



From measuring the rural to the rural made to measure: social representations in perspective

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Abstract

The founding myth of rural sociology established an opposition between countryside and cities, classifying these notions as separate spatial and social realities. In the last two decades, an idyllic and divinized image of the rural has been constructed, especially in countries from the European Union. What reasons have conspired to foster this new appreciation of the rural? Is there a mutually accepted, recurring meaning between the way this new discourse about the rural is created in Europe and in other countries? This study aims to explore some of the contradictions associated with what the authors call the emergence of a rural “made to measure” in a context marked by post-productivism and the increasing weight of post-materialist values, taking social representations of the rural as the focus of the analysis.

Keywords: rural; social representations; new rurality; rural development.

It would be stating the obvious to say that since the late twentieth century, rural and sparsely urbanized areas have become the object of renewed appreciation. This phenomenon is quite widespread and acquires different formats and meanings in different regions of the world. In Europe there are powerful arguments behind this rediscovery, which is strongly linked to the resurgence of a discourse that includes terms widely used in the academic and political/institutional environments, such as the multifunctionality of the rural, the territorial focus, intersectoriality, or even what has been called “new rurality”, all of which has a strong influence on the design of proposals for development interventions for areas considered peripheral and/or underprivileged. The transition operated by the Common Agricultural Policy since the late 1990s and the emergence of instruments for interventions in sparsely urbanized or rural areas help shed quite a clear light on the nature and scope of this process.

In Latin America, this discussion is no less important, not least because it is associated with an intriguing new direction in the philosophy and action strategies of the main international cooperation agencies, which have taken on board the new guidelines formulated in Europe, especially the new discourse about development processes. The common element that unifies both contexts lies in the fact that the role rural areas can play as we face a crisis in our pattern of civilization, which has prevailed since the end of Second World War (Beck, 1992), is being reviewed, with deep impacts on the social order, demographics, economics and especially the environment. As a result of this spectrum of changes, different phenomena which were previously seen as belonging (or exclusive) to industrialized countries started to affect other countries in the world.

Even in the late twentieth century, Camarano and Abramovay (1999) announced a rising male-to-female ratio and ageing of Brazil’s rural areas, while other studies (Anjos, Caldas, 2005) found that these changes were most marked in the southernmost states of the country and that there was a clear trend for deagrarianization. Parallel to this, a higher proportion of the rural population was found to be pursuing activities that had little or nothing to do with agriculture. To analyze these phenomena would be to go beyond the scope of this study. The only reason we mention them is to demonstrate the sheer size of the challenges being faced today and their increasing similarity in other apparently different parts of the world.

That “rural” cannot be reduced to “agricultural” and that there is a rural “beyond production” (Maluf, Carneiro, 2003) has been at the heart of an intensive body of work headed in Brazil by the group led by Graziano da Silva (2001) with the “Rurban Project”. The implications of these studies are very well known. They have served to disseminate the end of the founding myth of rural sociology, which opposed countryside and city¹ and classified these notions as separate spatial and social realities. From a political and institutional point of view, these studies have served to renew the rhetoric of the work done by the Brazilian state in the sphere of development and public policy management. The recent creation of a Secretariat for Territorial Development, “citizenship territories”, “food security and local development consortia” and other strategies are just a few examples that demonstrate an evident, albeit yet-to-be consolidated, trend in government action.

But there are other issues worth highlighting in the context of the new approaches that have come together in the revival of the “rural” as an issue. Key amongst these is the influence exerted by geographers in the 1990s, who, above and beyond recognizing that industrial

society had not fully eliminated all the essential attributes of rurality, shouldered the mission of proposing new instruments and criteria to define, measure and compare it. The different criteria proposed for defining the rural emphasize the adoption of new classification systems.

“Brazil is less urban than it is thought to be” is the title of a study by José Eli da Veiga (2002) centered around his critique of the dominant normative bias in these approaches. There are certainly countless examples of similar studies of a clearly classificatory nature, such as those that indicate positive or negative net migration, describe changes and discontinuities in migratory flows, etc.

The plethora of adjectives (isolated rural, profound rural) used in studies (e.g. Kayser, 1990, 2000) bear witness to the unresolved nature of the debate. Indeed, the typology adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides three categories for regions – predominantly rural, significantly rural, and predominantly urban – which has helped shape thinking about the fate of the rural. Other terms have also been coined (agricultural rural, non-agricultural rural, predominantly agricultural, metropolitan rural, etc.) as new Brazilian official statistics have been published, aiming to break free from the limitations imposed by dichotomic schema. This discussion, important though it may be, also lies beyond the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting here that we are today faced with a double-edged transformation: a change in the object of study itself – the rural as an issue – and also in the way we see it. There are increasingly stronger signs of a new rurality which seeks to break free from the trammels of agrarianism and traditionalism, and which is apparently unrelated to the changes introduced on a global level (Aguilar Criado, 2007, p.147).

It is as part of this process that what we might call a “reinvention” and idealization of the rural as a social construct embedded in the historical moment experienced by contemporary society is emerging: a time that is converging towards the emergence of a rurality envisaged as a kind of “rural idyll” (Hervieu, 1995), reproducing the melancholic image of a past lost in the midst of the great sociocultural upheavals; a rural that “outsiders” see as an essential guardian of biodiversity and the wonders of the natural landscape; a rural that not only seeks to project itself outwards, but which yearns to heighten the desire of those keen to consume more than just its produce and a smattering of tangible goods.

Although this picture is particularly powerful in the European Union (EU), as we shall see, there can be no doubt that it also affects other latitudes, to a greater or lesser extent, including Brazil and other Latin American countries. What factors have conspired to conjure up this new appreciation of the rural? Is there a common denominator underpinning the way this new discourse about rurality is being constructed in Europe and other countries? What can we expect as an outcome of this orientation? How can one speak of a new rurality without conjuring up the features that sustain the social representations constructed by consumers in their apparent urge to experience traditions and singularities, to the detriment of standardization and convention?

Generally speaking, these are the issues that will underpin our reflections, which are guided by three main assumptions. The first is the understanding that the last two decades have seen a significant change in the social representations of the rural in developed countries, especially

in the EU, which is manifested in an equally decisive reformulation of the instruments for intervening in territorial development.

The second assumption is the recognition of the existence of an inherent duality in the perception of the rural as a specific kind of geographical space and as a social representation or “idealization”, to paraphrase Halfacree (1993). It is in this sense that we put forward our title – From measuring the rural to the rural made to measure – of this work. The present time, as we hope to show below, reflects the contradictions about the way society is reworking the image of the rural and constructing a new discourse about rurality.

The third assumption is the understanding that the “rural made to measure” is a corollary of a set of transformations across contemporary society which will be described in this study.

Below, we analyze the topic of social representations and the heuristic importance of this notion for understanding the processes to be addressed later, especially those that have influenced the changes in the social representations of the rural per se. We will then sketch out the construct we call “rural made to measure”.

Social representations

Representation is too broad and complex a topic to be analyzed fully in this section. Rather, what we intend to do is to reveal some of the issues that seem to us to be crucial if we want to make headway in our attempt to elucidate the questions raised earlier about the rural as social representation and the main implications arising from this debate.

It is in the founding work of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim's (1968) *The rules of sociological method*, written in 1895, that we find the first allusions to the issue of representation in the distinction drawn between “individual” and “collective” representations. However, as Duveen (2010, p.13) warns, the effort to raise sociology as an autonomous science led Durkheim to propose a radical separation between these two forms of representation, with the former falling into the field of psychology and the latter coming to constitute the object of sociology.

The first major contribution to the study of social representations comes with the seminal work by Serge Moscovici. His theoretical and epistemological approach transcends the boundaries of social psychology and is today incorporated into the realm of other humanities and fields of knowledge. Recognition of the links between this notion and Durkheim's sociology cannot shroud the fact that Moscovici diverges² from the original view of the French sociologist by understanding that he conceived of representations as stable forms of collective comprehension. Meanwhile, Moscovici sees social representations as a kind of collective creation, “in conditions of modernity, implying that under other conditions of social life the form of collective creation could also be different” (Duveen, 2010, p.16).

The dual statute of this concept, which is both assumed to be a phenomenon in itself and a singular theoretical frame of reference whose heuristic potential is indisputable for the study of the “world of ideas” and contemporary social processes, is often seen as complex. For the purposes of this article, what matters is that Moscovici was interested in the study of how and why people share knowledge, constitute a common reality, and

turn “ideas” into “practices”. In this sense, it is worth noting that social representations fit both functions perfectly:

a) First of all, they *conventionalize* objects, persons, and events we encounter. They give them a definitive form, they locate them in a given category and gradually put them as a model of a given type that is distinct and shared by a group of people... b) Secondly, representations are ‘prescriptive’, meaning that they are imposed on us with an irresistible force. This force is a combination of a structure that is present even before we start to think and a tradition which decrees what must be thought (Moscovici, 2010, p.34-36; emphasis in the original).

It is people and groups who are responsible for creating representations in the context of communication processes; these are not, therefore, molded by individuals in isolation. Meanwhile,

Once created, however, they take on a life of their own, circulate, meet, are attracted to, repelled by and give rise to new representations, while old representations die. As a consequence of this, for one to understand and explain a representation, one must start with the one or ones from which it was born (Moscovici, 2010, p.41).

Moscovici (1961, 2010) refers in his work to the proximity between language and social representation when he says that to know something is to speak of it. To speak of a “new rural” is far more than to predict a new discourse that legitimizes the role of funding agencies in the ambit of territories. Other discourses are brought into play to convey the details of this idea, from a simple pamphlet that shows the beauty and bucolic nature of far-flung places to a label attached to a foodstuff designed to show that it is possible to reconcile traditional tastes with the demands of modernity.

The allusions made to a range of transformations which supposedly illustrate the understanding that we are facing the death of old and the birth of new social representations about the rural are very eloquent. This seems clear in the idea of a supposed “rural renaissance” (Kayser, 1990), the “reinvention of the rural” (Gray, 2000) the “birth of another rurality” (Veiga, 2006), or the emergence of a “new rural” (Eikeland, 1999), to cite just a few examples that illustrate this change. But what factors and circumstances come together to make these new social representations of the rural possible? This is the task we shall turn our attention to in the next section.

The rural as social representation

“Who killed rural sociology?” is the thought-provoking title of a paper presented by Friedland to the United States Congress of Rural Sociology in 1978, which was only published as an article much later (2010). The fact is that this and other works explore the highways and byways of an unsettled debate which it is far from our intention to rekindle. Even so, since then the position taken by Newby (1980) clearly expresses the understanding of the majority of social scientists that the rural has no sociological meaning and that no sociological definition of the rural may be viewed as acceptable (Rye, 2006, p.420).

However, if as Gray (2000, p.30) said the rural does not represent a particular “geosocial” space, an alternative heuristic maneuver would be to see it as a practical form of language

about a type of “space-discourse” (Pratt, 1996), a “social representation” (Halfacree, 1993) or even a “grounded metaphor” (Creed, Ching, 1997). We agree with Rye’s (2006, p.409) position that the discussion about the way rurality is conceived reflects a new moment which began in the 1990s and which saw a veritable “cultural about-turn” in the humanities. In this process of change, the rural came to be seen as a subjectively constructed social phenomenon whose locus was far more in people’s minds than in a material or objective reality.

Gray’s (2000) study translates very clearly the transition operated by the Common Agricultural Policy, which has undoubtedly been the most important policy in the EU since it was first formulated in 1957. This interesting work analyzes the repeated “re-inventions” of the rural through four major phases that deserve to be described here, not least because they reflect specific historical circumstances experienced in the rural old world.

The first phase, as recorded by Gray, started in the late 1950s and early 1960s and consists of a stage when agriculture became the main instrument for the construction of community space in Europe. It was about forming an image of the rural that rejected a vague, indeterminate, national concept in favor of a different representation that was broader, formalized and publicly visible, constructed through what the author calls “improvised sociolinguistic practice”. Discourse and social representations are ultimately two sides of the same coin.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was supported by certain principles (free markets, free circulation of capital, labor and merchandise, community preference for agricultural produce, financial and budgetary solidarity), which reflected the member countries’ protectionist orientation for the farming sector. Despite the great disparity between the respective countries’ agriculture budgets, average farm size, degree of food self-sufficiency, and the importance of agriculture to their national accounts, there were two major similarities between the member States that became the pivot for a unified Europe when it came to defining levels of intervention in agriculture.

Firstly, these countries had already established their own mechanisms for protecting their farmers’ income, because the memory of the difficulties experienced during and after the Second World War was very much alive, feeding a desire to maintain self-sufficiency in food supply. The second reason for such strong intervention was the need to foster an image of a rural society that portrayed people and their way of life in the countryside with its cultural values, recognizing that rural interests were politically important to the member countries. In the document of what was then the European Economic Community, the rural was represented as a configuration that encompassed agriculture and rural space, with the former being seen as a synthesis concept that included nature and the values that permeate rural space. “Family farming and rural society” were the building blocks of the image forged by the CAP and simultaneously incorporated by the member countries (Gray, 2000, p.35).

The second phase described by Gray was when the rural was projected as a social representation, as a “location”, through certain discursive practices. With the aim of implementing mechanisms that preserved the founding concept of a rural centered around the constitutive elements of agriculture, family farming and rural society, there should be tangible places within the borders of Europe that reflected the geographical attributes of the landscape, social relations and family nature to be found there. The aim of conciliating social equity and economic efficiency was at the root of the major conflicts seen in the Common

Agricultural Policy in the 1970s. The programs which derived from it further aggravated the problem. These difficulties could be divided into the “agricultural problem” (Bowler, 1985, p.46-48) and the “rural problem” (Kearney, 1991, p.126).

The agricultural problem had to do with the general effect the economy had on the farming sector, especially the inverse correlation between increasing yields and declining demand for food by consumers. With the spread of green revolution technologies, farm yields grew vertiginously, far more quickly than consumer demand. This led to an unprecedented crisis amongst the CAP countries in a continent where scarcity of food had quickly flipped to overproduction. As Hervieu (1996, p.8) aptly put it, the CAP became the “victim of its own success”. There were also other problems to be overcome:

the choice of selling surpluses on the world markets seemed increasingly difficult and burdensome³ for the EEC because it would imply heavy subsidies on the part of the EAGGF, which assured farmers payment of the difference between the depressed international prices and domestic prices, which were normally higher. The prospect of new countries entering the European Community (Spain and Portugal in 1986) added new concerns, further exacerbating the real prospect of agricultural surpluses (Anjos, 2003, p.66-67).

The problem of surpluses and the decline in agricultural income were interrelated phenomena. In response, protectionist mechanisms started to be introduced, artificially creating a space where family farming and Europe’s rural society could flourish, at least economically (Gray, 2000, p.37).

But the solution to the problem of agricultural surpluses had to be brought about structurally by reducing planted areas, taking out of business those farms considered inefficient (i.e. “family-run”) so they could look for employment in other sectors.

The “rural problem” is a reflection of the mutual dependency of family smallholdings and rural society when faced with the structural adjustments imposed on the agricultural sector. However, what these measures did, especially the subsidies, was to effectively exacerbate the disparity between large modern farms and small family landholders who were fighting for survival and had until then represented the “iconic” image of European rural society.

While the CAP defined the community ambit as a single space, the rural development policies designed to attack the problems arising from the structural adjustments subdivided the land into 166 regions. The more underprivileged areas were defined as priority areas for the receipt of payments called “direct aid” (unconnected in any way to yields), which would offset their incapacity to respond to the hostile environment which was in fact mostly caused by the very instruments of the CAP. In the first and second phases of the policy, the idea was to foster an image that reflected the profound connections between agriculture and rural space in which the former was the bonding agent by *antonomasia*.

The third phase fostered a substantial change in social representations, in that the rural gained autonomy from agriculture. As this transformation took place, it would not be an overstatement to say that the rural became far more a place for “consumption” than actually for the “production” of agriculture. At the time, documents were published that clearly expressed this change of perspective:

Starting in 1988, the important study entitled *The future of the rural world* marked a decisive about-turn as a conceptual framework that would have a decisive impact on the course of the CAP. Its essence lay in its effective option to defend the 'development of the rural environment' instead of the repeated insistence on eminently agrarian content that had until then underpinned the European Community's approach (Anjos, 2003, p.69; emphasis in the original).

There was a veritable awakening as to the wealth of riches and diversity in the rural space, a new perception of the existence of the breadth of activities (trade, small and medium-sized factories, services, etc.) pursued in land that accounted for 80% of the EC, and where almost half the European population lived. It was agriculture that was pursued inside this rural space and society and not the other way around, a fact that implied a radical reversal of the social representations constructed in the previous stages of the policy. It was also admitted that the Common Agricultural Policy had been responsible not just for the decadence of many rural areas, but also for the environmental degradation arising from "productivism" fed by the fat subsidies granted to farmers since their introduction in the 1960s.

Two fundamental aspects of the new social representation of the rural were leisure and environmental preservation, even if the image of "agrarian fundamentalism" that had shadowed the trajectory of the CAP still remained alive and well (Hervieu, 1996, p.105). But if in the former case, rural spaces were seen as leisure and recreation destinations capable of lifting the spirits of the population at large, in the latter it was a matter of making every effort to strike a new ecological balance in Europe's rural spaces. The understanding that rural areas must be preserved, not just for farmers but also for the enjoyment of society as a whole, started to take root.

A new discourse started to be articulated around the social representation of the rural. Instead of having farmers demanding aid from the CAP for the production of agricultural commodities, it was now possible for rural areas to be places where people from elsewhere could go to consume their diverse offer, which included the natural environment, beautiful landscapes, cultural heritage, customs and local handcrafts. And to buffer the decline of rural areas there had to be financial investments to support the range of activities and spaces that framed the rural. This phase clearly delimits the transition operated between the "sectorial" focus and what became known as the "territorial development" approach (Anjos, 2003, p.85-86).

The fourth and last phase described by Gray coincided with the time when the European Commission brought out a number of documents that presented a diversified image of the rural within the concept of a broad agenda of rural development, which included the MacSharry reform (1992), the Leader I (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale, or "Links between actions for the development of the rural economy") Initiative (1991), the Cork Declaration (1996), the Buckwell Report (1997) and Agenda 2000 (1997). The regions are now divided into three broad groups (predominantly rural, significantly rural and predominantly urban) based on the OECD methodology, itself based on the proportion of the population who live in places considered "rural" or which have a population density of fewer than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer. The new classification that "measured the rural" was imposed on these foundations in the new guidelines produced as part of Europe's development legislation.

The Leader initiative's primary aim is to address the problems affecting rural areas by providing aid for local groups which take an active role in defining development programs for their own areas.

"Forge a new local political space" is the basic orientation by which stakeholders are encouraged to take the lead in the development of initiatives aligned with history and culture as part of projects to harness local resources. In this sense, making them aware of their own identity is not an end in itself or a simple marketing ploy, but a broader and deeper frame of reference that has permitted other local identities to flourish.

The description provided here sketches out in broad terms the major transformations achieved by this new viewpoint that has focused on social representations of the rural and how they have changed over time. We have drawn on the transition seen in the agricultural and rural development policies adopted in the EU because they are such a rich framework for understanding the underlying processes, and especially for the influence they have had on other countries, especially in Latin America.

Limited though it may be, this brief description serves to show a profound change that has taken place in social representations of the rural in a context that has culminated in the emergence of a post-industrial society. It is in the wake of these transformations that a constructed or "reinvented" image (to paraphrase Gray, 2000) has start to be projected, which we repeatedly draw attention to here.

There can be no doubt that this transition hides a whole host of contradictions that need to be brought to light. We would therefore draw attention to the fact that social representations are also a field of conflict or tension, as described by Moscovici, especially between "reified universes and consensual universes", opening schisms between the language of concepts and the language of representations (Moscovici, 2010, p.91). Reified universes are those where scientific knowledge, technologies and specialized activities are produced and circulate, making them essentially restricted environments. Consensual universes correspond to the intellectual activities of daily social interaction in which the new is incorporated and "resignified" by conventional wisdom.

A new image of the rural has been forged, creating frames of reference and imposing new ways of recreating reality, with implications and interfaces that deserve analysis. This is the objective of the next section.

The rural made to measure: the interfaces of idealization

The concept of a "rural made to measure" underpins the core argument of this article, complemented by the features framed by a new social representation of the rural by which it is implicit that functions other than farming per se should be incorporated into the rural. For the purposes of this article it is important to highlight two pivotal ideas that have conventionalized objects linked to this "resignified" rural, lending it a prescriptive nature. We will analyze each one individually.

The rural idyll

The rural idyll is undoubtedly one of the images that most stands out in the social representation emerging in the heart of a society marked by what has come to be known as “post-productivism” (Wilson, 2007; Wilson, Rigg, 2003) and by the increasing importance of “post-materialist” values (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005). The rural is now portrayed from a romantic perspective as an idyllic retreat (Creed, Ching, 1997, p.19), with all the symbolic values implicit in such a notion. It is a place to take “refuge from modernity” (Short, 1991) and an explicit manifestation of atavisms awakened in broad swathes of society that yearn to (re)encounter the “traditional”, the “authentic”, the “exotic”, the “singular”. Interestingly, the emergence of the rural idyll was superbly portrayed in the seminal works by Keith Thomas (1996) and Raymond Williams (1989) as belonging to a new conception that actually dates further back, to the eighteenth century. According to Thomas,⁴ it emerged in the context of man’s changing attitude to the conservation of the natural world and is not strictly ideologically related to the rise of industrialization in the western world.

Meanwhile, the “romanticization of the rural” and its association with nature has a long history and does not originate in the European rural development agenda of the late twentieth century. While these remote roots are not unfamiliar, it is also true that only very recently have we seen an explicit framework for political and institutional intervention that admits clearly and unequivocally the nature and meaning of this (re)awakening which we aim to investigate here.

Some examples can illustrate the widespread currency these images have gained in contemporary times. In Woortmann’s (2004) study of the development of tourism in southern Brazil, traditional eating habits in the region are shown to have been resignified. There, restaurants and festivities labelled “colonial”⁵ are an attempt to give new status to the ethnic eating habits of German Brazilians. According to Woortmann, the old habits (heavy foods rich in butter, meat and lard) serve to satisfy the gastronomic memory of tourists and city-dwelling descendants of immigrants. If food is identity, it is given a new construct, gradually drawing away from a set of values that cannot be sustained, except in an idealized and different way, in the daily life of the rural families in colonial communities in the far south of Rio Grande do Sul, who today live in cities.

An intriguing study by Rye (2006) analyzes the images of the rural that inhabit the imaginary of adolescents from rural communities in Norway. The findings show a predominance of social representations that link two powerful images of the rural: the idea of the idyll and the idea of boredom. In this author’s view, these images are not so much mutually contradictory as mutually complementary.

These can be associated with the idea of a place for a good life (Jones, 1995; Halfacree, 1993), but also with boredom, or the rural dull (Haugen, Villa, 2005; Berg, Lysgard, 2004; Lægran, 2002). But Rye (2006, p.416) argues that these representations should not be seen as mutually exclusive except insofar as they constitute different dimensions of the same context. The dimension of the rural idyll is a stronger image than that of boredom, and is preponderant amongst Norwegian youth, reproducing the idea of a place set in the natural environment where there is a dense social structure where everyone knows everyone else,

a sense of neighborliness or belonging, and a strong spirit of cooperation. But the image of the idyll coexists with the negative, not-so-evocative image of the association with boredom, with not being “modern”, a dearth of opportunities, and people working hard but earning little (e.g. rednecks).

The tradition-led social representation of the rural is an attribute widely evoked in the official discourse adopted in development policies in Europe and other parts of the world. There is surely an increasing demand on the part of consumers to enjoy the fruits of tradition, which explains to a greater or lesser extent the rapid rise in demand for food and farm produce bearing clear markings of its provenance. By this, we particularly mean articles with geographical indications (vines, olive oils, cheeses) and a whole plethora of farm produce that alludes to uniqueness and tradition. This kind of initiative has been encouraged in the last reforms of the CAP, as we saw earlier, through the advent of new rural development policies. And it was necessary to put into practice programs like Leader and the Rural Development Program to encourage the creation of rural development groups in countries like Spain.

Andalusia is a prime example of how fast these rural development groups have been formed. In 1994 this autonomous Spanish community had just nine such groups for the first Leader initiative, but it now has 52.

Retrieving traditional knowledge, creating tourist itineraries, thematic museums, handicrafts, cultural festivals and gastronomic routes are just a few of the key attributes of these funding agencies, whose primary mission fits perfectly with the new discourse of the EU, which is financially grounded in the “second pillar of the CAP” and the previously mentioned programs.

The social representation instated by the frameworks described here shrouds a whole battlefield of conflict, especially between agrarian fundamentalists, to borrow the expression coined by Hervieu (1996, p.105), and groups aligned with the rural development model pushed by the European funds. But this discussion cannot be covered here. What we can do is to reflect on two questions which we deem fundamental in analyzing this idyllic vision perpetuated in the social representations of the rural.

The first of these has to do with the fact that this idealized image of the rural is often fabricated artificially to satisfy corporate interests and the interests of groups working for this new discourse about the rural, which, as mentioned earlier, is also being pushed as a promising model for Latin America. However, the topic raises certain issues, as Arias and Blanco set forth in their study:

Despite the quantitative and qualitative changes that have taken place in recent decades in rural societies in Latin America the dominant view of the rural idyll has been maintained over time from the urban perspective. This ‘selective’ image of the rural has been fine-tuned and commercialized as the economic base has shifted from agriculture to tourism. This image of the rural is now available, at a price, to visitors from urban areas. Towns recreated from the 1930s and real towns called cultural capitals are sold in the form of tourist packages. As Price (1996) notes, adding cobbled streets which often never existed and turning squares into cultural centers, these attractions portray an unlikely, glorified rural past on the current landscape (Arias, Blanco, 2010, p.185; emphasis added).

In an ethnographic study of rural communities from the French Alps conducted by Maria José Carneiro, these aspects are also exalted, especially when the author compares “festivals in the village” with “village festivals”, whose differences are marked:

‘festivals in the village’ become a special time and space for reinforcing the new village identity resulting from interaction between different cultures. The main characters in these rituals are children of émigrés who nostalgically reencounter traces of their culture of origin, tourists who come in search of the outlandishness of an idealized country village, and certain residents who, in an effort to show the proximity between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’, do their best to show they share the same ‘modern’ habits that are as idealized as the social representations that the city dwellers make of the rural world (Carneiro, 1998, p.201-202; emphasis in the original).

The debate about “invented tradition” is nothing new in the terrain of the humanities, especially in history,⁶ if we bring to mind the classic study by Hobsbawm and Ranger (2008). But for the purposes of this article, what matters is to highlight the articulations involved in the social representation of the rural that evokes the idyll. This recuperated or preserved tradition, to paraphrase Harvey (2009), can then be seen to be literally “commercialized”, being produced and sold as an image, a simulacrum, a pastiche. Let us turn again to the example of the village festivals in Carneiro’s study to reinforce this understanding of the matter:

So, the ‘festivals in the village’ and the ‘country festivals’ express the crisis in country values, but also reveal the other side of the coin. The former more than the latter proclaim at the same time the end of a ‘country culture’ and the reawakening of certain elements of this same culture, but in a different context, in a different system of reconstitution of the village identity. This festival lays bare the domination of capitalist thinking on the values of traditional village life. It speaks to us of the market’s appropriation of elements of a culture and the space where this culture takes place – tourism – and consumption as a form of leisure (Carneiro, 1998, p.201-202; emphasis in the original).

The new “rural products” being bought and sold in gourmet markets, regional festivities and other spaces are far more diverse than tourist packages, special foodstuffs or typical attire that hail to the past, because they implicitly bear the mark of an unmistakable “commerce in identities”. The passage below sums up this aspect perfectly, alluding to the case of Andalusian clothing:

The shawl and Flamenco clothing are made differently according to whether they are consumed locally or globally, because their uses and functions are different for locals and outsiders, which are perfectly distinguishable to the locals’ eyes; in what constitutes the ritual spaces of their own culture and what makes up the repertoire of objects that recreate the local image, they reproduce the themes of Spanishness and therefore ‘commercialize their own identity’ (Aguilar Criado, 2003, p.419; emphasis in the original).

Advertising and different ways of marketing products, whatever they are, are a fertile ground for decoding the social representations of the rural, especially because they embody ideas about a historical time which it is the aim here to demarcate.

The rural as a synonym for nature

The second pivotal idea that supports this new social representation and which reproduces discursive and non-discursive actions is the ultimate association of the rural with nature, biodiversity and protected spaces or other well-known connections. This association is very apparent, even in countries with a strong tradition in global farming, such as France. The study by Hervieu and Viard (1996) shows that 72% of urban French believe the countryside is more a landscape than a place for production. But what is surprising, as Abramovay (2003, p.27) warns in his comments on this research, is that this is “the opinion of no fewer than 61% of the people who live in the rural environment.”

The relationship with nature is seen as the foremost feature of the rural, in that life lived there is perceived as qualitatively superior to life in the cities (Rye, 2006, p.410). But the fact is that even amongst rural youth in Norway, as studied by Rye, social representations of the rural leave no doubt as to the intimacy of this association. When asked what words they would choose to describe the rural, the clear winner was the idea of nature. Interestingly, on a scale of 1 to 5, this connection earned an average score of 4.7 from a group of 650 adolescents.

There is nothing to be added about the nature of this image that is projected abroad and also taken for granted by the very people who live in the countryside. But it is also true that this association has become a strong argument for justifying the model of agriculture pursued in the EU,⁷ with its strong subsidies as mentioned earlier.

In France, “territorial farming contracts” (Velasco Arranz, Noyano Estrada, Anjos, 2008) were created during the administration of Lionel Jospin in the defense of a “new social pact in agriculture”, which did not prosper because of the vicissitudes of French politics. Ultimately, it was about explicating a compromise with French and European society by incorporating the imperatives of environmental sustainability. However, the frequent food and farming scandals (dioxin affair, bird and swine flu and, more recently, the Spanish cucumber crisis) are just the tip of a huge iceberg of contradictions inherent to food production in Europe and the rest of the world.

Faced with such uncertainty, there is a constant preoccupation on the part of citizens about the safety and quality of the products they consume (Beck, 1998; Díaz Méndez, Gómez Benito, 2001; Callejo Gallego, 2005; Aguilar Criado, 2007). The fact is that in the large food/farming production systems, an ever wider gap is opened up between “agrarian” produce and “food” products (Langreo, 1988) when decision-making is transferred from producers to processors, and, more recently, to distributors, with major implications for rural development in view of the serious limitations on opportunities for direct contact with consumers.

What remains for us to do is to recognize that the social representation encapsulated by the concept of the “rural made to measure”, which links the rural to the idyllic and the natural, must be powerful enough to convey to society at large an image that sets it apart from repeated food scandals, environmental degradation, and certain practices which in one way or another have fuelled considerable controversy over the present and future of rural areas both in Europe and in other countries like Brazil.

“How many more ‘typical villages’ can we cope with?” is the interesting title of a study by Figueiredo (2003) that indicates precisely this need to think about how far this exaltation

of the rural can be stretched and the material and symbolic costs for the social stakeholders implied in these processes.

Final considerations

The recognition that rural areas are not doomed and the change in the parameters that define the rural nature of contemporary societies have formed the backdrop for new perspectives, especially since the mid-1990s. While these features have been analyzed in brief in this study, this was not the core objective of the discussion. The main aim was to explore different social representations of the rural and how they have changed, taking as a backdrop the great transformations affecting contemporary societies. We subscribe to the view expressed by Redclift and Woodgate (1994, p.61-62) that the representations of the rural that predominate in today's societies are intimately linked to a "sense of loss that has accompanied modern industrial civilization. The countryside has taken on a statute of inheritance, such as cathedrals, because it shows us our past."

The growing importance acquired by post-materialist values and the transition to post-productivism are mutually related processes. Effectively, the transformations fostered by the Common Agricultural Policy and the emergence of the territorial approach to development are expressions of a debate that has had a decisive influence on reformulations of policy instruments for agriculture and the rural world in Latin American countries and the official rhetoric adopted by funding agencies.

Nonetheless, we have turned our gaze beyond these now familiar examples. Our purpose has been to indicate the risks associated with this social construction of the rural or, more explicitly, this social representation forged to suit the circumstances, whose implications are numerous, not least because of the spread of this idyllic, divinized, romantic image of the rural; a vision with an inherent risk of reifying cultures and identities, especially because the exaltation of the exotic, the traditional and the singular seems associated with a "commercialization of identities."

The implicit identification of the rural with nature, biodiversity and protected spaces is pivotal for this social representation constructed in contemporary times, and is recognized as such by the very inhabitants of rural areas, as demonstrated in the studies mentioned earlier. However, even if this may be apparently paradoxical, it would be wrong to claim that there is a tacit acceptance of this function by the people who live in the countryside, primarily because the glorification of natural environments by "outsiders" and even by the state can sometimes lead to new forms of domination.

Converting environmental attributes into consumable articles, landscapes or sceneries to be reconfigured and adorned for aesthetic appropriation by tourists and society in general does not always reflect and is not always in tune with the representations, expectations and practices of the "locals". This leads us to think how important it is to understand how the processes that produce this recodified rural and the circumstances that have driven its emergence have come about in the context of a broader discourse about the rural that is today taking shape to a greater or lesser extent in contemporary societies. The social construction of the rural

in the present day reflects the historical moment we are living in, but certainly cannot be seen as a field without tensions, conflicts or contradictions, as we have sought to show here.

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NOTES

¹ In the development of Brazilian sociological thinking, the relationship between the city and the countryside has been treated in quite an original manner, especially in the crucial historical circumstances of the 1920s and 30s, during which time representations were produced that had a great impact for a long period of time, as indicated by Lima and Hochman (2000), Hochman (2010), and Sá (2009). While recognizing the importance of these studies, it would be unfeasible to extend the period covered in this work beyond the selected time frame, which is mainly the last two decades.

² Upon explicating this concept and defending himself against those who consider the notion to be overly vague, Moscovici (2010, p.306) warns: "I would like to recall that the idea of collective or social representation is older than all these notions and that it is part of the 'genetic code' of all the humanities."

³ By the mid-1980s, as alluded to by Etxezarreta et al. (1995, p.57), the expenditure of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) had exceeded 70% of the European Community's budget.

⁴ Thomas notes that many seventeenth century writers claimed that while God had made the countryside, man had built the cities. If rural life was portrayed as divine creation, the city was associated with smoke, filth and stench, features of a period marked by the expansion of manufacturing and increased population density.

⁵ In the south of Brazil, "colony" is a highly polysemous word. It may equally refer to an agrarian unit of measurement (about 30 hectares) or to a region colonized by European immigrants (Seyferth, 1974, p.54). Beyond this peculiarity, the expression has particular resonance amongst the Germanic communities (*kolonie*), since they were the first non-Iberian immigrants to settle in the south of the country. It would therefore be fair to say that the word encapsulates the sense of autonomy that is reproduced as a recurring ideal in the practices adopted by the families and the discourse of the farmers.

⁶ In the seven volumes that constitute the known works of Pierre Nora (1997), *Les lieux de mémoire*, there is an extensive inventory of places and objects in which the French national memory is incarnated, including the restaging of a past as a mission that serves multiple purposes. In this context of made-up traditions, the history of revolutionary festivities reveals a permanent dialectic of remembering and forgetting, which cannot be seen as the having come about by chance.

⁷ The issue of the social representation of the rural in the ambit of the EU may also be analyzed in the light of the dynamics of nationalism and its stalwart resistance in the context of a globalized world. Examples of this analytical perspective can be seen in the work of Jacques Cellard (1989) and Hagen Schulze (2001).

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