

Written in Stone – analysis of the images of the rural conveyed in the promotional website of the *Schist Villages Network*, Portugal¹

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Despite the diversity of European and Portuguese rural areas, the intensification of *deruralization* and the dissociation between rural space and agriculture are certainly amongst the most prominent social, economic and territorial changes that have been occurring since five decades ago. These processes of transformation have been particularly significant in peripheral rural regions, stimulating major changes in their economic and social roles. From food producers and labour force reserves, these areas have been transformed into consumption spaces in which tourism and leisure activities possess a prominent role, leading to a ‘touristification’ or ‘patrimonialization’ of the countryside.

Tourism and related activities possess a relevant role in the constitution of the countryside as object of consumption and in its commodification, mainly through the presentation and promotion of rural areas using certain images and symbols which influence and contribute to construct the social imaginary on rurality. These images and symbols often appeal to an idyllic rural, full of opportunities to live ‘experiences’, to ‘feel’ the ‘real thing’, the authenticity and the genuine character of villages and their characteristics. In fact, in many promotional materials of rural tourism destinations one may find this appeal of the rural, based on images and symbols conveying a rural in which the natural resources, the costumes and traditions, the ‘rustic things’ have been transformed into new products to satisfy external demands.

The case of the ‘Schist Villages Network’ analysed in this presentation, provides empirical evidence (through the content analysis of the website of the network) on the commodification of the countryside. The features, as well as the symbols, words and images used to promote the network and the villages included in it (27), seem to be more focused on the imaginary of the tourists, on their expectations, desires and needs while visiting a rural area than on the very local character of the territory. The rural promoted is always ‘green’, ‘ancient’, ‘brown’ (from the schist), ‘enchanted’, ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’, offering a vast range of activities, experiences and memories. Although the main aim of the network was to improve the living conditions of local inhabitants and to contribute to local development, all the promotion and activities are oriented to external demands and consumptions. The network aims at the commodification of almost every element present in the

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villages. In fact, every element (material and immaterial) seems to be transformed into an amenity ready to be sold and offered to tourists.