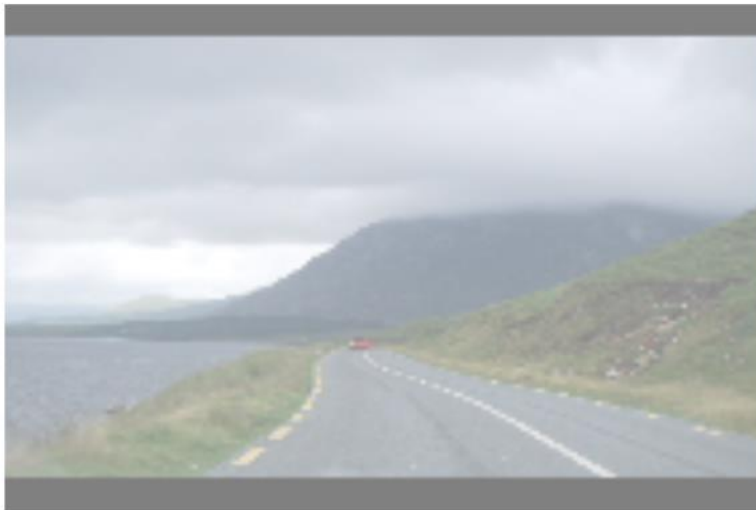


# The Rural Narrative: Stuck in Nostalgic Sentiment and Political Opportunism?

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## Today's Presentation

1. Narratives of decline
2. Subjectivity/Object(ivity)
3. The Value of Nostalgia?



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September 26th 2019, Ballymacscanlon House Hotel, Dundalk, Co. Louth



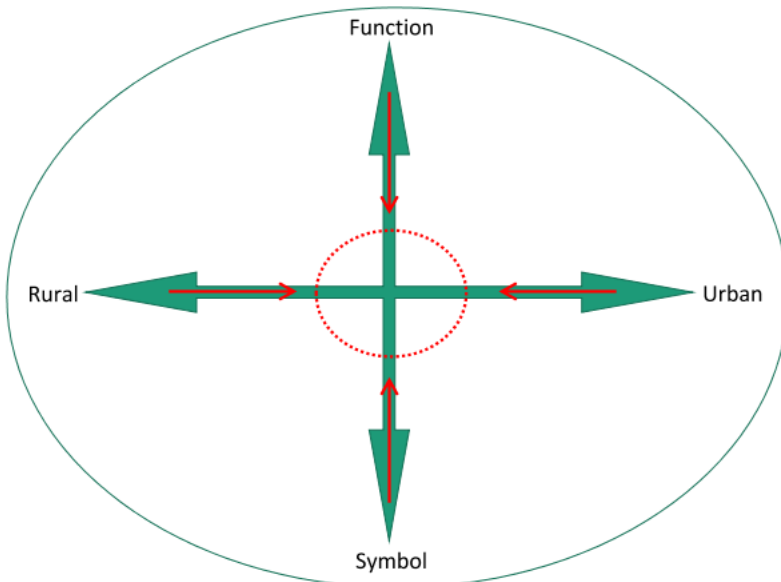
# Narratives of Decline

Centre on questions such as ...

- What is rural(s)
- What it means to be rural(s)
- What is the role of contemporary & future rurals



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Divergent Paths since the 1990s (and earlier) –

an urban-rural dichotomy;

separation of function and symbol, i.e. agriculture & rural no longer interchangeable

have been influential in rural studies

and policy ... to a degree!



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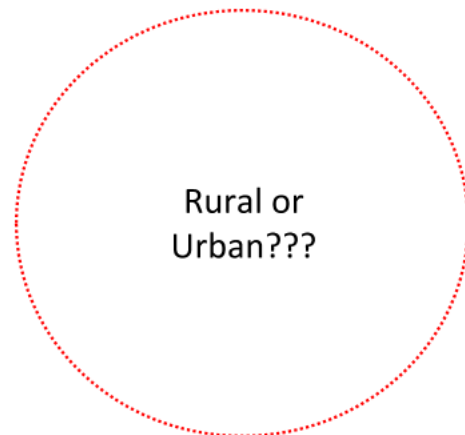




There is more in common with 'non-rural' or 'urban' dwellers and workers than we often admit

## Narratives of Rural Decline

(Agricultural change)  
Aging population  
Youth out-migration  
Unemployment / underemployment  
Hidden poverty  
Disadvantage  
Low income  
Poor planning  
Weak infrastructure ...



# Narratives of Decline

One argument for the spatial distinctiveness of rural places is the particular type of change that is occurring in the countryside, for example the process of 'recovery' from agricultural decline perhaps being the most significant of these (Meadowcroft, 2005)

Or recovery from post-industrial/manufacturing era ...



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## Subjectivity/Object(ivity)

*“The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle **as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them** and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who are nearly half people and half bicycles ...”.*

Extract from *The Third Policeman*, by Flann O’Brien (1967, author’s own emphasis in bold).



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## Subjectivity/Object(ivity)

“Nostalgia for some real or imagined state of harmony and centeredness once experienced in rural settings haunts the victim of mobile and fragmented urban milieux”.

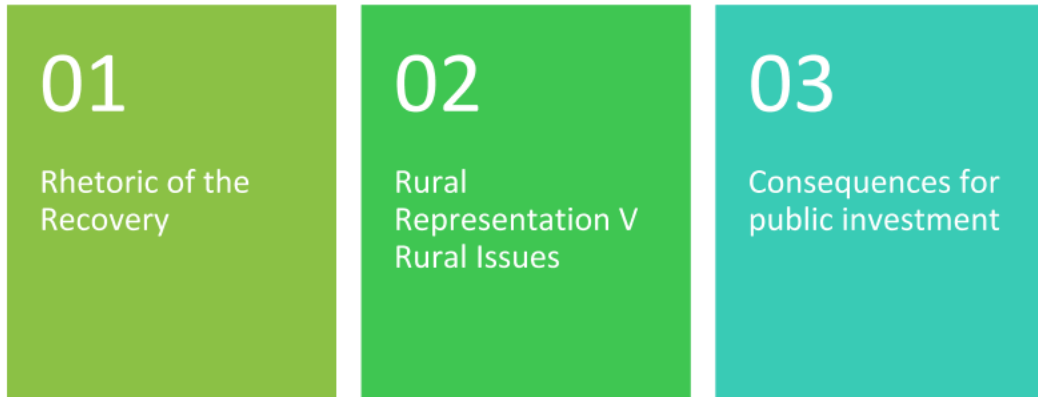
Buttimer, 1980: 166



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*“The media ... complicit in reproducing the interpretative frames of the countryside lobby, and in so doing they helped to reshape popular and political discourses of rurality” (Woods, 2010: 217)*



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## Subjectivity/Object(ivity)

- Not coming to terms with a changing / changed rural
- Tension between an agricultural rural and another rural(s)
- Representation and outcome
- Spatial justice – aligning different rurals with different urbans to deeply understand the nature of decline/change/opportunity
- The strong agricultural lobby existing in Ireland has perhaps instead muted the other rural voices that represent 'anything other than farming'.



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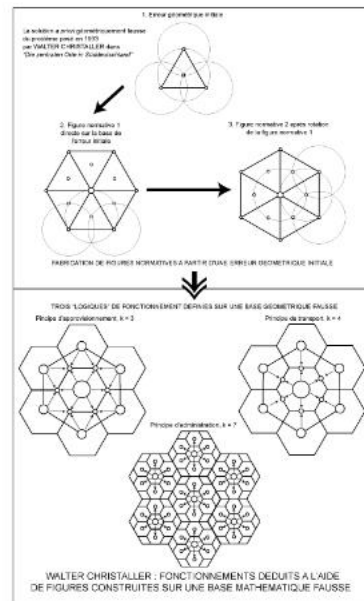


## The Value of Nostalgia

If we were to look at the world coldly and completely objectively we might have a world of functional places without interest or variety.

When we adapt to our environment and recognise its uniqueness without fetishising then we find the place in between subjectivity and objectivity;

the everyday and the special.



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# The Value of Nostalgia?

*“The prevalence of the rural idyll myth in media representations has had a material impact in stimulating the growth of rural tourism and counterurbanisation and informing the expectations of visitors and migrants; in disguising the existence of rural poverty and class conflict; and in promoting benign and anthropomorphic representations of animals and nature that have helped to shape public opinion on issues such as farming, animal welfare and hunting.” (Woods, 2010: 218)*



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# The Value of Nostalgia?

Oversimplifying the message

Not acknowledging (in reality) the complexity of rural issues

Denial of rural as places of opportunity



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We are moving towards a rural of potentials and opportunity:

“...the perception that “rural” is synonymous with “decline” is wrong. Ireland’s economy and heritage are heavily dependent on the contribution of rural areas.”

“Rural areas make a major contribution to Ireland’s **identity** and to overall national development in economic, social, cultural and environmental terms.”



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Bialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

Ireland 2040

ational Planning  
network



## The Value of Nostalgia?

In the everyday geographies of peoples’ lives the reality of the lived experience is a complex mix –

To represent the rural as a singular is to diminish it; belittle it; misunderstand it ...

to ultimately let it down by not truly representing the complex rural that exists ...

the decline narrative at least acknowledges there is a problem; but in relying on that approach, it does not come near a solution and does not recognise the positive actions taking place.



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# The Value of Nostalgia?

The decline narrative can allow for an ideological approach to take hold and does not give space for an evidence based approach.

The decline narrative can also allude to a nostalgia for things past, for something that may have never existed.



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## Conclusions

- Need for strong evidence bases in decision-making and policy formulation
- Need for bottom-up engagement to understand the complexity of the rural – no one rural nor does its narrative belong to one group or experience
- Need to work towards strengthening the rural potential – delving deeper to build on what exists



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