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Pavel Klvač (ed.): *Kulisy venkovského života/ Scenes of Rural Life*

Drnovice: Občanské sdružení Drnka. 2006. 61 pp.
ISBN 80-239-7956-6

Pavel Klvač (ed.): *Na tom našem dvoře/ In Our Backyard*

Drnovice: Občanské sdružení Drnka. 2007. 73 pp.
ISBN 978-80-254-0882-7

Pavel Klvač (ed.): *Pospolitosti nikdy dosti/ Closeness Never Too Close*

Drnovice: Občanské sdružení Drnka. 2010. 71 pp.
ISBN 979-80-904591-0-6

Pavel Klvač (ed.): *Lidé na venkově/ Rural Dwellers*

Drnovice: Občanské sdružení Drnka. 2011. 73 pp.
ISBN 978-80-904591-2-0

Pavel Klvač (ed.): *Krajina za humny/ Backyard Landscapes*

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In 2012, the fifth and final volume of a series of books dedicated to the countryside of the Drahanská Highlands was published.[1] This series was prepared and published by Pavel Klvač in collaboration with his students in a course called "Rural Sociology" taught at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno. Each book, as well as the entire series itself, has thus far only received sporadic attention, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the fact that in many ways this pentalogy is on the margins of Czech social science: thematically it

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falls under the categories of rural sociology and environmental humanities, and methodologically it utilizes visual social science methods, whereas the approach it takes to both its subjects of study and the public that it tries to address makes it a work of public science. Thanks to this marginality, Klvač's pentalogy can be considered an important contribution to the development of alternative approaches in the Czech social sciences, and thus a contribution that deserves more than just marginal attention.

Each volume in this pentalogy aims to capture selected phenomena representing contemporary rural society in the Czech Republic via a combination of black-and-white photographs and brief captions (in both Czech and English). The common overarching theme of the entire project is a study, to use Pavel Gibas' phrase, of "the hybridity of rural space" (Gibas 2009: 103), i.e., the blending of the old with the new, the traditional with the modern, and the local with the global. Each title in the series, however, focuses on a different theme in an attempt to portray the relationship between the traditional and the modern. Of course, this is not done through the perspective of the innocent eye; instead, these works seek to find visual illustrations of phenomena, subjects, and problems whose definitions stem from rural sociology and environmental thought about landscapes.

The photographs and captions contained in the first volume in the series, *Scenes of Rural Life*, depict the material attributes typical of rural life. The term *scene*, in its theatrical sense, according to Klvač's introduction, refers to the material objects of traditional farm life that have been stripped of their original useful value and have been transformed into symbols of the traditional, into *props* recalling the traditional in a modernizing countryside. (These objects include horse-drawn wagons, horseshoes, whips, small religious structures, outhouses, and wagon wheels affixed to walls.) The material products of handiwork can also be considered parts of these *scenes*, although they do not so much demonstrate the frugality and creativity of traditional farming culture as the ways that people dealt with the lack of material goods during the communist era. Thus we can see: a plastic bin attached to the chassis of a baby carriage (p. 31), a go-kart made of welded-together pipes (p. 11), a well-thought-out water-catching contraption made of bathtubs, drains, and barrels (p. 14), a greenhouse made of plastic sheeting (p. 18), a greenhouse made of glass jars (p. 29), a rabbit cage (p. 19), and a DIY meat smoker (p. 19). Handymen still use cast aside and locally available materials in the Czech countryside today, although this skill has been largely pushed aside with the availability of pre-fabricated materials and the unraveling of consumption links to locally available goods.

It is this invasion of the modern, urban, and non-local that a third group of pictures portrays: a doorstep made of industrially produced tiles (p. 27), a prefab fountain, railings, and plastic conifers (p. 13), a neatly manicured lawn and robust aloe plants growing in plastic flowerpots (s. 13), a large house built in the "Baroque businessman" style, decorated with balustrades, towers, terraces, and bay windows (p. 26), and the controversial, deteriorating football stadium in Drnovice, built to hold seven thousand fans in a village with a population of over just two thousand (p. 9).

The photograph of a pig in a sty on the cover of the second book, *In Our Back Yard*, indicates the main subject of this volume: rural *self-sufficiency*. The study of rural modernization here focuses particularly on village courtyards and backyards, which have been

gradually changing from multifunctional areas equipped for raising farm animals to recreational areas where one no longer moves from the sty to the manure heap in rubber boots and overalls. Today, most people walk between the grill and the pool in sandals and swimsuits. Nonetheless, photographs of small farm animals do appear in the book as a key indicator of self-sufficiency: Mr. Blažek's goat (p. 10), poultry on the manure heap (p. 12), and a picture from a pig slaughter (p. 14). Once again we find here pictures depicting handiwork, which is unquestionably connected to self-sufficiency, as both emphasize frugality. These two phenomena also share an existential bond: the products made in the workshop of the handyman are often used for raising farm animals and growing crops – for example, a DIY tractor (p. 56), a centrally heated greenhouse (p. 26), a rain catcher (p. 30), and a henhouse made from on old kitchen counter (p. 60). Just as in the first book, here too we find several photographs depicting modernized and urbanized courtyards and backyards that have seen neither handyman nor farm animal for many a year: a fake cat on the roof and a fake lamb in the yard (p. 18) and a well-manicured lawn, mulch, wooden sculptures, and paths and curbs made of concrete slabs (p. 36). The book closes with a photograph of a raggedy scarecrow standing in a field (p. 62) as a kind illustration of a disappearing symbol of small-scale agriculture and handiwork, which at the same time is a tribute to Rudolf Šmíd's studies of scare-crows (1999; 2009).

The third volume, *Closeness Never Too Close*, attempts to capture the consequences modernization has had on the countryside by examining rural closeness as a typical attribute of ideas about traditional rural life. The aim of this photographic expedition was to capture the places and events where and when rural dwellers come together and where rural closeness has survived: in this book we can see a photograph depicting a line of people waiting in front of a mobile butcher shop (p. 10), scenes from the production of plum brandy (p. 12) and its consumption (p. 26), a bench as a symbol of the space between the front yard and door of a house as a semi-public place, intended for the inhabitants of the house to interact with others around them (p. 14), conversing bus passengers (p. 16), shoppers in front of a local shop (p. 22), team sports (p. 28), and guests at local pubs (pp. 42 and 48). Although there are only a few rare depictions of the consequences of modernization and the ever more intensive penetration of urban individualism and anonymity into rural communities (see, e.g., the photograph of a high fence separating the public from the private, p. 28), each caption mentions these consequences; each illustration of closeness is accompanied by a textual description that reminds us that rural forms of socializing are on the decline.

The fourth volume, *Rural Dwellers*, shares much in common with its immediate predecessor, as it focuses on local figures who are often at the center of public events in rural areas. This volume is an exceptional genre piece within the pentalogy as it contains only portrait photography. Some of the portraits seem to be somewhat superficial to me; they were taken in the homes of those portrayed and thus out of the context of the activities that make them locally important or interesting figures. Most of the portraits, however, can be considered good examples of documentary photography taken in an authentic environment: for example, pub keeper Miloš Jura standing behind the bar (p. 18), the Krátký couple touching their beautiful beehive carved out of the trunk of a lime tree (p. 20), or tinsmith Tomáš Baldík in his workshop (p. 60). One photograph however cannot express the life stories of these people and their

communities that took years to create; thus, key information of value and interpretation can be found in the captions more than in the photographs that they accompany.

In the final book of the pentalogy, Klvač tackles a subject that is closest to his research interests: although the relationships and connections between culture and nature and the character of the cultural landscape are dealt with in each of the preceding books, *Backyard Landscapes* (Klvač 2012) deals with these issues the most. The rural landscape is a hybrid – just as are rural material culture, courtyards and backyards, and rural community life – where various attempts over time to subjugate nature and the landscape itself can be found. The Czech landscape is still often a remnant of the communist past, as attested to by large fields (p. 18) and allotment garden "colonies" (p. 44). We can also find the remnants of traditional agriculture and culture in these landscapes: sunken lanes (p. 16), balks and groves (p. 28), springs and wells (p. 40), and small religious structures (p. 30 and 34). These traditional landscape elements have been slowly creeping back into the Czech landscape in recent years; in many places, these changes are occurring simultaneously with attempts to turn the landscape into one big attraction for tourists – covered in asphalt, bicycle paths, and look-out towers (p. 12) – and attempts at subjugating the countryside to interests from outside the region, as the existence of power lines (p. 46), water towers (p. 24), television towers (p. 22), etc., demonstrates. The environmental focus of the book can be found not only in the photographs but also in the captions that describe the relationships between the botanical and ecological (including references to the growing season, the botanical identification of tree species in the landscape, mentions of ecosystems, etc.) on the one hand and the social and cultural on the other.

Visual social science is unique in that it incorporates technical images into the process of producing scholarly knowledge on three levels: (1) as a data collection tool; (2) as a subject of study; and (3) as a tool used for representing scholarly knowledge. By opening any of the books in Klvač's pentalogy, it is clear that the photographs serve as a data collection tool and as a key representational medium, but less as a subject of study. Klvač's pentalogy thus follows in the realistic traditions of visual social science and landscape photography (including inhabitants and architecture), where each photograph serves as a document, a catalogue record of a certain type or problem discovered by a scholar and photographer, an illustration of a certain process or phenomenon as evidence of the existence of that which has been photographed. In this regard, Klvač's pentalogy is an atlas or photo album of the hybrid aspects of the contemporary countryside. It should, however, be mentioned that by itself this book series is a good illustration of the fact that the realistic approach to photography is still relevant and beneficial, both in everyday life and science, and that not every use of photography as a method of data collection and representation of knowledge needs to be subjugated to (self-)reflective and critical examination and questioning.

Although the visual element of this project is clear and incontestable, how can we be sure about categorizing the photographs and captions it contains, both genre-wise and in terms of academics, as scholarship? Is it, rather, better described as a documentary project? Or is it just a collection of interesting, anecdotally captioned photographs? The connections and differences between documentary photography and visual sociology (and even often photojournalism), or between science and non-science, have been discussed frequently

within the context of visual social science. Photojournalism, documentary photography, and sociological photography have much in common: they draw from the same tradition of understanding photography as evidence, they focus on very similar topics, as a rule practitioners become involved in the issues they depict, etc. Although in recent years there have been intensive efforts at intentionally blending science with non-science, especially within innovative and creative approaches in the social sciences (see e.g., Becker 2007; Knowles and Cole 2008; Sullivan 2009; Vannini 2012), certain differences between scientific and non-scientific methods of photography can be identified; I believe that it is still advisable to maintain these differences.

In this regard, the most famous such studies are those of Howard S. Becker (1995) and John Wagner (2004), according to whom whether photography is sociological, documentary, or journalistic mainly depends upon the context in which the image is used, the way in which it is legitimized, and the reaction it elicits from its viewers. According to Becker, photographs are sociological if they contribute to answering existing sociologically relevant questions or forming new ones and if they are accompanied by sociological text that defines them and grounds them in sociological discourse. Wagner also talks about the necessity of surrounding photographs with other types of data (statistics, tables, graphs, diagrams, the comments of those photographed, etc.) and explaining their use with an explicitly formulated research design including methods and theory. From the perspective of these two authors, Klvač's project can certainly be categorized as visual social science. The research plan, the methodological grounding of the project, the focus on the questions posed within rural sociology, and the close connection between the photographs and the sociological, albeit somewhat unconventional, captions lend themselves to the scientific character of the work.

Photographs and text may be combined in many forms. For the first book of the pentalogy, Klvač selected a format that is somewhat reader- and viewer-"unfriendly." Each photograph is marked only with a brief caption noting the month, year, and place in which the picture was taken; the full captions have been placed in a special, separate section at the end of the book. He appropriately chose to change this picture-text format for the next four books, in which photographs and text are combined on a two-page diptych with the left-hand page featuring a photograph and the right-hand page the caption. This manner of combining image and text is already well established in the social sciences (see, for example, Bateson and Mead 1942) and is considered to be most reader-friendly. By looking at just one photograph (for example, Klvač 2006: 10), it would be hard to tell that the conifer trees in the flowerpots are fake, and not everyone who looks at this photograph would come to the conclusion that the countryside is becoming uniform and that the bonds between traditionally used local material resources for building houses is slowly coming undone. The same can be said about a photograph of the village shop (Klvač 2006: 12); from this image alone, one cannot come to the immediate conclusion that competition from supermarkets and shopping centers is forcing small local shops out of business, a phenomenon that is complicated not only by the attitudes of rural inhabitants toward everyday goods but also by the fact that one of the most important places for forming rural closeness is being destroyed in the process.

Visual sociologists and anthropologists tend to base their defense of using photographs in the social sciences on Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination (compare,

for example, Knowles and Sweetman 2004: 7). If the sociological imagination involves the ability to understand the connections between individual biography and history, between the personal and the social, the specific and the general, then photography is often considered a significant helper for the development of this imagination. There is no doubt that joining an image, for example of a specific rural scene, with a caption that leads the reader to consider the consequences of the modernization of the countryside, its transformation, hybridization, etc., truly connects the specific and the personal with the general and social. Thus, visual social science and the concept of the sociological imagination have always had a close relationship with the ideals of public sociology, especially in the form articulated by Michael Burawoy (2004; 2005) and inspired by Mills (1959). Attempts at using images for the purpose of representing scientific knowledge have always been motivated by an attempt to move beyond science based on inaccessible academic jargon. I do not have sufficient space here to present Burawoy's concept in detail, let alone to summarize the rich and ambivalent discussion that has developed around it (see, for example, Nichols 2007). However, I will present his concepts of *traditional* and *organic* sociology.

A typical example of *traditional* public sociology is a written text that utilizes a form and style that is accessible, and which serves as a vehicle for introducing scientifically grounded arguments into the public discussion. *Organic* public sociology is based on efforts to involve social actors in the research process and to involve them in initiating certain social changes (see Burawoy 2005: 7–9). Klvač's photographic-sociological project can be classified under both of these types of public sociologies. The books of his pentalogy are free of inaccessible academic jargon; they are understandable. Klvač uses them to try to introduce various aspects of rural modernization into the public discussion in a traditional manner. I cannot judge how the inhabitants of the Drahanská Highlands received his books (Klvač himself never writes about this), although even without this knowledge, his project can also be viewed as an example of *organic* sociology. The origins of this pentalogy are very closely connected to the studied region and its inhabitants, mainly thanks to the Drnka Civic Association which has published all five volumes of the series. The goal of this association is to develop community volunteerism in the village of Drnovice and the surrounding region with an emphasis on reviving its social and cultural life and nature conservation and landscape protection. Pavel Klvač, the chairman of the Drnka Civic Association, thus *organically* combines his research activities with a sense of engagement in the place and community which he studies and in which he lives.

Klvač's pentalogy stands at the margins of Czech social science for two reasons: it is visual and public. The use of visual methods in Czech social science has always been sporadic, although its popularity has been increasing. Without giving a detailed overview, Blažek's *Venkovy* (2004) must be mentioned in particular as a key inspiration for Pavel Klvač's project, with its visual methods and public character. Furthermore, I should mention several general works about visual sociology (Sztompka 2007; Siostrzonek 2011) and visual anthropology (Petráň 2011). Empirical as well as general studies have also been published such as that of Olga Šmídová Matoušová and Lucie Markvartová (2011). Although public sociology/science is beginning to be reflected in Czech academia, it is still not practiced much. Petrusek (2002; 2011) has written about it in several works. In the former of

these cited works, he highlights the socially engaged and essayistic writings of Jan Keller, Jiří Přibáň, and Václav Bělohradský. Petrusek himself is co-author, along with Jan Balon, of one of the few Czech books popularizing sociological knowledge (Petrusek and Balon 2011). Tereza Stöckelová's exceptional work on the standing of public science among Czech scholars (2012) is another example. It is understandable and excusable that Czech social science, during the twenty-five-year period of transition from the era of "socialist snoozing," has somewhat overlooked some marginal tendencies that have significantly contributed to the current state of the social sciences in the world today. In my opinion, Klvač's project is one signal that Czech social scientists are finally waking up to the alternative and marginal, as Gibas (2011) recently noted.

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