BOOK REVIEWS

URBAN-RURAL INTERFACES:
TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

With a review of:

Vanessa Miriam CARLOW, Institute for Sustainable Urbanism ISU, TU Braunschweig (ed.), *Ruralism: The Future of Villages and Small Towns in an Urbanizing World***, Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2016, 296 pages, Gert-Jan HOSPERS and Josefina SYSSNER (eds.),** *Dealing with Urban and Rural Shrinkage: Formal and Informal Strategies***, LIT Verlag, Münster 2018, 146 pages and Jörg SCHRÖDER, Mauricio CARTA, Maddalena FERRETTI and Barbara LINO (eds.),** *Territories: Rural – Urban Strategies***, Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2017, 304 pages.**

1. INTRODUCTION

This article reviews three edited books which discuss the spatial theme, which is receiving more and more attention in today's academic and policy circles. As a quick overview of the titles shows, the books are all concerned with the relationship or interaction between urban and rural regions, or, to take an older nominal pair, between town and country. The perspectives described in the books focus on the current situation of this relationship, in a constellation characterised by the fact that nowadays more than half of the world's population is living

in urban contexts – with a still growing highly concentrated share all over the world but today especially in Africa and Asia. This urbanisation can be seen as a contrast to sparsely populated peripheral territories that also abound across the world. Today, we live indeed in an "urbanising world" as one of the book titles states. However, if measured in terms of space or square kilometres, an enormous part of the world still consists of peripheral or non-urbanised territories, not in every respect even rural.

In addition, we must face the fact that the world in which we are living is no more a world which could be named as belonging to the 'Holocene', to use the title of one of the books of the Swiss author Max Frisch. As a matter of fact, we are rather living in a man-made epoch, the 'Anthropocene', as the famous Nobel-Prize winning chemist Paul Crutzen has stated. This epoch is dominated by urban structures which even led Geoffrey West to the derivative term: 'Urbanocene'. In his book *Arrival City* (2012) Doug Saunders described this constellation as a continuous flow of people migrating from rural regions into cities. In his view, cities should be better prepared to accept and integrate these people instead of trying to create strategies to stop them from coming. Is this an unstoppable future trend? Is this trend more relevant for the booming cities in Asia and Africa? Or do we have strategies to prevent this movement from rural areas into urbanised regions which can stop the escape from 'the country', leaving the rural areas in a permanent status of depopulation? And in whose interest should this happen?

Accidentally, the aforementioned trend is not a new phenomenon. Depopulation migrations have characterised Europe since the start of the industrialisation period, which was accompanied by urbanisation – offering job opportunities and better living conditions. Furthermore, we should not forget the old motivation for moving to the city: it could free people from the status of dependency as an heir of feudal structures. The still quite famous German proverb "Stadtluft macht frei" (The air of the city makes you free) is a case in point.

In addition, the problematic circumstances of life around 1900 in big and rapidly growing European cities created a desire of bourgeois people to move away from cities to rural regions. They migrated to more or less romanticised villages, serving as refuges to escape from the grey walls of the city. This was the dream for a more pleasant life in the countryside, not as a farmer but rather as a hobby gardener or landlord far away from the real hard working life of farmers. In Germany, this even created a special movement, the 'Jugendbewegung'" (Youth Movement), which was characterised by "agro-romanticism" and "hostility toward big cities", to refer to the title of an important study by Klaus Bergmann. A trend which was adopted with the Garden City-concept and the associated movement by Ebenezer Howard around 1900. And this bourgeois praise of country life has remained a trend, favoured and supported by journals like *Country Life* in Great Britain and *Landlust* (love for the country)

in Germany. With the Covid-19 epidemic and its new living and working constellations – home office is gaining importance – interest in the country is rising once again.

Allow me to discuss how the three books under review tackle today's urban-rural interactions – having a long tradition and a future dimension. Is the topic a never ending story?

2. TACKLING URBAN AND RURAL SHRINKAGE

The book edited by Gert-Jan Hospers and Josefina Syssner is the outcome of a research project supported by the Formas Swedish Research Council. The editors have stressed that the current dominance of urbanisation entails "massive implications for non-urban places", resulting mostly in the shrinkage of the population (depopulation), a change of population composition (leaving elderly people back), and an "over-dimensioned infrastructure" (p. 9). The editors have also stressed that this phenomenon of shrinkage has been a problem of the countryside for a long time, while today it is the topic of cohesion policies in many European countries, especially regarding the question of whether this should be tackled with the help of "top-down" or "bottom-up" strategies. The chapters in the edited volume discuss "how local communities in both urban and rural contexts have responded to the challenge of population decline". It is emphasised that spatial planning "is only one of the many ways to deal with population decline". And "the book brings together several theoretical perspectives, case studies and policy lessons from both urban and rural areas" (p. 11). The articles are written mostly by Swedish and Dutch authors with three exceptions: there are also contributions by academics from Italy, Germany, and Russia.

One chapter tackles the topic of "Towards a culture of degrowth", that is accepting the fact of "growing smaller" (p. 17 ff.). The following chapter discusses the problems of fixed assets, i.e. old infrastructure mostly neglected in relation to the adaption of real estate (p. 31 ff.). Another chapter highlights the importance of "raising community involvement and empowerment" to tackle the shrinking processes in old industrial regions (p. 45 ff.). The case of Russia reveals (p. 58 ff.) a lack of "a professional approach to spatial planning" – this is quite a statement! The case of regional planning in Lower Austria (p. 73 ff.) reveals the "unexploited potential of strategic spatial planning in shrinking regions" and the need to have "a rethink of the division of tasks between the public sector and civil society". This is supported by a Dutch case study (p. 87 ff.) which stresses the need "to strengthen informal ties".

The following analysis of both a Swedish and a Dutch case (p. 100 ff.) reveals once again the "dominant impression" for the future of rural depopulating regions: "Informal groups are the ones most active in the local planning process". These groups are central, but they have "to formalize their informal structures", that means they must be taken seriously not just as individual voices or special interest groups. Obviously, this is not an easy proposal but rather a demanding one. The following case study, which deals with the Swedish region of Östergötland (p. 111 ff.), reflects the fact that in many peripheral areas more and more women, especially young ones, are leaving the region. The chapter demonstrates that this Swedish region is not by itself an "equal country". However, the fact of employing the so-called "Local Economic Analysis" tool might increase the chance for improvement by focusing on the endogenous potentials of the area. This idea – adopted based on the experiences from development policies in the Third World – was discussed already in European regions intensively in the 1980s!

The chapter on "social inclusion of migrants in European shrinking small towns" (p. 123 ff.) uses the example of Germany to suggest that the success of this integration depends on a clever combination of formal and informal strategies, which is not present in all regions. The last chapter deals with mobile technology (p. 134 ff.) as a chance for rural areas to raise the level of digital literacy. Again, this is still more a desideratum for many regions than reality.

Essentially, this book combines professionally written and documented analyses of several important aspects of the economic and social realities of shrinking localities, stressing the need for engaged formal governmental and institutional arrangements, as well as active informal structures, i.e. active participation and mobilisation of endogenous potentials. This book offers clarity of view and, in many ways, may inspires researchers and, hopefully, also the actors affected by the shrinkage processes at their locations. For those at the front of such shrinking processes I recommend that – based on these findings – a short manual should be written or developed about all the aspects of shrinkage and the possible ways of handling it.

3. RURALISM: THE FUTURE OF VILLAGES AND SMALL TOWNS IN AN URBANIZING WORLD

This book edited by Vanessa Miriam Carlow is based on a talk from 2015 at the Institute for Sustainable Urbanism of the Technical University Braunschweig (Germany) about "The Future of Villages and Small Towns in an Urbanizing World". Its appearance is quite different from the previously discussed book, not so much in terms of its main topic, but when it comes to its layout: the book combines ana-

lytical texts with maps, diagrams, and illustrations. It even includes a photo essay, which makes its design rather attractive and appealing.

In its approach the book focusses on transgressing the dichotomy of urban and rural constellations. This reminds me of a cartoon by the French cartoonist Sempé which juxtaposed the picture of a traditional village and a high-rise urban centre: all the labels in the village signifying pubs and shops had names and implications of the modern city, like "Centre of Joy", "Express Service", etc., while in the city the labels had names like "Old Barn", "Horse Stable", and more. This cartoon could be viewed as an early critical vision of the coming age of ruralism! The photo essay at the beginning and end of the book also reflects this tone. It presents pictures of a small village as the habitat of small family houses in an urbanised (suburban, small city) style without any urban life in the vicinity of agroindustry and adjacent big distribution centres for goods – quite a contrast to the cosy image of a village or the idea of "Landlust"!

The following chapter discusses two perspectives of modern rural life. One deals with quasi-suburban living areas and agro-industrial structures, while the other can be characterised as "secluded luxury or ecological enthusiasm" at the edges of big cities. The perspectives are linked to two scenarios: "On the one hand, these scenarios are dominated by highly industrialised, large-scale agriculture, operated using large quantities of chemicals. On the other, the scenarios focus on small-scale, local food production and dense local networks" (p. 27). However, such constellations do not only reflect different settlement structures or lifestyles but also different social structures and differences in income. The latter aspect is often overlooked in the current development of "ruralism". In general, there are no common strategies for development into the new phase of ruralism, combining rural and urban elements, because this development is heavily dependant on the relevant local natural, economic, and social context. Moreover, it matters if localities are situated close to or far away from cities, as Kvorning, one of the book's contributors, has argued: "It should also be said that there are probably villages that must be abandoned and demolished and rural districts that must remain very sparsely populated," (p. 38). In other words, cohesion policies regarding "ruralism" must always be seen and adjusted in relation to applicable local circumstances. There are no ready-made solutions that match every context.

The next chapter discusses the special constellation of small towns, "a persisting pattern of contrasting *urban* and *rural"* (…) a decisive element of the Central European settlement system", which is endangered as well (p. 52). The chapter is followed by another one which asks how the image of rurality in the city, featured by supermarkets, journals or TV, corresponds in any way to the reality in villages. It is not surprising that from the urban perspective "we find a clean version of rurality (…), where the commodities of the city are guaranteed and the discomfort of rural life, like animal dirt, noise, smells, and the agriculture industry and so on are avoided" (p. 61). This is more than a misunderstanding, but actually this is not

a new observation because a similar misunderstanding existed around 1900 as well. It must be said, however, that the book does focus on the urban/rural constellation in history. There are flashbacks into the development of this over time, e.g. by reflections on the changing landscape around the German cities of Hamburg and Dessau.

There are some chapters which analyse and represent case studies about spatial development in different parts of Germany, like the fusing of urban structures into rural "Hinterlands". This development is framed as "Landungsprozesse" (landing processes or disembarkation), that means "those consequences and effects which are dependent on the surrounding metropolitan centers (…), just how they landed," (p. 121). The book also discusses case studies of the 'hard' impacts of urbanisation on rural environments, being the opposite to the 'soft' impacts of a rural style on urban environments.

The fact that this is not a new phenomenon is demonstrated impressively by a very personal chapter by Eckard Voigts. His contribution analyses the images of rurality in the context of literary documents over time and shows "the complex, two-way diffusion of urban-rural exchange" (p. 175) – but the literary voices are coming mostly from urban or urban-influenced writers. The case studies presented are based on research not only in different German regions, but also in parts of Sweden, Norway, China, Colombia, and Oman. In an interview with Stephan Petermann, who has been working with Rem Koolhaas, is the interlocutors has argued that besides the growing effects of urbanising all over the world, it should not be forgotten that "the countryside is ninety-eight percent of the world's surface and fifty percent of the world's population of mankind lives there (…) Today, the terra incognita is the countryside". Yet "the supposed dialectical opposition of urban growth and rural decline might be true when you look at population proportions, but not at the actual size of infrastructure built substance" (p. 268). Consequently, Petermann is asking for a completely new approach towards the countryside beyond "the celebration of the romantic countryside in magazines like *Country-Living* and *Landlust*".

With its combination of analyses, case studies and impressive photographs, this inspiring book presents a particularly good introduction into the new world of "ruralism". Together with the previous book, which presents a more straight-forward academic discussion, the edited volume is helpful in understanding the future development of the countryside 'under attack' by omnipresent urbanisation processes.

4. TERRITORIES: URBAN-RURAL STRATEGIES

The third book under review is *Territories. Rural-Urban Strategies*, a volume edited by Jörg Schröder, Maurizio Carta, Maddalena Ferretti, and Barbara Lino. It addresses the "potential of multiplicities of places in larger-scale perspectives,

and in a rural-urban view of linkages of cooperation for human and natural habitat". Its case studies came from Sicily, Northern Germany, Liguria, Trentino, Catalonia, Campania, as well as from Brazil and the US. All territories under consideration are "targeted towards rural-urban interfaces" (p. 2). The book is based on a 2016 international conference in Hannover as part of the "Hochschuldialog Süd-Europa" (University Dialog Southern Europe), a programme by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) with contributions from German, Italian, and Spanish universities. The volume is a very condensed panorama of presentations of eighteen scientists combined with "a colloquium debate with fourteen young scientists" and with "a master student laboratory".

As Jörg Schröder, one of the editors and organisers, argues in the first part of the book ("Flows"), the intention "is to start a discussion for a working outline of research towards innovations by an architectural approach – as methodology extended beyond buildings, toward larger spatial scales, for the disciplines of urban design and territorial planning" (p. 16). In turn, Mauricio Carta stresses that the aim of this new approach is to create open, creative discussions on planning platforms, as opposed to following strict prescriptions by masterplans. The following chapters discuss concepts for agro-cities and agro-cultures, and ideas for a new urban plan for the Italian city of Lecce, which should not be based on zoning or peripheral expansion any more, but rather "on the city's deepest values: landscape, tourism and quality of life" (p. 70) – that means the inclusion of the basic values for city planning rather than prolongating the status quo. However, this raises the question of how these abstract goals can be implemented in relation to other very concrete interests. All these contributions stem apparently from oral and visual presentations but once transferred in the book, which is well designed, the result is not always successful because many pictures, graphs, diagrams, and maps must be looked at or read with a magnifying glass.

The next section of the book is concerned with "Places". Its chapters deal with the concepts of "Regiobranding" and "Rural Routes", followed by a section on "Patterns". The authors deal with Italian examples, from Sicily and Rome, and focus on "rurban" fringes like urban gardening. In the section on "Practices", which discusses innovative actions, examples from Italy and Brazil are presented. In the "Tactics" part of the book strategies toward self-sufficiency and sustainable development, food cities, and placemaking in the city are discussed. "Visions" presents the re-emerging flows of a river, as well as the social regeneration of brownfields and new visions for the relationship of a city with its port, the recycling of urban rivers, and the adaption of blue and green infrastructure for an urban resilience strategy. "Processes" discusses the status of Mediterranean agriculture, as well as the spatial integration of a new subway. But there is also a focus on highways as a TechnoEcoSystem, resilient landscapes, the transition from food production to energy production, historical rural buildings as a territorial resource, scenarios for sustainable development, and, finally, transformation processes in an urban quar-

ter of Sao Paulo. The last section entitled "Workshop" presents the result of deliberations of master students about a part of the Elbe valley, South–East of Hamburg, just in the middle of the former frontier between East and West Germany, now a protected area according to UNESCO biosphere regulations.

As said at the beginning, the book is the outcome of a conference concerned with new architectural planning approaches towards urban-rural constellations with the idea to learn from examples from all parts of Europe and even from some parts of America. It was intended for it not to deliver innovations in a systematic overview, but to learn from different spatial constellations about future approaches toward rural-urban strategies. As such, it is a source-book about innovation in this field. It is a pity that the many pictures and graphical designs – as they were apparently shown at the conference – appear in the book in a way that they are hard to recognise or even to read. As it is presented, it is more a record of the conference rather than a book.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What can be concluded after reading these three books? All three raise the old relationship or confrontation between town and country, which changed from a status of equal dependency before industrialisation to an uneven relationship after it. As early as in the Communist Manifest by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this unevenness was approached in terms of the level of living in the country vis-à-vis the standard of urban life. And nowadays? In the EU, the target of cohesion policy is still to guarantee equal living conditions in all regions, in Germany even in the constitution under the "Gleichwertigkeit der Lebensverhältnisse" (equivalence of living conditions) stipulation. To reach this target many policy programs were enacted, but today new constellations have posed new challenges: sustainability, climate protection, conservation aspects, and, last not but least, new living styles – the "rurban" style – not only for the privileged but for all. However, there are still differences, nationally, regionally and…rurbanly! This requires new approaches.

All three books provide arguments and ideas to understand the current challenges in town and country, either analytically or by design examples. They do so in different ways. Two of the books excel in reasoning respectively visual presentations, while one has some problems in its readability. But all three volumes contribute to an ongoing process and discussion about the future development of urban-rural constellations. These constellations are not settled yet – especially when we relate them to the new challenges of digitalisation and globalisation, new international divisions of labour and its uneven side-effects, as well as ecological, social, and economic sustainable development. And, obviously, when discussing urban-rural relationships we should not forget the current climate crisis, and, final-

ly, global epidemics and the ways they are tackled by the international community and how they might influence the future relation between working and living (e.g. the concept of home office) – just to raise a note on the current and future "rurban" situation with which we have to cope.

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Inge HOOIJEN, *Place Attractiveness. A Study of the Determinants Playing a Role in Residential Settlement Behaviour* (Ph.D. thesis), Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market, Maastricht, 2021, 242 pages

When writing my PhD-thesis some twenty years ago, I came across the classic *The Economics of Location* (1954) by the German economist August Lösch. I still remember how impressed I was by the opening sentences of the book: "Our existence in time is determined for us, but we are largely free to select our location. This is influenced, though not dictated, by our place of origin. Finding the right location is essential to successful life…" (p. 3). Though seemingly obvious, this observation was an eye-opener for me. Therefore, I was immediately attracted to the book *Who's Your City?* (2008) in which the American creative class-guru Richard Florida explored 'the geography of happiness'. Based on the Place and Happiness Survey among 27,000 Americans, he showed that the place where people live proves essential for one's happiness – it ranked third, just behind personal life (family, relatives and friends), and work, but ahead of one's income level. In short: location choice is a life-decision.

In her Ph.D. thesis Inge Hooijen examines this crucial 'where-factor' and the implications it has for places and their development strategies. In an era in which many European regions are confronted with brain drain and demographic shrinkage, this is a very relevant policy issue. More and more policymakers ask themselves how they can attract and bind residents to their territories. Knowledge workers are welcomed in particular since they may boost the regional economy. How to make a place more attractive and competitive in the Europe-wide battle for talent? Against this background, Hooijen has conducted four empirical studies in several geographical contexts (the Dutch region of South Limburg, the

Meuse-Rhine Euregio, and the Netherlands as a whole) utilising a mix of methods (data-analysis, surveys, and interviews). The four studies are embedded in a book that starts with an introductory chapter and ends with a conclusion, discussion and policy recommendations.

The first study investigates the location choice of a sub-group of knowledge workers, namely people working in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). To establish their living preferences, Hooijen has analysed data from surveys taken by 420 employees in a high-tech business park in South Limburg, followed by interviews with 32 of them. For the believers of Florida's creative class theory, the results will be a surprise: the respondents were not so much attracted to vibrant and trendy cities with plenty of culinary, cultural and nightlife opportunities. For them, basic consumer amenities (e.g. supermarkets and family doctors) sufficed; these were seen as more important than bars, theatres and restaurants. Moreover, the average STEM-worker valued green areas and open spaces more and thus preferred a suburban lifestyle.

The next chapter in the Ph.D. thesis explores the (im)mobility intentions of prospective graduates: whether they intended to stay in the area where they studied or leave it after graduation. To answer this question, Hooijen analysed the data gathered in surveys returned by 1,211 students based in five higher education institutes in the Meuse-Rhine Euregio. In their plans to stay or go, students considered several factors: apart from their perceptions of the quality of life and career opportunities in their study area, they examined the region's 'openness', i.e. its ethnic diversity and tolerance, as well as the ease to come into contact with the local population. Social ties of prospective graduates, e.g. having a partner, family and friends in the region, also played a part. Finally, individual characteristics like one's place of birth and nationality influenced the decision of students to stay or leave the area. Although the study is context-specific, it is a convenient illustration that the choice of a location entails more than just 'hard' factors. It is not only about economics – the soft side (sociology and psychology) is relevant as well.

In the chapter that follows the discrepancy between stated and revealed preferences in location choice is scrutinised. In my view, this is an important topic, since it is well known that that what people intend to do does not always correspond to that what they actually do. To examine this gap, Hooijen has distributed the aforementioned survey in the Meuse-Rhine Euregio about two years later among a sample of 220 graduates. To offer more insight, the survey results are complemented with findings from 27 interviews. Apparently, about 70 percent of the graduates participating in the study actually did what they intended. The others stayed in the region or left it because of several factors. For one thing, location-specific capital (DaVanzo, 1981) bonding people to an area (e.g. regional familiarity) plays a role besides new opportunities to leave it, for example because someone obtained a master's degree. For another, unexpected events such

as a breakup with a partner, and personality traits can explain whether or not the original (im)mobility intentions were realised.

The last empirical study is linked to the fascinating question Florida raised in his book *Who's Your City?* (2008): are people with certain psychologic attributes drawn to some regions in particular? Is there a match between a person and a place? To test this claim for the Netherlands, Hooijen has used a sample of 4,500 respondents from the HBO-Monitor, i.e. a survey among recent graduates from Dutch universities of applied science. When relating the personality traits of these respondents (e.g. their degree of extraversion and neuroticism) with the environmental characteristics of the region they lived in, a geographical clustering among Dutch regions could actually be observed. For example, it appeared that graduates who ranked high in terms of their extraversion were relatively more clustered in the Randstad area and the south of the Netherlands than in the eastern and northern parts of the country. However, this relationship weakened with age, while economic factors seemed to be the driving force of choosing where to live. Yet it is still valid to say that personality traits influence location choice.

In the last two chapters Hooijen discusses the findings of the four empirical studies. A general conclusion of the dissertation is that residential behaviour is determined by a range of factors that can also differ from person to person. Therefore, the answer to the question "what makes a place attractive?" simply is "it depends". Also the relevant geographical level is subject to differences: for some a house or street is the most important factor, while for others it is the city or the region. These main findings have important implications for policymakers, business people and representatives of higher education institutes who are interested in attracting or retaining people for their territory. In fact, they should be as specific as possible in targeting individuals and develop customised approaches to impact their (im)mobility decisions.

All in all, *Place Attractiveness* is an inspiring Ph.D. thesis that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of people's location choices. Through its interdisciplinary approach and the application of mixed methods it offers a fresh look at the topic. To be sure, one could criticise the empirical studies that are brought together in the book on several points. For instance, how place-specific are the findings? Would they also hold in other European regions and countries and among other types of residents? And why is the geographical focus of two of the studies on a cross-border region, thus making matters unnecessarily complicated? It is also unclear how Hooijen has dealt in her research with the effect of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). After all, in life decisions such as residential settlement behaviour people often tend to justify the choices they make (ex post rationalisation) in order to avoid psychological stress. At the same time, Hooijen has done a great job in dealing with the 'where-factor' and the interplay of its various determinants. Her book is a must-read for geogra-

phers, planners, and other social and spatial scientists, as well as professionals working in regional development and place marketing. Non-specialists may also find food for thought in the dissertation if only because it makes one involuntarily reflect about one's own location choice: did I find the right location for a successful life?

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