

## Rurality and Northern Reality

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**Abstract:** From the examination of the concepts of both “rurality” and the “North,” the geographical and “technical” meanings of these concepts are socially and politically based. The quantitative, technical definitions tend to focus either on a simple variable related to distance from urban areas, or size of population, regardless of what lies between. There is also a dominant, socially created association between the rural and an agricultural or suburban setting. Lacking alternative symbols and concepts of the North on the public stage, the old stereotypes, often reflecting colonialism, still apply. This perspective has resulted in a lack of recognition by political actors of the particular characteristics of rural and northern regions and the communities that dwell within them, including the Boreal Shield ecozone; particularly a meaning of rurality that excludes “extractive” communities. Further, this lack of awareness is reinforced by the fact that the Boreal Shield and other northern ecosystems in much of the North are divided by provincial boundaries.

### I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Public policy is made in the name of symbols. Such symbols do not emerge fully formed from the head of Zeus, but from the contests of economic and political actors. If policy-makers can define the North and establish their preferred causes for development, then they can also establish their views of policy. This article examines the concepts of “rurality” and the “North” as they are used in both the academic literature and as inspiration for policy. It ends by suggesting the implications for policy-making of these widely shared meanings.

Approaches to defining both the “rural” and the “North” tend to fall into two categories, the geographical and the social. As Du Plessis et al. put it, there is “a long-standing debate whether ‘rural’ is a *geographical concept*, a location with identifiable boundaries on a map, or whether it is a *social representation*, a community of interest, a culture and way of life.”<sup>2</sup> Pitblado prefers “technical” as a label to “geographical,” because he suggests that

social approaches to defining rural may also be geographical.<sup>3</sup> For both of the concepts of rural and “North,” “technical” approaches will be examined first, and then social ones.

## II. Definitions and Images of Rurality

### A. Technical Definitions of Rurality

Population and distance are the most common proxies in operationalizing the concept of “rural” for use in program management and policy-making. According to Bodor and his co-authors, there is a meaningful population threshold of about 10,000 persons for rural communities in Canada. They note that about 20% of the Canadian population lived in 4,235 communities of less than 10,000 populations in 1992, and that it has been suggested that the 10,000 threshold may have organizational meaning for the provision of specialized services. This rural threshold appears to differ from much of the Australian or American literature, where communities of 25,000 to 50,000 have been considered as rural.<sup>4</sup>

Distance is the other standard proxy for rurality related to social and economic conditions as exemplified in a paper by Slack, Bourne, and Gertler for the Panel of the Role of Government of the Government of Ontario, in 2003.<sup>5</sup> Du Plessis, Bollman, and Clemenson, writing for Statistics Canada, define rurality in terms of commuting distance, e.g., “the population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of centres with population of 10,000 or more.”<sup>6</sup> This definition, however, has also been considered by some Northern Ontarians as more appropriate for southern Ontario than for the hundred or more “isolated rural” Northern Ontario communities where the population is often at or below 1,000. Consequently, some municipalities in Northern Ontario tended to suffer relative to southern communities from the strict interpretation of the municipal RSCM (Rural and Small Community Measure), as defined by Statistics Canada, when applying for government grants such as the Rural Infrastructure Investment Initiative (RIII).<sup>7</sup>

With respect to “remoteness” in more technical terms, it tends to be defined by distance from urban centres. Places that have zero commuting to Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) or Census Agglomerations (CAS) are considered the most isolated.<sup>8</sup> Much of Ontario, including portions of southern Ontario, qualifies as “remote” by this standard. As for the creation of an index of “accessibility” as an indicator of remoteness in particular, Slack et al. note that, “in Canada there is no classification of places in rural or northern Canada, nor any agreement on what such a classification

should look like.<sup>9</sup> Since 2003, however, the Ontario Medical Association has developed a “Rurality Index of Ontario” that mixes the notions of rurality and remoteness, assigning points based on a number of factors including travel time to nearest referral centres. The index is used in several government funding formulas aimed at increasing the level of rural medical service.<sup>10</sup> Northern Ontario communities are included in this index on the assumption of their rurality.

Distance is sometimes related to commuting, rural-to-rural commuting to census subdivisions, and census subdivisions to “self-contained labour areas.” “The ‘labour’ in the title of the ‘self-contained labour areas’ therefore refers to the *movement* of labour from the place of residence to the place of work.”<sup>11</sup>

The distance approach can reflect somewhat imprecise language with respect to rurality in relation to northern communities. In this context, there is very little distinction between northern and other communities, and whether northern communities are considered rural or not. For example, with respect to Northern Ontario, Slack, Bourne, and Gertler write, “the purpose of establishing a tax incentive zone in the north is to encourage businesses to invest and expand in smaller, rural and northern communities.”<sup>12</sup> This implies that northern communities are rural—or does it?

Northern Ontario does not fall specifically into any technical or constructed categories of rural areas in the Canadian academic literature on rurality, not even residual ones. For example, Ray Bollman of Statistics Canada offers a quantitative decomposition of rural Canada based on census data. He suggests a five-fold typology “describing the diversity of rural Canada as it actually is.” These categories include: “urban frontier,” adjacent to larger cities; “rural nirvana” areas concentrated in southern Ontario; “agro-rural” with small populations in dispersed settlements; “rural enclave,” almost exclusively in the Atlantic Provinces with low rates of economic activity and high rates of unemployment; and “resourced area,” relatively high in natural resources (minerals, petroleum, forests) and with a high share of young people and a very low proportion of elderly.<sup>13</sup> This category of “resourced area” is a residual category that includes most of Canada, but seems to be the closest fit with resource-based communities in the Boreal Shield. The population dynamics of much of Northern Ontario, however, more closely resembles his third category, the “agro-rural.”

*B. Social Definitions and Images of Rurality*

There is a wide and deep literature relating the rural and the urban in social terms. Relating the technical to social or subjective definitions of the rural, Michael Woods observes that there is no simple standard definition of rural:

Whatever picture of the “rural” you have conjured up, it will probably be different from that imagined by the person sitting nearest to you ... This is not to say that we all have an entirely individual understanding of rurality. Our perceptions will be shaped by a wide range of influences that we will share with other people: where we live, where we holiday, which films we watch, which books we read. Local and national cultural traditions are also important, as is what we learn at school, what we read in the newspapers and the political propaganda that we receive from pressure groups. In some countries, “rural” is not a widely used concept at all but visitors to those countries will recognize spaces that look to them to be “rural.” Thus, if our understanding of what “rural” means is not individually specific, it is at least culturally specific.<sup>14</sup>

Halfacree, concerned with the conceptual limitations of the rural and its definition in scientific terms, writes with respect to those who focus on statistical definitions,

Their methods involve trying to fit a definition to *what we already intuitively consider to be rural*, in the absence of any other justification as to why they should be regarded as representing the rural. In other words, they are trying to put the cart before the horse, the rural having been already “defined” by those doing the classifying ... You go away and look for statistics, variables that might fit with your intuitive descriptive idea of what rural is and then you define rurality accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Keith Hoggart writes that “research on rural areas has tended to adopt a theoretically undifferentiated approach to what is ‘rural.’”

The central point is that the undifferentiated use of “rural” in a research context is detrimental to the advancement of social theory. As such, it is critical that notions of rurality do not guide the selection of sites for empirical investigation. The broad category “rural” is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural—urban similarities can be sharp.<sup>16</sup>

Differences across rural areas have been recognized, but they have been inadequately theorized and similarities in causal processes across the rural-urban divide have received far too little attention.

The rural is often opposed to the urban as an idyllic and rustic alternative. For example, Raymond Williams identifies the traditional and perhaps dominant sense of rural as one end of the city-country dichotomy that goes back to Ancient Rome.<sup>17</sup> Mormont observes that “we talked of the rural world in order to define a separate and distinct universe—i.e., a separate population living according to rules different from those of the urban world where other activities, other populations and other ways of life were to be found.”<sup>18</sup> Jane Jacobs discussed urban planning in terms of an important tradition of “garden cities” beginning with Ebenezer Howard, an English court reporter for whom planning was an avocation. Looking at the living conditions of the poor in late-nineteenth-century London, and hating not only the wrongs and mistakes of the city but the city, Howard thought it an “outright evil and an affront to nature that so many people should get themselves into an agglomeration.”<sup>19</sup> Howard proposed building a new kind of town—the Garden City, where the city poor might again live close to nature; pleasant towns encircled with a belt of agriculture. Anti-urban urban planning soon became the dominant tradition in both town and regional planning, and in architecture.

The contemporary European literature in the discipline of geography tends to see this social construction of rural reality as the most important approach.<sup>20</sup> Hoggart and Halfacree both refer to the rural myth, a “village of the mind” that Pahl had described twenty-five years earlier. “For a particular mobile middle-class group the metropolitan village is, to borrow R. E. Park’s phrase, ‘a state of mind,’ referring to wealthy and middle-class commuters.”<sup>21</sup> Images of the rural as a state of mind, including the bucolic, pastoral, remote and rustic, and, most importantly, the agricultural, become applied to the North almost by default in opposition to the urban. But while the association of the term rural with Southern Ontario agriculture is well-established in the literature of rurality in Canada, it does not apply to Northern Ontario. There is agriculture in Northern Ontario, but only 4% of provincial farms and land in crops, and about .5% of Northern Ontario’s land mass.<sup>22</sup> Thus association of Northern Ontario with a southern-based technical definition of rurality is misleading.

Interestingly, a social approach to rurality that appears to have more relevance to the Boreal Shield in Canada has appeared in the American literature. It focuses on “extraction, as America’s other social landscape”: “Rural life is often characterized by two contrasting landscape types—

agricultural and extractive ...”<sup>23</sup> As an explicit analytical concept of the rural as described by England and Brown, the “extractive” is missing from the Canadian discourse on Northern Ontario.

Remoteness is a concept often associated with rurality, and also with the “North.” Considering social definitions of remoteness, in a comparison of social work practice in Canada and Australia that is applicable in a broader context, Bodor, Green, Lonne, and Zapf argue that,

Rural practice models developed in both countries are contextual, generalist, and community-based or community-embedded. There appears to be a distinction made in both countries between rural practice (service to agricultural and primary industry communities) and remote practice (service to isolated remote regions such as the Australian outback and the Canadian north). While a distinction appears to have been made between rural practice and remote practice, there still seems to be some confusion about how the terms rural and remote are defined. It would appear that few [sic] communities can be sharply divided between being either rural or remote while the perception of the two terms as elements on a continuum can be equally confusing when important and unique differences between communities are not acknowledged.<sup>24</sup>

Bobor and his co-authors further note that since the mid-1980s there has been an effort in the Canadian literature on social work to define “remote” practice as something different from the American notion of rural social work in terms of the colonialism inherent in the Canadian situation. “Grounded in economic notions of colonization, exploitation, and purposeful underdevelopment, the remote practice approach recognizes the dependence of the northern hinterland on the southern heartland for markets, technical expertise, investment capital, information, and general well-being. The overall effect of this dependent relationship has been to transfer value from the northern hinterland to the urban south.”<sup>25</sup> They add that “world views and cultural values underlying service delivery in remote regions [presumably they mean southern in origin] must be assessed for relevance and potential damage in the local context.”<sup>26</sup>

The Canadian literature puts a technical and economic rather than social and conceptual emphasis on single industry communities, not focusing wholly on extraction.<sup>27</sup> Therefore this *literature* tends to be politically and socially neutral. Social visions of the term rural are, however, not neutral or apolitical. Shucksmith refers to the capturing of rurality, in which different actors engage in “conflicts ... over definitions of rurality in order to achieve

their preferred outcomes—each interest using words, ideas, concepts and images which reflect these preferences.” This is the classic battle for political reality and purposed outcomes; sometimes for personal, more often for organizational or other partisan purposes based on class. It is these latter notions of rurality—and the north—applied to the “North” for ideological reasons, but represented through rhetoric as universal ones, that we might refer to as “mystifications” of the rural in relation to Northern Ontario.<sup>28</sup>

From an historical perspective, one of the most notable of ideological “mystifications” of the term, in keeping with the identification of rural with agricultural, and the linking of agricultural rural to Northern Ontario, was the portrayal for political and economic purposes of Northern Ontario as an agricultural paradise. As Donald Pugh describes,

Many early settlers entering the clay belt region were unfortunate victims of a deception which portrayed the region as a promised land, fertile and generous beyond all sane belief. Ontario government departments, including the Department of Crown Lands, Department of Agriculture and the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway Commission, justified their efficiency between 1900 and 1932 by the number of settlers persuaded to enter this northern “bonanza” district. These departments consistently and enthusiastically endorsed the clay belt climate, soils and forest in an avalanche of glowing press releases, settlement brochures, maps, farm photos and touring exhibits and lectures.<sup>29</sup>

This was a multi-faceted colonial effort, including the efforts of Toronto merchants who wished to resettle urban masses and farmers’ sons in the clay belt as a balance for the popular attraction of the booming West.

### III. Definitions and Images of the “North”

When considering northern issues, it is useful to consider where and what the “North” is. As with rurality, there are both technical and social definitions. These conceptions may be examined in terms of their contemporary relevance for policy-making.

#### *A. Technical Definitions of the “North”*

Ecological zones provide a useful way to look at the North and its communities, although this classification does not correspond to more traditional political boundaries, such as provincial ones; the ecological zone of the Boreal Shield, for example, has a sum greater than its individual



parts as northern portions of provinces, as will be further noted. Eco-zones describe communities that reflect the common geological and biological characteristics of these communities.

Is the “North” the Taiga Shield alone? In his paper discussing the concepts of rural, the remote, and the north, Pitblado notes the lack of consensus on definitions for any of these terms.<sup>30</sup> Pitblado notes different understandings of the term “North,” including the tendency to push the boundary of the “real” North to the 60th parallel. This boundary corresponds with the boundary of the Taiga plain as an ecological zone. Such a definition considers everything immediately below the Taiga as “south” by default or as some undefined transitional zone; and the rest of the country “below” that in an intermediate north-south terminological limbo. Pitblado notes, for example, that McNiven and Puderer use sixteen climatic, biotic, and socio-economic indicators that put such urban centres as Thunder Bay and Sudbury into the “south,” even below a wide transitional zone.<sup>31</sup> One of McNiven and Puderer’s maps is reproduced below (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** North-South transition lines (Source: McNiven and Puderer, *Delineation of Canada’s North: An Examination of the North-South Relationship in Canada*, Statistics Canada Geography Division, 2000, 15)



A notable characteristic of this map is that the transition zone between north and south corresponds, from Saskatchewan eastward, with the Boreal Shield, that ecological zone that combines the Canadian Shield and the Boreal Forest. The Taiga Shield and Hudson's Bay Lowlands, with 3% of the Canadian population, are considered the North, while the Boreal Shield, with three million residents, is not. McNiven and Puderer cite Statistics Canada as saying that "for the statistical area classification (SAC), Statistics Canada recommends that the 'north' category include only the region north of the north transition line," but they do not give a reference for this classification, and they seem to be citing themselves.

This paper argues that the Boreal Shield as an ecological zone should not be excluded from the North, and that communities in the Boreal Shield ecozone are northern communities. The Canadian Shield is that "vast U-shaped peneplain of Precambrian and other ancient rocks," which covers two-thirds of Canada. It stretches down from the mouth of the Mackenzie River, touching the northeast corner of Alberta, and includes the northern third of Saskatchewan, Manitoba north of Lake Winnipeg, and Ontario between the Hudson's Bay Lowlands and the St. Lawrence Plain to the south. It includes all of Quebec north of the St. Lawrence (except for a small area of the Hudson's Bay Lowlands to the north and the equally small area of the St. Lawrence Basin immediately contiguous to the north shore of the river), the St. Lawrence Plain just mentioned, and on to Newfoundland. It lies to the north of various ecozones, including the Boreal Plains, the Mixedwood Plains, and the Atlantic Maritime. It excludes the taiga region to the north and the transitional mixedwood forests to the south.<sup>32</sup>

The section of the Boreal Shield in the United States is described as part of the ecological zone situated between the boreal forest and the broadleaf deciduous forest zones, and is therefore transitional.<sup>33</sup> Russia and Scandinavia also have boreal forests with similar ecologies. In short, the environmental or ecological setting for these communities is a central one. The Boreal Shield provides a common economic foundation based on the exploitation of minerals and forests for the people and communities in which they live.

In brief, the boreal and the taiga shields as ecological zones, along with the Hudson's Bay Lowlands, might be collectively useful for defining "North" in a geographical or "technical" sense. Each ecoregion is different, however, with different policy implications. The Taiga Shield has a population of 100,000 people and the Boreal Shield has three million. This alone is noteworthy. Any definition of North that includes the former to the exclusion of the latter is not a useful one.

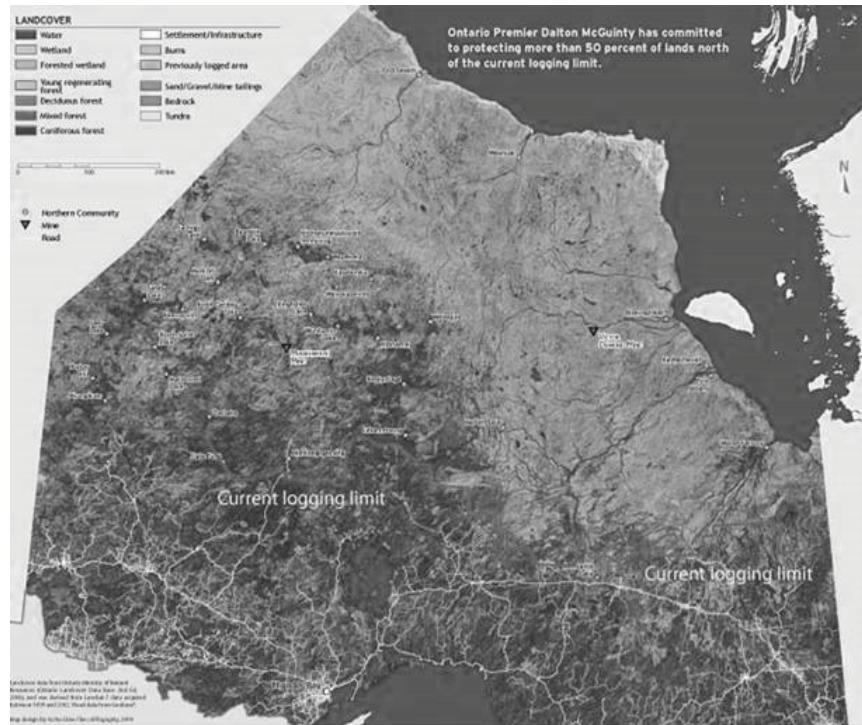
It might also be noted that there is another technological definition of the North within Ontario based on archaeological “cultural areas” that is also useful for our purposes and that overlaps with ecological zones. J.V. Wright argues that the prehistory of the Aboriginal peoples who occupied Ontario can best be understood by dividing the province into two major regions—a northern region and a southern region, the former mostly within the shield and with a coniferous forest, and the latter with a predominantly hardwood forest.<sup>34</sup> Wright goes on to suggest that the technical, archaeological division is essentially the same as the social and political one between Northern and Southern Ontario; with Northern Ontario being composed of districts, and Southern Ontario consisting of counties.

The more kindly endowed Southern region has always supported a far greater prehistoric population than the harsh Northern region and the same situation exists today with reference to modern population densities. The richer archaeology of the south, however, has been complicated by the development of local cultural groups which interacted with each other and outside areas in a highly complex fashion. On the other hand, the Northern region is characterized by a high degree of cultural similarity which allows certain general interpretations to be drawn from relatively limited archaeological data ... Certainly cultural interactions and contacts took place along a broad span of the somewhat ill-defined boundary between the two areas but such events appear to have been relatively unimportant.<sup>35</sup>

These cultural zones describe the difference between rural in Southern Ontario, and the “other than rural” in Northern Ontario. These zones also reflect Aboriginal social divisions that are older than European settlement.

On the margin of the distinction between technical and social (and political) concepts of the “North” are the province’s official definitions of the north within their jurisdictions. The Province of Ontario has created a *Far North Act* in which the “Far North” is considered to be above the current logging limit. The province is committed to protecting half of that area, and community-based land use plans will be used. In other words, First Nations’ approval of land use plans is now required by law. They will identify and approve the areas in the Far North that require protection as well as those areas suitable for economic development. Some Aboriginal organizations and mining interests object to this legislation: the former from the perspective of their conceptions of sovereignty, and the latter because of the restrictions on their activities. A map of the Far North follows (figure

2). Ontario seems to have two official “Norths”—the North that includes Muskoka and corresponds with the Boreal Shield, and the Far North above the existing logging limit that corresponds more closely with the latitude of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec’s official “Norths.”



**Figure 2.** Ontario’s Far North. (Source: The Ontario’s Boreal Futures Coalition: Maps)

Another useful map that describes the boundaries of the “official” Norths within each province may be found in *Changing Northern Economies: Helping Northern Communities Build a Sustainable Future* by Chris Southcott and Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox.<sup>36</sup> This map (see figure 3), created by the staff of the Northern Development Ministers’ Forum, depicts Northern Ontario with a Muskoka southern boundary. The Québec Provincial North, as set out by its *Plan Nord* of February 2012, covers the same territory as appears on the map. The north of the *Plan Nord* “encompasses all of Québec’s territory north of the 49th parallel and north of the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence.”<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 3.** Border delineating northern and southern Canada. (Source: Southcott & Irlbacher-Fox (2009). *Changing Northern Economies: Helping Northern Communities Build a Sustainable Future*. Northern Development Ministers Forum)

### *B. Social Definitions and Images of the North*

Halfacree's critique, previously noted, of statistical approaches to rurality—that they represent intuition in the guise of science—is also extended to definitions of the “North.” Halfacree quotes Shields' discussion of attempts to “define” the “Far North” of Canada: “The appeal to popular perception is indicative of a tautological circle in all of these studies; starting out from commonsensical intuition, statistics are gathered and then interpreted in the light of commonsense. Thus ennobled by the clothes of empiricism, commonsense is represented as scientific conclusions.”<sup>38</sup>

Our conceptions of the “North” may also be seen, like the “rural,” as a state of mind. From the perspective of a “North of the mind,” the mythology of the North has been both positive and negative. It has been portrayed positively as “the true north, strong and free,” in the name of both climate and race. As Berger puts it,

In the [nineteenth century] rhetoric of the day, Canada was ... the “True North” in Tennyson's phrase, the “Lady of the Snows” in Kipling's. “Canada is a young, fair and stalwart maiden of the north.” “The very atmosphere of her northern latitude, the breath

of life that rose from lake and forest, prairie and mountain, was fast developing a race of men with bodies enduring as iron and minds as highly tempered as steel." Canada was the "Young giant nation of the North", the "Young scion of the northern zone"; her people, "Our hardy northern race"; her location, those "Stern latitudes."<sup>39</sup>

The combination of geographical location and climatic condition were seen to mould racial character. "The result of life in the northern latitudes was the creation and sustenance of self-reliance, strength, hardness—in short, all the attributes of a dominant race."<sup>40</sup>

There have also been negative images of the North. Karen Dubinsky notes that both south and north have borne "distinct moral reputations." "Rural Ontario attempted to exploit the widely held association of country living and moral purity to its advantage ... [On the other hand,] those attempting to fashion mining settlements and logging enclaves into towns and cities in the north had continually to deflect and reshape criticism of the region as a wild and immoral netherland."<sup>41</sup> Sharon Wall also notes that the north was considered the home of uncultured immigrants, working-class radicalism, sexual immorality, inbreeding, and low intelligence. In the face of alarming rural depopulation in the south, the north was subject to much the same negative stereotyping as the city.<sup>42</sup>

Competing images of the "North" could (and can) be held simultaneously. From the positive perspective, the North was pure landscape: rugged Shield territory, empty space except when urbanites chose to descend upon it. Thus the North meant "parkland, summer, and leisure." In this frame of mind, one gave little thought to lumber or mining operations or even, for that matter, winter.<sup>43</sup> In the negative view, the North was constructed largely in terms of populace: who was there, the work they did, the ways in which their social world was organized. The Boreal Shield has had its own myths and images, and is considered important for the identity of Canada itself.

The Shield has contributed significantly to the evolution of a specifically Canadian consciousness and historiography. As the realm of the fur trade—of Native woodlore, the canoe, the self-reliant *coureur de bois* ... and of physical challenge and harsh winters—it gave rise to a frontier mythology with distinctive central images. After Confederation, this evolved into the national mythology of the newly independent Dominion, with the Shield's environment providing the objective locational anchor for Canada—"the true North, strong and free". When the Group of Seven sought to develop an art that was authentically Canadian

and not derivative of European styles, they discovered in the Shield's distinctive landscape a natural source of inspiration...<sup>44</sup>

The Canadian economist Harold Innis and his colleague, the historian Donald Creighton, described the development of the Canadian state in relation to the St. Lawrence River, the Great Lakes, and rivers west, such as the Saskatchewan, as what geographers have called a "penetration line" across the continent, providing access to the resources, notably the furs and forests of the Shield. These forms of natural capital provided "staple" products shipped out of the country. Innis recognized that resource exploitation in regions such as the Shield entrenched relationships of metropolitan dominance over remote hinterlands. He also recognized the important (but relatively ignored) role of the Aboriginal people in Canada's economic development.<sup>45</sup>

It will be recalled that in the colonial context, with respect to the agricultural and the rural, the clay belt within the Shield was touted as Canada's coming "agricultural backbone," "the future of Ontario," the "pasture land of the continent," and the "best stock land in Canada." Even the snow was praised for its "light flaky nature" and role as a warm blanket to protect fall and winter crops. Newly-founded northern towns accepted such rhetoric.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the rocky Shield was also considered negatively, as a barrier to the construction of the railroad west, to agriculture on the prairies.

The qualities of the Shield have also been portrayed for touristic purposes.

Middle-class urbanites enjoyed the rest cure in a canoe that northern Ontario promised. Since the 1850s, tourists had boarded steamers to seek miracle cures in the Lake Superior air. Wilfred William Campbell, a clergyman turned poet and travel writer, in 1910 rhapsodized about all of Canada's Great Lakes, regarding them as "not mere bodies of water ... but as vast influences, powers, consolers and sources of infinite wisdom, comfort and rest." ... Even into the 1930s, government-issued tourist literature invited visitors to "come north for health," for "invigorating atmosphere, cool nights for refreshing slumber, and abundance of pure and wholesome food and fine drinking water all contributed to a healthy, hard race."<sup>47</sup>

The Shield has also been sold as real estate in relation to the suburban ideal of the country close to, but different from, the city in terms of the wilderness ethos since the 1880s. With the advent of four-lane highways



(mostly completed) from Toronto to Sudbury and North Bay, the Muskoka area as far north as Bracebridge, and west to Parry Sound, has become a kind of suburb of Toronto in the classic bucolic style with a rustic twist, with vacation houses rather than “cottages” or “camps.” Their bourgeois patrons firmly in mind, the “Group of Seven” played upon and epitomized the desire of Canada’s Indigenous economic elite to have property in the North, and to see the North as a vacation wilderness.<sup>48</sup>

All these images of the “North” remain for many Canadians, including scholars and policy-makers.<sup>49</sup> The colonial context of northern economic development is also still a political reality. Forestry and mining, both industrial and high-tech, are very much part of the contemporary image of the North, primarily as Boreal Shield, still managed from the south. Where people enter the picture of the North from this perspective, it tends to be the lumber workers and the high income miners associated with these industries rather than First Nation communities. Resource-based communities, including urban communities, are part of this contemporary image of the North.<sup>50</sup> The concept of core–periphery epitomizes the North–South relationship.

Both Wallace and Daigle argue that limited economic diversification hinders long-term viability of northern development.<sup>51</sup> With the vast majority of basic sector jobs in many communities relying on one industry or one company, occupational diversity is constrained. This drawback is further amplified by the managerial hierarchy of the branch plant theory, which reveals that few high-level management positions (jobs with important knowledge) exist in northern Canada. In the past, this has meant that critical decisions for companies in the North have been made by management in Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver.<sup>52</sup> Also, as noted, there is an emphasis by influential scholars writing for government who speak of northern communities being “at risk” and in decline.

The principal dimension of recent population and social change in the province is the *geographical unevenness of that change*. As the rate of provincial population growth slows, only a few areas of the province can be expected to grow in the future. Most of the province outside of the major metropolitan regions, and their adjacent hinterlands, is declining. The sharpest contrast is between communities in the north and south of the province; and this *north-south divide* is growing. But, there are many parts of the south of the province, notably in eastern and western Ontario, that are also declining.<sup>53</sup>



This limited vision, focused on population growth, has included the geography and history of towns and cities in the Boreal Shield. With the exception of Mattawa, Sault Ste. Marie, Port Arthur, and Kenora, most of the towns and cities of the Boreal Shield were products of the Railroad Age, and the pre-existing ones were strengthened by it. As Wallace puts it,

Academics have found it convenient to describe the communities in Northern Ontario in simple categories such as “single-resource,” “resource-based,” “one-industry,” “single-sector” and “company towns.” Superficially appropriate for many communities, this categorization has constricted attempts to understand the urban North. Such nomenclature inhibits understanding of complex towns and cities now entering their second century.<sup>54</sup>

The notion of “risk” in the “north-south divide” may be an example of the problem-oriented approach to social issues and policies that has been predominant in recent decades, and that John McKnight argues against, preferring an emphasis on possibilities rather than deficits, a notion that has been applied across different fields and across levels.<sup>55</sup> Consider, for example, the assumptions made by Slack, Bourne, and Gertler when they specifically *define* “small, rural, and remote communities” as “communities at risk.”<sup>56</sup> Importantly, this kind of characterization has helped to justify southern politicians to make policy such as allowing northern resources industries to be sold to foreign companies.<sup>57</sup>

#### **IV. Implications for Policy**

From the examination of the concepts of both “rurality” and the “North,” it seems that the geographical and “technical” definitions (in Pitblado’s sense) of these concepts are socially and politically based. The quantitative, technical definitions tend to focus either on a simple variable related to distance from urban areas, or size of population, regardless of what lies between. There is also a dominant, socially created association between the rural and an agricultural or suburban setting. “Rurality” and “North” have a profound impact on public policy in both active and passive ways.

In the first place, these notions serve as the conceptual setting for much of the public policy about the North. Within each province, the provincial government, with its primarily southern influences, has been the dominant actor although local government plays a significant role in human service delivery systems. Lacking alternative symbols and concepts of the North on the public stage, the old stereotypes, often reflecting colonialism, still apply.

This perspective has resulted in a lack of recognition by political actors of the particular characteristics of rural and northern regions and the communities that dwell within them, including the Boreal Shield ecozone. Further, this lack of awareness is reinforced by the fact that the Boreal Shield and other northern ecosystems in much of the North are divided by provincial boundaries. The partition of the Shield by provincial boundaries encourages the continuation of colonial actions and attitudes in Ontario that have persisted for centuries. Zapf points out that “the vast Canadian north ... is perceived as an awkward jumble of territories and provincial top ends, “rather than as a region of its own.”<sup>58</sup> The same can be said for the Boreal Shield where the vast majority of northerners reside: split between provinces, and divided as an entity. This provincially based perspective can be constraining and damaging when southern urban-based program planners view their own northern regions as variations or economic extensions of the south, posing obstacles for service delivery. This is an entrenched structural setting for the North.

Southern politicians and policy-makers not only apply older “colonial” images of the North, but also create new ones. New continental and globally focused colonial symbols are now front and centre in the legislative and political drama of public policy about the North, further detracting from the North’s relative lack of identity. In the Ontario Government’s *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario 2011*, the imagery starts with the “global economy,” then the “North American economy,” then Northern Ontario is described as a “key part of one of the world’s leading economies” (implicitly southern Ontario) with “large areas of wealth and prosperity,” referring to Northern Ontario’s real estate. The growth plan states that Northern Ontario “will be transformed into a globally competitive region,” with the meaning of this fashionable notion of “transformation” being solely based on a Queen’s Park perspective.<sup>59</sup>

It can be recommended that the “North” needs new self-conceptions and political symbols recognizing its own particular characteristics upon which policy can be built. But these alternative symbols and meanings that might direct policy from the perspectives of either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal residents of the North seem to be limited. There is presently little sense that the North is an entity unto itself, or a political identity.

## V. Conclusions and a Prologue

Technical and social definitions of the “rural” and the “North” tend to reflect southern perspectives, and both old and new colonial priorities. Contemporary emphasis on the “global economy” and a “transformation”

of Northern Ontario into an extension of Southern Ontario in the “North American” part of that economy, is the discourse of the day. People and communities tend to be forgotten in a perspective of the North as real estate for cottages, forestry, or mining; and the notion of “remote” often seems to mean out of sight and out of mind. It is not that the older conceptions and images are not prevalent, even familiar *old* colonial ones as described; it is that they are being pushed off the political stage and into the wings in favour of *new* colonial ones.

Powerful Indigenous symbols of the North that help Northerners to build policy are limited, especially in the Provincial Norths. If “rurality” and the “North” continue to be contested concepts, it is a one-sided contest. What of the next “scene,” the next part of the drama? Looking forward inspires a number of questions. Is there an alternative emergence of a new meaning of “North,” a new north of the mind that has its focus on the integrity and economic welfare of the northern parts of provinces themselves, individually and perhaps together? What emergent symbol or symbols will unite these fractured parts of a Boreal whole with respect to policy, and even politically?

There are other questions. If such new or incipient images about the North are to emerge, where and from whom will they originate? Are they to come from Aboriginal interests and values, from non-Aboriginal ones, or as a reflection of both in some manifestation of a combined discourse?<sup>60</sup> How would such symbols resonate with southern Ontarians, new Canadians for example, who may or may not know anything about the North—based on myth or otherwise?

This article has attempted to provide the setting for specific policy issues by briefly outlining the conceptual contest, the struggle for definition, and the war of rhetoric about the meaning of “North” and some of its issues and challenges. Public policy is made in the name of symbols. The creation and domination of definitions of northern reality, tied to dominant understandings of economic and social development, provides the political basis for policies that affect the North. The future of the “Provincial Norths” is at stake.

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## Notes

1. This article was written while David Robinson, Steve Gravel, and I constituted the INORD team (Institute for Northern Ontario Research and Development, Laurentian University). I am grateful for the contributions made by both, all the errors being mine.
2. Valerie Du Plessis et al., *Definitions of Rural*, Agriculture and Rural Working Paper Series Working Paper No. 61 (2002), 6.
3. J. Roger Pitblado, "So, What Do We Mean by 'Rural,' 'Remote,' and 'Northern'," *C.J.N.R.* 37, no. 1 (2005): 163–68.
4. Ralph Bodor et al., "40 Degrees Above or 40 Degrees Below Zero: Rural Social Work and Context in Australia and Canada," *Rural Social Work* 9 (2004): 54.
5. Enid Slack, Larry S. Bourne, and Meric Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities: The Anatomy of Risk* (Toronto: The Panel on the Role of Government, Government of Ontario, 2003).
6. Valerie Du Plessis et al., *Definitions of Rural*, 1.
7. Susan Heffernan, PhD student at Laurentian University with northern administrative experience, Personal Communication, June 2012.
8. Slack, Bourne, and Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities*.
9. Slack, Bourne, and Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities*, 8.
10. Government of Ontario, *Communities by Rurality Index (RIO) for Ontario* (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2009); Richard H. Glazier, Peter Gozdyra, and Naira Yeristysan, *Geographic Access to Primary Care and Hospital Services for Rural and Northern Communities*, Institute for Clinical Evaluation Services, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2011).
11. Anne Munro, Allesandrio Alasia, and Ray D. Bollman, "Self-Contained Labour Areas: A Proposed Delimitation and Classification by Degree of Rurality," *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* 8, no. 8 (December 2011), 3.
12. Slack, Bourne, and Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities*, 7.
13. Ray D. Bollman, "A Preliminary Typology of Rural Canada," in *Towards Sustainable Rural Communities: The Guelph Seminar Series*, ed. John M. Bryden (Guelph: University School of Rural Planning and Development, 1994).
14. Michael Woods, *Rural Geography* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 4.
15. H.K. Halfacree, "Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourse, and Alternative Definitions of Rural," *Journal of Rural Studies* 9, no. 1 (1993).
16. K. Hoggart, "Let's Do Away with Rural," *Journal of Rural Studies* 6, no. 3 (1990): 245–56.
17. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

18. Marc Mormont, "Rural Nature and Urban Natures," *Sociologia Ruralis* 27, no. 1 (1987), 17.
19. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
20. Mark Shucksmith, "Conceptualizing Post-Industrial Rurality," in *Towards Sustainable Rural Communities: The Guelph Seminar Series*, ed. John M. Bryden (Guelph: University School of Rural Planning and Development, 1994), 125–32.
21. R. Pahl, "The Urban-Rural Continuum," *Sociologia Ruralis* 6, no. 3 (1966): 304.
22. Government of Ontario and Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, "Northern Ontario Region at a Glance."
23. Lynn England and Ralph Brown, "Community and Resource Extraction in Rural America," in *Challenges for Rural America in the 21st Century*, eds. David Lewis Brown and Lewis E. Swanson (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 318.
24. Bodor et al., "40 Degrees Above," 55.
25. Bodor et al., "40 Degrees Above," 54.
26. Bodor et al., "40 Degrees Above," 54.
27. Sean O'Hagan and Ben Cecil, "A Macro-Level Approach to Single Industry Towns in a Knowledge Economy," *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 2 (2007): 18–43.
28. The notion of mystification is a useful term illuminating the neglected topic of the portrayal of partisan language and symbols as universal. A classic Marxist concept widely discussed, it is also dealt with it in relation to contemporary political communication in Frank M. Stark, *Communicative Interaction, Power, and the State: A Method* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
29. D. Pugh, "Ontario's Great Clay Belt Hoax," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 90 (1975), 19.
30. Pitblado, "So, What Do We Mean by 'Rural,' 'Remote,' and 'Northern,'" 165.
31. Chuck McNiven and Henry Puderer, *Delineation of Canada's North: An Examination of the North-South Relationship in Canada*, Geography Working Paper Series No. 2000–3 (Statistics Canada Geography Division, 2000).
32. A.R.M. Lower, "Settlement and the Forest Frontier in Eastern Canada," in *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement Part IX Part I* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936), 2.
33. R.G. Bailey, *Ecoregions of the United States* (Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Government of the United States).
34. J.V. Wright, *Ontario Prehistory: An Eleven-Thousand-Year Archaeological Outline* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, National Museum of Man, 1972), 7.
35. Wright, *Ontario Prehistory: An Eleven-Thousand Year Archaeological Outline*, 7.
36. Chris Southcott and Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, *Changing Northern Economies: Helping Northern Communities Build a Sustainable Future*, Priority Project Report:

- Northern Development Ministers Forum (Northern Development Ministers' Forum, 14 October 2009).
37. Gouvernement du Québec, *Plan Nord* (Ville du Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2012).
  38. H.K. Halfacree, "Locality and Social Representation, 24.
  39. Carl Berger, "The True North, Strong and Free," in *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1966), 4.
  40. Berger, "The True North, Strong and Free," 5.
  41. Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 145.
  42. Sharon Wall, *The Nurture of Nature: Childhood Anti-Modernism, and Ontario Summer Camps 1920–1955* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 45.
  43. Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*, 45.
  44. I. Wallace, "The Canadian Shield: The Development of a Resource Frontier," in *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada. Third Edition*, eds. Larry McCann and Angus Gunn (Toronto: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1998), 230.
  45. Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).
  46. Pugh, "Ontario's Great Clay Belt Hoax," 22.
  47. Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 147.
  48. Douglas Cole, "Artists, Patrons, and Public: An Enquiry in the Success of the Group of Seven," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1978); Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974).
  49. Changes in how Canadians see the North are a topic in themselves. The canoe, a long time symbol of the North, including representation in beer advertisements, has at least been partially overtaken as a popular pleasure craft by the kayak. There is a generation of new Canadians to whom the older myths and symbols may be unknown or have little meaning. This topic cannot be investigated here for lack of space.
  50. O'Hagan and Cecil, "A Macro-Level Approach to Single Industry Towns in a Knowledge Economy," *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 2 (2007): 18–43.
  51. Wallace, "The Canadian Shield: The Development of a Resource Frontier"; P. Daigle, "Maximizing Community Development Requires Professional Skills," *Commerce Magazine* (1988).
  52. O'Hagan and Cecil, "A Macro-Level Approach to Single Industry Towns."
  53. Slack, Bourne, and Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities*, 28.
  54. C.M. Wallace, "Communities in the Northern Ontario Frontier," in *Mines and Single Industry Towns in Northern Ontario*, eds. Matt Bray and Ashley Thomson (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992), 5.

55. John L. McKnight and John. P. Krestmann, *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993).
56. Slack, Bourne, and Gertler, *Small, Rural, and Remote Communities*, 3.
57. "If the Brazilian-owned Companhia Vale do Rio Doce hadn't bought it, Inco would 'not exist, it would have been closed down, it would have been liquidated if there wasn't a buyer,' said Tony Clement in a telephone interview late Friday afternoon. 'That was the Valley of Death that Sudbury faced.'" Carol Mulligan, "Vale Inco Saved Sudbury from Being Valley of Death: Clement," *Sudbury Star*, Saturday, July 18, 2009.
58. Bodor et al., "40 Degrees Above," 53.
59. Government of Ontario, *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario 2011* (Toronto: Ministry of Infrastructure, 2011), 1. The notion of "transformation" or "transformative" policies is a popular one in the neo-liberal lexicon directing how old social and political programmes may be changed into new, efficient ones with less dependence on government funding and particularly less concern with social welfare. Examples abound but are not mentioned here to prevent the discussion from straying too far afield.
60. John Ralston Saul makes the point that this would not be an unheard of development, in John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008).

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