

The Futures of Rural Policy: the Significance of Rural Futures Studies

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Summary

The UK Government — as well as agencies with a remit to inform government policy — has become increasingly active in generating and sponsoring futurological studies. This activity has pervaded discussions about rural policy as a succession of exercises have constructed scenarios for the British countryside 5, 10, 20 and even 50 years into the future. We discuss the significance of this phenomenon in terms of what it tells us about how rural policy might be affected by emerging styles of government. Although rural futurology is portrayed by government and others as an ‘enlightened’ mode of policy formation, we propose that part of the explanation may also lie in the emergence of two interrelated theories: government as the management of risk; and the strategic engineering of political discourse in the public arena. This leads us to face the inherent dissonance between the principles of futurology and the discourses of rurality.

Introduction

What will be the future for English rural society? To pose the question is to court controversy. Indeed, to speculate on the future of *any* social entity in the era of a 'runaway world' — to use Anthony Giddens striking phrase — would seem to embark on a somewhat intellectually hazardous enterprise. How much more so, then, when the timescales involved are 20- and even 50-years into the future. Yet, over the last decade, the UK Government has been accumulating futurological studies — through in-house studies or commissioned research — in all manner of topics. In the rural domain, these include the Strategic Futures study (Henley Centre for MAFF / DEFRA), the Tomorrow Project (Countryside Agency) and the Rural Futures Project (for Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs — DEFRA). For a review of these, see Ward & Ray (2004).

Why is there a growing interest in futurological studies by governments and their agencies? In this paper,¹ we will not be concerned with the content of each study's scenarios (and we will only touch on issues of the methodology by which rural scenarios have been constructed in the latter part of the paper). Rather, our purpose is to explore the significance of government-sponsored rural futurology as a contemporary political phenomenon. In this sociology of rural futurology, we speculate on a number of possible explanations.

Towards an enlightened mode of government policy-making?

In the preface to his BBC documentary-thesis *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), Adam Curtis suggests that, prior to the presently pervasive 'war on international terrorism' regime, societies and their political classes were becoming disillusioned with ideologies. The pursuit by nations (at least in the secular West) of explicit grand visions of utopia were being replaced by the modus operandi of the managerial state. Instead of referring to their respective ideologies, government action has increasingly been clustering around centrist policies, the imperative to respond to events and the monitoring of agents' performance against policy-defined targets.

Subscribers to this analysis (BBC, 2002) regret the short-termism that they see as being an inevitable consequence for the nature of government interventions. Insofar as a government might ever consider transcending the tyranny of reacting to the stream of events, its timeframe for action can

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be constrained by fiscal considerations, the politics of general elections and the adversarial nature of political debate in the mass media.

Yet, while the present-day mode of government can be characterised as managerialist, it is also accompanied by attempts to generate debates involving longer-term timescales at the centre of UK Government (e.g. the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit) and in Departments such as DEFRA. According to official rhetoric, futurology offers a way to anticipate future trouble and identify opportunities to exploit so that appropriate action can be taken in the short term.

Like other Government departments, DEFRA terminology now includes the concept of 'Horizon Scanning'. Departmental-sponsored futurology was to be marshalled into five 'priority themes'. One would encourage thinking on the forces shaping future landscapes. Another would focus on the wider natural environment, both in terms of the constraints of limited natural resources on socio-economic development and of the possible impacts of human activity on natural systems. The inclusion of a 'coping-with-threats' theme reflected the recent experience of BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), with activities under this heading focussing on the future of biosecurity and food hygiene. A fourth stream would involve explorations of the food economy in the sense of the modes of production that would respond to future risks while also contributing to the pursuit of environmental sustainability.

What is the significance of all this activity? At one level, the Horizon Scanning programme is merely DEFRA reviewing how best to serve its client group: rural residents and business. This requires the department to consider the implications of the new dynamics of rural society and economy for policy design. However, on another level, this activity is taking place within the wider political discourse of New Labour. It is the imperative of 'modernisation' that seems to be driving this examination of the assumptions underpinning rural policy. Contained within the modernisation rubric is: an acceptance of dynamic conditions of flexible capitalism / globalisation and the need to mould government interventions so as to cope with, and exploit, it; to pursue social change by challenging discourses and assumptions that hinder the rhetoric of 'opportunity society'; and the view, therefore, that, in a number of areas, the scope for government intervention might be less than (or different in kind from) what was thought appropriate in previous eras. Recent experience indicates not only that rural futurology is being generated by the dynamic of modernisation, but also that rural issues are thereby potentially being translated into a component of modernisation ideology. In other words, for all the present policy rhetoric of rural proofing of government policy, the logic of rural futurology is eventually to redefine rurality as, in large part, an outcome or artefact

of the forces of change in wider society. The implication would be that the existence of rural policy per se (or at least as presently pursued) would become less and less tenable.

Thus, one significance of government sponsored rural futures studies is not that they provide a more rational *modus operandi* for government policy formation — in that they focus policy thinking onto the longer-term — but, rather that futures studies actually constitute a realm in which either of two opposing ideologies — one concerning the (albeit enlightened) conservative rural development camp, and the other being a manifestation of New Labour / modernisation — might triumph as the framework for the design of interventions affecting rural society.

This questioning of the assumptions that underpin mainstream policy as well as the introduction of private sector values and methods into the public sector is pervasive. By (in a low key manner) instigating futurological studies of the countryside, the UK Government may thereby be encouraging a critical examination of the rural constituency. The problematising of who should be the beneficiaries of rural policy — and, indeed, whether there should be a specific *rural* policy at all in the future. Only by systematically devising rural scenarios can the modernisation framework be used radically to reform the use of public money in rural areas.

‘The risk management of everything’?

According to Power (2004), Government, and society as a whole, is increasingly aware of the potential for failure inherent in their projects and in big systems in general. The BSE crisis is cited as a catalyst for this changed orientation to state intervention. To this, we could add the FMD outbreak and, on a global scale, the threat of Avian Flu, as well as memories of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Risk management, Power argues, is now central to the mode of government in the UK. Indeed, he goes further, suggesting that risk management is substituting for political argument: Giddens’ ‘runaway world’ is forcing a politics of uncertainty.

Indeed, in 2002, DEFRA produced its own *Risk Management Strategy*. In texts introducing the Horizon Scanning programme, every opportunity is taken to stress its scientific and systematic nature. The overall goal was to cultivate the Department’s capacity “to anticipate and prepare for new science risks and opportunities”, cultivating “cross-cutting thinking that covers natural and social scientific activities and research” (DEFRA, 2002, p3).

Power argues that the logic of government as risk management is that systems of internal control arise. Control of the rural economy / society (through, for example, the collection of farm businesses level data and the administration of food production subsidies and grants, as well as physical planning regulation etc) is well-established. Monitoring and quality control (through livestock traceability requirements for example) in the post BSE/FMD era is on the increase. As in other domains, the Government's emerging general approach to intervention in the countryside is increasingly taking the form of decentralisation, whereby resources and responsibility for implementation are shifted to local / regional actors (for example, in local/participative rural development projects, health services etc) with central government retaining an evaluative/management role. For Power, this is a matter of 'risk communication (p19): "Previously the sole preserve of expert committees and individuals, the emergence of demands for consultation and for taking seriously the views of diverse publics has brought the principles for accepting risk — 'risk appetite' ... — into public question" (p.20). According to Power, government as the management of risk can be understood as "a new politics of uncertainty" whereby government institutions feel compelled to focus on the management of risk so as to safeguard the reputations of the institutions concerned as well as of their professional employees (p22).

Futurology serves, thus, as a modus operandi for transcending the tyranny of short-term problem solving and identifying risks on the horizon. By identifying longer-term processes (including those of an apparently a systemic nature), futurology identifies the domains that government cannot do much about and the dynamics / choices whose outcomes cannot realistically be predicted. The longer the futurological timescale, the less specific (in terms of geography and social factors) the scenarios become.

This helps to drive the new governance in which risk is spread (dissipated) from the centre downwards. Responsibility for policy-making and implementation is spread through consultation, participation and decentralisation. Thus, we can think of futurology being employed strategically to re-frame the limits of government responsibility and action; including the rural domain.

The management of political discourse

Open democracy and an aggressive broadcast media can inadvertently foster short-termism / conservatism among politicians and civil servants. A government department found even to be discussing a radical scenario risks being pilloried as if the debate was a leak of impending policy. The practice of departments in commissioning academic-led futurological studies might be seen,

therefore, as furnishing government with a coping mechanism. Futurological studies might be set up as public domains in which radical ideas could be generated and explored.

Thus, in sponsoring rural futurology (or any futurology), government can be seen to be stimulating the production of future scenarios which, being a function of futurological methods, can be portrayed by government as being systematic and objective. These scenarios are produced seemingly autonomously of government (or any other interests) interests. Their significance in terms of the modernisation / management of risk mode of government, is that the ideas can emerge into the public domain (by way of the research community and the rural policy community). We can see, therefore, how these objective ideas might allow actors to cultivate attitudes, to stimulate a critical attitude to the presently predominant discourse (of rurality) and to prepare the ground for introduction of radical policies in the future. While the discourse is being examined through any particular futurological output, the government can act as if it was merely one player among many: a player who is obliged react to / cope with the implications of the new knowledge of what it is being told is possibly going to happen in the future.

Any dissemination that happens serves to test contemporary reactions. Thus, for example, in the search for a policy to deal with political criticism of agricultural policy or land use regulations, ideas and their rationales could be filtered out into the public domain where they would either sink or begin to prepare opinion.

Futures of fate or futures of desire

So what is the purpose of futurology? Accepting that it cannot make claims for prediction, it is a tool to warn us of what might possibly happen or a tool to manipulate present-day discourse of government (and, thereby, challenge assumptions underlying rural policy)? Brand (1999) reminds us that there are two very different bases for futurology: futures of fate and futures of desire. This is partly about the philosophy underpinning the construction of future scenarios, but it also concerns how actors present and argue for a particular view of the future.

The future of fate is based on a systemic view: that the future will roll-out according to logic of forces inherent in present systems. The method involves starting with the present and variously projecting forward. The objective is to find out what is probably going to happen. The credibility of scenarios diminishes as timeframe for the futurological study increases. The scenarios are also prone to being conservative in sense of the maintenance of social order.

The future of desire, by contrast, is normative. The process starts by identifying what type of future is desirable and then working back (backcasting) in order to devise actions that would facilitate that future. It seems less rigorous, and certainly requires longer timescales to be credible. It is also, however, potentially more socially progressive, although this will actually be a function of whose desires inform the futurological exercise.

The dissonance between futurology and rurality

We have speculated above on the notion that futurology could serve as a mechanism to challenge the assumptions underlying present-day rural policy by imagining potentially radical future scenarios. UK governments, we suggested, might see in futurology a way of reconstructing the countryside (at least as a domain of intervention) in terms of modernisation ideology.

However, within the discourse of rurality is the notion of rural society being essentially the antithesis of change: it symbolises heritage, timeless images of national identity, organic social capital, the good life that is different from metropolitan society (the rural idyll). The sources of innovation (technical, commercial, social) are, therefore, to be found in the urban and large corporation sectors.

Contemporary rural development theory and practice attempt to counter this discourse by arguing for an endogenous (or neo-endogenous) model of regeneration. This is the idea that socio-economic vibrancy could be engineered by identifying latent resources and capacities; developing a localist mode of production and devolving the delivery of public services.

But to imagine a radically different rural future would, in a sense, be to contemplate the destruction of rurality as it is presently conceptualised. The literary equivalent of futurology is science fiction in that both are speculations on possible futures, extrapolating from the avant garde of present-day science and technology. Yet, it is instructive to see how, even in this literary version of futurology, rurality is invariably defined in terms of its conceptual opposition to scientific / technological / urban sophistication and 'progress'. The rural is used to represent either a wild (even savage) human or animal, sparsely populated terrain, set apart from 'society' or a pastoral, changeless refuge providing psychological restoration to techno-urban stressed citizens (Hollinger & Gordon, 2002). Apparently, it is difficult — in that it goes against the cultural grain — to imagine a rural futurology. 'Rural' is a category defined in opposition to modernity and futurism so that the attempt to inject

the latter into the former equates to the liquidation of the rural (its transformation into the urban). Mormont (2004) argues, thus, that it is the role of the concept of rurality in the era of modernity to be an ongoing critique of modernity / urbanism, even if essentially on the symbolic level.

This tendency was illustrated, to an extent, in the Rural Futures project when longer-term 50-year scenarios were exposed to discussion. During one workshop made up of representatives of various national organisations with a rural remit (government, voluntary sector, academics, private businesses) and another restricted to stakeholders from a particular region, scenarios consonant with either the traditional rurality (landscape, landuse and social) or contemporary rural development ideas (localised, endogenous, participative) were regarded as utopian and therefore received the enthusiastic attention of participants. Scenarios that were dramatically dissonant with the present-day values were viewed, by and large, as dystopian; participants had great difficulty in dealing with these futures seriously.

This also concerns the issue of which actors are involved in constructing and validating scenarios. A feature of involving stakeholders in the process, in our experience, was that futures of desire and of a relatively conservative nature (or, at best, reformative rather than transformative) tended to predominate. In a sense, rural organisations (including social scientists) have a remit to protect and improve the interests of their various rural constituencies; it would not be legitimate for them to subscribe to scenarios that undermined their remit. Thus there is a tension between, on the one hand, recognising the power of wider forces and, on the other, including in the model specific features of rural areas. Put another way, the former translates as exogenous drivers of change: broad technological and socio-political components that emerge from the cosmopolitan dynamic and are thus exogenous to locality and rurality. The latter — endogenous drivers — therefore, translates as drivers (or constrictions on change) specific to each rural area as well as to rurality in the national sense.

In the Rural Futures, the contrast was explicit and intentional:

timescale	20-year scenario exercise	50-year scenario exercise
epistemology	empirical / statistical and simulation	speculative / informed imagination
rural specificity	start from present rural trends and socio-geographical diversity within national countryside	start from speculations about the trajectory of wider socio-political and technological drivers, then try to map onto general types of rural area
degree of change	conservative or incremental	potentially transformational (including dystopian scenarios)
predominating the exercise	ruralists	futurological methodologists

Rural futurology: an ambiguous phenomenon

In this paper, we have explored the notion that (rural) futurology needs to be understood as a political phenomenon, in the sense of a tool available to certain actors (government and others) and in the sense of activity that has implications for sections of society. This is an important insight if only because, as academics, we are directly implicated in the scenarios-constructing process.

Much of the debate concerns the argument that government would be better were it to be informed by the longer term perspectives generated by systematic futurology. Futurology offers the prospect of critically examining present assumptions and, thereby, imagining radically different futures. We have also noted the duality in the rural domain: rurality being inherently conservative yet also being potentially reconstructed in the ideology of modernisation.

However, we should also note some of the negative connotations of government futurology. There is a view that society is changing at exponential rates. Human capacity to impact detrimentally on the future is growing faster than the capacity to record and anticipate those impacts and to understand their consequences. Options for the future are thus being closed down, and very quickly. The apocalyptic meta-prospect is that society will rush into a condition known as 'singularity' in which the pace of change has accelerated to such a degree that "extrapolation breaks down" and the near future becomes dangerously unstable and unknowable (Brand, 1999, 20). In general, change in society is accelerating — technological innovation, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies or the distractions of personal multitasking (Brand, 1999).

For the *Long Now Foundation* (Brand, 1999), futurology should be about reflecting on long term processes so as to optimise the number of desirable potential futures available to society (keeping our options open until each decision is unavoidable). Hasty decision-making is less 'wise' than when framed in an appropriately long-term perspective. Futurology is, therefore, a means of cultivating long-term collective responsibility. Constructing a philosophy for action based on a very long perspective would make for wiser decisions, not only by government but also by commerce and consumerism, science and technology.

The present-day international negotiations on the regulation of emissions to reduce climate change, for example, indicates that governments may have some leeway, where appropriate, in

conducting policy discussions on long time scales. Yet there is an ambiguity at the centre of the 'long view is best' rhetoric. It suggests a meta-project of cultural design. Conservatism — never proceeding until all the implications are known — could mean that futurology is co-opted to reinforce present-day social structure. Futurology could be available to interest groups not for the pursuit of social change or preparedness for the future but, rather, as a support for a reactionary ideology.

Moreover, short-termism and flexibility may, in some ways, be desirable. It is inevitable in that the forces for change in society, as many have commented, are accelerating at exponential rates; Moore's Law (the exponential growth over time in microprocessor density) becomes relevant in a growing number of domains, requiring governments to have within their armoury a capacity for flexibility.

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