especially on the flow of cooperative ideas and practice between continents, countries and regions).²

Edouard Lynch's paper on French responses to the 'rural exodus' of the 1920s and 1930s presents a perhaps more familiar reaction to the travails of modernisation. The French rural myth focused especially on the peasant as the bulwark of French nationhood. As elsewhere, urbanisation seemed only to intensify this identification. In the French case, rural population losses due to migration were exacerbated by the low birth rate in rural areas. Most aspects of this discourse were established as early as the 1880s but the First World War and the renewed agricultural depression of the 1920s and 1930s intensified existing concerns. The war brought into being a powerful myth of the peasant soldier, perceived as saviour of the nation and as having made unique sacrifices for France. This view gained ground over nineteenth-century liberal perceptions of the peasantry as a barrier to progress, espoused by writers such as Balzac and Zola. Even on the left, rural depopulation became a potent theme, with *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* deputies calling for a 'back to the land' movement. The peasantry was widely regarded as the military and economic backbone of France, the prime defence against German aggression and the foundation of national prosperity. Hence in France, the centrality of the countryside, and in particular of the peasantry, to national identity increased in the interwar period, principally it would seem in response to the First World War. Aspects of modernisation, in particular urbanisation, were seen as a threat to this.

Similar concerns can be discerned in Wales, as Wil Griffith demonstrates in his essay on essentialist nationalism and the rise of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party. Here, the situation was more complicated than in France because of the prominence of the language issue. Whilst Welsh continued to be widely spoken across much of North and mid-Wales, South Wales was very largely English-speaking by the 1920s.

This contrast was reinforced by the economic and social contrasts between North and South Wales. The north was largely agricultural, based mainly on small-scale pastoral farming. The south was perhaps the most heavily industrialised region of Britain, with coal, steel and other forms of metal-working to the fore. There was significant English immigration into the south, although also a substantial outflow due principally to the economic problems of coal mining. Culturally, the south seemed alien to core features of Welsh identity, notably language and rurality. Yet not only was most of the population concentrated in the south, but the region also contained the capital, Cardiff, and other places and institutions of historic significance in Welsh tradition.

As Griffith shows, Welsh nationalists regarded the survival of the language, of a distinctive and authentic Welsh culture, of agriculture and of the Welsh countryside as mutually dependent. Influential writers in the nationalist canon, such as Owen M. Edwards and Iorwerth Peate, held it as axiomatic that to be authentically Welsh was to be rural and that the countryside was the 'soul of the nation'. Unsurprisingly, this essentialist nationalism set great store by traditional agricultural practices, customs and traditions. Peate was the founder of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagan, located in a rural setting in South Wales in a conscious attempt to draw the attention of the urban majority to the value and vulnerability of the Welsh rural heritage. Yet in practice Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru found that this uncompromising traditionalism was difficult to maintain. Electorally and ideologically, farmers were central to the nationalist project. As elsewhere, farmers in Wales needed practical help to maintain competitiveness and profitability in the face of falling prices, and more efficient production and marketing methods were clearly part of the answer. The party was critical of the United Kingdom government for failing to establish a Welsh milk marketing board in 1934. It argued in favour of electrification and of a modernised, state-sponsored forestry sector, whilst also supporting the revival of a Welsh woollen industry.

The complexity of the relationship between modernisation and the preservation of rural traditions is also apparent in Anna Manchin's article on representations of rurality in the Hungarian film industry between the wars. As in Wales, essentialist nationalism was a significant force in Hungary, and again national identity was construed as distinctively rural. Just as Welsh nationalists struggled to come to terms with the industrialisation of South Wales, so Hungarian nationalists tended to project their fears and antipathies onto Budapest. Essentialist nationalism seems almost always to have had links to fascism in this period and this was especially pronounced in Hungary (much more so than in Wales for example) where Budapest was seen as liberal, cosmopolitan and Jewish. It is interesting, then, that the popular and successful interwar Hungarian film industry presented the relationship between rurality, modernity and national identity in a very different light. Hungarian films recognised and celebrated the country's rural heritage and landscape. Yet the notion of the countryside as morally pure in contrast to the corrupt cosmopolitan city was problematised or even inverted, partly by means of a class analysis that disrupted stereotypes of 'the countryside' as a unified social sphere. A frequent figure in Hungarian films of the period is the idle, dissolute gentry landowner. The economic travails of agriculture, and its difficulties in mounting an effective response to the agricultural depression, are often laid at the door of this failure of leadership.

The city, by contrast, is seen as offering the economic dynamism and innovation the countryside needs. Modernisation is repackaged here as offering salvation to the traditional countryside, symbolically expressed in the trope of a good-hearted urban girl revitalising and ennobling a degenerate estate owner. Crucially the representatives of the urban are predominantly seen as sympathetic to and respectful of rural traditions and landscape. Here, in a curious inversion, the real threat to the rural is from an internal moral collapse to which modernisation offers an antidote.

A similarly positive reworking of the relationship between modernity and the rural is apparent in Carin Martiin's paper on the Swedish milk marketing association, the 'Milk Propaganda'. As in all but a few highly industrialised countries like England, the agricultural sector in Sweden was simply too large to be ignored: in 1920 as much as two-thirds of the population lived in the countryside. Dairying was the mainstay of the rural economy. Indeed, most consumers of milk in Sweden were also producers. Yet most dairy herds were very small and production, distribution and marketing remained traditional and inefficient in many respects. Swedish milk production was bound up with ideas about modernisation and national identity at a number of levels. In the first place, because the dairy sector was dominated by small-scale, often subsistence units, yet absorbed so large a share of the country's labour force, it presented a potentially formidable barrier to economic growth and to Sweden's ability to attain parity with the leading industrial nations. Secondly, milk production related to concerns about the nation's health, especially in connection with the new-found discourse about vitamins that was such a feature of the interwar years.³ Thirdly, as in so many other countries the rural was seen as the bedrock of national identity in Sweden between the wars. In the circumstances of the agricultural depression, as international markets closed to Swedish producers and as imports threatened domestic sales, it came to be seen as a patriotic duty to consume Swedish milk and dairy products. In this way a modernising, often technological, discourse of healthy production, distribution and consumption practices was linked to the preservation of an authentic rural Sweden. As in Hungary and to a certain extent in Wales, and doubtless elsewhere, modernisation could be presented as the salvation rather than the nemesis of the traditional countryside.

England, in some ways, seems to have taken a different path, probably because of the very small size of its agricultural sector compared to industry, commerce and services by the interwar period. Here, as David Jeremiah's paper suggests, the countryside was increasingly seen in non-economic terms as a source of 'amenities' for an overwhelmingly urban population. The countryside was undoubtedly critical to most conceptions and perceptions of English national identity, and became more so during the interwar years, but it was the countryside as a landscape rather than as a socio-economic entity that mattered most. While Stanley Baldwin, the prime minister, famously declared that 'England is the country, and the country is England', there was no equivalent of the French myth of the soldier-peasant, and despite the efforts of the Land Settlement Association and other 'back-to-the-landers' in the 1920s, the notion that the authentic Englishman was an agriculturalist was rapidly on the wane.⁴ The Council for the Preservation of Rural England, formed in 1926, was concerned almost exclusively with the preservation of the visual countryside, aptly expressed in the title of the Council for the Preservation

of Rural England's photo essay, *The Face of the Land*. From this point of view, there was little prospect of using modernisation as a force to strengthen the aspects of rurality that contributed most to perceptions of Englishness. Certainly, there were individuals and organisations who sought to apply modern methods to agriculture with a view to strengthening the sector, for example agricultural economists such as A. D. Hall and C. S. Orwin and the numerous training courses and institutions established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet there is little evidence of a wider discourse connecting agricultural modernisation with national identity.⁵

In England, then, it seems that at the level of perceptions there may have been a less complicated disjunction between modernisation and rurality than prevailed elsewhere. But the social and economic context from which the English romance with the visual traces of an idealised rural past sprang was ultimately just as dependent on modernisation. As Jeremiah's essay on the car and the countryside shows, the development of comfortable and reliable private motor vehicles made English rural landscapes more accessible than ever before. The view from the car window was, archetypically, the fleeting, superficial 'tourist gaze', often directed through the viewfinder of a camera. Such a view was likely to take in half-timbered houses, historic coaching inns, village greens and church spires but to miss the contemporary life of the countryside. The magazines, guide books and posters produced by the motoring organisations encouraged a way of seeing rural England that was consonant with preservationism. The preservationist dichotomy between an aestheticised rural landscape construed as a precious relic of the past and a modernised, economically productive but damagingly ugly urban sphere found expression in postwar planning legislation, predicated on urban containment. In this way, modernisation fostered a way of seeing the countryside in relation to the nation that identified the urban present as a threat to the rural past.

The articles in this issue of *Rural History* relate to a disparate group of countries and issues but several common themes can be identified. Firstly, the articles show that across a range of countries with quite different histories, levels of development and political contexts, rurality was central to debates about national identity. Secondly, and linked to this, there was a pervasive sense of rural crisis in these years. The particular coordinates of this crisis differed from one country to another but a fear of rural depopulation, anxieties about urbanisation and the impact of the agricultural depression were prominent in most places. These influences were widely seen as threatening a traditional rural way of life, estranging the nation from itself in some cases almost in the hour of its birth. Thirdly, modernisation, in the guise of agricultural development, was paradoxically also sometimes seen as the best hope of saving the countryside from social, economic and cultural disintegration. Agricultural education and training would, many believed, lead to great increases in output and productivity, restore prosperity to the countryside and bring rural depopulation to a halt. Contradictory attitudes to rurality were therefore, it might be argued, intrinsic to interwar nation-building. One consequence, it might be suggested, was the development of a split between agriculture and the countryside. While the former was, increasingly, the object of modernising ambitions, mediated through technological innovation and frequently driven forward by the state, the latter became a site of preservationist projections. This opened up the potential for new tensions and contradictions.

To what extent these issues were new in the interwar period is more difficult to say. Some indubitably predated the First World War. The preoccupation with national identity, for example, was bound up with the rise of nationalism, which it is generally agreed originated in the nineteenth century or before. It is not difficult to find pre-1918 examples of nationalist sentiment expressed in a rural idiom, at least in the developed world. To take one example, composers such as Mussorgsky, Smetna, Grieg, Holst and Sibelius drew on rural folk music to project visions of national redemption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶ Nevertheless, in many countries there seems to have been an intensification of the relationship between rurality and national identity after the First World War. In Britain, for example, there was a remarkable publishing boom in popular guidebooks, photo essays and regional novels about the countryside, while in France, as we have seen, the war elevated the place of the peasantry in the national myth. The interwar years have sometimes been regarded as the high water mark of nationalism so it would not be surprising if the relationship between the countryside and national identity also intensified, although of it would require a much more comprehensive and ambitious survey than that presented in this issue to establish this.⁷

The roots of the agricultural depression can similarly be traced to the development of a global market for food in the 1870s. Again, however, the effects of global food surpluses were more pronounced in the 1920s and 1930s than they had been in the 1870s or 1880s. This was partly because the world trade system was much better integrated by the early twentieth century. Few countries were unaffected: Australia, the United States and China, for example, were involved, as well as Europe. One indicator of the greater depth and pervasiveness of the agricultural difficulties of the 1920s and especially the early 1930s was the extent of government engagement with agriculture. In marked contrast to the late nineteenth century, interwar governments almost everywhere intervened actively in agriculture, through protectionist legislation, marketing, and efforts to modernise the sector.⁸

On the whole, therefore, it would seem that while most of the tensions involving rurality, modernity and national identity in the interwar period emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century or before, there were some new elements at work in the post-1918 years. Perhaps the most striking of these was the pervasiveness and depth of the interwar rural crisis. The term could have been appropriately applied to each of the fifteen countries represented at 'Rethinking the Rural', including those traditionally regarded as beneficiaries of global trade in foodstuffs such as Australia and those thought to lie largely outside the reach of western markets like China. Was this the first global crisis of the countryside? Interestingly, this sense of crisis was often as apparent in countries like the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany where agriculture was no longer a major component of the economy. Clearly much wider tensions, strains and anxieties were involved. Some of these were doubtless social in origin. Most European and many non-European countries were riven with struggles over land reform between the wars, often reflecting conflict between aspirant peasant proprietors and declining gentry landowners.⁹ Where, as in England, much land passed from the hands of one class to another, this could have decisive effects on the rural social structure. Beyond this was a much wider array of cultural fears about the rise of mechanisation, the subjugation of nature and the direction

and ultimate destiny of the modernisation project. These seem to account for much of the intensity and political purchase of the nexus between rurality and national identity in these years, especially perhaps in the more heavily urbanised nations.¹⁰

To what extent did the Second World War bring to an end the rural crisis, or crises, described here? In many countries it seems to have done so at the economic level (not least through government intervention, which on the whole was much more extensive, systematic and lasting than before the war). There was no renewal of the agricultural depression, at least in the short term, and this may have mitigated some of the more acute interwar anxieties about the collapse of the rural sphere. It is more difficult to speculate about the trajectory of national identities but it could tentatively be suggested that they may have become less fraught and pressing, at least in Europe, in the 1950s and 1960s than they had been between the wars. The stabilisation of the international system and the partial supersession of national identities by Cold War alignments, combined with economic prosperity, all contributed towards this.¹¹ In other respects, however, it seems likely that the disruptive effects of modernisation on rurality persisted or even intensified after the war. Certainly in the United Kingdom, the strains generated between the modernisation of agriculture, actively sponsored by the state, and the rising tide of rural preservationism, also ironically institutionalised by the state through the planning system, became increasingly difficult to contain.¹² How far the United Kingdom's trajectory was typical is a question that calls for much more comparative research. It is hoped that the essays that follow will prompt many such questions, as well as surveying an interesting range of issues in their own right.

Notes

1. Ravnholt Henning, *The Danish Cooperative Movement* (Copenhagen, 1947); James C. Adams, *Notes on Agricultural Cooperation in the Netherlands* (1910); Lionel Smith-Gordon and Cruise O'Brien, *Co-operation in Ireland* (Manchester, 1921).
2. For Plunkett and his influence, see Margaret Digby, *Horace Plunkett: An Anglo-American Irishman* (Oxford, 1949); *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1931–40, pp. 706–7; T. West, *Horace Plunkett: Co-operation and Politics: An Irish Biography* (Gerards Cross, 1986).
3. Alan F. Wilt, *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 47, 215, 225.
4. Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999); Margaret Digby, *A Short History of the Land Settlement Association (in England)* (London, 1955).
5. Paul Brassley, 'Agricultural Science and Education', in E. J. T. Collins, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VII, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 594–649.
6. Philip V. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History* (Santa Barbara, 2004).
7. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1992), pp. 131–62.
8. Michael Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe* (3rd edn, London, 1989).
9. Wojciech Roszkowski, *Land Reforms in East Central Europe after World War One* (Warsaw, 1995).
10. One of the best discussions of this, although in a principally English context, remains Frank Trentmann, 'Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-romanticism and the

Transformation of Anti-modernism in Twentieth-century Western Culture', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), 583–625.

11. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870*, pp. 163–92.
12. These issues are explored in more depth in Jeremy Burchardt, 'Une campagne statique, une agriculture dynamique: les contradictions de la modernité dans l'Angleterre rurale, 1945–2001', in Emmanuel Roudaut, ed., *Villes et Campagnes Britanniques: Confrontation ou (Con)fusion?* (Valenciennes, 2003), pp. 115–34.