

Representations of “the rural” in promotional materials regarding three Portuguese villages

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With this poster, we want to identify the main patterns of representation of “the rural” based on main constructs retrieved from a literature review regarding representations on the rural space and rurality. Like in many other European countries, rural areas in Portugal have undergone significant transformations over the course of recent decades as a consequence of increasingly global socio-economic dynamics of change, being the most relevant one the decrease of relevance of agricultural activities.

As consequence of these processes of change, many rural territories are nowadays “constituted by post-agricultural spaces, whose populations continue to decrease and with them the prospects of revitalizing socio-economic dynamics” (Figueiredo, 2013:143). These tendencies have been particularly significant in marginal or remote rural regions of Europe, and also in Portugal. In which tourism is seen as a major asset to diversify the economic base of rural territories (Cavaco, 2003). From food producers and labour force reserves, these areas have been transformed into consumable spaces (Halfacree, 2006) in which leisure and tourism activities possess an important role.

Tourism and related activities are, to a great extent, the main driving forces of the rural reconfiguration processes, both in material and in symbolic terms. This process also triggers new development opportunities for rural areas, which may, if well planned and managed enhance these areas’ development (OCDE, 1994; Sharpley, 2002). There is, however, an increasing concern about *sustainable* development of rural areas through well integrated rural tourism, embedded in local structures, supported by local communities and based on endogenous resources (Saxena *et al*, 2007), which may, in fact, additionally provide a more appealing rural tourism experience to authenticity seeking tourists (Kastenholtz, Carneiro & Marques, 2012). The way this experience is designed and projected is central to the type of development induced, with rural tourism promotion deserving a particular attention, conveying visions of rurality and of the countryside often based on ‘global’ images and symbols, rather than on distinct local features, apparently inducing an idealization of the rural (Figueiredo and Raschi, 2012). These images and symbols often appeal to an idyllic rural, full of opportunities to live ‘experiences’, to ‘feel’ the ‘real thing’, ‘authenticity’ and the genuine character of villages, their features and natural surroundings (Figueiredo, Kastenholtz, Lima, 2013).

Based on a framework for content analysis of promotional materials on tourism in rural areas, developed in the scope of the research project *Rural Matters*¹, we here present some most relevant results regarding materials used to promote the three villages studied in the *ORTE project*² (the Schist village Janeiro de Cima, the historical village Linhares da Beira and the wine producing village Favaios) which have all benefitted from public investment in restoring mainly built heritage and invest in tourism as a revival strategy. Based on the examination of several types of documents, obtained from different sources we tried to assess the main representations, images and symbols about rural territories and rurality revealed in these materials, reflecting positioning, strategies used to attract the rural tourist market and distinguish these destinations from others.

The empirical evidence shows the features, symbols, words and images most used to promote rural tourism, which seem to be more focused on the tourists' imaginary, on their expectations, desires and needs while visiting a rural area than on the very local character of the territory and its community. The rural promoted is always 'green', 'ancient', 'authentic' and 'pure', offering a vast range of activities, experiences and memories. This overemphasis on the global images of the rural, may, in fact, lead to a "globalization of the countryside" and undermine more powerful regional positioning strategies, (e.g. Figueiredo and Raschi, 2012; Figueiredo, 2013).

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 (e.g. Figueiredo, 2013). Every element (material and immaterial) seems to be transformed into an amenity ready to be sold and offered to tourists. Rural areas are thus living in a consumption process, they are increasingly anchored in powerful and hegemonic images that people from urban areas possess about the countryside, inscribed in more general processes of the post-modern urban citizen in search of the 'idyll, the 'lost paradise' and 'the things of the land' (Figueiredo, 2013:143). This process is problematic in so far as mainly externally determined and not locally controlled, i.e. not sustainable in nature (Saxena *et al*, 2007). Additionally, from a destination marketing perspective, this "global view of the rural" does not strengthen the local/ regional positioning potential, does not present a particular appeal to those post-modern tourists seeking distinct "authentic" experiences nor does it enhance the community's identification with the destination image presented, leading as such to questionable results.

¹ *Rural Matters – meanings of the rural in Portugal: between social representations, consumptions and development strategies* (PTDC/CS-GEO/117967/2010), is a 3 years research project (started June 2012), funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and co-funded by COMPETE, QREN and FEDER (<http://ruralmatters.web.ua.pt/>). In the ambit of *Rural Matters*, we analyze other discourses, namely the ones conveyed by national governments' programs, rural development programs, by rural tourism development plans and financial incentives, by the tourism promotional materials produced at national, regional and local levels, as well as by the mass media and the cinema. These analyses are still in progress.

² The poster is a partial result of the 3 years (2010-2013) research project *The overall rural tourism experience and sustainable local community development* (PTDC/CS-GEO/104894/2008), financed by Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (co-financed by COMPETE, QREN and FEDER) (see also <http://cms.ua.pt/orte/>). The project aims at analyzing, in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner, the overall rural tourism experience lived and shared by hosts and guests in three Portuguese villages, conditioned by specific geographical, social and cultural contexts, by policies and marketing strategies.

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