

Yarwood, R.: *Rural Geographies: People, Place and the Countryside*. London–New York, Routledge, 2023. 265 p.

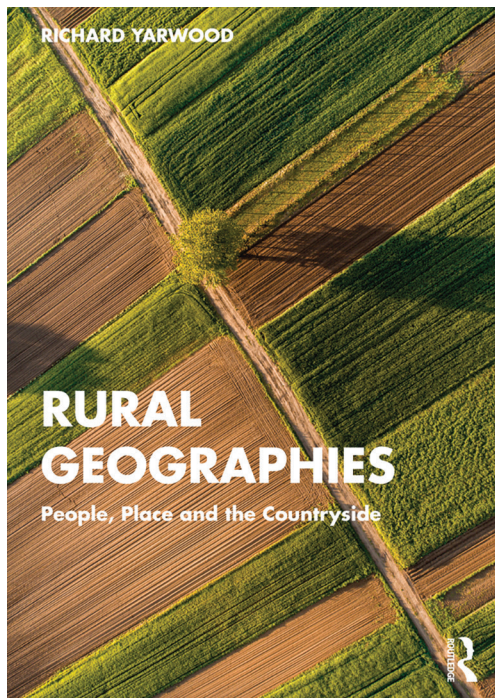
We live in turbulent times. Geopolitics (Brexit, the Russian invasion of Ukraine), the ecological crisis, including biodiversity loss, pandemics and diseases (COVID-19, avian flu, BSE, foot and mouth disease), climate change and its impacts, such as the historic European-wide drought in 2022, all affect Social-Ecological Systems (SES), including rural areas we study or live in. *Rural Geographies: People, Place and the Countryside*, written by Richard YARWOOD, a professor of Human Geography and the director of the Doctoral College at the University of Plymouth, UK, takes an interdisciplinary approach to reflect on how these events affect the countryside. The book introduces complex theoretical approaches that are useful in the study of the countryside, and it does so in a language that is widely accessible. The key ideas and concepts of the book are consistent with SES thinking, planning, and analysis, as they embody an integrated view of people and their environment. The SES approach allows us to consciously confront the prevailing view since the Enlightenment, which wrongly separates society and nature and reconstructs their relationship in a hierarchical form, where nature is not the fundamental context of existence for society, but a set of resources

to be dominated and exploited. This perspective is also one of the foundations of the ecological crisis that has emerged in recent decades. In accordance with the principles of SES research, the book equips undergraduate students with the necessary tools to analyse the ongoing transformations in rural space. Richard YARWOOD has extensive experience in both teaching (over 30 years) and research in rural geography. It is evident that the author has a consistent publication history in prominent journals specialising in rural geography. Notable examples include the *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Progress in Human Geography*, *Geoforum*, and *Geography Compass*. The breadth of his research interests, encompassing housing, policing, population change, service provision, volunteering, and animal geographies, reflects an integrated perspective on nature–society relations.

The book is divided into four main sections: ‘Contexts’, ‘Changes’, ‘Contests’, and ‘Cultures’. ‘Contexts’ introduces the different approaches through which the countryside has been studied. It shows how our positionality influences the way we study rural areas. It provides a concise introduction to detailed community studies, scientific and radical approaches, and recent interests in cultural and post-structural geographies. The structured summary of the advantages and disadvantages of each paradigm helps the reader to position him/herself in rural geography and to find the right approach to the study of rural change. For Hungarian readers interested in delving deeper into contemporary spatial theories from a Central and Eastern European perspective, the book edited by László FARAGÓ (2018) could be a useful resource.

The second part of the book deals with ‘changes’ in time and space. Keith HALFACREE’s (2007) threefold model, inspired by Henri LEFEBVRE, provides the organising logic for the subchapters. In terms of *rural localities*, agricultural change (productive) and economic restructuring (post-productive change) are discussed. In terms of *representations of the rural*, the focus is on how these representations reflect and drive rural change at different geographical scales. The final section considers the *lived experiences* of social change in the countryside.

Rural change has been characterised by various conflicts. The third part of the book, on ‘contests’, examines how rural places are contested in different ways and what these tensions reveal about rural society. Poverty and social exclusion remain pervasive challenges in the Global North, but often go unaddressed because of the neoliberal expectation that people and communities should help themselves. Within the eastern, Baltic, or southern member states of the European Union poverty or social exclusion is more characteristic in rural areas, while in western and northern member states it is more prevalent in cities. What a Central and Eastern



European perspective can add to the book's argument is that, in contrast to the experience of the Global North, poverty in rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is not hidden. The emergence of racialisation is intertwined with spatial marginalisation and segregation, but while this marginalisation is more specific to cities in the Global North, it occurs in highly deprived, often rural, areas in the Global East (MÜLLER, M. 2018). In contrast to the experience of the Global North, where the phenomenon of a 'rural ghetto' hardly exists, processes of socio-spatial polarisation, economic decline, and racialisation-based ethnic exclusion produced contagious 'ghettos' in Central and Eastern Europe over the past three decades (MIHÁLY, M. 2022).

In the next section, YARWOOD makes the important point that rural policy and governance, and its potential to empower people to address inequality in rural areas, is limited. The reason for this lies in the institutional background of rural policy. Rural development in the European Union is rooted in the EU's most expensive and extensive common policy, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is still dominated by the productivist paradigm. As a result, the CAP continues to favour large farms and only a minority of the CAP budget is devoted to rural development and post-productivist purposes.

The chapter on housing explores these issues further by examining how access to home reflects and perpetuates socio-spatial inequalities in the countryside. In the case of the UK, Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are presented as a promising example of building housing alternatives. CLTs are locally run, democratic, non-profit organisations that own and develop land for the benefit of the community. CLTs are a form of shared equity ownership and use public and private investment funds to acquire land on behalf of a specific community. In terms of building housing alternatives, there is a huge difference in where one is located in the global economy. While in many places in Western Europe and North America, such projects have become attractive to investors and ethical banks, the financial products needed for alternative housing development are not available in CEE – and, like mainstream commercial banks, these supposedly ethical financial actors also consider CEE to be riskier (GAGYI, Á. *et al.* 2023).

The next section on mobility draws attention to the ways in which the countryside is shaped by movement. As well as highlighting problems of inaccessibility, the chapter also draws attention to the interdependence of the rural places with other, often distant, places. Migration of agricultural labour is highlighted as an important feature of the global countryside. The disparities between old and new EU member states, together with the right to work and move as EU citizens granted by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, prompted migration to take up work in a range of jobs that offered relatively high wages, including manual agricultural work associated with the harvesting and processing of

food (YARWOOD, R. 2023, 127). Cheap Eastern European labour increased the production of labour-intensive crops in certain Western European countries, such as asparagus, cherries, and strawberries in the UK.

As the final section of this part of the book shows, global perspectives are needed to ensure a sustainable and resilient future for the countryside. Windfarms are used to illustrate some of the complexities associated with sustainability. Although windfarms help to reduce carbon emissions and generate renewable energy, they provide little social or economic benefit locally (YARWOOD, R. 2023, 144). Continuing on YARWOOD's line of thought, a concern about the renewable energy boom can be that it may result in green grabbing, through which former public or agricultural land is appropriated to meet the territorial demands of renewable energy development. The phenomenon was also studied from CEE by Katja MÜLLER and Marieke PAMPUS (2023). The scarcity of resources available to social movements, coupled with the highly polarised political environment within CEE, serves to impede the development of large-scale renewable energy projects. This, in turn, hinders the establishment of democratic control over climate policy.

The 'cultural turn' has had profound impact on the way rural geography is studied and the issues it focuses on. As the fourth part of the book on 'cultures' outlines, it led to a growing interest in landscape, hidden others, and human-nature relations. National parks are presented as an example of landscape designation in the chapter about rural landscapes. The idea of a national park was linked to an idyllic image of the rural (Lake District, England) by the poet William Wordsworth in 1810, and it became manifest in the USA with the foundation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. The profound environmental impact of the industrial revolutions drove conservation efforts in the Global East too. Dedicated primarily to scientific research, a system of nature reserves ('zapovedniki') were established in the steppe region of the Russian Empire in the 1890s. In order to gain stronger support from government officials, supporters of 'zapovedniki' increasingly accommodated limited tourism between the 1930s and 1960s (ROE, A. 2020). By the late 1960s, growing damage caused by tourists in the 'zapovedniki' increased the sense of urgency for the Soviet Union to establish Western-type national parks and again direct tourist traffic away from 'zapovedniki' (ROE, A. 2020). Several Soviet republics established national parks in the 1970s (e.g. Lahemaa National Park in Estonia in 1971, Hortobágy National Park in Hungary in 1973). An intriguing point made in the chapter is that the designation and location of national parks reflects dominant, but contested, ideas about what kinds of landscapes are valued, what kind of activities should be allowed in them, and who they are for (YARWOOD, R. 2023, 158).

This line of thought is unfolded in the chapters on rural others. The call to study rural others widened the

scope of rural geography and opened the discipline to new methodologies and new, critical ways of thinking (YARWOOD, R. 2023, 187). Intersectionality, developed by black feminists, recognises that social characteristics, such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender, are not independent of each other but, rather, are ‘mutually transformative and intersecting, each altering the experience of the other’ (RUDDICK, S. 1996 in YARWOOD, R. 2023, 184). As the study of or with rural others is largely undertaken by privileged academics, YARWOOD encourages us geographers to pay more attention to our positionality and backgrounds, when studying other groups of people. Moving on to human-nature relations, the chapter on ‘More Than Human Ruralities’ emphasises the role of animal geography to interrogate people’s ethical relationships with animals and how these shape rural places. Donna HARAWAY’s socialist feminist cyborg approach is proposed to grasp how animals are incorporated into global capitalism as elements of productivist agriculture (HARAWAY, D. 2013). Beyond animal geography, HARAWAY’s cyborg approach can fruitfully be combined with James O’CONNOR’s relational political ecology to study landscape transformations (RUDY, A.P. 2005).

An important point made in the concluding section is that although rural areas are often presented as being affected by exogenous change, they also offer the possibility of radical, far-reaching change from within. The spatial evolution of society often starts in peripheral rather than core areas. Rural places can provide spaces for new, more radical forms of citizenship to emerge. The connections created by a global countryside offer the possibility for radical and transnational politics and resistance to emerge from rural places (WOODS, M. 2016 in YARWOOD, R. 2023). The food sovereignty movement led by ‘La Via Campesina’ is presented as an example of emancipatory rural politics. However, as a transnational movement, rooted in countries of the Global South, it reflects only to a limited extent on the political context of post-state-socialist CEE and the everyday experiences of the people living there. CEE is characterised by widespread disillusionment with politics, opposition to socialism and cooperativism. The communist legacy influences societal attitudes towards capitalism and socialism, making the adoption of the anti-capitalist pro-socialist ideology of ‘La Via Campesina’ problematic in CEE (HAJDU, A. and MAMONOVA, N. 2020). Nevertheless, food self-provisioning through backyard farming, small-scale farming, and local markets, are a few typical Central and Eastern European practices that are crucial for the realisation of food sovereignty and alternative food systems (MENDLY, D. and MIHÁLY, M. 2024).

The literature of rural geography by, from, and about the Global North has been criticised not only from the Global South, but from CEE too (TIMÁR, J. 2007; JEHLIČKA, P. 2021). For a Central and Eastern European reader, it can be appreciated that in line with the global

perspective of the book, various examples are taken from CEE, such as land grabbing in Romania, or migrant workers of CEE representing cheap workforce for labour-intensive agricultural work in Western Europe. However, apart from these examples, the book has little to say about the specific, (semi-)peripheral perspectives on rural change from the Global East.

The post-socialist transformation of CEE economies implied their integration into global capitalism as dependent market economies, which are dominated by foreign direct investment and have only a limited degree of economic sovereignty. This development was accompanied by internal polarisation, with some regions being transformed into important hubs of global capitalism and others (mainly rural peripheries) losing economic relevance. Inhabitants of peripheralised rural areas have a feeling of abandonment and political discontent (MIHÁLY, M. 2022). Small-scale farmers are the losers of the globalisation of food systems in CEE too. After the rapid privatisation of state-socialist agricultural cooperatives, the further modernisation of the agro-industry that came with EU membership has created significant costs and administrative burdens for small-scale producers in CEE (DE MASTER, K. 2013). Since the change of regime, the concentration of the retail sector, which has intensified with EU membership, has significantly reduced the prices that can be demanded for the crops produced. As a result of these processes, both in Poland (DE MASTER, K. 2013) and in Hungary (INZSÖL, R. 2021), political discontent among small-scale farmers has increased and many are abandoning farming due to livelihood challenges. The political discontent resulting from the globalisation of the food system in Central and Eastern Europe has so far been mobilised by right-wing populists rather than transnational food sovereignty movements (DE MASTER, K. 2013; SZOMBATI, K. 2018). Therefore, I agree with the author that future work in rural geography should be by, rather than of or about, those from the Global South (and Global East).

Rural geography, as this book emphasises, is part of the broader discipline of geography. In line with Social-Ecological Systems research, geography is able to provide a holistic vision of the world in a way that shows awareness of society and the environment. This unique approach makes the book a valuable resource not only for undergraduate students and teachers of rural geography and rural studies, but its accessible language also makes it relevant to rural development practitioners in the Global North and beyond.

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