

RESEARCH

Rural-Urban Blurring and the Subjectivity Within

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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 in regard to how rural-urban should be understood today.

Keywords: Rural-Urban; Subjectivity; Experiential space; Humanism; Materiality; Landscape

Introduction

The categories of 'rural' and 'urban' have been used to study places for a long time. During the second half of the 20th century, however, a growing number of researchers and professionals have questioned the usefulness of these categories in diverse geographic contexts. Already back in the 1960s, Pahl (1966: 299) noted that although the layman use of the terms 'urban' and 'rural' is not disputed, these categories are 'more remarkable for their ability to confuse than for their power to illuminate' (cf. also Stewart 1958; Dewey 1960). In spite of those early acumens, the rural-urban dichotomy is still sustained in various development policies, academic studies, administrative structures, to mention but a few, while its divisive entrenchment affects in great profusion the validity of many vital statistics and theoretical insights or outcomes of deployed societal actions.

Throughout the developed world, areas classified traditionally as 'rural' are in constant economic, social, and visible transition. Such transition is, to a considerable extent, the result of urbanization, perhaps one of the most important human processes impacting the environment at all scales and levels. Even though areas regarded generally as 'urban' are *also* subject to constant changes, the changes

observed within 'rural' areas are perhaps the most dramatic (Antrop 2004). With the resource-based economy in decline in favor of greater economic diversity, the countryside of today has gradually shifted from being a landscape of production to also being a landscape of consumption. Increased personal mobility (commuting, occurrences of holiday and second homes), as well as the ability of telecommunications and information technology, have all contributed to the countryside steadily acquiring the characteristics of 'a functional extension of the city' (Millward et al. 2003). Such progress renders rurality as a notion inherent to cultural insularity and traditionalism all the less apparent, whereupon 'rural' and 'urban' are becoming increasingly blurred (Champion and Hugo 2004; Cloke 2006; Szymańska 2008; Halfacree 2009; Woods 2009; Bański 2010; Bukraba-Rylska and Burszta 2011; Easterlin et al. 2011; Halamska 2013). The very fact that nations define 'urban' and 'rural' so differently hints at the underlying problem with the dichotomy's blurring.

Not only does this blurring cover a wide spectrum of dimensions; its complexity is further deepened by the many, still noticeable, differences between 'the old rural' and 'the new rural', 'the urban' and 'the urbanized', and even 'the ruralized urban' (Cloke 2006; Woods 2010a; Szymańska 2013). Although new concepts such as 'urban', 'peri-urban' or 'exurban' have been launched to somewhat (and with varying results) remedy this fuzziness (Antrop 2000; Theobald 2001; Meeus and Gulincx 2008; Qviström 2007; Qviström 2013), they continue to revolve around the same old conceptual rural-urban axis. Accordingly, the subject of rural-urban conceptualization

is broad, ambiguous and contentious, and there is no one right way of viewing it. Still, with an air of finiteness and an impress of objectivity while effectively being pliable, it is of little surprise the terms 'rural' and 'urban' are so often misconstrued. As Cloke (2006: 18) put it, '[i]t is surprising how often we seem to lack an adequate understanding of how the concepts that underpin the idea of rurality should be defined and made relevant. It is almost as if the strength of the idea of rurality is in its overarching ability to engage very different situations under a single conceptual banner'. Effectively, current uses of 'urban' and 'rural' in, for example, legislation, policy or funding may get in the way of making good planning, design and development decisions. One possible reason behind this could be that the subjective nature of 'urban' and 'rural' has not yet gained widespread acceptance (cf. Woods 2010a).

Subjectivity is a central philosophical concept, related to consciousness, reality and truth, and, accordingly, involves a subject, that is, an agent capable of conscious experiences (e.g. perspectives, beliefs, feelings). Moreover, since 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' its tenets become. Notwithstanding the sheer implications of drawing social boundaries, the main problem with dichotomies is their limited conceptual potential of capturing a complex world—an error which is ignored for purposes of convenience (Freibach-Heifetz and Stopler 2008; Hoggart 1990). This becomes even more pronounced when dichotomous systems of meanings overlap to the point of signifying each other's antonyms (cf. Halfacree 2009).

Nevertheless, since seeing the world through sets of binary conceptions is very much part of the human nature (Cloke and Johnston 2005), we probably also must accept the culturally induced permanence of the rural-urban dichotomy. In that light, the challenge today is not to disprove that a rural-urban distinction exists or to cogitate that it is conceptually wrong, but rather seek to understand its shifted nature from a contemporary point of view. Given the ever greater leeway for subjectivity involved in this process, and—what follows—an increased dispersion of opinions, we argue that there is a need for clarifying how 'rural' and 'urban' are understood in various contexts and, hence, making the terms more transparent.

At this point, a note on the difference between context-dependency and subjectivity in regard to rural-urban thinking is in place. Context-dependency relates to the relevant constraints of the communicative situation that influences language and discourse, and is hence considered a collective phenomenon (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). Subjectivity, on the other hand, is much associated with the individual and the notion of personhood, which influences, informs, and biases his or her judgments (Solomon 2005). Subjectivity, however, is an inherently social mode, which forms through innumerable interactions within society; in other words, it comes about through various contexts. Conversely, the latter would not have been possible if it were not for the cerebral activity of the individuals creating those contexts. This, in turn, creates an insoluble causality dilemma. To make sense

of it, while subjectivity and context-dependency much overlap, an important distinction could be a temporal one. Context-dependency, as a collectivity or a social contract, takes arguably more time to negotiate, consolidate and change than subjectivities, which, due to their individual mode, are more spontaneous and fluid. Our argument is that 'rural' and 'urban' have come to a point in their conceptual development at which they can signify almost anything (cf. Bosworth and Somerville 2013), and this span widens with an ever greater speed without raising considerable intellectual doubts. It happens when the meaning and the utility of a concept become conflated so the concept is thought to be useful simply because it instills meaningful images, regardless of how shared those meanings actually are. For instance, a concept's necessary metaphysical and epistemological functions may no longer be fulfilled, while its fulfilled linguistic function can give the appearance of a fulfilled stability function, hence the conflation (cf. Rey 1983). This 'collective fluidity', in turn, assumes the characteristics of subjectivity.

Mindful of the above, this paper focuses on how to handle the rural-urban blurring. Although we adopt a critical stance towards the use of 'urban' and 'rural', we at the same time acknowledge they are impossible to do away with (cf. Hoggart 1990), and this is neither our point. Instead, in an effort to better understand the rural and urban of today our aim is twofold: (a) to problematize a hidden yet manipulative objectivity, including its empirical effects, sustained by the reproduction of the rural-urban dichotomy; and (b) to explore humanistic and materiality-based perspectives on current rural-urban understanding and the possibility of integrating the two.

We depart from a European focus, which means that the ideas raised here may not apply to other developed countries with considerably different geographies (such as the USA, Canada, Australia or Asian Russia), nor to the many developing countries where ways of life and standards of living between traditionally rural and urban areas may still remain significant (United Nations 2016). At the same time, some of the ideas raised in this paper may neither be strictly transferrable to *all* of European territory—an exemption which also belongs to the crux of our argument.

In terms of disposition, we begin with a short historical walkthrough on the conceptual evolution of 'rural' and 'urban' and the oscillating relation between the two. Next, we outline a number of problems inherent to the sustenance of the rural-urban dichotomy in the administration of European policies, including some practical implications through the example of small towns in Poland. We then raise 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 will be done in two steps; firstly by elaborating on two important theoretical currents impregnating the rural-urban debate today; secondly, by combining the latter into one conceptual lens—landscape—as a more timely approach to the incessant practice of rural-urban categorization.

Historical overview of the debate concerning the rural-urban dichotomy

As the progressive incongruence between the concepts of 'rural' and 'urban' makes them more and more subjective, their development will eventually demand more emphasis on their conceptual coherence. However, subjectivities do not evolve in isolation but are derivatives of years of cultural and discursive indoctrinations, whose pace of evolution is unlikely to keep up with the rapid material and socio-economic transformations, which require an adequate conceptual vehicle. Understanding this relation calls for a short historical walkthrough on the evolution of perspectives on the rural-urban dichotomy.

Assuming that the historical construction of the 'rural' and 'urban' in its very inception may have borne meaning along a discursive worse-towards-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 moral and cultural associations attached to it. In classical Greece, the city was closely tied to the principle of (Athenian) democracy, where citizens of the city 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 2010a). The 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. The medieval city, hence, became 'an outpost in a sea of rurality' (Gold 2009: 150) and came to materialize a hierarchical social system.

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 of 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 assumptions lay ground for a brand of urban planning that created modern cities. The modern spirit inherent of these assumptions embraced a broader approach, including a moral dimension, i.e. 'right', 'proper' and 'reasonable' ways of implementing societal master plans (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 Macedonia) 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 counter-cultural movements (Hirsch 1993) grounded in mistrust to authority for mismanaging social life. 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 (cf. Castells 1977).

With the onset of feminism and postmodernism in the 1980s, the focus on topics inherent of social constructivism (class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or disability) consolidated what has become known as the 'cultural turn' (Halfacree 1993). 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, which has been seen as 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 address issues of, for example, social exclusion and poverty in rural areas (cf. Woodward 1996). Today, changes in the countryside are less perceived as the outcome of some urban bias that negatively impacts rural conditions, as 'rurality' has come to be envisioned through new conceptual developments in its own right (cf. Corbett 2014; Munkejord 2011; Rytönen 2014; Watson 2014). Nevertheless, the rural-urban dichotomy remains and continues to be used as an allegedly useful separator.

As this very condensed historical outline 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 2010b). Rural and urban, hence, are problematic in this respect, especially when applied as guiding lights in policy. 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 arises. It is all too often forsaken that the mere *usage* of any concept on a systematic basis (rural and urban included) curtails maneuverability to address the complexity of socio-economic problems by discursively steering intervention into predefined alleyways. Not only does the practice of cultural labeling cement pre-existing power structures imbedded into these concepts (Eriksson 2010;

Stenbacka 2011), it also dictates *how* a problem should be addressed regardless of its de facto needs of intervention. The seemingly innocent concepts of ‘rural development’ and ‘urban development’ are tacit reaffirmations of this intricacy.

The rural-urban distinction in practice

Policy and the rural-urban problem

In order to understand how the historical concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ operate in contemporary policy practice, let us focus on Europe, the birthplace of these concepts. The rural-urban issue is of particular concern within the European Union as a consequence of the various integration processes that take place there, not least in view of the EU’s continued eastward enlargement. Integration, however, necessitates some form of standardization. Since the EU has policies that explicitly focus on urban and rural areas respectively (for instance, the Rural Development policy; European Commission 2008), there is a need to decide what areas in this diverse geographic setting are to be recognized as ‘rural’ or ‘urban’. The current rural-urban typology, however (employed, for instance, within all European Commission communications, reports, publications and statistical analyses), is based predominantly on population density (Ulled et al. 2010). Such classification system may in certain situations strike as unreflective or perhaps mechanical in that it subordinates a wide array of social, historical and cultural factors that prevail beyond such simplistic labeling. This, in turn, can run the risk of reducing rural and urban to a set of *entities* rather than *qualities* (cf. Pacione 2009). At the same time, EU’s Rural Development policy (as of 2007–13) still has a pronounced agricultural focus (cf. Stenseke et al. 2011; Brauer and Dymitrow 2014). With over 56 per cent of EU’s population living in what are defined as rural areas (European Commission 2008), only 5 per cent—as of 2009—were employed in agriculture, and the number of jobs in this sector is falling steadily (European Commission 2012). Seeing the contemporary understanding of ‘rural’ as ostensibly extended towards subtleties like ‘quality of life’, the apparent focus on economy seems in that light counterintuitive (Stenseke 1997; Brauer and Dymitrow 2014). Let us consider it.

The state’s activity in regulating its territory must begin with the discursive process of constructing that territory as an object of governance. Consequently, as Woods (2010a: 233–234) puts it, ‘the first step in analyzing rural [or urban] policy is (. . .) to interrogate the discursive assumptions and representations that underpin policy formulation’. Since spatial developmental strategies—rationality notwithstanding—often depart from the two conceptual spheres, the rural and the urban (cf. Moseley 2003; Taylor 2007), *successful* development is most likely to be dependent of proper governance of rural-urban linkages (Danida 2000; Lhermitte 2000). Since government’s engagement with different spatialities requires knowing the territory in question, any major societal shift needs adequate attention, such as commissioning audits from leading academics. For instance, when this was done in England in the late 1990s following a distinct shift in the orientation

of rural policy, the reviews of the audit presented a very different picture of the rural than that portrayed in conventional statistics (Woods 2010a: 234). In light of the aforementioned rural-urban blurring, trying to square the tensions that arise provides challenges for policy-makers (Richardson and Jensen 2000). Thus, terms like ‘rural policy’ and ‘rural planning’ have become so broad ‘as to almost lose meaning’ (Lapping 2006: 104). Despite these problems, rural and urban development debates are still often conducted separately (Allen and Dávila 2002; Ward and Brown 2009), despite certain initiatives (like OECD or ESDP) launched to mitigate the rural-urban distinction through new—though not uncontested (Richardson and Jensen 2000)—models of rural-urban partnership and polycentric spatial development.

Although institutional lock-ins as well as the relative rigidity of societal structures may be partly to blame (cf. Brauer and Dymitrow 2014), the unwillingness to refrain from the rural-urban model is much dependent of the concepts of rurality and urbanity remaining firmly entrenched in ideas about space, place and society that linger on in people’s everyday practices and imaginations of the contemporary world (Cloke 2006). For instance, in an attempt to attenuate the rural-urban dichotomy, the EU has introduced a third type of regional classification—the intermediate. Nevertheless, in rural statistics, intermediate regions are combined with predominantly rural regions and called ‘rural regions’, while in urban statistics, intermediate regions are combined with predominantly urban regions under the label ‘urban regions’. In effect, this renders conflicting statements saying that 80 per cent of the EU is urban and 55 per cent is rural (Eurostat 2010: 245).

Moreover, the deployment of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ can in certain circumstances strike as highly counterintuitive, especially whenever land is conflated with people (cf. Mormont 1990; Dymitrow and Brauer 2016). This is perhaps most visible in programs designed to ease social deprivation, i.e. where political actions are being differentiated on account of the area’s (rural or urban) classification, despite exhibiting identical or much similar problems (cf. Dymitrow and Brauer 2014). In other words, if the rural-urban distinction more perpetuates a stereotype than helps solve problems, it instead turns into an unnecessary conceptual filter that diverts attention from self-identified problems.

Conceptual conflicts of rural-urban nature are also visible in many other—perhaps less pressing yet still important—situations, one of which is outlined below for illustrative purposes.

Examples from small towns in Poland

In view of EU’s eastward enlargement, we have chosen a number of Polish cases to illustrate how leaning on the concepts ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ might prove problematic. Poland is a country where the rural-urban debate is exceptionally vivid and sometimes may even become stormy (Dymitrow and Krzysztofik 2015). There, the rural-urban distinction is considered as ‘at least as important as the east-west development dichotomy’ (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2006: 17) and the division it creates is

sometimes depicted as two Polands: a better-developed urban part and a worse-developed rural part. The Polish definition of 'urban' is based on the historical concept of 'town privileges' that has gradually segued into a contemporary formal definition of 'urban area', subject to urban-specific development. At the same time, areas not classified as urban are automatically regarded as rural—an approach which is not unproblematic. For one, as the term 'rural' refers both to the vast territories of uninhabited space (arable fields, forests, meadows, national parks, mountain ranges, marshes, etc.) and to all 'non-urban' settlements (including the humans who inhabit them), there is a great risk of conflating land with people whenever 'rural' is deliberated as an analytical category. For another, because of this strange mix of historical (traditionalism) and contemporary (rural-urban blurring) conditions, in Poland, there are 'cities' of less than 900 inhabitants as well as 'villages' of more than 12,000. Last but not least, many so-called degraded towns (i.e. formally rural yet urbomorphous and largely de-agrarianized settlements that have had urban status in the past) are not being granted formal urban status despite being objectively (i.e. according to the established national criteria) more urban than numerous formal towns that have managed to retain their historical urban status (Krzysztofik and Dymitrow 2015). Contrarily, many overgrown and fully urbanized villages refrain from applying for urban status for pragmatic reasons, because, if granted one, they would no longer be eligible for a number of state subsidies, like those aimed at teachers, farmers and owners of agritourism facilities.

Interestingly, although the direction of socio-economic development is implied, the debate is first and foremost held within physical and visual frames, often with historical connotations (cf. Dymitrow 2013). Urban artifacts such as urban morphology, the market square and the town hall are put forward as evidence justifying urbanity. Alternatively, agricultural fields and traditional rural housing are put forward as rural denominators. The implication is that whenever 'urban' and 'rural' are thought of as something self-evident their respective totalities become reduced to one or two attributes, most likely the conspicuous ones. The result of this is the construction and cementation of certain stereotypes, which in turn have the tendency of becoming damaging and even pernicious (cf. racism, genderism, heteronormativity, etc.). Such stereotypical imagery of physical landscapes, however, is often used to legitimate the rural-urban distinction in the public airwaves.

The small town of Obrzycko in western Poland is a vivid example of this. In 1990, Obrzycko (by then a village) managed to regain its formal urban status, which it had lost in 1934 and fought for ever since, as its inhabitants simply could not identify with being 'rural citizens'. Normally, when a formally rural settlement in Poland gains or regains urban status, it is always merged with the surrounding rural hinterland to form a new, mixed-type rural-urban municipality. In this particular case, however, due to lack of procedural knowledge and sheer oversight from the regional authorities, Obrzycko was mistakenly detached from the rural municipality and made a separate urban

one, despite its scarce population of 2000 and an area of only 3 km². This unnatural division ultimately created two sets of administrative posts whose officials preside side by side in the same building. Not only is it extremely costly, it also prohibits the government of the urban unit from space-consuming investments due to its territorial exiguity, and, analogously, deprives the government of the rural unit of unimpeded access to various social and cultural institutions located in the urban center. 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 per cent of the rural voices are against integration (Rząd RP 2010). Effectively, the division remains and the altercation is kept ablaze. What the case of Obrzycko 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. It also shows how this perceived duality may manifest itself through the use of specific iconographies.

There are also other indicators of people's perceptions of rural and urban being largely shaped upon the presence or absence of certain physical characteristics that are culturally acquired and therefore expected (various historic landscapes, visual codes, cultural arch-typing, and so on; cf. Dymitrow 2014). These processes are further intensified in rural-urban interfaces where these codes are disrupted. Reactions tend to materialize not only in response to the gradual rural-urban blurring, but also whenever a change of discourse is about to take place as a result of administrative decisions (when a rural locality is subject to a suggested or upcoming change of formal status to 'urban') or morphological transformations (when a rural locality is subject to a series of physical alterations to make it appear more urban). Such abrupt changes are also an intrinsic part of the blurring, because in a reality where 'rural' and 'urban' lack clear points of reference there is more leeway for different interpretations. For instance, revitalization of the small town of Tarnogród, which included the creation of a large open space in the middle of its dilapidated market square, brought about local protests. Since morphological alterations automatically imply a change of cognitive patterns, such changes entail consequences. In this particular case, people found themselves exposed in a previously sheltered environment, ultimately demanding more greenery. However, enacting the building restorer's guidelines and the directions of the endorsed zoning scheme, the landscape architect in charge dismissed those claims, arguing that a market square has traditionally always been a large 'urban' place and never a lawn or a park (Pelc 2010). And so, the space was made open. This example shows how a stereotype view on urbanity clashed with a view based on bodily experience in an environment subject to rural-urban blurring.

Another example of similar maladaptation is the village of Lubycza Królewska, which after the redrawing of Poland's boundaries developed gradually into a thriving cross-border post along EU's eastern frontier. During the

past 30 years, it has increased manifold on account of its demographic, spatial and functional potential, which eventually led to a much delayed yet unanimous application for urban status. Nevertheless, the application resulted in two outright rejections (in 2013 and 2014) because the local authorities failed to account for some measurable criteria (Krzysztofik et al. 2016). Such dismal cases of bureaucratic fads and egregious measures of (mis) evaluation are largely dependent on the failure of proper reconnaissance of a settlement's condition during its transformation along a vaguely defined conceptual rural-urban axis. There are many other levels on which lay discourses and generic discourses may clash, as lay people seem to have a very clear opinion about what is rural or urban and what is not. Such displays of situated knowledge may, in turn, conflict significantly with, like in this example, the intentions of Polish authorities and experts.

The tiny rural town of Klwów (population 450 in 2009) provides another example of local residents reacting to conceptual rural-urban inconsistencies encountered in their immediate surroundings. Here, a costly 'urban-style' revitalization project was met with skepticism. An integrity failure (a large gap) in one of the frontages of the market square made agricultural fields visible directly from the town center, ultimately sustaining the established communal sensation of rurality (Dymitrow 2014: 11). A similar reaction, although in a different context, was encountered in the case of Poland's smallest formally urban town, Wyśmierzyce (population 921 in 2014). There, instead, the heavily internalized urban discourse (brought to fame by the exploitation of the town's microscopic size) was momentarily threatened by some visible attributes generally associated with rurality (cf. Dymitrow 2012). On the contrary, discourses of the reversed type (i.e. when an urban-centered discourse either operates under an imposed rural discourse or challenges a prevailing rural one) abound, as many people cannot come to terms with the breach between the formal label and the physical container.

It should also be noted, that such reasoning conflicts with the notion of social construction of ruralities and urbanities, as there seems to be a clear physical tenet in this experience-based awareness-shaping process. Whether these kinds of cognitive organizations are rational or not is secondary here; more important is that such processes do operate on a local level, ultimately shaping people's in-situ knowledge. And when these seemingly innocuous observations are coupled with the broader concepts of 'rural' and 'urban', there may be ramifications when, for instance, the locally perceived and the centrally defined fail to converge.

Summarily, the presented expressions of how people understand 'rural' and 'urban' in everyday life in close relation to the physical environment point to two deficiencies observable when 'rural' and 'urban' are construed today: (a) lack of experience-based perspectives informing current rural-urban understanding, such as in policy-making, and (b) unnecessary conceptual dichotomizations stemming from treating ruralities and urbanities as either material entities or as social constructs. In the next section

we will elaborate on the both issues, and also suggest a possible way how they could be made less discordant.

Bringing together humanistic and materiality-based approaches

The renewed quest for humanism

Given the strong focus on space within the rural-urban debate (either empirically informed or preconceived), the issue of *how* the notion of rural and urban space is understood, created and operated within should not be underestimated. Since various land use management policies gain expression in different physical settings, then the inclination towards preservation or redevelopment of these could effectively be conditioned by preferences rooted in different sets of values. Conservation policies, for instance, are closely related to the ways each society values and views its roots and traditions, and if these policies are a relatively recent development, the areas affected by them may 'run the risk of allowing their values to be gradually taken over by contemporary and external transformations' (García-Esparza 2012: 16–17). This, in turn, could be linked to the fact that the material landscape holds no values in itself, only those identified by people from different standpoints (Stenseke 2000). Therefore, the issue of *whose* values are being represented in policy is important. A similar approach can be found in the European Landscape Convention (Jones and Stenseke 2011), where human perception is at the core of the convention. It follows from the idea that in order to understand how the environment shapes and is shaped by people it is advisable to identify 'how individuals and groups acquire knowledge of their environment and how this knowledge shapes their attitudes and behaviors' (Knox and Marston 2007: 237). For instance, in times when 'rural' is no longer synonymous with the primary sector of the economy but encompasses a plethora of other platforms, it overlaps realms and regimes previously ascribed to urban areas. The point is that when ruralities are constructed in that way, space, as Lefebvre (1991) notes, inherently becomes a means of production, leading up to new creations of space where control exists and thus becomes a form of power.

Having reviewed an extensive body of theoretical work on the rural-urban continuum, Sokołowski (1999: 43) argues that 'local perception' is '[a]n important, but largely neglected, attribute of urbanity'. This neglect is not only true of possible misclassifications of urbanizing rural areas. Also small towns may succumb to the perils of the persistent dichotomy in cases when their particular condition becomes camouflaged by the lack of detailed information (UN-Habitat 2006). One example of this are the nostalgic urban ambitions of small-town inhabitants in Poland, who—despite similar means of employment—try to distinguish themselves from their rural fellowmen, be it by different landscape histories, uses of language or physical attributes (Siemiński 2000; Gorlach and Foryś 2003; Kwiatek 2006).

Of course, any attempt at capturing local perception may prove problematic as the concept of 'local' has become increasingly difficult to define; a problem which is also an intrinsic part of rural-urban blurring. Nevertheless, the

emphasis on human awareness, agency and consciousness points towards the importance of examining how spaces are perceived on the basis of physical presence. Although geography, as a spatial science, spans the entire range of conceptions of space (cf. Sack 1980), humanistic geographers' concern for space is not just for its own sake, but for what it may mean to people. Hence, while '[m]athematical spaces are pure form, devoid of human meaning, experiential spaces have no form but are replete with human meaning' (Couclelis 1992: 231). Experiential space can be described as the space humans experience based on intuitive, unexamined and unarticulated forms of spatial understanding (Couclelis 1992). Seeing rural and urban—as geographic spaces—becoming increasingly blurred, it is in the *social* distinction that significant differences between the two remain (Cloe 2006: 19). This distinction is also the one factor that transforms space into place (cf. Tuan 1974; Jackson 1994). Contrarily, major changes to the physical environment may make places cease to exist, and, as they lose their meaning to people, the geographic locality becomes instead a place understood as space (cf. Hermelin 2005).

Examining who people in a given place conceive themselves to be, as a consequence of that place, can be sorted into the field of research branded as 'sense of place' (Beidler 2007). As this includes all dimensions of human experience (physical, social, psychological, intellectual and emotional, encountered in beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes; cf. de Wit 2013), it aligns with a phenomenological approach. It departs from the stance that 'assumed notions and perspectives, whether of the specialist or layperson, are often out of accurate contact with the entities they purport to see, know, or interpret' (Seamon 1982: 119). In such view, idealistic objects and values are just as objective as realistic ones (Mordwa 2003), whereupon a natural world deprived of ideal and value could strike as incomplete and superficial, if not false (Chojnicki 1985: 272). To the detriment of such stance, Coole (2007) has noticed that in political studies the material and experiential dimensions of the body either tend to be neglected or largely ignored. She sees such omissions as serious given that 'there are many ways in which power operates on a corporeal level' (p. 414). Attempts to access 'the "more-than-representational" rural geographies by investigating ways in which rural experiences are felt, sensed, [and] intuited through bodily actions and performances' have also been made by Woods (2010b: 835; quotation therefrom), Carolan (2008) and Wylie (2005). Simonsen (2013), in particular, acknowledges the troublesome nature of the past 20 years of anti-humanist and post-humanist dominance within human geography in terms of comprehension of lived experience, notions of agency and politics. Instead, she advocates a return to a new form 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 (. . .)' (2013: 10). The public social debate has in many areas already shifted towards a more progressive humanistic direction (cf. Head and Stenseke 2014). Perhaps a similar development could be expected in the debate on rural and urban?

The renewed interest in materiality

When discussing experiential space, the issue of materiality needs special elaboration. As the rural becomes increasingly urbanized through greater mobility, accessibility and the provision of goods, but also in regard to rife changes in function, it could be argued that the remaining fundamental tangent of rurality—if any—still seems to lie in the differing physical (material) characteristics that are intuitively recognized as 'rural'. The assumption behind such reasoning can be found in some earlier works of authors representing various schools of thought. Lynch (1960), for instance, referred to it as 'imageability', that is, '[the] quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer' (p. 9). Also Lefebvre (1991: 12) contended that our knowledge of the material world is based on concepts that are defined in terms of the broadest generality. This would imply that, despite individual variations, the ways in which we understand the physical world are largely the result of some commonly shared interpretations.

Currently, the humanities and social sciences experience a 'material turn', which implies an increased empirical interest in things, technologies, bodies and materials as notional objects of study (Domanska 2006). Bennett and Joyce (2010: 4) describe the material turn as

[t]he crucial intellectual move (. . .) that turns away from notions of coherent social totality, and towards the erasure of familiar conceptual distinctions between the natural and the social, the human and the non-human, and the material and cultural, divisions that are all predicated on the immaterial/material divide.

Also referred to as a 'return to things', the material turn signals a rejection of constructivism and its ilk (deconstruction, narrativism, textualism) that may have taken us too far from reality and therefore finds expression in re-establishing that contact through a pursuit for what is 'real' (Domanska 2006). Advocates of the material turn argue that material things have hitherto been black-boxed to act largely as 'a backdrop to the real social action which takes place elsewhere in the encounter between human subjects' (Harvey, in Barnett 2009: 7). Although indeed insightful within the realm of discourse, social constructionism and the cultural turn have been criticized 'for neglecting the material dimensions of the rural condition that have a real impact on the experiences of people living, working and playing in rural space' (Cloe, in Woods 2010a). Mahon (2005), for instance, noted that the residents' experiences and perceptions of both 'town' and 'countryside' focus principally on physical aspects (as opposed to social characteristics). Similarly, Stedman (2003) found that landscape attributes matter a great deal to constructed meanings and that these constructions are not exclusively social. This point is particularly crucial, because even though people's constructions of 'rural' and 'urban' are indeed important, we must not forget to acknowledge the *physical* world subject to some very real policies. Human interpretations of 'reality', as Domanska

(2006: 341) characterizes them, 'are not to be understood in terms of textual and linguistic structures only, but also as mediated by artifacts', which 'shape the ways that people gain access to reality'.

As the aforementioned Polish examples indicate, there is indeed a direct connection between physicality and current rural-urban understanding. All human actions are geographically anchored, whereby humans effectively draw from and respond to the geographic characteristics of the surroundings they encounter in their everyday lives (cf. Tilt et al. 2007; Maga-Jagielnicka 2009). This, in turn, shapes their spatial awareness. In light of this constant socio-material reciprocity, we complete this section by resorting to the potential of a landscape approach as a possible conceptual tool to better understand the logics of contemporary rural-urban distinctions.

Landscape: Bringing together different perspectives on rural-urban blurring

In light of the conceptual muddle present during the past two decades, it could be of scientific and policy value to bring forth the physical and subjective tenets of rural-urban awareness, including ways in which these tenets can be identified and experienced. In that vein, a landscape approach appears to be fruitful in bringing together the two important theoretical currents in research on rural/urban today: humanism and materiality.

When it comes to conceptualizations of 'landscape', there are manifold scientific perspectives (for a walk-through, see for instance Jones 1991; Wylie 2007). In this paper, we are inspired by Nordic-Germanic understandings of landscape, which have evolved in parallel with the cultural turn and, thus, never de-materialized (Olwig 1996). In short, such understandings see landscape as a limitless continuum, where physical elements integrate through co-evolution with socio-economic features, institutional components and intangible aspects such as values, traditions and knowledge. This perspective is mirrored in both the European Science Foundation's briefing on landscape (European Science Foundation 2010) and in the European Landscape Convention (Jones and Stenseke 2011). Moreover, since this perspective acknowledges the integration and co-evolution of material and immaterial aspects in a specific place, it opens for a dialectic synthesis between social-constructivist and materiality-based views (Widgren 2004). A landscape approach, therefore, does not easily fall victim to dichotomization as a result of the much different yet equally viable perspectives of the cultural and material turn, respectively. Last but not least, a landscape approach takes into account changes that do not necessarily occur in the proximity of an 'urban core', as well as those that are perceptually not aligned with a rural-urban axis at all.

As we see it, the constancy of the concept of landscape lies in its function as a locus for culture-nature and subject-object relations. As such, it connects rather than divides, while favoring the integration of the physical with the subjective (Hägerstrand 2001). In a similar vein, the concept of landscape has recently been proposed by Pinto-Correia and Kristensen (2013) as a new conceptual

basis for integrating social and ecological perspectives and, by that, to better understand the changes that occur in the rural spaces of Europe. Despite conceptual oscillations through times, 'landscape' still remains a highly subjective theme, at the same time opening up to a plurality of interpretations. Accordingly, by focusing on the interconnections present in the non-haphazard production of landscape, landscape—as a guiding perspective—could bring a deeper understanding of how different areas are valued, monitored, changed, harbored, used and misused.

Landscape is not the solution to the rural-urban blurring as such. We still need categories to structure societal actions, and there will never be a perfect match between categorization and the perceived reality, particularly so because perceptions *are* subjective. However, what needs to be changed is our relation to categorization. Landscape, as a concept, explicitly signifies fluidity, which in turn aligns with the characteristics of subjectivity. Rural-urban, despite a plethora of postmodern 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 which creates a false sense of stability (cf. Rey 1983). The only effective way of getting rid of this false sense of stability is by pre-announcing it. The concept of landscape has that quality: it pre-announces the involvement of subjectivity.

Hence, acknowledging that rural/urban will continue to be used in planning, administration and research, there need to be greater awareness of the fluidity of this distinction: that these concepts only vaguely indicate what kind of areas and phenomena we are dealing with. A landscape approach helps deconstruct the characteristics and criteria that underlie any categorization of rural and urban respectively through the question: What material features and what immaterial characteristics signify each category? The material dimension can be specified through questions pertaining to land use, population density, settlement structure or physical forms. The immaterial characteristics comprise, for example, issues related to history, image and function, as well as the manifold systems of meaning derived therefrom. By making the logics behind the uses of 'urban' and 'rural' in various political, administrative and managerial contexts more apparent we can increase the transparency for decision makers as well as the general public. This, undoubtedly, implies democratic gains.

Conclusion

We often perceive the world in dichotomies: good or bad, left or right, body or soul. The rural-urban divide is not an exception; we often use expressions like 'city life' or 'in the countryside', without proper consideration what they really imply. But where does 'rural' end and where does 'urban' take over? Urbanization—one of the more striking yet unevenly progressing phenomena of our time—renders the rural-urban dichotomy all the less transparent. Not only cannot 'urbanity' and 'rurality' be compared internationally in an effective way; also within

the same countries strict definitions create an artificial barrier within a complex, more subtle reality. Changing land uses, connectivity, livelihoods, lifestyles, and so forth, consequently alter our society, making it in constant need of redefinition. The most difficult part is *how*.

We acknowledge that the rural-urban dichotomy, although simplistic and largely anachronistic, is so deeply rooted in our conceptual understanding of the world that it probably is there to stay. However, if the dichotomy is to be sustained, we argue it is of particular importance to better clarify what it means *today*, because the blurring of the rural-urban distinction invokes ever greater subjectivity. Here we speak for bringing together humanistic and materiality-based approaches. We argue that materiality is a vital aspect in understanding rural/urban of today. Even if we assume that 'rural' and 'urban' are social constructs, much of 'rural-urban reality' still finds reflection in the material world that frames us, ultimately determining our referential frameworks. The divergent (or 'flawed', if you will) nature of these frameworks is in turn an inherent part of being human. The examples from small towns in Poland indicate that this dimension is locally significant and that the sense of rurality/urbanity, respectively, is much derived from the physical characteristics of the lived environment rather than from the mere degree of socio-economic development.

We propose a landscape approach as an interesting starting point for further discussions about some key considerations conducive to a better understanding of 'rural' and 'urban' of today. We believe it can serve as an inspirational way forward for further, more detailed, and certainly much anticipated works dedicated to the problem at hand, which will demand more emphasis on its conceptual development. Much scholarly groundwork on rural-urban conceptualizations from the perspective of bodily experience has already been laid. However, there is a need to take the subject further and actually make theory and practice meet. If not, such conceptualizations will remain largely as detached ideas, while the rural-urban practice will continue as if little had happened over the years. We contend it is important that the ideas that inform rural-urban understanding today capture the abstract yet experientially recognizable spatialities that reflect humans' interactions with the physical land. As such, human perception of the nature of these interactions is an important ingredient.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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