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Deconstruction and hermeneutical space as keys to understanding the rural

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to complement the existing literature on defining the rural by suggesting a novel approach that makes possible a holistic understanding of the rural. The proposed approach is based on deconstruction of the concept of the rural and on hermeneutical philosophy. The current approaches applied in rural studies are evaluated through the lens of holistic understanding, and solutions to the observed problems are discussed. The problems of current rural studies stem from inadequate conceptualization and biased social theory. The conceptual problems can be alleviated, firstly, by understanding the concept of space not only literally but also figuratively. Secondly, the concept of the rural has to be deconstructed into its essential parts. Regarding social theory, the modernization theory applied in rural studies has to be modified so that it gives more room to otherness than it currently does. The article proposes that a holistic understanding of the rural can be achieved through hermeneutical realism, that is, by understanding the world as a hermeneutical space and by reassembling the deconstructed parts of the rural in that hermeneutical space. Deconstructing the rural into qualities such as contrast with the urban, open space and freedom is groundbreaking in the sense that the rural is not seen as an independent social

construct with its specific advocates. From the viewpoint of social theory, the emphasis on otherness provides an opportunity to find a more significant role in society for the rural than that of a follower of urban development.

Keywords: rural studies, deconstruction, hermeneutical space, hermeneutical rural, modernization, understanding

1 Introduction

Since the first half of the twentieth century, defining the *rural* has more or less occupied the minds of rural researchers. Some researchers have taken the notion for granted while others have invested more in defining the concept. The rural is connected to its conceptual counterpart, the urban. It is understood that both the rural and the urban have material and immaterial meanings, which actualize themselves in reality together as geographical and discursive hybrids or joint formations. This understanding has, in practice, led to a conceptual chaos where almost anything can be defined as rural. Rural researchers have admitted this by speaking about a *post-rural* phase of rural studies.

According to my interpretation, the problems with defining the rural during the past three decades stem largely from the conceptualization of space, which in current rural studies is based on a discipline-specific, namely, a geographical understanding of the concept. Geographical understanding reaches the tangible, intangible and literal facets of space, but largely ignores the figurative facets of space. To understand the rural holistically, we need a transdisciplinary concept of space, which includes the conceptual realms of several academic disciplines, such as geography, philosophy, history, linguistics, social sciences, psychology

and evolutionary biology. The use of language, for example, can create spaces that are not geographical, but which can be described as figurative. A transdisciplinary conceptualization makes it possible to understand all facets of space: the tangible, intangible, literal and figurative.

So, according to my interpretation, even when the concept of *rural* is understood as both tangible and intangible, as literal and figurative, *rural space* is defined in current rural studies mainly as a literal, geographical, physical area. The discursive, metaphorical and figurative characteristics of the rural are conceptualized as properties of the literal rural space, that is, of the rural area. Or, to put it more moderately, the literal space always lurks in the background of rural conceptualizations. In practice, this kind of conceptualization has led rural researchers to become lobbyists for the interests of rural areas or for rural sectors (such as agriculture, natural resources or environment) that utilize rural areas. In a way, this is an easy solution to the problem of defining the rural. However, it is not sustainable from the viewpoint of the cultural, societal and environmental development of humankind. A lobbyist's attitude is always biased with regard to the totality.

As a solution to the problems in the current approaches of rural studies, I propose, firstly, that rural researchers should delve more deeply into the analysis of the concepts of the rural and the urban to understand their essential meanings. This can be done by deconstruction, a process of disassembling the concepts of the rural and the urban. Secondly, rural researchers should understand their research subjects as parts of the world in which they exist. This means that the deconstruction should be completed by reassembling the disassembled concepts of the rural and the urban from the holistic perspective – to discover a valid and valuable role for the rural and the urban in the world. This reassembly can be accomplished by applying

hermeneutical philosophy. The concept of hermeneutical realism is based on the fact that the world exists in principle as an understandable *hermeneutical space* consisting of tangible and intangible objects and their varying literal and figurative meanings. Conceiving the research subject – the *hermeneutical rural* – as part of hermeneutical space helps to understand it and evaluate its value.

Constructing a holistic understanding of the hermeneutical rural – a view that takes into account all the tangible, intangible, literal and figurative aspects connected to defining the rural – is a huge challenge that is beyond the scope of a single article. My goal is to suggest a deconstruction of the rural and outline a tool, based on hermeneutical philosophy, which can help approach the rural in a holistic way. Although a holistic approach requires consideration of all aspects, including those established in current rural research, in this article I emphasize those aspects of defining the rural that represent a new kind of thinking and to which too little attention is paid by the dominant approaches. What the hermeneutical perspective could provide for each existing approach is largely left out of this article, although in itself it would be an interesting subject for further research.

In section 2 of this article, I review the main approaches to conducting rural research and defining the rural. I discuss the main conceptual, theoretical and philosophical characteristics of current rural studies that I see as problematic from the viewpoint of a holistic understanding of the rural. In section 3, I present my solution to deconstruct the concept of the rural into its meaningful parts in order to understand its essential meanings. In section 4, I propose a theoretical framework, based on hermeneutical philosophy, which enables the problems of current rural studies to be discussed. In the concluding section 5, I evaluate the

significant original contribution made by the article to the international rural social science literature and discuss the future challenges of the approach I am suggesting.

2 Analysis of current rural studies

2.1 Approaches to defining the rural

The approaches to conducting rural research and defining the rural have been taken as research subjects mainly since the early 1990s. The first commonly used classification of the approaches of rural research from this period was presented by Keith Halfacree (1993). He divided the approaches into four classes: (1) descriptive approaches, (2) sociocultural approaches, (3) rural as locality and (4) rural as social representation. This classification has been used, for example, by Michael Woods (2005) in his textbook *Rural Geography* and by Neil Stoop (2018) in his recent master's thesis. Halfacree (2006, 2007) continued to develop his approach by applying Henri Lefebvre's (1991) thinking to define the 'totality of rural space'. According to Halfacree (2006, 52), the totality of rural space consists of a triad: (1) rural locality, (2) representations of the rural and (3) lives of the rural. Woods (2011) used this three-fold model to structure his textbook *Rural*.

Paul Cloke (2006) formulated his understanding of the approaches to define the rural in the *Handbook of Rural Studies* (Cloke et al., 2006). He divided the approaches into (1) functional, (2) political-economic and (3) postmodern and poststructuralist approaches. This kind of classification has been accepted and applied rather universally among rural researchers, though with slightly different specifications (see e.g. Woods, 2009; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016; Gallent and Gkartzios, 2019). My understanding of the approaches to define the rural is

based on Halfacree's (1993) and Cloke's (2006) classifications, and I divide the approaches into (1) descriptive, (2) political-economic and (3) poststructuralist approaches.

Descriptive approaches consider defining the rural as a practical demarcation of rural areas, mainly for the purposes of regional or local governance and planning. The descriptive approach starts from the premise that the researcher formulates a more or less clear idea of what the rural means. After that, the researcher specifies measurable variables that stand for the rural. After measurement by region, the researcher typically derives from the variables an index of rurality for each region. According to the degree of rurality of the region, it can be classified either as rural, urban or a hybrid of rural and urban. As Halfacree (1993, 24) states, descriptive approaches do not, strictly speaking, define the rural: they only describe the rural formulated by the researcher. Despite their shortcomings, these approaches are always relevant as countries and regions need them to implement their regional and rural policies.

Political-economic approaches (also known as restructuring approaches), seek to look beneath the empirical. They try to specify the economic and social processes and structures that alter rural areas or localities. Political-economic approaches gained strength especially in the 1960s, when the deepening economic and technological modernization revolutionized local development. Local communities became dependent on external markets and institutions. According to Marc Mormont (1990, 29), in such circumstances, the study of the local effects of social change came to be a natural task for rural research. Political-economic approaches are suitable for studies concerned with sectors such as the food system and natural resources, as well as for research on regional economies and localities. From the perspective of defining the rural, the milestones of political-economic approaches since the 1990s have been the discussion on the restructuring of rural areas by Terry Marsden, Jonathan Murdoch,

Philip Lowe, Richard Munton and Andrew Flynn (1993), the differentiated countryside by Murdoch, Lowe, Neil Ward and Marsden (2003), and the narratives of rural change by Mark Shucksmith and David Brown (2016). Political-economic approaches produce clear, analytical descriptions about the development of rural sectors and localities.

Poststructuralist approaches, also referred to as postmodernist, are sensitive to the multiple discourses that constitute different versions of rurality, so that the rural is usually defined as a social construct or a social representation. The growth of interest in poststructuralist approaches was related to the so-called cultural or linguistic turn of social sciences, which diffused into rural studies in the early 1990s. A particularly important vehicle for this trend was the debate in the *Journal of Rural Studies* initiated by Chris Philo's (1992) article concerned with 'neglected rural others', which argued for a heightened sensitivity to difference (see also Cloke and Little, 1997a, 1997b; Halfacree, 1993, 1995, 1997; Jones, 1995; Mormont, 1990; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, 1994, 1997; Philo, 1993, 1997; Pratt, 1996; Phillips, 1998, 2002; Rosenqvist, 2004). The reflection on otherness was continued in the 21st century in the book *Country Visions*, edited by Cloke (2003). The presentation of otherness forced rural researchers to take into account ways of understanding the world that were free from the established ways of thinking. After Cloke's book, enthusiasm for the research on otherness has decreased, but the poststructuralist approach has found other development paths.

Poststructuralist approaches meant a considerable extension of the scope of defining the rural, especially towards political and intangible issues, such as discourses and social representations of the rural. Compared to descriptive and political-economic approaches, poststructuralist approaches produce analyses that are often complex and cryptic. However,

they may be the only way to try to holistically understand the world and the rural as part of it. According to my interpretation, the poststructuralist approaches applied in rural studies to date can be associated with relational and hybridity thinking, which have become common in the social sciences in recent decades and diffused from there to rural studies. As the name suggests, relational thinking is interested in the interrelationships between things. Things and interrelationships can be both tangible and intangible. Relations emerge in the world, for example, as networks and interactions. Hybridity thinking emphasizes the complexity of the interrelationships between things.

Halfacree's (2006, 2007) suggestion to define the totality of rural space represents relational thinking where rural localities, representations of the rural and rural people are considered in relation to each other. The applications of actor-network theory in rural studies have questioned the duality of society and nature by considering the co-evolution of social and natural actors (or actants) in rural areas (see e.g. Murdoch, 2000, 2003, 2006; Jones and Cloke, 2002; Jones, 2006). In addition, Woods's (e.g. 2007; 2011, 266–275) theorizations regarding the global countryside are examples of research that combines relational and hybridity thinking. Woods (2007, 485) says he is examining 'the reconstitution of rural places under globalization, highlighting the interaction of local and global actors, and of human and non-human actants, to produce new hybrid forms and relations'. According to Woods (2011, 48), a relational approach also helps to understand the hybrid relation of the rural and the urban, 'recognizing both the urbanization of the rural and the ruralization of the urban'. The hybrid character of space, consisting of both rural and urban characteristics, has recently been emphasized also by Menelaos Gkartzios, Kyriaki Remoundou and Guy Garrod (2017, 23). From the viewpoint of defining the rural, hybridity thinking is problematic, because it leaves

unsolved what is meant by the rural as well as by the urban. The definitions of those terms have to be determined case by case based on prior knowledge or attitudes, or, with hindsight.

2.2 The desire to rematerialize the rural

The ways in which poststructuralist research is currently conducted in rural studies largely reflect the tradition of the political-economic approach. Several authors have emphasized the need to ‘rematerialize’, ‘resocialize’ and ‘repoliticize’ our understanding of the rural (see e.g. Cloke, 2006, 24; Woods, 2009, 851; Heley and Jones, 2012, 210–213; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016, 4; Gallent and Gkartzios, 2019, 19).

The demands mentioned above sound partly as if the poststructuralist approach would be interpreted as a continuation of the political-economic tradition. It may be that approaches inspired by the cultural/linguistic turn have been intellectually and academically difficult and threatening to the extent that those who favour approaches that are more traditional have considered it appropriate to ignore them (cf. Philo, 1992, 197). Another explanation for the dominance of the political-economic tradition is that the opportunities offered by the cultural/linguistic turn have been judged to be relatively small and subordinate to the opportunities offered by other perspectives. The distant attitude towards the cultural/linguistic turn also fits the general understanding of the position of rural studies within society and the social sciences. Mormont (1990, 29, 23) stated, as early as 1990, that the main tasks of rural research were to identify the local effects of the general social change and to defend the interests of people living in rural areas or using rural areas. Such tasks have continued to the present day (see e.g. Pratt, 1996, 70–71; Cloke, 2006, 20–21, 23; Heley and Jones, 2012, 208; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016, 2–4). Lobbying views defending certain interests as justified,

but when that practice is viewed in light of holistic understanding, its value is doubtful: the meaning and value of interests for the whole is not within the scope of the evaluation.

Another trend in current rural studies in arguing for rematerializing the rural is to pay attention to the more-than-representational aspects of the rural (see e.g. Carolan, 2008, 2009; Halfacree, 2009, 2012). This trend has been partly inspired by the cultural turn in the social sciences. The more-than-representational aspect refers to the material, bodily experiences and affects regarding objects. Performing and doing are important ways to get knowledge of the world. The more-than-representational perspective is complementary to the understanding of the rural, but it alone cannot provide a holistic understanding.

In terms of matter and spirit, I am inclined to follow the footsteps of Michael Bell (2007, 412), who suggests that the ‘mater-real’ and the ‘idea-real’ are equally important elements in the constitution of the ‘plural rural’ reality. This article focuses on the conceptual understanding of the rural, so it deals mainly with intangible ideas. Material things can be seen as the raw material for this process.

2.3 Towards late modernist rural studies

Throughout its history, rural social science research has been based mainly on analytical philosophy, where researchers distinguish a more or less well-defined part of the reality to form the subject of their research. This entity is then investigated as accurately as possible. According to Philo (1993, 433; see also 1997, 40), rural research tends to theoretically determine in advance how the world works. In that case, it remains unsolved how people – especially non-average people – think and act in the world. So, in practice, it has thus far

proved to be impossible to formulate a holistic understanding of the rural through analytical approaches. Good but perspectival analytical work has been done on many trends in rural studies, but a holistic understanding is missing. In any investigation of the rural, something always seems to be left out.

A conciliatory attitude towards the dialogue between currently dominant approaches in rural studies and approaches that try to advance the thinking of the cultural/linguistic turn is recommended. According to Günter Figal (2015b, 1), societal thinking has changed from the phase of emphatic modernism – through a short-lived period of postmodernism – to the phase of placid modernism. In this placid phase there is no reason to fear opening the old conceptions and adopting new ideas to complement the previous ones. The broader the view of the rural, the better the social and political relevance of different rural concepts can be assessed.

In this article, I propose that complementing the analytical tradition of rural research with hermeneutical philosophy would help to gain a holistic picture of the rural and rural research. While analytical philosophy concentrates on explaining and specifying mechanisms, hermeneutical philosophy strives to understand or interpret phenomena. In a situation where the rural and the urban have polysemic meanings – including tangible, intangible, literal and figurative ones – hermeneutical philosophy offers tools by which we can try to formulate an overall understanding of the rural and the urban. A hermeneutical approach combined with poststructuralist conceptual analysis makes it possible to deconstruct the rural into its meaningful parts and then to construct a holistic understanding from the parts.

In a situation where postmodernism has not proven to be a sustainable way of thinking, and where the modernization of society seems to manifest itself in many diverse forms, I would suggest that *late modernist* would be a more appropriate phrase than *poststructuralist* to illustrate an approach that aspires to a holistic vision of the world. This wording would highlight the need to combine the best parts of structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and hermeneutics.

In the rural studies of the early 21st century, descriptive, political-economic and poststructuralist approaches remain popular, but the cultural turn project remains unfinished, its full potential underutilized. I propose that more extensive use of the ideas of the cultural turn would complement the prevailing approaches. In my view, the conceptual, theoretical and philosophical problems with current rural studies stem from three interconnected aspects: (1) inadequate conceptualization of space, (2) adherence to the framework of urban- and society-centred modernization theory in understanding the world and (3) inadequate conceptualization of the rural.

2.4 Conceptual, theoretical and philosophical problems in current rural studies

2.4.1 Conceptualization of space

Space is a concept that nowadays can be encountered in almost every discipline. The concept is used more often in an implicit than an explicit way. As Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (2000, 1) state, this causes problems: ‘The problem is not so much that space means very different things – what concepts do – but that it is used with such abandon that its meanings run into each other before they have been properly interrogated’. Jeff Malpas (2012) has made a sharp

analysis of the use of the concept of space in geography and in the social sciences more generally. Despite the prolific growth in geography and the social sciences of metaphors concerning the concepts of space and spatiality, they have been thought out and analysed surprisingly little (Malpas, 2012, 226).

The critique by Malpas (2012), towards geography and social sciences more generally can also be directed to the current approaches of rural research reviewed in section 2.1. For Malpas (2015c, 121), the generalized use of spatial concepts in the social sciences has mainly manifested as a generalization of metaphorical expressions without any analysis of the intrinsic ontological significance of these concepts. In contrast to Malpas, in this article I use the adjective *figurative* instead of *metaphorical*, since the figurative is more neutral than the metaphorical. The term *metaphorical* refers more than *figurative* does to something that is ephemeral and not real.

From an ontological point of view, space is manifested in the world in two forms: literal and figurative. Literally, space means a physical or geographical space. Figuratively, space is an abstraction that exists detached from physical space. As an abstraction, space can be described as, among other things, virtual, linguistic, social, cultural or affectual. In a figurative sense, space is manifested as a certain situatedness of an object, for example, in the structures formed by time, language, consciousness, society, culture and values. Information networks and social media can be considered figurative or virtual spaces in which people are situated (cf. Cloke, 2006, 22). Time, language and consciousness along with sociocultural and virtual structures do more than limit the being of people and other tangible and intangible things; they also provide room and opportunities for individuals, communities and other things. From the perspective of ontology and of human life, the figurative meanings of space are, in

practice, at least as important and as real as the meaning of the globe's physical surface and astrophysical space.

Although the use of figurative expressions concerning space in the social sciences has increased, only a few theoreticians of space have explicitly distinguished the literal and the figurative meanings of space in a single framework, one in which there would be both literal and figurative space separately as well as literal and figurative space interwoven in the same reality (see e.g. Crang and Thrift, 2000; Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011). In geography, the figurative meanings of space are generally conceptualized as characteristics of literal space. Poststructurally oriented social sciences, on the other hand, easily end up understanding space in a purely figurative sense. The closest to the type of holistic understanding of space, where literal and figurative space are seen as equally important, has been achieved in feminist and gender studies (see Rose, 1993, 155–156; Brown, 2000, 16–20; McKittrick, 2011, 246; Mahtani, 2011, 332; hooks, 2015, 28–30).

According to Malpas (2012, 228; 2015b, 363), the problem with the relational thinking reviewed in section 2.1 is that it deals more with the theorizing of spatial rhetoric, imagination and politics than with the theorizing of space itself. Malpas (2012, 229; cf. also Olsson, 2007) considers the thinking of, for example, academics such as Doreen Massey (2005) and Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner and Martin Jones (2008, 389) to be diagrammatic and even cartographic examinations of relations. Malpas is also more sceptical than Halfacree about the applicability of the thinking of Lefebvre in the conceptualization of space. Malpas (2015c, 121) sees that Lefebvre's thinking overly emphasizes the production of space and gives too little room for the productive capacity of space. By understanding space genuinely as a literal as well as a figurative concept, the understanding of spatiality expands, deepens and opens up new

possibilities for understanding. Halfacree (2006, 47; 2007, 128) concludes that a conceptualization of the rural without reference to locality or physical geographical space is merely a ghostly, momentary and transient fantasy and not a serious starting point for research and understanding. This conclusion is rather extreme, so I would rather consider the suggestion of Malpas (2012, 230), who emphasizes the need to take into account the multifaceted ontological character of the concept of space.

Therefore, when talking about spatiality, it would be important to highlight explicitly the extent to which a literal space is being referred to and the extent to which it is a figurative one. In the life of a human being, the literal and figurative meanings of space appear separately, but they also mix, so that their distinction as separate research subjects is meaningful only in a heuristic sense. Human beings never exist only in physical space, since through language the figurative meanings always have an impact on their being. This means that, in practice, literal and figurative space often manifest themselves as hybrids or joint formations. Yet in figurative spaces such as information networks and social media, people can be completely detached from physical space.

The problem with current rural studies is that, in practice, the rural becomes understood through the concept of space defined in the discipline of geography (see e.g. Halfacree, 1993, 34; 2006, 44–51; 2007, 126–128; Heley and Jones, 2012, 208–212). It is understood that the rural has both a literal spatial meaning and a figurative meaning that is detached from literal space, but the figurative spatial characteristics of the rural are understood as nothing but reflections of the literal space. The result is that the full productive capacity of the figurative space remains unnoticed.

2.4.2 Urban- and society-centred modernization theory

The social sciences lean largely on modernization theory, which, in principle, is quite simple (see e.g. Aro, 1999, 36–39), implying that social scientists should place themselves in the middle of a transitional period between two social epochs. According to modernization theory, society gradually evolves, in the first instance, from an untouched wilderness to a pre-modern rural society. The pre-modern rural society turns into a modern industrial society, which in turn becomes a postmodern or late modern society. A modernizing society is thought to be renewing and evolving continuously, linearly and always in a better direction. Modernization also seems to impose demands on individuals: they should always be even more progressive, more rational, more civilized and more sophisticated. It can be argued that modernization theory constitutes the mainstream, or the ‘sameness’ that can be perceived in social scientific research.

Gerald Creed and Barbara Ching (1997, 8) maintain that a cultural hierarchy exists in western science and in western culture as a whole in which urbanity mostly emerges as a positive trait and rurality as a negative one (see also Rosenqvist, 2007, 4). The mainstream thinking can be said to be based on an urban-centred modernization theory. Development and progress are thought to arise and take place in cities and the role of the countryside is to follow the development of cities. In a sense rural development becomes subordinated to urban development. The urban is defined as the centre of development, while the rural is positioned at the edge of modernization.

From a rural perspective, accepting the role of a follower does not provide a very inspiring starting point for the dialogue between the rural and the urban. In order for rural interests to

be worthy of defence, the rural should play an important role in society. In recognizing the important social role of the rural, we should not only take into account the traditional roles of the countryside as a food producer and as a source of raw materials, but also the themes brought out during the cultural turn of rural studies: the otherness and the sameness connected to rural–urban interactions. A more significant and constructive role for otherness (for the rural) in relation to sameness (to the urban) in social theory than the one offered by modernization theory in its current form should be identified.

Social scientific modernization theory approaches the understanding of the world from the perspective of social structures and social mechanisms. In accordance with its name, diverse communities are often considered as the basic units of social science research. In rural research, an individual is usually understood as a member of some rural community. A rural community, also called a rural society, is seen as the basic unit of the rural (see e.g. Phillips, 1998, 2016; Panelli, 2006, 63; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016, 1). Certainly, a large share of people can be understood comprehensively according to their social status. Social relations have differing levels of influence on individuals, but the outside world hardly ever fully determines an individual's life. Rather, in reality, individuals live, at least in part, in a dispersion, in a diaspora, where different social, communal, and individual determinants intersect.

According to Philo (1992, 200), there is a risk that rural research reduces individuals to average representatives of their reference community (see also Cloke, 2006, 21). In communal thinking, there is a danger that the community appears as a machine-like system that determines the life of an individual (see e.g. Harvey, 1989, 10–38). In emphasizing communality, social dialogue can turn into a mere ideological or political struggle. In line

with Malpas (2012, 241), it can be said that emphasizing communalism may be an obstacle to a genuinely profound policy that takes into account the diversity of individuals. Mainstream thinking does not capture the possibility that an individual always has, at least to some extent and no matter how tight a social space, the power to act in an unexpected way.

2.4.3 Conceptualization of the rural

Halfacree (1993, 33–34) has stated that the sign referring to the rural has, over time, detached itself from the significances of the rural and that the significances of the rural have become divorced from their physical and geographical referents. Rural studies have failed to take these findings into consideration in full.

What has been said in section 2.4.1 about the conceptualization of space can to a large extent be applied to the conceptualization of the rural. Despite the growth of social representations concerning the rural and rurality, the ontological significance of the various literal and figurative expressions regarding the rural have been analysed surprisingly little. On the contrary, it has been accepted that the rural has polysemic meanings and, in practice, almost anything goes in defining the rural. But, as we have noticed, the concept of rural space is used in a restricted way in rural studies. The geographical understanding of rural space reaches the tangible, intangible and literal facets of space, but ignores the figurative facets of it.

Mormont's (1990) analysis of the development of rural sociology is interesting for its relation to the conceptualization of the rural. Mormont (1990, 22) suggests that the lack of interest in theoretical and conceptual reflection within rural sociology has led to a social definition of the rural that hampers genuine, in-depth rural sociology. A specific concept of the rural evolved

in rural sociology in the 1920s and the 1930s, when the rural was separated from agriculture as a specific entity that was connected to the industrialization and modernization of society (Mormont, 1990, 22). The rural became conceptualized as the village, as an alternative community with regard to the general economic, technological and social development, where individuals could follow alternative ethical values, and which could offer harmonious communal life and many different roles for individuals. In Mormont's (1990, 27) view, the emphasis on community-based rural identity was vital in rural sociology until the end of the 1950s, after which the gaze of rural sociologists turned to social change.

Social change revolutionized local development, and local communities became dependent on external markets and institutions. The task of rural sociology was to determine the local effects of general social change as well as to defend the interests of a restricted group of people: rural inhabitants and people using rural areas (Mormont, 1990, 29, 23). As reviewed in section 2.4.2, social changes are often bundled together in the social sciences under the rubric of modernization. The city represents the forefront of renewal. The rural, on the other hand, is an intermediate step in the development of an untouched wilderness into a city. According to Mormont (1990, 30), the current development of local rural communities is much more affected by their relationship to social change than by their internal characteristics. They share an identical relationship with regard to time (i.e. modernization), yet each possesses their own unique local geographical area.

Although individual rural areas are unique, they are not internally homogeneous. These areas are inhabited by many kinds of people and they are used by multilocal people living outside the area as well (Mormont, 1990, 30–31). From the viewpoint of modernization theory, a rural area is a geographical locality in which the interregional flows of people, goods and data

encounter each other. The success of this kind of a region is dependent on its ability to achieve a good position in those networks. For Mormont (1990, 34), the rural region is not one space but a multiplicity of various social spaces. Each space has its own logics, own institutions and own actors, none of which are necessarily local.

Modernization efforts in the rural area easily create a competitive situation where a hegemonic struggle for defining the rural is occurring (see e.g. Pratt, 1996; Frouws, 1998; Rosenqvist, 2000, 2004; Halfacree, 2006, 2007; Frisvoll, 2012). Actors seek to promote the acceptance and spread of their own rural concept. Mormont (1990, 36) states that the struggles to define the rural are characterized by the substitution of concrete definitions with abstract ones. In this case, speaking of the rural turns into empty, contentless talk, the only purpose of which is to promote one's own interests. In this atmosphere, the rural is interpreted as an empty concept – the post-rural – the practical meaning of which is always defined in the contextual power struggles according to the perspectival political relevancy of the definition and the interests and will to power of the definer (see e.g. Mormont, 1990; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993, 411, 424–425; 1994, 83, 86; Jones, 1995, 41, 47). A power struggle through contentless concepts sounds like an ineffective way to promote sustainable social development. It would be more efficient and fair to speak about things using contentful, meaningful concepts.

3 Deconstruction of the rural

3.1 Search for the essences of the rural

In the conceptualization of the rural, rural research has partly ended up in a state of confusion. At the same time, the separation of the rural and the urban has persisted in society. Those

concepts are constantly in use, so they have social significance (see Cloke and Johnston, 2005, 11). Cloke (2006, 18) is surprised that researchers have been unable to define the rural more clearly than they have by now and to demonstrate its social relevance. In the current reality, I do not support the idea proposed by Gkartzios et al. (2017) that the definition of the rural should be approached by mapping out different ways of using the concept in various national and lingual contexts. Even if this were done, what the rural means would still not be understood. Instead of such an inductive approach, explicit universal essences of the rural concept should be sought.

Concepts and signs such as the rural are things that have both literal and figurative facets. For an in-depth understanding of concepts and signs, one has to analyse what kind of separations they contain (see Malpas, 2012, 232). It is also necessary to interpret the environment, that is, the context of things. Context often appears as texts that link things together (Figal, 2010, 56). Text represents the tradition in the sense that it crystallizes the knowledge that has been gained to date about the topic in question (see Figal, 2015a, 534). Texts are specific things in the sense that they exist outside the author, as objects that call for interpretation (Figal, 2010, 107). A thing does not commonly appear as either only literal or as only figurative, but as a hybrid of literal and figurative meanings.

Although Mormont (1990) himself sees rural space as a physico-geographical concept, his thinking nevertheless contains elements that can be used to expand the extension of the concept of rural space to include both literal and figurative space. For Mormont (1990, 40), the rural is a category of thought and spatiality is an essential quality of being. He views the rural as representing a space that symbolizes difference: it offers people space and an opportunity to establish one's frontiers, a chance to fence off the outside world (Mormont,

1990, 37). While the spatiality of the rural offers an opportunity for people to realize different values, the city can be seen as a space dominated by limitations (Mormont, 1990, 38). From the viewpoint of the theoretical conceptualization of the rural, Mormont's thinking is interesting in how the rural differs from the urban, and how the rural can offer more freedom to a human being than the urban can. From these thoughts it is easy to proceed in the direction that space is conceptualized as a literal notion and as a figurative one.

When the figurative rural is taken only as a reflection of literal space, the creative or productive capacity of the figurative rural in its full richness remains unnoticed. In reality, the meaning of the rural has fragmented into its literal and figurative parts, but the current rural studies do not take full advantage of this. The hegemonic struggle over the definition of the rural, together with an inadequate conceptualization of rural space as, ultimately, a geographical space only, makes a holistic understanding of the rural impossible.

By analysing the literal and figurative meanings of the rural, the urban and space, it is possible to destabilize the generally assumed cultural hierarchy between the rural and the urban. Mainstream thinking – whether modernist or poststructuralist – is not necessarily the only meaningful starting point for finding a constructive social role for the polysemic rural. Alongside the structure-centred approaches, we need individual-centred perspectives whereby new prospects and visions for Mormont's (1990) riddle regarding 'how to be rural' can be discussed.

As a concept, the rural is essentially connected to its binary counterpart, the urban. There is no rural without the urban, and no urban without the rural. As elements of language, signs referring to concepts like the rural and the urban are exceptional: what each sign means is

contractual or arbitrary (Figal, 2010, 205). The meanings of binary oppositions such as rural and urban can easily be turned upside down. For example, the countryside can be described as idyllic and as forbidding, whereas the city can be described as the source of development and as a seedbed of evil. In this way, if one wants, the rural can be seen as the centre and the urban as a periphery.

Dialectical thinking can exploit binary oppositions such as rural and urban. Dialectical thinking emphasizes that counterparts differ and that they develop in conflict with each other (see Cloke and Johnston, 2005, 14). However, conflicts are not always as bad as they sound. The sign systems of language are based on differences, without which we cannot understand anything. Deconstruction, which can be described as disassembling and reassembling the signs of a language, can be used to study the contradictions and possibilities of reconciliation of binary counterparts in more detail than is possible through dialectical thinking (see Cloke and Johnston, 2005, 16).

The deconstruction of the rural is necessary for three reasons. First, the sign referring to the rural has detached itself from the significances of the rural. Second, the significances of the rural have become divorced from their physical and geographical referents. Third, the literal and figurative meanings of the rural and the urban are mixed with each other in the present reality. The deconstructed rural concept makes it possible to explore the appearance of the rural in society in a more versatile way than what is currently possible (see Rosenqvist, 2007, 3). Using deconstruction as a means to define the rural means abandoning the idea that the rural is an independent social construct.

3.2 Rural as otherness, open space and freedom

Etymological analysis provides a good starting point for the deconstruction of the rural (see Rosenqvist, 2007, 4–5; Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019). Etymologically, the English word *city* is directly related to such notions as citizenship and civilization, which easily leads to overtones of importance, progress and modernity. The word *city* and modernization theory are closely linked. Of the various terms in the English language referring to the countryside, the word *country* as such denotes a state, a nation, or an area relatively far from a town or city. *Country* is derived from the Latin *contra*, implying a contrast, something that is in contrast to the town or city. This contrast is emphasized still further in the word *countryside*, which implies a choice of side. *Rural* as an adjective refers to open land or an open space. *Urban* as opposed to rural, in turn, refers to a closed space.

This etymological analysis supports many of the interpretations I have made above of Mormont's (1990) thinking. It also opens up promising possibilities for conceptual deconstruction of the rural. In the light of the etymological analysis, the essential core features of the concept of the rural are the emphasis on the contrast with the urban, open space and freedom. Open space creates freedom and freedom creates possibilities for renewal. At the same time, the contrast of the rural with the urban means the remoteness and otherness of the rural in relation to the urban centre of modernization. In other words, the rural is situated in the marginal – at the edge of modernization. Situatedness like this can be seen as a positive thing. From the edge, it may be easier than from the centre to understand all kinds of otherness and even the entire world. Rurality may even be needed when the modern centre is reformed.

But the essences of the rural do not cover everything that exists. As noted, the concept of the rural is used in many ways in practice. This means that when we are trying to gain a holistic understanding of the rural, we cannot just limit ourselves to the forms of life that are based on the essential core features of the rural. The forms of life that are based on the acceptance of modernization and urbanization as the dominant evolutionary processes have to be taken into account as well. An understanding that accepts the significance of modernization and urbanization as dominant social mechanisms can be said to be based on sameness, whereas an understanding that challenges the dominant views can be said to be based on otherness. The dominant views tend to emphasize matter and materialism, and in the more marginal views spirit and idealism come to the fore. According to the dominant views, progress proceeds through hegemonic struggles over space. The struggle takes place, for example, in the fields of regional (i.e. place-based) policy, natural resources policy, food policy and environmental policy.

The marginal forms of life that are based on otherness operate at the edges of hegemonic struggles: people try to find alternative lifestyles and life policies, for example, in the spheres of deviant behaviour, nomadism, cosmopolitanism, traditionalism, mysticism and playfulness. In practice, rural as otherness manifests itself, for example, in such phenomena as spirituality, relaxedness and leisure. In addition to secular living, working life, and other organized forms of social life, people need spirituality, disengagement from everyday necessities and tranquillity. As a top athlete does not succeed without a suitable combination of strength and relaxedness, neither does a person flourish without a proper combination of matter and spirit, realism and idealism, or seriousness and playfulness.

The concept of the rural, understood as contrast, open space and freedom, closely resembles the concept of *wilderness*, which has been studied specifically by Roderick Nash (2014). Wilderness becomes defined vaguely as the rural, a literal physical desert and, figuratively, something that is lost, unmanageable, disordered and confused with regard to civilized, modern society (see Nash, 2014, 1, 6). Wilderness has both a negative and a positive meaning. It can be seen not only as unfriendly, strange, mystical and threatening, but also as beautiful, friendly, uplifting and delightful (Nash, 2014, 4). According to Nash (2014, 246–247), civilization and wilderness need each other. Likewise, people need both communality and privacy, freedom and order, beauty and bread. Society needs wilderness to understand that human beings are part of their environment and that they and their technology cannot fully control the environment (Nash, 2014, 255). Wilderness can be seen as a ‘space of hope’ for the freedom of people and even for humankind as a whole (Nash, 2014, 262; cf. Harvey, 2000). It is conceivable that wilderness is needed as a counterpart for civilization, to ensure the sufficient preservation of intellectual diversity (Nash, 2014, 262). It has even been suggested that intellectual and artistic creativity requires a wilderness to question the established beliefs (Nash, 2014, 263–264). Overall, civilization may need both a wilderness and the rural (cf. Nash, 2014, 271).

The modern and the anti-modern can be seen to present themselves – just as the urban and the rural do – simultaneously in the current society. They need each other. Modern society may not develop without an anti-modern counterforce. Narrow-minded modern or narrow-minded anti-modern attitudes lead, however, into an undesirable confrontation and a parochial defence of vested interests. The task of social research, which seeks to understand the development of society, is to find out how the modern and the anti-modern, on the one hand, and the urban and the rural, on the other, intertwine in each case. In very few cases do the

modern and the anti-modern, as well as the urban and the rural, appear as independent, self-sufficient entities. When a researcher reaches the core of the case-by-case definition of the rural and the urban, they can begin to assess the social significance of the rural and whether it is worth developing. Rural development cannot be a self-evident starting point for rural research, but the possible development should be based on solid and transparent premises.

4 Constructing a hermeneutical tool to understand the rural

4.1 Hermeneutical philosophy

Hermeneutical philosophy is a philosophy that attempts to understand what it means to be a human being in the world (Malpas, 2015a, 1–2). Fundamentally, hermeneutical philosophy is individual centred: individuals are the ones who understand. Hermeneutical philosophers typically talk about an individual's *life-world*, which, basically, refers to how a person subjectively experiences the world. A person, however, does not live in a vacuum: that person is influenced by surrounding people, social mechanisms and the environment. Factors surrounding the life-world form an external *thing-world* consisting of tangible and intangible objects. There is always a more or less permeable boundary between the life-world and the thing-world. By the limits of the life-world, individuals maintain their identity. Some things are accepted as part of the life-world, while others penetrate there without asking for permission. Things that are not accepted or not noticed remain outside the life-world.

I suggest that the individual-based hermeneutical framework can be broadened to understand the life-worlds of communities. Communities come into the world through struggles and compromises between individuals and groups of people. Communities consist of individuals

whose life-worlds are sufficiently consistent. At the same time, it is difficult to understand the community without understanding the individuals that make up the community. Philosophical reflection on being helps to understand the boundaries of communities' life-worlds with respect to the external thing-world. From the viewpoint of defining the rural, a particularly interesting subject of study is the life-world of the community of rural researchers. As discussed in section 2, the community of rural researchers is not a coherent group, but it consists of subgroups applying different approaches. Each approach is characterized by a particular type of perspective on the world, in other words, a certain type of a life-world.

The hermeneutical philosophy that I apply in this article is mainly based on the thinking of Figal (see George, 2009, 2010; Figal, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) and Malpas (2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017a, 2017b). By combining Figal's and Malpas's thinking and terminologies, I try to construct a holistic theoretical framework to analyse the life- and thing-worlds of individuals and communities. I suggest that an appropriate name for the philosophical approach that I try to apply in this article would be hermeneutical realism. In order to understand the whole of life-world and thing-world, we need to consider three questions: What is being? What is living? What is understanding?

4.2 Being

In Figal's (2010, 145–146) hermeneutical philosophy, the human being lives in a hermeneutical space that has the dimensions of freedom, language and time. Figal (2010, 145) does not judge how comprehensively the three dimensions he presents describe the being of a human being. He is interested, instead, in linking the dimensions together. In Malpas's (2015b, 362–363) view, Figal overly emphasizes the phenomenological dimension of space,

that is, things that are in the consciousness of a human being. Malpas sees that Figal pays too little attention to the spatiality of being. Malpas (2012, 226) calls his own approach ‘philosophical topography’, and as shown in section 2.4.1, he understands space in both a literal and a figurative sense.

By combining the ideas of Figal and of Malpas, we can say that the basic dimensions of being are space, time, language and freedom. A human being is born into a spatial, temporal and linguistic context. Compared to space, time and language, freedom as a basic dimension of being is more questionable. At least a human being is free in the sense that one is a separate creature from other things after one’s umbilical cord is cut. In practice, the basic dimensions of being are interwoven.

As stated in section 2.4.1, there are two species of *space*: the literal and the figurative. I understand space as an integrating concept. It binds existence into reality. Time, language and freedom would be incomplete without space. Space – especially in its figurative sense – makes possible the situatedness of humans with regard to time, language and freedom.

People and the other objects of world are in *time*. They have a past, a present and a future (George, 2009, 909; Figal, 2010, 269). They emerge, appear or manifest themselves at a given time, and at some point they disappear to the undetected. The past and the future are not independent things, but they accompany people as memories and expectations (Figal, 2010, 283–284). What currently affects humans may also be something that comes from memories or from future expectations (Figal, 2010, 285).

One cannot think of a human life-world and a thing-world external to it without *language* (Malpas, 2017a, 388–389). People are born into language and gradually they learn to speak from out of it (Figal, 2010, 195). Language is a sign system that enables a person to interpret things and phenomena. What each sign means is contractual or arbitrary (Figal, 2010, 205). Signs are not separate from one another, but they together form linguistic entities, contexts and textures in which human consciousness operates (see Figal, 2010, 210). By using language, human beings are situated in a discussion with respect to their conversation partners. Because language is open and flexible, it supports the freedom of individuals and communities to interpret things and phenomena in their own way (see Figal, 2010, 196, 212; George, 2009, 909; 2010, xix).

Freedom means, for example, the right or opportunity to be, think or do something unhindered. Freedom can be either freedom from something or freedom to something (George, 2009, 908; Figal, 2010, 155). From an individual's point of view, freedom means that the outside world does not fully determine the individual's life. Freedom offers people opportunities for action. From an ethical point of view, the freedom of an individual is always tied to duty. One has to take care that nurturing one's own freedom does not offend the freedom of others.

4.3 Living

To understand deeply what living and understanding are, the idea of *objectivity* developed by Figal is necessary. Figal (2010) develops – mainly based on the thinking of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer – a unique way to understand philosophy as hermeneutical. Figal differs from his predecessors in that he emphasizes the meaning of

objectivity – or objectity, if we want to express it more precisely – in the formation of being, living and understanding. For Figal, objectivity does not mean thorough neutrality, as the term is often understood. For him, objectivity or objectity (the German word is *Gegenständlichkeit*) means a hermeneutical experience in which something from outside an individual's life-world draws that individual's attention, and places some kind of a demand on them (see George, 2010, xii; Figal, 2010, 2).

In line with Figal (2004, 20), it can be said that there is no living without objectity, that is, without something that is outside the borders of one's life-world. A bare being becomes a living one when that being begins to use their senses and consciousness in their thinking and action. Affects and observations regarding tangible and intangible things that are external to a person form the basis for consciousness. On the grounds of affects and observations, a person – being in space, time, language and freedom – forms interpretations and presentations regarding things and phenomena. Consciousness does not really work with the very things and phenomena themselves, but via the signs of language (Figal, 2010, 230). Consequently, what is in consciousness also refers partly to what is outside consciousness, that is, to the sign system of the language and, thereby, also extensively to the environment of the individual.

Orientation is an essential part of human life. People are directed towards what is important to them and what affects them (see e.g. George, 2010, xxv; Figal, 2010, 163, 324–325; Malpas, 2012, 238). If the observed things and phenomena start to interest people sufficiently, they begin to wonder how they can exploit those things and phenomena in pursuit of their own goals. The interpretations of things and phenomena thus influence the orientation of people. Action is directed towards goals that give meaning and direction to the action (Figal, 2010, 156).

4.4 Understanding

Understanding is a property of an individual, as something that happens within an individual. Human beings try to understand not only themselves, but also people and other objects around them. Some external things are such that a person accepts them to their life-world, and there are also things that the person, consciously or unconsciously, excludes from it. Human beings have a tendency to set boundaries around their life-worlds, for example, to show the meaningfulness of their lives or to enhance their identities. However, a deep understanding of being and living can be obtained only when a person recognizes the limits of one's own life-world, observes external objects, and relates internal and external things to each other.

According to Figal (2010, 319), life can be understood as a text that must continuously be interpreted. When conceived in this way, human life with its various dispositions, attitudes, relationships and experiences forms a kind of logical or textual order (Figal, 2015a, 539). This is why it is possible to understand human life (see Figal, 2009, 258). According to Malpas (2017b, 434; see also 2015b, 358; 2017a, 423), human life can only be studied properly by examining the situatedness of human beings. Understanding is a matter of being *between*, that is, of being situated between the reader and the text, between the speaker and the listener, as well as between the interpreter and the interpreted (Malpas, 2015b, 354).

Human orientation and freedom always have an influence on understanding. Even though a person's purpose may be to understand things equally from every point of view, that person's conceptual and interpretative choices influence the orientation of understanding (see Figal, 2014, 19). Individuals should be aware of this when they think they understand something.

4.5 Hermeneutical space

Figure 1 tries to visualize the considerations presented in sections 4.1–4.4. When constructing the philosophical model, I have tried to keep in mind Philo's (2000, 219; 2011, 166) suggestion – based on Michel Foucault – that research subjects should, at first, be placed in the same figurative space, without any prior theoretical framework. Figure 1 emerged from a process where I first placed things relatively randomly on a blank sheet of paper. By gradually tracing the relations between things – applying mainly Figal's and Malpas's thinking – I arrived at the model presented in the figure. The figure can be used as a list of things to be considered when trying to understand the rural holistically.

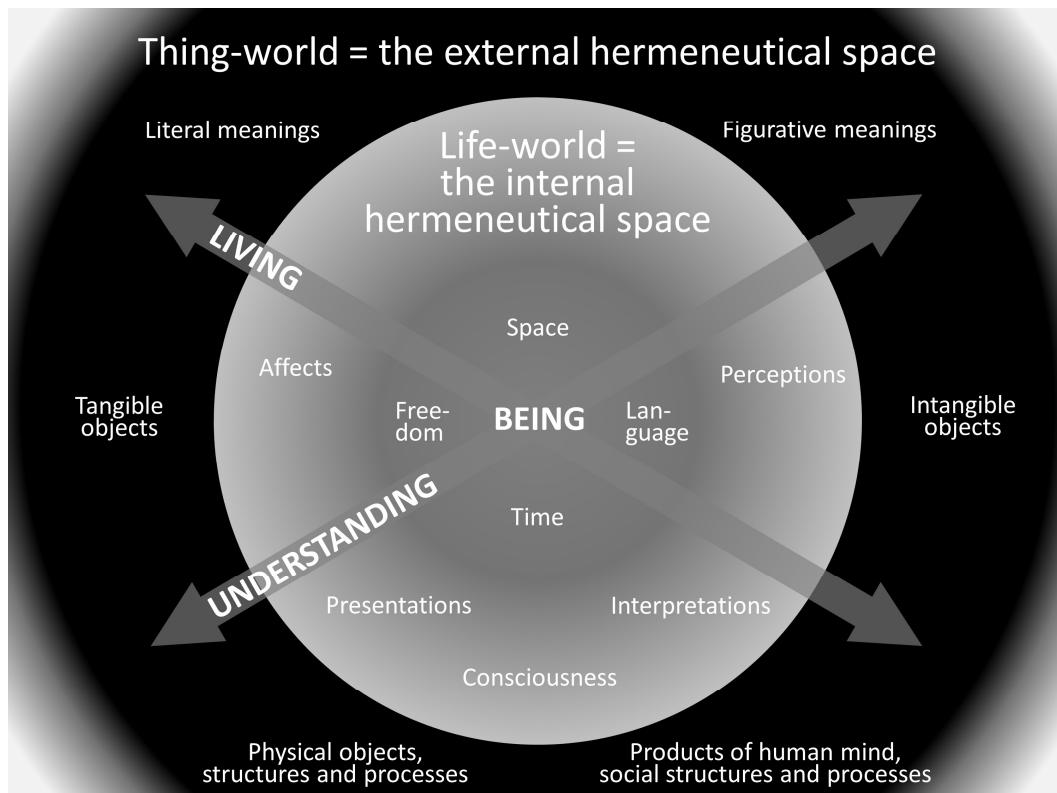


Figure 1. Being, living and understanding in the hermeneutical space.

The hermeneutical space consists of the internal hermeneutical space (life-world) and the external hermeneutical space (thing-world). The internal and external hermeneutical spaces must be understood as permeable to the basic dimensions of being: all objects and things in the hermeneutical space are in space and time; a person seeks them through language and they also have freedom at least in the sense that they exist regardless of what people think about them. The internal hermeneutical space is also permeable to the factors of external hermeneutical space: people internalize some of the external factors to their life-worlds while others are such that they exclude them from their lives. The placement of factors in the figure does not describe exactly the relationships between factors, but the relationships must be analysed in research on a case-by-case basis.

Hermeneutical space refers to the world that is now or possibly in the future reachable by human beings. Hermeneutical space consists of tangible and intangible objects, structures and processes related to them. Objects have literal and figurative meanings at the same time. Compared to each other, these meanings are equally real, because they have causal effects. Human beings are specific objects or things in the sense that they are able to, to a greater or lesser extent, be aware of the boundaries of their own life-worlds. Hermeneutical space is always wider than the life-world, because at a certain point in time a person is unable to recognize everything in and around oneself.

The tangible and intangible objects, structures and processes of the external hermeneutical space, as well as the different literal and figurative meanings of these, pose challenges for the

lives of individuals and communities. Individuals and communities live in their own life-worlds, but they are prone to influences from the external hermeneutical space. The life-world is formed by a process in which a human being or a community, through the basic dimensions of their being (space, time, language and freedom), consciousness, perceptions, affects and interpretations begins to act and define their relationship to the external hermeneutical space.

Holistic understanding of a certain life-world is possible only at the interface between the internal and external hermeneutical space. Holistic understanding requires analysing of the life-world in question as well as the mapping of those life-worlds, objects, structures and processes that remain outside the life-world in question.

4.6 How the hermeneutical perspective complements the prevailing approaches

Philosophical reflection on being that is based on an individual's point of view complements the existing rural research. People are individuals who tend to interact with other individuals and their surroundings. However, communities and the environment do not fully define individuals. Even if individuals are constrained by the so-called straitjacket of social structures – that is, the social fabric of their lives – and enabled by their social embeddedness, they always have, to some extent, freedom by nature. This freedom cannot be understood if individuals are viewed merely as members of the community. On the other hand, it is not possible to understand the community without understanding the individuals that make up the community.

The hermeneutical model crystallized in Figure 1 helps, above all, to understand people and the world as a whole. People always interpret and present their being in a certain, more or less

limited way, so that the life-world or the internal hermeneutical space always has some kind of boundary around it. The boundary of the life-world is not permanently closed but it is open to new possibilities hiding in the external space. A comprehensive understanding of hermeneutical space forces people to reflect on the meaningfulness and ethicality of their lives and activities.

Hermeneutical thinking challenges those rural researchers who apply the descriptive or the political-economic approach to reflect on what is left outside their designated research subject – the rural area, locality or sector. Consideration of external objects forces the researcher to assess the significance, value and importance of the research subject from the viewpoint of the whole world and society. Certainly, it is not socially valuable to protect the interests of a local community, for example, in a case where a small power bloc defines the development goals of the community according to their own personal needs. Promoting the exploitation of natural resources in areas that are ecologically sensitive or otherwise poorly suited to such activities also requires comprehensive consideration.

Hermeneutical thinking can be utilized especially in discussions concerned with the development of poststructuralist rural studies. To understand what is happening in this late modernist phase of societal development, it is important to combine the best parts of modernist, poststructuralist, postmodernist and hermeneutical thinking. As said before, good but perspectival work is being carried out in all areas of rural research. There is no reason to criticize those approaches as such. They can also be used to understand the rural. However, what is groundbreaking about poststructuralist, postmodernist and hermeneutical thinking is the conceptualization of space and the rural as not only literal but also as figurative concepts. The reality of figurative concepts has yet to be considered deeply enough in rural studies.

The analysis and deconstruction of the rural concept in sections 2 and 3 revealed the essential figurative features of the concept: contrast, otherness, openness and freedom in relation to the sameness, closedness and subordination represented by the urban. The deconstructed rural can be used to understand the rural as part of a hybrid consisting of the rural and the urban. This understanding is achieved by complementing the traditional analytical approach to rural research with the hermeneutical approach illustrated in Figure 1. The deconstruction and the hermeneutical approach can help to find a more significant and sustainable role for the rural than as a follower of urban development.

5 Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed the possibilities of developing and complementing the conceptual, theoretical and philosophical premises of rural research. The main pioneers whose ideas I have tried to develop in my work are the rural sociologist Mormont and the philosophers Figal and Malpas.

While my paper focuses on the search for complementary elements to the premises of rural studies, it is clear that in our quest for a holistic understanding of the rural, we need all existing and promising new approaches to this demanding task. Indeed, the different approaches should be seen as complementary and contributing to a holistic understanding. However, all individual approaches and rural policy discourses – such as regional/place-based policy, natural resource policy, food policy and environmental policy discourses – should be tested, for example, in the framework of the hermeneutical model I have presented, in order to

evaluate the value of the results and impacts of such approaches and discourses in relation to the whole.

In terms of the conceptual starting points of rural studies, my main contribution to the discussion in this article is to understand space both literally and figuratively, so that the literal and the figurative come to be viewed as equally important elements of reality. Germs of this kind of thinking can be found separately from the studies of space (see Malpas, 2012) and those of the rural (see Mormont, 1990), but they have not, according to my knowledge, been studied in a single framework.

The rural deconstruction carried out in this article aimed at defining the essential features of the rural and its conceptual meaningfulness. The idea was to avoid the use of the concept as a pawn in a power game where the meaning of the rural is determined on a case-by-case basis depending on what the power game requires. Based on the deconstruction, the hard core of the concept of the rural can be considered the emphasis on its contrast with the urban, open space and freedom. From the viewpoint of rural studies so far, this kind of conceptualization is groundbreaking, because the rural is seen as a quality and not as a social representation or a social construct with its specific advocates. Yet when there are no advocates, there is a danger that the rural research based on deconstruction remains a novel academic adventure without major policy recommendations (see Philo, 1993, 434; Cloke and Little, 1997b, 9, 11; Cloke, 2006, 22–25; Nash, 2014, 252–253). Nevertheless, rural research based on deconstruction is useful at least in the sense that it can reveal the biased character of rural discourse when such is based on an empty rural concept.

With regard to social theory, I have tried to test the dominant thinking based on modernization theory, especially from the angle of what role modernization theory offers the rural in society as a whole. I do not want to deny the progress included in modernization, but I would like to look for a more meaningful role for the rural in society than as a follower of urban development. It would be fascinating to think that the rural would be needed to maintain the intellectual diversity and creativity of society. The deconstruction placed the rural at the edge of modernity, which means that the rural represents otherness with regard to the centre of modernizing society. Just as success in life requires a suitable mix of matter and spirit, realism and idealism, and seriousness and playfulness, a modernizing society may also need both the urban and the rural. In this respect, this article leaves challenges for further research that should seek to concretize the significance of the potential new role of the rural.

In regards to the philosophical starting points of rural studies, I have tried to highlight the complementary nature of the hermeneutical approach in relation to the prevailing approaches, which I have described as analytical. The hermeneutical approach makes it possible to open up the established mindsets to new effects. In hermeneutical thinking, the rural does not have to be seen as a discrete research subject, but it can be considered part of a hybrid of both the rural and the urban. Regarding understanding, the approach presented here emphasizes, in the spirit of Figal, the importance of the external hermeneutical space situated outside the life-world of an individual or a community. This perspective is well suited to rural studies aiming at examining the conceptual and practical intermingling of the rural (the otherness) and the urban (the sameness) in hermeneutical space. The hermeneutical approach also complements existing approaches so that through it not only communities but also individuals can be explored.

Hermeneutical philosophy reflects on what is meant by being in the world and it is based on the ability of human individuals to conceive, while the starting point for rural research is usually the communality of human beings. In a globalized society, communality and spatiality appear in new forms to the extent that the widely accepted association of the rural with localities, local communities or physical geographical space alone can be questioned. By using the individual-based hermeneutical model that I have presented in this article, it is possible to examine all possible manifestations of rurality, and, at the same time, gain a complete view of the world in which the manifestation is taking place.

This article presents challenges for rural research, geography and other disciplines that study human beings and communities. Demonstrating the social significance of the deconstructed hermeneutical rural requires further concretization. The concept of figurative space and the hermeneutical approach provide opportunities to look for new directions for rural research. The further development of the hermeneutical approach requires transdisciplinary collaboration, to which geographers bring their knowledge of space, historians their knowledge of time, linguists their knowledge of language, social scientists their knowledge of communities, psychologists and evolutionary biologists their knowledge of the psycho-physical characteristics of human beings, and philosophers their knowledge of thinking. To understand the world, it is not enough that each discipline examines the matter from its own perspective. It would seem that geographers – as experts in the concept of space – should take on the role of initiator in this collaboration. Opening the concept of space to include both the literal and the figurative space is, in itself, a major challenge for geography. This presents an opportunity also for rural research to act as a driver of scientific breakthroughs, not just as a follower of other social science research (cf. Cloke, 2006, 26).

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