

*Exploring the Evolutions of Historical
Very Small Towns in Rural Change:
A Focus on Their Socio-spatial
Reconfigurations in Pays de Caux,
France (1960-2020)*



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Exploring the Evolutions of Historical Very Small Towns in Rural Change: A Focus on Their Socio-spatial Reconfigurations in Pays de Caux, France (1960-2020)

Highlights:

1. Very small towns have been facing structural processes which have strained their historical functions.
2. In Pays de Caux (France), they have lost their historical socio-spatial characteristics.
3. Overrepresentation of retired populations is emerging in the very small towns' centres.
4. Neglected by academic literature, it is timely to put them in the agendas.

Abstract: The European countryside is structured by numerous simple rural centres, termed very small towns (Servillo *et al.*, 2014), which provide facilities, goods and services to their surrounding local areas. Neglected by the academic literature, very small towns have been facing series of structural processes (deagrarianisation, deindustrialisation, development of mobilities, etc.) for several decades, which have strained their historical functions and raise the question of their obsolescence. In this paper, we question this potential obsolescence by focusing on their socio-spatial evolutions since the 1960s in the rural region of Pays de Caux (Normandy, North-West of France). Based on hybrids research methods (using historical census, historical aerial photographs and interviews of decision-makers and local actors), we discuss the extent to which very small towns have lost their historical identity.

Our research leads to three mains results. First, the differences between built environment of very small towns and villages has become blurred. Second, the composition of very small towns and villages labour force – different in the 1960s due to an overrepresentation of the upper-middle class in very small towns – are now virtually similar. Third, new socio-spatial characteristics are emerging in very small towns centres and tend to redefine their role.

Keywords: Very small town, rurality, ageing, social change, morphological change.

***Las mutaciones socio-espaciales de las ciudades muy pequeñas en el medio rural:
El caso del Pays de Caux, Francia (1960-2020)***

Ideas clave:

1. Las ciudades muy pequeñas han experimentado procesos estructurales que ponen en tensión sus funciones históricas.
2. En el Pays de Caux (Francia), dichas ciudades han perdido sus características socio-espaciales históricas.
3. Las sobrerrepresentaciones de poblaciones jubiladas y pobres emergen en los centros de dichas ciudades.
4. Descuidadas por la literatura académica, es el momento de ponerlas en las agendas.

Resumen: En Europa, el medio rural se estructura en torno a ciudades muy pequeñas (Servillo et al., 2014) que desempeñan históricamente una función de abastecimiento en bienes y servicios para la población local. Estas centralidades rurales, poco estudiadas, padecen desde hace varias décadas procesos estructurales que ponen en tensión su función histórica en medios rurales y plantean dudas sobre su obsolescencia. Este artículo cuestiona esta potencial obsolescencia centrándose en la evolución de las características socio-espaciales de ciudades muy pequeñas desde los años 1960 mediante el estudio de la región rural del Pays de Caux (Normandía, al noroeste de Francia). Para ello, hemos desarrollado una metodología híbrida que entrelaza el análisis de fotografías aéreas antiguas, censos históricos y entrevistas a actores locales.

Tres resultados principales sobresalen de este trabajo. En primer lugar, la distinción morfológica e histórica que diferenciaba ciudades muy pequeñas de pueblos es actualmente mucho más difícil de establecer. En segundo lugar, la composición social de la población activa de dichas ciudades, históricamente caracterizadas por una sobrerrepresentación de las categorías sociales superiores, se asemeja hoy en día a la de los pueblos. Finalmente, nuevas características socio-espaciales aparecen en sus centros, hecho que permite reconsiderar la función de estas centralidades rurales.

Palabras clave: Ciudades muy pequeñas, ruralidad, envejecimiento, cambio social, transformación morfológica.

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1. Introduction

Europe is characterised by a high density of cities and towns (Bourne *et al.*, 1984; Pumain & Saint-Julien, 1996), which include numerous simple rural centres. Termed "very small towns" in the European ESPON Reports (Servillo *et al.*, 2014), these rural centres provide facilities, goods and services to their surrounding local areas, and thus structure the European countryside. In France, along with small towns, very small towns (called bourgs) form the urban base (Braudel, 1986; Pinol, 1997). Historically, their centrality and their economic and socio-spatial characteristics distinguish them from villages.

In France and in Europe, very small towns have been facing series of structural processes for several decades, straining their historical role. Deagrarianisation and deindustrialisation have weakened their role as centres of trade in farm produce and non-food goods. In some cases, the closure of factories, also lead to weaken them as centres of production (Jousseume 1998; Powe, 2018). More broadly, the global restructuring of the economy deeply challenged very small towns. The selective effect of globalisation and metropolisation had negative impacts (Cunningham & Fol, 2009; Mayer & Knox, 2010), leading some authors in Germany to describe many remote small towns as victims of a "peripherisation" process (Keim, 2006; Wirth *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, very small towns also faced space-time contraction. Indeed, the development of mobility (Kaufmann, 2008) tends to "short-circuit" them in favour of bigger

cities (Bretagnolle, 2009). At the same time, the rise of peripheral shopping centres also led to a devitalisation of towns' shopping centres (Powe & Hart, 2008; Phillips & Swaffin-Smith, 2004, Paddison & Calderwood, 2007). Finally, centralisation policies targeting public services (Taulelle, 2012; Baudet-Michel *et al.*, 2019) deprived very small towns of local public institutions, especially in France. All these processes led some authors to study the current role of rural service centres in rural areas (Deller *et al.*, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2008), and to raise the question of their potential "obsolescence" (Estèbe, 2018).

In some parts of France, very small towns nonetheless experience significant demographic growth (Jousseau & Talandier, 2016a; Royoux, 2018). Along with villages and part of the European countryside, they benefit from urban sprawl and global rural residential attractiveness (Lewis, 2000; Hirczak *et al.*, 2011). This dynamic reflects the anchorage of very small towns in rural areas, profoundly affected by socio-economic reconfigurations (Ilbery, 2014; Entrena-Duran, 2015).

In the light of the diverse structural processes mentioned above, this paper aims to understand the current role of very small towns by questioning their potential obsolescence. We will focus on their socio-spatial evolutions and study the extent to which very small towns have lost their historical identity and functions.

This paper also aims at expanding the academic body of knowledge about very small towns. Despite their central historical role and their prevalence in rural areas, they have so far been neglected by both the academic literature and public policies. Indeed, these last decades major studies mostly paid attention to metropolitan areas (Connolly, 2008). However, small and medium-sized cities currently seem to benefit from a renewed interest (Bell & Jaynes, 2009; Bretagnolle *et al.*, 2019). They are for example at the core of European ESPON programs (Servillo *et al.*, 2014) and considered as a priority theme in the European Urban Agenda that is currently being developed. As increasing attention is being dedicated to the bottom of the urban hierarchy, very small towns are still not included in these programs, when it could be timely to put them in the academic and public policies agendas.

2. Methodology

2.1. How to define very small towns?

The limited number of studies on very small towns makes the establishment of criteria to define them difficult. Small towns, on the other hand, have been the focal point of a significant body of academic literature which mostly define them by their population. Different thresholds have been used by researchers, depending on the country. Table 1 summarises the population thresholds currently in place to define small towns.

Table 1.
Population thresholds defining small towns in different countries

| United Kingdom | United States | Germany | France | European Union |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| From 3,000 to 20,000 inhabitants (Powe & Hart, 2017) | Under 10,000 (Daniels et al., 1988; Besser, 2009) or 50,000 inhabitants (Brennan et al., 2005) | From 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants (Powe & Hart, 2017) | From 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants (Kayser, 1972, Laborie, 1997) | From 5,000 to 25,000 inhabitants (Servillo et al., 2014) or from 10,000 to 50,000 inhabitants (Mayer & Knox, 2010; Bretagnolle et al., 2019) |

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Attempts to define very small towns with population thresholds could be articulated in line with these criteria. From a European perspective, the TOWN project, for instance, defined very small towns as settlements of less than 5,000 inhabitants, with a population density greater than 300 inhabitants per km² (Servillo *et al.*, 2014). In France, the lower threshold for defining a small town is also 5,000 inhabitants. In this

paper and conforming to the TOWN project's and the French literature, we will thus consider 5,000 inhabitants as the upper threshold for defining very small towns.

However, the sole use of population thresholds to define very small towns is unsatisfactory. Indeed, as with small towns, this approach can be discussed because of its arbitrariness (Laborie, 1997; Édouard, 2012). Furthermore, very small towns are characterised by their economic centrality (Christaller, 1933) rather than their size. It is in fact impossible to differentiate them from villages using only population thresholds. In France, their population can thus be similar to that of big villages (Roncayolo, 1987). In this study, two additional functional criteria were consequently selected to define very small towns. First, very small towns must be the central municipality of a *bassin de vie*¹. Second, they must have a small supermarket and/or a large supermarket, a secondary school and/or a nursing home. This way to define very small towns in terms of their commercial and services functions is based on a functional definition of France's urban hierarchy proposed by Jousseau and Talandier (2016b). In contrast, small towns are characterised by the presence of a high school, a large supermarket, a maternity home and/or a short-stay hospital and villages by the lack of commercial and service function or often by the sole presence of an elementary school and a bakery. These two criteria, combined with the population upper threshold mentioned earlier (5,000 inhabitants), enable us to reveal the specific centrality of very small towns and to identify them in Pays de Caux.

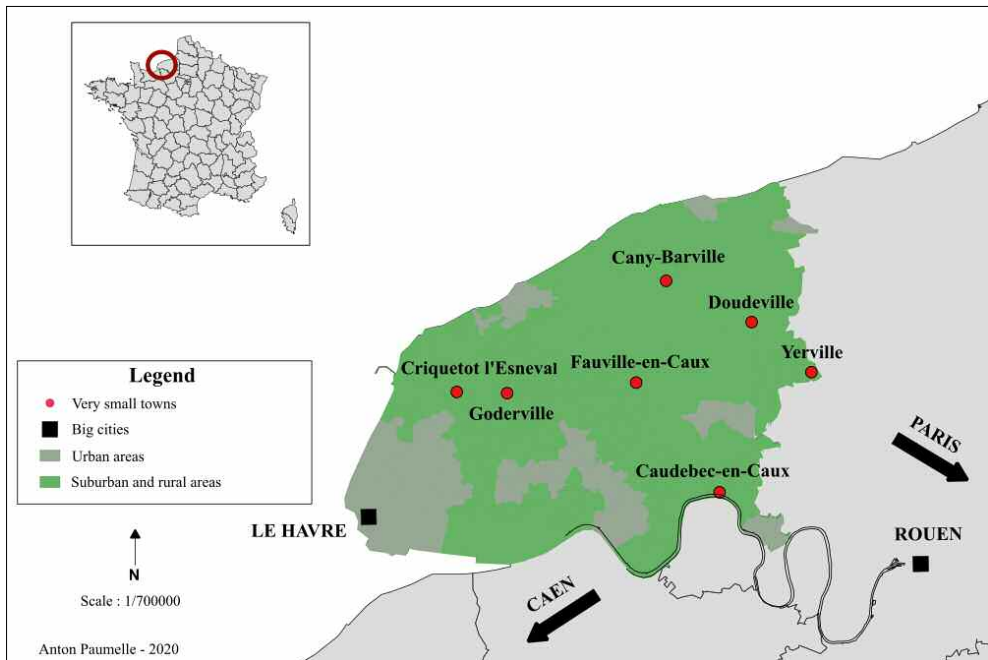
2.2 A representative case of study: Pays de Caux

Pays de Caux, a region of the Seine-Maritime department (Normandy, North-West of France), was chosen as our fieldwork for this study. Its geographic position located outside of both metropolitan and rural remote areas is illustrative of most of French rural areas (Hilal *et al.*, 2011). One of its characteristics is its high population density. Indeed, the Seine-Maritime density is 200 inhabitants/km², which is twice the French average (103 inhabitants/km² in 2017). As shown in Figure 1, we identified seven very small towns in this region, which set up a dense network (Criquetot l'Esneval, Doudeville, Yerville, Goderville, Fauville en Caux, Bacqueville en Caux and

1• The *bassin de vie* terminology comes from a French territorial division by INSEE, which seeks to identify "the smallest territory on which the inhabitants have access to the most common equipments and services". In 2012, there were 1,664.

Cany-Barville). In Figure 1, urban areas are formed by municipalities and groups of municipalities including continuous built-up, define by INSEE, and a minimum population threshold of 5,000 inhabitants. Rural areas are defined by municipalities which do not meet these criteria.

Figure 1.
Very small towns in Pays de Caux



The Pays de Caux countryside was historically driven by a prosperous agriculture and strong local industries. However, much like many European rural areas, it has since suffered from the joint effects of deagrarianisation and deindustrialisation. Because of its proximity to the Parisian urban area (180-200 km), Pays de Caux is also a territory with a strong residential attractivity, and thus subjected to deep socio-economic mutations. Finally, the difficulties encountered by a great number of urban agglomerations in Pays de Caux (Paumelle, 2019) give us the opportunity to fully question the processes endangering very small towns.

2.3. Hybrids methods

Our research began with a systematic collection of socio-demographic municipal databases (LAU2) proposed by the national census board, i.e. l'INSEE². As very small towns are historically characterised by their built environment, we supplemented it with a study of very small towns and villages' morphological transformations. This analysis was done through a study of aerial photographs from 1955 along with a digitised database of constructions in Pays de Caux in 2013³. With the help of GIS technology, we displayed residential and commercial buildings in order to focus on those two historical functions for very small towns⁴. Finally, interviews were undertaken with a range of decision-makers and local actors to complete our observations. Conducted in the canton of Goderville in 2018, it includes 52 short semi-structured interviews and 12 long semi-structured interviews with inhabitants, real-estate professionals, shop-owners, and local decision-makers.

3. Results

3.1. The loss of a historical identity

3.1.1. Compared to villages, a disappearance of social specificity

French very small towns traditionally concentrated a high proportion of upper middle-class in the countryside (Jousseume, 1998). Historically, notaries, doctors, big merchants and the rural economic elites could be found there, drawn by very small towns' centrality (Braudel, 1986; Frémont, 1977). These populations were deeply lin-

2. *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*, [National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies].

3. The aerial photographs and the digitised data base were made available by IGN (*Institut national de l'information géographique et forestière*).

4. The map of the built environment comes from the « BD TOPO » from Seine Maritime Departement in 2013, and was produced by IGN. When using GIS, it is possible to use options to display only some types of buildings.

ked to the very small town's identity and sometimes even played a part in defining it (Roncayolo, 1987).

Table 2 compares the social composition of very small towns in Pays de Caux in 1968 and 2014, to that of villages. 1968 was chosen because it approximatively marks the end of the rural depopulation in this region and the beginning of strong socio-demographic mutations linked to the progressive residential attractiveness of rural areas and to the development of mobilities.

Table 2.
Social evolution of labour force in very small towns and villages

| Socio-economic classification of labour force (25-54 years) | | Farmers | Craftsmen, shopkeepers and business owners | Managers and professionals | Intermediate occupations | Employees | Workers |
|---|------------------|---------|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|---------|
| 1968 | Very small towns | 9.8 % | 22.4 % | 5.4 % | 11.2 % | 16.1 % | 35.1 % |
| | Villages | 30.8 % | 9.2 % | 1.0 % | 6.5 % | 9.2 % | 43.4 % |
| 2014 | Very small towns | 1.0 % | 5.6 % | 8.8 % | 23.7 % | 34.5 % | 26.4 % |
| | Villages | 2.0 % | 5.6 % | 9.4 % | 27.5 % | 27.9 % | 27.5 % |

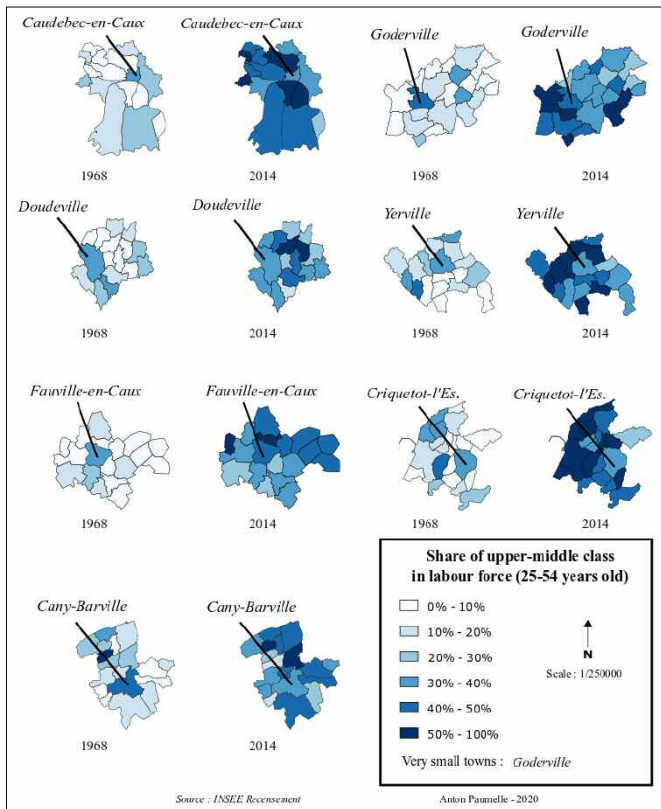
Villages: 230 units; Very small towns: 7 units. Source: INSEE. Paumelle - 2020

Table 2 shows a uniformisation of the social composition between very small towns and villages through time. As described in academic literature, very small towns' social composition was clearly different from that of villages in Pays de Caux in 1968. The share of farmer in labour force was low and the upper-middle class were overrepresented, which contrasted with villages population. For instance, 5.4 % of very small towns' labour force were managers and professionals, whereas they only represented 1 % of the villages' labour force. Craftsmen, shopkeepers and business owners accounted for 25 % of the population in very small towns, and only 10 % in villages. However, in just a few decades, those historical characteristics disappeared. Table 2 shows that in 2014, the social compositions of villages and very small towns uniformised: managers, professionals, craftsmen, shopkeepers and business owners can be found in virtually the same amount in both categories of settlements. Nowadays, it is even working class such as employees that are overrepresented in very small towns compared to villages.

3.1.2. A spatial reversal within cantons

The cantons are a French administrative division which, in rural areas, groups together several villages and, very often, a very small town. Amongst socio-economic categories, we focus on the distribution of the upper middle class (managers and professionals, craftsmen, shopkeepers and business owners, intermediate occupations), historically overrepresented in very small towns. They correspond to columns two, free and four of the Table 2. The proportion of this population amidst the overall labour force was represented in 1968 and in 2014 at the scale of the cantons.

Figure 2.
Upper-middle class in the cantons of Pays de Caux in 1968 and 2014



The different maps of Figure 2 reveal a spatial reversal of upper-middle class concentration in cantons. In 1968, they were clearly concentrated in very small towns, but in 2014 they appear scattered in the whole rural municipalities, with even a slight preference for villages. Figure 2 thus shows the link between centrality and upper middle-class concentration in 1968, and its disappearance. The overall increase in upper middle-class erased this historic heritage. The case of the canton of Caudebec-en-Caux is a good illustration of this process. In 1968, the very small town stands out thanks to the concentration of the upper-middle class in its labour force, but in 2014, it is unperceivable. Nowadays, it is one of the municipalities in its canton with the lesser part of upper middle class amidst its labour force.

The progressive residential attractivity experienced by the Pays de Caux's rural areas since the 1960s seems to have been accompanied by a change in settlement motivations of households from the different social groups. More precisely, the relative loss of centrality of very small towns, along with the development of mobilities seem to have led to the disappearance of very small towns historical social identity. They are no longer characterised by an overrepresentation of upper middle-class. In contrast, an undifferentiation between very small towns and villages emerged in residential choices of the labour force.

3.1.3. A conjoint loss of morphological identity

The identity of a settlement is intimately linked to its morphology (Roncayolo, 2002). In France, very small towns are historically characterised by their built environment. For instance, they are recognisable with their market square, shopping streets and characteristic houses. Figure 3 distinguishes the old built environment, before 1955, and the one that came after. Three municipalities were studied in Pays de Caux, two very small towns (Goderville and Fauville en Caux), and one village to compare them to (Saint-Sauveur d'Emalleville).

Figure 3.
Morphological evolutions of rural settlements in Pays de Caux

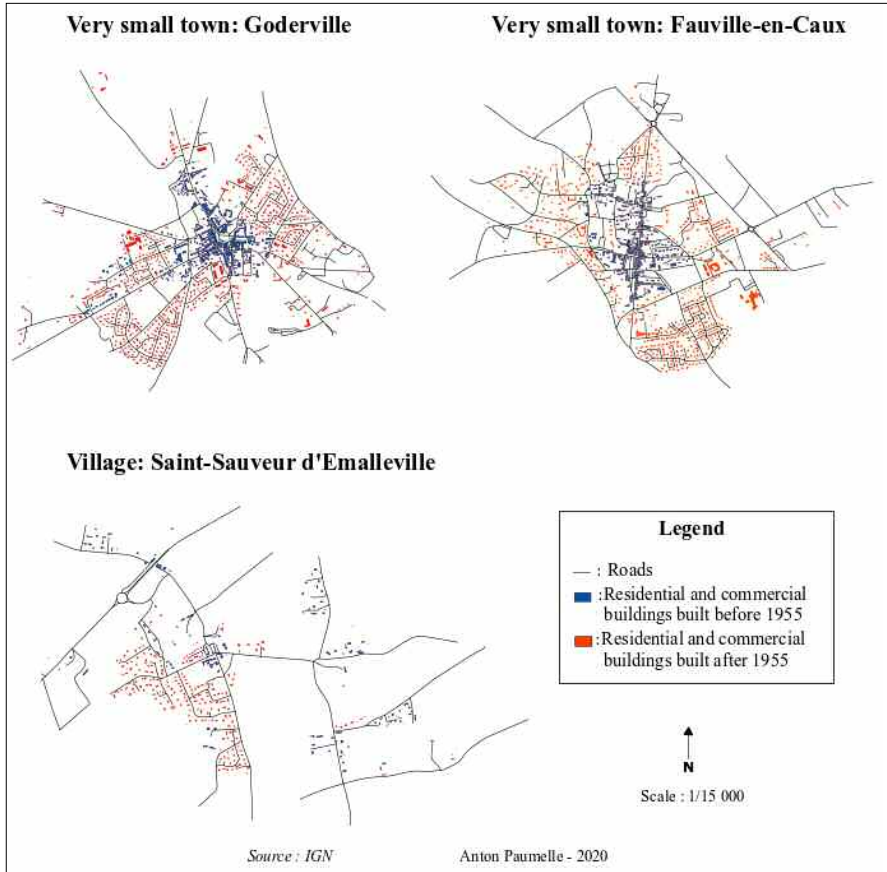


Figure 3 reveals an important mutation of very small towns and villages' built environments since the 1950s with a loss of morphological identity for very small towns. Before 1955, very small towns had, for the major part, a contiguous built environment concentrated along the main roads, the market square and the church. Their dense agglomeration, mostly based on trade, distinguished them from villages. Moreover, we notice the presence of some ancient individual houses, which stood apart from the centre. They were mainly farmhouses, houses linked to small industries, and bourgeois houses. In contrast, in the small municipality of Saint-Sauveur

d'Emalleville, a major part of the houses was grouped in scattered hamlets. The centre of the village consisted of several contiguous houses with a garden. There was no urban agglomeration.

A few decades later, these characteristics are no longer accurate. After 1955, a deep change in the morphology of very small towns and villages can be witnessed. Constructions built after 1955 differ from the ones before. In very small towns, the most recent areas were constructed far from the centre and the main roads. For the most part, they are individual houses of one or two floors with a garden. The development of very small towns is homogeneous, planned, and secondary roads were constructed to serve those new residential areas. Villages followed the same morphological evolution. Saint-Sauveur d'Emalleville witnessed a major rise in residential construction, identical to that of Fauville-en-Caux and Goderville.

The market square and the shopping streets of very small towns centres contrast with the new residential alleyways only used for mobility. Much like very small towns' historical social characteristics, Figure 3 reveals a process of rising undifferentiation between very small towns and villages.

3.2 Current socio-spatial characteristics: signs of devitalisation and population ageing

Beyond the loss of historical identities, our research also brings to light new socio-spatial characteristics which are emerging in the very small towns centres.

3.2.1. In very small towns centres: signs of devitalisation

The evolution of very small towns centres symbolises some of the difficulties encountered by very small towns in the last decades. The centres, which used to be at the core of rural life, are now facing different forms of devitalisation in Pays de Caux. Their residential function is threatened by the development of recent residential areas and their commercial function is undermined by the development of mobilities and peripheral shopping centres. In Goderville, these negative dynamics can best be seen by looking at the state of the old built environment.

Figure 4.
Old buildings in a very small town centre



Picture 1 - Rue de la poste, Goderville, 2018, by Paumelle



Picture 2 - Rue Jean Prévost, Goderville, 2018, by Paumelle

These pictures were taken in 2018 in two of Goderville's main streets. It reflects the state of some of the old buildings in the very small towns centre. The building on the second picture is composed of several vacant dwellings, all in poor conditions. When asked about the state of vacancy in Goderville's old centre, the deputy mayor mentioned over a hundred of unoccupied housing units. For local actors, the lack of attractiveness is the main reason explaining the high vacancy rates of very small towns' centres. Indeed, this housing market mainly consists of small dwellings with no garden and which suffer from a lack of rehabilitation. Despite a significant housing demand in Goderville, these dwellings seem unsuitable.

The difficulties encountered by the very small town centre are not solely observable by the state of its old buildings. Through our fieldwork, we also noticed the lack of participation to events which used to be at the heart of rural social life, such as the weekly market or the Sunday Mass. Many respondents also noticed that the number of visitors to the shops has fallen in the last decades. Local and national decision-makers came to the same findings. In Goderville and in other very small towns from Pays de Caux, a town planning agency was asked to help "revitalise" centres. According to the mayor of Goderville, this is a way to avoid the structural "desertification" of his town centre. At the French scale, a nationwide program named

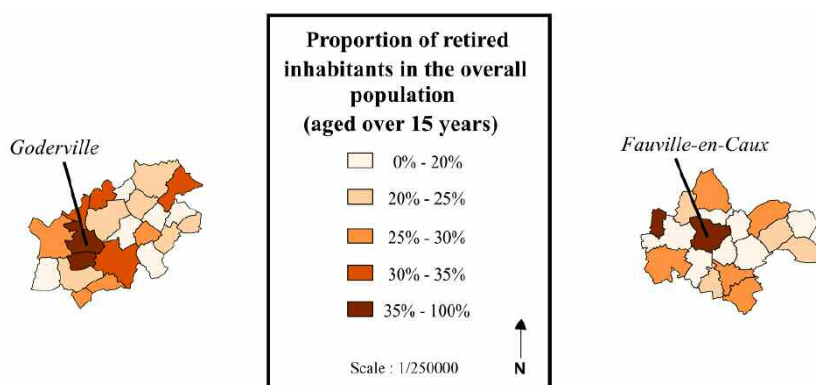
"Redynamisons nos centres-bourgs" [Let's revitalise our very small towns' centres] came through in 2014 to fight against the devitalisation of very small towns.

From a social perspective, the devitalisation of very small towns centres comes along with a concentration of poor population that emerged with the interviews. In Goderville, to justify their residential choice, some inhabitants of the centre mentioned a temporary situation or financial difficulties. The low rents of unpopular small collective buildings and high rate of social housings could explain this observation. Thus, in contrast to their historical social composition, very small towns centres now seem to concentrate a population partly characterised by their precarity. This current social specialisation observed in Pays de Caux is also described by rural sociologists in other French rural areas (Coquard, 2019; Mischi *et al.*, 2016).

3.2.2. Towards a new specialisation: the concentration of retirees

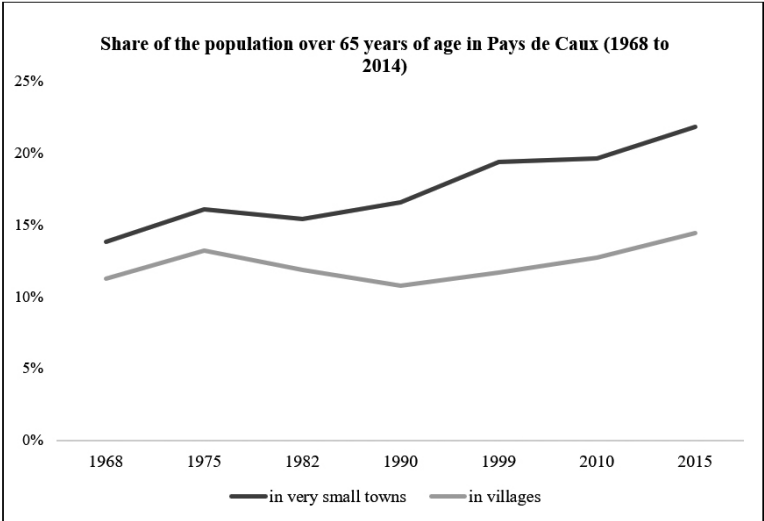
Our fieldwork also highlights a concentration of elderly population in very small towns centres. Figure 5 presents the proportion of retired persons in the overall population aged over 15 years in two illustrative cantons. The different maps displayed demonstrate a clear concentration of retirees in very small towns rather than in villages. In these two cases of study, the highest share of retirees in the population is in very small towns. Thus, in Fauville-en-Caux and Goderville more than 35 % of the inhabitants, aged over 15 years, are retirees. In several surrounding villages, this rate is only around 15 %.

Figure 5.
Localisation of retired population in two illustrative cantons (2014)



The concentration of retirees in very small towns is a dynamic process. Figure 6 presents the share of the population over 65 years of age in very small towns and villages of Pays de Caux since 1968.

Figure 6.
The ageing population in Pays de Caux: a gradual distinction between villages and very small towns since 1968



Source : INSEE

Paumelle - 2020

This graph confirms previous results and offers a historical perspective. First, it shows that in Pays de Caux the share of the population over 65 years has been increasing in very small towns since 1968. This process is particularly significant between 1982 and 2015 (+ seven percentage points). Second, it highlights a new distinction between the population of very small towns and villages. Indeed, the difference between the share of people over 65 years living in very small towns and villages has been increasing since 1968. Whereas in 1968 there was only a two-percentage points difference between villages and very small towns (11 % and 14 %), in 2015 this difference is about eight points (14 % and 22 %). Very small towns seem thus to be particularly attractive to elderly populations in Pays de Caux.

A series of factors explain this trend. Firstly, direct access to shops and services appears to be a fundamental element. Affected by a gradual reduction of their mobility, elderly populations look for a home close to essential food shops (bakery, butcher's shop, etc.), and health-related shops and services, such as pharmacies. Following the same logic, the close presence of hairdressers, banks, and of a medical centre are also valuable for this populations. Secondly, very small towns offer collective housings which meet the housing demand of some of elderly populations. According to the interviewed real estate agents, many of the elderly wish to stay in rural areas without having to take care of an individual plot. However, the housing must be adapted to this type of population, which is not always the case, especially in the old buildings. Finally, very small towns offer more opportunities for the elderly population to socialise than villages. Indeed, the very small town centre is still a central meeting place for this population. Moreover, the concentration of associations with a high number of members, such as the *Amicale des anciens* [Retired People's Club], or the local Veteran Association attracts elderly peoples, who may otherwise be isolated.

The increasing specialisation of the Pays de Caux' very small towns towards the elderly population can also be seen in their built development. Goderville, along with other very small towns, is currently planning the construction or the expansion of nursing homes. For the same reasons, the rehabilitation of some of the town centre's housing stock is also being considered. In conjunction with the evolution of the housing stock, the growing development of health-related businesses can be observed within the commercial landscape of the very small town centre. In Goderville, walkways were also lowered to facilitate the daily journeys of people using walkers. Thus, from a morphological perspective, the very small towns' specialisation towards elderly people is rendered visible.

4. *Discussion*

The different approaches used in this study lead to several results enlightening our issue about the potential obsolescence of very small towns.

First, the study of very small towns' social evolutions precisely shows the loss of some of their historical specificities. Indeed, the composition of very small towns'

and villages' labour force – different in the 1960s due to an overrepresentation of the upper-middle class in very small towns – are now virtually similar. From a morphological perspective, the sprawl of residential areas blurred the difference between the built environment of very small towns and villages. Along with this progressive uniformisation, during our fieldwork we observed signs of devitalisation in very small towns historical centres, symbolising an increasing fragility of their historical identity. Since the 1960s, the development of mobility (Kaufmann, 2008) and the socio-economic reconfigurations of rural areas (Ilbery, 2014; Entrena-Duran, 2015), amongst other structural process, strained some of their historical role. In Pays de Caux, we demonstrate that very small towns went from being a central place for local rural life, with a distinctive population and built environment, to a more anonymous anchor point.

Nonetheless, our analysis allows us to qualify the idea of the obsolescence of very small towns. Indeed, it also brings to light an overrepresentation of retired inhabitants, which contribute to partly redefine the socio-spatial characteristics of very small towns. The concentration of retirees appears as a new way to distinguish very small towns from villages in rural areas. Emerging mainly since the 1980s, the ageing of very small towns in Pays de Caux seems to be more and more significant. Often seen as a sign of decline by local actors, it also participates to maintain the very small towns' role of providing facilities, goods, and services to their surrounding villages. As explained by several authors (Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Vollet *et al.*, 2013), retirees are active in rural communities and stimulate the demand of goods and services. Moreover, they could make collective housings attractive again in very small towns centre. Therefore, they could also be seen as economic and social opportunities for very small towns centres facing devitalisation.

To conclude, in Pays de Caux, very small towns lost some of their historical characteristics and their centres experience signs of devitalisation. However, by welcoming retired inhabitants, a new socio-spatial characteristic is emerging, which could participate to avoid their disappearance as towns, and redefine their role.

These findings call for additional studies. A national or international study including the diversity of rural areas would be relevant to extend our conclusions. In France, Pistre (2012) considers, for instance, six different types of countryside based on socio-demographic criteria. Pays de Caux is characterised by his proximity to a metropolitan area (Paris), his high population density and his economic difficulties caused by deindustrialisation. It could be valuable to extend our research to other types of rural areas like remote or metropolitan ones. Furthermore, in Europe, numerous rural regions share the same specificities than Pays de Caux (Gourdon *et al.*, 2019). In the United Kingdom, for instance, the rural areas of the North West admi-

nistrative region are highly populated, close to metropolitan areas (Liverpool and Manchester) and facing deindustrialisation. Comparison with this region could complete our findings. Furthermore, our results about the ageing of very small towns suggest, more especially, additional academic works. As a part of a PhD, we are conducting research to report on the ageing of very small towns in other rural fieldworks and to clarify the role played by retired population in social and economic development of these rural centres. Initial results show for instance that the ageing of very small towns is a structural process present throughout France, which is even more important in some remote rural areas than in Pays de Caux.

Finally, looking beyond the question of their possible obsolescence, several contemporary issues show the necessity to further study very small towns in France and Europe and place them on the agenda, as were small towns and medium cities in the last few years. The concentration of poor and retired populations previously highlighted leads us to see very small towns as at the core of crucial societies' stakes. Indeed, the ageing of populations is one of Europe's major demographic challenge for the next decades, particularly in rural areas (Maclaren *et al.*, 2019). This global phenomenon requires an appropriate "territorial thinking" for rural areas, and offers strong research opportunities (Stockdale, 2011). Furthermore, precarity is another major societal challenge. It is widely present in rural areas (Hochedez & Mialocq, 2015), but more diffuse and less visible than in urban spaces (Boulineau & Bonerandi-Richard, 2014). In that regard, more investment by public policies towards very small towns could be valuable. Finally, the growing global environmental constraints on mobility could lead public policies to a gradual promotion of small local rural centres with a collective residential housing stock.

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