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Rural space as a social representation. Case of villages in the Łódź Metropolitan Region (Poland)

Abstract: The aim of the empirical research was to determine the degree of social cohesion on the basis of the perception of the specifics of the modern countryside (which is undergoing disagrariation) and the values of rural environment. The case study illustrates selected social consequences of spatial policy regarding housing in rural communes in the suburban area of a big city (case of Metropolitan Area of Łódź). Unlike macro-scale studies, both Polish and foreign, micro-scale studies have shown that differences are even greater and concern neighbouring areas. The different ways of life are manifested in different behaviour patterns and levels of territorial identity. New residents of a village perceive space primarily in terms of functional utility (convenience of residence), while long-time residents attach sentimental value to it, due to historical continuity. In such a case, special attention is paid to social and spatial behaviour patterns stemming from the historical continuity of certain individual characteristics of functioning within a local structure.

Keywords: rural space, social representations, social diversity, Poland

Introduction and conceptual framework

The work is based on the assumptions of post-structuralist approach, including the sociological concept of “spatiality” (H. Lefebvre), as well as the resulting geographical concept of rural space research in a model developed by K. Halfacree (2009).

Post-structuralism in geography uses the achievements of social sciences, especially sociology, mainly in the field of theoretical basis. For human geographers, one of the key theoretical works, which led to a long and fruitful discussion was the book “The Production of Space” by French philosopher and sociologist H. Lefebvre (1991). H. Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) constructed his work around a conceptual triad. He described various ways in which space is produced and reproduced. The elements of this triad are:

- spatial practices – which embrace production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets of characteristics of each social formations;
- representations of space – which are tied to the relations of production and to the “order” which these relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and “frontal” relations;
- spaces of representation – complex symbolism linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life.

H. Lefebvre's concept of production of space was inspiring for research in human geography. Most of the studies were conducted on the example of urban space. Theoretical transformations in rural studies, especially the “cultural turn” of the 1990s, raised interest in new theoretical concepts among rural geographers (Wójcik 2012). The greatest credit for developing research concepts related to H. Lefebvre's basic theses should be given to K. Halfacree (1993, 1995). He developed a model that identifies three major dimensions of rural space studies, i.e.

- rural localities – inscribes through distinctive spatial practices;
- representations of the rural – formal expressions;
- everyday lives of the rural – what it is like be(com)ing in the rural.

A post-socialist urban region in a broad sense is very interesting for researchers from the countries that went through a social and economic transformation, as well as from other parts of Europe and the world (e.g. Kovács 2009, Blacksell, Born 2002, Węclawowicz 2002, Sýkora 1999). The main reason is the reconstruction of spatial structures, especially of large cities, under the influence of various factors of economic transformation, globalisation or the impact of European funds.

In recent years, the studies of transformations in suburban rural areas involved analyses of the phases of urbanisation within the discussion of the life cycle of urban regions (Champion 2001, Geyer 2002). In the case of post-socialist countries, the researchers also pointed out the dynamic character of suburbanisation (the return to free land sale) and the need of some inhabitants to

move to more elite estates at the suburbs. Studies also stressed the complex social nature of the process of urbanisation, resulting from different motivations of migration (cf. Tammaru 1999, Ouředníček 2007, Boren, Gentile 2007). Given that these proposals were primarily formulated by specialists in urban processes, little attention was paid to the transformations of postagrarian structures in suburban villages. This was discussed, among others, by M. Phillips (2005), who used the example of English countryside to interpret the transformations of local communities under the impact of an invasion of new inhabitants (gentrification of the countryside).

In the case of suburban areas of large post-socialist cities, the concept of human ecology in the context of metropolitan processes assumes a new meaning. The main aim of research within this concept is to define the relations between the society and the territory (social space). Territorial identity (placeness) is an important component of local identity (e.g. Sibley 1999), as well as an important condition for the emergence of local social and territorial cohesion. People in the countryside meet not only social, but also natural structures. Therein lies the fundamental difference in the formation and interpretation of the specific characteristics of rural life in the conditions of increasingly decreasing importance of production functions (mainly agriculture). A significant difference between the city and the countryside lies in the role of nature in creating the social and territorial individuality (Macnaghten, Urry 1998), since nature creates not only the foundations for productive but, more and more often, also consumption behaviours in the countryside (Woods 2011).

Methodological issues and case study

Compared to other large Polish cities, the suburban area of Łódź is much less developed. In the early 1980s, regional statistics called areas with dominant agricultural functions “open areas”. In the case of Łódź Metropolitan Area, open areas included most rural communities bordering the city of Łódź (see Aglomeracje miejskie... 1983). Most villages located in the vicinity of Łódź started undergoing vast changes during the social and economic transformation (1990s), especially under the influence of the residential function in the circumstances of suburbanisation and the development of personal car transport (Wójcik 2008).

Rural areas of Łódź Metropolitan Area are thus an interesting case study of rural transformations that significantly changed the social and economic structure over a relatively short period of time (10-15 years). It can be said, that the choice of such case study allowed us to observe the processes in *statu nascendi* (“under development”). It is important in the case of social studies, as the information gathered from the participants (creators) have not been erased from their memory yet. On the other hand, learning about local social communities was also vital, as their inhabitants are both new and long-term residents of the countryside who observe one another, thus fostering the formation and retention of opinions about the neighbourhood environment.

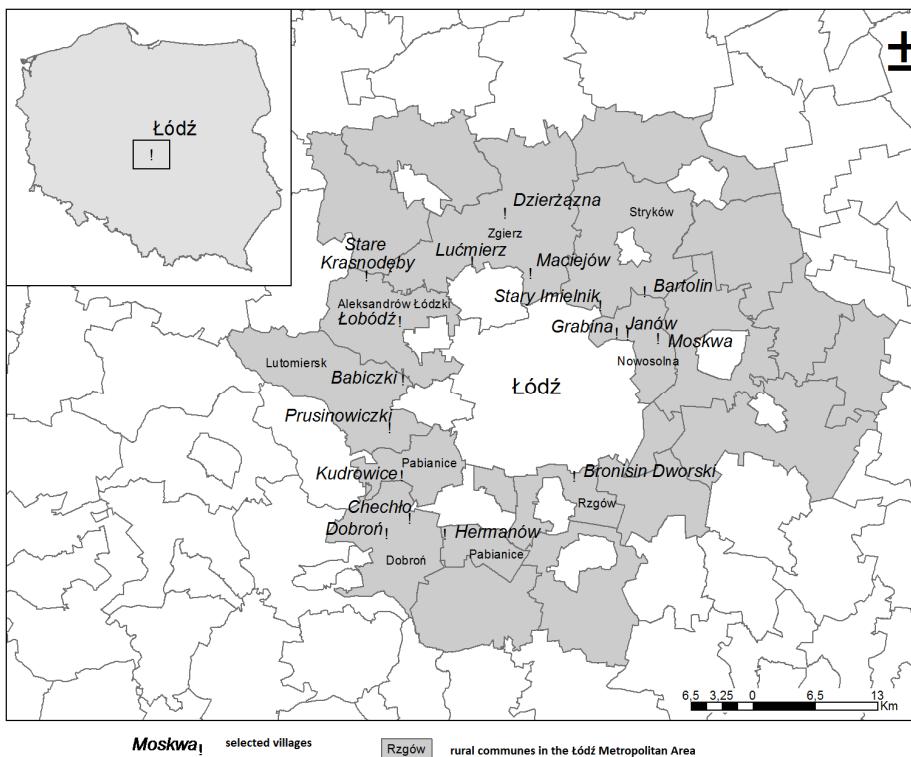


Figure 1. Villages selected for field studies

Source: own study.

For field studies, 17 villages were selected (fig. 1). This selection was preceded by local inspection of rural settlements in the Łódź Metropolitan Area, i.e. in Zgierz powiat (district) - the communes of Zgierz, Stryków Aleksandrów Łódzki; in East Łódź powiat (district) - the communes of Nowosolna, Andrespol, Brójce, Rzgów; and in Pabianice powiat (district) - the communes of Ksawerów, Pabianice, Lutomiersk. The selection of villages was dictated by the specificity of their functional and spatial structure, i.e. the settlements whose intense transformations started in the 1990s (usually late 1990s), and whose proportion of developed (built-up) plots were from 20% to 50% of the total area of the settlement.

The aim of the empirical research was to determine the degree of social cohesion on the basis of the perception of the specifics of the modern countryside (which is undergoing disagrariation) and the values of rural environment. Were also trying to determine the motives choice of the village as a place of residence for new residents. 301 were conducted in the villages, 114 (38%) with new residents and 187 (64%) with long-term residents. 15 to 25 interviews were conducted with the residents of both groups in each village.

New rural residents come mainly from the core of the metropolitan area, i.e. from the city of Łódź (e.g. Próba delimitacji obszaru... 2008). They are mostly university or high school graduates, while many (approx. 50%) long-term residents declared primary or vocational education (fig. 2).

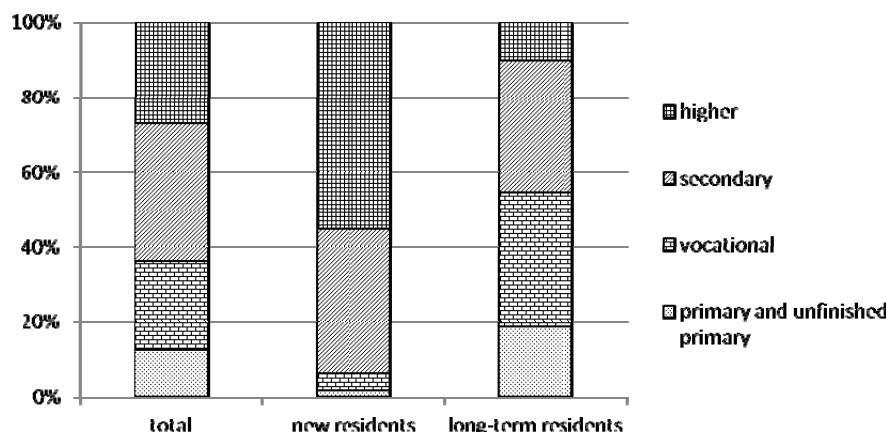


Figure 2. Respondents by education level

Source: own study.

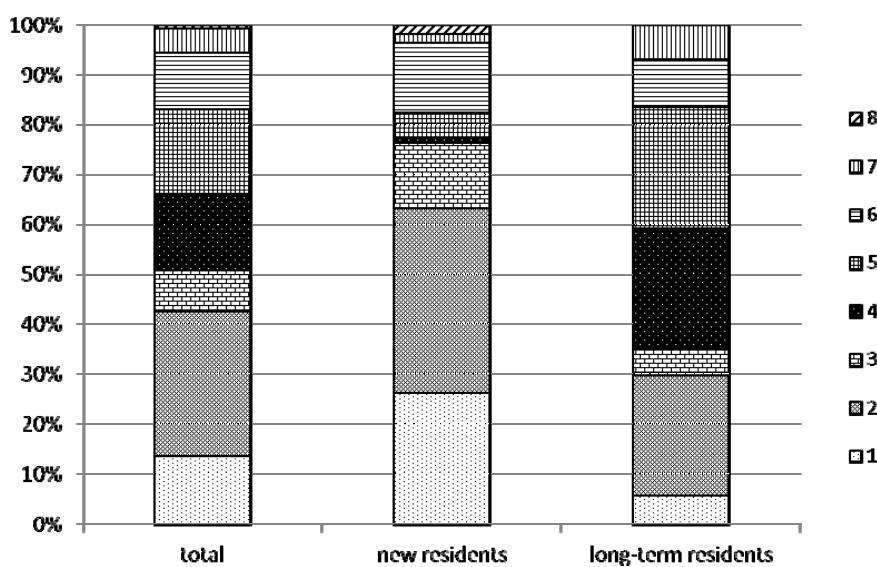


Figure 3. Respondents by occupation (type of economic activity)

Professional activity: 1. hired employee in the public sector, 2. hired employee in the private sector, 3. entrepreneur, 4. farmer, 5. retiree, pensioner, 6. student, 7. unemployed, 8. undetermined

The situation with professions seems similar. Over 75% of newly settled respondents declared that they were entrepreneurs or hired employees of private or public sector (fig. 3), so their workplaces were located outside the countryside (92%). In the case of long-term population, categories such as farmer, hired employee of the private sector, pensioner and unemployed were quite popular.

Rural social representations

K. Halfacree wrote that to identify rurality is to identify the various things that make somewhere, someone, or something rural (2009, p. 449). The definition of contemporary countryside by its residents is thus an important task. Referring to the images created by the residents is one way to determine the nature of contemporary countryside (Ilbery 1998). This is due largely to the powerlessness in defining countryside based on traditional criteria, especially functional and social ones (Woods 2011, Wojcik 2009).

The increase in social diversity of suburban areas, especially in the vicinity of large cities, has had a tremendous impact on the differences in the perception of social and natural environment. Residents were asked to give their two most important associations with the term "countryside". The answers were very diverse, which proves the ambiguous social representation of rural areas (fig. 4). An association with agriculture was the most frequent response (almost 33%). "Agriculture" was, however, given as a distinctive feature twice as often by long-term than by new residents. This is related to the origins of local communities, where this type of economic activity was until recently the main or an important source of income. Newcomers build their idea of the countryside mainly based on the features associated with the landscape and environmental (ecological) aspects that serve as important motivations for choosing a location. Natural values and associated features of the surrounding (the environment), such as "peace" and "silence", as well as the landscape ("nice view") are fostering the stereotype of suburban villages. This perception of the countryside is typical in societies where there is a decline in the importance of the productive functions (agriculture) and all burdens related to the formation of new environments of residence.

The generally low importance of the social value of the countryside, especially relating to the perception of the countryside as a community based on social closeness, is both important and telling. This feature was more often quoted by the long-term representatives of families, but even in their case the level of responses can be deemed very low.

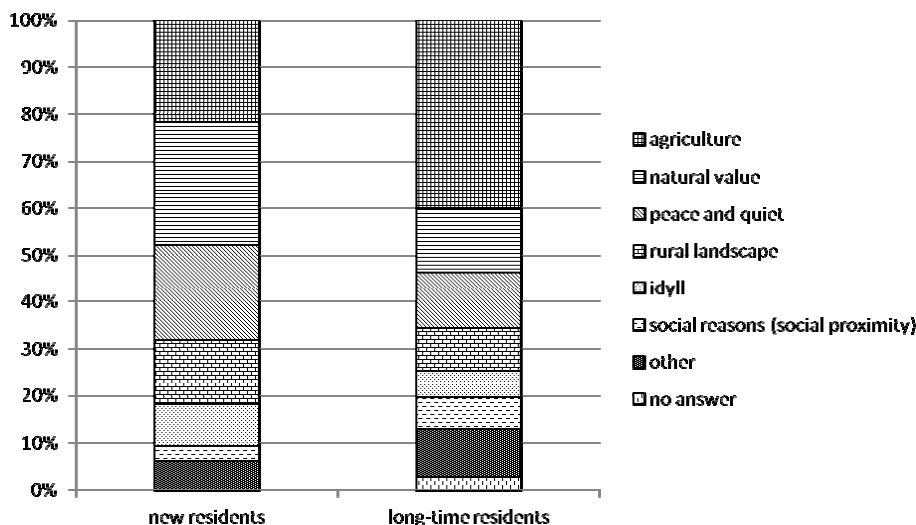


Figure 4. The structure of the respondents' responses to the question "What associations do you have with the word countryside?" (%)

Source: own study.

Based on this, respondents were asked to indicate the features that distinguish contemporary countryside from other places to live and work, especially urban ones (fig. 5). In this case, in contrast to the responses to the associations with the word "countryside", "lifestyle" characteristics were the most popular. Even though the concept of "lifestyle" has broad social connotations, it most often referred to the differences in practices (behaviours, activities) of countryside residents based on the specific environmental and usability circumstances of the countryside. Respondents indicated various forms of contact with nature, feelings associated with experiencing "open" space (landscape) that fostered better life harmony, creating family atmosphere, better opportunities for spending time together, etc. The sense of different lifestyle based on the rural environment was more often perceived by immigrant to the countryside. This is probably related to their higher awareness of the (chosen) villages' values that influenced their decision to change their place of residence, i.e. move from the city to the countryside. In this case the "rurality" in the eyes of new residents is somehow "made" in the process of confronting their expectations with the properties (realities) of the countryside. In the case of the so-called "long-term" residents, the sense "rurality" as a lifestyle comes naturally, as it emerges from the continuity of living in the rural environment.

Other features distinguishing the countryside from other environments (especially cities) listed by the respondents mostly related to the functional aspects. More often than newcomers, the long-time residents indicated the different nature of the countryside based on other human activities (professional activity), especially agriculture, as well as the use of space, which related to a large extent to forms of agricultural development, as well as to the landscape and settlement aspects.

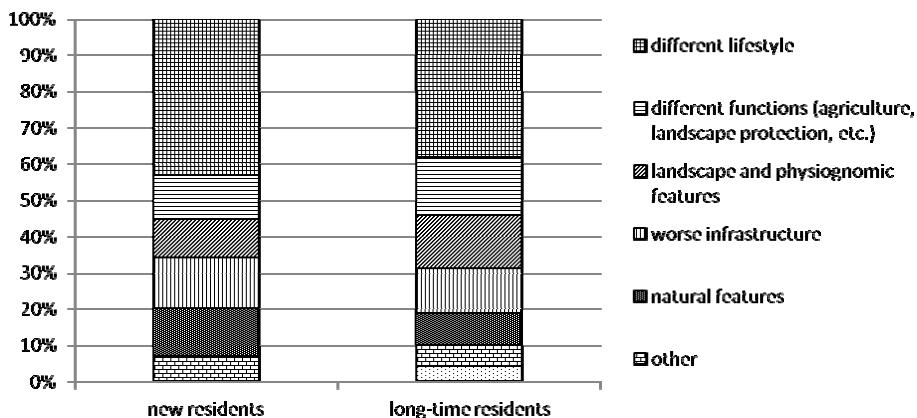


Figure 5. The structure of the respondents' responses to the question "Do you think that the countryside is different in any way from other places to live and work (e.g. the city)?" (%)

Source: own study.

The difference in space perception is important for the overall context of the social image of rural environment. This is primarily related in the recognition of the role of agriculture as a functional and social unifying force of the traditional countryside (the connection between the settlements and the fields). Newcomers tend to stress the distinctive features of the countryside from its inside, i.e. the settlement, which emphasises the sense of "rurality" based on the fulfilment of residential function. Long-time residents perceive the countryside in a more complex way, which is the result of the sense of "long existence", but also of their relationship with the land. In this case, the perception of the countryside often has a second perspective, which includes the view of the home (homestead) from the field.

Conclusions

Even though it is caused by vastly different systems of perceptions and meanings, the integration of people with their local environment is largely built upon the sense of rurality, but what is understood by this notion by different social groups has diverse mental background and interpretations. Examples of studies on the evaluation of local living environment show that the social coherence of the countryside is gradually weakening, resulting mostly from the more and more varied lifestyles, social needs and expectations towards their place of residence. Various forms of social life are created on the basis of the same system of material resources of the countryside (land, territory). The relativisation of the understanding of "countryside" is related to the ways it is constructed, i.e. it stems from the social representations - forms of judgements and ideas. The countryside under transformation, in the transient period, is somewhere in-between. This "in-between" means not only a point on a scale of formal urbanisation, but, above all, refers to its suspension among the representations (ideas) of rurality.

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