

## The Mobilisation of Rural Identities and the Failure of the Rural Protest Movement in the UK, 1996–2001

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**Abstract.** This paper uses tools developed in political sociology to analyse social movements and political discourse to examine the rise of rural protest movements in the late 1990s. Drawing on documentary evidence and interviews with participants in localised protests, the paper argues that the movements failed to become established because they were unable to form a common sense of identity amongst those living in rural areas. The paper moves from examining the increased political sophistication of the pro-hunting movement through to the experience of localised pickets by farmers via the countryside marches and the fuel strike. It argues that, although the protests leaders were able to organise short term protests, they were unable to appropriate or provide explanatory scripts that made protest activity meaningful to many who took part. The paper concludes by considering the difficulties of attempting to organise a collective identity from contemporary understandings of rural life.

### Introduction

Many commentators saw the English countryside between the years 1996 and 2001 as being in the throes of a crisis. Beset by the outbreak of a fatal zoonosis (BSE), an agricultural recession accompanied by a restructuring process, long-running contention over hunting with hounds, a change in the governing political party and finally an epidemic of animal disease, rural life appeared to be in turmoil. Each of these individual processes and events interpolated to create a complex of problems that for many appeared insoluble. Through this diversity of flows, several groups sought to advance their political claims, seeking to find political opportunities in a highly fluid situation. The Countryside Alliance (CA) quickly pushed itself to the fore of the debate by advancing arguments about the singularity of rural life.

Through organising a series of dramatic protests, the Alliance hoped to create a definition of a rural identity that would defeat the new government's opposition to hunting with hounds. They organised a series of mass rallies in London

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that sought to highlight the concerns of all rural people around the importance of hunting. Having created this political space, another more radical group Farmers for Action (FFA), mobilising with other factions, was able to launch a dramatic protest—that they termed the ‘fuel strike’. These protests saw pickets at fuel distribution centres stop the supply of petrol and diesel to everyone bar the essential public services. Both of these protest groups were characterised by structures that were dominated by a self-selected leadership and an inability to get the movement to cohere. These protests foundered on the inability of the groups to create a rural identity that enrolled enough people living in rural areas. The attempt to create a nationally based identity across the diversity of lives led locally in rural areas ran in stark contrast to the Alliance’s ability to organise a protest across rural space. The FFA found that nationally they were unable to create arguments in favour of their positions that they could sustain and, at a local level, protest was not rewarding enough for those who took part. Organising protests was far easier than creating a cohesive movement with a common identity and solidarity. The ending of the protests was brought about by the very fluidity of the situation that had allowed for the initial protests to be launched. The foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 stopped movement across rural spaces, whilst temporarily fracturing the epistemic grounds on which rural life was understood.

This paper merges the tools used in political discourse analysis with many of those used in social movement theory to consider how the discourses and organisations of the protest were created. It moves from considering the opportunity structure into which the protesters inserted their arguments through to the roots of the pro-hunting movement. The paper then considers the role of the discourse of ‘farmer exceptionalism’ that had been espoused by groups representing farmers for many years and how this was used to mobilise people to protest. From this point, it considers the emergence of the Farmers for Action and their role in the ‘fuel strike’, looking at their attempt to appropriate the *repertoire* of the Labour movement. It then considers the experience of dairy farmers picketing their local dairy under the aegis of the FFA and their response to the experience of protest. The evidence for this paper has been gathered from documentary analysis, local newspaper archives and interviews with those who have participated in the protests.

### **Pyre Time**

The period between 1996 and 2001 was a singular one for British agriculture and rural communities, which created a situation that was simultaneously very open to change and also deeply challenging for those involved. Problems ran into one another, making the accidental or freakish appear systemic and the more routine appear novel. The linking of a novel disease in bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) to human deaths in 1996 marked the rapid downturn of many farm businesses after some of the best years on record. This was later to be compounded by the bungled emergency measures to control an old but unfamiliar disease five years later, when foot and mouth disease broke out in 2001. Not only were businesses damaged, but the very meaning of farming came to be questioned not only by consumers but by many farmers as well. Alongside the many millions of animals burnt, there was also a bonfire of the familiar configurations of norms that had underpinned much of British agriculture.

The co-occurrence of these animal diseases with the most severe recession in British agriculture since the 1930s strained an industry already in the grip of long-term structural changes. At the farm level, market forces were creating a trend to larger and increasingly specialist farms; heavily capitalised and deeply dependent on technology, these farms looked to become globally competitive. Meanwhile, in the farming household, the emergence of increasing diversification of farm businesses, and women increasingly working off the farm, created new dynamics within farming families. Although these are long-term trends, the pressures brought by economic failure and disease control measures, had a profound and, on occasion, tragic impact on many farming families.

The regime of representation, both political and cultural, of agriculture and rural life had been strained in the years before this period, but at this time it was finally pulled asunder. The National Farmers Union (NFU) which had championed professional farming for more than 50 years, in an often corporatist arrangement with the ministry responsible for agriculture, was experiencing a decline in support. Farming had become increasingly diverse and so harder to represent, particularly as farmers became competitors with one another and the NFU was unable to provide the governmental support that its members had once expected. As the corporatist arrangements of agriculture dissolved, environmental groups were able to gain access to the policy network. Although initially they were confined to considering agri-environmental measures, during this period the focus increasingly shifted to practices on the farm. Animal Rights activists targeted the export of veal calves and later in the period environmental activists destroyed experimental genetically modified crops, in an attempt to veto the types of crop that might be adopted. The political impact of British farmers, always less than that of their continental cousins, was declining; meanwhile, the range of actors increased, creating a new complexity in policy formation.

As Melucci argued, it is not the content that protest, but those who feel that in some way their identity is being challenged, and it is at those moments that they emerge from the networks of daily life to break into the public sphere (Melucci, 1996a). Protest can focus on demanding and gaining rights denied or it can be to gather back social power that has been lost. It is this that is the central paradox of the attempt to mobilise rural people around a rural identity based on hunting; it tried to span this divide. On the one hand, it demanded that rights be recognised and, on the other, there was the feeling that it was attempting to regain a set of powers that had been lost. The unnegotiable demand was the preservation of the 'right' to hunt with hounds and surrounding this was a constellation of social demands. This configuration alienated potential supporters travelling in either direction; those sympathetic to the social demands were unlikely to view hunting as a 'right', whilst those who viewed hunting as a liberty were often unsympathetic to the interventions required for the social agenda to be met. Such political paradoxes are often bridged by an alliance based on a distinctive identity that surpasses the individual elements, a feeling of solidarity and commonality that carries a movement forward. The torsion of pursuing social demands only through the obligatory support of a highly contentious cultural practice, created a dynamism that both propelled the protests but also made them highly unstable.

## Methodology

The theory and methodology that underpin this paper are based on merging discourse analysis and social movement theory. Whilst each of these approaches has previously emphasised the importance of structure, often over individual agency, this paper tries to redress this balance by foregrounding the role of personal socio-spatial networks. Following the lead of Melucci, it views protest as arising from individuals' attempts to defend their identities, which they feel to have been threatened (Melucci, 1996a, 1996b). The importance of personal socio-spatial networks is that people tend to move towards protest with friends and acquaintances who share the same network (Purdue *et al.*, 1997; Jowers *et al.*, 1999). Rural life changes some of the modalities of these networks, as will be discussed later in the paper. Protest discourses need to find ways of providing 'scripts' that offer not only immediate guides to action for those taking part, but also an explanation of why such action is necessary and what will result from it. Such discourses need to tie in with those other discourses that structure and form the daily lives of those taking part; otherwise the demands for action will be truly 'unthinkable' (Dürschmidt, 1997).

Woods, in his recent and welcome attempt to introduce the consideration of social movements into the study of rural politics, underemphasises the importance of public protest and personal fulfilment derived from movement participation (Woods, 2003). In doing so, he treats the Countryside Alliance and its radical outliers as social movements, rather than as élite driven protest groups. He fails to consider the well-established discussion of the Organic movement as being a movement that fulfils most of the criteria of a successful social movement and is also an example of a contemporary 'rural' movement (Tovey, 1997; Reed, 2002) in that it has loose informal networks of association and collaboration, a strong sense of common identity, a social stake which it is contesting through persistent collective action and resorts to frequent political protest (della Porta and Diani, 1999). The emphasis above on the work of Melucci and the centrality of protest in movements is intended to extend and deepen the discussion of rural social movements.

Rather than allowing discourse to remain as an inchoate and almost occult apparatus, as Foucault tended to suggest, it can be usefully imagined by borrowing from Michael Freeden's work on ideology (Deleuze, 1988; Foucault, 1997; Freeden, 1998; Kendall and Wickam, 1999). For heuristic purposes, discourse can be envisaged as a series of modular elements that are held together by a series of logics. The exact configuration of these modules and the gravity of the logics that bind them together vary over time and between localities. In tracking these elements, their positions relative to one another and their overall 'morphology' it is possible to follow the changes within a discourse over time (for a related methodology see Dryzek, 1997). The moments and processes during which a discourse is reconfigured offer opportunity for intervention (Bevir, 1999). As the elements move into a new form, chance, human agency and accident can lead to a range of appropriations, mutations and syntheses which mark out the new configuration. In this way, rapid or unexpected changes in the social and cultural context can offer a range of opportunities for those seeking to create new discourses.

Recent work by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly has emphasised the dynamics of contention, in the face of their own previous models of protest that had

underemphasised the dynamic flows involved in social movements (McAdam *et al.*, 2001). Although their renewed emphasis on the role of contingency in social movements forms part of the background to this paper, their analysis of 'scale shift' is the most important. Social movements and protests often move from the highly localised and specific to the national and general with startling speed—a scale shift. Although it is necessary for the structural conditions for such protests and mobilisations to be in place, the agency of the movement actors also needs to be considered. Structure and opportunity alone are not enough; skilled negotiation and political acumen are required. Scale shift is the process, described by McAdam *et al.*, of increasing the scale of a protest either through 'brokerage'—seeking and creating alliances to spread the protest—or 'diffusion'—the transfer of information along established lines of interaction (McAdam *et al.*, 2001). This facilitates the creation of a common cause and so spreads the protest, leading to often rapid increases in the size of the movement. As will be demonstrated, both mechanisms were used at different times in this instance.

## **Data**

The evidence collected for this paper comes from a number of sources, principally through a careful archival reading of several local weekly newspapers (Lawrence, 1996; Liepins, 1996). These observations are backed up by national newspaper reports where appropriate and, as the Alliance increasingly turned to the Internet, through websites and e-mails. Several meetings where the leaders of the FFA spoke were attended. The final element of data was drawn from interviews with dairy farmers who took part in a variety of FFA pickets of dairies in west Devon and north Cornwall. These interviews were conducted as part of wider research into the survival strategies of family farmers sponsored by the Countryside Agency (Reed *et al.*, 2002). The transcripts of the interviews provide the evidence about the experience and emotional impact of protest activities. In moving the focus from national documents to local press interactions and then to interviews, the various layers of protest are revealed. Each of these data sources works at a different level and the interaction between them reveals the importance of a multilayered approach.

## **The Countryside Alliance**

Over the course of just a few months, a new minority emerged, a minority quite unlike any other—the countryside. With their cry of 'Listen to us', country people established themselves as a significant force in politics (Countryside Alliance, 2000a).

The Countryside Alliance brought rural protestors onto the streets of London and out of TV screens in July 1997 not only in defence of hunting, but of a whole rural way of life. Just as it ushered rural people out onto the streets to protest about the neglect of rural areas, the rural economy was entering a period of severe recession. The Alliance itself acknowledged that it was formally constituted by a merger of three groups: the British Field Sports Society (BFSS), the Countryside Movement (CM) and the Countryside Business Group (CBG). Although the main aim was to defend field sports, they also aimed to be a

lightning rod for the concerns of other allied groups. It claimed that its members were those people: “who live in the countryside, many of them farmers, and they have concerns about other important issues that affect their everyday lives” (Countryside Alliance, 2000b). This collocation of hunting with other rural issues was an attempt to broaden the constituency of the movement. The Alliance also recognised and supported the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Farmers Union of Wales (FUW) and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). It hoped to gather the support of those who lived in rural areas but did not belong to these groups. The Alliance posited its appeal on a notion of a separate and distinct rural identity that differed from that of urban or suburban people (Hart-Davis, 1997).

The Alliance did not opt for a ‘simple’ geographical definition of rurality; after all some of its major backers were urban people (see below). After acknowledging the difficulties of defining the rural in an overwhelmingly urban society, it started its definition by ordering the countryside’s inhabitants into different groups. First, the farmers: “Families involved in traditional, conservation-minded farming and allied trades are part of the true rural population” (Countryside Alliance, 2001). This sentence conducted an intense amount of discursive work, introducing a ‘true’ rural population and by a logical but unstated extension a ‘false’ population. The second group of true rural-dwellers were: “People who participate in country sports, and support an identifiable rural culture and rural system of values” (Countryside Alliance, 2001). The second part of the package discloses that there are true rural values, which the Alliance had identified and could name. The precise configuration of these values is left opaque; however, central to it is hunting. The final group are those: “Recent settlers from towns, as well as many who, by circumstance, are forced to live in towns and cities for at least part of their lives” (Countryside Alliance, 2001). Lest the reader fear that they would be excluded—anyone can be rural as long as they support hunting or rather the system of values that the Alliance has identified. The term rural is rendered geographically redundant because the Alliance has created a group who define themselves as rural and do so by supporting hunting with hounds. Rural-dwellers who do not agree with hunting are not ‘true’ rural people and those who live in cities and do agree with hunting are ‘true’ rural people. Geography is abandoned; lifestyle is the new definition of rurality.

One of the most testing parts of any protest is the organisation of a group of people across space and through time. This takes on a different modality for a rural social movement where the population is more physically dispersed and the barriers to travelling to a protest site higher. A repeated pattern of this group is a high volume of protests with a local frame of reference that do not register with the national media. This localism has meant that when these protests have attracted national attention they appear to have arisen suddenly when, in fact, they have been building slowly in rural locales and in the networks of hunting or farming. Contemporary communication technology has facilitated a greater degree of co-ordination, as has the use of e-mail and websites. Personal contacts and networks would appear to remain the cornerstone of effective organisation. The Alliance could rely on the local Hunts to act as already-existing organisations from which the protests could be co-ordinated. This conforms to McAdam *et al.*’s (2001) model of the diffusion of social movement looking for a scale shift. Diffusion requires a network of organisations and interactions through which

the information can be communicated. The background to the 1997 protest needs to be considered before the apparently sudden emergence of the Countryside Alliance can be explained.

### **Hunting for a New Identity**

The election of a Labour government was the initial and public cause of the protest, as it was anticipated to bring in a parliamentary bill banning fox hunting. In its own account of the first march of 10 July 1997, the CA stated: "Planning for a remarkable year started in December 1996, when the decision was made to stage a London rally, the 'Countryside Rally', in defence of country sports and the country way of life" (Countryside Alliance, 2000). Far from spontaneous, the issue was narrated long before the new government was elected. There was an implicit assumption that a Labour government would be hostile to the 'country way of life'. As well as loss of power at the national level, the effects of the loss of power at a local level should not be underestimated. For example, in Somerset the gradual rise of the Liberal Democrats had taken the County council from Conservative control in the early 1990s. Not only in urban areas, but also in rural areas was there a considerable middle-class presence which delivered the wards to the Liberal Democrats (Woods, 1997). As is explained below, the threats to hunting had made the pro-hunting groups more sophisticated and organised. An examination of one of the groups that formed the Alliance is helpful in illustrating how 'hunting' with hounds became configured about more than the pursuit of a fox.

### **The Pursuit of Influence**

Masters have to be exceptionally tactful and diplomatic in their dealings with farmers and landowners with the country. Keeping the country 'open' for hunting is the greatest responsibility under taken by a Master (Clayton, 1987, pp. 19–20).

Such is the advice offered to those who want to learn how to hunt to hounds in pursuit of the fox. It can stand as a general piece of advice for the whole management of hunting as a lifestyle and aspiration. There is no automatic link between hunting and farming, let alone hunting and the majority of rural people. Any such link has to be created and sustained through the actions of the hunters (Clayton, 1987). It is this activity which is the basis of the mobilisation of the Countryside Alliance. Those who formed the Alliance used the structure of the hunts and an appeal designed to key into the configuration of the discourse of farmer exceptionalism (see below) to defend their chosen identity.

Hunting with hounds, in its modern form, is a relatively recent innovation and it has always attracted controversy. Historically, one of its main opponents has been the Labour Party, which has persistently and consistently moved to ban the hunting of animals with hounds. It has been persistently fierce in its rhetoric about banning hunting and consistently timid in taking actual measures against it. Labour governments in 1949 and 1964 presented bills to ban hunting with hounds; in 1978, the Labour government banned the hunting of otters. After leaving office in 1979, it pledged itself unwaveringly to banning hunting, but the years of Conservative domination ensured that hunting had an easy ride. In the

mid 1990's, when it became obvious that a Labour victory was likely, the supporters of hunting began to organise themselves. The New Labour government had received considerable financial support from anti-hunting groups and had retained a commitment to the banning of hunting. This mobilisation was in part a response to the growing awareness within hunting of how it was perceived by others and the necessity of presenting its cause more effectively (Hart-Davis, 1997; George, 1999).

Until the late 1980's, hunting was always defended in a reactive and *ad hoc* manner as threats presented themselves, as Janet George, one of the organisers of the Alliance noted: "The defence of hunting has always been of a reactive nature: when there was a direct threat, the BFSS and its membership went into battle" (George, 1999, p. 40). The growing sophistication of the challenges to hunting, particularly through the National Trust, pushed those in favour of hunting to raise their game organisationally (George, 1999). As Clayton notes in his guide to riding to hounds, "provincialism is a strength and weakness in foxhunting" (Clayton, 1987, p. 19), and fierce local loyalty had been matched by a suspicion of outsiders. Gradually in the late 1980s, the hunting organisations realised that their sport was threatened nationally and they need to respond at that level. In 1991, a levy was placed on all hunts to fund a national campaign for hunting. This campaign in 1992 put 16 000 protestors on a demonstration against a private member's bill attempting to ban hunting. Those in favour of hunting for the first time started to try to match their opponents in organisation and use of the press.

The first sign of the growth of this contest was 45 000 people rallying at various points across the UK in favour of hunting and against a private member's bill in March 1994. Despite the size of this demonstration, it gained little press attention. The hunting organisations started to learn important lessons in how to influence the media and what strategies they should adopt. The first indications of these can be seen in George's comments on deciding which hunts should appear in a TV documentary about hunting

some hunts were excluded from consideration because a high percentage of red coats and hop hats in the mounted field could present an image too much in line with the caricature of hunting that had dominated the media in the past (George, 1999, p. 71).

As well as seeking different images by which to be represented, the hunting organisations sought to find new allies. At a local level, the diffusion role of the hunts was being augmented by the attempt at brokerage being made by changing the discourse that defended hunting. Changing the discourse and brokering deals with new allies became for the pro-hunting groups an élite-led activity.

### **The Countryside Movement**

The Countryside Movement (CM) was not a mass movement; rather, it was an élite grouping determined to widen the support for hunting. In 1996, it paid for a series of adverts in national newspapers, promoting a caring image of those involved in rural jobs. The first meeting of the CM was held at Buckingham Gate, the London offices of Prince Charles. Membership of the CM was initially restricted to broadcasters, wealthy landowners, farming insiders and the ex-head



of MI6.<sup>1</sup> Quickly, a new strategy was devised based on mobilising mass demonstrations through the use of the TV and widening the debate to include more than just hunting. The role of the CM was to spread the discussion about hunting into new areas, to change the form of the discourse whilst retaining its central features.

Spurning a membership organisation, the CM sought funding from private businesses concerned with the continuation of field sports and wealthy individuals. It opted to keep a database of those who were 'members' and expressed sympathy for the cause. Interestingly, in this it mirrored the very 'disorganisations' that radical environmentalists championed at that time, where informal membership and flexibility were stressed. This élite group had yet to find a vehicle for the dissent they wished to register. With the emergence of the Countryside Alliance, the CM found the lift it had been looking to use.

### **Farmer Exceptionalism**

The CA was quick to target farmers, not just because of their control of the vast bulk of the land in the Countryside but also for their political impact. After many years of effective and astute lobbying, the representatives of British farmers had achieved an important role within the policy-making process (Flynn *et al.*, 1996; Clark and Jones, 1998; Grant, 2001). This was built on a discourse of 'farmer exceptionalism', which stressed the unique role and burden of the farmer. Before detailing the configuration of this discourse, it is worth considering its various effects. Through stressing the uniqueness of the farmer in feeding the nation and conserving natural heritage, it has also led to feelings of isolation. Discursively barred from being able to make comparisons with the roles of others and stoutly defended by their representative organisations, farmers felt themselves to be an isolated group. Ironically, the 1990s witnessed the decline in the influence of the farming organisations in policy circles and amongst farmers, just at the moment when government had to call on them as never before (Clark and Jones, 1998).

The first filaments of the strands that make up the discursive configuration of farmer exceptionalism are the unique burdens that farmers carry. Which of these takes priority varies depending on the situation, but all are based on their relationship with the land. The use and the future of this land is their personal responsibility, their role and their burden. Farmers are responsible for feeding others, no one else produces food and by extension food of such quality. To achieve this, they must be free to dispose of their land and deploy their technologies as they see fit. This land is productive in a number of other ways—it produces the countryside that embodies and represents important elements of nationhood. The land is therefore heritage, both that of the nation but also frequently that of their own family, which is to be passed on inviolate to the next generation (Errington and Gasson, 1993; Potter and Lobley, 1996). Land is therefore the productive site of the nation, the family and the self, the responsibility for which lies with the farmer and his family. The benefits of this system are more widely felt and it is therefore appropriate for the farmer to receive support from the public purse.

The Countryside Alliance's appeal to a unique rural way of life is built on and from the discourse of farmer exceptionalism. It continued some of the same claims about exclusive knowledge and responsibility from the discourse of

farmer exceptionalism, but added as an expression of this the role of hunting with hounds. The Alliance was reaching out to farmers when it was increasingly obvious that their existing organisations' explanations could not encompass the events that were unfolding as at the same time they continued to defend the industry, but not the people within it. With an identity under siege in this manner, these new allies appeared plausible in championing the neglected farmer.

As the agricultural recession got worse and the problems of farmers, particularly the smaller or tenant farmers, grew more pressing, the Alliance provided a springboard for the more militant organisations. The Alliance had prepared a public narrative about the straits of rural life that the militant farmers were able to use. Unlike the Alliance, this would not be organised by the great and the good, but by a much earthier network of people. This group was critical of the passive stance of many of the farming organisations that had represented their interests but wanted to transcend the narrow definitions of rurality offered by the Alliance. Unlike the diffusion model of scaling-up the protests used by the Alliance, the militant farmers used the brokerage route, looking for disaffected allies with whom to make common cause. They also moved from the standard repertoire of protest on which the Alliance had relied—marching, lobbying and petitions. Transgressive protest deliberately seeking to have an impact beyond the numbers involved would be the new repertoire.

### **Farmers Taking Direct Action**

The eruption of the fuel strike in the autumn of 2000 signalled another leap in the tactics and sophistication of the organisation of the rural movements. The group co-ordinating the blockade of the petrol refineries and distribution centres—Farmers for Action—was a new actor. Formed at a meeting at a service station on the M5 in May 2000, FFA self-consciously combined the organisational form of the *disorganisations* of the radical environmentalists with the demands and militancy of French farmers (Doherty, 1999; Doherty *et al.*, 2002). As with the Countryside Alliance, the emergence into the national media was presaged by a long period of regional protest. Unlike the Alliance, the FFA was not led by aristocrats and did not seek a broad consensus with existing groups. Learning from its regional campaigns, it sought to be broadly populist and tactically audacious.

Small-scale protests by farmers started as early as 1997 with Irish beefburgers being dumped in the sea at Holyhead, mass picketing of supermarket distribution centres and localised picketing of fast-food restaurants (Hetherington, 2000). In March 2000, *The Farmers Weekly* published three pages listing direct action demonstrations by farmers since 1996; a total of 102 protests had taken place, approximately one action every two weeks (*Farmers Weekly*, 2000). With the collapse in farm produce prices, with milk prices falling 50 per cent in the preceding three years, the protestors started to construct a narrative of who was to blame and who could take remedial action. French farmers provided a repertoire of action and a narrative of blame that was directly emulated by the FFA. Derek Mead, a large farmer in Somerset and an FFA leader was open about this: "I know quite a few French farmers. Their union is far more in touch with everyday problems than the NFU, which is useless. They have a very tight network" (Hetherington, 2000). Mead also demonstrated that part of the protest

was actually an internal one, against the passive and distant institution of the NFU. Loose networks of farmers organised sporadic protests in Wales and the far South West throughout 2000, dissatisfied by the leadership of the NFU, their expectations raised by the mobilisation of the Countryside Alliance. Hauliers were launching similar regional, networked protests throughout the early part of 2000, protesting at the price of fuel that was 'slowing' their industry.<sup>2</sup> It was the convergence of these two narratives and the co-operation between the disgruntled that led to the fuel protests.

The fuel protests broke through the pre-existing limits of rural protest, with its populist narrative about the cost of petrol and the role of the government in this problem. It was the speed of the initial protest, the response by the FFA networks and role of the oil companies that made the protest so effective.<sup>3</sup> A relatively unsuccessful campaign by tabloid newspapers to 'Dump the pump' placed the issue within a broader narrative of 'Rip-off Britain', a land where the public were exploited by business and government alike. When the first protestor deployed in September 2000, the networks of the FFA were able to place relatively small pickets at most depots quickly and sympathetic tanker drivers decided that it was not 'safe' to cross the lines. Panic buying, prompted by media reports, quickly started to empty filling stations and the pressure on the government started to mount (Wintour, 2000). Equally, pressure started to build on the networks of the FFA; their devolved network did not have the common purpose or the discipline to hold the protest for long. Counter-protests by environmentalists emerged; public sympathy began to flag as fuel shortages began to threaten personal mobility; and questions were raised about quite who controlled the protest. As the protestors started to fall away and other groups started to view the protests as their opportunity, the FFA called off the blockades.<sup>4</sup> The exact role of the neo-fascist British National Party and the multinational oil companies became the subject of some fevered debate (Corporate Watch, 2000; Jeffrey, 2000; Milne, 2000).<sup>5</sup> The FFA's promise to return, unless their demands were met sounded hollow at the time, and proved to be so.

The speed of the protest and diversity of the protest groups made it difficult for them to cohere around a longer protest. The speed at which the protest coalesced taxed the group's ability to provide an explanatory script to those joining the protest. This can be seen in their constant borrowing of other groups' repertoire of protest. As has already been noted, the French farmers were a direct source of tactics and inspiration. This was not rooted in British popular discourses and narrowly identified the protests with farmers. In part, this was what the FFA was implicitly identifying as the weakness of the NFU and CA's position. This led the FFA to reach for the historical example of the Jarrow March; a move as superficially surprising as it was unsuccessful. The CA had used marchers as the build-up to the Countryside Rally in March 1998, almost exclusively made up of hunt servants and small rural business people whose attention they had focused on the rally. These marchers had drawn on the example of Jarrow in their own rhetoric, but this was largely for consumption inside the movement (George, 1999). As it was, they did walk the whole distance, although tending to rest at night at some well-heeled houses (Hart-Davis, 1997). So in turning to the Jarrow March, they were turning to a recent as well as historical precedent.

The failure of this effort to appropriate the Jarrow Hunger March into the fuel protest in November 2000 was in part a reflection of the difference in class-base

and the residual strength of the labour movement, but also a reflection of the lack of collective identity within the rural movement. Many people were actually affronted by this effort at appropriation which reflected the rapidly changing circumstances of the protest. The fuel protests were supposedly about the unjust effects of petrol revenue on those whose livelihoods were influenced by the price of fuel, whilst the Jarrow March was a protest for work. By invoking Jarrow, they had unintentionally raised the questions of class and privilege that would play against their protest. Rather than those denied the opportunity to work, the protestors were seen as entrepreneurs protesting at the vicissitudes of the market place, after being protected from it for much longer than many other industries.

### **My Dairy, My Argument**

The localised demonstrations of the FFA were carefully directed at points along the distribution and processing chain of milk, with dairy plants being a particular target. Interviews with the farmers who took part in these protests revealed a great deal about the motivations behind the protests and the experience of them. All of the 10 dairy farmers interviewed remembered the protests as, for the majority, it was one of the few occasions they had taken an evening off. Due to financial pressures, most had replaced hired labour with their own so, in their heavy workload, to take time off for a protest was a novelty (Reed *et al.*, 2002). Only one younger farmer had taken part in more than one protest and he was a formal member of the FFA. The protests were organised through the tight networks in which these farmers lived—with their families having farmed the same area for many years their networks of association were deeply embedded. Two of the farmers who took part in the protests were senior members of the NFU and, apart from the member of the FFA, only one other farmer had taken part in the Countryside Alliance march. The dominant reason for taking to a dairy picket was tactical and personal.

Alex Sims<sup>6</sup> the prime mover in the area for the FFA had taken part in protests ranging across Devon: “Well, we picketed Dairy Crest’s milk factory several times, this time last year, wasn’t it. And I went to Totnes, St Ivel plant down there and also Tor Valley, the milk factory at North Tawton”. Alex Sims’ friend and near-neighbour Mr Pierson, a prominent member of the local NFU branch expressed a more common logic behind the process

Yes, I think Farmers for Action are good in as much as they stir up a bit of interest and get things moving, and I can see the NFU being more and more sort of corridors of power, because that’s were things actually happen, but it’s also useful having another arm that stirs the masses up and actually, you know, gets some action on the streets. But whether the ... I think the NFU that are actually clinching the deals (Mr Pierson, 2002).

Picketing your own dairy was constructed as an act that put pressure on the NFU to be more persistent and at the same time strengthened their role in the policy process. None of the farmers interviewed mentioned the fuel protests and only one was a supporter of the Countryside Alliance, as a member of the British Field Sports Society. He did not allow the hunt onto his farm and was ambivalent about some hunting with hounds, but justified it on conservation grounds: “I don’t really agree with stag hunting, but you’ve got to move the

bloodline from one end of the moor to the other end or else you get interbreeding and you get problems that way" (Cowlard, 2002). The complexities of protest and rural identity looked very different from those taking part in the low level protests than they did in the discourses used at a national level.

In the interviews with farmers who had taken part in the local FFA protests, the absence of a discussion of the central importance of hunting to a rural identity was striking. Paradoxically, it was the rhetoric around the attempt to appropriate the Jarrow March that was more apparent. Most of the farmers identified themselves as struggling working people looking for a fair reward for their labour. The ambit of their protest was directed at the dairy they felt was not giving them a fair price and the government they felt was neglecting them. Protests that adversely affected others or broke the law were not something they sought. Whilst most embraced parts of the discourse of farmer exceptionalism, they did so without the exaggerated rhetoric of their self-appointed representatives and with a greater sympathy for others.

All thought that rural life was part of a distinct way of life, but there was little agreement about what that meant. Mr Mattern was clear that the aggregation of rural life was part of what he saw as the problem

But you know looking at it on the other side, there are farmers like all the ones in East Anglia and people are getting huge amounts of EU money on subsidies for, you know, cos they've got thousands of acres, I mean, you know they are driving around flash cars and they are loaded. But you know, they are still classed as farmers same as the little family farm down in Devon and worse than us that are, you know, really struggling to make a living. That's the problem, we're all lumped in together (Mr Mattern, 2002).

The farmers who took part in the interviews also expressed a range of political opinions ranging from a desire for a centralist state direction of agriculture through to a bullish free market orientation, whilst one farmer wanted to surrender production on his farm to pursue conservation goals. The rapid scaling-up of the protests by both the CA and the FFA, despite pursuing different mechanisms, had failed to enrol this group of farmers into their narratives. Loyalty to locality, the dictates of the family business and personal political convictions were not so easily swept up into, or subsumed within, larger discourses. The scripts provided for the farmers were used only for a short time or amended in the light of other priorities. All of the organisations in the protests began to suffer the same democratic deficit that the NFU was accused of embodying. Although a different élite, the group around the FFA were no more democratic than the great and the good gathered in the Countryside Movement.

### **Pitching for a Fight**

By the end of 2000, after a roller-coaster campaign since just after the election of the New Labour government in 1997 that had culminated with militant farmers blockading the fuel distribution centres, some of the Countryside Alliance had given up the chase. A memo leaked to *The Guardian* contained evidence that many senior figures in the Alliance had accepted the inevitability of a ban (Hencke, 2000). The Burns Inquiry set up to investigate the role of hunting with hounds in rural life and the utility of hunting with hounds had proved to be a

bitter disappointment to the hunt supporters (de Lise, 2000). Although far from dismissive of the social and cultural importance of hunting to particularly remote rural areas, it was not the clear commendation of hunting that the Alliance had hoped it would be (Lord Burns, 2000). Increasingly, it was becoming difficult to sustain the Alliance as the radical edges of the group were pushing against the confines of what was an essentially conservative agenda.

The protests of the FFA had transgressed not only the normal conventions of protest but more specifically the repertoire of protest on which the CA had based itself. The Alliance had prided itself on their good-natured protest, the orderly procession of people and the lack of litter (George, 1999). Rather than a dignified column of well-behaved protestors, the FFA promised to ensure that someone, probably their spokesman David Hanley, got arrested. Tension was building between those who were prepared to break the law and those who were not. The outbreak of foot and mouth disease prevented the London rally scheduled for the early summer from taking place and the dispute having to be debated. It remains a fault-line within those who seek to defend hunting as to whether breaking the law is acceptable and quite where the limits to protest lie.

The foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak from February to September of 2001 meant that all hunts were suspended, that almost all public meetings in rural areas became edged with concern and that mass demonstrations were unfeasible. Unable to meet or to protest, the movement took to websites, e-mail groups and the telephone. The spectacle of the pyres of burning animals and distraught farmers brought the discussion to another space. If the Countryside Alliance had wanted a debate about rural life, they got one. Unable to protest or to intervene dramatically, the rural protest groups had to sit it out. The re-election of the New Labour government ensured that the discussion would be with the very people that they had so passionately opposed and confirmed that their protests had had little electoral impact. If any protests or actions were to be taken again it would be in the context of a debate transformed.

Part of the transformation of the debate was the appearance of farmers and rurality in a context in which they had not been previously been viewed. Through TV images in particular, individual farmers chosen through the lottery of disease, represented themselves directly to the camera. Whilst the farmers' representatives pushed their influence to its limits within the policy network, individual farmers reworked the dominant images of farming life. The discourse of farmer exceptionalism was by-passed and reconfigured by the contingencies of the epidemic. Rural life was discussed, as a diversity of actors with a range of needs, in a new tenor. FMD demonstrated the responsibilities and exigencies of contemporary animal husbandry in the most dramatic manner. Quite how the debate about rural life and the discourse of farmer exceptionalism would be reconfigured was unclear as the disease abated; it only appeared certain that it had been transformed.

Farmers directly representing themselves to the camera evoked considerable sympathy amongst the wider public. The irony of this situation was that the wider public have generally been far more empathetic in their attitudes towards farmers than most farmers had realised. Winter attributes some of the impetus around the rise in the importance of local food provision to a 'defensive localism', part of which has been informed by gestures of solidarity towards local farmers (Winter, 2003). Certainly, the predominant representation of farm-

ers in the popular media remains benign; the 'Farmer harmer' characterisation of radical environmentalism has not gained widespread support. Personal solidarity and a generalised empathy about the vicissitudes of life are different from accepting the political analysis presented by these protest groups.

The rural protests lacked the final elements of seeking a more widespread mobilisation or action, in that they had no record of solidarity with others and little strategic dexterity. The failure to appropriate the Jarrow Marches demonstrated that exceptionalism cuts in at least two ways. In having failed to offer even the rhetoric of solidarity for the struggles of others, the bare minimum for the remnants of the British labour movement, farming organisations had stood on the wrong side of the hedge for too long. A long, and often pugnacious, rearguard defence against environmental organisations had polluted this as a stream for organised expressions of togetherness. Whatever the personal opinions of farmers and hunters, having been represented by organisations associated with privilege left them isolated. Voters and consumers were able to differentiate deftly between personal sympathy, often based on local or personal affiliation, and the political prognoses offered by self-appointed representatives.

Both the fuel strikes and the countryside marches attracted some initial populist support but these did not translate into strategic political success. The fuel strike quickly lost support and further widespread protests failed to materialise. The FFA had emulated the tactics of radical environmentalists but not the strategy and form of the action. Frequently the eco-radicals offer the public dramatic demonstrations of their personal determination, around issues in which they have no direct pecuniary interest. Around this are mechanisms of support, such as boycotts or petitions, that allow the supporters to demonstrate their solidarity at a distance. The fuel strike struck at the personal mobility of its supporters and detractors alike, whilst seemingly endangering vital public services—others were beginning to suffer for the cause of the protestors. Discursively, the changes required to garner wider support could not be made in the time-frame that such a dramatic protest created.

Strategically the Countryside Alliance found itself in the position that its supposed opponents were choosing to allow it for their own purposes; it had become politically expedient for a restricted hunting to persist. Electorally, the Alliance had not been able to demonstrate that it could damage the Labour Party; the election of 2001 was held at the height of the foot and mouth outbreak and the party had been returned to office with a huge majority. The Liberal Democrats were the principal beneficiaries of the decline of the Conservatives in rural constituencies and so it was of little interest to the Labour Party. Fox hunting could be banned any time by the government such was the size of its majority, but it chose not to do so. Hunting with hounds is a useful tool for the leadership of the Labour Party; it excites the interest of the political left and engages the animal rights lobby. Whilst parliamentary backbenchers are busy clamouring for it to be banned, they are not attacking government policy and animal rights campaigners are not looking towards topics that could be politically damaging such as sport fishing. As long as people hunt with hounds, it will be politically useful to its opponents; it persists as long as it retains that utility.

### **Scorched Identities**

The dominance of the identity as a concept around which social and protest movements mobilise belies the difficulties of actually constructing and realising a collective identity. As has been discussed in this paper, the problem for smaller

movements is to take advantage of opportunities by scaling-up their protests. The flux of the situation in rural England presented just such an opportunity for the pro-hunting movement and the disaffected farmers represented by the FFA. Part of the scaling-up process was to convince others to make common cause, to share a discourse that set out an explanation of events and a script for action. The hunting movement sought allies through a network of diffusion, whilst the FFA sought to broker deals with others, on this occasion hauliers. Although this resulted in dramatic protests, their challenges dropped away through the difficulty in forging a collective identity that was viable in the dynamic situation they were seeking to exploit.

Whilst these groups might be able to organise themselves over space, they struggled to create a durable collective identity. The evidence presented in this paper points to the salience of place in mobilising protest against the abstraction of a 'rural' space. People may be mobilised through the networks of their daily lives, but these networks represent particularities that are not easily subsumed by external scripts. Although the discourse of the pro-hunting movement keyed deliberately into the discourse of the farmer's representative organisation, it did not attach itself sufficiently to the embedded discourse of the farmers themselves. The distance between the farmers and their organisations was a gap that was unbridgeable by the Countryside Alliance. In part, the mobilisation of the FFA was a protest against this gap, but the eruption of farmer militancy disrupted the Alliance itself. The politics of transgressive protest proved too difficult for a conservative movement to negotiate. At the same time, both organisations were guilty of underestimating the diversity and sophistication of the political ideas of those they were seeking to attract. In this paper, the focus has been on farmers, but the analysis may be more generally applicable. The protests failed because they were unable to span the differences between rural people well enough to create feelings of solidarity and commonality that could sustain a continued campaign.

Ultimately the very contingencies of the situation that had presented these opportunities to introduce protests withdrew those opportunities. The disruptive effects of animal disease rippled through social and discursive structures, reconfiguring both and ushering in new areas of contention. A collective identity based on a non-geographical 'rural way of life' failed due to the resistance of place- and occupation-based identities. What at times seemed to be the cusp of a dynamic wave of protests was punctured by the inability of the mobilising discourse to encompass the complex diversity of the protestors' lives. The focus on trying to organise through elite structures was in sharp contrast to the local and persistent focus of many of the protests. For a moment during the fuel protests, it appeared that the groups had become a movement and had found a more democratic form. Once the network behind those protests was revealed and the actors within became more obvious, it too quickly fell away, a democratic deficit apparent once again. Perhaps only when a more democratic form of rural protest is found can the persistent protests and differing agendas of those who live the countryside be realised.

## Notes

1. Present at the first meeting were Sir David Steel (former leader of the Liberal Democrats), Hugh van Cutsem (businessman and friend of the Prince of Wales), Max Hastings (ex-editor of the



- Daily Telegraph*), Alan Kilkenny (PR consultant), Sir David Naish (former head of the NFU), John Rennie (former head of MI6), Michael Sissons (journalist), the Earl of Peel and the Duke of Westminster.
2. There are strong links between the hauliers and farmers; many haulage firms have their roots in a diversified farm business and particularly in rural areas a large proportion of their business is reliant on the agricultural industry. The form of their businesses is also similar in that they are frequently small, capital-intensive businesses operating on slim margins and identifying themselves as 'working people' rather than belong to a managerial class.
  3. The exact role of the oil multinationals within this dispute remains opaque; whether they were genuinely outmanoeuvred by the protestors or if they took the opportunity to remind the government of their power, remains debatable. The protests certainly did not damage their profits.
  4. The protestors in Wales and Plymouth were the first to move away from the blockades. These areas were arguably even more dependent on fuel and with a more restricted range of suppliers; the protest appears to have started to rebound on them.
  5. The British National Party claimed a role in the protest, whether this is the case or if represents opportunism on their part remains unclear (Jeffrey, 2000; Milne, 2000).
  6. All of the farmers' names have been changed.

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