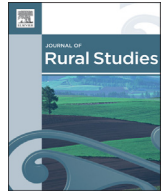




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The relevance of the political economic approach: The interpretations of the rural in the migration decision of young women and men in an economically backward region

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to contribute to the understanding of gendered migration strategies through presenting the findings of a study on the interpretation of the rural and rurality offered by young women and men living in an economically backward, predominantly rural region of Hungary (Észak-Alföld) in connection with their migration plans. The paper also aims to compare the discourses of rural residents and academics on the rural. Both 17- to 19-year old male and female secondary school pupils and 20- to 42-year-old women living in rural settlements unanimously emphasised the lack of paid jobs as a characteristic feature of the rural. Their contextualised representations of the rural confirm the relevance of political economic approaches, which dominate Hungarian academic discourses. The image that students presented reflects actual gendered inequalities in the rural areas of the Észak-Alföld in respect of the labour market and public services and the values and expectations that local communities communicate. In the case of young adult women, the lack of jobs, impaired real property and economic underdevelopment are features that homogenise the otherwise varied picture of the rural. The paper points out the importance of studying the rural places facing economic and social problems and the advantages both of adopting a critical feminist perspective and of applying a political economic approach focussing on economic problems.

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1. Introduction

The share of men and women in Hungary's population has long reflected rural-urban differences. Women outnumber men more significantly in cities than in villages.¹ At the beginning of the current decade there were fewer women than men in the 20–39 age range among permanent residents in all categories of settlements with a population of fewer than 50,000. The gender selectivity of this young generation's outmigration from rural areas was clearly confirmed by an international study² examining Hungary's economically most disadvantaged regions. The issue of how gender and migration, or gender and the interpretation of the rural, are interconnected often surfaces in international academic discourses

(see, e.g., Little and Panelli, 2003; Bock and Shortall, 2006; Bryant and Pini, 2011). Despite, inter alia, an unequal sex ratio and its adverse impacts, Hungarian researchers studying rural issues only marginally participated in such discourses (see, e.g., Csurgó, 2011; Timár and G.Fekete, 2010).

Since the onset of the recent financial and economic crisis, which coincided with a political and social crisis in Hungary, there has been an increase in the number of rural studies that emphasise, in particular, labour market disadvantages, economic backwardness, material well-being deficit and poverty, while also acknowledging the diversity of rural characteristics (see, e.g., Kovács and Váradi, 2013; in the special issue of the *Tér és Társadalom*, 2015/1). These issues are particularly acute in socially and economically disadvantaged regions like the Észak-Alföld, which is the subject-matter of our study. Academic discourses in Hungary focus on economy rather than culture, production rather than reproduction and material rather than ideal, complementing them with the issues around and criticism of the development policy of the state. They adopt a political economic approach rather than a cultural/constructionist one. Hardly anything is known about rural

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¹ Based on the data of the 2011 census, corresponding figures for women/100 men were 113 in the former and 105 in the latter.

² ESPON & Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde, 2013.

residents' constructions and representations of the rural or rurality (Csurgó, 2007a; Megyesi, 2007), let alone their possible gendered nature. Indeed, such knowledge would be very important for better understanding the causes of selective migration and for making more effective those regional policies that aim to address rural-urban inequalities in a manner that is mindful of their gender aspect if, indeed, such policies are adopted at all in the near term.

We aim to tackle two issues in this study in the hope of contributing to the elimination of the above deficiencies in national and international academic discourses. Meanwhile we bear in mind both the material and ideal content of the rural and present the relevance of both political economic approaches that focus on the problems of economically disadvantaged villages/rural regions and feminist approaches that focus on the ideas of rural residents. The two issues are:

1. The characteristics of the interpretation of the rural offered by young women and men in connection with their migration plans and experience as well as the structural circumstances shaping their interpretation in the Észak-Alföld. This enabling a better understanding both of the migration strategies embedded in the materiality of place-making, and of the contextualised nature of the rural.
2. To what extent the most characteristic components of the opinions of male and female rural residents on the rural are similar to or dissimilar from how academic discourses view villages and rural regions.

The first part of the study provides a theoretical outline of the approaches of research in Hungary, placing them in the context of international research. It also serves as a starting point for a comparison of the discourses of rural residents on the rural with academic discourses. We then briefly present the structural characteristics of the Észak-Alföld. Next we go on to present the results of the empirical study comprising a questionnaire survey of secondary school pupils and interviews with young women. The closing chapter summarises the answers to our questions and provides the most important conclusions drawn from the beliefs and opinions of those living in the rural space. We point out the importance of studying those rural regions and settlements facing economic and social problems. We also highlight the advantages of combining a political economic approach that focuses on economic problems with a critical feminist perspective.

2. Theoretical background: recent discourses in Hungarian rural studies

Besides intending to learn about how rurality is constructed by rural residents (and their associated motives for migration) we were curious to explore the extent to which those constructions reflected topics of academic discourses of the rural. For this purpose we adopted a self-reflexive approach in our research. We also strove to interpret our empirical results from broader perspectives that had not, or had hardly been, applied previously in rural studies carried out in Hungary. In order to do this, we assessed certain conceptual approaches of academic (mainly geographical) knowledge production in Hungary, in the context of international academic discourses on the rural.

Thinking in terms of the three categories applied by Cloke (2006) in the conceptualisation of rurality, it can be said that the *functional approach* is still present to a very great extent in the relationship of Hungarian human geography to the rural. This approach already has a tradition of many decades with regards to the definition of the term 'rural' (see in Kovács, 1998; Csatári, 2005; Kovács et al., 2015), but it has been adopted again in the definition-

making competition, classification and delimitation pressure fuelled by the affrays between EU rural policy lobbies (see in Kovách, 2012). The *political economic approach* (Cloke, 2006) is also maintained, in part, by the demand for practical application. However, the emphasis on the interrelationship between agricultural production and consumption and their social impact is far less in the Hungarian than in the "Western" academic discourses. Agricultural geography had lost ground already during socialism (Farkas, 2010), and when a market economy was developed only the minimum of information was available about those affected by agriculture (Kovács and Kelemen, 2007). Counter-urbanisation, and rural gentrification, however, still remains far below the level that could change consumer habits in the same way that Western rural geography has revealed. The attention of geographers has been captured mainly by new problems such as extreme unemployment, economic underdevelopment and even ghettoisation in certain rural areas (e.g. G.Fekete, 2005; Bajmócy et al., 2007; Péntzes, 2011). Thus, the understanding of the "rural" by the political economic approach primarily comprises the study of regional inequalities and the related role of the state, economic and political dependence within spatial peripheralisation and the concentration of social marginalisation in rural areas (e.g. Kovács, 2010; Koós, 2015; Nagy et al., 2015; Váradi, 2015). At the same time, *social constructionism* (Cloke, 2006) is almost completely missing from Hungarian rural geographical approaches.

In Hungarian geography, there has been no cultural turn, to which "Western" geographies in general and Anglo-American studies in particular ascribe the spread of this third trend in the conceptualisation of rurality (see e.g. in Woods, 2009). As a consequence of the cultural turn, the emphasis on the material and real or "mater-real" was replaced by the interpreting of the rural as a social construction, as a representation of the ideal or "ideal-real" (Bell, 2007). Although Hungarian rural studies have also produced some knowledge of representation of this kind by politicians and regional planners (Kovács, 2007a; Csatári and Farkas, 2010), very little is known of the discourses of residents about the rural or rurality (see the analyses of sociologists regarding a national questionnaire survey: Csurgó, 2007a; Megyesi, 2007).

One of the factors that impedes the spread of social constructionism is the lack of the post-modern approach in Hungarian rural geography and, what is more, in human geography in general (for one of the first attempts see G.Fekete and Lipták, 2011). The same applies to the post-structuralist approach, and therefore fewer followers are engaged in studying the discourse and the interpretation of rurality as a social construction. However, the role of social conditions is no less important in this regard. We share Zsuzsa Ferge's opinion (2006: 479): "*Hungary does not live in postmodernity. Society matters, even though it constantly changes. The overwhelming majority of people are not free to choose the life they live or the way they 'behave'.*" Impoverishment and segregation are extremely intensive in the countryside (Virág, 2010; Schwarcz, 2012; Kovács and Váradi, 2013; Koós, 2015), and this fact is, in our opinion, not given sufficient attention in European academic (and political) discourses.

Regarding this research, a major factor impeding the spread of social constructionism is delay in the application and the weak position of the *feminist perspective*. This delay can be identified in rural sociology (Csurgó, 2011) and social geography in East Central Europe and, hence, in Hungary, due to a shared socialist past (Timár and G.Fekete, 2010). The geography of gender in Hungary is focusing on the correlations between post-socialism and the survival strategies of rural households (Timár, 2002), women entrepreneurs as new economic actors (Szörényiné Kukorelli, 1999; Momsen et al., 2005), and the role of women in rural development (Jelenszkyné Fábán, 2009; G.Fekete, 2010). These studies do

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