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“The protection of the countryside under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004: policy and practice in the Creedy Taw area, Mid Devon”

Proposition for the one-day conference **“Rural Spaces in the UK (18th-21st centuries): Identities, Mutations, and Representations”**, Rennes 2 University, Friday 10 April 2015

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From the invention of the English country landscape in the modern times (Hoskins, 1955) to the rural idyll of the last century (Buller, 1997) and the present “back-to-the-land” movement (Halfacree, 2006), the English countryside has become such a reference in English-speaking cultures that it seems difficult to say anything in a critical way about the countryside policies implemented in England and Wales. Our research focuses on the evolution of the farmed countryside (fields, grass, barns, paths, dwellings and natural places included in farming systems) in rural communities, both in England and France¹. This paper aims to analyse, from a French perspective, the English planning policies concerning rurality. Under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, countryside planning is organised at national level through the planning policy statement “Sustainable Development in Rural Areas” (PPS 7), a 20-page document reviewing the general perspective of the Town & Country Planning Act 1947 (TCPA 1947), that mainly advocated conservationism. Countryside gentrification (Gill, 1996) and the conflicts between farmers and the community (Griffiths, 2007) are the main issues that result from the local implementation of such a statement, in addition to other contested policies such as the “access to the countryside” (Kay and Moxham, 1996).

Methodologically, the contents of 15 semi-structured interviews conducted in the Creedy-Taw area (Mid-Devon, UK) between May and July 2009, along with the planning policies detailed in the Local Development Framework (Core Strategy 2006 and Development Plan Documents 2007) published by the Mid-Devon District Council, will serve as the primary sources of our analysis of the countryside planning process in England. This qualitative approach will allow us to understand how the planners, farmers and local inhabitants deal with the implementation of these planning policies. Ordnance survey maps and orthophotographs will be used to show the spatial impact of these policies in the Creedy Taw area, and an overview of the 2010 up-to-date version of Mid-Devon local documents will help us establish to what extent and for what reasons the District councillors are trying to improve their rural planning policies. The French planning policies and their implementation in the Coglais (Pays de Fougères, Brittany) will be simply used as a comparison to show that English planning policies are not *the* path but only *one* path to build a post-industrial countryside. A similar comparative pattern was established by H. Buller and K. Hoggart (1994) when they analysed the French countryside from an English perspective.

The **main results** can be summarised in two main points. On the one hand, development permission is so scarce in the hamlets and small villages that farmers are pressed to sell barns as new residences for huge amounts of money, which allows them to invest in their business, but speed up the gentrification of Devon’s countryside. On the other hand, these policies contribute to preserving an idyllic vision of a traditional agricultural English landscape, and have positive consequences on the rural economy through tourism, on residential attractiveness and for the recognition of farming externalities. It seems that local stakeholders make do with the weaknesses resulting from rural conservation (lack of affordable dwellings, poor quality of local road networks) because they adhere, even the farmers, to the idealised vision of a landscape-oriented countryside.

¹ Though my research mainly focuses on England’s Mid-Devon, I will borrow from previous research carried out in France to examine the situation with a fresh perspective.

The first point to be discussed is the critical analysis that a French perspective enables us to engage. In both countries, despite their enormous differences, the planning systems tend to protect farmed space. But our survey shows that what is a historically based principle in Britain is rather the product of social relationships in France. In Coglais, farmers have lost more acres, but their social importance has increased with the sprawl of dwellings. In Devon, the acreage remains, but farms and farming seem to be more and more disconnected from the rural communities. In the two areas, nevertheless, post-productivist farms enable both to spare space thanks to a better valorisation of the land and to culturally reconnect agriculture to the general and now urbanised local community.

The second point of discussion concerns the evolutions in Mid-Devon planning policy. In early 2015, the Mid-Devon Planning Core Strategy 2006 still remains operative, but the Development Plan Documents (DPD) have been replaced by the Allocation and Infrastructure Development Plan Documents (AIDPD 2010). An overview of the modifications that took place at the parish level will enable us to know if some significant changes occurred.

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