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Terra incognita: Migration of the elderly and the nuclear hardship hypothesis

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Abstract

This article deals with out-migration of elderly in a 19th-century rural society undergoing major economical and social changes. The first aim is to shed light on the particularities of the old-age migration, concentrating on out-migration because the migratory balance stayed negative during the entire period of observation. The migration intensity and the destination areas give a background and reopen the question of the geographical immobility of the elderly. The second goal is to identify some variables that incited some people to leave at an age when neither job nor the will to start a family could justify it. This search for explanatory factors of old-age mobility operates from a thematic scope, that of the nuclear hardship hypothesis.

This article differs from demographic analyses on aging that were generally made at an aggregate level, based on national statistics. It also differs from the implicit or explicit assumption of old-age immobility found in family history studies. In the Pays de Herve, family relations and the position of the oldest in the household determined standard of living more than economic conjunctures or the social structure.

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