



RURALITIC

RURAL REVIVAL,
A LIFE IN THE INSPIRATIONAL
COUNTRYSIDE

Deliverable 2.1

Investigating Rural Europe Through a Social Space Approach: Key issues to consider when conceptualising the relationship between class and space in rural European areas.



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Project summary

Over the past few decades, rural areas have experienced profound socio-demographic transformations, driven by their roles in ecological, digital, and bio-economic transitions. These transformations, further accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have led to significant diversification, rendering rural regions complex and unequal – similar in many ways to major cities. Thus, a key problem concerns our knowledge about – and perception of these places because the tools, concepts, and above all the public policies traditionally applied are no longer suited to address the increasing diversity of contemporary rural areas. Our consortium, RURALITIC, is academically armed and well prepared and to tackle these challenges. The first step involves rethinking 'the rural' and examining the intricate relationship between social groups and geographical spaces. This conceptual requalification of what rural areas is, and can be, will enable the production of new scientific concepts and tools, including new data, surveys, indicators, knowledge and typologies, enabling a new and synthesised view of the current dynamics and processes of change and aid in foresight for public authorities. Secondly these new concepts and typologies will then be deployed to analyse the drivers of attractiveness, existing public policies, and innovative initiatives within rural areas. By implementing pilot projects and creating an initiative library, we'll tailor recommendations to diverse social and rural contexts. Finally, RURALITIC aims to envision and produce various scenarios for Europe's rural future. The main outcome will be a reorientation of public policies, from general policies to policies tailored to different rural areas, while maintaining the main orientations of European policies, focusing on sustainable prosperity, resilience, connectivity, and infrastructure.

Project keywords

Sociology, Covid, circulations, social morphology, statistical survey, ethnography, econometrics, cluster, rural social spaces, perception, attractiveness, public policies, library of initiatives, typology.

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Type of deliverable

Code	Definition	Selection
R	Report	☒
DEM	Demonstrator, Pilot, Prototype	☐
DEC	Websites, Patent Fillings, Videos, etc.	☐
Other	(please describe the type)	☐

Dissemination level

Code	Definition	Selection
PU	Public	☒
SEN	Sensitive, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	☐
CI	Classified, as referred to Commission Decision 2001/844/EC	☐

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Introduction

This report sets out reference options for developing research on rural Europe based on a social space approach. Drawing on a review of the scientific literature, it is suggested that this social space approach can significantly renew the research agenda concerning the relationship between socio-economic inequalities and rural areas. To achieve this renewal, the centrality of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984a[1979]) conceptualisation of social space – and the sociology it has inspired – is assumed. In this regard, the report reviews the main contributions of Bourdieu's sociology of social and symbolic space, demonstrating how they also provide points of reference for understanding relationships of homology with socially produced and appropriated physical space. From an analytical perspective, the report seeks to draw on what L. Wacquant has recently termed the 'Bourdieuian trialectic' (Wacquant, 2023) and which he has applied to the renewal of urban sociology. With the same priorities in mind, the report demonstrates that there are well-established points of reference for extending the development of this Bourdieusian trialectic perspective to rural contexts, thereby also contributing to the renewal of rural sociology and of so-called rural studies. By exploring the implications of these reference points with regard to the theoretical and methodological operations underpinning the constitution of the key concept of social space, the report provides an operational roadmap of core variables to be considered in the construction of rural social spaces, demonstrating how this procedure can promote the trialectic approach that the RURALITIC project aims to implement in order to understand European rural worlds. Considering the interrelation of these elements with research perspectives on physical and symbolic spaces, the report concludes by setting out the priority lines of analysis for applying the 'Bourdieuian trialectic' in rural Europe. This is done in light of a conceptual framework that considers modes of domination, the strategies of social reproduction employed by social agents and how these are embedded in population movement processes.

Bourdieu's social space approach and its consequences

Despite his seemingly detached perspective on physical space, Bourdieu's intellectual work contains analytical frameworks that are useful for understanding this topic. Indeed, in his analyses of colonial domination in Algeria (Bourdieu, 1958; Bourdieu & Sayad, 2020 [1964]; Pérez, 2022), in his research into the social origins of celibacy at different stages in rural France (Bourdieu, 2008 [1962]), in his analysis of the social dynamics generating inequality in post-war France's economic growth (Bourdieu, 1966), or even in the collective projects in which he was involved concerning the tensions inherent in the relationship between spatial proximity and social distance in large urban housing estates (Chamboredon & Lemaire, 1970; Pasquali, 2018),

Bourdieu makes specific contributions regarding the precise meaning of the relationships between diverse social positions and inscription in physical space. Such relationships already involve significant implications in terms of the production of social agents' dispositions.

However, the analytical framework we wish to apply can be seen even more clearly in Bourdieu's sociological work on education and culture. As it is well known, Bourdieu devoted himself to an in-depth study of the processes of domination embedded in relations with schools and culture. This study transformed the sociological understanding of class formation processes from topological and relational perspectives. In articles such as 'The Anatomy of Taste' (Bourdieu & Saint-Martin, 1976) and, above all, in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984a [1979]), Bourdieu employs the relational mode of thought he advocates, combining questionnaire surveys and ethnography with the statistical technique of multiple correspondence analysis (Rouanet et al, 2000). One of the most significant implications of this approach is the concept of social space (Bourdieu, 1984a, pp. 128-129). Social space is based on configurations of relations structured around divisions in the volume and composition of social agents' capital — fundamentally, social class, as well as economic and cultural capital, among others — and divisions in agents' social trajectories over time. In turn, these divisions are homologous to lifestyles, the space of which Bourdieu defined in terms of distinction, pretension and necessity (Bourdieu, 1984a, pp. 262-267; pp. 339-346; pp. 374-386). Extending the relational analysis to the three regions of social space — the bourgeois, petty bourgeois and working class — significant internal divisions emerge, defined by expressiveness, legitimate culture, and capital composition (economic and cultural) and the temporal inscription of social agents' association with these divisions. In addition to homologous configurations in the relationship with politics (Bourdieu, 1984a, pp. 451–453; Bourdieu, 1982), Bourdieu also defines a set of lines of inquiry that highlight possible homologies between social and physical spaces (Bourdieu, 1984a, p. 124). This line of thought became the central argument in the programme text entitled 'Site Effects', which Bourdieu published in *The Weight of the World* (1999[1993]). Preliminary formulations of this argument have since been rediscovered and recently published. They are particularly clear in their interpretative aims:

Social space tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties. This means that all the distinctions proposed about physical space can be found in reified social space (...). It follows that the locus and the place occupied by an agent in appropriated social space are excellent indicators of his or her position in social space. One may also note in passing that part of the inertia of the structure that makes up social spaces results from the fact that they are inscribed in physical space and can be modified only at a cost of a painful *work of transplantation*, by moving things and by uprooting or deporting persons. (Bourdieu, 2018 [1991], p. 107).

Although Bourdieu did not develop a sociology with an explicit focus on physical space, it remains true that he explores the implications for the socially produced and appropriated physical space of divisions and inequalities in social space and symbolisation at various points in his work (see also Bourdieu, 2000; Ripoll, 2023; Borges Pereira, 2024). As Loïc Wacquant has demonstrated, the concept of social space is a key category in Bourdieu's sociology (Wacquant, 2019). In recent work, in the book *Bourdieu in the City*, Wacquant explored the analytical implications of this by establishing a framework of analysis that considers the sociological problematisation of the city (Wacquant, 2023). The 'Bourdieuian trialectic' proposed by Wacquant in

this work considers the centrality of social space, interpreting the relations of homology established between it, symbolic space and physical space. While social space retains the active properties of the forms of capital with which social agents endow themselves (Wacquant, 2023, p. 38), symbolic space refers to the dispositions that structure the categories used to classify people, activities and objects and the movements of the body (Wacquant, 2023, p. 39). These categories are reproduced by social agents and various agencies, including the State. Physical space, in turn, refers to the geographical setting in which activities take place, as well as the location of infrastructure, buildings and activities. It is therefore significant in terms of the practical relationship of social agents with these elements, as well as the realisation of mental categories in space (Wacquant, 2023, p. 38, pp. 161-184). This trialectic is relational by nature, emphasising that each space is simultaneously a *product*, a *stake* and a *weapon* (Wacquant, 2023, pp. 6-10). As previously mentioned, it emphasises that the relationship between spaces is one of homology but may also involve replications of varying degrees, failures and disarticulations, depending on the configuration of the mechanisms and strategies of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1994). These result from the material and symbolic struggles defined within each of the three spaces and therefore require investigation, to which Bourdieu's sociology invites us (Wacquant, 2023, p. 9).

In addition to the Bourdieu studies already cited, there is substantial empirical research evidence to support the research proposal based on the Bourdieusian trialectic. Central to Bourdieu's approach is the concept of social space, which is based on an analytical framework grounded in the geometric data analysis (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010; Lebaron & Le Roux, 2015). This framework promotes relational approaches that emphasise class divisions (membership and origin) and the different forms of capital (economic, cultural and social). It has made it possible to document the significance of social divisions at different territorial scales. This has been achieved at the European level (Brousse, 2017; Hugrée, Pénissat & Spire, 2020) and at more localised territorial levels. Examples include national levels (Masclat et al., 2023) and urban levels (Prieur et al., 2008; Rosenlund, 2009; Borges Pereira, 2018), which have a clearly localised focus (Laferté, 2014). More targeted research has sought to prioritise the study of symbolic space by analysing lifestyles, varied representations, and the dynamics of symbolisation, including the relationship with the State (Authier & Cayouette-Remblière, 2025; Schultz Larsen & Nagel Delica, 2021). In turn, there is substantial evidence of the relevance of these analytical perspectives to research on rural contexts (Bourdieu, 1977; Reboul, 1977; Madureira Pinto, 1985; Ferreira de Almeida, 1986; Champagne, 2002). Recent research in the field of rural sociology has highlighted the importance of recovering a sociological perspective focused on the study of power and domination as a means of renewing the discipline (Brown & Schucksmith, 2024). Our approach seeks to contribute to this renewal by developing an empirical research design based on Bourdieu's triad, scaling it up and applying it to rural Europe.

If this is the analytical core of the approach we intend to implement—based on an assessment of almost five decades of research into social spaces and what, following Wacquant's proposal, are now referred to as symbolic spaces and physical spaces—it is important to examine in greater detail how this relates to the research challenges associated with its application in rural Europe. Given the centrality of the concept of social space to the research process, it is particularly important to define the core set

of variables implied by the rural social space approach. The following section of this report is therefore devoted to this task.

Core variables for social space construction and their implications for the analysis of rural Europe

As we have demonstrated, Bourdieu's work on education and culture redefined a whole tradition of sociological analysis of class divisions and their symbolisation (Bourdieu, 1984a). By adopting a relational theoretical and methodological perspective defined by concepts such as 'field', 'capital' and 'habitus', he made a significant contribution to redirecting research on social classes (Mauger, 2026) by redefining it on the basis of the concept of social space (Wacquant, 2019). Seeking to draw methodological conclusions from the intellectual journey outlined here, this section sets out recommendations for developing a multi-method, multi-level sociological approach to rural social spaces in Europe. Taking into account the relationship between rural social spaces and symbolic and physical spaces, this approach prioritises the core variables to be analysed. It provides a framework of reference for designing the methodology of research procedures involved in collecting, compiling and analysing empirical data on rural social spaces in Europe. It also opens up avenues for further analysis of symbolic space and socially produced and appropriated physical space. In terms of scope, it is important to bear in mind that the recommendations in question primarily concern the analysis of individual-level data. The decisions made in this regard pertain to the research procedures that have been established for the collection, compilation and processing of data derived from questionnaires, interviews and inventories concerning individuals. These decisions are associated with Work Packages (WP) 4, 5 and 7 of the RURALITIC project. It is imperative that specific adaptations are made in order to align these choices with analysis plans that depend on ecological and contextual data, such as those found in WP3.

It should also be noted that the recommendations promote an analysis of Bourdieu's legacy, practice, and interpretations in successive waves of research by a broad group of researchers in various national contexts. However, they only concern the priorities for retaining core variables in the collection and establishment of data. This does not equate to exhaustive use in the constitution of social spaces. The principal aim of this exercise is to guarantee the availability of core variables in the information collection procedures to be instituted in WPs 4, 5 and 7. As these variables are usually integrated into different geometric data analysis procedures (Rouanet, Ackerman, & Le Roux, 2000; Le Roux, & Rouanet, 2010), subsequent studies within the scope of the project will determine the set of variables and active modalities to be used in successive topological analyses, beginning with those related to the matrix concept of social space (Wacquant, 2019).

In light of these considerations, it is proposed that the concept of social space, with a focus on its rural manifestations, be operationalised based on the preservation of information using the following variables:

- The respondent's social class (information on members of the respective household should also be collected).
- The respondent's educational capital (measured by ISCED). This collection should be extended to other members of the household, particularly spouses, where justified.
- The respondent's working hours (daily or weekly) for individuals in economic activity.
- The respondent's working arrangements (remote or not) for individuals in economic activity.
- The respondent's class of origin (using information about the father and/or mother, or individuals responsible for socialisation at the age of fifteen).
- The educational capital of the respondent's parents (or individuals responsible for socialisation).
- The economic income of the respondent's household (monthly figures).
- The volume of land available to the respondent and their household. Groups with present or past economic activity in agriculture.
- Status of land available for respondents and household groups with present or past economic activity in agriculture (ownership, lease, etc.).
- Type of housing where the respondent lives (characteristics to be determined). Possible use of interviewer's description.
- Relationship to respondent's housing ownership and number of dwellings available.
- Status of respondent's housing – primary or secondary.
- Assets available in respondent's household (equipment, vehicles, books, etc., to be determined, as well as a possible value scale for different types of equipment);
- Place of residence: a general characterisation based on factors such as the number of residents or a grid to be defined according to the project's developments on rural typologies.
- Basic sociographic information on the gender and age of the respondent and members of the household; place of birth and nationality of the respondent.

As emphasised previously, the concept of social space is matrix-like. Different combinations and variations of variables and their respective modalities have been used to carry out geometric data analyses at the origin of social spaces of different scopes, with a particular focus on local social spaces (Bourdieu, 1984a, 1984b, 1989a; Duval, 2010; Duval, 2013; Ellersgaard, Henriksen, Kristensen & Larsen, 2017;

Coulangeon & Duval, 2014; Melldhal & Börjesson, 2014; Blasius, Lebaron, Le Roux & Schmitz, 2019; Lidegran, Börjesson, Broady & Bergström, 2019; Flemmen, Jarness & Rosenlund, 2019; Denord, Palme & Réau, 2020; Hugrée, Pénissat, Spire & Hjelbrekke, 2022; Börjesson, Bryntesson & Haru, 2025; Laferté, 2014)¹. Whilst sociological research into local social spaces has a clearly defined focus on urban contexts across different parts of Europe (Prieur, Rosenlund & Skjott-Larsen, 2008; Rosenlund, 2009; Borges Pereira, 2018), research into specific regions of social space (Amossé et al., 2023), or even into local social spaces in rural contexts (Champagne, 1987; Borges Pereira, 2010), has led to significant advances in knowledge in this field. Thus, when creating social spaces based on surveys, the combination of identified variables must enable the research objectives to be achieved. When the primary level of analysis is geographical and data are collected at ecological and contextual levels, priority should be given to collecting social stratification variables that reflect social divisions (Borges Pereira & Laferté, 2025). This is also important for understanding the significance of different traditions of sociological class analysis (Hugrée, Pénissat & Spire, 2020; Siblot, Hugrée & Pereira, 2025). Together with the possible levels of geographical delineation, this priority will enable heuristic approaches to the configuration of social inequalities with interrelationships that can be conceptualised based on typological frameworks for rural territories (Aubert, Lépicier & Schaeffer, 2006; Hilal, Barzak, Tourneux, Schaeffer, Houdart et al., 2011; Bruneau, Laferté, Mischi & Renahy, 2018; Hedlund, 2016; Hedlund & Lundholm, 2015). The analysis of social space, due to its methodological design and the information embedded in its constituent variables, allows us to explore the relationships between its key properties, such as the overall volume and composition of capital, the trajectories of social agents and the structuring factors. Statistical and sociological analysis of these structuring factors provides detailed insight into how social space is configured according to the gender, age, geographical location, migration practices of social agents (Atkinson, 2018). This enables precise coordinates to be established for understanding the social morphology of the topological configurations identified within social space. This advances sociological knowledge based on relational and intersectional frameworks. Participation in the social division of labour in rural contexts, and thus in the social space, is characterised by clear gender divisions. These can be identified through territorial statistics but are best captured by a survey-based approach. The research design planned for WP4 of the RURALITIC project in France, Portugal, Sweden and Denmark, and on a pilot basis in Poland, will enable this line of research to be fully implemented.

In this context, the relationship between symbolic and physical spaces is characterised by identifying suggested lines of analysis rather than taking an inventory of variables. This approach is considered more heuristic at this stage of the research, enabling the selection of variables pertaining to symbolic and physical spaces to be carried out in an approximate manner for the time being. In the Bourdieusian trialectic favoured by this approach (Wacquant, 2023), symbolic space is understood to involve constructing an interpretation of lifestyles and representations (Bourdieu, 1984a [1979], 1989b; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1992; Rosenlund, 2009; Bennett et al., 2009; Roose, van Eijck & Lievens, 2012; Hanquinet & Savage, 2016; Borges

¹ Many of these studies are collaborative research projects that provide empirically tested solutions for developing research models based on the concept of social space. To avoid making the bibliography too extensive, it should be noted that these works and their developments have been carefully reviewed by the project team. Several members of the RURALITIC project team also contributed to some of the works cited here.

Pereira, 2016; Börjesson, 2016, 2018; Cartier, Coutant, Masclet & Siblot, 2016; Atkinson, 2021). In line with Bourdieu's research and that of others who have built on it, it is proposed that comprehensive information be collected on everyday practices in terms of their social and cultural aspects. This should also cover the classification and representation systems that respondents develop in relation to these practices. Initially, the practices should allow us to capture their domestic, local, and urban impacts (the latter in the sense of being more extensive territorially). The representations should enable us to determine how respondents classify their lifestyles and the contexts in which they live (Wacquant, 2023; Schultz Larsen & Nagel Delica, 2019, 2021, 2024), with protocols adjusted according to knowledge of rural experiences and their historical inscription (Lynch, 2024). Combinations of knowledge of lifestyles should include protocols for understanding contact formation processes and social capital (Cayouette-Remblière, Charmes, & Steinmetz, 2025). Similarly, the approach should include protocols designed to understand the practical and symbolic dimensions of the circulation of social agents, including variables designed to document respondents' relations with means of transport and residences (see also Barbieri et al., 2025; Börjesson, Bryntesson, & Haru, 2025; Fromentin, & Pistre, 2021). In this regard, the incorporation of an analytical perspective on legislation and planning concerning land use at different levels of analysis (national, regional and local) is both essential and critical. The various policy frameworks, which involve political struggles and mobilisation at the symbolic level, establish the conditions for the structuration of social spaces and play an active role in shaping the physical and built environments (Bourdieu, 1980, 2005; Hartmann, Hengstermann, Jehling, Schindelegger & Wenner, 2025; Wacquant, 2023, pp. 82, 126-127; Pinçon-Charlot & Pinçon, 2018).

The physical space that is socially produced and appropriated is captured through an exhaustive characterisation of the surveyed locations from the perspective of activities and populations. This characterisation takes as a reference the material and symbolic properties that define the locations in the context of regional and local variation. At the first level of analysis, this characterisation is envisaged as being carried out in dialogue with the socio-economic typologies on rurality, thereby benefiting from ecological and contextual data processing (Tabard, 2002; Eder, 2019; Pecher, Tasser, Walde & Tappeiner, 2013; European Commission, 2021; Emanuelsson, Johansson & Ekman, 2008; Weingarten, Neumeier, Copus, Psaltopoulos, Skuras & Balamou, 2010; Tillväxtanalys, 2014; Grundel, 2022; Stjernberg, Norlén, Vasilevskaya, Tapia & Berchoux, 2023; Talandier & Acadie Coopérative, 2023; Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya & Penje, 2024). At a second level of analysis, it is considered heuristically valuable to explore sources of information that can contribute to identifying geophysical components and their relationship with human activities and spatial use, including soil and its social production (Reboul, 1977). This opens the door to exploring the relationships between grids, roads, buildings, night-time lighting and CO₂ emissions (Gómez et al., 2025) in exercises that approximate the ecological condition of social and class inscriptions (Collective 'Classes Vertes', 2024, p. 15). At the third level of analysis, the procedure for characterising physical space must include identifying its relationship with the built environment, using a more detailed approach whenever possible (Paliou, Lieberwirth & Polla, 2014). This approach may include the configuration of the space as architecture and its types, benefiting from the study of its uses (for a theoretical and methodological appraisal of this area of research, see, among others, Pinson, 1993; Segaud, 2007; Léger, 2012;

Gilbert, 2016; Cayouette-Remblière, Lion & Rivière, 2019). This third level of analysis will benefit from contextual data resulting from observation work carried out when preparing fieldwork associated with questionnaire surveys and/or interviews. However, it should be possible to establish a fourth level of analysis that draws on data from questionnaires and interviews with users of these spaces. If the characterisation of relevant spaces is exhaustive, surveys on the availability, use, and circulation of/within these spaces can establish this link with the help of a specific set of variables.

Figure 1 shows a concise traceability matrix which links the concepts and analytical dimensions prioritised by WP2 of the RURALITIC project to the territorial indicators of WP3 and shows how these are operationalised in WPs 4, 5 and 7. A more detailed version of this document can be found in Appendix 1 of this report. This last version enables more direct links to be established between the various Work Packages, the conceptual frameworks they use and the questions and variables they prioritise.

From concepts to data: the RURALITIC analytical framework

Linking WP2 conceptual dimensions to territorial indicators (WP3) and individual-level data (WP4, WP5 and WP7)



Figure 1: A concise traceability matrix linking WP2 concepts and analytical dimensions to WP3 territorial indicators and to their operationalisation in WPs4, 5 and 7.

Note: a comprehensive and verifiable version of this matrix can be found in Appendix 1 of this paper.

Here, then, is a proposal for operationalising a core set of variables that constitute the concept of rural social space, along with the analytical framework that should be prioritised when interpreting its relationships with symbolic and physical spaces. The

following section sets out the main analytical priorities of applying this trialectic perspective to the analysis of rural Europe.

Applying the “Bourdieuian trialectics” to rural Europe: analytical priorities for a research programme

Drawing on Bourdieu’s trialectic, an analysis of rural worlds must take into account the way in which social spaces, symbolic spaces and physical spaces are structured through dynamic processes embedded in relations of power and domination (see figure 2). Rural territories should not be interpreted as stable or homogeneous entities (Halfacree, 2006). In fact, they are structured around specific patterns of settlement and differentiated uses of physical space, shaped by the interaction between economic activities, patterns of sociability and temporal rhythms. Applying a trialectic perspective to rural social spaces in Europe involves combining it with the study of modes of domination, systems of reproduction mechanisms, and strategies of reproduction of social agents (Bourdieu, 1994). This is set within a framework of societal recomposition and transition that transforms rural worlds into specialised contexts. As sociological research has shown, the process of urbanisation, including its practical impact on everyday life and symbolic significance, is deeply rooted in rural European landscapes and not confined to urban areas (Rémy, & Voyé, 1992; Glesbygdverket, 2008; Brenner, 2014; Brenner & Katsikis, 2020; Lefebvre, 2022). As the nature of the responses in these rural contexts needs to be determined, they may potentially entail extensive movement of goods and/or people. While the association between rural contexts and agriculture is a classic element of European rural landscapes, industrial and extractive activities also play a role, fuelling complex demographic movements that generate both emigration and immigration (Smith, Philips, Kinton & Culora, 2019). Conversely, tourism and changes in residential patterns involving complex systems of primary and secondary residences, exacerbated by connections to cities and the adoption of remote working and digital nomadism, are also causing centrality to shift and generating gentrification (Bryson, & Wyckoff, 2010; Phillips, Smith, Brooking & Duer, 2021; Zwęglińska-Gałecka, 2021). While rural exodus and intra-rural mobility have historically been considered a structural feature of rural areas (Zagorskas, Makutėnienė, Stauskis & Dijokienė, 2026), it is important to recognise the significance of biographical movements throughout the life cycle, including education, employment, retirement, leisure activities, and free-time routines (Nordin, Hammarlund & Bergh, 2025; Hult, Perjo & Smith, 2021). It should be noted that multi-residency in rural worlds is an option for certain social groups (Hjort, 2023; Steinbrunner & Schartmüller, 2024). Although the RURALITIC project prioritises analysing alternative ways of structuring the social space in European rural contexts, this perspective is particularly well-suited to examining different social positions, including those defined by their relationship with agriculture in its various forms, intersections and structuring factors. This includes the positions of agricultural entrepreneurs, whether male or female (Van der Ploeg, 2009; Backman & Palmberg, 2015; Esparcia & Serrano, 2016; Laferté, 2018, 2021; Hedlund, Lundmark & Stjernström, 2017; Griffin & Phillips, 2024; Shortall & Prendergast, 2026),

as well as those involving manual labour by local or migrant workers (Hjort & Malmberg, 2006).

From this perspective, rural areas are characterised by the potential for a variety of specialised economic activities to coexist, including agriculture, industry and extraction, as well as a wide range of personal care and provision services. These activities are embedded in spatial configurations that intersect with and align to recreational uses, such as tourism, leisure activities and second homes. This variety of uses contributes to the fragmentation of physical space, as well as the diversification of social positions and the trajectories associated with them. Seasonality is therefore a key element of the dynamics inherent in rural settings (Martín Martín et al., 2020). Periodic influxes of visitors, tourists or temporary residents can shift the focus of centrality, temporarily conferring prominence on areas that more static approaches view as merely peripheral and marginal. These processes contribute to the reshaping of the physical organisation of space through the intensification of infrastructure, housing and service use, as well as of patterns of sociability, socialisation and symbolisation. Drawing on research using similar sociological models (Borges Pereira, 2021), the research being developed within RURALITIC suggests that these processes generate alternative configurations of interaction and representation, shaped by the relationships between permanent residents and transient populations. Further investigation of these relationships is therefore required.

These transformations can be analysed using a set of hypotheses that link social and physical spaces, which are understood in terms of either homologous or disjoint relations. In some contexts, the concentration of working-class populations in positions of economic disadvantage corresponds to their location in areas of industrial or extractive activity that have been abandoned and are characterised by environmental degradation and a decline in investment (Lana-Renault et al., 2020). In other contexts, processes of impoverishment and social desolation — associated with demographic decline and the erosion of local social networks (Zagorskas et al., 2026) — coexist with forms of agricultural intensification, where physical space is exploited to the maximum despite the weakening of social structures (Nowack et al., 2023). In many cases, this intensification of agriculture also entails the intensification of migrant work (Pereira et al., 2021; see also, for a perspective of this process in America, Holmes, 2013).

Conversely, other configurations reveal the growing importance of gentrification and residentialisation processes, particularly in peripheral zones and areas of environmental or heritage value (Parkinson, & Pendlebury, 2019; Pato et al., 2026). Here, the reconfiguration of social space — through the arrival of more affluent social groups — is accompanied by transformations in physical space. These include the regeneration of built heritage, the preservation of landscapes, and the expansion of residential construction in coastal and mountainous regions. Similarly, there are various ways of defining the legal frameworks that govern land use for productive, extractive and residential purposes (Kah, 2020; Philip, Wilson & Duffy, 2024; Schermer, 2011; Stenbacka & Mathisen, 2023; Stoustrup, 2022). The allocation of physical space in rural areas is one of the characteristics that research has long highlighted as being specific to rurality (Madureira Pinto, 1981; Mathieu & Jollivet, 1989). This issue is now becoming increasingly important, as disputes over land for productive purposes, mining and permanent, secondary or tourist residential uses are emerging in various rural contexts. This is intensifying the political struggles surrounding land-use legislation in different European countries (Hartmann et al.,

2025; Ofoegbu, Balzter, & Phillips, 2023). These dynamics involve power struggles within the state and bureaucratic fields, as well as their regional and local manifestations. In these, social agents and groups engage in politics in various ways (Bourdieu, 1980). These dynamics often result in new forms of symbolic valorisation, reclassifying territories as desirable and contributing to the redefinition of local identities. But can also mean the (re)production of forms of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, Slater & Borges Pereira, 2014; Malatzky & Couch, 2023) and discontent (Lundåsen, 2024).

Taken together, these processes emphasise the significance of analysing rural areas as relational and procedural configurations. In these configurations, social, symbolic and physical spaces are reconfigured through mechanisms of domination and strategies of reproduction that are embedded in patterns of population movement. Bourdieu's trialectic is therefore a powerful tool for understanding the ongoing transformation of rural Europe, as well as its structure.

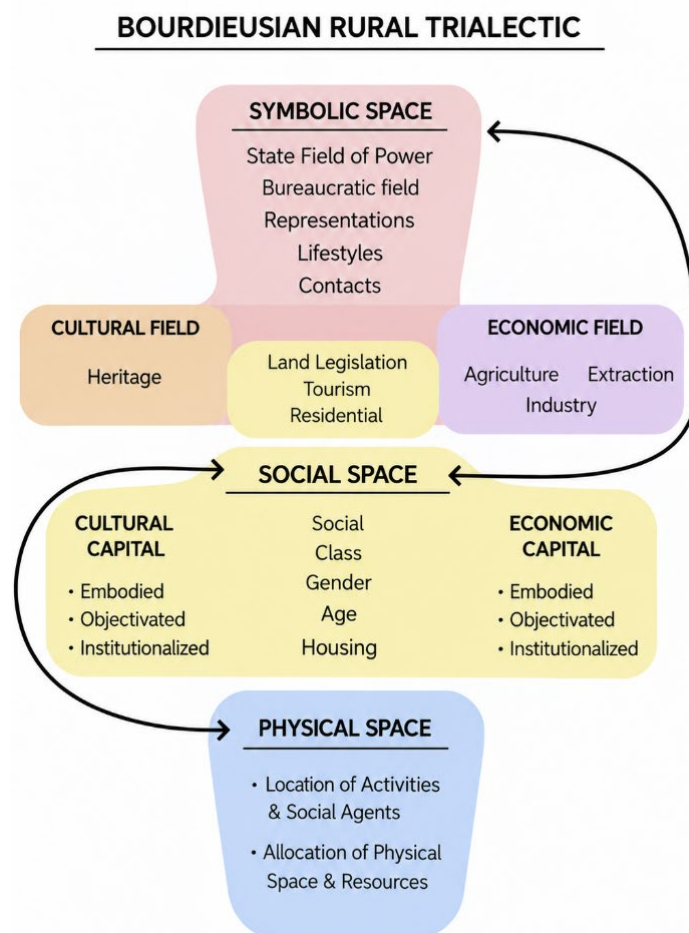


Figure 2: Bourdieusian Rural Trialectic.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Wacquant (2023).

This conceptual phase is designed to determine the research priorities for WP3, WP4 and WP5 – the typology, the questionnaire and the ethnographic fieldwork, respectively – with a view to subsequently identifying appropriate public policies by

type of territory (WP7). The main risk at this stage of the programme's progress lies in the overly broad scope of the European NUTS 3 statistics, which do not allow sufficient detail to differentiate the evolving physical spaces in contemporary rural Europe. To address these challenges, we are deploying alternative statistical approaches through our own questionnaire (WP4) and ethnographic methods (WP5). In parallel, we are exploring national statistical approaches that provide a more detailed spatial analysis. We are making good progress in France through the OPOSOM joint programme, and we are trying similar approaches in Sweden, Denmark and Portugal as part of the RURALITIC project. This will provide an alternative to the overly broad spatial grid at European level.

Conclusion and next steps

In short, Bourdieu's sociological approach can be used to investigate the city and other industrial and rural contexts in a creative way. The concepts of social space and symbolisation play a key role in defining an operational perspective for studying social and symbolic inequality with a clear physical spatial dimension. Combining the reconstruction of the statistical history of territories and their typological modelling within a multilevel analysis alongside the use of questionnaire surveys to analyse the relationship between the economic and class positions of social agents, population movements and their respective practices and representations from a social space perspective is demanding in terms of time and resources, but achievable.

This report establishes a conceptual and methodological framework for analysing rural Europe through a Bourdieusian trialectic centred on the relationships between social, symbolic and physical spaces. The report's key idea is that rural areas should not be considered homogeneous, but rather as dynamic and relational configurations where social positions, capitals and trajectories are connected to practices, representations and the material and spatial environments in which social life takes place. These configurations are shaped by power relations, mechanisms of social reproduction and population movements, and are therefore subject to processes of recomposition and transformation.

The review undertaken in Work Package 2 (WP2) has provided a set of established theoretical and empirical reference points for developing this perspective in the study of rural Europe. In particular, it has enabled us to identify a core set of variables for constructing rural social spaces. These include social class, economic and cultural capital, class of origin, work, land, housing, assets, place of residence, and sociographic characteristics such as gender and age. These latter characteristics allow us to study the structuring factors of these social spaces. At the same time, the analysis has identified complementary lines of enquiry for symbolic space, centred on lifestyles, representations, social capital, circulation and the institutional and historical inscription of rural experiences. For physical space, it has highlighted the importance of analysing the location of population and activities, infrastructure and environment, the built environment and architecture, equipment and accessibility, and processes of physical-space transformation.

Another outcome of this work has been to establish an analytical link between conceptualisation and empirical research. The traceability matrix developed in this report illustrates how the dimensions identified in Work Package 2 (WP2) can be linked to territorial and ecological indicators in Work Package 3 (WP3) and to individual- and household-level variables and research protocols in Work Packages 4, 5 and 7. This provides the basis for a multi-level research design, enabling individual social positions and trajectories to be interpreted in relation to differentiated territorial contexts and rural typologies. The approach is deliberately heuristic: identifying core variables does not predetermine the final constitution of social spaces, since the selection of active variables and modalities depends on subsequent geometric and topological analyses. Nevertheless, it preserves common and preliminary analytical possibilities. This integration is essential for transitioning from a set of parallel data resources to a relational analytical infrastructure that can support the creation and comparison of rural social spaces across Europe. The objective is to integrate these sources and levels of information into a coherent, comprehensive data integration model.

A second major step concerns the development of a model of rural perceptions in Europe, building on the historical research initiated in WP2, task 2.1. The reconstruction of the historical representations and perception of rural areas provides an essential complement to the socio-economic and territorial dimensions developed in the present report. Following the footsteps of Topalov, Coudroy de Lille, Depaule and Marin (2010), this study will analyse the historical representation, categorisation and valuation of rurality in different European contexts. It will begin by cataloguing and understanding the ‘words of the rural’. It will also explore how these representations relate to evolving social structures, political and institutional frameworks, and transformations of the physical environment (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2015). This work should ultimately provide a historically grounded model of rural perceptions that can be brought into dialogue with the contemporary analysis of lifestyles, representations and territorial practices developed in the subsequent WPs.

Taken together, these two next steps — the comprehensive integration of the project's empirical data and the construction of a historically grounded model of rural perceptions in Europe — will consolidate the conceptual framework established in WP2 and enable its full empirical development. The objective is not simply to produce comparable indicators of rurality, but to develop an integrated relational approach capable of explaining how social positions, symbolic classifications and material territories interact, reproduce and change over time. In this sense, the present report constitutes a foundation for the subsequent empirical stages of RURALITIC and for the development of a comparative sociology of rural Europe grounded in the relationships between Social Space, Symbolic Space and Physical Space.

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Appendix 1

WP2–WP3–WP4/WP5/WP7 Concept–Variable–Indicator–Operationalisation Traceability Matrix

Conceptual dimension	Variable / analytical dimension	WP3 – Territorial proxy / indicator	WP4, WP5 & WP7 – Operationalisation
SOCIAL SPACE	Social class	—	Respondent's social class, and equivalent information for household members, based on occupation.
	Economic capital	Gross Value Added per capita	Household income; land volume and status; housing ownership and number of dwellings; household assets.
	Cultural capital	Knowledge / Employment	Educational capital (ISCED) of respondent and, where appropriate, household members; educational capital of parents/socialisation agents.
	Working hours	—	Daily/weekly working hours of economically active individuals.
	Working arrangements	—	Remote/non-remote working arrangements.
	Class of origin	—	Father's/mother's occupation or that of individuals responsible for socialisation at age 15.
	Land	—	Land volume and status (ownership, lease, etc.) for households with present/past agricultural activity.
	Housing	—	Housing type, ownership, number of dwellings and primary/secondary status; interviewer description where relevant.
	Assets	EU Cohesion Policy Funding	Household assets, including equipment, vehicles and books; types and possible value scale.
	Place of residence	Regional inscription – NUTS 3	Characterisation according to population and/or grids developed through rural typologies.
SYMBOLIC SPACE	Sociographic characteristics	Population projections 2050; old-age dependency	Gender, age, place of birth and nationality of respondents and household members.
	Lifestyles	Tourism nights spent	Comprehensive information on everyday practices and their social and cultural dimensions.
	Everyday practices	—	Practices analysed through domestic, local and wider/urban territorial inscriptions.
	Classifications and representations	European Quality of Government Index	Respondents' classifications and representations of practices, lifestyles and living contexts.
	Social capital and contact formation	—	Research protocols addressing contact-formation processes and social capital.
	Circulation	Migration volatility; demographic dynamism	Practical and symbolic circulation, including relations with transport and residences.
	Institutional inscription of rural experiences (political and planning)	Voter turnout; anti-EU voting	Relationship of social agents with policy and planning traditions in their contexts.
PHYSICAL SPACE	Historical inscription of rural experiences	—	Representations and research protocols addressing rural experiences and their historical inscription.
	Location of activities and populations	Territorial characterisation of activities and populations; rural typologies	Linking individual-level data to survey contexts and WP3 rural typologies; 40 survey contexts across the four survey countries.
	Infrastructure and environment	Average internet speed; grids, roads, buildings, night-time lighting, CO ₂ emissions	Linking respondents' backgrounds and social trajectories to contextual infrastructure and environmental characteristics.
	Built environment and architecture	Housing rental affordability	Relationship with built environment, architectural configurations, types and uses.
	Equipment availability, use and circulation	Travel time to health services	Availability, use and circulation through relevant spaces, captured through questionnaires and interviews.
	Rural spatial configurations	Energy capacity	Settlement patterns and uses shaped by economic activity, sociability, temporal rhythms, tourism, leisure, second homes and seasonality.
	Physical-space transformations	Index of land degradation	Transformations associated with agricultural intensification, industry/extraction, environmental degradation, gentrification, residentialisation, heritage regeneration, landscape preservation and construction.

Note: The WP4/WP5/WP7 column has been explicitly populated in this report version to make the operationalisation visible. A dash (—) indicates that no distinct WP3 territorial proxy/indicator is specified for that analytical dimension. The operationalisation of WP4 is complete for the three types of spaces (social, symbolic and physical). This is reflected in the existence of corresponding variables in the already pre-tested version of the survey to be conducted in WP4 in France and Portugal, as well as in the modalities envisaged for its implementation in Sweden and Denmark. The operationalisation of a core set of variables for social spaces in WPs 5 and 7 is also complete. The operationalisation of symbolic and physical spaces for WPs 5 and 7 is ongoing and will evolve on a step-by-step basis as and when applicable.