



Rural gentrification in Catalonia, Spain: A case study of migration, social change and conflicts in the Empordanet area [☆]

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ABSTRACT

The intensity of rural depopulation in Catalonia has diminished since the 1980s. New population growth patterns are occurring in rural areas, basically due to immigration. Although there has been a certain awareness of the magnitude of this process and its territorial distribution, little is known about the protagonists in this immigration and the impact on rural municipalities. Results are presented from a study of the immigration process in a group of rural inland municipalities close to the Costa Brava, a Mediterranean coastal region with extensive tourism. The great beauty of the landscape and the existence of housing stock that is being abandoned but remains desirable have led to a population influx from Catalonia's large urban areas, especially Barcelona, purchasing these homes as a primary or secondary residence.

This has led to rehabilitation of the housing stock, but also to higher housing prices and the resulting exodus of the young local population that cannot afford them; a potential source of conflict between the local population and the newcomers. The study is based on census data and statistical records, as well as extensive fieldwork, including interviews with local residents, newcomers and key informants.

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1. Introduction

One of the main debates about migration to rural areas has focused on differences in participation by social class, and the resulting impact on rural society. This topic has been widely studied in Great Britain, where migration toward rural areas primarily involves a population that has been called the *service class*, a designation that is often related to or synonymous with *middle class* or *new middle class*. These studies describe an intense and extensive process of gentrification in a large part of rural Britain (Champion et al., 1998; Cloke and Thrift, 1990; Cloke et al., 1995; Hoggart, 1997; Phillips, 1993, 2005). A similar replacement of local population, mostly farmers and working-class people, with a middle class has been studied in other countries as well (Curry et al., 2001; Ghose, 2004; Swaffield and Fairweather, 1998; Walker and Fortmann, 2003).

However, as Phillips (2002) noted, rural gentrification studies had focused on issues of class colonization and social displacement and less on the process of material refurbishment of properties.

[☆] This article is drawn from a broader study, “*La constitución de una nueva ruralidad? Migración y cambio sociodemográfico en áreas rurales de Gerona: el caso del “Empordanet”* [Building a new rurality? Migration and sociodemographic change in rural areas of Gerona: the case of “Empordanet”], financed in 2003 by the Centro de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo en Áreas Rurales de Zaragoza [Center for the Study of Depopulation and Development in Rural Areas, Zaragoza].

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Gentrification is not only a displacement of social classes and persons, but also brings changes in leisure and retail activities, consumption patterns, and valuation of rural properties, whether used for housing or other purposes.

Some rural gentrification studies have taken this path, focussing primarily on the broader social and economic impact of the rising cost of housing as a result of this persistent immigration (Curry et al., 2001; Dirksmeier, 2008; Findlay et al., 2000). As growing demand pressure raised prices, conflicts with the local population were to be expected as access to housing options became increasingly limited for them and for their adult children, given the greater purchasing power of the new arrivals (Ghose, 2004; Walker and Fortmann, 2003). Higher prices in turn produce a population selection essentially based on purchasing power, which may lead to a new social homogeneity (Murdoch, 1998; Phillips, 1993; Smith and Phillips, 2001; Smith, 2002).

Age is another aspect of the housing market and migration trends that has been studied (Champion et al., 1998). As young people who are ready to establish their own homes experience great difficulty finding career opportunities and affordable local housing, they contribute disproportionately to the rural exodus. As this occurs, the process of generational renewal becomes more difficult and the spiral of emigration and depopulation in the rural environment continues.

Although longstanding rural–urban migration trends reversed and came under scrutiny in the 1970s in the United States and

many European countries (Berry, 1976; Champion, 1989), the process did not reach Spain until a decade later. The population of major Spanish cities stabilized and a growing dispersal of the population was detected throughout the territory, although primarily in the rural areas closer to cities (Precedo Ledo et al., 1986). It was not until the 1990s that a group of studies focussed on the revitalization and resurgence of the rural population far from periurban areas (Camarero, 1993; García-Pascual, 2003; García-Sanz, 2003). These researchers found that the massive rural–urban migration that ended in the 1980s had been followed by significant population recovery in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, which are defined as non-urban in the terminology of the Spanish National Statistics Institute. However, these studies noted that the growth was not homogeneous and, although the generalized downward trend in rural population and the high rates of emigration had attenuated, a broad range of rural areas reported negative net migration and/or negative natural increase.

Depopulation and population ageing continues to be quite generalized throughout rural Spain, still attracting the attention of social scientists studying the impact and consequences of these trends. The academic debate and the published studies to be found on the *rural renaissance* (Kayser, 1993) in Spain are limited and have been cast in strictly demographic and quantitative terms (Rivera Escribano, 2007): the nature and magnitude of the migration flows and the impact on population distribution. Little is known about the causes and motivations of this emigration to rural areas and the related consequences of the arrival of this new population with respect to housing, planning, services, employment, etc., in areas that until very recently were experiencing intense processes of depopulation.

Pioneering studies by Hoggart and Paniagua (2001), Paniagua (2002a,b) and, most recently, Rivera Escribano (2007) and Rivera (2009)¹ focussed on an analysis of the motivations and rationale for this movement to rural areas. Paniagua (2002a,b) stresses economic motivation, finding that the new service class and the self-employed professionals who move to rural areas are primarily seeking to develop a quick path to a more successful professional career in small and medium-sized provincial cities and in rural towns. Environmental and quality of life motivations are secondary. In this sense, the emotional links of Spaniards with rural areas, and even the characteristics of rural areas in Spain, are quite different from the *rural idyll* (Bunce, 1994; Mingay, 1994) associated with England: “Whereas English rural society might be regressing towards a mythological past, mainstream Spanish rural society still pumps the past through its main arteries” (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001, p. 76). The contributions of Rivera Escribano (2007) and Rivera (2009) focus on the types of motivations and types of immigrants and show more heterogeneity in the migration to rural areas. She describes the “pragmatic dystopia” of people moving to periurban areas seeking an affordable residence and the “deep-rooted utopia” of those searching for a new lifestyle deep in rural areas. In between, she found many people who settle in an intermediate rural area or “refuge utopia”, motivated more by environmental and social concepts than by economic or employment reasons, who want both a different rhythm of life and to maintain their links with the city and with daily activities in town (work, arts and leisure, shopping).

This group of pioneering studies pays less attention to the social consequences of this migration for the communities where those migrating choose to settle. The concept of gentrification, for example, has only been analysed in Spain in relation to the processes of

social change in urban contexts and has never been applied to the rural territory. Furthermore, these studies focus on the whole of Spain or the provinces as the geographical unit of analysis, not on the smaller geographical areas where a rich and complex picture of this new emigration to rural areas emerges.

One of the objectives of the research described here has been to address some of these features of rural gentrification in Catalonia (Spain), focusing specifically on the process of rehabilitation and renewed occupation of houses in a small area – Empordanet – that suffered an intense process of abandonment until the 1980s, and on the consequences and conflicts this process has provoked in recent decades due to the arrival of a new, more affluent population resembling the “refuge utopia” seekers described by Rivera (2009).

In their overview of the “restructuring” of rural Spain, Hoggart and Paniagua (2001) noted that new immigration in rural areas scarcely provoked any conflict between newcomers and the local population, due to the great stock of abandoned houses. However, if we focus our analysis in specific local communities, residents do report that tensions have begun to arise with the arrival of this new population wave. A complicating factor is the virtual absence of public policy provisions for housing, zoning, etc., in the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship. For the past two decades, the needs of rural areas have been quite forgotten (Valenzuela, 2003), given the perception that their depopulation trend would necessarily result in an “adequate” supply of housing stock.

One of the peculiarities of rural housing in Spain as a whole, and in the case of Catalonia in particular, is the high number of houses used as second homes. Although concentrated along the coasts of the peninsula, this is becoming a significant housing type in inland rural municipalities as well. Whether the purchase represents a second (seasonal or temporary) home or a more permanent residence (immigration), the result is strong pressure on the local housing market. A current prospect of a “residential tourism” model, based on massive construction of seasonal or permanent housing, has introduced a new element that arises repeatedly in social and political debates in the municipalities studied here: the possibility that this model might extend into the most rural inland municipalities.

The common perception is that of a dichotomy. On one hand, a local population may want more housing options, especially multi-family structures, and new economic activity to create jobs and enhance the economic vitality of their community. On the other hand, new arrivals may attempt to preserve the landscape, charming old structures and other bucolic characteristics, a smaller population and lower levels of economic activity, as essential to preserve the natural and social environment that attracted them in the first place (Cloke and Little, 1990; Cloke et al., 1995; Ghose, 2004; Walker and Fortmann, 2003). However, the reality is much more complex, as interests and alliances mix, mingle, and diverge (Paniagua, 2002a).

2. Methodology

The fieldwork for this study in the Empordà was conducted within the territorial boundaries of the northern Baix (Lower) Empordà (traditionally called Empordanet), part of the Mediterranean tourist destination known internationally as the Costa Brava (Fig. 1). We studied the dynamics of more recent migration and the processes of social change in the inland municipalities, rather than the coastal communities that rely on the provision of tourism services and have experienced strong growth since the 1960s.

The study area covers approximately 480 km² in the lower plain of the Ter River, with a well-developed infrastructure of roads, small towns, and *masies* (the large, traditional farmhouses

¹ Studies on immigration to rural areas of Spain in the 1980s do exist, but the research is very specifically related to immigration of political and social anticapitalist groups to deep rural areas (the *countercultural back-to-the-land* movement, Halfacree, 2006). These groups sought an alternative to life in urban/industrial areas during the last years of the Franco regime and the beginning of Spain's return to democracy.

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