

## Critique and the Return of the Rural Esther Peeren<sup>1</sup> (University of Amsterdam)

A not so new but definitely resurgent divergence in various nations across the globe is that between the urban and the rural, with many rural communities feeling marginalized, disparaged, unheard and under threat from national urban elites and international immigrants. This feeling of being excluded from or disempowered in their society, and of being forced to change their identities and traditions, leads significant numbers of people in these communities to vote, in what has been called “the revenge of the countryside,” for right-wing nationalist populist parties, leaders and policies.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, for example, Remainers are predominantly found in the cities, whereas Brexiteers are overrepresented in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> Trump voters, too, disproportionately come from rural areas, leading to a spate of articles discussing Trump’s election and continued support in terms of a widening “rural-urban divide.”<sup>4</sup> This divide, of course, is nothing new, as is emphasized by articles in the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Guardian*,<sup>5</sup> and is widening only in relation to the recent past in which the local-global or national-global opposition (in which the global was seen to dominate or even obfuscate the local/national in a similar way as the urban is seen to do the rural) seemed more relevant – socially, politically and culturally. But now the allegedly forgotten countryside or province is back, asserting itself against the city and, most stridently, against metropolitan capitals (London, Washington, Amsterdam, Paris, Athens and, at the European level, Brussels), and doing so through a rhetoric of victimhood that in many cases is underpinned by xenophobia, racism, sexism and homophobia.

The successful political assertion of the forgotten, dispossessed rural, often in support of politicians whose policies would do little to improve conditions in the rural, highlights the importance of asking whose society a particular society is (seen as) – who is or feels part of it and who doesn’t – and by whom and on whose behalf it is being critiqued. Although it is tempting to dismiss the “revenge of the countryside” as originating wholly in ignorance and/or racist resentment, there is some legitimacy to the claim that the rural is (and has been) neglected, not least as a site of critique. In this regard, it is telling that in the reader for

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<sup>1</sup> This position paper emerged as part of my role as PI of the project ‘Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World’ (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 772436).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_revenge\\_of\\_the\\_countryside7156](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_revenge_of_the_countryside7156). This divergence is not only visible across Europe and in the US, but also in Turkey, South East Asia and Brazil. See <https://www.ft.com/content/e05cde76-93d6-11e8-b747-fb1e803ee64e>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexit-and-public-opinion-cities-and-towns-the-geography-of-discontent/> and <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/rural-england-left-behind-brexit-hunting-ban-remain-leave>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/upshot/america-political-divide-urban-rural.html> and <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-the-rural-urban-divide-is-putting-democrats-at-a-disadvantage/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2018/1226/The-deep-roots-of-America-s-rural-urban-political-divide> and <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2018/jul/04/us-rural-urban-divide-historical-roots>.

this iteration of Terra Critica the city is the explicit or implicit center of both society and its critique, while the countryside remains almost unmentioned.

Thus, in Koyré's text "The Political Function of the Modern Lie," for example, he asserts: "It may be objected that the lie is as old as the world itself, or at least as old as man himself, a *mendax ab initio*. Also, the political lie came into existence together with the city, as history amply demonstrates" (143).<sup>6</sup> This statement equates the beginnings of the world and the beginnings of man with the emergence of the city, effacing the non-urban, including the rural, altogether. At best, Koyré suggests that non-urban man (who, apparently, is not yet truly man) does not tell political lies, which plays into the longstanding idealization of non-urban or pre-urban life in the genres of the pastoral and idyll. Hall's "Racism and Reaction," which focuses on post-WWII racism in Britain, on its first page ignores the historical presence of black people in rural areas by exclusively referring to their distribution, "in their thousands," over "English cities" (142).<sup>7</sup> The rest of his text elaborates his view of the "interconnection between the politics of race and the politics of the inner city," which is very illuminating but only tells part of the story of black presence and racism in Britain. Bhabha, in his brief discussion of the 1984-85 British miners' strike, notes that "the choice was clearly between the dawning world of the new 'Thatcherite' city gent and a long history of 'the working man'" (12).<sup>8</sup> Here, the new city gent is opposed to the working man of the past, with the specific non-urban (or at least non-metropolitan) location of the striking miners glossed over as they are assimilated into a generalized class identity. Bhabha's formulation also elides the fact that during the miners' strike, the "new city gent" was aligned with (and in some cases came from) the old rural gentry. Thus, the societies Koyré, Hall and Bhabha are writing about in their texts – and, by implication, the anti-capitalist, anti-racist and postcolonial critiques they are leveling against these societies – turn out to be decidedly urban-centered.

Hall's "The Meaning of New Times" first mentions the city in relation to the paradoxes of modernity and the question of whether the new should be welcomed or rejected.<sup>9</sup> After pointing to the contrast, on the global scale, between the "rich 'West'" and "the famine stricken South," produced by "forms of 'development' which destroy faster than they create," Hall portrays the city as having gone from "privileged [*sic*] scenario of the modern experience for Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin" to "the anonymous city, the sprawling city, the inner city, the abandoned [*sic*] city" (256). Here, the position of the city as marking a positive newness and progression is undermined, but the non-urban remains elided. On the same page, however, Hall argues that Gramsci's "Americanism & Fordism" deals with the

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandre Koyré, "The Political Function of the Modern Lie." 1945. *October* 160 (2017): 143-151.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, "Racism and Reaction." 1978. *Stuart Hall - Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*. Ed. Sally Davison et al. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 142-157.

<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory." *new formations* 5 (1988): 5-23.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times." 1989. *Stuart Hall - Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*. Ed. Sally Davison et al. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 248-265.

same question about the new he is dealing with (only in relation to Fordism) and was written in an age where the challenges for the Left were much the same as in the late 1980s (and perhaps also the late 2010s): “retreat and retrenchment of the working-class movement, ascendancy of fascism, a new surge of capital ‘with its intensified economic exploitation and authoritarian cultural expression’” (256). Hall then lauds the “comprehensiveness and range” of Gramsci’s diagnosis of the situation in Italy in the 1930s, with one of the “new questions” concerning “the contrast between ‘super-city and super-country’” (257). Although Hall does not take up this question, by mentioning it he provides an intertextual link to an account of society and critique that emphatically includes the rural.

A turn to Gramsci can illuminate how rural-urban relations figure into the questions of “whose society?” and “whose critique?” as asked in 1930s Italy and today. In “Notes on Italian History,” Gramsci insists that “the relations between urban population and rural population are not of a single, schematic type ... It is therefore necessary to establish what is meant by ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ in modern civilisation, and what combinations may result from the fact that antiquated and retrograde forms continue to exist in the general composition of the population, studied from the viewpoint of its greater or lesser density” (90-91).<sup>10</sup> This first of all draws attention to the schematization that characterizes discourses about the rural-urban divide, including present-day populist-nationalist ones, and underlines the need for a critical assessment of what the rural and the urban mean, in relation to each other and in various contexts. Second, it suggests that older forms of the urban and the rural tend to linger and influence the present, so that expectations of the new may be confounded, as when “a rural type is more progressive than a self-styled urban type” (91). In “State and Civil Society,” Gramsci charts how the mutual disdain between countryside and city (often based on stereotypes), as well as underestimated differences on the ground (such as the countryside’s deep commitment to Catholicism), prevented peasants and urban workers from being united in an anti-capitalist revolution. In addition, he shows how the figure that was the biggest obstacle to the betterment of the peasantry was neither urban nor of the rural landowner class: instead, it was the rural petit-bourgeois, turned petty intellectual in the town, whose “function consists in opposing ‘politically’ the attempts of the peasant farmer to ameliorate his existence – since any improvement in the relative position of the peasant would be catastrophic for [his] social position” (213). This figure is volatile and susceptible to a multiplicity of ideologies, including “bizarre” ones (213), and, “at the decisive moments they always move to the right” (274). Essential to this figure is a sense of lost privilege that, instead of provoking solidarity with other *morti di fame* or starvelings, makes them choose the side of the landowners and *carabinieri* (273-274). It does not seem too far-fetched to look for parallels between Gramsci’s account of this “disruptive element in the life

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<sup>10</sup> All Gramsci quotes are from: Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2007.

of the countryside, always thirsting for changes" (273) and certain rural (and urban) Trump or Brexit voters.

It is even less of a stretch to see the super-city versus super-country polemic in Italian literature of the 1920s drawn on by Gramsci in "Americanism and Fordism" as a forerunner of the tensions between globalization and nationalism/localism that underlie the 2010s "return of the rural" in various contexts. The polemic pitched "a Fordist fanfare" that exalted urbanism, cosmopolitanism and capitalism against a ruralism that entailed "the disparagement of the cities typical of the Enlightenment, exaltation of the artisanat and of idyllic patriarchalism, reference to craft rights and a struggle against industrial liberty" (287). Like today's populist nationalism, which has espoused its own form of ruralism, the critique of Fordism put forward by the super-country is not completely without merit; however, what the super-country proposed instead of unfettered Fordism was a conservative, nationalist, xenophobic defense of Italian civilization, as in this quote from Mino Maccari: "When Supercountry opposes modernistic importations, its opposition is aimed at *preserving* the right to select from them with a view to *preventing harmful contacts*, mixed with those which could be useful, from *corrupting the integrity of the nature and character proper to Italian civilization*, quintessentialised over the ages and now yearning (!) after a unifying synthesis" (qtd. in Gramsci 289 – the exclamation mark is his).

The ruralism of the super-country, just like the urbanism of the super-city, cleaves to a binary opposition between rural and urban (and between all their traditional connotations). To allow the rural to return as a different critique than the populist one of the super-country or Brexit/Make America Great Again, we need to recognize, with Moten, that "part of the trouble is that when we think the margin we think it in opposition to the mainstream ... when really they are both in opposition to the border" (259-260) and make room for imaginative constructions that transcend this binary thinking, such as an "urban pastoral excursion into an endlessly renewed, *renéo'd green*" (260).