

# **RURAL / URBAN REDUX**

Conceptual problems and material effects

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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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