



Menorca (Isabel Codina).

Returning to the Land: Problems, Strategies and Dynamics of Neo-Ruralism

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Centuries ago, the development of cities and the exodus of the rural population to urban areas brought about the phenomenon of the search for nature and return to the rural world which, since then, has accompanied human beings. This return, as well as for practical and economic reasons, is undoubtedly prompted by a psychological aspect: returning to the countryside is the dream pursued, a yearning to reencounter the places and times of our childhood. Thus, memory plays a fundamental role in this phenomenon of return to the rural world which, in some Western countries, is becoming quite a common practice. Hence, the dynamics of population redistribution, observed from a multidisciplinary perspective, can provide an answer to the major questions put forward by the social sciences.

Ways of Going Back: On the Return to the Countryside and Ways of Seeking Nature

The search for nature and the return to it are hardly new phenomena. In the West, this has taken place almost since the first big cities began to develop. The countryside was longed for as a source of calm, an inspiration for poets who already praised it in this idealised manner, and restitution of a healthier existence for the body and balance for the mind. Let us recall, for example, from the works of some of the great writers of antiquity, the following text by the Hispano-Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (known in English as Martial), because it may resemble a contemporary poem:

*Life is much more fortunate
If it boasts, happy Martial, these signs:
Business without distressing difficulties,
A fertile field, a perennial fire,
No dispute, sobriety, a calm mind,
Genuine health, a solid body,
Prudent frankness, secure acquaintances,
Easy coexistence, a table without
affectation,
Nights without excess, evenings free,
A jocular and yet chaste bed,
Dreams that make darkness vanish,
And being whatever you wish to be,
without envies,
Neither longing for nor fearing death.*

However, it was particularly from the 19th century when the option of this return to nature became a pursued dream, an ideal of life for some of those who decided to settle in rural areas, fleeing the city, as an alternative to the whirl of the metropolises and the imposition of consumption for its own sake. As a silent rebellion of “citizens” who refuse to be just “consumers” (García Canclini, 1995).

Many Western countries that would have achieved the greatest levels of what in them was understood as development seem to have felt themselves bound to a demographic return to the countryside

Throughout the 20th century, and mainly from the 1960s, this return took on forms which do not always clearly reveal an ideological or philosophical conviction supporting the choice made. Such would be the case of those who were and are forced, due to the inaccessibility of the urban space (for instance, because of the cost of housing), to settle in peri-urban areas, which, rather than a recovery of the countryside, results in a ramification of the city, an extension of the metropolis, thus becoming a “dispersed or diffuse city” (Monclús, 1998). Moreover, and after almost three decades of abandonment of rural areas, many Western countries that would have achieved the greatest levels of what in them was understood as development seem to have felt themselves bound to a demographic return to the countryside.

What matters is that these return movements could not have taken place if something had not changed in the conceptions – first of the elites and later of the masses – of the value attached to the countryside and the city. Thus, the current which forced people to flee a harsh and declining countryside in order to seek the opportunities and apparent comfort of the metropolises gradually changed direction, and the countryside has now become yearned for and

the city the inhospitable place from which we must flee. This is prompted, as we pointed out, by reasons related to economics, comfort and – if you wish – to advisable democratic redistribution, but none of this would take place without a change of trend that springs and is reconstructed from mentalities.

If we approach the phenomenon from this point of view, the background of current migrations and population mobility can be perceived as something related to both the construction of some imaginaries and to merely pragmatic reasons or explanations. The countryside/city tension is no longer – if it ever was – the confrontation between the urban and the “exurban” (or “beyond the urban”, as the English word *exurb* denotes). Beyond the strictly urban, people have multiple ways of seeking out nature, ranging from those who have gone to live on the outskirts of the city, but continue working in it, to those who have retired from their job, mainly from a Northern European country, and decide to settle in the South because of the better weather and the lower cost of living to spend their remaining time as “professional tourists”.

Beatriz Nates Cruz and Stéphanie Raymond, who lead one of the groups more specifically dealing with this issue, distinguish three main categories of “return” in the cases they have studied (Nates Cruz and Raymond, 2007):

- Return to nature (austere way of living, in harmony with nature).
- Return to the countryside (urban way of living that enjoys the goodness of the countryside).
- Return to the land (neo-rural way of life with environmental balance).

They focus on three concepts that would help to understand what is happening and how these categories have acted or have been reflected in recent reality:

- The process of “gentrification”, “yuppyfication” or “elitisation” must be understood as forms with an urban background, as well as models that serve as inspiration for those who have continued to live in rural areas.
- The determinations of *selfness* which, from the point of view of collective identity, these authors call the identity of the “we as selves” would contribute to explaining how immigrants who literally or metaphorically return to the countryside – sometimes from distant countries – are seen and how they are integrated or rejected in the daily and institutional discourses and/or practices.
- “In these determinations, the concept of *tradition*, from its meaning of innovation (of tradition), objectifies the changes produced by those arriving and which are reappropriated or assimilated by the natives” (Nates Cruz and Raymond, 2007: 14).

Thus, what should be explained, finally, is why in countries such as France, but also in some regions of the United States, there has been this spectacular demographic transformation in favour of the migration of “return” to the countryside, not only in peri-urban areas but also and precisely in the regions most distant from the metropolis or categorised as “isolated rural”. And to find out to what extent this inversion of the trend of past decades – already suggested by some data – can take place in regions that seemed condemned to abandonment in Spain, contributing through case studies that could become “reproducible models” for this change in direction to become more accentuated in subsequent years.

As Nates Cruz and Raymond point out, “the causes and foundations of the ‘returns to the land’, of the ‘returns to nature’ or, even more so, the ‘returns to the native soil’, have been the object of some research both in France and the United States,” especially in the 1970s and 1980s. However, what should be researched now

is whether “migrations to nature in the 1970s, beyond their protest aspect, can be considered as an epiphenomenon which forms part of a larger movement encompassing a context wider than the neo-rural” (Nates Cruz and Raymond, 2007: 16). What seems clear is that this trend is longstanding and has increased in recent times. What remains to be seen is what can be done to encourage it, given that a redistribution of the population in some areas that levels the balance between the urban and the rural would seem the most appropriate at present. In this respect, a redefinition of the rural and the urban from their tensions, relations and inter-influences also becomes necessary to prevent or palliate the surrounding countryside from becoming a gigantic backyard of the cities, where everything that becomes waste, which is not needed or is surplus to requirements, ends up. As Nates Cruz and Raymond suggest referring to their own research, the contributions by works of this nature and theme “will be attractive not only for the academic world, but also for different officials and organisations interested in the new particularities emerging in the West and, especially, in rural areas of Eastern Europe” but, moreover, “in the study of related issues in other territories” (Nates Cruz and Raymond, 2007: 11).

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Because the issue to be studied is not only that people leave the countryside, in other words, that – as happens in some areas of the Mediterranean old Europe – they continue to leave it, but also that people come back. To what and how do they come back? This would perhaps be the pertinent question. And, given that the toing and froing between the countryside and the city seems to have a long history, we

should also ask, beyond the materialistic and pedestrian explanations: why do people, in each moment, return or leave?

The Place where Memory Sleeps or the Unification of Disjointed Time

The usefulness of these kinds of studies or the benefits that would derive from them can be found within the conceptual framework of the performance model that is known as “sustainable development”, an expression already introduced in the Brundtland Report (1987) of the World Commission on the Environment and Development but somewhat worn out by its misuse at present. This is because we believe that only a development planned from pre-existing resources and consuetudinary forms of exploiting them would properly deserve to be called “progress” and because we are convinced of the importance that a prior anthropological knowledge of the community on which we are to act has – or should have – for the correct application of such a concept. The objective is also, therefore, to construct a study model on the different groups of returnees and different types of villages, from the most apparently “typical” rurally to the most “hybrid”, and for these models to serve as an example for the study of other groups and other similar communities, or that can contribute to providing suggestions to confront the problems currently facing certain groups and people. We are talking about groups and peoples that, participating in cultures that some have called “hybrid”, constantly redevelop those “strategies to enter and exit modernity” (García Canclini, 1989) so characteristic of the present. These are strategies that are usually guided towards the ingenious identification with utopias of the past, through the “invention of tradition” and of history (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1985), or with future utopias generally based on industri-

al urban expansion and development. However, “the question of interest is not to determine whether a small community is traditional or not, but rather to determine if it has the capacity to transform and regenerate itself through time” (Valcárcel-Resalt, 1997). There must be, therefore, other alternatives that adequately combine – in each case – innovation and preservation of existing resources and this project seeks to advance in this direction through its analyses and proposals. Because if the door of return is open, the countryside will have been saved from becoming a relic of what it was and a monument to itself. Although it changes, or rather precisely because it will change, it will transform and adapt to current problems. One of the most interesting conclusions reached by Nates Cruz and Raymond is that, in fact, what has been understood and studied as problems of the countryside and options being tested to resolve them are no more than an announcement, the exponential demonstration of what is coming and can come, the advancement of what we will – probably – find in the future: “It is thus necessary to observe the rural world as a research area in which the great questions posed in the social sciences can be studied” (Nates Cruz and Raymond, 2007: 17).

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For example, and beyond the so-called “rurbanisation” (Berger et al., 1980) that would confirm the influence of the urban over the rural, there is already an appreciable change of direction in the idea of progress and development which is particularly affecting the countryside. The idea that the state unit was a preferred model for progress has led to the consideration of other models and other policies that, when tested in the rural environment,

come to proclaim the opposite: that diversity guarantees more the interest of the others in a people and better favours their survival than the cultural homogeneity until recently pursued and forced by the political and intellectual elites of European countries with their concept of monolithic nation which they took to America.

When we speak of the “return to the countryside”, it is almost always metaphorically. However, there is also a literal return – of those who left or their descendants back on “native soil” – that, as we have said, seems to be increasing in determined areas of Europe. Therefore, it can be interesting to explore such a trend and look at the problems posed for the returnees in their rural place of origin after the diaspora of recent decades from the countryside to the cities. It is also interesting to try to understand the neo-rural strategies and dynamics that these people, families or groups develop on their return. Perhaps there are problems and models to solve them that must take on importance in the immediate future.

The objective of a settled population can be fundamental in regions such as Castilla y León. And the use of “ecohistory” must also be incorporated in this sense of transformation of the rural environment, as the new configuration implies different uses of and actions in the surroundings or, generally, the landscape, as a conditioning element conditioned by human groups. This has been happening in some areas such as Urgell, in Lleida, where the recovery of goods, lands or real estate for new uses of tourism exploitation of the landscape has emerged as an endogenous movement of its inhabitants, contributing to its maintenance and conservation. Given all of this, we defend the construction of a qualitative model of analysis and research that further explores the reasons of the “returnees” for returning, listening to their voices, and investigates the efficacy of the strategies that have allowed them to re-

turn successfully. Such a model could be applied to other areas and countries in which similar phenomena are taking place, and facilitate in the future comparative research carried out by other teams in collaboration with ours. People leave and return for a reason; they manage to do so satisfactorily in many cases. And we believe that understanding this fact in relation to the shaping of an applicable model will in itself be a relevant contribution for the coming times.

We defend the construction of a qualitative model of analysis and research that further explores the reasons of the “returnees” for returning

Returning to a place you have never been before is an escape. Returning to the place you come from is a reencounter. Reconstructing oneself in this place will be, to a certain extent, living everything anew because, as the poet Martial pointed out “remembering is living twice.” We have thought that cultures depend on places, but places depend no less on culture. Whether you are going or coming is not as important as the fact that culture moves. We have believed that the differences of culture obey variations of place and, in fact, probably depend more on the ways of representing and understanding time. Martial was well aware of this when he set his peaceful life in Bilbilis against the “hustle and bustle” and the “sweaty toga” of those who lived in Rome. In short: “This is how I like to live, and die.”

Gregory Bateson wrote in 1978: “If part of a cultural system is left ‘behind’, there must be another part that evolved ‘too quickly’ and that was exactly what was already happening. “Time is disjointed” for this reason, because “the imagination has moved too far ahead of rigor” (Bateson, 2006: 238) and to reunite it again, to unify it, place really is important. These places that make up our inexperienced vision of time and the world. Because not only

is time now “disjointed”: so is space. And space and time with each other. Today, we measure space with time: two, three hours, how long it takes to get from one place to another. And not time with space, as was done before: one mile, two or three. We are closer than ever to places and further from knowing them.

We do not seek nature so much as lost and longed for time. We do not seek a space so much as an identity

In recent generations we have grown by feeding on mistaken suppositions about space and time: regarding as satisfactory, on the one hand, the illusion that history is an objective form of telling (in the dual sense of counting and narrating) time. And accepting, as scholars of society, the mirage of a rural or traditional culture separated from the other or others. However, it is the relation of mobility between the rural and the urban, between the ways of living and estimating time in villages and towns, which must be studied. And only from memories, individual and collective, not from the convention of a pretended historical objectivity can disjointed and fragmentary space be reunited. As Roberto González-Quevedo, a writer who was born near the Sil river in Bierzo Alto and knows a great deal about this matter, reflected pertinently: “Although all our time is important and significant, I think there is no doubt that our most personal time is condensed in the first years of life. And the same happens in terms of space: there is a place on the land surface with which we have a special connection, ‘our’ space. In short, our identity is born from the intersection of two great coordinates: that of a first time, when the infantile mould of what we are is established, and that of a determined space to which our life is linked, also generally a space of when we were children” (González-Quevedo, 2007: 64).

This is probably one of the main reasons that, since the time of Martial to our own

present, we have returned to the countryside left behind, which is why it is still – perhaps today more than ever – worth returning. Because today the imagined, culturally constructed, territory is more important than the physical, geographical, territory taken until recently as the only real one. We do not seek nature so much as lost and longed for time. We do not seek a space so much as an identity.

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