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Interjection

From Village Community to Megacity

A Renaissance of the Village is Possible!

On the Potential of Rural Areas in Germany and France

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In both France and Germany, people are attracted to the big cities – but at the same time, the yearning for a rural life is increasing. The potential of rural regions to create identity, preserve traditions, and constitute a sense of home should not be underestimated. The economical and societal developments in the 21st century depend, among other things, on how the multifaceted reserves of energy in rural areas are used.

The ubiquitous availability and networking of information at any time from any place seems to be increasingly shrinking the world into a “global village”. Original quotations by US President Donald Trump or astronaut Alexander Gerst are available to anyone on Twitter in real time. Weather in Berlin or Böblingen, Paris or Moulins, a person’s location is becoming increasingly irrelevant to knowledge, participation, and involvement. The classical contrasts between urban and rural are vanishing. Digitalisation is leading to increasing independence from location – in both private and everyday professional life. And yet, in many places there is still a striking divide between large cities and villages. It is obvious that the differences between urban areas and rural ones are still important. Some even think that the disparity between urban and rural is becoming greater and that the 21st century could one day go down in history as the “century of megacities”.

What is the situation in the core European states of Germany and France? Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles de Gaulle signed the Élysée Treaty 55 years ago. The two countries pledged close cooperation in all important political questions and at all levels from this point forward and promised to dedicate themselves to exchanging ideas, rapprochement, and establishing equal living conditions. Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron are currently planning to revise the treaty governing German-French cooperation, reorienting it and, in particular, further strengthening cooperation in the areas of economy, education, and culture.

What starting points, what common answers, and what different developments or speeds are there in Germany and France with respect to the omnipresent challenge of “urban and rural”?

Despite obvious as well as far-reaching differences, Germany and France have a comparable range of population densities, ranging from sparsely populated peripheral areas to dense metropolises. Both in the federally structured Federal Republic and in centrally organised France, many people still tend to move to large agglomerations. In addition to professional prospects, finely meshed infrastructures of all kinds – from good transport connections to medical care to cultural offerings – are central factors when people select their main place of residence. In both Germany and France, living space in large cities is scarce and expensive. At the same time, some rural regions on both sides of the Rhine complain of demographic imbalances and abandoned property or even depopulation. There is no question that excessive urbanisation is not good for “rural areas”. Phenomena such as closed production sites, abandoned businesses, or emptying town centres that were initially only to be found in areas with weak structures in the (new) Eastern *Länder* in Germany have begun to appear in Germany’s west and several regions in France, too. Small municipalities outside of the metropolises, far from central transport routes and tourist attractions, are especially subject to this suffering and deterioration.





Depopulation in rural areas has long ceased to be an exclusively Eastern German phenomenon.

It appears worthwhile to provide a comparison of France on the subject of “urban and rural”. The initial situation and challenges are essentially comparable and transferable, but our neighbour’s ratio of inhabitants to area makes it easier to see: There is only an average of about 100 inhabitants per square kilometre in France; in Germany, there are some 230. Additionally, the tension between the administration, which continues to be very centralised, and the few large metropolises on the one hand and the particularly strong cultural historical importance of rural areas on the other, clearly accentuates the differences between urban and rural in France.

La France profonde as the French countryside and its lifestyle is known, is enchanting. It seems to preserve the “good old days”. We think of the films *Jour de fête* with Jacques Tati or *Le Tatoué* with Louis de Funès and Jean Gabin. We recall the strong atmosphere, sometimes melancholy, of the rural stories of George Sand and other French writers. We whistle the tune to *Douce France*, in which Charles Trenet extols the beloved, happy country life of his childhood. Enchanted, ochre-coloured façades, weather-beaten roofs, rough cobblestone squares, and sublime church steeples form an impressive panorama of regional building materials and historical craftsmanship in many towns that have been preserved completely and unchanged. What at first glance appears to be an untouched, even idyllic village centre with a pleasant patina conceals a darker side that, even with all the fascination and appreciation, must also be given attention. Estates

← City lights: Despite strong ties to their rural origins, especially young people in France are attracted to the metropolitan regions. Source: © Johannes Höhn.

that used to be managed by large families and those employed by them, and alleyways that were once filled with hustle and bustle and children's laughter, are now home to only a few people, many of them elderly. Houses and shops are frequently empty. Classic rural agriculture consisting of farmsteads inhabited and run by families, long proud of their contribution to "Europe's breadbasket" and still to this day a fixed component of France's cultural identity, is in many places being replaced by machine-friendly agriculture with industrial operations and growing areas of cultivation.

These processes are accompanied by alienation and hopelessness among young French people. Many of them are still deeply rooted in their rural home regions, however. Rural areas continue to be a place of yearning. This longing finds expression in the often realised desire of many French city-dwellers for a "weekend house in the country" – accompanied by a willingness to spend Friday afternoons and Sunday evenings on the motorway, often in congested traffic. The leisurely pace of village life, quiet, and even seclusion is sought as compensation for hectic daily routines. Order and manageability have their place in this longing, too. There is no doubt that rural areas have great emotional potential to create identity, preserve traditions, and create a sense of homeland. Their *pied-à-terre*, or "foot on the ground" is what many French people proudly and lovingly name their second home in the country. By this, they mean far more than just "property", even though a country house may often represent pension savings or merely the hope for "retirement in the country". No, they are often the houses of parents or grandparents and thus associated with childhood memories. They are family hideaways. In this way, quite a few "city dwellers" retain and deepen sustained emotional ties to one of France's many rural cultural landscapes.

Many of these features can be found in Germany, too. There is an unwavering longing for a "type of rural life" as sales figures for magazines about a love of the countryside, the urban gardening trend and the waiting list for allotment gardens

attest. However, rural areas can also offer great potential beyond their emotional strengths; providing development opportunities, particularly in industrialised nations. The future of Germany and France in the 21st century is crucially dependent on how the multifaceted reserves of energy in rural areas are exploited and positively utilised. Ignoring "rural areas" involves not only neglecting houses, monuments, places, and landscapes, but also entails striking at the roots of our identity and established culture, cohesion, language, special-interest groups and clubs, and the preservation of traditions and age-old customs. Both French *Régions* and *Départements* and German *Länder*, *Landkreise*, and *Bezirke* are subject to the following principle: promoting rural areas consolidates social cohesion, strengthens integration, and facilitates equal living conditions. Local self-government is also secured: after all, small regional authorities have proven especially successful in "regulating the concerns of local society on one's own authority", as Article 28, Paragraph 2 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany dictates. "Rural areas" also offer its inhabitants a high degree of security, especially from a social perspective. Here, social networks are usually closer knit than those in large cities: "We know each other", "We take care of each other", "We help each other", "We are there for each other", and "We do not let each other down" are sentiments that can often be heard in the country.

With appropriate support, much more potential could be released in rural areas.

Rural areas constitute the undervalued "power centres of our country", as summarised by Julia Klöckner, Germany's Minister of Food and Agriculture, in her inaugural speech in March 2018. Based on this foundation, people can shape their future with confidence, self-determination, and care. The following twelve fundamental theses are offered as a basis for the discussion of the situation in Germany and France:

1. Rural areas must be promoted and individually developed at the local level with respect to economy and agriculture, ecology and tourism, infrastructure, education, and society and culture.
 2. Even if there is no “countryside” as such, but many widely varying rural areas, basic support for them is indispensable for creating and safeguarding equal living conditions. Besides the availability of electricity and drinking water and viable transports connections, today in particular this also includes: fast internet connections and reliable mobile communications coverage even in remote communities, functioning local and regional transport or adequate alternatives, infrastructure, decentralised provisions to ensure health and care services, investment in the protection of nature and of historical monuments, and practical funding or projects for culture and leisure activities.
 3. Rural areas must not be patronised. What we have long since realised to be true of development cooperation is at least as valid for supporting rural regions: don’t spoon-feed them, but help them to help themselves – don’t merely subsidise them, but listen to them, appreciate them, and support them.
 4. Rural areas need room for manoeuvre and freedom. Supporting them requires ensuring that they have sufficient funds, but then allowing them as much freedom in their decisions as possible: the local people are the ones who know best how to use the available resources.
 5. Rural areas require attention and appreciation, which motivates people to volunteer in politics, clubs, and initiatives.
 6. In a globalised, flexible world, people are increasingly searching for a home, roots, feeling of security, origins, and reliability – and they find them particularly often in rural areas.
 7. Rural areas have a special opportunity, responsibility, and almost a duty to observe the individual in their inalienable dignity, worries and hopes. Whilst urban areas often require pursuing politics for the collective body, the more manageable communities in rural areas allow a stronger and clearer emphasis to be placed on the individual.
- Rural areas must conceive themselves as future workshops. Thus they could become a role model for other communities.**
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8. Rural areas must be creative and search for their own, at times unusual paths from a multi-purpose building and common markets to agile public buses and mobile libraries right through to coordinated delivery services and new developments in telemedicine. It is helpful to differentiate the spacial structure here: what should each locality focus on, what services should be maintained by whom, and what medium centres should be jointly constructed?
 9. Rural areas must not become or appear self-referential. They must conceive themselves as workshops for constructing the future, network themselves in a special way, exchange good and best practices, and benefit from each other’s experience, even across borders.
 10. Rural areas must not put their heads in the sand. On the contrary, courageous communities in rural areas play a pioneering role: they develop structures with streamlined bureaucracies, cultivate close ties to business, complete joint projects and measures with churches, clubs, and initiatives, and in doing so encourage other cities and communities.

11. Rural areas thrive on a distinct, independent culture of voluntary work. These areas clearly radiate the dignity of civic engagement. Local politics should recognise, cultivate, and foster it accordingly – and not take it for granted. Social cohesion collapses in the absence of civic engagement. Conversely, the rural volunteer spirit is a vital nucleus of the *énergie démocratique* in Germany and France.
12. Those responsible for rural areas should not bemoan their state or lose themselves in descriptions of their problems, even though such behaviour might appear justified. They should function as confident, passionate facilitators and thus create solutions to problems.

In short, rural areas should strengthen their strengths and weaken their weaknesses. The fact that cities often imitate rural life by emulating village structures and vital village neighbourhoods and community activities, shows how attractive “country life” and how modern the love of the countryside is. There is no reason for rural areas to envy big cities, emulate them, or “play city”. Rebranding themselves with their obvious weaknesses would be foolhardy – and, realistically, doing so would cause rural regions to fail. Fortunately, rural areas in France, Germany, and elsewhere have their own dignity combined with so many individual strengths that it pays to make use of them. A renaissance of the village is possible – and seen up close, it is *déjà en route*.

–translated from German–

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