

# Rural Poverty – do we need a sociological perspective?

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Rural poverty has received relatively little attention from scholars in Europe or the USA, often regarded as secondary to more visible urban poverty. Lately, however, rural disadvantage has received unexpected attention, if only for its perceived role in generating political upheaval (see [Krugman, Hank](#) or [Guilluy](#) for example). Divergences between rural and metropolitan electoral results, support of populism in rural areas and even the rise of protest movements in the countryside have prompted a renewed interest in urban-rural disparities and [rural feelings of inferiority and marginalisation](#). What can sociology tell us about rural poverty and disadvantage?

In spite of important achievements, rural poverty and disadvantage remains a marginalised theme within both rural studies and social research. In our [recent paper in Sociologia Ruralis](#), we reviewed the existing state of knowledge and identified six themes for further investigation and policy development. This short article summarises these challenges.

## 1) Europeanisation and internationalisation of rural poverty and exclusion research

Looking back at rural poverty research in the last two decades, we notice a concentration on a few, particularly English-speaking countries, notably Britain and the US. This is problematic because the British case is exceptional in Europe, with quite different demographic trends and processes of middle class colonisation well documented. Rural poverty not only constitutes a quantitatively more serious problem in many other European countries but also its forms and drivers are different, whether it concerns ethnic rural poverty in Hungary, the problems of post-socialist rural transformation, the effects of austerity in southern European countries, or population shrinkage in the German periphery. Recognising this diversity presents a major challenge for rural poverty research, complicating cross-national comparisons and theoretical conceptualisation. The concept of [unequal spatial opportunity structures](#) offers one potential avenue for understanding the drivers of social disadvantage and poverty in different regional and national contexts.

## 2) Space and Place

Compared to urban poverty research, studies on locally specific factors and contexts of rural poverty are still scarce. Neither is there much investigation in Europe into the relationship between social inequality and spatial inequality, in contrast to rural studies in the US. Rural areas are highly differentiated, both in terms of their access to employment, services and other assets, and in terms of their social characteristics. But research on the place-specific factors of rural disadvantage and associated power relations and stigmatisation is less developed than in urban sociology. Given the high levels of residential segregation in many cities, specific place- and neighbourhood-based factors of poverty became dominant issues for urban poverty scholars. Place-based specifics and geographic variability should also be fully acknowledged in research on the macro level political and social transformations of the recent decades in relation to rural lives and economies, with deep impacts upon inequalities, including the impact of the economic crisis and austerity policies on rural

inhabitants. In addition to research which examines the role of place in relation to rural poverty and opportunity structures, there is also a need for research to examine the role of space – specifically the relationship between social inequality and spatial inequality. (see [Hooks et al. 2016](#)).

### **3) Rural poverty and transforming global processes**

The countryside is as globally interconnected and interdependent as towns and cities. But while the concept of the ‘global countryside’ provoked a lot of research on rural economic restructuring, food chains, tourism and migration, it has not received sufficient attention in rural poverty and inequality studies, notwithstanding recent studies which, for example, examine the impact of the financial crisis (and the consequent Eurozone crisis) on young people in rural Greece. Social polarisation, in terms of labour market transformations, housing affordability, land ownership, reach and mobility, is one of the defining features of the global countryside. Yet the role of increasing global interconnectedness, the rising importance of global actors in transforming rural places, and global-local negotiations and configurations in driving social polarisation and rising inequalities within and among places has not been sufficiently explored.

### **4) Incorporating multiple dimensions and power relations**

Despite critiques of the concept of social exclusion, its deployment in rural research has facilitated a multidimensional, dynamic approach which highlights the interaction of different systems of resource allocation and related capacities to act, connecting structure and agency. As a relational concept, this has encouraged investigation of the interconnectedness of labour market participation, housing, service provision, transport, childcare, social welfare, family and community engagement which characterises the day-to-day experience of rural dwellers, as well as drawing attention to power relations and ‘voice’. [Shucksmith](#) has proposed a new approach to rural class analysis, based on the writing of Pierre Bourdieu. This would conceive of class as a continuous, contested and fluid process of discursive construction, identity formation, mobilisation and struggle based around habitus, field and capital, and inextricably bound up with place. Increased emphasis on different social hierarchies (not only class) and new sources of inequality such as [precaritisation](#) of work would enable us to draw a more nuanced picture of rural poverty and its causes.

### **5) Socio-cultural aspects of rural disadvantage**

In some, but not all, European countries in the 1990s, rural studies began to give much greater attention to cultural identities and differences, under the influence of the cultural turn in human geography and of post-structuralist theories. Many rural scholars moved away from concerns with social class, incomes and material assets towards studying how people in rural areas may be marginalised through cultural practices in everyday life and especially through the social construction of identity and symbolic capital in social and lay discourses. This opened up new spaces for the study of poverty, exploring processes of stigmatisation, discursive power and symbolic violence in the construction of rural disadvantage. With populist discourses emerging in many countries of rural people and places being left behind and disempowered, these insights are particularly valuable and

can be the basis for further avenues of investigation into the production and reproduction of poverty and inequality, feelings of inferiority in rural and peripheral areas, and resulting mobilisation.

## 6) The dynamics of rural poverty

The concept of social exclusion emphasises not only multidimensionality but also a focus on the underlying dynamic processes. For this reason, [Shucksmith and Chapman](#) called for longitudinal studies to explore the dynamics of disadvantage in rural areas, using either quantitative skills to analyse longitudinal household panel data or qualitative skills to pursue a life-history or oral history approach. In either case, the intention would be to yield a greater understanding of the pathways or trajectories which lead into rural poverty (including the 'trapdoors' and 'trampolines' associated with moves into and out of poverty, unemployment or homelessness) and the associated relational processes. Very little such work has been undertaken in Europe, partly because of a disinclination amongst many rural scholars to develop expertise in quantitative methods and also because of data deficiencies – with incompatible data and definitions often frustrating international comparative work. A number of welcome exceptions are highlighted in [our recent paper](#).

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the last two decades of rural poverty research, we conclude that rural poverty and disadvantage are still under-researched by sociologists despite their prevalence. Rural areas have received attention lately because of concerns about 'left-behind places' and the rise of populism. Rural sociological studies confirm that there are indeed feelings of exclusion and being-left-behind in various rural contexts, related to the perceived decline of local economies, infrastructure and social environment. But the notion of lagging rural areas is entrenched in modern society's imagination and the current thesis about deepening urban-rural disparities leading to a growth of populism is far too simplistic. Sociologists have learned much about the processes underlying rural poverty and disadvantage but the topic remains under-researched and more evidence is urgently needed.

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