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## Leading Through Image Making? On the Limits of Emphasising Agency in Structurally Disadvantaged Rural Places

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### 1 Introduction

In recent years, the focus of debates on suitable responses to peripheralisation has increasingly shifted from structural factors of regional polarisation to the practices and room for manoeuvre of the local actors subjected to it (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013; Kay et al. 2012; Nugin and Trell 2015; PoSCoPP 2015; Timár and Velkey 2016). This emphasis on approaches that focus on the agency of local actors has been particularly prominent in the literature on socio-spatial ascriptions (Bürk et al. 2012; Lang 2013; Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013; Paasi 1995; Wacquant et al. 2014) and place leadership practices (Horlings and Marsden 2010; Hidle and Normann 2013; and others) that intensely discuss leading through image making as a potential

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development strategy (for example Paasi 2013; Raagmaa 2002; Semian and Chromý 2014). While the latter certainly plays a crucial role in attempts to overcome territorial stigmatisation—constituting an inherent part of peripheralisation—this chapter questions whether this new focus on agency in the form of active image making also represents a suitable response strategy for rural areas<sup>1</sup> facing structural disadvantages while simultaneously being encouraged to act as resilient places, proactively fighting those very disadvantages (Bristow 2010; Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013; Kay et al. 2012).

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in four rural areas of Estonia between 2015 and 2017, as part of the Marie Curie Initial Training Network ‘Socio-economic and Political Responses to Regional Polarisation in Central and Eastern Europe’ (RegPol<sup>2</sup>). It critically scrutinises the potential agency of place leaders to actively shape structurally disadvantaged areas through image making. Following the ongoing neoliberalisation of regional policy along the lines of competitiveness and economic growth, rural areas are increasingly urged to perform as active ‘place-sellers’ (Bristow 2010, 160; PoSCoPP 2015; Woods 2013). In the same vein, the local leaders in our four case study areas, which are subject to both material and discursive peripheralisation, also turned to image making and place marketing as ways to overcome these processes and enhance regional development. The case studies included the following municipalities: Järva-Jaani in Central Estonia, the Island of Kihnu in Western Estonia, as well as the newly amalgamated Setomaa<sup>2</sup> and Tõrva municipalities (northern part of Valga County) in Southern Estonia (for an overview see Map 1). The local decision makers in these areas built on the promises of consumption-oriented place promotion and post-productivist entrepreneurialism that is encouraged by successful best practice examples usually located in structurally advantaged urban areas (Bristow 2005; Shearmur 2012). However, due to the rapid trend of (sub)urbanisation in Central and Eastern Europe in general, and Estonia in particular, rural areas have been increasingly subjected to the processes of material peripheralisation. These have



**Map 1** Case study areas (Illustration by Grete Kindel)

resulted in tangible structural disadvantages such as socio-economic decline, selective out-migration and institutional thinness (Leetmaa et al. 2013; Nugin and Trelle 2015; PoSCoPP 2015). Like other rural areas in post-socialist space (Kay et al. 2012), our case study areas are, moreover, confronted with considerable discursive peripheralisation. Whereas in Setomaa and Kihnu Island this takes the form of a struggle with territorial stigmatisation, Järva-Jaani and Valga County (including Tõrva municipality) are dealing with the issue of invisibility. Against this backdrop of great material and discursive peripheralisation, the question arises as to whether this new focus on place leadership and active image making can really fulfil its promises with regards to regional development.

Our case studies convey the limits of such agency-based approaches in structurally disadvantaged rural areas. While leading through image making may function as a possible solution to challenges of regional

polarisation, these examples show that it may also bring about new problems of idealisation and responsabilisation through urging local leaders to take on ever-growing responsibilities for coping with material and discursive peripheralisation. These challenges faced by rural place leaders do not only result in a shift of responsibilities from the national to the local level due to a heroisation of local agency, but also precipitate neglect of the structurally difficult context in which these response strategies are supposed to take place.

As the chapter will reflect upon, this new focus on agency also has consequences for researchers who wish to make sense of leadership and image making, since they are also agents in those very processes they aim to understand. After introducing the debate on the development potential of leadership through image making, we therefore, move on to discuss the challenges experienced by local leaders who attempt to put these agency-based approaches into practice and the implications they have on the research process. Our analysis builds on 66 interviews conducted with local and regional decision makers and community leaders representing the fields of politics, administration, entrepreneurship, culture, media, tourism and social work (including youth work such as education and sports). These people are well known locally for their engagement with these issues. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse all interviews and participant observations (for a detailed analysis, see Grootens 2018; Plüschke-Altöf 2018), hence only a selection of these are used in this chapter. They illustrate the challenges facing local actors engaging in leadership through image making, a situation widely found in other rural areas in Estonia, Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewees represented in this chapter. In order to ensure their anonymity, the names have been changed. Moreover, for the same reason, the table only indicates their fields and regions of activity and not the concrete functions they fulfil in the case study areas. Through this analysis, we show the complexity of acting in peripheralised rural places. This also questions the focus on agency-based solutions in contexts of structural disadvantage.

**Table 1** List of interview partners (Illustration by the authors)

Name	Gender	Field(s)	Region
Airi	F	Entrepreneurship, tourism	Kihnu
Artur	M	Entrepreneurship, tourism, culture	Järva-Jaani
Egert	M	Politics, culture	Valgamaa (Tõrva)
Endrik	M	Politics, culture	Kihnu
Greeta	F	Journalism, culture	Setomaa
Helle	F	Journalism	Valgamaa
Jaagup	M	Entrepreneurship, community initiative	Setomaa
Imbi	F	Culture	Valgamaa (Tõrva)
Katrin	F	Entrepreneurship, culture, tourism	Kihnu
Kulno	M	Education	Järva-Jaani
Liis	F	Social work	Järva-Jaani
Peep	M	Politics, culture	Valgamaa (Tõrva)
Priit	M	Politics	Kihnu
Ragnar	M	Entrepreneurship, culture	Setomaa
Reili	M	Journalism	Valgamaa
Robert	M	Politics, sports, culture	Järva-Jaani
Toomas	M	Culture, politics	Setomaa

## 2 The Potential to Act in Times of Peripheralisation: Leading Through Image Making

Increasing regional polarisation in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond has attracted the attention of researchers trying to make sense of these processes from diverse theoretical standpoints (see Kühn 2015; PoSCoPP 2015 for overview). For some time, this debate has focused on the structural difficulties to which peripheral places are subjected, thereby depicting local actors as passive and receptive (Kay et al. 2012). Recent scholarship has, however, started to analyse these processes with the help of a more relational approach conceptualising peripheralisation as a multi-scalar, multi-level and, above all, contingent process that can only be understood in relation to its counterpart of centralisation (Keim 2006; Kühn 2015; PoSCoPP 2015). By focusing on the (re-)production of uneven spatial developments, this approach urges us to question

why certain types of spaces, such as the rural areas studied here, are more prone to peripheralisation than others (Keim 2006). While not all rural areas are necessarily peripheral, rurality is often associated with peripherality, mirroring not only existing material difficulties but also the dominant stigmatisation of rural places, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013; Kay et al. 2012; Plüschke-Altöf 2016). Moreover, as a processual concept, peripheralisation has the potential to include the room for manoeuvre of local actors (Kühn 2015). The re-emphasising of agency in these often structurally defined contexts connects to the ideas of Massey (2004) who, among others, warns against the danger of ignoring agency in places and merely seeing them as victims of distant global processes (re-)produced *somewhere else* in space. Following the recent popularity of agency-based approaches, these are instead considered as room of negotiation or power struggles, and potential sites of agency by influencing local-global relations (Massey 2004; Woods 2007; Kay et al. 2012).

One way of conceptualising this room for manoeuvre in a regional development context is prevalent in the concept of place leadership. This concept departs from a focus on studying static heroised individuals seen as leaders. Instead, it centres more on *leadership* as ‘a multi-actor process of place-making’ (Mabey and Freeman 2010, 509). Leadership, in this reading, is not necessarily seen as an individual activity but as a multi-faceted process of formal and informal actors operating within and beyond place boundaries in an attempt to improve economic—and potentially other—outcomes (Beer and Clower 2013; Sotarauta et al. 2012). Going beyond studying formal leadership only, practised by mayors or governors, place leadership in this sense can also entail the actions of non-elected leaders, such as cultural activists or entrepreneurs, among others. In other words, the concept of leadership widens our understanding of place leaders, which can therefore, include all those actors purposively working towards improving their places. Despite the critique of the concept that it suffers from ‘conceptual confusion and endemic vagueness’ (Alvesson and Spicer 2012, 369) and its rather functionalistic and normative tendency towards measurable outcomes (Mabey and Freeman 2010), place

leadership thus has the potential to highlight the role of agency in the development of places. Rodríguez-Pose (2013) even goes so far as to consider leadership the missing factor in explaining why some regions grow and others do not.

It is not only in the literature that leadership is usually seen as positive in itself and openly appreciated, but in our fieldwork this was also visible, as one of our field notes from a visit to Kihnu Island by the Minister for Rural Life illustrates. For him, 'local leadership of regional development is extremely important; it's the only counterweight to the central authority.'<sup>3</sup> He highlights the role of leadership in institutionally thin regions subjected to the consequences of centralisation, which is also echoed in the academic literature (Beer and Clower 2013). In policy discourse, as Estonia's plans for using EU Structural Funds between 2014 and 2020 show, a belief in the importance of human agency can also be witnessed. Framed under the umbrella of enhancing administrative capacity, training events are organised for public sector officials and actors working with NGOs and social partners (Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Estonia 2014). In our interviews, leadership was often understood as positive engagement with communities and connected to activeness in these communities. As Kulno from Järva-Jaani mentioned, 'I really participate in every event, because first of all I am [working at the school]. It is my example for the students [to show] how everything should be done.' This open appreciation of leadership and activeness for the communities in the areas studied makes it clear that these concepts are not only theoretically recognised as essential, but also practically appreciated by actors living in these regions.

Alongside place leadership, also the importance of socio-spatial discourses has been acknowledged in the research on regional polarisation and peripheralisation. Since the cultural turn in human geography, a growing body of literature has focused on the discursive dimension of regional polarisation. On the one hand, it largely concentrates on the meaning that communicative processes have for the evolution and persistence of peripheralisation processes (Bürk et al. 2012; Lang 2013; Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013; Paasi 1995; Wacquant et al. 2014), especially in rural areas (Kay et al. 2012). On the other, it treats regional images as ways of dealing with peripheralisation, or as so-called

soft development factors. These can be employed as external marketing tools or as an endogenous resource to strengthen social capital in a region (Paasi 2013; Semian and Chromý 2014). Despite acknowledging the power of images that tend to stick to places by influencing individual as well as collective actions (Bürk et al. 2012; Wacquant et al. 2014), the literature also highlights the agency of people and places to negotiate the images they are subjected to (Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013; Valentine 2007).

In the research on place marketing and place making in particular, there is a strong focus on 'proactive localities' (Leetmaa et al. 2013, 17) that has also inspired the debates in our Estonian case studies and consequently trickled down into numerous national and local development plans (Agan and Kask 2009; Raagmaa 2002). The local leadership in these areas became aware of the crucial role that images might play for their place development in two different ways. While Kihnu Island and Setomaa previously struggled with processes of territorial stigmatisation ranging from a feeling of neglect to the tangible loss of potential investors in the region, Järva-Jaani and Valga instead encountered the problem of invisibility or of being 'blank spaces on the map'. The conclusions that they drew from these differing experiences were, however, very similar. The cultural activist Toomas from Setomaa and teacher Kulno from Järva-Jaani noted that they 'seriously reconsidered things and then decided that the orientation had to be changed' (Toomas) and from that point 'do whatever it [takes] to be in the big picture, to be in the big plan' (Kulno). Hence, they opted for the response strategy of active image making, which Bürk et al. (2012, 339) describe as 'trying to prove the opposite.' It means that local actors acknowledge the negative images ascribed to their region and turn them on their head to create positive ones. This kind of image reversal is one of the most common response strategies to 'discursive act[s] of peripheralization' (Bürk 2013, 169). It stands in contrast to the other most common responses: that of reproducing negative ascriptions, which might lead to a feeling of hopelessness among the locals, and that of an absolute rejection of the ascribed socio-spatial images (Bürk et al. 2012).



### 3 Unexpected Challenges? Responsibilisation and Idealisation

Leadership and image making have thus been discussed as agency-based approaches with the potential for a better understanding of peripheralisation processes and dealing with them. However, while offering an alternative to a structurally determined conceptualisation of place development, this new focus on agency also poses unexpected challenges for local actors in structurally disadvantaged rural areas who try to put these response strategies into practice.

A central challenge local actors experience when trying to react to the backdrop of a new regional policy focus on leadership and agency is the accompanying shift of responsibilities from the national to the local level. In our case studies, it became clear how local actors are urged to take over ever more responsibilities from the state under the veil of active citizenship. For example, during one fieldwork visit, the local entrepreneur Jaagup was confronted with this kind of responsabilisation by national politicians paying a visit to the Setomaa region. After he had extensively reported to them on the enormous efforts undertaken by local activists to overcome regional peripheralisation, the politicians replied with an appraisal of local activism while simultaneously suggesting there should be an increase in the number of such active people in order to boost regional development. Jaagup then replied by emphasising that his time is, in fact, limited and that his 'wife might also like to see him once in a while.' Hence, while the politicians drew on a discourse that shifts the responsibility for regional development away from the state to the regions themselves, Jaagup pointed out the consequences this focus on place leadership have for the personal lives of the people who take over these responsibilities. The problem of local activists 'terribly overburdening themselves,' as Setomaa journalist and cultural activist Greeta phrased it, has been an issue in all of our four case studies. In a broader sense, the case studies thus point to the neoliberal promotion of rural leadership as, in fact, propagating a 'broader "self-help" ethos' that urges local actors to take on state responsibilities while

simultaneously downplaying the individual burdens that come with it (Kroehn et al. 2010, 498).

The neoliberal appraisal of leaders taking on responsibilities (and simultaneous denial of the price they pay for it) has a further downside: the blaming of people who are either unable or unwilling to take on these responsibilities. In our case studies, this blaming often took the form of a division between the active and the non-active. For example, Greeta and Toomas, two cultural activists from Setomaa, criticise the non-active as not being willing 'to take on any kind of responsibility.' Liis, a social worker from Järva-Jaani, criticises unemployed people, saying that, 'they are the kind of people that don't want to go and work.' Priit, one of Kihnu's political leaders, went so far as to make the following request from the interviewer: 'if you have any *active* people who want to live on a small island, then send them here.'

In line with the research on territorial stigmatisation (Bürk et al. 2012; Wacquant et al. 2014), this simultaneous appreciation of activeness and a lack of understanding for the non-active usually goes hand-in-hand with a depiction of the social pathologies of the latter who are portrayed variously as development-resistant alcoholics, social welfare abusers or Soviet nostalgics with personal initiative levels 'close to zero' (Toomas). Imbi, a cultural activist from Valga region, puts it this way:

Work? Oh yeah, there are so many out there who are searching for employees. This is what they say. There used to be a lack of employment, now there is a lack of employees. Because the state benefits those lazy people who are sitting dust to dawn in the park with their bottles of beer. Gives them money, and they don't go to work. (Interview, Valgamaa, 23 November 2016)

The strong focus on leadership and active coping, therefore, does not only lead to the placing of responsibilities onto local actors, but also to the disqualification of those who are unable or unwilling to meet these normative standards. Thus, there is an interesting ambiguity here that mirrors how local actors are also deeply embedded in neoliberalised (regional) development discourses. On the one hand, they take a critical stance towards local responsabilisation by emphasising the price

they pay for taking on responsibility for regional development. On the other, they reproduce these discourses by setting themselves as positive role models of leadership and activeness and blaming and responsabilising exactly those among the local population who cannot partake in the new development and cannot live up to these roles.

Apart from the issue of responsabilisation, which highlights the usefulness of some actors and the ascribed uselessness of others, we also encountered practices of idealisation. The attempts to overcome territorial stigmatisation with active image making often result in a purely positive portrayal of the place through which structural disadvantages fade into the background. Ragnar from Setomaa and Airi from Kihnu—both active in the field of entrepreneurship—also acknowledged that, due to image campaigns, ‘from outside we look better than we actually are’ (Ragnar) and ‘if we want them to see how poor we are [...], then it is possible,’ but ‘no one wants to do that’ (Airi). Further, when talking to entrepreneur Artur and politician Robert, from Järva-Jaani, this idealisation became evident. At the start of the interview, they were not keen to discuss the problems in their region at all, as Artur explained: ‘there is no point in just whining, it will not take you anywhere.’ This tendency among dominant local groups to idealise their place towards the outside and thereby omit persistent material difficulties has also been problematised within the research on rural idylls (Little and Austin 1996; Matthews et al. 2000; Valentine 1997; Watkins and Jacoby 2007). Not stating these difficulties might thus also mean not dealing with them in practice, which is a considerable risk considering ongoing peripheralisation in these areas.

Moreover, those who wish to address persistent problems might be faced with a situation in which they are treated as ‘traitors’ or ‘trouble-makers’ who destroy the beautiful image of a place that others have worked so hard for. Journalists in the Valga region experienced this when they decided to openly problematise and illustrate the consequences of its ongoing decline in population. For example, one of the journalists, whom we here call Helle, explained how the difference between what still appeared in her memories of the place where she spent her early childhood and ‘what is there now’ motivated her to deal with the topic in a set of newspaper articles, including a photo series.

This initiative was supported by a local leader who gave an open interview about the problems he encountered. While the articles initiated an intense debate on the peripheralisation of the region, they also resulted in the same leader being accused of having ‘ruined our image.’ Further, there were complaints against Reili, the newspaper editor, as to why they would only depict ‘ugly houses when we have nice ones here too.’ As a consequence, the editor decided to publish a counterbalancing photo series portraying only sites of beauty within the region.

What is evident from these examples is that the local leadership aims to put into practice what has been suggested to them in recent regional policy debates, namely, to be active leaders and place sellers. However, against the backdrop of rural peripheralisation processes, they also quickly experience the limits that such agency-based response strategies have in structurally disadvantaged places. While certainly offering novel possibilities for local development, leading through image making therefore, also poses new challenges of responsabilisation and idealisation in structurally disadvantaged rural places. How then to address persistent material difficulties and the limits of local agency when openly stating them is seen as development resistance or re-stigmatisation of the region?

#### **4 Researching Leadership and Image Making: Reflections on the Agency of the Researcher**

When trying to make sense of these practices of place leadership and image making, we as researchers also faced the challenges of acting in structurally disadvantaged places. Since our research took place in regions facing material difficulties, we noticed that we were seen as potential solution bringers and allies of our interviewees, as this occurrence during one of our field visits to Kihnu shows:

After saying thanks for the interview and goodbye, the interviewee Katrin (who is active in the fields of entrepreneurship, culture and tourism) once

again re-emphasised the difficulties that they were facing in the community, dealing with unemployment and lack of future economic prospects. She finished the conversation by expressing her hope that the research she was now participating in could also have a positive influence on finding some new ideas for development. (Field notes, Kihnu, 21 January 2016)

On another field visit, after finishing the 'official' part of the interview, Egert, a local politician from the Valga region continued to discuss the future perspectives of the place: 'But if you [the interviewer] would come here and work on improving the region, then...' He left the sentence unfinished. For the farewell he prompted, 'Why don't you move here? What are you doing in [the city] anyway!' These examples show how hope is vested in the researchers to provide some sort of solution for these places, which also includes the expectation to engage in local image reversal campaigns. This is further demonstrated by the following field note from a meeting of a local development group in Valga County:

At the end of a lengthy meeting, which saw lively discussions on the pros and cons of engaging in place marketing projects with the help of development funds, Peep (a former interviewee and local politician) approached me with a request: 'Listen, how occupied will you be with your work in the near future? I was wondering if you might care to write something for our local newspaper? I mean, your research clearly shows that it is not a question of wanting to deal with image making but that we must, that we must develop the region into a brand.' (Field notes, Valgamaa, 30 November 2016)

This local re-interpretation of our research aims and results initially left us puzzled. Did we really convey this image when introducing ourselves and our research? After repeated occurrences of such incidents, it became clear that these were attempts to make our research part of local development and image making processes; our research itself was seen as instrumental in the processes we were studying. For us, this resulted in real conflicts of loyalty: how could we ever address findings that could be deemed critical or not relevant by Peep, Katrin, Egert and

others after they had provided us with access to the field and vested so much hope in us? How should we position ourselves towards these local expectations that we get involved?

This not only made us very conscious of the question of how to frame or present our research results (cf. Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008), but also of the fact that as researchers we cannot exempt ourselves from local processes of which we inevitably become part. This also requires carefully reflecting upon our own agency as well as the ways in which we change the places through our mere presence in them (Annist and Kaaristo 2013; Blondel, forthcoming). We are aware that researchers vary in their willingness to engage with the social processes they study. Their roles can differ from that of a 'neutral' bystander where any interference with social groups leads to 'systemic bias' (Hammersley 2006, 11) and is thus to be discouraged, to a more activist position that views contributing to social change and empowerment of marginalised groups as a duty of social research (Kitchin 1999). While it, therefore, depends on the positionality of the researcher whether these practices are interpreted as legitimate requests by certain actors to play a more active part in the research or as attempts to instrumentalise it for their own purposes, they certainly influence the researcher's position in the field and the knowledge produced.

Next to our embedded roles as researchers in the field, the methodological choices we make also influence knowledge production in its final form. As Miggelbrink and Meyer (2015) have strikingly noted, the only way *not* to reify spatial images is by refusing to use them at all, rendering research on these topics and writing about them impossible. Therefore, the risk of reproducing hegemonic images of place—stigmatising or idealising—in the way we put questions to our interviewees or present our results is real and often remains unreflected upon. Moreover, due to the difficulty in grasping local power structures when entering the field as an outsider, there is also the risk of involuntarily reproducing them in the form of bias in interview partner selection or data collection (Annist 2013; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). These biases influence the stories we are told and hence also those we retell afterwards. This holds especially true in a post-socialist

context, where social networks are often quite fractured and key actors, therefore, difficult to find (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). We experienced this quite acutely when talking to Endrik, long involved in the political and cultural development of Kihnu Island:

Listen, Mart only gives you the names of his election union and they say the same to you. [...] They belong to the same wing which is now in power. But if you want to listen a little bit to the opposite side as well, I suggest you speak to Kadri. (Interview, Kihnu, 22 February 2016)

Most such fieldwork experiences occurred after the ‘official’ parts of the interviews were over. Instead of exempting these ambiguous situations and the ambivalent feeling they cause from the research results, we suggest regarding them as rare opportunities to reflect analytically upon the intentions and hopes of the interviewee, who may provide the researcher with certain images of the region or recommendations for other interviewees for a specific reason. Considering the contextuality of socio-spatial discourses (Valentine 2007), it is thus key to ask ourselves continuously how we have influenced the field through our presence, if we have spoken to all relevant groups, and what kind of stories the interviewees would convey to other people or in a different setting.

## 5 The Limits of Agency in Structurally Disadvantaged Places: Conclusions

Agency-based concepts such as leadership or image making have been at the heart of recent debates on responses to regional polarisation and also have an important place in this book: *Regional and Local Development in Times of Polarisation: Rethinking Spatial Policies in Europe*. While acknowledging the potential in these concepts, in this chapter, we have first of all shed light on the limits experienced by local practitioners in structurally disadvantaged areas who try to employ leading through image making as a potential solution for

the peripheralisation of their regions. After acknowledging the room for manoeuvre that these agency-based approaches might open up according to the literature and our fieldwork, we pointed out the potential challenges they pose. On the one hand, we have problematised the process of responsabilisation of local actors, in which local leaders are praised for their activeness (while downplaying the risk of being overburdened by taking over these responsibilities) and simultaneously those actors who are neither willing nor able to take up these responsibilities are blamed for their 'inactiveness.' This responsabilisation of local actors goes hand-in-hand with the danger of neglecting the structurally disadvantaged contexts in which they find themselves. On the other hand, whereas leadership and active image making are often discussed as strategies to overcome stigmatisation discourses, and therefore peripheralisation processes, we have demonstrated that they also pose the risk of idealising these places. In this way, image making—as an example of leading peripheral places—very clearly shows how the active showcasing of some positive or clearly defined images inevitably hides other negative or more ambiguous images. It is important to also bring the latter to the fore so as to make the challenges of acting under the circumstances of peripheralisation visible and therefore debatable.

Secondly, this chapter has reflected on the agency of the researcher trying to make sense of these response strategies. As researchers, with our writing, case and interviewee selection or even our mere presence, we are not exempt but in fact deeply embedded in the field we study, and therefore in the local image making and development processes. Our research practices themselves might even contribute to the processes of responsabilisation, idealisation or stigmatisation we have described, since we are also active agents in the processes we study. Failing to acknowledge this agency of researchers misses out on gaining a more reflective understanding of the processes we aim to comprehend.

Thus, in order to gain deeper insight into the ways in which peripheral places are produced, we propose a more processual understanding of place development in general and of the 'hidden diversities' (Kay et al. 2012, 55) within peripheral rural places in particular.



Places can thereby be conceptualised in a heterogeneous way, which acknowledges the multiple modes of (non-) engagement, images and relations constituting them. This also results in a rather nuanced approach towards agency where rural areas as a whole can be seen as ‘inconsistent *and becoming*’ (Kay et al. 2012, 60, emphasis added). Such a structurally contextualised understanding of agency can only come to the fore by going beyond the orthodox methods of standard interview situations. Ethnographic methods, as Hörschelmann and Stenning (2008) propose, are useful in this regard as they are better able to grasp local power relations. Only due to longer term or repeated visits to the field were we able to understand such power structures and see beyond the visible leaders and positive images. We thus believe that such ambivalent fieldwork situations as we have described above should in particular be reflected upon in analyses instead of omitting them as disturbing background noise. We argue that only by using these ‘slower’ methods is it possible to overcome situations in which only the same spokespersons for development, who convey the ever-same images, are interviewed and listened to. More concretely, this means that when researchers are selecting cases they should also keep an eye open for those not-so-perfect leaders and ‘less glossy’ images in order to not simply showcase yet another best practice example of actively coping places.

By paraphrasing Halfacree (2006, 49), we therefore argue that ‘only through a focus on contextual practice,’ which re-considers the structural limits of agency, can we as practitioners and researchers try to come closer to understanding the ‘truth’ of place making in rural space, which also applies to situations in which structural factors are preventing an active response or there are no marketable images to instrumentalise. Only by acknowledging this multiplicity of images, these modes of activeness, and thereby also the complexity of agency in structurally disadvantaged contexts, are we able to gain more realistic insights into the potentials of image- and agency-based responses to regional polarisation. Despite their promise such strategies have to consider both problems of stigmatisation (and invisibility) and problems of idealisation as well as not only the possibilities but also the (structural) limits of acting in peripheral places.

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## Notes

1. Even though we are aware of their conceptual differences, for the purpose of this chapter we use place, region and area interchangeably.
2. For more information on the historical region of Setomaa and its leadership practices, see Annist (2013) and Plüschke-Altöf (2018).
3. Interviews were conducted in English or in Estonian and subsequently translated into English.

## Literature Recommendations

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