



Farmers in remote rural areas: The worth of permanence in the place



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ABSTRACT

The drivers of change in rural economies and societies in the global north and their different presentations at the place level are commonly recurring topics in recent rural studies.

In this context, it is possible to discuss the concept of rural resilience associated with the combination of processes of restructuring and resistance. Restructuring implies different processes of change, and resistance suggests permanence. Change and permanence have different forms of presentation: place-spatial, community and individual.

In this context, the present study examines the strategies of farmers in selected remote rural areas of Spain; with the purpose of exploring the different processes of adaptation at an individual level, founded on economic and non-economic (moral) decisions. The methodology is mainly qualitative: biographical interviews with farmers living in remote rural areas.

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Introduction

Recently, in the context of geographical literature on rural restructuring there has been renewed interest in the study of remote rural areas from different perspectives: changes in agriculture (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011), immigration of urban origin (Bosworth and Willett, 2011), setting up of small businesses (Young, 2010). This tendency reveals an increasing complexity in this area, not only due to the effects of globalization processes, but also because of the behaviour of different rural actors in the place. Indeed, from these areas, “otherness” can be addressed from social or sociocultural perspectives that take on a new relevance in these types of spaces and reveal their strategies of resistance in the place. Traditionally, “the others” have been attributed only a residual social consideration compared to other dominant social groups in a given place (Little, 1999). In remote rural areas it is necessary to reformulate the category of “the others” in relation to the place of residence and living. All the residents in remote rural areas would initially be included in this definition of “the others”, because of their spatial location. But this tendency has shifted the focus towards rural otherness, towards rurality instead of towards farming, despite the close dependence of the social continuity of many of these areas on the farmers.

Traditionally, in remote rural areas a sectorial and professional view of the farmer was established, instead of regarding him in a moral, cultural or human light. The sectorial perspective often includes productive and environmental references to the farming

or rural area in relation to its impoverished nature, especially associated with the establishment of limitations or conditioning factors to production. The professional perspective is based on limitations of the farming activity derived from the spatial location. This perspective has dominated the regulation and institutional policy in these areas and has also been prominent in some of the geographical literature (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998).

A social, cultural, moral or ethical image of the farmer, from the rural geography perspective is linked to the (deficient) conditions of daily life and the interactions between social and community life and development of their activity, which have become inter-linked. This perspective has been secondary in two ways from a geographical perspective which, on the one hand, focuses more closely on rural otherness in remote rural area and, on the other, on the farmer’s professional image.

From this sociocultural and ethical perspective of the farmer, this article analyses the discourses and strategies of the farmer who has continually resided in remote and depopulated rural areas. The aim of this work is to study the processes of change associated with farmers (people) living in these areas and the resistance strategies they have adopted to continue residing there in a setting of impoverished communities and altered and marginalised spaces.

Farmers living in remote and depopulated rural areas

According to Morris (2004: 242), rural geographers have shown little interest in the social and cultural approach to farming, and have tended to focus more on political economy approaches (Morris and Evans, 2004). However, in spite of a near neglect of the cultural perspective of farming (and farmers) in the literature; there has been interest in the study of actors (groups) and marginalised

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spaces, from the very first proposals (Little, 1999), in an attempt to foment the study of rural otherness. The problems of marginality (social and spatial) are associated with individual or group trajectories, based on their distinctive traits (Cloke, 1997). In other words, any one individual can be marginalised in different ways and to variable extents as a result of their personal, spatial and temporal characteristics (Little, 1999: 438). Hence, the cultural aspect of the others, can deconstruct and even individualise responses to processes of change and marginalisation, even among farmers. Hence, a cultural perspective can also be valuable to study some resistance strategies of specific farming groups, instead of the usual discourses that focus more on political power. Rural geography studies based on qualitative analysis focus more on the ethical or moral relationships between farmers and the farm, especially in animal husbandry (e.g. Riley, 2011) or the space of the farm (Holloway, 2002; Convery et al., 2005) and on the farmers' implementation of environmental regulations (Burton et al., 2008). These studies have highlighted the importance of a cultural approach in the creation of farmers' identities and in their relationship with the sociocultural construction of given places. However, very limited research has focused on farmers in remote rural areas.

Rural actors who live in remote rural areas can be studied from the perspective of the processes of change that affect these areas, but also in relation to their resistance or adaptation to the effects of these processes. Processes of change are more clearly associated with the perspective of consumption rather than production. This explains why more attention focuses on new actors in these areas than on the transformation or adaptation of traditional ones. New populations arriving in these remote rural areas are usually associated with consumer activities, mainly tourism, while the traditional actors are mainly farmers. Hence, a process of social transformation has been witnessed and also a decrease in the farmers' power or influence, in the context of the development of a more pluralistic society (Woods, 1997). However, this same perspective has generated a homogeneous image of farmers, as just another social group, and the sociocultural study of farmers as a heterogeneous group has been completely obscured (Morris and Evans, 2004). One of the main processes of agricultural change in these areas is the decline and, also the transformation of agriculture and the loss of farming jobs, which manifests in a variety of ways, and at variable rhythms, depending on the regions concerned and generates different types of farmers, not only as a response to global processes, but also as an adaptation to more local circumstances.

However, one of the resistance strategies (Keith and Pile, 1997) actually corresponds to the permanence of some farmers in a place and adaptation to processes of change. It is notoriously difficult to draw a dividing line between (marginalised) spaces and groups and these should be tackled from a fluid perspective that can connect spaces and behaviours of the social groups residing in the spaces. It is, therefore, essential to incorporate a feeling of territorial fluidity and flexibility in discourses of resistance, to determine their spatial connection (Slater, 1997). With this approach, in the context of marginalised spaces, one can talk about spatial resistance closely linked to the social dimension of the residents in these areas, which would result in the generation of resistance spaces (Keith and Pile, 1997). There would also be an important influence of the space, environment, landscape or place in the generation of resistance processes or in the construction of others (Philo, 1998). In the case of farmers, these resistance processes would be associated with so-called professional politics of resistance, which include a broad range of aspects including the continued existence of the community, the (symbolic) value of the space, family roots, agricultural policy regulations and the characteristics of the farm. These resistance processes have a long-lasting nature, associated with a gradual and relative spatial marginalisation and a transformation

of the social and professional position in the context of the social community.

However, the processes of change and resistance in rural areas that affect some farmers take place in a significantly transformed social and community context, linked to a continual loss of population that reduces the size of the communities and, in many cases, affects their traditions and customs. This can result in, at least, a seasonal breakdown of the working and residential space and a marked mobility.

The sum of these processes of change and resistance in a place can result in the development of processes of resilience by farmers in marginalised and depopulated areas, and the gradual adaptation in the long-term to a new way of life and a new professional strategy. This is characterised by an increase in the size of the farm and a decrease in the number of farmers, within the context of a reduction or destruction of rural communities and a significant increase in daily or seasonal mobility. In rural studies, resilience has usually been placed within the context of the behaviour of the rural community. Since there is no consensus about its employment or measurement it has been used as an ad hoc concept for the specific case at hand. Hence, from the perspective of population geography, it has been used in association with the decision (or not) to migrate in the context of specific communities in remote rural areas (Perez et al., 2010; Schmalzbauer, 2011), associated with their socio-environmental aspects (McManus et al., 2012), permanence of the identity based on communal tenancy of the land (Barnes, 2009), local control and ownership of land (Varguese et al., 2006). More elaborate approaches have attempted to associate rural geography of resilience with sustainability (Franklin et al., 2011) or multifunctionality of the community (Wilson, 2010) or with the resilience of communities and rural populations to social and institutional changes in a US context (Brown and Schafft, 2011). In the present study, resilience is associated with permanence or resistance of farming professionals in a place or farm, by the adaptation of their daily lives and the characteristics of the farm to the different processes of change over a long period of time. Resilience is understood as the final stage of this process of permanence that achieves a complex adaptation to a life and territory with a reduced population and density. The processes of change and resistance coexist, the former associated with transformations and new dynamics that generate losses (or gains) and the second associated with adaptation and spatial mobility. Processes of resilience correspond to the sum of all the adaptations to processes of change and resistance in a place, and are specific to each farmer (Fig. 1). The sum of these processes of change and resistance produce a new situation of resilience or stability with a new setting clearly adapted to the depopulation situation, characterised by daily or seasonal mobility, reduced number of farmers, the amalgamation of farms, a loss or important change in the community spirit and a disappearance or drastic reduction in rural communities. As explained, resilience is associated with the rural community in an undifferentiated way. In this study, more attention is paid to the individual, in this case, the farmer, who adopts specific decisions in a changing environment. Not all individuals in the same community or in the same socio-economic group will react in the same way to profoundly changing situations. Hence, the intention here is to deconstruct rurality and resilience.

Methodology and study areas

According to Morris and Evans (2004), the analysis of discourses can be used to study the lifestyle and complexity of some groups of farmers and to study strategies of resistance and permanence or resilience. Oral histories have also been used to study the different farming cultures and processes of change in farming and the

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