



International conference of rural geography 2014

Nantes – 2-6 june 2014

“The Countryside: spaces of innovation in an urban world”

Call for Papers

UMR CNRS 6590 « Espaces et sociétés » (ESO)

Commission de géographie rurale (CNFG)

Grupo de geografía rural (AGE)

Rural geography research group (RGS / IBG)

Arbeitskreise « Ländlicher Raum » und « Dorfentwicklung » (DGfG)



New neighbourhood in Courçon d'Aunis (France) / Black swans between fields (Holland) / Educational goats (England) © Yvon Le Caro

Call for Papers

After having emphasised the study of rural areas, European geographers increasingly lost interest in them during the years of economic growth after World War II. Nonetheless, a collection of work has emerged since the 1960s to show how rural areas have adapted to constraints imposed by urbanization, involving changing ideas, industrialization, and rural marginalization in urbanized and globalized society. As well as acting as attractive areas for residents, rural areas have been studied in their own right and as valuable counter balances for urban society. Natural resources, recreation, food production, post-productivist agriculture, and socio-economic trends have become important objects of study by geographers who have rural interests. **Whatever scale of observation is selected, these pieces of work will sometimes relate to agricultural or non-built-up areas, and sometimes to rural areas defined in relation to urban agglomerations.** Unless otherwise specified the term 'countryside' is used with this double meaning in the present call for papers.

The work of the CNRS research team 'Spaces and Societies' (ESO) and its colloquia reflect these orientations: 'What countrysides for tomorrow?' (Rennes, 1992); 'Environment and nature in the countryside, new functions between decline and/or revitalization' (Nantes, 1997), 'Living countrysides, a model for Europe?' (Nantes, 2000); 'Making the countryside. Practices and projects in rural spaces today' (Rennes, 2005). The ambition of the colloquium to be held at Nantes in 2014 is to propose a new stage in the geographical expression of this 'rural renaissance'. It will show how rural dwellers regard the city and the urban world, often in both a critical and a utilitarian way. We argue that rural areas have become spaces capable of creating innovations to overcome some of the contradictions in urban society that surrounds them. Also, we seek to examine how rural areas compete in new territorial assemblages marked by decentralization, reduced control by central State authorities, and inter-territorial cooperation, and experiencing general competition (attractiveness of residences, tourism, and economic activities; and location of public services).

We have chosen to emphasise innovation as the way to approach these problems since this allows us to emphasize changes, both intentional and unintentional, that respond to 'urban' demand, that is to society as a whole. Expressed as adapting to constraints and exploiting new opportunities, innovation is a process that relates to the **application of technologies**, to social processes and usage, to ways of organizing and evaluating areas (planning, landscapes) and territories (regulations, structures of government and governance). Different scales of innovation, from the individual to Europe as a whole, may be approached spatially and thematically, either in an individual paper, or in a series of papers in sessions at the Conference. **The relevance of innovation as a means of analysing the countryside and its use in the media may equally well be discussed.** Adopting the continent of Europe as the frame of reference for the Conference allows useful comparisons to be made and diverse solutions to be explored from one region or one nation to another, both within the European Union or beyond its limits. The international dimension of the Conference will **also** allow geographical approaches of various countries to be compared: experience of earlier bilateral conferences, such as Baeza in 2007, Colchester in 2009 and Münster in 2011, revealed points of convergence and complementarity.

Theme 1. Practices, values and images of rurality: reappropriations and ‘recycling’

‘Out-dated’ yesterday, innovating today? Here the idea is to compare temporalities, actors and spaces, by examining the renewal of certain practices, values and images, as if countrysides are now benefitting from a balancing effect. Responding to urban demand, certain practices that were neglected or even ridiculed from 1950 to the 1980s have now been renewed and reappraised to become the flavour of the month; locally-based food supply, organic farming, self-sufficient eco-friendly living, that were considered ‘alternative’ practices in the 1980s, are becoming commonplace in the countryside and are spreading in urban areas where gardening is sometimes seen as urban agriculture. Some resources, such as enclosed, hedgerow landscapes (*bocage*), have been reappraised in a new economic and political context. Certain ‘resistance to change’ have become ‘visionary’, even spearheading technical and social innovation. We suggest four themes, but these are not exhaustive.

a) Renewed ways of life

What ‘rural’ practices are being adopted by new inhabitants in the countryside, and are they bringing ‘urban’ practices with them? Should a form of settlement planning be developed from urban experience in rural areas that are already rich in their own settlement forms? There are threats of suburban housing in the countryside; should there be a focus on rural production and conservation? Is rural depopulation releasing housing stock? Different national contexts permit various forms of creativity.

b) What landscapes for attractive countryside?

Emphasising individuals and families **especially**, to what extent do landscapes shape the attractiveness of the countryside that is **initially recognized collectively**? How to reconcile the green, bucolic imagery of tourist and residential publicity, with modernized agriculture and its landscape consequences? How are local councillors and residents coping with these changes? What new, ‘neo-naturalist’ images of the countryside are there, linked to environmentalism? What links are there between environmentalism, preservation, economic development, and ‘nature-urbanization’, discussed in Spain in 2007?

c) Forms of **emerging** culture in the countryside

‘Alternative’ groups, **marginalized members of society** (punks, squatters, travellers, **those in temporary shelters or mobile homes**), once unthinkable in the countryside, are now installing themselves and not necessarily receiving more hostility than in towns. What is their contribution to rural revitalization, to the emergence of a new kind of plural, or multicultural society, **and to the renewal of social interaction**? Where are such places in Europe’s countrysides? In peri-urban areas, what balance is there between metropolitan governance and initiatives by local residents?

d) Reconquest and re-invention of the local.

Perhaps the countryside is a better place for envisaging new expressions of the ‘local’, as opposed to the banalization of places and ways of life in our urbanized, globalized world. With growing concern for locally produced food some farmers are mediators who are imparting new ‘meanings’ and identities to rural places. Carthorses in towns? Use of local building materials? Other innovations in the countryside, such as OGMs, encounter **resistance in society**. Can the differences between farmers’ quest for efficiency and new urban demands (e.g. for quality foodstuffs, respect for nature) be reduced? To what extent are ecological and environmental approaches being introduced into territorial planning? Across some open spaces some groups enjoy recreation (hiking, picking flowers and berries, hunting, fishing), whilst access to other open areas is declining: how to regulate such areas and reconcile these differences?

Theme 2. Which innovators and what context for innovation?

The aim is to **envisage** countrysides as places of innovation, to examine innovators, and to explore the contexts and conditions (both specific and recurrent) for the emergence and diffusion of innovations; but also to see how these processes favour some actors rather than others. Can one identify unknown innovators?

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a) Trajectories of individuals and groups of innovators

Looking at individuals and groups in various territorial and thematic contexts may help us understand conditions for innovation in European countryside. On what ideological bases have innovators conceived action? What models adopted, and experiments conducted? What support have they received, and what help is lacking? Can one identify the autonomy of these innovators against the norms of wider society or local society?

b) Support for innovation

What support from cooperative and other groups? Do such structures help overcome the inconvenience of living in thinly-peopled areas? Do they help to mobilize local dynamism? What innovating services? Can flexible, multi-services be developed? How may one mobilize inter-generational links in ageing rural areas? What innovating role for young rural people? Do young rural people wish to continue to live in the countryside, and if so under what conditions?

c) Experiments with local democracy

Social and territorial organization at the local scale varies enormously across Europe. These variations may be discussed here, including attempts at participative democracy, community initiatives, and attempts to reconcile local actors. Changes in administrative authorities offer a chance to observe aspects of resistance and negotiation between rural dwellers and their political representatives.

d) Public policies to encourage innovation

In addition to the CAP, there have been various EU initiatives, including the LEADER programme and ‘poles of rural excellence’. What are the relations between such schemes and local groups in the countryside? How effective have these schemes been in encouraging new initiatives and new economic enterprises? How effective have externally imposed innovations been (e.g. modern livestock accommodation). To what extent do innovations stimulate social change or reinforce established social structures? It is important not to avoid adopting **a critical approach to innovations**. On the one hand to encourage innovators may help clarify political responsibilities when confronted by economic crisis. On the other hand, innovation sometimes hides its role in structural elaboration and reproduction. How does innovation produce renewed social structures? How does it support established social structures? If the European countryside becomes a place for innovation, to what extent will its image of social backwardness and inferiority to urban life remain? Will public policies allow rural areas to experiment, as geographers would like to see, without hindrance or blinkers.

Theme 3. Scales and territories of innovation in Europe’s countryside

This cluster seeks to explore geographical conditions behind the emergence and diffusion of innovations in the European countryside: innovations characterized under the first two themes. To encourage cross-national information, some sessions in this third cluster might be scheduled early in the Conference.

a) Recent territorial changes in Europe

Changes in local authority units, regionalization and related issues are fundamental to understanding the dynamism of actors and the emergence of innovations in rural areas. Comparative papers covering more than one country would be useful. How do rural areas fare in terms of administration by comparison with surrounding urban areas and urban society?

b) Emergence and diffusion of innovations in rural areas

Europe demonstrates certain types of location for certain innovations:- windfarms, organic farming, local food systems, rural festivals. Where are new models (for agriculture, settlement, energy) emerging, and how are they being diffused? Is this a matter of proximity and networks, or is it a more random process? How typical are the various experiences studied? Can the idea of ‘intermediate space’, as in Germany, be applied elsewhere with regard to new forms of mobility (not necessarily rural to urban) or new forms of production?

“The Countryside: spaces of innovation in an urban world”

c) Localism and proximity in debate

Here it is expected that there will be discussion of competition between areas, since innovation is a factor of competitiveness; how may this operate in the context of competing territories? Or what inter-territorial solidarities may be identified? Can innovations and resources be shared among different areas? Forms of transport (public, on-request, car-sharing) might be a revealing theme to illuminate the link between innovation and territorial re-composition. Similarly for energy: how to produce it, and consume it? Conflicts between national planning and local concerns can be identified: should rural areas produce energy for the national market and for towns nearby? Can they be efficient and significant in the regional environment? Do rural dwellers produce less household rubbish than their urban counterparts?

d) Comparability and transferability of innovation

From a scientific point of view, can one compare what is happening in the countryside of the different nations of Europe? To what extent do juridical, socio-economic and cultural differences limit such comparisons or make them invalid? How do local actors make such evaluations, for example when they discover relevant innovations in areas they have visited in other European countries? Can one make a critical study of policies, such as LEADER, which focus on the transferability of experiences? Comparison and transfer may be appreciated at different scales: nation, region, and locality. Broad comparisons may be made but differences between neighbouring localities can create walls of incomprehension! The transferability of innovations requires openness to new ideas. Fortunately, such openness seems to be present in many rural areas of Europe, especially where migration trends have contributed to a greater diversification of their population: examples and analyses of such situations will be welcome.

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The date for submitting proposals for delivering papers is

1 october 2013

Proposals to be send to: <rural.conference@univ-nantes.fr>

Proposals are to be sent as pdf files as on two side of A4. On the first side is to be shown the title of the paper in the language to be used for the presentation, followed by the translation of the title into the three other languages of the Conference. For each author and co-author, family name, first name, university position, home institution, and email are to be given. On the second side should be indicated, in 11 point font, the language to be used and a summary of the proposed paper emphasising its problematic, its methodology (including the area(s) studies for empirical studies) and the principal results obtained. Information from both sides of the proposal sheet will be considered by members of the scientific committee and will not be confidential in character.

Authors will be informed if their proposal has been selected by early December 2013, and must send their written paper (or, failing that, a long summary) by April 2014, so that the proceedings may be distributed (either electronically or on paper, but without ISBN) well before the meeting. This will facilitate discussions at the Conference.

Oral communications will be presented in one of the four languages of the Conference. Instructions will be given regarding the possibility of **bilingual slide presentations (powerpoint) with text in French and English.**

After the Conference, contributors will have the opportunity of submitting their revised texts before 20 September 2014, with a view to publication. The scientific committee envisages that this may be in the form of special issues of academic journals, or edited volumes to be offered to reputable publishing houses. The precise form of publication will depend on the theme and the language of the material submitted by each author. The scientific committee cannot guarantee publication but anticipates being able to communicate what solution has been adopted by the end of 2014, depending upon favourable responses from the reviewers, in the case of journals, and from publishers, in the case of books.

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