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Rural Sociology and Sociological Theory

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Discussion Research ID	DPR-2026-1347
Year	2016
Field	Environmental Science
Author ORCID	0000-0002-4048-683X
Licence	CC-BY
Original source	Sociln studia / Social Studies
Permanent link	https://discussionpublishers.com/research/03e634d7-eeb6-4800-86a4-f0eea8cc720b
Publisher	Discussion Publishers discussionpublishers.com

Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue, the authors outlinethe relationship between rural sociology and generalsociological theory, discuss the pitfalls of such relationshipand call for a stronger theoretically-sophisticated ruralsociological research. They discuss the contribution of otherpapers in the issue to this goal.

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Cite as: Pavel Pospch, Lszl J. Kulcsr (2016). Rural Sociology and Sociological Theory. Discussion Publishers, DPR-2026-1347.

Editorial

Rural Sociology and Sociological Theory

Pavel Pospěch and László J. Kulcsár

"Location, location, location" goes the mantra of all real estate agents, and it is indeed hard to deny that the place where we live does matter. Location affects our way of life, the jobs we work, the amenities available to us, and the social networks we use every day. There is hardly any aspect of our lives, which would not be connected in one way or the other to the communities where we live. The only sociological inquiries that do not list some form of location amongst the studied variables are the ones that keep location constant across the board, rendering it moot for analytical purposes, but reinforcing its importance from the conceptual perspective.

Location matters in sociology, not only because it shapes our values, norms, and experiences, but also because geography often creates, amplifies, or hides social inequalities. The uneven spatial allocation of resources is not a new phenomenon, and over time this has manifested in various ways, such as the old German saying "the city air makes you free", or the tone apparent in Marx's writings about the "idiocy of rural life", which later sadly entrenched how communist countries approached rural places and populations.

In popular culture, rural and urban areas are often perceived as opposites; in fact, many of the differences are simplified and exaggerated to achieve the desired effect, whether it be the reinforcement of an person's identity or a media company's commercial utility. In academic practice though, rural and urban sociologists have a lot to talk about. They study subjects that are defined by their geographical location, yet the role of this location is hard to measure. Is rurality the defining feature of the lives of rural populations? Or is it merely a setting, a background, against which wider social processes are taking place? Is rurality a factor in the explanation of social phenomena, or is rurality itself a factor to be explained? Or, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz's (1973: 22) dictum, should rural sociologists *study villages*, or should they *study in villages*?

These dilemmas are intrinsic to both rural and urban sociology. Over the course of time, the twin disciplines have explored a number of approaches. On the one hand, an essence of the *first rural*, as Bell (2007) calls it, has been pursued by many authors, often taking their cue from a simplified reading of Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and Durkheim's *mechanical solidarity* (Hillyard 2007). Understanding rurality as an irreducible, objective concept, such approaches run the risk of confusing the premise with the conclusion: rurality as a point of departure leads to rurality as a point of arrival. Rural populations are specific because they

Sociální studia / *Social Studies* 2/2016. Pp. 5–8. ISSN 1214-813X.

Discussion Publishers edition DPR-2026-1347

live in rural settings. At the same time, rural places are being shaped by the people who live there, sometimes preserving and protecting it from any change, and sometimes exploiting it for the greater good of the community, should that be real or perceived.

On the other hand, following the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), scholars have studied both urban and rural spaces as *produced*. In this view, cities and rural areas do not act as determining actors; rather they take a back seat to the production forces of late capitalism. The meaning of places and spaces are, then, constructed as opposed to observed through common understanding. This leads to a different kind of trap: if rurality is only a particularly arranged node of forces coming from outside of rural areas, why do we need to have a specialized sociology of the rural?

Complicating these perspectives is the fact that while *urban* is more or less defined in all countries, *rural* is left everywhere as a residual. Should we be measuring or constructing rurality, what kind of rural do we have in mind? At what point may that complexity trigger the question whether it still makes sense to talk about the rural, in singular? And we have not even mentioned how rurality is defined by urbanites – seemingly an accepted common practice, although its opposite would probably be disturbing for many.

Navigating between the extremes of these theoretical dilemmas, from locational essentialism to locational relativism, is not an easy task, as our urban sociologist colleagues will gladly confirm. What does this mean for rural sociology and for this issue specifically? If the "rural" in *rural sociology* becomes problematic, one should build on the "sociology" part. To this issue, therefore, we have invited papers with the potential to contribute to a more general sociological theory, beyond the scope of rural sociology. The findings of these papers not only expand our knowledge about rural areas in Europe and elsewhere but they also bring rural sociology into a critical dialogue with theoretical concepts developed in other branches and disciplines of sociological thought.

In the first paper on peripheries in Estonia, *Bianka Plüschke-Altof* analyses the relationship between rurality and peripherality. Introducing her notion of discursive peripheralization, she explores the hierarchical relationships and inequalities reproduced in the media discourse on peripheral areas. A hegemonic discourse of peripheralization is analysed and possible counter-discourses and dissenting voices are identified in a discursive analysis of Estonian media. The author identifies the interpretive coalitions of elite, centrally located, and mostly male actors, who reproduce the image of rural peripheries as lagging behind, institutionally thin, remote, inaccessible, multiply dependent and deviant. The legitimising "stories of decline and incapacity" provide an explanation of the state of Estonian rural peripheries as well as a trajectory for further development, which is, in the duality of centres and peripheries, presented as the only possible alternative.

Poverty and social disadvantage are the topics of the contribution by *Josef Bernard*, *Anja Decker*, *Kateřina Vojtíšková* and *Renata Mikešová*. Building on the theory of local opportunities structure, the authors conduct a qualitative inquiry amongst disadvantaged rural inhabitants. For these people, limited spatial mobility and limited temporal flexibility, combined with unemployment, precarious labour conditions and accessibility of services, are the key factors making life difficult. Consequently, rural inhabitants devise a number of coping strategies built around mobility enhancement, reduction of travel needs, use of alternative

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resources, and so on. Many of these strategies, the authors conclude, are based on locally available resources and may not be readily visible to the eye of the outsider or, perhaps more importantly, of the policy-maker.

Like other European countries, Finland organizes an annual "Village of the year" competition to reward active, well-developing rural municipalities. In her study of this competition, *Kaisu Kumpulainen* shows the governing technique over rural areas, whereby the "good" villages are recognized according to sets of norms and competition criteria. The key characteristics on which Finnish villages are evaluated in the competition are strategic planning, development projects, responsibility for local welfare, cherishing cultural heritage, and village spirit. Together, these co-create an idyllic image, as well as an instrument of power. As the requirements for successful villages have expanded, the self-organised activity of the respective villages has been emphasized. At the heart of the competition thus lies a neoliberal concept of a private, active community, which through sufficient engagement can solve not only local problems but also more general problems in the area, caused by the decline in public services.

In her study of social engagement in rural areas, *Michaela Dopitová* compares two Czech villages with different levels of civic engagement and public activity and focuses on the relationship between social engagement and the integration of rural newcomers. Dopitová's paper engages with the lively discussion of rural community and social capital and it refers to the current processes of suburbanisation, counterurbanisation, and rurbanisation. Building on Oldenburg's concept of a third place, the author highlights the importance of third places for social engagement. The activity of local leaders, mostly village mayors, is seen as a second key factor for social engagement and successful integration of newcomers. The study suggests that a loss of "rural character" is the price villages pay for the successful integration of old and new rural residents.

Luis Camarero and *Jesús Oliva* are the authors of a sophisticated theoretical paper that engages in a dialogue with recent discussions in British rural geography in its attempt to find an appropriate theoretical anchoring for the understanding of contemporary rural change. Using empirical data from Spain to illustrate their points, the authors identify three key processes that foster change in rural areas: differentiation, globalisation, and increased mobility of social life. Together, these processes contribute to rural hybridization, a capacity of rural areas to combine the local and the global in themselves. Rather than merging with the urban or defining itself against the urban, the rural is moving back and forth, creating a hybrid of both environments.

In the final paper, Spanish rural areas are again in focus. *Angel Paniagua* presents a study of three kinds of festivals in rural Spain, referring to sacred symbols, historical and mythical realities, and agrarian traditions, respectively. Through these festivals, tradition is not only kept alive, but also reformulated and re-negotiated with reference to social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Rural festivals thus play a key role in the negotiation of transition from traditional rurality to the new, pluralistic rurality. Rather than re-affirming or subverting the social order, these events provide the symbolic means for re-articulation of unstable and challenged rural identities.

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