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**Meanings of the Rural in Portugal – exploring its diversity and its legitimacies**

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**(Extended) Abstract**

The aim of this seminar is to present the results of a recent research about the meanings of the rural in Portugal, based on the conclusions of the project I recently have coordinated: ‘*Rural Matters – Meanings of the Rural in Portugal: Social representations, consumptions and rural development strategies’*. The project was funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, in Portugal, and by the European Union.

The main aim of the Rural Matters project was to understand, based on a multidisciplinary approach, the connections between representations, consumptions and development strategies, in order to assess the Portuguese imaginary about the rural, as well as its possible territorial effects. To achieve these goals, the project analysed, at the national scale:

* + The core aspects shaping different social representations on the rural;
  + the diversity of agents who appropriate rural territories and convey their images through different angles, pursuing different purposes, and using different means;
  + the motivations and contents underlying demands and consumptions of rural areas and products, particularly associated with tourism and leisure;
  + the way in which rural development strategies integrate and convey different needs, desires, representations and lifestyles currently present in rural territories;
  + the connections, interrelations and mutual influences of the previous aspects.

In a specific manner, the meanings of the rural were analysed taking into account a time frame of around 30 years, since Portuguese accession to the European Union (in 1986) until 2012 (the starting date of the project). The project adopted a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches and techniques to address the abovementioned topics, as following:

* Political and Policy instruments and means
  + Content analysis of:
    - Government programmes
    - Rural development policies and investment strategies
    - Tourism policies and investment strategies
* Semi-structured interviews (and its content analysis) to the politicians responsible for rural development, agriculture, tourism and territorial planning during the last 30 years, in Portugal.
* Tourism promotion, media and entertainment
  + Content analysis of:
    - Promotional materials (websites, brochures, leaflets, posters) of the National Office of Tourism and of two rural tourism associations
    - Promotional materials (websites, brochures, leaflets, posters) of 3 villages’ networks: Schist, Historical and Wine villages’ networks.
    - Content analysis of two main Portuguese daily newspapers: Público and Correio da Manhã
    - Content analysis of 6 Portuguese movies on rural areas or that use the rural as the main filming set.
* Social
  + Questionnaire directed to a sample of the Portuguese population
    - 1853 valid questionnaires were completed and analysed through quantitative analysis
  + Semi-structured interviews to a sample of the questionnaire’s respondents
    - 26 interviews, representative of the 5 main groups of respondents identified accordingly with their type of representation on the rural.

The completion of these tasks resulted in a considerable amount of data that I am not going to explore in detail in the presentation. Several publications dealing with the different dimensions analysed are available at the project’s website - [*http://ruralmatters.web.ua.pt*](http://ruralmatters.web.ua.pt/). However, I will present some of the main and more general conclusions that emerged from the analysis of data. First of all, a relative homogeneity of political and policies’ narratives and visions on the rural, disregarding political ideology and rural areas’ main transformations, may be identified. Newspapers tend also to reproduce the dominant political and policy discourses, emphasising the domains in which financial incentives have been concentrated during last decades. An important shift may be identified in all these visions and narratives on the rural, most conditioned by European Union orientations and discourses on the rural. Therefore, until 1995, a sectoral vision seem to be dominant, emphasising the need of agricultural modernization and clearly identifying the rural with agricultural production. From 1995 onwards, the documents analysed expressed a much more territorial, multifunctional and post-productivist vision, although the main part of the financial instruments were still concentrated in agricultural activities. The latter evidenced a contradiction in the political and policy discourses about the rural, in Portugal, as well as a lack of clear direction in what concerns rural development.

Tourism promotional materials evidenced also a certain level of homogeneity and a relevant shift in the ways rural areas are represented in tourism campaigns from the middle of the nineties. Before this date, the rural was represented as ‘ancient’ and ‘unchanged’. From 1995 onwards the countryside is presented in the campaigns as no longer a place for ‘old people’ but rather the context for new actors: the tourists, evidencing in a clear manner the processes of ‘touristification’, ‘patrimonialization’ and ‘re-naturalization’ of Portuguese rural areas. In the same line, the countryside is portrayed as increasingly open to ‘external’ consumptions, in which all the all the elements and dimensions (natural, cultural, architectonic, economic, and social) may be constituded as commodities and amenities.

In the cinema analysis, a greater diversity of ways of portraying the rural was identified. In fact, the analysis of movies revealed a representation of the rural as a territory (or a set of territories) that is in between preservation and change, between nostalgia and modernity. Some prevalent common themes in the movies are: abandonment, isolation, opposition to the urban, difficult balance between tradition and modernity, return and rural multifunctionality. In fact, the movies analysed reveal an asymmetric rural, with divers rhythms that hardly fit in a single matrix.

Regarding the last dimension analysed within the project – the Portuguese population’s representations on the rural, taking into account the results from the questionnaires and the in-depth interviews[[1]](#footnote-1), one important conclusion is that, contrary to the northern parts of Europe and mainly to the anglo-saxonic world, the idyllic notion – although relevant – is not the dominant one. In fact, 5 different clusters were identified, expressing the heterogeneity of social representations about the rural in Portugal, a dominant negative vision, as well as some oppositions and contradictions, therefore far from the hegemonic views and discourses often presented in the literature.

Also based on the results from the questionnaire it was possible to drawn some conclusion on the social consumptions of the Portuguese countryside. Almost half of the sample declared to visit rural areas with tourism and leisure purposes and based on a heterogeneous set of motivations, travel behaviours and activities. In what concerns food and food related products consumption, more than three quarters of the respondents declare they consume small-scale, rural produced products. The motivations are mainly related to its representation as healthier, better flavoured and more reliable than other, often massified, products. Family ties with rural areas seems to possess a relevant role in the consumption of local productions.

Finally, regarding social representations on rural development and on governments’ actions and interventions, the vast majority of respondents classify rural areas as poor and underdeveloped, considering governments’ actions not sufficient to address these territories’ problems and constraints. Despite that, the majority of respondents defend that rural areas are extremely important to Portuguese economy, society and tourism development.

Taking into account these results, a number of questions may be raised regarding the efficacy of rural development policies and strategies that have been conducted in Portugal in the last 30 years but mainly regarding some legitimacy issues, namely:

* What are the prevailing representations and discourses on the rural in Portugal?
* What kind of legitimacies are being dominant? What interests are being represented?
* At what cost or with what kind of impacts on rural territories?
* What are the main transformations in the Portuguese population within rural territories and what were the main factors influencing those changes?
* How are the diverse representations and discourses on the rural being translated into policies and strategies for rural development?
* What are the consequences in terms of rural restructuring and reconfiguration processes?
* What kind of effectiveness may be attributed to rural development policies and strategies?
* What are the actors of those representations and what is their legitimacy?

In the light of the projects’ results, in this presentation I will try to address these questions and to foster the debate around them, aiming at having some contributions from French realities and similar studies.

1. From the interviews performed, some were selected to be part of a documentary-film produced within the ambit of the project by Daniel Amaral. The document, with English subtitles may be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zteW5ieSfZk&feature=youtu.be> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)