

Abstract

Investigating the (possible) emergence of a 'New Squirearchy' in rural England, this research considers the extent of a practical appropriation of the discourse of the country gentleman within the milieu of a specific community in the South East. A process commonly attributed to the middle class, this study engages with those debates on class and class analysis which continue to play out as a key theme in rural studies, and argues for the incorporation of concepts of performance in providing more nuanced accounts of society in the countryside. Drawing on theories of embodiment as developed in the wider disciplines of sociology and geography, and considering them in direct relation to consumption and cultural capital, this research details the existence of the 'New Squirearchy' as a discernable community of practise at work in – and dependent upon – the routine operations of other collectives in rural space.

Mapping out the movements of those seeking to fulfil the roles and lifestyle historically accredited to the landed elite in detail, this empirically driven enquiry comes out of an intensive tract of in-situ ethnography. Centred on the act(s) of 'gentryfication' in the fabric of 'village England' and 'Eamesworth' more specifically, this story questions the apparent becoming of the 'New Squirearchy' through such institutions as the public house, the Parish Council and the village fete. In so doing, the suitability of this moniker is questioned, and the difficulties associated with delineating and ascribing specific identities are brought to the fore. Here it is argued that a changed political landscape dictates that acts of paternalism within the rural community have become unfeasible or impotent in a modern day scenario, and that the multiple identities which individuals assume and embody across space and time renders social interaction within such a setting as being increasingly fluid, reflexive and indistinct.