

Sustainable Geographical Changes in Rural Areas—Social, Environmental and Cultural Dimensions

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1. Introduction

The geographical debate on the processes of transformation of rural areas has considerable continuity and permanently generates new research questions in the global North and in the global South. This debate maintains large processes or axes of transformation that have multiple spatial disparities at micro, meso- and global scales.

The geographical debate is multidimensional and supports various perspectives:

1. Sociocultural, which relates to the dynamics of change in communities, the emergency processes of new social groups, the renewed role of women or the new geographical identities of the countryside or rurality;
2. The new environmental perspective encompasses from the great geographical debates associated with political ecology in the global South to the unequal integration of agri-environmental policies or the environmental redefinition of rural areas by Western populations;
3. From the perspective of political geography, rural areas now have a renewed symbolic value in national identity and politics, which is expressed in the changing position of the rural core and peripheral areas.

With this call for papers, from the beginning of 2021, it was intended to summarize the state-of-the-art developments in a research area with a long academic tradition, but also with increasing complexity due to the plurality of results and approaches. This Special Issue supports quality research from a mainly geographical perspective that integrates multiple dimensions into a regional or local area and, on the other hand, also encourages research associated with one of the three dimensions: socio-cultural (also socioeconomic), environmental or political.

Two years after starting this Special Issue, it is necessary to delve into the heterogeneity of the various academic trends and the multiple rural realities across the world. There is a fragmentation of tendencies or approaches [1] in the global North as the plurality of academic orientations widens and, in parallel, relatively autonomous theoretical orientations emerge in the global South. In the global North, rural geographic theory has been dominated since the 1990s by political economy and socio-cultural approaches and more recently by the moral and ethical dimension of new ruralities and the rural emotions or by the (re)materialization of rural geographic studies. In addition, it is necessary to account for renewed attempts of global explanations of the processes of rural restructuring that connect global processes and local realities across the world, where the orientations of political economy, socio-cultural orientations and even the most recent moral and emotional approaches to rurality are synthesized and amalgamated. There would be a rural global equivalent to a global city, which would allow a global theoretical argument for the multiple regional and even local manifestations of rural processes. However, it is necessary to point out that in certain regional areas of the global South, relatively autonomous theoretical arguments emerge that seek to provide an analytical explanation to the geographical realities of their own mesorealities. In this regard, in Latin America, there are theoretical approaches of a longer tradition that revolve around the concept of ‘new rurality’. More recently, relatively



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autonomous analytical orientations have been generated to explain the intense changes promoted by the restructuring processes in rural China regions than in the post-communist stage (more classic) with some notable transformations associated with socio-economic reconstruction after a process of urbanization and a return to the countryside, better planned for the political system than in Western countries [2].

Consequently, it seems that a competition is emerging between global theoretical arguments born in the core of the global North and regional explanatory models, which respond to specific realities of certain rural areas of the global South. A post-colonial model rebalanced in the academic thesis?

In addition to an essentially theoretical contribution to the emergence of new autonomous arguments in the academic context of the global South [1], the three empirical and spatially localized contributions reflect transformation processes in the Global South in African countries such as Uganda [3], Asian countries such as China [2] or Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia [4].

2. Articles

The different contributions to the Special Issue of Sustainability have different methodological approaches to the processes of transformation, change and rural restructuring: (1) the qualitative one, based on a micro case study and development of geo-ethnographic techniques, with questions about the value for other areas of their conclusions; (2) the quantitative one based on the analysis of numerous townships in a region through the econometric analysis of statistical data generated by the public administration, a characteristic that limits the conclusions and their causal validity; (3) mixed or hybrid approaches that combine the analysis of surveys designed ad hoc and carried out in the context of the research to resolve the issues and questions that the research wishes to resolve, which are subsequently analyzed through descriptive statistics, but which have the value with unique data obtained through the research-oriented process itself. These data are improved upon with more open interviews with key informants in the area to adequately contextualize the meaning of the cold statistical data.

The contributions to this Special Issue make it possible to highlight the existence of parallel multi-scale processes of change in the global South that can lead to (cultural) homogenization, (economic) modernization and (social) integration, but which highlight the renovation tensions between modernity and tradition at the micro and meso-levels. The different studies reveal the potential of analysis in small worlds such as households, intra-community or township or of large regional interpretations. In fact, there are macro, meso- and micro approaches in the different studies of the Special Issue of Sustainability, but they are not used in a comprehensive way in every study.

The intra-community conflict in rural areas stands out for its relevance. The community is a local space of tensions, ruptures, transformations, but also encounters with consensus, which uniquely reflect the complexities of processes of restructuring in a global perspective located in remote spaces, border areas or under development geographical scenarios.

The contributions to the special issue also highlight the different terminology for the definition of the phenomena: revitalization, transformation and consumption development, with its due theoretical support, in addition to the change and restructuring terminology coined in the global North. An example is the use of the word displacement, which in the global North is used as an argument in processes of rural gentrification, where urban newcomers displace traditional local populations, although there are current processes of emergence of the second generations of newcomers, or in the global South where it appears linked to the massive encounter of populations of foreign refugees with local native populations in wide border areas.

The study on Malaysia is based on the analysis of a hamlet, Telok Melano, of 55 households located in a relatively isolated border area until the recent construction of a highway [4]. The object of study is the confrontation of the processes of modernization of a State and its socio-cultural impact in a small rural community that had maintained its

customs and its own dialect due to its isolation and geographical remoteness. The use of the household concept that implies and brings together the family and their home and the data that originates from studies on agrarian geography is relevant. In this type of micro case study orientation, the value of its conclusions responds to the at least regional or meso-significance and originality of the case selection, the rural community of Telok Melano. The modernization of communications and infrastructures promotes processes of socioeconomic and labor transformation by gradually abandoning agricultural and livestock activities by local tourist businesses. However, in this context, there are resistance phenomena that seek to preserve the essence of the cultural, religious and linguistic legacy of the traditional rural community. In this sense, there would be two circuits at the micro level: one that hybridizes at the socioeconomic level with the outside world, and the other that resists the processes of de- or acculturation originating in the context of modernization process, but that in many cases may have the same protagonists, even in the same households.

The contribution located in the border area of Uganda that is only concerned with Sudan aims to explore the extensive processes of displacement and migration of sub-Saharan refugees and the processes of rural restructuring and transformation that they generate in the host rural areas of Uganda [4]. The refugee population is practically equivalent to the native local population. It is pointed out that the rupture and emergence of the new community networks and structures is a crucial feature of displacement. In this way, the micro level of analysis is very relevant: communities, households and even individuals. This paper highlights the socioeconomic (and cultural) opportunities and limitations of the refugees in the close encounter with the host community and the key role of governmental politics. The specific contribution of this paper is the protected displacement impact in the new -and appropriate- spatial and political context and their host communities. Ultimately, the resilient and sustainable relocation of large numbers of refugees depends on the new spatial context, and the appropriate social, institutional and policy frameworks [4]. However, the precise study of these displacement processes also needs new theoretical orientations and renewed points of view with respect to the usual ones in the global North or in other areas of the global South where refugee policy is territorially, politically and socially associated with a vision of conflict.

The study carried out on the 1233 townships of the Gansu province of China [2] is based on agricultural censuses. This contribution establishes interesting suggestions for the rural China revitalization program in the context of global interpretations emanating from the country itself to theoretically frame the intense restructuring processes of rural China. This contribution uses the concept of consumption development as the axis of change for rural communities in underdevelopment rural areas. The authors themselves indicate that 'rural revitalization has become a major political concern in China as a result of economic transition and changes in urban-rural interaction' [2] (p. 1). The rural vitalization or China rural revitalization policy implies 'the development of township consumption economies as the heart and driving force' [2] (p. 1) of rural (re)vitalization of rural China. In any case, one of the main conclusions is the spatial heterogeneity of the underdevelopment rural areas in China and the relevance of primary factors in the development process township consumption. The authors' recommendations suggest that rural politics should be based on the population township scale or level. In this sense, the local government is a key piece in the process of rural vitalization at regional level and repopulation politics at even national level. Other key factors are the role of modernization of infrastructure and the infrastructures for rural local market systems. For all these purposes, the rural China township consumption development needs an adequate financial support.

3. Contributions

In short, the true overall value and scientific and academic contribution of this Special Issue is the emergence of studies in relatively autonomous theoretical niches in the global South which reveal the different processes of transformation and change in the meso-

or regional scales. As a future trend, it is possible to suggest a strengthening of these theoretical orientations that even compete with the explanatory theoretical framework originating in the global North with its different orientations. A truly rural global supports or should support not only multiple processes of transformation on a global scale but also the emergence and consolidation of meso-levels of theory and argumentations that respond to the emerging realities of regional areas in Africa, Latin America and Asia. In this way, concepts and even vocabulary are adapted, giving a new or renewed meaning to words such as hybrid, displacement, households, resistance, etc. Adequate feedback between empirical academic works and theoretical argumentations will allow an adequate development of the meso-level of analysis of the rural global South.

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