Peripheral geographies of migrant activism

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On 5th July 2017 we held a workshop at the Phoenix Arts Centre in Exeter to explore ‘The Radical Rural: Peripheral Geographies of Migrant Activism’. The workshop was organised by a group of academics from the Geography Department at the University of Exeter: Professor Nick Gill and Dr Jen Bagelman, and two PhD researchers Amanda Schmid-Scott and Emma Marshall. Over thirty people attended including representatives from local community groups, artists, activists and other academics from the University of Exeter, the University of Bath and the University of Bristol.

The purpose of the workshop was to consider how local communities are engaging with global issues of migration, particularly in response to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and the large-scale arrivals of people from Africa and the Middle East on the shores of Southern Europe over the last few years.

About the Workshop

Thinking of our own position as scholar-activists based in Exeter, who often find ourselves travelling to major cities such as Bristol or London to take part in protest or activist work and research, we wanted to bring together a collective of academics and activists who might see their work as taking place in the ‘more-than-urban’ places, or places that may be referred to as ‘peripheral’, ‘rural’, ‘provincial’, ‘isolated’ or simply ‘unexpected’.

As we began to delve in, we discovered a wide range of organisations and activist groups doing incredible and energetic work in these types of settings. We decided to bring these divergent energies together in one room, to discover what could be learned. We didn’t have a fixed idea about the precise shape of these practices; instead, we were keen to provide a space to share knowledge about what is already taking place in these more-than-urban places.

What we did

The day was split into two parts: the morning session showcased presentations from community organisers and academics, including Sue and Gez Richards from Hay, Brecon and Talgarth Town of Sanctuary in Wales, Steve Bradford and Saif Ali from the South Devon Refugee Support Network, June Marshall from Refugee Support Devon, Anna Roderick from Abide, Christine from Organic Arts, Nicola Frost from Devon Community Foundation, artist Eva Fahle-Clouts, who has worked with refugees in the Calais camp, Laura Colebrooke from the University of Exeter and Lydia Medland from the University of Bristol. The afternoon hosted group discussions facilitated by Marjolein Rijken around experiences of doing community work or ‘activism’ in rural (or less-urban) settings.

The whole day was documented using visual minutes captured by Claire Stringer, an artist commissioned for the event.

These discussions raised many key issues, which we summarise here. This summary includes suggestions raised at the Radical Rural event; however, it is not an exhaustive overview of our conversations. We intend for this summary to be read as companion to the on-going conversations that were stimulated by this event and a textual addition to the visual minutes documented here [see insert]. We hope that they are generative suggestions that can be used to help you build strength in your community and energise the projects you might be part of, or the ideas you might have.
What we learnt: a summary

Throughout the day there were many productive discussions exploring how people work together in rural areas to promote social change, or to respond to political crises. The discussions exposed many positive aspects of how people find ways to mobilise and make use of their unique contexts: this included for instance, the strong community ties that tend to characterise more-than-urban environments. In the context of the Syrian refugee situation, some expressed how their community responded with overwhelming generosity, putting out notices on community notice boards asking for food and clothing donations to be sent, or for newly arrived families. These kinds of responses reveal how more-than-urban spaces can respond spontaneously and can work collectively by pooling together resources.

Discussions also revealed some of the challenges that people encounter. The issue of ‘connectedness’ – whilst often strong within the community itself – was at times an issue when it came to feeling connected to more central activist “hubs”. People raised issues not only of physical distance, with people needing to drive many miles to reach different communities, but also of the rural topography which at times proved a challenge to reach different communities, but also of physical distance, with people needing to drive more central activist “hubs”. People raised issues not at times an issue when it came to feeling connected to people encounter. The issue of ‘connectedness’ Discussions also revealed some of the challenges that participants in rural settings faced, occurred through instances of physical and verbal abuse. Whilst these encounters are of course, not unique to rural or less urban settings, they do reveal some of the challenges around cultural and racial diversity which those based in these places face. Notions of a supposed ‘close-mindedness’ often associated with more rural settings unfortunately become reality on occasion: one participant, himself a refugee, revealed how he had been physically assaulted in the small town in which he was living.

More generally, at the workshop we learnt that there were differences in opinion over how we should describe this type of politics, including what was meant by ‘radical’, ‘rural’, ‘peripheral’ and ‘activism’. The very notion of what was ‘peripheral’ was problematised by various participants, with some suggesting the need to consider the place from which we consider the periphery to be. Others said they didn’t ‘feel’ peripheral at all, despite their rural locale, and simply the fact they lived in Britain meant that they were part of a global network of political activism. Even the notion of naming these types of activities as ‘radical’ was unsettled, many suggesting that this type of political action was not necessarily radical at all. After all, people have been responding to global crises in rural places for decades: if they were now ‘radical’, how could they be normalised?

What we can do

Creating welcome

The notion that ‘everyone knows everyone’ echoed throughout the workshop, suggesting that more-than-urban settings enable a level of familiarity and intimacy. We found this to be a significant and consistent component to how communities were responding to and engaging with issues of migration in their village or town. Creating a culture of hospitality through what one presenter called being ‘spontaneous and serendipitous’ are vital qualities of more rural settings. All of us can play a part in creating a welcoming environment where people from all places, backgrounds and hardships can be part of our communities. Think about the practical steps you can take (and are possibly already taking) – what can you offer others? How can you make sure everyone feels included?

Make the most of what you have

You may already have a wealth of resources where you live and in your local community. Talk to others about where your strengths lie and build on these. You don’t always have to create something completely new to make change happen. Capacity-building and coalition-building is central to successful mobilising.

Improvise

Sometimes organising and mobilising social action can be difficult, particularly where there are large distances between communities, or travel and transport is difficult for getting to certain places. Don’t be put off by physical or logistical barriers, be creative and work with what you have. Sometimes exceptional things come from unexpected places.

Stay in touch

You may find social media helpful to be in contact with other likeminded people, but remember that communication doesn’t have to be with the masses. The one-to-one contact we have is also important, stay in touch with the people you already know and the people around you. Use the phone, use spaces where meetings can take place e.g. village halls or pubs. Don’t believe that Facebook holds all of the answers – people were political long before the Internet was created.

Take responsibility: beyond borders

You don’t just have to take responsibility for your own actions or the people closest to you. Responsibility can extend over borders. Think about how your actions are connected to regional, national and global issues. What can you do to make the world a place we all want to live in?

It’s not just what you do that counts, it’s how you do it. Take care in how you approach things, it’s not always the outcomes we can measure that are important. Sometimes the process is just as productive.

Embracing more-than-urban environments

Recognise the potential of green spaces as therapeutic landscapes. Whilst rural areas may not always be the easiest or most convenient places to live, there are lots of positives that could be shared with others, particularly people who live in cities or urban areas. There are lots of ways of sharing the countryside with others, think about who might enjoy visiting these areas and how you can help to get them there.
Represented organisations / institutions

Abide, Ottery St. Mary
Ashburton Refugee Support Network
Beyond Borders, Totnes and District
Citizens UK, Totnes
Dartington Hall Trust
Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support
Devon Community Foundation
Efford Take Apart
Intergr8 UK
Kaleider
Organic Arts
Refugee Support, Devon
Singing for Refugees, Totnes
South Brent Refugee Support Network
SpaceX
University of Bath
University of Bristol
University of Exeter
Université Paris-Est
The Radical Rural ‘peripheral’ geographies of migrant activism

Global Food Systems

Places of Sanctuary has diversified a Global Sense of Place

We're an exchange of Ideas

Connected

Spaces

Strategic

Rather than reactive

Politicalisation of the Rural

Resources

Powerfully restorative

Football is universal

They're just like us!

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

THINK GLOBALLY BUT ACT LOCALLY

Community Sponsorship

Find housing

Who's Peripheral?

Stimulate Communities to Work Together

Stimulate

Global Processes affect us all

Links & Connections

Everyone knows everyone

Whose Periphery?

How is it possible to have Seasonal Food all year round?

Grown in Spain, Morocco

Global enclave

Migrant Workforce

Globalisation

What is about Employment Rights?

What are their skills?

Foodbanks: a moral panacea

16 week delays

Big Crisis

We need to change how we are doing things

Work with commissioners

We have rights to be heard

Our History

Changes, benefits

How can we prove economic inactivity?

Resistance: this doesn't work

Sanctuary not just a 'place'.

Empower

The person

Create a sense of purpose

Volunteering education

Raise awareness

Refugees are often defined by their losses and needs

What are you passionate about?

How can I empower the person

Create a sense of purpose

Volunteering education

Raise awareness
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