The politics of place: Official, intermediate and community discourses in depopulated rural areas of Central Spain. The case of the Riaza river valley (Segovia, Spain)

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This paper provides theoretical and methodological arguments to study the politics of space in small marginal and depopulated areas of Spain. The case for research is the Riaza river valley in the province of Segovia.

Usually the analysis of rural space (and the geographical space in general) provides opposing presentations: vertical, between global and local or horizontal between urban and rural or in community–out of community. Fewer contributions adopt as an objective the configuration of spatial categories *into* a small area. This contribution differentiates the politics of small rural areas into three main levels or spheres: (1) official, (2) unofficial or intermediate and (3) community or spontaneous. Between these levels there is conflict but also collaboration, founded on the specific nature of the situation or problem and the agents and actors involved in each one. The methods are mainly qualitative with complementary documentary sources (local newspapers, official documents from regional and environmental administration). The interview program presents two phases: (1) with people involved in the decision-making process at an area level and (2) with representative figures (in professional and social term) in the study area. The conclusions confirm the existence of different parallel and segmented discourses in each level and also between levels of decision-making.

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1. Introduction

In the recent geographical literature it is increasingly common for space to be replaced by analytical categories such as nature, culture or the community, and its relationships with rules and regulations of social activities. These not only correspond to relationships between individuals but also between institutions or agencies (Milbourne, 2003). This has led, in the context of rural geography, to research into reduced areas (Cloke and Jones, 2001; Holloway, 2002; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993), based on socio-spatial or socio-political processes, of a spatially-limited nature (Edwards and Woods, 2004). It has also enabled structural conformation in decision-making to be explained more in association with communities, the landscape and cultural values of small areas and has facilitated qualitative analytical approaches (Davies and Dwyer, 2007; Edwards et al., 2001).

Research linked to small rural spaces has revealed two main levels of power relationships: official and community usually

linked to conflictive positions (Woods, 1998, 2003; Cloke et al., 1998), with little evidence of a fluctuating structure between them or the existence of intermediate levels. Nor do we commonly find viewpoints that combine consensus relationships with conflicting relationships between different levels of decision-making. Hence, in this perspective, space usually operates at two different levels: one official and one community, but both associated with different formulations and identities of a same space. In any case, these would correspond to one top level and one lower level, but between them one could argue that fluctuating and permeable levels exist, with these levels constantly transforming or being redefined with time.

In Spain, depopulated inland areas are suitable spaces for this type of analysis. In these, traditional structures of decision-making processes have been dismantled to adapt to new situations or have been rearticulated in new socio-political scenarios and economic structures, to which the population remaining in the area can even, become adapted. Depopulation and its spatial and environmental repercussions have been much studied from different perspectives and there is a long-standing tradition of these kinds of studies in Spain, although usually linked to scientific approaches of a positive nature, associated with demographic data (Pinilla et al., 2008). As

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a result, these types of spaces can often be considered as rather undifferentiated compared to other spaces (agents, processes or structures) of larger entity.

In the context considered here, the main objective of this article is to study how the politics and values associated with a specific rural space (mainly social, natural and cultural) can acquire different formulations in the form of socio-political processes and discourses that help to configure *intra* levels of decision-making. These differentiate between communities and can conflict with spaces delimited by public administrations and with their own political rationalities of larger spatial scope. This can clearly be observed in inland spaces in Spain, where a clear process of depopulation has dismantled social structures, conditioned the management of public policies and transformed the political-administrative microstructures that are still today in a process of recomposition. In this context, it can be considered that multiple discourses could be developed about the same place or places. Hence, three different types of discourses can be identified: official, intermediate and community, which can be assumed to interact and change together.

2. Place and community in the micropolitics of the (new) conformation of the countryside

In the framework of rural geography, research into space and community has had some degree of continuity since the eighties (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004). In this context, the community category, as also occurs with the place category, or that of nature, are changing, as relationships are developing with a system of values that is dominant in society, but to a variable degree, and is also notably changing in relation to each social group (Daniels, 1992; O'Keeffe, 2007; Panelli and Welch, 2005; Kleese, 2002; Murdoch, 2006a). Therefore, each researcher adopts a personal approach to their studies. The same place can be studied from different perspectives and in this way the researcher himself can play an important role in the co-production of knowledge (Woods, 2003). According to Murdoch and Pratt (1993), the rurality can be characterized by the social construction of power relationships, especially in studies of place. The construction of these power relationships depends both on the nature of the discourses and also on the academic tradition.

This perspective of critical social and cultural geographers' results in complex associations being formulated among place, its measurement and power relationships (Cloke and Thrift, 1994; Liepins, 2000; Nelson, 2002; Cloke, 1997; Murdoch, 2006b:182). From this point of view, up to four large interpretative lines can be distinguished: (1) Studies linked to the social representation of space, based on spatially localised discourses. Different images of a place are developed associated with a social use (Harper, 1987; Nelson, 2001; Holloway, 2004; Mahon, 2007) and the social representation of alternative groups (Halfacree, 1993, 1999; Little, 1999; Meijering et al., 2007; Mahon, 2007; Cartier and Lew, 2005; Holloway, 2001). Some recent works from this perspective place social representation between spatial characteristics and daily life in rural areas (Gibson and Davidson, 2004; Halfacree, 2006). Halfacree (2006), following on from Lefebvre (1991), distinguishes three types of rural places: one associated with spatial practices linked to formal representations of a unified space; another linked to signification and legitimating processes, in which tensions arise between the different elements of the rural space; finally, a third one is associated with elements of daily life, and is characterized by its incoherent and chaotic nature (2) Socio-cultural approaches to political power in small areas. The community, management of nature and management of the surrounding space are understood through cultural and social conflicts (Stanley et al., 2005;Marsden,

1999). This perspective has also had considerable influence in the latest developments of rural geography (Cloke et al., 1998; Woods, 1997, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Winchester and Rofe, 2005). In this area, the distinction linked to Foucault's line of thought between micro- power situations and power institutions (Crampton and Elden, 2007) is relevant, related, on the one hand, to a distribution of power in a given situation – changing in time – and to more permanent structures of power – especially institutional ones (Crampton and Elden, 2007). This argument tends to criticise the static nature of studies of the community and supports an interpretative route that associates the community with local power. These analyses are largely influenced by the Weberian tradition in relation to community politics and confer considerable importance to relationships between bureaucratic institutions and the people who live in that community (Gray, 1990a,b; Woods, 1998). (3) Studies more closely linked to the relationships between place and community. From this perspective, the specific space of a community is not a product of its social relationships, but is rather an important element in the creation, maintenance or transformation of relationships of social dominion in a place, and in the socio-cultural construction of its limits (Cloke and Jones, 2001; Cloke et al., 2000; Holloway, 2002). Some people or social groups with more power than others establish what is suitable for a specific place or community, including its limits. To not accept what is considered suitable is to place ones self outside the established regulations. Using an expression of Bourdieu, a dominant "lifestyle" begins to take shape (Bordieu, 2005). They approach this subject from the perspective of relationships between the place and identity in the context of recent cultural tendencies, essentially through concerns about place, identity, geographical knowledge of the medium and the cultural politics (Cloke, 2006). In this way, they articulate distinctions about the place linked to cultural events, identities and political discourses. (4) Another final viewpoint is associated with analyses more strictly linked to place – as a spatial category – which try to elucidate micro strategies, often linked to community–nature relations, in relation to clearly dual structures of geographical analysis (Latour, 2005). This perspective has been perfected by recurring to so-called defence strategies of the place that can be structured differently in each area linked to political–spatial processes resulting from multiple interactions (Massey, 2005:103; Escobar, 2001; Halseth, 1996; Woods, 2007), and would also have different time rhythms (Massey, 2005:141), but would especially be linked to conflictive relationships, particularly in socio-environmental studies in rural areas (Halseth, 1996; Barlow and Cocklin, 2003; Dirlik, 1998). This would acknowledge a differential behaviour for each community, within a specific natural and cultural framework, which would repeatedly try to arrange itself by opposing negotiation processes (Cloke et al., 1998; Commins, 2004; Masuda and Garvin, 2008).

Modern approaches in human and rural geography place emphasis on the complex nature of the space (Cloke et al.,1998; Soja, 1996; Cloke, 2003; Whatmore, 2002), with different and multiple dimensions linked to the promotion of selected identities, which have been used in recent case studies (Panelli et al., 2008). These approaches adopt a pluralistic view of a place (Neal and Walters, 2006; Massey, 2005), and, at least partially, support a route of analysis focused on many superimposed planes, as well as permitting the consideration of multiple structured spaces and the parallel duration of other non-structured ones, with multiple relationships between both levels, producing complex scales or identities of power (Edwards et al., 2001; Rutherford, 2007; Woods, 2007).

In any case, it is possible to argue that a place is a specific location of confluence both of agents and of people (Panelli and Welch, 2005), but can be designed on multiple parallel planes,