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The quest for rurality in Wallonia in 2013 (Belgium)

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Because Walloon countryside is easily reachable from the main cities, it lives in close connection with the urban world. The urban people colonize the countryside; the ways of life become less distinctive. The meaning of rural and urban are muddled. Moreover, at one side the drastic reduction of the number of farms and at the other side the concern of biodiversity in towns including the return of agricultural practices, increase confusion. Yet, according to a survey (Laplec, 2012), less than 7% of Walloon and Brussels people are undecided to say that they live in towns or in the countryside. Nevertheless arguing for the fact of living in countryside is difficult.

The paper scrutinizes 186 rural development projects selected on the short list of the first and second "Let's live my village!" calls funded by the King Boudouin Foundation in 2013. These calls gave up to 5,000€ of support to local rural initiatives. The program "Let's live my village!" aims to enhance the citizenship, the participation, the rural identity and, as all the King Boudouin Foundation calls, "the working together for a better society". Associations and groups of citizens from whole Wallonia including from urban spaces claimed and argued their rurality. They had to convince the selection committee both of the importance of their project for the local community and of the embeddedness of their project in the countryside.

The analysis leads to several observations. First, we notice the difficulty for village committees to succeed without any help from urban associations or from new comers issued from the urban world (neorurals). The projects had to be innovative and had to include relatively elitist (and even urban?) concepts that led indeed to the reinventing of the countryside. For instance, the success of the allotment gardens (in the countryside?) in the first call speaks for itself. Secondly, we observe the difficulty to define countryside. Most of the groups use simply the maximum population density suggested by the OECD. If the density exceeds the 150 inhabitants per kilometres square, they turn to land cover data. Sometime the living together, the community knowledge but also the scarcity of different services are also used to justify being in countryside.

Regarding projects, there is a professionalization of the actors who want to support local interactions. They increasingly substitute "normal" citizens and the amateurishness of youth group and event committees who simply want to meet together on the church square and take a drink.

Based on this factual information, the paper feeds the reflection on the rural-urban distinction and discusses the reasons to maintain the idea of rurality in a Walloon urban countryside.