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VOL. 5. N° 10
**AN INTRODUCTION TO “RURAL SOCIAL SPACES AS
AN OBJECT OF REFLECTIONS, INTERVENTIONS AND
DISPUTES”**

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This monograph aims to debate the material, political, social, cultural and symbolic configurations of current rural spaces in the frame of the homogenising trends of capital and neoliberal politics.

We set out to invite researchers from a range of disciplines from which to discuss the visions that dichotomise and commodify social life in the country, and in contrast, that essentialise and demonstrate the numerous social relationships that link the country and the city.

In this line, we return to the question posed by Argentine anthropologist Hugo Ratier and professor María Rosa Neufeld during the early years of our formation, who argued that the country and the city are not clearly bounded, opposing and exclusive entities, and invited us to explore how much of the urban is present in rural life, and vice versa. “How many ruralities do you know?” They insisted that “the rural must be explained”. They asked these questions to make us aware that these are changing historical realities, both individually and in their interrelationships. These statements may appear obvious, but we revisit this appeal for explanations of the complexity in the way rural lives are shaped both socially and historically, rather than regarding what we find there as mere hindrances or expectations of the future.

The articles in this monograph allow us to precisely debate with ahistorical and essentialist visions, and illustrate the complexity of processes that have little to do with versions that continue to proliferate. On the one hand are the versions laden with a certain demographic, social and cultural fatalism, that assume rural populations will disappear as part of an inevitable evolutionist advance, without questioning why or taking into consideration current movements, the material and symbolic forms of production that redefine them, resistance, reappropriation and identity reconfiguration of rural populations. The articles we present also challenge the romantic, hopeful visions proposed by going back to rural spaces, to nature, to a benign, restorative lifestyle that conceals the power relations and the exploitation of rural workers (landowners or otherwise) that seem to disappear in the landscape.

Raymond Williams’ (1973) seminal book *The country and the city* constantly returns to the rhetorical comparison of life in the city and in the country that goes back to Greek and Latin literature, yet spans all cultural history to the present day. He tells how Marx and Engels were the first to suggest that the modern city was a social and physical consequence of capitalism. And here lies the fundamental concern that runs through the book: how capitalism transformed his native British society and how it redefined the relationships between these two spaces. He shows how the dichotomies underlying these relationships are dismantled when we see that the two realities are connected in a shared history, in such a way that they affect each other. He thus argues that “capitalism, as a mode of production, is the basic process of most of what we know as the history of country and city” (Williams, 1973: 302), adding that the country-city fiction was part of the hegemonic constructions that obscured the relationships of subordination within and between the two spaces.

The articles compiled in the Àgora section follow, to a greater or lesser extent, this line of argument: the processes studied cannot be understood without resorting to relational and historical perspectives, which in turn lead to the conditions underlying capitalist restructuring.

They refer to territorialisation processes that imply economic-political domination and the construction of hegemonies, and that engender resistances and appropriations involving symbolic-cultural dimensions. They imply



recreations of both ruralities and urbanities and are the result of capital's unfurling of a productive rationale that establishes exclusionary territorialities and jeopardises the life of populations through ecocidal interventions. These are constructed through neoliberal policies that have their distinctive traits in each Latin American country, but that entail among other things the expulsion of families and communities from their lands, the violation of rights, and state abandonment of productive, educational, health and other activities. In the case of Mexico these processes were reinforced by legalising the privatisation of collective land ownership—the option to sell collective-communal properties to private individuals, which was already common practice—and the opening up of borders to markets and capital, especially in North America, through arrangements provided for in the North American Free Trade Agreement, which has accelerated the exodus of hundreds of thousands of working age people who are forced to abandon their lands, thereby changing the patterns of consumption and reproduction in rural communities.

The monograph presents articles by Mexican and Argentinean researchers, most of whom are anthropologists. The socio-historical configurations and the widespread presence of indigenous populations in the case of Mexico characterise the concerns and help to debate the dichotomous views that, as Czarny points out, constituted the development of the discipline by framing analysis of the indigenous world—since the beginning of the twentieth century—as campesinos and through that, as cultures rooted in the rural context. The studies on Argentina analyse the consequences of the expansion of the agribusiness model, the shift of the agricultural frontier, the suppression of non-capitalist means of production and the expulsion of campesinos, traditional farmers and other social actors in rural areas. They reveal the resulting conflict and the presence of a multiplicity of actors who, using various strategies, challenge territorial ownership, resources and institutions, and construct narratives about rurality, the place of the country in development, the links between rural and urban spaces.

The article “Rururban insurgencies. Native peoples against the mega-projects of Mexico City” by Omar Arach, Diego Linares and Luis Hocsman, opens the monograph. These authors present the results of research on the struggles of the indigenous peoples of Mexico City against infrastructure and development mega-projects. Empirical studies and emerging documentation testify to the singularity of the “advance of the urban stain” (which includes communal and community lands used for agricultural production, protected natural areas and archaeological heritage sites, among others). They refer to what they call “rururban” resistance to the mega-projects associated with the General Urban Development Plan and the new constitution of the Ciudad Autónoma de México. They examine the various lines in which capital is expanding in many directions, describe emerging resistance and finally propose that through local resistance movements people are not only upsetting the processes of capital accumulation, with varying degrees of success, but are also challenging the dichotomies and underlying hierarchies of modernity (city-country, nature-culture, backwardness-progress, rationality-irrationality, among others), conflicts and processes that help us to imagine alternative political configurations in a context of a crisis of civilisation and global environmental deterioration. The authors recognise that the “rururban insurgencies” they analyse exemplify modern forms of political intervention with a skilful handling of the available legal and institutional resources, in an adverse political context in which public policies are increasingly conditioned (if not directly dictated) by “market rules”.

In his article “The new airport and the defense of territory in Atenco-Texcoco, Mexico”, Itzam Pineda explores precisely this point through one of the cases of resistance mentioned in the previous article, which he extends and complements with an analysis of the political uses and social protection of cultural practices associated with the socio-historical processes in which indigenous peoples play a leading role in defending their land. The context of this analysis is an anthropological intervention accompanying the legal process led by Atenco-Texcoco communities against the construction of the new airport of Mexico City. The inhabitants, members of the Nahuatl communities, use their cultural legacy as a tool of struggle first in the legal context and then in other political and social settings. Through an ethno-historical approach to the region and long-term analysis he shows that this is not the first time that this circumstance has arisen and in consequence, proposes studying historical moments in which the people in this region have used cultural specificity and ways of conceiving and organising their environment to defend their land. He also describes how these people have historically protected their ethnic identity as a territorial strategy and to safeguard the continuity of their community. The article then follows the steps taken by the communities involved in the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (FPDT, Peoples' Front for the Defence of the Land), the fate of their demands, repression, prison and death of many of this struggle's leaders. The article also refers to the difficulties of obtaining academic endorsement to support their ethnicity and their rights to conserve land covering 10,000 hectares, much of it in common ownership, and put a stop to a project that would eradicate the last vestiges of Lake Texcoco.

As I write, and following the election of a new president in the country, consultations have taken place with local communities in accordance with provisions established in Article 2 of the Mexican constitution and Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, the majority of which have declared their opposition to the continuation of the mega-project. This is a victory because it puts indigenous peoples' rights to decide on the development of their lands before the interests of capital, but also, as Pineda notes, because it reflects the development of these communities' experience in strategically using their indigenous identity and the legal instruments that protect their rights, identities that cannot be substantiated nor exclusively linked to static rural spaces.

In the third article, "Rural young people, between the crisis of social reproduction and international migration. The case of the Oriente de Morelos region, Mexico", Nashelly Ocampo Figueroa offers another perspective on the process of capital accumulation in Mexico and the relationships between urban and rural spaces through an analysis of rural youth migration from the Morelos region to North American cities. Her analysis combines hard statistical data with approaches that recognise the complex processes of subjectivation affecting the new generations. To this end she uses investigation-intervention strategies that include working with groups of young people in whose lives, and those of their families and communities, migration experiences (with varying degrees of success) have been a central factor.

Ocampo Figueroa presents a characterisation of "young people", emphasising the way they represent the core of procreative productive forces and therefore occupy a central place in social, family and community reproduction. She then describes the conditions of subordination facing rural youth, which are exacerbated when the only path open to them is international migration, usually clandestine, and selling their labour in conditions of overexploitation. These processes entail complex reconfigurations, since on the one hand they will shape the local dynamics of life and work in their communities of origin, modifying the modes of production tied to the land. On the other hand they affect the construction of a model of the young social subject in rural communities, also associated with higher levels of schooling and mass media presence that have contributed to transforming local identities and homogenising through "consumer" patterns that appear not to distinguish between belonging to urban and rural, and place them in situations of clear material and emotional fragility.

Also in the context of Mexico, the monograph includes an article by Gabriela Czarny, "Indigenous youth: between rural-ethnic markers and new urban affiliations in the university", which presents the results of research carried out "about and with young indigenous people" enrolled in the programme Licenciatura en Educación Indígena (LEI) at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), Ajusco, Mexico City.

The author discusses the tensions and conceptions that operate as dichotomies in the debate on public policies for indigenous people in higher education and reports the continued use of dichotomous categories that classify young people as rural or urban, and the derivations in terms of essentialisms to which this leads. She includes narratives of indigenous young people that present a multifaceted landscape and refer to youth experiences beyond the bounds of ethnic markers.

In a brief but fascinating review, the author identifies the main conceptual positions that framed analysis of the indigenous world—since the beginning of the twentieth century— as campesinos and through that, as cultures rooted in the rural context. She highlights the visions of indigenous communities as closed, self-sufficient, culturally compact units that would later be contested by empirical research, which would also demonstrate the presence of indigenous people in the cities and in a wide range of cultural and identity situations and processes. Czarny then analyses the policies of affirmative action based on ethnicity, particularly the creation of the LEI, and describes the ways in which rural and urban markers play different roles among indigenous young people in coping with life in the urban school, while at the same time allowing them to recognise themselves as members of indigenous communities.

Turning to the articles on Argentina, Sofia Ambrogi presents "Interconnected networks: alliances and business solidarity in the territorialisation of the agribusiness model (Córdoba, Argentina)", a model, she argues, that requires interconnected configurations between state actions, business interventions and agricultural technical associations, and the communities. She attempts to understand how the social legitimacy of the agribusiness model is constructed in the urban centres and cities of

Córdoba, Argentina, by examining the interventions of business and a technical agricultural association. To find responses to this question she analyses projects and social actions developed by agricultural business actors that aim to construct narratives on rurality, productive development, sustainability and social responsibility. Following this line of argument she critically revisits a conceptual framework, neoextractivism, which tends to overempha-



size social conflicts and tensions rather than the consensus and legitimacy that the agribusiness model generates, precisely what she attempts to respond to. Among other questions, she pays attention to debates that focus on cities as “marginal” territories when considering rurality and the territorial transformations proposed by the agribusiness model. In this vein she advocates exploring the ideological (not only productive) dimensions that business practices assume in urban contexts, and that in the long term become a hegemonic aspiration both within the sector and towards the “community” (that is, non-agricultural sectors and institutions).

In her article “Public policies and rural-urban daily life. A socio-anthropological approach to the conceptions of agricultural plans and programs (Santa Fe, Argentina)”, Marina Espoturno analyses one of the public policies being developed around local experiences in the city of the South of Santa Fe province: the Cambio Rural II (rural change) programme (INTA-Ministry of Agro-industry). This geographical area has particular relevance for the soya model, and is home to many of the transnational businesses linked to the production, commercialisation and transformation of commodities. Technical agricultural institutions, agricultural technology educational institutes and supply companies are also located in the area, and it is in this field that she focuses on the experiences of two groups of producers. She analyses the wording of this public policy in order to identify the conceptions about the rural subjects who take part, and from her field records based on interviews and observations she describes the specific experiences in the locality.

Her aim is to understand, from a relational position, what happens with regard to identities, production practices and meanings on the public policies brought into play between the rationale of the government and that of the subjects. She argues that the hegemony that has built the agribusiness model is not absolute, but rather a disputed process in that the subjectivities and other ways of carrying out or contemplating agricultural production continue to persist and appropriate and reformulate these policies.

Macarena Romero Acuña’s paper takes us to a different landscape; from the central area of agricultural production and agribusiness in the pampas, we turn to an island in the Paraná Medio River and a large city, Rosario, with a strategic port for cereal exports and an active goods and services sector. In her article “City, island rurality and public policies. Formative experiences of young people in the Paraná Delta (Rosario, Argentina)”, the author explores the relationships between this city and the island context, paying attention to urbanisation policies, which she considers affect the daily lives of the islanders by transforming the labour relations of fishing families and affecting the educational processes of young people in their transition from primary to secondary school. These formative experiences encapsulate the processes of young people’s daily lives involving work, whether on the island or in the city, the dynamics of family organisation, the associational processes of the fishing cooperative, etc., together with other relational processes on a more general scale in which the public policy dimension comes into play, such as compulsory intermediate level schooling—which does not, however, imply the existence of a school on the island itself— together with the environmental modifications that arise from infrastructure work taking place in the river, changes in fishing routes that translate into employment limitations for the fishing community, or the privatisation of mooring places on the coast for embarking and disembarking in the city and the growing tourism in the island area.

Finally, Verónica Hendel’s article, “Roots in the air. Rural Social spaces and mobilities in the pampas region of contemporary Buenos Aires”, closes this monograph section with an attempt to answer the question we posed in the call for papers on some of the ways in which social life is produced and reproduced and how everyday routines are constructed in different territories, in this case, in the rural pampas environment of Buenos Aires in Argentina, within the contemporary homogenising tendencies of capital and neoliberal politics. According to Hendel, the ways these processes occur affect rural social spaces by transforming them, re-signifying them and constructing new dialogues between the urban and the rural. Her article revisits developments in a doctoral thesis that initially focused on a rural technical school, the Centro Educativo para la Producción, in a district in the province of Buenos Aires, which gave her access to a diverse and heterogeneous set of institutions and local social actors (from the district’s Sociedad Rural to small producers who have become precarious rural workers or caretakers of weekend homes).

The theoretical and empirical work revealed a constant “toing and froing”, which contrasts with the stereotypical image of static rural life. This mobility appears to be linked to the notion of “new rurality” that reflects the lack of employment stability, the need to abandon their homes and the impossibility young people face in building their lives there. To this can be added the term “nomad”, notions that exemplify unrootedness, of migration to the towns and cities, the search for better employment conditions, the consequences of the transformations that characterise agriculture in the pampas in recent years, contract work, instability and the break down of a certain configuration and experience in rural social spaces that combined the place of work and the place for living.