

PANIAGUA, A.; BRYANT, R. and KIZOS, T. (eds.) (2012)  
*The Political Ecology of Depopulation: Inequality, Landscape and People*  
Zaragoza: CEDDAR, 311 p.  
ISBN 978-84-92582-77-8

Faithful to its title, *The Political Ecology of Depopulation* is an attempt to examine depopulation—mainly in Europe—from a political ecology perspective. According to the editors of the book, political ecology's primary focus on densely inhabited areas of the Global South has "tended to neglect the casual [*sic*] dynamics and socio-natural implications of the historical depopulation of areas" (p. 11). Through numerous empirical studies mostly from southern (France, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal), but also northern (Denmark and Holland) and Central (Czech Republic) Europe, as well as one case from the US, the book explores both "the construction of depopulated areas as well as efforts to redress such problems" (p. 11). The editors see the overall contribution of the book to be the combined focus it offers on marginality, depopulation and environmental transformation in different European countries. The main insight emerging from the book is the "importance of taking the differentiated meaning of marginality and its dynamics in rural areas subject to depopulation seriously" (p. 18). Overall, I think that the book succeeds in presenting and establishing the diverse character of the phenomenon of depopulation as well as the diversity of the social and socio-environmental science lenses through which it can be studied. However, I feel that it is less successful in explicitly clarifying its links and contribution to political ecology literature and research. All in all, the wealth and diversity of case study material earn a recommendation to read this book.

Depopulated spaces in rural Europe are often sites of neglect whose socio-environmental landscapes are a *bas-relief* of external economic development priori-

ties materialised through variable levels of public and private investment. The interdependent and co-constructed inland and coastal (French Riviera) landscapes of Alpes-Maritimes in France (Bryant) exemplify a relationship between 'shadowy' and 'luminous' landscapes where the latter landscapes have benefited economically and population-wise by drawing resources from and externalising impacts to the further ones. The consecutive transformations of the Jutland landscape in Denmark (Kristensen and Primdahl) from one sustaining subsistence economies into arable land, non-productive uses and a landscape of socioeconomic and demographic decline, reflect the shifting needs of growth-oriented economies supported by state policies. State attempts to favour economies of scale and productivist agriculture have led to depopulation due to migration and economic inequality among rural inhabitants. Public policy in the form of EU subsidies in Kilkis, Greece (Koutsou and Partalidou) has favoured lowland irrigated crops and farms at the expense of the already disadvantaged lowland non-irrigated and mountainous farmers (due to Greek State post-WWII agricultural policies).

One wonders to what extent the use of public subsidies to generate such a two-tier system of productive and unproductive agriculture and the concurrent generation of large-scale agricultural concentrations in lowland areas and cheap and mobile labour in mountainous regions may have also facilitated processes of capital accumulation. This is important, as the analysis of degraded socio-ecologies in relation to or at least within the context of uneven capitalist development is political ecology's stock-in-trade (e.g. Peet et al., 2011).

Although the book does not explicitly explore the importance of capitalism in depopulation, links between the two flicker in some contributions. EU agricultural policy's new focus on increasing competitiveness has introduced mentally exhausting activities (e.g., the obligation to record all work activities) for farmers in southern France (Tsiomidou). Those farmers then feel that farming has ceased to be independent, creative work where one exercises mental capabilities to find solutions in complex situations of human-nature interaction. This transformation of farmers into dependent labour where "[t]he labourer is required to execute motions without having the authority to reflect upon their purposefulness" (Molinier, 2006: 306) is an example of alienating technologies resulting from the neo-liberal requirement for competitiveness introduced in EU agricultural policy. The drive to expand energy production as the "new cash crop of rural America" (p. 275) helps to create policy and public support for controversial projects that use depopulation and economic depression to justify the sidelining of environmental (ethanol plant in rural Kansas) or scenic landscape (wind farms in Vermont) concerns. Marginality in those cases provides fertile ground for expanding the commodity frontiers of capitalism (Moore, 2002) with the support of public policy. Indeed, the interaction between state policy and market forces powerfully shapes the experience of depopulation and environmental degradation in marginal European rural areas. This is evident in western Lesvos, Greece (Kizos et al.), where sheep farmers are locked in a low-profit and environmentally degrading activity whose profitability is maintained by public subsidies and controlled by powerful intermediaries and price- and cost-setting markets beyond their reach.

This image of depopulated areas and their adverse socio-environmental rea-

lities as the result of state and capital neglect or exploitative logics informs a major strand of a relatively recent literature on 'First World' political ecology (McCarthy, 2002). Predominantly US-based, this literature studies the 'First World' as a site subject to processes that are regularly associated with 'Third World' spaces which create peripheries within the First World. As regards rural sites, it considers how a combination of the control exercised by state regulators over natural resource-dependent communities and the logic of capital investment has produced Third World conditions in many depressed rural areas within the "spatial heart of capitalism" (Schroeder et al., 2006, p. 163) in Europe and North America. This essentially structuralist approach is complemented by a post-structuralist one, which postulates that modernity and capitalism are not necessarily as dominant in marginalised First World sites as usually assumed and that their effects are partial, contested and incomplete. First World 'marginalised' sites are thus also analysed as spaces of opportunity where viable and even more hopeful alternatives may operate. Interestingly, *The Political Ecology of Depopulation* presents examples where local agents manipulate available resources and opportunities in ways beyond the prescribed or expected ones.

Rural agents in Spain use funding from the EU-LEADER programme to develop 'best environmental practices' that go beyond the traditional focuses of nature protection and renewable energy (Espania). These practices use the notion of 'the environment' as an organiser of activities that implement a productive (e.g., incorporate environmental quality in the production process), socio-cultural (e.g., cultural heritage interpretative centres) or support-system (e.g., environmental education and training) dimension. The result is that through the LEADER programme the environ-

ment becomes “one area that greatly contributes to the design and implementation of integrated rural development strategies” (p. 60). In the Czech borderland (Kucera and Chromy), rural dwellers engage in the restoration of landscape landmarks (e.g., buildings) from the Czech-German past not only in a utilitarian effort to make their area attractive to visitors but also as part of an effort “to learn something about one’s own region and to recreate a relationship with a certain historical and intergenerational continuity” (p. 208). Locally-driven strategic development planning initiatives in Denmark (Kristensen and Primdahl, 2012) provide opportunities for researchers to harness their knowledge at the service of community priorities and reveal “the potential to bring back vitality to rural areas including collective beliefs in the virtue of the struggle to survival and autonomy... [and]...prove to be effective governance approaches” (p. 187). At a more institutionalised level, the territorial cooperative Noardlike Frsyke Wälden successfully implements an alternative vision of rural development in a marginal area of Friesland (northern Netherlands) (Domínguez-García et al.) that brings together such diverse stakeholders as farmers, politicians, scientists, hunters and environmentalists in a successful model that integrates conservation and farm production. A key implication of inequality in the subsidies system for agriculture in Greece (Koutsou and Patalidou) is that “farmers (especially those in more favoured zones) are now dependent on the State (and EU) and capital, in comparison to the situation during the half [*sic*] of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 247). Nevertheless, those farming in less favoured areas (e.g., mountains) in northern Greece (Kilkis Prefecture) have become less dependent by developing alternatives such as investing in livestock, and could be more resilient to a possible (or perhaps even probable, under the current fiscal

circumstances and policy choices of the Greek State) withdrawal of public support to agriculture.

Marginalised and depopulated rural areas in Europe are spaces of diversity where other processes, beyond the overwhelming interaction between capital investment and state regulator logics, also take place. In remote rural areas of Castile and Leon, Spain (Paniagua), processes of administrative homogenisation that concentrate smaller communities into one municipal unit interact with depopulation to create multiple locality identities as well as micro-politics where regional institutions and mayors have more clout. Similarly, in the Alpes-Maritimes of southern France (Paniagua), communities mobilise diverse strategies of spatial representation which provide much-needed flexibility in the area’s response to major processes of transformation. And despite the high rate (over 40%) of farm abandonment in Italy’s mountainous regions (Omizzolo and Streifeneder) and a steep decrease in active farmland between 1990-2007, the current situation in the Apennines is “relatively stable or has a positive trend” (p. 223).

So, in line with what the First World political ecology literature maintains mostly for rural North America, ‘marginalised’ rural spaces in Europe can be read both as backwaters or sites of neglect and as spaces of hope and opportunity. Although the book reveals the diversity of socio-natural implications, realities and drivers of the historical depopulation of rural areas in Europe, it does not reflect on the implications of the factors for political ecology and makes no explicit links to the literature. Perhaps with the exception of Bryant, individual chapters do not explicitly attempt to reflect on the implications of their research with reference to the key elements in the political ecology framework of analysis, e.g., the relevance of unequal power relations,

the role of politics in effecting environmental change, etc. (Robbins, 2012). Likewise, the overall book lacks a specific space for synthesising insights and discussing its contributions, such as in the form of a concluding chapter or a sub-section within the introductory chapter where those reflections and links to the field of political ecology—and particularly First World political ecology—are drawn. This absence of systematisation of the knowledge offered by the individual cases is a missed chance, both because depopulation is a key dimension in the peripheralisation and construction of remote areas in Europe (as it is well pointed out by the book) and because the book is replete with examples of such areas emerging either as undergoing a process of becoming backwaters or responding in unexpected ways. An explicit discussion of what the book achieves with reference to the analytical framework and body of work in political ecology would also establish a useful starting point of reference for future studies on depopulation within the field.

Overall, I believe that the book's mission of offering "a rich account of how political ecological dynamics condition depopulated rural areas, mostly in a European context" (p. 12) is achieved, but that the mission of studying depopulation "from a political ecology perspective that encompasses rural areas" (p. 11) is not as successfully achieved because the diversity revealed by the studies is not systematised in a comprehensive way. Unfortunately, some chapters also have several typos and a somewhat informal appearance (more akin to un-

nished drafts), which diverts attention from the interesting messages they try to convey. Notably, and on a more positive note, the 'Conclusions' sections of almost all the chapters contain commendably concise descriptions of each chapter and its main messages.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/dag.143>

