

RURAL GEOGRAPHY IN SLOVENIA – AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Rural geography in Slovenia – an overview

The paper shows an overview of theoretical and conceptual directions in Slovene Rural Geography. The first part of the paper deals with the changes in understanding of the term rural area, and the second part discusses some theoretical concepts. The last chapter provides an overview of the most often researched topics in the field of Rural Geography in Slovenia.

Key words

Rural Geography, theory of Geography, Slovenia

1. Introduction

Writing about Rural Geography in Slovenia may be quite a tricky task. Almost the whole Slovene territory could be considered as countryside more or less affected by human activities. There are no large cities in Slovenia, and more extensive suburban development forming urban landscape is quite recent and rather small in extent. Therefore many geographic discussions willingly or unwillingly revolve around rural areas. However, we have to argue that Slovene Geography tends to focus rather on the implementation of geographic ideas than on the development of theories. Slovene Rural Geography therefore follows the basic theoretical postulates of Geography as a science because its own theoretical approaches, which would be oriented towards rural areas, have not been developed yet.

2. Concept of rural areas

The initial geographic descriptions of countries did not consider rural areas as a special field of geographic research. The term 'landscape' was used instead. The most common characteristic of these areas was agriculture, thus the term agricultural landscape was used in the first debates about rural areas. In Slovenia, Jakob Medved provided the following description of rural areas in the sixties (Medved 1967, 155):

The geographic environment of rural areas is defined by three groups of influence: human beings in a certain socio-economic environment, natural circumstances, and general level of socio-economic and technical development.

Only once the differentiation of the countryside became so obvious that urban areas could no longer be analysed together with rural areas, conditions for introducing a modified term were provided. The next definition of the term was based on two characteristics: the relationship towards the city (Vri er 1974, 108-110) and the understanding of rural areas as a regional complex (Ile ič 1976, 254). The emphasis of the first characteristic was on the areas 'outside the cities', which is a rather negative and not a very precise definition (Vri er 1982, 12). Rural areas encompassed everything that could not be described as a city. When considering this definition, we have to bear in mind that most of the settled part of Slovenia was predominantly rural, whereas more and more non-agrarian activities were being concentrated in the cities, making them less dependent on the surrounding agrarian areas. The second characteristic pointed out the agrarian activities and the specific characteristics related to them.

Rural areas are areas outside the cities that are characterized by a smaller population density, the predominance of agricultural activities and forestry, the connection of the majority of non-agricultural activities with agricultural production and population, a slower demographic growth, simpler social stratification and smaller settlements with lower levels of centralization (Kladnik 1999, 163).

This definition is descriptive and defining. It considers rural areas as homogenous areas without developmental dynamics and spatial differentiation, and completely overlooks the aspect of transition from a natural landscape with a minimal level of anthropogenic influences to an urban landscape with a minimum level of nature and maximum level of anthropogenic influences.

In 2005, Drozg presented a more detailed and precise definition, which emphasizes the crucial characteristics of the rural areas and omits statements describing the colonial relationship between the cities and the countryside.

The countryside is an area where agriculture and forestry are the most important activities in the formation of the physiognomy of the landscape, a significant proportion of the population is still economically dependent on the primary economic activity, and there are rural settlements in the area (Drozg 2005).

All the above definitions emphasize in particular the morphological aspect of rural areas or the elements of the physical space (land use, settlements). Rural areas are understood exclusively as a physical space and do not include social, personal, virtual and other possible viewpoints. Although modern studies consider also such aspects, Slovene Geography has not yet included them into its definition of rural areas. One should nevertheless stress the following characteristics:

Rural areas are areas of higher rurality (in the physical and social sense) and lower urbanity (in the functional and cultural sense), or areas where the rural identity is more pronounced than the urban one.

A more modern description of rural areas has been provided by M. Klemenčič, who has listed a few crucial facts defining "post-rural" countryside (Klemenčič 2006, 162):

Changes in behaviour and in the understanding of the rural population... from understanding rurality as a place of firm entity, to understanding it as a spatial practice..., rural area is a hybrid area... with a set of networks in which one can find different essences..., which results in different types of rural areas. Rurality is deterritorialized because its signs and symbols have become more and more distant from the corresponding geographic space.

We can conclude that in Slovene Geography, rural areas are understood as a physical category, which is similar to the understanding of the landscape. Definitions of rural areas thus derive from elements of physical space, such as land use, settlements and specific economic activities. In addition, rural areas are understood as being different from urban areas. The town therefore appears as the referential point of comparison in all the definitions. It is defined at the same time as an agricultural and forestry area and an area with a smaller population density and a slower demographic growth. However, it is unusual that rural areas include also the highest parts of the highlands and the surrounding areas of the largest towns. As regards the definition of the term countryside, one can agree with Irma Potočnik Slavič, who says that the weakness of the existing definitions lies in:

- the fact that the differentiation of rural areas is not emphasized enough,
- the emphasizing of the differences between cities and rural areas,
- the subjectivity of the emphasized differences (Potočnik Slavič 2008, 14).

We must also stress the fact that different ways of understanding the rural areas have different indicators for limiting these areas versus the cities and the natural landscape, which means that the territorial range depends on understanding the rural areas (we must admit that this question has not yet been subjected to professional analysis, as if the range of rural areas was taken for granted). In the first period, when rural areas were treated as agrarian landscape, the social and economic indexes prevailed (see Vrišer 1974, 108), among which the share of rural population and the quantity of agricultural production were emphasized. In later periods, the differences between cities and rural areas were emphasized especially

as regards the number of inhabitants in the settlements, and the social set-up (employment and educational structure, demographic movements). The latest period tries to limit rural areas using life-style (Drozg 2007) and economic situation indexes (Potočnik Slavič 2008).

3. Conceptual directions in the research of rural areas

The term Rural Geography has been used in Slovenia only since 1967, when Svetozar Ilešič, one of the most important Slovene geographers, became interested in analysing "the general geographic appearance of rural landscape and rural areas" (Ilešič 1979, 254). He defined his point of view in a discussion about Agrarian Geography and landscape as follows:

We must be aware of the fact that in times of high urbanization and strong decline in the share of agrarian population, rural life in the countryside is becoming less and less isolated and more intertwined with other social and geographic processes. ... The term "pure agricultural landscape" is also losing its meaning. ... It is therefore more difficult to discuss such landscape or area in pure "agricultural geographic" terms. If we consider the ecological conditions and the evaluation of their importance through different phases of socio-economic development to a sufficient extent ... we see instead of the so-called agricultural geographic appearance a complex and dynamic general geographic appearance of a rural landscape developing in front of our eyes all by itself (Ilešič 1979, 254).

At the moment, Rural Geography is at a milestone, as is the case with Regional Geography in general. Complex knowledge on a certain area (countryside, region or part of the world) is nowadays hardly if at all possible. The majority of phenomena analysed in Geography are not limited spatially but contextually (Geography deals especially with the spatial characteristics of a certain phenomenon). Today's science differentiates between the subject and the methods of familiarization and not between the areas (space), which is the essence of Regional Geography. The empirical instruments and analytical methods used probably do not show us the whole range of a certain area. This type of discussion is therefore moving closer to essays, and cultural and humanist studies. If we consider the increasing unification of space regarding the social and technical infrastructure on the one hand, and a growing heterogeneity of lifestyles and economic activities, not limited to a specific space (city or countryside) on the other, the discussion of concepts that relate to only one segment of space is questionable. *When learning about the countryside, concepts are used that help us interpret the landscape as a whole and not only the rural areas as a part of it.*

Slovene Rural Geography does not have concepts that would serve as the origin for interpretation of circumstances in the landscape (see Klemenčič 2006, 168), but uses several contextual and methodological approaches to interpret the landscape complex. We can therefore show only the methodological frame of how the area was seen and interpreted through contextual origins of Rural Geography, or with other words, what contents of the countryside would stick out at some point and how they would be interpreted. Svetozar Ilešič was the one who tackled this issue in his 1979 discussion, in which he identified three ways of analyzing the rural area: the morphogenetic, the socio-geographic and the economical-geographic (Ilešič 1979, 241). His division is still valid today, even though it relates more to areas and less to the conceptual differences which in those times were not yet as distinct as nowadays. In his discussions on the rural areas, M. Klemenčič defined the socio-

geographic and pre-structural approach (Klemenčič 2006, 168). "The first one tries to be integral and problem-oriented..., while the second one puts the structure of the rural area in the foreground." (ibid). We believe that the analysis of rural areas shows several (conceptual) directions.

3.1. Geographical concepts that have influenced Slovene Rural Geography

Before reviewing individual geographic orientations, we would like to briefly present the impacts of foreign schools on Slovene Rural Geography. The ideas of German geographers had the largest influence that resulted in an extensive scientific cooperation between the years 1970 - 1999 (see the record of M. Pak, Pak 2008). Slovene geographers have largely adopted ideas about complex Geography, and the impact of the Munich Social Geography was very strong as well. It is necessary to mention also the ideas of French geographers, whose concept of 'genre de vie' was very popular. From seventies onward, the Polish geographic school was influential, especially in the domain of land use mapping (Andrej Kostrowicki). In the eighties, the topics concerning environmental protection became widely accepted. After this period, the influence of Anglo-American Geography gained ground, especially the ideas of possibilism and behaviourism.

Tab. 1: Geographic concepts that have influenced Slovene Rural Geography.

Concept	Period	Foreign representatives	Slovene representatives
Unite (Systematic) Geography	after 1960	Vidal de la Blache Alfred Hettner	Svetozar Ilešič, Marijan M. Klemenčič, Drago Kladnik
Social Geography	after 1970	Wolfgang Hartke, Karl Ruppert	Vladimir Klemenčič
Land use	after 1960	Andrej Kostrowicki	Svetozar Ilešič
Economics of agriculture	after 1960	Anučin Vsevolod	Igor Vrišer
Possibilism	after 1980	Jörg Maier	Marjan Ravbar
Post ruralism	after 1990	Michael Woods, Keith Halcrafee, Arno Paassi, Benno Werlen	Marijan M. Klemenčič

3.2. Conceptual orientations of Slovene Rural Geography

3.2.1. Physiognomic-morphogenetic orientation

The first period of investigating rural areas was based especially on what could be seen, on the observations of the physical space and less on secondary resources, such as statistical data and thematic cartographic maps. The most obvious topics in the landscape prevailed, such as nature (relief, vegetation) and visual effects of human activities (settlements, infrastructure, agricultural land use). Apart from observation and mapping, oral sources were also important. During this period, the geographic familiarization of the countryside was very close to Ethnology and History. In the conceptual sense, the man-nature relationship prevailed. The geographic research was therefore oriented towards defining landscapes with joint characteristics, most often with similar survival conditions and a similar paysage. Regional studies of homogenous rural landscapes were very frequent. The findings from that period were most often genetic (developmental), historically oriented, and with an emphasized segment of natural circumstances – as a display of natural reality that defines human action from settlement to economic orientation on the one hand, and on the other hand as a factor that is shaped and exploited by humans. This orientation considers the landscape as an art category, although there is a "geographic complex of landscape elements" present. However, from the methodological viewpoint, the displays were merely a description of natural, social

elements and morphologic segments, according to the so-called Hettner's scheme. The research of the landscape's structure and the most important landscape elements as well as the principles of connections between them was often not considered at all.

This orientation is still present in Slovene Rural Geography. A classical work of this kind is Ilešič's discussion about the systems of field division (Ilešič 1950) and numerous regional displays of rural areas. We must also emphasize the discussion on the types of cultural landscape (Urbanc 2002) and on the morphological types of settlements (Drozg 1992) that are in the methodological sense very close to the recognition of "deeper structure" of the rural areas and rural settlements.

3.2.2. Functional possibilistic orientation

This orientation in studying rural areas is a reaction to the previous one; instead of emphasizing the influence of nature on human beings, the active role of humans in adjusting and selecting the most suitable possibility for economic development and life as such is emphasized (as opposed to a relatively receptive role which was attributed to the humans in the previous orientation). Possibilities for economic activities and for the exploitation of natural resources are given. This is also related to the expanding of non-agricultural activities to the rural areas, which occurred in the 1960s in Slovenia. In regards to the latter, Matjaž Jeršič defined the following functions of rural areas (Jeršič 1982, 142):

- acquisition of food and raw materials,
- supply of drinking water,
- hydro-energetic potentials,
- natural and environmental role,
- recreational area.

This orientation was at first considered as an evaluation of the conditions for individual economic activities. However, the approach is not methodologically consistent (objective), which consequently means that the results were either very general or very similar – in one period, agriculture was the most important natural potential, and in another period tourism and recreation became the most important. This orientation later on revolved around resources as potentials for economic development – natural, created and endogenous (Potočnik Slavič 2008). Nature and physical environment are still in the foreground of this orientation, yet nature is understood as a potential (economic category) in the sense of natural resources and not as scenery from an artistic point of view.

3.2.3. Processual-structural orientation

Slovene Rural Geography started to familiarize itself with spatial changes in the 1970s. The recording of spatial changes, the transformation and the changing of the elements of landscape formation were to a great extent enabled by ample empirical data – numeric and thematic mapping – as well as by the tendency toward a larger empirical support of findings. The knowledge of processes usually includes the knowledge of structure. This led to numerous typologies of rural areas, settlements and administrative units, in general to a more detailed knowledge of space on the local level. It also led to the discovery of new meanings of rural areas, such as marginal areas (Pelc 2005), demographically threatened areas (Klemenčič 1972), less developed areas (Ravbar 1997), deployment of social capital and the sense of creativity (Ravbar and Bole 2007). This orientation showed a great decrease of the

importance of natural factors for the structure of the rural area, while its ecological importance grew.

Instead of the previously mentioned physical spaces, social space emerged almost unconsciously in the interpretation of rural area. Another change is evident: regionalization was no longer the final aspect of familiarization with the rural area, but a means for new findings. In this context, the works of Drago Kladnik and Marjan Ravbar regarding the classification of the Slovene rural areas should be mentioned, who used a number of thematic maps and typologies to show the development potentials and the level of development of individual rural areas. (Kladnik, Ravbar 2003). Ecological circumstances in rural areas, such as the fragility of the areas and the forms of protection of natural resources also caught attention of geographers. (Špes 2000, Rejec Brancelj 2000). Rural Geography was also affected by quantification in the 1970s. Drago Kladnik tried to evaluate the influence of natural and social factors on the intensity of land use (Kladnik 1990). In this context, we must mention also Vladimir Klemenčič's article *Tendencies of changing the Slovene rural areas* (Klemenčič 1991), which shows the differentiation of rural areas regarding the intensity of urbanization processes.

3.2.4. Socio-cultural orientation

Once the idea of »despatialization« and the move from physical space toward spatial effects of human activities on nature/landscape were introduced into Social Geography, the context of the interpretation of rural areas was also changed. The once unified categories, such as inhabitants, were no longer shown according to demographic indexes, but in smaller groups with certain similar characteristics which generated changes in the landscape. New social groups and lifestyles appeared; the social groups were assigned an active role in the shaping of the landscape and the living environment. Stanko Pelc showed the role of daily migrants / commuters in the changing of the Domžale hinterland (Pelec 1993). Themes showing a different understanding of Rural Geography appeared; not regional displays but displays of effects of human activities on the landscape. We must emphasize the discussion regarding the supply and the habits of inhabitants in rural areas (Drozg 2007), regarding a different meaning of time when evaluating the rural space, and regarding the relationship between "habitus" and "habitat". Rural areas are understood as a cultural phenomenon where the term rurality has the central role, and not as areas with specific social, economic and morphologic characteristics.

Tab. 2: Conceptual orientations in Slovene Rural Geography.

	Subject	Basic concept	Most important fields
Physiognomic-morphogenetic orientation	Landscape, rural settlements	Unified, complex Geography human-nature	Regional displays
Functional-possibilistic orientation	Effects of human activities	Possibilities of economic development	Agricultural and Economic Geography
Processual-structural orientation	Changes, genesis	Changing, transformation, structure	Ecology, spatial planning
Socio-cultural orientation	Actors of landscape changes	Effects of human activities on the space	Local studies, life styles, identities

4. Most often discussed topics in Slovene Rural Geography

Stanko Pelc (2002) argues that Rural Geography has a significant formal role in Slovene Geography as one of the core compulsory subjects in Geography courses at the University of Ljubljana and the University of Maribor. The analysis of the number

of monographic publications and articles from the field of Rural and Urban Geography available in the largest Slovene geographic library (Department of Geography, University of Ljubljana) has shown that the ratio between the number of bibliographic units on urban topics and on rural topics is strongly in favour of the urban ones. Namely, the ratio is 1:4 for Slovene monographs and approximately 1:3 for the articles. According to Drago Kladnik (1999), the main topics of the Rural Geography research field are rural depopulation, urban impacts and urban way of life in rural areas, impact of recreation and tourism, structural changes in agriculture and rural planning. For the purpose of this paper, we analysed bibliography from the field of Rural Geography and were surprised to find out that there were relatively few monographs which were marked by the keywords Rural and Geography. These monographs included beside books also different conference proceedings, diploma works, doctoral and master theses and unpublished research reports (typed or printed). The main topics were rural settlements, land use, regional descriptions of countryside regions, development and planning, and some covered more general rural geographic topic. Quite some monographs dealt with different kinds of activities in rural areas, such as agriculture and tourism, with the development of rural areas and with planning issues. As regards articles, published papers and other published short scientific texts, the majority covered the field of land use and dealt with changes in built-up areas, changes in the use of agricultural land and methodological approaches to land use studies. Another widely investigated field of interest of Slovene Rural Geography is the study of settlements and activities in rural areas. It includes articles about rural settlements, the changes that rural settlements underwent in the process of (sub)urbanisation, the analyses of morphological characteristics of rural settlements, the settlement pattern and the centrality of rural settlements. The activities in rural areas range from basic agricultural activities analysed from different aspects through the most widely researched rural tourism, to less frequently researched topics, such as supplementary activities on the farm.

Rural development is another important topic. It covers texts about rural development and village renovation programmes and about different developmental problems and opportunities for the development in certain rural areas, such as wine roads or drug addicts' community.

Other topics are not as widely researched as the above mentioned. However, they may represent one aspect of the research. Demographic characteristics of the Slovene rural areas such as age structure, population growth, depopulation and economic structure are very often analysed, however, only in a few scientific texts they are the central topic. To conclude this short review, the Slovene Rural Geography is not systematic but strictly thematic.

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Summary

The initial geographic descriptions did not consider rural areas as a special field of geographic research. Instead, the term 'landscape' was used. The most common characteristic of these areas was agriculture, which accounts for the use of the term agricultural landscape in the first debates about rural areas. In Slovene Geography, rural areas are predominantly understood as a physical category, similar to our understanding of the landscape. Definitions of rural areas thus derive from elements of physical space, such as land use, settlements, and specific economic activities. Apart from that, rural areas are understood as areas that differ from the urban ones. The town therefore appears as the referential point of comparison in all the definitions. At the same time, rural areas are defined as agricultural and forestry areas, as well as areas with a smaller population density and a slower population growth. It is, however, unusual that in these definitions rural areas also include the highest parts of the highlands and the surrounding areas of the largest towns.

The Slovene Rural Geography has not developed concepts that would serve as the origin for the interpretation of circumstances regarding the landscape, but uses several contextual and methodological approaches of how to interpret the landscape complex. We believe that the analysis of the rural areas shows several (conceptual) orientations:

- ∞ Physiognomic-morphogenetic orientation
- ∞ Functional-possibilistic orientation
- ∞ Processual-structural orientation
- ∞ Socio-cultural orientation

The most often discussed topics in the Slovene Rural Geography are: rural settlements, land use, regional descriptions of countryside regions, development and planning, and some other more general rural geographic topics. Quite some monographs deal with different kinds of activities in rural areas, such as agriculture and tourism, as well as with the development of rural areas and the planning issues.