

REVIEW

Old Geographical Materialities. Recover the Past and the Heritage in the Present of Pheripheral European Rural Spaces: A Research Proposal

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ABSTRACT

The past has had a minor consideration in geographic studies the transformation of rural areas, usually dominated by socioeconomic analysis. Incorporating the old and in many cases, the materialities of the past through a reconsideration of heritage to the future of rural space requires an adequate conceptualization and reconsideration of rural materialities and especially of popular housing. In this way, it is intended to decentralize the human and functionalist point of view to give a life of their own to rural cultural and natural materialities in the context of more-than-human-geographies. The renewed study of heritage and the historical past acquires a notable value in the present and future of rural areas through: (1) the interpretation of dissymmetrical realities where the old confronts new activities; (2) for adequate and realistic management of rural heritage and the processes of selective recovery of heritage in certain historical places.

1. Introduction

Returning in summer to the most unpopulated areas of Europe is a joy for the soul and the heart of those who investigate in rural areas. Many houses are open, and many people pass placidly and calmly through the narrow streets. This movement expresses and recounts in a daily way in the summer months, the seasonal cycle

of many unpopulated areas and specifically of the most depopulated Spain, as it constitutes an ephemeral way a meeting place for those who resisted and never left when everyone did, those who returned a few years after emigrating flooded by longing for their place, those who never stopped returning for the summer to reconnect with their origins and loved ones and those who were already born in other larger and more urban places but were

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always tied to family origins. This is made possible by the recovery of popular heritage in rural areas.

The preservation of the family home or its rehabilitation has constituted a silent transfer of urban income to rural origins, not yet adequately quantified. Many families have pledged their savings to preserve, restore, or even acquire a home in rural origins. They are not second homes, they are family homes where the periodic annual reunion of reconstituted rural communities takes place within the framework of material realities rehabilitated and raised again, in many cases after being lost.

Now that the European Commission has established a long-term vision in 2040 for a new flourishing of rural areas and especially of unpopulated areas^[1], it is possible to favor a quiet change from the most unpopulated rural spaces. This is the most appropriate vision for a country of territorial imbalances of the magnitude expressed by Spain. For now, in countries with serious imbalances, progress is required in the principle of spatial positionality established in successive national-territorial strategies. To achieve territorial equality, it is necessary to start with the rebalancing of rural areas. In this strategy, it is necessary to take into account the value of past and heritage and articulate the precise processes to incorporate them into the present and the future.

The purpose of this contribution is to suggest a series of geographical considerations that serve as a frame of reference to incorporate past and heritage into the processes of change in European rural areas and especially in southern spaces. The processes of rural change have different speeds in Europe, but are more delayed in the peripheral areas of the continent and in each country. In these remote areas, it is possible to investigate the relevance that the recovery of rural materials can acquire especially rural houses. Research in these remote rural areas has usually focused on their social dimension, obscuring the role of the material setting.

2. The Reconstructed Materialities

Geographical studies on rural change processes have usually had a social perspective, focused on the one hand on the loss of traditional populations and the introduction of new populations and the other on the analysis of new realities and social conflicts between locals and newcomers who arrived. The analytical dimension of the current rural geography has positioned his studies in the present, forgetting some interesting dimensions of the past in explaining the current processes of rural transformation. The renewed role of heritage and traditional landscape are some of the dimensions that it is possible to incorporate from the past^[2]. This allows positioning the studies in

the material realities of the past in the micro-processes of rural transformation and from a broader dimension to position in the cultural and natural materiality the study usually centered on the human or from the human. In this context, rural reconstruction processes of built and non-built heritage and rural environments can be established^[3]. Giving affection, symbolism, and a life of its own to rural heritage contributes to decentralizing and adopting an alternative point of view or at least different from the human soul and the utilitarian vision for the people, agencies, and institutions of the rural (popular) heritage. From this perspective, it is possible to question the possibilities and the new role of old material realities in new contexts. Also, on the role of old traditional communities and new materialities, for example in energy contexts- or new technologies in old communities in form of dissymmetrical realities old in new or new in old in a continuous process of insistent eruptions of the past in the rural spaces of the present^[4].

3. Management Styles of the Past

There may be different styles to manage the past in the present. This suggests giving a relevant role to the scale of historical past from small to national in a vertical dimension. It is also possible to manage the spatial scales from a horizontal view: central-marginal, marginal-central, and marginal-marginal according to the relative value of the location of the (heritage in) place. Indeed, the micro and macro value of heritage in place / out of place is relevant. The place encounters would add places with location and local histories of their own. Consequently recover the (power of) past not a sample material scenario or scenic of new things or it is not only heritage and (active) culture but is a force for the future with three broad dimensions: the new value of rural place, tourism (as example of economic activity) and new populations.

Heritage is a spatial phenomenon^[5], with several dimensions: (1) Location, not all heritages is associated with specific places and are built from people and non-human elements. (2) Distribution, not all places has the same heritage or the same notoriety. (3) Scale, the place is possible to analyze within a hierarchy of spatial scales, from local to international. A particular heritage can have a variable function and vision on each scale. Heritage can acquire value from the local to the global. The very management of heritage sites obeys politics with spatial scales where global ideals of conservation and traditional and particular interests of rural communities compete^[6].

4. The Reconstituted Historical Place

The place is related to the past through the relevance

of the place and its originality. This contributes to their differentiation. The past is a key component of selectivity (re)colonization through material manifestations: popular houses and monuments or through the event or historical literature. There is always a differentiated or relative value of place context in each time of history. For example, in countries with a historical process of repopulation, there is a notorious value of political and military borders, with two dimensions intrinsic value and positional value. It is possible to argue an academic transition from history to heritage in the reconstruction process of the new rural heritage sites^[4]. In many rural areas there has been a process of destruction, revival, and reconstitution, with multiple simultaneous processes of loss and conflict of historical heritage in its two natural and cultural dimensions.

At present, it is possible to argue emergent relational communities of interests in historical places. More than local communities based on the extra local value of local rural historical places (emblematic national or regional value). The village suggests notable and multiple differences in the history but selected images and associations persist in the present^[7].

A characteristic is the relevant play of old and new heritage and landscapes in the constitution of contemporary new functions of old landscapes. In the present time exists differentiated visions of histories of rural change are based on old and new materialities. In this context it is possible to make a new history of depopulation and restructuring in rural areas based on materialities: rural houses and emblematic artifacts and landscapes. Materiality, memory, time, politics, place, and heritage have a remarkable and continuous intersection^[4]. It is possible to establish material memories of the past in place as an object of rural heritage. The past is not a pre-condition to produce of heritage^[5]. Time is central in the interpretation of heritage, but heritage is viewed and interpreted from the present. Heritage is a present-centered process^[8]. If the present society and people make the heritage, the heritage needs to manage for contemporary purposes. Heritage must be viewed within the cultural and material context of a particular time^[8]. The history of heritage is a history of the present or a historical succession of narratives of successive presents^[8]. Is a process with notable continuities in the time. For this reason it is possible to conceptualize heritage through the idea of representation^[5]. In this way, heritage becomes a commodity subject, and is possible the coexistence and conflict between different views of heritage in the present.

Heritage has remarkable relevance in the identity of the place. Conceptualizing heritage as meaning or

representation rather than an artifact or object suggests social conflicts for different positions, interests and views of individuals or social groups^[5]. The importance of identity as bounded by place and the use of heritage is a notable source of contestation. The past in the present is a heterogeneous, fluid, and malleable relation, with flows of heterogeneous materials^[9].

There is a selective nostalgia for times and places of the past^[10], which makes it possible to connect the past time with the present landscape in a qualified way. The past acquires meaning in the present landscape. The material past of a place affects the everyday life of local populations. The past is cumulative in the rural setting and contributes to making the scene more complex. Multiple individual pasts give plurality to the collective past of the rural community. Each separate individual makes his moral history^[7]. The moral development of a community suggests a kind of physical or spiritual renewal.

5. Recover (loss) Materialities

5.1 Recover the Material Lost of Rural Decay and the Emergence of New Materialities

‘We speak of vulnerable places and things needing protection, conservation, and preservation’^[4]. Currently, there is a crisis of accumulation in heritage practice which suggests alternatives to material conservation in the context of a great material rural change. As Desilvey^[4] argues, the first thing is to recognize the historic value that is granted to each place in the way to post-production, for later to reserve repair and adequate maintenance. In certain places, the ruin has affected the aesthetic value; while in others natural processes have returned the place to a stage before the managed landscape^[11]. Decay is associated with logic of loss or with the logic of rebirth and renewal^[4]. ‘The continuous accretion of the tangible past is counterbalanced by its continuous loss’^[10]. Heritage is a process that refers to heritage practices in the present in the context of transitions in the experience of space and place^[12]. Thus, heritage is produced by people according to their current concerns and experiences. Consequently, it varies with the passing of the present time in the form of a changeable social process. If heritage is produced in the present, its relationship with the past has a clear temporality and spatial experience^[12]. Micro-spaces emerge from the key social discourses and material constitutions of given assemblages of power^[9].

It is necessary to distinguish between an elite or institutionalized memory –the authorized or hegemonic heritage discourse^[8] and the memory of ordinary

people associated with everyday life. Old sites must be integrated within the context of political agendas and wider conceptions of present popular memory. Heritage is a permanent subjective and cultural process, where identities are created and answered, at different scales^[12]. Oral histories reflect aspects of landscape heritage by offering alternative narratives^[13]. In this sense, the rural place is produced and consumed through multiple and contrasted paths by non-expert voices from below. But, local and popular interpretations suggest a more democratic and inclusive management heritage agenda. It also allows us to notice the moral dimension of the landscape, its plurality, and its social value to integrate it into the practice of conserving the heritage site. The lost period is also a lost period of county life. As Matless^[3] suggests, in each loss and recovery process there is a particular morality of settlement. The reconstruction of a place allows making a new visible community^[3]. People and new materiality produce a new material and visible community. Social change produces new material and visible communities.

5.2 Recover the Material Past and Traditional Heritage for the New Future

Heritage has a present-centered and future-orientated relationship with the past^[12,8,6] in form of a process. The term 'heritage' is used to refer to the complex practices and policies that structure our relationship with past material^[4]. There is a macropolitics of heritage around institutional practices associated with the preservation and a micro-politics that emerges from the management of specific places, adopting an intimate distance^[4]. The valuation of past material does not necessarily encompass accumulation and preservation, since invocations to natural processes or managed decline may appear in institutional agendas^[4]. The recovery of the historical conditions of a place allows the emergence of new trajectories. The conservation and preservation of natural and cultural heritage are always associated with the future^[14]. Heritage is a non-renewable resource^[15] and can have various levels of rarity. It is possible to suggest material resistances or heritage survivals of past rural environments. At the edges there are many survivals precarious communities in visible form of dispersed settlements or close villages^[7]. The community to survive has had to change in its dimensions even as imagined (future) or memories (past) of place. Heritage analysis has been oriented to adopt integrated approaches to examine the politics of loss in both cultural and natural heritage sites^[15]. Landscape memory of cultural and natural heritage sites is a key factor in recovering the past after a period of loss and

disturbance^[11]. We constantly reform historical material sites or scenes as much as our memories. Cultural prejudices affect preservation and destruction. The past is continuously selectively viewed, altered, and preserved in the present. Reconstruction of past scenes can also create new ones^[10]. The reconstruction of rural houses are a particular example traditionally associated with the interests of the 'fashionable folk'^[16]. More recently, the purchase and rehabilitation of traditional houses to use them for recreational amenities has been a notable way of investing money in the new urban middle class. The rehabilitation and use of traditional rural housing, one of the main components of rural heritage, is a prestigious factor in contemporary Western societies.

Heritage allows associating heterogeneous human and non-human realities and actors and assembling different management practices and politics to design different strategies for the future^[17]. These heterogeneous properties of heritage are assembled in the present to qualify the particular future of the place. There is a process of heritage experiences in the present in the context of the heritage site^[18]. This is manifested encounter between an exclusive and inclusive sense of identity and belonging^[19].

5.3 Particular Histories of the Management of Decay and Institutional Histories of Decay and Recover

Material systems encompass multiple unique trajectories and stories of change and transformation. The memories associated with the heritage forms may be popular or elite, consensual or contested, but the association between 'material persistence and memorial function goes largely unquestioned' in the geographical discipline^[4]. Protection in heritage contexts does not refer only to material realities or objects. It also presents a subjective dimension linked to the encounter between different social memories and materialities. There is a particular and singular association to each heritage site between materiality, memory, and subjectivity. Materiality is not a fixed entity but establishes a dynamic relationship with other entities. Some different paths and processes allow creatively configuring the preservation process in a creative way in permanent more-than-human dialogue^[14]. All loss material recovery processes operate on-site and off-site in the form of dynamic and particular associations that generate a diversity of styles. There is a group or individual heritage concerning the social behavior of individuals^[5]. The positive and negative views of heritage sites change in the form of stories that reflect a variety of local communities and organizational structures. In other words, there is a notable acceptance of the inevitability of

change as a permanent process situated in the present.

6. Conclusions

Usually, the analytical nature of geographic research has obscured some areas of work that can acquire considerable relevance in a re-evaluation of the transformation processes of rural spaces that encompass stages of decline, change and new emergence. The reconsideration of materiality and rural heritage as the starting point of rural spaces allows the usual socio-economic point of view that dominates modern rural geographical studies to be decentred.

It is about providing an alternative perspective based on materiality and natural and cultural heritage that allows reinterpreting the evolution of rural spaces, especially in the most remote and unpopulated areas where the transformation processes have been more acute. In this context ‘curated decay’^[4] has a notable relevance in the reinterpretation of the dynamics of rural spaces based on the management of materiality.

Rural materiality is mainly based on a re-emergence of popular housing and concern for other accessory buildings or old rural roads. It has a popular dimension associated with the dimension of the rural place. It is about giving life or it’s voice to the rural heritage that allows decentralizing the utilitarian point of view that usually dominates its study. Through the more-than-human geographies, it is possible to reevaluate the rural natural and cultural heritage of remote rural areas and incorporate it with a life of its own into a global reinterpretation of rural transformation processes.

Currently, it is about investigating in geography about global transformation processes and their different faces in each place. In this proposal we focus on European spaces, but there are other areas where the relevance of materiality is different, such as those of new colonization such as the United States or in spaces with unique dynamics such as the Far East or even Latin America, where materiality acquires another relevance associated with regional dynamics.

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