



Is rurality a thing of the past?

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In the era of globalisation and metropolisation, is rurality an old-fashioned concept, a thing of the past? The arsenal of reforms and laws that have been passed – indeed, often forced through – in recent years in France seems to give weight to this idea, while the economic crisis has proved to be the perfect opportunity to (dis)unite small local authorities under the steamroller of global finance.

Metropolisation means concentrating not only economic life but also collective human existence in general in the centres of towns and cities. For urbanites, the alibi for that which is imposed as a progress for civilisation is that of profitability and what are claimed to be economies of scale. The formatting of minds by this doxa of our arrogant modernity becomes entrenched via the stifling effects of new information and communication technologies (NICTs). The result: local elected officials, average citizens, are finding it increasingly difficult to understand this complexification of our democratic life, and no longer believe in our ability to live harmoniously side by side. The world's major trade flows irrigate the vast concentrations of humans that are our metropolises, abandoning all that is not urban to desertification. While metropolitan areas account for 2% of annual growth in GDP, and furthermore while French GDP is stagnating, it is not hard to guess where the differential lies: it is in the vast rural and periurban spaces that growth is lowest and indeed often negative, depending on the area.

Denser city centres versus rural exodus

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the recent “Duflot law”, formally known as the *loi ALUR* (*loi pour l'accès au logement et un urbanisme rénové*, ensuring access to housing and renewed urban-planning measures),¹ whose three key objectives are to protect agricultural land and forests, to encourage intercommunalities (i.e. structures with responsibility for certain local-government functions for a whole group of municipalities), and to “densify” housing. To this end, the transfer of urban-planning responsibilities from France's 36,700 *communes* (municipalities, each of which has its own mayor and municipal council) to intercommunal structures will be compulsory with effect from 26 March 2017. Furthermore, in intercommunalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, the granting of planning permission will no longer be the responsibility of the state civil service, as this function is also to be transferred to intercommunal structures. While the environmental reasons for this – space-saving, minimising transport costs – are understandable, the economic pretext belies the notion that the only acceptable forms of civilisation and ways of life are urban. Not all of these objectives are equally laudable as, aside from the first of the three, they do little to mask the general intention of progressively absorbing *communes* and concentrating power in intercommunalities – an intention that is unsurprisingly viewed by many mayors as pernicious, as the complexity of the procedure makes it particularly impenetrable for the average citizen or rural councillor, who are led to believe that the result will be economies of scale that, in fact, either are unproven or which benefit only certain causes. These gradual and surreptitious changes – difficult to explain and thus

¹ See (in French): www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000028772256&categorieLien=id.

to counteract – therefore constitute a useful weapon in the armoury of an anonymous and rootless technocracy that legislates from Paris without any knowledge of the “real France”. But, as always, the end justifies the means. However, to draw a parallel with psychoanalysis, the devil is hidden in the detail, like a suppressed emotion that will eventually resurface despite one’s best efforts: recentralisation appears to be the new unspoken objective, the magic solution to all France’s problems. In pursuing this goal, the reality is simplified rather than rationalised, pulling the wool over the eyes of the general public in the process. Accordingly, hyperurbanisation – responsible for concreting over the equivalent of an entire rural *département* every seven years – primarily concerns the (r)urban fringes.

This unsatisfactory scenario of two-tier, two-speed development adversely affects not only rural France in the strictest sense of the term but also the whole of “rurban” or “peripheral France” (“*la France périphérique*”), to use the expression coined by geographer Christophe Guilluy (2014). Depending on the definition used, this “peripheral France” comprises all areas on the outskirts of cities that can be considered part of their ever-expanding metropolitan areas, and is home to some 60% of the national population. In the worrying process that is currently being endorsed by France’s national elites, on both sides of the political spectrum, there are legitimate concerns that a “crazy machine” is at work, albeit one that is largely hidden from view, whereby certain minorities are discriminated against and influential politicians bypass the democratic process in order to create oligarchies that are out of the reach of public scrutiny. At this point, a fundamental question needs to be asked: has France as a society abdicated its responsibilities and abandoned all desire to take control of its destiny? Are its ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity still the founding values of the French republic and French society? More importantly, who hears the faint sounds of protestation and resistance emanating from the forgotten millions out in the sticks?

Safeguarding a territorial balance

Would it not be wiser to try to maintain a territorial balance between big cities and “peripheral” areas, between the the hyper-urban and the hyper-rural, in the name of national solidarity and a clearly understood public interest? This alternative scenario is supported by the 90% of French mayors who are in charge of rural *communes* and who feel increasingly disenfranchised and threatened by a centralising movement, just 30 years after a broadly successful decentralisation process was implemented. The automatic transfer of responsibilities – and almost certainly funding, too, to the point where *communes* end up in a stranglehold situation – will lead to their absorption into intercommunal structures with no clear identity. Decidedly, the economic crisis is the perfect excuse for pushing through any course of action. And yet, during the États Généraux de la Démocratie Territoriale (“General Assembly to Review Territorial Democracy”) held in October 2012, President François Hollande clearly stated that France’s different “territories are not a burden but an asset for a successful economic recovery”. Indeed, numerous prominent politicians have seen fit to make apparently heartfelt contributions stressing the importance of defending rural areas, before taking quite contradictory action as soon as the microphone is switched off. Many of them are presidents of intercommunalities who seek simply to extend the scope of their responsibilities in order to absorb the small *communes* in their areas. Rural mayors do not particularly appreciate others speaking on their behalf, but the problem is that they rarely get a chance to make their own voices heard.

For rural mayors, the territorial reform that has been announced is nothing more than an admission of political abandonment in terms of territorial development and fiscal equalisation – in short, in terms of territorial equality. These mayors have the figures to show that it is not *communes* of under 500 inhabitants that drain public resources: in the town halls of these communities, there is one employee for every 166 inhabitants, whereas in towns and cities of 50,000 or more the figure stands at one employee per 53 inhabitants. Personnel costs in rural town halls amount to €184 per inhabitant, compared with €779 per inhabitant in towns and cities with populations over 50,000.

Neither can local councillors in rural *communes* be accused of being a strain on the public purse, as they receive far lower allowances than their urban counterparts, to the point that they could be said to be essentially undertaking voluntary work rather than pursuing a professional political career. Rural municipalities represent 90% of France's *communes* and account for 19% of municipal civil servants nationwide – for 33% of the national population.

And yet rural areas have assets to flaunt, including as economic spaces, albeit on the condition that the necessary communication infrastructures exist to facilitate trade. It is also true that economic areas containing a network of companies make it possible to pool some of their services. Nevertheless, these territories above all need to keep their public services; they must refuse to become “medical deserts” – or, worse still, human deserts. There is a great deal of work to be done here, but also great potential, which must be explored further – in rural territories just as much as in urban areas. The majority of spaces in question are experiencing demographic expansion as a result of the arrival, in particular, of new country-dwellers (“rurbanites”). In the space of 30 years, *communes* with fewer than 3,500 residents have seen their combined population rise from 18 million to over 22 million, bearing in mind that 33% of the French population live in rural areas covering 91% of the national land mass.

Rurality as an asset: the “new village”

The new “village” of Cadenet in Provence, described by Jean-Pierre Le Goff (2012), despite its differences compared to a traditional village, has proved a highly attractive community. This is because it appears to offer values that city-dwellers yearn for: “The old municipal council, whose members were often blunt but supportive of their community and steeped in a shared culture born out of both local and national customs and attitudes, has been replaced by a new, more varied and colourful council where sometimes radically different individuals, social categories, networks and mental universes coexist in a single space with no shared vision for the future... Shunning the clichés and idealised visions of Provence, the village elders feel that they are the last representatives of a culture that is dying out in the face of ‘neorural’ lifestyles and mass tourism...”

The new “village” is the result of an inevitable adaptation to economic globalisation, albeit an adaptation that has been imposed rather than chosen. The corollary of this is that its future, like that of French society, is set to become a serious problem. The breakdown of traditional village communities corresponds more generally to a breakdown in the stable categories of French society and in French society's gradual disconnection from its customary affiliations. The excesses of individualism have torn it apart, causing it to lose its bearings and its collective perceptions. Jean-Pierre Le Goff gives a frank assessment of the state of rural life today that avoids the pitfalls of unnecessary nostalgia, while nevertheless pointing out that there was, in the past, “incredible friendship and solidarity that mitigated the harshness of village life and was a source of joy and pride”. We might add here, for ethnologists, that 500 inhabitants is recognised as the maximum population size for a community or society where everyone truly knows one another.

Of course, the key component of rural life, farming, has changed just as much, if not more, having undergone radical transformations over the decades. French society is less and less agrarian. Modernisation of farming, the image of farmers on their tractors, the industrial agricultural techniques of the big, capitalist agrifood firms – are these the signs of a pacified, if not altogether happy, rurality? In view of the 200 farms that cease operations every week in France, this is highly unlikely.

This “new village” serves as a place of retreat for urbanites fed up with the problems of big cities and for families in social difficulties, who believe they will find a haven of peace and quiet in the countryside. They may be disappointed in this respect, and indeed some mayors can bear witness to the new sources of suffering that have been experienced by newcomers who entertained certain illusions of village life. Just like a traditional village, this “new village” can be the object of

fantasies for new residents. Nevertheless, it is still true that “the village” acts as a “counter-model to our mobile, globalised society,” in the words of Christophe Guilluy (2014, p. 133). Working-class households that move to a “new” village hope to find a rural space that is more human, or suburban spaces that suit them better, at least. However, they instead find that the solidarities of the past have in part disappeared.

Creating new solidarities

What, therefore, can be done to establish new solidarities? The experiences of rural mayors are often proof that it is by joining forces, making do with whatever resources come to hand (as nothing can be taken for granted) and involving associations and volunteers that villages can resist this trend towards urban concentration and metropolisation that national politicians and large local authorities want to impose without discussion or debate. Instead of taking the time to find suitable solutions, we are seeing, in this time of financial, societal and moral crisis, a headlong rush towards large numbers and generalised, simplified solutions. The differences that set rural areas apart from other territories need to be demonstrated on the ground and in our capacity for harmonious living, in clear opposition to the technocracy obsessed with major impacts and grandiose projects. Rural mayors need to adopt an eternal anthropological vision, namely the vision that humanity has historically applied to its natural and human environment. Of course, it is not easy to defend this identity when confronted with the dominant ideology of homogenisation – an ideology espoused by selfish and demanding consumers, instrumentalised by the democracy of material possessions and accelerated by the omnipresent retail sector and the omnipresent media, where everything must be technological and digital – rather than the ideology of moral obligation. Rurality, by contrast, is the world of “undulating and diverse” little things, as Montaigne described them in his *Essays*, of an in-between place that is profoundly human.

Intercommunal structures, through the pooling of services and resources, represent a social progress – for example, with the creation of *centres intercommunaux d'action sociale* (intercommunal social action centres). But they must be considered as a toolkit, to be used to make real financial savings by sharing resources; they must not encroach upon the decision-making powers of elected municipal councillors or upon *communes*' margin for manoeuvre, as the *commune* is the only tier of government that offers truly local democracy and the most appropriate level of mutual acquaintance for the vast majority of citizens. For all the reasons outlined above, it is easy to understand how intercommunal structures (“communities of *communes*”, “agglomeration communities”, “urban communities” and “metropolises”) have tended to become technocratic and autocratic. Their increasingly complex mode of governance puts the elected officials of small *communes* at the mercy of those representing larger local authorities. And the day when small local authorities manage to find common ground with their city counterparts, it will be too late, as all of France's small *communes* will have been stripped of their competencies and of their souls. Following the poorly implemented reform of the primary-school week in France (initiated in 2013/2014),² it is clear to see that costly extracurricular activities are bound to be transferred to intercommunalities (which have more funds than small *communes*), no doubt followed by responsibility for primary schools in general. This prospect is not one relished by most mayors, who wish to maintain the link between the *commune* and the local state primary school. However, they

² Previously, most nursery and primary schools operated a four-day (or occasionally four-and-a-half-day) week, with lessons running from 8.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. and from 1.30 p.m. to 4.30 p.m. on weekdays except Wednesdays (when schools were closed), with some schools also opening on Saturday mornings. Following the reform, nursery and primary schools are now required to operate for four-and-a-half days a week from Monday to Friday (with no lessons on Wednesday afternoon). The school day has been shortened on Tuesdays and Fridays, ending at 3.00 p.m., but as many parents cannot pick up their children earlier, extracurricular activities have to be provided until at least 4.30 p.m. The funding of these activities essentially falls to the *commune* (which is responsible for nursery- and primary-school buildings and non-teaching staff and services), with a contribution from central government, but for small *communes* this is a strain on resources. Many *communes* have recruited volunteers to run certain activities.

may not have a choice, as the technocrats seem to know best... and, after all, in such a negative context, is it not inevitable that the strongest will win the day? A desire for concentration, homogenisation and an authoritarian levelling-out of disparities is at play within France's current intercommunal structures, where the ultimate goal is unanimity and quasi-compulsory consensus.

As will now be clear, the question of the degree and nature of interdependence between different types of territories is crucial for a country such as France, which is going through a difficult period marked by democratic deficits and citizens who have lost their bearings and are seeking points of reference. French citizens of this era are no longer rooted in "a territory and a history," as Marcel Gauchet (2002) puts it in his commentary on the poor state of our modern societies. Furthermore, the solutions proposed are often nothing more than sticking plasters on a wooden leg. Rural mayors were hoping that the Assises de la Ruralité ("Rural Affairs Forum") organised by the the French Ministry of Housing, Territorial Equality and Rural Affairs in the autumn of 2014 would have an impact that went beyond the initial "announcement effect" and kept its promises, but what is really needed is proactive, concrete action – for example, correcting funding inequalities such as those currently present in the *dotation globale de fonctionnement* (general operating grant for local authorities), whereby an urbanite is worth twice as much as a country-dweller: rural *communes* with populations below 500 receive just €64 per inhabitant, compared with €128 for cities with over 200,000 inhabitants. Moreover, when we bear in mind that central government is planning to stop these grants to *communes* and instead pay them directly to intercommunalities, on the condition that they then redistribute the monies to their member *communes*, is this not another nail in the coffin of rural life? We are in the process of radically changing our civilisation – that of the earth and of nature, a civilisation as old as the world – in a climate of general indifference.

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