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"Uneven processes of rural change"

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'Drawing' the countryside: freehand sketches as representation of rurality in Poland

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Abstract – Framed as part of relatively few studies on representations of rurality in Poland, this paper analyses how the image of the countryside is remembered in the consciousness of inhabitants and represented in the form of freehand sketches.¹

INTRODUCTION

Work on spatial representations originated in urban contexts, with relatively little attention paid to rural areas. Following the 'cultural turn' in rural geographical studies more detailed attention has been paid to the importance of representations in shaping the dimensions and definitions of 'rurality'. The aim of this paper is to interpret the image of the contemporary Polish countryside remembered in the consciousness of inhabitants and reproduced in the form of freehand sketches.

In the following paper we utilise Halfacree's (2004, 2006) three-fold model of rural space. Using H. Lefebvre's (1991) seminal 'conceptual triad' for understanding space, Halfacree's model sees rural space as having three facets: rural locality, representations of the rural and lives of the rural. Thus, he brings together material, imaginative and practiced ruralities and sees them as intertwined. As Merrifield (2000, p. 175) argues, 'the spatial triad must always be embodied with actual flesh and blood and culture, with real life relationships and events'.

In Poland, just like in other European countries, the debate about changing nature of rural space takes place within the international context of ongoing rural and urban changes, outlying two key interrelated dynamics, i.e.: globalization and the increasing consumptive importance of rural places. Consequently, with the growth of the market economy in the 1990s, we observe in Poland the emergence of a multifunctional rural regime which influences the rural landscape, with new non-productive functions in local economies and new lifestyles emerging. However, despite the dynamic changes to rural spaces and rural

lives, many elements remain stable, permanently inscribed into the rural landscape and social relationships.

METHODS

This paper presents an attempt at analysing and interpreting freehand sketches of rural areas invoking the image elements distinguished by K. Lynch (1960) and, due to the scale of the settlement units under analysis, classification of neighbourhood sketches proposed by F. C. Ladd (1970). The method of freehand sketches were part of semi-structured interviews which focused on images of particular villages, the most significant elements of their structures, contemporary changes in their landscape and their social evaluation.

The research was conducted in twelve villages located in Lodz central Poland, Mazovia and Greater Poland provinces. In this paper, the three villages of Sacin, Rzućów and Sulmierzyce - differing with regard to their size, historical development and dominant economic functions - were chosen as case studies. Participants were selected to retain proportions of elementary socio-demographic features of the population of individual settlements, such as: age, sex and education. People were asked to prepare freehand sketches of their village including what they felt were the most important elements of space and their broader surroundings.

RESULTS

Irrespective of the character and specific features of particular villages, and the socio-demographic features of participants, the freehand sketches varied and can be classified along all the types distinguished and described by F. C. Ladd (1970) - starting from pictorial, presenting only the most important parts of settlements, and moving towards maps with orienta-

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tion points, which reflected the whole villages, indicating and naming neighbouring areas at the same time (Fig. 1).

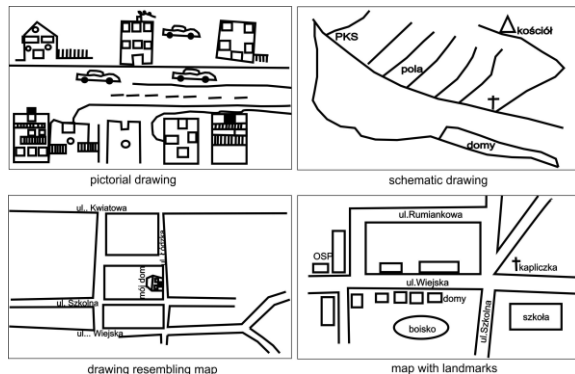


Figure 1. Types of sketch maps of neighbourhoods
Source: F. C. Ladd (1970).

Types of village sketches, their shape, structure and content can be interpreted in the context of two fundamental issues: 1) size, character of development and contemporary functions of the village, especially the quality of social infrastructure and 2) strategy for making sketches adapted by individual people participating in the research.

Sketches of all villages, irrespective of the represented type, were started from the main road, along which the settlement was developing. Depending on the size of the village, one or several streets were taken into account, but primarily concentrating on objects with important social functions, i.e.: churches, wayside shrines, cemeteries, schools, bus stops, fire stations. It was these elements that predominated in all images of villages. Besides the network of roads and significant nodes, sketches included also living areas, often highlighting respondents' own place of living or houses belonging to relatives. Interestingly, especially in the context of contemporary socio-economic changes of the Polish countryside, it seems rather rare to draw farmland, which appeared only in every tenth sketch and mostly served the function of 'filling' the empty space on the checker. Only the village of Sacin, with very strong agricultural functions was an exception in this regard. In other areas, it was only farmers who drew farmlands in their sketches.

CONCLUSION

Freehand sketches of the countryside presented and interpreted in the paper are examples of representations of the countryside, expressing contemporary multi-dimensional understandings of 'countryside' and 'rurality'. Space in the perspective of spatial representations is full of symbols, presents meanings and

values attributed by people to specific places and enables a deeper insight into the multiple experiences of rural social life.

As forms of the world structured in the mind, they fulfil many cognitive and practical functions – broadening the nature of research which focuses on space as socially constructed. Sketches of rural settlements allow us to determine not only the character of images, but also to describe the contemporary nature of 'rural areas' and 'rurality' thanks to their contents. They not only reflect, but also (re)create attitudes towards the countryside and rural lives and are intertwined with social practices.

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