

‘Suburbanism as a Way of Staying Alive’: Reinventing the Rural

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the social transformations that took place in the Portuguese rural space. In particular, we will study the village of Albernoa in the region of Alentejo in Southern Portugal in order to characterize the deep structural social change this place has gone through. In fact, similarly to what has happened to the major rural areas in the region, this village has suffered progressive ageing and continuous depopulation. These tendencies occurred simultaneously with the reduction of several agricultural enterprises and activities. We will also identify some dynamic indicators connected with the increasing spatial mobility (*sprawl*) and the gradual integration of urban habits. Albernoa is now at the crossroads between urbanization and marginalization.

To analyze these changes we will use a multidimensional perspective of the concept of social space, based on the theoretical approach presented by Lefebvre. This author states that space should not be interpreted as a mere receptacle of social relationships. On the contrary, social space is produced daily in concrete places and is grounded in different kinds of practices and social representations. The distinction and consequently the inter-relation between the notions of space and place helps us to dismantle the various mechanisms that make up these complex social exchanges in which the concepts of *rural* and *urban* are constantly re-inventing themselves.

Keywords: Rural community, urbanization, place, social representations

1.0 Introduction

Arising from the case study of the Portuguese village of Albernoa, the objective of this text is to characterize the way in which rural spaces have suffered a host of profound changes that are manifest in the daily lives of village residents. We have therefore approached the concept of social space from a multidimensional perspective, based upon the principles of Lefebvre (1974), according to whom space should not be interpreted as a mere receptacle where social relations take place. On the contrary, these daily encounters, each in their own fixed settings, are based on a whole range of differentiated practices and social representations. The distinction and consequently the inter-relation between the notions of space and place helps us to dismantle the various mechanisms that make up these complex social exchanges in which the concepts of *rural* and *urban* are constantly re-inventing themselves.

From this perspective, we will focus our analysis upon the designated phenomena of the urbanization of rural spaces. Our aim is to understand the extent to which urbanization affects the life of a village, whose population has found itself being moved further and further away from its traditional agricultural activities and is therefore looking for alternative work and leisure outlets outside the village.

To study these processes we used a variety of different methodologies. Surveys were carried out among representative segments of the village residents¹ by means of questionnaires as well as in-depth interviews with a varied group of individuals.² Based on our analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, we tried, in the first instance, to provide a profile of social practices, namely those based upon levels of spatial and social mobility and, following in the second, to analyze how these are represented by the ‘social actors’ themselves.

2.0 The Urbanization of the Rural: The Sense of Place

Two relatively contemporary structural mechanisms are the basis of the process described as rural urbanization. Throughout the past few decades, it has been proven that there has been a general diminution in the importance of the agricultural sector in developed economies. According to Remy and Voyé, rural spaces have suffered a drastic restructuring of agricultural activities in recent decades: “this restructuring has had a two-fold effect. On the one hand, there has been a stark reduction in the number of farmers and in the percentage of people employed in agriculture. On the other hand, and as a result of the development of mechanisation and the mass introduction of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, productivity per hectare has increased in huge proportions” (Rémy & Voyé, 1994, p. 148).

The other reason lies in the dynamics of the urbanization process which has manifested itself so profoundly in the most varied of contexts—not only in large metropolises, but also in medium-sized cities and even in small towns situated in traditionally rural spaces/areas (Laborie, 1996). By making the local economy tertiary, the investment in urban construction is being fuelled by political interests in urbanization, which are more or less effective, the spread of mass consumption, the diversification of the culture and leisure programmes on offer, the improvement in peoples’ quality of life. These tendencies, along with other factors, are a clear expression of the intensity of the changes that are occurring in some of these cities and towns³.

These two inter-connected processes—the dismantling of traditional structures and agriculture alongside mushrooming urbanization—has meant that rural communities have suffered a series of profound changes that are irreversibly

¹ The survey was carried out on the residents of the village in 2003. There were 145 individuals from different family backgrounds. The number of questionnaires completed accounted for about 45% of the residents of the parish (INE, 2001). Using the data collected, we were able to characterize 370 people who make up the family groups in question. This figure represents about 42% of the people who lived in the village in 2001 (890 according to the same censor). In our sample, around 53% are women, while the remaining 47% are men. The leading questions were defined considering these five dimensions: a) socio-demographic account of the family backgrounds; b) description of the daily life and social practices taken place inside and outside of the village; c) forms of spatial mobility between the village and the urban areas; d) characterization of some agricultural activities; e) social representations concerning the future life of the village.

² Thirteen interviews were given to a diverse group of people. The selection of people for this group was based upon two criteria: a) an awareness of the broad heterogeneity of society, both in generic terms and in terms of age and professional status etc. b) the people who were interviewed were involved in some civic activities, i.e. were involved in village life. The transcripts were interpreted by a thematic and categorical content analysis (Bardin, 1988).

³ The urbanization of rural spaces has become widespread in many societies, particularly, in the developed Western world. A marked example of this situation is found in the United States where there has been a significant increase in the suburbanization of rural areas (Beyers & Nelson, 2000; Duany et al., 2000; Gootdiener & Hutchison, 2006, p. 105-138; Salamon, 2003a).

reflected in their social and territorial reconfiguration. The most poignant of these changes is perhaps the reality of increasing spatial mobility. Many villages, most especially those that are close to urban centres, have turned towards the city. The part of the active population that has chosen to reside in the country tends to work in the city. In turn, the necessities of consumerism have also been channelled into more urban spaces as they are able to offer both a greater diversity and wider selection of products. The car has become the ideal means of transport for commuting between the village and the city (Gaspar, 2000; Jetzkowitz et al., 2007).

Increasingly, these villages are turning into dynamic places that are the starting points for numerous daily trips and trajectories to urban centres. This situation could be due to the radical alteration in village populations, along with the increasingly urban make-up of rural communities (Salamon, 2003a). Nevertheless, urban spread is not necessarily the cause, and in many cases there is no real increase in the construction of new houses and other buildings (which is a paradigm of the densely populated suburbs of big cities). Instead, there is evidence of a marked increase in mobility. The notion of *sprawl* tries to embrace this dimension of movement that is a phenomenon in itself: “sprawl needs to be seen in terms of movement rather than in the relations of fixed points” (Ingersoll, 2006, p. 9).

The urgency and need for mobility have become one of the essential components of rural communities in transformation, a factor which, to a certain extent, reflects a perennial necessity for social, economical and cultural inter-connection with the city. The result of this is that the loss of the villages’ dependence upon agriculture has made them more dependent upon urban centres. All in all, this new reality does not necessarily represent an indifference between urban and rural spaces, nor a kind of homogeneous *continuum* (Pahl, 1966).

A lot has already been written about the different ties between rural and urban life. Some authors have said that rural erosion will tend to become more and more immersed in the inevitable ‘waves’ of urbanization, which have uniformly taken over and spread through the most diverse of territories⁴. Other authors have pointed to the fact that the capacity of the rural communities is not just a question of resisting change, but rather of adapting to it and of reinventing themselves in the light of the new socio-economical dynamics (Kayser, 1990, 1996)⁵. These two visions are not necessarily opposing or exclusivist ones. There are areas that have undergone large-scale processes of urbanization and, perhaps because of them, they have been simultaneously capable of demonstrating an endogenous capacity to revitalize their local economies, namely by means of developing new sectors like tourism, the environment and small-scale cultural and leisure undertakings, etc. (Ferrão & Lopes, 2004; Jollivet, 1997; Perrier-Cornet & Hervieu, 2002; Reis & Lima, 1998).

There are different ways of dealing with the concept of *urbanization*: “some have conceived of urbanization in the physical sense of the increasing area of land being developed for urban use, while others view urbanization as a social process of people adopting the attitudes and behaviour traditionally associated with life in cities and towns, irrespective of where they might live” (Champion,

⁴ This perspective is presented in a very critical way by some authors of rural sociology (Kayser, 1990, p. 16-17; Newby, 1983, p. 107-109), who consider it deeply belittling and analytically hegemonical.

⁵ The work of Kayser marks a turning point and a paradigmatic shift in the analysis of rural life viewed as subject to erosion and bound to disappear.

2001, p. 144). We think these conceptions are both valid and they are not necessarily alternative to each other. On the other hand, it is possible to say that in some situations and in some spatial contexts they are not inevitably associated with each other. This is the case of what is happening in the village of Albernoa⁶.

Actually, this is the case for numerous rural settlements located in the interior of Portugal (Ferrão, 2003). In fact, we can say that although these places have been losing population the last three or four decades, some of them are simultaneously witnessing a deep change in their population habits, namely in the adoption of the so-called urban ways of life (Almeida, 1999; Lourenço, 1991; Silva, 1998). This is happening mostly in the villages located near cities, like Albernoa, which are situated in close proximity to the most important and urbanized city in this region of Southern Alentejo. This spatial propinquity reinforces the linkage established between the villagers and the city life taking place in Beja: people are commuting frequently for working and/or for consumption practices in the city.

Thus, concerning the peculiarity of this place, we can define urbanization as a process of linkage responsible for deepening the relationship between the villagers and the city life (economically and socially speaking). But this process is not associated with the increment of physical density expressed in term of land being developed for urban use. In fact, as we shall see, besides having lost a lot of residents in the last fourteen years, its population is also getting older. Regarding these contradictory sociological and demographic tendencies, it is not wrong to admit that in Albernoa some signs of marginalization (measured in part by the resident migration and the aging process) coexist with other signs of urbanization such as sprawl.

In this way, urbanization does not impose itself in a uniform way like an abstract entity that frames reality through its intrinsic characteristics (Masuda & Garvin, 2008). For this reason, it is not possible to extrapolate a universal vision of these phenomena (Mathieu, 1996, 1998; Mormont, 1990) without taking their social contexts into account or, more specifically, to placing their concrete places into question.

It is therefore important to consider each place as a living space and not as a mere receptacle that frames a differentiated collection of social relationships. In conceptual terms, the interaction between *space* and *place* is not always clear and linear. On the whole, the notion of space usually refers to more far-reaching dynamics that might affect (or not) the reality that is lived in those places (Agnew, 2005; Cresswell, 2004).

According to Gieryn, “(...) place must be more than (say) racial proportions of neighbourhoods, unemployment rates in cities, birth rates in nation-states. Here, place becomes a stand-in for clusters of variables located in spaces chosen for their analytic utility but generally denuded of architecture, landscape, and actors’ own narrations” (2000, p. 466). Consequently, the author suggests that “places are endlessly made, not just when the powerful pursue their ambition through brick and mortar, not just when design professional give form to function, but also when ordinary people extract from continuous and abstract space a bounded, identified, meaningful, named and significance place” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 471).

⁶ Albernoa is located in the interior of Southern Alentejo (in the South of Portugal), 20 km away from the city of Beja, the capital of the district. In terms of its demographical and sociological composition, this village is relatively representative of the region, with no exceptional particularities compared to the other villages.

This perspective is very similar to the notion of place, defined by Massey, as a site of multiple identities and narratives which are marked by a specific (and unique) range of social interactions (Massey, 1994). One important dimension of this sense of uniqueness is experienced in daily life: it is difficult to imagine its continuity and routines, in the way Giddens (1989) describes, developed out of some given places and concrete social contexts. In short, we can say that *place* is a less abstract notion than *space* because it endorses a specific materiality capable of being appropriated through the construction of several and distinct meanings and practices; or, using Smith's (2001) expression, we can define place as a *social construction of space*.

This approach can be connected with the question of *rurality*. As Pratt (1996) writes, we should be aware of the multiplicity of meanings that are bound up in this concept. However, it seems relatively consensual that we cannot characterize the particularity of each meaning without establishing a sociological analysis based not only on one (or more) concrete place(s), but also on the interpretations by the people who are living in it: the different meanings of rurality are constructed within the contexts of their own lives (Jones, 1995). In this sense, we intend to define rurality as a social construction based on discourses woven by the people who experience their daily lives moving (and staying) through several concrete places.

This sense of uniqueness of the place, as Massey defines it, is in part produced by discourses and social representations carried out by the people who live in it (Halfacree, 1995). From this viewpoint, rurality might be conceived as a production and simultaneously as a product of social practices and representations that are attached to and bounded up with a specific sort of place (a particular village, a peculiar landscape, a small town, etc.).

This paper intends to show that the urbanization of rural zones cannot be defined just as a linear and devastating process that distorts and dismantles rural communities to such an extent that they lose any capacity to reinvent themselves. As there is a whole range of contradictory dynamics affecting certain territories, as for examples in the region of Alentejo in Southern Portugal, we shall see how the resident population of a small village is increasingly constructing its own sense of belonging through its representation of rural life. This village, in turn, is reinventing itself because of the urban experiences of the villagers. In order to explain this phenomenon, we shall use the notion of *representational space* proposed by Lefebvre (1974). This will allow us to conceive of space not just as a mere reflection of social interaction, but rather as a social construct that is continually being produced in the process of daily life (Soja, 1996).

3.0 Albernoa: Between Urbanization and Marginalization

The Alentejo is traditionally a region of large rural estates (*latifundium*) that has always had a strong agricultural heritage, especially in the production of cereals. The traditional agricultural system was based upon paid manual labour for working the land, which reached a peak at the height of the harvest season (Cutileiro, 1977). Since the 1960s there has been a significant investment in the mechanisation of agriculture, a situation that has led to a stark increase in out-migrations (Barros, 1986). The lack of alternatives to agricultural work has led to a wide scale desertion of towns and villages, with many people moving to more urban areas of Portugal, particularly to the metropolitan borough of Lisbon). Between 1950 and 2001, the Alentejo region lost more than one third of its population and in some areas, this figure was as high as two thirds. At the same time of this depopulation, there was also a substantial increase in the

percentage of people over 65 years old who were left in the villages, rising from 7% in 1950 to 23% in 2001 (INE, 2001).

Nevertheless, this emptying of rural communities did not occur in a linear way. Cities like Évora and Beja, for example, have experienced substantial growth; both cities have witnessed an increase in their populations of 70% and 60% respectively, since the 1940s. In the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s, the region underwent important demographical and socio-economical developments in certain urban areas. This demographical evolution contrasts quite clearly with the regressive tendencies that have, above all, affected rural spaces. People left the farmlands, but they did not all migrate to the borough of Lisbon. Instead, some opted to stay and live in the towns and cities of the Alentejo itself.

Hence we can surmise that two opposing tendencies co-existed that would affect the fabric of rural communities. One was the depopulation and aging of the more remote dioceses and rural areas, and the other was the rapid growth of urbanization and modernization that changed considerably the face of some urban centres. In this sense, when we think about the Alentejo, we must also think about a space that is interwoven with an urban texture and which has very distinct characteristics that are not simply exclusive to more recent changes in contemporary Portuguese society.

In truth, the region has always stood out because the majority of its residents live in cities, towns or villages. In a way, the urban component has never been absent from the local history of the region. However, the most recent urban developments that have taken place in Portugal have contributed to the erosion of a large number of these villages, not just in terms of population, but also in terms of various socio-economic services, even though many of them have greatly improved their infra-structures (basic sanitation, the resurfacing of roads and streets, and improvements in living conditions, cleanliness etc.), principally thanks to the work carried out by local councils since 1974—the date of the carnation revolution that started democracy in Portugal.

Albernoa is one such village that finds itself at the crossroads of development that seems to be permanently put off. Since the 1940s, it began to lose residents whose number dropped from 3525 in 1940 to just 890 in 2001 (INE, 2001). Over the same time period, as the population decreasing, it also aged. The number of elderly people over the age of 65 increased from 29% in 1991 to 36% in 2001 (INE, 2001). By contrast, for Portugal as a whole the percentage of people over 65 years was about 16% in 2001. These basic indicators characterize a depressing demographic reality which underlines the fact that a significant number of these old people are out of work and that their mobility is negligible. The oldest members of the community spend almost all their time in the village and on the whole, only go into the city when they need to do so for health reasons (i.e. they go to the health centre or the hospital in Beja).

Nevertheless, more than a third of the population is working and for these, village life is very different. Of this group, about 58% holds a job outside the village and in fact most of them work in the city of Beja. This population is much younger and it maintains close ties to the city and commutes there on a regular basis because of work, but also for leisure and shopping. In truth, throughout the last decades, the village has been losing some of its economical functions, especially those related to commerce and public services. At the moment, the commerce in the village is restricted to three cafes and about the same number of grocery shops. Most people do their household shopping in the city.

Table 1 represents the distinction between the older and younger generation and how the latter commutes between village and city. The variable '*levels of*

spatial mobility’ as shown in Table 1 results from an analysis of commuting practices in terms of four categories: *very low*, includes people who ‘rarely’ go to the city; *low*, villagers whose average is ‘some times per year’; *regular*, those who commute ‘several times per month’; *high*, people who commute to the city ‘several days per week’. As expected, as age increases, so respectively does the percentage of villagers who rarely go to the urban centre. Given their sporadic, almost non-existent trips to the city, it is the older people who attain the lowest percentages on the ‘regular’ and ‘high’ levels of spatial mobility (14.5% and 0%, respectively).

Table 1. *Spatial Mobility in the city of Beja in terms of age*

Levels of spatial mobility (sprawl)	Scale of residents’ ages (%)			
	Up to 35 years	36-55 years	56-65 years	Over 65 years
Very low	6.7	7.1	24.0	45.2
Low	10.0	28.6	44.0	40.3
Regular	50.0	39.3	24.0	14.5
High	33.3	25.0	8.0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey conducted in 2003.

It is for this reason that youngest members of the community tend to be almost totally dependent upon an urban lifestyle, which is expressed in other factors besides their consumer habits. Their day-to-day lives are lived simultaneously in an interstitial space that is a regular interchange between the village and the city.

On the grounds of these factors, we can see that the village finds itself in a relatively ambivalent, social situation. On the one hand, its population continues to get older and to diminish, while, on the other hand, a conjunction of symptomatic signals of spatial (and also social) mobility is evident in the interactions that are developing alongside urbanization. In other words, we could say that, to a certain extent, urbanization has come to the village through the daily lives of the villagers themselves. It is through them that the village of Albernoa has acquired a capacity to interact with the most widespread aspects of spatial dynamics that have marked the region: the place has reshaped itself, based upon the daily lives led by its residents. This observation confirms one of the key principles of Lefebvre’s theoretical perspectives that the production of spaces needs to be analyzed as a permanent dialectic between the general and global dynamics of space and the place in which we live on a day-to-day basis (Lefebvre, 1974; Merrifield, 1993; Shields, 1998).

4.0 Representation of the Rural: Reinventing the Place

Having characterized the spatial dynamics that have had a real influence on the daily lives of the village residents, it is important to understand the ways in which they represent their own village in view of the deep-set changes that have taken place in the region, for “representations of the rurality remain a significant feature in the spatialisation of everyday discourse, and therefore remain a legitimate focus for investigation in rural studies” (Cloke, 2003, p. 2). To accomplish this, we will analyze the social representations of rural life, wherein the social actors themselves can trace a typical outline of their

experiences and daily routines, following Jones who defines the lay discourses of the rural as “people’s everyday interpretations of the concept of rurality and of the places they see as rural” (1995, p. 36). To complete this task, we will characterize the diverse discursive positions proposed by Lefebvre (1974) which, according to Merrifield, “is space experienced through the complex symbols and images of its ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (1993, p. 523). This notion can be applied to the vision that the village residents have about their own lives within the village and the relationship that they have established with the city. Space seen from this perspective is a relatively ample dimension that is not limited by the physical perimeter of the village itself. In this sense, we will be focussing on what individuals in the village themselves tell us about their own daily lives, spent in a place of rural characteristics which is undergoing an intense process of change⁷.

Could it be that based upon the representations of daily life, a concept of a living place will emerge that is quite distinct from urban life? Or will the opposite be true, and what we are witnessing is the erosion of rural life as far as the representational meaning in the construction of a vision about living space is concerned? For the resident themselves, is life nowadays in Albernoa still seen as being essentially rural? Deep down, it is this question that we hope to answer based upon our analysis of in-depth interviews with some of the residents.

The survey, which we carried out on these different versions of daily life, reveals a diverse range of perspectives on the meaning of rural (and also urban) life. From these results it is possible to construct a general model of social representations (see Figure 1). This model does not attempt to be exhaustive, nor does it intend to put forward a universal maxim that could be applied to a whole range of rural contexts. Above all, Figure 1 should be seen as a model which has emerged from the analysis of different ways of being and living in the everyday life of this particular village⁸.

As we have seen, during the last three decades, Albernoa has suffered a host of processes that have resulted in a dismantling of its traditional structures and which have caused a radical change in the ways that people work and live in the village. These changes have been such that the number of people working in the agricultural sector has been falling continually. Therefore, in this sense, the village has lost one of the most essential aspects that used to characterize it as a rural space, not just in structural terms but moreover in terms of daily life. Currently, urbanization represents a very real trend that is affecting the majority of the working population and, to a lesser extent, also the nonworking. This means in fact that the agricultural component has ceased to be a predominant and important element of day-to-day life: the majority of families have ceased to be dependent upon agriculture and have become increasingly distanced from the problems affecting this sector. As they are no longer actively involved in agriculture, the population has now developed a very different kind of relationship with the village and this is shown very clearly through the intensity of the various modalities of spatial mobility. This is how village life is lived and the way to really understand it depends, to a large extent, on the types of interactions that exist outside the village with more urban spaces.

Moreover, the representations of rural and urban have redefined themselves in the light of other factors that do not necessarily have anything to do with

⁷ Keith Halfacree (2006) uses the concept of *everyday lives of the rural* to define this *representational* dimension of the rural space.

⁸ This comprehensive model is based upon an analysis of the thematic content (Bardin, 1988) of the interviews and the results of the survey carried out upon the resident population of the village.

agriculture. For example, our discussions with village residents have revealed a great deal about housing, notably how much people invest in their homes, the relationships they have with their various neighbours and also their work environments, their social lives and the consumer habits which are developing or have developed in urban spaces. This crossover of experiences could provoke a certain indifference about what “rural life” and “city life” really mean to people, but what we actually observed was the opposite. People were more concerned about redefining what normally identifies and separates the content of the two. In the interviews that we carried out, and the conversations we had with the people living in Albernoa, nobody said that living in the village is (or could be) the same as living in the city of Beja. On the contrary, one of the frequently mentioned advantages of living in the village was that of being able to enjoy the benefits of both “worlds” (urban and rural).

However, despite the fact that people who live in Albernoa did not really know much anymore about the traditional elements of agricultural life, there is evidence that they continue to perceive the village as an essentially rural place. From this perspective, the village could be perceived as a rural space which is tending towards a non-agricultural one, since the majority of the population no longer work in agriculture, and which is going through differentiated processes of urbanization and of marginalization. We thus find ourselves in a complex social space that, from a sociological perspective, cannot be interpreted through a linear or universal point of view.

The research methods we used as the general model of social representations allowed us to systemize the profile of the village population across a variety of points of view. We are thus in a position to say that the majority of people have characterized their lives in the village along these two main lines: one is related to the spatial order determined by the morphology of the place itself and the other aspect of village life that stands out is related to the social ties which exist between the village residents. When they were asked about what they most valued about village life, some of the interviewees said that the concrete and physical space that they had (and own) in the village was the central reason why they liked living there. The very word, ‘*espaço*’, the Portuguese word that means ‘space’ in both a physical and morphological sense of owning, was explicitly cited by some, particularly men, although they had some difficulty in specifying exactly what they understood by this concept:

A – (...)The advantages of living in Albernoa, well that’s my home, comfort and peace... Space [*espaço*]!

Q – Space?

A – The space that you have here⁹ would be difficult to find somewhere else for less money. The road [from Albernoa to Beja] is good, and the people there are nice, the village is calm ... l. —Bank clerk in Beja, aged 45

Q – (...) What is it then that I love about it? You say the village but ...

A – The village, the space.

Q – The space?

A – The space because I know it like the back of my hand. I grew up there and I know the place inside out. I know it all. It’s completely

⁹ The interviewee is referring to the city of Beja where the interview took place.

different. I like Albernoa and I like the space which I can find there, not the people, in particular. If you were to ask how many people, not even half of them. —Security guard in Beja, aged 21

Q – Have you never considered going to live in the city of Beja?

A – No.

Q – No?

A – No, because there is no space there and I am used to having a lot of space around me and I like to look and see ... —Employee working in the social services, aged 51

These interview extracts highlight three aspects of what is understood by the notion of a lived place. The first one refers to the most utilitarian aspects like the advantage of having a bigger house for less money. The second interviewee values the village because it is a familiar place in which he grew up, a place where he feels he has roots. The last one talks about the space around the village and emphasizes the importance of the landscape. These various elements are often interconnected and, in certain cases, they emerge in juxtaposition to the space offered by the city, which in most interviews was clearly seen as inadequate.

The morphological dimension of a place is made up of many levels that can be seen both as positive and negative. According to some interviewees, the *house* is valued as a *personal place*, which allows them to have a certain degree of autonomy in the face of the social control that has always controlled village life. On the one hand, it is important for them to be around other villagers to give them a sense of place as a *continuum*, the openness of village life where any neighbour can just pop in because there is a mutual understanding and trust among them (doors are rarely locked). On another level, the village is also valued because it is a familiar place where everybody knows everybody else and people get on fairly well with one another. And yet, the village's sense of neighbourliness is tinged with a certain degree of mistrust because of the tendency to interfere in peoples' private lives and in the lives of their respective families.

The link to the city of Beja is seen to be a pleasant kind of *pendular space* which serves a functional purpose as a city which is close enough to allow frequent visits so that people can regularly make the most of what it has to offer, but, at the same time, far enough away to allow some quality of life which is inherent to rural life (peace, silence and landscapes ...); or, as an adverse space which normally does not even have sufficient conditions to allow people to commute effectively (e.g. if they do not have their own car or suffer from health problems, etc.).

A second dimension, namely that of *social relationships* usually takes on two distinct and opposing viewpoints. The positive view that we distinguish as *aggregation* defines the village community as a harmonious collective that encompasses the majority of people living there; whereas, the more negative view emphasizes the autonomy and demarcation of village life where people live their lives alongside one another and not together at all.

This first viewpoint values the relationships between neighbours in a positive way as well as the advantages of interconnectedness:

“(…) At the end of the day, this is the place I want to be in a quiet little corner where everyone knows everyone else and we are big family, we are all interested in each others’ lives. Sometimes this isn’t such a great thing but the truth is that it’s a way of caring about others, because if we didn’t talk to each other, we wouldn’t care and my friends are all here, my life and I don’t think I’d be able to live in Beja.”

“(…) the advantage that we have is that this is a welcoming little corner of the world “um cantinho” where we all know and trust one another, we don’t have to worry if the door is closed or not. I left my own door open … I don’t even worry about the door key – in fact the door is open all day long. I only really lock the door at night before I go to bed. I am totally relaxed because here I feel part of a big family.” —Gardener, aged 51

According to this woman, who adheres to the first viewpoint, the village represents a haven protected (in a “cosy little corner”) from the tribulations of the city and all the commuting to and fro. Even though she acknowledges the excess of gossip that sometimes invades and interferes with her privacy, it could be said that this interviewee embodies the friendly nature and solidarity of the majority of relationships in the village, in the way that people there tend to care about their neighbours.

The interconnectedness is seen as an advantage that guarantees the safety and a greater sense of well-being in their day-to-day lives. Implicitly, there is almost always a comparison made with more urban spaces, where people do not know one another and live with a greater sense of fear.

There is, on the other hand, the opposite point of view that sees village life with a certain sense of regret because of the interfering nature of the neighbours:

“(…)I love Albernoa but I think living here is a bit more complicated, not because of the village itself, because I do love it …but you just need one person, who knows who you are, what you are like, where you are from and where your roots are. We don’t mind any of that, it’s just afterwards … the atmosphere in the village is very ‘heavy’, you know … I don’t even know if that is the right word but there is an atmosphere … there is nothing that we can do that they don’t know about and that isn’t criticised and that doesn’t get exaggerated and all of these things and this here, well, my girlfriend never liked this kind of place …” —Security guard, aged 21

This way of seeing things is, to a certain extent, just the opposite of the previous one because of its negative overtones about the nature and intensity of relationships within the village. The people we spoke to, and who shared this view, regarded their neighbours as people who would intrude into their private lives. In many cases, the village is seen as a place with a heavy atmosphere, somehow oppressive because everybody gets involved in other peoples’ business.

Using these positive and negative elements of village life as our starting point, it is possible to construct a model, characterized by four distinct categories as follows:

- a) *Rootedness* – represents those people who value the following two aspects, the dominant sense of harmony and collective cohesion within the village and the notion of a familiar space.

- b) *Protection* – represents the people who tend to value the spatial and morphological dimension, particularly the personal space, at the expense of neighbourliness that is seen as a rather negative aspect.
- c) *Accommodation* – corresponds to those people who like familiarity among neighbours but who in turn do not like some obstacles which interfere with their spatial perspectives, namely the hassle of commuting to and from the city.
- d) *Constraint* – defines those people who are clearly dissatisfied with life in the village and who dislike the intrusiveness of neighbours and do not even feel happy living there.

		<i>The morphology of the place</i>	
		+	-
<i>Social</i>	+	Rootedness	Accommodation
	-	Protection	Constraint

Figure 1. Representational model of rural life

The first two viewpoints were most frequently recorded among the residents (see Figure 1). In turn, the other two outlooks were relatively residual, affecting certain strands of the population. The profile which we have called *accommodation* fundamentally characterizes some elderly people who feel a certain dissatisfaction in living in the village because they feel that they are removed from a host of institutions and organizations that could offer them goods and consumables. They are people who demonstrate some regrets at not having left the village when they were younger, as other people did.

The outlook of people in the *constraint category* corresponds to a very specific group of people, namely young people (some who still live with their parents) and who, in the short- or medium-term, intend to leave the village to live elsewhere. They are people who feel saturated by village life and do not see their futures there.

The tendency towards *rootedness* or a greater sense of *protection* can embrace people of different age groups and with very distinct lifestyles. In fact, it is upon these two viewpoints that the predominant lifestyle structures of the village are based. Our first thought might affirm that those who value their personal space and individualism most would fit better into a more urban lifestyle because it would give them more daily contact with the city. In fact, it could be said that a greater exposure to urban life could also reinforce the significance of some components of traditional rural life, especially in terms of interconnectedness, relationships and people helping one another. In fact, both points of view have caused a revalorisation of some aspects of rural life in terms of spatial factors and/or relational ones.

To sum up, we can say that those who are *protective* of their private space are those members of the population who are most likely to have links and develop intense spatial mobility with the city of Beja. For them, their home is a place to be preserved and the target of substantial economic (and also affective) investment, which can be seen, among other factors, in terms of what has been spent on expensive and high quality household goods and appliances.

Those who belong to the *rootedness* group are mainly people who do not move around very much and tend to consume less than the previous group. Instead, they prefer to pass their time in the village, which they consider being their “natural” space and, generally speaking, they like to socialize regularly with their neighbours.

The *representational* model of rural life was based upon an essentially formal outline within which it was possible to frame different ways of organizing daily life. This means that the diverse types of sociability and distinct modalities of space appropriation identified previously might or might not point to similar positive or negative viewpoints about the various aspects of village life. In other words, the chosen model of representation adapts itself geographically to social practices, without imposing a universal significance on the way that daily life is lived and what people think about it.

In this sense, the meanings of rural and urban life have tended to be defined simultaneously and in opposition to each other, which has created a constant comparison between the two: the village resident focuses upon a variety of aspects that have changed in the village and upon the increasing social ties and heterogeneity of urban contexts. In this sense, it is important to recognize the dynamic character of these different outlooks: the same individual might take on (or assume in the future) a distinct stance regarding village life.

5.0 Conclusion: It’s Better to ‘Suburbanize’ than to Disappear

The data we have set out in this paper outlines the situation of a village that has undergone such a multiplicity of processes that it is difficult to define through simple typology. In truth, and despite the fact that the number of people in the village seems to be constantly falling, we have seen that from a sociological point of view, their social reality is relatively complex.

In additions to gradually losing its population, this place has simultaneously suffered a process of urbanization, as reflected in the way people adopt attitudes and behaviours that are traditionally associated with life in cities and towns. Albernoa is at the crossroads between these two processes. The fact that it is steadily losing residents does not change the evidence that those who stayed (those who remain) have suffered the same social changes that have been experienced throughout the Alentejo region. The dynamics of urbanization have reached this place, fundamentally via the everyday lives of its residents and through their countless journeys from the village to the city.

In this way, an interdependence has been established between the way villagers organize their daily lives and routines and the creation of new forms of representing rural life. In a sense, we can say that village life has gained other meanings which reveal the constant involvement established with wider spaces, namely urban areas. Life there, in that particular village, has undergone a whole host of transformations during the past three decades; these began with agriculture, which used to be a mainstay of village life, being almost completely wiped out, and ended with the increase in spatial and social mobility. These transformations have caused a reformulation of the process of urbanization which is appropriated in different ways. Thus, instead of holding a general vision that continues to regard the village as essentially rural—clearly distinct objectively and subjectively from urban life—this study tends to contemplate distinct perspectives that are contradictory in themselves in terms of what is or is not valued in village life.

For instance, those people we interviewed see urbanization as a kind of final opportunity to invert regressive demographical tendencies. It was even said

that in face of the progressive dwindling of village life, it would be better to become a dormitory of the city. This could be a way of attracting many more people from the outside to come and live there. Or, perhaps we can say, in a context where spatial mobility is (now) commonplace and the car has become an indispensable means of transport, that the relative geographical proximity of the village to the city could be attractive for new inhabitants who are looking for a certain quality of life that is difficult to find in more urbanized places.

All in all, it is possible to say that for a place which is becoming depopulated, the main priority is, without doubt, to get more people to come and live there, and to achieve this aim the promotion of building programmes might represent a viable option. In this sense, suburbanization—conceived as a process of incrementing physical and residential density—appears to be one of the valid possibilities for the future sustainability of the village. In fact, some of the testimonies were very clear about this issue; for them the village only has two opposite destinies. Its demographic tendencies will increase and it will eventually disappear or, on the contrary, it will become more and more dependent on the city economy, turning itself into a bigger dormitory.

However, we cannot overlook the fact that the mere (and so far, hypothetical) increase in the population and in the building developments will not necessarily improve the quality of the social life in the village, nor will it create more places in which to socialize and spend leisure time. On the contrary, it may in fact make people become more individualistic and thus cause more division among the population, as it is the case of many rural American communities (Duany et al., 2000; Salamon, 2003a, 2003b). In the end, the increase in residents (and residences) might be understood as a potential future for Albernoa, which could not only invert the depressing demographic cycle. It could also provide the basic conditions needed to improve new forms of social networks (Carmo, 2010). This in turn would and should be reflected in the improvement of the levels of local development and social initiatives.

6.0 References

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