

# MICROREGIONAL HYBRIDITY: ON THE (UN)SUSTAINABILITY OF THE URBAN/RURAL DICHOTOMY<sup>1</sup>

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“Hey bro! Come to my house tonight, there will be some beer, we’ll just hang out and chat about what’s new!”, Bedřich shouted at me when we saw each other while driving my car through the village, and I asked him what his plans are for the evening. “Yeah that would be great, we should tell Zbyněk and the others as well!”, I replied, waved goodbye, accelerated my car, and left for the important interview that I had in the nearby village, where some of my other informants and my relatives live.

Later that day. Evening. End of February. Back in Sudličín, a lost village of 70 inhabitants, that is located on the edge of the Loužná Microregion in Southern Bohemia. My mother lived there before she moved to Prague in 1970’s. Sudličín is therefore a place where I spent a lot of time in my grandparents house during my childhood. The air is filled with ashes falling from the chimneys of the houses. Finally, I am going to meet Bedřich and the other guys from the village that I have known for a long time. The meeting is set up in the Bedřich’s boiler room. The space is filled with the mix of smoke and smell of wet dog hair. After some time, I realize that Bedřich uses the room as a shelter for his Jack Russel Terrier. The dog is named “eponymously” Jack, and he is currently locked in the small cowshed next door. Every time we went out to the courtyard to piss, the dog started to whine, whimper, and scratch at the door.

When you stand in the courtyard and look around, you can see the constant work-in-progress of Bedřich’s world. At first sight, it seems like a complete mess, but if you look more closely, you see that the things in the courtyard all have their proper place and meaning. There are many forester tools, a 40-year-old tractor in disrepair, and you could also hear the tramping and the snorting of the horses from the barn. Horses are Bedřich’s greatest love. All of this stuff put together creates Bedřich’s life. He is, of course, a lumberjack.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was supported by grant SVV 2017-260470.

He grew up in the woods nearby the village. His father and mother worked as a foresters, and lived in the former gamekeeper's house. In the eyes of the fellow children from the village, he was perceived as the nice and calm weirdo from the woods. Among the villagers, his family is well-known for the frequent but harmless alcohol excesses of his father, Jeroným. Several years ago, after some years of hard work in the forests all across the South Bohemia region, Bedřich purchased a house in the village from his friend, a long-time private farmer who was moving to another village a few kilometres away from Sudličín. Bedřich moved in with his partner Lotta, their five-year-old daughter, and Bedřich's twenty-year-old step-son. Bedřich and Lotta are not married. This is not uncommon here. Several years earlier, around the time when they got together, they were forced to conceal their relationship for a period, because of Bedřich's father's generally bad reputation. Since then, however, things have gotten a lot better.

When I entered the boiler room, I recognized some other well-known guys. They meet there in the evening a few times each week. I greet František and Zbyněk, fifty- and forty-year-old bachelors, currently working in the local collective farm, in the big cowshed to be precise. Zbyněk is my relative, the son of my mother's cousin. In the corner sits Jaromír, a 35-year-old single, unskilled worker in the local town factory.

Right after I entered, I saw that they were a bit drunk, so I refused to ask them my research questions. Chatting, however, proved to be fruitful as well; we constantly joked and talked about everyday life and their (our) collective memories. Bedřich told me that next summer he is planning to go canoeing the Yukon River in Canada.<sup>2</sup> At midnight, I went to sleep. They remained until the last bottle was empty. It was a nice evening, because we built a situational safe space isolated from the outside world.

Shortly after this evening, I again counted the bachelors, spinsters, and the singles living in the village, but I stopped counting at the number of twenty. Nothing surprising for me. But then I realized what I had missed before, since I had been focusing mainly on singles – Bedřich is an “exceptional” individual, not only for fighting his family reputation, but also because unlike the many of his local mates, he has a stable partnership and a relatively free occupation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the dream of Yukon became reality. Bedřich spent several weeks in Canada during August 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The description is based on the fieldnotes created in the Sudličín village in the Loužná Microregion, Southern Bohemia, at the end of February of 2017. Common names of the villages, the microregion, and the names of the actors are, of course, anonymized.

This opening fieldnote is a part on the data created during my ethnographic fieldwork in the Czech countryside. In 2016, I was involved in applied research that was focused on the regional conceptualizations and perceptions of the media contents about current migration issues in Europe. During analysis, I realized that the data speak about the specific situations of the villagers and their local strategies and struggle against their feelings of increasing peripherality, marginality, and inferiority. To be precise, instead of migration issues, I became really interested in the socio-economical and infrastructure topics connected to the Loužná Microregion.

In the beginning, I started to wonder about the context and characteristics of the local singles and their solitude. This is not a trend specific only for Sudličín, but is found in many similar villages in the Loužná Microregion.<sup>4</sup> The regional population<sup>5</sup> has been constantly decreasing since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The average age of the inhabitants increased between the 2004 and 2011 from 40 to 44 years. At the end of 2016, 20.8% of the population was older than 65 years.<sup>6</sup> This is mainly because of the “extinction” of the villagers. Many of the houses in the region are used only by city-cottagers or even remain empty. Younger generations tend to leave the region for bigger cities. Lots of households are lead by those who stayed, single men who have inherited the properties and politics. These people experience continuous abandonment as an omnipresent reminder of the increasing geographical and socio-economical peripherality of this formerly agricultural locality.

The “evening image” depicted in the opening narrative came to my mind again when Eliška, a 68-year-old widow retiree also from Sudličín who worked all her life in agriculture, told me during our interview about the strategies of younger men in the village. She knows it very well. Despite her retirement, she sometimes worked as the waitress in the local pub:

*E: “Only a few are coming. The pub is open mainly due to the thirsty old men (most of them are from the city); they have no other place to meet.”*

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<sup>4</sup> The Slovakian documentary film Nesvatbov about similar phenomena was shot in 2010. The film takes place in the Slovakian countryside, and depicts the local strategies of getting the local men in contact with women.

<sup>5</sup> According to data of the Czech Statistical Bureau, the population of the Microregion amounts to 13,708 inhabitants (12/31 2017). For example, in 1869, when the first census for the Loužná Microregion was taken, the population was about 25,000 inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup> Sources of statistic data are anonymized, but carefully discerned from the available analytical documents.

ML: “*What about the younger guys?*”

E: “*Younger guys from the village? They don’t come here; they prefer buying bottled beer and sit somewhere in a boiler room. They finally come to the pub when they’re drunk enough. But it is a complete mess. Sometimes, they are shouting, arguing with people from Prague. In the past, the pub was full all the time.*” (Eliška, 68, Sudličin, Loužná Microregion)

The tension between those hailing from Prague, “*Pražáci*”<sup>7</sup> and some of the local men and women represents a long-term latent conflict. What are the origins of these misunderstandings? Is it because locals only have ephemeral and blurry images of the wealthy city life, and “*Pražáci*” are stereotyping, mocking, or exoticizing local “*rural*” life?

The situation is much more complex. Eliška is, for example, rather positive about her contacts with people from cities, especially from Prague, but when speaking generally about her perspective on urban life, she expresses serious tensions and emphasizes differences. She is critical especially when it comes to the issues of local infrastructure, state government, and EU restrictions and quota.

*“Several days ago, they said on the TV news that in Prague, buses and trams will be renovated and new ones will be bought. And I said to myself, don’t annoy me! Here? The bus goes only in the morning. They have cancelled the afternoon service. Every time when our children have afternoon lessons, parents have to pick them up by car. On the TV, they still talk about developing the countryside, but they are killing it here. People abandon the villages, and who will be living here? Yes, of course some people from Prague are coming back, but it is not enough.”* (Eliška, 68, Sudličin, Loužná Microregion)

### Right to Anything

Does Eliška, as well as many others in the village, feel that the voice of the local people is constantly weakened? Is it adequate to say that some locals feel that they are inferior, alone, or even invisible? Let us look at this complex

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<sup>7</sup> “*Pražák*” and “*Pražáci*” (in plural) is common and slightly derogative term used for Prague denizens both inside and outside of Prague. In fact, Sudličin also has some weekend inhabitants who hail from Pilsen, but the vast majority of non-locals are from Prague.

phenomenon from the socio-spatial and economic perspective based on actualized Marxist thinking.

In his famous article “Right to the city”, British social geographer David Harvey (2008) explores the prevalence of the neo-liberal urban or “city-like” forms of life and social organization in the globalized world. In the original essay published forty years earlier, Henri Lefebvre stated that “*the revolution of our times has to be urban or nothing*” (Lefebvre 1996). As Harvey says, this notion is coherent with the Marxist point of view – by which the city is the locus and the aggregate of progress. Through these perspectives, the rural world is implicitly condemned to the global urban progress.

Here is Harvey’s definition of the “right”, as the engine of social progress:

*The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire. It is, moreover, a collective than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization* (Harvey 2012: 4).

What if we replace(d) the term “city” with “countryside”, “village”, or “rural”, etc. Nothing essential happens. It is still the same right. As Harvey puts it “Right to the city” is an empty signifier (Harvey 2012). The concept itself is not about the city, it is rather about the idea of “rights” – essentially a global issue. Therefore, I argue that the urban and rural cannot be perceived separately. That is why this article tries to avoid both past and current theoretical frames of the urban/rural dichotomy or continuum theories (see Wirth 1938, Redfield 1947, Lewis 1965, Hannerz 1980, Hruška 2014).

To be more precise, I consider the urban/rural connections an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1984; Tsing 2005) made of realities, practices, and social constructs that should be partially explored via the mix of hybrid core/periphery processes (Kraidy 2005) that are influenced by the global society and economy flows or disruptions, and mirrored and reflected on the social, ecological and economical microlevel of particular localities. In other words, I would like to discuss my perspectives on a specific case study of a “countryside” locality that I observed through the lens of socio-spatial hybridity which questions the urban/rural dichotomy. I use the term hybridity as a source of opportunities for overcoming the binary thinking that should allow the “*inscription of agency to subaltern and even permit the destructuring and destabilization of power*” (Prabhu 2007).

## Origins of “Geographical Hybridity”: Is there a bottom of the labour market?

*“The traditional city has been killed by rampant capitalist development, a victim of the never-ending need to dispose of overaccumulating capital driving towards endless and sprawling urban growth no matter what the social, environmental, or political consequences” (Harvey 2012: xv).*

Global cities are the original “vehicula” and “loci” of neo-liberal exploitation. But for the recent fluid global capital, the city is not that important. The rural – if it ever was – also is not. The core term in the quotation is, again, not the city, but the “sprawling growth”. The attributes “urban” or “rural” are, from the global point of view, superfluous, but the dichotomy has still its social importance on the everyday level, no matter that it economically does not fit the situation any longer. We should call this socio-spatial process a geographical hybridity.

Contemporary “geography” is based on diverse yet simultaneous processes. The globe represents only one space, but at the same time, the global system *economically (and therefore socially)* hardly engages spatial niches (not only “rural”) that are not sufficiently contaminated, exploitable, and sustainable by the logics of the neo-liberal capitalist economy. How and why are the lives of the people (no matter if from the city or countryside) changed, influenced, and transformed by this dissonant relation between the core/periphery and the urban/rural perspective that is embedded in the processes of multifocal capital dispersion, technological innovation, socialist heritage, or post-socialist transformation?

Throughout the last twenty-five years, the people in Sudličín had to observe how some of the former socialist enterprises bankrupted and some of them were transformed into joint-stock companies. These changes were caused mainly by the decline of agriculture’s position in state policy, by new farming technologies, and also by an influx of foreign capital that introduced three new-built factories located nearby the local centre of Loužná (town of 7,000 inhabitants). Some would say that the locals were lucky. In fact, the global industry “saved” the microregion from even broader and more visible peripherization (40% of jobs in the microregion are of an industrial character). But what is the price for it? This capital is held by foreign companies, which means – from the point of view of many locals – only the money earned by the workers remains in the microregion. Skilled electricity technician and locally well known self-educated photographer

Jan, who has lived in Sudličín all of his life and has worked for twenty years in a shifts at the local car component factory reflected on this unstable situation in the following manner:

*“There are lots of others – Vietnamese, Ukrainians. In the factory where I work, I have a problem understanding others – the Spanish are here, as well as Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Poles. We cooperate and communicate with our arms and legs. They are hard-working, but unstable. The people fluctuate a lot. In the past, you had your factory job, and you kept seeing the same people working the machines; nowadays, it is different each week, the question is if it is paying off (...) they (the local workers) are naturally pissed off. There was some foreign agency, and they somehow got to the information about how much they (foreign workers) were paid. The agency employees – they said it themselves but it is not authenticated – had better wages than us. It is unskilled labour and the same for everybody, but then the guy from the agency comes and he earns 6 or 8 thousand crowns (250–300 USD) more than us... People are sorry about this and it makes them angry.”* (Jan, 55, Sudličín, Loužná Microregion)

On the one hand, the microregion (and, the foreign workers groups – who are not the topic of the article – as well) should be seen as a space that is partially exploited by the hidden neo-colonial policy bonds connected with the global capital companies. We predominantly feel inferiority towards the unattainable sources of global capital (compare to Delanová 2015). Global capital makes no difference between urban and rural. Temporary contracts, three-shift operations, working restrictions, cheaper foreign workers agencies, a position at the end of production line – this is the everyday framework that nearly every family in the microregion experiences.

On the other hand, most of features of the “outside”, “predatory capitalist”, and “progressive” society and economy have become for some of the locals hardly comprehensible. This is, of course, not of their intellects or abilities. The main factor is a *hybrid social distance*, which is an assemblage of everyday experience and of the perception of (social)media contents. This distance distorts and warps itself according to the actual situation. Changes of this distance should be observed on socio-political (e.g. the increasing number of nationalist sentiments and far-right voters) and techno-economical strategies (the refusal to accept “progressive” beliefs, values and strategies). Metaphorically said, power and value structures are constantly trying to persuade everybody that

the gravy train is leaving, so some of the locals react by watching it live on TV, while later try to forget about it and create their own world, holding a beer can in the boiler room.

### Components of “Social and Geographical Solitude”

*“We believe in doing the right thing in the right way for the right reasons.”*  
(motto of US company that operates a factory in Southern Bohemia)

So far, the hybrid perspective has been rather blurry. What are the factors that make the rural world of late capitalism different from other forms of geographical and socio-economical peripherality, and therefore even more hybrid? The previously depicted “rurban” situation illustrates that (we are) politically, socially, and scientifically, as well, experiencing the need for the re-conceptualization of the perspectives on exclusion and marginality. I argue that according to the neo-liberal exploitation, there are forms of peripherization that can be defined as a mix of “social and geographic solitude”. Those forms were illustrated by the quotations and field notes in the first half of the text.

This “rural” social and geographic solitude has three interconnected but “frictious” (Tsing 2005) and disrupted components, which are informal and based on the combination of accelerating and opaque social dynamics of core/periphery perspectives of the world and political, material and economic situation of some areas:

1. Micro-social component. It refers to the hybrid life of the community, which is based on the interlocking of rural heritage and global trends and flows. It should be understood as the scene of the emptying village (global migration flows), where some spheres of everyday life are even more outward and mutual, so most people are well-aware of each other’s lives and attitudes. At the same time, the “post-socialist” notion of freedom forces those who desire liberties and still want to stay here to invent and occupy their atomisation “safe spaces”. This means that such non-adaptives are so well-known and occasionally “watched” by the other locals, so their strategies have to oscillate between visibility and invisibility. This illustrates why some local guys don’t go to the pub, but rather sit in their boiler rooms, as well as why the waitress has optioned to have closer bonds with the local “Pražáci” than with some of the locals. These forms of locally encoded sociality are hybrid *par excellence*, because they are based on the frictious processes of negotiation between values of community and individualist-capitalist atomisation.



2. National infrastructural component. National and governmental issues are often perceived through the images of local cores – often cities. Such representations show the local people’s imagined position in the socio-economically no longer existing urban/rural frame of the nation state and politics. These conceptualizations imply the sense of losing the positions held by “old countryside”. Feelings that the past will never return, and that some people are becoming more and more alienated by the city-like processes are best described in Eliška’s quote about the city.
3. The local reflection of global geopolitics and the economic strategies of important regional employers is the third component of this “solitude”. It can be illustrated by the feeling of exploitation, solitude, and invisibility in the context of global capital, migration, and labour strategies. This component shows the framework of the frictious and awkward (Tsing 2005), yet locally-negotiated hybridity that is represented by the melting mosaic of a former rural socialist setting with a mix of post-transformation changes brought by the so-called “western ideologies” – free market, foreign capital, European Union funds and legislation, etc. It is vividly described in Jan’s previous quotation (and is partially present in Eliška’s quoted opinions as well – development topic).

These components are interconnected and inseparable. In general, they create part of an assemblage which structures the local everyday life, actors’ strategies, practices and discussions over people’s lives in the microregion. What holds these three components together is the situational hybridization of urban/rural and core/periphery dichotomies – only this mix is useful in people’s everyday lives. Negotiations of rural characteristics should be seen as an example of filling the “empty signifier” of “rural” with meaning, no matter if socially or geographically. In other words, micro-explosions of rural consciousness depend on the actual environment. Its negotiation is diverse – based on the topics of local community, the perception of the local “Pražáci”, as well as on the transformation issues prescribed to foreign capital companies, to the national government, or to European institutions.

It has to be emphasized that people in the village who were depicted in the article are not formally excluded (in the terms of, for example, advanced marginality, see Wacquant 2008) from the local, regional, national, global society, and they are not in a risky financial situation. Their solitude lays in fact that they are constantly facing the hybrid components of late capitalism

core/peripherality – they feel strong bonds to the land, observe the ageing local community, and diminishing of the local culture, as well as the instability of local labour market. At the same time, they feel that they represent the peripheral but still integral part of the world – they want to participate, they are affected by national policies, geopolitics, and they observe the prosperity of the national economy while taking advantage of the outputs of modern technologies. All of these elements together hybridize them, which means to exclude, separate, as well as connect and engage them from/with the imagined “progressive”, “multi-faceted”, and sometimes “fallen” societies of the leading groups that define the ways of productive living strategies, general taste, and the worldview. TV, internet, Facebook, Tinder, etc. could only augment this unstable and awkward feeling. Is this situation, which evokes some of the features of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) – or, in this context, “Peripheralism” – is it the geographic and social (or cultural) otherness combined with the long-term power relations that sets these “artificial” spatial and symbolic boundaries into the hybrid core/periphery flows, and therefore increases some social tensions, policies, and local labour market strategies?

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