

# EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF MODERN RURALITY: TRANSGRESSION, HETEROGENEITY, MULTILOCALITY, MULTIFUNCTIONALITY EDITORIAL

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The theme issue aims at investigating some of the methodological and epistemological challenges concerning the empirical research of modern rurality that has been emerging in Europe and elsewhere after the post-productivist transition (Ilbery 1998). As a complex organizational concept that permeates the economic and social structure of the countryside in the post-industrialized world, modern rurality is a source of narratives produced by different players, both local and global (Cecchi 2001). Modern rural areas characterized by the interconnection and interrelation of urban and rural as well as the transgression of the boundary between urban and rural, are therefore heterogeneous, multifunctional spaces characterized by ever increasing intercultural encounters, cultural transmission, as well as changes in travel and mobility patterns.

The concept of rurality as multifaceted, complex, fluid and dynamic requires epistemological and methodological revisiting. 'Rural renaissance' (Ivanko et al. 2009), as is the resurgence of rural areas in the studies of the 1990s commonly referred to, implies the emergence of new disciplinary, conceptual and methodological approaches to rural research in order to analyze the contemporary rural condition. A 'global countryside' (Woods 2007) requires adopting diverse theoretical perspectives covering post-modernist oriented human geography, theory of practice and power, theory of social space, actor-network theory, feminism and the like. Likewise, there has been a methodological revolution in rural studies in recent years introduced by the cultural and spatial turn; the basic questionnaire techniques give way to qualitative methods borrowed from anthropology such as participant observation, and semi-structured interviews (Woods 2012: 3). Novel interdisciplinary collaborative tendencies, such as the 'ethnography as/of collaboration' (Marcus 2009), help to bridge seemingly different perspectives, which enable intense methodological reflection within the research process and enhance further theoretical developments. To understand the dynamic nature of rural development, iterative ethnographic research (O'Reilly 2005; Burawoy 2003) consisting of systematic revisits to research sites has been employed in order to grasp the plurality of experiences of the diverse actors in modern rurality. Other research strategies such as multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) help scholars to follow the emergence of

hybrid rural place filled up with changing social and power relations.

This theme issue challenges the assumed characteristics of the rural as stable, homogenous space with rigid social stratification and specific spatial configurations, and rural people as passive populations who occupy peripheral position within existing political, economic and cultural structures. Instead, it aims to show the complex and dynamic ways in which rural space is perceived, conceived and live. Rurality emerges as hybrid, fluid and dynamic space, which is continuously materially and culturally restructured. Rural space is a process produced by different practices and often competing interests, which involves ambiguous interrelations between different actors, practices and ideas (Kay et al. 2012). Our aim is to show how the transformation processes have affected local community.

What are the issues at play in rural contexts? The theme issue presents papers that deal with some of the key challenges for the study of rural places and people in the twenty-first century. They include issues of spatial and social relations in modern rurality; the re-making of a post-productivist countryside (Halfacree 1997), illustrated by the resilience of rural communities to urbanizing pressures; issues concerning global mobility patterns to rural space as well as transnational amenity migration; problems associated with the reduction of traditional farming systems and their replacement by rural tourism; problems of population recomposition; issues of interdisciplinary and comparative research. The authors of the articles seek to indicate challenges and outline possibilities that are there for scholars dealing with rural studies from the social science perspectives: how we do rural research in the twenty-first century, with whom we do it, and when and where we do it (Hannerz 2010).

Hana Horáková's text in this volume discusses some of the epistemological and methodological challenges concerning multilocal research in four rural areas in Czechia that have recently embarked upon a project of international tourism. Based on the perspective of modern rurality as an unbounded and fluid concept she argues that classic modes of doing fieldwork should be replaced by those that better correspond to the new conceptions of the rural as a social representation. The illustrative example of such a research strategy is multi-sited ethnography that proves

to be a legitimate proposition for contemporary research of rural development through tourism (Horáková 2014).

Dana Fialová and Jiří Vágner look into the processes of reconceptualization of the territorial identities in selected rural areas of Czechia with a high concentration of second home users. Their research results show that (1) the differences between second homes and primary residences seem to be more blurred than in the past, and (2) the second home owners and users are additional significant agents with a considerable influence especially on social life in the increasingly multifunctional rural space and local community (Fialová, Vágner 2014).

Andrea Boscoboinik investigates methodological challenges of anthropological research in the Swiss canton of Valais which has recently undergone profound changes in agricultural policies and as such has become an arena of conflicting political, economic and ecological interests. She shows that carrying out research in this setting becomes sensitive and politicized. To overcome the difficulties arising from a sensitive context, interdisciplinarity and multilocality, enabling comparison of various rural contexts, are crucial to achieve relevant results (Boscoboinik 2014).

Montserrat Soronellas-Masdeu et al. analyze the impact of international female immigration to the Catalan rural areas, namely to the communities experiencing problems in depopulation and masculinization. They highlight the issue of population recomposition which is the result of refeminization of these communities. They point to the ways these female immigrants become essential economic and social agents, and thus contribute to develop and sustain new forms of rurality (Soronellas-Masdeu et al. 2014).

We hope that the presented empirically driven insights into social change of modern rurality will provide a fresh look at the old ways, present novel ways of doing things, and discover 'how rural spatial and social relations are constructed, represented, materialized, performed and contested' (Woods 2012: 3). Moreover, the research papers may shed new perspectives not only on the rural but also, by moving beyond localism, on the new contexts within which we can examine global issues such as mobility, development and change.

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