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Poverty, social exclusion and coping strategies in rural Europe

Editorial: Pauvreté, exclusion sociale et stratégies de résistance en Europe rurale – Armoede, sociale uitsluiting en strategieën van verzet in ruraal Europa – Poverty, social exclusion and coping strategies in rural Europe

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Editorial: Pauvreté, exclusion sociale et stratégies de résistance en Europe rurale – Armoede, sociale uitsluiting en strategieën van verzet in ruraal Europa – Poverty, social exclusion and coping strategies in rural Europe

Henk Meert

- 1 An overview of Belgian post-war rural geography highlights at least three clear research programmes. First of all, many publications have focused in detail on contemporary social-economic and spatial aspects of agriculture, obviously still being the most important form of landuse in the remaining Belgian countryside. The majority of these contributions offered valuable descriptions and explanations on landuse, crops, income structure of farming enterprises, the problem of successors on the farm and many other interesting topics (see e.g. Christiaens and Van Hecke, 1989). Secondly, taking into account the highly «dispersed urbanised» settlement pattern and the ongoing process of suburbanisation in Belgium, especially in the northern part of the country (Flanders), a lot of academic work has also been invested in a diversity of spatial aspects concerning relations between the city and the countryside (e.g. Van der Haegen, 1982 on spatial commuters patterns or Christiaens, 1987 on aspects of rurbanisation). A third prominent research programme in Belgian rural geography deals with the rural landscape as a legacy of the past, in which former social and economic structures as well as spatial configurations are embedded (see e.g. Annaert, 1952 on the geography of modes of productions in relation to levels of agricultural estate possession, Dussart, 1961 on shapes of parcels or Verhoeven and Daels, 1970).

- 2 However, this volume deviates at least in two ways from these established traditions. First of all, the sum of the contributions is not limited to the classical search for internal spatial differences within a given boundary. Space is also seen as a crucial contextual concept, which mediates in the relationship between micro and macrosocial aspects of society. This explains why the volume incorporates several valuable contributions from non-geographers. Indeed, it is my strong belief that in the case of human geography – and here I quote the words of A. Giddens (1984) – “the work of geographers today has as much to contribute to sociology as sociologists can offer in return” (1984, p. 364), and that... there are no logical or methodological differences between human geography and sociology (p. 368).
- 3 A second divergent path of this volume concerns social exclusion. This may be a relatively new topic to Belgian rural geographers. With different theoretical and empirical approaches from the northern part of Europe, a geography is offered of current marginal rural groups: the poor, the socially and/or spatially excluded, and of their coping strategies in order to fight their situation. As such, this volume answers Philo’s (1992) call to craft a rural-human geography that goes beyond the «average dwellers or users of the countryside», a rural geography that focuses on the «other», those who are poor, socially excluded, bankrupted, old, female, disabled, those who belong to ethnic minorities etc.:
- 4 ... the social life of rural areas is indeed fractured along numerous lines of difference constitutive of overlapping and «multiple forms of otherness», all of which are surely deserving of careful study by rural geographers... (Philo, 1992, p. 201)
- 5 However, as Little (2002) rightly points out, there is a danger that such a research programme might escalate in what she calls «research tourism», meaning that the academic work should end where it really has to take off, this is at the stage of simply documenting the lives of ‘other’ groups without challenging conventional understandings of rurality.
- 6 To avoid this trap, this volume combines several papers, which broadly go beyond this way of academic voyeurism. A first set of papers stresses important socio-economic and spatial structures of the agricultural otherness in Belgium and in the European Union (Etienne Van Hecke about poor and low-income farmers). A second series of papers discusses different groups of ‘other’ rural people and conceptualise the important dialectics between space, social capital and macro-economic processes. Thus Dominique Moran focuses on processes of marginalisation in forestry villages in the Russian North; Sveinung Eikeland deals with remote households in the Norwegian countryside and their coping strategies; Gunnar and Gert Svendsen explore the conditions for co-operative entrepreneurship in rural Denmark during the 19th century; Frans Thissen, Joos Drooglever Fortuijn and Wim Ostendorf address patterns of spatial inequality for the life chances of young people in a rural industrialised area of Flanders and Henk Meert unravels the mediating role of space in the socio-historical production of permanently inhabited campsites in Flanders. But the kick-off of this ‘neglected rural geography’ is by Mark Shucksmith: he discusses the economic, political and social forces, which operate in rural areas, and then conceptualises the key notions of this volume: poverty and social exclusion, illustrated with the British case.
- 7 I hope that this overview of some neglected rural geographies throughout Europe, may be a fruitful attempt – to quote Philo’s words – in turning also in Belgium neglect into

engagement. That way, a fourth research programme may complete the work of Belgian rural geographers.

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