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Theme 1

RURAL MOBILITIES AND MEANINGS OF THE RURAL. LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

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Social representations of the countryside in a world of mobilities

Local governments and rural institutions, rural stakeholders and policy makers as well as rural researchers address nowadays a much more complex reality than imagined just a few decades ago. If the classical rural studies analysed the immobility of peasant world or its transformation through the process of urban-industrial modernization, nowadays we explore a new kind of governance of rural hybridizations and mobilities (exurban residential sprawl, international flows of labour, return migrations, residential tourism, rural second homes). As some authors have pointed out increasingly unexpected groups appear in unexpected places (Williams, 2009) and migration to rural areas has become a key subject to understand the globalization process itself (Milbourne, 2007; Bell and Osti, 2010; Kasimis et al. 2010; Oliva, 2010; Carmo and Hedberg, 2011; Camarero et al., 2011; Halfacree and Rivera, 2011).

Related to all these mobilities, a large array of rural representations underlie. From the rich imaginary about *rural idyll* that inspire certain residential strategies to the meanings marketed by the global tourism industry (Figueiredo and Raschi, 2013). Including the deeper senses of place linked to ontological security (Giddens, 1990) and the ideologies about the *return to the nature* and narratives for *selling places* (Burgues, 1982). Some of these representations were diffused under the flourishing of the new *economies of signs and places* (Lash and Urry, 1994) that characterized the last turn of the century. For example, those related to a kind of

generic rurality replicated elsewhere (Oliva and Camarero, 2013). But other rural meanings are deeply rooted in the everyday experience of groups living these transformations and have to be studied by fieldwork research in order to understand their changing role in social strategies and practices.

Connecting the “sense of the epoch” with personal experiences

This paper deals with the meanings of the rural underlying these last mobilities by exploring them in different sociological profiles (neorurals, commuters, young locals, new residents, returnees, labour immigrants, secondary home owners, retired) interviewed in the fieldworks developed under the framework of a three-year research project funded by the Spanish Plan of I+d (CSO2012-37540). To carry out the analysis we consider thirty in-depth interviews to informants selected according to their family characteristics, residential biographies and labour strategies. All of them have been conducted in two rural areas analysed as cases study representatives of the peri-urban rurality (Gran Vega region in Seville) and rural mountain areas (East Navarran Pyrennees).

As noted by C.W. Mills (1959) in his well-known reflection on the utility of Sociology, this science should explain how biographical experiences connect with structural processes of social change. Our working hypothesis is that to understand the changes in the meanings of the rural we have to explore this connection. The *new mobilities* paradigm theorized by Urry (2006) provides an explanation of the “sense of the epoch”. That is, about some of the main processes involved in the rural restructuring since the last decades of twentieth century. Our fieldwork research illustrates the role that different meanings of the rural play in day life projects and social experiences of concrete groups of rural residents.

Changing meanings of the rural and rural hybridizations

The cultural-ideological reconfiguration of postmodernity (Harvey, 1989) could be seen as a major cause of the increasing revalorisation of the rural at the end of the last century (Oliva, 1999). Since then we have witnessed a continuous diversification of their meanings and, as a result, a multiplication of rural resources (Perkins, 2006) provided by the commodification of all of them (heritage, landscape, identity). This variety of marketed meanings involves a specialization of the territories to fit the different *gazes* of the *mobilities* they attract (for

example, leisure or sport tourism) (Urry, 1990; Figueiredo and Raschi, 2011). However, most of them refer the traditional dichotomic representations of the urban *versus* the urban.

The *new mobilities*, including international migration and long distance commuting, are not only changing the sociological composition of rural residents, they also appear to disrupt the old senses of the analytical categories of the urban and the countryside, the global and the local, residence and mobility, gradually turning some of them into a kind of *decentered* categories (Lash, 1990; Bauman, 2000). Furthermore, the information and communication technologies and private automobility are completely changing the rural life modes and habits (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Camarero, Cruz and Oliva, 2014). For example, our research found a wide rural hybridization with global and metropolitan dynamics, and allowed us to identify a diversity of social strategies and actors that come together in these scenarios.

While tourism industry construct “rural experiences” and a “rural authenticity” to sell, local commuters, labour immigrants or returnees experience daily the rural hybridization. If the meanings of the rural marketed inspire the representations of a sort of “generic rurality”, rural groups seen its meanings connected with their vital projects and familiar resilience strategies. Our fieldwork illustrates many strategies combining family homes in the capital and in the village, both in a weekly pattern as in ways that change the main residence when family needs require it along the family cycle. It also identify local returnees working as professionals in public services and want to reconnect with family networks in a rural countryside transformed by means of transport and telecommunications. In all these strategies, the meanings of the rural are no longer construct from immobility of traditional societies but from the flexibility and accessibility.

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