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Theme 1

A TALE OF TWO RURALS: ANTONYMIC DISCOURSES ON THE PORTUGUESE COUNTRYSIDE¹

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Theoretical framework

As widely and well-documented, rural areas, particularly in peripheral and remote regions of Europe, underwent several socioeconomic transformations particularly after the 50's and in consequence of major changes in agriculture. These transformations are increasingly visible, especially in southern European societies and in Portugal, in the passage of rural areas as places of production to spaces of consumption (Figueiredo, 2013; Halfacree, 2006). Accompanying these changes major transformations seem to occur in the ways rural areas and rurality are socially represented. A threefold narrative on the rural seemed to emerge from such transformations: a pre-modernity or rural crisis discourse; a productivist perspective and a rural renaissance vision (Gamache *et al.* 2004; Halfacree, 2007, Murdoch,

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2003), although the last one – emphasising the consumable character of many rural areas nowadays, based on the traditional cultural values and natural resources – seems to be increasingly dominant in terms of social representations, particularly in the ‘global north’ (Cloke, 2006; Figueiredo, 2013; Halfacree, 2006, McCarthy, 2008).

A great part of the social representations on rural areas and on rurality, particularly the idyllic ones, have been widely influenced by mass media, cultural industries (e.g. cinema), tourism promotion and political discourse (Capela & Figueiredo, 2014; Fowler & Helfield, 2006; Pinto & Figueiredo, 2014) evidencing a complex myriad of sources and means acting on the construction of images and discourses about the rural. Despite the growing hegemonic idyllic views on the rural in Portugal, following the tendency of other (more central) European countries, a diversity of rural social representations seem to emerge mainly related to historical, social and cultural specificities and, undoubtedly to the place rural areas and rurality possess in national economy, society and cultural identity.

Methodology and findings

The administration of the questionnaire of the Rural Matters’ project was carried out in 31 Portuguese municipalities between November 2013 and October 2014. 1853 valid questionnaire responses were obtained via an online form or in person. The following task of the project involved interviewing 30 of the people who responded to the questionnaire in order to further assess their views on rural areas and their development, as well as their patterns of consumption of rural areas through foodstuffs and/or tourism. The aim was to interview people with different views on rural areas while following the sample distribution in terms of gender, age, qualifications, municipality and parish of residence – classifying parishes as “urban” or “rural”, following the INE² criteria, and the municipalities as level 1 (most urban), level 2 (semi-urban) and level 3 (predominantly rural)³.

To do so, a Hierarchical Cluster Analysis was performed on a preliminary sample (N=1839) before all the data was gathered, since the interviewees’ selection needed to be done before all 1853 questionnaires were applied. The main criterion for this analysis was the answer to the first question of the questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to describe rural

² Instituto Nacional de Estatística. [<https://www.ine.pt>]

³ Level 1 municipalities: population density higher than 500 inhabitants/km², total population higher than 40000 inhabitants; level 2: population density higher than 500 inhabitants/km² with total population lower than 40000 inhabitants + population density between 100 and 500 inhabitants km² with a total population higher than 25000 inhabitants; level 3: the remaining municipalities.

areas using three words. We aimed at identifying homogeneous groups of respondents based on the nine images of the rural explained below, using Ward’s method as the clustering method.

The words used by respondents to describe rural areas were categorized into nine different values: rural as *idyllic* (e.g.: beauty, purity, pleasant, authentic), rural as *anti-idyllic* (e.g.: boredom, insecurity, toughness, idle), rural as *disadvantaged* (e.g.: abandonment, neglect, unemployment, aging, depopulation, backwardness), rural as *space of well-being* (e.g.: nature, healthy, well-being, quiet, secure), rural as *place of development/transformation* (e.g.: diversity, transformation, development, productive, prosper), rural as *an inhabited place* (e.g.: people, characteristics of the inhabitants, names of places/villages/towns/regions), rural as *space for economic activities* (e.g.: agriculture, livestock, tourism, food, forest), rural as *landscape and place of resources and natural elements* (e.g.: water, animals, trees, landscape, green, mountains) and *rural as a physical space* (e.g.: houses and other buildings, landmarks, among other physical traits).

Table 1. Images of the rural conveyed by respondents

<i>Image of the rural</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Rural as idyllic	639	34.5
Rural as anti-idyllic	165	8.9
Rural as disadvantaged	869	46.9
Rural as space of well-being	630	34.0
Rural as place of development/transformation	221	11.9
Rural as an inhabited place	117	6.3
Rural as space for economic activities	536	28.9
Rural as landscape and place of resources and natural elements	392	21.2
Rural as a physical space	177	9.6

As seen in Table 1, the images conveyed by respondents vary widely. Almost half of the respondents, using any of the words they used to describe rural areas, have characterized them as disadvantaged (46.9%). On the other hand, 34.5% characterize them as idyllic and 34% as a space of well-being, both positive traits. The cluster analysis reveals five different, homogeneous groups of respondents regarding their views on rural areas:

Group 1 (N=563) tends to classify the rural as **anti-idyllic**, a **physical, inhabited** space where **economic activities** take place. The members of this group are generally older (50-64 and 65+ age groups) with lower qualifications and live predominantly in the most urban

(level 1) municipalities. They tend to associate rural areas with industry more often than other groups and are less prone to associate them with agriculture/forestry and leisure activities.

Group 2 (N=530) tends to classify the rural as **disadvantaged**. Most people who live in level 3 municipalities (the most rural) fit into this group. They are mostly aged 25-34 and have higher qualifications and they tend to associate agriculture/forestry/livestock farming and tourism as the main economic activities of rural areas.

Group 3 (N=174) sees the rural as **a place of development/transformation**. They usually have high qualifications, are aged 25-49 and associate rural areas with tourism and leisure activities.

Group 4 (N=286) respondents have an **idyllic** view of rural areas and see them as a **space of well-being**. Respondents of Group 4 are usually young (15-24 years old) with high qualifications

Finally, Group 5 (N=286) respondents see the rural as **landscape**, a **space for economic activities** and as a **place of resources and natural elements**. Albeit somewhat similar to group 1 in terms of the images conveyed by rural areas, respondents of Group 5 tend to be younger (mainly from the 15-24 age group) and associate rural areas with tourism and leisure, as well as agriculture, forestry and livestock production.

Due to time-related constraints and the lack of interest for collaboration by some of the potential interviewees, only 26 of the 30 interviews actually took place. Table 2 sums up the number of interviews done per group of respondents.

Table 2. Number of interviews per group

<i>Group</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>
1. Anti-idyllic	8
2. Disadvantaged	8
3. Place of development	3
4. Idyllic	4
5. Space for economic activities	3

In the interviews, in line with the results from the questionnaire, when asked to describe rural areas, the respondents (table 3) tend to classify them more often as disadvantaged (65.4%) and as a space of well-being (61.5%).

Table 3. Images of the rural conveyed in the interviews

<i>Image of the rural</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>% Interviewees</i>	<i>Number of references</i>
Rural as anti-idyllic	2	7.7%	4
Rural as space for economic activities	11	42.3%	19
Rural as a physical space	2	7.7%	2
Rural as an inhabited place	6	23.1%	8
Rural as landscape and place of resources and natural elements	10	38.5%	13
Rural as disadvantaged	17	65.4%	45
Rural as a space of well-being	16	61.5%	35
Rural as idyllic	11	42.3%	18
Rural as place of development/transformation	4	15.4%	5

Respondents generally characterized the rural in the interview the same way they did in the questionnaires: interviewees that belong to Groups 1 or 2 – the ones with a predominantly negative view of rural areas – characterized those more often as disadvantaged (correspondingly, 9 and 25 mentions); those who view the rural through more ‘positive’ lens (Groups 3 and 4) have more often characterized rural areas as a space of well-being (6 times among those who belong to Group 3 and 10 among Group 4 respondents). Group 5 respondents, who view the rural mainly as a space for economic activities, have, again, characterized rural areas as space for economic activities (Table 4).

Table 4. Number of mentions of each category per group of respondents

<i>Image of the rural / Group</i>	<i>1 - Anti-idyllic</i>	<i>2 - Disadvantaged</i>	<i>3 - Place of development</i>	<i>4 - Idyllic</i>	<i>5 - Space for economic activities</i>
Rural as anti-idyllic	0	3	0	1	0
Rural as space for economic activities	4	2	2	5	6
Rural as a physical space	0	1	0	0	1
Rural as an inhabited place	2	3	1	2	0
Rural as landscape and place of resources and natural elements	3	2	2	1	5
Rural as disadvantaged	9	25	2	5	4
Rural as a space of well-being	6	8	6	10	5
Rural as idyllic	4	5	3	4	2
Rural as place of development/transformation	0	2	2	1	0

The images conveyed by the interviewees seem even more contradictory when we look at who described the rural as disadvantaged and as a space of well-being. Nine out of the

sixteen respondents who have characterized the rural as a space of well-being also used words that characterize the rural as a disadvantaged space.

“There are two... Two opposites: on the one hand, depopulation, along with all the problems that come with it, human depopulation... On the other hand, quality of life. Two completely opposites... But, for me, that’s what characterizes them [rural areas].”

- SAB-O-11, female, 35-49, higher education, level 3 municipality, rural parish, Group 4.

The array of positive, negative and neutral aspects of rural and rurality conveyed by the people who were interviewed is sufficiently broad to conclude that there’s no hegemonic image of rural areas among them. In fact, most people express antipodal images of rural areas in their discourses: peaceful but isolated; beautiful but abandoned; healthy but away from health and other public services; a place full of good memories but out of job opportunities; full of potential but lacking investment; the perfect place to raise a family, but lacking schools and entertainment. Those *two rurals* overlap both in the minds of each respondent and in the bigger picture, and they fully demonstrate the complex reality of the Portuguese rural areas.

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