

**REDEFINING THE LOCAL:
THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF RURAL SPACE IN
SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 1982-2006**

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF Ph.D

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Abstract

This thesis brings together a series of existing and ongoing pieces of research, conducted over a period of some years. There are five primary aims.

The first is to construct a coherent empirical picture of the social organisation of space in rural South Australia by the early 1980s, at the outset of a period of turmoil and rapid change. The second is to bring together two relevant but disparate levels of theory (globalisation/structural change and localism/place attachment), to understand the impact of the rural crisis of 1984-94 on rural communities, families and individuals. The third is to trace the context and development of the crisis itself, the resultant poverty, demographic change, and reduced socio-economic viability of communities. Fourthly, the theoretical and empirical findings are applied to the search for an altered accommodation between society and space, through which a modified and regrouped but still essentially intact rural society can survive beyond the crisis. Finally, I reflect on the methodological contribution and limitations of the thesis, and also on the ethical concerns and values confronting an academic researcher reporting on a local- or micro-level social tragedy, concealed and rationalised by national macro-level success.

Chapter 1 deals with fundamental concepts and epistemology.

Chapter 2 sketches the evolution of the South Australian rural habitat up to the 1980s.

Chapter 3 examines macro-level theory on globalisation in the structuralist and political economy traditions, which seek to explain the forces changing the politico-economic ground rules within which rural communities have to operate.

Chapter 4 examines theory relating to the world of the individual person and his/her most immediate social reference groups - family, neighbourhood and community. It presents a model of place-making, and evaluates the contributions of various disciplines towards understanding specific aspects of this process, particularly rural sociology, social and humanistic geography, structuration theory and theory relating to human territoriality.

Chapter 5 reveals how individuals and local social groups actually occupied space and developed place-attachment in rural South Australia in the early 1980s. It draws on field studies carried out between 1979 and 1986, and on a 1982-83 postal sample survey of 2000 rural households.

Chapter 6 traces the course of a decade of almost continuous rural crisis, from about 1984. It shows how the global economy and political decisions (international, national and State) flowed through to rural people and places. Demographic and economic impacts are examined at State level, with a regional example.

Chapters 7 (quantitative) and 8 (qualitative) examine the changes wrought by the crisis on rural society and the social organisation of space. They draw on a 1992/93 replication of the previous postal survey to demonstrate the persistence and continuity of major features of the rural society, but also the fragility of the current spatial organisation. The widespread rural poverty in the early 1990s and its impact on the state of rural morale are demonstrated, along with perceived changes in key community characteristics, and divergence of the economic from the social organisation of rural space.

Chapter 9 assesses requirements for a socially sustainable rural Australia, in the light of the last ten years' developments in rural research. It argues the need for the focus of localism to be re-defined upwards from individual community to regional level

Finally in Chapter 10, I reflect on the contribution and limitations of the thesis, and on the wider problem of the role academics could, should and do play in relation to the deeply meaningful social transformations we purport to study.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

.....

(Peter J. Smailes)

Dated this.....day of2006

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