

Wendland: “Peripherality revisited”

A field trip concept developed for the international conference

“New rural geographies in Europe: actors, processes, policies”

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Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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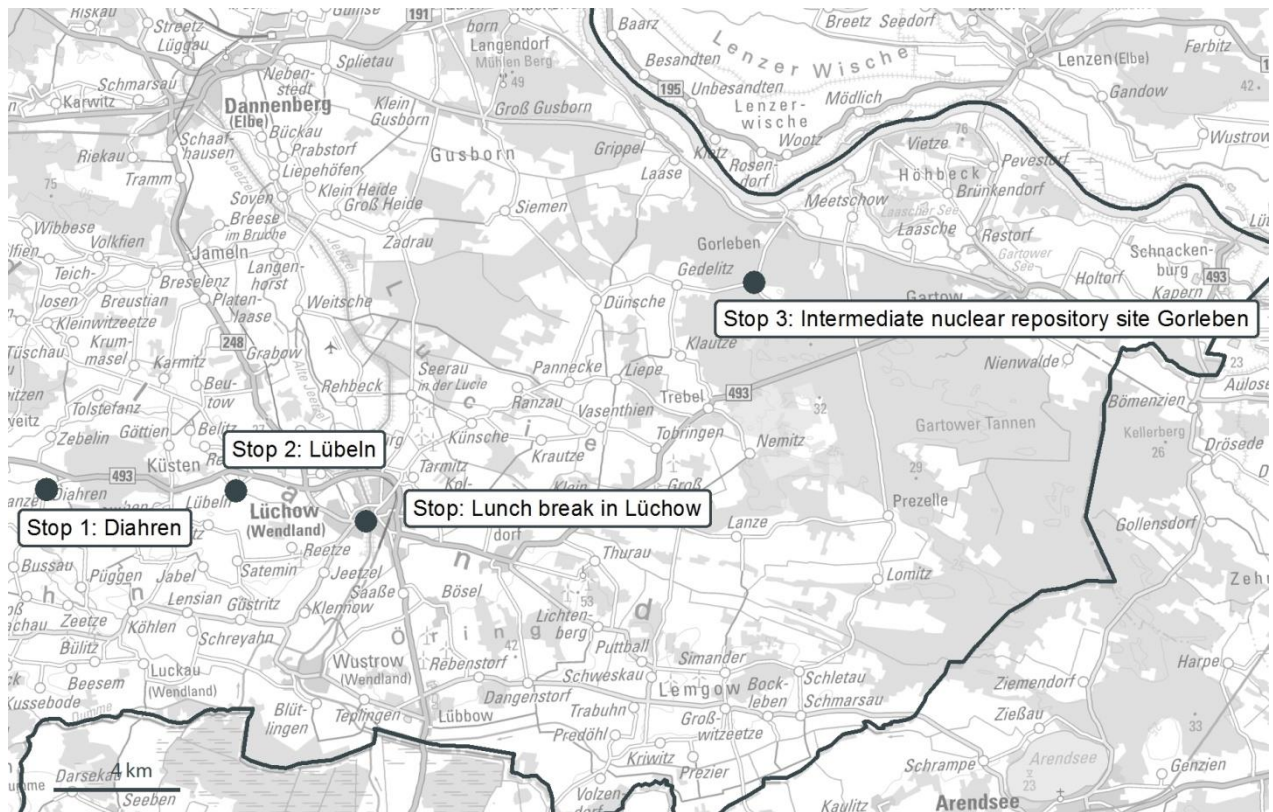
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38116 Braunschweig

www.ruralgeo2017.de

Field trip guides: Annett Steinführer, Patrick Küpper

1. Field trip stops



Map 1: Field trip route.

Source: Thünen Institute 2017 based on GeoBasis-DE/BKG 2017.

10:00-11:00 Village Diahren: Newcomers in a “periphery”?

Field trip partner:

Giselher Kühn, village spokesperson/ organic farmer

11:30-12:30 Lübeln: Rundling villages as a phenomenon of the periphery?

Field trip partners:

Adrian Greenwood, Ilka Burkhardt-Liebig

Members of board of “Verein zur Förderung des Wendlandhofes Lübeln und der Rundlinge e.V.” (Rundling Association)

12:45-13:45 Lunch: Gasthaus Wendel, Lüchow

14:30-15:30 Gorleben: Protest movement and creative industries as an alternative for the Wendland’s development?

Field trip partners:

Michael Seelig, Grüne Werkstatt Wendland (Green Design Workshop Wendland)

Francis Althoff, Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Lüchow-Dannenberg e.V. (Citizens’ Initiative for Environmental Protection Lüchow-Dannenberg)

2. Introduction: Wendland as a periphery

The Wendland, synonymous for the administrative district of Lüchow-Dannenberg, has always been marked as a remote and structurally weak area.

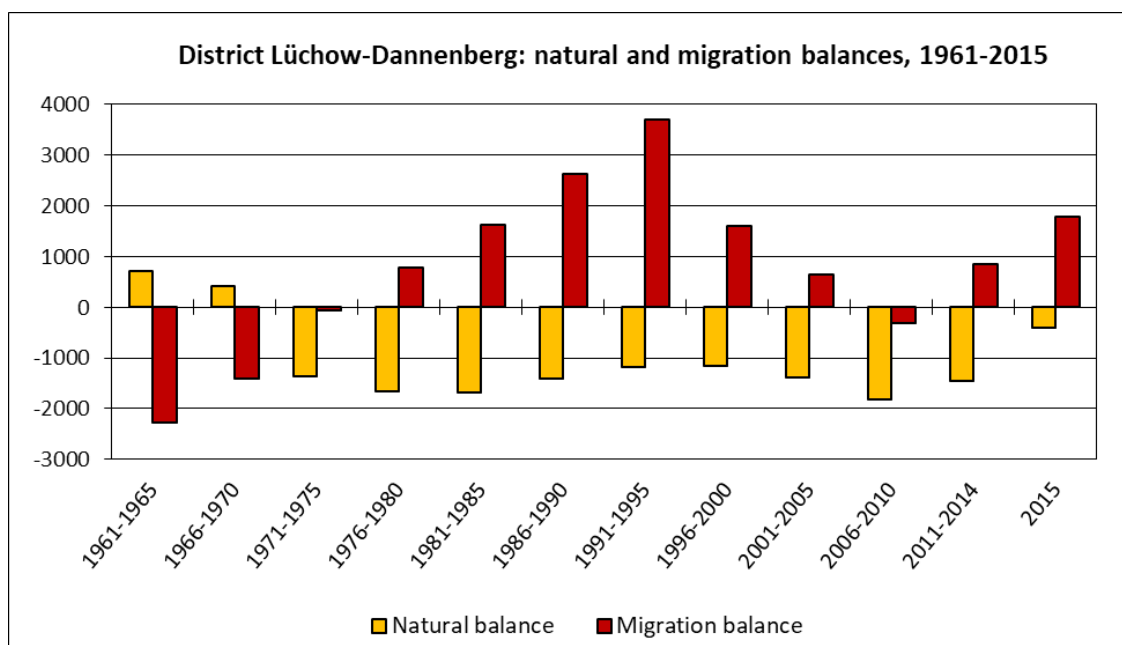
Compared with Germany as a whole, but also with the state (*Bundesland*) Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony), to which the Wendland belongs, the district has a very low population density. A negative natural balance and an above-average ageing are today's major demographic challenges (Table 1 and Figure 1). While young people leave the region, in higher age groups the Wendland's population diagram exhibits downs and – rather untypical for a rural periphery – also peaks. Today, about 50,000 inhabitants live in the Wendland, which is more or less the same number as in the early 1970s. The negative population development is rather caused by the long-term negative natural balance (Figure 1). Demographic projections calculate a 7.7 % population reduction by 2035 compared to 2012 with the corresponding numbers for Germany and Lower Saxony accounting for -2.8% and -2.1%, respectively. The unemployment rate is higher than the Lower Saxonian and German average (Table 1).

Table 1: The district Lüchow-Dannenberg: facts and figures (in comparison with Germany and Lower Saxony)

	Lüchow-Dannenberg	Germany (average)	Lower Saxony (average)
Population development 1990–2000	+5.9%	+3.1%	+7.3%
Population development 2000–2010	-5.5%	-0.7%	-0.1%
Population development 2010–2014	-1.0%	-0.7%	-1.2%
Share of 6- to 18-year-old (2014)	11.2%	11.0%	11.7%
Share of 25- to 30-year-old (2014)	4.3%	6.4%	5.8%
Share of 65+ (2014)	26.6%	21.0%	21.4%
Population projection 2012–2035	-7.7%	-2.8%	-2.1%
Population density (population/km ²) 2015	41.1	229.9	166.5
Gross salaries and wages p.a. in 1,000 € (2014)	28.4	40.4	36.1
Unemployment rate (2016, average)	8.0%	6.1%	6.0%

Sources: BBSR & THÜNEN-INSTITUT FÜR LÄNDLICHE RÄUME (2017), STATISTISCHE ÄMTER DES BUNDES UND DER LÄNDER 2017.

Figure 1: District Lüchow-Dannenberg (Wendland): Natural and migration balances, 1961-2015



Sources: RITTER & HAJDU 1982 (for the years 1961–1980), for all other years: LSN 2017.

From a functional perspective, the media, politics and sometimes even science draw upon such spatial characteristics to mark an area as a “periphery” – a space that faces severe problems in regard to its economic and social welfare (STEINFÜHRER et al. 2016: 9). For instance, “in terms of transport infrastructure, Lüchow-Dannenberg has traditionally been one of the most peripheral areas in Western Germany. During the Cold War, the ‘Iron Curtain’ divided the area from neighbouring regions. Until 1990, only two interstate highways linked the area with the rest of West Germany. The only railroad tracks from the West still end in the town of Dannenberg” (SCHRADER et al. 2001: 45; Maps 2 and 3).

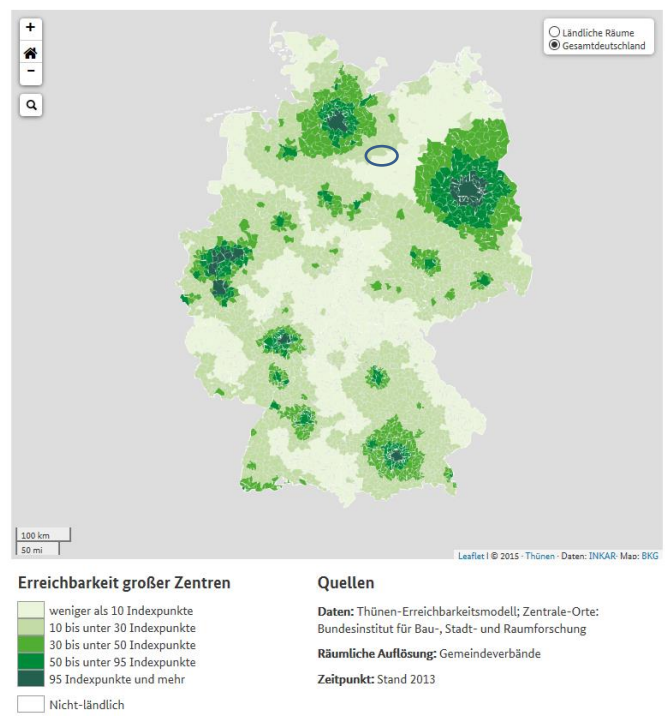
Discussing the periphery-concept of PÉREZ-SOBA et al. (2012) as a space located between core areas or at the edge of a core area that goes in line with a demographic decline, a decline in main economic activities and a loss of local identity, STEINFÜHRER et al. (2016) raise the awareness that a peripheralisation (i.e., the application of the structure functional perspective) leads to a problematisation of space (ibid., 5-22). However, this negative perspective inherent to peripheralisation misses other processes that tend to a positive regard of the affected areas.

Map 2: The two Germanies in 1961:
The Wendland bordering the GDR



Source: DHI 2017 (IEG-MAPS, Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz / A. Kunz 2004)

Map 3: Accessibility of the next five largest centres
(measured by an index = the darker, the better)



Source: Thünen Institute 2017
www.landatlas.de

On the one hand, the deterministic locational perspective on periphery renders any development of these areas impossible, since the respective area’s location at the edge of a core is static. However, considering the current increasing mobility and intensified communication, spaces, however remote they might be, are integrated into physical, social, economic, institutionalised and cultural networks that overcome their locational determinacy. For that reason, on a micro scale there is no evidence that allows for an ascription of structural weakness to remote areas *per se* (ibid., 7-9).

On the other hand, locational and functionalist problematisation discourses are powerful in the consolidation of peripheries that sometimes lead to a reduction of their power of action and disposition (ibid., 12). KEIM 2006 demands that the potential of peripheralised areas as regions that allow for a “(social-) experimental utilisation and forms of living without the pressure of hegemonic developments in the centre” (in STEINFÜHRER et al. 2016: 10) be considered and hints at their potential compensational function. In general, STEINFÜHRER et al. (2016) summarise that there is currently a lack of empirical research on peripheralisation; at the same time, research neglects mechanisms and processes of de-peripheralisation through global networks and markets.

The relatively linear demographic and economic development of the Wendland long before and during the inner-German division, as well as after the reunification, suggests that the peripheralisation of the Wendland through spatial, functional determinisms does not sufficiently explain the socio-economic characteristics of the region. It must hence be asked to which extent the continuing narratives of the periphery influence the image of the Wendland and which impacts this has for the actors in that particular space. It is doubtful that the structure functional and demographic “faults” are so overwhelming that they are the only characteristics determining the area’s potential for its future. For that reason, while trying to avoid spatial determinisms, we will explore possible de-peripheralisation processes. Sticking to PÉREZ-SOBA et al. 2012, we will focus on the fourth dimension of peripheralisation, the *loss of local identity*, to suggest that the Wendland does not subdue to peripheralisation in all its features. Following that, the field trip will explore whether de-peripheralisation processes promote productive, alternative developments in the Wendland that might otherwise remain unseen.

The guiding questions for the field trip are thus:

- Which processes of peripheralisation are taking place in the Wendland?
- Which processes of de-peripheralisation are taking place in the Wendland?
- Which actors, with which interests, promote which kind of construction of the Wendland as a periphery? Are there positive connotations to periphery?
- How are both perspectives connected to each other? Do they determine each other?

3. Field trip

1 Diahren: Newcomers in a “periphery”?

From its early history until today the Wendland’s peripheral location seems a repetitious narrative. The inner-German division had placed the Wendland (corresponding to the administrative district Lüchow-Dannenberg) in a peripheral location within the national territory of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the course of time, spatial determinisms were often employed to describe and even explain the economic weakness of the Wendland.

However, today and already in the past decades the Wendland is significantly attracting people seeking a more “peaceful” life which they expect to find in a less industrialised and urbanised area such as Lüchow-Dannenberg. Most of the people moving to the Wendland, however, are not dependent on job offers in the area; many of them “bring their jobs” as self-employed workers with them (NDR 2016, GRÜNE WERKSTATT WENDLAND 2016). Although the population is shrinking, this influx of new inhabitants demonstrates that there is a particular interest in the Wendland, though not from a structural perspective, but rather from the cultural; thinking in functionalist terms it is to be asked which potential such new and interested inhabitants bear for regional development. The newcomers’ motives to move to the Wendland and their subjective ascriptions to it shed light on alternative discourses and practices that might contradict the demographic change as a risk scenario in the peripheralisation discourse. It might reveal where the region has potentials that have hitherto been undiscovered.

The field trip will take us to Diahren, a small Rundling village in the Wendland which was nearly abandoned in the 2000s. Shortly thereafter, the village was revived by the in-migration of new inhabitants from outside of Lüchow-Dannenberg. Meeting people from Diahren, we will have the opportunity to explore if and how the “structural weakness” can be regarded positively as a locational advantage.

Field trip partner:

Giselher Kühn

Village spokesperson

Organic farmer

2 Lübeln: Rundling villages as a phenomenon of the periphery?

The name “Wendland” refers to an old German word for the Slavic population, the “Wenden”. A group of people denominated as “Slavs” appeared for the first time in the current central and eastern Germany most likely between the 6th and 10th century. Slavs settling in the Wendland spoke their own Slavic tongue, the Draveno Polabic, and fostered Slavic folklore and traditions. In the course of the Wenden crusade 1147, migrants from Western Europe settled in the Slavic area of today’s Germany where they mixed with the Slavic population. Both an assimilation and acculturation to the Western European settlers replaced the Slavic folklore and Polabic language in central Germany; as an exception, the Draveno Polabic language was maintained in the Wendland until the 18th century (HARDT 2013: 5). Historians suggest that the Wendish people were able to keep their culture for so long, because of the Wendland’s “hidden geographical location” (NEDDENS & NEDDENS 2017), referring to its peripheral character. The Wendland was never of interest to warring parties establishing and extending their realms: “The Wendland, however, remained in a peripheral situation during all these events [*i.e., wars, the author*]; (...) Dense forest and sparse population characterise the region” (ibid.).

The Wendland is famous for its Rundling villages, a particular settlement type; its origins (Slavic or Germanic) are subject to controversial debates among historians. The houses of a Rundling are arranged in a circular pattern, so that every door faces the central square in the middle of the village. Rundling villages are especially abundant in the Wendland (ARNOLD 1988: 187). The Association for the Preservation of the Rundling Villages concentrates on the preservation of these villages in the Wendland and in particular to the region’s peripherality: “The geographic peripheral location of the Wendland caused its [*the settlement structures, the author*] slow development, but thereby supported the preservation of old settlement types” (NEDDENS & NEDDENS 2017).

On the field trip we will explore the Rundling villages and their history in the Rundling Museum in Lübeln, drawing on the expertise of members of the local Rundling Association.

Field trip partners:

Adrian Greenwood, Ilka Burkhardt-Liebig

Members of board of “Verein zur Förderung des Wendlandhofes Lübeln und der Rundlinge e.V.”
(Rundling Association)

3 Gorleben: Protest movement and creative industries as an alternative for the Wendland's development?

Already during the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Wendland attracted creative folks as well as members of the *Landkommunenbewegung* (Rural Commune Movement)¹, since its low building density and much abandoned property provided the space and quiescent nature that these groups were seeking (ALTHOFF 2017).

The proportion of people working in the creative industries however, only increased significantly after a salt stock in Gorleben in Lüchow-Dannenberg was nominated as a possible final repository for nuclear waste. In 1977, the minister president of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht, announced the idea of establishing an atomic reprocessing plant and final repository in Gorleben, Wendland. Subsequent protest movements, which doubt the safety of the salt stock, received considerable national and international attention and did not only mobilise the local population but also attracted many nuclear opponents to the Wendland (RUCHT 1980: 100). The founding of a citizens' initiative (*Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Lüchow-Dannenberg e.V.*) and the subsequent networking with nearly all anti-atomic movements throughout Western Germany (RUCHT 1980: 117) facilitated the protest to last until today; Gorleben has still not been announced as a final repository, but it is meanwhile the site of an intermediate repository.

The omnipresent anti-nuclear campaign does not only encourage ecologically-oriented people to move to the Wendland, but has also developed a strong cultural scene with people living from creative jobs. Since the demonstrators were "tired of simply fighting against (...) the politicians (...) the activists had decided to take the fun at least equally serious. (...) A unique scene emerged, where protest occasionally turns into an art form, and art is most of the time associated with politics" (HOGREFE 1994: 72). The "culturalisation" seems to have developed a particularly *cultural* self-concept of the region: In debates about the economic development and marketing of the region, people draw upon what they claim to be extraordinary potentials of culture and creativity in the Wendland region (WENDLAND-NET 2009). However, MASUREK and HACHMÖLLER (2002) also identify problems with this self-concept of a culturalised and alternative region: Since the cultural self-concept is based on a political attitude, the discussions on regional marketing often turn into non-negotiable, ideological arguments that make it difficult to utilise the image for regional development (ibid.: 67-69, see also WENDLAND-NET 2009, KASSEL 2005: 292).

In the last stop we will meet people active in the anti-nuclear movement and in regional development. They will take us to the site of the intermediate and potential final nuclear repository near Gorleben. We want to ask about trajectories of regional development influenced by the atomic project and the anti-nuclear campaign, and whether they might even have induced and induce de-peripheralisation processes.

Field trip partners:

Michael Seelig: Grüne Werkstatt Wendland (Green Design Workshop)

Francis Althoff: Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Lüchow-Dannenberg e.V. (Citizens' Initiative for Environmental Protection Lüchow-Dannenberg)

¹ The Rural Commune Movement attracted people from different protest movements e.g. anti-nuclear, women, peace and ecology. They criticized capitalism and the bourgeoisie and tried to establish an alternative form of living and working together. In the middle of the 1970s, there were about 200 rural communes in Western Germany (GLÄTZER 1978).

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