

Original Research Article

Social Geographical Materialities in Rural Spaces. Material Changes or/and Social Changes? Key Questions for a New Countryside in the Global North

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, ways of analysis are established that allow the incorporation of material change processes in the context of global rural restructuring. The traditional binary relation can evolve towards hybrid models based on the permanent becoming and the post-structural or the post-modern visions. The evolution from the binary to the hybrid analysis model aims to establish simple and complex encounters between social and material categories. In the second part of this contribution, the different types of (dis)encounters are established through three traditional house sales processes in the High Besaya area in Cantabria (Spain), analyzed in an auto-ethnographic way.

Keywords: rural geography; material change; space; encounter; hybrid relations

1. Introduction

The analysis of the processes of rural social change is one of the main orientations of study in the Global North. In this academic context it is necessary to analyze the relevance of rural materialities in the conformation of a new social composition in the countryside. In classic works on rural restructuring it was suggested that ‘It is self-evident that the middle class can move into rural areas only if housing is available’^[1]. One of the ways of inserting oneself in rural areas and finding a home is: ‘the conversion of farm buildings to housing is one element of this refashioning of rurality which aims to recreate authenticity’^[1]. But among the new social groups there are different forms of rural experience or authenticity: ‘They transform rural areas as they simultaneously seek to

reproduce these scarcities...’^[1], additionally the ‘rural areas considered as a particular ensemble of houses (...), can play a key role in the spatial configuration of the middle class’^[1].

It is possible to posit different aspirations of new comers, with particular class conceptions of material shape^[1]. In this orientation, there would be different types of restructured villages^[1] with different character: 1) rurality retained, 2) eclipse of the rural, 3) development and community conflict (local-new comers). Recent work on rural social change introduces the perspective of lived landscapes^[2]. The social renewal of rural areas is usually linked to new comers, but is possible a transformation of traditional populations. The social mobility of ex-traditional rural populations (up or down) in the place and the arrival of new comers (with different social class attributes) produces

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social dissonances and turbulences, even in the same locality, which has physical and material manifestations of the changes taking place. The displacement argument associated with the arrival of new social groups that has been suggested in rural gentrification processes^[3,4], has to be combined in the study of new (im) materiality with the replacing or transformation of the old and traditional class in new class.

The domain of the social over spatial geographical categories has as its main consequences the analytical relevance of meetings places and post-structural geography, with an essentially topological vision of space, but not topographical. In this sense, it is necessary to argue that reconsideration would be necessary, in order to recover the topo perspective in a co evolution with topo^[5], in the context of local social details and material biographies. Consequently, it is necessary to assemble academic explanations, realities process and multiple provisional end products. But, what are the future of rural areas and the future of its interpretation? The purpose of this contribution is to propose analytical paths to rebalance the social vocation of recent rural geography for a more cultural/material hybrid vision focused on material change. The case of study is the analysis – in a self-experimental way- the strategies of buying traditional houses in High Besaya (Cantabria) (Map 1).

2.Theoretical background.

(Im)Materialities to/versus social are a traditional binary relation in rural studies. This relationship can be broken down into other derived binary relationships such as traditional social to new social and materialities and (im)materialities, which are two binary relationships that evolve at different rates in parallel, but have a dependency relationship in the context of local worlds. The heterogeneity or the heterogeneous social relations is a transition from traditional social in rural areas to new society. In this orientation of social change, the materialities

and (im)materialities and the new society is a new play of encounters in the restructured rural areas.

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The usual dynamics of rural spaces suggest a unidirectional evolution in three phases: (1) from traditional rural (2) change (3) to (end) restructured rural, but currently the question arises in rural areas affected by restructuring processes and what is the next stage? Is this new evolution of rural spaces exhausting? And it requires, at the same time that it allows, to generate and use a new explanatory framework that suggests a progression based on three stages: (1) Binary (2) transition (3) hybrid. The hybrid point of view, within the framework of rural geographic studies, is based on the moment/permanent becoming, the post-structural visions (fluid, hybrid) and the post-modern visions (minor theory)^[7], allows to analyze and integrate the new material/social/individual play of relations in the new countryside.

In this theoretical and academic context, the value of (fixed) materialities is situated in the world of (fluid) immaterialities. There are notable dualities between the ‘fixed materialities’ and the permanent changes in the immaterialities. The fixed materialities would have the relative value of permanence, while the immaterialities would be subject to the subjective visions and considerations of change through time. That is, materiality finds a new social and economic value in the context of the

immaterialities that enclose visions and cultural values that are fluid and move symbolically and spectrally in time/space. In this sense Deleuze^[8] points out that 'surfaces are the place of meaning. Signs remain meaningless until they enter the organization of the surface.

In the hybrid relation people-materiality, materiality 'is relating –mainly- to static or passive element' and people is an active element, with two criteria of interaction or relationship: immaterial (visions: spectral and nostalgic) and strictly material (essence of materials, combination of different materials).

In the process of rural change, society and space are unified through action^[1]. At the local level, there are usually interactions of heterogeneous actants characterized by the inequality of nature actants. This orientation establishes limits to hybrid perspectives and a selectivity of the hybrid relations in rural areas, which would be subject to the possibilities of new malleable hybrid relations: the immaterial interpretation of materiality.

Tensions in the rural communities or localities usually occur between two categories, old and new, which affect both the (im) material world and the

social world. Between these (binary) categories, there would be “puzzles of tensions or battles of tensions” at the local level, depending on whether assemblages or dis-assemblages, encounters or dis-encounters were produced or established. This situation generates and coincides with academic tensions and research tensions (mainly in the objects of study): linked to new realities and new study orientations.

There would be two major explanatory models, with different tendencies:

Binary ---- regressive (close space, opposite visions)

Hybrid ----- progressive (heterogeneity actants, topological space)

Various encounters can be developed on these two types. In other words, the evolution from a binary model to a hybrid model suggests various types of encounters that allow rural reality to be analyzed in a more intertwined way between the different elements and components and not simply in opposing or confrontational terms.

Table 1. Simple and complex encounters between social and material categories

Social	Old	Encounter/hybrid (simple encounters)	New social
Binary classical	Encounter/hybrid	Complex hybrid encounters. The core	Encounter/hybrid
Material	Old (im)material	Encounter/hybrid	New material

Source: Own elaboration.

In this argument point, it is necessary to define the meaning of simple encounters and complex encounters (Table 1): (1) Simple encounter is the action space between two categories of social or two categories of material or one category of social and other of material. (2) The core of complex encounter is the sum of old social, old material, new

social and new material (see table 1).

The individuality of (im) material is the character of each rural house. There would be multiple individual materiality, single plays and encounters in within each locality. The traditional geographical vision of the encounter people and place can be more complex as it is replaced by a

vision of people and micro place (rural houses). The usual traditional dichotomies old farmers and new comers can currently be established between encounters in place or encounters in rural houses. Simple encounters become multiple and complex encounters. As Deleuze^[8] suggests, 'individuals are constituted in the neighborhood of the singularities they surround; they express worlds as circles of convergence.

According to Murdoch and Marsden^[1], a holistic approach to the analysis of power relations would be determined by different lines of action: knowledge, social action and materiality -understood as the 'distribution of economic resources that facilitate certain courses of action' -^[1]. There would be materiality tensions between exchange and use value, which in definitive are tensions between culture and economy binary categories: hybrids elements in (new) materiality with different social interpretation.

Multiplicity of temporalities interacting in the new power spaces of localities. Fixed materials and fluid values and forms of significance with repercussion in the production and interpretation of collective norms are found in the notion of temporality. The norms pretend to generate order but in the same way they provoke localized conflicts and resistance. The planning versus resistance duality suggests how local ruptures transform major change processes into more localized practices^[9]. The tensions between the locals and the newcomers are mainly based on the standards and the 'appearance' of the houses.

In the process of planning the materialities would be conducted by government entities with the active participation of different (socio) ecological entities and with the interaction of multiple trajectories of actants in place^[10]. Actants places are complex specific time-spaces, as a consequence of multiple configurations as intersections of many encounters between 'actants' that have reflection or manifestations in the place and local politics and policies. The acting

trajectories would be mediated by collective norms of plays, which reflect power relations between social groups, changeable through time.

Recover is a new key word in the new countryside with two dimensions: recovering what was invested in the purchase and rehabilitation of a rural house and recovering the traditional materiality of the house. The first dimension has a socioeconomic interpretation of the successive relationships between people and materiality, the second dimension has a material foundation by converting the decadence of old and decadent materiality into new materiality. In this last sense, recuperating is a hybrid concept, with multiple orientations: nostalgic, immaterial, material.

As previously stated in the recover process, it is possible to find a resistance of binary visions of the rural. The category resistance is fixed and the category change is fluid. Binary is an old/new form of resistance? It is possible to argue that there are two types of resistance: material resistances versus social resistances, which can coexist, oppose or even favor each other in each local context. This resistance also affects progress in rural analysis.

Environmental entities can be divided into two broad categories: protected or sacrificed, which require adequate translation in the new rural processes. The resistance and change processes would lead to generating hybrid materiality in both types of categories. The play of processes of change also combines and includes the regressive and resistances visions, where the past has a general dimension and the present is particular^[11].

But in the processes of generating a new countryside there are tendencies of lost not definitive or transitional in a permanent becoming. In this theoretical way a key research would be where is the meeting between lost in/and new materiality. Lost is a relevant part of renewed conception of materiality in the context of a new countryside. The lost---latent---reemergence process has two broad readings: (1) new materialities, associated with recover,

re-materialized and new realities (new villages with restored old houses), (2) lost old materialities, associated with forgotten, nostalgic and memory (old rural artifacts that are hidden). These two processes are complementary in the new organization of rural areas that are being restructured where the seasonal social community progresses to definitive and permanent community. In the context of a post vision more cultural, with more multiple identities in some forms of materiality, the main routes of research have two main orientations: (1) Houses histories where the successive encounters people and materiality are analyzed and (2) biographies of old landscapes in the form of interactions with personal and social perspectives and the new life of material landscapes^[12].

3. Methods and study area.

Some rural geographical literature suggests the need for micro studies based in marginal voices, biographical trajectories and emotional narratives^[13,14]. Biographical studies based on narratives that have been used to study processes of spatial and rural marginalization and in the construction of otherness, emphasize the relevance of location the study area^[15,16]. Only intensive qualitative research, based on selected cases, can adequately identify relationships and strategies of individuals^[17]. To fill this research gap in rural studies, this research uses qualitative methods with a biographical orientation approach to (auto) ethnographic experiences^[18,19]. Through this research method, the researcher lives experiences and their connection with feelings and moral values that establish their own individual stories are able to be detailed^[20,21]. Willianson^[22] suggests that auto ethnography connect the autobiographies with social and cultural context.

Auto-ethnography involves a researcher writing about a topic of great personal relevance situating their lived experiences within the social context^[23]. In auto ethnography the division between self-other is ignored and the text

refers explicitly to the author experience. This also influences the way of writing which affects the researcher's own experience.

The study area is the High Besaya region in Cantabria autonomous community of Spain (Spain) (Map 1). The case studies reflect the purchase processes developed experimentally by the author during the year 2022, in different municipalities of High Besaya. In the three cases (Fishery, Pujayo and Holy Rood of Iguña) towns without any services except for a bar, this in the case of Pujayo closed during the investigation. The experimental research described in narrative form relates the difficulties of the process of acquiring a traditional rural home in the place of their family origins.

Initially, all the towns between Sands of Iguña and Fishery were considered, although finally Sands and Barcena, the largest, were discarded, as they included urban typologies (high-rise buildings) among their buildings. Rehabilitated houses from which a 10-minute walk to the railway station could be accessed were analyzed. All houses have a long sales process. Since they are not safe investments and can lose value over time, and in any case, it is necessary to adjust the price in order to recover the investment (cost of the property and taxes, very high in the region, of 10%). After considering 3 houses in Holy Rood, 2 in Fishery and 3 in Barcena of Shell Foot, 3 houses were finally selected and negotiations for their acquisition began. In all cases, they were rehabilitated traditional houses of new comers that were for sale due to the lack of interest of the owners in using them over time.



Map 1. Study area.

4.High Besaya strategies of sale of the second generation of seasonal new comers: results and analysis of study cases.

Case 1. Fishery, is the one located at the highest altitude of all those analyzed -621 meters-. Its population has always been very small and the town has undergone a gradual process of material recovery of the houses since the beginning of the millennium that has given rise in recent years to a certain demographic recovery, within very small values, between the 60 and 80 inhabitants. In 2021 it had 82 inhabitants distributed in two population centers. Politically it is represented by a group of voters who intends to locally revitalize the municipality. Most of the inhabitants of Fishery municipality are retired or work in the near city of Kingdom.

The house has three phases in the purchase-sale processes: (1) purchase from old-traditional people, of a house with traditional functions and materialities. (2) The first generation of new comers carried out a rehabilitation in 1997,

and began a recovery process (investment and material) and subsequent sale (what was spent) is a direct sale process and among the known community^[24]. It is a 500 m² house, of which a third are warehouses and garages, old stables and stables. The residential space is just over 300 m², distributed in 6 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms. During the recovery process there has been a transformation of the agricultural-livestock functionality into a residential one. The first buying and selling process is the traditional one in the area, without diffusion outside the local community, through a sale sign in the building itself and the known community. (3) Preservation of the rural house for the second generation of the new comers (20 years of seasonal new comers with usual residence in Santander), which begins a sale process in order to maximize profit through a regional real estate agency and with a very high price compared to others paid in the area. The price is even above the appraised price. There is a gradual process of adjustment due to the lack of quality demand. There is a disengagement from the town by the owners and a resistance to the sale to someone from the town or with ancestors from the town. This provokes the passive resistance of the rural community in the face of such an aggressive sale

that has a great impact on the prices paid for any house in the town up to that moment and that prevents a good part of the known community from participating in the sale process. The initial asking price is €259,000 in February, an offer of €190,000 is made in April, €20,000 more than any price paid until 2021 for a similar house in the village. The response of the property, nothing below 240 thousand euros. In June at the beginning of the summer the real estate agent contacts me to tell me that it is reduced to 229 thousand euros, in case I am interested. In October, after having spent a good part of the summer holidays visiting other towns in the High Besaya and locating houses for sale with similar characteristics, decided to call and they told me that they had offered it to a couple from Soria province for 195 thousand euros, which finally was not interested. An event that emotionally impacted me, like everyone who wants to return to the regions of their ancestors and look for a home. They offer me to go see it again, now with this new price, but I think the sale process lacks my morality. I think they have established a price for those linked to the town and the local population and another for those from outside, in better conditions. I wondered about the greed of the sellers who were lucky enough to buy as it was done before: to recover the investment and the cost of the rehabilitation. But these people had a sales strategy that sought to make the maximum possible profit and then not return to the town. The traditional style of buying and selling real estate in the towns associated with the known community has disappeared.

I have understood with this auto experience the value of the place that I have analyzed so many times, the emotional roots that so often unite a place of origins, with another life that has disappeared today. There are many houses in one place, but the place is unique.

Case 2. Pujayo. It is a small town -at a height of 415 meters- with 88 inhabitants. in 2014, currently a neighborhood, which belongs to the municipality of Barcena Shell Foot -680 inhabitants in 2018- since the mid-19th century, adjacent to

Fishery and Ground. It has been declared the most beautiful town in Cantabria in 2020 and for several years it has been a finalist for the quality and conservation of its popular architecture.

The house has a purchase process from the old traditional population by seasonal summer newcomers that is associated with a careful rehabilitation process in 1990, which fully respects the interior materiality and not only the exterior façade, with traditional materials, -eg. chestnut wood- on the floor of the rooms. The house is prepared for the family summer vacation of a family that usually resides in Santander. With the evolution of the family cycle and the retirement of the owner, the loss of interest begins and the process of sale by the children, in agreement with the parents. It is a direct sale process, without intermediaries or real estate agencies. The house is offered at 185 thousand euros, but I pointed out during the visit during October that it is smaller, around 120 m², than the advertising (180 m²), given that annexed buildings and the paved patio had been included. Adjacent is a beautiful urban plot of 700 m², which is sold together. I imagine that the price was intended for the 3 heirs (60 thousand euros for each one and expenses). Since it was not the type of property I was looking for, I have no other contact with the property, but after 10 days I receive a message telling me that I am getting a reduction of 20,000 euros (10%).

Case 3. Holy Rood of Iguña is located at a height of 208 meters. It is a small town of 155 inhabitants in 2008 that belongs to the municipality of Ground -1494 inhabitants in 2021-, adjacent to the north with Barcena Shell Foot. Municipality famous for being the setting of the well-known novel by the writer Delibes 'The Way'^[25], where the tranquility of the Iguña valley is described during the 1950s, at the beginning of the rural exodus and subsequent depopulation. Lifelong feelings for land and place and the perils of urban success are exposed in this book. The security of the rural place against the professional possibilities of the urban world.

The house comes from a traditional agro-livestock construction rehabilitated and converted into a home. The house has 160 m² of residential use in its entirety distributed in four bedrooms and two bathrooms. The sale occurs after 10 years -carried out in 2010- of its comprehensive rehabilitation, through a real estate agency due to the loss of interest in its seasonal use due to the change in the family cycle and the growth of the children. For 10 years it has been used as a holiday residence (seasonal summer new comers) due to the tranquility and good climate of the valley by a family from outside the region. In mid-September contact with the regional real estate and the next day we have a visit to the property. The sales strategy is based on an adjusted price with little chance of a reduction, beyond a small reduction due to deficiencies or specific improvements that need to be made to the house. A very well-preserved house, which responds to advertising, but still has papers in the registry so immediate sale and occupation is not possible. I visit the town and the valley several days in a row to check the atmosphere and I like it, also the climate that for decades attracted wealthy people from Santander and other regions for the summer. It is just one hour by train from Santander. The town only has one bar, but less than 2 km away is the municipal head Ground where there are places to eat and basic services: health, pharmacy and security.

It is a difficult decision, since I have to bury part of my life savings in a house in a depopulated area, where there is no safe investment. Also, in my own insertion process I am more aware of certain problems that I used to analyze from the outside but that are now personal questions: is there a pharmacy? An establishment where to eat? Health services? In none of these three towns are there public services. But I am also invaded by the feeling of isolation in winter, loneliness. There are many questions to take the step, the individual projects that I used to investigate from outside, like another and that now are my problems and uncertainties to take the step. I also think that this is

the true change of life, the 'change' to dry, to get away from urban life, from the city flat. If I could settle permanently, but for years it would be coming and going to my residence in the city. I will worsen or improve my quality of life; all those who sell their property, now see the house in the town as a materiality that generates obligations and expenses, but not benefits or personal satisfaction. I will be like this in a few years. I have to be sure of the pleasure that having a new property will give me and I have my doubts about buying a flat in my hometown.

5. Conclusion

New materials in the play of fractured rural societies have a relevant role in the future of the rural areas of the global North. In the new restructured rural areas, the question arises, now what? The traditional old and new vision of rural areas can be replaced by a lost and new vision in restructured areas as two flow circuits and differentiated relationships. In this context, the lost is characterized by memory, nostalgic and forgotten and the new by recover, realities and rematerialized. They are complementary visions in the restructured rural spaces where they establish their connection^[26]. The new in rural areas encompasses new people from other places, but also the social renewal of old or traditional populations in new populations in the same area. There would be spatial mobility, but also vertical mobility. In addition, the new rurality also has a socio-economic sense that rural areas have never lost: upper-class versus lower-class. On many occasions we define rural areas as a horizontal plane in contrast to urban areas, obscuring the complex social reality of the new countryside.

The usual encounter people --- place would be replaced by encounters people --- house. It is in a new vision of micro-encounters in houses of rural place for the analysis of rural areas in the form of small histories or biographies.

As has been shown in previous sections, there

is already a second generation of new comers (or third). The first buys the house from traditional local populations and rehabilitates them for/according to urban comfort. The second buys the rehabilitated houses and increases their cost (as it is done through real estate agents and usual buying and selling processes in the urban world). It is a process of successive and chained replacement of new comers and not of displacement of local populations. We usually consider the urban and rural world-territory as opposites, but at present more complex phenomena are taking place that break with this dichotomy and new comers are being replaced by second and third generation new comers, it is no longer a question of displacing but to replace. In all this game of repopulation, the worst unemployed are the local populations and those who want to return to the place of their ancestors. These people are linked to a place and their choice is greatly reduced.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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