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THE ‘MUTILATED’ VILLAGE IN THE PROCESS OF MORPHOGENETIC CHANGE – THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND APPLICATION IN RESEARCH ON SETTLEMENT AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the concept of the “mutilated village” as a new analytical category for interpreting a specific type of rural settlement transformation. The concept refers to settlements that, as a result of sudden and most often exogenous impacts, have lost part of their morphological, functional, social or cultural integrity, while retaining settlement continuity. The term “mutilation” has a metaphorical character and denotes a socio-spatial condition of a settlement resulting from the deconstruction of its previous socio-spatial whole, rather than its complete disappearance. The article presents the theoretical foundations of the concept of the “mutilated village”, identifies its main dimensions – morphological, functional, social and cultural – and proposes a typology and a research model enabling the operationalisation of this category in empirical studies. The research procedure includes the identification of factors leading to the loss of settlement integrity, the analysis of the course of transformation, and the assessment of the village after “mutilation”, taking into account its adaptive potential, capacity for regeneration, and possible trajectories of further development.

Keywords

‘mutilated’ village • rural settlement • morphogenesis • human geography • settlement geography

Purpose, subject and scope of research

The aim of the article is to develop the theoretical foundations of the concept of the “mutilated village” and to propose a methodological

framework for its empirical analysis. The concept is introduced as an analytical category for interpreting a specific type of transformation in rural settlement, characterised by a sudden loss of territorial, functional, social or symbolic

integrity, while maintaining at least partial settlement continuity.

The literature on rural change includes a wide range of concepts describing different trajectories of settlement transformation, including rural decline, degradation, depopulation, abandonment and village disappearance. These issues have a long research tradition in geography, rural studies and settlement studies.

Existing research, however, focuses primarily on two categories of settlement change. The first concerns villages experiencing long-term, evolutionary degradation associated with processes such as depopulation, deagrarianisation, economic restructuring or peripheralisation. The second refers to rural areas that have disappeared completely, resulting in a break in settlement continuity. This issue has been highlighted by both international scholars (e.g. Driver, 2006; Oosthuizen, 2009) and Polish researchers (e.g. Figlus, 2016, 2017; Heffner & Latocha, 2020), where the complete disappearance of villages constitutes a distinct research category related to memory and social trauma (Madurowicz, 2024). Such villages persist only in social memory and, at most, in historical records.

Much less attention has been paid to villages that formally and functionally continue to exist but have experienced a sudden, externally induced disruption of their existing socio-spatial structure. It is precisely this analytical gap that the concept of the “mutilated village” seeks to address. The category thus refers to a specific socio-spatial state of rural settlements arising from abrupt, externally driven interventions (i.e. large-scale infrastructure projects, mining activity, forced resettlement, warfare or environmental disasters) which result in the loss of a significant part of their former territorial, functional, social or cultural integrity, without leading to their complete disappearance.

A “mutilated village” is therefore neither a disappearing settlement nor one undergoing gradual decline, but rather a settlement that continues to exist while functioning

under conditions of disrupted integrity. Consequently, the concept should not be understood as synonymous with rural decline, degradation or village disappearance. Instead, it describes a particular state of unstable equilibrium of a rural settlement unit, situated between potential gradual decline (degradation), complete disappearance and possible development. In other words, it refers to a distinct type of morphogenetic change positioned between these categories.

A “mutilated village” remains a functioning settlement unit; however, its previous integrity has been fundamentally disrupted, which may involve the loss of territory, the destruction of part of the built environment, the displacement of inhabitants, the transformation of local functions, or the erosion of symbolic structures related to place identity and collective memory.

It should be emphasised that the concept of a “mutilated village” does not imply irreversible decline. The consequences of “mutilation” may vary significantly and lead to different development trajectories, including further decline, stagnation, adaptation, or the emergence of new forms of socio-economic development. In this sense, “mutilation” should be understood as a specific mode of transformation—a particular socio-spatial condition of a settlement—rather than a final outcome of change. The introduction of this concept aims not only to provide a more precise description of this type of settlement transformation but also to establish a research framework enabling the identification, comparison and interpretation of villages affected by abrupt decomposition.

The notion of “mutilation” is thus used as an analytical metaphor describing the sudden fragmentation of an existing socio-spatial whole.

Research on “mutilated villages” should therefore focus on three interrelated issues:

1. the factors and mechanisms leading to the disruption of settlement integrity;
2. the multidimensional consequences of such transformations in morphological, functional, social and cultural terms; and

3. the long-term trajectories of change through which affected villages adapt, regenerate or continue to decline.

The concept of the “mutilated village” thus constitutes both a theoretical and methodological proposal aimed at extending existing approaches to the study of rural transformation and providing a framework for analysing rural settlements affected by sudden and destructive changes.

The research problem of village decline in the context of rural transformation processes

In research on rural settlement, two main research approaches are traditionally distinguished: morphological-genetic and functional, which have set the framework for the analysis and interpretation of settlement processes in rural areas. The first approach encompasses morphological-genetic studies focusing on the analysis of the spatial layout of villages in terms of both habitat elements and fields, their ownership forms, and the relationships between the place of residence and the place of work of the rural population. The research has made it possible to reconstruct the ways in which villages are organised and function, as well as to capture their variability over time (Conzen, 1969; Szulc, 1995; Wójcik, 2011, 2012, 2013; Figlus, 2017).

The second research trend is the functional approach, which analysed the role and significance of villages in a broader supra-local settlement system and changes in their functions over a longer period of time. Particular attention was paid to the transformation of the agricultural function, including the processes of its gradual supplementation or replacement by other forms of socio-economic activity, which led to a transition from the traditional model of an agricultural village to the concept of multifunctional development of villages and rural areas (Wesołowska, 2018; Cloke, 1985).

Within these trends, the issue of the broadly understood transformation (restructuring) of the countryside has been attracting

increasing interest from researchers over the last decade. Within this research approach, scholars examine topics related to both the dynamic expansion and development of rural settlements, mainly under the influence of suburbanisation and counter-urbanisation processes (so-called rural areas of success), as well as their degradation, spatial disintegration and complete disappearance of settlement, defined as a rural problem area (Halfacree, 2007; 2008; Bański, 2004; Bański & Wesołowska, 2020; Bański et al., 2020; Czapiewski, 2010; Wesołowska, 2018; Suliborski & Kulawiak, 2017, 2022).

The problem of complete and permanent rural decline affects numerous villages which, as a result of long-term degradation processes or short-term but intense catastrophic events or administrative and political decisions, have suffered a break in their settlement continuity (Scharlau, 1933; Abel, 1943; Beresford, 1954; Krenzlin, 1959; Roncayolo, 1965; Born, 1972, 1979; Dyer, 1982; Muir, 1982; Davison, 1996; Driver, 2006; McLeeman, 2011; Ellis Burnet et al., 2021).

In classical approaches, research focused on identifying the causes of rural decline, reconstructing the origins of settlements, and analysing the morphological and spatial effects of abandonment, including the destruction of buildings and the disappearance of settlement patterns. More recent studies also emphasise the profound social and cultural effects, expressed, among other things, in the disruption of social ties, local social memory, and the loss of place identity (Assmann, 2011; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Scudder, 2005). Historical research includes studies analysing the post-settlement landscape as a carrier of memory and traces of the former use of this space (Cosgrove, 1998; Lowenthal, 1998, Bevan & Conolly, 2013). In Polish literature, the issue of the disappearance of villages is widely discussed, especially in relation to the effects of wars, changes in national borders, forced displacement and economic crises. Numerous works have addressed, among other things, the problem of the permanence of settlement traces, the reconstruction of former village layouts, and the role of political

and institutional factors in this process (Rymar, 1971; Wolski, 2007; Szmytkie, 2008; Latocha, 2013, 2016; Figlus 2016, 2017; Majewska, 2017, 2024; Heffner & Latocha, 2020).

A separate line of research concerns villages undergoing long-term degradation processes, which do not lead to the complete disappearance of settlement, but result in its gradual weakening (regression). These processes are most often associated with the impact of structural and global factors, such as economic restructuring, crises in agriculture, deagrarianisation, the peripheralisation of rural areas and unfavourable demographic changes (negative migration balance, ageing population). In the global literature, this phenomenon is analysed in the context of research on rural decline, which is understood as a multidimensional deterioration in the demographic, economic and spatial condition of rural areas, as well as the loss of their traditional functions (Lawrence, 1973; Clout, 1973; Mountjoy, 1982; Clark, 1989). Initially, this research focused on changes in the agrarian structure and land use, but over time, increasing attention began to be paid to the social and cultural effects of decline, including social marginalisation, the weakening of social capital and changes in the lifestyle of residents (Pinilla et al., 2008; Collantes & Pinilla, 2011; Kučera & Chromý, 2012; Rizzo, 2016; Alamá-Sabater et al., 2021).

In Polish literature, the issue of rural degradation is analysed, among other things, in the context of depopulation, deagrarianisation and regional differentiation of the process. The common denominator of these works is the belief that rural degradation is a complex process, encompassing spatial, social, cultural and ecological aspects (Miazga, 1990; Stasiak, 1992; Heffner, 2002, 2014, 2016; Bański, 2004; Wesołowska, 2018, 2023; Bański & Wesołowska, 2020; Śleszyński, 2021, 2024; Rosner & Wesołowska, 2022).

Both in international and Polish literature, settlement disappearance and rural decline constitute the dominant conceptual frameworks through which negative transformations in rural areas are interpreted (Heffner,

2014, 2016; Wesołowska, 2018, 2023; Rosner et al., 2022; Śleszyński, 2021, 2024). However, these approaches do not fully capture situations in which villages continue to exist formally and physically, yet are affected by sudden and externally imposed factors that fundamentally transform their territorial, social, functional or symbolic integrity. Such transformations are usually associated with forced displacement, resettlement programmes, large-scale infrastructure projects, mining activity, armed conflicts or environmental disasters (Scudder, 2005; Oliver-Smith, 2009; McLeman, 2011; Assmann, 2011). Previous studies have documented numerous consequences of such interventions, including landscape transformation, the destruction of cultural heritage, the weakening of local ties and social relations, and the destabilisation of place identity (Bevan & Conolly, 2013; Ellis Burnet et al., 2021).

These phenomena have typically been analysed separately within research on displacement, disaster impacts, post-mining landscapes or cultural trauma, rather than as a distinct category of settlement transformation. This reveals a significant conceptual gap. Between the categories of the “vanished village” and the “degraded village” lies a group of settlements that have neither disappeared entirely nor undergone solely gradual decline. Instead, they have experienced rapid and destructive transformations, resulting in the loss of part of their former socio-spatial integrity, while maintaining settlement continuity.

These settlements continue to exist administratively and physically; however, their territorial extent, functional structure, demographic composition, social relations or symbolic foundations have undergone fundamental transformation and restructuring. They therefore represent a specific case of rural transformation and require a separate theoretical description referring to such concepts as place, morphogenesis and functional approaches, as well as the identification of new methodological solutions.

The concept of the “mutilated village” proposed in this article is intended to fill this

analytical gap. As it refers to rural settlements affected by rapid and most often exogenous factors leading to a significant disruption of their morphological, functional, social and cultural integrity – without causing their complete disappearance – it should be regarded as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, existing categories of rural degradation and disappearance.

Its purpose is to provide a framework for analysing rural settlements which, despite losing part of their former integrity, retain settlement continuity and remain subject to further socio-spatial transformation processes.

The concept of the “mutilated village” thus extends existing approaches to rural transformation by integrating spatial, functional, social and cultural dimensions within a single analytical framework.

The “mutilated village” as a socio-spatial phenomenon

The concept of the “mutilated village” constitutes an analytical category aimed both at capturing a specific type of transformation occurring in rural areas – insufficiently addressed in existing research on local communities and their living environments – and at describing a particular socio-spatial condition of rural settlements resulting from abrupt changes induced by external (exogenous) factors.

The term ‘mutilation’ can be applied not only to living beings, but also extended to any other entities that exist in reality and are realised, if they constitute a kind of distinct entity (e.g. social, landscape, economic or technical) – in a situation of violent damage caused by the removal of a part of them. ‘Mutilation’ is directly related to the permanent loss of the attribute of wholeness. The concept of ‘mutilation’ usually has negative connotations and refers to changes that make something worse, incomplete, imperfect or dysfunctional, although the effects of ‘mutilation’ in a given situation may contribute to the creation of a new whole, the quality of which may be better than the previous one.

A socially and territorially realised entity is, among other things, a place, which Fu Tuan (1977: 75) presented as a distinction of space, arguing that “[...] *a closed and humanised space becomes a place. Compared to space, place is a calm centre of established values. Human beings need both place and space*”. Place, as defined by Johnson (2007), is a meaningful location, i.e. one that constitutes a conglomerate of sensory perceptions and emotional experiences, which is a function of our physical presence in the world. Casey (1997) states that “*place contains all the elements that uniformity has eliminated: identity, character, nuance, history*”. Agnew (1987) distinguishes three aspects of place: (1) *location*, because a place can be defined by objective coordinates, (2) the material shape of a place (*locale*), i.e. its specific form (buildings, streets, layout, etc.), (3) *sense of place*, i.e. the subjective and emotional relationship between a person and a place. A place is a whole, from which removing a fragment causes its disintegration and the creation of something new, no longer what it was before. This decomposition initiates new social, economic and spatial processes, which may result in the creation of a significant location – i.e. a place.

The process of decline may have random causes, such as a natural disaster or war, or it may be deliberate, resulting from intentional human action. It may be endogenous, when the factors of change lie within the whole itself, or exogenous, when they are inspired from outside. The disintegration of a place can occur on several levels, namely: physical, cultural, social, economic or existential (Casey, 1997).

The village, thanks to the humanisation of the landscape by giving it form, symbolism and meaning, and by creating a separate social space in which coexistence, activity and exchange take place, is a specific constituent of place.

Rural settlements constitute more than merely spatial units; they are socio-territorial entities whose identity emerges through the interaction of landscape, community, economic

activity and local meanings. Processes such as forced displacement, large-scale infrastructure investments, mining activity, armed conflicts or environmental disasters may disrupt these relationships within a relatively short period of time. Such interventions frequently alter the morphology of the village, weaken existing social ties, transform economic functions and undermine the established place identity. Although the settlement unit may survive administratively and physically, it often loses part of the attributes that originally defined its integrity as a place.

The notion of “mutilation” should not be interpreted literally, but rather as a heuristic metaphor describing the partial fragmentation of a socio-spatial whole (Chojnicki, 2010). Mutilation results from loss – of certain social and material values, as well as of the existing *genius loci*. The aim is not to emphasise destruction per se, but to draw attention to situations in which rural settlement units continue to exist despite the loss of essential elements of their former structure.

Moreover, this concept does not imply a predetermined development trajectory. Rural settlements affected by such transformations may experience further decline, remain in a state of stagnation, or successfully adapt to new social and economic conditions.

As Archer (1988) writes, “*a unique feature of socio-cultural systems, distinguishing them from organic or mechanical systems, is their ability to undergo rapid restructuring. Such restructuring depends on human subjectivity and practical interaction*” (as cited in Sztompka 2005: 190).

According to the authors, a ‘mutilated’ village can be considered as part of a morphogenetic change process. In geographical and settlement studies, the concept of morphogenesis (in the strict sense) has, by definition, affirmed a diachronic approach. It refers to the emergence of a settlement form in terms of its layout, forms and physiognomy of buildings (Koter, 1974), but it lacks the human factor – the ‘subjectivity factor’ (Sztompka, 2005). In sociology, the concept of morphogenesis is understood as a process of social

change. It was formulated by Archer (1988) and referred to “*complex exchanges between structures and actions, leading to a change in the existing form, structure and state of the system*” (as cited in Sztompka 2005: 190).

In this sense, the concept of morphogenesis has a broader cognitive dimension (morphogenesis *sensu largo*), as it refers to the entirety of socio-cultural and functional change in a given place as a complex effect of the relationship between social and material structures and human activities, which are the cause of direct change in the whole, i.e. material content, social content and mutual relations. The concept of morphogenesis therefore defines the scope of research into villages that have been damaged on three levels:

- morphogenetic research in the strict sense (geographical and settlement-related), e.g. changes in spatial layout, building physiognomy, new centres, etc.
- research on social structures in the process of change, e.g.: spatial displacement, change in interpersonal and social relations with the place, symbolism and memory, etc.,
- research on the process of change in human activities leading to the creation of new functions of the place.

The concept of the “mutilated village” provides a framework for analysing rural settlements that have undergone rapid and destructive transformations while retaining settlement continuity. Its analytical value, however, lies not solely in describing the process of “mutilation” itself, but in explaining how such settlement units adapt, reorganise and redefine their identity following the loss of key elements of their former socio-spatial structure.

From metaphor to exemplification – conditions and dimensions of rural ‘mutilation’

Changes occurring in Polish villages result from a wide range of causes. On the one hand, they have a global dimension, reflecting

broader civilisational transformations; on the other, they may be conditioned by various regional or local factors. These latter factors operate in specific places and affect the settlement units located there. This may lead both to their growth and development, but also to stagnation, degradation or even decline, sometimes becoming the starting point for a different spatial and functional form – thus initiating the creation of a new place.

In areas that are specific in economic, social or historical terms, there were factors operating with great dynamism, often taking a destructive form. They destroy existing places – rural social, economic or morphological structures – by mutilating them in a way, which is a direct impulse for an accelerated process of change, often leading to the emergence of a new quality (e.g. Suliborski et al., 2022).

Rural settlement units can be changed as a result of individual factors or a combination of many conditions. In other words, 'mutilating' factors are actions that cause rapid change leading to 'mutilation'. In general, they can be divided into natural factors, which are random in nature, and anthropogenic factors, which result from human activities. They may originate outside the village (exogenous factors) or within the village itself (endogenous factors).

a. external (exogenous) factors, e.g.:

- planned by administrative authorities, resulting from functional transformations of areas (buildings, roads, dams, reservoirs, special areas, liquidation of state-owned farms or agricultural cooperatives, etc. (e.g. Suliborski et al. 2017),
- war disasters (destruction of technical infrastructure, depopulation and displacement of the indigenous population, border changes, etc.),

b. ecological disasters and other natural disasters (floods, storms, droughts, epidemics) internal (endogenous) factors: resulting from the limitation or exhaustion of the biological and cultural potential of local communities (e.g. sudden rural depopulation, ageing population, lack of local leaders,

decline of farms, lack of jobs, decline in the standard of living of residents, lack of interpersonal relationships and negative social relations, depletion and limitation of local natural resources, e.g. soil, mineral resources, water, forests). The exogenous factors discussed above lead directly to the emergence of 'mutilated' villages. Endogenous factors, on the other hand, are generally responsible for the slow degradation of villages, although they may also occur in 'mutilated' villages at a later stage of their existence as a secondary effect of the previous action of other exogenous factors.

The exogenous conditions that directly lead to the creation of 'mutilated' villages can be divided into two main groups. The first category includes intentional factors resulting directly from political and administrative decisions, such as the outbreak of war, the displacement of populations for ethnic reasons, the construction of a dam, the creation of an open-cast mine, or the development of new transport systems. The second group consists of random factors, such as natural disasters (floods, fires) or other calamities, such as epidemics.

An example of rural 'mutilation' can be seen in villages that lost part of their habitat and fields due to the construction of the Jeziorsko dam on the Warta River in 1986. In this case, an administrative decision was made based on retention and economic needs. The reservoir was put into use to regulate river flows and irrigate agricultural land, and it also serves important recreational and energy functions. However, about a thousand people living in four hundred farms were displaced for the construction.

As can be seen from the maps presented from the period before and after the creation of the reservoir (Fig. 1), significant modifications to the existing settlement network can be observed. These are particularly noticeable in the case of the villages of Siedlętków and Popów (in the municipality of Pęczniew). In both settlements, a clear change in the spatial extent of the villages, the disappearance

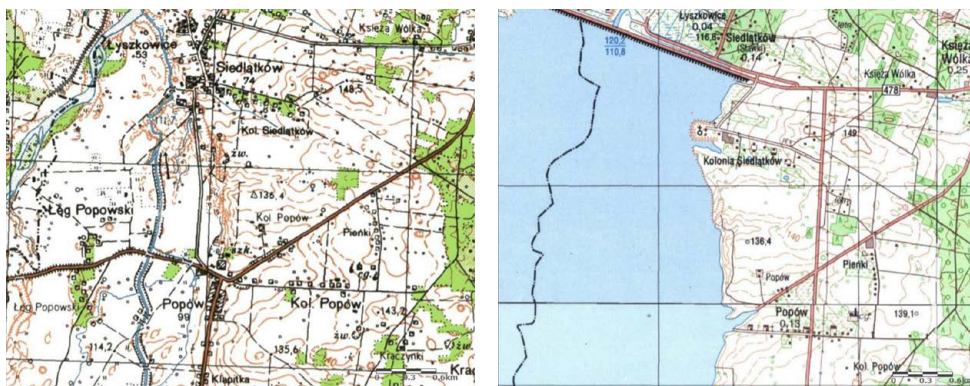


Figure 1. Topographic maps showing the spatial layout of the villages of Siedlętków and Popów (Pęczniew municipality) before and after the creation of the Jeziorsko dam reservoir on the Warta River

Source: National Geoportal: www.geoportal.gov.pl



Figure 2. Topographic maps showing the spatial layout of the villages of Łękińsko and Czyżów (Kleszczów municipality) before and after the creation of the excavation site associated with the establishment of the Bełchatów Lignite Mine

Source: National Geoportal: www.geoportal.gov.pl

of some buildings and the transformation of the transport infrastructure as a result of the flooding of the area by the dammed river can be seen.

Another factor illustrating the phenomenon of rural disfigurement is the settlement changes caused by the establishment of the Bełchatów Lignite Mine. The discovery of deposits and the decision to exploit them at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s was a turning point in the spatial development of this area and necessitated the resettlement of residents from the areas designated for opencast mining (Liszewski 1985). Several villages were completely destroyed, for example Łękińsko and Czyżów (in the municipality of Kleszczów). Based on an analysis of two maps: before and

after the start of the investment, a partial disappearance of villages and clear morphological changes can be seen (Fig. 2). In both cases analysed (the creation of a retention reservoir and lignite mining), rapid and violent processes took place, which caused a partial disappearance of settlements. The radical spatial changes, which are visible as a result of a comparative analysis of the maps, were accompanied by intense functional, social and cultural effects. The examples discussed provide a basis for a better understanding of the idea of a 'mutilated village' and the factors causing 'mutilation', while the cases presented require further detailed empirical research on the conditions, course and consequences of the process of change.

In Poland, due to its complicated history, there are many 'mutilated' villages and entire settlement networks. This is particularly typical of areas that were incorporated into the territory of the Polish state after World War II, as well as areas inhabited by ethnic or national minorities (Lower Silesia, Sudety Mountains, Western Pomerania, Warmia and Masuria, Bieszczady Mountains, Low Beskids and others). For historical reasons, these areas inherited entire settlement systems that were incomplete ('mutilated'), deprived of certain elements that determined their subjectivity (integrity). This damage was caused by violent processes resulting from the war and the decisions of the victorious powers. As a result of various circumstances, significant resources were destroyed – buildings, technical infrastructure – and there was also displacement and depopulation of localities (abandoned villages), an influx of new residents and their confrontation with the existing reality – often foreign in terms of nature and culture.

According to the authors, four main dimensions of rural 'mutilation' can be distinguished (Fig. 3):

1. The morphological dimension, which manifests itself in the partial loss of territory (e.g. as a result of flooding or expropriation); deformation of the spatial layout (e.g. removal of roads, bridges, changes in the division of fields or residential plots); the demolition or relocation of buildings and changes to their appearance (new forms of buildings). The morphological aspect is reflected in the decomposition of the village and the disruption of its spatial integrity.
2. The functional dimension, which consists of changes in the functional structure (e.g. liquidation of local economic entities, disappearance of existing functions, possible decline in entrepreneurship, emergence of new forms of activity, change in the existing foundations of economic development). Thus, there is a clear transformation of the local economy.
3. The social dimension, which in practice refers to a change of permanent residence, displacement, a possible influx of summer

visitors/tourists, the weakening of historical neighbourhood and community ties, and the emergence of new social relationships. As a result, there is a change in the demographic potential and social structure of the village, social disintegration or a redefinition of the local community.

4. The cultural dimension, which often involves the loss of symbolic places (e.g. churches, schools, cemeteries, shrines), the disappearance of traditions and rituals (e.g. church fairs, harvest festivals) or the creation of a "new memory of place" – memories and narratives about the "lost village". Thus, an inevitable transformation of local identity is taking place.

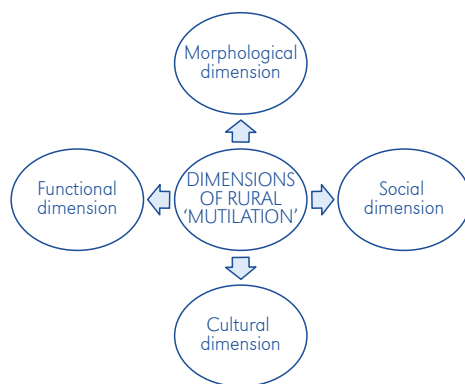


Figure 3. Dimensions of the rural 'mutilation'

The concept of 'mutilation' refers to the loss of the traditional identity of a village and its existential foundations as a result of a combination of factors, leading to an accelerated process of change. In the classical approach, a village fulfils two basic functions: housing and agricultural production, which define its traditional identity. Each village consists of three basic elements that identify the settlement as a whole, i.e.: (a) inhabitants, (b) habitat (its layout and buildings), (c) rural fields (their spatial arrangement and form of use). 'Mutilation' can refer to any of these components of the village or to the settlement unit as a whole. Therefore, different types of 'mutilated' villages can be distinguished, taking into account genetic aspects and spatial consequences (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Forms of “mutilated” villages

Type (form of “mutilation”)	Explanation	Examples
Morphologically “mutilated” villages	Settlements in which there has been a significant loss or deformation of the physical (e.g. buildings) and spatial structure (e.g. plots, homesteads).	Villages partially flooded by reservoirs; villages affected by open-cast mining; villages partially destroyed by war or natural disasters.
Socially “mutilated” villages	Settlements in which demographic and social continuity has been disrupted.	Villages subjected to forced displacement; repopulated villages; villages affected by mass out-migration.
Functionally “mutilated” villages	Settlements that lose their traditional economic base and dominant functions (e.g. agricultural or agro-service).	Villages affected by deagrarisation; settlements transformed into tourist centres; villages converted into logistics or industrial zones.
Culturally “mutilated” villages	Settlements experiencing the loss of symbolic resources, collective memory and local identity.	Disappearance of places of worship; destruction of cemeteries and monuments; disruption of traditional cultural practices.
Complex (multi-dimensional) “mutilated” villages	Settlements affected simultaneously by changes in several dimensions.	Villages displaced due to large-scale infrastructure projects; villages affected by war and post-war population replacement; villages eliminated due to mining activity.

Proposal for a research model of ‘mutilated’ villages

The concept of the “mutilated village” requires the development of a research framework that enables the identification of forms of rural transformation which diverge both from gradual rural decline (degradation) and from the complete disappearance of settlement. The proposed framework aims to operationalise this concept and to provide methodological guidelines for the identification, analysis and comparison of cases of abrupt rural restructuring driven by external factors.

The research model of a “mutilated village” assumes the analysis of complex relationships between “mutilating” factors and the capacity of the local community for regeneration and adaptation.

In constructing the research model, it is assumed that the unit under study (the village) constitutes a territorially embedded socio-spatial system, composed of interrelated morphological, functional, social and cultural elements. In other words, it represents a local system in which, as a result of sudden changes in the human living environment, there has been a loss of continuity in its spatial

structure, local identity, community cohesion and functional integrity.

Within this model, the village is not treated as a neutral backdrop for economic activities or extreme natural events, but rather as an active social entity, a carrier of memory, values and emotions. From a methodological perspective, a village is considered “mutilated” when this disruption affects at least one of the four identified dimensions to a degree that significantly weakens the former integrity of its settlement system.

Accordingly, the analysis does not focus solely on the process of “mutilation” itself, but also addresses the aspects of transformation that led to the loss of the village’s former integrity, as well as the subsequent processes of adaptation, restructuring and regeneration.

The analytical objective is therefore to examine the relationships between “mutilating” factors, the structural changes they induce, and the subsequent development trajectories of rural areas. This framework thus addresses four main research questions:

1. What factors (exogenous or endogenous; intentional or random) lead to the ‘mutilation’ of villages?

2. What morphological, economic and socio-cultural effects did the change bring about?
3. How do residents (current and displaced) remember the former space and how do they reconstruct the former identity of the place?
4. What traces of 'mutilation' are visible today in the landscape, culture and collective memory?

The proposed research model is integrated and comprises three basic analytical components, which should be implemented in a specific order (Tab. 2). The first stage of the village study involves identifying 'mutilation' factors

(e.g. military action, decision to resettle, natural disaster, establishment of an open-cast mine or dam reservoir, etc.) which suddenly and relatively quickly led to radical changes within the existing settlement. Research in this area involves identifying and characterising the factors that led to the disruption of the socio-economic continuity of a given settlement (village). This is possible thanks to the use of historical methods based on the search and critical analysis of source materials, including archival documents (e.g. legal acts, press articles) and literature on a given locality.

The second stage of the study of 'mutilated' villages involves analysing the transformation process caused by the impact

Table 2. Proposed research procedure for 'mutilated' villages

No	Stage of the research procedure	Research methods	Data sources
1.	Identification of causal factors (determining which factors suddenly and relatively quickly led to changes in the existing settlement and contributed to the destruction of the village (e.g. military action, decision to resettle, natural disaster, construction of a mine or dam reservoir))	Historical methods (analysis of documentary and descriptive historical sources) and comparative studies based on a review of the literature	Archival legal acts, official and planning documents, press articles, etc.
2.	Analysis of the transformation of a 'mutilated' village (reconstruction of changes) in three dimensions: • morphological (analysis of changes in the rural layout, extent of building demolition and its physiognomic changes) • functional (transformation of the spatial and functional structure, access to services and infrastructure, forms of economic activity and new investments) • social (changes in social structures, intensity and directions of migration, neighbourly relations, level of local ties) • cultural (perception of landscape transformations, loss of places of memory, change in local identity)	Field observation and inventory; cartographic and statistical analysis; social research methods and techniques (e.g. in-depth interviews, questionnaires, focus methods, narrative methods, oral history, mind maps)	Cartographic materials; geodetic data; archival and contemporary statistical data; questionnaire surveys and informal interviews with residents and local authorities; photographic documentation
3.	Diagnosis of the final result and prediction of further development directions: • Determining whether and to what extent the village has lost its integrity. • Identifying the characteristics of the 'mutilation' (e.g. lack of spatial continuity, breakdown of social ties, weakening of identity). • Assessing the potential for adaptation and regeneration (e.g. tourism, new recreational functions).	Social research methods, comparative methods, forecasting methods (statistical and heuristic), case studies	Analytical documentation (processed historical data, including cartographic, statistical and iconographic data), results of social research, expert opinions

of 'mutilation' factors. The research model therefore assumes the need to reconstruct the course of changes and determine the degree of 'mutilation' of a given settlement. An in-depth analysis and description of the changes in the structure of a given village should cover the four dimensions discussed earlier: morphological (decomposition and disruption of the spatial integrity of the village), functional (transformation of the local economy and spatial development), social (changes in the social structure of the village and disintegration of the local community) and cultural (disappearance of places of memory and loss of place identity).

With regard to the morphological dimension, the research concerns changes in the spatial layout, demolition or relocation of buildings, physiognomic changes and landscape transformations. In this context, cartographic and statistical analysis methods can be used, based on old and contemporary maps and plans, as well as quantitative data and historical photographic documentation. In terms of the functional dimension, the study covers long-term changes in the functional and spatial structure of villages (e.g. structural changes in land use, infrastructure transformations, changes in the local labour market and forms of entrepreneurship). In this case, cartographic and quantitative methods should also be used, with the use of dynamic statistical data, planning documents, maps and aerial photographs. The social aspect requires an examination of demographic changes, migration processes and their spatial repercussions, including neighbourly relations and local ties. The cultural dimension, on the other hand, refers to the perception of change by rural residents, including their sense of loss of significant places, adaptation and opportunities for reconstruction. The analysis of local attitudes and narratives should play a key role in identifying the social and cultural dimensions of a 'mutilated' village. Studying the cultural dimension is relatively difficult because it involves understanding part of the process in which reality and one's own actions are reflected as a result

of the opposition between the object and the subject. The rich theoretical and methodological achievements of the so-called geography of perception and humanistic geography may be helpful in this case. It is necessary to use the entire spectrum of social research methods and techniques, including in-depth interviews, questionnaires, focus methods, narrative methods, based on direct conversations with residents, local leaders and decision-makers.

The third stage of the research concerns the assessment of the development trajectory (path of development) of the village following its transformation. As a result of the impact of various factors, the village has undergone a clear metamorphosis, in which, depending on the degree of change, a new place has emerged, whose existence and functioning may be based on different, new principles, and whose quality often exceeds its previous state. Following the occurrence of a causal ("mutilating") factor, villages may follow different development trajectories. Some continue to decline, others stabilise in a modified form, while still others successfully adapt and develop new socio-economic functions. At this stage, it is therefore important not only to determine whether and to what extent the village has lost its previous cohesion and to identify the characteristics of "mutilation" across individual dimensions, but also to incorporate a predictive perspective. A key analytical task is thus the diagnosis of the regenerative potential of the "mutilated village" and the assessment of its capacity for adaptation and revival. This involves analysing its ability to restore lost functions through the development of alternative forms of economic activity, social innovation, or various forms of civic engagement leading to the redefinition of place.

For the purposes of empirical research, rural 'mutilation' can be operationalised using various indicators relating to specific aspects of this phenomenon (e.g. the ratio of lost or degraded land, the proportion of demolished buildings, measures of demographic structure and migration, the degree

of business closures, the level of unemployment, etc.). These indicators can be synthesised and reused to determine the degree of rural 'mutilation'. In order to identify the set of phenomena determining the 'mutilation' of villages, and then to describe and explain the process of reconstruction and final transformation, the model for studying 'mutilated' villages should be based on a mixed methods approach, combining elements of quantitative and qualitative research. In quantitative terms, the source material consists of statistical data (e.g. from the Central Statistical Office, local registers or environmental data) as well as survey data. Qualitative research, on the other hand, should be based on in-depth interviews, oral history analysis, field observation and analysis of local documents. It should be emphasised that the use of a qualitative approach is crucial in this research, as only this approach allows the researcher to observe individual facts and thus does not leave them indifferent to the reality that is subject to cognition and interpretation. In this way, a relationship often arises between what is being discovered – the object of study – and the discoverer, i.e. the researcher involved in trying to understand what they are experiencing. Such triangulation of methods is also necessary because it allows us to capture both the structural and symbolic dimensions of the phenomenon of 'mutilation', which is very complex.

The main contribution of the proposed concept lies in linking research on rural transformation (change) with studies on settlement continuity, resilience and place identity. Rather than focusing exclusively on processes of decline or disappearance, this concept makes it possible to describe rural settlement units that have survived "destructive interventions" and, in doing so, have experienced a significant decomposition of their original socio-spatial structure.

In this sense, the concept of the "mutilated village" constitutes a complementary analytical category within contemporary research on rural change.

Discussion

The concept of the "mutilated village" proposed in this article should not be interpreted as an attempt to replace existing approaches to rural transformation, rural degradation or the disappearance of settlement (e.g. Born 1972; McLeman 2011; Kučera & Chromý, 2012; Wesołowska, 2018; Bański & Wesołowska, 2020; Ellis Burnet et al., 2021). Rather, it is intended as a complementary analytical concept that highlights a specific trajectory of change which has so far remained largely overlooked in research on rural areas.

The proposed concept of a 'mutilated' village is an interactive metaphor referring to cases of settlements which, as a result of sudden and rapidly occurring factors, mainly exogenous – intentional or random – have lost their integrity in the short term, leading to changes in their territory, physiognomy, spatial layout, functional structure and existing socio-cultural character. 'Mutilated' villages differ from other villages in Poland in terms of the process of change that takes place in conditions of long-term degradation, e.g. as a result of population ageing, gradual deagrarianisation, civilisational changes, etc. Another important differentiating criterion is the completeness of the effects of destructive factors.

In previous research, most authors have focused either on long-term, evolutionary and gradual changes and their spatial repercussions (e.g. Clark, 1989; Pinilla et al., 2008; Rizzo, 2016; Heffner, 2016; Wesołowska, 2018; Bański et al., 2020; Alamá-Sabater et al., 2021), or on the complete abandonment of settlements and the disappearance of villages as a result of wars, forced migrations, environmental disasters or political decisions (e.g. Beresford, 1954; Born, 1979; Muir, 1982; Driver, 2006; Szmytkie, 2008; Latocha, 2016; Majewska, 2017). Although these research traditions have provided substantial theoretical and empirical insights, they offer only a partial explanation for rural settlement units that experience sudden, externally induced disruptions without losing formal settlement continuity.

The proposed concept is intended to address this intermediate category of rural transformation. A “mutilated village” is not equivalent to a vanished village, as it continues to exist physically and administratively. Nor is it synonymous with a village undergoing gradual degradation, since the critical transformation is initiated by a relatively rapid and destructive event. The defining feature is therefore not the final state of the settlement, but rather the mechanism and the pace of change.

It is also important to emphasise that, from an analytical perspective, the concept proposed by the authors distinguishes between the process of “village mutilation” and the state of the “mutilated village”. *Village mutilation* refers to the destructive process through which the integrity of a settlement is weakened by external factors, whereas a “*mutilated village*” denotes the resulting socio-spatial condition. This distinction is crucial, as settlements experiencing similar destructive events may subsequently follow different development trajectories, ranging from decline to successful adaptation and renewal.

The concept also builds a bridge between settlement geography and contemporary place-based approaches rooted in human and social geography, as well as in rural studies and cultural anthropology. By emphasising the interaction between material (physical) transformation, collective memory and place identity, it links morphological approaches to settlement change with research on traumatised landscapes, social memory and socio-spatial resilience. It should be noted that the concept of resilience provides a useful complementary perspective for understanding the adaptive capacity of affected communities (Folke, 2006; Christopherson et al., 2010; Davidson, 2010; Pike et al., 2010; Bristow & Healy, 2014, 2015; Weichselgartner et al., 2015; Meerow et al., 2016; Zhang & Li, 2018). Resilience is based on adaptability, the ability to survive disasters, infrastructure flexibility, strong social ties, a willingness to help one another, and the implementation of innovative solutions that allow communities to function despite

destructive events. In this context, ‘mutilated’ village are examples of settlements which, under the influence of short-term violent and destructive factors, must continue to function with limited resources in a flexible manner and be capable of further development, taking into account potential risks and responding effectively to threats.

At the same time, several limitations of the concept should be acknowledged. First, the notion of “mutilation” is intentionally metaphorical and may be interpreted differently across disciplinary traditions; its analytical usefulness therefore requires further empirical verification in diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Second, the distinction between “mutilated villages” and severely degraded villages may not always be clear-cut, particularly where rapid and long-term processes overlap. Third, the proposed typology and methodological framework are exploratory in nature and should be refined through comparative case studies conducted across different countries and settlement systems.

Consequently, the main contribution of this concept lies not in identifying an entirely new empirical phenomenon, but in providing a coherent interpretative framework for analysing a specific form of rural transformation characterised by sudden disruption, partial loss of settlement integrity, and subsequent trajectories of adaptation, stagnation or decline.

Conclusions

This article proposes the concept of the “mutilated village” as a specific socio-spatial condition of rural settlement units, which emerges as a result of sudden, externally induced transformations leading to the loss of their spatial, functional, social and cultural integrity, without, however, resulting in their complete disappearance.

To date, this category of rural settlements has received limited attention in the literature. Therefore, the concept of the “mutilated village” is intended to fill this gap by focusing on the mechanisms, dimensions and consequences of such transformations.

The presented concept is based on a multifaceted analysis and allows for the identification of the multidimensional nature of change (space – society – culture) and the tracing of the process of transformation of a place under the influence of specific factors. It describes both the causes of change, the material effects of the loss of part of the territory, and the symbolic consequences for the inhabitants and collective memory. In this context, the proposed theoretical category of a 'mutilated village' has great cognitive and practical value, and the proposed concept appears to be very useful from the point of view of interpreting a specific type of change in the settlement landscape of villages in relation to existing theoretical approaches.

An important conclusion emerging from this study is that villages affected by destructive events should not be viewed solely through the lens of degradation. Their future development trajectories may vary significantly and take different forms—from further decline to stabilisation, adaptation and the emergence of new socio-economic activities. In this context, it may be:

- recessive, resulting from the loss of existing social and economic resources, leading to the collapse of farms, depopulation and, consequently, the disappearance of villages.
- reconstructive (stagnant), consisting in the restoration of individual elements and their functioning on similar principles and at a similar level as before the 'mutilation' factors took effect,
- developmental, when the influencing factors imply a new situation for the existence of the former whole, acting as a kind of stimulant (social activities different from those previously carried out lead to a change in social relations and the development of new functions, and consequently to the construction of a new whole based on different principles of functioning).

The proposed research model of a 'mutilated' village fits into the concept of 'place' and 'locality,' and thus into the socio-cultural

way of explaining the human environment. Therefore, in its theoretical and methodological basis, it refers mainly to the achievements of human geography and its related fields, i.e. rural geography, cultural anthropology and sociology, although the rich achievements of settlement geography (research on the morphology of villages, the function of place, etc.) and historical geography should also play an important role, especially in terms of identifying factors of change in the morphological dimension.

The model for studying 'mutilated' villages takes the form of a diagnostic and interpretative tool, enabling not only the identification of sudden and rapid degradation of a given settlement, but also the indication of potential ways of its renewal and adaptation. It is a tool for planning development interventions and, at the same time, for creating the basis for effective policies towards degraded areas. It also provides an opportunity to identify and understand the mechanisms of marginalisation and the revitalisation of rural areas. Due to its analytical nature, it can also be widely used in comparative studies, including international ones (e.g. villages flooded by dam reservoirs or villages displaced by the construction of lignite mines). Research on 'mutilated' villages can also contribute to enriching existing empirical and theoretical knowledge with new insights into settlement changes.

It is also worth noting that future research should place greater emphasis on verifying the assumptions proposed in this article through comparative empirical studies conducted in diverse geographical contexts. Such studies could contribute to refining the conceptual boundaries of this category, assessing its explanatory value, and identifying the factors influencing the long-term outcomes of rural transformation processes.

The concept of the "mutilated village" should be understood as a heuristic and analytical tool that facilitates the study of a specific form of rural transformation positioned between gradual degradation and the complete disappearance of rural areas.

Its main value lies in integrating spatial, social and cultural perspectives within a single conceptual framework designed to interpret complex processes of change in rural areas.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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