

The New Identity of Catalan Rural Geography
Rosa CERAROLS; Joan NOGUÉ [ed.] (2022). *L'altre món rural. Reflexions i experiències de la nova ruralitat [=The Other Rural World. Reflections and Experiences of the New Rurality]*.

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1. Introduction

There has been an extensive debate about the existence, or not, of a Catalan school of geography, which would have been in its heyday before 1939, with all the grandeur of the well-known regional monographs (in the Catalan case, regarding *comarques*, ‘counties’) with a strong ruralist accent. It would have continued during much of the long dark night of Franco’s dictatorship, perhaps until the advent of the first, self-described, “new geography” shortly followed by those that would call themselves “new geographies” in plural (or “new new geographies”?). Indeed, it has been argued that the crisis of this Catalan school of geography – that I do believe happened – was epistemological, even ontological, with the arrival of international ideas about geography from outside Catalonia during the 1960s and afterwards.

However, with a less momentous interpretation, I think that the crisis of the Catalan school of geography is also due to the effects of the institutionalisation of geography in Catalan universities in those years, which should be remembered as having happened within a markedly Spanish nationalistic dictatorial context. At this point, I am convinced that even though unconsciously, over the decades a Spanish mentality operated which led to the gradual abandonment of certain scales, logics and methods of work. Although Font (2013) has argued that Catalan geography is largely explained by the existence of the Catalan national perspective, I must recognise that I am not very convinced about the last half-century, as I have already stated in Paül (2021). At the same time, the legal reforms of universities introduced after Franco’s death (the so-called

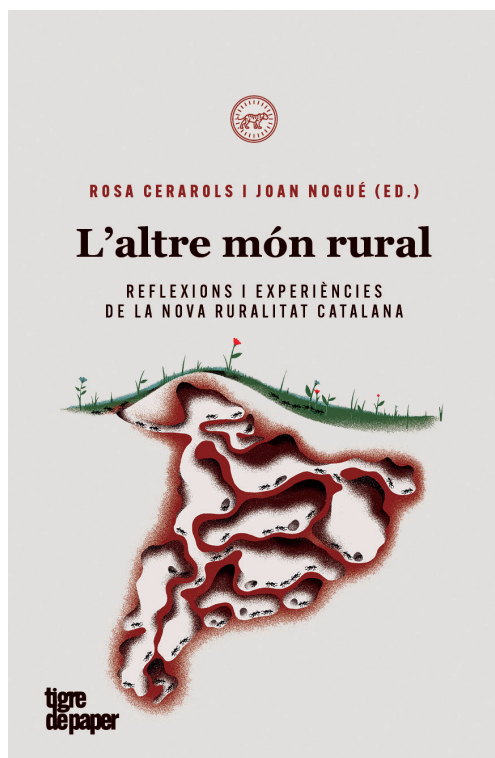
“transition”) consolidated a bureaucratic and administrative framework that reinforced rooted tendencies established in the dictatorship, for example, through mechanisms such as determining which publications (journals, publishers, etc.) were considered of quality; the system of previous accreditation for eligibility for university positions set by the governments; the academic networks that were established; or the different competitive calls for positions which were often chaired by colleagues who tended to see the Catalan scale (not to mention county or local scales) as insufficient. The “warnings” formulated by Capel (2003) are clear proof of this, and it must be said that it set the pace for many people who tried to lead the way, even today, I fear.

These reflections may seem out of place in the review of a recent book, but they frame the main message that I want to communicate: we are in the presence of a work that allows us to maintain that Catalan rural geography has a defined identity, different, neither better nor worse, in relation to those practiced in neighbouring territories. Indeed, it is a happy coincidence that there has been another book published with a very similar purpose (to provide a regional rural geography), but for the whole of Spain, by Molinero and Alario (2022), at the same time as the book reviewed here. We will return to this comparison later.

Certainly, we are all affected by the debate that has been generated in Spain based on the influential book by del Molino (2016), about the so-called “Empty Spain”. It is widely believed to be responsible for the creation of a label that has triggered latent dynamics, such as the resurgence of certain provincial or regional political movements along geopolitical lines (Paül *et al.*, 2021), but that is meaningless from a geographical perspective (Paül, 2020). However, in Catalonia, Garcia Coll and Sánchez Aguilera (2005) had been speaking about the revitalisation, at least partial, of Catalan rural areas for years. Also, the impressive rural atlases of Aldomà (2009, 2015, 2022) also confirm that years before the idea of an “empty rural Spain” emerged, Catalan rural space was something read very differently. Still, and to finish this initial digression, I think that applying the adjective “empty” to rural space is not very original, seeing as it has been widely used in France from at least the 1980s to refer to the imaginary diagonal line drawn between Lorraine, to the northeast, and Gascony, to the southwest, coinciding with the ‘French Desert’ of that famous essay by Gravier (1947).

2. Analysis

The editors of the volume set down the general aim of the book in the first sentence: “to publicise the diversity of the Catalan rural world [...] in order to leave behind the hegemonic and stereotypical vision that still prevails” (p. 5). This objective corresponds to a daring opening hypothesis: “the rural world moves. Something is moving there, and not just a little. Nothing is what it



seems” (p. 6). At this point, they make an initial claim for a local scale and the places chosen to be part of the work, which “are not simple sceneries, but first-class protagonists” (p. 6), so that the geographic approach is well established: the places themselves are actors, not mere locations. In my opinion, the tone of the work is defined by the words *hope*, *enthusiasm*, *expectation* and *advocacy* (p. 10), which are also used in the introductory section. Finally, they explain that there are three sections which they quickly define: “Contexts”, “Experiences” and “Conversations”. If I may, this division is perhaps the aspect of the book that I find the most debatable. Although of course, the division into categories is always a complicated affair, there are texts that have a conversational

format in the two other sections; the “Experiences” are everywhere and the clearest “Contexts” are found toward the end of the work, and not at the beginning. However, it is not a simple task to arrange 31 contributions.

The first section, “Contexts”, includes twelve chapters that describe general approaches applicable to the whole of the Catalan rural area. The first two works focus on mental representations: the first, by Enric Mendizàbal, on rural geography as a subdiscipline; and the second, by Bernat Lladó, around *Noucentisme*, an early twentieth-century Catalan cultural renovation movement, and its idea of the “city of cities” and the implicit consideration it dedicates to Catalan rural space, with a constant mention of the work of Oriol Nel-lo and an interesting contrast with the aforementioned del Molino (2016). The genealogy of rural studies developed in Catalonia that is woven by Mendizàbal is one possibility, and it was with much excitement that I noticed the many references to the work of the unforgettable Roser Majoral. The text of Bernat Lladó, in turn, can be compared to the following one by Gemma Estany. The landscape is very present in both, but the first one deals with the world of ideas, while in the second, only the tangible aspect is taken into consideration; to put it briefly, Catalan rural space is characterised as forestry and depopulated. The underlying trends that have led to this diagnosis by Gemma Estany partly stem from the economic explanations offered in the fourth text by Isabel Salamaña, which proposes three stages that explain the transformations that

had been occurring from the nineteenth century up to the present. The fifth contribution, by Mireia Baylina, brings a reading of rural space from the point of view of feminist geography, largely based on the interview of six women who live and work there.

From here, seven “Contexts” follow, offering sector-specific approaches emphasising a particular aspect: agroecology (Federica Ravera and Vanesa Freixa), housing (Oriol Porcel), solidarity economy (Ricard Espelt), governance (Òscar Gussinyer and Erica Zárate), energy (Sergi Saladié), artistic creativity (Rosa Cerarols) and the media (Jordi de San Eugenio). All seven “Contexts” highlight realities such as the following examples of each, respectively: the formation of alternative agri-food networks; the determined approval of public housing policies in some counties; the activity of cooperatives that pursue social transformation; the development of established systems of citizen participation in some municipalities; the existence of social movements that defend a fair energy transition; land art initiatives throughout Catalonia; or local newspapers with strong advocacy for the county scale. As mentioned before, in all these cases there are specific examples that can be confused with the following section of contributions: “Experiences”.

From a formal perspective, the fifteen “Experiences” have something in common that distinguishes them from the previous texts: their brevity. Indeed, not one goes beyond ten pages, unlike the previous longer “Contexts”. I will group the “Experiences” in two sets: there are ten chapters that geographically refer to a specific rural locality/county/region; and the other five are initiatives that combine many different places, often through a network associative formula. These last five have a direct correspondence with the “Contexts”, hence they could be interchangeable: the Association of *Micropobles* (‘tiny villages’, as explained by Oriol Serrà), with more than 200 municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants, responds to the challenge facing the entire Catalan rural space, particularly depopulation; the @Repoblem (Ton Lloret) initiative, originally on Twitter, is in line with the Association of *Micropobles* and aims to offer advice, job offers, etc. to people who want to live in the area. *Ramats de Foc* (‘Fire Flocks’, by Emma Soy and Sergi Nuss), is a collective of about twenty shepherds who control underbrush growth through livestock as a strategy to avoid fires – the group is currently spread throughout the counties of Girona, but aims to extend beyond this region, and is a possible solution to the “country of forests” diagnosed by Gemma Estany; the *Caçadora de Masies* (‘Farmhouse Hunter’) Marta Lloret, with whom I had the pleasure of working intensely back in 2006 on an inventory of farmhouses of the Pla de Barcelona (the search led to the book directed by Maluquer and Viñuales, 2009), explains she began on Twitter, and now, the initiative is a broad one that openly coincides with the housing “Context” put forward by Oriol Porcel. Lastly, the *Associació de Dones del Món Rural* (‘Countrywomen’s Association’) seems consistent with the context of Mireia Baylina, as referred to earlier.

In my opinion, the ten local/county/regional “Experiences” are the contributions that best correspond to the influential Halfacree’s article about the definition of rural space: “rural *localities* [...], if they are to be recognized and studied as categories in their own right, must therefore be carefully defined according to that which makes them *rural*” (Halfacree, 1993, p. 28, original italics). They appear in the book in the following order: *Escola de Pastors i Pastors de Catalunya* (‘Catalonia’s School of Shepherds’) in the town of Rialp in the Pallars county (Laia Batalla); the *Eixarcolant* Collective of Jorba, a town west of the Conca d’Òdena county; the local energy community developed by Ruplà local government, in the Baix Empordà county; the *La Conca 5.1* network, an associative entity of the Conca de Barberà county with the objective of promoting the county’s social and cultural dynamism; *Diàspora Ebrenc*, an association formed by people from the Terres de l’Ebre southernmost Catalan region residing in Barcelona that aims to generate a debate about the region in question; the *Priorat in Person* writers’ meeting convened by the Quim Soler Centre in Molar, Priorat county, since 2009 (Júlia Viejobueno); the Centre for Contemporary Art and Sustainability *El Forn de la Calç de Caldors* in the Moianès county (Roser Oduber and Joan Vendrell); the Konvent space and project of Cal Rosal, in Berguedà county, a self-managed initiative of artists; the Calafou cooperative, located in the former textile workers’ village of Marçal (Vallbona d’Anoia, Anoia county), which has restored the site using bioconstruction and has generated a powerful ecological recovery discussion about the Anoia river (Enriqueta Font, Spideralex and Kozzak, among others); and the rehabilitation of the abandoned town of Solanell in the Alt Urgell county, whose collective impetus has influenced other places (Saül Garreta). In the end, the collection of “Experiences” is as rich as it is suggestive.

Although it is unnecessary to look for a specific spatial representation of “Experiences”, from a geographical perspective, I am surprised by the exclusion of the lands of Lleida from this section. A few years ago, Nel-lo (2003), Tarroja *et al.* (2003) and Nogué and Vicente (2004) argued that the Terres de l’Ebre region was the *terra incognita* of Catalonia, whose mapping out began, ironically, thanks to the demands of the movement against the *Plan Hidrológico Nacional* (‘Spanish National Hydrological Plan’) of Aznar’s government (1996-2004). Reading this work made me think that the lands of Lleida are today’s forgotten region, perhaps because the agro-industrial model that has been forcefully developed (as Isabel Salamaña discusses in her text) does not blend well with the type of rurality that dominates Catalonia and, I fear, and this is not a criticism, but a line of inquiry, that invisibly supports the book I am reviewing. I cannot emphasise enough that we have recently seen new visions of the region of Lleida that we should not overlook: in literature, the case of the wonderful trilogy *Tríptic de la terra* (‘Pamphlet of the Land’) of Ibarz (2020), if you accept Saidí as a Lleida town, which I know may not be easy; in geography, the essay by Aldomà (2021) for example, significantly titled

L'ignot oest ('The Uncharted West'); or in cinema, the undoubted phenomenon *Alcarràs*, by Carla Simon (2022).

Finally, "Conversations" are four dialogs: Joan Nogué with Marina Garcés, Itziar González with Roser Vernet, Toni Luna with Lluís Llobet and Rosa Cerarols with Isabel Banal and Sara Boldú together. The first of the interviews seems to me to be more of a "Context", concurrent with Bernat Lladó's article. The fourth, which is in fact moderated by Rosa Cerarols herself, presents an obvious continuity with her text in the "Contexts" section. The other two interviews are true experiences: one we have already come across (the Quim Soler Centre in the Priorat county) and another is a completely new one (the Farrera Centre of Art and Nature, in the Pallars county). It is a courageous act to introduce interviews in a rural geography book, although it is a genre in which Joan Nogué has already excelled: indeed, he developed back in the 1980s, along with M. Dolors Garcia Ramon, the project *Els geògrafs i la Geografia a Espanya* ('Geographers and Geography in Spain') which produced eleven videos that can be accessed at the digital library of the University of Girona (<http://diobma.udg.edu/handle/10256.1/818>; accessed 25/06/2022).

3. Final observations

The book we have in our hands offers an expressive collection of essays about rural geography conceived and written in an optimistic tone. Although the volume provides a serious critical diagnosis that includes the detection of many nuances and uncertainties (some of the contents of the "Contexts" are an obvious example), as a whole, the forty or so authors emphasise the positive symptoms visible in rural Catalan areas: something which is foreseeable in the introduction of the book. Without losing cogency at any time, the vision outlined is very different from what we are all too keen to feel, admit and reproduce. At this point, as I have said above, the volume avoids the discourse of "Empty Spain" established in Spain by del Molino (2016), or in France, probably by Gravier's "French Desert" (1947). Of course, there is a significant part of rural Catalan space that has been experiencing depopulation for decades, but it is possible to create a very different reading if you are inclined – in line with the revitalisation notion that has been mentioned several times – and this book achieves that. If I may be allowed to quote myself, as I had already informed in two works about the rural geography of Galicia written in the first half of the 2010s (Paül, 2013, 2015), beyond addressing rural space with socioeconomic quantitative indicators that generate depressing cartographies, we have the opportunity to detect, to motivate and involve ourselves in the "hopes for the countryside's future".

There is much temptation to contrast this work with the rural geography of Spain of Molinero and Alario (2022). In the end, Molinero and Alario (2022)

use the notion of an “Emptied Spain” – *mutatis mutandis* the “Empty Spain” brand – as their main idea, unlike Cerarols and Nogué (2022), who do not make use of this concept. On the other hand, the structure of Molinero and Alario (2022) corresponds with the classic themes of rural geography: population, economic activities, ecological functions, rural development, etc., of which, it must be said loud and clear, there is no trace of in the first level (the three large sections) or the second (the 31 book chapters) compiled by Cerarols and Nogué (2022). It should be made clear that the point is not that Catalan rural geography (understood as the Catalan rural area) is objectively different from the Spanish. The point is that Catalan Rural Geography (understood as a subdiscipline) can be conceived and practiced by means of a situated approach, as Haraway proposes (1988). Mireia Baylina reminds us of this when she affirms, plain and simple, that “rural space [...] is constructed” (p. 123): it depends, therefore, on the construction we create, such as Woods (2005, pp. 10-13) explains perfectly.

I therefore think this book contributes to a unique rural geography, which in some way allows us to nourish its own geographic accent. It is, of course, a rural geography very different from that of the Catalan classical school that I referred to at the beginning of this text. However, they share an advocacy for the local and county and especially Catalan levels, of which we should never have renounced, despite the pressure exerted on us to do so. I must celebrate this fearless re-cultivation. The volume also goes beyond rigid academic structures through its uninhibited collaboration not only with other disciplines but with authorship from outside the walls of the university. And the current context does not exactly encourage this kind of bold collective approach. Catalan rural geography shows, in the end, an enviable vitality, and a renewed identity.

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