



## Discursive no man's land: Analysing the discourse of the rural in the transitional Czech Republic<sup>☆</sup>



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### A B S T R A C T

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This paper presents an analysis of the expert discourse of the rural in the period of transition in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. Before 1989, the discourse was monopolised by the governing communist regime. With EU accession in 2004, the discourse became standardised to the EU programmes and policies. The period in between these two dates is referred to as “discursive no man's land” in which new meanings, functions and values were assigned to the rural. The paper concentrates on (a) how the rural was established as a public issue to be addressed by experts, (b) how the discourses of the rural changed under the influence of structural, macro-social factors and (c) what were the grounds on which state intervention in favour of the rural was perceived as legitimate. In answering these questions, the analysis identifies agriculture as a key element which provided a “function” for the pre-1989 instrumental understanding of the rural. After the collapse of the regime and the rapid shrinking of the agricultural sector in the country, the discourses of the rural took two paths. First, experts were looking for “new functions” of the rural, which came to be seen in cultural alternatives to urban modernity. Second, the figure of “rural renewal” emerged, aiming to rectify the perceived wrongdoings of the past.

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### 1. Introduction

The important thing is to change the habits of our thinking. We must say to ourselves: these are our sources, these are the goals to be achieved, in this particular order [...] The basic focus of any further work is indeed in the change in our thought. It is not about the laws, but about the morals of people, of the whole society.

(Czech Minister of Regional Development on the rural)

(quoted from P26, 1999/12: 12)

Two dates stand out in the recent history of the Czech Republic and its predecessor, Czechoslovakia. First, in 1989, as a part of the wave sweeping across the then-Soviet bloc, the country went through a “velvet revolution”, shedding Soviet influence and the monopoly of the governing Communist party. The centrally planned economy was replaced by a free-market-oriented capitalist economy of the western variety. Second, in 2004, eleven

years after the partition of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic accessed the EU and became integrated in common European programmes and policies. Both these changes had a major effect on Czech rural areas and on the way that *the rural* was conceived, addressed, and understood in the country. This paper addresses the discourse of the rural in the period between these two dates. Between the central planning of the Communist regime, which ended in 1989, and the EU standardisation, which started in 2004, there was a discursive “no-man's-land”, where discourses of the rural were at once devoid of the plans of the Communist government and not yet adjusted to the “western” standards of the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). How, in this period, was the rural established as an issue deserving public discussion? How did its discursive position change under the influence of structural factors? What arguments were used to support state intervention on behalf of the rural, and what were the sources of its legitimacy? These are the questions addressed in this paper, which considers a fascinating period of few restrictions and many opportunities.

The paper begins with a brief review of the present debates on the discourse of the rural. These debates are later expanded by analysing how the representations and discourses of the rural develop in a process of society-wide transformation and how they reflect macro-social developments. In Section 3, the scope and the

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methods of analysis will be introduced with a special focus on expert discourse, which, in the Czech Republic, has assembled actors from various fields, including public policy, research and development, NGOs, lobbying, and media. The actual analysis constitutes the third section of the paper. The “story of the rural” is told chronologically, starting in 1985 and ending in 1999. Key frames<sup>1</sup> of the discourse are identified and summed up in the fourth, concluding section. The frames of *rural renewal* and *function of the rural* are prominent. The analysis shows how the *function of the rural* has changed dramatically, as well the relation of the rural to the urban. The post-communist representations of the rural define its subject negatively on two axes: first, in temporal relation to the past (as renewal and rectification), and second, in relation to the urban world (as an alternative).

## 2. The discourses and representations of the rural

The focus on the discourses and representations of the rural was a prominent part of what has been described as a “cultural turn” in rural sociology (Cloke, 1997). While over the last twenty years the notion of cultural turn has been used in reference to social science in general (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999; Jameson, 1998; Nash, 2001), in rural sociology, the turn towards culture has been facilitated by the processes of rural restructuring (Marsden et al., 1990; Woods, 2005) and by the corresponding change from the rural as a space of production to a space of consumption (Duenckmann, 2010). While the images and representations of the rural and rurality had been studied previously (Pahl, 1995), the early 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in the topic (Halfacree, 1993, 1995; Jones, 1995; Lawrence, 1997; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1992).

A number of studies of the discourses and representations of the rural were undertaken from the mid-1990s onward. Scholars have studied lay (Halfacree, 1995; Jones, 1995) and academic discourses of the rural (Hermans et al., 2009; Madsen and Adriansen, 2006), representations of the rural in media (Phillips et al., 2001), rural-related gender stereotypes (Morris and Evans, 2001; Saugeres, 2002), discourses of social movements (Gorlach et al., 2008; Woods, 2003), and other ways of ascribing meaning to the term *the rural*. Yet, scant attention has been paid to the representations of the rural in post-socialist countries, even though they provide an interesting case of countries in the process of large-scale social transition.

The idea of rural as a representation has been put forward by Halfacree (1993, 1995), who has taken up Moscovici’s notion of social representations to describe *the rural* as a cultural concept rather than as a specific material location. For Halfacree, social representations of the rural are “an amalgam of personal experiences and ‘traditional’ handed-down beliefs propagated through literature, the media, the state, family, friends and institutions” (Halfacree, 1993, p.33). Social representations “recode” the rural and endow it with moral values and ideological functions. While conflicting and ambiguous, social representations have real impacts on rural areas (Halfacree, 1993, p.32) because through them and through the underlying discourses the rural is made meaningful. The discourses and representations have a “constitutive power” (Jones, 1995, p.36) in relation to the rural, which “becomes increasingly reliant upon the social production of meaning” (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010, p.195). Michael Bell has summed up the discourses and the representations of the rural by the

term *second rural*, as opposed to the *first* (material) rural (Bell, 2007).

The frames tied to the *second rural*, as identified by the studies from the “western” countries, include two polarities that are of particular importance in the present case. First, two frames have emerged as key parts of the discourses of the rural: the *rural idyll* (Bell, 2006; Short, 1992) and *rural deprivation* (Woodward, 1996). Woodward identifies the contradicting relationship between these frames in the fact that the normative rural idyll effectively conceals the marks of deprivation by presenting signs of deprivation as natural to rural life. In the Czech expert discourse, as the analysis will show, these frames have been allied, rather than in contradiction, in an effort to win the attention of public policy for the rural. Second, both concepts of *idyll* and *deprivation* rely heavily on the relationship between *rural* and *urban*, as analysed by Bell (1992), Pahl (1966), Williams (1973), and others. According to Murdoch and Pratt (1993), the modernist social science has always understood the rural as opposed to the urban. This relationship typically contains two assumptions: (a) that the rural is an entity not yet conquered by modernity and (b) that the forces of urban modernity are closing in on and eroding the rural (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, p. 417). Both these assumptions, and the related concepts of idyll and deprivation, play a part in the developing discourse of the rural in the transitional country.

The analysis will show how the Czech expert discourse employed the frames of *rural idyll* and *rural deprivation* and how the representations of *rural-urban* relationship have changed dramatically over the course of the 15 years between 1989 and 2004.

## 3. Expert discourse in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic

### 3.1. The rationale

Given the wide range of studies dealing with discourses and representations of the rural, why conduct another one? Is there anything particularly important about the Czech expert discourse of the rural in the late 1980s and 1990s? This section sums up the arguments for an answer in the affirmative. Two areas stand out in making this case specific and important: the setting of the discourse, and the participating actors.

First, the analysis focuses on Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic between 1985 and 1999.<sup>2</sup> From 1948 to 1989, the country was governed by the Communist party (the only legally allowed party) in a system of centrally planned economy. Repressive in its nature, the regime imposed severe limitations on the freedoms of expression, restricting freedom of speech, freedom of the media and publishing, as well as the independence of scientific research (Machonin, 2004; Wheaton and Kavan, 1992). As a consequence, the discourse of the rural was, as in the whole public sphere, controlled by the state. The discourses – academic, professional, and popular alike – were all subject to censorship, just as all media. The representations of the rural and rurality were centralised and strongly regulated. Until the collapse of the regime in 1989, the expert discourse of the rural was produced largely unanimously, with the conclusions of experts and academic often only mirroring the assignments of the governing Party (Pátek, 2004).

After 1989, censorship was abolished and freedoms of expression were constitutionally guaranteed. Czechoslovak and, later, Czech and Slovak experts, academics, and politicians could once

<sup>1</sup> The term *frame* is derived from the work of Erving Goffman, who defines frames as “schemata of interpretation” (1974: 21). The term has also been used in discourse studies, where it denotes an entity that can be “evoked or referred to in the activities represented by schemata” (Fairclough, 1989: 159).

<sup>2</sup> While 1989–1999 is the decade in question, it is necessary to include the period 1985–1989, as well, in order to understand the post-1989 discourses, which, as I will show, were often defined against those of the pre-1989 communist Czechoslovakia.

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