



# The right to the country?

## Ruralising spatial justice

Michael Woods  
Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins  
Rhys Jones



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 726950. This document reflects only the author's view. The Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.





# What can we learn by **ruralising** spatial justice?







# The right to the city

- Lefebvre (1968) *Le Droit à la Ville*
  - **spatial justice** involves the right to take part in the urban transformation process; it involves a struggle





# Spatial justice

- As a language/discourse that:
  - Is meaningful, allowing connections to be made with pre-existing struggles for justice?
  - Is less problematic than some alternatives (e.g. core/periphery, uneven development)?
  - Can be progressive with a focus on a positive goal?





# The right to the country

- As a means to problematise:
  - the right to the city
  - ‘social justice in space’





# The right to the country

- Five dimensions:
  - Territorial inequalities
  - Access to space
  - The production of inequalities
  - The perception of injustices
  - A normative model









# In Wales

- A 'lagging region' that needs to 'catch up' with the rest of Europe?
  - Net recipient of EU funds (ERDF, ESF and CAP) – around £79/€90 per capita (Ifan et al 2016)
  - €2.4 billion allocated through the ERDF and ESF during 2014-20 (Woolford and Hunt 2016)
  - West Wales and the Valleys a 'less developed' region (GDP per capita less than 75% of EU avg.)



# The right to the country: Territorial inequalities



- Rural-urban distribution and disparities
- Access to infrastructure and social services
- *Troubling the concept:*
  - The difference between spend and access





# In Wales

“I was around when the **first set of programmes were coming to an end** ... government, I think, was in quite a difficult position whereby our **GDP per capita** in those areas hadn't really changed and we were still ... below the European threshold. So on the one hand this was a **bit of an indictment** of all of the money. Has the money been wasted? On the other there was this mmm, but we still actually **want to stay under the threshold** because then we'll qualify for another round of funding. So that was sort of an **interesting political dilemma**”

(IMAJINE WP1 INTW06, senior civil servant, Welsh Government).



# The right to the country:



## Access to space

- The right to access, live in, work in, own and enjoy rural space
- Relationship between inequalities and exclusion
- *Troubling the concept:*
  - Tensions between groups and rights





# In Wales

“[A] lot of people have told me that I’m **too gay** for [small town] ... There’s been lots of suggestions that I should tone things down ... Conform more, but ... my life to me at the moment feels quite **run of the mill**. It feels largely banal. It’s largely child centric. I don’t really feel that I’m particularly up to hijinks. My political activism is quite limited ... So **I feel really confused** by the way that I am sometimes perceived here and also quite **apologetic** and also a little bit **depressed** if I’m honest, and a little bit crushed.”

(IMAJINE WP5 INTW006, urban-rural migrant)



# The right to the country: Producing inequalities



- Rural inequalities are not ‘natural’ but the product of state processes
- Economic policies and the production of rural inequalities
- *Troubling the concept:*
  - Power dynamics in rural space





# In Wales

“[T]he thing with the [school funding] pot is that if you lose somebody down here somebody else wins, **somebody loses all the time** ... because there’s only a quantity of funding that’s got to be shared according to the formula ... when the formula was first set up, it was when grants were on the up, everything was on the up rather than on the way down ... it was comparatively fair, but with a reducing pot it **works against** the ones at the bottom of the pile ... the **rural ones are losing out big time.**”

(ROBUST project, rural local authority officer)



# The right to the country: Perceptions of injustice



- Measurement vs perception
  - Inequality is quantitative
  - Injustice is qualitative
- *Troubling the concept:*
  - Who perceives rural space?







# In Wales

“[L]ooking at geographies ... tells a story about the inequity and the **unfairness that people experience**”

(IMAJINE WP1 INTW07, public health manager)

“[Y]ou only have to go **ten or fifteen miles**”

(IMAJINE WP1 INTW06, senior civil servant)

“[H]ow good are our relationships? If we address those things, which are **softer things in life**, we’re actually less likely to get to the point where we’re having to **address needs**”

(IMAJINE WP1 INTW05, senior civil servant)



# The right to the country:



## As normative model

- Can the right to the country be a progressive vision for a more equal, just society?
- What might a spatially just countryside look like?
- *Troubling the concept:*
  - The rural as normative and progressive





# In Wales

"The assessments acknowledge the importance of local spaces as assets, acknowledge their roles in people's well-being and consider how people engage and interact with these places. However, most well-being assessments showed **very limited consideration of the significance or causes of spatial differences**, including ... the differences between rural and urban or inland and coastal communities ... These were described as relevant problems, but their **localised impact** on well-being remained unexplored."

(Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2017)





# Conclusion

- Spatial justice provides a framework through which to explore rural inequalities from multiple perspectives
- Concept of justice introduces a qualitative indicator of perceived (un)fairness
- Mutli-level and multi-layered, from regional governance to individual experiences
- Highlights the complexity of inequalities – Equality between who? Justice in relation to what? Rights for who?
- Role of policy in (re-)producing inequalities, but also as a vehicle for addressing injustice
- Raises questions of political power and authority in and over the rural

