Public Policy and Rural Space: An Introduction

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The objective in this Introduction is to present a broad conceptual framework within which the various articles in this special issue devoted to public policy and rural space can be situated. Furthermore, since the articles deal with French territorial space, a brief discussion is given of the interest presented by the French, and more broadly the European Union, experience for readers of the CJRS from other countries, and particularly those from Canada.

The articles do not treat all aspects of rural space and development, but are focused to a large extent on public sector policies, programs and institutions. This necessitates that we broach the issue of governance of development of rural areas. In focusing on rural space, it is important to situate rural space and the policies developed for them in their broader national contexts, a critical dimension of understanding the construction of rural space (see, e.g., Marsden et al (1993) and Benz and Eberlein (1999)). For instance, there are often contradictions in national policies for rural areas because of the overwhelming emphasis given to the metropolitan regions in many countries. Since a major preoccupation of regional and rural development is to reduce disparities between regions, the continued support given to metropolitan regions contributes to maintaining the disparities.

First, a simple and broad conceptual framework is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the interest presented by the French and European contexts for North American readers and indeed readers from other continents and countries. Finally, a number of key themes are identified which relate to the broad subject area treated in this special issue, and these are linked into the different articles presented in this special issue.

A Conceptual Framework

The framework is presented in Figure 1. The population and activities of rural areas have been undergoing significant transformations throughout the 20th century. Urbanization and industrialization have modified the spatial distribution
of population and economic activities in all countries. These transformations can be linked to processes of farm consolidation, mechanization, labour withdrawal from farming and generally the substitution of capital for labour. In other primary sectors, such as fishing, forestry and mining, similar processes have been in play, such as technological change and its impacts on labour demand, to which we can also add corporate restructuring and international competition, among other factors.

The processes have not been simple and different socio-economic systems of production have responded in different ways, meaning that rural spaces have not followed the same trajectories. Furthermore, other processes such as interregional and international competition and technological change have also created both opportunities and constraints for agricultural production, and for the other activities embedded in rural space, including new ones in some areas. The net result of all this has created a mosaic of rural spaces, as well as a whole series of externalities. Many negative externalities have been associated with these transformations, ranging from the loss of agricultural and rural population from some rural spaces to the negative environmental consequences of the industrialisation of agriculture (Bryant et al. 2004).

In relation to the negative or undesired consequences of many of these transformations, the public sector throughout the Western World has developed different forms of intervention through a myriad of policies and programs. Their goals have not always been coherent with each other. In the same country, policies and programs of different ministries and central State agencies have oftentimes been at cross-purposes as well. And, through all this, the role and functions of central States, and as well those of other levels of government, have been undergoing rapid change, more rapidly in some countries than in others (Bryant and Cofsky 2004). Many of these changes have involved various degrees of decentralization and de-concentration of central government.

But at the same time, more and more non public sector actors have become involved in various forms of governance – structures and processes of managing change and development when there are multiple interests involved (Ansell 2000; Lafontaine and Jean 2005; Edgington 2003). While institutional structures have been created to incorporate representatives of different organizations, and even different segments of interest, the informal environments in which these governance structures are created are potentially in a constant state of flux, reflecting the emergence of new actors and of new segments of interest. How governance structures and processes adjust to these constantly emerging realities thus become of critical importance to their long term effectiveness.

In this special issue of the CJRS, the focus is on the public policies, programs and institutional frameworks and how some of them relate to rural space, always recognizing how they may be influenced by non governmental forces and processes.

The French and European Union Context in Relation to Rural Space

A number of points can be made about the involvement of the French State in regional, and rural development (Ancien 2005), which are of interest to readers from other countries, and especially Canada:

- France has had a long history of involvement in regional development, particularly from the mid-1950s onwards;
- This early development was very much a top-down process, reflecting the significant power and presence of the Central French State;
- This led to the development of a national scale, institutional framework for regional development;
- French experience in regional development had an influence on a number of other regional development programs, including that of Canada towards the end of the 1960s;
- Much of the early development of French regional development policy and programs was related to the overwhelming dominance of the Paris region in relation to other parts of the economy;
- In the course of this development, some important concepts and tools were developed that have had a significant impact on many regional economic development programs in other countries – foremost amongst these was the notion of the ‘growth pole’ and subsequently the ‘growth centre’ or ‘development centre’;
- The French State also developed a number of innovative policies and programs aimed at dealing with a number of issues that arose from the evolution
of agriculture and more generally, rural space, in the post-World War II period, namely surplus agricultural production, the exodus of farm populations, and the inefficient nature of farm structures in many French regions. These led to the development of innovations in the various areas of farm restructuring (e.g. the reinforcement of earlier farm consolidation programs aimed at reducing farm fragmentation (remembrement), the development of the SAFER (Société d'Aménagement Foncier et d'Établissement Rural) covering very rapidly almost the whole of France in the 1960s (the ARDA program in Canada in the 1960s was at least partly and incompletely modeled on the basis of the conceptual bases of the SAFER); Subsequently, with the setting of more powerful regional structures in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the progressive development of a variety of institutional structures at regional levels (e.g. the Parcs Naturels Régionaux (PNR) from 1967 onwards), the development of pays, and the emphasis placed on intercommunality (intermunicipal cooperation). In these newer institutional structures, such as the PNR, preoccupations extended beyond the existing rural agricultural and other activities to include preoccupations with local development and the conservation of natural and cultural heritage - in short, much of what has been subsequently placed under the rubric 'sustainable development'.

The European Union has developed a strong presence (some would argue much too strong) in agricultural policy, through the CAP (the Common Agricultural Policy). The importance accorded to agriculture is shown in the enormous share that agriculture occupies of the E.U.'s budget (over 50%). The E.U. has developed a number of significant policies and programs, implemented through the member states, dealing with such preoccupations as agro-environmental measures and, in the sphere of rural development, the various LEADER programs, including the current LEADER + program. The various LEADER programs present a number of similarities to rural development programs in other countries, including the Community Futures program in Canada, a federal program established in the mid-1980s.

Both France and the European Union are characterized by a strong institutional thrust. It is interesting to compare their experience with that of other countries, especially in North America, usually seen as less institutionally-oriented in the development of solutions to various rural problems.

Public Policy, Programs and Institutional Frameworks: Recurring Threads

Some key trends affecting public policy in relation to rural space are identified, in order to situate the various articles in this special issue of the Canadian Journal of Regional Science. They represent an approach that has elsewhere been referred to as the identification of mega-trends (cf. Naisbitt (1982)) in relation to society and economy generally; Bryant (1991) in relation to trends affecting local development.

The Changing Role of the State (at all levels) in Relation to Policy, Programs and Institutions Related to 'Rural' Space

Many factors and processes have been involved in the changing role of the State in society and the economy, such as rapid technological change, the growing awareness of the population about fundamental issues in society and their increased capacity as a result of education, the growing complexity of our economies and societies, globalization, the changing structure of systems of exchange such as the demise of many local systems of exchange (e.g. marketing, local capital circuits) and the liberalization of markets. Some aspects of the liberalization of markets, a complex phenomenon, in this special issue is dealt with by Chevassus et al who investigate how certain agricultural and agro-agricultural activities exposed to international competition have become more concentrated spatially, particularly activities that have benefited under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union. The regional consequences of subsidized agricultural production faced with liberalization of markets are significant, and the policy implications important. Sylvander et al deal with another aspect, the reactions to increased liberalization of trade, specifically through the recognition of local specification of product source (Geographical Indications) in an attempt to develop specific market segments.

These broad patterns have yielded many consequences, one of which has been the changing roles and functions of the central State and other levels of government (Bryant and Cofsky 2005). In many national jurisdictions, this includes the increased attention given to various forms of local development, which for many observers could be likened to a new mega-trend that has appeared in the last 20 years. The rise of local development in its various forms has probably occurred earlier in North America (the U.S.A. and Canada) than in the European Union. The involvement of local, and regional, players is not to be construed as a failure of the central State, but rather as the recognition of the new realities of the increasingly more complex and dynamic societies and economies we live in. Several of the articles in this special issue treat different aspects of the changing roles of the State, particularly from the perspective of the changing relationships of the central State with local and regional actors (e.g. Berriet et al).

Decentralization

A related phenomenon is that of decentralization, including the devolution of responsibilities, the deconcentration of central State activities and the delegation of responsibilities (Meloche and Bryant 2005). An interesting effect of some of these processes is the decentralization of policy development and/or the appropriation of parts of the policy arena by local and regional actors. In the European
Union, and in relation to EU policy and programs, this is best encapsulated in the principle of subsidiarity. Berriet et al explore this in relation to agricultural policy and how regions play different roles depending upon the level of decentralization of the State by conducting some international comparisons. Piraux et al also probe the roles of local actors in the management of Territorial Farming Contracts (Contrats Territoriaux d’Exploitation - C.T.E.).

Part of the phenomenon of decentralization has been the development of new forms of institutional arrangement and the involvement of local and regional players, both public and non public sector, in novel forms of governance. This is reflected in a whole myriad of new institutional arrangements in France over the last 40 years or so dealing with rural space. This has included the development of the Parks Naturals Regina (PNR) or Regional Natural Parks since 1967, a novel form of integrating conservation with local development (e.g. Desroches and Bryant 1997; Allie and Bryant 2003). Other arrangements also directly related to rural space include the pays, a theme that Aubert et al deal with extensively in their assessment of the efficiency of such structures and the role of local actors, especially local elected politicians, in their management. And many rural areas have become involved in inter-communal arrangements of cooperation and collaboration in the management of their areas (Bisson, 2006).

The issue of whether policy formulation can be effectively undertaken at the local and regional levels is also a significant issue in relation to decentralization. Asnar et al undertake an economic analysis of local environmental policies in rural areas. Berriet et al’s analysis is also pertinent here, particularly in relation to agriculture and multi-functionality of agricultural land. Local and regional land use planning can also be included under this theme; Bertrand et al explore land use policy and multi-functionality in the Alpine Sillon region, and Kephaliacos et al also treat the issue of multi-functionality in relation to how CTE are interpreted at the local and regional level.

Concluding Remarks

It would be useful if readers ask themselves a number of questions as they read these articles:

- How do the contexts of their own national territories differ from that of France? Are these differences significant in terms of how policies, programs and institutional arrangements are developed?
- How important are local development processes and structures? In some countries, they certainly developed earlier than in France? Does this mean that they are necessarily different because of the evolving circumstances affecting economies and societies through time?
- What is the emphasis placed on institutional structures and arrangements (governance structures and processes) in their countries?
- How significant are forms of governance involving non governmental actors in their countries?

In short, what constitutes the most effective mix of central State and local and regional State involvement in their country in relation to rural areas?

References


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