



# Members in Profile

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## Neil Argent

I'm an Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of New England in Armidale where I have been since 1996. Much of my research is focused on rural issues so this is a great place for me to be based. I grew up in the Barossa Ranges of South Australia and spent my early working life as a rouseabout, farm hand and shearer, mostly in my 'home' region. I have always had a deep attachment to rural people and landscapes and that period of my life confirmed my deep concern for the livelihoods of rural



people. So, I got into the University of Adelaide via the mature age entry scheme to study a Bachelor of Arts. To be honest, I didn't really know what I wanted to study beyond philosophy, politics, history and English – I must have had ambitions to be a writer one day! That was until I found the entries for the geography subjects in the university handbook. Here I found subjects that were not just concerned with the contemplation of the world (as important as that is) but that also provided a set of concepts, techniques and skills with which one could productively intervene in that world. Although I loved biogeography I was particularly inspired by my studies in urban, population and rural geography. Given my background, the political economy approaches to understanding rural change that we studied really opened my eyes to the set of forces driving social, economic and demographic change in rural communities.

The 1980s and 1990s were troubled decades for much of rural Australia, with many farmers and rural communities facing crisis conditions caused by excessive debt, poor commodity prices, diminishing government support and service closures, and I felt a passion to apply my geographical 'toolbox' to better understanding the causes of this plight. My PhD research investigated the impact of the deregulation of Australia's financial and banking system on Kangaroo Island farmers, and I was very fortunate to receive the John Lewis Medal for Excellence in Postgraduate Research in Geography for my thesis. Since then, and after making the shift to Armidale, my research (and teaching) interests have pretty much kept faith with my roots. I have held a number of Australian Research Council grants – many with valued colleagues – into different aspects of rural change: the spatial patterns and local socio-economic impacts of rural bank branch closure during the late 1990s; rural community viability; Australian farmers' sense of local attachment; amenity-led migration into Australian rural communities; and the spatial patterns and causes of youth migration from rural Australia.

In an increasingly urbanised society, both within Australia and globally, there is a tendency on the part of some to think of ‘the rural’ as marginal and doomed to ongoing decline. I think that this greatly oversimplifies the complexity of rural Australia. In perhaps my most well-known paper (Argent, 2002) I argued that rural Australia was best thought of as a mosaic of different types of regions, borne on contrasting trajectories (to a greater or lesser extent) of economic, social, demographic and land use change. Today, I would echo those sentiments but also add that as mobility (of people, capital, ideas, commodities) increases, ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ are progressively intertwined with each other. Recent important public debates concerning food security, the (in)humane treatment of livestock, management of the Murray-Darling Basin and the projected growth of the Australian population and its distribution all necessarily implicate rural people and places. For me, then, geography has opened up – both literally and metaphorically – new vistas on the world, and provided me with a powerful set of tools for helping making sense of that world.

Argent, N. 2002, From Pillar to Post? In Search of the Post-Productivist Countryside in Australia, *Australian Geographer*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 97-114.