

REFLEXIVE INTRODUCTION TO THE CATEGORISATION OF THE EUROPEAN COUNTRYSIDE

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At the end of the 20th century, French rural geographers used a simple typology that encapsulates three categories of the countryside: “campagnes fragiles”, “campagnes périurbaines” and “campagnes vivantes”. “Campagnes fragiles” are characterized by depopulation linked with remoteness and difficulties to develop a competitive agriculture. “Campagnes périurbaines” developed at suburban fringes. Finally, “campagnes vivantes” serve as a model of rural development characterised by socio-economic development based on a multisectorial economy (including agriculture, embedded industry, and tourism), strong social cohesion and regional identity. Thirty years later, we should probably add new categories: “agricultural countryside”, “recreational countryside”, “residential countryside”, “greying countryside”, “countryside supplying energy”, “new peasantry countryside”, “Biosphere reserves” and pay attention to other perspectives such as natural and cultural heritage, water resources protection and ecological transition. The paper discusses these old and new types of countryside and underlines main challenges that countryside faces; it shows how sensitive the categorisation could be according to the level of analysis, the period of observation and the perspectives. Because European countryside is diverse and faces huge diversity of issues, because Europeans interact differently with the countryside, we urge researchers and practitioners, especially people who work at national or international levels, to analyse carefully the local and regional context before proposing recommendations or assessing the richness or the potential of rural areas. As well, we recommend enriching the scientific analysis by an action research perspective, which solely allows coping the contemporary complexity.

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