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RURAL / URBAN REDUX

Conceptual problems and material effects

Mirek Dymitrow



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

RURAL / URBAN REDUX

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ABSTRACT

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Concepts are the basic building blocks of all knowledge, while the strength of the theories that guide any societal project is dependent on the quality those concepts. Contrarily, the utilization of questionable concepts will result in questionable material effects. As two of the oldest geographical concepts still in widespread use, 'rural' and 'urban' stand in stark contrast to the immense changes encountered by society over the last century, let alone decades. Steady, fast-paced transformations in the environmental, economic and social dimensions have rendered the rural/urban binary a contentious one – a conceptual vestige of sorts, whose blurred and malleable characteristics, immense spatial coverage and aspectual all-inclusiveness have come to form an odd marriage between bygone world views and a globalized 21st-century reality of interconnectedness. The aim of this thesis is to critically evaluate our use of the concepts 'rural/urban' in order to help erase the contagion of indifference attached to them in a recalcitrant reality of admissibility. This compilation thesis consists of five theoretically and methodically diverse papers and a summative part inspired by a much wider range of ideas. By combining geographical perspectives with insights from critical theory, cognitive psychology and STS, this eclectic work addresses the phenomenon of rural/urban thinking using a new syntax and a new argumentative narrative with the ambition to change the way that thinking is apprehended and acted upon. With a focus on performativity, constitution and implications of concepts governed by various subject positions and psychosocial factors, this work lays the groundwork for an under-researched dimension of 'rural/urban' – that of the human condition – amidst an exceptionally rich conceptual literature on what 'rural/urban' "is" or "means". Three basic conclusions stem from this work. Firstly, anyone talking about 'rural/urban' is performing it, and we have no mandate to project 'rural/urban' performances onto "people out there" and then evaluate how 'rural/urban' is like by examining those people's actions. Secondly, 'rural/urban' are ridden with too many problems with regard to their basic conceptual constitution that their signification is unlikely to converge with what we are trying to explain. Thirdly, since 'rural/urban' as spatial concepts are often used with regard to human activities, there is a risk of conflating land with people, and thus forfeiting the core of our approach. Given these three important conceptual problems there is also the likelihood that 'rural/urban' may tacitly contribute to the retention of some pressing societal problems. This thesis makes the case for reconfiguring our relationship with familiar conceptions of societal organization. Its principal contribution is to help facilitate decisions on whether 'rural/urban' are truly analytically contributory to a specific line of action or whether they serve merely as a cultural ostinato acquired by external, scientifically and societally undesirable, mechanisms.

Keywords: rural, urban, concepts, knowledge production, geographers.

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Appended papers

Paper I	Dymitrow, M. and Stenseke, M. (2016): 'Rural-urban blurring and the subjectivity within'. <i>Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History</i> , 3(1), 1–13. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16993/rl.1 .
Paper II	Dymitrow, M. (2017): 'Degradation, restitution and the elusive culture of rural-urban thinking'. <i>Fennia – International Journal of Geography</i> , 195(1), 36–60. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.60462
Paper III	Dymitrow, M. (2014): 'The effigy of urbanity or a rural parody? A visual approach to small-town public space'. <i>Journal of Cultural Geography</i> , 31(1), 1–31. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2013.873298
Paper IV	Dymitrow, M., Biegańska, J. and Grzelak-Kostulska, E. (2017): 'Deprivation and the rural-urban trap'. <i>Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie</i> , early view. DOI:10.1111/tesg.12263
Paper V	Dymitrow, M. and Brauer, R. (forthcoming): 'Meaningful yet useless: Factors behind the retention of questionable concepts in human geography', in peer review, minor revisions.

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Paper I is co-authored by Prof. Marie Stenseke (MS) from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. My approximated share in creating Paper I accounts for c. 75%. The principal contribution of MS has been developing the part on landscape, as well as critically revising the paper for logical and theoretical consistency, although MS has been involved in the development of this paper throughout the whole process.

Papers II and III: as the sole author I was responsible for all parts of these studies.

Paper IV is co-written by Dr. Jadwiga Biegańska (JB) and Assoc. Prof. Elżbieta Grzelak-Kostulska (EGK), both human geographers working at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. All authors participated in the research design. The order of authors was based on the following distribution of input: principal contribution to conception and design (MD/JB/EGK); drafting the article and revising it critically for important intellectual content (MD/EGK/JB); final approval of the version to be submitted (MD); analysis and interpretation of data (EGK – material dimension; JB – socio-economic-dimension; MD – discursive dimension); acquisition and preparation of data (JB and EGK); methodological considerations (EGK/MD/JB); and technical preparation (JB/MD/EGK). Approximating exact shares for co-creating Paper IV is extremely difficult in that the paper involves a vast, time-consuming empirical part, whereupon setting up rigid shares would depend on how the different types of input are to be weighted (it should be noted that the underlying empirics have been used for several other, differently oriented papers, with a different order of authors).

Paper V is co-authored by Rene Brauer (RB), a geographer and STS scholar, currently finalizing his PhD (Brauer, 2018) in tourism and hospitality studies at the University of Surrey, UK, under the supervision of Prof. John Tribe. The paper is the result of transdisciplinary insights and continuous discussions, and both authors have participated throughout the research process. My approximated share in co-creating Paper V accounts for c. 65% because of the greater input in terms of conceptualization, subject matter, structure and narrative, including developing the defiltration maxim idea and tying it to the constitution and mechanics of 'rural/urban'. The psychological and knowledge production dimensions (extra-scientific factors) have been developed jointly. Moreover, the core idea of the paper has been explored and developed in several other papers, with different distribution of input.

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If worrying signs develop in the way society is working, we need to ... look beneath everyday understandings and practices for old conceptual infrastructures which may have gone wrong. (Jones, 2009: 310)

The history of human geography has been waymarked both by binary thinking and by exhortations to bridge between the philosophical and material polarities emerging from such thinking. Resultant landscapes of understanding have thereby exhibited a curiously double-edged character. Analysis and interpretation of human geographical phenomena have tended to fall easily into categories of seemingly distinctive opposition – urban/rural ... and the like – and the professional paraphernalia of human geography, such as journals, books, courses and research specialisms and reputations, have served to render these categories more concrete. Yet alongside these categorical processes and practices there has been a naggingly consistent desire by some geographers at least to argue against the domination of polarized categories. (Cloe and Johnston, 2005a: 5)

There are two ways in which culture can facilitate coordination. One is by shaping our cognition, perception, attention, and memory. [Second] is by taking the concepts, scripts, and meanings to be normative for members of the group. (Haslanger, 2017: 2)

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1. A quick start to the thesis

In human geography, and in social sciences as a whole, the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are increasingly recognized as cultural constructs rather than sets of geographically bounded spaces or facticities (Bosworth and Somerville, 2014; Brenner, 2013; Woods, 2011; Scott et al., 2007; Cloke, 2006; Hubbard, 2006; Halfacree, 2006; Champion and Hugo, 2004; Little, 1999;). As some of the oldest geographical concepts still around, their pervasiveness stands in stark contrast to the immense changes encountered by society over the last century, let alone decades. Steady, fast-paced transformations in the environmental, economic and social dimensions (cf. Szymańska and Biegańska, 2011; Borcz et al., 2009; Millward et al., 2003; Rabbinge and van Diepen, 2000) have rendered simple spatial classifications inadequate in terms of usefulness, especially those rooted in an old binary imaginary that defies the contemporary reality of interconnectedness (Pile, 1999; Halfacree, 1993; Hoggart, 1990).

Specific morphologies, specific population densities or specific ways of doing economy no longer breed particular types of social relations, at least not to the point of granting them such primordial gravitas. As Cloke and Johnston (2005a) note, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ is one conceptual pair that “*has survived the onslaught of material reality and philosophical re-positioning*” (p. 10). Instead, “*urban/rural differences have carried with them other more hidden messages*” that “[go] beyond the material look of the land and [imply] more deep-seated differences” (p. 11). Hence, although ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ today should perhaps best be understood as categories of thought (Mormont, 1990) narratives (Ulled et al., 2010) or conversational realities (Halfacree, 2009), they continue to underpin and influence large sectors

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of societal organization as acceptable guiding perspectives (cf. Tunström and Spas, 2016; Brenner, 2015; Szymańska, 2008), while “*rural and urban development debates are often conducted separately*” (Ward and Brown, 2009: 1237). The point is that due to increasing blurring and the lack of working definitions (Somerville et al., 2014: 294), there is an ever greater likelihood that current understandings of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as used in formal contexts (e.g., research, legislation, public administration, policy, land use, funding) may be ill-adapted to reflect a significantly changed society, and that unreflected uses of these concepts may get in the way of making informed analyses and sound development decisions.

This intricacy is entangled in a compound argument forming the rationale of this thesis. Concepts, once established, change more slowly than the society because of various psychological and socio-material factors (cf. West, 1985; Hodgkinson, 1997; Bruner et al., 1999; Anderson, 2007; Winthrop-Young, 2014). Moreover, concepts governed by powerful mental schemata become easily embroiled in common parlance and thus entwined in various institutional structures (Kegan and Lahey, 2009; O’Brien 2013). What happens is that fewer constitutive aspects of an outbound concept support its purported analytical and explanatory value, whereupon the concept reciprocates less with the needs of society to be adequately comprehended and responded to. Instead, the concepts begin assuming the characteristics of a stereotype (Rey, 1983), i.e. they become increasingly associated with certain conspicuous characteristics, which are still clearly visible but which are insufficient to explain phenomena unrelated to those characteristics (compare concepts such as “blacks”, “women” or “immigrants” with the various situations in which they are being used). The same goes for ‘rural/urban’:

No one disputes the right of the layman to use these terms to denote different patterns of land use, which are easily observable; what is disputable is the sociological relevance of these physical differences especially in highly complex industrial societies. (Pahl, 1966: 299)

Due to their longevity, concepts retained in spite of their poor utilitarian value gain authority in terms of lending, more or less explicit, justification to various projects, policies, strategies or even research lenses. In short, not only do old structures not reciprocate with a changing society but the concepts upon which those structures are based give rise to new structures (e.g., new rural development programs or new urban research departments).

Conventional administrative, imaginative and intellectual boundaries have been developed between those supposedly different kinds of space, and subsequent understandings of changing spatial differentiation have served further to entrench the binary. (Cloke and Johnston, 2005: 10)

The problem lies in the fact that we¹ maintain and entrench a conceptual paradox that grows stronger with every passing year. Perhaps more importantly, we do not seem to notice (or care to notice) this paradox despite a battery of resurfacing criticisms and available geographical knowledge on the subject. In one way or another, the awareness of the problematic nature of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts is not widely embraced². The logical implication of this is that we may also not be aware of the pernicious effects of ‘rural/urban’, including compromised communication, misdirected resources or the downgrading of social theory.

Perhaps, as a loose descriptive vehicle, there is merit in acknowledging a distinction between rural and urban. However, what starts as loose description too readily attains causal status. (Hoggart, 1990: 247)

This, in turn, points to the need to revive the critique of ‘rural/urban’ and the virtual yet apprehendable realities they shape through new compelling examples and arguments.

1.2. Point of departure

This thesis is about the rural/urban *binary*, with binary understood as a simple amalgamation of two elements within the wider human activity of categorization (Cloke and Johnston, 2005b). However, it is not about ‘rural/urban’ as geographical spaces (representations of the world), but as concepts purportedly thought to define geographical space (conceptions that we think represent the world). The term “spatiality”, understood as socially constructed space, fits well into the here adopted view of ‘rural/urban’. Taking into consideration that social phenomena are of uneven prevalence, relevance and quality, those that excel in prevalence and relevance but underperform

-
- 1 By using the impersonal pronoun “we”, I speak to individuals, not groups; in effect, to everybody using ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ unreflexively as analytical or explanatory concepts.
 - 2 As Koch (2005: 5) notes, the issue of spatial effects of the social construction of society remains under-conceptualized as questions about that relationship “*are hardly ever posed*”.

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with regard to quality are the most likely to benefit from a critical analysis, and 'rural/urban' seem to meet these criteria.³ However, unlike relativist yet open-ended (value-free) stances toward 'rural/urban', mine is a critical one, acknowledging that their social constructions no longer reciprocate with what they are thought or meant to represent. However, attentiveness toward this lack of spatio-conceptual reciprocity has been conspicuously subdued through an intriguing phenomenon of collective desensitization.

Given this broad critical beginning, whom exactly am I targeting? This question can be answered rather simply: anybody using the concepts. Since this thesis approaches the use of 'rural/urban' from a general, psychosocial perspective, there is no need to differentiate between how the processes of concept attainment, retainment and detainment work between different groups of people. That said, by its scope, focus and choice of references, this thesis puts emphasis on specialized, professional uses of 'rural/urban' (academics, planners, administrators), as this is the most likely source of contention in terms of probable implications. Even more specifically, many examples and trains of thought developed in this work deal with geographers. This is done for three reasons. Firstly, the core of this work is embedded in geographical literature and the perspectives unfolded here may resonate best with geographers and scholars familiar with the geographical way of writing. Secondly, 'rural/urban' are inherently spatial concepts, with space being arguably the most recognizable and thus characteristic feature of geographical thought (Thrift, 2009); the implication is thus: we should know better. Thirdly, human geography is a concept-heavy discipline defined less by its canonical works and more by its canonical concepts (Johnston and Sidaway, 2015), which puts particular pressure on the consistency of its core concepts.

When discussing the points of departure, a number of caveats need to be addressed. I am aware that both the rationale of this thesis and the ideas developed will not resonate with readers who choose to subscribe to any of the following four principal assumptions (followed by my quick stance on those):

- (1) 'Rural' and 'urban' are good concepts, and it is perfectly acceptable to continue relying on conventional definitions.
 - As Fleck ([1935] 1979) noted, while concepts can be constructed very effectively from historical factors and from the thought collective

³ That said I do not deny those limited instances where 'rural/urban' may still have explanatory values (usually when opposing extreme settings such as metropolises versus small agricultural villages).

(collective imagination), their “*usefulness ... is a circumstance which is really independent of any individual knower*” (p. 83). This means that “[t]he more deeply we enter into any branch of science the more strongly will we be tied to its thought style” (Fleck [1935] 1979: xxiv). It is hence both possible and tempting to operate within “*normal science*”⁴ (Kuhn, [1962], 1970) as long as the critical mass needed to instigate the breakdown of consensus is not reached.

- (2) ‘Rural’ and ‘urban’ do not form a binary, which means that they can work independently of each other.
- This may appear to be true because most rural and urban theorists/ studies do not cover or work across both concepts but concentrate on one.⁵ However, any summarizing attempt set out to capture the quintessence of these concepts (individually or in combination) treats them as historically and cognitively interconnected, and where such a connection continues to be epistemologically constitutive for thought and action in relation to rural and urban questions (whatever they may be) (Brenner, 2015; Cloke and Johnston, 2005b). What this means is that ‘rural/urban’ will always (implicitly or explicitly) revolve around a core opposition, because without opposition as a context they would lose their *raison d’être* (Chapter 2 deals with these issues).
- (3) A concept only requires a definition to be used as one pleases.
- This is neither how human cognition works nor how science is supposed to work, accepting that its main goal is to subdue bias and manipulation by way of private definitions (Chapter 3 deals with these issues). The concept of the “ivory tower” is instructive here. It refers to any entity of reason and rationality that colonizes a sphere of knowledge. As Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) put it, “[t]he ivory tower can be dangerous ... in its inherent privatization of knowledge and intellect”, especially when intellects collectively end up defending a sanitized master narrative.
- (4) All concepts work on a similar basis.

4 “Normal science”, a concept developed by T.S. Kuhn ([1962] 1970), is the regular work of scientists theorizing, observing, and experimenting within a settled paradigm or explanatory framework.

5 Working with only one concept at a time has the notable disadvantage that we may forget what we are working in opposition to, and, in turn, why we are using the concept altogether.

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- While all concepts have a common cognitive ground (after all, they are used by humans, who in turn use their brains, which in turn operate according to neurobiological principles), every concept has a different socio-cultural underlay, which needs to be explored through individuation in order to assess its place in any one specific situation. Summarily, while parts of this work may be generalizable to other (including geographical) concepts, especially binaries (cf. Paper V), the contribution of this work is putting generalizable theories in relation to ‘rural/urban’ specifically.

These important distinctions must be addressed up front in order to disambiguate the role of this work, and how it should be read (see section 1.6 for further clarification).

Since the topic about ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ could be made limitlessly broad, opening the discussion to all possible angles would neither be helpful for the consistency of this thesis nor desirable for creating new insights in view of what has already been done. Generally, the focus of conceptual rural and urban studies has fallen within three dimensions: the historical dimension (How did ‘rural/urban’ come into being?); the phenomenological dimension (How can we better understand ‘rural/urban?’); and the applicatory dimension (How can we adapt ‘rural/urban’ to better fit a changed reality?). However, these disparate foci on history, meaning and utility – rather than on how they fit together – have consolidated an intriguing attitude amongst geographers toward ‘rural/urban’s’ place in human geography through a collective preference for salvaging a sinking boat rather than discarding it before once again sending it off to sea. With this in mind, my point of departure is that the challenge to understand ‘rural/urban’ of today lies not in determining what ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are, but in what way something or someone is considered ‘rural’ or ‘urban’, by whom, and why. Hence, the focus is on the performativity, constitution and implications of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts governed by various subject positions and psychosocial factors.⁶ This is done by specifically building on scholarly literature critical of the use of these concepts, rather than on “rural studies” and “urban studies” in general.

One other important aspect needs to be addressed upfront. Since this thesis partly targets the phenomenon of (‘rural/urban’) knowledge production within academia, a note on my view of science and its role is necessary.

⁶ An approach that looks at individuals in the context of the combined influence of psychological factors and the surrounding social environment.

Although metaphysics is dealt with explicitly in Chapter 4, here I only wish to lay the foundation. While this dissertation is committed to constructionism, including a view of science as socially/culturally/linguistically constructed, at the same time it is imbedded in a conservative argument with regard to the role of science in/for society. This is seen in concepts such as progress of knowledge, validity and reliability, which surface throughout this thesis. To clarify, while these concepts may be associated with a modernist (positivist) presupposition of “an external reality waiting to be discovered or inventoried”, this is not my understanding. While there are many definitions of science (be it natural or social), a science where amassment of knowledge is thought to lead to a better understanding of the world builds on the concept of progress. Accepting a definition of progress as “*a forward or onward movement*” (Merriam-Webster, 2017) sees progress as primarily a *directional* concept, where direction is dictated by way of convention and consensus (it is not by chance that the arguably most prestigious academic geographical journal goes by the evocation to progress – *Progress in Human Geography*). This means that findings, ideas and concepts that are no longer accepted by a critical mass (i.e. a backward directional movement) fall out of favor, while new orientations need to be sought after (Latour, 1993; Johnston and Claval, 1984). And this is how my argument relates to the concepts ‘rural/urban’ and their role in normative contexts (Chapters 3 and 4 deal with this phenomenon)⁷.

7 It should be noted that amassment of knowledge needs to be controlled for or we would end up in a disjunctive welter of opinions arrived at by unaccounted ways. This would inevitably undermine the rationale of academia and its modus operandi. Two known concepts of such control are ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’. Again, by using them I do not presuppose a positivist explanation, given that quality assurance of facts, statements and ideas can also be done by way of soft falsification (Tribe and Liburd, 2016; 45), i.e. considerations of gains in intelligibility. Validity is simply a state or a quality that “*produces the desired result*” (i.e. is effective), while reliability is something “*suitable or fit to be relied on*” (i.e. is dependable) (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Now, what is considered effective or dependable is a different question, and this again is a matter of consensus and convention. The currently accepted proxy indicators of “scientific quality”, including peer review, accreditation, and expertise, are inevitably flawed but being the “best” (= most adhered to) options presently available, they form the bulk of the academic production of knowledge. This also means that if we remove those proxy indicators we will no longer have science but something completely different like journalism, politics or religion (cf. Taleb, 2012). This is also why some reputable STS scholars, like Harry Collins, have propagated for the return of social science to science: “*We must choose, or ‘elect’, to put the values that underpin scientific thinking back in the centre of our world; we must replace postmodernism with ‘elective modernism’. To support this, social scientists must work out what is right about science, not just what is wrong — we cannot live by scepticism alone. The prospect of a society that entirely rejects the values of science is too awful to contemplate*” (Collins, 2009: 30).

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This way of combining constructionism with a conservative argument is neither odd nor new. The combination applauds constructivist critiques but feels nervous about giving up universals altogether. It basically signifies a position somewhere in-between, known as normative constructionism, strategic essentialism, pragmatic utopianism, and pragmatic universalism. Instead of relying on rigid principles, the normative constructionist is basically a pragmatist or a functionalist, because they use practical effect as the measure of theory. Here, practices come to the fore, as one “*makes calculated, ‘strategic’ decisions about which universals or essentials might work in a given context and which might fail*” (Jones in: Whitehead, 2016: 130). What this means is that it is possible to subscribe to different ontologies about different aspects of the world, e.g., one can be essentialist with regard to some aspects and constructivist with regard to other (and everything in-between). Subject matter, hence, often dictates what ontological position one adopts toward it. In this respect, this thesis is committed to an open-ended normativity: normative by reluctantly accepting the bias of the scientific formulas as we have defined their ability to say something about the world, but open-ended with regard to an awareness that all knowledge is constructed, fluid and flawed, and that the insights here presented are only some of many possible interpretations.

1.3. Rural/urban redux

A thesis with a critical take on ‘rural/urban’ cannot end up confirming or disproving these concepts, as this would be epistemologically incongruent with the assumed point of departure. Although conventional scientific methodology decrees that theories can only be fashioned on the basis of repeated observation of what exists in the world, a geographic theory, as Hubbard (2006: 10) puts it, is “*an attempt to think space in a new manner*” (cf. also Hubbard et al., 2002). Mirroring Johnston (in: Hubbard, 2006: 10), theories, in this sense, are “*connected statements which seek to explain geographical phenomena rather than merely describe them*”. This aligns with Steve Jobs’s famous aphorism that “*creativity is just connecting things*”. In that vein, the crucial task of a geographical theory is to express a phenomenon by means of a new vocabulary and syntax with the ambition to change the way a particular phenomenon (like rural/urban thinking) is viewed, studied or practiced (cf. Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Tunström, 2016). The term “redux” is instructive here. This post-positive adjective meaning “brought back” (from Latin *reducere*) has been widely used in the literature

and popular culture to denote a new interpretation of an existing idea, be it by restoring, remixing, remastering or even retroverting it (cf. Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). To do so, I work broadly (athwart different aspects, situations and contexts) and eclectically (across different interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks), drawing on the many geographical – and before them sociological – studies, claiming the concepts' disutility in a scientific context. In other words, this thesis takes on where others have left off by exploring new avenues to apprehend the place and rationale of 'rural/urban' in human geography and beyond.

Although I treat 'rural' on a par with 'urban' (i.e., as conceptual antipodes), there is somewhat greater focus on rurality in the way of citation and exemplification. This is simply because "the rural question" is far more discussed in current literature and hence more easily illustrated (this is compensated by a greater focus on "urban" in the appended articles). For the sake of the conceptual argument, however, both concepts can be freely and concurrently exchanged (cf. Gilbert, 1982). As Bosworth, Halfacree and Somerville (2015: 295) outline, 'the rural' *"is not a distinct 'produced' (Lefebvre, 1991) space or type of space but is constituted by the same relations as those that make urban space. And capitalist social formations and capitalist (and anti-capitalist) projects are not specifically urban or rural but cut right across all urban/rural distinctions"*.

1.4. A focus on breadth

This thesis has not been conceived as a monolithic piece dedicated to a specific case study, consumed by a specific context, or imbued by a particular theory. In order to understand where this thesis comes from it is important to understand its place in relation to the wider debate on rural/urban conceptualization, but also to the PhD project as such.

To begin with, the approach of this thesis is breadth-centered, rather than depth-centered. Such an approach is also in line with my research interest in 'rural/urban' as concepts, which led me to dig into the problem in the first to place: to understand how a simple idea, a global confidence in 'rural/urban' as an acceptable analytical, explanatory or practical distinction, has come to grow to such enormous proportions (a so-called bandwagon⁸) in spite of decades of refutation through available scientific knowledge. Put

8 A bandwagon is a proposition that is argued to be valid because it is widely held to be valid.

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differently, depth is unlikely to exhaustively explain the problematic nature of 'rural/urban' as such, but breadth can. Let me explain. Breadth and depth signify two different types of research output, with depth implying more specialized work and breadth more boundary-spanning work. As Bateman (2015) put it, “[w]hether it’s crossing disciplines, breaking down silos, or thinking outside the box, everyone’s talking about boundary spanning as the key to solving the world’s toughest problems”.

Moreover, depth is more readily adopted in performance-oriented research, while boundary-spanning breadth is the preferred solution when one’s research is seen as “*an opportunity to learn*” (Bateman, 2015) While specialization may still apply to certain contained subjects, research on “*one of the oldest and most pervasive of geographical binaries*” (Woods, 2011: 3) used globally and universally by a wide range of actors is unlikely to benefit from a depth-centered approach. In fact, the subject is so diverse, ambiguous, contentious, open-ended, and subjective that these underlying aspects need to be shown consecutively and integratively, but this can only be achieved through breadth. In conclusion, the nature of the rural/urban problem is likely to benefit from providing a bigger picture to understand why its repudiation has not gained a foothold.

1.5. Situated knowledge?

Knowledge does not hatch in a vacuum and is always anchored somewhere. The term “situated knowledge”, coined by D. Haraway (1988), refers to knowledge specific to a particular situation. Knowledge is never pure, simple, ahistorical, value-free, and context-free; it never comes from a “no-view point” but comes from “a view point”. Knowledge is always situated somewhere and in some time, and what that knowledge means in one time/place differs from knowledge produced in another time/place. Most things we take for granted, so-called commonsensical knowledge, is situated. Knowledge changes with social change, including fleeting values, belief systems and cultural differences. Understanding the situatedness of knowledge can thus be useful to make sense of why some phenomenon occurs in some particular way (Phoenix et al., 2011). The concept of “situated knowledge” is also applicable to the creation of authoritarian knowledge, most notably articulated through science and its sometimes assumed position as a modest witness. While, “*in principle, the researcher ought to be able to produce non-ideological discourses*”, the question “*who is sufficiently liberated from the discursive construction of the world to make this distinction*” (Winther

Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 22; em.phasis in original) is probably impossible. To avoid unwanted “*representation while escaping representation*” (Haraway, 1988), Haraway’s major contribution is establishing “*a tradition of thought which emphasizes the importance of the subject in terms of both ethical and political accountability*” (Braidotti, 2006: 197).

Unsurprisingly, this thesis is also situated. My interest in rural/urban issues goes way back, and is initially coupled with the concept of “degraded town”⁹ in a Polish context. My lived experience from having resided in a degraded town has sparked my interest in issues of irreconcilability between the formal label and the material (and often socio-economic) container, and, what follows, the different paths of development a geographic area can assume depending on whether it is classified as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’. And although I eventually left Poland for Sweden (where I have lived for most of my life) I continued to cultivate my interest in the topic. During my BSc I attempted to find the “right” methods to define urbanity, only to arrive at the conclusion in my MSc that this is an impossible task, and that the rural/urban distinction is a fluid, refractory cultural practice, much detached from any satisfying logical or rational explanation. Acknowledging this elusiveness during my PhD, I instead embarked on a journey to better understand the nature of ‘rural/urban’, including its societal recalcitrance. Initially, I was drawing predominantly on Western geographical literature on ‘rural/urban’, given that reflexivity with regard to rural/urban conceptualization in, for example, Polish literature is still nascent (but see Kubicki, 2011; Bukraba-Rylska, 2011; Gorlach and Foryś, 2003; Śpiewak, 2012; Wójcik, 2013, 2017). Having sensed a saturation of viewpoints on rurality/urbanity within the geographical literature, as well as an onerous, recurring lack of consistency in how ‘rural/urban’ was handled, interchangeably (often within the same works) as either social constructions (often in very sophisticated ways) or as materialities (often sloppily and implicitly), toward the end of my PhD I found interest in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and social psychology, looking for more complex, human-centered explanations. While this thesis represents the current stage of that journey, it also reflects the described development, and, by that, the diversity and changeability of angles of attack explored in this thesis. During the final six months of my PhD, I began working as a research coordinator for a municipal development project (*Urban Rural Gothenburg*) dealing with questions of how to best

9 A degraded town is a visually “town-like” settlement or one that fulfills all or most national criteria of urbanity, which, however, for various historical, political, cultural or even developmental reasons, is not considered formally urban – but rural. This topic is explored in Paper II and partly Paper III in this thesis).

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integrate ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ under the banner of sustainability, a commitment which gave me the much needed, non-academic, perspective on rural/urban issues. I travel a lot and socialize/collaborate with people from across the world, which means that my experiences dealing with ‘rural/urban’ extend to a much wider range of socio-cultural contexts than this thesis draws on. This also means that while on an academic level I endorse constructivism, I am not unfamiliar with thinking within or freely moving across different epistemological traditions of ‘rural/urban’. Hence, my relationship with ‘rural/urban’ inevitably mirrors a life trajectory and the various influential social relationships – lay, academic and professional – established during this process, a detailed listing of which is cognitively impossible. Put differently, this thesis visualizes the undertaken problem through my own fragmented and convoluted experiences, representing my own equally fragmented and convoluted points of view.

That said, the concept of “situated knowledge” is not unproblematic. While it signals awareness of the whereabouts of one’s own knowledge claims (and, by implication, the partiality and positionality stemming therefrom), it is also misleading (cf. Rose, 1997¹⁰). Knowledge is never hermetic and thus cannot be tied to (or situated in) any one particular realm of knowledge but forms a mosaic of information acquired from manifold sources and cultural contexts (Hansen, 2011) (Paper V in this thesis deals specifically with that). Moreover, knowledge is never fully transferrable from the situation it purports to draw on (Kahneman and Klein, 2009) but succumbs to multiple alterations due to varying levels of understanding, selectivity, fragmentariness, assortment, and complementarity of various chunks of information. Also, knowledge is never static (Taleb, 2012) but changes in step with personal reflection. This means that the processed information, while obviously situated somewhere in the beginning, is very likely to become altered, crisscrossed and relativized; as such it is no longer situated where it supposedly originated. In the end, it is impossible to state where one’s knowledge really comes from, rendering the concept of “situated knowledge” an interesting although rather insubstantive source of guidance. Then why discuss it at all? – one might ask. As I see it, it is foremost a question of generalizability and limitations of the inferences made in this thesis.

10 Rose (1997) has criticized this stance: “Linda McDowell (1992: 409), for example, has written that ‘we must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and write this into our research practice’. But I found this an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. Indeed, I think I found it impossible, and this is the failure from which this essay springs” (Rose, 1997: 305–306).

Put differently, is the knowledge I draw upon idiosyncratic to the point of not being recognizable in or transferrable to other socio-cultural contexts?

Conceding that a rural/urban distinction is a problematic representation of reality, then *any* context building on such a distinction is likely to favor some and disadvantage other aspects/subjects of that reality. The difference is that the rural/urban binary, while virtually universal, is resorted to in practice differently depending on various factors such as an area's overall level of development, whether or not the rural/urban distinction is attained by the legal system, or simply through the character of historico-cultural practices present in that particular context. Hence, why conceptual problems will be particularly viable in countries where the rural/urban binary finds political (i.e., not merely statistical or cultural) reflection, instances of rural/urban-induced disadvantage can be found anywhere, regardless of whether the employed distinction is political, statistical, cultural, or any combination thereof (cf. Krzysztofik et al., 2016: 319–320). What this means in practice is that while the understanding of 'rural/urban' in, for example, Poland¹¹ can be significantly different from that in the Netherlands, Finland or Hungary (cf. Buciega et al., 2009), the very fact that a rural/urban distinction is made at all means that the principal problem can be approached philosophically, beyond the constraints of "situatedness". That is also the main reason why this thesis approaches 'rural/urban' from a conceptual, rather than a semantic, level of analysis, while the issue of situatedness of rural-urban thinking is dealt with in research question 2 (section 1.7).

1.6. Choice of approach

'Rural/urban' can be approached in many ways. Given the multiplicity of understandings, each aligns with specific paradigmatic assumptions, which in turn imply different metaphysical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, methodological, and methodical. In order to apprehend 'rural/urban' scientifically, it is important to delineate how this will be done. Drawing on the very different developments in rural geography, Woods (2011) provides nine possible ways of engaging geographically with 'the rural' (and, by implication, with 'the urban', cf. Hubbard, 2006):

¹¹ Disregarding the fact that there is no unanimous Polish understanding of 'rural/urban', which instead varies somewhat between different actors, age groups and contexts (cf. Mielcarek, 2008; Dziki, 2013).

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1. Approaching it	2. Imagining it	3. Exploiting it
4. Consuming it	5. Developing it	6. Living it
7. Performing it	8. Regulating it	9. Re-making it

Depending on what kind of engagement is chosen, rurality can be understood as either an idea or as an object of study. It may have a specific purpose, referring to ways in which the rural is brought into being or deal with practices of constructing knowledge about the rural. From this division it is also apparent that studying the rural in a specific way presupposes a specific level of certainty as to what the rural is, let alone whether it exists at all. While the first of Woods's ways of engagement has an epistemological underpinning, the second approach is more phenomenological. Approaches 3 through 5 define rural space as a predefined economic space, approach 6 is experiential, while approach 7 is about how the concept is produced and reproduced. Approaches 8 and 9 engage mostly with political perspectives, with the former focusing on governance of "rural space" and the latter on changes in "the countryside" (once again assuming that there is one). As such, Woods' listing represents a chain of abstraction (from meta-analytical to applicative) with regard to how rurality as a spatial concept can be studied.

Given this thesis' engagement with 'rural/urban' on a conceptual level, it is aligned with approach 7, that is, how they are performed. This approach underpins all the constitutive articles¹² and overarches the main conclusions. Studying how 'rural/urban' are performed involves taking into account the development of these concepts as ideas within academic, management and lay discourses, but also how they materialize through policy and practice (Gómez Pellón, 2012; Woods, 2011; Erjavec and Erjavec, 2007). Unlike Woods (2010a; 14), however, who interprets approach 7 (performing rurality) as the "*enactment of rurality through performance and the everyday practices of rural life*" – also visible in Halfacree's (2006: 51) model of rural space ("*everyday lives of the rural*"), my interpretation of performativity is different (outlined in more detail in section 3.4). I argue that with rurality as a concept, performing it must not be tied to the lives and practices of "rural

12 The performative perspective notwithstanding, the individual papers in this thesis deal additionally with complementary approaches. Paper I is also enmeshed in approach 1; Paper II incorporates elements of approach 2; Paper III explores approach 9; finally, article IV balances between approaches 6 and 7. Paper V is solely about performativity. The five papers together show how secondary approaches to 'rural/urban' feed particular ways of performing the concepts.

people” but to the lives and practices of anybody using the concept ‘rural’ (the same goes for the concept ‘urban’).

The angle of attack of this thesis requires a brief discussion. A doctoral thesis approach, as Dunleavy (2003) argues, should be problematizing in that “an ‘unproblematized’ thesis topic ... leaves open too many questions along the lines of: what is this thesis for?” (pp. 23-24). Understanding the term “problematizing” as the questioning of assumptions, framings, inclusions, emphases, and exclusions, for instance, has as its antithetical counterpart “descriptive”. Realizing that descriptive theses in human geography belong to the past, in the context of conceptual theses the distinction problematizing/descriptive is less immediately forthcoming. A thesis dedicated to what happens in “rural areas” or concerned with the coping strategies of “urban people” may very well be problematizing in its style of approach, but in view of the rural/urban problematic at the conceptual level it still comes across as descriptive, because it puts the spatiality above the problem: it fuels the use of both concepts and adds to the endless repertoire of how “rural” and “urban” areas/people are.

Lastly, a note with regard to the style of this work requires a few sentences. There are a number of passages and trains of thoughts (“scaffoldings”), which loom large throughout the thesis¹³. These personal reflections are intimately tied to the study’s conceptual character. Seeing concepts as constructs of the human mind, such style is justified insofar as it helps relate the constructed (established knowledge) to the process of constructing (knowledge in the making). This is also why Chapter 4 on metaphysics has been included in this thesis: to more clearly convey what view of knowledge and knowledge-making I subscribe to in order to better understand my line of approach (cf. also sections 1.9.3 and 3.4).

13 Some may regard scaffoldings as elements that should have been dismantled in the final version. Such a perspective is tightly interwoven with the reader’s view of science, including what is considered a scaffold and what is not. For instance, treating only previously published materials, established scientific methods and results (obtained by rigorously following those methods) as pieces eligible for inclusion, but seeing personal reflections about basic scientific concepts upon which the rationale of an unfolding analysis lies upon as scaffoldings, smacks of a depersonalized Science (with the capital S) consumed with prediction, prescription and control (cf. Baron, 2010). Such an approach becomes problematic in the context of social sciences and particularly within conceptual pieces, where an increased focus on modes of knowledge production (a view that irrational humans cannot explain the actions of other irrational humans) is less and less aligned with explanation but adopts a more personal stance (reflection) (cf. Boyer [D.], 2015).

1.7. Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim, objectives and research questions of this thesis stem from the specific, previously outlined, contingency surrounding the rural/urban binary: its performative nature on the one hand, and on the other hand its 100-year-old history of conceptual irreconcilability between available knowledge and actual practice.

The aim of this thesis is to help erase the contagion of indifference attached to 'rural/urban' as long as they continues to be admissible categories in geography and beyond. More specifically, my ambition is to critically evaluate how we use the concepts 'rural/urban' in order to take appropriate action. This means actively reflecting upon whether 'rural/urban' are truly analytically contributory to a specific line of usage and then determining whether to retain or abandon them.

Placing the rural/urban problem primarily at the conceptual level, I pursue the aim with the help of two objectives. The first objective is to present problems inherent of rural-urban thinking in a different light in order to lay bare the hidden paradoxes it rests upon. This will be done in the constitutive papers, each elaborating on different conceptual problems and material effects of the rural/urban binary in situations and settings where its perpetuation is likely to be problematic. A second, more theoretical, objective is to enrich geographers' diet of available viewpoints concerning the role and uses of the concepts 'rural' and 'urban' on a general level. This will be done by pegging the insights from the constitutive papers to concept theory and STS.

The objectives will be approached with the help of three principal research questions. While formed as questions for the sake of approachability, the questions are not meant to be answered but rather to provide a direction for discussion (cf. Kumpulainen, 2008). The reason for this stems from the nature of the subject matter ('rural/urban' seen as a vehicle of thought). The following questions permeate the thesis:

- *Question 1:* How does the rural/urban conceptual vehicle come about and how is it withheld in various situations?
- *Question 2:* To what extent do understandings of 'rural/urban' converge across the scope of their situatedness?
- *Question 3:* What are the implications of sustaining the rural/urban conceptual vehicle for societal organization in general, and human geography in particular?

The first question is concerned with the performativity of concepts, i.e. how ‘rural/urban’ are construed and used today, and what tensions they may spawn in select spatio-cultural settings. The second question relates to the constitution of the concepts ‘rural/urban’ by looking into whether certain tropes associated with rurality and urbanity may or may not be replicated across different spatio-cultural contexts, that is, it attempts to break the contextual barrier (cf. Asdal, 2012). The third question looks into the implications of the concepts ‘rural/urban’ by exploring whether/how the rebounds explored in the second question may be detrimental to society. Here, I also want to engage in a discussion about the efficacy of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts in geography.

In the broadest sense, the theoretical contribution of this empirically informed conceptual thesis to existing research consists mainly of an updated critique toward unreflective or misinformed¹⁴ usages of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as naturalized or insufficiently hotwired (sensitized) categories of thought.

1.8. Format

Choosing the appropriate format for writing a thesis is an important consideration. As indicated earlier, a thesis dedicated to the concepts as vast as ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ is unlikely to be explored to the fullest in one monolithic empirical study. If done that way, it would not be particularly helpful in arriving at conclusions that can be extrapolated further afield than the study’s geographical context. Instead, I chose the cumulative format (thesis-by-publication), in which the strict delimitation of each article allows for adopting different theoretical frameworks, different methods and different analytical lenses. Moreover, the quality of the dissertation is likely to improve through the constant flow of critique and feedback from reviewers and editors during the continuous peer-review processes. Lastly, given my broad research interest, a cumulative thesis format can facilitate drawing conclusions based on multiple case studies, and, as such, the principal contribution of this thesis lies in the articles.

Although, technically speaking, this thesis consists of five papers the insights assembled in the summative part are inspired by a much wider range of ideas. This is important to mention insofar as a conceptual-type contribution is always broader than the collected material it purportedly

¹⁴ Relative to the inferred logic (rather than my “informed” understanding).

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draws on.¹⁵ Consequently, the inferences underpinning this thesis are deduced from several additional concomitant projects; however, all – in one way or another – deal with the generic rural/urban problem.

To limit the amount of constitutive papers to a digestible whole, the five papers were selected to provide the most diverse yet thematically amalgamated chunk of empirical and conceptual contributions to advance current state of knowledge.¹⁶ Moreover, each paper deals with a theme that, as I see it, has not gained sufficient traction (see section 3.7). The articles are freestanding (in the sense that each can be read and understood independently of an overarching background) and should be seen as stories or essays depicting, unlocking and repainting different problems rooted in the same conceptual problem.

1.9. Disciplinary positioning

1.9.1. Rural and urban geography

While positioning a thesis about problems inherent in rural/urban conceptualization automatically brings to mind the academic subfields of urban geography and rural geography:

[T]he binary of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ has ... been incorporated into the organization of geography as an academic discipline, and ... the popular cultural associations of the city and the country have been influential in setting the parameters of ‘urban geography’ and ‘rural geography’ and in defining their objects of inquiry. (Woods, 2011: 4–5)

Positioning this thesis within the scope of urban geography and rural geography, however, is not unproblematic. A thesis questioning what lies at the heart of two separate subfields is difficult to position within either one or the other; at the same time, the sheer division is indicative of the problem

15 The PhD project (2012-2017) generated 18 articles, with 15 published or accepted for publication as of November 2017, and 10 published book chapters (single-, co- or multi-authored).

16 For instance, I omitted from inclusion a major empirical paper entitled “*Dealing with ‘the rural’: Counterfactualty and the young*” (Dymitrow, forthcoming), exploring perceptions of 216 youths living in two of Poland’s largest formally rural settlements (in fact fully urbanized) with regard to the concepts of ‘rural/urban’. The reason for exclusion was its phenomenological (rather than problematizing) approach toward the deliberated concepts, because it would depart excessively from the rest in terms of angle of attack.

posed in this thesis. As historical accounts show (Woods, 2005; Hubbard, 2006; Pacione, 2009), urban and rural geography have come to mirror each other over the years, largely converging in what could be described as relationality, i.e. acknowledging the socially constructed mode of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ yet without forgetting about their material underlays that imbue human lives with a sense of realness. The most recent developments in both subfields suggest that no meaningful separation between the two realms exists (see Chapter 2).

With regard to the direction of this study, it would be spurious to position my research today within the field of rural geography or urban geography. Not only is it the middle ground between the two I explore, but acknowledging a priori the existence of a rural or urban would undermine the quest that lies at the heart of this thesis. Regardless of that, the conceptual content of this thesis fits within the conceptual parts of both what today might still be considered rural and urban geography.

That said, the broad coverage of the rural/urban binary throughout society makes this thesis extend naturally throughout a number of geographical subdisciplines, including cultural geography, landscape geography, historical geography, political geography, and geography of perception. Due to its angle of attack, however, it falls foremost within the range of critical geography, outlined next.

1.9.2. Critical geography

Critical geography is a variant of the rich tradition of critical enquiry in social science and the humanities that embrace efforts not only to interpret the world but to change it (Blomley, 2009: 123; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010). Although being diverse with regard to epistemology, ontology and methodology (Hubbard et al., 2002), critical geography has a number of common denominators, two of which align with the approach of this thesis (after Blomley, 2006): (1) its emphasis on discourse and meaning to uncover ways in which representations of space (here: “rural” and “urban”) serve to sustain power or can be used to challenge power;¹⁷ and (2) its use of space as a critical tool to identify ways in which spatial arrangements (here: “rural” and “urban”) can produce inequality, oppression and opposition under a veil of power. Critical theorists often obtain knowledge by way of reinterpretation of the historical record, often challenging the orthodox views held by

¹⁷ I use the term “power” generally in a neutral sense (power must exist and is not an inherently negative phenomenon), but this term may be contested whenever issues of democracy are threatened or challenged (cf. Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

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professional scholars by introducing new evidence and lines of reasoning (cf. Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

However, while these two perspectives form the backdrop of this thesis, issues of representation and power are not central points of embarkation for this thesis, as both have been sumptuously explored in previous studies. Instead, by choosing critical geography as a scientific pivot point I emphasize “*the significance of networks, connections, flows and mobilities in constituting space and place, and the social, economic, cultural and political forms and processes associated with them*” (cf. Woods, 2011: 40–41). By so doing I opt for the use of frameworks such as actor-network theory and other relational approaches to rurality and urbanity, which reject concepts of space and place as fixed entities. Given this approach, I engage in trans-disciplinary excursions, demonstrated through the use of epistemological eclecticism, methodological openness and methodical breadth (more on this in Chapter 4).

1.9.3. STS

The overarching focus on performativity (how ‘rural/urban’ are performed) makes this thesis partially touch upon the sphere of interest of STS (Science and Technology Studies or Science, Technology and Society). STS is an offspring of science studies, looking into how social, political and cultural values affect scientific research by shifting the definition of “how science works” from philosophy to sociology (Latour, 2005). Departing from a sociological understanding of knowledge production (which I adopt in this thesis), STS sees science as an essentially human endeavor (cf. Latour, 1987) shaped by both scientific and extra-scientific factors.¹⁸ Scientific factors are those determined by disciplinary norms such as definitions of concepts, methodological guidelines, publication requirements or academic rules of conduct (Law and Urry, 2004), while extra-scientific factors (or socio-materialities) are socio-material and cognitive drivers that (in the view of STS) shape science, but which typically are not considered part of its canon and should not influence or interfere with science according to disciplinary norms (cf. Orlikowski, 2007¹⁹).

¹⁸ Not to be confused with non-scientific factors such as spiritual beliefs, questions of morality or popular trends (Bloor, 1991; Shermer, 2001; Collins, 2014).

¹⁹ “Socio-materiality” is a concept originating from the organizational theorist Wanda Orlikowski (2007), herself adopting the focus on relations from Latour, Callon and Law’s actor-network theory. Due to this orientation, the concept places itself within the tradition of STS, allowing for a relational understanding of the world.

Having introduced ‘rural/urban’ as a vehicle of human thought, its construction and maintenance is interwoven with the production of knowledge (conceptual performativity) in academia, and automatically involves inquiries into how and why these concepts are maintained by academics (not only by “society out there”, beyond academia). A focus on extra-scientific factors is important, because when creating, evaluating and devaluating concepts in academia it is easy to assume that this is done by following scientific procedures with little interference from the private lives of visceral humans (Fleck, [1935] 1979; Chalmers [1976] 2013; Law, 2004). Such an approach aligns less with the scope of geography (there is no clear-cut spatial dimension in it) and more with the scope of STS (although it does shape the outcome of geography).

1.10. Delimitation

Delimitation means “*a systematic bias intentionally introduced into the study design ... by the researcher*” (Price and Murnan, 2004: 66). There are many ways in which delimitations can be drawn, for example with age groups, sex, race, ethnicity, and geography. Since this thesis deals with conceptions of space, a note on geographical delimitation is of particular weight.

Three of the constitutive (empirical) papers – II, III and IV – are located in Poland. The main reason for placing the studies in Poland is simply because there the culture of thinking in rural/urban categories is, for historical reasons, particularly salient.²⁰ From a historical-realist perspective (described in section 4.3.2), the more something is talked about, the more “real” it becomes. In line with STS (see 1.9.3), this approach assumes that conceptual inquiries are easier to study when they are discussed (cf. Venturini, 2010). Consequently, choosing a setting viable with a specific way of talking is likely to bring forth discussions, problems and contradictions, which otherwise would be more difficult to study.²¹ Therefore, the challenge undertaken in the papers was to look into ways in which particular discourses and social

20 It should thus be noted that the choice of Poland is in no way indicative of the country being exempt from the blurring of whatever might be described as rural and urban characteristics.

21 Compare, for instance, with the phenomenon of gender expression in, for example, Islamic countries versus Hollywood, where male/female differences are culturally more pronounced (although in opposite directions) with say, in Scandinavia, where they exist but are more uniformized. In Poland, rural-urban differences are discursively more pronounced and hence easier to study. But it is still the same principal phenomenon everywhere.

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mechanisms saturate rural/urban conceptualizations and what material effects they may incur.

For this reason, a general introduction to Poland in the context of rural-urban thinking is not necessary at this point, as this would unfairly suggest some form of territorial homogeneity. Since “[v]alues can differ even within a territorially bounded (including smaller) nation” (Nathan, 2015), in view of the very different subject matter undertaken in the papers (historical construction of “rural/urban” in the context of degradation/restitution; material construction of “rural/urban” in the context of market square revitalization; social construction of “rural/urban” in the context of deprivation in post-agricultural and post-military estates), the respective findings are not representative of Poland as a whole. That said, ample context is provided in each of the papers.

In conclusion, while Poland looms large throughout this thesis as a touchstone and point of embarkation, the ideas presented here are not constrained to its scope, but are highly suggestive of rural/urban performances employed elsewhere, although perhaps less noticeable in terms of scale and intensity.

1.11. Denotation

A note on the denotation (graphical representation of words and graphemes) of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ in this thesis is in place. Denotation is an important aspect of semantics, the linguistic and philosophical study of meaning in language, formal logics and semiotics (Nöth, 1995). Expectedly, conveying graphical representation in an understandable manner is crucial for the proper functioning of author-reader communication in verbally unguided, that is, solely text-assisted, mediums.

To begin with, the compound [rural : urban] is not a fixed lexeme but a free association of two words related by means of lexical opposition, i.e. lying in an inherently incompatible binary relationship. Opposition, in turn, implies the involvement of antonyms, but these can manifest in various ways (Aarts et al., 2014). Gradable antonyms are two words of opposite meanings, where the two meanings lie on a continuous spectrum ([hot : cold]; [skinny : fat]; [boring : interesting]). In complementary antonyms, the two meanings do not lie on a continuous spectrum ([dead : alive]; [identical : different]; [inhale : exhale]). Lastly, relational antonyms are two words of opposite meanings, where opposite makes sense only in the context of the relationship between the two meanings ([doctor : patient]; [predator

: prey]; [teacher : pupil]). While scholarly literature uses the compound [rural : urban] interchangeably in all three ways, the common denominator is their antonymic relationship. This, then, is less about the sheer mode of semantic opposition of these concepts (e.g., as a continuum, a dichotomy or as relationalities – all described in detail in section 2.4), but rather how the concepts are treated analytically in the text.

This also means that the compound [rural : urban] will be represented somewhat differently throughout the thesis depending on the analytical context in which the opposition appears:

- *Slashed variant* ('rural/urban') generally denotes a context of disjunction. However, the oblique slanting line is also commonly used for connecting alternatives, both exclusive items (like yes/no) and to note variants (like can't/cannot), but also for connecting non-contrasting items (like the Foucault/Deleuze generation), where it assumes similar meaning as the hyphen (Curzan, 2013)²². The slashed variant is the preferred denotation used in this work.
- *Hyphenated variant* ('rural-urban') usually denotes a context of conjunction. In this thesis it appears more sparingly, mainly in citations, but also to stress the context of connection.
- *Juxtaposed variant* ('rural' [and/or] 'urban') denotes a context of nearness, wherein the coordinators [and] and [or] are used to punctuate the two words to avoid direct juxtaposition ('rural urban').²³ The juxtaposed variant is intended for purposes of lexical individuation, without any recourse to meaning or value.

Another important aspect of graphical representation of key concepts is punctuation or, more specifically, the use of quotation marks. Single quotation marks (') individuate [rural : urban] when used as words or terms ('rural', 'urban'), that is, without implied meaning or value. Double quotation marks, in turn, are used to individuate [rural : urban] when used as meaning- or value-bearing markers, often with commonplace stereotyp-

22 The slash has been also frequently used to denote conglutinations revolving around a binary, for example by Neil Brenner (state/space, implosions/explosions) or even in Foucault's famous encryption of power/knowledge. Because this thesis inherently treats the compound [rural : urban] as a binary (regardless of the mode of antonymization, be it gradable, complementary or relational, cf. section 1.2).

23 While direct opposition may work well in speech, it can look awkward in writing but is still used.

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ical implications, to which the double quotation marks serve as a means of distancing (“rural”, “urban”).²⁴

Lastly, the compound [rural : urban] is often used as modifier to various other concepts, such as ‘binary’, ‘distinction’, ‘thinking’, ‘conceptualization’ etc. These expressions, expectedly, do not mean the same thing. For instance, the expression “rural/urban binary” means ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as a pair of related concepts that are opposite in meaning; “rural/urban distinction” means the act of making a semantic contrast between the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’; “rural-urban thinking” means structuring a spatial philosophy based primarily on the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’; and “rural/urban conceptualization” means the process of construing an understanding of the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, etc. As such, the various compounded expressions found throughout this thesis are not distinct concepts but represent nuances and variations, which effectively mean different things.

1.12. Disposition

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 are theoretical. The theoretical framework used in Chapter 2 consists of background theories used to provide ample context for the rationale of this thesis. Its purpose is to outline the problematic of ‘rural/urban’ both as the result of societal changes and in view of philosophical repositioning. Within the context of the latter, a number of takes on ‘rural/urban’ are presented, along with an evaluation of each of them. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 serves as the analytical framework for the five papers, and is used primarily in the discussion chapter to tie the papers together. The theoretical material is conceptually oriented, steering the ‘rural/urban’ problematic away from the spatial domain into the conceptual realm. Chapter 4 elaborates on the metaphysical assumptions underlying this thesis, covering the whole spectrum from my choice of scientific paradigm to methods. In Chapter 5 the five papers are presented. This is followed by Chapter 6, which forms the analytical discussion of the thesis, where insights from the five papers are put into relation to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 3 and addressed through the three research questions. Chapter 7 presents the main conclusions.

²⁴ Note that double quotation marks are also used, conventionally, to set off direct speech, a quotation or a phrase; however, quoted text is written in italics.

CHAPTER 2

Rural/urban

2.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the rural/urban problem from three perspectives: societal changes versus conceptual immutability, constancy of critique, and philosophical repositioning. The first part aims to outline the problem from a spatial perspective, the second from a reactionary perspective, and the third from a theoretical perspective. All three must be factored in to address the complexity of the rural/urban problem, and to arrive at its appreciation. The chapter ends by sketching out a research gap, in other words a need to pay greater attention to ‘rural/urban’ as concepts rather than as geographical spaces.

2.2. Societal changes vs. conceptual immutability

As implied in Chapter 1, ‘rural/urban’ are powerful concepts that have been used to study and understand places for a long time. The rural/urban binary evokes powerful feelings and associations and “*continues to have a material effect in shaping the social, economic and political geographies of large parts of the world*” (Woods 2011: 49; see also Meeus and Gulinck, 2008; Brenner, 2011; Cloke and Johnston, 2015a). It also remains “*one of the oldest and most pervasive of geographical binaries*” found throughout society and is deeply embedded in culture, science and planning (Woods, 2011: 3), sustained in various ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ development policies. The entrenchment of the rural/urban binary in most census reports greatly affects the validity of many vital statistics, and the fact that nations define rural and urban differently hints at the underlying problem with the binary (Dahly and Adair, 2007,

1408). Although institutional lock-ins and the relative rigidity of societal structures may be partly to blame, the unwillingness to refrain from the rural/urban model is dependent on the binary remaining firmly entrenched in ideas about space, place and society that linger in people's everyday imaginations of the world (Cloeke, 2006). This means that attempts to put a rural or urban label on some particular space or any generalized course of social action are in fact largely dependent on a discursive classification of 'urban' and 'rural' fixed at some unspecified point in history (Woods, 2011: 43–44; see also Krzysztofik, 2014).

Assuming that the historical construction of 'rural' and 'urban' in their very inception may have borne meaning along a discursive worse-to-better scale (mostly in terms of civilizatory progress), the literal meaning of rural as open space (Ayto, 1990) was soon made sophisticated in terms of the moral and cultural associations attached to it. In classical Greece, the city was closely tied to the principle of (Athenian) democracy, where citizens were allowed to participate in rational debates about civilizatory development. Rural was, by exclusion, everything outside of the city (Bridge, 2009: 106). By the time of classical Rome, the countryside became a place (as opposed to space), a vital source of food and fiber, a political resource and a status symbol (Woods, 2011). Rural came to be portrayed as pristine, innocent and virtuous (Williams, 1975). In medieval times, cities became associated with the guild system, which created an interconnected network that starkly differed from the feudal rural surroundings. This was because the city was usually the seat of the local lord, ruler or administrative body, while the market square was the only point of physical interaction between the two spheres. Hence, the medieval city became "*an outpost in a sea of rurality*" (Gold, 2009: 150) and came to materialize a hierarchical social system.²⁵

With the onset of industrialization, the rural/urban discourse was starkly reinforced by the discourse of modernity (Berman, 1983). However, the growing capitalist spirit inherent in urban areas led to a reinvented sentiment toward rural settings as opposed to the emergent anti-urban myths that depicted cities as "*loathsome centers of fornication and covetousness*" (Ruskin, 1880: 319). In view of the increasing urban population, the Chicago School (departing from Simmel's assumptions) further naturalized rural/urban relations by treating city life as pathological or deviant. The ecological models of the Chicago School, however, were criticized because they elevated land-use patterns to the status of explanatory categories, while failing to elaborate on their origins. Despite these criticisms, their theoretical

²⁵ Parts of this text are extracted from Paper I.

assumptions laid the groundwork for a brand of urban planning that created modern cities. The modern spirit inherent in these assumptions embraced a broader approach, including a moral dimension, that is, “right”, “proper” and “reasonable” ways of implementing societal master plans, almost exclusively inherent in the “Western World” (Gold, 2009).

The devastation brought on by the two world wars saw yet another re-emergence of the city as the nexus of civilizatory progress, contributing to the marginalization of rural areas. This all-encompassing approach incorporated anything from architecture, scientific principles and functionality to city layouts and interior design. The hubristic belief of being able to manage all aspects of human life was only eclipsed by the catastrophic failure of many of these projects (cf. Albert Speer’s *Welthauptstadt Germania* or Nicolae Ceaușescu’s *Project Bucharest*). As such, their contemporary remnants (e.g., the much criticized *Skopje 2014* project in the capital of Macedonia²⁶) are regarded as anachronistic examples of an urbanity that should have been avoided. This anti-urban sentiment – as opposed to the rural idyll and the more “natural” way of living – was embraced by the 1970s counterculture movements grounded in mistrust of authority for mismanaging social life (Hirsch, 1993). The focus on residential construction was simply not apt to address the deep-lying social issues, inviting scholars to subscribe to analyses based on a Foucauldian notion of power.

With the onset of postmodernism in the 1980s, the focus on topics inherent in social constructivism (class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or disability) consolidated what has become known as the cultural turn. By the 1990s, aware of the fact that “*more or less everything and everywhere had by now become urban*” (Lees, 2009: 786), urban geographers identified themselves less as such, which eventually led to an “*urban impasse*” (Thrift, 1993) and the loss of a hitherto central object (and subject) of study. At the same time, agriculture, the defining characteristic of the rural, had to yield to economic changes. Mechanization, which had significantly cut the involved labor, created changes in land use and in ways people provided for their livelihoods (Rabbinge and van Diepen, 2000). Nevertheless, these structurally reinforced mechanisms left little room for maneuverability to

26 *Skopje 2014* is an ongoing project financed by the former (until 2017) right-wing, nationalist Government of the Republic of Macedonia, with the purpose of giving the capital Skopje a more classical “super-urban” appeal. Involving massive constructions of museums, government buildings and monuments depicting historical figures from the (disputed with Greece) region of Macedonia, the project has been criticized for constructing nationalistic historicist kitsch (a “mini-Las Vegas”) and for its immense cost (up to 500 million €) in the face of many pressing socio-economic problems.

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address issues of, for example, social exclusion and poverty in “rural areas” (cf. Woodward, 1996; Corcoran, 2003). Today, cities are less perceived as the main drivers of development, as rurality has come to be envisioned through new conceptual developments in its own right (cf. Corbett, 2014; Rytönen, 2014; Watson, 2014; Munkejord, 2009). Moreover, the ease of interchangeability between the concepts of ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ is perplexing. For instance, the expansion of the urban field into the countryside can be seen as both a process of “*ruralizing the city*” or as “*urbanization of the rural*” (Urbain, 2002, as cited in Woods, 2011: 46). In effect, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are becoming increasingly blurred in a wide spectrum of objective and subjective dimensions (Champion and Hugo, 2004; Cloke, 2006; Drescher and Iaquina, 2008; Szymańska, 2008, 2013; Pacione, 2009; Bański, 2010; Yeo and Neo, 2010; Easterlin et al., 2011; Fierla, 2011; United Nations, 2011; Woods, 2011; Śpiewak, 2012; Halamska, 2013; Torre and Wallet, 2014). This leaves the issue of rural/urban conceptualization broad, ambiguous and contentious, with no accurate way of viewing it. This lack of mainstreaming found reflection in academic attitudes, whose longevity, persistence and similarity has accompanied ‘rural/urban’ for a long time. These are outlined in the next section.

2.3. Constancy of critique

Due to the immense societal changes, the rural/urban distinction has long been criticized by researchers and professionals for its lack of analytical and explanatory power in a relational, interconnected world that defies simple categorizations. Already one century ago, Galpin (1918) questioned its validity, urging its immediate dissolution and replacement by a new orientation. Ever since, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ have been characterized as “*vague and contradictory and [their] use should be discontinued for scientific work*” (Galpin et al., 1918; paraphrased by Gilbert [J], 1982: 611–612), while the “*scientific justification for employing the title rural*” has been described as “*entertaining*” (Gillette, 1917: 184). Questions pertaining to the continued legitimacy of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ have been raised with regard to where to draw the line between them, deeming such practice “*very uncertain, and even whether it is really worth while [sic] drawing it at all*” (Bailey 1924: 162, 164). The rural/urban distinction has been pegged as “*not one of social networks or of institutional profiles but of individual outlook*” (Stewart Jr., 1958: 158) and whose use “*reveals a gross lack of agreement concerning their referents*” (Dewey, 1960: 60). Being such a “*fuzzy, descriptive designation*”,

the matter that 'rural' and 'urban' purports to depict "*becomes relatively unimportant*" (Bealer et al., 1965: 257), whereupon the terms themselves become "*more remarkable for their ability to confuse than for their power to illuminate*" (Pahl, 1966: 299).

It is not merely a matter of confusion though. The rural/urban binary has also been characterized as a "*rhetorical device*", with us being "*the victims of our own terminological duplicity*" (Copp, 1972: 159). For instance, the "*theoretical crisis of rurality*" has been found to lie in the "*basic insufficiency of the sociological concepts with which rural phenomena have been apprehended*" (Galjart, 1973: 254–255), leading to "*a form of theoretical-empirical myopia influencing what is known and can be known about ... the concept 'rural'*" (Falk and Pinhey, 1978: 547). Sher (1977: 1) went even further, claiming that "[t]he simple fact is that rural people, rural communities, and rural conditions are so diverse that we can find evidence to support nearly any characterization".

By the 1980s, the time felt ripe for some conclusions. Newby (1986: 209) conceded that "[t]here is now, surely, a general awareness that what constitutes 'rural' is wholly a matter of convenience and that arid abstract definitional exercises are of little utility". In the same vein, Hoggart (1990: 245–246) observed that "*the designation 'rural', no matter how defined, does not provide an appropriate abstraction ... [and if] we cannot agree what 'rural' is, this does not give us carte blanche to rely on 'convenient' definitions of it*". Also, the concept 'urban' has been met with similar critique, with Thrift (1993: 229) identifying "*something of an impasse*" in urban studies, replete with "*recycled critiques, endlessly circulating the same messages*".

Well into the 2000s, little had changed. As Cloke (2006: 20) observed, "[d]espite strong warnings to the contrary ... these loose concepts continue to underpin aspects of rural studies ... [with] ... empirical work conducted on this basis [often being] flawed" (Cloke, 2006: 20). According to Cloke and Johnston (2005a), "*the rural/urban divide has been kept alive by a binary model of thinking, peddling ideas of separation, difference and even opposition*", while in practice "*the divide has become blurred in all kinds of ways*" (p. 11). This blurring has made any rural/urban distinction increasingly "*irrelevant*", to the extent it is "*no longer useful for making sense of societies characterised by high levels of geographic and social mobility*" (Hubbard, 2006: 2). The severity of this continuation led to geographers extending their concerns to notions of ideology, normativity and even myth-making. As Halfacree (2009b: 450) put it, "*continued belief in any town versus countryside divide may even be seen as ideological, both denying and confusing human understanding of the spatiality of contemporary capitalism*" (cf. also Brenner and Theodore, 2002), while Stenbacka (2011: 243) ponders whether "*the divide*

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[is] used to underpin the struggle to constitute the superior and uphold a prevailing norm". Lastly, Halamska (2014: 1) concedes that when "entering the territory of chaos with appearances of certain stability, referring to myths will not help solve problems".

As the above outline suggests, 'rural/urban' can be conceptualized very differently, with each conceptualization being equally problematic, for example:

Functional and political-economy conceptualizations of rurality have struggled to resolve this paradox^[27], leading to the suggestion that the 'rural' should be abandoned as an analytical term ... whilst social constructionist approaches have focused on the discursive realm to the neglect of actually existing social and economic relations. (Woods, 2011: 43)

Effectively, the variety of functions and meanings attached to the rural/urban binary has made it "an ambiguous and complex concept" and "a messy and slippery idea that eludes easy definition and demarcation" (Woods 2011: 1). Consequently, trying conclusively to define it materially "runs the risk of perpetuating a 'chaotic conception' ... of space that is most unlikely to ground a robust ... structured coherence" (Somerville et al., 2014: 282). In conclusion, 'rural' and 'urban' have come to a point in their conceptual development at which they can signify almost anything (cf. Sher, 1977; Hoggart, 1990; Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2011), and this span widens with an ever greater speed without raising considerable intellectual doubts.

With the same critique still standing, 'rural/urban', in hindsight, come across as enigmatic (to use a weaker characterization). On the one hand, we continue to operate within established rural/urban frameworks as if no progress has been achieved. On the other hand, we continue to ask: "What's rural about rural aging?" (in the *Journal of Rural Studies*), "What is urban about critical urban theory?" (in *Urban Geography*), and whether the idea of 'rural/urban' is still relevant today (cf. Roy, 2016; Woods, 2011; Rowles, 1988). Perhaps more interestingly, we also seem to come to the same insights and conclusions: how contested it is and how it lacks coherence altogether (cf. Somerville et al., 2014).

This dual attitude – condoning a rural/urban distinction on the one hand yet criticizing it on the other hand – has necessitated ways of philosophical

27 Woods (2011) refers to the fact that "the networks and flows of people and goods, capital and power – have always transgressed the discursive divide of urban and rural" (p. 43).

repositioning in order to accommodate this fatuous disparity. In the next section, some of the most popular conceptualizations of rural/urban will be presented, accompanied by a critique of those conceptualizations.

2.4. Philosophical repositioning

From the preceding overview we can surmise that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are vague concepts fueled by discourses from various epochs, standpoints and interests. The city and the countryside are ambiguous subsystems of meaning because of their dual function in the socio-economic macrosystem: as complementary and contradictory at the same time (Stanny et al., 2017). While this ambiguity poses an insoluble methodological dilemma, researchers still continue to look for differences between them. The aim of the following review is to summarize how ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are most often handled in practice at a conceptual level, but also to outline some general problems associated with such conceptualizations.

As noted in the introduction (section 1.6), ‘rural/urban’ can be approached in many different ways. Most notably, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ can be deliberated either independently of each other (What is rural? What is urban?) or in tandem (In what way is ‘rural’ different from ‘urban?’). Given the orientation of this thesis (conceptual focus), I am less concerned with what these concepts mean (as established in the previous chapter, in isolation they can mean virtually anything), but rather how they are construed and played off against each other at a conceptual level (there cannot be a ‘rural’ without an ‘urban’, and vice versa).

This means (as signposted briefly in section 1.2) that in this thesis ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are treated as a *binary*. Binaries are simple amalgamations of two elements within the wider human activity of categorization (Clope and Johnston, 2005b). Binaries are always social constructions, that is, they are not given. Binaries are used for simplification (e.g., to avoid cognitive overload) and for identity building by stabilizing points of reference (we/them; I/you). As such, binaries are both normal and necessary for human intellectual processes (Clope and Johnston, 2005a). However, the character and mode of different binaries is always determined by various, often changeable and fleeting, discursive and socio-cultural developments, and the outcome will differ significantly between concepts.

For the purpose of this overview, I depart from the three most common conceptualizations of the rural/urban binary: ‘rural/urban’ as a dichotomy,

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‘rural/urban’ as a continuum, and ‘rural/urban’ as hybridities, relationalities and networks.

2.4.1. Dichotomy

Binaries often assume the qualities of dualisms or dichotomies. Dualisms (also known as dualities) are integrative and mutually supporting. They constitute a system of meaning of two essential and irreducible parts or a philosophical construct of two equal, interplaying forces (think of yin and yang). While opposite in meaning, they are not necessarily based on valuation but on complementarity (none is better or worse). Dichotomies, on the other hand, represent a division of a given totality (by means of conscious processes) or a contrast between two things as being opposed or entirely different. To be considered a dichotomy, the two parts must be jointly exhaustive (everything must belong to one part or the other) and mutually exclusive (nothing can belong simultaneously to both parts). As such, dichotomies are largely disintegrative, rarely symmetrical and are likely to be polarizing. The process of treating continuous or multicategorical variables in a two-part fashion is called dichotomization, wherein the discretization error inherent in dichotomization is ignored for the purposes of convenience (Freibach-Heifetz and Stopler, 2008). Dichotomies (especially visible in gender) have been described as a social boundary that discourages from crossing or mixing assumed roles and viewpoints, or from identifying with three or more forms of expression altogether (cf. Pile, 1994).

A common way of representing the rural/urban binary (in scholarly literature, in policy and planning, and in lay speech alike) is as a dichotomy: if something is ‘rural’, it is not ‘urban’ (and vice versa). As Stanny et al. (2017) observe, this view is historically (rather than theoretically) conditioned, additionally strengthened by the geographical (and, before it, sociological) research tradition. This led to the establishment of certain theoretical regularities, which, due to the high level of abstraction involved, found little common ground with the realities they purported to portray.

There are several problems with dichotomies. One of the most salient characterizations of ‘rural/urban’ is that of between descriptive and socio-cultural definitions.²⁸ Descriptive definitions (cf. Cloke, 1977; Sokołowski,

²⁸ According to Cloke (2006), it is possible to recognize three significant theoretical frames for conceptualizing rurality: functional, political-economic and social-constructionist. The *functional conception* identifies rurality via elements of the physical environment, of which extensive land uses – such as agriculture and forestry – are a significant part. *Political-economic conceptions* of rurality emphasize the social production of existence and

1999) accept that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ exist, whereby ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ areas are identified through the “correct” selection of parameters that define their socio-spatial characteristics (e.g., agricultural, morphological, demographic). Socio-cultural definitions (cf. Tönnies [1887] (1957); Wirth, 1938), on the other hand, highlight the extent to which people’s socio-cultural characteristics vary with the type of environment in which they live (e.g., that population density affects certain behaviors and attitudes). Both approaches, however, besides not working well empirically, have since been criticized for being theoretically flawed: socio-cultural definitions as spatially deterministic, while descriptive definitions as spatially indifferent and hence ontologically shallow (see Halfacree, 1993 for an overview). As both “*demonstrate an erroneous conceptualization between space and society*” (Halfacree, 1993: 26), the problem lies less in how they are conceptualized and more in how these two supposedly different kinds of space are opposed to each other by way of dichotomization.

It is easy to think in dichotomies, especially since dualistic thinking is a psychological predisposition of humanity (cf. Buss, 2015). Moreover, this need for differentiation is not done randomly, but along some semantic watersheds, which, logically, reflect the intellectual spur of time in terms of constructed relations. According to Derrida (1981: 41), meaning in the West has been defined strictly in terms of binary oppositions to form “*a violent hierarchy*” with “*one of the two terms governing the other*”. The first term in

its interconnectedness with the outside world. These came to include a new set of dimensions such as accessibility, employment, housing, land use, recreation, and rural planning, with more emphasis on dealing with economic restructuring, social and environmental re-composition, and the role of the state in organizing change. *Social-constructionist conceptions* of rurality stem from significant changes in both ideology (postmodernism) and in food regimes, agricultural policies, farming techniques, and environmental impacts, ultimately destabilizing rurality as a concept and strengthening the idea that rural places do not represent distinct localities (Clope, 2006: 20).

With regard to urbanity, Pacione (2009: 19–20) lists four principle ways to conceptualize urban places: population size, economic base, functional definitions, and administrative criteria. Population size stems from the notion that urban places are generally larger than rural places; an urban economic base presupposes a predominant engagement in non-agricultural work; functional definitions of urbanity reflect the extent of a settlement’s spatial influence; and administrative criteria are national, particular definitions of urbanity that are largely incomparable between different countries. Most of the conceptions listed by Pacione, often under different terms, recur in most literature dedicated to the issue of urbanity (Kielczewska-Zaleska, 1972; Maik, 1992; Öhman, 1992; Persson, 1992; Drobek 1999; Sokołowski, 1999; Liszewski and Maik, 2000; Szmytkie, 2003; Żebrowski, 2005; Szymańska, 2008). It should be noted that since the emergence of postmodernism urbanity (just like rurality) has been increasingly viewed as a social construct (cf. Pile, 1999; Amin et al., 2000; Gotham, 2003).

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the binary is “*endowed with positivity at the expense of the other: presence and value are attached to factory, while non-factory is absent and devalued*” (Gibson-Graham, 2000: 97–98). In other words, there is a universal, culturally and psychologically sustained proneness to dichotomize concepts, even those we objectively know to be non-dichotomous.²⁹

Clearly, the rural/urban divide is not an exception (see Cloke and Johnston, 2005b). ‘Rural/urban’, despite a plethora of literature deliberating its changed semantics and significance, are still conceptually rooted in a dichotomy: if something is not ‘urban’ it is ‘rural’ (and vice versa), regardless of where we choose to place the separator today. In effect, what we get is a myriad of context-bound separators operating under a common conceptual banner (cf. Cloke, 2006), a situation that creates a false sense of stability (cf. Rey 1983).

Brenner (2015), for instance, demonstrates this through his account of “urban theory”, which today is “*in somewhat paradoxical condition*”. As Brenner notes, on the one hand there is massive disagreement within the field about almost anything: what ‘the urban’ is, what methods should be used to study it, and so on. On the other hand, the field is very strongly marked by the legacies of the last 100 years, presupposing certain underlying spatial taxonomies derived from the period of capitalist development in which the field emerged. Hence, the urban/rural divide represents two specific types of spaces that supposedly should be studied according to their own particular principles, and this, Brenner concludes, continues to be “*epistemologically constitutive for thought and action in relation to urban questions*” (Brenner, 2015). Because of that, and owing to a process known as internalization of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 129–162), ‘rural/urban’ have given rise to separate theories and separate professional paraphernalia, including books, scientific journals, conferences, scholarships, education programs, and departments, all named eponymously after these old spatial categories. And while ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are no longer attached to any unique physical environments or particular lifestyles, their extant institutional materialities inevitably force researchers and professionals to operate within their particular conceptual boundaries, keeping the dichotomy afloat.

29 One example of this are colors. We naturally accept the presence of plurality, even acknowledging that different people perceive colors differently (Özgen, 2004). But also here dichotomies easily emerge, most notably [black : white]. White is often associated with innocence, perfection, the good, purity, honesty, cleanliness, the beginning, the new, neutrality, lightness, and exactitude, while black is frequently associated with death, mourning, evil, secrets, violence, the end, witches, and magic (Heller, 2000).

Although we are witnessing efforts to revert the view of ‘rural/urban’ as a dichotomy and make it more similar to a dualism (the countryside and the city are being re-modeled into “linkages” and “relational” systems) (see section 2.3.3.), it is mostly a philosophical exercise. Because if a construction is no longer supported by societal structures, then trying to transform it to the binary’s less disruptive cousin (the dualism) – rather than to get rid of it – is interesting from a sociological perspective. As Stanny et al. (2017: 276) outline:

[T]he problem of defining areas by dividing them into rural and urban, including carving out a rural and an urban part from a socio-economic totality (i.e. the issue of criteria) is eventually insoluble. Drawing the line between the city and the countryside is arbitrary and will always raise doubts. However, the unequivocal adoption of specific criteria gives rise to enormous consequences and puts weight on how an area will be developed.

We must not forget about these consequences when dealing with ‘rural/urban’ in a dichotomous fashion, as preconceptions informed by amalgamations of the rather dated and naïve social theories underpinning such a model (see section 3.6) are very likely to impinge negatively on, for example, research outcomes, governance solutions and policy formulation (cf. Champion and Hugo, 2004; Scott et al., 2007; Lerner and Eakin, 2011).

2.4.2. Continuum

Out of the efforts to subdue the impact of dichotomous formulations of ‘rural/urban’, the concept of “rural-urban continuum” arose as a response to the increased modernization in the late 19th century in the form of “*massive spatial and social upheavals brought about by the industrialization and urbanization*” (Halfacree 2009a: 119). Influential to this development was Tönnies’s work [1887] (1957), which, although still approaching the problem dichotomously, managed to reverse the hitherto positive connotations ascribed to the cities and the negativity of rurality as captured in Marx’s famous expression: “*the idiocy of rural life*”.

Thinking in terms of continua (gradients) is a tempting and potentially effective way of reducing the harshness of dichotomies. This is perhaps best illustrated with colors, which naturally form a spectrum of various wavelengths, often unperceivable when confronted with one specific color. In the same manner, the idea of a rural-urban continuum assumes that

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'rural' and 'urban' exist, but the transition between them is not abrupt, but smooth and gradual (e.g., remote village – developed village – town – city – metropolis) (Dewey, 1960; Sokołowski, 1999). The rural-urban continuum should thus be understood as “*a group of settlements occupying the middle part of a rurality-urbanity scale, where formally rural and urban units are interspersed*” (Sokołowski, 2008: 63).

While the concept of rural-urban continuum added a different dimension in terms of flexibility, it has not passed unscathed. A pioneering and highly influential critique was raised by Pahl (1966), whose attempts to read off social patterns (ways of life) from spatial milieus had failed and which he deemed worthless. In summary, the continuum idea – as opposed to the rigid rural/urban dichotomy – is seemingly more nuanced but obfuscates a number of important issues (after Halfacree, 2009a). Firstly, there is very little evidence of space and society mutually reinforcing each other to the degree that the continuum idea could be a valid representation of reality. Secondly, the concept obscures the heterogeneity of urban places (at the one pole) and downplays the lacking reference to typical rural places (at the other pole), which instead are made by implication. Since the “purely urban” and “purely rural” are merely abstractions of the dichotomy, devising a gradation upon something that does not exist (or cannot be grasped epistemologically) renders the continuum idea a philosophical exercise. The idea also fails to empirically account for the lack of *de facto* gradation with regard to physical proximity (e.g., from the city core outwards), while conceptually it has been criticized for environmental determinism, *a priori* self-containment and inverted ethnocentrism (privileging “Western” perceptions, cf. Siwale, 2014).

To further clarify the lack of merit in the continuum idea, let us return to the notion of gender. Firstly, contemporary gender theory does not consider gender as merely biological sex, but also includes four other psychosocial aspects, including gender identity, gender expression, sexual attraction, and romantic attraction. Secondly, and more importantly for the sake of rural/urban comparison, not only are those aspects non-binary, but each aspect represents a *separate* slider onto which each and every individual's gender-related inclinations can be mapped. This way of mapping gender, hence, is not monoaxial but generates an uncountable range of combinations, somewhat similar to that of a padlock code (Killermann, 2013).³⁰ Now

30 It should be noted that this point of view has since been criticized by some contemporary psychologists, arguing that what comes to define gender is conditioned by both biological and cultural factors (e.g., Baron et al., 2015; Dicey Jennings et al., 2015; Lubinski and Persson Benbow, 2006).

Table 2.1. Aspects of urbanity according to Dewey (1960).

Heterogeneity	Impersonal relations	Division of labor	Anonymity
Mobility	Segmental roles	Class differences	Predatory relations
Emphasis on time	New family role	Employment patterns	More female employment
Multiple dwelling units	Secularism	Non-agricultural life	Cosmopolitanism
Tenancy	Complexity	Tolerance	Superficiality
Low fertility	Sophistication	Commercialization	Liberalism
Automation	Literacy	Creativity	Blasé attitude
Stereotyping	Critical attitude	Utilitarianism	Formal controls
Interdependency	Subjective outlook	Intense occupational space	Social participation
Transiency	Individualism	Objectivity	Practicality

if the values on the five sliders are staggered (not aligned), it is very difficult to determine one's gender proclivity using variations on the male/female binary. Consequently, the popular trend today is to expand the gender conceptology to be more inclusive (Facebook, for instance, has, as of 2017, 71 gender options). The same principle can be said to apply to the rural/urban distinction, but here instead of five sliders there are many more. Having reviewed an extensive body of theoretical work dedicated to rural/urban conceptualization, Dewey (1960) identified more than 40 attributes usually associated with urbanity (Tab. 2.1), whereof at least 10 find very frequent usage (cf. Sokołowski 1999; Pile, 1999). Consequently, each of these attributes (sliders) can be set differently.

This means that when investigating, for instance, "rural" and "urban" people's lifestyles it seems unwarranted to take into account a classification of rural and urban areas based on function (e.g., the intensity of agriculture) or density (number of meters between buildings). In a de-agrarizing world of ICTs (information and communication technology) and mobilities, lifestyles no longer differ, at least not significantly. Today, thence, many geographical areas can be at the same time "rural" and "urban"³¹ or neither (cf. Strzemińska, 2011). For instance, a settlement can be 100% "non-rural" in terms of a non-agricultural employment sector (the functional attribute), but this does not make it automatically urban with regard to, for instance, density

³¹ A caveat: I am not at ease using such descriptions, and why I do it here is for pedagogical reasons, departing from the theory of rural-urban continuum.

and scale. On the other hand, a settlement can be 100% “urban(ized)” in terms of infrastructure (e.g., the coverage of water, sewage and gas supply, transport provision and digitalization) but at the same time 100% “rural” in terms of centrality (lacking supra-local facilities altogether like banks, theatres and law firms) (cf. Sokołowski, 2015). Although some time ago these attributes were correlated (i.e., when a “rural” locality was subject to urbanization in one respect, others usually followed suit), today, any of its constitutive attributes could be evaluated on a dual “rural–non-rural”/“urban–non-urban” scale (cf. Dijkstra et al., 2013), producing a wide range of unique combinations.

As this wide range of combinations is practically impossible to account for in practice, continuum enthusiasts usually adopt an aggregated approach (Sokołowski, 1999). In other words, in order to forcedly place scattered data on a monoaxial continuum, we must resort to artificial mean values (cf. Dahly and Adair, 2007). This in turn is a very meager representation of what the conceptual model (continuum) tries to depict. Think of this via the analogy of so-called assessment sports – like figure skating or dancesport – and how they are judged. If all adjudicators give the same couples more or less the same points (placements), then their relative placements in the competition can be said to align with the actual technical, athletic and musical achievements of those couples. Such an outcome is then considered fair by minimizing the interference of subjectivity and maximizing objectivity – the strictly regulated standards of how certain types of performance should be awarded points. Contrarily, a competition scoreboard marred by scattering and lack of consistency between the different adjudicators (be it by unfair play, lack of concentration or work overload) do not produce satisfactory results. The couples are of course given placements (by way of advanced mathematical algorithms), but the results produced in this way are accepted as a necessity of the competition format (it must produce ranking) rather than a fair reflection of reality. However, life is not a competition, and arithmetical approaches to scientifically “adjudicate” rurality/urbanity according to the continuum principle are – at least from a social-science perspective – inappropriate.

This brings us to the last important question: what is really the purpose of the continuum idea? Why would we want to know that a municipality is 63% urban, and how should we interpret it? Notwithstanding the fact that different 63%-urban localities can be diametrically different due to the countless possibilities of internal combinations (vertical variability), the added nuance (“63% urban”) will be lost as long as we continue to organize society in a dichotomous fashion (i.e., if the policies, research

orientations, administrative divisions, fund designations, salary levels, for example, continue to be “rural” or “urban”). Moreover, thinking in terms of gradient (horizontal variability) is also treacherous in that a 63%-urban settlement may have nothing in common with either the model city (at the one pole) or with the model village (at the other). Then why at all compare it to those? As Halfacree (2009b) ponders, the urban-rural continuum as an academic concept is popular because of its very strong cultural presence: *“There is something of the self-fulfilling prophecy in the idea that spatial form is associated with social form: people’s expectations of what they will find in particular places, and subsequently, how they will act and be expected to act in such places can be seen to be related to the cultural representation of that place”* (p. 123). The terms “rural” and “urban” seem to have become too complex to be either qualified or quantified, signaling a need to approach them differently.

2.4.3. Hybridities, relationalities, networks

Although the urban-rural continuum is a meager heuristic tool, empirical evidence continues to support its apparent significance in certain circumstances (Halfacree 2009b: 123). Whether this is the result of the immense push toward the relevance of the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ through public culture and key institutional practices is not entirely clear, as this can also be the result of connections that accrete with a seemingly rural/urban stratification through repeated meanings (cf. Hatano and Inagaki, 2000). Still, realization that actual social and economic relations (flows of people, goods, capital, and power) *“have always transgressed the discursive divide of urban and rural”* (Woods, 2011: 43) has given way for more creative conceptualizations of both concepts. The third way of viewing ‘rural/urban’ – namely as hybridities, relationalities and networks – represents the latest developments in this area. I have grouped them together because in the subject literature they are often used interchangeably. However, if we stay germane to what these terms mean, there are subtle yet important differences. A hybrid is the result of combining or crossbreeding two or more parts, which also means that the result is something different than its constitutive parts. Relationality, on the other hand, refers to the manner in which two things are associated, and as such the term does not alter the constitutive parts but explains in what way they interact with each other. Networks, lastly, signify an interconnected or interrelated chain, group or system, and usually refer to the final product that exerts impact or influence over something. The reason why the terms hybridities, relationalities and

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networks are often grouped together is because they try to do something different with the concepts 'rural/urban' than hitherto has been the case.

The stitching together of what never should have been divided in the first place has an established niche in scholarly philosophical literature. Lefebvre [1962] (2011) displaced the conventional divisions between "modern" and "unmodern" by moving from philosophy to sociology enmeshed in the social, political and cultural forces at work in post-WW2 France, setting up in this way the path toward "postmodernity". Berman (1983) examined the conflicting relationship between the concept of modernism and the processes of socio-economic development ("modernization"). Using various classical texts as a source of literary interpretation of modernization, Berman explored the self-destructive nature of modernization, arguing that modernity's defining characteristic is "*that of continual reassertion of ambivalence*". For Latour (1993) the dualistic distinction between nature and society inherent in modernity is an artificial construct. Latour argued that contemporary matters of public concern (e.g., global warming, technologies, pandemics) often conflate scientific factors (specialist discourses, including academic practices) with extra-scientific factors (popular discourses, including politics) to such a degree that a nature/culture divide is no longer conceivable. In turn, this irreconcilability is what has laid the groundwork for the many post-modern and anti-modern movements. To make sense of it, Latour seeks to recouple the natural with the social by making a case that such a modernist distinction never existed among "pre-modern" peoples. To do so, he proposes a "Parliament of Things" (Latour, 1993), wherein natural and social phenomena, including the discourses of both, should neither be seen nor studied separately, but treated as hybrids created (and controlled for) through public interaction between people, artifacts and concepts.

The concept of hybrid geographies has been outlined by Whatmore (2002) in her pioneering account of how human agency together with materials, discourses and knowledge create hybrid collectives or "*relational being and becoming*". As Cloke (2006: 77) put it, such "*hybrid approaches seem well capable of rematerializing and even resocializing our cultural understandings of rural [and urban] spaces*". In line with the hybrid approach, a smorgasbord of new concepts such as 'the new rural', 'rurban', 'post-rural', 'suburban', 'peri-urban', 'exurban' or 'counter-urban' have been launched to (with varying results) redress the fuzziness. Nevertheless, all are visibly neologistic variations on the concepts of 'rural' and 'urban'. In order to define 'peri-urban', one still needs to define the 'urban'. There are multiple criticisms of the use of the concepts 'rural/urban' in both their original sense and their various expanded usages. Both fail to define or explain 'rural/urban' because

of the extreme language of self-referentiality without any external reference, and could be seen as an attempt to give substantiation to an established yet dwindling system of meaning. Instead of prompting fresh thinking based on new insights, this en masse propels the relevance of the rural/urban vehicle. In other words, instead of assuming a problem-oriented approach, there is this tendency to think about problems spatially. This comes along with an urge to reimagine the assumingly spatially underpinned rural/urban binary against a reality increasingly disingenuous to whatever aspects of 'rural/urban' there still may be left.

While hybrid approaches try to stitch together old concepts because they do not seem to work independently, relational approaches want to make sense of how elements that make up those concepts fit together. As Wylie (2007: 200) put it, "*relations do not occur in space, they make spaces – relational spaces, and the geography of the world is comprised of these*" (cf. also Massey, 2005: 107). Therefore, a relational approach seeks to explore "*both the relations that constitute the rural [or urban] and the shifting nature of the relation between the rural and the urban*" (Woods, 2011: 17). It also highlights the complexity of rural/urban constructions, emphasizing "*the significance of networks, connections, flows and mobilities in constituting space and place, and the social, economic, cultural and political forms and processes associated with them*" (Woods, 2011: 40). The starting point for relational discussions about 'rural/urban' is that they are spatial concepts, and in order to make a distinction between them we need to agree that they refer to *different* kinds of space. This raises the question of what is meant by "space" in the first place. As Somerville et al. (2014: 278) conclude, the problem is that "*it is usually assumed that 'space' has structure, but there seems to be no general agreement about its exact form*" (see also Couclelis, 1992). According to Halfacree³² (2006: 52) "space" may be interrogated in terms of the extent to which it demonstrates structured coherence, in other words the overall degree of stability between economy, state and civil society at the local level.

To accomplish this, Halfacree (2006) envisions rural space as a tripartite model, where rural localities, representations of the rural and lives of the rural are tightly interwoven (Figure 2.1).³³ Rural localities are those inscribed

32 Drawing on works by Harvey, Cloke and Goodwin.

33 The division of space into three facets stems from Lefebvre's (1991) work 'The production of space'. According to Lefebvre (1991: 41–52), space is produced by dynamic interrelations between representations of space, representational space and practice over time. While spatial practices and representations of space are relatively common to human geography, the addition of the third field – spaces of representation – "*spaces that are lived, experi-*

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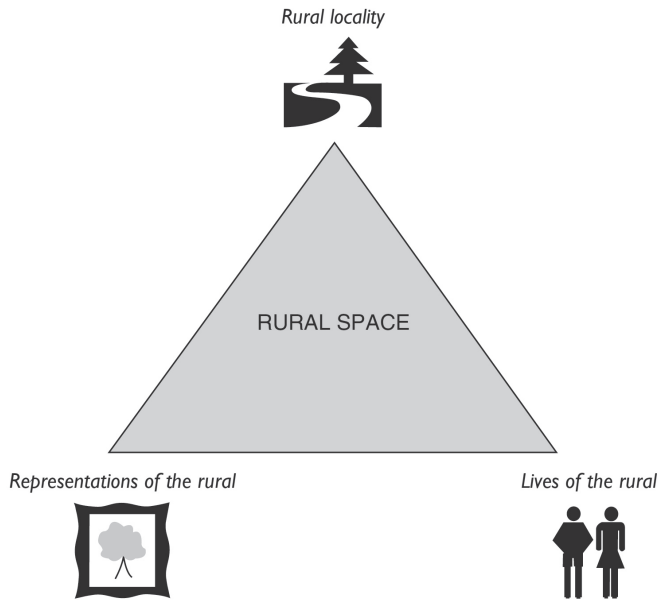


Figure 2.1. The hybrid totality of rural space by Halfacree (2006: 52).

through relatively distinctive spatial practices linked to either production or consumption. Formal representations of the rural are those expressed by capitalist interests, bureaucrats and politicians, and refer to how the rural is commodified in exchange value terms. They are also associated with procedures of signification and legitimation, and try to dominate rural localities and lives of the rural. Lastly, everyday lives of the rural are inevitably incoherent and fractured, and incorporate both individual and social elements in their cognitive interpretation and negotiation. Notably, these three facets together produce an understanding of rural space that dissolves the troublesome dualism between locality and social representation (Halfacree, 2006: 52).³⁴

enced and recoded through the actions of those that occupy and use them" (Elden, 2009) – was Lefebvre's major contribution. This dimension connected the hitherto (either real or imagined) spaces into a tripartite entity of "real-and-imagined" spaces (Elden, 2009: 590).

34 A similar but focally reshuffled model has been elaborated by Slätmo (2014). The difference between Slätmo and Halfacree (2006), however, is what has been inserted at the intersection of the influencing dimensions. While Slätmo places human activities in the middle, Halfacree does so with space. Although the latter model corresponds more with the focus of this thesis, Slätmo's visualization is perhaps more useful when approaching the concept from a subject position. Moreover, the addition of social institutions as a separate factor falls within the discourse tradition of historical institutionalism (Gailing and Leibenath, 2015).

Hence, aspects of rurality can be mapped onto this threefold model, and when all three facets are examined together, their totality can be said to articulate one of three forms of rural coherence: (a) congruent and unified; (b) contradictory and disjointed; and (c) chaotic and incoherent (cf. also Halamska, 2014). Of these three forms, only the first expresses a full structured coherence (Somerville et al., 2014: 280). It should be noted that due to rapid societal changes, spaces of the first kind are becoming rarer, while spaces of the second type are becoming the norm. Perhaps most worrying are places of the third kind, which “*hold together at neither the perceptual nor conceptual level ... represent[ing] a potentially subversive alternative within the overall logic of abstract spatiality*” (Halfacree, 2006: 52). Although structured coherences are always dynamic and fluid (cf. Massey, 2005), Halfacree’s triad approach gives an approximation of what may be meant when ‘rural/urban’ is inferred and how coherent that inferral is. This also implies that the extent to which an individual place can merit the label ‘rural’ or ‘urban’ “*depends on the extent to which the totality of rural [or urban] space dominates that space relative to other spatialities*” (Halfacree 2006: 51). Consequently, the status of any place is an issue that “*always must be determined on the ground/in place to avoid rural [or urban] fetishism*” (Halfacree 2006: 51; cf. also Hoggart, 1990: 245³⁵).

The relational approach with regard to ‘rural/urban’ has become popular in human geography over the last few decades; however, it has also come under criticism. Although useful for its descriptive capabilities to conceptualize reality, it is limited (even impotent) in its predictive capabilities (Nowak, 2014). Since relational approaches refuse to state a priori their epistemological, ontological and methodological commitments, their argument suffocates all of the finer intricacies of their object of study (cf. Venturini, 2010). Hence, while the relational approach can help us rethink the relationship between the rural and the urban, it is perhaps more appropriate for explorative scientific approaches, whereas in policy and planning there is a pressing need to define one’s position in advance in order to commence a meaningful intervention. While rejecting concepts of space and place as fixed entities and retreating from privileging the social, a relational approach tends to adopt “*an agnostic position*” (cf. Woods, 2011: 40–41). By doing so, it assumes an attitude that is inherently incompatible with the rigid realities of rural/urban opposition. Effectively, a relational approach

35 *At the local level, causal processes draw sustenance from local social structure ... with behavioural outcomes being contingent upon the interrelations of structural conditions and on the manner and circumstances under which these are transposed through human agency into behavior*” (Hoggart, 1990: 245).

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tacitly accepts “rural” and “urban” but instead relativizes their respective individuality.³⁶ This is a logical contradiction, stemming from the inability to let go of established frameworks with simultaneous realization that they do not work in practice. What we are left with are inconsistent messages, and optimistic cliché-like statements, leading to the lack of structured coherence. In other words, we get caught in our own metaphors, sometimes balancing on the verge of absurdity.

To escape the trap of relativism, a more apprehendable view borne out of the relational tradition is that of networks. As Woods (2011: 43) put it, the relational approach “*permits us to recognize the diverse networks and flows that criss-cross rural and urban space and the hybrid forms that result as being part of the very constitution of both the rural and the urban*”. Understanding ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as complex assemblages of material, social and human actors has given rise to actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005).

ANT is a constructionist approach to social theory and research, most notable for its treatment of objects (non-humans) as part of social networks. Controversial due to this particular insistence, ANT is also known for its critique of both critical and conventional sociology by refraining from essentialist explanations of various social events. Developed initially to understand how scientific knowledge is consolidated, ANT has since been applied more widely onto any social process by looking into how it is being stabilized (Latour, 2005), for example the phenomenon of rural/urban thinking. Since ANT assumes that many relations are both material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts), its application has been particularly fruitful to understanding, for instance, the complex network of policy development (e.g., Manning, 2002; Rutland and Aylett, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Within ANT, many different entities can represent actors; they can be animate such as actively acting humans or animals, but also inanimate matter, concepts, groups, institutions, weather conditions, and so on. Classical ANT assumes that all actors have their particular strengths and weaknesses, whereupon the latter may be overcome by joining forces with other actors. This process of joining forces is called alliance building, as this increases the relative power position of the actors involved. Many different alliances and their associated actors make up a so-called actor-network. The basic idea is that one actor can heterogeneously engineer different alliances of actors in such a way that the resulting network becomes powerful

36 For example, “*understanding rural-urban linkages matters because it provides the basis for measures that can improve both urban and rural livelihoods and environments*” (DANIDA, 2000).

enough to merit a dominant position (the attribute heterogeneous refers to the many different spheres covered such as: material, social, conceptual, and legislative; cf. Latour, 1987). This heterogeneous engineering of alliance building is done by translating interests, compromises, and physical bonds, for example. However, it should be noted that the process is not neutral insofar as the actors are transformed by the alliances they build, and, by that, the process is largely a game of give and take.

While ANT approaches have proven important to map out networks that maintain 'rural/urban' in the society (other than just relationize them), ANT comes with its own set of problems. The biggest problem concerns its treatment of animals and inanimate objects as actors, a view that clashes with the concept of intentionality (cf. Winner, 1993). It has also been criticized for its amorality (Shapiro [S], 1997), lack of criticism and failure to challenge structures of domination (Whittle and Spicer, 2008), and for being too descriptive to virtually explain any social process (Amsterdamska, 1990). Hence, its mode of sociology of association runs the risk of debauching into endless chains of association.³⁷

Reflecting the various philosophical changes in hybrid/relational/networked conceptualizations of 'rural/urban', Halfacree (2009b: 449) outlines four perspectives on how one can position 'rurality' today. These perspectives form, I would argue, some of the most exhaustive explanations of 'rurality' currently available. Although Halfacree applies the four perspectives to 'rurality' specifically, they, by implication, automatically apply to 'urbanity' as well, and much of this is evident in Halfacree's own justifications (further evidence is supplied in the constitutive papers included in this thesis):

37 Most of these criticisms have been addressed though (e.g., in Latour, 2013). ANT's conception of agency does not presuppose intentionality, as intentionality is unimportant given that "objects perform spatial conditions of (im-)possibility" (Law, 2000: 2) For instance, "[i]t is impossible to erect a house at a place where a house already exists" while "the geometry of a plot of land and its relative location to adjacent plots influences the size, shape, function, etc. of a house" (Koch, 2005: 8). Moreover, agency is neither located in human subjects nor in non-human objects, but in heterogeneous associations between them. Lastly, the task of ANT is not to explain social construction. As Sack (1997: 2) put it, "the reductionist sense that 'everything is socially constructed' does as much disservice to geographical analysis as a whole as has privileging the natural in the days of environmental determinism". The difference between ANT and other social constructionist approaches is that ANT remains adamant in its requirement that each and every part of the actor-network must be materially and empirically enforced before it can impact the network. Thereby, ANT does not deny the existence of social constructionist meta-categories like discourse or power, only their a priori assumed effect upon each and every case (Latour, 2013), for example the assumption that the gender pay gap is necessarily the effect of patriarchy.

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1. **Rurality effaced.** The first perspective, departing from Marxian political-economy outlooks, argues that “*capitalism has progressively done away with formerly significant geographical demarcations and borders, including that between rural and urban*”, whereby “*continued belief in any town versus country divide may ... be seen as ideological*”. The main critique is that “*one needs to pinpoint spaces distinguished enough by their own causal forces that they can be labeled ‘rural’*”.
2. **Rurality’s popular resilience.** The second perspective argues that in spite of the commonplace rejection of rurality, it still remains a vibrant concept due to its “*strong cultural, popular presence ... within everyday life, which leads to its widespread understanding and usage*”. So even though the rural is difficult to pinpoint, “*people act on or through their understandings of rurality in their everyday lives*”, ultimately “*producing the rural world*”.
3. **Rurality beyond representation.** The third perspective draws on Jean Baudrillard’s ideas of the age of simulations, “*where the map no longer follows on from the territory, seeking to represent it, but instead ‘precedes’ and ‘engenders’ it*”. In this view, “*representations of rurality [are] being deployed to shape existing rural spaces, or even to corral assemblages of rurality ‘beyond’ the rural*”. This happens: (a) when a “*particular quality of life [is] infused heavily with particular representations of rurality*”; (b) when “*existing rurality [is] ‘reconstituted’ to resemble more closely what rurality is ‘supposed’ to look like*”; and (c) when “*rurality is deployed to assemble many elements of the rural even beyond what most people would acknowledge as rural space*”.
4. **Rurality beyond the rural.** Departing from non-representational theory, the fourth perspective critiques “*the predominance of representation issues within rural studies’ cultural turn to date, an anti-materialist, pro-social bias, and also the fear of espousing some form of environmental determinism*”. Stressing rurality’s affective significance, it postulates the importance “*not to see any one-way relation between the (rural) environment and action but to see the environment more as a set of affordances or opportunities*” (cf. Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2. Skopje, Macedonia: “Rurality beyond representation” or “urbanity beyond the urban”?

These four perspectives presented are largely complementary, although some, notably the idea of rurality as effaced, “are more difficult to reconcile with one another” (Halfacree, 2009b: 455). In conclusion, ruralities and urbanities are clearly strongly social, but they are also more than this. That said, placing the ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ within the “socially produced [and contested] set of manifolds” (Crang and Thrift, 2000) requires creating an architecture through which we can better understand the totality of what can be regarded as labeled spaces.

2.5. Taking it further: How rural/urban knowledge comes about

Of late, human geographers have been attending to the relations and experiences “*shaped by a focus not on the way the world is, but on how the world is coming to be through an engagement with our interventions in, and responses to, the world*” (Greenhough, 2010: 42, emphases in original). Mindful that “[s]ocial practices have citational force because of the spaces in which they are embedded” (Thrift, 2000: 677), the past 20 years of anti-humanist and post-humanist dominance within human geography have awoken calls for new forms of humanism, one “*that avoids the rationalist and self-righteous claims of the old ones but maintains elements of the experiential dimension of social life*” (Simonsen, 2013: 10). With that mindset, geographers have entered a new dimension of knowledge-making, where comprehension of

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lived experience, notions of agency, politics, and participation, as well as processes and performances of knowledge production become increasingly relevant for how we understand various concepts from a range of theoretical, methodological and empirical considerations (cf. Nelson [Lise], 1999; Nash, 2000; Dewsbury, 2000; Houston and Pulido, 2002; Szerszynski et al., 2003; Pearson, 2006; Waitt and Cook, 2007; Kay, 2012).

Because assertions about urbanization of the countryside (and vice versa) are known to be based on subjective characterizations of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ (Woods 2011: 44; Hubbard, 2006: 69–70), they have become “*implicated in the production of places and, in particular, in the judgment of people’s practices within places*” (Cresswell, 2009). This has spawned numerous attempts to access the more-than-representational rural and urban geographies (Carolan, 2008; Wylie, 2007; Edensor, 2006; Lorimer, 2005) by adding significant performative gravity to those “*largely unreflexive habits, quotidian performances that tether people to place*” (Edensor, 2006: 491). Subsumed under a more general disciplinary refocus on “bottom-up” (Barnett, 2011; Pain, 2004), “outside-in” (Bawaka Country et al., 2016) and “more-than” (Head, 2011) perspectives, this new wave of gaining understanding has been instantiated through numerous attempts to access geographies where “*rural [and urban] experiences are felt, sensed, [and] intuited through bodily actions and performances*” (Woods, 2010: 835). Such an approach privileges first-hand stories and provides an alternative to grand narratives that otherwise inform understandings of ‘rural/urban’ but they also implicitly extend an invitation to the creation of those concepts (e.g., McGill, 2000; Edensor, 2006; Woods, 2010; Bossuet, 2013; Kruger, 2013; Mordue, 2014; Cassel and Pettersson, 2015; Shirley, 2015a, 2015b; Laszczkowski, 2016; Wright and Eaton, 2018).

Notably, this philosophical insight has also come to implicate geographers as active performers of rurality (Woods, 2010) and, by implication, of urbanity (cf. Brenner, 2013):

[R]ecognising the rural as performed also means acknowledging the ways in which rural geographers ourselves perform rurality through our research – reflecting our positionality, our engagement with various rural research subjects as well as with research-funders and users, our selection and use of different research methods, and the political and policy implications of our work. In these ways, the practice of rural geography is closely tied to the performance of rurality, and rural geographers are revealed not only as observers and recorders of the rural but also as active agents in producing, reproducing and performing rurality. (Woods, 2010: 844)

There is a caveat though. Although commendable from an ethical point of view, sheer recognition of one's own role in the process of conceptual enactment alone is unlikely to be effective unless we actually can pinpoint in what way such enactment creates realities (cf. Brauer and Dymitrow, 2014; Dymitrow and Brauer, 2014, 2016). Yet, this particular relation has to date not been scrutinized in an effective way, or fully understood. A number of questions come to mind: (a) how do we identify, approach and use 'rural/urban'; (b) where exactly do we place those rural/urban performances; and, most importantly, (c) who is really performing rurality/urbanity? In other words, the current pervasive trend to elevate the local, the mundane and the quotidian to a position of authority within academic knowledge production is an unfinished story with regard to the uncharted effects such transposition has on intellectual consistency.

This issue is particularly visible in an analysis of seven papers handpicked by Woods (2010) as a point of embarkation for his seminal paper in *Progress in Human Geography* about performing rurality, which he had characterized to "have critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher" (Leyshon, 2002; Chacko, 2004; Pini, 2004; Dougill et al., 2006; Moseley, 2007; McAreavey, 2008; Edelman, 2009).³⁸ Indeed, some authors addressed issues of academic integrity in the sense that the identity of the researcher can be conflictual and therefore evince bias (Pini, 2004; Edelman, 2009). Others reflected upon the potential of new approaches to obtain a more holistic understanding of the rural, for example by combining different theoretical ideations (Chacko, 2004). Some raised the possibility of approaching land use and development issues in more productive ways (Dougill et al., 2006; Moseley, 2007), while others discussed the potential of ethical considerations in order not to marginalize and harm research subjects (Leyshon, 2002; McAreavey, 2008). None, so it seems, had fully addressed the consequences of their own agency "in producing, reproducing and performing rurality" (Woods, 2010: 844). Tab. 2.2 is meant to shed some light on the problem of locating the whereabouts of the knowledge that instantiated the authors' reflections upon their own partiality and positionality, in other words how the 'rural' was identified in the first place.

³⁸ The following review is described in more detail in a separate paper (Dymitrow and Brauer, 2017).

Tab. 2.2. How “rural research” is made rural. Analysis of the whereabouts of rurality as instantiated in seven papers characterized by Woods (2010) to “have critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher”.

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(1) Leyshon (2002) conducted his study within a self-appointed “rural area” of South West England. No other detailed description of the area was provided as “the names of the villages ... have been changed” (p. 179). Since the organization tied to the research project was located in this area, the studied youth issues were effectively made ‘rural’ by the organization, with no possibility for the readers to determine in what way they were considered ‘rural’ and what was rurality’s role for the research outcomes.

(2) Chacko (2004) conducted her study in self-appointed “rural areas” of West Bengal (India), more specifically in Kultali Thana, as this area is supposedly “entirely rural, lacking in infrastructural facilities, and characterized by chronic poverty” (p. 200). It should be noted though that the town of Kultali had (as of 2001) 187,942 inhabitants, and even Chacko herself depicts the area of West Bengal as one that ranks fairly high in terms of socio-economic indicators within India. Hence, the author’s characterization of her area of study as “entirely rural” came to perform rurality, despite the fact that lack of infrastructural facilities and instances of “chronic poverty” are not generally accepted as determinants of rurality, but can be found in any one spatial context (cf. Biegańska et al., 2016; Krzysztofik et al., 2017).³⁹

(3) Dougill et al.’s (2006) study was situated in the UK’s Peak District National Park, where the authors focused on the role of stakeholder participation in “rural research”. The study was done in collaboration with the Moors for the Future, an activist group consisting of “representatives of the National Park, Farmers Union, Land Owners’ organisation, conservation agencies and private water companies” (pp. 264–265). Thereby, the special interests of the lobby group came to locate rurality within the boundaries of the National Park (which also encompasses the town of Bakewell and much of western Sheffield, UK’s third largest city with 575,400 inhabitants).

(4) McAreavey (2008) conducted her research in the UK, more specifically in two communities, anonymized as “Great Village” (8,000 inhabitants) and “Small Village” (3,000 inhabitants). The first was a Victorian-era settlement with “a quantity London overspill housing” from the 1960s, while the second – a mix of “council estates, affordable homes and luxury housing” (p. 392). No other clues of context were provided, although proximity to London, the considerable size of the settlements⁴⁰ and their non-standard morphologies all render the qualification of the study as “rural development research” questionable, especially when the author positions her research within the field of “rural sociology” (How can we know that the social relations present in those cases are ‘rural’?). However, the studied areas were made rural because the project tied to the housing association where the author was employed was labeled a “rural development project” (p. 391).

(5) Pini's (2002) study was conducted at "two different agricultural sites that make up the Australian sugar industry" (p. 171), and was undertaken in partnership with an agri-political group of 6,000 sugar cane farming families, who provided "cash and in-kind support" for the research, as well as meeting facilities (p. 171). As such, she was restricted to an understanding of the rural as one of the sugar cane industry within the collective. It is unclear, though, in what other way the studied sites were rural, or even where exactly they were located.

(6) Moseley's (2007) sites remain unspecified. His reflections are tied to "rural communities" in Mali, Malawi, Lesotho, Niger, South Africa, and Zimbabwe during his employment at various development-oriented governmental and non-governmental agencies (p. 335). No other hints of context are provided, although general expressions such as "rural Africa", "rural settings" and "rural farmers" can be found throughout the paper (the last does suggest agricultural context). Perhaps more certain than not, the studied communities were made rural by the context of the author's workplace and its working methods (e.g., "In African development work, rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) ... have become popular diagnostic and assessment tools"; p. 336).

(7) Edelman's (2009) paper on "rural social movements" is perhaps the most restrictive as to clues of spatial context⁴¹, although the name of the venue – *Journal of Peasant Studies* – and the declared focus "mainly on peasant and farmer movements" (p. 246) provides some indication. There is no method section but the author states that he "draws on a reading of materials produced by movement and professional and academic researchers, on many conversations over the years, and on [his] own experience as a researcher" (p. 246). Noteworthy is the ease with which peasant and farmer movements were made "rural social movements" by reading professional and academic materials, and which supposedly made the now largely false equivalency between farming and rurality – both in developed and developing countries (e.g., Rigg, 2006). As Edelman states upfront, his choice of approach "results from the author's own disciplinary location" (p. 247). Such disciplinary perspectivism, however, can run the risk of leaving out sufficient consideration whether the invoked phenomena really warrant the use of the label "rural".

Source: Dymitrow & Brauer (2017: 34–35)

39 Poverty and lack of infrastructure are evident in shantytowns, favelas, gecekondu, socialki, barrios, ghettos, bidonvilles, and many others, including regular housing estates. A notorious example of this is Lunik IX, a Roma-inhabited borough in the Slovak city of Košice, infamous for its extreme poverty in combination with cut-off gas, water and electricity supplies, and cancelled waste management and communication routes (cf. Berescu, 2011).

40 Many towns in the UK have populations smaller than 8,000, and even 3,000, like the city of St David's with 1,841 inhabitants or the town of Fordwich with a population of 381. Backtracking Edelman's prior research experience takes us mainly to Spanish Central America.

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In summary, Woods's (2010) selection of papers, whose authors supposedly "*critically reflected on the practice and positionality of being a rural researcher*" (pp. 835–836), is a double-edged sword, where high levels of reflexivity are easily exchanged for facile evincements of partiality. The outcome? Consider the following compilation: desert farming in Mali, luxury sub-London homes, peasant movements in Guatemala, chronic poverty in West Bengal, youth identity in South West England, the sugar cane industry in Australia, and a tourist-packed park fringed by the UK's most urbanized area. What is the common denominator? Is there even any? The Occam's razor answer is that they all contribute to the production of "rural theory". However, such production takes place even though the rural location is unspecified ("*rural Africa*"), anonymized ("*Small Village*"), generalized ("*sugar cane industry*") or synergized ("*reflections of past research*"), but also when the rural label is pre-given by an organization or by a research project, or simply arrived at by implication – be it by lack of update at best (the false equivalency farming = rural), or by lack of reflection at worst (stereotyping). In other words, while all authors expressly signaled their awareness of partiality and positionality in connection to the whereabouts of "rural knowledge", at the same time they evinced a sleight of hand, which Haraway (1991: 189) has described as the "*god trick*" (see section 1.5).

A more straightforward characterization of the described phenomenon would be mixing it all up. We try to be reflective of concepts we know to be problematic, but in view of better tools – and having to work against stark mental schemata – we fall into our own pit. In concluding their book, Bosworth and Somerville (2006) very hesitantly posit that rurality is "*more than an empty signifier*" and that its core meaning may be taken from a reading of its predominant structured coherences, and that the distinctive spatiality taken from the latter essentially foregrounds 'nature':

This may be expressed by the involvement of animals directly in a labour process (e.g., for producing raw materials from the land, as in livestock grazing), or by humans working directly on the land for a living (as in arable farming), or by interactions between humans and a wider 'natural environment' that contains a diversity of non-human species ('wildlife'). (Somerville et al., 2014: 294)

However, a later sentence states that "*the boundaries of the rural are immensely permeable*" (p. 294), signaling that the only structured coherence, so it seems, would be what the commissioned authors have chosen to write about.

Pushing the boundaries of rural/urban definition is another widely practiced phenomenon seen in many academic works, e.g. in this recent thesis about growth and decline in “rural Sweden”.

In this thesis, rural is operationalized in different ways between Papers II and III. Paper II has a regional view on rural areas since it is interested in the labor market aspects of sparse social structures. In contrast, Paper III applies a local definition of rural whereby all urban localities with a population over 1,000 are classified as urban while the rest of Sweden is classified as rural. ... In Article I, which looks at employment trajectories for agricultural workers, rural is not defined explicitly; instead agriculture is looked upon as a rural sector. As the discussion above suggests, this does not mean that agriculture is a defining characteristic of rural, only that agriculture mainly takes place in rural areas. (Hedlund, 2017: 6)

Here, the author defines rural areas in three different ways: once regionally, once locally (while putting settlements of 1,000 inhabitants and Stockholm in the same urban basket), and once by not defining them explicitly, yet exchanging it for the agricultural sector (which the author qualifies as not being synonymous with rurality, but does so anyway because agriculture takes place in rural areas ... which are rural because there is agriculture?). Noticeably, the author is interested in three different aspects of economic life: 1) labor market aspects of sparse social structures; 2) socio-economic characteristic of settlements smaller than 1,000 inhabitants; and 3) employment trajectories of agricultural workers. These are rather clear delimitations and there is really no need for adding the rural label. But the label is added. The problem lies in the fact that the results from the three studies are aggregated and repackaged as knowledge about how “rural Sweden” is.

It can thus be concluded that different rural areas have experienced, and will continue to experience, the shift from manufacturing to services differently, where some areas have grown in both demographic and employment terms while others have declined. In this sense the heterogeneity of rural areas are [sic] a product of both growth and decline ... (Hedlund, 2017: iii)

The conclusion is that different rural areas have experienced development... differently, and that “*the heterogeneity of rural areas*” is a product of both

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growth and decline. Could this be because rural areas have been defined differently in the first place?

Similar intimations can be found with the idea of “performing rurality”, sumptuously outlined by Edensor (2006) in the *Handbook of Rural Studies* as “ways in which the materialities and meanings of rural space are reproduced, consolidated and contested” (p. 487). However, while Edensor’s exposé goes into great detail to account for the fluidity of rural performances, the concept of rurality is handled rather one-sidedly throughout the paper, boiling down to all-too-familiar paraphernalia of rurality, such as craft products, golf centers, vineyards, gardens, family farms, cheese dairies, themed pubs, manor houses, hedgerows, farm yards, barns, streams, fences, pastures, horse breeding, foxhunting, houndsmen, horns, silage, fertilizers, and “a sensual apprehension of the textures of turf, hay and soil, the smells of beasts and vegetation, and the sounds of animals and machinery” (p. 491). A lot goes on in “rural areas” today (however we may wish to define them), and most of those activities occur irrespective of spatial variance: eating, sleeping, caring for children, jogging, running a barbershop, singing in a choir, checking Facebook, working from home, taking the bus to the mall, buying stuff online, fixing the car, having a beer, being unfaithful, being hungry, falling ill, becoming unemployed. Contrarily, in view of the steadily diminishing primary sector of the economy, disregarding these abundant yet atypical everyday performances as rural (because they fail to meet the preconceived taxonomies) could be seen as disenfranchising the vast majority of “rural dwellers” (whoever they may be) from their right to rurality (should they so choose), and thus violating the principal assumption of the performativity approach.

Such proclivity to “[think] *critically about rurality but nonetheless thinking about it*” (Halfacree, 2012) is intellectually dangerous in that it – in the face of lacking alternatives – may even instantiate a form of apologetics. Confer the following statement:

This article shows that while no single rural/urban classification can be used for all geographies, using such a product helps to better understand the differing characteristics of rural and urban areas in a consistent, transparent way. (Pateman, 2011: 11)

Here, initial denouncement is followed directly by appraisal: from lack of unity to full consistency (and even transparency?). Moreover, one cannot better understand the characteristics of rural and urban areas unless one first defines what ‘rural/urban’ is (which, as stated upfront, is insuperably

difficult). Effectively, better understanding here equals to ‘you get what you want’. This tendency is so strong it even penetrates expressly critical inquiries, as in Woodward (1996: 65), who shows “*how discourses of ‘the rural’ operate to conceal ‘deprivation’ in rural areas*”; in Cloke and Milbourne (1992: 371), who foresee “*forays into issues of the cultural constructs of rurality in contemporary rural lifestyles*”; or even Edensor’s (2006) aforementioned reflective piece, where rural performativity is defined as “*ways in which people are predisposed to carry out unquestioned and habitual practices in rural settings*” (my emphases). Human geography is awash with similar circular analyses, and all leading to the same outcome: the retention of ‘rural/urban’. Lastly, we must not forget that many rural and urban theorists have made lucrative careers by building on and adding to those very concepts; constantly keeping ‘rural/urban’ relevant is also a way of keeping them afloat. In essence, we seem to know they are bad, but we do it anyhow because the established culture of tolerance lets us get away with this. Effectively, such testimonies provide a truncated state of fidelity, where reflexivity is seconded by contradictory empirics of uneven value, few commonalities and questionable whereabouts. A conclusion to this line of reasoning could be that by turning toward performativity as an allegedly more helpful way of obtaining rural coherence, we at the same time overlook our own role in keeping rural and urban theory alive.

2.6. Challenges today

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, the rural/urban binary forms a strong social order for making sense of the world. What is more, it is strong enough for us to be more consumed with reconceptualizing this binary rather than deconceptualizing it on account of its inherently flawed constitution. This important observation remains curiously under-researched, while those who have had a go at it (as the preceding subchapter illustrates) have left the reader with a considerable portion of discomfiture.

It all boils down to the notion of culture. Since all spheres of human knowledge are created by “irrational humans”, they are intricately enmeshed in one another, both reflecting and shaping trains of thought in line with prevailing zeitgeists. Scientific activity, including geographical, is no different. *Sensu lato*, culture is all what people do, think and possess as members of a community; *sensu stricto*, it denotes a sphere of intercommunication, in which socially accepted meanings of value are important. In other words, culture is a set of learned phenomena transmitted by socialization (Rykiel,

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2014: 67). Hence, the cultural formation of individuals lies in the inculcation of various cultural codes. Importantly, to act as carriers of meaning these cultural codes cannot linger in isolation but must operate in systems of references (Bauman, 1996: 156). If not, Bauman argues, codes of meaning produce closed social systems at best, or totalitarian systems at worst. The question that yet remains to be answered is what kind of system – or social structure – do ‘rural/urban’ represent?

Trying to make sense of how social structures work, Haslanger (2017: 2–4) – drawing on Rawls, Zawidzki, Richardson, Sewell, Martin, and others – has compiled a set of helpful tools. To begin with, a social structure is a system of interdependent social practices that catalyze meaning in five dimensions.

1. Firstly, practices provide a stage setting for action, “*for unless there is the practice ... whatever one does, whatever movements one makes, will fail to count as a form of action which the practice specifies*” (Rawls, 1955: 25). In other words, if we discontinue evoking ‘rural/urban’ as conceptual frameworks the world will no longer “be” ‘rural/urban’.
2. Secondly, social practices require coordination of meaning. Because of human beings’ extreme sociality, “*solving problems of coordination with our fellows is our most pressing ecological task*” (Zawidzki, 2008: 198). With regard to ‘rural/urban’, this would imply that our preoccupation with preserving coordinated meaning (everybody understands ‘rural/urban’) may take precedence over other constructs such as fact, logic and consistency.
3. Thirdly, social practices do not form a hegemonic system, but “*a topology upon which specific causal factors interact to produce probabilistic effects*” (Haslanger 2017: 3 after Richardson). In translation, our practices “*draw on cultural ‘tools’ [e.g., ‘rural/urban’] to provide ‘paths’ [e.g., rural and urban development programs] across the social landscape in ways that facilitate coordination*” (Haslanger, 2017: 3). Effectively, we may overlook evidence of apparent inconsistency because ‘rural/urban’ seem so coordinated.
4. Fourthly, and oppositely, what things in the world are “*also depends on their preexisting physical characteristics*” (Sewell, 2005: 51). Hence, materiality may become a potential site of a coordination problem. This would mean that there is a material limit to how far the reinvention of

‘rural/urban’ can go before these concepts collapse under the burden of their proliferating variations.

5. Fifthly, social practices fall on a continuum between so-called thin and thick conceptions: thin practices are merely regularities in our behavior, while thick practices are the effect of our “*normative responsibility to act in a certain way*” (Martin, 2009: 7). ‘Rural/urban’ seem to operate in both ways depending on the situation: as thin conceptions in loose, non-binding everyday conversations, and as thick conceptions in the many professional contexts within which they appear (research, policy, administration) (cf. Gieryn, 1983). However, both help keep ‘rural/urban’ alive: thin conceptions by facilitating them and thick conceptions by legitimizing them. Now whether we assume the role of “useful idiots”⁴² or “centers of calculation”⁴³ is less important than the fact that by so doing we do contribute to a specific culture of tolerance towards these concepts.

Needless to say, culture matters, simply because culture is the primary source of both social progress and regression (Hirsi Ali, 2016). Yet, sometimes it may be difficult to see whether it is progress or regression we are catering to:

The fact that we rely on cultural schemas to interact not only with each other, but also the world, changes the world to conform to the schemas we bring to it. This has significant epistemic effects: the schemas we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped. Thus it becomes difficult to change schemas, for they appear to have epistemic warrant. (Haslanger, 2017: 3)

Realizing that conceptual tropes can solidify understandings of abstract psychologies, ways in which they lend insight into complex social relations and identities is an important part of how the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ need to be approached in the face of the current state of affairs. In other words, it is imperative to firstly and foremost change our relationship with ‘rural/urban’, regardless of whether we see them as materially definable

42 In political jargon, a useful idiot is “a person perceived as a propagandist for a cause the goals of which they are not fully aware” (Holder, 2009: 394).

43 The notion of a center of calculation was developed by Latour (1987) to denote venues in which “*knowledge production builds upon the accumulation of resources through circulatory movements to other places*” (Jöns, 2011: 158). The term is generic to the emergence of “modern knowledge”, with scientific and economic centers of calculation being “*inextricably linked to the rise of European science, capitalism and imperialism*” (ibid.).

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spaces, as academically titillating spaces of representation or as local sources of knowledge that deserve elevation to a position of authority. Contrarily, given all we know about 'rural/urban' today should take us in the direction of viewing them as communicatively weary approximates and perhaps abort feeding the constant cyclical processes of rural/urban conceptual sanitization.

This focal reshuffle could be summarized in three under-researched "human" dimensions of 'rural/urban': conceptual constitution, performativity and implications. However, unlike previous attempts that targeted these dimensions mostly through a focus on semantics, reflexivity and misinterpretations, in this thesis I put a greater emphasis on the production of rural/urban knowledge from the position of the researcher. This implies paying greater attention to how concepts operate at a cognitive level, how they gain foothold and are collectively maintained, and how we can avoid harm by "unlearning" concepts. These aspects will be primed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Concepts

3.1. Introduction

Words strain and crack, the poet laments; they slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place. What poets deplore, theorists have come to exploit. Indeed, what has inspired the last five decades of theorizing more than our great awareness of the slipshod fickleness of speech? What are large portions of theory other than sophisticated parasites of linguistic vicissitude? Whether the latter is said to be an inherent structural property of language or caused by the fact that it is a social medium processed by billions of wayward tongues that keep adding and subtracting layers of meaning, the bottom line is that linguistic communication cannot arrive at any reliable truth capable of fully sustaining itself for more than three pages. Subject to deferral and slippage, language is either inherently unstable or hopelessly promiscuous; in either case, it obstructs reliable signifying practices. (Winthrop-Young, 2014: 376–377)

What Winthrop-Young's soliloquy poignantly illustrates is how important it is to understand how we communicate with each other. While concepts are generally thought to reflect our supposedly shared thoughts and ideas, we must not forget that they are mediated through *language*, which is a slippery, unreliable, obstructive, parasitic, and promiscuous mode of communication. According to postmodernists we lack direct knowledge of anything; our relationship to everything we know is mediated by our concepts, our language and the society that gives us both. In other words, all objects are the products of conceptual activity, while between us and objects will always be concepts (cf. Hassard, 1999). However, here is where similarities between

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postmodernists and psychologists end (Peterson, 2016). Understanding postmodernism as “*a set of critical strategic and rhetorical practices ... [set out] to destabilize concepts*” (Aylesworth, 2015), psychologists disagree that “*the entire point of human categorization is about power relations*” (Peterson, 2016). Instead, understanding that concepts and categories are made up can lend an important perspective on how concepts emerge and come to be in the first place (Peterson, 2016), not least with regard to ‘rural’ and ‘urban’.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the rural/urban problem could be, in the most general way, summed up in two openings. Firstly, the debate can be held at an empirical level. By departing from observations, and, acknowledging changes that occur, the task is to discuss to what degrees “rural” and “urban” places have changed and how they need to be reimagined and redefined in the face of default ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ ideations. Secondly, the debate can be held on a philosophical level by looking into how ‘rural/urban’ can be understood today based on new theoretical developments. Both, however, depart from the basic assumption that there is ‘a rural’ and ‘an urban’ (they are treated as given), whereupon not enough stress is put on the cognitive and sociological processes steering both factions, and the sheer possibility that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as concepts may be inherently unsuitable to capture, understand and explain the various socio-spatial phenomena that take place within their overarching scope. This, in turn, requires more emphasis on their conceptual constitution, performativity and implications than their contents.

3.2. What is a concept

A discussion about concepts must commence with a definition of what exactly a concept is. A concept is a fundamental category of existence mediated as an abstract variant of an object, state or ability. When our mind makes generalizations it extracts similarities from numerous examples, and, depending on what similarities are chosen, the scope of the concept is changed (Margolis and Laurence, 1999). Hence, concepts are frameworks that shape the ways in which we perceive and understand the world.

Such understanding of concepts goes back to Kantian faculties of understanding: the notion that human understanding is bound by its situatedness within the human mind. This insistence led to the questioning of how we perceive knowledge and objectivity, consequently rendering the latter largely ineffective. With the lack of metaphysical justification of how knowledge is consolidated, philosophers and sociologists alike turned to

observing people in the practice of creating knowledge. Based upon insights from this line of inquiry, the concept of intersubjectivity, among others, has been suggested as a means to understand how perceptions about the world become more than just personal preferences when consolidated through customs, rituals and other social conventions (Crossley, 2002). Within social groups, everyday routines, small negotiations of work order, and establishing of institutions, for example, can over time mold and bolster structures, which to an unreflected mind may appear as objective truths. However, when external conditions change, mostly as a result of fast-paced civilizational progress, older conceptualizations are usually being questioned. The main point here is that intersubjective judgments affect – often unconsciously – our understandings of the lived world, and, ultimately, the ways in which we interact and engage with it. Hence, shared cognition and consensus are essential to effectively harbor human ideas and relations with the geographical environment (cf. Buttimer, 1976).

Seen as constituents of thoughts – either as mental representations (cf. Locke, [1690] 1975; Hume, 1739 [1975]), abilities (cf. Wittgenstein, [1953] 2010) or senses (cf. Peacocke, 1992) – concepts are crucial for most cognitive processes, including categorization, inference and decision-making (Margolis and Laurence, 1999). Although a concept has little value unless it is supporting a task or the doing of things, disputes about concepts “*often reflect deeply opposing approaches to the study of the mind, to language, and even to philosophy itself*” (Margolis and Laurence, 1999: 1). Given that “*the task of isolating and using a concept is deeply imbedded in the fabric of cognitive life*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 122), the problem becomes more tractable when seeing concepts in the capacity of the human brain than in their fixed characteristics. This in turn calls for an understanding of the chain of events leading up to the attainment of a concept.

3.3. Concept attainment

Concept attainment (or reconceptualization) signifies an inductive process that constructs concepts, or brings meaning to concepts, by searching for common characteristics and distinguishing conceptual examples from non-examples (Bennett and Rolheiser, 2001). Studies on the processes of concept attainment are concerned with how people achieve the information necessary for isolating and learning a concept, how they retain this information, and how this information may be transformed (Bruner et al., 1999: 101). Given that these vastly complex tasks of achieving, retaining, and

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transforming information are managed “*without exceeding the relatively narrow limits of human cognitive capacity*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 102), the process of concept attainment comes with a number of simplifications. Still, it remains a much overlooked aspect of knowledge production due to our preoccupation with “meaning” (content⁴⁴) rather than with the process of acquiring meaning. Our understanding of concepts is indicative of how we bring meaning to facts, principles, systems, theorems, and so forth (Bennett and Rolheiser, 2001); it also sets the tone for the discussion and negotiation of reality.

Concepts are learned by associating external stimuli with internal mediating stimuli “*either by some simple law of frequency or contiguity⁴⁵ or by a rather circular and overbegged law of effect⁴⁶*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 122). Avoiding an overly neurological explanation, Perkins (2013) summarizes concept attainment via four aspects: attributes, purpose, model cases, and argument. At the first level, a concept is formed on account of its critical attributes. For instance, the concept of ‘screwdriver’ is attained through the object representing it having a handle, a shaft and an end that fits into a screw. At the second level, for a concept to be attained it must be associated with a purpose. In the case of the screwdriver, it is designed to put in screws. At the third level, the concept must be associated with a concrete model case to act as a matrix (for instance, a flat-head screwdriver, a Robertson, or a Phillips). Lastly, for a concept to be attained it must be associated with a compelling argument for learning in. As for the screwdriver, we learn that it can give us a mechanical advantage when assembling objects.

Simple as it might sound, knowledge about the process of concept attainment can be underestimated. This is why we *know* some concepts but not others; this is why we *understand* some of the known concepts but not others; this is why we can relate and choose to *use* some concepts and not others; and this is why we *care* to learn some concepts and not others. We may have heard about the concept of “transubstantiation” but have no clue what it means; we may understand the concept of “landscape” but only at the very basic level; we may be able to relate fairly well to the concept of “politics” but lacking the necessary aptitude we may actively refrain from

44 Cf. “*Reflecting this challenge, four perspectives on how one can position rurality today are now presented, instead of dwelling on its content, although the latter is unavoidably referred to at times*” (Halfacree 2009b: 449).

45 The principle that ideas, memories and experiences are linked when one is frequently experienced with the other.

46 *Responses that produce a satisfying effect in a particular situation become more likely to occur again in that situation, and responses that produce a discomforting effect become less likely to occur again in that situation*” (Gray, 2011: 108-110).

discussing it; lastly, we may want to learn more about the concept of “salary negotiation” than about “a chicken’s worldview”.

An important question is how do we know we have learned a concept in a serviceable way? According to Bruner et al. (1999) this happens when a person feels “*able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty*” (p. 103). However, in instances where cues do not yield complete prediction people go about it in two basic ways. Some “*will continue to explore obvious attributes and abstract not obvious ones to explore so long as they are not able to categorize perfectly*”. Others “*will stabilize in their behavior and will base their categorizations exclusively on partially predictive cues without any further effort to try out new, possibly relevant attributes*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 103). What the second behavior implies is that we may think we know more about a concept than we actually do. As Peterson (2015) notes, to truly understand a concept, “[y]ou have to increase your focus and concentration on the every single element of the entity, and [it] takes a tremendous amount of cognitive effort ... to build your model of reality into that level of resolution”. Because people prefer order over chaos, they “*don’t like the feeling that there is something they don’t know*” (Peterson, 2015). What we do instead is default to low-resolution solutions.

This is particularly visible with complex concepts, and with concepts that are used both as colloquialisms and as specialized terms. With regard to the former, take the concepts ‘rural/urban’. Today they have become exceptionally complex and can denote almost everything – for example space, places, people, animals, practices, governance, art, philosophy. The problem is that the more you throw into a concept the less clear it is. Complexity is very difficult to operationalize (cf. “sustainability”) (Torre and Wallet, 2014: 651; Wuelser et al., 2012; Law, 2004). With regard to the latter, ‘rural/urban’ are deployed both as analytical categories throughout the society (e.g., in planning, administration, research) and as meaningful concepts used in everyday situations. Unlike esoteric, highly specialized concepts, such as ‘dehydration’, ‘afforestation’ or ‘antidisestablishmentarianism’, the terms ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are used widely by a non-specialist population to signify an established image of different places and spaces. Hence, lay people are more prone to have a clear picture of what ‘rural/urban’ means (unlike, for instance, antidisestablishmentarianism). Therefore, there may be ramifications when people’s lay discourses of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ become juxtaposed to situations, programs and policies that go under the label of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ but are used in a different or unfamiliar manner (cf. Jones, 1995).

Why we still will not let go of ‘rural/urban’ easily is, following Peterson (2015), because it destabilizes our past, our present and our future, and pres-

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ents us with a load of uncertainties, where we at one point had a functional map and knew how things related to one another, including how we should act upon it. Whether it is anxiety or fear depends on the magnitude of the novelty added. Something that contradicts one's axiomatic presuppositions releases a stress response, and although humans like novelty in small doses, seeing their expectations dashed causes a "*generalized disinhibition of potential*" (Peterson, 2015) with serious consequences upon our use of concepts (more on unlearning concepts in section 3.6).

3.4. Constitution of concepts

A constitution is a set of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which an entity is governed and these rules together make up (i.e., constitute) what the entity is. Conceptual constitution denotes all those signifiers put into a concept, producing an intersubjective state of mind or a representation of reality, which is associated with the name of that particular concept (cf. Margolis and Laurence, 1999). As such, it refers to the cognitive, logical and linguistic tenets of communication using mental shortcuts.

Humans group objects and events into pragmatically useful concepts with regard to reality constraints (Bruner et al., 1999: 117). The terms "concept" and "category" are thus intimately related. A category is "*a collection of instances, which are treated as if they were the same*", whereas a concept "*refers to all the knowledge that one has about a category*" (Kavouras and Kokla, 2007: 8). Categorization enables us to learn about our environment economically and allow us to cope with stimulus variability to extend the acquired behavior to new instances (Jitsumori, 2012: 513). Categorization is thus an aid to coping with complexity, but also a means for creating individual and collective identities (Clope and Johnston, 2005: 1). Categories determine real life experiences, political outcomes, and they can even make the difference between life and death (Peterson, 2016). Although intended as an aid to communicate and act in the world (Dahlberg, 2015: 207), some categories are vague and undetermined and only exist as abstractions (Clope and Johnston, 2005: 1–2).

There are different types of categories (e.g., physical objects, classes, properties, relations) and different means of categorization (the right to belong to a certain category). The most known way of categorizing is by means of definition as definition is thought to "*transcend the particulars of experience*" (Pinker, 2015: 271). This form of categorization creates so-called classical categories (also known as Aristotelian). What is perhaps less known

is that most categorization is done by way of family resemblance (creating so-called Wittgensteinian categories).

The concept of “family resemblance” (Ger. *Familienähnlichkeit*) argues that things that could be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all (Wittgenstein, [1953] 2010). Pinker (2015: 272–274), elaborating on problems inherent in categorization by family resemblance, lists its five basic problems:

1. Impossibility to find a set of membership conditions
2. Fuzzy borders
3. Crisscrossing features
4. Associations despite lacking criteria for membership (stereotype theory)
5. Unequal membership (prototype theory)

The first three problems are associated with difficulties of categorization. Pinker (2015: 272) argues that if the definition of a “turtle” includes having a shell, then soft-bodied variants like leatherbacks should not be considered turtles, but they are. Equally, men of clergy subject to celibacy (including the Pope) are not considered “bachelors”, even though the definition of the latter is an unmarried man. Fuzzy borders include not being able to guess what category an object should belong to. For instance, tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, aubergines, and peas are often considered “vegetables” (by way of family resemblance) whereas they definition-wise are “fruits”. And why is curling considered an “Olympic sport”, while the highly athletic and competitive dancesport is not? Even geography has had its share of family resemblance trouble when it ran into a crisis in the 1950s for being too descriptive to be considered a scientific discipline. Crisscrossing is yet another trait of family resemblance, meaning that members of categories show both family resemblance and lack of such at the same time, for example “[m]any vegetables are green, but carrots aren’t; many are crunchy when raw, but spinach isn’t” (Pinker, 2015: 273).

The two last problems – stereotyping and prototyping – are connected to the implications of categorization. As both imply the involvement of unfavorable inclusions and exclusions, they are perhaps the sharpest thorns in the logic of family resemblance, especially visible in the context of ‘rural/urban’.

Stereotyping requires perhaps a lesser introduction. Stereotypes are “consensual beliefs about group characteristics that influence the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of others, sometimes blatantly but often in

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a manner so subtle that they are outside awareness" (Fein and von Hippel, 2003: 1). As Pinker (2015: 274) notes, most categories have stereotyped features, that is *"traits that everyone associates with the category, even if they have nothing to do with the criteria for membership"*. For instance, Pinker continues, *"when people think of a grandmother, they think of gray hair and chicken soup, not a node in a genealogical tree"*. Why people rely on stereotypes (even when they would rather not) is predicated on a variety of cognitive, but also motivational and socio-cultural, factors, which in combination add to the inescapability and maleficence of stereotyping (Fein and von Hippel, 2003: 6). Moreover, given that stereotypes serve basic cognitive and motivational functions, *"they are highly resistant to change"* (Fein and von Hippel, 2003: 1).

The second major problem inherent of family resemblance categorization is prototyping. Prototype theory (Rosch, 1973) is a development in cognitive science where the idea has been explored. Instead of using a definition-based model (e.g., a "bird" is a feature with feathers, a beak and ability to fly), prototyping involves selecting and prioritizing elements of unequal status (e.g., a jay or a robin is often considered more prototypical of a bird than a penguin, an ostrich, a turkey or a hummingbird). Prototypical members of categories are *"those with the most attributes in common with other members of that category and with the fewest attributes in common with other categories"* (Rosch and Mervis, as cited in Jitsumori, 2012: 513). Since most categories *"are internally structured into prototypical and nonprototypical members, with nonprototypical members tending toward an ordering from better to poorer exemplars"* (Jitsumori, 2012: 514), categorization by means of family resemblance creates so-called artificial categories.⁴⁷

The difference between artificial categories and natural categories is that some categories (like "things that are black" or "things that you see on the ground") feel like artificial contrivances while others do not (Schweder and Miller, 2012: 41–42). A natural classification is *"one founded on attributes which have a number of other attributes correlated with them, while in an artificial classification such correlation is reduced to a minimum"* (Schweder and Miller, 2012: 43). This distinction helps us differentiate between "kind" and "contrivance" insofar as conflating them is known to be *"the source of controversy and much misunderstanding"* (ibid.). In accordance with so-called Adansonian realism (after Michael Adanson), categories must be constructed with a particular purpose and must be good enough to make

⁴⁷ Artificial categories are something many animals have been documented to learn (Jitsumori, 2012).

inductive generalizations. As such “*there cannot be one ideal and absolute scheme of classification for any particular set of objects ... there must always be a number of classifications*” (Gilmour, 1951: 401).

The issue of prototyping is especially relevant with geographic concepts, given that “*geographic concepts are associated with signs (images) used to capture their intended meaning*” (Kavouras and Kokla, 2007: 10). Somehow a panorama of New York, London and Shanghai is considered a better example of urban than Hum, Croatia, with 21 inhabitants or Lost Springs, Wyoming, the smallest town (yes, officially urban) in the world with a “city population” of 4.⁴⁸ Somehow pictures of historical quarters of European medieval towns fit more neatly into our images of urban than does the lava-clad capital of Plymouth, Montserrat, or Whittier, Alaska, whose whole population lives in a single multipurpose building. The Sydney waterfront serves as a better example of urbanity than do permanent tent cities in Saudi Arabia, agrotowns of Belarus, Chinese “urban villages”, a deserted Chernobyl, a disrepaired Luník IX or Kibera, Africa’s largest slum. The same goes for “rural”; open landscapes, bucolic hillside villages and horse-drawn carts amidst agricultural fields fill the screen upon a single Google image search. There is no sight of rooftop horticulture in Mexico City, degraded towns, ghost towns, involuntary parks, luxury safari villages, Antarctic research stations, or high-rise suburbs like Kozięgłowy off Poznań, where rural/urban labels change across the street.

Admittedly, these are extremes. Obviously, most of the “urban world” does neither look like New York nor Lost Springs, while “rurality” is seldom encased in solitary cottages overlooking a placid lake. The irony, however, is not that these non-prototypical examples are exceptions, but the mental images serving as prototypes for these concepts are not representative of the majority, let alone the totality, of all possible places that go under the invoked label (cf. Atkinson, 2017; Servillo et al., 2017; Hamdouch et al., 2017; Bell and Jayne, 2006; Woods [C], 2006⁴⁹). According to the United Nations (2014), the global rural population is now close to 3.4 billion,

48 For years it was proclaimed that Lost Springs had a population of 1, making the burg a national curiosity (Kelly, 2011).

49 For instance, as Atkinson (2017) argues, there has been limited recognition that small and medium-sized towns have a significant role to play in the European territory – accommodating 38% of the EU’s population (European Commission, 2011). Moreover, as Dijkstra et al. (2013) show, the relationship between locality size and economic performance has limited relevance in Europe. Servillo et al. (2017) add that small and medium-sized towns “*have largely been neglected by urban research*” (see also Heffner, 2005; Vaishar et al., 2016). Also, the rural-urban dichotomy is known to disguise the problems of small towns (Woods, 2006) with “small urban centres” often being overlooked in terms of aid assistance.

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while 3.9 billion are considered urban. However, since the vast majority of these areas are neither bustling high-rise metropolises nor agricultural sparsely populated lands (cf. Dijkstra et al., 2013; Hamdouch et al., 2017), a syllogistic (deductive) error known as the undistributed middle arises. Still, these prototypical members influence our conception of 'rural/urban' as categories, when we select our case studies, when we reach for theory, when we explain phenomena, when we devise policies, and when we wonder why some problems remain insoluble (cf. Servillo et al., 2017).

In effect, we turn prototypes into stereotypes. As Rosch (1973: 330) put it, "*it is easier to learn categories in which the natural prototype is central to a set of variations than it is to learn categories in which a distortion of a prototype is central and the natural prototype occurs as a peripheral member*". This is a very important observation. Realizing that the world is not two-part; stereotypes and prototypes are especially visible with binaries. Human geography in particular "*is replete with ossified binaries that require serious attention*" (Clope and Johnson, 2005a: 10), with 'rural/urban' oft being mentioned as an exemplary one. As noted in the previous chapter, due to ongoing rapid societal changes the categories 'rural/urban' can no longer conceptually accommodate the variety and fragmentation of socio-material morphologies that go under these labels. The results of conceptual confusions are visible if only with statistics, replete with conflicting statements such as that 80% of the European Union is urban and 55% is rural (European Commission, 2010: 245). In effect, when we think of rural or urban prototypes, it is likely we are invoking near stereotypes. And because we are locked on stereotypes, we do not actually know how a true rural or urban prototype looks like today. This is perhaps the greatest reason why most rural geographers conduct their studies in stereotypically defined rural areas and most urban geographers locate their research in prototypical urban environments. Contrarily, relatively few choose the immense variety of places in-between (cf. Atkinson, 2017; Servillo et al., 2017; Hamdouch et al., 2017; Bell and Jayne, 2006) because they are more difficult to peg, more difficult to insulate theoretically (due to the lack of appropriately labeled scholarly debate), and perhaps also more difficult to sell to a "rural" or "urban" journal (in order to be interesting to a major general geographical journal, an atypical study must exert a higher level of skill and erudition).

This does not come without problems. By departing from one or a few attributes, most likely the most visually prominent ones (such as contrasting morphologies), we inadvertently downplay a nuanced representation of a more complex state. Compare the following parallel sets of statements:

Talk to the black guy over there! Ask the old woman! I was talking to her standing next to the ugly one.		Talk to the intelligent guy over there! Ask the nice woman! I was talking to her standing next to the cancer survivor.
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Here, certain visual attributes were chosen before other, less conspicuous ones, marking already in its inception morphological and physiological attitudes toward conceptualizations of subjects. As Abram (2003: 31) put it, “*looking is the active organization of what we see, and what we see is socially organized, structured through our internal interpretation of the visual stimulus*”. As we have seen in the past, the construction and cementation of stereotypes has the tendency to become incendiary and even pernicious to various groups (e.g., racism, genderism, heteronormativity, age-centricity). However, precisely this often tends to be the case with ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ representations. For instance, having investigated the discursive shaping of the most strategic policy designed to inform the path of “rural development” in contemporary Europe (EU’s Rural Development Policy), the results were unexpectedly unbalanced (Brauer and Dymitrow, 2014). Despite the outlined intentions to broaden the policy’s scope toward more human-oriented subtleties (cf. European Commission, 2008a), there was clear thematic overemphasis on agriculture, while the focus on aspects of quality of life was largely insignificant (cf. also Cagliero et al., 2010; ECoA, 2011; Schuh et al., 2012). The strong focus on agribusiness effectively diverted the attention from “rural people” to “rural land”, including the vast majority of “rural people” not involved in the primary sector. Here, a prototypical (functional) view on rurality overshadowed the more subtle and less apparent aspects of rurality (community life, family life, health, political stability, gender equality) except for in the rhetoric that proclaimed otherwise.

Prototyping has more far-reaching implications if we consider how the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are used in practice, not least in research. For instance, why call something or someone “rural” by the image of, for example, an open landscape when talking about subjects causally unrelated to that image (or when such causality cannot be readily established), for instance “rural youth”. This equals creating an artificial category based on a prototype, which only occurs as a peripheral member within the invoked category (“rural”). There is great likelihood that the immense category “rural” is not explanatory of what we wish to understand (cf. Hoggart, 1990: 247). In effect, we often distinguish subjects on account of objectionable descriptive definitions (of ‘rural/urban’), while our logical connections smack of rejected socio-cultural definitions – a conflation, which, for example, in the context

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of deprivation, may have dire consequences. Shapiro [B] (2015) takes it even further, arguing that “[a]nytime [we] put a modifier in front of a term that is inherently good [we] turn it into a perversion of itself” (e.g., “political correctness” is no longer a question of true or false, i.e., “correctness”, but about conscious avoidance of consequences). Using the expression “rural youth” requires ample reflection, definition and motivation; why is this modifier chosen and not another. More often than not, this is seldom the case. However, the problem is perhaps less about the dichotomization per se than how much damage it can cause. While attentive attitudes toward undesirable implications of binaries have suffused much of human geography, our culturally disproportionate focus on difference (in the vein of Deleuze, [1968] 1994) continues to batter our psychological proneness to binarize. This, in turn, makes us rely on stereotypes, which are perilously prone to leave out the details, where the problems usually are located.

3.5. Performativity of concepts

Performativity is a perspective acknowledging that citational uses of concepts produce a series of effects. By taking on certain roles or acting (performing) in certain ways we consolidate an impression of certain things being the way they are (e.g., “rural” or “urban”), and this in turn is crucial to what we think ‘rural/urban’ are, including how we choose to present that knowledge to the world (cf. Butler, 2010). By taking a cue from earlier developments, postmodernists and poststructuralists exposed a host of paradoxes, false axioms and hidden power structures implanted into the neutralized realities of racism, colonialism and patriarchy (to mention but a few) (see Said, 1978; van Dijk, 1993; Butler, 1990). Effectively, hitherto neutralized concepts, such as ‘black/white’, ‘civilized/wild’ or ‘male/female’, have become hotwired. There are premises suggesting that this acumen is equally valid with respect to the concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, whose inherently dichotomous character, objectively blurred characteristics, immense spatial coverage, and aspectual all-inclusiveness results in an odd marriage between imagery of bygone world views and fast-paced transformations of the 21st century.

With regard to ‘rural/urban’, Woods’s (2010) aforementioned identification of geographers as active agents in producing, reproducing and performing rurality adds a different dimension to the notion of rural or urban performativity by acknowledging that concepts and categories take shape through processes influenced by histories, discourses, ecologies, and power relations (cf. Dahlberg, 2015: 207). While all of these factors belong

to the firmament of academia, not all of them would count as scientific by contemporary standards. Having in section 2.5 made a case for the double-edged character of performance-oriented reflexivity, I would suggest that conceptual performativity must be addressed differently: through the prism of extra-scientific factors.

One of the first mentions of extra-scientific factors was by Weber ([1904] 1941), who contended that defining science according to purely rational and empirical laws would not work in social inquiry as these are “*decided according to value-ideas*” (p. 80). Fleck [1935] (1979), building on Weber’s work, introduced the concept of ‘thought collective’ as an important step to understanding how scientific culture changes over time. Kuhn ([1962] 1970) developed this idea and incorporated it into his concept of *scientific paradigm*, in which external factors such as “*idiosyncrasies of autobiography and personality ..., the nationality or the prior reputation of the innovator ... sometimes play a significant role*” (p. 153). Foucault, in his account of the human sciences, applied the similar notion of *épistème* to elaborate the impact of power on scientific progress. In Foucault’s [1966] (1970) sense, extra-scientific factors influence how the social construction of a given concept develops according to the changing discourses. Furthermore, “*extra-scientific factors [have been identified to] play a strong role in determining who collaborates with whom in the international scientific community*” (Frame and Carpenter, 1979: 481). Among other extra-scientific factors, scholars mention: gender (Harding, 1991), geography (Livingstone, 2003), ideology (Walker, 2003), memory (Nora, 1989),⁵⁰ politics (Latour, 1993), and language (Pinker, 2003). Still later developments have also sought to extend scientific knowledge production to include cognitive and other psychological contingents (Feist and Gorman, 2013; Carifio and Perla, 2013; Proctor and Capaldi, 2012; Klahr, 2002) to better understand how our own minds can extra-scientifically influence scientific knowledge production.⁵¹ More importantly, all these factors affect the concepts we use.

50 Eriksen (1995: 46) notably attributes provision of many contemporary qualities by means of social production of memory. She particularly sees academia as a major contributor to such production, which renders history a “*mythology of modernity*”, that is a linear metanarrative capable of supplying contemporary populations with roots and answers to principal existential questions.

51 For instance, in the context of higher education, Trowler and Cooper (2002: 221) characterize extra-scientific factors as “*a constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships related to [the subject] ... identities in interaction, power relations, codes of signification, tacit assumptions, rules of appropriateness, recurrent practices, discursive repertoires, implicit theories*”, all of which influence the design of teaching and learning regimes.

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New concepts and ideas are introduced into science constantly. Some ideas become popular while others fall out of favor; this is part of the natural progression of any growing academic field. However, it is not only the academic merit of competing concepts or their internal validity that decides if these will be incorporated or abandoned (Latour, 1993). Classical philosophy of science and the idea of a disinterested academia may suggest this, but from 50 years of critical sociological studies of science in action we know that this is not the case (Sismondo, 2012). The basic assumption is that the cost involved in the unmaking of a concept (in terms of socio-material alliances holding it together) conditions if a proposition is accepted as true or false, whether it will be criticized or praised, and whether it will be maintained or abandoned (Fleck, [1935] 1979; Chalmers, [1976] 2013; Law, 2004).

Figure 3.1 is a visualization of the process of transformation that every scientific concept goes through.⁵² Firstly, a concept needs to be established. This is achieved by drawing inspiration from previously established knowledge, the so-called hinterland. This allows for the identification of ontological categories, whereupon a study object can be identified. This ontological transformation reduces an overwhelmingly complex reality into an understandable and manageable size. The next step represents a methodological transformation, which generates data and offers hints to potential correlations. This transformation isolates the relevant information according to procedures that were established within the (methodological) hinterland. The following theoretical transformation is achieved by further removing and filtering redundant data and linking this into the existing (theoretical) hinterland. This, in turn, renders a theoretical idealization of the observed reality, which subsequently becomes a representation of reality in correspondence with the established hinterland, influencing new studies. From then on, the whole process is repeated. This is, for example, how the concepts of 'rural/urban' have made their way into human geography, and why they are so difficult to get rid of.

This form of conceptual performativity, however, runs into problems of representation, because previous knowledge (upon which its construction was based) inherently influences how "reality" is to be interpreted for every new study. Science and Technology Studies (STS) researchers called this dilemma the multiple reality assumption (cf. Mol, 2002). This interpretation is at odds with the conventional assumption that the more different approaches are implemented to solve a problem, the better our understanding of it. For instance, if we adopt new, borrowed or just different lenses to

⁵² This text is partly extracted from Brauer and Dymitrow (2017).

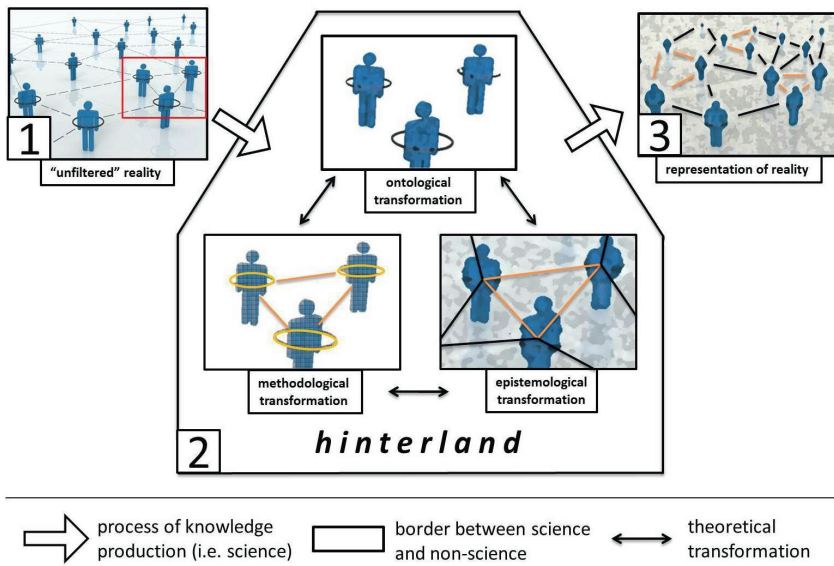


Figure 3.1. A sociological model of doing science (Brauer and Dymitrow, 2017).
 Source: Authors' reinterpretation of Law (2004).

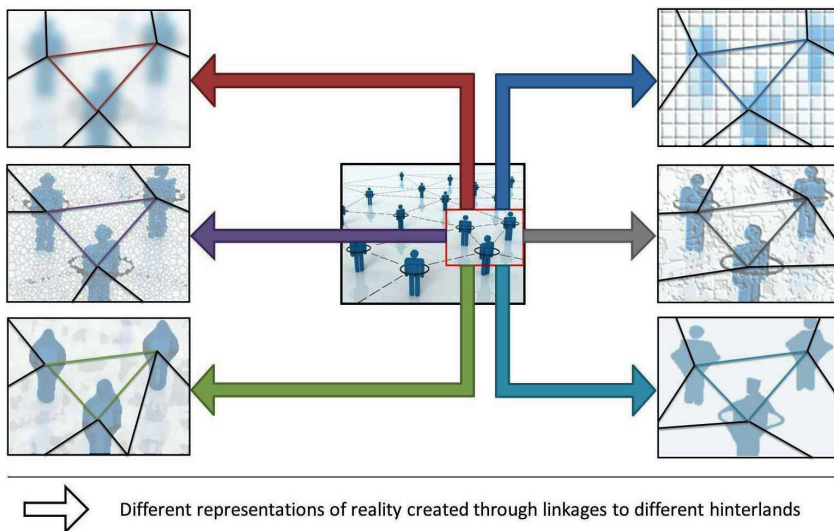


Figure 3.2. Illustration of the consequences of a multiple-reality assumption for scientific representation (Brauer and Dymitrow, 2017). The same situation is being transformed into different representations of reality, depending upon a particular approach chosen. The different colors represent different ontological, methodological or theoretical approaches (see Figure 3.1 for how this process unfolds). Source: Authors' reinterpretation of Mol (2002).

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approach 'rural/urban' this will lead to a better understanding of it. Instead, the multiple reality assumption implies that depending on what research is chosen to serve as an alliance, a new interpretation of the same reality is created – that is not the same as a “better understanding” (Figure 3.2).

At a theoretical level, this gives rise to an inescapable relativism of ideas that has laid the foundation for much criticism toward classical definitions of science, which cannot circumvent this impasse philosophically (Kuhn, [1962] 1970; Feyerabend, [1975] 1993; Sismondo, 2012). The practical consequence of this contingency is that scholars can be referring to the same object, which nonetheless is conceptualized much differently depending upon what parts of the hinterland the chosen approach is built on (cf. Mol, 2002; Law, 2004). Hence, the particularities of sociological knowledge production as outlined by STS scholars see knowledge production as a process of praxis. The implication is that although philosophically contradicting knowledge claims cannot be achieved, in praxis it is possible (cf. Collins and Evans, 2002).

Now, in instances where rules and regulations are vague, more undesirable material is likely to sieve through, and we will face greater difficulties determining what is scientifically sound and what is not. In the context of 'rural/urban', this would mean setting up more conscious rules of introspection to determine whether 'rural/urban' are truly analytically contributory to a specific line of research, or whether they serve merely as a decorum acquired by external mechanisms (especially in settings where extricate criteria are vague) (Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Shanteau, 1992). In other words, emphasizing the knowledge production with regard to most concepts (performativity of science) is crucial not only to avoid the 'garbage in, garbage out effect' (downgrading social theory), but also to avoid causing indirect harm, that is when our research findings are siphoned into the public realm under the guise of scientific justification.

3.6. Implications of concepts

As the outline in Chapter 2 shows, the rural/urban binary has never been portrayed as a neutral conceptual pair but as a battle of discourses, with one ousting the other at some point in history (Woods, 2011). 'Rural' and 'urban' are problematic in this respect, especially when applied as guiding lights in policy, governance and research. By cherry-picking stop images of rural/urban relations from one historical period and sustaining them in a reality of much changed values and perspectives, a host of problems is

likely to arise. It is all too often forsaken that the mere usage of any concept on a systematic basis curtails maneuverability to address the complexity of socio-economic problems by discursively steering intervention into pre-defined alleyways. Not only does the practice of cultural labeling cement pre-existing power structures imbedded into these concepts (Eriksson, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Stenbacka, 2011; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015; Zegar, 2016), it also dictates how a problem should be addressed regardless of its de facto needs of intervention.⁵³

An important aspect of concepts is the anticipated consequences of categorizing. As noted earlier, to have learned a concept well means being able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty. In instances of low certainty one must consider both the gains from a correct categorization and the price of wrongly categorizing a specific instance. There is also a need to consider whether the “rightness” or “wrongness” of a categorization has a different price attached to them (Bruner et al., 1999: 105). This is not only a psychological aspect of categorization; divagations of this type are also embroiled in the tenets of consequentialism, a perspective holding that consequences are the decisive basis for any assessment about the rightness or wrongness of deploying a concept (Mizzoni, 2010).⁵⁴ Therefore, choosing a concept must be preceded by a series of interrelated sequential decisions (Bruner et al., 1999). And it is here academic conceptualization should differ from everyday conceptualization. But does it?

Turning attention to the constitution of certain concepts rather than their implied signification has helped isolate linkages between conceptual dichotomies and social oppression in philosophy, psychology, sociology and much of human geography (Sewpaul, 2007; Blackburn, 2005; Chiappari, 2001; Hermans and Kempen, 1998; Scholz, 1995). For instance, the impact of dichotomies ‘love/justice’ and ‘private/public’ and their application in practice has been identified as the means through which oppression materializes in religion and capitalism to the detriment of women and the needy (Freibach-Heifetz and Stopler, 2008). As for ‘rural/urban’, similar contingencies have been more downplayed, whereby the use of these concepts is seldom deliberated as causal or contributive to marginalization, but the concepts are more often used as analytical canvases for *existing* social problems (cf. Amin et al., 2002; Torre and Wallet, 2014). For instance, as Hubbard (2006: 2–3) ponders, the question whether high levels of crime,

53 The seemingly innocent concepts of ‘rural development’ and ‘urban development’ are tacit reaffirmations of this intricacy.

54 In its extreme form, consequentialism can also imply that if a goal is important enough, any method of obtaining it is adequate (“*the end justifies the means*”) (Mizzoni, 2010: 104).

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disease, fear, and poverty are problems of the city or merely social problems that happen to be located in cities is rarely addressed, while a focus on urban representations has been criticized for distracting from real problems of poverty, inequality, deprivation, and crime in cities (Peet, 1998; Hamnett, 2003). The discourse of urban planning, for instance, is implicated in the production of “the ghetto”, a site associated with particular people and particular kinds of practice (Cresswell, 2009). In the same vein, ways in which people see the countryside (the so-called “rural gaze”) has been demonstrated to obscure the recognition of problems such as crime, poverty and deprivation in rural areas (Abram, 2003; Barclay, 2004; Donnermeyer et al., 2006⁵⁵; Shortall, 2008). Social problems inherent in “rural areas” continue to be characterized in specific ways, for example in terms of lesser access to transport, more pronounced demographic structures (including greater age and gender disparities), specific inheritance systems (including modes of land tenure) or specific forms of housing (European Commission, 2008b). However, when social policy conceptualizes deprivation along rural/urban lines, that deprivation may acquire a different meaning from the anticipatory spatiality it is being devised for (cf. Shortall, 2008). Karwacki (2002: 90) put it somewhat differently: “*The universalism of the culture of poverty is ... not identical to the ideal type but a locally modified nucleus of that culture which lives its own life*”. So while there is no shortage of studies set to explore the relation between “rural” or “urban” social policy and deprivation/exclusion (cf. Bernard et al., 2017; Vilches et al., 2017; Levy and Schady, 2013; Lerner and Eakin, 2011; Shortall, 2008; Woodward, 1996), one global tendency can be observed: the persistent localization of problems in prototypically rural/urban areas (see Dymitrow and Brauer, 2017 for further elaboration).

For one, places transcending commonplace rural characterizations are often overlooked in social policy (e.g., poorly serviced housing estates, brownfield villages, flophouses, residential trailer parks, shantytowns, favelas, tent cities, and collective state farm estates). For another, conceptual irreconcilabilities of social policy are likely to suppress equivalents of “urban problems” in formally rural areas (and vice versa) (Levy, 2008). Hence, this practice of categorization runs the risk of purifying social space through the rejection of difference between different kinds of spaces (Sibley, 1988). This is likely to affect both the quality and the quantity of deployed intervention (cf. Marks-Bielska, 2005). Also, as Torre and Wallet (2014: 615) note, in the face of the ambiguity and controversy of the term “rural”, it is unclear

55 For instance, as Donnermeyer et al. (2006) note, the concept of “rural crime” has been neglected as an area of study (but see Paper IV).

whether relations between regional, rural and territorial development are “*various forms of the same movement, mechanisms that slot together, or ... independent processes*”. Given the lack of appropriate concern for the strong cultural dimension embedded in the rural/urban conception, it remains uncertain to what extent its retention as a pair of seemingly neutral spatialities contributes to the retention of some pressing societal problems. Although the perpetuation of the rural/urban binary must not lead to problems of deprivation, the sheer division of space (and by implication people) into two categories is bound to clash in practice in one way or another.

In conclusion, by shifting the focus to the performative nature of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts, their potential for harmdoing can be better understood.

3.7. Unlearning concepts?

Words are stiff, obstinate, unyielding; they are slow to move and hard to change. Their recalcitrance is deeply rooted: words are frozen blocks of meaning with seven-eighths submerged in the past. This, too, theory exploits. The originality effect of many new proposals emerges from the confrontation between new conceptual enterprises and the ghosts of concepts’ past. Conceptual inertia is no less fertile a source of intellectual unrest than conceptual slippage. (Winthrop-Young, 2014: 377)

Having commenced Chapter 3 with Winthrop-Young’s quote on the elusiveness of language, I would also like to close it with the second part of his exposition. Here, Winthrop-Young (2014) shows that concepts are not only slippery, but once established they can become rock-solid and may be very difficult to get rid of. More interestingly, Winthrop-Young couples this property of language to something theorists have come to exploit. Obviously, any theme can be developed infinitely by adding new elements, changing approaches and crossbreeding it with other disciplines. Also, ‘rural/urban’, so it seems, have been explored in an enormous range of facets, from a plethora of different viewpoints, and across numerous disciplines, even though any exhaustive conceptual discussion points to them being convoluted figments of imagination that poorly reflect a changed reality (see Chapter 1). In that vein, recourse to ‘non-representation’, ‘embodiment’, ‘more-than-human’ approaches, ‘assemblages’, ‘effacement’, ‘post’- and ‘beyond’-perspectives, and many other analytical lenses attached to ‘rural/urban’ can be seen in a dual way: either as “redevelopment” on the positive end, or merely as ex-

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amples of pressured academics lending sophistication to empirically and philosophically exhausted themes by exploiting the obduracy of language. In the context of academia this of course is associated with the idea scientific progress (see section 1.2 for a primer). Regardless of what direction it may take, science cannot stand still (Kuhn, [1962] 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970). This prerequisite gives rise to a constant innovation requirement, according to which we are required to take knowledge further, even with regard to themes that seem to have come to an intellectual standstill.

But are we really just cunning theorists who exploit the stiffness, obstinacy and unyieldingness of language? From a cognitive point of view – not necessarily. There are a number of concept retainment mechanisms, two of them being cognitive inertia and belief perseverance (Anderson, 2007). Cognitive inertia refers to the tendency for beliefs or sets of beliefs to endure once formed. In particular, cognitive inertia refers to the human inclination to rely on familiar assumptions and exhibit a reluctance and/or inability to revise those assumptions, even when the evidence supporting them no longer exists or when other evidence would question their accuracy (Hodgkinson, 1997). Belief perseverance means clinging to an initial belief in the face of new information that firmly contradicts or disconfirms it (Anderson, 2007: 109) and is consistent with the view that human beings act at times in an irrational manner (West, 1985). A particular subtype of belief perseverance involves so-called naïve theories, which are social theories about how the world works, often based on stereotypes and which are eagerly attributed to causes of various phenomena (Anderson, 2007: 109). At least three psychological processes underlie belief perseverance: availability heuristic, illusory correlation and data distortion. The first involves recalling how well one has done in the past; the second involves remembering more confirming than disconfirming cases; and the third involves the inadvertent creation of confirming cases while ignoring the disconfirming ones (Anderson, 2007: 110). What this can mean for ‘rural/urban’ is that a person who has in the past been successful while using these concepts (e.g., received a sizeable grant, earned a respectable title or published an important work related to ‘rural/urban’) is more likely to pursue similar approaches/solutions in the future. And while cognitive inertia is psychologically factored and belief perseverance is sociologically (culturally) conditioned, both exert the same effect on the retention of bad concepts by acting as psychological barriers to change⁵⁶: instead of thinking for ourselves, we subscribe to predetermined

⁵⁶ There are also a number of other sociological and psychological factors, which are dealt with in more detail in Paper V and hence need no further introduction at this point (boundary-work, perspectivism, politicized inclusionism, innovation requirement, cog-

patterns. For instance, consider the following exposé from *The Economist* on the concept of “Eastern Europe”:

“Eastern Europe” is a concept dating from the Cold War. Geographically it didn’t make much sense even then. Finland and Greece are not really Western, and Prague is west of Vienna. Nowadays the term doesn’t make sense politically or economically either. Even Cold-War Eastern Europe wasn’t a monolith; it included mavericks like Romania and rebels like Yugoslavia and Albania. Today the whole idea of Eastern Europe is out of date and a bad brand with connotations of poverty, marginalization, and weirdness. Most of the ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe are anything but. [Eleven] of them are in the EU or more or less in the waiting-room. The richest ones are catching up the poorest of the old Western member states. Nor are the countries of the former Eastern Europe marginal. All the newish EU members, plus Albania and [Montenegro], are in NATO too. Eight are in Schengen. [Five] are members of the euro. Only one country in Europe meets both the Eurozone’s rules on debt and deficit and NATO’s target on defense expenditure; that’s Estonia, which wasn’t even on the map [27] years ago. (*The Economist*, 2011; updated for 2017)

Still this concept continues to spook and even rebrand itself through the current (2017) wave of reluctance to “Western Europe’s” (e.g., France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, UK) proclivity toward political correctness, openness to immigration and submission to loss of cultural specificity. Most importantly, this is not necessarily a sign of ignorance; it is how processes of concept retainment work.

To avoid or eliminate the negative consequences of a bad concept must involve any of the following: (re)developing it (making its meaning broader and its edges softer), limiting it (reducing belief perseverance) or unlearning it (eliminating it altogether). While my stance on redeveloping questionable concepts is unmistakable, let us now look at the two remaining ones.

Limiting conceptual use by reducing belief perseverance is a difficult process given that the most straightforward solution – simply asking people to be unbiased – does not work (Anderson, 2007). An important and often forsaken factor here is that concepts are of uneven significance and are therefore differently difficult to readapt. What we need to consider here is

native dissonance, confirmation bias, analytical ethnocentrism, dualistic thinking, textual entrapment, routinization, vested interest, imperception of concept-subject relation).

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the so-called content effect in deductive reasoning (Cosmides, 1985). Human performance differs dramatically depending on the type of problem we are facing. People are good logicians when it comes to social contracts (rights and responsibilities); however, with abstractions (“*bloodless letters and numbers*”) this comes less easy (Pinker, 2014: 46). Although the premises of logic itself should hold regardless of the content, psychologically content matters. This is perhaps why ‘rural/urban’ are more contested when tied to a social contract (e.g., in countries where differences in wages are differentiated on account of ‘rural/urban’ inhabitation), but in instances where no such contract can be identified they merely hover as undisruptive abstractions⁵⁷ (compare this to the concept of ‘gender’, where breaches of contract spark much stronger reactions). Concluding her seminal paper on categories, Rosch (1973) states that “*artificial prototypes (the best examples of nonperceptual categories) once developed, may affect the learning and processing of categories ... in a manner similar to the effects of natural prototypes*” (p. 349). That would suggest that prototypical versions of the abstract (nonperceptual) categories of ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’, once learned, are difficult to get rid of, and this in turn affects how we internalize ‘rural’ and ‘urban’: when we take a bite of the apple, there is no way back. To amend that, Anderson (2007) argues that the most successful debiasing technique is counterexplanation,⁵⁸ namely “*get[ting] the person to explain how the opposite might be true*” (p. 110).

While debiasing is rooted in social psychology, the concept of *unlearning* has its origins in managerial and organizational theory (Hedberg, 1981). Despite a slight resonance of totalitarianism over it (the mind goes back to the 1990s film *Total Recall*), the concept merely denotes a categorical change of perspective in the face of cognitive challenges associated with relinquishing outdated practices. The concept has since been used in a wide variety of contexts, including health, technology and education, indicating a thriving research field (cf. Becker, 2005; Starbuck, 1996; Pratt and Barnett, 1997). Unlearning concepts is rooted in the fact that “*it is possible for individuals to extinguish memories*” [sic] and is associated with a number of nested suppositions, including existential, methodological, and relevance-contingent (Thomas, 2011: 17). Meadows (2008: 162), for instance, emphasizes the importance of “*exposing paradigmatic assumptions, or the shared ideas ...*

57 As Cloke (2005: 26) put it, “*I am aware that for some individuals, academic contexts, and even entire disciplines, the cultural turn will have made little impact on the everyday conceptualization of rurality and rural change*”.

58 Counterexplanation is the opposite of inoculation, a theory developed by the social psychologist W.J. McGuire in 1961 to explain how to keep existing beliefs consistent in the face of counter-attitudinal influences.

that constitute our deepest beliefs about how the world works”, especially those that “unknowingly support actions that are no longer useful” (in: O’Brien, 2013: 591). In an effort to understand why people, organizations and systems do not change, Kegan and Lahey (2009) metaphorize the inertia as an immune system designed to protect us against negative impacts, disequilibria and anxiety.⁵⁹ And while important for the proper functioning of individuals and structures, the system, however, “can be dangerous when it rejects new material that it needs in order to heal itself or to thrive” (O’Brien, 2013: 591).

Let us test this preposition by returning to the “Eastern Europe” example, for which The Economist (2012) experimentally suggests a number of such categories:

Instead of “Eastern Europe” we need some new categories. I like “Danube Europe” based on that river’s catchment area. It shares a lot of history, culture, climate, food and architecture. Then there’s “Roma Europe”, the countries that are home to most of the continent’s most put-upon ethnic minority. Then there’s “Scared-of-Russia Europe”, which is the countries that still regard the Kremlin as just possibly a military threat or at least some kind of security problem ... As for “Eastern Europe”, put it in the dustbin of history... better late than never. (The Economist, 2012)

Although presented slightly tongue-in-cheek, the suggested new categories – if you think about it – are really neither better nor worse than “Eastern Europe”, although many of us would probably find them... strange? In his evaluation of the concept of unlearning, Thomas (2011) notes that “*the most apparent shortcoming of popular application of the unlearning concept has been the lack of holistic and integrative thinking*” (p. 29), and that the concept of unlearning would be better served by a clearer distinction between two levels of unlearning: collective (organizational) and individual. This would suggest that unless the individuals’ relation to ‘rural/urban’ changes, the institutions will not.⁶⁰ At the same time, lest the institutions change, we

⁵⁹ The concept of *autopoiesis* (Maturana and Varela, [1972] 1980) is instructive here. It refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. While introduced as a biological concept, it has been applied within the fields of systems theory and sociology (cf. Koch, 2005).

⁶⁰ When creating laws, order and institutions, we concurrently crystallize our actions by saving them in material actors, which in themselves create restrictions. An institutional lock-in occurs when a network is created, wherein actors enforce a self-referential system that solidifies its rules of conduct. It happens through “*organizational learning processes, historical framing, and routinisation of management which creates taken-for-granted*”

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may find it difficult to disentangle from the material web of actor-networks that hold 'rural/urban' pinned to the wall.⁶¹ In this constant crisscrossing between protectionism and progression, 'rural/urban' assume a precarious position. On the one hand, unlearning them at the individual level is a "*complex process that integrates knowledge acquisition, skill building and the ability to make specific meaning out of a number of environmental cues*" (Thomas, 2011: 4). On the other hand, this is all too often thwarted by existing practices and habits (Clark, 2009).

As for human geography, making a significant impact within our discipline is becoming increasingly difficult; nevertheless, since the innovation requirement stands a more obtainable goal seems to be developing and redeveloping old concepts. On a more optimistic note, if we subscribe to the idea that understanding the world is changing it (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010: 342), the question we need to ask ourselves is what kind of conceptual development do we want: the retentive or the forgetful? Or, more specifically, do 'rural/urban' – like "Eastern Europe" – belong to the dustbin of history?

3.8. Summary and research gap

In this chapter, I located 'rural/urban' in a conceptual frame, that is, shifted the attention from 'rural/urban' as geographical spaces (representations of the world) to 'rural/urban' as concepts purportedly thought to define geographical spaces (conceptions that we think represent the world). The first three subchapters dealt with the constitution of concepts: I defined what a concept is, explained how concept attainment in humans works and how we construct the categorical basis for conceptualization. I further expanded this knowledge to a framework for understanding that concepts always come with implications, be it desirable or undesirable. The following chapter has extended the use of concepts to the notion of performativity, that is, the capacity for language not simply to communicate but also to consummate action. While sections 3.1 through 3.5 roughly mirror the theoretical basis

problem and solution formulations, or 'rules of thumb', that align with ruling institutional practice" (Essebo, 2013: 76). Ultimately, this system both creates and continuously strengthens institutional lock-in. Paper V details this supposition, including providing a template for individual guidance.

61 Such a perspective is also more in line with the psychological point of view given the difficulty "*to recapture preconceptual innocence*" (Bruner et al., 1999: 101) and the fact that memories are (apparently) never completely extinguishable (cf. Postman and Underwood, 1973), but which can be unlearned through individual effort.

for the topics enclosed in the three research questions (constitution, implications and performativity of concepts), the last section (3.6) dealt with the prospect of unlearning concepts in support of my call for individual action to more conscientiously handle ‘rural/urban’. The information included in this chapter, loosely, forms the analytical framework for the discussion held in Chapter 6.

To conclude, the sociology and the psychology behind rural/urban’s retention is rarely addressed, and never in a systematic fashion. This is perhaps because such a perspective requires a change of angle of attack to include and combine theoretical frameworks from other fields of knowledge to a new level of integration, upon which the contagion of indifference can eventually start to break down. The key, then, is to let go of studying ‘rural/urban’, and begin studying geographers (and other professionals) in action. Realizing that this angle of attack may appear sensitive to some, I maintain that countering this sensitivity may be the only way to approach a long-lived problem head-on and, by so doing, create the basis for an open debate about our relation to some of geography’s most canonical concepts.

Given that such angle of approach requires more emphasis on the constitution, performativity and implications of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts rather than their contents indicates a research gap. Since concept attainment “*represents one of the most basic forms of inferential activity in all cognitive life*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 122), there is a need to isolate the uses of ‘rural/urban’ not as tools that depict “spaces out there”, but as fragile and fragmented pieces of conflicting information with which we create an equally fragile and fragmented reality. This maxim is visible in all five constitutive papers of this thesis, although each does it on its own through the use of different auxiliary concepts⁶²:

- Paper I – *subjectivity* – (we mean different things) >>
- Paper II – *elusiveness* – (we do not really understand each other) >>
- Paper III – *parodying* – (we resort to prototypes/stereotypes to make it work) >>
- Paper IV – *harmdoing* – (prototypes/stereotypes are likely to cause harm) >>
- Paper V – *knowledge production* – (we need to understand what we are doing and why in order to prevent harm).

⁶² Auxiliary concepts are alternative, secondary or derivative ideas (relative to the main one) that can “*help put into a new and clearer perspective several aspects of the role which auxiliary concepts play in scientific theories*” (Hintikka and Tuomela, 1970: 298).

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Each of these auxiliary concepts will be elaborated on in greater detail in the discussion section and coupled with the findings of the papers. Here, I will only lay out the main chain of abstraction these concepts represent.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity implies anything belonging to the thinking subject rather than to the object of thought. While thoughts, opinions and tastes are always extracted from a slew of available discourses, subjectivity is generally considered a characteristic of the individual rather than the group, although parts of it will naturally overlap. Hence, “[a]s much as subjectivity is a process of individuation, it is equally a process of socialization, the individual never being isolated in a self-contained environment” (Silverman, 2014). In view of the constant barrage of criticism toward ‘rural/urban’ and considering the total lack of any agreed-upon working definition implies that, while the concepts are culturally stable through ongoing socialization, the disparity they produce is suggestive of a high degree of individuation. And while individuation is a desirable principle in certain contexts, in others it is largely unsolicited. This is particularly pertinent in science where standardization (the removal of taste, bias, arbitrariness, and randomness) is the goal, otherwise we turn science into something different, like journalism, politics or religion.

Elusiveness

Subjectivity in any formalized context results in a condition known as elusiveness. This implies the failure to allow for a clear perception or complete mental grasp of a thing or a concept, which in turn is hard to express or define. Hence, being elusive means pretending to be something one is not. When resorting to elusive explanations of the world we create a parallel cosmology arrived at not by sensory experience but by conceptual constraints. The concepts remain the same but the meanings attached to them differ to the point we do not really understand each other. But we continue to talk. Consider the following. It is perfectly possible for one party to call a cat “a dog” and speak about “dogs” to another party (remaining faithful to that word’s definition) and keep the discussion going fairly unrestrainedly, only with some minor cuts. One can then, experimentally, exchange the meaning of “cat” for a number of other established concepts, such as “a child”, “a Russian”, the army”, “love”, “science” etc., to find out that a discussion is still feasible, although with an increasingly greater amount of cuts, jams and glitches. However, if we choose to accept and naturalize “cat” as a diverse concept of a variety of meanings, those cuts, jams and glitches become part

of the cat's constitution, its conceptual identity. Slowly, as interpretational flexibility gains ground, we stop reacting to all those subliminal portents of incredulity and incoherence, and, just in case, we pluralize the concept: the cat becomes the catities. Needless to say, 'rural/urban' have gone through such transmutation, and the 'ruralities' and 'urbanities' we learned to embrace are the result of this process.

Parodying

From this, another epiphenomenon arises. If 'rural/urban' are subjective and elusive, how can we actually do anything with them? Since subjectivity and elusiveness implicitly suggest disorder and chaos, even though conceptual disorder and chaos can be justified politically through the discourse of plurality (ruralities, urbanities), the concepts should not work in practice. The fact is that they do (or at least it seems so) given how many aspects and dimensions of societal organization are performed under the 'rural/urban' banner: from scientific conferences to development programs, from theory-building to tourism, from administration to the distribution of resources, and many more. The simplest way to explain this duality is by differentiating between *whether* something works and *how* it works. Beginning backwards, any form of communication requires a common ground. With regard to 'rural/urban', there is still a common ground, but to make that ground we must resort to prototypes (e.g., rural = open fields, urban = high density), stereotypes (rural = farming, urban = skyscrapers), and a range of derivative false equivalencies, which, while cognitively valid, are not good representations of these concepts in view of how we chose to broaden their meanings. The term "parody" is instructive here. Parodying literally denotes the act of making a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing, often nigh on the grotesque, in other words a distorted, incongruous or bizarre rendition of what is being depicted. More broadly, parody denotes "*any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice*" (Dentith, 2000), and sometimes, the reputation of a parody can even outlast the reputation of what is being parodied (for instance, the TV sitcom *'Allo 'Allo!* is perhaps better known than the drama *Secret Army* which it parodies). I believe this is how 'rural/urban' have managed to outlive themselves, oddly reconciling the lack of common ground in the broader sense with a form of common ground that actually works. Performed in this way, however, 'rural/urban' become an ectoplasm of sorts, a sensible fixture brought on by the energy fed by institutional structures that will not let go of 'rural/urban' usage (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966), despite the fact that their common ground

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is rarely seen in everyday life, and in spite of well-established theoretical knowledge about 'rural/urban's immense plurality.

Harmdoing

Harm denotes any form of physical injury or mental damage, either intended or unintended. According to Gert (2004), harm is both a moral and a legal concept construed along any of the following: pain, death, disability, loss of freedom, and loss of pleasure. More broadly, however, harm can denote any form of setback to interest (Feinberg, 1984). While harm can arise as the result of an onset of emotion (e.g., rage killing or manslaughter), more often than not harm is conceptually induced. What this means is that any abstract division or delimitation upheld or enforced by social factors will at the same time enable and constrain individual agency. The wages of a cleaner and a university professor are diametrically different even though both may work the same hours. One reason is that we conceptually value intellectual skills more than physical labor despite both being equally necessary for the society to function. We put a conceptual veneer of sanctity over concepts such as "responsibility", "education" and "intelligence" to justify a professor's higher salary, even though responsibility is a very relative concept, education is merely a venture to obtain another form of knowledge, and intelligence is not an achievement but a biological predisposition. In sum, even if we proclaim that all humans have equal worth, the lives of a cleaner and a university professor will be much different in terms of levels of induced harm. Importantly, this will not be because of the amount of calories burned but because we construe concepts differently. 'Rural/urban' are no different. Conceptualizations of 'rural/urban' draw on imaginations on how the world is like, while frameworks of understanding based on 'rural/urban' depart from efforts to best manage those imaginations. Now in instances where subjectivity is high and elusiveness takes precedence over structured coherence, most imaginations catering to valid conceptualizations of 'rural/urban' will lose their socio-material reciprocity and start breeding the grotesque. And since the grotesque is per definition not a reflection of reality but its contortion, harm is likely to manifest.

Knowledge production

Constructions of concepts occur everywhere and at any time through a process known as knowledge production. While knowledge production may denote any form of new knowledge emerging through social and cultural interaction, the concept is commonly associated with the related activities clustered in a higher education institution, a research center or any enterprise

professionally creating new knowledge (Latour's "centers of calculation"). The main characteristic of a center of calculation though is its ability to legitimize knowledge, not because it is better but simply because it has passed through its institutional rites. The obvious crux is that formalization is not necessarily the same as quality, although formalization very often is interpreted as an indicator of quality. As academics operating within such a system, many of us are aware of this discrepancy. The question is: should we just go with the flow because it is easy and permissible or perhaps pause once in a while and reflect upon what kind of concepts we use to understand and explain the world? Increasingly subjective, elusive, and posing as their now hard-to-find prototypes likely to turn ominous or cause harm when deployed unreflectively, 'rural/urban' require such a pause to understand how far off the mark they really are. On the one hand, available scientific publications represent a virtual Wailing Wall of problems associated with this binary. On the other hand, we attired ourselves with an impenetrable exoskeleton of rural/urban tolerance. However, limitless tolerance is dangerous in that it entrains a paradox. The paradox of tolerance states that if a society is tolerant without limit, their ability to be tolerant will eventually be seized or destroyed by the intolerant (Popper, 1945). What this means for 'rural/urban' is that if we, in an additive, inclusive manner, continue to tolerate every possible interpretation of it as valid, we will eventually downgrade social theory. As Anderson (1982) notes, our social theories are "*often unresponsive to logical and empirical challenges*", while "*the process of creating causal explanations or general scenarios to explain observed events contributes to such unwarranted theory perseverance*" (p. 126). Social theories are no more than frameworks of empirical evidence used to study and interpret social phenomena (Seidman, 2016), so if the empirical evidence no longer supports the frameworks then any continued use of "rural theory" and "urban theory" will meet with any of the following: inaccuracy, skew/bias or impreciseness/haziness.

This makes 'rural/urban' extremely tricky. Should we jettison them as an expired perishable or continue to protect them as cultural heritage? Should we continue trying to understand them or find better ways to spend our time and money? Or is there perhaps some satisfactory middle ground for handling the dilemma? This thesis addresses these issues through a number of different perspectives, which may have been pushed into the background amidst an exceptionally rich geographical literature on what 'rural/urban' "is" or "means".

CHAPTER 4

Metaphysics

4.1. Introduction

Every academic work makes metaphysical assumptions, i.e. they engage in explorations into the fundamental nature of reality. However, these explorations can be done more or less explicitly depending on the nature of the subject matter, the degree of establishment of the undertaken approach (hypothesis or method), or simply reflecting the requirements of a particular research context. These differences reflect two broad conceptions about reality: strong and weak metaphysics. The strong classical view assumes that objects exist independently of any observer, while the weaker, more modern view assumes that objects exist inside the mind of an observer (Lincoln et al., 2011). More productively, metaphysics (as many other branches of philosophy) is perhaps best understood as semantic pursuits done through introspection and conceptual analysis (cf. Morris, 2015).

Engaging explicitly in discussions about concepts emphasizes the abstract nature of knowledge claims, as is the case with this thesis. This means that by necessity the metaphysics section had to be made more prominent in order to better contextualize my view on the deliberated subject matter. The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the cornerstones of what conceptual research means. It will provide an introduction to critical theory (the scientific paradigm underpinning this thesis), along with its ontological, epistemological, methodological, and methodical tenets. It will also briefly discuss aspects such as contribution and originality. However, I would like to begin by laying out why I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a geographer and where it fits within the broader production of geographical knowledge.

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Firstly, each scientific discipline has its own set of concepts that define that discipline – its identity: “[s]ociologists have society, biologists living things, economists the economy, and physicists matter and energy” (Clifford et al., 2009: xii). Geography, whose tenets form a crucible of three diverse traditions (physical sciences, social science and humanities), is a much wider discipline (Richards, 2009; Johnston, 2009; Blunt, 2009) and hence identifying one major concept is more difficult. Scale, map, culture, nature, landscape, time, risk, development, globalization or sustainability are all possible contenders, but the first thing that probably comes to mind is “space”. Geographers proudly raise their concern for the spatial implications of various phenomena as their professional identity. At the same time, for a study to be considered geographical it requires that space – geography’s “*fundamental stuff*” (Thrift, 2009) – is handled in a way that is actually apt to say something about the world. Acknowledging that the construction of space is a “*social process in which meanings are attached to landscapes or in which landscapes themselves turn into symbols*” (Gailing and Leibenath, 2015), my concern for space is to ensure that the tools (conceptualizations of space) we geographers use are of such quality as to ascertain solid geographical inquiry.

Secondly, while the debates on the nature and meaning of space have engulfed geography for decades (see e.g., Couclelis, 1992), the sheer concept of space has remained stable in geography and so have two of its most common imaginings – ‘rural’ and ‘urban’. Effectively, suggestive of Kuhn’s [1962] (1970) paradigms, it is impossible to say whether ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are still around because they really are needed or whether they are sustained to uphold geography’s spatial identity in a competitive academic reality. Having alluded in the introductory chapter to the possibility of a geographical bias of thinking about problems spatially, my point of departure is that critiquing its key concepts should not be considered critiquing the discipline. Scientific disciplines are merely administrative structures set up to facilitate the production of interconnected knowledge (Latour, 1987), an understanding that more recently has been condoned through the spread of multidisciplinary,⁶³ crossdisciplinary,⁶⁴ interdisciplinary,⁶⁵ and transdisciplinary⁶⁶ research strategies (cf. Stembler, 1991 for a thorough overview).

63 Contrasting disciplinary perspectives in an additive manner and involves little interaction across disciplines.

64 Viewing one discipline from the perspective of another.

65 Combining two or more disciplines to a new level of integration, whereupon the component boundaries start to break down (it is no longer the addition of its parts).

66 Two or more discipline perspectives transcend each other to form a new holistic approach

In that light, while the classical question “In what way has your research contributed to geography?” (cf. Browning, 1974⁶⁷) could strike today as myopic, conformist, protectionist or overly administrative, I identify myself as a human geographer because my interest is in people, communities and cultures with an emphasis on relations of and across space. However, the extensive use of ‘rural/urban’ as analytical categories in geography could also be indicative of the unwillingness to let go of geography’s core identity-forming basis. Given that human geography as a discipline has been defined less by its canonical works but rather by its canonical concepts (Johnston and Sidaway, 2015), doing geography in an ever more complex world requires proper disaggregation of the fuzzy ones (cf. Markusen, 1999). This is especially important with those quasi-scientific concepts that have with time acquired sufficient gravitas to be able to percolate into the public realm under the guise of scientific justification.

With that in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to outline my stance toward knowledge-making in the context of conceptual studies about ‘rural/urban’. It begins with a reflection on how I understand conceptual research, which is later put into relation to my choice of research paradigm (critical theory), along with its components (from ontology to method). A note on contribution and originality finalizes this chapter.

4.2. Doing conceptual research

As noted earlier, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ in the context of this thesis are treated as concepts purportedly thought to define geographical spaces. By “[making] *the concepts themselves the objects of the research*” (Xin et al, 2013: 72), it aligns with the branch of knowledge production branded as conceptual research.

Conceptual research, nominally, is the opposite of empirical research in terms of contribution. However, non-empirical research must not necessarily be conceptual, given that many literary historical and philosophical reviews are not always conceptually engaged (Xin et al, 2013). While both

(the outcome will be completely different from what one would expect from the addition of the parts).

67 “In a recent editorial essay in *The Professional Geographer* Gilbert F. White declared, “One of the common and commonly destructive questions about research runs ‘But is it geography?’ I would like to see us substitute ‘Is it significant?’ and ‘Are you competent to deal with it?’” (Browning, 1974: 137).

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historical⁶⁸ and philosophical⁶⁹ research may and often do encompass conceptual elements, conceptual research, as Xin et al. (2013: 72) define it, “*seeks to undertake a logical clarification of concepts and analysis of the use of a concept*”. Conceptual research, hence, often requires going back on empirical findings and/or philosophical analysis, but can also serve as a point of reference for the latter. This also means that research can be both conceptual and empirical at the same time. Due to this insistence, conceptual research also aligns significantly with theoretical research, but, unlike the latter, which uses theoretical frameworks to explain a particular phenomenon, conceptual research is more concerned with concepts (purported to explained particular phenomena), and does so by combining theory with empirics and philosophical commitments (cf. Maxwell, 2011).

Conceptual research is different from strictly empirical research in many ways, with the most important difference being that there is no clear method associated with it (Xin et al., 2013; Tribe and Liburd, 2016). An empirical researcher can pick any available conventional (generally accepted) method and basically claim scientific merit provided that they followed its protocols (within a reasonable margin of error). As such, the method part of an empirical study seldom requires a probing discussion. A conceptual researcher, on the other hand, must rely on their imagination and creativity to provide the most cogent and compelling rhetoric. This is because a concept is purely a vehicle of human thought, and human thought cannot be approached effectively using methods “*stuck in ... nineteenth-century, nation-state based politics*” (Law and Urry, 2004: 390):

We argue that social and physical changes in the world are – and need to be – paralleled by changes in the methods of social inquiry. The social sciences need to re-imagine themselves, their methods, and their ‘worlds’ if they are to work productively in the twenty-first century where social relations appear increasingly complex, elusive, ephemeral, and unpredictable. (Law and Urry, 2004: 390)

Mindful of this, Xin et al. (2013) propose “*a process of scoping, comparison, reflection and abstraction ... including defining concepts, comparing them,*

68 “*Since historical research often reviews past social ideas, attitudes, beliefs, or understandings of a particular issue and analyses how these have changed over time, it is sometimes classified as conceptual research*” (Xin et al., 2013: 72).

69 “*The relationship between philosophical research and conceptual research ... is much closer particularly in the analytic tradition where the major focus is on the analysis of concepts*” (Xin et al., 2013: 72).

historical analysis, the construction of conceptual typologies, finding conceptual gaps, deep reflection, synthesising and finally a reconceptualisation of the subject" (summarized in Tribe and Liburd, 2016: 45). Although vague, Xin et al.'s approach summarizes some of the methods that can be used to approach a concept. It also marks the distinction between conceptual research (how a concept is produced, attained and withheld, and why) from the somewhat associated phenomenological research (how a concept is used with regard to different cultural meanings and significations).

To conclude, conceptual research about 'rural/urban' views these concepts as vehicles of human thought, and is hence more in need of stating and discussing the underlying metaphysical assumptions than purely empirical research, which can be done without such discussions.

4.3. Critical theory

In order to apprehend 'rural/urban' analytically, it is important to define how they will be apprehended. Given the multiplicity of 'rural/urban' understandings (see section 1.6 – Woods's [2011] classification), each of them aligns with specific paradigmatic assumptions, which in turn imply different metaphysical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, methodological, and methodical.

A focus on the performative nature of 'rural/urban' aligns with the paradigmatic assumptions of critical theory, the paradigm underlying this thesis. The principal task of critical theory is to provide resources to catalyze change for those seeking to obtain a more just society (Haslanger, 2017). Critical theory offers accounts of various social phenomena (like racism, sexism, ageism, ableism), which can inform social movements on how to help change the social structures that keep in place certain undesirable social practices (as discussed in section 2.6). As Shelby (2014: 63) outlines,

[s]ocial critics do not merely systematize common sense or popular scientific findings, social critics seek to inform, and possibly shape, public opinion with clear and careful thinking, well-established facts and moral insight. They will of course draw on and engage both common sense and scientific thought, but they do so without taking a slavish attitude toward either.

Critical theory, hence, assumes a position leaning toward constructivism but retaining post-positivism's sense of (critical) realism. It also acknowledges

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its historical situatedness in cultural structures, and, by that, dovetails with the scope and ambitions of critical geography, within which this work is developed (cf. section 1.9). Unlike constructivism, however, which sees “understanding” as its primary goal, the nature of knowledge associated with critical theory is seen as structural and/or historical, while the aim of inquiry is critique and transformation (be it by restitution or emancipation).

Generalization in critical theory is done by means of similarity, while goodness or quality of inquiry is evaluated on its historical situatedness (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 112). This includes assessing “*the extent to which the inquiry acts to erode ignorance and misapprehensions, and the extent to which it provides a stimulus to action, that is, to the transformation of the existing structure*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 112), for example changing the way ‘rural/urban’ are viewed and understood by replying to “ignorance” and “misunderstanding” associated with them. This is usually mirrored in the voice of the critical theorist, who assumes the role of the “*transformative intellectual*” set out to “*develop greater insight into the existing state of affairs*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 115).

In critical theory, values of the researcher are seen as “*ineluctable in shaping ... inquiry outcomes*”, while “*excluding [them] would not be countenanced*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 114). However, contrary to constructivism, in which the inquirer is seen as “*orchestrator and facilitator of the inquiry process*”, critical theory “*tends to cast the inquirer in a more authoritative role*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 114). With regard to ‘rural/urban’ this has meant that my generally hesitant stance toward ‘rural/urban’ needed to be stated upfront, as this reflects how the problem formulation and theory have been chosen and presented. Hence, while the tone in my articles may at times come across as “authoritarian”, I am aware of my role as a facilitator (i.e., in terms of choice of research design, methods, theories, approaches, attitude, etc.) and its inadvertent impact on the findings (cf. also section 1.2).

The rest of this chapter follows the familiar metaphysical superstructure from ontology to method:

- *The ontological question*: What is the nature of reality and what can be known about it?
- *The epistemological question*: What is the nature of the relationship between the (would-be) knower and what can be known?
- *The methodological question*: How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?
- *The methodical question*: What tools can be used to concretely apprehend the methodological goal?

4.3.1. Ontology

Critical theory is founded on historical realism, an ontology that essentially proposes that what is seen as real has been shaped by cultural, political, social, economic, and ethnic values. While these realities are inaccurately considered “true”, they are – for all intents and purposes – “real” now (McCullagh, 1980; Grene, 1987). Put differently, historical realism, “*assumes an apprehendable reality consisting of historically situated structures that are, in the absence of insight, as limiting and confining as if they were real*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 111).

Historical realism represents an ontological development of critical realism in which “*reality is assumed to exist but to be only imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). The associated philosophical concept of verisimilitude (or truthlikeness) stressing that truths behind assertions, although realistic and believable, are in fact apparent (Wheeler, 2017), is instructive here. Historical realism as ontology redevelops this notion, seeing “realness” as inappropriately taken as natural and immutable through its crystallization into a series of structures, which effectively shape “*a virtual or historical reality*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). As such, “truths” are not apparent (as in post-positivism) but relative (i.e., plastic yet apprehendable). In order to access those, it is necessary to unpack the epistemic practices that regiment the enactment of theories, concepts and subject positions (‘rural/urban’ included).

Due to its focus on human-related values, historical realism (just as constructivism) adopts a fundamentally non-essentialist stance on “truth”, i.e. the non-belief in essence of any given thing, idea or metaphysical entity (Cartwright, 1968). Non-essentialism (or anti-foundationalism) is rooted in the human condition (as opposed to essentialism’s human nature), which is dynamic, heterogeneous, internally riven, changeable, and exhibits blurred boundaries (Nathan, 2015). Non-essentialism is not the same as nihilism, which suggests the lack of belief in reputedly meaningful aspects of life (Brassier, 2007). Non-essentialism, in this case, stems from the nature of ‘rural/urban’ as a system of meaning, which due to immense societal changes, can apply to almost everything (there are no generally accepted definitions for ‘rural/urban’ to hold as Aristotelian categories, and there are increasingly fewer family resemblances to make them admissible as Wittgensteinian categories). As such, no part of rural/urban understanding can be expected, and therefore cannot be regarded as essential. Of course, that is not to say that ‘rural/urban’ as systems of meaning do not exist.

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There is a backside though: How much relativism can one accept before it shreds any system of meaning into dependable pieces of information? Accepting a non-essentialist premise as a condition of knowledge, the problem (“*just one representation of the world among many other representations*”) appears philosophically insoluble (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 22).⁷⁰ Here, historical realism differs significantly from constructivism’s unconditional relativism,⁷¹ as it accepts the possibility to reconcile different degrees of essentialism for different concepts. Although expertise and experience are important factors in determining what level of essentialism is acceptable for any one concept, complexity plays a crucial role in this process. The concept of “chair” is less likely to be perceived as contentious or problematic than concepts such as “justice”, “democracy” or “sustainability”. Hence, given the relative simplicity of the concept of “chair”, we might settle for an essentialist definition of it as an object with a sitting surface, four supporting legs and a backrest. The concept of “sustainability”, on the other hand, can be rocked simply on account of its emotionally (altruistically) laden presupposition that doing good should not compromise the needs of imaginary future generations, although current media and research discourse may convey the impression that such actions are essential. This is perhaps why non-essentialism primarily applies to (but is not limited to) debates about abstract conceptions.

Seeing ‘rural/urban’ as both abstract and complex concepts, they lend themselves well to historical-realist ontology: the adoption of a fundamentally non-essentialist stance (‘rural/urban’ today can be/mean anything), yet, due to their historical embeddedness in societal structures, allowing them to be approached as if they were real (this duality is particularly visible in Paper III).

70 One accepted practice of validating research based on non-essentialist premises is to make it as transparent as possible for the reader. It should be noted, though, that the rhetoric behind this kind of justification can be treacherous. Being transparent means – for all intents and purposes – still arbitrarily choosing an option and practically leaving the rest for the reader to adjudicate. This act of choosing is not much different from essentialist approaches, which also make arbitrary choices but support it with references to known theories or methods. By transferring responsibility to previous bodies of knowledge we ultimately avoid self-reflexivity. Hence, since the difference seems to lie at the level of the deployed rhetoric (we are more or less essentialist toward different concepts), the notion of non-essentialism works perhaps best as an ontological manifesto, an existential approach to life and a specific positioning within the crucible of diverse academic traditions.

71 ...“*which assumes multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting social realities that are the products of human intellects, but that may change as their constructors become more informed and sophisticated*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 111).

4.3.2. Epistemology

The epistemology of critical theory is often subjectivist and/or transactional (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Subjectivism is a philosophical tenet holding that “*our own mental activity is the only unquestionable fact of our experience*” (Richardson and Bowden, 1983: 552–553). It is derived from the notion of *subjectivity*, another central philosophical concept related to consciousness, reality and truth. All these involve a subject (here: the researcher) capable of conscious experiences such as perspectives, beliefs and feelings. Because subjectivity is “*considered true only from the perspective of a subject or subjects*” (Solomon 2005: 900), the more a certain idea is shared by many, the more “objective” it becomes. This acumen is in line with the tenets of historical realism, where what is seen as real has been shaped by a range of broadly understood cultural values (cf. Lincoln et al., 2011). Subjectivity, hence, is an inherently social mode, which forms through innumerable interactions within society. Conversely, these interactions would not have been possible if it were not for the cerebral activity of the individuals creating those contexts (this discussion is further elaborated in Paper I).

In order to apprehend those context-dependent subjectivities, a transactional epistemology is often resorted to, that is any approach set out to address the complexities of human social exchange employing a set of philosophical tools (Dewey and Bentley, 1949). What this means for critical-theory epistemology is that “*the investigator and the investigated object are assumed to be interactively linked, with the values of the investigator (and of situated “others”) inevitably influencing the inquiry*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). As such, the values of the researcher are thought to always influence the findings. For instance, a critical stance toward ‘rural/urban’ will produce results that corroborate ‘rural/urban’ to be ill-suited concepts, and this is an intrinsic epistemological property of critical theory. Consider the following:

Neo-Marxists discover world systems, or uneven developments. ...
 Foucauldians discover systems of governmentality. Communitarians
 discover communities. ... Feminists discover glass ceilings, cultural
 sexism, or gendering assumptions built into scientific and social
 science method. (Law, 2004: 5–6)

Transactional epistemology assumes that knowledge is value-mediated (and hence value-dependent): “*what can be known is inextricably intertwined with the interaction between a particular investigator and a particular ob-*

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ject or group” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). While this stance may prove challenging for conducting a scientific inquiry, it lends itself well to eclecticism. As a conceptual approach that does not hold rigidly to a single set of assumptions, eclecticism draws upon multiple theories, styles or ideas to gain complementary insights into a subject or applies different theories in particular cases (cf. Sil and Katzenstein, 2010). For instance, “[e]clecticism is recognized in approaches to psychology that see many factors influencing behavior and cognition or psyche, and among psychologists who consider multiple perspectives on identifying, explaining, and changing behavior”. Similarly, cultural concepts (‘rural/urban’ included) are never theoretically hermetic but build on multiple aspects of the noösphere (the sphere of human thought), and since many of these aspects show common features they can be taken to represent a boundary-spanning conceptual nucleus (Hansen, 2011). Likewise, rural/urban conceptualizations as used and implemented by researchers, policymakers and lay people alike form a blend of philosophical, psychological, epistemological, sociological, political, and historical contingencies, whereby a meta-theoretical, synthetical way of approaching them allows for a fuller elaboration of the problem inherent in ‘rural/urban’ thinking. Thus, eclecticism looms large throughout this thesis, covering, for example, history, architecture, quantitative analysis, social philosophy, cognitive psychology, and medical theory.

4.3.3. Methodology

The methodology typically associated with critical theory discovers findings through the exchange of logical arguments, which is thought to “*transform ignorance and misapprehensions (accepting historically mediated structures as immutable) into more informed consciousness*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). Because the formative values of the researcher (e.g., altruism, empowerment, wish for change) are thought to influence the findings, the exchange of arguments is usually done by way of dialectical dialogues. Dialectic, or the weighing of two or more different viewpoints about a subject in a wish to establish truth by way of reasoned arguments, aligns with the transactional nature of critical inquiry. Critical theorists engage in dialectic based on findings arrived at by both qualitative and quantitative methods (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 112). Qualitative methods are necessary for conducting dialogic research, while quantitative methods provide a solid informational base (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 114). Both, however, require a prior understanding of the social, political, cultural, economic, and ethnic structures and histories surrounding their implementation.

Critical theory epistemology in a geographical context, hence, would imply an individual (subjectivist) yet dialectic (transactional) attempts “to think space in a new manner” (Hubbard, 2006: 10). Thinking space in a new manner, methodologically speaking, however, may prove difficult due to the lack of a clear method in many conceptual works. Mindful of this, Xin et al. (2013) propose a nine-step model, which is roughly the model I have taken as a source of inspiration during this work:

First, the argument is based on the authors’ expertise, long term engagement with the issues and deep knowledge of the relevant literature (good scholarship). Second, there was systematic evaluation of counter evidence and a Socratic dialogue maintained between the authors (soft falsification). Third, careful attention is paid to the structure, logic and plausibility of the argument (rhetoric). Fourth, the argument is compared with established neighboring concepts (triangulation). Fifth, the results are consistent with the research aims (validity). Sixth, the research process is carefully documented (transparency). Seventh, the results add to human understanding (usefulness). Eighth, the results make something visible that was previously not so (additionality). The final condition (reflexivity) requires a short discussion (...) [about] positionality (...) and not to “other” other knowledge including its tacit, informal, experiential, oral, moral, practice, indigenous and other dimensions (Tribe and Liburd, 2016: 45 after Xin et al., 2013)

When discussing methodology, it is important to understand how it relates to established methods in the context of conceptual research. Different methods, as Law and Urry (2004) explain, produce different and often very inconsistent results, and this has been a major concern of social science. While some might argue that some methods are better than others (epistemology), some say that methods are tools, and different tools do different jobs (pragmatism); yet still others say that different methodological approaches imply different perspectives that a priori inform the quality of the outcome (perspectivism). Concerned with the power of social science, which by its methods enact, rather than describe, social realities, Law and Urry (2004) contend that all three approaches direct attention away from the performativity of method and make it “*difficult to imagine that different research practices might be making multiple worlds ... [that are] equally valid, equally true, but simply unlike one another*” (p. 397). In effect, they

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tacitly reproduce the idea that there is a single reality out there waiting to be discovered, understood and ontologized.

Although reflexivity with regard to one's choice of methodology is a standing requirement of academia, a truly axiological discussion about method (and its ability to say something about the world) is often omitted, allowing for the researcher to hide behind what is simply a historically established procedure. In effect, as Law and Urry (2004) see it, current methods do not resonate well with important reality enactments in that they deal poorly with the fleeting, the distributed, the multiple, the sensory, the emotional, and the kinesthetic. In other words, they are ill-adapted to conceptual research, which usually embodies some or all of these dimensions.

Although this discussion reflects on how 'rural' and 'urban' found their way into geography through the enactment of the scientific method in the first place,⁷² it also signals that any in-depth discussion about the employed methods is often more of an academic requirement than a step closer to "the truth". If anything, different methods have particular strengths (or, more exactly, stronger focal orientations) with respect to the different layers of social research (e.g., political, cognitive, social); hence, methodical variability (using more than one method) is likely to produce a broader (not necessarily "better") picture of the studied phenomenon for others to evaluate. As Bohleber et al. (2013) observe, it is well known that there is "*a lack of consensus about how to decide between competing and sometimes mutually contradictory theories, and how to integrate divergent concepts and theories*" (p. 501). However, by studying the concepts' history, phenomenology, construction, meaning-making and possibility of integration, it is possible to at least understand the logic behind their enactment.

In conclusion, in view of the orientation of this thesis and its metaphysical assumptions, adopting a multi-method approach is a way to provide the broadest possible coverage of the topic.

4.3.4. Methods

In line with the stipulation that conceptual research should seek to "*avoid any methodological strait-jacketing and remain open and creative in [its] thinking*" (Tribe and Liburd, 2016: 45), the employed methods here exhibit significant variety. Because critical geography lacks a distinctive theoretical identity (Hubbard et al., 2002) there are no specific methods associated with

72 Cf. "[Method] *needs to find ways of knowing the slipperiness of 'units that are not' as they move in and beyond old categories*" (Law and Urry, 2004).

it. This is also in line with the eclecticism associated with the undertaken subject matter and the diversity of the constitutive articles. As such, the methodical breadth of this thesis aligns with a mixed methods research approach (also called multimethodological approach). Gaining in popularity since the 1980s, mixed methods research combines the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in order to broaden the research (cf. Cresswell, 2004; Brannen, 2005). Overall, however, a geographical focus on human activities is considered more receptive to qualitative research methods, especially in conceptually oriented studies (Johnston, 2000; Waitt, 2005; Flick, 2009; Maxwell, 2012), and those dominate in this thesis.

The used methods include: concept analysis, discourse analysis, situational analysis, rhetorical techniques, historical deconstruction, visual analysis, morphometry and GIS processing, index construction, questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, theory as method, reverse engineering, and maieutics. For greater clarity and context, the employed methods are described paper by paper in Chapter 5.

4.4. A note on contribution and originality

The canonical sociological literature on the place of originality in scientific evaluation has defined [it] ... as the making of a new discovery that adds to scientific knowledge. ... No one, however, has yet questioned the specific assumption that originality consists of making new discoveries or producing new theories. For instance, although Bruno Latour and others have criticized the literature's emphasis on priority disputes, how academics define and go about assessing originality remains unexamined. (Lamont, 2009: 167)

When discussing contribution, an oft-discussed aspect of an academic work is its originality.⁷³ Given this significance, before one can engage in a contributory discussion, I will briefly outline what this concept means to me and how I see it in the context of scholarly contribution.

Originality is a difficult concept. An original work outside of academia is usually considered one that has not been received, copied or based upon the work of others. In the context of arts it is often a compliment to the

⁷³ Having studied how professors in social sciences, humanities and history evaluate excellence, Lamont (2009: 167) found that the six evaluative criteria (clarity, quality, originality, significance, methods, and feasibility) do not each receive the same weight, with originality being far more heavily weighted (89%) than feasibility (51%).

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creativity of artists, writers and thinkers for its unique style and substance (cf. Macfarlane, 2007). In strictly psychological terms, originality has been found to be “*related to independence of judgment, to personal complexity, and to the preference for complexity in phenomena, to self-assertion and dominance, and finally to the rejection of suppression as a mechanism for the control of impulse*” (Barron, 1955: 478). When applied in an academic context, however, originality becomes tricky. Going rogue by breaking conventions is usually frowned upon; instead, drawing heavily on other scholars’ ideas through extensive referencing is expected. These requirements seem contradictory to the substance of the concept of originality, and are in line with the much criticized (e.g., Kuhn, [1962] (1970); Latour, 1987; Law, 2004) conception of science as an enterprise run in a cumulativist convention, that is as “*an undisturbed sequence of successes*” (Rykiel, 1988). Very much in line with the essentialist perspective of uncovering the real world, such ontology inadvertently constraints originality.

Given these premises, achieving originality seems overly subjective if not controversial, and is dependent on the rhetoric used to claim it, as well as the erudition of the reviewer (what might be original for one scholar may not be for another), not to mention all of the extra-scientific contingencies (such as the level of language comprehension, amount of time and energy put into the review, mood of the moment, need of public assertion or recognition, interpersonal relations, and so on). Many of us know the disappointing sensation of having read a paper only to conclude there was nothing new or original in it. At the same time, the paper passed academic peer review and – at least nominally – could be considered original.

Obviously, originality is a vague and private concept (Said, 1983: 129) and a relative one. Is a large empirical study that once again confirms or rejects a theory original? Well, at least the empirical material is new. Is an in-depth ethnographic analysis of one person’s life original? Well, at least the person has not been analyzed before. Is a fresh conjecture that is too bold in that it shakes the institutional practices of academia original? Well, the theory is definitely new. In other words, as long as we do not replicate an existing study, the work is in one way or another original. Hence, it is about the degree and aspect of originality according to certain socially and contextually conditioned preferences and practices, often unwritten and unspoken. In other words, originality is not another step closer to “the truth” but is the effect of social conventions, or, as Said (1983) put it, “*the value of writing as an object of analysis is that it makes more precise the almost anonymous alternation of presence and absence we impressionistically and perceptually associate with originality*” (p. 129; emphasis added).

In view of Hubbard's (2006: 10) definition of a geographic theory as "*an attempt to think space in a new manner*", the crucial task of a theory is to express a phenomenon by means of a new vocabulary or syntax with the ambition to change the way that particular phenomenon is apprehended, understood and acted upon (cf. Hubbard et al., 2002; O'Brien, 2013; Castree et al., 2010; Johnston and Sidaway, 2014). Therefore, originality as I see it is addressing an old (unoriginal, if you like) problem through new situations and new trains of thought with the help of a new argumentative narrative. In that way, the problem gains qualitatively different exposition and, as such, is likely to speak to new audiences and hopefully inspire old ones.

By combining insights from critical theory, cognitive psychology and STS, I wish to take the debate on 'rural/urban' elsewhere; namely, that we can no longer ignore the human condition lurking behind every convention or social practice, no matter how naturalized it may seem. The concept of "human condition" is of course conflictual, because some may associate it with an essentialist view of human beings ("human nature"), and this is certainly not my intention. In fact, questions about the distinguishing characteristics of humans, including our ways of thinking, feeling and acting – and what causes them – are among the oldest and most important ones in philosophy and science. And this is not so much a question of what humans do "naturally" but more about what kind of biological predispositions we possess, which catalyze certain behaviors when subjected to a variety of socio-cultural situations. The point is that sometimes we tend to detach science from the fact that it is created by humans, and in the process of looking for rational explanations we may overstate our abilities to make sense of the world. If we truly want to understand the world through our thoughts and actions, our inquiries must be paralleled by monitoring our biological and sociological ("human") constraints. This is particularly important if we want to resolve situations that appear paradoxical in the face of agreed-upon standards of conduct, for example on how scientific findings should influence existing scientific canons and, consequently, catalyze change.

In this thesis, I give my perspective on the rural/urban problem by paying greater attention to the impact of the human condition with regard to the problem's perseverance.

CHAPTER 5

Papers

5.1. Introduction

This thesis consists of five appended papers, each covering a particular theme as outlined in section 3.7. All five articles deal in one way or another with the performativity, constitution and implications of the concepts of 'rural/urban'.

Paper I gives a broad conceptual overview of the problem of rural-urban blurring, including some empirical examples from Poland. Paper II provides a problematizing approach to the discourse of rural/urban in Poland, as expressed through the practices of degradation/restitution. Paper III assumes a pragmatic approach to 'rural/urban' through a concrete example (revitalization of "urban" market squares in small towns in Poland). It differs from the other papers in that it not only exposes the paradox of rural/urban actions in practice, but it also suggests an applicable method/approach to what can be done about it (more consistent guiding principles) if we must maintain a cultural rural/urban perspective in spatial planning. Paper IV is another empirical piece consumed with the possible harmful effects of maintaining a rural/urban perspective with the example of socially deprived estates in Poland (one formally "urban" and one "rural"). This comparative, qualitative/quantitative study sets out to raise awareness about the perils of rural/urban thinking when dealing with socio-economic development. Paper V deals with the issue of knowledge production with regard to the concepts 'rural/urban' through a focus on geographers. It differs from the other papers in terms of scope (it is not spatially bound) and angle of attack (it focuses specifically on conceptual perpetuation). It deals with the sociological and psychological mechanisms behind the retention of 'rural/urban'. This is thus the most dialectic and generalizable piece in this thesis: it can pertain to any questionable concept(s) still in use. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the papers.

5. Papers

Table 5.1. Overview of the papers.

I.	Dymitrow, M. and Stenseke, M. (2016): 'Rural-urban blurring and the subjectivity within'. <i>Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History</i> , 3(1), 1–13. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16993/rl.1 .
II.	Dymitrow, M. (2017): 'Degradation, restitution and the elusive culture of rural-urban thinking'. <i>Fennia – International Journal of Geography</i> , 195(1), 36–60. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.60462
III.	Dymitrow, M. (2014): 'The effigy of urbanity or a rural parody? A visual approach to small-town public space'. <i>Journal of Cultural Geography</i> , 31(1), 1–31. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2013.873298
IV.	Dymitrow, M., Biegańska, J. and Grzelak-Kostulska, E. (2017): 'Deprivation and the rural-urban trap'. <i>Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie</i> , early view. DOI:10.1111/tesg.12263
V.	Dymitrow, M. and Brauer, R. (forthcoming): 'Meaningful yet useless: Factors behind the retention of questionable concepts in human geography', in peer review, minor revisions.

5.2. Paper I

Abstract

Realizing that a changing society is in constant need of redefinition, the rural-urban distinction is especially important to look systematically into. One reason is that although the outdatedness of the rural-urban dichotomy is widely acknowledged, it is still largely sustained, not least in 'rural' and 'urban' development endeavors, which are often conducted separately. Such practice may seem questionable in the face of the progressive blurring of these concepts, which makes them increasingly subjective. Acknowledging the continued need for categorization on the one hand and admitting to its flawed nature on the other, we submit there is a pressing need to capture the changing logic of rural-urban subjectivity in order to better handle it in practice. By combining humanistic and materiality-based perspectives, we discuss the concepts of 'rural' and 'urban' with emphasis on perception and experiential space as one possible way forward. In that vein, we also tentatively explore the potential of the concept of 'landscape' to serve as a bridge between physical and subject-centered tenets of rural-urban awareness. We argue it could become a useful conceptual tool for creating context from the divergent theoretical currents with regard to how rural-urban should be understood today.

Paper rationale

Paper I departs from the assumption that current uses of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ in legislation, policy and funding may get in the way of making good planning, design and development decisions. One reason is that although the outdatedness of the rural/urban dichotomy is widely acknowledged, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ development endeavors are often conducted separately. Another is that the progressive blurring of these concepts makes them increasingly subjective. Acknowledging the continued need for categorization on the one hand and admitting to its flawed nature on the other, the paper submits there is a pressing need to capture the changing logic of rural/urban subjectivity in order to better handle it in practice. The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to problematize a hidden yet manipulative objectivity, including its empirical effects, sustained by the reproduction of the rural/urban dichotomy; and secondly, to explore humanistic and materiality-based perspectives on current rural/urban understanding, and the possibility of integrating the two.

The paper begins with a short historical walkthrough of the conceptual evolution of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ and the oscillating relation between them. Next, it outlines a number of problems inherent in the sustainment of the rural/urban dichotomy in the administration of European policies, including some practical implications through the example of small towns in Poland. The paper then raises some pertinent conceptual and theoretical issues by assuming that the concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are not only the result of changing conditions in particular places but also of the changes in theoretical perspectives on how ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are to be understood. This is done in two steps; firstly, by elaborating on the two aforementioned theoretical currents; and secondly, by combining the latter into one conceptual lens – landscape – as a more timely approach to ‘rural/urban’ today. Although landscape is not suggested as a solution to the problem, the paper highlights the need for a change in our relation to rural/urban categorization, the subjective nature of which has still not gained widespread acceptance. It concludes that the only effective way of getting rid of the false sense of stability imbedded into the concepts ‘rural/urban’ is by pre-announcing it. Since the concept of landscape (in the Nordic-Germanic understanding) inherently treats material and immaterial aspects of any one place as an inseparable entity, it automatically pre-announces the involvement of subjectivity. As such, it could become an alternative conceptual lens to current ‘rural/urban’ understandings.

While Paper I sets the tone for the upcoming articles (with Papers II, III and IV serving as empirical underlay), it does not show how this change of

5. Papers

perspective can be done. This is instead dealt with more systematically in the last paper (Paper V).

Methods and data

Paper I is a conceptual piece, whose main contribution is to provide a historical background to the ‘rural/urban’ problem, to anchor it in contemporary policy context, to contrast two (materiality-based and humanistic) perspectives, to explain the problem, and to suggest the concept of ‘landscape’ as a possible way forward. As such, there are no empirics involved in a systematic way. Instead, the paper follows the protocols for conceptual research (Xin et al., 2012), and the presented narrative is exemplified with empirical examples from previous and upcoming research (Dymitrow, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2017; Krzysztofik and Dymitrow, 2015a), as well as published works by other authors.

5.3. Paper II

Abstract

Despite fierce criticisms, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ still constitute powerful narratives around which we structure our society. The formal reality, however, frequently disregards the cultural nature of these concepts, elevating them to the role of objective spaces apt to serve as acceptable guiding perspectives. While the analytical inadequacy of rural-urban ideations is well-documented, the phenomenon of formal-cultural conflation remains much less explored. Acknowledging that ideational space of social representations can only exist through the practices of discursive interaction, this paper’s objective is to lay bare the phenomenon of rural-urban thinking when externalized through the little-known practices of degradation and restitution in Poland. Using conceptual methods, including discourse analysis and historical deconstruction, this paper assays the hidden architectures of formal-cultural conflation by means of a richly contextualized analysis. The findings, presented in four discursive openings, reveal embedded elements of hierarchy, loss, injustice, and self-victimization, which may create a divisive culture spawned by elusive promises of development at the cost of misinterpretations of history, local disappointment and cultural segmentation. In conclusion, formal appropriation of historical concepts is likely to engender a cultural geography of discord spun around a largely insignificant division, especially when development-oriented aspects of urbanization become entwined with emotional issues.

Paper rationale

With Poland as an example, Paper II deals with the timely cultural phenomenon of thinking about problems spatially through the use of the rural/urban dichotomy as a naturalized matrix. While studies on the problematic nature of the rural/urban binary proliferate, addressing its formal-cultural conflation as it materializes in practice has not gained sufficient ground. To avert this dearth, this paper sets out to elucidate this problematic by taking account of the little known concepts of 'urban degradation' and 'urban restitution'. More specifically, it focuses on the philosophical analysis underpinning the concepts of 'degradation' and 'restitution' in Poland with regard to how the notion of rural/urban is framed and valued there. It shows the problem of 'rural/urban' when seen as a value orientation, by depicting a situation that denies that meanings of identity are subject to change, and that human conditions vary over time and space. It also shows how the Polish discourse of 'rural/urban' essentializes a national culture.

The aim of this interpretative paper is to enrich geographers' diet of 'rural/urban' understandings through a richly contextualized account of the practices of degradation/restitution. Seen more broadly, it also pinpoints the ambiguity and contentiousness of 'rural/urban' as cultural concepts when elevated to formalization. The discussion is held in four discursive openings, each of which deals with a specific aspect of rural/urban ideation that has not received sufficient attention. With a critical take on 'rural/urban' as allegedly useful systems of meaning in the public discourse, the paper is an example of how some generally accepted cultural norms and practices wobble when put to scrutiny.

Methods and data

The employed methodology followed a two-step research process. The first step was to identify the dominant discourses shaping rural/urban attitudes in Poland today. For this part, discourse analysis was employed using written materials, mainly political documents (petitions, appeals, recommendations, declarations, decisions, web articles) ranging from national scale sources (Ministry of Interior and Administration of the Polish government) to local administrations (county councils and municipal governments). Attitudes in scientific approaches were synthesized by covering most of the existing literature on degradation/restitution (including a recent comprehensive editorial endeavor – Krzysztofik and Dymitrow, 2015a, set out to capture the subject's state-of-the-art). Perspectives of locals were analyzed using mainly web-based materials (social media, blog threads, comments to topical articles) but also through conversations conducted during prior field visits

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to 160 degraded and restituted towns. Important sources of information were websites of local interest groups, cultural associations and opining individuals.⁷⁴ During this step, four dominant discourses were identified.

The second step of the research process (explored in detail in this paper) involved unpacking these four discourses in order to provide a fuller picture of the phenomenon and, by extension, an understanding of the rationale underlying current rural/urban conceptualizations in Poland. Mindful of the lack of a clear method in many conceptual papers, this paper adheres to the protocols for conceptual research (see section 4.3.3), as outlined by Xin et al. (2013) and Tribe and Liburd (2016). More specifically, this is done by combining historical deconstruction (cf. Munslow, 2006) with situational analyses (contemporary examples) and rhetorical techniques (analogies, metaphors, similes) assembled to articulate the (il)logic embedded in the identified discourses.

In line with the paper's philosophical ambition,⁷⁵ it was necessary to acquire a discursive material that was broad enough to warrant ample synthetization. This was done by investigating the discursive mindsets suffusing three major societal dimensions related to the topic of degradation/restitution in Poland: lay discourses, the political arena, and the academic community. For the purposes of this paper, the focus of analysis was less on the differences between these dimensions (which were surprisingly few and insignificant) but on the many occasioned similarities, which conspicuously tend to overlay and intensify each other to eventually consolidate a national psyche of specific attitudes (cf. Pennebaker and Banasik, [1997] 2008). Adopting an analytical scheme that sees 'rural/urban' as "*historically*

74 The first step was deliberately not presented in detail in this paper with the motivation not to replicate findings from previous works (including methods and results sections) but to take these to another level of integrative, conceptual analysis. This is why the first part is intentionally subdued, and the second has been more explicitly developed. It is my contention that underplaying the discussion held in the second part is what lies at the heart of why the rural/urban problem has remained largely unresolved. The results are often stupendously straightforward. E.g., if someone says "*Our town has lost its town privileges and this is not fair*", they evidently invoke the discourses of loss and injustice. However, the interpretation as to why this is being done and how true the invoked discourses are to the inferred logic remains insufficiently addressed. In the longer run, this lack of discussion affects the quality of the concepts 'rural/urban' when used in other, often unrelated, contexts.

75 While drawing on and combining insights from extensive empirical work, the focus of the paper is on the philosophical analysis of the central findings common to much of the underlying empirical material. The empirics upon which this paper draws from can also be found in several other works (Dymitrow, 2012, 2013, 2015; Dymitrow and Krzysztofik, 2015; Krzysztofik and Dymitrow, 2015a, 2015b; Spórna et al. 2015, 2015b; Krzysztofik et al., 2015, 2016, 2017a; Szmytkie et al., 2015).

mediated structures” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110), the data underlying the presented arguments and counterarguments on the nature of degradation were acquired from archival documents (including original legislation) and from the most reliable historical studies. Contrarily, insights on the tangibles of restitution (e.g., current state, predispositions, effects) were obtained from statistical materials (mainly the Central Statistical Office of Poland) and contemporary scholarly analyses.

5.4. Paper III

Abstract

The market square has been a distinguishing characteristic of European cities for millennia. However, in the context of small towns, where the square is often the sole identifier of their physical “urbanity”, its role differs from that of large towns. This fact is substantial within national administrative systems that endorse desirable urban status to rural settlements endowed with an urban morphology. It is also important in times of extensive EU-subsidized actions aimed at improving the quality of public space in small under-resourced towns. However, many projects fail to draw from and respond to the specifics of the local context, and, by focusing on the details and disregarding the basics, they may defeat their purpose. Departing from extensive field observations in Poland, this paper puts theoretical frameworks and current trends in urban design in relation to various elements of a square’s spatial configuration in order to arrive at degrees of their urban significance. By interpreting the fundamental values embedded in the morphology of market squares, this paper attempts to isolate the cultural archetypes that shape our perception of such places as urban. The proposed analysis could be used to meet the main goal of market square revitalization, namely to visually articulate “urbanity”.

Paper rationale

With Poland as an example, the paper deals with the cultural phenomenon of revitalization conducted within the public space of small peripheral towns in Poland. Since revitalization is contemporarily understood as granting a place its lost values, to be effective, it must go hand in hand with the intellectual process of restoring memory. With regard to degraded towns dating back to the Middle Ages, such restoration is largely vested in the historical element – their urban past. In this particular context, the intent of revital-

ization is therefore to visually enhance or restore the towns' deteriorating "urban" character.

To this background, Paper III takes a different stance toward the concepts of rural/urban – a pragmatic one rather than merely critical. It features an example of how "urbanity" in Poland is rematerialized through the example of a specific artifact – the market square. The paper revolves around the underlying assumptions, visions and ways of implementation through which urbanity gains material presence in the context of very small and under-resourced towns. By focusing on one specific aspect of "urbanity" – its visuality – I work with three pre-given assumptions (primed earlier in Paper I and conceptualized in Paper II): a) "urbanity" is thought to exist; b) "urbanity" is considered an important identity marker for under-resourced towns; and c) the purpose of revitalization is to make them appear more "urban". The problem that arises is how this should be done in view of lacking guidelines, disparate theoretical frameworks and questionable ideological (political) motives. Assuming that "urban revitalization" is *the way* to do it, my point of departure is that it: a) be consistent with the inferred logic about what "urban" is thought to be (i.e., a modern rendition of a historical entity); b) respect the scale, individuality and social context of the place of deployment; and c) focus on the basics rather than the details in order to align with the set goals.

Acknowledging that "urban morphology" is merely a configuration of artifacts that are culturally internalized to conform to a mindscape widely recognized as "urban" (Conzen, 2004), I attempt to recreate what "urbanity" may mean according to the historically inferred logic. This is done not merely by deconstructing it, but by reconstructing a workable framework in line with the presumed discourse. Such an approach is different because it allows for making something productive of a narrative that is not likely to go away.

Methods and data

By integrating a visual approach to physical urbanity (cf. Libura, 1990; Mordwa, 2003; Johansson, 2009) with quantitative methodology, this exploratory paper combines theory and empiricism to encapsulate the problematic nature of small-town public space in environments where such nature has a cultural foundation. As such, it is conceptually related to Lynch's (1960) criterion of imageability, i.e. the "*quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer*" (p. 9). The empirical material on which this paper leans are based on an earlier study (Dymitrow, 2012) dedicated to method development for assessing the level of morphological urbanity of town centers common in small pre-industrial towns, to which market squares act as

their main contextual urban identifiers. The devised methodology was based on morphometry and GIS⁷⁶-processing of data derived from remote sensing of 336 Polish towns, whereupon a composite morphological index, V_{msm} (based on the variables *integrity*, *compaction* and *composition*), was constructed, with the intent to relay the degree of a market square's physical urbanity. It was later followed up by field verification through visual evaluation of the overall level of urbanity of 69 (of the 336) small-town market squares. Because of its overly technical character, this paper does not describe the specifics of the methodology at hand (see Dymitrow, 2012: 97–120); instead, it focuses on the theoretical framework and the empirical observations that served as a point of departure when devising and validating it.

5.5. Paper IV

Abstract

Departing from the idea that cultural mechanisms are capable of allowing for conceptual dichotomies to create oppression, this paper challenges the engrained tradition of using 'urban/rural' as guiding labels in societal organisation when seen through the prism of deprivation. Two Polish deprivation-ridden estates – one 'urban' and one 'rural' – were investigated. Having taken account of the residents' everyday lives in the socio-economic, material and discursive dimensions, our findings indicate that the notions of rurality and urbanity imbricate and leapfrog meaningful territories at the local level. Realising the danger of deploying stereotypes as beacons in governance, from this richly contextualised account we draw that many problems today are space-independent and cannot be attenuated by following development paths reinvented in the name of empirically questionable yet culturally sustained and politically ontologized spatialities. This, then, calls for rethinking both the discursivity and the elusiveness of rural-urban thinking in the context of deprivation.

Paper rationale

In line with the current refocus on subject-centered perspectives to inform rural/urban taxonomies in formalized contexts, numerous academic studies predicated on exposing the plurality and relationality within dominant rural/urban discourses have emerged (cf. Strzemińska and Wiśnicka, 2011; Leyshon,

⁷⁶ GIS = Geographic Information System – a system designed to store, transform, analyze, and present geographic data.

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2008; Tilt et al., 2007; Rye, 2006; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003; de Gennaro and Fantini, 2002). While shedding valuable light on the complexity of the problem, two basic oversights could nonetheless be observed. The first concerns determining in advance who is rural and who is urban; hence, precipitously labeling the subjects whose perceptions were meant to inform the justification of those very labels (cf. section 3.4).⁷⁷ The second oversight is that the addressed respondents were predominantly considered “normal” citizens of the society, that is, people, whose opinions, by implication, were somehow deemed more relevant than others’. Addressing the experiential dimension of the rural/urban problem through the prism of deprivation has not yet gained ground. To avert this dearth, this paper is an intrepid attempt to couple the two, while at the same time avoiding adopting a priori labeling.⁷⁸ By taking account of nominally (formally determined) “urban” and “rural” residents’ perceptions of their everyday lives in the social, material and discursive dimensions, our results indicate that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ – as allegedly useful systems of meaning in the public discourse – expire at the local level in settlements displaying advanced socio-economic deprivation. By integrating new hard-to-get empirical material with theoretical discussions within the scope of social, cultural and political geography, the paper explores the notion of conceptually induced harm by coupling it with the phenomenon of rural/urban thinking.⁷⁹

Methods and data

This paper combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Choosing an appropriate research design involved not only determining the severity of deprivation of the studied places but also assessing their character along a rural/urban axis, both through local perceptions of the rural/urban binary, and in terms of lateral comparability by means of measurable indicators of the socio-economic and material condition.

77 For instance, labeling children “rural youth” or “urban pupils” has similar implications as in Dawkins’ (2006) critique of a priori labeling children by their parents’ religion, for example “Christian children”.

78 The case areas were chosen on the basis of their similarities, while the formal ‘rural-urban’ difference was only added as a concomitant variable for reasons of comparison.

79 Parts of the data material underlying this paper have been presented in four other papers, each developed in different theoretical directions (Biegańska et al., 2016, forthcoming; Feltynowski et al., 2016; Krzysztofik et al., 2017b). The idea of ‘rural/urban’ in the context of harmdoing in a different context has also been explored in two other papers (Dymitrow and Brauer, 2014, 2016, forthcoming).

The first methodological problem revolved around finding ways of overcoming the residents' distrust, fear and enmity, as each non-resident entry was considered territorial violation, creating a hostile atmosphere. Hence, permeating such hermetic environments was a long process of trust-building, only made possible with the help of gatekeepers. The research began with a lengthy period of direct observations, followed by gathering information on the study groups, and finally conducting a questionnaire survey based on a non-random sample. This approach involved eschewing statistical inferences in the classical Neyman-Pearson tradition in favor of statistical description.⁸⁰ The questionnaire consisted of closed-format questions, including closed-ended, bipolar, rating scale, Likert-scale, semantic differential, and buying propensity questions, and, to a much lesser degree, dichotomous questions. Important questions of a sensitive matter were circumvented through references to third persons ("Do you know someone who...?"). Open format questions were used whenever it was instrumental not to steer the respondents into stereotypes (cf. Daszkiewicz, 2012). Considerable effort was put into the choice of simple vocabulary and variation to avoid monotony and cover enough breadth, i.e. information other than what was available from official estimates (the obtained information was nevertheless supplemented and contrasted with the knowledge of officials who were in regular contact with the respondents).

The survey involved a total of 60 persons over 15 years of age (including 31 from "rural" Chotel and 29 from "urban" Rolnicza) of whom 52% were women. Approximately 1/3 of the respondents were under 20 years of age, 2/3 were younger than 45 years, while the oldest was 72. In terms of demographic characteristics (age, civil status), the respondents from both localities were of similar composition. None of the respondents had higher education, while shares of those with elementary education were similar for both localities, at about 1/4 each. All in all, every fourth person older than 15 was surveyed (five incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis). The surveys were tested beforehand on the gatekeepers.

The data obtained from the survey were followed up by in-depth interviews conducted during the second phase of the research, that is, when the respondents became more comfortable with the research situation.

80 Today, studies based on non-random sampling are fully grounded in research methodology, and are increasingly seen as an important alternative to probabilistic approaches (Szreder, 2010). The decision to employ non-random sampling was conditioned partly by the difficulty to enlist respondents, partly due to lack of estimates of the total population size (a significant part of the residents live unregistered as a result of failed evictions and unlawful intrusions).

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The purpose of conducting interviews was partly to deepen, disambiguate and contextualize certain trends uncovered during the survey, and partly to uncover important information that did not seem relevant prior to the survey. Because of the latter, but even more due to the fragility of the research situation, unstructured interview was chosen as the appropriate method.⁸¹ Interviews were facilitated through gatekeepers (yet without their presence) in places designated by the respondents themselves. Average interview duration was 70 minutes, with the longest lasting 2.5 hours. All in all, 18 interviews were conducted (10 in Chotel and 8 in Rolnicza), with respondents differentiated by gender, age and occupation. All interviews were conducted in Polish and later transcribed, with quotations used in the article translated into English.

5.6. Paper V

Abstract

The concepts 'rural' and 'urban' have long been criticized by geographers for their lack of analytical and explanatory power, yet have remained a vital source for conceptual guidance in human geography. Realizing that the continued use of questionable concepts inadvertently runs the risk of compromising communication, misdirecting resources and downgrading social theory, the current status of 'rural/urban' creates a paradoxical epiphenomenon of progress-making in geography. We disentangle this paradox in two dimensions. Firstly, we show how a conflation between meaning and utility is what renders us desensitized to the problem. Secondly, we outline twelve extra-scientific factors likely to actuate the binary's persistent retention. We finally sketch a sensuous template set out to minimize its undesired impact. We concede that the confusion surrounding 'rural/urban' in human geography cannot be understood unless the influence of extra-scientific factors is fully taken into account, revealing the concepts' vestigiality. This, we argue, is the only way forward if we truly want to embrace the rationale of the scientific approach. The principal contribution of our paper, thus,

81 Unstructured interviews allow one to build better rapport with the respondent due to its similarity to regular conversation. Moreover, owing to greater honesty brought on by this rapport, unstructured interviews are considered better tools for approaching sensitive subjects (cf. Corbin and Morse, 2003; Côté and Salmela, 1994). Understanding the respondents' fear of authorities (e.g., losing custody over child or apartment), whose monitoring tools tend to be very formalized and structured, opting out of such an approach also helped mitigate social desirability bias (cf. Fischer and Katz, 2000).

is laying the groundwork for this particularly under-researched dimension of 'rural/urban' amidst an exceptionally rich conceptual literature on what 'rural/urban' "is" or "means".

Paper rationale

Paper V sets out to make sense of a simple yet intriguingly under-researched problem: If we, as geographers, know 'rural/urban' to be spatial concepts of poor analytical and explanatory merit, why do we keep resorting to them so often, with the imminent risk of compromising communication and corroding social theory? The contribution of this paper is to systematically elaborate on a problem central to human geography, namely the persistent retention of some of its core albeit highly questionable concepts. The paper marks a philosophical and activist contribution to the phenomenon of undesirable concept attention. It draws extensively on theoretical frameworks from previous literature, while pursuing a structured case against unsolicited/unreflected uses of 'rural/urban' in human geography.

In terms of generalization, while dealing specifically with 'rural/urban', the character of the introduced approach makes it applicable to any doubt-laden concept, in human geography and beyond (that is why 'rural/urban' was excluded from the title). Given this angle of attack, this interdisciplinary and eclectically informed interpretative paper pursues a systemic argument that is likely to be of interest to not only human geographers, but also to sociologists, anthropologists, STS scholars (including philosophers of science), and other social scientists as an example of a broad conceptual problem entangled in the practices of human geographers.

In this paper, we concede that the confusion surrounding 'rural/urban' in human geography cannot be understood unless the influence of extra-scientific factors is fully taken into account, revealing the concepts' vestigiality. We argue this is the only way forward if we truly want to embrace the rationale of the scientific approach.

Given that the contribution of this paper is to outline a new multifaceted perspective on a complex phenomenon, our analysis of extra-scientific factors had to, by necessity, be kept broad. Since breadth in the context of a research paper must imply brevity, in order to appraise the widest array of pertinent factors, the latter could not be dealt with in-depth. Effectively, the paper should be seen foremost as an overview and an introduction to further research into each and every one of the identified factors.

Methods and data

The research process began with articulating the research problem concerning 'rural/urban' and its retention in human geography, but also outlining our own pre-understanding of how knowledge production within human geography's hinterland works at the meta-level (see Brauer and Dymitrow, 2017 for a detailed demonstration). The explored literature was selected liberally at first, but narrowed to certain areas of STS and cognitive psychology, respectively. The theoretical frameworks were constantly put into relation to geographical literature on 'rural/urban', as well as to our own experiences of both concepts, through constant conversations between the authors and others. The aim of the literature review was to uncover as many plausible extra-scientific factors of legitimate status as possible, supported by a coherent collective body of scholarly literature. This involved evaluating the factors for consistency and probability of causal linkage to the process of knowledge production. The last stage involved selecting the final set of factors (including making sure that the degree of separation between them and their impact on psychosocial practices was significant enough), structuring them for legibility, and, lastly, re-engineering their causal mechanisms for the retention of 'rural/urban' in human geography.

Being a philosophical contribution, the paper uses theory as a method. It consists of four distinct parts, for each of which the use of theory is different. In the first part, 'rural/urban' are outlined as objects of longstanding geographical critique. Here, we adopt a summarizing approach to previous geographical studies, upon which a hypothesis is built. The second part marks a move to cognitive psychology, where the meaning-utility conflation is outlined as a possible cause for desensitization to 'rural/urban's' troublesome nature. Here, the use of theory is for explanatory reasons. In the third part, with the help of STS, a sociological view of science is introduced to outline the concept of 'extra-scientific factor', which is used to explain the retention of 'rural/urban' within human geography along with a comprehensive walkthrough down 12 such extra-scientific factors. This part employs a form of extractive reasoning⁸² known as reverse engineering (cf. Venturini, 2010), which can be used as a source for introspection and personal reflection ('How likely is it that I am doing this?').⁸³ The last part

82 Extractive reasoning is a type of reasoning which occurs "when an experienced mind makes sense of a whole situation by seizing on its most information-bearing detail" (Powell, 2014: 178).

83 Here we opted out of a strictly empirical approach based on verbal report, i.e. simply asking human geographers 'Why do you use the concepts rural/urban in your work?', as such a question would most likely come across as too broad too leading, and prompt the

introduces the defiltration maxim, a sensuous template devised to sort out our own positionalities in the process of using 'rural/urban' in our research. This part mirrors the former, i.e. provides a forum for introspection that revolves around the assembled 12 factors. This approach, called maieutics or the Socratic method (Nelson [Leonard], 1950), involves prompting a cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presumptions.

interviewees towards intellectually constructed answers (cf. Anderson, 2007). Given that *"verbal report (...) provides insufficient data for making generalizations about [concept attainment in humans]"* (Bruner et al., 1999: 102) instructive answers would be difficult to obtain. We therefore found more merit in assembling the most likely drivers responsible for those retentive practices among human geographers by drawing out plausible scenarios based on recognized theoretical frameworks from STS and cognitive science. That said, our ideas have not hatched in a vacuum, but depart from several years of (anthropological) experience watching 'rural/urban' in the making while being 'within the system'. This has included studying the uses of 'rural/urban' in: scientific articles and conference papers, discussions in research groups and conference sessions, article manuscript preparations, evaluations of research projects, supervisions, etc. but also based on a host of other experiences, including acting as researchers, authors, teachers, coordinators, journal editors, session conveners and conference organizers.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

6.1. Introduction

The outline of a compilation thesis discussion will vary depending on how one understands the role of the constitutive papers of the thesis. If the articles represent different parts of a homogenous study then the discussion chapter is more likely to cover the respective contributions of the papers in order to arrive at some general conclusions. In that case, the articles correspond to the data material in a monograph thesis. Contrarily, in a heterogeneous thesis on an overarching topic, each article constitutes an independent whole. As such, the need to arrive at generalizations from the results is lesser and may even seem unwarranted. Instead, the discussion serves as a looser ground between the more general theoretical frameworks introduced in the summative part and the insights drawn from the articles.

The heterogeneous character of this thesis stems from the fact that each paper unpacks a specific theme of rural/urban thinking and couples it with its material effects. The themes undertaken in the papers form a progressive metanarrative that moves from problems of concept attainment (acconceptualization), via those of concept retainment (reconceptualization) to those of concept detainment (deconceptualization) in the context of 'rural/urban'. This roughly reflects the compound argument presented in the introductory section 1.1:

- Paper I – *subjectivity* – (we mean different things) >>
- Paper II – *elusiveness* – (we do not really understand each other) >>
- Paper III – *parodying* – (we resort to prototypes/stereotypes to make it work) >>
- Paper IV – *harmdoing* – (prototypes/stereotypes are likely to cause harm) >>

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- Paper V – *knowledge production* – (we need to understand what we are doing and why in order to prevent harm)

However, rather than merely reiterate the findings of the papers (which are contained in specific settings and are best understood in their respective contexts), I will instead elaborate on the insights drawn from these findings in a larger perspective. As outlined in section 1.7, this will be done with the help of three principal research questions, each approaching a specific aspect of the rural/urban problem:

- *Performativity*: How does the rural/urban conceptual vehicle come about and how is it withheld in various situations?
- *Constitution*: To what extent do understandings of ‘rural/urban’ converge across the scope of their situatedness?
- *Implications*: What are the implications of sustaining the rural/urban conceptual vehicle for societal organization in general, and human geography in particular?

6.2. On performativity

The first research question in this thesis is how the rural/urban conceptual vehicle comes about and how it is withheld in various situations. It is concerned with how ‘rural/urban’ are construed and used today, and what tensions they may spawn across select spatio-cultural contexts. In other words, it puts performativity of ‘rural/urban’ as concepts in the limelight.

Having introduced performativity as a perspective acknowledging that citational uses of concepts produce a series of effects, implies that performing rurality or urbanity is fundamentally the same as verbalizing it. By talking about ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ we simultaneously consolidate an impression of certain things, places and subjects “being” rural or urban. While this is in line with how concept attainment generally works, in the case of ‘rural/urban’ this becomes problematic. In spite of the 100-year-old critique of “*rural and urban [as] vague and contradictory and [whose] use should be discontinued for scientific work*” (Galpin et al., 1918), the rural/urban distinction continues to serve as a viable material framework for expanses of societal organization. What is more, this contradiction is starkly visible in research, not least amongst geographers, and their proclivity to “[think] *critically about rurality but nonetheless thinking about it*” (Halfacree, 2012). This in turn puts a question mark over progress in human geography in terms of

how well we are able to adapt knowledge to reciprocate with societal change at large (cf. Bassett, 1999; Losee, 2004). Hence, viewing scientific progress not only as the launching of sophisticated ideas, but also seeing those ideas actually being adopted by the larger scientific community (cf. section 1.2), the persistence of ‘rural/urban’ in geographical research would suggest that progress in this particular arena has not really been achieved. The problem seems to lie in the misunderstanding of how conceptual performativity works or in the failure to fully embrace the scope of this concept.

While each paper targets performativity in different ways, this issue is perhaps best visualized in Paper V, wherein rural/urban performativity is examined in the context of human geographers by looking into a number of principal sociological and psychological factors that make us think and act in certain ways. More specifically, concern has been raised about geographers’ continued professional use of ‘rural/urban’ as acceptable analytical categories. While (as noted in section 3.4), geographers have been “*revealed not only as observers and recorders of the rural but also as active agents in producing, reproducing and performing rurality*” (Woods, 2010: 844), the only tangible change this allegedly increased awareness generated is a shift in methodologies and a greater sense of ethics. What has not shifted is the persistent tendency to pre-label subjects as “rural” (or “urban”), whose mundane performances were meant to inform the justification of this very label. Let us consider it.

When focusing on everyday experiences and mundanities of “rural [or urban] subjects”, the notion of “everyday ruralities” or “everyday urbanities” is not unproblematic. Two questions instantaneously come to mind: Why ruralities? and Whose ruralities? (For the sake of clarity, I am here only discussing ruralities, but these can be replaced for urbanities.) Firstly, what exactly are “everyday ruralities”? This assemblage consists of two signifiers. The attribute “everyday” is easy to comprehend. It implies some form of rhythmicity (every + day) and ordinariness (as extraordinary is unlikely to happen every day), in other words something typical. But what are “ruralities”? Notwithstanding the recognizable and now largely mandatory “post-modernist plural” (cf. section 3.7 and the example of “catities”), identifying rurality “*is to identify the various things that make somewhere, someone, or something rural*” (Halfacree, 2009b: 449). With the slight rectification that things cannot make anything an abstract concept (but humans can), we can agree upon that the verb “make” is crucial to this definition in that it needs to be understood literally, in an active sense, rather than to signify some passive state of becoming. Departing from the commonly accepted notion today that rurality is an “*imagined space*” and an “*artificial construction*”

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(Woods, 2011: 264), it would be fair to assume that “everyday ruralities” *are* in fact rurality. However (unless we actually witnessed anyone ever utter the words “I am making rurality”), pinpointing those practices to some “people out there” misses the point that whenever we look for “everyday ruralities” in “rural areas”, we *will* find “rurality” (cf. Law, 2004). And ultimately that “rurality” is supposed to inform us how “rurality” is performed (cf. Tab. 2.2). Such appeals, as Shields (cited in Halfacree, 1993: 24) put it, “*are indicative of a tautological circle ... 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*”.

Lest tautology is what we are aiming for, understanding “everyday ruralities” must involve a shift in semantics: in order for someone to perform rurality, one must first indicate it is rurality – and not something else – that is being performed. When examining rural performances (cf. Table 2.2) geographers either depart from a *spatial delimitation* or an *activity delimitation*⁸⁴. When departing from a spatial delimitation, geographers usually focus on certain material manifestations of rurality (e.g., remoteness, open landscape or nature), yet the entire variability of the studied areas’ performances is made “rural” by extension, normalizing its definition through a morphological contingent. Contrarily, when departing from an activity delimitation “rural activities” are often identified from a preconceived traditionalist understanding (e.g., farming, hunting, mining, and so on), whereby any area exhibiting those traits becomes “rural” by extension, effectively normalizing rurality’s definition by the actions of a few. By so doing, geographers will always be able to make any performance or any spatiality “rural”.

I would argue that since rurality can only be performed by calling it beforehand, anyone evoking this imaginary concept is a potential rural subject. In conclusion, understanding that social science helps enact realities (Law and Urry, 2004), the principal premise is that whenever “everyday ruralities” are evoked, the everyday of the principal constructors of rurality is often blackboxed – that of the geographers, the same geographers who go to work every day and make places, people and things “rural”.

It should be noted, however, that this is not an indictment of geographers as vacuous. Performance studies in general have been criticized for the difficulty to identify the subject (cf. Green, 2007; Schechner, 1994),

⁸⁴ Both approaches correspond roughly to the descriptive and socio-cultural definitions as outlined by Halfacree (1993), with the first rendering spatial indifference and the second spatial determinism.

which instead “*is abstracted in time and place, has little agency, [and] is conceived within a purely discursive, non-material world*” (Pratt, 2009: 527). Since the subject problem arises when the epistemological premise of the performance approach is synthesized with conventional sociology at large, it effectively renders everything a performance:

[W]hilst the performative, as a theoretical tool or concept, can be used in any given circumstance, its usefulness and what it uncovers and creates are fundamentally specific to the context in which it is sited. (Dewsbury, 2000: 475)

The shifting of perspective toward performances of the rural has also been said to bring to light “*power relations within the rural, that may be overlooked in other approaches*” (Woods, 2011: 201). However, if the performative is “*necessarily aberrant and parasitic upon conventional, citational, and socially stratified context*” (Dewsbury, 2000: 475), by making others “perform rurality” for us, we are hardly gaining any better understanding of ‘the rural’, including its power relations. On the contrary, we – as researchers – could be accused of extending a perfunctory, tokenistic gesture toward disempowered “rural people” out there in a wish to atone for our own privileged position or to deflect possible accusations of exercising a top-down approach (cf. Gilbert [M], 1997; Niemann, 2003). In view of the invisible subject problem, turning to the performativity of rurality, hence, falters on the finish line. While performativity is undeniably linked to the idea of a performance, it is a slippery term in that ‘the performative’ is not itself a concept signifying a discrete act (the performance). Beside this easy conflation of performativity with performance (Butler, 2010), a performance can only come about through there being an audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Hence, claiming that ‘people out there’ are performing rurality because we have empirically witnessed it misses that “*people become performers because they underline their behaviour under the auspices that they are being scrutinised by others*” (Dewsbury, 2000: 475, emphasis in original). This then additionally blurs the boundary between performance and everyday life by discursively doubling up the performing (as in “*making rurality*”; cf. Halfacree, 2009b: 449) with acting (as in dissimulating an action as “rural”) (Schechner, 1994). Effectively, it is methodologically impossible to tell who is performing what, and, consequentially, eliminate the fact that we might be performing rurality from the privacy of our offices.

This problem is also illustrated empirically in Paper IV. According to the respondents, while both ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are used as terms in everyday

language, they serve primarily as designators for a more general civilizatory progress (e.g., better equipped and more modern apartments are associated with the concept of urbanity *if* the questions are posed in this fashion) but otherwise are not particularly important in everyday communication. In other words, they indicate certain weight but have no explanatory value. This, then, contradicts the societal propensity to depart from those labels when trying to understand ‘rurality/urbanity’ along with their associated problems, needs and solutions. Besides, both studied estates (‘rural’ and ‘urban’) are very similar in every aspect, and most of their inhabitants neither work nor engage in activities that could be described as either “rural” or “urban”.

Although the estates in Paper IV represent a socio-economic extreme, similar premises can be found in many other settlements beyond the curtain of deprivation. For instance, with over 56% of the European Union’s population living in what are defined as “rural areas” (European Commission, 2008a), only 5% – as of 2009 – were employed in agriculture, and the number of jobs in this sector is steadily falling (European Commission, 2012; Roser, 2017). Similarly, in a world of ICTs, mobilities, capitalism, and diffusion of innovations, defining, “urban activities” is virtually impossible. So who is really performing rurality/urbanity?

This question is important insofar as it helps develop the triadic conceptualization of rural space as visualized in Halfacree’s (2006) model (Figure 6.1, left). Firstly, to make a space “rural” or “urban” today, we still need a physical locality, but that locality must no longer be constituted by distinctive spatial (“rural”) practices (first alteration). Secondly, that locality must be tied to some mental representation of rurality (no alteration). Thirdly, to make a representation-infused locality “rural”, we need people whose choices to make it “rural” (and not something else) are not random but tied to a number of sociological, psychological and combinatorial factors. In short, anybody doing something under the auspices of the term “rural” (i.e., using the term) is in fact performing it (Figure 6.2, right). This interpretation of performativity is also more genuine to Butler’s intended use of the term (cf. section 3.4).

This model can also be vastly simplified. Since space in the *geographical* sense must be tied to a physical underlay we need a locality. Remembering that “*mathematical spaces are pure form, devoid of human meaning*” (Coulélis, 1992: 231), we must infuse that locality with some form of idea. Such ideas often stand in for representations of historical states of affairs. Lastly, we need agents (apostles, propagandists, campaigners if you will) to make

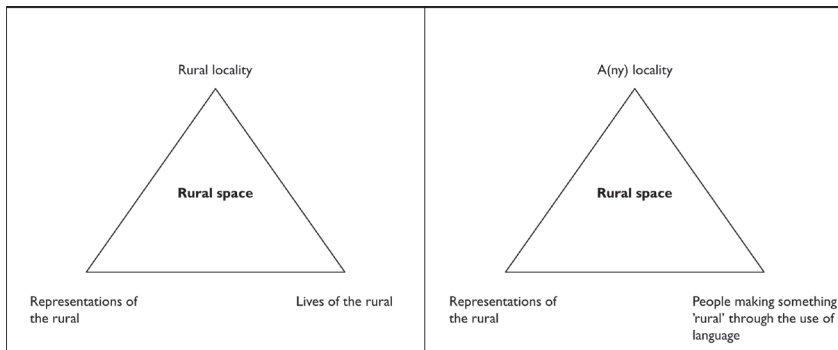


Figure 6.1.

Left: The hybrid totality of rural space as envisioned by Halfacree (2006).

Right: The author's suggestions for alteration.

the ideated locality “rural” by proclaiming (in speech or in writing) that it is “rural” (Figure 6.2).

While the first alteration (‘a locality’) only reflects a changing society by stressing the greater variability of spaces to which the label “rural” can be potentially attached, the second alteration (‘an agent’) is probably more important insofar that without agents who *make* spaces ‘rural’ we are only left with localities with very different representations. This might not be a bad thing though. The removal of labeling agents would open up of for new ways of understanding places without squeezing them into a binary category, which the reality keeps rejecting. Contrarily, by making things,

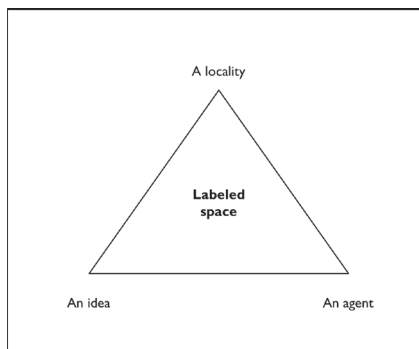


Figure 6.2. The hybrid totality of labeled space (e.g., “rural”, “urban”). The author’s suggestion, inspired by Halfacree (2006).

places and people “rural”, we create a discursive field whose load is likely to discharge – often subconsciously – to other, thematically more or less unrelated, contexts. In instances where this discursive linkage is not directly apparent (or obscured by years of cultural indoctrination), certain assumptions (or “facts”) are then less likely to be questioned and reflected upon. This in turn creates a silent ground for their justification, as countless empirics show. This idea surfaces throughout the five arti-

cles, although seen from various viewpoints: administrative, historical, and visual, as outlined next.

In Poland there are innumerable examples of administrative manipulations surrounding incorporations of ‘rural’-labeled communes into major cities. Promises of prompt development issued by ambitious (avaricious?) urban municipal authorities may tempt their “rural neighbors” to vote for the incorporation of huge tracts of agricultural land into the cities for unorthodox reasons, for example to procure grants reserved for large cities by increasing the city’s population⁸⁵. Some minor nearby settlements even apply for urban status themselves as a means to offset such incorporation (lately Otyń and Skarbimierz-Osiedle). Contrarily, the last 10 years has also seen a reverse trend, namely the dissolution of many artificially conglomerated cities to make the farmers and owners of agritourist facilities in those cities again eligible for “rural” subventions (cf. Szmytkie, 2016). In a similar vein, many overgrown and fully urbanized villages (up to 12,000 inhabitants) refrain from applying for urban status for pragmatic reasons, because if granted one they would no longer be eligible for a number of anachronistic state subsidies, particularly those aimed at teachers. While the job description of a teacher in “rural areas” decades ago involved, for instance, lighting a fire in the furnace and shoveling snow around the school building (hence higher salary), today, although this no longer applies, the differences in salaries between “rural” and “urban” teachers remain (and even so for the many homogenous built-up areas where the “rural-urban” boundary runs along a single street).

Paper II shows how the urban label is also used to catalyze local development by means of historical reconstruction. This brand of urban performativity involves claims that towns degraded by a foreign oppressor should be exempt from the restitution process because degradations enacted by undemocratic means are an act of violation of the Polish law. The paper shows how exploitation of repression-induced degradation is so widespread that it is even being transposed onto historical reversals of urban status that had absolutely nothing to do with it. For instance, the minuscule settlement of Siedliszcze, which had its urban status revoked on April 10, 1821, regained this status on January 1, 2016. During the pre-restitutional campaign (2015) it was widely heralded that the town’s historical degradation happened “*after the January Uprising of 1863–64*⁸⁶” or “*slightly*

85 The city of Rzeszów is an infamous example of this. It augmented its area by 115% in only 10 years (from 54 km² in 2005 to 120 km² in 2016), while its population increased only by 16% during that same period (from 160,000 to 190,000).

86 The January Uprising was an uprising in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

before” (by 42 years!) the Uprising. In any case, the very mentions of this uprising brought to mind images of crushed Polish resistance (reproducing the dreaded Russian repression narrative, cf. Taras, 2010) and helped prop up the town’s restitution of urban status. Hence, portraying degradations as unjust (be it by historical ignorance or by deliberately forging history) is a particular way of performing urbanity, which many Polish towns resort to in order to access the perks of urban-labeled benefits (in Poland there are over 800 degraded towns). This is especially true for questionable cases such as Siedliszcze, the least developed of the newly restituted 98 towns (cf. Spórna et al., 2015a: 416), or Wiślica, which will become Poland’s smallest city on January 1, 2018 with only 500 inhabitants.

Paper III illustrates this way of performing urbanity from a visual side, where authorities of formally rural Polish ogle at obtaining urban status (for whatever reasons) by means of “urban revitalization”. The paper shows that doing so in underpopulated towns is confusing for the locals and seldom embraced by them. Although such efforts oftentimes do produce aesthetically attractive results, they instead render public spaces unusable and are a waste of valuable social space. Moreover, the encountered “wholesale heritagization” (using mass-produced wells, benches, fountains, and pillories) or exoticization (use of contextually alien elements such as English gazebos, Parisian street lamps or Greek sundials) is much more likely to cause uniformation by erasing traces of particularity and historicity. Another finding is that “urban revitalization” of settlements exhibiting advanced physical degradation – unlike larger centers – is a very delicate matter that requires competence and understanding of the consequences that an inadequate intervention can induce. Contrarily, constrained townifications may seem purposeless in terms of effective governance, while over-the-top urban historicization merely parodies the concept of urbanity in the face of the inferred logic (“to become more urban”).

If we consider this closely, the deployed revitalization actions are ensnared in a peculiar chain of illogic. Wanting to become urban by pretending to look urban by invoking urban schemata from the past to obtain contemporary benefits of urban status (which are neither clear, nor guarantee the expected way of development) is then less about content and more about window dressing (cf. Dibazar et al., 2013). This aligns with Eriksen’s (1993: 23) contention that tradition, despite being created by modernity as its opposition, is actually part of modernity itself, because without modernity

against the Russian Empire. It began on January 22, 1863 and lasted until the last insurgents were captured in 1864. This uprising is often attributed as the cause of stripping 338 Polish towns of their urban status.

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as a context, tradition would have no meaning. Such cultural engendering of urbanity also mirrors Halfacree's (2009b) third Baudrillard-inspired perspective (simulation, hyper-reality) on rurality (cf. section 2.4.3), where "*representations of rurality [are] being deployed to shape existing rural spaces, or even to corral assemblages of rurality 'beyond' the rural*", although here in an "urban" context. Firstly, urban representations become infused with particular representations of urbanity, namely an 18th-century urban ideal from the time immediately prior to the towns' formal degradation (something Paper II explains in detail). Secondly, the towns are reconstituted to resemble more closely what urban is "supposed" to look like by focusing on the most conspicuous item to convince the spectator that it is in fact urban. This involves creating a prototype from the past that has little to do with contemporary outlooks on "urbanity", and which effectively becomes a perversion of itself – a stereotype. Lastly, "urbanity" is deployed to assemble elements beyond what most Poles would recognize as "urbanity" by using various exoticisms from a catalogue of heritage clichés (i.e. "*internationally recognizable idioms, reflecting a cultural identity through global heritage icons*"; Ashworth, 2007: 5).

Performing urbanity/rurality is both a psychological and a sociological process, and the both strands often intertwine (as Paper V illustrates). While psychological processes happen more or less subconsciously (we cannot fully control for how our brains handle cognition), the sociological processes are seldom purposeless but involve intricate elements of expectation, negotiation and manipulation. As the empirical papers demonstrate, 'rural/urban' as performative entities are tricky in this respect, because they rarely involve the throwing out of a *carte blanche*. This is especially important if we subscribe to the idea that 'rural/urban' can be investigated empirically in the field. If you ask somebody, "How is it like to be rural/urban?", you are likely to get an answer. But if you instead ask that person, "How is it like to be you?", you will probably not hear 'rural/urban' mentioned. In that vein, resorting to "everyday ruralities/urbanities" as a geographical nexus of understanding, rurality's/urbanity's whereabouts are of primary concern, because if 'rurality/urbanity' are merely figments of imagination then "everyday ruralities/urbanities" can only belong to those imagining them. Indeed, "everyday ruralities/urbanities" *can* take place "out there", but this can only happen if 'rurality/urbanity' are admittedly the concepts their alleged performers identify their performances by. Perhaps more often than not, however, they unfold "in here", while what happens "out there" are merely our own projections and transpositions. This means that

if performativity is really the way we want to obtain better knowledge about ‘rural/urban’, we first need to clear our own backyard.

6.3. On constitution

The second research question deals with the extent to which rural/urban understandings converge across their situatedness. Since the early 1980s, actor-network theory has contested the status of “context” as an explanatory resource and this has been of massive importance as “*a warning against reducing events and actors to a given context*” (Asdal, 2012: 379).

We, humanists and social scientists alike, often explain our findings by referring to an outside context or we understand and interpret the actors we study and their way of acting with reference to their embeddedness in a specific and wider context. In this sense, context is very often thought of as a (for the time being) stable background to which our original findings and claims can relate. However, on the other hand, the topic comes with little else but trouble: What is context and what role do contexts actually play in our efforts at working out what is at stake in *texts* that come to us from the past? What is the relation between text and *context*? (Asdal, 2012: 381; emphases in original)

‘Rural/urban’ are texts from the past. This means that by looking into whether certain tropes associated with ‘rurality/urbanity’ may or may not be replicated across different spatio-cultural contexts, it is possible to break the infamous contextual barrier (cf. Duranti and Goodwin, 1992).

The underlying assumption of this discussion is twofold. The first part concedes that ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ have come to a point in their conceptual development at which they can signify almost anything, and this span widens with an ever greater speed without raising considerable intellectual doubts. While this gives rise to a conceptual incongruence, this is – at least theoretically – acceptable as long as that conceptual incongruence is shared by many (cf. the shared understanding of “democracy” in North Korea). However, ‘rural/urban’ are ridden with a host of other conceptual flaws that seem to overarch the confines of context. This angle forms the second part of the discussion.

The concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, so it seems, are often used (performed) without careful consideration of what they really imply. What we do know

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is that changing patterns of land use, modes of connectivity, livelihoods, lifestyles, and spatial relations, for example, alter our society, making it in constant flux. We also know that 'rural' and 'urban' have been subject to immense theoretical and philosophical repositionings. They have been envisioned as binaries, dichotomies, dualisms, continua and sliders; theorized as phenomena, forces and social constructs; envisioned as structured coherences or chaotic conceptions, as rhetorical devices or ideologies, as categories of thought or conversational realities, as narratives or exclusionary othering devices. Researchers have tried to understand 'rural/urban' through philosophical recourses to 'embodiment', 'more-than-human'-approaches, 'assemblages', 'effacement', 'post'- and 'beyond'-perspectives, and a host of other transdisciplinary crisscrossings. All, in one way or another, have proven treacherous, ambiguous or contentious. Why? Cognitively, it all boils down to one principal aspect: subjectivity – a topic explored in Paper I.

As noted in sections 3.3 and 4.3.1, certain concepts work better than others simply because they are more "clean", or precise (Aristotelian categories) and, as such, they gain more points on the intersubjectivity scale. Subjectivity, on the other hand, is considered true only from the perspective of a subject or subjects (Solomon, 2005: 900). This means the more a certain idea is shared by many, the more apparently objective it becomes. This gains particular prominence with those binary systems of meanings that overlap to the point of signifying each other's antonyms (cf. Sokołowski, 1999). As outlined in section 3.2, shared cognition and consensus are essential to effectively harbor the sea of human ideas and relations with the geographical environment; in other words we must have a common ground for effective communication⁸⁷. This also automatically implies that by organizing ourselves against any system of meaning, we "*inherently must concede part of [our] individuality towards a homogenous goal*" (Peterson, 2015). The problem arises with those concepts where subjectivity gains excessive leeway. Assessing the value of a concept, hence, must involve accounting for its relation to notions of complexity, repeatability and changeability, and deconstructing them into a number of logical constitutions, that is collections of traits related by entailment to the concept being analyzed (Earl, 2002). This in turn can reveal how strong or vulnerable a concept is (cf. Barrett, 2015). The following compilation lists 10 constitutive flaws with 'rural/urban' that recur across different "contexts", as shown in the appended papers. While some of them

⁸⁷ Notably, this is not the same as *thinking in the same manner*, on the contrary. However, our disparity of opinions must be ascertained by reassurance that we at least are talking about the same thing.

apply to concepts in general and others only to certain types of concepts, all seem typical of 'rural/urban' in particular.

Inadvertent dichotomization

Firstly, although lexicologically a binary (i.e., a conceptual pair), 'rural' and 'urban' are often used as a dichotomy (i.e., as two mutually exclusive parts), and dichotomies are known to be badly suited to reflect a messy, nuanced world. This is visible especially in Paper II, which shows how the Polish practice perpetuates the historical concepts 'rural/urban' (and the false dichotomy they uphold) as objective truths and as materialities that exist beyond conversational realities. Also, Paper IV shows a range of examples representing three dimensions of rural/urban limitations: formal-legal, visionary and practical. The first dimension highlights the limitations of a formal-legal rural/urban division. This aspect appears particularly salient with regard to eligibility for revitalization for "urban areas", ban on livestock maintenance in "urban areas" or lack of free school transport for "urban children". Dichotomization is also present in several anachronistic "rural" state subsidies aimed at employees working in formally designated "rural areas" (regardless of their material manifestation). The second dimension deals with specific ways in which "urban" and "rural" problems are discursively shaped in local policy. This dimension is important insofar that rules and regulations are sometimes less a factor for placement of money than are underlying visions (e.g., envisioning "urban areas" from the perspective of wealthy metropolitan units with great potential versus activation of agriculture as the main priority for "rural areas"). Judging from the kind of investments made at both studied areas, the rural/urban qualifier is not incidental but geared toward specific forms of development principles. Lastly, the third – practical – dimension deals with ways in which socio-economic problems are dealt with in practice based on the private convictions of local officials. Nominally, formally "urban areas" are seemingly covered by a higher quality of social care services than formally "rural areas", although the latter can, supposedly, count on greater individualization of approach. However, in practice the life situation of deprived people in both areas remains equally strenuous and unchanged, regardless of the stated benefits for urban and rural areas, which instead come across as empty rhetoric. Instead, problems that do not fit well into the practical rural/urban schemata are disavowed, reconstituting the vulnerable into deviant and failing. This shows that "reality" follows its own course (in Paper IV for the worse), and that dividing it in a rural and an urban part is likely to divert attention from self-identified problems. As one affected interviewee in Paper IV noted, "ru-



Figure 6.3. An “urban molding paste” is apparently one that adds volume and definition. When abstracted onto “urban” sensu lato, the volume part seems to work better than the definition part.

amount of cognitive effort”, so instead we opt for low-resolution solutions (see section 3.3). Although this is not a problem per se should a complex concept be consensually considered useful (such as freedom, democracy, participation, accountability or sustainability, cf. Boyer [C.B.], 1949), when this utility cannot be readily identified, the concept’s retention should be questioned. This dimension of ‘rural/urban’ looms large throughout all five papers as a point of embarkation.

Universal variability

Thirdly, ‘rural/urban’ are used globally, which is at risk of using them as if they were universally invariable. This in turn is a severe threat to basic human communication. Among 228 countries for which the United Nations has data, about half use administrative definitions of urban, 51 use size and density, 39 use functional characteristics, 22 have no definition of urban, and 8 define all or none of their population as urban (Vlahov and Galea, 2002: 52). While differences between ‘urban’ Mexico City and ‘urban’ Hum of 21 inhabitants are perplexing, the term “rural space” is even more differentiated

ral-urban, whatever, as long as the programs can help us. Something must be done before people hit the bottom. There are already those who’ve stopped wanting”.

Added complexity

Secondly, ‘rural/urban’ are complex concepts, which today can denote almost everything. Presently, these denotations have become exceptionally multifarious: space, places, people, animals, practices, governance, art, philosophy, mythology, phraseology, and even hair paste (!) (Figure 6.3). The problem is that the more we throw into a concept the less clear it becomes. Complexity, in turn, is very difficult to operationalize. To build a model of reality into that level of resolution, as Peterson (2015) argues, requires “*a tremendous*

and can include: arable fields, woods, meadows, national parks, mountain ranges, marshes, glaciers, rain forests, and not to forget all ‘non-urban’ settlements (like the Polish “village” of Sosnowiec with 90.000 inhabitants in 1914) – including the humans who inhabit them. Still, this flawed underlay, as Paper IV shows, affects the patterns of national development in terms of distribution of resources. Programs supporting innovation and largescale investments are conceptually designed to further a growth-oriented brand of development widely understood as “urban” while so-called “rural programs” revolve around the restructuring of the primary sector, and only to a lesser extent support more general activation schemes. Moreover, geographies of development also form an important factor, where “*differences between the experiences of rural life in Africa compared to that of the more developed world [make] the two rurals almost incomparable*”⁸⁸ (Siwale, 2014: 15). Using a very simple analogy, this is like saying that a bird is not a fish, but anything that is not a fish is a bird. Realizing how few people actually define what they mean by ‘rural/urban’ (even in specialized contexts where these terms supposedly play a major role), puts a big question mark over the semiotic efficacy of international interlocution. Although no paper deals with this issue head-on (all do it in passing), much of this critique is imbedded in the fundamental problem with ‘rural/urban’ as outlined in the theoretical chapters.

Multiaspectuality

Fourth, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are multiaspectual by reduction and comprise at least 40 known attributes. Today, however, due to uneven and fast-paced societal changes, these attributes can vary independently of each other. This means that the evolution of the constitutive aspects of ‘rural/urban’ no longer correlates with an assumed linear transformation along a rural-to-urban (and vice versa) axis. Therefore, it is impossible to determine what ‘rural’ or ‘urban’ is without resorting to artificial mean values or stereotypes based on the most conspicuous aspects (cf. section 2.4.3). This corresponds to the definition of “artificial classification”, where “*correlation [between a number of attributes] is reduced to a minimum*” (see section 3.3) and is known to be “*the source of controversy and much misunderstanding*” (Schweder and Miller, 2012: 43). It also undermines the idea of a ‘rural/urban continuum’. While this flaw has been explained in section 2.4.2, Paper IV illustrates it empirically. In Polish deprivation-ridden post-socialist settlements (socjalaki),

88 Notwithstanding the misconception that “Western” rural and “African” rural are “two rurals”.

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commonplace ideations of ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ imbricate each other in both the socio-economic and material dimensions. Also discursively the encountered lay narratives of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ converge or leapfrog each other at both localities. This supports Halfacree’s (2009b) first of four perspectives on rurality – ‘rurality effaced’ (section 2.4.3), according to which “*capitalism has progressively done away with formerly significant geographical demarcations and borders, including that between rural and urban*” (in this case capitalism along with Communism). Paper IV outlines that the discourse of rural/urban opposition lingers mostly as a materialized stand-in for a more general civilizatory progress, whereas its social content has largely become amalgamated. Effectively, although the residents in both localities perceive urbanity/rurality similarly through sets of objective indicators, stereotypes are easily resorted to at a conceptual level (to deal with multiaspectuality), reinforcing the divisive power of a largely imaginary binary.

Old concepts

Fifthly, ‘rural/urban’ are very old concepts and hence require conscious and continuous justification to keep them afloat in a changed reality. Throughout history, as a result of technological progress, we have witnessed a myriad of evolutionary developments within a wide range of concepts. One notable trend is that when the main function of a particular concept changes significantly, i.e. to the point at which its original function only constitutes a fraction of its extended range of uses, the concept becomes re-conceptualized (e.g. the reconceptualization of the telephone – via the mobile phone – to form the smartphone, or the typewriter – via the computer keyboard – to form the touchscreen) (cf. Karahanna et al., 2006). When the main function of a concept remains the same (even though its technological advance has been significant), the concept tends to stay the same: food, car, plane, make-up, animal, and flag.⁸⁹ With regard to ‘rural/urban’, the names remain unaltered. This raises a number of important questions. If the nature of “rural” changes significantly, is it fair to still call it “rural”? Assuming that it is, is it thus the gradual transformation of “rural” that justifies this term to be used for something completely different? How about if that same change had occurred abruptly? Would it instead have been called something else because of the greater contrast against the surrounding space it would

89 In some instances, the usage of a specific concept can also change significantly to mean something completely different, but this is done consciously and as a form of mockery, for example as in the concept of ‘democracy’ as used in the name Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and in the names of other former communist states.

produce? Holding on to old concepts (as Papers I through IV illustrate) is not always the best solution.

Paper II, for example, shows how striving for urbanity by resorting to the concept of ‘degradation’ invokes historical scars and keeps the rural/urban divide relevant through a specific form of resentment. And while “[m]emory is not trash but useful intellectual and emotional knowledge” (Lubecka 2010: 158), one needs to distinguish between memory as an abstract container of contextually inalienable values and memory as a dispositive⁹⁰ through which certain discourses gain material presence. The discursive load added to the concept of ‘degradation’ entreats stories laden with almost exclusively negative connotations while the celebration of historical serfdom and suffering could be seen as a gratuitous use of the concept. This form of urbanity, the relentless nourishing on “historical wrongs”, may eventually turn morbid and impede fresh future outlooks that depart from *current* preconditions for sound development.

Cultural messiness

Sixthly, ‘rural/urban’ reflect a cultural messiness inherent of their origins. This means that they were not constructed as analytical tools to better understand the world, but were taken out from a messy reality and a posteriori remolded into ontologized, scientified and politicized concepts. The problem is that messy concepts, due to their impreciseness, are inherently unfit to get things done. Understanding culture as the primary source of both social progress and regression, the origins of words taken for principal cultural codes is not unimportant. In research or planning, a “cool” development project or a “funky” method would be unacceptable because these popular-culture adjectives (although largely understandable) are too imprecise to help fulfill a task. Precise and unambiguous language is mandatory in many situations such as medicine, judiciary systems or air traffic control, where ineffective communication may incur dire consequences, including death. In situations where conceptually induced harm is not sufficiently sensed, laxity is practiced. Expectedly, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ projects abound.

Paper I qualifies this contingency through the example of the town of Obrzycko, which due to lack of procedural knowledge was mistakenly detached from the rural municipality of Obrzycko and made a separate

⁹⁰ A dispositive (Fr. *dispositif*) is “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble, consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural planning, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proportions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositive. The dispositive itself is the network that can be established between these elements”. (Foucault, 1980: 194)

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Table 6.1. The three incompatible currents of thought influencing in tandem the understanding of ‘urbanity’ in Poland (based on Papers II, III and IV in this thesis).

“Urbanity as a state”	“Urbanity as a label”	“Urbanity as a value”
<i>Driver:</i> processual forces	<i>Driver:</i> legal forces	<i>Driver:</i> emotive forces
<i>Theory:</i> urbanization	<i>Theory:</i> urbification	<i>Theory:</i> heritage theory
<i>Scale:</i> global	<i>Scale:</i> national	<i>Scale:</i> local (nationalistic)
<i>Subscribers:</i> academics, etc.	<i>Subscribers:</i> legislators, administrators, planners	<i>Subscribers:</i> residents, cultural associations, local authorities
<i>Problem:</i> rural/urban blurring	<i>Problem:</i> ineffective classification criteria	<i>Problems:</i> mythmaking and utopian/dystopian narratives

urban municipality in spite of its scarce population (2,000) and area (3 km²). This unnatural division created two sets of administrative posts whose officials preside side by side in the same building. Not only is the double administration costly, it also prohibits the government of the urban unit from space-consuming investments due to its territorial exiguity, and, analogously, divests the government of the rural unit of unimpeded access to various existing social and cultural institutions located in Obrzycko. Furthermore, the division restricts both municipalities from accessing various grants and subsidies, precludes realization of joint projects in spite of mutual interdependence, and, most disturbingly, loosens social bonds. Despite numerous attempts to integrate both units on behalf of the urban municipality, 99% of the rural voices are against integration. Effectively, the division remains, keeping the altercation ablaze. What this case illustrates, is how important the issue of rural or urban identification may be to people, and whose relinquishment may become the subject of a heated debate.

Because the distinction between formal urbanity and cultural urbanity in Poland is neither sufficiently differentiated nor problematized, confusion arises as to what ‘rural/urban’ really stand for, making societal actions that depart from such a distinction contentious and difficult to successfully operationalize (cf. Table 6.1).

Spatial bias

Seventhly, ‘rural/urban’ are spatially biased concepts, despite the knowledge that basing human-oriented governance on a spatial category may smack of the much critiqued spatial fetishism (cf. section 2.4.3). While spatial bias is a widespread phenomenon (something the commonality of the question “Where are you from?” reveals), this aspect of ‘rural/urban’ is

perhaps best illustrated through the practices of geographers. Geographers' field of maneuverability is thematically gravitating toward a spatial focus. As geographers we are from day one trained to reason in spatial terms, and hence the spatialities 'rural/urban' are likely to become a much overused tool – something we just throw out to place our research somewhere. This mode of knowledge production brings forth questions of how spatial characterizations not only create spatialities ("rural and urban areas") but spatialities with expected problems. In the context of science, rural and urban perspectivism – the repeated resorting to synthetic "*foreground perspective-optics*" (Nietzsche, [1878] 1996) – when applied a priori to various research problems, is likely to distort the results by missing that many problems transcend spatial demarcations (cf. Law, 2004: 5–6; see also Table 2.2). And while 'spatial thinking' is not limited to 'rural-urban thinking' (cf. Crang and Thrift, 2000), the mere act of deploying a spatial analysis in certain contexts is problematic through the creation of geospatial environments (Wright, 1947) under the guise of geographic demarcation (consider the discussion about Eastern Europe/Western Europe in section 3.6). However, what this does is create tacit acknowledgment of the importance of the spatial dimension, when no (or little) such importance is warranted (Paper IV explores this dimension empirically).

In geography, as Paper V suggests, 'spatial thinking' before 'problem thinking' (cf. Scribner, 1977) is a type of pareidolic⁹¹ perspectivism conditioned by the academic climate of geography, which may or may not impair sound analysis. We must not forget that if we look for problems in "rural" or "urban" areas it can be tempting to find "rural" or "urban" problems. However, such inquiries will never be capable of pinpointing the role of rurality and urbanity in creating those problems, simply because the problems were made "rural" or "urban" by placing it 'there' from the beginning.

Othering

Eighthly, 'rural/urban' are ridden with power relations and unspoken othering mechanisms. For instance, the universal notion that "rural people" are different from "urban people" (cf. Eriksson, 2010) is one such outcome. Paper II shows how the Polish reality perpetuates hegemonic relations by hailing the supremacy and desirability of 'urbanity' over its historically constructed antonym of 'rurality'. It also assumes that degradation is a loss by making comparisons to a (re)imagined historical state, regardless

91 *Pareidolia* is a psychological phenomenon in which the mind responds to a vague stimulus as something known to the observer, such as interpreting rocks on Mars or spots in toast as faces, or hearing hidden messages in music (Liu et al., 2014).

of the (in)accuracy of that comparison across two temporal contexts. This discourse also imbues past rural-urban relations with historical events, which may or may not have had a direct impact on the development of those relations. Put simply, by invoking injustice it creates a culprit. Lastly, the incessant invocation to the wounds of the past makes “being rural” an odd combinatorial legacy of victimhood encased in a contemporary, utopian outlook on urbanity.

Paper IV illustrates the issue of othering through the example of two deprived communities, one formally urban (Rolnicza) and the other formally rural (Chotel). In view of the ruling rural/urban discourse, not only do Rolniczans feel passed by, but their social isolation prevents them from partaking in Toruń’s geographically proximate yet culturally inaccessible range of “urban” services. Unsurprisingly, only a few respondents identified Rolnicza as urban. Contrarily, Chotelans are consigned to a life in the shadows of contemporary rurality, without being able to contribute vocationally to what lies at the heart of that concept. Effectively, both groups of residents question the rural-urban dichotomy itself: *“The rural-urban divide discriminates people ... It’s not good. It shouldn’t be like that. It’s like dividing people into groups A and B, completely at random”*.

Paper V takes this issue further, stressing the terminological non-neutrality of concepts in relation to the different degrees of geographers’ self-identification with these concepts. The last part of section 6.3 on implications of concepts concludes this discussion.

Colloquial vs. specialist

Ninthly, ‘rural/urban’ are both colloquial and specialist concepts. The problem is that widely understood concepts used in unfamiliar ways are likely to become contentious. The issue of colloquial versus specialized uses has been addressed in section 3.3 in the context of concept attainment. Unlike esoteric, highly specialized concepts, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ are used widely by a non-specialist population to signify an established image of different places and spaces. Therefore, there may be serious ramifications when people’s lay discourses of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ become juxtaposed to situations, programs and policies that go under the labels of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ but are used in a different or unfamiliar manner. Papers I, III and IV sumptuously exemplify this phenomenon, for example, through the case of revitalization of the town Tarnogród (Paper I), where the landscape architect ordered to cut down all trees in the market square (used by the inhabitants as a park) because a market square has *“traditionally always been an open space”*. Paper III is filled with similar examples. This once again supports Halfacree’s

(2009b) “beyond representation”-perspective, in which “*existing* [urbanity] is ‘reconstituted’ to resemble more closely what [urbanity] is ‘supposed’ to look like” (section 2.4.3).

Paper IV shows how similar deportments are reflexive of some broader trends that pierce the society today, namely the pressure to live up to and maintain a “modern urban lifestyle”. However, the study shows there is a discontinuity between specialist and colloquial understanding of what this means. While the solutions depart from “advanced urbanization” (or a “progressive countryside”), the practical problems lie at a more fundamental level. In realities inundated by advanced deprivation current developmental discourses only contributes to a superficial form of modernization. The study shows how, owing much to EU-programs like *Digital Poland*, the high degrees of digitalization contrast starkly with the deficiencies encountered in the basic material infrastructure. The residents cannot afford to renovate their damaged apartments so the little money they have (or procure through loans) is spent on technology. Eventually, such advances cannot be seen solely as success stories but also as vents through which effects of unresolved unemployment, isolation and ill health are channeled.

Stereotyping

Lastly, ‘rural/urban’ are heavily stereotyped concepts, despite the knowledge that stereotypes rarely illuminate but obfuscate issues. The issue of stereotypes surfaces throughout the papers, as it is perhaps one of the most common constitutional flaws with the rural/urban binary. In Chapter 3, I couple this topic with concept attainment theory. Given the immense ongoing societal changes, we no longer know how a contemporary rural or urban prototype looks like, and instead historical prototypes are taken out from a limited mental dispositive. Hence, when we think of rural or urban prototypes, it is likely we are invoking stereotypes or near-stereotypes (section 3.3). Paper IV illustrates this problem in the context of deprivation, with “urban programs” (supporting innovation and large-scale investments) and “rural programs” (revolving around the restructuring of the primary sector) effectively circumventing localities that do not inscribe themselves in any of these visions. Paper III illustrates the problem materially, in the context of urban historicization, while Paper V discusses how the prototype-stereotype conflation is also likely to steer “urban” and “rural” researchers toward doing research in stereotypical areas, while omitting the immense variety of places in-between (cf. Servillo et al., 2017). As Fein and von Hippel (2003: 6) note, “[l]earning and applying stereotypes tend to be all too easy; resisting

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stereotypes, in contrast, requires effort, practice, and motivation. Nevertheless, the benefits to society that such resistance can bring are enormous”.

Given this deluge of constitutive flaws raises the question of why would anybody want to sustain these concepts. In section 6.1, I identified geographers as “rural [and urban] agents”. What has not been deliberated at that point is why we act as such agents in the first place. This is a different question, which Paper V attempts to explain. It is shown how the meaning and utility of ‘rural/urban’ have become conflated to the point of desensitization toward their problematic nature. In line with the four principal functions of concepts (epistemological, metaphysical, linguistic, and stability), only three seem to be fulfilled. Geographical epistemological multiplicity produces very distinct forms of knowledge, where a common terminological repertoire (‘rural/urban’) is approached differently (e.g., as a space, a discourse, a performance, a practice) and, as such, undermines the epistemological function. Neither is there unity with regard to the metaphysical function, with geographers – when attempting to identify the ‘rural – *“put[ting] the cart before the horse, the rural having been already ‘defined’ by those doing the classifying”* (Halfacree, 1993: 24). Thirdly, the linguistic function of ‘rural/urban’ seems to be fulfilled through its temporal constancy of inscription and vocalization of specific signs and phonemes, allowing geographers to use the same label to condense very different spheres of knowledge and thus strengthening its “*overarching ability to engage very different situations under a single conceptual banner”* (Cloke, 2006: 18). Lastly, acknowledging that a concept can only be stable if it evokes the same or much similar meanings across a wide range of recipients (Rey, 1983: 241–242), rural/urban disjunctivity produces literal coherence (Kahneman, 2011) by inferring conjectural stability. In other words, we may think we are talking about the same things but in fact we seldom do.

In concept attainment theory, knowing a concept means being “*able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty”* (Bruner et al., 1999: 103). This is also in line with the notion of Adansonian realism (section 3.3), according to which categories should be constructed with a particular purpose and be good enough to make inductive generalizations. Given the armada of existent adjectives with the help of which we can much more exactly and concretely articulate and qualify what we mean (e.g., Table 2.1), there is seldom reason to resort to ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ (even cognitively, most humans are unable to keep track of more than seven

variables at the same time). This then raises the question of which categories we wish to retain: classical (based on clear definitions) or Wittgensteinian (based on family resemblance). Pinker (2015) asks: “*Does this mean that people’s heads are stuffed with fuzz and that classical categories are fictions?*” He also disagrees, conceding that people can learn “*categories with clean definitions, crisp edges and no family resemblance*”, eventually conciliating that a dolphin is not a fish and that Tina Turner is a grandmother.

6.4. On implications

The third research question explores how faults in the constitution of ‘rural/urban’ may be detrimental to society. In other words, it is concerned with the implications of concepts.

Organizing society entails the necessity of categorization. However, implementing badly drawn boundaries and approximate divisions into societal organization will always have consequences. Subscribing to the idea that the constitution of reality is not created by individuals/structures but by discourses (Foucault, 1980), categories can become vents through which power is exercised. Increased attention toward the implications of concepts rather than their implied signification has helped isolate linkages between conceptual dichotomies and social oppression in philosophy, psychology and sociology. And while reflective attitudes toward the harmful implications of certain concepts have also suffused much of human geography (particularly race, class and gender), with regard to rural/urban conceptualizations similar contingencies have been more subdued. While everything is certainly located in ‘space’, it is often forsaken that spatial conceptualizations must not always be given priority of categorization (before, for example, gender, affluence, disability) for the direction of analysis or action. And although the most progressive developments in conceptualizing rurality/urbanity today converge at treating them as cultural constructs rather than as geographically bounded places or facticities, their ambiguity, controversiality and impracticality of deployment are often underplayed in practice. For instance, questions such as whether “*the development of rural areas [should] be effected without underlying any specificity*” (Gorlach and Forys, 2003: 296) or whether intensified crime, disease, fear, and poverty are problems of the city or merely social problems that happen to be located in cities (Hubbard, 2006: 2–3) are rarely addressed. Effectively, by locating problems in pre-labeled spaces (whether it is research, policy or market investigations), the question to what extent the retention of ‘rural/urban’ as seemingly neutral

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spatialities contributes to the retention of some pressing societal problems remains largely unresolved.

In the context of power, this brings forth the question of how spatial characterizations come into play with the construction of harm, for example deprivation (Ramakrishnan, 2014). The concept of “deprivation” is never given but constructed against select elements of socio-economic life that are – variably – considered the norm using specific theoretical frameworks (cf. Woodward, 1996; Tickamyer, 2009). Since the internal consistency of any one place is influenced by the overall degree of stability between economy, state and civil society at the local level (Halfacree, 2006; cf. section 2.4.3), problems inherent in ‘deprivation’, like poverty, illiteracy, disease, discrimination or unemployment – when conceptualized along rural-urban lines – are likely to acquire a different resonance relative to what anticipatory spatiality they are being compared to, for instance:

Residential contexts in which people live are among the factors that influence and shape various forms of social disadvantage and enable to create diverse compensatory strategies both in rural and in urban areas. However, the urban-rural dichotomy represents an unduly superficial explanatory framework for describing the experiences of social disadvantage. (Bernard et al., 2017)

Understanding this form of normativity is key to understanding deprivation as engineered through a host of conceptual filters of which ‘rural/urban’ is one – howbeit under-researched – example.

Paper IV explores this preposition, wherein the rural/urban dichotomy is explored as a contender for perpetuating human suffering. This approach necessitated both a critical evaluation of ‘urban/rural’ against a backdrop of conditions, relations and meanings that permeate two deprived areas, as well as questioning the value of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ as culturally persistent yet poorly revised vehicles of thought, all too often resorted to for strategic guidance. Two similar deprivation-ridden post-socialist estates (*socjalaki*) were investigated: one formally urban and one formally rural. Firstly, in line with Halfacree’s (2006) contention that the ideational space of rural/urban representations can only exist through discursive interaction, at *socjalaki* commonplace ideations of ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ imbricate each other in both the socio-economic and material dimensions. Secondly, acknowledging that the material space of ‘rural/urban’ localities can only exist through the practices of structural processes (Halfacree 2006), our results point to the possibility that the current envisionment of development is unlikely to

reach and materially reshape spaces incompatible with spatial ideations based on dominant discourses.⁹² Alluding to Chambers's (1983) oft-cited deprivation trap,⁹³ the paper suggests another possible layer: rural/urban thinking. Acknowledging that a concept has little value unless it supports a task (cf. section 3.1.), the envisioning of space in predefined ways trembles on the edges of assigning space causal power when approaching the complexity of the human condition. In effect, such practice may miss the fact that many problems transcend spatial demarcations. This is in accordance with Halfacree's (2009b) first perspective of rurality effaced (cf. chapter 2.4.3). When people are hungry, lack access to education, are discriminated against – these are not 'rural' or 'urban' problems, they are problems. To ascribe them spatial inscriptions with confidence, we must, as Halfacree (2006: 389) observes, "*pinpoint spaces distinguished enough by their own causal forces that they can be labeled 'rural' [or 'urban']*". However, when the same problems occur in much variegated geographic settings such labeling smacks of overuse.

An instructive analytical tool here is the principle of iatrogenesis,⁹⁴ which denotes any benevolent action that inadvertently produces undesired outcomes. Given that many areas today lack the presumed "rural" or "urban" conceptual foundation for a specific brand of action, societal actions labeled as 'rural' or 'urban' are not only likely to fail, but also to potentially cause harm. Iatrogenesis (literally '*caused by the healer*') is a Greek term derived from medical theory, where it denotes inadvertent yet preventable induction of disease or complications by medical treatment or procedures of healthcare professionals⁹⁵. The famous aphorism "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) captures loosely, yet poignantly, the principal message of this concept.

92 Since both processes reinforce one another, in spaces of spatiotemporal disruption like *socjalcki*, the chain of reciprocity is broken. Locally, this breakage manifests itself through what could be described as disjointedness relative to spaces of mainstream characterization. Since the character of 'rural' and 'urban' *socjalcki* is very similar, identifying mechanisms involved in the reproduction of their status quo then is unlikely to be successful when deliberated in categories of 'rural/urban'.

93 Chambers's (1983) model consists of five clusters of disadvantage – poverty, powerlessness, vulnerability, isolation, and physical weakness – which lead to and reaffirm each other.

94 The idea of iatrogenesis has been elaborated in two other papers (Dymitrow and Brauer, 2014, 2016).

95 Before the advent of penicillin and modern medicine, hospitals were much more likely to kill their patients than to cure them. Without knowledge of the germ theory diseases spread from patient to patient (often by doctors), killing them in numbers. Unsurprisingly, hospitals were referred to by their contemporaries as *seminaria mortis* ("seedbeds of death") (Sharpe and Faden, 1998).

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Although iatrogenesis is a well-established concept within medicine, it is relatively unknown outside of it, the main reason being that the sheer notion that knowledge production can be linked to harm is usually resisted (Taleb, 2012: 110–131) (but confer the now rejected practices of ‘lobotomy’, ‘eugenics’ and ‘scientific racism’). While originating from medicine, the principle of iatrogenesis can be extended well beyond its confines (e.g., Levy, 2008; Shortall, 2008).⁹⁶ Language and linguistic metaphors in particular are known to create iatrogenic symptoms⁹⁷. Negative effects of metaphoric language, for instance, have been demonstrated in psychotherapy, with patients “*becom[ing] ‘fixed’ on the metaphor and defin[ing] reality rigidly within the metaphor’s linguistic boundaries*” (Boisvert and Faust, 2002: 251). Such pathological internalization considerably restricts their prospect of recovery. Knowing how this can be done is a matter of debate (cf. section 3.6), although there are premises suggesting that iatrogenesis is a universal phenomenon inherent in the human (biologically conditioned) tendency to assist others, which in turn conflicts with the limitations of the human brain to anticipate conceptually induced harm.

The point is that the use of language in certain ways *does* catalyze change (as discussed in section 6.1). However, whether that change will be intended or iatrogenic depends on what we want to achieve. As Paper V suggests, there are a number of sociological and psychological factors influencing the retention of ‘rural/urban’ (boundary-work, perspectivism, politicized inclusionism,

96 A contemporary example is the financial crisis of 2008, which followed the US housing market bubble. Policymakers’ interventions, which pushed for deregulation of the financial market, unwittingly laid the foundation for the crisis. Although the risks were pointed out to regulators, the policymakers nevertheless continued with the course for deregulation. In effect, although their intervention was not the direct cause of the crisis (predatory lending practices were), it did set up the initial conditions for the economic collapse and hence amplified the effect. Another noticeable iatrogenic of our time are the phenomena of overeating and obesity in well-off societies. Civilizational and technological progress pursued to reduce physical labor and maximize quality of life has contributed to an abundance of food, with cheap, readily available and often unhealthy staples being over-consumed. Additionally, unequal geographic distribution of those resources has added to hunger and malnutrition problems in the underdeveloped parts of the world.

97 Foucault [1961] (2006) was one of the first to raise concerns for the social construction of ‘madness’, when the emerging medical (professional) discourse reconceptualized mental illness as a moral failure. By appealing to guilt and religious sentiment, the patient was constantly judged, corrected and threatened, which much exacerbated their condition. Drawing on those early insights, contemporary philosophy of medicine is aware of the hybrid naturalist/constructivist nature of the concept of “disease” (including its individuation), and its prescriptive role through the use of causal concepts (Smart, 2016). Regulatory institutions (including academia) are also known to both shape and normalize human behavior.

innovation requirement. cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, analytical ethnocentrism, dualistic thinking, textual entrapment, routinization, vested interest, imperception of concept-subject relation). This breadth makes it impossible to distinguish between desirable and undesirable factors retaining them, unless the latter can be identified and consciously factored out.

While much research remains to be done in this field of performativity, the mere issue of letting in a confirmedly antiquated spatial order onto development strategies can have harmful consequences. Moreover, accepting Derrida's (1981) contention that meaning in the West is defined in terms of binary oppositions, it is important to look into whether one of these oppositions could be a cultural bias so incompatible with the layered realities of oppression and inequality that instead of helping the deprived it may deprive the help of its carrying capacity.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize the terminological non-neutrality of concepts in relation to the different degrees of self-identification with these concepts. In view of Foucauldian implications of power-knowledge, post-modernist and post-structuralist scholars exposed a host of paradoxes, false axioms and hidden power structures embedded into the neutralized realities of racism, colonialism and patriarchy (to mention but a few). 'Rural/urban' – seen as concepts, not as geographical conditions – are still seldom deliberated as causal or contributive factors to, for example, oppression and marginalization (likewise, we no longer have patriarchal development projects, racist ventures and imperial policies, but we do have rural and urban development programs). Unlike race and gender, 'rural/urban' are less associated with the discourse of (collective) victimhood, and, as such, are not perceived as potentially harmful to the subjects they purportedly portray (cf. Neuberger and Cottrell, 2006). For instance, fewer today would react to slurs of rural/urban connotation than to sexist affronts (cf. Hoff Sommers, 2001). This is because the gender-subject relation (the notion of being a man or a woman) is more culturally hotwired (rendered sensitive to its veiled liabilities) than the rural/urban-subject relation, despite the fact that we are just as much subjects of rural/urban policies as of gender contracts. Furthermore, this ratio is also likely to pertain to geographers' own sphere of self-identification, hence inhibiting cautiousness when using the concepts 'rural/urban' (cf. Melucci, 1995; Cote and Levine, 2002). This becomes especially important when deployed as putatively spatial categories in human-oriented contexts, which by their scope and content transpire as more human than spatial. By hotwiring 'rural/urban' in a fashion akin to gender will certainly not solve the pressing problems of our time. Nevertheless, it may make us think again before they are once again thrown into the game.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

7.1. Introduction

This thesis was devised with the aim of raising awareness about how we use the concepts 'rural/urban' by critically evaluating the culture of indifference developed around those concepts. This has been done by presenting problems inherent in rural-urban thinking from a different light in order to lay bare some dormant paradoxes it rests upon – both conceptual and material. By combing insights from the constitutive papers with available theoretical knowledge on the problem, a second objective was to enrich geographers' diet of viewpoints concerning the role and uses of the concepts 'rural' and 'urban' on a more general level. In tandem, the contribution of this thesis is to provide an updated critique towards unreflective usages of 'rural' and 'urban' as naturalized categories of thought.

Importantly, this thesis is not concerned with what 'rural/urban' mean, as this angle has been well covered in conceptual geographical research. Although the issue of meaning looms large throughout all articles, its function is not to uncover meaning, but to explore how it comes about and consolidates through particular subject positions, and what social effects it might produce through constructed relationships between people and (labeled) places. This has been explored through the use of three themes: performativity, constitution and implications of 'rural/urban' as concepts. Performativity assumes that concepts are not neutral but performative, i.e., by using concepts we shape the world, not describe it. Constitution is a conceptual property that entails a perspective that looks beyond the content and instead focuses on how concepts are assembled, attained and retained. Implications refer to the empirical or expected consequences of performing concepts that are poorly constituted. Each theme has been

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explored in Chapter 6. Reflexive of these explorations, in this concluding chapter I summarize the most important insights but also outline some significant challenges for future research.

7.2. Summarizing insights

Undertaking this project has helped assess trends, undeveloped paths and unresolved issues that need further attention. While there are many issues that can be raised, if I am to summarize the most pervading findings it would be through the following three terse aphorisms, each associated with a specific theme:

1. *Performativity*: “Who is performing what?”
 - a. Anyone talking about ‘rural/urban’ is performing it. We have no mandate to uncritically project ‘rural/urban’ performances onto “people out there” and then evaluate how ‘rural/urban’ is like by examining those people’s actions. This is tautological at best or colonizing at worst.
2. *Constitution*: “More problems than advantages?”
 - a. ‘Rural/urban’ are ridden with too many problems with regard to their conceptual constitution that they are unfit to be used at the extent they are. The problem is not so much with what they signify (the contents) but how well that signification converges with what we are actually trying to explain.
3. *Implications*: “Conflating land with people?”
 - a. Since ‘rural/urban’ are poorly constituted concepts and concepts are performative, they are bound to be embroiled in negative consequences. Because ‘rural/urban’ as *spatial* concepts are often used with regard to humans and human activities, there is a risk of conflating land with people.

Taking into account these findings is intimately related to the new way of doing geography. In recent decades, geography has changed significantly; it has become a transdisciplinary, multi-theoretical, concept-heavy discipline. What this means is that this shift in orientation should be reflected in our relationship toward concepts as interesting avenues for doing new kinds of

research. This also means that we need to revise existing concepts, especially those which have been around for a long time.

‘Rural’ and ‘urban’ are concepts under duress. They are also awash with inconsistencies. Due to their complexity, chequered history, global disconformity, conceptual overlapping, and an ever greater subjectivity stemming from that overlapping, they are becoming increasingly difficult to handle in practice, while their sanctioning ties up considering resources. Still, we witness a tendency slanted to upholding the status quo by piecing together shards of logic to make objectionable concepts stick. Ultimately, the incursion of ‘rural/urban’ into the domain of geographical thought is likely to affect the quality of human geography.

Concepts are the basic building blocks of scientific knowledge or theoretical frameworks for any discipline. The strength of the theories that guide a discipline is dependent on the quality of the concept analysis. Thus, the utilization of poorly understood concepts in research and theory development will result in questionable reliability and validity. (Botes (2002: 23)

In times of greater transparency, this is likely to undermine trust in human geography through the knowledge claims we make as academics. As Withers (2016) noted, trust in human geography has not been subject to detailed review, including “*under what conditions [it] can be warranted, and possibly lost*” (see also Hamnett, 2003).

In a wish to abandon essentialism to contingency, in this thesis I looked into a number of sociological and psychological factors that make us think and act in certain ways with regard to a conceptual pair that has been under scrutiny for over a century. More specifically, I raised concern about geographers’ continued professional use of ‘rural/urban’ as acceptable analytical categories, despite a litany of geographical work dismissing their usefulness. Realizing that the discrepancy between available knowledge and actual practice can run the risk of compromising communication, misdirecting resources and downgrading social theory, the encountered ratio points to a worryingly under-researched epiphenomenon of progress-making in human geography.

While “*conceptual frameworks significantly determine what we see – and what we overlook or take for granted*” (Gilbert [J], 1982: 610), we at the same time must not forget how “*curiously difficult [it is] to recapture preconceptual innocence*” (Bruner et al., 1999: 101). This implies paying greater attention to the relationship between the concepts we use and the “reality” inadvertently



Figure 7.1. Graphical representation of a Möbius strip.

drawn by those concepts. This is particularly true of meaningful-yet-useless concepts (after Paper V), as this increases the likelihood of extending their faculty. Not only can this extension cloud their intended explanatory merit, but it can also potentially create an artificial, potentially damaging filter, not least for the consistency of human geography.

Having analyzed the concept of “microaggression”,⁹⁸ Hoff Sommers (2017) concluded that “[t]he theory is so amorphous that it is meaningless. It can be used by anyone, anywhere, for anything. It’s a game we all can play but none can win. So why play it?” (5:30). This conclusion sounds eerily similar to how ‘rural/urban’ could be characterized today. Given the deluge of criticisms the binary has faced (and an even greater pool of significations), it is difficult to envision any approach deploying a rural/urban distinction as a beacon of understanding to be successful. By missing the important conceptual difficulties that underpin the complexity of the rural/urban problem there is the likelihood to forfeit the core of what is being addressed. Seeing orientability (consistency of orientation) as an important property of Euclidean space, (Munroe, 1963: 263), the concept can also be applied to any abstract conception of space (cf. Couclelis, 1992). In this sense, ‘rural/urban’ have become twisted into a Möbius strip, a surface, which while appearing neat and symmetrical, is notable for being unorientable (Figure 7.1).

To be qualified as a concept understood as a fundamental category of existence in metaphysics, ontology or contemporary philosophy (cf. Mar-

98 The theory of microaggression, coined by C.M. Pierce in the 1970s, denotes the casual degradation of marginalized groups by way of subliminal everyday exchanges of denigrating messages. While frequently promoted by promoters of social justice, a number of psychologists and other authors (including B. Campbell, H. MacDonald, A. Etzioni, G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, J. Manning, R. Nader, and C. Hoff Sommers) have argued against this concept as scientifically not well substantiated, with the potential to be harmful to both individuals and society.

golis and Laurence, 1999), I would argue that any cognitive pattern under consideration to be adopted as a useful concept cannot:

- a) lack some basic common denominators between its various understandings (today, there is too little prototypical material of both ‘rurality’ and ‘urbanity’ left to justify the extent of their usage);
- b) encroach significantly upon the semantic territory of its widely acknowledged conceptual antonym (‘rural’ upon ‘urban’, and vice versa); and
- c) be reduced to conspicuous forms, otherwise the concept becomes synonymous with its stereotyped rendition while claiming much greater semantic merit.

The common usage of the rural/urban binary often fails to meet the definition of a useful concept in this particular sense, while the breadth of “situated knowledges” it draws from (cf. section 1.5) is so overwhelming that the concepts become almost useless. As shown, there are far too many dismal cases of misvaluation in efforts to effectively target societal problems using ‘rural/urban’, for example in research, policy and governance. These are often largely dependent on the lack of proper reconnaissance of an area’s unique and delicate condition that may not easily align with a conceptual rural/urban axis, and where more informed understanding of its historical, evolutionary and contemporary context could help arrive at much more accurate inferences. All too often it is forsaken that the mere usage of a(ny) concept on a systematic basis (‘rural/urban’ included) curtails maneuverability to address the complexity of social problems by discursively steering fractured realities into deftly predefined avenues. This, combined with the multiple meanings of ‘urban/rural,’ creates a highly volatile situation that to date has remained unresolved. Since the contemporary “city” and “countryside” are no more than what we choose them to be by means of definition, characterization and developmental envisioning, rural/urban thinking is problematic. If it perpetuates a prototype/stereotype more than helps solve problems, it can easily turn into an unnecessary conceptual filter that diverts attention from self-identified problems. Clearly, depending on what definition of ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ is chosen, the outcome becomes diametrically different.

Concluding the insights of this thesis in the most general sense could assume this form:

- ‘Rural/urban’ today hold up less as materialities and more as social constructs that shape materialities. These materialities are shaped very

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differently depending on the discourse underpinning rural/urban conceptualization.

- We do not really know what 'rural/urban' is today.
- Most often, we do not need 'rural/urban' to explain a specific phenomenon.
- Many problems occur everywhere, regardless of whether we choose to call them 'rural' or 'urban'; instead, 'rural/urban' are likely to divert attention from actual problems.
- It is irresponsible to use 'rural/urban' as we please, just because it is convenient.
- Be wary of how you and others use 'rural/urban'. Ask: "What do I/you mean by 'rural/urban'?" and "Do I/you really need to use these terms?"

So, should we let go of 'rural/urban' forever? As Somerville, Halfacree and Bosworth (2014: 295) put it, "*the production of the rural is far from dead, and within this ongoing process the struggle to attain at least a degree of coherence (whether desirable or not) will itself carry on*". This means that 'rural/urban' will continue to exist (beyond the conceptology of human geography), and because of that they will have to be studied. So although we must not necessarily erase the concepts of 'rural/urban' what we need to erase is the contagion of indifference attached to them in order to minimize their undesirable impact.

At this point, one other issue often brought forth needs to be addressed. If we, tentatively, should stop using 'rural/urban' what then should we replace them with? This question, while sounding reasonable, is in fact deceptive. If you think about something "bad" (e.g., a tumor, an abusive spouse, a storm, groundwater toxicity, a war) it must not necessarily be replaced with something "good" or "better". Most often, removing the unwanted element (at least partially) suffices to bring ease, peace, relief or order. Thinking in terms of substitution is a slippery slope because we are not short of complementary, already existent, concepts. In the English language, for instance, there are about 100,000 verbs with distinct senses (Oxford English Dictionary 2008). This vast number is more than reassuring that the society will not perish if we limit our use of two of them. Therefore, the problem seems to be more culturally abstinential (compare with quitting smoking). Even if we manage to lay off 'rural/urban' for a while, in lack of better habits and in the face of the strong rural/urban institutional superstructure towering above us, we are at constant risk of relapse. What we must do instead is reconfigure our relationship with familiar conceptions of societal organization, with which we analyze and explain various societal phenomena.

7.3. Future outlooks

Understanding the ‘rural/urban’ vehicle involves a compound perspective that goes beyond what ‘rural/urban’ “are” and “mean”; it is also a matter of understanding their mechanics and way of propulsion in order to truly grasp what they do, for whom, in what way, and how. Hopefully the findings of this thesis can help chip into the conceptual debate on the problems arising from the cultural imposition of the rural-urban binary onto the formal arena and – vice versa – on the implications of formalizing a largely cultural construct. Reflective of the constitutive five papers, the following thoughts are a timid attempt at laying out some outlooks on future research in view of the angles of attack developed in the preceding chapters.

Firstly, reminiscent of G. Orwell’s aphorism “*who controls the past controls the future*”, there is a need to look into the origins of rural/urban relations in order to understand the socio-economic context that shaped their current situation. There are far too many misunderstandings and misconceptions accompanying the concepts of urbanity and rurality today. For the most part, the origins are shrouded in history, but arbitrary reifications associated with those origins are eagerly exploited for contemporary purposes and dissipated as objective truths. Hence, it is important to separate myth from accounts based on scrupulous and transparent research based on first-hand documentation and compelling historiographic deduction. This is particularly true of narratives embracing issues of high social value like justice, money, pride, democracy, and power.

Secondly, the concepts of urbanity and rurality are also often accompanied by stories of demise and success. Seeing urbanization as a process that transforms societies, an important derivative is to investigate how formalization and change interact. Presently, there is still a dearth of studies that would look into how rural/urban narratives actually affect socio-economic change and thus steer development into certain – desired or undesired – alleyways. In this respect, following Halfacree (2012: 389), the main challenge is to “*pinpoint spaces distinguished strongly enough by their own causal forces*” that they can merit a certain label, as opposed to acquiring or losing a label, irrespective of what that label actually means and does. In order to avoid creating artificial problems, we need to better isolate the relation between development and the spatial label it purportedly embodies.

Lastly, linear accounts of social phenomena may be convenient but seldom provide an appropriate abstraction. We must not unreflectively accept the transition from urban to rural and from rural to urban as propitious just because it has been sanctioned by a governmental decree. Far too many aca-

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demographic studies accept this sanctioning as a justifiable denominator of urbanity and rurality, respectively, and, in all complacency, choose to forget about the real world out there, the one beneath the labels. More in-depth empirical studies on the problems that rural/urban labeling may incur are needed. This pertains specifically to case-based research dedicated to the perceptions of those closest to the effects of cultural convictions and normative perspectives brought forth by the rural/urban distinction. In order to better understand and to more efficiently approach various labeled spatialities, we must not forget about the local stakeholders entangled in those realities – and not in the capacity of “urban people” or “rural people” – and whose attitudes toward formalized cultural constructs are just as important as those deduced in the confines of academia.

If we acknowledge that the ontological rationale of employing a rural/urban distinction is “*to find out whether or not one can identify any aspects ... that speak of more substantial and significant differences between the qualities of the rural and ... the urban*” (Halfacree 2009b, 449), we need to be cautious. This is particularly important whenever the cultural dimension of ‘rural/urban’ sees formalization under the guise of objectified space, as this conflation of values is likely to extend the faculty of these concepts. In this sense, if we geographers do not sort out our own role in the knowledge production surrounding ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, then any further refinement (methodological, conceptual or theoretical) of these concepts will only represent a form of refined bloodletting, rather than a move to genuine improvement of our tools of understanding.

In this sense, the point of rethinking the *raison d’être* of two concepts central to human geography in relation to space is to ensure that any issues addressed or assumptions made departing from a rural/urban distinction are based on the best available evidence and information, and that the adopted concepts do not blind us as researchers to important aspects that could be a fruitful source for innovation. I argue that only by reflecting upon our own role in geographical knowledge production can we be able to tell the difference between a concept’s meaning and utility.

The principal take-home message stemming from this work is to always try to actively determine whether ‘rural/urban’ are truly analytically contributory to a specific line of research or whether they serve merely as a cultural obstinacy acquired by external mechanisms. While this thesis can only do so much as raise awareness about our uses of ‘rural/urban’, change always begins at the level of the individual. As Peterson (2016) notes, “[w]e need to find a balance between the existence of value structures and the proclivity to rely on established structures just because they are convenient”. In other words, we must determine on which structures we want to predicate our concepts.

‘Rural/urban’ are merely conceptual structures we have grown accustomed to. There is a need to analyze them causally and usher in a period of change in relation to rural/urban thinking. This understanding is essential to garner the necessary public support for more critical rural/urban attitudes, as this issue – as continuous evidence shows – cannot be left to chance.

Given their scope and breadth, the different factors keeping ‘rural/urban’ in place will have different bearings on the degree of one’s personal agency to influence the usage of ‘rural/urban’. Sociological factors, obviously, will be more difficult to budge than psychological factors, although the latter may be more difficult to notice and come to terms with than the former. Given this contingency, the first step is to become more aware about one’s own (and others’) uses of the concepts, and only secondly, depending on one’s personal margin for maneuver and discretion, to take informed action.

7.4. Epilogue

Human geography has changed, expanded... Being a geographer today means being trained and capable of doing many kinds of research, none of which must revolve around vestigial spatial concepts just because they continue to be tolerated. Everything is certainly located in “space”, but if we keep elevating the role of space by means of concepts we denounced ourselves, we churn up a rural/urban thanatophobia of sorts – afraid to kill them off just because they have been around for a long time.

If understanding the world is changing it (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010: 342), then thinking about change in new ways must involve questioning the assumptions underlying formal practices that shape contemporary societal organization. If we acknowledge that the ontological rationale of employing a rural/urban distinction is “*to find out whether or not one can identify any aspects ... that speak of more substantial and significant differences between the qualities of the rural and ... the urban*” (Halfacree, 2009b: 449), we need to be stay vigilant. To break away from the grip of ‘rural/urban’ we need to be “*prepared to think the impossible ... or rather without more or less canonical tables of values*” (Holden, 2008: 249).

On the one hand, the spirit of our time encourages us to champion holism and “*representations that can take more of the world in*” (Thrift, 2009: 89). On the other, responsibility tells us to disaggregate fuzzy concepts, and not only to take in but also to make sense of that world. Geography is its concepts, and trust in geography is the quality of those concepts. So before we make the world rural or urban... again, let us first check the closet for our own skeletons.

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