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Migration, environment and rural gentrification in the Limousin mountains

Frédéric Richard, Julien Dellier and Greta Tommasi

- 1 The countryside of many developed countries has, over the last few decades, been subject to a greater or less pronounced demographic renewal. Depending on the timeframe and the geographical and linguistic contexts, this has been described as *reprise* or *renaissance rurale* (Kayser, 1990; Simard, 2011), as *renouveau* (Pistre, 2012), as turnaround (Champion, 1998), and as counterurbanisation (Buller, 1991; Kontuly, 1998) etc. In any case, the literature devoted to it seems mixed with regard to the issues (economical, sociocultural, environmental, political, etc.) raised by the authors. For example, the migratory movements that fuel the larger part of the demographic recovery have prompted diverse studies which, depending on the conceptual apparatus used, fall into in scientific (sub)fields, or even paradigms, such as population geography (Smith, 2002; Milbourne, 2007; Pistre, 2012), amenity migration (Moss, 2006; Cognard, 2010; Marcouiller *et al.*, 2011; Martin *et al.*, 2012) or rural gentrification (Smith, 1998; M. Phillips, 1993; Bryson et Wyckoff, 2010). It is from this viewpoint that we have examined the roles of repopulation dynamics and new inhabitants in relation to certain changes currently taking place in the Limousin mountains¹.
- 2 This area, like most of the Limousin, has benefited from a significant migratory flux over the last few decades (Duboscq and Mathieu, 1985; Le Floch, 2008; Tommasi, 2012). Individuals and households, by their profiles and practices, profoundly change local society, or rather, *societies*. At the same time, as suggested by other studies (Papy *et al.* 2012), relationships “with nature and natural resources” and with the environment in general are noticeably evolving in the French countryside, and the Limousin mountains are no exception. As elsewhere, their migratory attractiveness is fuelled by somewhat idealistic visions of nature and other environmental amenities, visions based on images of high altitude areas and their harsh climate. However, in the same way that these environmental characteristics of an area can influence a new population's implantation

(Moss, 2006; Cognard, 2010), they can, in return, participate in the development of the local environment, considered as a social construction, combining the material reality and the idealistic visions (Depraz, 2008) of the society that inhabits and invests in it. In this regard, the concept of rural gentrification, as represented in the Anglo-Saxon literature, could prove very pertinent, in particular when defined as *greentrification*, a term conceived precisely to underline the central role of the environment in the social and geographical change processes that constitute rural gentrification (Smith, 1998; Smith and Phillips, 2001; Phillips 2005; Hines, 2007, 2010; Bryson and Wickoff, 2010). The few studies carried out from this perspective revolve around three elements: 1) The arrival of new inhabitants (evicting, relegating or replacing local populations), motivated in part by environmental amenities 2) at least some of whom belong to specific social groups (those who hold the relevant values and who are tempted to impose them) and finally 3) at the instigation of these new inhabitants and social groups, the transformation of the environment, as much from a symbolic (visionary) point of view as from a practical or landscaping perspective. Overall, without looking at the issue in an overly rigid way, and without counting upon it being entirely appropriate, this frame of reference will apply to our case study. The objective is to show how the concept of rural gentrification might contribute to enhance the way in which we see the mutual influences of migration and the environment in rural settings, and more precisely here in mid-mountain regions.

Scientific context and methodological options

- 3 There are multiple factors involved in the demographic renewal of the countryside in developed countries. Amongst other arguments, “nature” and, more widely, the environment (since it includes more objective considerations: a less artificial landscape, available space, “health quality” etc.) were defined very early as key elements in this new attractiveness. As for the narrower question of interaction between “environment” and mobility towards rural destinations, some recent research has tackled this in a stimulating manner. So, Paquette and Domon (2003) adopted an approach that could be termed as systemic in order to consider the mutual influences of newcomers on one hand and, on the other, of environmental characteristics and transformation (functional and landscape changes in particular) of the Quebec countryside. By settling in the countryside, the newcomers change the landscapes of the areas in which they invest, including their local neighbourhoods, via their domestic habits; their imprint on the landscape “reflecting their identity and revealing their conception of rural life”. For their part, Argent *et al* (2009) looked into migrants’ sensitivity to rural amenities in Australia, mentioning, amongst other things, the *stimuli* and aesthetic markers at a local scale, as well as the environmental impacts of these migrations. Even though the authors consider themselves researchers in the field of amenity migration, they do not use the classic conceptual framework and the references they cite are more like those of researchers working on rural gentrification. Furthermore, various works dedicated to the latter pay particular attention to the role of the environment, as much in the overall process of gentrification as in its local implementation, both before and even more so after the gentrifiers settle in the English countryside. (Smith et Phillips, 2001; Phillips, 2005; Phillips *et al.*, 2008; Richard, 2010), or North American (Hines, 2007; Bryson et Wickoff, 2010). Over and above factors such as the gentrifiers’ social status and/or their ability to master documents and planning

applications, the importance of “the environment”, and “nature”, is such that researchers working to develop the concept of rural gentrification regularly use the term “*greentrification*” to clarify, or even replace, gentrification.

- 4 Attempting to gain inspiration from these approaches, we have used a flexible definition of the environment that simultaneously integrates all the “natural” elements that constitute the surroundings or ecosystems at varying scales, the features of the landscapes, and all the “environmental amenities” that ensue. It is equally apt to include all of the practices and environmental views of the populations, who are able to express them and claim them as their own. This relatively neutral term was employed in the thirty or so semi-structured interviews with key informants (elected representatives, community technicians etc.) and in the much stricter interview guide² used with a sample of 120 inhabitants. One third of this sample was comprised of local people³, in the sense they were native to the Limousin mountains and had never lived elsewhere. The remainder were newcomers, these being defined as individuals who had come either from other areas of the Limousin, or from other regions, to live permanently in the area at the time of the survey. Finally there are some “returners”, as the local population calls them, referring to people, native to the mountains, who had left for a long period of time (sometimes over their entire working lives) before returning. Added to this were the classic criteria⁴ (age, activity, socio-professional group) and especially, given our questions about environment’s role in migratory and residential trajectories, the current type of housing. The premise that was put forth was that given their respective particularities in terms of settlement, building density and supposed social proximity, but mainly access to “natural” areas and degree of interpenetration between built and vegetated areas, the three main types of housing available in rural Limousin (isolated, in a hamlet, in a village/market town) could have influenced the residential choices of the interviewees and reveal details about their hopes and aspirations regarding the environment.
- 5 Likewise, the Limousin mountains seemed a large enough area to present varied migratory and morpho-landscape configurations, and so likely to produce noticeable differences in the socio-demographic recomposition underway. Three sections, each including three to four communes, or municipalities, were selected to be investigated using field surveys (figure 1). The first one (South-East Creuse), the most isolated, has only recently become attractive. It offers varied scenery that shows the traces of a lively agricultural industry, combined with wooded countryside and forests. The second area is situated on the Millevaches plateau itself. It is an area nationally renowned for its landscape’s individuality, its ecological richness, and even the controversial dominance of evergreen tree species, but maybe even more so for the density and energy of its network of non-profit associations, to the point where it has been the subject of various studies (Le Floch, 2008; Bobbé et Perrot, 2012; Tommasi, 2012, 2014). Compared to South-East Creuse, the plateau distinguishes itself with a well-established migratory attractiveness, the first significant arrivals of new inhabitants having happened in the sixties and seventies (Duboscq and Mathieu, 1985). Finally, the third area is located in Corrèze, south of the Regional natural Park. With mixed forest coverage (evergreen and deciduous), hillier than the other two areas, it is differentiated by its more peri-urban migratory dynamic, due to the relative closeness of market towns (Tulle, Brive-la-Gaillarde, Egletons) that are sources of skilled employment, often in the civil service.

Figure 1: Locations of the three areas chosen for our field survey, in the Millevaches Regional Natural Park, in Limousin.

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Migration, migrants, gentrifiers?

- 6 From the perspective previously explained, the first step consisted in deconstructing the fluxes and migratory journeys of the new residents: we needed to validate, or discount, their status as gentrifiers, then, when relevant, and depending on the attention paid to environmental factors and issues, propose the hypothesis of a form of *greentrification*. Chosen for this study on account of its many environmental amenities, which have been “approved” or institutionalised since the creation of the Millevaches Regional Natural Park in 2004, the area presents the classic elements of a mid-mountain region. Though it stands out due to its very small population density (average of 12,3 inhabitants per km², figure 2, map A), it has become attractive since the seventies, to both inter-regional and international migrants, and has since benefited from a positive net migration rate (8585 arrivals versus 6059 departures just in the period 1999-2006, figure 2, map B). In absolute terms, these numbers are modest and only partially compensate for the natural deficit. However, compared to the total population which was 38 679 inhabitants in 2006, and even more so when compared at a local scale, the number of new inhabitants becomes noticeably more significant. Thus, according to INSEE, the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, just the most recently settled (between 2001 and 2006) may represent up to a third of the total population of some municipalities (figure 2, map C).

Figure 2: Demographical elements in the Millevaches Regional Natural Park in Limousin, 1999-2006

Source : MIGCOM 2006, INSEE

- 7 Beyond the simple demographic figures, other evidence suggests that migrants contribute significantly to any local socio-geographical recomposition. Considering migrants as potential gentrifiers (as well as the other criteria), given that they have more economic, social and/or cultural resources than the local population, the available data tends to confirm this suggestion. Then, regarding qualifications, INSEE's numbers show that in the Limousin mountains, as in the rest of the Limousin, new inhabitants are on average more highly qualified than the existing population. Though for reasons of statistic reliability it wasn't possible to break down this data at commune level, or for the three groups of communes we surveyed, the profiles of the people we met were consistent with this general pattern. Moreover, the differential between old and new residents in terms of qualifications translates partially in terms of financial resources, measured here as income. Thus, in keeping with households in other rural areas of Limousin, the average reference income of those in the Regional Natural Park increased proportionately faster than those in the Limousin's urban conglomeration (where they are nonetheless notably higher). Here again, the interviews conducted with the individuals from the three areas tended to confirm the influence of new residents in this general increase in household's average income, highlighting the difference between original local populations and those more recently settled.
- 8 Further to these observations about various resources, where at least some of the migrants seem to be relatively well off, the survey aimed to define the role of the environment in the newcomers' migratory projects. In this respect, apart from slight local differences, the field survey is clear: whether it's referred to in terms of "nature", landscape, living environment, productive resources, recreational opportunities, etc., the environment occupies a central role, even a founding role, in new inhabitants

migratory and residential plans. Such as, for example, a working person, from the Vassivière-Plateau, for whom “The main criterion was the environment, all these forests, the way you feel free everywhere, there are very few fences. That's really a quality of life” or another person, from Corrèze for whom “It's the natural environment that we liked here, and everyone who comes here, our friends from the four corners of France, they all think it's fantastic here. They say here is real nature”. Aside from that, and even though a proven causal link cannot be established, many of the migrants who had been attracted by this “environment “ (of clearly plural content) had studied, often in higher education, an environmentally related subject (engineer in ecology, water or forestry, guide training, paleo-environmental studies etc.).

- 9 In detail, the survey showed that the new inhabitants paid attention to the environment at every stage of planning their migratory journey. Corresponding to these stages, this attention can be expressed (figure 3) via variable lexical fields, which make respective references to the conceptual/intangible, the ideal (stereotypical, idealistic and idyllic visions of the countryside, fantasies and dreams), the materiality, and to experience. Finally, when declining the analysis as far as the desired type of housing (and the property finally chosen to invest in), the newcomers explain (or re-interpret?) their chosen residential locations in the light of predetermined aims and ambitions, which stem from before their migration and relate to a vision of a future a domestic and/or micro-local environment, favoured for some reason.

Figure 3: Lexical fields of the stages of the migratory process

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The environmental impact of the migrants, a sign of rural gentrification

- 10 Similarly to what has been previously discussed about the types of housing sought before migration when settling in the Regional Natural Park, perceptions of the environment, including the landscape, are generally idealised and mythicised based on socially constructed visions (Urbain, 2002; Hervieu et Viard, 2005; Richard, 2010; Tommasi, 2014). Yet, if environment and landscape have an impact on migrants, the opposite is also true: the newcomers contribute to change the landscape of the areas in which they invest, in particular at a very local scale via their practices and domestic arrangements and home improvements. (Phillips *et al.* 2008, Paquette et Domon, 2003). This ability to change the environment and/or the landscape is very uneven; it depends on the type of gentrifier and the capital they have at their disposal. As they progressively evict and/or replace the local populations, they remodel local societies and their chosen areas. Depending on their sociological profiles, the gentrifiers' motivations, capabilities and methods of action vary (Phillips, 1993; Smith et Phillips, 2001; Smith, 1998), but in all cases, they confirm the recreational function of the countryside (Solana-Solana, 2010) that become post-productive consumption areas (Bryson et Wyckoff, 2010). In this respect, the gentrifiers can be distinguished by their tendency to encourage and to be involved in these transformations, as well as their custom of developing domestic spaces, of which they are usually the owners. (Phillips *et al.* 2008; Paquette et Domon, 2003). In addition, they mobilise and exploit local institutions and planning/improvement policies in order to influence the present and future of their area and local public property. (Parsons, 1980; Little, 1987).
- 11 In the Limousin, on a domestic scale, the new resident's impact intervenes from the moment they settle. It sometimes starts with a simple, but strongly symbolic, reopening of closed shutters. The gardens, previously abandoned or even overgrown, are maintained and taken care of again. When added together, these individual impacts on the landscape (at a housing level), brought about by the settlement of new inhabitants, generate changes that are visible over the whole of the study area. Especially important is the practice of renovating houses, in particular the embellishment or rebuilding of the exteriors, particularly by creating or widening openings. This practice is widespread amongst neo-Limousin inhabitants (as opposed, in this case, to the returners who are much less involved) although it remains relative to their financial capacities (photo 1). The housing transformations, added to an equally unanimous commitment to gardens, suggest different values and a quest for aesthetic design that contrasts radically with the traditional kitchen gardens (planting and replanting, introduction of new species, upkeep, fences, etc.) (Photo 2).

Photos 1: Renovation of traditional buildings, local signs of new populations

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Photos 2: Garden aesthetics, or reinvention of the local relationship with nature

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- 12 Furthermore, most new inhabitants undertake, or associate themselves with, heritage-related and landscaping projects that go beyond the borders of their own property. One of the points that the study shows is the difference in priorities between the returners, who, from a sense of belonging and a certain nostalgia, tend to involve themselves more in local non-profit associations that undertake smaller, heritage-related renovation projects (churches, bread ovens, dry stone walls, creation of footpaths etc.) and the neo-Limousins, who appear more sensitive to ecological projects (forest biodiversity preservation, sustainable development and urbanism). Far from being Manichaean, the co-existence of these different types of involvement, partly due to the local background and long-held family/heritage-related values on the part of the returners, whereas founded on ownership and personal experience (and preferences?) of newcomers, provides, on the contrary, many points of convergence. Thus, though the returners are by definition more likely than the neo-Limousins to own agricultural land, woods and forests, they express similar visions, and it is indeed their common ideals with regard to land use, cultivation and plantation that contribute in a significant manner to the present and future of local landscapes.
- 13 The newcomers' interest in environmental issues can be explained by their involvement in many "virtuous" actions in the realm of sustainable development. For example, the use of short and local food supply chains is quite symptomatic of the general trend. Indeed, via this socially distinctive practice, newcomers distinguish themselves from the returners and even more so from older residents in their use of these types of marketing. Besides using them much more than the returners or locals, they are motivated by reasons that are political and almost militant, often calling themselves "consom'acteurs" or "consumer-activists" (simply being familiar with the term is significant here). By supporting local agriculture the newcomers contribute indirectly to maintaining local agriculture, which is diversifying both in terms of what is being produced⁵ and in production methods, which are moving towards best environmental practice, whether or not they are certified (as organic). Though a causal link has yet to be established, the Millevaches area is characterised by a high concentration of producers that involve themselves in local distribution networks. (Richard *et al*, 2014). In any case, in the same way as the studies previously mentioned, this example illustrates the will, and even more so the capacity of certain neo-Limousins, who are nonetheless gentrifiers, to (co)-construct or co-create the idealistic country areas (cf. *supra*) that they originally imagined when they arrived.
- 14 This isn't the only example that illustrates the local propagation, or infiltration, of environmental preoccupations driven by the newcomers. In some cases, their aspirations and projects are even more welcome in local communities, given that these are sometimes managed by neo-Limousins, who are playing an ever-increasing part in the local community and inter-regional councils. Such positive feedback can have a bearing on local improvement projects and can in some cases engender programs that are ambitious with regard to the size and budgetary limits of the communities (local planning regulation, reed-bed systems, small business "incubators"). Above all, these projects, which often belong in the field of "social economics and solidarity"⁶ benefit from the support of a network of actors allied to a non-profit association called "De fil en réseaux" (which roughly translates as "threads in a network"). Therefore, those we qualify as "alter-gentrifiers", based on their sociological profile, have access to a well-established local mutual help platform. This network proves to be very active in

spreading its ideas via two “official bodies” with committed editorial policies (Télémillevaches and IPNS, figure 4). At the heart of the network are the three municipalities of Faux-la-Montagne, Gentioux-Pigerolles and Royère-de-Vassivière, which are, not without irony, called by some newcomers, “the golden triangle”. From this centre, the earliest area to experience incoming migratory fluxes, the network’s branches stretch far beyond the Regional Natural Park.

Figure 4: Banner of Télémillevache and front cover of the journal IPNS

Télémillevache was distributed, on cassette and then on DVD, to all the communities in the Regional Natural Park from a local pick-up point (town councils, private individuals). 1000 copies of every edition of the journal IPNS (Plateau de Millevaches journal of information and debate) are distributed.

- 15 However, this willingness to support a social and “ecologicalising” environmentalist philosophy, and even to impose it to the point of being overly prescriptive, exposes to the risk of alienation by some sectors of the population. During the local elections in 2014, a text called “Proposition for a common platform in the Limousin mountains” was circulated, at the initiative of a group of newcomers (see IPNF n° 46 and 47). It expressed ideas about an innovating project for the area, developing the socio-environmental issues (forest management, energy self sufficiency, proximity distribution, welcoming new populations), subjects that are important to new inhabitants. Without a causal link having been clearly established with this manifesto, the political debate and the disagreement between newcomers and locals resulted in a remarkable state of tension, which led to the failure of many of the candidates who were most open to the new inhabitant’s initiatives (Tommasi, 2014).

Conclusion

- 16 The Limousin mountains represent an isolated and outlying rural area in a mid-mountain setting and, at the same time, a historically left-wing area (French resistance, rural communism, the Courtine episode etc), which remains attractive to individuals and movements (ref the Tarnac affair) linked to alternative and alter-globalist philosophies.
- 17 Given this geographical and social context, it may seem somewhat incongruous to interpret the social and geographical re-composition that has taken place over last few decades as a possible rural gentrification. However, by breaking down each of the steps and the conditions necessary to prove the relevance of this concept, the Limousin mountains can be considered a region exhibiting, with certain limitations, a gentrification process.
- 18 With regard to the different forms of capital (financial, cultural, social) that can be mobilised by some at least of the new inhabitants, the research cited allows the identification of different categories of gentrifiers. Whilst some of them could be similar to “mainstream” gentrifiers, others, the alter-gentrifiers, probably belong to the category of *marginal gentrifiers* identified on the other side of the English Channel (Phillips 1993; Cloke *et al.* 1995). In any case, whether it is perceived just as an aesthetic and scenic living environment, or rather as a resource with potential to be exploited for an ecologically virtuous social project, the environment occupies a fundamental role in the migratory process and the *greentrifiers* investment in the development of the countryside.
- 19 However, despite the consistent observations, the gentrification process in the Limousin remains much less advanced and/or substantial than can be observed elsewhere. In concrete terms, though remaining fairly diffuse, it sometimes results in gentrification “pockets”, noticeable because they are centred on parts of villages, even hamlets, which have been entirely bought out by new inhabitants who exhibit the socio-cultural characteristics of potential gentrifiers. In addition, at the Limousin mountains scale and the Regional Natural Park scale, the dynamics are unequal. The Plateau-Vassivière thus emerges as an example of an area noticeably changed by alter-gentrification, exerting its influence on other sectors, sometimes via local intermediaries (individuals or associations). Though the dynamics induced by these actors can coexist with the aspirations and efforts of the more conventional gentrifiers and the local population, animosity can still arise. In this respect, the latest community elections and the resulting tension, caused by the split between the “neos” and locals and remarked upon by both candidates and the electorate, tends to reassure us in our interpretation of the rural gentrification process (at work in this area).

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NOTES

1. This research is the result of a study commissioned by the Limousin Region in the context of its policy of welcoming new populations into rural areas. The aim was to investigate links between the environment and migratory patterns (Richard et Dellier 2011).
2. Some parts could be considered questionnaires. This “choice” was dictated by the sponsor’s desire to obtain “quantifiable” results, aiming to render the study potentially more “digestible” and “exploitable” by its users.
3. Despite the nuances and also the reservations that must be made about the distinction between “local” and “new residents” (Girard, 2012).
4. This is a little difficult to carry out on this scale in terms of the reliability of the data available in the additional sections of census surveys and in the individual subject’s files (MIGCOM).
5. The market gardening sector is expanding, for example, despite bio-climatic conditions considered unfavourable when judged by conventional standards.
6. For example, the municipality of Faux-la-Montagne (with a population of 359 in 2011) la SCIC (Société Coopérative d’Intérêt Collectif) l’Arban has developed, in partnership with the local authorities, an eco-quarter project, which currently under construction.

ABSTRACTS

The migratory dynamics of rural and/or mountainous areas have been the subject of much research, of which the various methodological and conceptual apparatus belong to distinct scientific (sub)-fields or disciplines. They can be distinguished by, for example, input from the population, amenity migration or rural gentrification (Smith, 1998; M. Phillips, 1993; Bryson et Wyckoff, 2010). It is from the latter viewpoint that this contribution aims to look at the demographic, sociocultural and environmental dynamics at work in the Limousin mountains. Some of the Anglo-Saxon literature on rural gentrification has highlighted the central role of the environment and/or nature, both as social construction, i.e. territorial designation and as a geographic framework, in the migratory dynamics and in the processes of social recomposition liable to produce one or more forms of rural gentrification, or *greentrification*. In more detail, the

environment could have an effect in advance of the migrants' settlement and continue to influence them over the entire course of their migration and residence. However, following their implantation, due to their gentrifying traits, i.e. those of new residents and actors of gentrification, may seek to change the environmental characteristics of their surroundings and move towards the 'ideal' that originally attracted them. In this instance, field surveys would tend to indicate that though this broad framework generally applies to the Limousin mountains, it remains necessary to determine firstly the nature of the gentrifiers, who could possibly be described as "alter-gentrifiers", and secondly whether their impact is equally significant within the Parc Naturel de Millevaches as a whole.

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Keywords: migration, environment, rural gentrification, Limousin mountains, PNR Millevaches

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