

INTRODUCTION



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This book addresses the political ecology of historically depopulated areas mainly in Europe. While these areas have received some attention over the years by social scientists, little of this work examines the topic from a political ecology perspective that encompasses rural areas. Political ecology, a multidisciplinary research field that explores unequal power relations between actors and regions, has notably focused on densely populated areas (especially in the Global South), but has thereby tended to neglect the casual dynamics and socio-natural implications of the historical depopulation of areas.

This is an important gap in the literature as there is much to learn from these areas and their fate even as a broadly based political ecology perspective sheds new light on their trajectories. In the present volume, the aim is to address this topic with reference to an array of empirical case studies mainly from across Europe. While contributors reflect a clear and interesting diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches from economics, geography and sociology, they nonetheless share a common interest in the role of inequalities and marginality in the construction of depopulated areas as well as efforts to redress such problems.

The depopulated rural areas are shaped by distinctive and multifaceted inequalities that mark them out from other sociocultural dimensions and geographical contexts. Over the years, analyses of these areas have nonetheless tended to oversimplify their differentiated if interconnected trajectories of production, consumption, landscape construction and population change in both historical and contemporary settings. Especially for those rural areas that are considered to be economically and culturally 'marginal', historical processes that have shaped their development are often unique. Hence, the resulting landscape changes (notably including social, economic, political and environmental) can be very

diverse. These landscapes in turn reflect complex, specific and interacting human-environmental dynamics of marginality, inequality, scale, and cultural processes.

In this collective volume, we seek to explore these dynamic landscapes of marginal rural areas mainly as environmental and unequal processes. These landscapes are of great interest at this historical juncture in light of their spatial, environmental and socio-economic properties. They are caught up in processes of continuous change as a result of multifaceted marginalization processes even as such change is manifested through shifting and ever contingent patterns of inequality over time.

In this context, it is possible to develop an agenda of research that combines new socio environmental approaches to rural areas based on an integration of different and transversal traditions in the study of depopulated (rural) areas.

The chapters in this book explore diverse aspects of the research agenda (without claiming to cover all possible topics). Specifically, they mainly offer one or more of the following: case studies of landscape change in specific depopulated areas; interlinked processes of marginalization and environmental change; marginalization of rural areas and marginal cultural landscapes; specific socioeconomic issues relating to inequalities in depopulated areas; micro analyses of and approaches to rural marginalization (including 'micro' marginalities in otherwise non-marginal areas or countries); socio-natural empirical investigations ; and the socio-politics of historically depopulated rural areas. The wide array of empirical cases and specific topics ensures that the present volume offers, in aggregate, a rich account of how political ecological dynamics condition depopulated rural areas, mostly in a European context.

This book is inspired by and is one outcome of a research project (funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, code CSO2008-00953) that between 2009 and 2011 explored the relevance and utility of a political ecology perspective to the analysis of depopulated areas in different socio-cultural settings in Mediterranean Europe. Contributions by Paniagua, Bryant and Kizos reflect this particular project, even as the thematic concerns of that project have influenced the issues addressed in the other invited contributions to this volume. All of these contributions were

presented at the 25th biannual European Congress of Rural Sociology, held in Chania, Greece in August 2011.

Ángel Paniagua in his chapter analyses the discourses of local elites in two depopulated and marginal areas in Castile and Leon and Cantabria regions of northern Spain. The aim here is to compare and contrast how local politics and elite visions affect spatial cohesion, environmental politics, cultural representations and local inequalities across these two areas. Paniagua documents the relevance of local politics of depopulation to wider, regional politics of depopulation, as well as the (co)existence of multiple sociospatial and socioenvironmental visions articulated with reference to the two case study areas.

Javier Esparcia assesses rural development and marginalization across Spain in order to locate best policy practices that reflect a territorial and environmental focus. This case study draws notably on content analysis of official documents in order to produce a conceptual model that captures the differences and similarities between different geographical areas and programs, as well as multi-actor engagement and interests therein. The author finds that interventions in economically disadvantaged and marginal rural areas have a significant environmental component in which natural heritage may be central – and he notes that future policy in aid of sustainable development in such marginal areas across the country also needs to accommodate such a focus.

Raymond Bryant addresses the historical and contemporary ways in which a historically depopulated inland region has been connected to the development of one of Europe's most affluent regions, the Cote d'Azur in South-East France. He explores how the intertwined elaboration of a 'luminous landscape' and 'shadow landscape' has occurred since the late 18th century with depopulation, environmental transformation, and socio-economic marginalization being the fate of the latter (the so-called *arrière-pays*). He argues that such an arrangement has prompted a series of political and ecological challenges that bedevil both landscapes today but which are especially acute in the interior areas of the Alpes-Maritimes.

In another chapter Paniagua analyses the dynamics surrounding local depopulation in the South-Eastern French Alps, seen to be a useful example of a wider socio-demographic and political ecology processes in

this country. Combining both quantitative and qualitative data in a case study of the Vesubio Valley, he explores how historical depopulation is interwoven with processes of marginality, multi-scalar politics and social processes of change. The chapter describes the various important consequences for the internal relations of space as well as the articulation of local practices and conditions with external influences.

Thanasis Kizos *et al.* explore the diverse and mainly social and economic responses to, as well as attitudes about processes of marginalization in case studies from Western Lesvos, an island in eastern Greece. The authors are centrally concerned with local perceptions of marginality and land degradation in an area subject to historical depopulation where sheep husbandry in a semi-arid and ‘doubly’ peripheral setting is the norm. Based on extensive interviews, they find that the causes of land use intensification and associated environmental degradation are mostly economic (low incomes from farming) and social (inability to manage collectively common resources). At the same time, many farmers refuse to “see” the important adverse environmental impacts *let alone* admitting that overgrazing by their sheep is a key factor thereto. For local farmers, marginality is not an environmental issue, but rather one that relates to human population levels as well as and economy insecurity.

Paul Swagemakers and Dolores Domínguez García provide a detailed analysis of how farmers in the Friesian Woodlands in the Northern part of the Netherlands have sought to combine field bird protection with farm development, thereby adapting farming practices to the conditions of this marginal rural area. The situation here is paradoxical –a marginal area within a country otherwise not characterised by marginality– and reflects specific micro-level processes. To address local problems, farmers embarked on a strategy of cost reduction strategies in dairy protection that was combined with a quest for new sources of income. The political, economic and ecological utility of the local territorial cooperative was seen to be pivotal insofar as it served as a vital regional broker between national and regional conservation programs and the economic interests of farmers.

The paper by Idalina Dias Sardinha *et al.* assesses the relevance of participatory processes in efforts to combine sustainable development

and collective social action in depopulated areas. The authors do so in the context of a comparative analysis of two quite distinct areas in northern and southern Europe: namely Mina de Sao Domingos (in southern Portugal) and Lihme (in western Denmark). Despite their different economic and socio-ecological conditions, they find that public participation was a formal part of the local deliberative processes – yet in both cases has failed to equate to meaningful local people's input, at least as seen by the people in question. The authors conclude by outlining some of the lessons learned from these two cases about how to seek local resident's input in depopulated areas, even as they propose ways forward for community driven strategy making and for the research needed to support such processes.

Lone Kristensen and Jørgen Primdahl consider how marginality in rural landscapes may be identified as such in terms of different factors like agricultural economy and emigration. Landscapes with poor conditions for agricultural production and/or landscapes with declining populations may, for different reasons, be termed marginal compared to highly productive and/or attractive landscapes – raising thereby important public policy issues. Complexity in terms of differential values, power dynamics and scale issues is clearly a challenge. Using examples from Denmark the authors give a brief outline of recent policy issues and solutions related to marginal landscapes as this topic has evolved in this country. In the process, they chart how debates in this area are linked to broader perspectives about the role of regulation and new modes of multi-scale governance as determining factors in relation to community and landscape. Kristensen and Primdahl conclude by stressing the need for collaborative approaches to policy and planning for marginal landscapes.

Zdeněk Kučera provides a detailed case study of the multifaceted and even ambiguous nature of marginality in the 'peripheral' western region of the Czech Republic. Drawing on historical examples, the author shows how sometimes events may occur, often caused by external factors, that lead to dynamic changes that re-shape the condition of local landscapes as well as communities inhabiting them. These events may result in further marginalization in some cases while positively stimulating local development in other situations. Rapid and large-scale depopulation due to the transfer of the Czech Germans after the Second World War as well

as subsequent resettlement by new groups and the sudden opening of borderland areas after the fall of Iron Curtain in 1989 are two key such events. The author uses specific geographical examples (notably the Žluticko area) to underscore the complex political, economic and cultural dimensions and implications of the re-working of ‘borderland peripheries’ in this eastern European country.

Omizzolo and Streifeneder investigate the shifting fortunes of depopulated areas in Italy’s mountain regions over the last two decades. The authors show how policy neglect and/or inconsequential policy interventions has often gone hand in hand with continuing decline in these marginal upland agricultural lands. They observe how various interlinked processes are at work – notably, ongoing depopulation, expanding alpine tourism, selected urban style development in adjoining valleys, and declining local public services. While such dynamics affect mountain areas across Italy, the authors nonetheless illustrate cases of good practice (for example in policies undertaken in the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano) as well as providing suggestions for improved local business strategies in aid of economic diversification and advancement, with an eye to tackling endemic conditions of marginalization.

Koutsou and Partalidou examine inequalities in rural northern Greece to assess the impact of a succession of policies on processes of local marginalization. Drawing on extensive farmer interviews in nine villages, the authors trace how those policies have tended to exacerbate inequalities as well as many local resident’s sense of marginality. They cite the case of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy which, especially since 2003, has provided subsidies to the heads of participating farm households that have only served to increase inequalities and social separation between farmers depending on their relative ability and interest in adhering to the CAP scheme. Koutsou and Partalidou thus underscore the ambiguous implications of policy designed to tackle rural marginalization that seems to have only promoted in this case differential incomes and associated perceptions among local farmers instead.

In their chapter, Gidarakou and Kazakopoulos assess the record of programmes and policies based on ‘Less Favoured Areas’ (or LFA) status in the context of Central Eubia in Greece. LFA based interventions have

multiplied over the past two decades even as their effectiveness and implications remains unclear in many cases. Particular attention in these schemes has been given to the effort to diversify farmer incomes and practices. Combining primary (interviews) and secondary (local economic and population statistics) data, the authors document the variable economic results and local farmer perceptions of LFA initiatives that seek to tackle marginalization in this area of Greece.

Theresa Selfa's chapter offers a contrasting American perspective on the mainly European topics and cases explored in this book. While also concerned with the experiences of historical depopulation and marginality (based on examples drawn from Kansas and Vermont), she situates this experience in the context of current efforts to address these problems via the location of alternative energy production facilities (wind farms, a bio-energy plant) in these areas. Support for renewable energy production in these lands draws on discourses promoting climate change mitigation and local economic development in a way that often serves to sideline any environmental-based critiques of such development. The author thereby illustrates the ways in which marginal areas still remain areas for economic experimentation and environmental transformation by external actors prompting local debate and divisions in the process.

The chapter by Eleni Tsiomidou explores the personal histories of farmers involved in agri-environmental measures in the southern French regions of Gers and the Vendée. Based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted with farmers, the author probes the complex relationship that exists between the personal histories of subjects and changes in the regulatory context. In particular, she examines how the adaptation of farmers to requirements for environmental protection is a dynamic process that affects their professional identity as well as the relationship to their personal histories over space and time. The author concludes by stressing the importance of understanding farmer's own perceptions about shifting work expectations as they experience external efforts to address the marginal conditions in which they live.

The overall contribution of this book relates to the combined focus on marginality, depopulation and environmental transformation in different countries across Europe (as well as a contrasting American case

study). Across an array of geographical examples, as well as accommodating different scale, conceptual and methodological considerations, the book promotes a flexible and broad-based political ecology understanding of this intersection of topics in order to ascertain some of the causes, present conditions, responses and possible solutions to persistent conditions of marginalization in the case study countries. Perhaps the main insight to emerge from this volume is the importance of taking the differentiated meaning of marginality and its dynamics in rural areas subject to depopulation seriously. While classic cases of marginal areas and depopulation certainly feature in this volume, various contributors also point to more exceptional situations. The rich array of case studies also highlights a profusion of official and non-official efforts to tackle complex and shifting conditions of marginality and depopulation – often with ambiguous or unintended outcomes. In sum, the present book underscores the need for detailed empirical and critical scrutiny of how changing environmental conditions, dynamics of marginality, and trends in depopulation intersect with specific associations and meanings.

Future research needs to build on the insights of the present volume. Thus, further empirical case studies of rural areas subject to depopulation and environmental transformation are required to broaden and deepen understanding of the variable causes, conditions and outcomes (as well as possible solutions to) of these particular contexts. In particular, attention ought to be given to the geographical variations within marginal depopulated areas in order to obtain a finer resolution of the political ecology dynamics at play. Such research should encompass areas in Europe not covered in this book (such as the Balkans) as well as comparable sites elsewhere in the world (for example in the Americas building on the contribution of the U.S.A. case study in this book). Ultimately, international comparative work can emerge from these endeavors providing rich grounds for conceptual and policy building.