Making a place of their own
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SUMMARY

Making a place of their own. Rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe

The fabric of rural areas is distinguished by increasing diversity. The rural has become a place not only for agriculture, but for a number of other functions, such as recreation, nature, and housing. Rural populations are also diversifying, with the immigration of other groups such as middle-class migrants, and 'urban dropouts' or anti-urbanists. Many of these in-migrants find resonance in their rejection of certain features of the urban, such as pollution, individualism, criminality, and crowdedness. The rural is juxtaposed with the urban, and idealised as a site of nature, community, safety and peace. In this study, the focus was on a specific group of urban dropouts, namely intentional communities. Intentional communities can be identified by their deliberate attempt to realise a common, alternative way of life on the fringes of mainstream society. Their most characteristic features can be summed up with the following criteria: (1) no bonds by familial relationships only; (2) a minimum of three to five adult members; (3) membership is voluntary; (4) geographical and psychological separation from mainstream society; (5) a common ideology that is adhered to by all members; (6) sharing of (a part of) one’s property; and (7) the interest of the group prevails over individual interests. These criteria encompass a wide range of intentional communities that practise varying degrees of withdrawal from the context of mainstream society.

The main objective of this study was to provide insight into the life course of intentional communities located in rural areas in Northwest Europe. To achieve this, three research questions were posed: (1) Which processes have influenced the development of the phenomenon of rural intentional communities in the Western world from 1960 onwards? (2) Which categories of rural intentional communities can be distinguished in the Western world? (3) Which underlying mechanisms can help explain the life courses of different types of rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe?

Research methods

When the study began, an overview of intentional communities in the Western world was lacking. Therefore, a comprehensive database of intentional communities was created. These communities were approached by ordinary mail and e-mail, and asked to fill out a survey which in turn provided data on the communities’ locations, ideologies, and economic and social independence. Based on the survey data of 496 communities, a typology consisting of four types of communities was established through principal components and cluster analyses. The resulting types were labelled (1) religious, (2) ecological, (3) communal, and (4) practical communities. Subsequently, a multiple case study was carried out to obtain in-depth information on the life courses of rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe. Of each of the types, a ‘typical’ and a long-standing case were selected. In addition, one ‘typical’ ecological community which had not been built yet was chosen. The identification of the ‘typical’ cases was based on their average scores on the defining variables for each type. With regard to long-standing cases, the communities founded the earliest were selected. The studied communities were located in
the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom and Denmark. Data were predominantly collected through in-depth interviews with members of the communities. The interviews were analysed with use of QSR NVivo while adopting a grounded theory approach.

The development of intentional communities
The intention to withdraw from society into communities as a result of a certain dissatisfaction with mainstream society seems universal. A large number of both religious and secular groups have existed at least since the first century BC. From the 1960s two trends in society have influenced the development of intentional communities. The first trend is the increasing acceptance of different lifestyles. This is reinforced through the rise in postmodern characteristics of society, the most important of which are fragmentation and diversification. In general, intentional communities are tolerated as an alternative to life in mainstream society, rather than rejected as ‘deviant’. The second trend is the occurrence of counterurbanisation, which is a population deconcentration from (sub)urban to rural areas. The creation of rural intentional communities is fuelled by a sense of dissatisfaction with city life and idealisation of the countryside. Various groups of people contest aspects of mainstream society, and react by moving to the countryside. Intentional communities, for instance, reject the extreme individualism they observe in mainstream society, and establish more communal-oriented lifestyles. Furthermore, they want to limit excessive consumption and live ‘simpler’ lives, in harmony with nature. In this respect, they resemble other anti-urbanists, such as back-to-the-landers and those practising ‘simple living’. Although intentional communities occur in many different circumstances, certain processes, such as postmodernisation and counterurbanisation, can facilitate their development.

Four types of intentional communities
Members of religious communities (n=89) are usually single and/or aged over 65. They are united through their shared commitment to the communities’ religious ideologies. Common rituals, such as prayer services, celebrations, spiritual gatherings, as well as work and meals, reinforce a collective identity. Religious communities are often centrally organised, and their members have little private space and share property and personal capital. Ecological communities (n=115) withdraw to remote locations, and on an average they occupy an area of almost 500 hectares. They need space to practise their environmental lifestyles, which focus on limiting consumption and environmental pollution. Ecological communities buy and grow organic fruits and vegetables, and generate power from renewable resources. The communities are often run through consensus. Members are mostly families with children, who live in private houses. Communal communities (n=131) can be found in or near villages. Their lifestyle is focused on communal living, and their main ideological focus is on interpersonal contacts among the members. As ecological communities, they are often run through consensus. Their members are families with children who inhabit private houses and are outward-oriented with respect to social contacts. Practical communities (n=161) are established for utilitarian reasons. They serve to facilitate convenient family lives through sharing facilities. Practical communities are the least withdrawn of the four types, and they are often located in suburban areas, close to mainstream services.

It is necessary to note that the classification of a community into a type is not fixed. When fundamental changes take place in a community, it can develop into another type. Although the typology is a simplification of reality at a certain point in time, it provided a useful
framework for selecting and studying the life course of a small number of intentional communities.

The case study
From both the surveyed literature and the case study, it transpired that the common ideology, organisational structure, and position in society were the most important mechanisms underlying the communities’ life courses. These factors are discussed in turn for each type of community.

Religious communities
The religious communities that were studied were Carmel DCJ in Sittard, the Netherlands, and Goloka Dhama in Abenteuer, Germany (chapter 4). Carmel DCJ is a Carmelite monastery which was founded in 1898. Thirty-five members from various international backgrounds lived together in the community. Goloka Dhama is a community that belongs to the International Society for Krishna CONsciousness (ISKCON). It was founded in 1995 and had twenty members at the time of the study.

A shared ideology stood central in both studied religious communities. Both the nuns and the Krishna devotees designated their lives to serve their ‘God’ as well as possible, before being united with Him in the afterlife. Both communities belong to a world-wide network. The continuity of an individual community is subordinate to that of the ideology itself. The organisational structure of the studied religious communities served to facilitate the spiritual transition of their members, which was realised through strict daily routines, and hierarchical structures. Carmel DCJ in particular functioned as a total institution, where members had restricted personal space and freedom. With the secularisation of society, Carmel DCJ has become increasingly out of place, reflecting Catholicism on the wane. Goloka Dhama is a ‘foreign’ influence in Northwest Europe. The devotees were aware of this, and were committed to maintaining a sense of neighbourliness with their surroundings, to secure local acceptance of the community.

Religious communities serve to facilitate their members’ transition to a higher plane of existence. As such, the life course and continuity of an individual community are not relevant, especially when the community is part of a wider movement. However, the human need to become united with ‘God’ ensures a continuous demand for religious communities. Thus, as a phenomenon, religious communities are likely to continue to exist on the fringes of mainstream society.

Ecological and communal communities
The studied ecological and communal communities are Toustrup Mark, Chickenshack Housing Co-operative, Tweed Valley Eco-Village, Eden and the Hobbitstee (chapter 5). Toustrup Mark is an old ecological community with 80 members, which was founded in 1971 as a rural hippy commune on Jutland in Denmark. Chickenshack was founded in 1995, had six members when the study was conducted, and is located near Tywyn in North Wales. Tweed Valley has been trying to secure land in the Scottish border region from 1996 onwards, and had about eight members at the time of the study. Eden is an old communal group in Oranienburg, Germany. It was founded in 1893 and had around 1,500 members. The Hobbitstee in the Netherlands is an average communal group, which was established in 1969, and comprised seven members.

The ideals of ecological and communal groups consisted of various combinations of (1) a concern with protecting the environment, (2) commitment to communal living to create a
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Sense of togetherness and belonging, and (3) affinity with the left side of the political spectrum. Some of the politically engaged ecological and communal groups wanted to convey their ideals to the mainstream. The organisational structures of ecological and communal groups were characterised by equality. The land of all communities was owned by the communities as institutions, which was motivated by the ideal of providing affordable housing. Some members abused such ideals, and exhibited free rider behaviour. Through using and exploiting a community, free riders may undermine its continuity. The ideals of ecological and communal groups relatively resembled popular ideas in the mainstream, and attracted both committed members and free riders. If the communities were successful in developing effective mechanisms to keep out free riders, they could thrive on their popularity in mainstream society.

Practical communities
The practical case communities are Whiteway Colony in Gloucestershire, United Kingdom, and Trudeslund in Birkerød, Denmark (chapter 6). Whiteway is an old practical community founded in 1898, and had 110 members. Trudeslund is a cohousing community which was established in 1981, and had 59 members. Practical communities are least withdrawn from the mainstream, both physically and ideologically. Their communal living serves to enable comfortable family lives, and the sharing of facilities, and is not a goal in itself. A key issue in the organisational structure of practical communities is the division between public and private space. When the original anarchistic focus malfunctioned, Whiteway increased private space, and struck a balance between public and private. Trudeslund’s members were on the verge of a conflict involving the extension of the houses of some members, which would threaten the public community space, as well as the sense of privacy of other members. Members of practical communities want to live communally with as few constraints on their private spaces as possible. Practical communities can be characterised by a sense of enriched neighbourliness. Their continuity is uncertain, as they might assimilate into society because of their similarity to ‘regular’ neighbourhoods.

Other places
Intentional communities create alternative places on the fringes of mainstream society (chapter 7). They contest the dominant mainstream discourse, which continues to (re)establish white, heterosexual, able-bodied, sound-minded, middle-class, middle aged men as the norm. It is important to note that because of their contestation of certain mainstream norms, intentional communities are not completely detached from the mainstream. Rather, they suspend or invert what is ‘normal’, and function as liminal places or heterotopias. Liminality is a state of being “betwixt and between”. Intentional communities are often characterised by markers of liminality, such as uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflict. Heterotopias are places in which certain mainstream norms are inverted. For instance, through their different ideologies, intentional communities invert dominant norms, and function as heterotopias. Besides intentional communities, other alternative developments function as Other places as well. Examples are anti-urbanists, artist communities, travellers/nomads, and transnational migrants. Intentional communities are but one example of a wide range of alternative movements. Alternative lifestyles can make society more ‘colourful’ through their provision of more and different insights.