



Aspects and experiences of crisis in rural Greece. Narratives of rural resilience



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore aspects, dynamics and experiences of the crisis in the Greek countryside. The 'rural' is emerging in public discourse as a resilient milieu of solidarity, of social innovation, and of opportunities for employment, especially in farming and in rural entrepreneurship. It seems that the crisis has contributed to triggering social constructions of 'idyllic rurality' which generated counterurbanisation tendencies and expectations for urbanites to return back to the land. However, those who had remained in rural areas and in farming were already been confronted with the prolonged crisis of the agricultural sector (CAP reforms and market liberalization), now coupled with the severe impact of the recent economic and financial crisis in Greece. Drawing on narratives of farmers and incomers in two rural areas, the paper investigates experiences and strategies to deal with the crisis, in the framework of work and family and in the context of discourses on rural resilience. Personal accounts reveal that remaining or returning to rural areas often conceal cases of underemployment and social deprivation and that, both farmers and incomers are not explicitly supported by policy makers.

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1. Introduction

Rural areas have been promoted in recent years as an attractive milieu combining pleasant living conditions and interesting employment opportunities, especially in rural entrepreneurship and services (e.g. the agrofood and tourism sectors). The changing character of rurality, grafted with diverse urban features (economic activities, social composition, consumption models, etc.) has had manifold effects – of both attraction and repulsion – on migration patterns from and to the countryside at different times, in the context of new significations of rural space (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Halfacree, 2008, 2012; Milbourne, 2007; Ni-Laroire, 2007; Woods, 2005).

In several parts of Europe, the economic crisis since 2008 has reinforced the "rural idyll" through emerging perceptions about "rural resilience", according to which the rural community and the reactivation of social and family networks make possible access to affordable housing and food provision, while offering opportunities

for employment in farming and para-agricultural activities, particularly for returnees from the cities who are the owners of inherited family property. The debate is more lively in the European South, where links with the family and place of origin are stronger (Castles and Ferrera, 1996; Gkartziou, 2013; Koutsou et al., 2011; Mulder, 2007). As noted characteristically by Bock (2013) the rural milieu is not merely fragile but is also a locus for social innovation, solidarity and resilience. Rural resilience refers to the capacity of rural regions, as dynamic socio-ecological systems, to adapt to changing external circumstances in such a way that a satisfactory standard of living is maintained (Heijman et al., 2007). Natural and human resources, investments and infrastructure as well as tangible factors such as social capital and local knowledge are important for adaptive and innovative processes to struggle with versatile changes rooted in natural hazards or socio-economic crisis (Heijman et al., 2007; Schouten et al., 2009; Magis, 2010; Bristow and Healy, 2015; Christopherson et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012). Undeniably rural resilience is a complex concept dealing with increasingly entangled and interrelated ecological, economic and cultural systems while adaptation takes many different forms according to local circumstances, including the severity and duration of the problem, public-individual strategies, technological

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configuration, financial support etc (McManus et al., 2012).

Rural areas have been perceived in lay understandings as more resistant and persevering against deprivation and poverty compared to the urban areas, and especially the inner city, where the concentration of poverty is more visible (Woods, 2005, pp.268–269). These considerations are now fuelling idealistic images for rural areas as refuges for coping with the economic crisis. In fact, if in an initial phase counterurbanisation was motivated by aspirations for better conditions of life and work (i.e. lifestyle considerations), especially in the tertiary sector, more recently counterurbanisation has been reinforced by the pressure of the crisis, and indeed the expectation of securing a livelihood from farming in its more traditional or more entrepreneurial manifestations (i.e. employment/economic motivations). Previously undervalued farming activity is being rediscovered through the lens of resilience by virtue of its perceived multiple benefits. It has, therefore, acquired a foothold in public discourse. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the concept from a social science perspective, rural resilience represents an encompassing narrative for rural development policies to attract in-migrants, especially during the crisis. At the same time, rural resilience is gaining ground in the imaginary of urbanites, particularly among the lower and middle classes who are being hit by the crisis and perceive, in various ways, the rural as locus of refuge or recovery, always in conjunction with quality of life motivations and ideals of rural values.

However, those who have remained in rural areas and in farming, with the farm as primary or secondary source of income, are already being confronted with the crisis of the productivist model of agriculture and the consequences of the related revisions of the Common Agricultural Policy, including decoupling, reduction of protectionism in agriculture, and market liberalization, particularly in disadvantaged Mediterranean regions and in heavily subsidized production branches (e.g. tobacco). For farmers, the economic crisis of recent years (in all its manifestations) might be considered “a crisis within a crisis” as the farming crisis preceded the post-2009 financial and economic crisis. This constitutes for them a familiar territory of deadlocks, conflicting production options and survival strategies (Anthopoulos et al., 2013). This complex dynamic in the midst of an uncertain and changing political and economic environment generates continuous redefinitions of relationships and flows between the urban and the rural (migration, employment, commercial transactions, social relations). Social actors reflect upon new individual and collective strategies of social and geographical mobility and shape new cultural perceptions of rural work and life questioning blanket terms such as “rural people” and “rural community” in the rural restructuring process (Milbourne, 2007).

This paper proposes to examine aspects and dynamics of the recent economic crisis as well as strategies of social actors, utilizing empirical research conducted in two farming areas in Greece, namely the municipalities of Agrinion and Thebes. The key points investigated are concerned with:

- a) how individuals (farmers who have remained in the region and incomers) are experiencing the crisis in rural areas and what problems they face in light of the discourse on rural resilience.
- b) what types of strategies they elaborate, both in the framework of work and family and in that of social relations and cultural expectations, all within the broader dynamic of rural restructuring.

2. Between rural idyll and agricultural crisis. The complexity of rural mobility

During the past few decades the rural ideal and the farming crisis have been interwoven in a complex interplay of outgoing, incoming and intra-regional population movements in rural areas.

As early as the 1970s new aggregate movements of people into rural areas were being registered in many agricultural regions of the developed world, at the same time that less favoured rural areas and small village communities were continuing to lose population as a result of the exodus of people seeking employment opportunities in cities (Berry, 1976).

The rural idyll, related to the perceived quality of physical environment and rural life, is the key driver in urbanites' decisions to move to the countryside. Counter-urbanization processes are the complex result of economic restructuring of urban and rural communities, and of socio-cultural and technological changes facilitating greater geographical and social mobility than was offered to previous generations (Woods, 2005). Given these developments, the geographic and rural-sociology research agenda moved from statistical analysis to mapping the changing demographic and socio-economic profiles of rural populations, while focusing on the narratives of in-migrants. A wide range of publications in western countries (especially in the Anglo-American literature) offers rich information on the spatial, temporal and socio-cultural complexities of demographic change (for example, Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Halfacree, 1994; Mitchell, 2004). They further highlighted impacts on gentrification processes associated with socio-cultural, land use and housing-related conflicts in rural communities as a result of population movement, primarily of the middle-class in-migrants. Counter-urbanites mostly do not take up farming activity but intervene in local affairs through involvement in local government, assuming community leadership by virtue of the advantages of their urban culture (a relatively high educational level, organizational and communicative skills, professional and social networking) sidelining the socio-professional group of farmers (Petrou and Anthopoulos, 2013; Woods, 2005). They also affect rural property markets, generating inflationary tendencies in real estate values, including the value of agricultural land. If they are not in the category of retirement migration (e.g. migrants returning to their place of origin), the types of employment most promising for active urbanites moving to the countryside are in the areas of rural entrepreneurship, ecology and countryside stewardship.

At the same time we rarely have direct knowledge of farmers' hardships amidst rural restructuring, agricultural and rural economic change and even more amidst the recent economic crisis through their own narratives. We learn of them through the mediating discourse of incomers and more specifically their judgments on the rural communities into which they have moved and usually within emerging rural conflicts (Petrou and Anthopoulos, 2013; Bossuet, 2006). That said we do not know what is at stake in farming, as a social and productive dynamic, as a prospect and as lived experience, from the perspective of the farmers themselves, although farming continues to play an active role in the development of rural areas.

This re-construction of rurality on the basis of rural resilience, a discourse addressed to potential migrants with expectations, has been adopted by politicians, who promote the rural as “an opportunity”. Their discourse shows little sign, however, of having been affected in any way by the prolonged farming crisis which preceded recent events.

The crisis in the primary sector has to do with structural questions and regulations in the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy and its reforms, and with the internationalization of markets that are requiring increasing competitiveness of agriculture in terms of production costs or in terms of place-based specific quality (within the new agri-territorial paradigm). The contraction in farm incomes, socio-spatial inequalities between fertile lowland regions and less-favoured areas, or between small and large producers, underemployment, farmers' debts: all these factors generated vocational dead-end situations, stress and mental health problems

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