



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating the representations of the village in socialist Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

This study deals with shared ideas about the countryside and its inhabitants during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. It identifies the most significant sources of contemporary representations of the rural. These include, besides historical ideas pre-dating the regime, the party-state itself, expert structures, the arts, and pop culture. In many cases, representations encompassed efforts to transform the countryside, or society, or to maintain the status quo, and, following de Certeau, we can consider such activities to be strategies. On the other hand, villagers approached these representations and strategies using their own tactics. This study demonstrates that rural policymaking was not just in the hands of power structures; the effects it had depended a great deal on the dominated rural inhabitants.

Introduction

This study deals with representations and understandings of the Czechoslovakian countryside and its inhabitants during the Communist regime. In earlier eras, the rural and urban had been viewed as being very different. The Communists, however, attempted to eliminate this perceived gap in the interests of building on Marxist ideas, and the party-state understood a united society to be classless and therefore without class conflict, which was its goal. From this standpoint, the party-state developed the vision of a united nation that included all Czechs, regardless of class or religious affiliation, that had been born among nationalists in the nineteenth century. Although the interests of different social groups meant this dream never materialised, its core idea never went away. Indeed, after 1938, during World War II, it re-emerged in a new context and with new meanings, developing even further after liberation in 1945, when the victorious Czech nation saw unity, especially anti-Nazi and even anti-German unity, as the key to peace. After the Communist coup in 1948, it became the foundation upon which the unity of workers and peasants was built.

Historians studying representations of European rurality initially examined both literary sources¹ and landscape paintings.² This subject and approach was particularly popular among scholars inspired by Marxist thought, delineating evidence of class conflict and the unequal workings of capital in the countryside.³ Here, Raymond Williams's 1973 study *The Country and the City* was both ground-breaking and set an agenda for subsequent studies. In studying a range of representations of the countryside, Williams argued that these images were framed in relation to not just the workings of the rural but also defined in contradistinction to the urban. According to Williams, the 'contrast of country and city' as symbols helps us arrange 'more general processes' in society.⁴ Hence, the image of the country is a vision of the past and of community (*Gemeinschaft*), whilst the city is represented as the future, as a space of capitalism and individualism. Although Williams's analysis is primarily based on the study of literature, later

researchers would also work with archival sources, both written and iconographic,⁵ and study the relationships between representations of the rural and historical reality or social practice. For example, Michael Bunce analysed how ideas about the countryside ideal contributed to shaping landscapes.⁶

If current research about rural representations focuses on their historical and social embeddedness, and their reciprocal relationship with agency, the question this paper poses a slightly different question. How did rural representations change in the Communist era: Was there a shift from representations that distinguished different groups to an attempt to portray a united society? What is beyond doubt is that representations continued to play an important political role in this period, continuing the nineteenth-century representational practice in which nationalism was a critical framing device. These representations were, and continued to be, in part about the past,⁷ related social dynamics,⁸ constructed internal and external enemies,⁹ and even detailed Western counterparts.¹⁰ These representations were produced both by the party-state and society. Indeed, in the Communist era, there was a remarkably diverse and rich range of representations.

Conceptually, this paper takes as its starting point the idea that the 'countryside' is a social construct. It builds in particular upon the work of Owain Jones and Keith Halfacree, who agree that, for constructing the countryside, lay discourses, popular discourses, and academic and professional (political and bureaucratic) discourses are essential.¹¹ Halfacree, however, combined representations with the material, emphasising the material features of the rural (e.g., agriculture) and everyday practices influenced by the above-mentioned discourses (e.g., self-sufficiency, second-home ownership in the countryside). Halfacree draws from Lefebvre's three-fold model of space. This conceptual triad encompasses *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces*, which together produce social space. *Spatial practices* reflect the material dimension of space in the sense of its production and reproduction but also particular locations. *Representations of space* (or conceptions of space) are conceptualised by experts, who often develop them based on ideology and knowledge. *Representational spaces* are spaces lived through symbols and images that are created by the inhabitants and users of these spaces. Thus, every space is simultaneously perceived, conceived, and directly lived. Lefebvre also notes the dialectic relationship within this conceptual triad.¹² As Halfacree summarises, this means that 'each of the three facets cannot be understood in isolation from the other two'.¹³

Owain Jones' work has further developed this idea of the interconnections between signs, symbols, and practices. He understands them all as integral parts of lay discourses when he talks about 'people's everyday interpretations of the concept of rurality and of the places they see as rural'.¹⁴ Here, I must mention that I do not want to give up on the important question of whether ideas and images determine agency, or vice versa. However, answering this question is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁵ For this paper, what is more important is that agents making expressions about the rural do not distinguish whether they do so through words or practices. What is essential is that these representations (regardless of the form they come in, whether they are images, ideas, or practices) are meaningful and capable of entering into communication. Such communication can be viewed from various perspectives – whether it is directed to or outside of one's own group, especially if communication comes from power holders.

Elaborating on this point of view, Micheal de Certeau distinguished between *strategies* used by subjects with power (such as businesses, armies, cities, and scientific institutions), and on the other hand *tactics*, which are used by powerless subjects, the weak, in their everyday lives.¹⁶ De Certeau noted that even under the conditions of mass production and control over people's lives, ordinary people are not passive objects but, as consumers, readers, spectators, and pedestrians, are wilful, and creatively use goods, pop culture, and spaces following their own designs and based on their own needs. Here De Certeau describes tactics as *la perruque* (a French term for 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer'), bricolage, or poaching, which are used in daily practices such as talking, reading, watching TV, moving about, shopping, dwelling, and cooking.

In the second half of the twentieth century, in Czechia the all-powerful party-state asserted its perception of the rural. It requested the services and sometimes tolerated the activities of different groups of experts who took specific approaches to describing the countryside (especially architects, sociologists, and ethnologists). Producers of art and pop culture also (re)produced various images of the countryside.

These representations of the countryside encompassed various practices, whether they were attempts at transforming the countryside or maintaining the status quo. Steps leading towards the specialisation of agricultural production, the introduction of large-scale production, making services and goods available in rural areas, transforming the housing stock, or protecting vernacular architecture can be understood as strategies applied by power-possessing institutions that affected or targeted the countryside. On the other hand were the dominated rural dwellers, who approached these representations by applying their own tactics,¹⁷ confronting them with their own identities, observing them with careless humour, and also resisting social changes dictated by cities, or in the context of their own desires for change and experiences with the advantages of living in the city or the village. During this communication, representations of the village and strategies were adopted, rejected, and transformed by rural inhabitants in a process of negotiation.

Negotiation took place on the level of ideas (structures) – for example, beliefs that the countryside was pure or backwards – and on the level of practices, whether they were strategies (of institutions with power) or the tactics (of villagers) – for example, the government's efforts to eradicate economic disparities, wearing traditional dress, or practising self-sufficiency.

Even though de Certeau's theory of practices has been most useful for studying popular culture or dominated groups,¹⁸ his emphasis on subversion, appropriation, and resistance can help us better understand rural policymaking in Czechoslovakia. Negotiating representations of the rural should interest us for several reasons. It demonstrates that in socialist Czechoslovakia, there were multiple images of the countryside and strategies of rural policymaking. It also shows that rural policymaking was not only in the hands of the party-state and power-wielding institutions, but that its impacts largely depended on the dominated rural inhabitants.

This study summarises the results of a four-year research project examining representations of the countryside and rural policymaking in the Czech lands under Communism; some of the findings have already been published.¹⁹ Research began with an analysis of a sample of seventy-five village chronicles from various parts of the Czech lands covering the years 1945 to 1980. Even though during this period there were guidelines that suggested what issues chronicle keepers should focus on, many such chronicles reflect the remarkable perspective of each keeper as well as attitudes and practices shared by rural inhabitants. This analysis provided a general overview of representations of the countryside with which its inhabitants were confronted.

The print and broadcast media, as well as films, were the undisputed disseminator of representations of the rural. The research therefore then focused on contemporary printed periodicals intended for a rural readership (*Zemědělské noviny*, *Beseda venkovské rodiny*, *Naše vesnice*, *Vysočina*), national newspapers and magazines (e.g., *Rudé právo*, *Květy*), and television serials and films focusing on rural themes. The selection of the analysed periodical texts, serials, films, and their literary basis was based on sampling. In some cases, full-text searches of digitalised titles were used. These sources were then used to verify the representations of the rural contained in village chronicles.

I then studied how representations were used, strategies implemented, and tactics applied at the local level by studying documents produced by local and district governments, that of the *místní národní výbor* (MNV, or the local national committee) and the *okresní národní výbor* (ONV, or the district national committee). The research was focused on two geographical areas – the Blansko and Žďár nad Sázavou districts. The periodical texts and pop culture were analysed for the same purpose.

This phase of the research led not only to identifying the most common representations of the rural and the most frequent rural policy strategies but also the most significant actors responsible for producing these representations and strategies (e.g., the party-state, expert groups, and pop culture). How these actors represented the rural was then examined by studying contemporary publications, including books (political, academic, and popular science) and trade publications and academic journals (e.g., *Architektura*, *Zemědělské stavby*, *Výstavba socialistické vesnice*, *Sociologie zemědělství*, *Zemědělská ekonomika*, *Český lid*).

When studying sources produced during the Communist regime, we must keep in mind that there are limits on their validity given the censorship and self-censorship that was practised at the time.²⁰ This, however, does not mean that these sources do not provide evidence of the plurality of opinions and attitudes under Communism and that they cannot help us hear the voices of rural inhabitants. There are three arguments in favour of this point of view. First, many rural problems (especially in the 1950s and 1960s) were seen as the legacy of the so-called bourgeois First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), and therefore, criticism targeting them was approved by the party-state (e.g., the conditions of housing and infrastructure, the petty bourgeoisie in relation to consumerism/consumption). Second, the party-state supported criticism of social problems and economic shortcomings (but did not tolerate any questioning of its ideology), which could be aired in pop culture and in the media (e.g., problems with supplying food, consumer goods, and housing; theft of state property for building houses; labour morale). Third, in the analysed sources we also find space occupied by opponents of the party-state and its strategies. Most often though, it was through criticism of such ideas and subsequent repression (e.g., opponents of collectivisation).

Representations of the rural in the collective memory

The process of negotiating representations of rural areas and their inhabitants was affected by collective memory. In the context of this paper, I understand collective memory as a collection of mnemonic products (rituals, places, images, stories, etc.) and practices (commemorations, representations, celebrations, etc.) related to the countryside. It is important to note that the collective memory is not fixed, but instead is subject to 'fluid negotiation between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past'.²¹ Therefore, it is never homogenous. Until the twentieth century, Czech society took an ambivalent approach to imagining the countryside. Proponents of the civilising mission depicted rural inhabitants as backwards, in terms of both thinking and quality of life.²² Villagers (in the twentieth century) were imagined as gravitating towards an exaggerated conservatism and ostentatious religiosity. They were also thought to live unhealthy lives, in terms of the food they ate, the places they lived, and the personal hygiene they neglected. And of course, a rural life was also full of hard work. Rural backwardness was the result of the inaccessibility of services and infrastructure available in cities (plumbing, gas, electricity, and sewerage systems).

Romantic-nationalist images of unspoiled rural folk and their culture also persisted into the twentieth century. Although this idea lost political significance among the Czechs after Czechoslovakia was established as an independent state, it would gain new life during World War II and the German occupation.²³

From the late nineteenth century onwards, representations of the pure and unspoiled countryside, especially compared to the image of the city as a place of depravity, took on greater importance. Baroque writers had already praised the countryside, which they saw as the ideal environment for a moral, pious, and diligent life (Adam Michna z Otradovic, Jan Amos Komenský).²⁴ They were certainly inspired by ideas about the rural idyll going back to Classical times. This discourse was supported by trends in medical care and healthy living.

The world wars re-ignited the antagonisms between the countryside and the city. Food shortages hit urban populations much harder than their rural counterparts, many of whom could produce their own food. Moreover, during World War II, the right-wing-leaning countryside

adapted better to the new order. Social tensions culminated in many calls for the countryside to prove which side it had been on during the war,²⁵ but they never found political backing. After the war, there was a widespread belief in the necessity of establishing national unity, and the prohibition of the right-wing Agrarian Party, as the main organisation representing rural interests, was supposed to contribute to achieving this goal. But these changes did not erase the Romantic-nationalist or civilising representations from society.

The agricultural collectivisation that occurred in the 1950s left a major mark on the collective memory. The violent transformation of the countryside and the persecution of rural inhabitants were etched into the stories of rural families, their houses and land, and upended relationships in villages.²⁶ This part of the collective memory had an impact on the tactics used by rural inhabitants to deal with the representations and strategies of the party-state and other power structures throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The party-state and representations of the rural

Czechoslovakia began to undergo a sociopolitical reordering after 1945, which picked up in intensity after the Communist coup in 1948. During the initial charismatic era of Communist rule, dominated by the cult of personality, the party-state enjoyed the spontaneous support of a large part of the population. As economic problems mounted, however, people began to distance themselves from it. Liberalisation, which was sparked by the 1962 Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ÚV KSČ), and attempts at reform in the late 1960s were, following the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, replaced with purges within both the party and society. These ushered in a period referred to as normalisation, during which the regime consolidated its power, in part by ensuring that the consumer demands of the population were being met and that citizens had more time for private activities, for example, by shortening the working week or overlooking low productivity at work.²⁷

Life under the regime was not the same everywhere. It was affected by local conditions and the individuals who held power within the party, cities, villages, or enterprises. There was also no single image of the countryside; instead, representatives of the party-state often had differing ideas of rurality. We do, however, encounter an official version, based on Marxist ideas, which established the party's main policy line towards the countryside (i.e., its strategies).

Efforts to create a united society, free of internal conflict, and a bond between the workers and the peasants were a fundamental part of Marxist doctrine. The workers were given the leading role and were considered more politically mature due to the greater division of labour in industry.²⁸ This was a key point in ideological considerations that led to descriptions of agricultural workers as backwards and living in socioeconomic conditions that were considered outmoded. Collectivisation and the emergence of a new class, that of cooperative peasants, were thus perceived as comprising a transitional stage in society's journey towards Communism.²⁹

The first performative demonstration of the unity between the city and the countryside came immediately after the war, when large numbers of industrial workers helped with the harvest in 1945. National harvest festivals, at which government officials were present, were held in thirteen Czech cities and were attended by both urban and rural inhabitants.³⁰ Workers continued to help harvest crops in the following years, although the quality of their work often did not meet the expectations of farmers. During efforts to bring socialism to the countryside, urban industrial enterprises were supposed to bestow paternalistic patronage on farms. Enterprises signed agreements with agricultural cooperatives in which they promised to help them with political affairs such as persuading farmers to join the cooperative or explaining the relationship to cooperative ownership, but also with harvest work and improving technology.³¹ Likewise prominent artists bestowed their patronage on rural settlements to help develop culture. The first such programme to improve rural culture was initiated by writers,³² and later other types of artists would follow suite. Rural inhabitants also took organised sightseeing trips to Prague to better

understand the city.³³ Finally yet importantly, May Day celebrations, the most important of the regime's performance, played a critical role in creating unity between the countryside and the city. Ceremonies were held in urban centres, where rural inhabitants flocked, mingling with city dwellers in parades and demonstrations. This unity was declared on banners and in speeches.³⁴

At the material level, the party-state is built on the established agrarian representations of the rural. During harvest season, the entire nation turned its eyes to the countryside, which for a short time was the focal point of society. The media, both print and broadcast, was full of reports about the harvest that referred to it as a 'struggle for grain'. Such reports were usually put in the context of the necessity of achieving self-sufficiency in foodstuffs.

Another image of the countryside related to its material aspects portrayed it as a backward place. From the moment the war ended, living standards became a hot topic in the political discourse. The Communists, however, took an ambivalent approach to living standards.³⁵ They were concerned that highlighting this issue would be interpreted as an endorsement of the petite bourgeoisie lifestyle and thus refused to reduce the matter of living standards to a mere question of consumption.³⁶ Rather, they saw it as a means for creating the new socialist man and perfecting the socialist way of life.³⁷

Policy targeting improving the living standards of the entire population was a response to the unrest resulting from the currency reform of 1953, which saw people lose their savings overnight.³⁸ Later, the party-state focused on evening out the differences between urban and rural inhabitants. Both goals were to be met by increasing agricultural production. Thus, in 1962 at the Twelfth Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, plans were laid to bring agriculture up to the level of industry by 1970.³⁹ The same goal was reiterated at the next congress four years later.⁴⁰

This new emphasis on living standards was meant to mollify the populace after the social turmoil and political crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, the party declared 'certain successes' in efforts to bring the living standards of agricultural workers up to those of industrial workers.⁴¹ The census taken in that year, which also covered data about home furnishings and fixtures and household consumption, provided evidence of this.⁴²

At the end of the 1970s, it was officially declared that the quality of life in rural areas was on par with that in cities. A rhetorical shift occurred at the Sixteenth Congress of the Central Committee in 1981, when the general secretary of the party directly boasted about eliminating rural underdevelopment.⁴³

The critical strategies for increasing agricultural output before 1960 were collectivisation and mechanisation. Collectivisation went hand in hand with class warfare waged against large landowners. From the 1970s onwards, specialisation and large-scale production became key, as the village-based agricultural cooperatives (JZDs) originally formed during collectivisation were merged to create large agriculture enterprises.⁴⁴ According to ideologues, specialised agricultural workers were supposed to achieve the same level as industrial workers through their class consciousness as 'cooperative peasants', which was essential for the development of socialist society. Thus, the Marxist outlook led from increasing agriculture's economic performance to the general improvement of economic, social, and cultural conditions in the countryside.

Expert structures

Sociologists

Even under the Communist regime, sociology was a relatively diverse discipline with each of its many layers having a different relationship to the party-state.⁴⁵ However, the products of only two currents of rural sociology were readily visible in public fora: Marxist publications and empirical studies that avoided ideological issues altogether. Despite the dramatic transformations rural areas were undergoing, sociologists were mainly interested in matters related to agriculture and the

emerging 'cooperative peasant' class,⁴⁶ as the transformation of agriculture beginning in 1948 did indeed introduce the most dynamic changes in the countryside.⁴⁷ However, in the 1960s demographics shifted, and agricultural workers no longer formed the majority in rural areas. In small villages with less than 200 inhabitants, most people still did work in agriculture. However, in villages with populations from 1,000 to 2,000, 80 per cent of inhabitants worked outside of agriculture, many of whom commuted to towns and cities for their jobs.⁴⁸

Sociologists described agriculture as being underdeveloped as a result of the insufficient division of labour (i.e., little specialisation among workers), insufficient specialisation of agricultural enterprises, and low levels of mechanisation and automatisisation in agricultural production.⁴⁹ Sociologists also understood that urbanisation and industrialisation were inevitable processes, ones that had unfavourable effects on the demographic composition of agricultural workers. This typical rural section of the population comprised largely older, unqualified workers; very few young people; and generally poorly paid employees.

Sociologists asserted that class relations were less developed in villages compared to the cities.⁵⁰ By the 1960s and 1970s, cooperative members included both peasant farmers who had originally owned parcels of land farmed by the cooperatives and the descendants of previous landowners. According to sociologists, the second group of cooperative members had no connection to the land they worked and thus had a certain detachment from it as a means of production. The number of such agricultural workers grew slowly. The goal was to achieve similar relations to the means of production among agricultural workers as among industrial workers (who generally had less personal relationships with the means of production).⁵¹ Rural underdevelopment, when compared to urban conditions, also stemmed from the different nature of working in agriculture and industry. Sociologists also could not deny the stark differences between living conditions in the countryside and in the city.⁵²

Sociologists addressed rural economic disadvantages in Marxist terms. They perceived that the neglect of basic employee care in agriculture (e.g., lack of occupational hygiene, poor working environments, the large amount of difficult manual labour, etc.) resulted in a lower cultural level among agriculture workers. Although differences still persisted, in some ways rural culture was indeed improved.⁵³ For example, consumption levels increased, as demonstrated by comparative surveys of home furnishings and fixtures in rural agricultural and working-class households and in urban households. In contrast, sociologists saw the persisting underdevelopment of rural areas in the differing cultural interests of rural inhabitants and in the different needs of agricultural workers. Sociologists studied these interests through examining the leisure-time activities of rural inhabitants, both agricultural and industrial workers. They found that passive forms of leisure predominated, such as watching television.⁵⁴

From the 1980s onwards, we also encounter more frequent sociological studies about rural inhabitants' relationship to the environment. In this period, rural inhabitants were anachronistically still clinging to an admiration for modernisation, and the value of the rural environment was only recognised by those who inhabited it only once this idea spread from the city. Sociologists also found that villagers who moved to cities had a specific need for green spaces and related activities (e.g., gardening) that urban areas lacked.⁵⁵

Sociological representations of the village often veered sharply away from rational and technological solutions to problems facing the countryside (i.e., increasing pay in agriculture) towards solutions based on ideology or causal assumptions that were detached from the reality of rural life and would never appeal to villagers (e.g., the relationship to the means of production and the culture of work determining the living standards of individual workers). Pro-regime sociology used the language of ideology to describe rural underdevelopment and in doing so had to anachronistically highlight one aspect of rurality (agriculture and agricultural workers). The rural population was certainly not the target audience of sociological studies, but because the party-state incorporated sociological findings into its mechanisms of technocratic rule, they did have an effect on rural inhabitants. Interestingly, sociologists continued to focus on the idea of bringing rural

areas up to the same level as cities well into the 1980s, a theme that had fallen out of the political discourse when it had earlier been declared that rural underdevelopment had been eliminated.

Agricultural economics

The party-state, heavily emphasising the economic exploitation of the country and its inhabitants during the transformative 1950s and subsequent years of technocratic rule, associated the countryside with agriculture and its outputs.⁵⁶ The theoretical direction agricultural production was supposed to take was determined by agricultural economics. This discipline's institutional roots reach back to the pre-World War I era. In the interwar period, several agricultural economics institutions were active in Czechoslovakia. After 1945, there was a high demand for research on the economics of agricultural cooperatives. Changes after 1948 shifted research towards the planned economy and the economic efficiency of all branches of agriculture.⁵⁷ In the 1950s, Czechoslovak economists found inspiration in the work of their Soviet counterparts and adapted Soviet findings for applications in Czechoslovakia. Once agriculture had already been collectivised, the discipline contributed to studying various economic issues related to this sector. From the mid-1950s onwards, agricultural economists tackled the complex issue of how to transform individual cooperatives into large-scale production enterprises. Beginning in the mid-1960s, they emphasised intensification and agriculture's standing within the economy as a whole.⁵⁸ Thus, they attempted to contribute from an economic position to the goals that Marxist sociologists were speaking about. Economists began to base agricultural production on technological advancements and sought to fully industrialise farming. They concentrated on discovering the economic laws governing agricultural production and worked on issues related to planning in agriculture, optimising the use of different production conditions, and the geographical distribution of farming enterprises. They also studied agricultural workers, particularly their incomes and living standards.⁵⁹

By adopting a Marxist perspective, official agricultural economics promoted collectivisation, large-scale production, and intensification as key strategies in agriculture's transformation towards socialism. Under technocratic rule after mid-1950s, agricultural economics continued to play a prominent role. As Professor Jaroslav Kabrhel, the leading agricultural economist of the day, summed it up 'socialism and science are indelible'.⁶⁰

Architects and planners

The discipline of architecture was a diverse one encompassing architects working independently and research institutions dealing with designing entire rural settlements. Architects themselves also had varying links to the party-state ranging from avoidance to cooperation.

Even though architects, like sociologists, mainly associated rural areas with agriculture, they looked at them from other perspectives as well. In the late 1960s, these professionals noted that rural areas were home to more people than cities, and indeed more than 50 per cent of the population resided in villages. Over time though, this changed, and architects began to increasingly view the countryside as a recreational area. They regularly emphasised the environmental aspect of the countryside and also viewed it as both a source of raw materials and a space for constructing all types of buildings.⁶¹

Architects also described the countryside as being backwards. But for them, the reason was the underdeveloped nature of the building stock. A survey of a selection of villages in Moravia in 1950 showed 'that on average 30–35 per cent of buildings were ruined, uninhabitable, or had such fundamental flaws that the only way to remove them was by erecting new replacement buildings'.⁶² Similar criticism had earlier been voiced in the interwar period and emphasised how unhealthy and unhygienic living in such houses was. The same survey led to the finding that 'up to 35 per cent of the rural population is supplied with unhealthy water [...] fully functioning

sewerage systems are lacking in most villages'. These shortcomings were considered the legacy of capitalism, which, according to architect Aleš Viklický, only exploited the countryside.⁶³ They criticised the use of the kitchen for different activities undertaken by the whole family (as well as children spending time with adult smokers, sick and healthy people sleeping in the same room, and people sleeping with smaller animals in the same room) and the use of other rooms for other purposes than they were intended. Architects saw a basic strategy for improving housing in having bathrooms and closets by the entranceway so that dirt from adjacent agricultural buildings would not be brought into the main living space. They also sought to introduce certain aesthetic elements into interior design.⁶⁴

The new style of rural housing was performatively declared through the rebuilding of the village of Lidice, which had been burned to the ground by the Nazis. Here, four types of houses with a similar layout were built; they all featured a kitchen, three rooms, a bathroom, a pantry, and a guestroom on the upper floor. These houses were centrally heated and featured special furniture⁶⁵ reflecting the specific nature of rural life ('functional, robust furniture').⁶⁶

In the 1950s and 1960s, problems with the rural housing stock were addressed by building apartment buildings,⁶⁷ in keeping with the preference for collective housing.⁶⁸ Constructing such housing was cheaper, took up less space, and brought urban housing culture into the countryside. The typical four-flat building, with two flats on each floor, began to sprout up all over the country.⁶⁹

The model village of Rovná (in North Bohemia's Sokolov district), where ground was broken in 1966, represented architects' more progressive visions of rural collective housing. The village was centred around a concrete square, bordered by public and commercial buildings, surrounded by four high-rise buildings each containing forty-two flats.⁷⁰

Architects also saw poor access to services as another source of rural underdevelopment, as they had previously done in the interwar period.⁷¹ The basic strategy for eliminating this problem was the establishment of a 'centralised settlement system'. This idea was born in the early 1950s among urban planning and architecture researchers, who rejected the Soviet model of the *agrogorod*, or rural town, as unsuitable for the Czech environment due to its dense settlement structure, rugged terrain, and urbanisation, and thus proposed this system as an alternative.⁷² Planning was based on the idea that it was economically unfeasible for every village to offer all services. Thus, different categories of settlements were established, based on whether new construction was planned in them or whether there were plans to provide all basic services in them. Central settlements in this system were meant to provide services to people living in nearby villages. Geographers tried to join in the debate, but their work fell between the cracks.⁷³ A key role was played by a Brno-based regional planning research group, whose members in the liberal late 1960s subscribed to the ideas of German geographer Walter Christaller and his central place theory developed in the 1930s.⁷⁴ Because Christaller was a member of the Nazi Party, he had previously been taboo in Czechoslovakia. Research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s led to the gradual implementation of the system based on government resolutions issued in 1962, 1967, and 1971.⁷⁵

Unlike sociologists, architects applied strategies based on a rural image that reflected the real conditions in rural areas and what was possible in them. They ranged from designs for interiors and buildings for both rural inhabitants and urban cottage owners to planning entire villages and even the entire settlement structure of the Czech countryside. These architects based their plans on an image of the spatial, historical, economic, aesthetic, and settlement characteristics of the countryside that set it apart from the urban environment, as well as on the needs of urban inhabitants, including those who did not live permanently in villages (i.e., urban cottage owners).

Ethnologists

Soon after the Communist coup, ethnology was taken over by figures with pro-regime ideas, especially in Prague, at Charles University and the Academy of Sciences. The new political context

brought with it new research focuses: in the 1950s this meant worker culture, the ‘kolkhoz’ village (based on the Soviet research model), and eventually, the ‘socialisation of the village’.

In studying the culture of the socialist village, the main task was to describe rural progress in a socialist country, especially progress in material culture (agriculture and housing). Many ethnographic exhibitions in museums presented these issues. Research also concentrated on the identity of rural inhabitants and their cultural life (social life and rituals), which were affected by the reorganisation of agricultural production.⁷⁶

Besides conducting research, ethnologists were also involved in varying degrees in the regime’s use of folk traditions as a favourite type of cultural production and in the establishment of entirely new festivities (e.g., harvest festivals⁷⁷ and opening of the spring ceremonies⁷⁸). The party-state referred to some folk traditions as ‘progressive’ and being part of the socialist way of life. These ‘progressive traditions’ therefore lay at a point where ideas about national and socialist ways of life intersected.⁷⁹ But ethnology was still dominated by the study of remnants of traditional folk culture in rural areas, which avoided the direct influence of the ruling ideology. It was tolerated, however, because the nationally oriented Communist regime preserved traditional folk culture in the national representations.

In terms of material culture, this meant seeking out vestiges of traditional folk culture drawing attention to the anachronisms of contemporary village life and its persistent backwardness, which was now viewed in a positive light. In contrast, remnants of the old social order, religious life, and magic were considered negative holdovers. Ethnologists studied the various manifestations of the culture of contemporary rural communities (folk traditions, festivals, dress) through the prism of authenticity and observed that a major change had occurred. They emphasised the new context of folk culture, which they noted had very little in common with the world of the traditional village. Thus, ethnologists created a dual representation of the countryside: as a place of authentic traditional folk culture that had been sporadically preserved and the image of a modern, socialist village, which liberated people from hard labour but also resulted in cultural levelling and thus inauthenticity.

Nature conservationists

The natural environment was always a part of representations of the rural, including those produced under the Communist regime, especially in art. In the 1950s, radical efforts to control nature featured side by side a conservationist approach to the environment,⁸⁰ which had begun developing in the nineteenth century. The first legislation regulating nature conservation came into effect in 1956, and a state nature conservation organisation, the State Institute for Historical Preservation and Nature Conservation, was established in 1958. In addition to this organisation, Regional and District National Committees also had departments focused on environmental protection.⁸¹ In 1957, *Rudé právo*, the party-state’s main newspaper, published the first article about the government’s reflections on the negative consequences of industry on the air, water, forests, and soil in North Bohemia’s Ore Mountains (Krušné hory) and steps taken to protect the environment there.⁸² Simultaneously, nature as a value in and of itself began to receive greater appreciation among the general population. Whereas in the 1950s images of meadows and ponds in publications about the countryside were accompanied by texts calling for their economic exploitation, in the 1960s we also encounter more lyrical descriptions praising the beauty of the landscape.⁸³

Throughout the regime’s duration, professional nature conservation was dominated by the protection of carefully demarcated segments of nature (specific areas, species, and formations) as opposed to focusing on environmental protection as such. Instead, the state’s economic interests took precedence, which resulted in vague language being used in conservation laws (which were ineffective as a result).⁸⁴ Environmental protection began to be slowly put into practice in the 1970s, when the natural environment was understood as a part of the human environment, and a better environment, a sign of better quality of life. Thus, central policies of the party-state began to

be applied at the local level, in the form of regulating the appearances of public space and gardens, organising household waste management, and so forth.⁸⁵

Conservationists felt that the countryside should serve two functions. Besides recognising its economic importance, they, alongside architects, called attention to the countryside's significance as an environment in which its inhabitants lived and as a recreational area for the whole country's population. It was in the context of this conception of the countryside that they called for the protection of natural resources: the land, water, and air.⁸⁶ Thus, the conservationist representation of the rural wed appreciation of the countryside's natural beauty with concerns about the threats it faced.⁸⁷

Strategies affecting the natural environment in the countryside and people's relationship to it came from both expert groups and public administration structures. Given the diversity of actors in nature conservation, these strategies ranged from legislation and large campaigns (in the form of propaganda, competitions, exhibitions, and television programmes, and the organisation of local tourism efforts.⁸⁸

Art and popular culture

The main lines of the socialist cultural revolution were outlined at the Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1949, and the cultural life of the country's inhabitants became one of the regime's priorities. This 'revolution' encompassed many activities, including amateur theatre, film screenings, and propaganda lectures. The party-state gained control over existing cultural infrastructure (film studios, radio stations, publishing houses, newspaper, and magazine publishers) and sought to make it even more robust by establishing local radio stations, developing networks of local libraries and cinemas, and, starting in 1953, launching the first television station.

Both popular culture and the fine arts were subjected to censorship and self-censorship, and the party-state determined what would be produced. We can consider art and popular culture together because individual works became medium and genre fluid, and therefore, classifying them as being examples of popular or fine art makes little sense for us: for example, literary works were adapted for radio, television, and film; magazines printed film posters and fine art; films were shown both in cinemas and on television. Here I will focus on three broad areas of popular culture that had the largest impact on society: literature, film, and television.

The Communist regime used older literary works (and works of art) to construct a cultural timeline of the Czech nation that centred around two main themes: social conflict and the national movement.⁸⁹ Such works often reflected historical rural representations, such as idyllic paintings of the countryside by artists like Josef Mánes and Josef Lada and 'rustic novels' (*Bauernromane*). These works told the stories of moral, down-to-earth peasants who were often presented as the polar opposite of arrogant, hedonistic urban dwellers who lacked national sentiment. Even though this genre combining the idyllic and national representations flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century,⁹⁰ many works written in this period were reissued in the 1950s and later, and throughout the Communist era, these books were required reading in school.

The regime also put great effort into ensuring contemporary works were being made. Production novels and films worked not only with representations of the new social order and the new socialist man but also of the new socialist village.⁹¹ The 'idyllic perspective' from which the countryside was viewed in the past was to be replaced by the perspective of 'revolutionary builders of socialism'. The goal of such works was clear: to actively contribute to the revolutionary transformation of the countryside and to contribute to its socialisation.⁹² The more these works abounded in propaganda, the less attractive they were to readers and viewers alike. They were characterised by formulaic characters, stasis, and a certain detachment from reality.⁹³

After the initial phase of ‘building socialism’ in the 1950s, the regime changed tact, demanding that works of arts present an objective image of the contemporary countryside. This remained the case throughout the existence of the regime, even as how artists could express themselves changed. The 1960s brought a certain element of liberation to Czech culture. In cinematography, this period gave birth to the Czechoslovak New Wave, whose films often directed criticism at the regime and society. The relative freedom of the 1960s was followed by a return to stricter Communist orthodoxy in ‘normalisation’. Gradual liberalisation then occurred in the 1980s. In this, the launching of television broadcasting was a watershed moment in culture that brought two important changes: television was a truly mass medium that resulted in cultural levelling. Thanks to the widespread availability of television sets and the limited number of programmes broadcast, people throughout the country watched the same things. Serials were particularly popular. A survey conducted in the late 1960s found that they were a topic of discussion for more than 90 per cent of respondents.⁹⁴

We can identify several rural images that reoccur across genres throughout the Communist era. Some of them catered to the party-state’s demands, whereas others drew on past ideas and reproduced older views about rural backwardness and the specific nature of rural life.

1. The countryside was portrayed as a closed, somewhat isolated community with strong internal social ties. For example, one of the characters in a 1952 book set in the countryside asks, ‘A stranger? What could a strange person bring these days besides trouble! And where would such a stranger come from?’⁹⁵ People in the village ‘lived like one family’ (in the serial *Tři chlapy v chalupě*, 1963). The countryside was a distinct space, defined against the outside, from where influences and innovations came with which the rural community had to come to terms, whether these were the impersonal demands of collectivisation, agricultural mechanisation (in the serial *Nejmladší z rodu Hamrů*, 1975), or the specific figures who brought such things to rural communities, opening them up to the outside world (in the film *Velká samota*, 1959).

2. The countryside was still agricultural. The village was portrayed through the lens of agriculture (e.g., in the film *Vesničko má středisková*, 1985), and changes occurring in the countryside were the result of processes happening in agriculture: collectivisation and the final stages of the class war in the country, fought against large landowners (e.g., in the film *Slepice a kostelník*, 1950). In the late 1950s, films criticising collectivisation began to appear (*Velká samota*, 1959), followed by even more in the 1960s (e.g., *Všichni dobří rodáci*, 1968). Filmmakers returned to this theme during normalisation, when enough time had passed so that collectivisation could be described as ‘the good old days’. Although conflicts were mentioned, they were never depicted and thus did not disrupt the idea of rural unity (in the film *Náš dědek Josef*, 1976).

3. The countryside had its own distinct culture. This culture was often depicted through gardening and the houses people lived in, and in southeast Moravia, through wine-growing (in the film *Bouřlivé víno*, 1976). A crucial role was played by traditional folk culture (especially folk song and dance, dialects, and clothing), which was portrayed along the lines of an older representation – as a symbol of a vanishing world, which was, however, still alive in the anachronistic countryside (in the film *Frona*, 1954). In the novel *Velká samota*, the local teacher likes ‘the ribbons in the manes and tails of horses, the barouches, and here and there the traditional folk costume among the desolate black of would-be urban clothing, [and] takes joy from every kosárek [a traditionally decorated hat worn by men] he sees, from every embroidered cap. He almost foolishly clings to the local folklore, he feels as if he is its guardian and reviver, eager to find the slightest hint of respect for traditions and enforce it where there isn’t any’.⁹⁶

Folk song and dance, however, were presented in a new socialist context, where questions about their possible functions in a socialist society (in the film *Zítřka se bude tančit všude*, 1952) and about authenticity (in the film *Opera ve vinici*, 1981) were posed.

The close social ties within rural communities meant that their members practised social control on each other. ‘In the city, you can keep infidelity a secret, Václav, but here [in our village] you can’t’, says the JZD chairman to a livestock specialist in the film *Vesničko má středisková* (1985). The

positively understood natural traditionalism of rural inhabitants was combined with the perceived honour and obstinance of rural dwellers to create the positive trope of the 'hard-headed peasant'. Rationalism and the ability to properly understand problems and to know how to deal with them appears in the literary trope of 'common sense', which was attributed to rural inhabitants who were uncorrupted by education and progressivism.⁹⁷ Rural inhabitants were also still depicted as being big-headed (e.g., in the film *Půl domu bez ženicha*, 1980), a stereotype that had been around since the nineteenth century.

4. The countryside was anachronistic. Early Communist works portray villages as the places of 'yesterday', where superstitious villagers controlled by the greedy, reactionary Church lived,⁹⁸ that needed to be changed. The countryside was also considered conservative, patriarchal, gender unequal, and resistant to new ideas.⁹⁹ As the 1950s came to a close, the relentless urge to eliminate what was considered to be the countryside's anachronistic nature dissipated, but its old-fashionedness would continue to be regularly mentioned. For example, in a 1961 novel, we read the following line: 'The village lived its ordinary life. Nothing here changed, nothing new happened. Everything takes place slowly and as usual following the old ways'.¹⁰⁰ Sometimes works merely depicted the material aspects of village life; other times they contained value judgements about the conservatism or backwardness of rural inhabitants (e.g., as depicted through traditional interiors, clothing, encounters between tractors and horse-drawn vehicles, etc.). On the other hand, large funerals, which surprised city dwellers, represented a type of anachronism that was viewed positively (as depicted, e.g., in the film *Smuteční slavnost*, 1969). But still, the anachronistic way villagers thought and acted led to persistent misunderstanding between the inhabitants of the city and the countryside (e.g., in *Hogo fogo Homolka*, 1970).

As the materiality of rural life began to catch up with that of the city, filmmakers shifted focus. During the normalisation era, a popular motif was what happened when urban dwellers were confronted with life in the countryside, and vice versa (e.g., in the serial *Chalupáři*, 1975). In the film *Na samotě u lesa* (1976), urbanites who find their dream cottage in a village experience culture shock when they discover just how dirty life there is and how peculiar the cottage's rural owner is. Ignorance of the latest fashion trends led to villagers being stereotyped as backwards. In *Vesničko má středisková* (1985) the local doctor says to his neighbour: 'Did you ever notice how many of our girls don't wear bras? . . . That's some fashion, isn't it? I'm glad it finally arrived here in the countryside'.

In the 1974 film *Tři chlapy na cestách*, we witness a conversation between a man from the city and a woman from a village overflowing with stereotypes and ethnocentrism. He says to her, 'I had no idea that here in the village you know how to do such dances', to which she responds, 'Hmm. Did you think we were Bushmen and that everything we have we tore off the trees, eh?'

In contrast, the way city inhabitants behave is a source of amazement in the countryside. We find examples of villagers gawking at urban cottagers sleeping in. The clothing and fitness habits of urban cottage owners also highlighted the differences between the two population groups (*Na samotě u lesa*, 1976; *Vesničko má středisková*, 1985).

Such portrayals were still common in the 1980s, even though the gap between the urban and rural populations was no longer so large (e.g., the serial *Doktor z vejmínku*, 1982).

5. The countryside symbolised nostalgia, which was evoked by the vanishing of traditional folk culture (in the film *Opera ve vinici*, 1981). We also even find nostalgia in production novels. Although in Romantic ideas, the village represented the rural idyll, which was close to people's hearts, in the context of building socialism the village had to be destroyed and rebuilt to ensure 'a brighter tomorrow'.¹⁰¹ Later rural nostalgia would be rehabilitated. For example, as a 1961 put it: 'Excuse me, but I am clearly moved, as we are almost always moved, when we all of a sudden see from some hilltop an intimately known huddle of rural buildings, cottages, snuggling together like chickens to create an image so familiar to us . . . Yes, Březůvka, not just some ordinary [village], so vulgarised by those who clearly hold no respect for our rural beauty and idyll'.¹⁰² Nostalgia led to people leaving the city for the countryside due to environmental concerns, to tend to a cottage (e.g., in the serial *Chalupáři*, 1975), or to solve a personal crisis (in the film *Co je vám doktore*, 1984).

6. The countryside was undergoing depopulation. The city offered higher wages and the opportunity to do less demanding work. At first, moving out of rural areas was portrayed in a negative light. For example, in the 1959 film *Velká samota* a government official returns to his native village, where upon seeing abandoned fields and hearing that some locals have left for the city poses the question: ‘What, isn’t there anything to do here?’ Later, this same motif was presented as a way to deal with personal problems (e.g., in the serial *Nejmłodši z rodu Hamrů*, 1975) or to achieve personal growth (film *Jáchyme, hod’ ho do stroje*, 1974).

In the 1950s, pop culture, in the genre of the production novel and film describing collectivisation together with the building of a socialist society, was supposed to be a strategy for transforming the countryside. Later, pop culture would come to be dominated by an image of the village with roots in the past. The village was once again portrayed as a distinct space, socially closed off, full of anachronisms, and backwards, which was manifested in material culture but also in the behaviour of rural inhabitants.

Villagers and negotiating the representations of the village

Thus far, the paper has examined the negotiation of the image of the countryside in socialist Czechia from the perspective of rural representations produced by different power structures and the strategies they developed, which, however, did not always influence how actors from these structures behaved. For example, some members of the Communist Party continued to look down on the countryside.¹⁰³ Some Communists were frustrated by rural inhabitants’ resistance to change,¹⁰⁴ for which they sometimes enacted revenge by maintaining differences in the quality of life in the city and the countryside (e.g., through supplying goods of varying quality).¹⁰⁵

One unavoidable factor that determined how many people related to the party-state throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century was the effort to bring socialism to the countryside, especially collectivisation and class warfare in the countryside. Direct resistance to these strategies was complemented by the use of various tactics, at first primarily intentionally lowering performance in agricultural cooperatives. As one village chronicle keeper noted in 1959: ‘People went to work when they felt like it [. . .] They did not follow the work schedule’.¹⁰⁶ When cooperatives fell apart and peasants reacquired their old fields, their output increased. An entry from the Blatnice chronicle states: ‘Once they got all their land back [after the temporary disbandment of an agricultural cooperative in 1954] the very next day they went out to their fields to plough, sow, till, and do other work that they didn’t want to do before’.¹⁰⁷ Later, a key tactic was preferring to work on their own garden plots.¹⁰⁸

If we turn our attention to the rural representations of villagers, they were first and foremost based on their locally rooted identity. For rural inhabitants, the location itself had meaning – on the planes of ideas and actions. One-third of rural inhabitants favoured living in the countryside over the city due to their emotional attachment to their village as their birthplace, their strong social ties in their village, and the specific rural way of life (this is among the one-third who preferred village life).¹⁰⁹ In many places, local identity was expressed through manifestations of traditional folk, both directed to the local community and to society as a whole. For example, in 1976 the chronicle keeper in Dolní Bojanovice wrote, ‘about 40 per cent of the young people wear festive traditional costumes during large celebrations [. . .] Our [local] musicians often represent Dolní Bojanovice in folk dress. They have appeared several times on television’.¹¹⁰ Their identity was also dependent on the context in which rural inhabitants were viewing the countryside. Here, the relationship with the city was critical.¹¹¹ In the 1950s, villagers felt that economic inequality in the form of lower income is what set them apart from urban dwellers. They agreed with sociologists about the negative impact of agriculture’s irregular working hours and its low levels of mechanisation, which led to agricultural work being poorly respected.¹¹² Low wages and the recognition that agriculture was underdeveloped gave rise to feelings of frustration. A survey

conducted in 1969 found that only 2 per cent of agricultural workers under the age of 35 considered their working conditions to be good. One-third of respondents stated that ‘certain pressure’ was applied on them to work in agriculture, and 21 per cent suffered from an inferiority complex stemming from their work.¹¹³ They also agreed with architects about the lack of modern housing, services, and cultural activities in the countryside.¹¹⁴

Their primary concern was achieving a standard of living equal to that of urban areas. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and even into the 1970s, rural inhabitants adopted urban fashions, changed their eating habits, took up new leisure activities (e.g., travelling), and changed their general consumption patterns at an increasing rate. The rural housing stock was modernised, and residential units attempted to meet urban standards in terms of fixtures, furnishings, and comfort. Village roads were paved, sidewalks built, and street lighting installed. In the eyes of rural inhabitants these changes to public space brought rural living practically up to urban standards.¹¹⁵

In the 1970s, wages in agriculture improved, and sociologists noted greater satisfaction with living in the countryside. For example, comparative surveys conducted in 1971 and 1977 among all rural inhabitants (both agricultural and non-agricultural workers) found that the percentage of people generally preferring to live in cities declined from 43 to 13 per cent and that those preferring to live in cities for a specific reason increased only slightly from 24 to 29 per cent, while the percentage of respondents preferring to live in rural areas increased from 10 to 20 per cent. The percentage of people who considered a village as good a place to live as a city increased from 18 to 31 per cent. A significant factor in these changes was the perceived improvement in rural life.¹¹⁶

A later study found that villagers were attracted to the city by visions of modernly furnished flats, shorter commutes, better access to public services (due to proximity to administrative offices), better goods and services, and, in last place, diverse cultural, sporting, and social offerings.¹¹⁷ Similarly, visions of ‘a more comfortable life’ and richer ‘cultural life’, as well as the unavailability of new products or delayed access to them in villages, had a significant influence on the identity of rural inhabitants, when they compared themselves with city dwellers. Further, as environmental quality in Czechia plummeted, villagers began to appreciate more the rural areas they inhabited. In the late 1970s, living a peaceful life in a natural setting was the most valued positive aspect of living in the countryside.¹¹⁸

In addition to place, work also played, and still does play, an important role in identity building in Czechia’s rural areas. For example, the chronicler from the village of Věteřov ended a description of local employment with the motto ‘Work is life, work is joy’.¹¹⁹ In survey responses and in Czech newspapers, magazines, and pop culture from the era, we regularly encounter the idea that villagers, unlike pampered city folk, were hard-working, capable problem solvers. The self-built house, a practice permitted in 1953, epitomised this view of the hard-working villager.¹²⁰ Most people, however, were unable to hire an architect and therefore relied on the few available standardised house plans, which they then constructed themselves, modifying the design if necessary, procuring the materials (some of which were in short supply), and doing all the basic construction work themselves (they would hire local craftsmen to do tasks requiring specialised skills).¹²¹ Neighbours would often help each other build houses, but there was also a shady side to things involving clientelism, bribery, and black-market labour, which the regime generally tolerated, as it was unable to meet the demand for housing. Building one’s own house was a tactic villagers used to fulfil their dreams of modern living, as flats were often unavailable and were associated with particular jobs (especially agriculture). This tactic was exemplified on screen by the protagonist of the 1980 film *Půl domu bez ženicha*: ‘I have three daughters. No one knows the third daughter, but still she is beautiful and terribly dear to me, because she’s that villa there . . . We worked hard on her for three years, but I don’t regret it. Now, she’s there. You see, beautiful, perfectly furnished’.

Individual creativity, however, was often at odds with the ideas of architects,¹²² who criticised the layout of these houses, their tastelessness,¹²³ and the negative impact they had on their surroundings – for example, by using inappropriate paint colours and materials, being excessively

large, or generally lacking respect for the surrounding natural and built environment.¹²⁴ More than just architects criticised the ‘architectural levelling’ occurring as houses based on the same few designs were built across the country.¹²⁵ Regardless of architects’ opinions, in the 1970s and 1980s, building houses in villages became commonplace due to the increasing affluence of villagers. For the people who constructed and lived in these homes, they meant something else: the meeting of a certain standard and a status symbol contributing to forming their identity.

Although blocks of flats featuring running water, bathrooms, and flush toilets introduced modern urban living standards to the countryside, fulfilling the hopes of many villagers, these new housing units were also problematic as they were not conducive to practising self-sufficiency or the leisure-time activities that rural inhabitants were accustomed to: and it was such outdoor work, in the garden and so forth, that helped define their identity. In response, the people living in these flats modified them. They engaged in what we might call ‘guerilla gardening’ today, building rockeries, vegetable beds, sheds, rabbit hutches, and chicken coops in the public space around these new buildings.¹²⁶ There were other disadvantages to them. Due to their layouts, it was impossible to keep living quarters clean of the dirt that came from tending to animals, working in the fields, or simply walking through a village with no sidewalks. In response, for example, officials from the JZD in Vrchy-Věcov (Žďár nad Sázavou district) invested in modifying flat designs. These buildings had only two flats – each with a bedroom on the upper floor, which was separated from the ground floor and any dirt that may enter the home.¹²⁷ Another tactic used by the residents of these flats was to leave them once they found out they did not like living there. The first people moved into the blocks of flats constructed in the model village of Rovná (Sokolov district) in 1967. By 1970, one-half of the 500 people who had initially moved in left, replaced by new residents.¹²⁸

The value attributed to work was also embodied in the practice of self-sufficiency: villagers grew fruit and vegetables in their gardens¹²⁹ and tended to their own livestock, which were sources of food and extra income.¹³⁰ Food self-sufficiency was also a basic economic tactic that mitigated the impact of income inequality between rural and urban areas. But it was more than just an economic question. Homemade products (e.g., wine, jams, sausages, etc.) enjoyed great popularity. Due to the low-quality food items sold in shops, in public opinion, these products increased the status of producers or consumers.

Rural inhabitants applied certain tactics to fight against inequality and to respond to representations and strategies that they rejected or creatively modified. Villagers asserted their local identities at events organised by the party-state to demonstrate the unity between the working class and the peasantry, especially May Day parades held in city centres, where participants from the countryside represented their individual villages. It is no coincidence that during the political liberalisation of the 1960s several villages managed to disrupt performative displays of unity on May Day in city centres when they were granted the right to hold their own celebrations.¹³¹

There was also resistance to the system of central villages as a means for closing the gap between the city and the countryside, especially in villages that were doomed to gradual decline. Local officials, taking advantage of connections they had, tried to get their villages reclassified, which led, at the very least, to delays in fully establishing this system. They also prevented certain bureaucratic services from being eliminated in non-central villages (e.g., vital records offices).¹³² Villagers were especially displeased with prohibitions on constructing new buildings, which went against their wishes to build houses in their birth village, mainly for personal and economic reasons, instead of in a nearby central village where services were available.

Rural inhabitants were also at odds with ethnologists, as these two groups had different views on the village and its culture. This could be seen in heritage protection efforts, which the owners of rural buildings were generally not interested in and often went directly against ethnologists’ recommendations.¹³³ It was also visible in the folk song and dance movement. Ethnologists, in

their search for authenticity, respected innovations carried out in a ‘folk spirit’, but condemned all other forms. They also levelled criticism at folk ensemble performances presenting political topics. Ethnologists also commented upon the technical quality of performances. It should then come as no surprise that rural inhabitants did not agree with the criticism levelled against ‘their ensembles’. For example, in 1979 the chronicler from Dolní Bojanovice noted that the village inhabitants enjoyed a series of song and dance performances, stating that ‘it must be considered that tradition too undergoes development, just like everything else (e.g., today we don’t reap with a sickle but we harvest with a combine)’.¹³⁴

Villagers also objected to how they were portrayed in pop culture, for example, in the serial *Hostinec U kořátek*, which was set in a village and originally aired in 1971. Each episode often teetered on the edge of lewdness and featured a host of grotesque characters parading across the screen. The village was depicted as backwards, as revealed by its material culture, such as rural fashion (aprons, headscarves on women, men’s berets, etc.) and original buildings and interiors (tile stoves, etc.). Unlike urban society, the rural community was portrayed as being close knit, with everyone living like ‘one family’, whose members defined themselves in contrast to the inhabitants of cities, from where came modernisation in the form of villas, new interior designs, urban fashion, women’s liberation, ‘modern’ concepts of relationships, the rise of television culture, and so forth. This show did not reflect villagers’ true relationship to work, portraying them as being lazy and the pub as the hub of activities. Although initially well received, the show eventually began getting negative reviews in newspapers; the reviewers cited the opinions of viewers, especially those from rural areas,¹³⁵ who claimed that the serial presented an unrealistic depiction of village life. They objected most strongly to a tractor driver character, who, instead of working, spends his days in the pub. Urban viewers, in contrast, claimed ‘that this is largely the way the contemporary village looks’. Criticism of the serial went so far to generalise that ‘our socialist village and its inhabitants have recently – seen through the eyes of artists – become amusing figures rather than people’. The Ministry of Culture eventually opined on the matter, agreeing with the criticism and condemning the serial.¹³⁶

These forms of resistance and creativity were not the only responses to images of the village and the related strategies. Many villagers simply accepted them, even the negative ones. The surveys mentioned above provide evidence for this, as does the endless stream of people migrating from villages to cities.

Conclusion

This study uses de Certeau’s concepts of strategies and tactics to demonstrate the plurality of rural representations and rural policies during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. It shows that rural strategies were produced not only by the party-state but also by many expert groups and pop culture. Such fragmentation is natural. There never was a universal perception of what the countryside was or meant. In Communist Czechoslovakia, rural policy began to diversify in the second half of the 1950s, after a period of ideological rigidity. This change had fundamental impacts. On the one hand, old representations of the rural were reintroduced into pop culture; on the other hand, this re-diversification enabled many new policies thanks to technocratic governance. With reference to Djilas’s idea of the new class, we must pose the question of how socially permeated these power structures were, that is, to what extent did the rural population contribute to their policies targeting the countryside.

At the same time, De Certeau’s theory helps us see that the failure of these rural policies was not always the result of the party-state’s incompetence but of the conscious tactics of rural inhabitants aimed at these policies. These tactics were based on the identity of villagers and their attempts to defend their way of life. Rural tactics were connected with political resistance most evidently only during the heated atmosphere of collectivisation, when clear ideological lines were drawn. Future

research should examine whether and how tactics were later associated with resistance, motivated by rural inhabitants' beliefs that the government was incapable of solving their problems.

On a general level, this study demonstrates that De Certeau's theory allows us to look at rural policymaking in a new light, as a strategy that tried to change the countryside to meet the ideas and needs of power structures. On the other hand, the concept of tactics enables us to see that behind their seeming passivity, rural inhabitants were arbitrarily negotiating the rules established in centres of power.

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- 2 Cf. Stephen Daniels, Denis Cosgrove, 'Introduction: Iconography and Landscape', in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels, eds, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge, 1988), 1–10; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1983).
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