

Gabriella Baj

Changing Rural Areas

Schmied, D. (Ed) 2008 *Winning and Losing: The Changing Geography of Europe's Rural Areas (Perspectives on Rural Policy and Planning)*, London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., pp. 307.

Winning and Losing: The changing Geography of Europe's Rural Areas is a volume of studies examining transformation processes and their effects on the European countryside. 21 authors present the changing geography of European rural areas in three main parts and 15 chapters. Rural Europe is undergoing major structural transformation due to changes in the rural economies and societies. The restructuring dominance of primary industries, manufacturing and services, the continued out-migration of educated young adults alongside 'urban to rural' migration, the growing numbers of retirees, low rural birth rate, high unemployment have resulted in rural communities with older residents and where the local economy is weaker and more unstable than in the recent past. The tourism sector is another key element in the restructuring of Europe's rural areas. But the diffusion of modern information and communication technology is having a growing impact on life in rural areas. These changes have transformed rural economies and are influencing a range of public policies.

This book is a collection of papers by authors of different nationality and academic background. Considering the wide range of qualified authors from different scientific areas the division of essays is very well structured. The reader is provided with a very impressive introduction which frames the quite diverse topics. There are three main parts containing essays on the changing rural economy, rural society and rural areas which complete and systematically follow one another.

The first part examines how the rural area (people, economic and institutional actors etc.) can conform to the new situation with chapters

exploring employment restructuring (Green), agricultural change in the 21st century (Bodiguel), global integration and industrialisation (Kalantaridis), rural tourism (Derek Hall), the digital economy (Millard) and goods and services provision (Löffler). The second part deals with changing rural society addressing migration (Schmied), the young generation (Bien, Lappe, Rathgeber), the elderly (Scharf, Wenger, Thissen, Burholt), gender issues (Forsberg) and social exclusion (C. Williams). The last main part presents case studies from Ireland (Cawley), Germany and Spain (Müller), Finland (Tykkyläinen) and the LEADER initiatives.

The first part presents the process of restructuring rural economy of the European countryside. What kind of new (or existing) potentials can be endorsed in order to be able to develop? The authors expressed the importance of understanding the integration of agriculture with other sectors for achieving sustainable agricultural systems. The spatial and geographical characteristics of EU countries differentiate the recognition process and techniques in the EU as is presented in the Swedish case. In the first part I would highlight *Chapter 1* which offers different models of future agricultural production for the EU. But after presenting the models the author clarified that development (or revitalisation) depends on the development of new activities outside agriculture, particularly in services. Anne Green assumes that rural areas are themselves diverse and have different economic, social and labour market potentials and problems. Despite the loss of agricultural predominance, rural space still is and for the time being will continue to be dominated by farming and thus shaped by the way agriculture is performed.

The second part examines changing rural society focused on the process of migration, the situation and future prospects for young people, the danger of social exclusion and the changing gender structure. The migration of labour geographically, out of rural areas, and occupationally, out of farm jobs, is one of the most pervasive features of agricultural transformation and economic growth. From the '70s significant changes can be observed in the structure of the rural population. The movement away from urban to rural areas causes a wide range of effects in the countryside. The current exodus of young people out of rural regions represents a brain drain that must be reversed. A key contribution could come from the so-called "neo-rurals": people of different ages and profiles who decide to move back, or simply move to rural areas for the first time. *Chapter 9* presents us with the results of an international study called OPERA which collected empirical data on the elderly in the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary and Poland. The main focus is on the social

integration of old people living in the countryside (institutional ties, their local voluntary social activities, normal daily lives).

The last group of studies are empirical cases which provide examples from Ireland, Germany, Spain and Finland. The last chapter attempts to answer the main problem such as “which actors are winners or losers in changing rural areas in Europe?”. The question is partly answered by the example of LEADER. According to the case studies it has been shown that to turn the loser-winner situation into a win-win situation cannot be foreseen as a result of one short-term experimental intervention in rural areas. But *further work on methods to increase the potential of concepts such as sustainable development, ethical commerce and consumption, social responsibility, equal opportunities, quality of life to contribute to more inclusive development process is needed.*

Although the editor admitted that the book does not give us a complete and streamlined picture of this topic as it is a collection of essays by authors of different nationality, scientific background and experience, I think that the book tells us the whole “story” because it addresses all the important key topics related to rural change from economic and social aspects to the economic restructuring of the European countryside, the changing life of the rural young and old inhabitants and the terms of environment, culture, social structure of rural areas. The reader could only miss the wider European opinions and examples since the authors and their research are from EU 15 countries. The Central and East European perspective or practices of professionals from these countries could strengthen the already relevant findings and results. The main strong point of the book is that it provides a really rural aspect and prospect, all of the studies dealing with the main problems and exploring the possibilities of the European countryside.

Overall, this collection of essays is recommended as basic literature for academics, practitioners and students too as it deals with all the topics required to understand the features, challenges and problems of changing rural areas in Europe.

