

## **WALLOON REGION: AN AGRO-FORESTERY LANDSCAPE WITHOUT FARMER?**

Serge Schmitz\*

### **Abstract**

Great landscape diversity of Walloon region, actions for a rural renewal, migratory flows back to rural areas and new challenges of Walloon rural area are represented.

*Key words:* Walloon region, rural area, rural renewal, agriculture.

## **VALONSKA REGIJA: KMETIJSKO-GOZDARSKA POKRAJINA BREZ KMETA?**

### **Izvleček**

Predstavljena je pokrajinska pestrost valonske regije, ukrepi za obnovo podeželja, selitve nazaj na podeželje in novi izzivi valonskega podeželja.

*Ključne besede:* Valonska regija, podeželje, obnova podeželja, kmetijstvo.

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\* Dr., Chargé de cours adjoint, Institut de géographie de l'Université de Liège, Allée du 6 Août, 2 B-4000 Liège. E-pošta : S.Schmitz@ulg.ac.be

## **Great landscape diversity**

The Walloon region presents a great diversity of landscape. Both natural features and land use history explain this diversity but industrialisation, urbanisation and migrations also have to be taken into account. Some parts of Walloon Region have good soils for farming. In North, low plateaux that rise slowly in elevation from 50 m to 200 m at the edge of Sambre-Meuse trench are the most fertile region of Belgium thanks to their cover of loess. Cultivated since the Neolithic, cultivation of cereals -wheat and barley- and sugar beet generally occupies more than 80 % of the land. To the south, the plateau of the Condroz and its margins contain soils derived of the decomposition of sandstone which yield mediocre soils while the limestone has weathered to give soils with a fair degree of agricultural potential. Pastures and fodder crops cultivation are the main land uses. In contrast, the Plateau of Ardennes is an elevated area (400 m to 694 m), with a harsh climate and poor soils developed from Devonian and Cambrian rocks. Forest and pastures are the common landscape. On the southern border of the Ardennes, there is another fertile region lying below 400 m, a small segment of the Paris Basin. (Christians, Daels, 1988)

The life of the countryside in Belgium as in many other regions of Europe was intimately linked with the development of towns. The countryside supplied towns, but since the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided workers for industry. Each progress in farming contributes to progress in town. The industrialisation of Belgium was focused around coal mining in the Sambre-Meuse trench. So, countryside in Walloon Regions was more affected by emigration than Flanders where pre-industrial Flemish cities did not experience such strong industrialisation. After the Second World War, the birth-rate decrease brought about rural depopulation in Walloon Regions. Some people thought of a desertion of countryside. They tried to find solutions for renewal in the countryside. "In agreement with important rules of rural areas, a specific development ought to allow people to live in these areas" (Tulipe, 1956).

## **First actions for a rural renewal**

After the Second World War and the reconstruction, Belgian authorities tried to develop economics activities without any distinctions between towns and countryside. Few people realised that countryside has richness

in itself. It was often seen as an empty space for the development of industry and urbanisation. Nevertheless, they also oriented farming to more efficient activities in accordance with the aims of the young CAP. The farmer had to supply Europe. The aims were :

- to increase in productivity,
- to improve the farmer's standard of living,
- to stabilise markets,
- to secure supplying and to maintain low food prices.

Belgium State helped farmers to increase their potentiality through incentives for investment and an active policy in the food industry. Since 1956, an active policy of land consolidation completed the measure for farming development (Schmitz, Christians, 1998c). It was a time of the transition from "peasantry" to a mechanical farming. But, many people were not able to develop and change their farming practices and decided to move and work in towns. Some of them were too poor; some didn't want to take out a loan others were simply attracted to the town. Thus, the number of farms decreased, the population of countryside also decreased and farmers in Walloon regions elected a more extensive farming.

Reactions come from some rural people who didn't want to see the countryside reduced to an empty space, an extension of urban areas. In the seventies, the project of commune merger around towns was a catalyst for rural areas (Schmitz, 2000b). Inhabitants claimed their rurality and didn't want to become anonymous community alienated by a town. To convince the authorities that rural communes have a future, they had to find a way for maintaining a specific life in countryside. Since 1973, beginning in Attert, Southeast Belgium, a project of rural renovation was developed. Other regions followed. In 1978, the government decided to take example on these spontaneous initiatives and to finance 24 rural renovations in Walloon regions. In 1979, the guide of rural renovation was published. A rural renovation must:

- be directed by the commune,
- take into account population and administration consultation,
- have a local commission in contact with population,
- be grounded on a master plan that has for aims:
  - maintain and increase quality employment in the community,
  - supply the population need for accommodation, infrastructure and service,
  - encourage industry adapted to rural areas,

- secure the development of farming and farm-based products,
- develop the natural resources like forest, without damage the biological and cultural heritage,
- integrate the tourism investment in the whole rural development,
- contribute to an integrate rural development.

In fact, the local character of initiative and limited funding led to limited projects like sporadic works, road, limited tourist development or natural conservation projects (Schmitz, Christians 1998a). These policies have contributed to the improvement of live environment and so to peoples' positive feelings. What was the contribution of these policies to the renewal of countryside? I think it was quite limited.

## **Reversal of migratory flows**

Since then, there was a new deal. From the seventies until the late nineties, depending on the region, the population began to grow again while main towns lost their inhabitants. Transport evolution allowed new strategies of localisation. The construction of motorways has an important impact on countryside. Now, it's easy to go everywhere in Belgium and there doesn't exist a village more than 30' a large or a medium town (Schmitz, Halleux 2001). Not only can people live in countryside and work in town but also different economic activities have been set up in rural areas. We can distinguish two types of migrant: families who originate in countryside but who didn't find a job there and people who are looking for a green environment and society (Schmitz, 2001b).

Arrivals of new inhabitants and new activities cause problems of cohabitation between "native" and migrant but also between different kinds of migrant who expect different thing from the same place. Countryside becomes a multifunctional area with many new expectations. It has to be a modern place that permits people to live and work but also an inert scenery landscape. People not only want the produce of the countryside but services and things that cannot be reduced to material things, they expect symbols also. These three kinds of things belong to a general set: the countryside areas where farming occupies the central place. However, some farms are sacrificed in new development of countryside. Too often, one forgets that farmers are the "landscape-keepers".

## New challenges

The Authorities of the Walloon Region have to find and follow a policy to maintain farming but they do not hold all the cards. Walloon Region and especially Walloon farmers are minorities in Belgium (21,000 farmers in Walloon Region/ 42,000 farmers in Flanders). In accordance with demographic history and the proximity of ports, Flemish farming is intensive with battery farming, horticulture, vegetable cultivation (incomes average of 7450 EUR/ha) when Walloon region farming is more extensive with cereal cultivation -wheat and barley-, sugar beet farming and grassland (average of 2000 EUR/ha). It's so sometime difficult for Walloon farmers to be listened and distinguished from Flemish farming as in the recent dioxin crisis. In this sense, the recent regionalization of farming can be good for Walloon farmers. Moreover, farming policy has also to take into account the CAP and the GATT. The new CAP of 1991 was not too bad for Walloon Region because Walloon farming is quite respectful of environment. In Walloon Region, the transition from a policy of price support to a direct help to farmer's incomes was catastrophic as in other European regions.

In accordance with Agenda 2000, Walloon authorities have recently decided to give an increasing importance to sustainable rural development. The old programme had four main points:

- help to farming investment,
- agro-environmental measures,
- help to the underprivileged areas,
- investment in agribusiness.

The new one has three priorities:

- increase of added value in for farming produce,
- restore interest for a sustainable farming,
- encourage production meaning friendly with environment.

The new European farming model is also the new Walloon model: a family, sustainable and multifunctional farming close to other citizenship, respectful of environment in a living rural area.

The Walloon Region has also to find a way to permit the installation of new activities in rural areas without denuding the countryside and handicapping farming. First, they have to persuade everybody in Belgium that rural areas are not an empty space but a rich space with many potentialities that cannot be destroyed. Tourism is one of the ways proposed frequently for the development. In the Walloon Region, there are few natural or cultural

sites of understanding interest but there is a great diversity of landscape interesting for one-day or weekend tourism. Both buildings, agricultural and forestry space regional diversity have to be protected. For new construction, it is quite possible through local legislation over building development. For the older buildings, especially great old farm buildings there are still problems to find a new function for them. For the space outside villages, maintaining farming and forestry activities is primordial. A new kind of contract has to be signed with farmer for the maintenance of quality and diversity in the landscape. Farmer should not only be remunerated for his production but for all his contribution in the society. The future of the countryside and the activities of the farmer within that countryside will evolve over time from a strict economic context to a more social and cultural context. An agro-forestry landscape needs farmers to live. Challenges are great in the Walloon region.

## **VALONSKA REGIJA: KMETIJSKO-GOZDARSKA POKRAJINA BREZ KMETA?**

### **Povzetek**

Valonska regija je ena od treh zveznih regij v Belgiji. Meri 18 884 km<sup>2</sup> in šteje 3,3 milijona od 10,2 milijona prebivalcev Belgije. Leta 1996 je 55,4 % površja odpadlo na kmetijska zemljišča in 29,5 % na gozd. 24 000 kmetov (2,5 % zaposlenega prebivalstva) je obdelovalo 75 000 hektarov zemlje. Danes je kmetov že 21 000, saj vsako leto izgubi delo 1 000 kmetov.

Za podeželje valonske regije je značilna kmetijsko-gozdna pokrajina z 98 % nekmečkega prebivalstva. V revnejših agrarnih območjih pogosto ostaja v vasi le en kmet. Kmetje so vse bolj potisnjeni na gospodarski in socialni rob. Pokrajinska pestrost določa usmerjenost kmetijstva. Severna nizka planota s puhlično prstjo je usmerjena v pridelavo žit in sladkorne pese. Južna nizka planota s peščenimi tlemi in manj rodovitnimi prstmi na apnencu je primerena predvsem za pašnike. Na ardenski planoti z ostrejšim podnebjem in revnimi prstmi na devonskih in kambrijskih kamninah prevladujejo pašniki in gozd.

Po 2. svetovni vojni se je podeželje smatralo kot prazen prostor za uveljavljanje industrije in urbanizacije. Kmetijstvo je vlada usmerjala v kar največjo pridelavo hrane, k čemur naj bi pripomogla tudi živilska industrija.

V 70. letih 20. stoletja je prišlo do samozavedanja podeželskega prebivalstva, ki se je uprlo kolonialnemu odnosu mest do podeželja. Koncem 70. let je prišlo do uvajanja notranjega razvoja, kar naj bi vodilo k izboljšanju življenjskega okolja na podeželju.

Izboljšanje prometnih povezav je obrnilo selitvene tokove. Na podeželje so se vračali odseljeni domačini in meščani, ki so iskali zeleno okolje. Podeželje je postalo polifunkcijski prostor.

V skladu z Agendo 2000 valonske oblasti poudarjajo pomen sonaravnega razvoja podeželja. Cilj valonskega modela je družinska kmetija s sonaravnim in večfunkcijskim kmetovanjem, spoštljivim do okolja. Turizem se izpostavlja kot dejavnik, ki bi pomagal uresničiti večino načrtov tako na gospodarskem področju kot na ohranjanju kulturnih vrednot in izboljšanju kakovosti življenja.

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