



The XXVI European Society for Rural Sociology Congress
Places of Possibility? Rural Societies in a Neoliberal World
18-21 August 2015, Aberdeen Scotland

The countryside is worth a thousand words

Portuguese representations on rural areas

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Aims



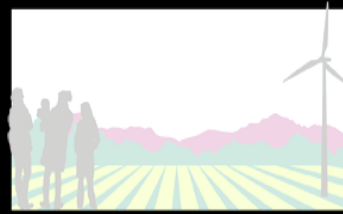
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- To unveil the heterogeneity of Portuguese society's representations about the Portuguese countryside
- The factors related to the existence of different representations
- Based on the results of a survey directed to a sample of the Portuguese population (**N=1839**) and
- Using a hierarchical cluster analysis of variables related to the social representations of the rural.

Theoretical background



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- The nature of the new functions attributed to rural areas – consumption-oriented rather than productivist – helped create brand new meanings for those territories, which seem to be now complex, multifunctional entities, far from the once hegemonic view of the rural as a synonym of agriculture and food production.
- The notion of the rural as a representation and a (lay) discourse rather than a specific material location was first deeply explored by Halfacree (1993, 1995, 2007), based on Moscovici's concept of social representations.

Theoretical background



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- For the author, social representations and lay discourses about the rural are “*an amalgam of personal experiences and ‘traditional’ handed-down beliefs propagated through literature, the media, the state, family, friends and institutions*” (Halfacree, 1993, p. 33).
- A threefold narrative on the rural seemed to emerge from such material and cultural transformations
 - a ‘pre-modernity’ or ‘rural crisis’ discourse;
 - a productivist approach
 - and a ‘pastoralist’, ‘rural renaissance’ vision (e.g. Figueiredo and Raschi, 2011, 2012; Halfacree, 2007; Murdoch, 2003).

Theoretical background



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- Some of the features of the aforementioned 'pastoralist', idyllic vision of the countryside, such as its environmental qualities (as opposed to the city), its authenticity, an idealized way of life, and its landscape and architectonical features are increasingly global and hegemonic – especially in the 'global north'
 - (e.g. Bell, 2006; Crouch, 2006; Figueiredo et al., 2013; Gamache et al., 2004; Halfacree, 2007; Murdoch, 2003; Perkins, 2006).

Theoretical background



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- Although Portugal shares some characteristics with other peripheral and southern European countries in terms of rural territories' transformations, the country possesses some specificities that have contributed to shaping current social representations on the rural, namely:
 - a long dictatorship period ('Estado Novo', 1928-1974) in which a 'ruralist' ideology and discourse was dominant
 - a strong rural exodus and a continuing loss of population since the 50s
 - the loss of economic and social relevance of agricultural activities
 - a recent rural rediscovery connected with tourism and leisure activities, as well as with nature conservation
 - and a still strong and complex range of ties between rural and urban populations

Methodology



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- A questionnaire applied to a sample of the Portuguese population over 14 years old (applied between 11/2013 and 10/2014 and combining personal interviews and online answers)
- **A total of 1839 valid questionnaires were obtained** (59.8% - personal interviews/ 40.2% online)
- **A quota sampling** approach was adopted based on the following criteria:
 - The municipality of residence categorized in three levels:
 - level 1 municipalities – most urban;
 - level 2 municipalities – the intermediate
 - and level 3 municipalities – the most rural
 - The parish of residence (categorized in two groups – urban or rural, according to INE classification)
 - Gender
 - Age.

Methodology



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- In order to segment the residents, the words that respondents used to describe rural areas were grouped into nine categories (nine binary variables):
 - (i) **rural as idyllic**
 - (including words such as, among similar others, beauty, purity, pleasant, authentic);
 - (ii) **rural as anti-idyllic**
 - (e.g. boredom, insecurity, toughness, idle);
 - (iii) **rural as disadvantaged**
 - (e.g. abandonment, neglect, unemployment, aging, depopulation, backwardness);
 - (iv) **rural as space of wellbeing**
 - (e.g. nature, healthy, wellbeing, quiet, secure);
 - (v) **rural as place of development/transformation**
 - (e.g. diversity, transformation, development, productive, prosper);
 - (vi) **rural as an inhabited place**
 - (e.g. people, characteristics of the inhabitants, names of places/villages/towns/regions);
 - (vii) **rural as space for economic activities**
 - (e.g. agriculture, livestock, tourism, food, forest);
 - (viii) **rural as landscape and place of resources and natural elements**
 - (e.g. water, animals, trees, landscape, green, mountains); and
 - (ix) **rural as a physical space**
 - (e.g. houses and other buildings, landmarks, among other physical traits).

Sample Profile



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- **Residence**
 - 92.4% of the respondents live in parishes which are considered urban and
 - 7.6% live in rural parishes.
- **Gender**
 - 56.0% of respondents are female
 - 44% are male
- **Age**
 - 12.8% - 15 to 24 years old
 - 64.3% - 25 to 64 years old
 - 22.9% - 65 or over
- **Education levels**
 - 45.2% of respondents have higher education
 - 17.7% of respondents with the first cycle or a lower education level.
- **Activity**
 - 47.3% are employed
 - 26.8% are retired
 - 14.4% are students
 - 9.0% are unemployed
- **Income**
 - 61.5% have relatively low net monthly household incomes (lower than €1500).
 - 5.5% of respondents have a net monthly household income higher than or equal to €4500.

Cluster 1

The Anti-Idyllic



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- (N=563, 30.6%)
 - Comparing to other clusters, this group tends to classify Portuguese rural areas more as an **anti-idyllic space** and as a **more physical place, as inhabited and as the context for economic activities.**
 - This group most likely associates **industry and construction** activities to rural areas rather than agricultural and forestry-related activities as well as leisure and recreation features.
 - Regarding the dimensions of rural areas, respondents within this cluster also identify **more often environmental degradation and folklore.**
 - This group tends to perceive **Portuguese rural areas as generally developed places, although they consider that Portuguese governments in the last decades have not acted in order to improve rural social and economic contexts.**
 - These respondents are generally older, retired and possess lower literacy levels.

Cluster 2

The Defeatists



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- (N=530, 28.8%)
 - The most likely to **describe the rural as disadvantaged** and as **the stage for agricultural and forestry-related activities**.
 - Although respondents within this cluster highlight the opportunities rural natural assets may open for tourism and leisure activities, they generally **perceive these areas as underdeveloped and backwards**, with agriculture being represented as abandoned, nature seen as degraded and population as aged.
 - **These negative representations persist regarding the future** of rural areas in Portugal, as respondents consider that these territories will continue to be abandoned and underdeveloped in the future, continuing to witness population losses and abandonment of economic activities.
 - **Respondents in this cluster are more likely to have at least one of their parents born in rural areas.**
 - They are relatively young (25 to 34 years old), tend to have high literacy levels and to be in the first stages of their professional careers.

Cluster 3

The Confident



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- (N=174, 9.5%)
 - Respondents who most often tend to represent rural areas as **places of development and positive transformation**, as well as spaces for recreation and leisure activities.
 - Although respondents within this cluster generally consider agriculture as an abandoned and neglected activity, they clearly **stress the abundance of natural resources and the assets Portuguese rural territories seem to have in order to promote processes of transformation and modernization concerning socioeconomic development.**
 - They are **extremely positive about rural areas' potential for diversification both in the present and in the future.**
 - They **use the Internet most often** as a source of information on rural matters.
 - They are also the **most enthusiastic in consuming rural food products, as well as in visiting rural areas with leisure and recreation purposes.**
 - Respondents within this cluster are mainly between 25 and 49 years old, are most often employed and possess high literacy levels.

Cluster 4

The Idealistic



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- (N=286, 15.6%)
 - They tend to have an **idyllic representation** of Portuguese rural areas and often qualify them as **places of wellbeing identifying at the same time a wide range of services and economic activities**.
 - Despite referring to the decline of rural population, they also highlight **rural landscapes, fauna and flora conservation as well as rural traditions, healthier food products and typical villages**.
 - They are distinct from the other clusters by also being the **most likely to consider Portuguese governments to have intervened in rural territories in a positive way** and by pointing out the **development of tourism and recreation activities as the most likely future for many rural areas in Portugal**.
 - Respondents in this cluster are generally younger (25 to 34 years old), students and persons that have completed secondary education.

Cluster 5

The Nature Lovers



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- (N=286, 15.6%)
 - They are more likely to represent rural areas **as natural landscapes and as possessing a variety of natural resources.**
 - They often **relate agriculture, forest and leisure activities to rural environments.**
 - Although they mention that **the government has had a little intervention** in several domains of the Portuguese rural areas , they perceive these areas mainly as **places for food production and for socioeconomic transformation as well as spaces with remarkable landscapes to sustain the development of nature tourism and leisure activities.**
 - They use a **wide range of sources of information** regarding rural areas' problems and issues – mainly television, newspapers and magazines, family, friends, schools and art.
 - They are generally young and possess **fewer connections with rural territories.**

Conclusions



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- There is not a fundamental contradiction between the social representations of the rural as idyllic and as deprived, since the signs of rural backwardness are frequently part of what people represent as the 'rural life' and therefore part of the rural idyll (Pospech, 2014).
- Apart from *The Anti-Idyllic*, all the other clusters identified in the analysis visibly portrayed the rural as a space mainly oriented towards consumption, mainly tourism and leisure consumption.
- It is also clear from the evidence analysed here that the rural, although still often identified with agriculture, is no longer an agricultural productive space.

Conclusions



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- There is a **relative lack of correspondence between sociodemographic characteristics and representations of rurality** as also pointed out by Halfacree (1995), although the author attributed it to the hegemonic character of the rural idyll notion.
- In the case of Portugal, **the idyllic notion – although important – is not the dominant one.**
- This may happen because of:
 - the diversity of Portuguese rural areas, despite the general common declining paths;
 - of the still strong liaisons Portuguese people have with rural territories
 - in spite of the influence of Estado Novo's 'ruralist' ideology in the older generations
 - as well as because of the long lasting political neglect of these areas that contributes to constructing a negative image of abandonment amongst the public.

Conclusions



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- The five clusters identified clearly demonstrate the **lack of homogeneity concerning social representations on the rural** in Portugal
- Furthermore they have also evidenced **some contradictions inside (and between) each cluster** regarding the social meanings of the rural
- Social representations of the rural in Portugal **very often place two dimensions together:**
 - on the one hand the rural as an abandoned, neglected and 'pre-modernity' space and,
 - on the other hand, the rural valued as an idyllic place precisely because of the persistence of the signs of its 'pre-modernity'.



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Tapadh leibh!
Thank you!
Obrigada!



RURAL MATTERS

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