Presentation Rural Landscapes Beyond the Idyll



1. Rural Landscapes from a Geographical Perspective

Geography as a discipline has purposely studied rural landscapes since at least its early modern period. In 1801, for instance, the founder of geographical science in its contemporary dimension, Alexander von Humboldt, when traveling in the Cauca region (currently South-Western Colombia, at that time belonging to the Viceroyalty of New Granada), described the process by which the Coconuco Indians had been expelled from the fertile plains – where the city of Popayán was founded by the Spanish conquerors - and forcibly displaced to the inclined slopes of the Puracé volcano. Agriculture was tough in these highlands because of the squalid soils and freezing climate, "where the frost kills their potatoes, cabbage and onion crops, while they watch how the most beautiful fields of wheat grow in their former lands of mild and more benign climate" (apud Avendaño, 2015: 19; our translation).

Narratives of this type expressively capture Humboldt's 'landscape style' (Ortega Cantero, 2004; Gómez Mendoza, 2008; López Silvestre, 2009), here, in reference to a rural area and, interestingly, describing a process of colonial dispossession. Importantly, in Humboldtian landscapes we not only find reflections on their material or tangible features (e.g. the contrast between the ravaged potato fields on the slopes and the fields of ripe wheat in the plains), but also the author's associated perceptions, feelings and even imaginations i.e. the open condemnation of colonial processes, including an apparently empathetic complicity with the feelings of the Coconuco Indians as they look back at their old lands from the mountain slopes.

The study of rural landscapes peaked in geography with the French Regional School in the early decades of the 20th century. During this period, regions, in particular in the case of France at the level of the pays (a supra-local scale that might be roughly translated into English as *county*), were described as possessing a particular rural landscape: this was assumed to consist of a characteristic pattern of elements perfectly adapted to the environmental conditions of the area (Buttimer, 1971; García Alvarez, 2006; Lencioni, 2009). On occasion, the term *rural landscape* would even be alluded to literally. For instance, in Vidal's ground-breaking *Tableau*, the different pays of the Garonne basin were described as follows:

The marls have by designation formed what are called 'strong lands' [terres fortes], lands of wheat which for more than two thousand years have never ceased to deliver their harvests. The fields dominate the physiognomy; they occupy the rounded knolls, run down the slopes, in places interrupted by small coppiced woods. The trees, especially in the bizarre form of pollard oaks, appear here and there [...]. (Vidal de la Blache, 1903 [ed. 1994]: 521; our translation)

Landscape characterisations of this kind were, for many decades, typical in geography and have been reappraised in the contemporary context in recently developed approaches, such as that of the "Landscape Character Assessment". This method, developed in the British Isles in the early 2000s, is concerned with "identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character", where character is understood as "[a] distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another" (Swanwick, 2002: 8). In this sense, it seems that the Vidalian school in its day framed a particular way of understanding landscapes, in particular rural landscapes.

Interestingly, several authors have evidenced that French rural landscapes as conceived by Vidal were not a simple material object waiting to be accurately described by the geographer, but an immanent national discourse about the identity of France (Ortega Cantero, 2005). However, this subtle, intangible reading was mainly non-explicit and perhaps derives from subsequent analysis. In any case, it informs us of the fact that landscapes cannot be solely conceived as material entities and that, frequently, they are used in national and nationalist narratives.

In the English-speaking world, the Vidalian approach is largely unknown despite Buttimer's (1971) book about the French Regional School; and, yet, a similar perspective was developed by Sauer (1925), who achieved considerable popularity in Anglophone geography. Sauer's landscape morphological method sought to understand the sequence of historical cultural layers that influence the configuration of the landscape conceived as a material construction. Rural landscapes were often seen to constitute the "perfect" type of landscape for such analysis, agricultural geography (crops, field borders, hedgerows, etc.) being central to the Sauerian approach to landscape studies. Sauer (1925: 48) quoting Humboldt, acknowledged that "The best geography has never disregarded the aesthetic qualities of landscape". However, he considered Humboldtian landscape as "beyond science", applying "the subjective approach"

that was understood as lying outside the remit of "geography as a positive science" (Sauer, 1925: 48).

For decades, rural landscapes were mainly considered through Vidalian and Sauerian lenses. However, from the 1970s onwards this dominant school(s) has undergone something of a reconfiguration. In many respects, although not always explicitly mentioning Humboldt, this move has meant revisiting the approach of the modern German geographer – i.e. embracing the intangible dimension of rural landscapes.

Radically, questioning inherited traditions has led to a denial of Sauer's (1925) way of thinking in the belief that landscapes can only be regarded in terms of subjectivities (i.e. imaginations, representations, discourses, etc.); accordingly, landscapes are not conceived as objects or physical entities per se. For instance, Brace (2003: 129) explains how, since the early 20th century, England is perceived as rural and harmonious, an ideal image that has come "to symbolise Englishness". In the United States (US), the notion of wilderness has framed the national identity; however, it is essentially a representation full of attached values, including spirituality (Tuan, 1974, 1996), rather than a materiality in itself – i.e. a pristine environment which has not been modified by humans (sic). Importantly, the notion of wilderness has been highly effective across the world to protect rural areas understood to be "natural", leading to a rampant trend of representational and planning conflicts (Depraz, 2008).

These movements defend the intangible dimension of landscape, arguing that it had been ignored in favour of the material and, allegedly, objective Sauerian perspective. However, the pendulum has maybe swung too far. Indeed, some authors fiercely contend that the tangible dimension of landscapes cannot be forgotten (Ortega Cantero, 2004). In short, it is hard to disagree with the following claim, written in reference to the Californian countryside, though it could be referring to almost anywhere: "Most commentators on the California landscape [...] have been little interested in showing the connection between both sides of the landscape [imagery and material reality], and how these sides are dependent on each other" (Mitchell, 1996: 17).

This brief overview has omitted to this point a critical consideration of the adjective rural in reference to landscape. One of the best known essays in this respect is perhaps Woods' (2011) Rural. The origins of the concept rural can be traced back to Antiquity, the word itself originating from Latin RUS, corresponding basically to what we understand as 'the countryside'. However, Woods (2011) shows how rural has not been systematically used in geography to define a specific arena, thus constituting an autonomous object of inquiry, until quite recently. He refers most notably to Clout's (1972) textbook as being representative of a turning point, but a decade before George was already publishing in French his work entitled *Précis de Géographie rurale* (George, 1963).

However, if for George (1963 [ed. 1974]: 17) "agricultural activity [is the] main foundation of rural life" (our translation), Clout (1972) was already noting that the rural was much more than just agriculture. This is a conclusion which appears obvious to us today, given that agriculture itself has been increasingly modified (Robinson, 2018). Woods (2011) shows that the rural cannot be taken for granted – that the rural space does not exist per se – including the representational and interpretational dimensions of the rural. The links between this conception of the rural with the conception of landscape described above are more than evident.

2. Rural Landscapes as Idylls?

According to Woods (2011: 21), "One of the most powerful and enduring ideas about the rural is that of the 'rural idyll'". The expression *rural idyll* is common in English, but is not readily translated to other realities beyond the Englishspeaking countries. Indeed, Bunce (1994) defined its scope in geographical terms as "Anglo-American", where "America" is understood as the US. However, the basic idea is present across the globe: the countryside is quite often perceived as a peaceful and virtuous landscape, opposed to the busy and problematic city, which has led to the idealisation of rural areas and a nostalgic vision.

Tuan (1974), Bunce (1994) and Short (2006) provide a genealogy of the rural idyll that is rooted in the British tradition. Looking beyond Antiquity and other historical periods that may be considered precedents, the apogee of the notion arrived in the late 19th-early 20th century. At that time, the rural idyll was consolidated as a nostalgic image of rural England, as a legacy inherited from the past that had to be preserved in the face of urban and industrial threats. Remarkably, this rural idyll was constructed from the urban (and suburban) world, meaning that too often it was an idea imposed from the outside on rural inhabitants (Woods, 2011).

In fact, Tuan (1974) describes the pendulum motion of historical views about the rural and the urban. In general, he shows how Western cultures have tended to idealise the cities in some periods, while rural areas have tended to be perceived with fear. Ironically, perhaps, in contemporary times, when cities have become dominant and rural areas have suffered intensive processes of depopulation as a result of the persistent rural flight, the rural idyll has (re-) emerged strongly and become widespread.

Woods (2011) describes variations of this rural idyll, quite commonly conveying different ideas of national identity. Tuan (1974), for example, had earlier noted these distinct manifestations in a description of Chinese representations. In Anglophone countries, the rural idyll created in England has been highly influential in Australia, for instance, where it often stands in stark contrast to Australia's own landscapes, but also in the New England region of the US (Bunce, 1994). In the Scandinavian countries, forests and lakes are often perceived as the quintessential landscape. In the case of the US, the wilderness notion introduced above can be considered a variation of the rural idyll with its specific characteristics and one that has been translated to many countries of the world thanks to movements of nature conservation and preservation and environmentalism during the 20th century (Depraz, 2008). In any case,

the "variations of the rural idyll", as they have been labelled by Bell (2006), are multiple and include contemporary views manifest in the media and the relevance attained by rural tourism, amongst others.

It is important not to forget however that the rural idyll is not only a representation, but that it also has a series of material consequences given that it encompasses powerful imaginations linked to marketing, promotion, etc. that influence decision-making (Halfacree, 2003). As a consequence, in the United Kingdom, for instance, the counter-urban demographic trend has been influenced by this idyll, resulting in very clear residential effects. The French equivalent of this counter-urban conceptualisation, the so-called renaissance rurale in the expression coined by Kayser (1990), logically, also has a representational dimension.

This special issue embraces an expressive set of plural perspectives on rural landscapes questioning the extent to which they can be considered as being in line with the rural idyll. We present different case studies in which a specific type of idealisation has taken place. Rural landscapes are understood as being both material and immaterial, though it is in this latter dimension that the idyllic construction is privileged.

3. The Preparation of this Special Issue

The collection of papers brought together here originates from a session held in the context of the 26th Annual Colloquium of the Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems of the International Geographical Union (CSRS IGU), which took place between the city of Santiago de Compostela, the municipality of A Veiga and the district of A Ulloa (Galicia), from 16th to 21st July 2018. This thematic session was entitled Bridging Gaps between Rural Imageries, and the "Grim Reality". With this title, the rural idyll was acknowledged as being one of the most relevant imageries affecting rural areas; however, at the same time, a specific reflection about the contradictions between this idyll and the "grim reality" was sought. More often than not, the material and immaterial realities of rural landscapes do not correspond, resulting in a gap that threatens to compromise rural sustainability.

One of the examples mentioned in the call for papers for this session was that of "conservation refugees"; a concept first coined by Dowie (2009). This line of research has repeatedly observed a pattern in which rural communities consisting of native peoples or poor farmers are being driven out because of the triumph of particular biocentric and urban-based landscape ideologies, which in turn have been converted into mainstream planning and conservation practices. Indeed, the organisers decided to devote one of the three opening keynote addresses to a discussion of conservation refugees in Latin America, applying a framework developed in the US to understand several areas of rural Brazil. This address has subsequently been published by Hoefle (2020).

This session – together with another focused on rural multifunctionality - attracted the greatest interest, each with 13 presentations. These presentations were published, following a peer review process, as short chapters (with a 3,000 word limit) in the book edited by Paül et al. (2018). The possibility of converting these contributions into papers suitable for journal publication was offered and, eventually, they were sent to a Spanish journal listed in SCOPUS and peer-reviewed according to that journal's guidelines (e.g. by doubling the word limit of the texts previously published as book chapters).

This procedure for publication had previously been discussed in Núi Sam mountain (Vietnam) in April 2017 amongst the CSRS IGU Steering Committee members with the aim of enhancing the dissemination of papers in the host country's indexed academic journals, given that in many countries the scholarly assessment of scientific activity is dependent on publishing in ranked journals of this kind. This explains how this special issue came to be published in Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica. Based on the quality of the contributions, ten authors presenting papers at the aforementioned thematic session were considered as being potentially eligible and pre-invited to submit a journal article before the conference (in late June 2018). Five of the authors eventually submitted a paper in early 2019, plus a sixth author who presented a work at a different session of the conference.

Given that the overall number of papers was low for a special issue of Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica, Joan Tort (University of Barcelona) suggested to the original editors of the special issue, Valerià Paül and Juan M. Trillo, that contributions from an ongoing research project on rural landscapes might also form part of the publication. The project, with code number CSO2015-65787-C6-4-P, was funded by the Spanish Government for the period 2016–2019 and was devoted to research into heritage and landscape in specific rural areas of Spain in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage conventions. Eventually, three papers based on work undertaken in the project have been included in this special issue, following, like the other six, the journal's peer review process during the course of 2019 and early 2020.

4. An Overview

The first three contributions to this special issue refer to representations of rural landscapes: two focus specifically on the rural idyll in the British Isles, while the third studies a community in the Argentinean Andes. The central set of articles in this collection of papers then turns to consider rural landscapes understood mainly in terms of their material realities. These three articles present Spanish case studies, the dominant approach being the recognition of distinct historical cultural layers in what we might consider an application of the Sauerian method. However, the intangible dimension of the landscape is always immanent. The final three papers focus on the challenges of planning in rural landscapes, critically mobilising the notion of heritage. The case studies here include landscapes in Belgium, France and Spain. In terms of language, five contributions are in Spanish, three are in English and one is in Catalan, representing the three languages accepted for submissions to Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica.

The first contribution, by Martin Phillips, Darren Smith, Hannah Brooking and Mara Duer, recalls that the academic notion of the rural idyll emerged in England in the early 1960s linked to Ray Pahl's observation of the fact that some of the middle-classes were moving out of the cities and into rural areas; a process that would later receive the names of *counter-urbanisation* and/ or rural gentrification, although Pahl himself did not use these terms. The case study reported in this first paper takes Hertfordshire as its focus, and compares Pahl's research in the 1960s with the findings of a survey administered by the authors. The results show that new forms of rural gentrification have emerged, including a so-called rural super-gentrification exercised by households with very high incomes. Interestingly, the authors find that rural gentrification has similarities with urban gentrification, including displacement – i.e. people are moved out from a property, the property is rebuilt and becomes the residence of wealthier gentry. In short, an immaterial construct affecting rural areas (i.e. rural idyll) can have a material consequence (i.e. displacement).

Next, Mary Cawley discusses how the rural idyll influences return migration in Ireland. A sample of Irish emigrants who returned home to a place with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants (understood as rural in Ireland) is used to reflect on their experiences of living overseas, their motives for returning and their experiences following their return. References to the rural idyll emerge in the study, in particular, among those considering the upbringing of their children, typically linking it with specific visions of relaxing family life in rural areas. However, some have had to migrate again in order to find suitable employment and an income – something they could not find in rural Ireland or because of a perceived lack of essential services. In this respect, specific measures are required to retain larger numbers of emigrants back in these rural areas perceived as possessing the attributes of the rural idyll.

The next paper, by Cornelia Steinhäuser, studies the intangible dimension of a remote rural landscape in Nazareno (province of Salta, in the Argentinean Andes, bordering with Bolivia). Instead of adopting the vision of the outsider, the author acknowledges the internal representation that the community makes of this landscape. The article reports that the indigenous group inhabiting Nazareno has a strong cultural identity, which has led it to take the decision of implementing a policy to shun tourism – in marked contrast with the neighbouring valley of Quebrada de Humahuaca (province of Jujuy, Argentina), designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, which has experienced a banalisation of its landscape. In the area of the case study, the author identifies affective, surviving links established by the community with the Pachamama ('Mother Earth'). In this sense, the Andean way of life of sumak kawsay (buen vivir in Spanish, good living in English) is a possible option for this community. However, economic change is afoot linked to the expanding market-economy that is increasingly impacting on a landscape of subsistence farming carried out on the highland slopes and in the narrow valleys. The paper explores the very notion of the rural idyll: is this a Western, and particularly Anglo-American, construction that makes little sense in other cultural contexts?

The first contribution in the set of studies examining Spanish rural landscapes focuses on the historical processes that have influenced an area's material appearance. The authors are César López Leiva, Sergio González Ávila and Ramón Elena Rosselló and they study the case of the mountains and valleys of Camero Nuevo, in La Rioja. Since medieval times, the area has been devoted to pastureland and transhumant livestock farming, with crops being located primarily in the valleys. Over the last two centuries, and especially since the mid-20th century, processes of afforestation have been intense. In 1996, the area was designated a Natural Park (Parque Natural de la Sierra Cebollera) and has since attracted a considerable number of visitors. The authors see this as an opportunity to re-value the rural landscape of Camero Nuevo, but they decry the lack of any in-depth understanding of its associated historical and natural heritage. The preservation of the area they believe needs to take into account, on the one hand, that the currently dominant forest landscape is a product of historical processes and, on the other, that active forest management is needed to maintain its character.

The following article, by Jorge Hermosilla Pla, Miguel Antequera Fernández and Emilio Iranzo García, examines Cortes de Pallás, in the Valencian Country. Here the landscape under study constitutes a traditional irrigation system that, unlike other examples in the inland areas of the Valencian Country, has not been abandoned. In morphological terms, at least, it has been well preserved, in part thanks to municipal management. However, most of the plots of land (approximately, three quarters of the total) that might potentially receive waters from the dense ditch network have been abandoned, while the remaining quarter are cultivated in the main by part-time farmers and retirees. The sustainability of this inherited landscape is clearly ambiguous. The authors argue that Valencians tend to have a positive appreciation of landscapes of this type, considering them heritage from the past, but this does not guarantee their preservation.

The last paper in this block, by Josep M. Panareda, describes a peri-urban rural landscape in the metropolitan region of Barcelona: the Tordera Delta. This area used to be prime productive farmland devoted to horticulture, but the impact of encroachment linked to the growth of Barcelona at the metropolitan scale has been severe in recent years. This process has seen the introduction of a wide range of manufacturing, residential and tourism uses (above all, the latter, with huge tracts of land being turned over to permanent campgrounds and holiday parks in the delta's coastal fringe). In the 1930s, this landscape was perceived to possess a notable aesthetic quality, but the processes of recent times have resulted in its degeneration in the terms identified by scholars of peri-urban agriculture. Moreover, increasing competition for the waters of the Tordera River, combined with intense natural coastal dynamics and the threat of the anthropogenic sea-level rise, pose significant challenges to the physical sustainability of the delta itself.

The next article is also concerned with peri-urban agriculture, although it adopts a perspective that is more obviously centred in landscape planning, an approach that is shared with the last two contributions in this special issue. Sylvain Rode, Albert Santasusagna, Joan Tort and Maria Teresa Vadrí compare different irrigated orchards with direct links to both a city and a river: Horta de Lleida, linked to Lleida and the Segre River; Hortes de Santa Eugènia, linked to Girona and the Ter River; and Horts de Sant Jaume, linked to Perpinyà (Perpignan in French) and the Tet River. Urban planning in these three Catalan case studies is analysed, considering how the plans address the complex interface formed by cities, farmlands and watercourses. The study finds that the respective planning tools have been effective in providing protection; however, strategic planning procedures – vision-oriented, prospective development processes – are found to be largely absent. In short, while planning exists, management has been overlooked. The three case studies also have in common the fact that they examine areas that are perceived as having a range of different heritage, environmental, agricultural and recreational values; yet, on occasions, these multiple visions lead to conflicts in planning.

The second paper devoted to the planning of rural landscapes, by Rocío Silva and Víctor Fernández Salinas, examines the contradictory policies adopted in the Punta Nati area, on Minorca (Balearic Islands); an island that has shown a great commitment to the development of a comprehensive sustainable project associated with the designation of a Biosphere Reserve. The area boasts outstanding environmental, heritage and landscape value, which has, however, merely generated a profusion of norms that are ultimately conflicting in nature. The study focuses on the identification of stakeholders (environmentalists, archaeologists, etc.) on the assumption that social perceptions are essential when seeking to manage landscapes. Recent discussions about the installation of solar panels highlights a conflict between stakeholders defending different perspectives: from an environmental viewpoint, the renewable energy project seems adequate, but from the perspective of the cultural landscape dimension, it has been contested. In contrast, the erection of windmills has a significant impact on the landscape but the grounds for rejecting the wind farm is based on environmental policies that give priority to bird protection schemes.

In the last contribution, Serge Schmitz and Laurent Bruckmann analyse the perceptions and uses of the Boucle de l'Ourthe in the Neupré-Esneux landscape; the first and only grand site paysager to be designated in Wallonia. There is an inherent conflict associated with this protected landscape, given that the area includes two hamlets, pasture lands and three active family farms; yet, most of its users associate it with notions of leisure and a natural spot that should remain unchanged, a sort of "wilderness". Moreover, protection of the landscape is based on the attribution of exceptional heritage values conferred by scientists, underlining what are primarily its historic value and natural features, while failing to take into account the opinions of local people and the site's visitors. Potentially, the conflict seems only likely to gain in momentum, with tourist numbers set to increase given that designation acts as a marketing label. The authors recommend a tool for the area that encompasses attempts to preserve landscape values, management (including farming) and effective regulation of tourism.

In addition to the nine papers, this special issue includes three book reviews. The first, by Valerià Paül, examines Scott et al.'s (2019) textbook on

rural planning. The second, by Giacomo Zanolin, reviews a book by Agnoletti (2018) about the history of forest landscapes in Italy. Finally, Martín Agrelo examines Trillo and Lois' (2019) collection of papers on landscapes and national identity in the Iberian Peninsula.

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