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analysis of the images of the rural conveyed in the promotional website of the Schist Villages Network, Portugal

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Discuss the reconfiguration processes occurring in Portuguese rural areas as the basis for the increasing ‘touristification’ and ‘patrimonialization’ of the countryside;

Debate the growing appeal to an ‘idyllic’ rural, full of opportunities for tourists to live experiences, to feel the ‘real thing’, the authenticity and genuine character of the villages and their characteristics;
Theoretical background

- Rural areas’ transformations during the last decades, from productive spaces to consumption-oriented places.
- These transformations have been both material and symbolic and are frequently associated with the loss of relevance of the activity that, for decades, marked rural societies and economies – agriculture and with the increasing representation of the rural as multifunctional, in which tourism and leisure activities possess a prominent role.
- Agriculture still possesses a relevant function in many of those territories, but as a multifunctional activity itself, i.e., combined with other activities and functions of the rural, namely the leisure ones.
As a result of these transformations, the majority of Portuguese rural areas are low density and they may be qualified as remote.

These areas are mainly constituted by post-agricultural spaces, whose population continues to decrease. The remaining population is mostly aged, retired, with low levels of literacy.

Due to the ‘permanence’ of certain rural and rurality features, these fragile areas are nowadays the objects of new urban demands and consumptions, which are in general, “based on very positive images of the rural and rurality, which is constructed in opposition to urban life” (Figueiredo, 2013: 131).
Rural areas are increasingly seen as amenities, frequently as a ‘global amenity’ (e.g. Cloke, 2006; Figueiredo, 2013; Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012; McCarthy, 2008), arising from different sources, such as:

- tourists,
- tourism operators and entrepreneurs,
- public policies,
- mass media,
- advertisers...

which tend to promote a relatively hegemonic and standardized image of rural areas and of rurality, independently of which rural contexts they are referring to (e.g. Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012).

As Cloke (2006) and McCarthy (2008) demonstrate, rurality seems, in many ways, deterritorialized and delocalized, i.e. increasingly independent of the concrete characteristics of a given rural area.

This seems to appeal to a virtual rurality (Cloke, 2006) or to a kind of McRural (Figueiredo, 2011; 2013)
Theoretical background

- As Perkins (2006) observes, rural recreational spaces are dominated by elements of the tourist production system.
- The main instruments to convey these representations are the promotion and advertising materials of the tourism industry.
- In fact, as again Perkins (2006) states, tourism entrepreneurs and agents may, through their activity, create mythical places, disregarding their real dynamics, even if some local features are generally mobilized as major advertisement tools (e.g. Machado, Medeiros, & Passador, 2012).
- Tourism industry contributes to reconfiguring rural areas, “re-making them both in material and in symbolic terms to address the demands, needs and desires of tourists” (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012: 23) and commodifying every rural element.
The Schist Village Network (SVN) began in 2001 and nowadays includes 27 villages and has been created with the aims of improving of the living conditions of local populations, through the promotion of strategies conducting to local development.

The villages may be qualified as remote rural spaces:
- Declining population
- Low density rates
- Ageing
- Low rates of economic activity
- Low levels of literacy
- Traditional agricultural activities
Based on the natural and cultural patrimony of the region, the SVN is anchored in three main small networks:
- villages’ network,
- river beaches’ network
- walking trails’ network,

which, “although connected to local features, have been developed to attract visitors and tourists” (Figueiredo, 2013: 138).

The SVN is nowadays a ‘brand’/‘label’ that manage to compete with other and more ancient Networks in the country (e.g. Historical Villages Network) and that was built upon the most remarkable element of the whole area: the schist.

As Figueiredo (2013: 138) argues “around it, a complete marketing and communication strategy has been developed, including promotional materials, books, videos and the Schist Villages Shop Network integrating 11 stores, eight of them located in some of the villages and three in urban centres: Pampilhosa da Serra, Lisbon and Barcelona”.
Methodology

- Content analysis of the website of the SVN, based on an comprehensive literature review.
- The concept of Rural Tourism, corresponding attributes and values were used.
- Two coding frames were built:
  - One dealing with the written parts of the website
  - and another one specifically oriented to the content analysis of images
## Analysis of the images of the rural conveyed in the promotional website of the SVN, Portugal

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“everything here represents numerous opportunities for leisure and sports. Here we feel the pulse of the land and its communion with Man when we see the villages, from far. These seem to be naturally born from the schist, as the trees. Today, its roots are each and every one of us”
- (Presentation of the Casal Novo village)

“whether it’s the food, accommodation, cultural events or simply arts & crafts you’re after, you’ll find the network of Schist Villages offering you products and services by professionals of excellence. From the country materials new products are made; the River becomes a canoeing track; a forest becomes a walking trail; an old tradition turns into a memorable event. You’ll find the purest, unspoiled river beaches, monuments, castles, and museums to visit. It’s a joy to talk to people and share their traditions, their arts and stories. Based on rural imagination, new objects of innovative design are created and made available in the Schist Villages network of shops”.
- (General presentation of the SVN)
Analysis of the images of the rural conveyed in the promotional website of the SVN, Portugal

Tag cloud representing the most frequent symbols used in the images of the SVN website

- water
- villages
- handicraft
- trees
- activity
- trek
- route
- championship
- fields
- chapel
- characterized
- houses
- brown
- ceramic
- start
- contemplation
- kitchen
- sofa
- discovery
- design
- sport
- enjoyment
- events
- flora
- forest
- fluvial
- outsiders
- front
- resident
- old
- church
- information
- interaction
- gardens
- young
- lakes
- flax
- free
- inhabitants
- location
- store
- wood
- meteorology
- mountains
- movement
- least
- nature
- snow
- clouds
- observe
- walls
- participant
- experience
- walking
- stones
- small
- trail
- people
- detail
- beach
- practice
- president
- young
- products
- grass
- republic
- rivers
- street
- running
- signage
- typical
- trail
- tourist
- valleys
- vegetation
- green
- volleyball
- schist

Tag cloud representing the most frequent symbols used in the texts of the SVN website

- activities
- water
- villages
- accommodation
- animation
- animals
- ancient
- art
- handicraft
- adventure
- olive
- beauty
- trail
- canoeing
- church
- house
- castle
- centre
- contact
- culture
- cultural
- discovery
- discover
- space
- species
- party
- fluvial
- gastronomy
- big
- church
- interpretation
- countless
- leisure
- inhabitants
- stores
- Lousã
- woods
- mill
- museum
- national
- natural
- nature
- snow
- landscape
- park
- touring
- heritage
- walking
- rocks
- trail
- piedade
- Portugal
- possibility
- beach
- products
- program
- project
- promotion
- quality
- network
- region
- restaurant
- river
- route
- rural
- holy
- mountain
- vegetation
- visitor
- visit
- schist
The case of the Schist Villages Network provided empirical evidence on the processes of change and reconfiguration and, clearly, on the commodification of the countryside.

The characteristics of the 27 villages included in the Network, as well as the images and symbols utilised to promote it are much more focused on the representations of the tourists than on the very local features of the area.

The SVN rapidly was transformed in a ‘brand’ with the aim of attracting ‘outsiders’ through offering and selling almost every element of local rurality.

By doing this, the SVN seems to be much more oriented towards external desires than to local needs and is definitely changing the territory into an urban recreational area.
Conclusion

- All the images and symbols analysed call our attention to the the McRuralization (Figueiredo, 2013) of the SVN territory.
- Although based on local features, the continued emphasis on the generic characteristics of the countryside – nature, tradition, authenticity, patrimony – tend to represent a rurality that tourists easily recognized as ‘familiar’ and may find in many other areas of Portugal and Europe.
- In the SVN the rural promoted is always ‘green’, ‘ancient’, ‘magic’, ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’, offering vast opportunities for leisure and relaxation.
- However the remote rural promoted in other parts of Europe and Portugal is very similar (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012).
- As we argued before (Figueiredo, 2013: 143)
  - “the new dynamics these processes seem to induce easily can be interpreted as the emergence of a rural territory which is mainly urban in its conception. A rural that seems to be no longer rural, but transformed by urban desires and needs and that seems to exist only to fulfil the dreams of the urban dwellers”.
- Consequently, the future of the SVN territory, as the future of many remote regions of Europe and Portugal, will be built upon

  the end of the rural as we know it.
Grazie Mille
Muito Obrigada
Thank you very much

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