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EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

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Farming as a Life Choice: the moral economies of Agroecological young farmers in Madrid

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Abstract

reproduction crisis of family farms in western countries, has caught the attention in the recent years of numerous scholars interested in studying this phenomenon's root causes and consequences (Lobley, M., Baker, J. and Whitehead, I., 2012). At the same time an ongoing research from different disciplines of social sciences is trying to trace how younger people are overcoming the obstacles and barriers that they find for incorporating themselves into farming. The present study can be placed in that growing interest of examining young farmers' trajectories given that it addresses the progressive increase of urban youth who, while lacking any agrarian background, are indeed interested in farming as a labor and life path. Specifically, this paper approaches the different dimensions that weave in young farmers' motivations, practices and ways of involvement in agroecology cooperatives in Madrid and how they affect both their daily experiences and problems. In other words, instead of concentrating on the specific economic and political conditions that may enable them to develop their own agrarian projects, we will stress the kind of reflections and problematics that shapes their motivations, evolutions and ways of relating with those economic and political structures. As we will show, in the discourses of these social agents, based in specific representations of the rural world, ethical and existential aspects intertwine with economic and political dimensions. Agricultural labor is seen by these farmers as a life choice, not separable from their different political and moral positioning. In addition, we will show the central role that alternative agrofood systems play by allowing these young people to start life projects that they consider ideologically coherent and socially and ecologically sustainable, helping them to overcome the habitual problems that young farmers face.

Introduction

The industrialization and urbanization processes within the region of Madrid over the last thirty years have placed agriculture in a very marginal position (López, 2008). Following the official data, farming represents a mere 0.10% of the Region's economic income and employs 0.75% of the overall population (Anuario estadístico de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2016). However, since the early 2000's we are witnessing a growing trend of rather small agrarian exploitations in the periurban area as well as in some outlying villages around the city. Even if in global terms the

agrarian activity of the region is still limited when compared to other areas of the country, we could state that this movement points to a reversal with the deagrarianization process that it has suffered. The protagonists of this tendency are mainly organizations managed by younger people that work under the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty. Although the majority of them are lacking official statistics, some studies have pointed out that currently in Madrid there are 50 organic vegetable production certified and non-certified projects (del Valle, 2013). We ought to bear in mind that this city has one of the greatest demands of consumption of organic products in the country, a fact that has contributed to the proliferation of these initiatives over the last five years.

But organic farming is a complex ground in which varying projects and positions get together and establish discussions about its truth. The specific organizations I have worked with and that constitute the base of this paper's reflections could be situated in that part of the field where organic farming is understood not merely as being sustainable techniques of food production, but also as a political practice that tries to implement different proposals of social change. In this sense, they belong to what Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman (2012) call *alternative food networks*, as far as they try to overcome the problems related to the industrial-capitalist agriculture by building fair and sustainable relationships with land and consumers.

For five years, I have been carrying out extensive ethnographic fieldwork based upon participant observation and in-depth interviews so as to better understand the specific way in which politics were understood and practiced within the scope of these food movements. More specifically I have worked with two separate agroecology production and consumption cooperatives as well as with other types of actors linked to them (farmers that had previously been engaged in some of these cooperatives, farmers' unions, consumers' associations...).

The ways these cooperatives are organized point to a breakage with the socio-ecological problems associated to the hegemonic agrifood system. All of them are based on a direct link between producers and consumers, respect to the seasonality of the food being delivered, highlight the importance of eating local food, maintain horizontal decision making structures that involve both farmers and consumers, try to avoid the commodification of food, and implement sustainable methods of food production.

More specifically, the first one (Surco a Surco) follows a CSA model: it has a box scheme and organizes producer and consumer assemblies every month in order to manage the specific situations and problems that are being dealt with. They maintain the collective property of the means of production and consider that every member of the cooperative has the right to receive a proportional weekly part of the harvest, in exchange for the payment of a fixed fee. Their lands are rented. The second one (La Madre Vieja) is also based on a box scheme, yet in this case the price of the box is fixed depending on its weight. Although farmers and consumers do maintain direct contact and get together at times they are not organized in collective assemblies. As a result of a family inheritance, they own the farm they work.

The work of reorientation of industrial agriculture towards sustainable food systems held in these cooperatives is led by farmers whose sociological profiles, ways of attachment to the wider community, ways of relating to their activity and consumers, expectations and motivations are, in general, vastly different to the ones reigning in the countryside¹: they are all under-35 urban people and most of them have a university degree. Something that has not to be considered as a specific characteristic of these organizations, but as a global tendency of organic agriculture projects of the region. As del Valle (2013) shows in her study, the average age of the organic farmers in Madrid is 40 years old, yet when talking of projects of less than two years of working it drops to 32. On the other hand, 71,4% of the farmers have an urban origin and 75% have university studies.

Given that fact, one question that could come into our minds is how these subjects without any previous agrarian experience and trained to perform other kinds of professions end up by either creating or joining an agroecology farm. To further explore this question, we will devote the following pages².

The core thesis that I will try to analytically expose throughout this work is that in the decision of becoming a farmer, as well as in their posterior trajectories, the particular way in which they define their position around diverse ethical and political concerns becomes fundamental. Agricultural labour is conceived by them as a life choice, not separable from their different political and moral positions.

Conceptions of politics and their role in farming paths

Julián has recently moved to La Iglesuela. This little town located near the border between Toledo and Ávila, is where Surco a Surco grows the vegetables that later on will be delivered to their consumers in Madrid. This is his first week as a farmer. He is 34, born and raised in Córdoba. He participated in different several political groups in the city while he was studying at university. Once we had finish harvesting we sat down together in the shade and I asked him how he ended up joining the cooperative. His voice is strong and firm and he seems to have an elaborated discourse to explain his choices. After telling me about how he met the other farmers he stared at me and said:

“I’m here because of politics. I’m aware that there are still many problems to be solved, but I think that working on a farm is one of the best ways to be coherent with my own ideology. The land gives you the opportunity of

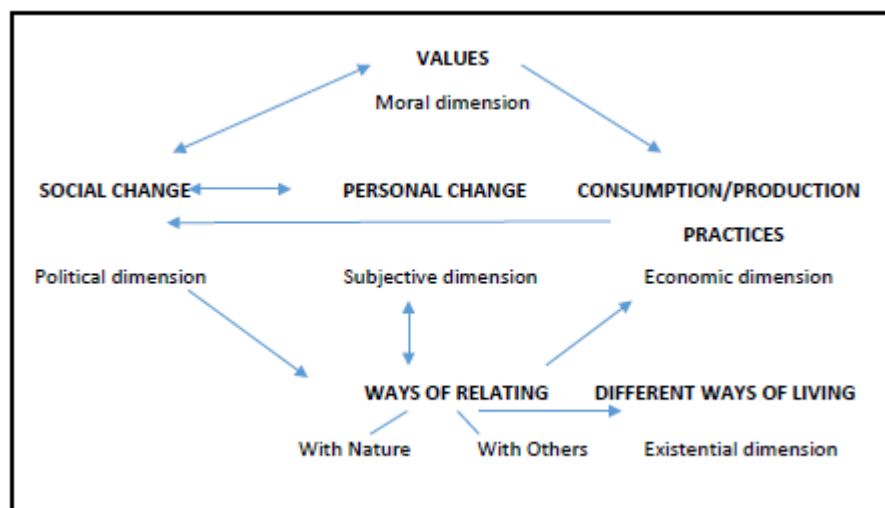
¹ Just as a clue, following the European Commission data, almost 60% of Spanish agrarian farms belong to people over 55, while only 3.7% to people under 35 (Dopazo and Marco, 2014). This phenomenon is not only found in this country. This same study explains that on average, for all EU countries, managers younger than 35 accounted for only 6 % of the total number while more than half of them were 55 or older and thus close to or even beyond the retirement age (Eurostat, 2015). Anyway, we have to bear in mind that the majority of the young farmers with which I have been working do not appear in the official statistics. The meaningful aspects of this data are more related to the possible loss of traditional agricultural knowledge and the issue of land access than to the lack of young people interested in farming.

² This is a situated study that does not try to reflect the reality of all young people that start an agrarian activity. Hence, this paper examines only one tendency of the reality of young farmers and does not aim to underestimate the importance that the rural youth have nowadays in many agroecological farms.

being more autonomous from the system and to construct a life based upon different kinds of relationships”.

This sort of statement does not differ too much from what Daniel and Juan, two other farmers with similar backgrounds, told me in an interview: *“This cooperative was a way of constructing self-managed (autogestionados) and anticapitalistic spaces and also like a step in the vacuum in order to live our lives in a different way”*; *“We are not only talking about changing the way of producing food... It’s about that but becoming a farmer is a life choice as well”*. If we analyze these discourses, one of the first features that stands out is how in the explanation of their choice of becoming a farmer, even if it is not explicitly named, there is usually a political background, in the broadest sense of the term. However, we are dealing with an understanding of politics that always implies two levels of reflections: a collective one, related to proposals of social change, and a personal one, related to a series of subjective concerns before which they feel they must define their stance³ (Foucault, 1984). In other words, for them the question about the kind of society that they want to build is attached to the question about the kind of life that they want to live. As Calle, Soler and Vara explain: *“food resistances are not an isolated phenomenon disconnected from individual strategies. There are several paths that bring together political strategies and lifestyles: habits, grammars and spaces that function as references of socialization and of social interaction”* (2009:9).

The next diagram below shows the structure of the relationships between moral, political, economical and existential dimensions in the approaches that support agroecology as a key for social change. Even if the definitions and contents of these terms are variable, in general all of them do share this way of articulating the various aspects implied in the transformation that agroecology is searching for



The questioning of the food system inherently implies a reflection about the kind of society that is necessary to build. This reflection revolves around how to create relationships with people and nature based on such values as solidarity, justice, autonomy, sustainability or

³ For Foucault, the subject is defined by the position that he takes around diverse concerns that imply a questioning of the self and the links that define it.

social responsibility. Furthermore, for them, these proposals of political transformation, as a result of an ethical questioning of the hegemonic social relationships, require as well changes in their own personal realm. If subjects do not transform certain daily practices, not only related to food, they believe that social change cannot be possible. In particular, it is understood that the same values that should prevail in the wider relationships of the new model of society that they are building, should also prevail in the present daily practices of all people who are concerned with these social problems. As one member of a cooperative stated: *“if we are unable to stop shopping in certain places, how could we plan to transform society?”* This is why the main objective of their cooperatives is not only to create alternative food systems but to generate spaces where an alternative way of living and relating to others can be achieved. By doing that they consider that some sort of *“life philosophy”* in which the exercise of those virtues and values permeates throughout the whole existence may be successfully promoted.

As may be inferred from these approaches, the consideration of eating as a *“way of fighting”* that many of these subjects share, does not limit the political space to what traditionally has been considered as the public realm. In this sense, one may state that the conception of politics that operates in this field, shares its origin with the feminist consideration of how *“the personal is political”*, and with its critic to the divide between public and private domains. The notion of politics that prevails in the agroecology movement intends to act not only upon the larger overall structures of inequality but also upon the small and quotidian details of *“private life”* through which they deem that social structure is reproduced day by day.

This is why politics has also in these spaces a function of moral ordering of the world, of behavior and of intellectual orientation of *“life senses”*. Hence the border between politics and ethics indeed becomes blurred. The practices of transformation point to the creation of spaces where they can *“live in another way”*, crossed by specific notions of goodness, justice, happiness, life and the human being. In this line, one of the founders of one of these cooperatives defined the objective of his organization in the following way: *“to create a space where we could be persons, decide, feel that you belong to a group, and be happy... To create self-managed spaces (espacios autogestionados) that work because they cover our vital needs”*. Given that the political discourses that prevail in these spaces are articulated in terms of values and point to existential aspects, it is necessary to focus on the role that a specific *moral economy* play in their motivations, expectations and the problems they face. This concept, defined by Fassin (2009) as the interrelations of values, norms and feelings that are produced and circulate in specific social spaces, can help us to delve into our analysis the array of values and emotions that come into play in the understanding of the trajectories of these subjects⁴.

Nonetheless, even if this interrelation between the political questioning of society with its moral and existential dimensions, characterizes the reflections of all sorts of actors within the agroecology movement, it acquires an even larger role in the case of farmers, to the extent that these cooperatives give them a material basis for constructing specific ways of living. In other words, the creation of these networks enables them to update an entire set of values and political positions by

⁴ The concept of moral economy was used firstly by E.P. Thompson as a tool for including in his analysis about peasant revolts the norms and social demands that the new economic system was breaking. Later on, Scott used this concept in his studies among south east Asiatic peasants for highlighting the values that sustain the expression of emotions (Fassin, 2009).

building different life models that they deem as being coherent at both an ethical and an ideological level.

Along these lines, it is striking how all the farmers that I have interviewed argued that they would not perform this activity outside of the framework of alternative food networks:

“Even if I enjoy working with the land, it would not be the same working for a “señorito” who pays me for doing it. This work that is very precarious in nature gives me a lot of things because of the social aspects that it incorporates. If I wasn’t involved in a social project like this, then I would have my own orchard, and that would be all. The fact that I am working as a farmer is related to the social form in which... I really like to help in the creation of this sort of things” (Farmer, woman, 34).

“But what I appreciate most is the social part of this, I am not sure if I would like being a farmer if I had a farm for working by myself and then selling the products to a store. Here what you have is that you are working with your partners, you are doing things in a different way, the consumers from Madrid come here and are interested in the farm, you have a series of meetings and assemblies... It is something more collective, there is another base... Only cultivate... Being alone and that’s all... I really don’t see it...” (Farmer, woman, 31).

As may be deduced from these statements, it is a matter of both orienting their efforts to the construction of a fair and sustainable food system, as well as being able to live a particular kind of life. Agroecology cooperatives are used in this line as projects that lead to an integral transformation of society and of the person himself. As has previously been explained, we are dealing here with a conception of politics in which personal change is understood as being a necessary condition in order to achieve wider social transformations. Hence, these alternative food networks act upon those two interrelated levels. We should not forget that without the support of consumers led by such core values as solidarity, social responsibility and commitment, these farmers could not enjoy the stable environment that allows them to start this kind of life projects despite their lack of agricultural experience and knowledge⁵.

Where to draw the line between life and work

For delving deeper into this topic I am going to introduce three separate cases that show different farmers’ reflections about their vital experiences. Through them we will be able to examine the diverse concerns that lead them to begin this activity and to give it a sense of purpose. At the same time they will also allow us to

⁵ Nevertheless, this also creates conflicts between food activists. On one hand, some of them claim that it is better to support “professional famers” with a deep years of experience in agriculture. On the other, many of these cooperatives function almost as a farming school for younger people with very little experience in agriculture.

understand the convergences and divergences in these narratives regarding the aspects that have just been analyzed.

The first subject has been continually moving between multiple rural agroecology projects in different areas of Spain, motivated by the search of ideological coherence at an existential level. This dissatisfaction led him to settle in different spaces looking for some kind of life ideal that he recognizes is still far from being accomplished. He has worked as a farmer in several cooperatives, all within the scope of the first model that was presented here. He joined the first one through some friends that he had met while he was studying biology at the university and looking for a way of moving out of the city. For him, agroecology is closely linked to an anti-capitalism political positioning in which farming is perceived as being a tool for constructing a “simpler” way of life. He is now 36 and works as a forest fireman in a smaller town in the province of Zaragoza. He left the agroecology cooperatives due to relational problems with other members. However, he is still looking for people interested in starting another farming project. He explained his path into farming in the following terms:

“I don’t see any sense in cities. I have never done it and have always been thinking about what kind of social model I would like to have. It would be a rural one (...). I really wanted to be useful in a society with all sorts of imbalances, and even if nowadays I’m not working as a farmer I still have political approaches. I mean, I live in a little town, I try to do all that I can by myself...and this is part of an agroecological position. Political, actually. To say no, I don’t want that and I’m not going to go through it. In this moment, my political bet is to live in a more simple way (...). If you are able to draw a line between your job and your life, for me it’s a mistake. You should do whatever you want and organize it however you want. It’s necessary to change attitudes and minds. And also to find your place, that is not easy at all. When I started working in the first cooperative it felt like a paradise. I felt very comfortable and more ideologically coherent”.

The second case shows us the story of a 34-year old woman from Argentina who has been working for the last ten years in a cooperative near Madrid. Before she joined it, she had been living in squats in the city and had no previous experience in farming. As we see in the following statement, her interest in farming differs from the first and the last case that I am going to present. The kind of agriculture she practices, due to the relational network in which it is inserted, is understood as an opportunity for combining her “personal life” with a job. In this sense, freedom appears as the main issue that motivated her to choose that profession. But a profession that she does recognize that she most likely will quit someday.

“I didn’t fit in Madrid. I was sick and tired of living in the city and wanted to move to a smaller town, I wanted life. Moving to the countryside gave me a lot of energy. I needed sunshine, fresh air, land and those sort of things that help me in my own mental stability. But, although I love working in the land, I don’t see this as being a lifelong job. Now I am feeling ok, but because the social aspects motivate me a lot, not only for being a farmer. What I do like is the freedom that it gives me. The feeling that I am not a slave of work. I really need a lot that freedom and autonomy, to decide by myself”.

Finally, I want to present a case of a 31 year old man who after getting a degree in agricultural engineering decided to set up a vegetable farm in his father's land. He is now the main farmer of La Madre Vieja. In his trajectory the vocation of being farmer acquires a more central role than in the others that we have examined. In contrast to the first one, his discourse is not articulated in terms of searching, but of finding. On the other hand, instead of emphasizing a political questioning of the system, he stresses the importance of carrying out a professional project in accordance with his personal interests. He conceives his work as a life quest and is constantly trying to improve his farm thinking in a long term period. In his own words:

“For me the farm is a job, because it is what puts food on the table, but far from being a burden. It is an effort that I always do willingly, and it also acts as my therapy. I have found my place, I am sure of that, and it makes me angry that people don't find it. Almost everyone is... In the wheel of saying yes and agree with things that... It seems terrible to me”.

A living from and in the countryside belongs to the search of coherent ways of doing things in a political level in the first case, of ways of enjoying a certain degree of freedom and control over their own lives that is denied in the wage system in the second, and finally, of ways of survival when facing a very complicated labour scenario in the last one. Nevertheless, despite the different orientations and forms that these reflections take, it is interesting to note how in all of them “autonomy” appears as a *subjective concern* strongly linked to their decision of becoming a farmer (*“what I do like is the freedom that it gives me”, “it's terrible to be in the wheel of saying yes”, “you should do whatever you want and organize it however you want”...*).

But autonomy is thought at a double level: as being able to create ways of food production independent from the capitalist market system, and also as being able to exert certain control over their own lives and their activity. As we have seen in the cases presented, these farmers claim agriculture as a key for *“conquering means of life”*. But not just any kind of agriculture. The concrete way in which these alternative food networks function, giving a central role to the commitment of consumers and always trying to maintain fair and stable economic conditions for the producer, do provide them the necessary material support for being able to get away from *“the city”, “the system”, “the market”* or the *“wage work”*; to be more *“politically coherent”*; or to live in a more solidary, ecological and simple manner. Something that would not be possible if they were working inside the industrial agrofood system.

Hence, it could be stated that the search of an autonomous and independent way of living, coherent with some ideological principles created by these networks is in many cases behind the agroecological experiences of these farmers. A kind of living where *“life”* and *“work”* are not perceived as being separated realms. *“It is a matter of being able to choose what to do and how to do it. Of giving value to my life and my time”*, explained Pedro, one 33 year old neo-peasant from northern Spain.

What these farmers are trying to achieve is that a set of ethical and political principles cross each and every area of their lives, even including work.

Imaginaries of rurality

We could not understand the fact that the agrarian activity is conceived as being a proper way of prosecuting these ideals unless we take into account the dominant representations of the rural world articulated in agroecology discourses. As we have seen in the first two cases presented before, the rejection of city-life was one fundamental pillar upon which their motivations for becoming a farmer were built. In the second one, she even traces a parallelism between the “*countryside*” and “*life*”, in opposition with the “*city*” and a “*no-life*”. This discursive structure is frequently found in their declarations. As I am going to analyze in this section, the countryside is thought, on the contrary of the city, to be a space that makes it possible to gain autonomy and embodies a set of values that modern urban societies seemingly have lost. A summary of the kind of dichotomies underlying the images of the city and the countryside in these farmers’ narratives can be found in the following diagram:



These concepts are built upon a base of values and feelings. Therefore, examining them is a good way of going deeper into the moral economies of this social universe and into the way in which they are closely connected to the paths of younger people into agrarian activities.

But firstly, it should be highlighted that this analysis is not going to consider these social representations and values as “mental images”, nor as a merely a set of cognitive data that has been gathered. On the contrary indeed, it is far more enriching for this study to pay attention to their different social uses, to how they are articulated in both their discursive and non-discursive practices and especially to the problems that arise when farmers need to mesh the values and ideals conveyed in these representations with the material conditions of practices. On the other hand, as Fassin and Eideliman (2012) argue, the quotidian moral does not appear in the form of abstract principles but is always mixed with varying social dimensions and therefore, its study requires an approach in respect to daily practices and discourses even if they may lack an explicit ethical content.

I am going to focus specifically on the examination of three rather wide groupings of images found in the rural world: the romantic conceptions of the countryside, the countryside as a space of hard lifestyles and the countryside as the *locus* of emancipation.

The idealization of the people from the countryside as carrying a *savoir faire* forgotten in the cities (“more solidary”, “more humble”...) typical of the romantic conceptions of the rural world, is one of the myths that contributes to strengthen the urge of “*going back to smaller towns*” rampant among between a certain segment of younger urban people dwellers. In fact, some agroecology organization leaders believe that it is important to leverage this kind of myth in order to encourage a massive transit of people from the cities into the countryside (something that, on the other hand, is considered as being the unique possibility of regeneration with regard to the ecological and social crisis that we are facing): “*we need something that consolidates these ideas that make living in the countryside attractive for young people*”, declared the manager of a rural union. At the same time, these representations are thought to be as a way of settling an historical debt with peasants, by counteracting the image that prevailed in the modern discourses of progress: “undereducated”, “conservative”, etc.

But albeit the romantic conception of the rural world and their habitants may function as a powerful tool for achieving that transit, it is, at the same time, one of the more common sources of frustration once young farmers have settled in the countryside and have to “*face reality*”. Badal explains in this way the disenchantment suffered by those that move to farm towns searching for shelter:

They have not found the peasants that they have imagined. People sculpted with a mold that simply does not exist anymore. People sharing the same values they have: ecologic awareness, attention to small things, cooperation, individual and collective responsibility, tight relation to territory and memory, critical spirit, curiosity, holistic thought, respect to singularity and heterogeneity... (2014: 122-23).

For instance, one of the main difficulties that the so-called “neo-rurals” have to confront comes from the need of finding a social network where they can “*feel comfortable*”. With the exception of those that have moved to some rural areas where there is a greater concentration of younger people, adapting to their new social environment is often far from easy. One farmer declared in a meeting that one of the reasons for leaving her agroecological project was that she could not “*find people to talk with and develop myself*”. In this point, we need to bear in mind that the choice of where to settle is in most cases conditioned by the facilities of access to land, as for instance, the place where their families own a plot. So, as they do not always have the possibility of choosing a particular place, many of them end up facing these kinds of unforeseen situations.

Furthermore, many of the farmers that have moved to farm towns hold a less romantic vision of their people: “*Those who have been working in industrial agriculture for many years are now too contaminated*”, told me one young farmer. Along the same lines, another complained about the difficulties that she had had in promoting agroecology among the local folks.

Anyway, this romantic conception of the countryside as a space of peace and quiet, authenticity and of contact with nature still has a central place in the first stages of these farmers' trajectories, something which would have been unthinkable in Spain sixty years ago. As Badal (2014) reminds us, after the Spanish Civil War and the postwar times and its development policies, to conceive the countryside as *"the place we should never have left"* and not as a space of misery, required a full generation who had only known the town as being in *"perpetual summer"*. A new generation that is now able to conceive the countryside in the following terms:

"Since the 50s we have witnessed a movement of rejection of the countryside, they said how bad living was there, that it was hard... This way of thinking is still there. But it is necessary to break that discourse because it simply is not true. Actually, what it does is to cut our roots, our contact with tradition, with the land wisdom, with our natural cycles. It cuts our contact with the land. And we want to connect back with the countryside. Recover that wisdom, information and knowledge that we have lost in the cities" (woman, farmer, 30).

These two lines of representation of the rural and the peasants are not only found in our days. Williams (2001) reminds us that the contrast between the city and the countryside, as two opposite lifestyles, go way back to ancient times. According to him, *"intense feelings"* were placed and generalized over those two spaces: the countryside as a natural lifestyle and the city as the place of progress; the countryside as a space of backwardness and limits and the city as the place of noise and ambition. Badal proposes in this line, the following questions that condensate the different historical images built around peasants:

Were they a degenerated sub-specie or the human race's last chance? Miserable people or morally superiors? Absolutely insane individuals or clever administrators of limited resources? Revolutionaries by nature or guardians of a reactionary regime? Did they live in an earthly paradise or in the big hell of little towns? (ibid: 126).

But, as things acquire a meaning within specific cultural contexts (Mintz, 1985), we need to frame socially and historically what urban people demand from the countryside nowadays. If we examine the images of the urban that those who move to smaller towns looking for another way of life reject, we see that all are related to the landscapes, social relations and rhythms that structure our daily lives: hurries, lines, distances, cars, traffic jams, anonymity, asphalt, pollution, stress... Ingredients of a life *"less life"*, *"little human"*, *"sick"* and *"non-sustainable"*. A very different conception of the city from the one that considers it to be as a place of freedom, possibilities and progress.

However, the image of the countryside as a space of tranquility begins to dissolve for many of these neo-rural young farmers in the moment they face what they call *"rural stress"*. As this farmer from Euskadi complained: *"people who want to move to the countryside come with urban rhythms that are not those of nature. We want to practice agroecology, be active in political groups, start a revolution... And then, where is the quiet life that we are looking for?"* Even if they slow down their activist rhythms, agriculture ones are far from that idea of the peace of the countryside held by those whose relationship with it is reduced to moments of tranquility, spare

time and rest. *“It is true that is not exactly as in the city, but here we don’t stop either. In fact, sometimes it’s even overwhelming”*, told me one young woman who participated in a rural cooperative of agroecology production in a little town of Extremadura. Furthermore, Felix Rodrigo Mora (2008), who has studied in depth many neo-rural projects conformed by young people, proposes that the main reason of abandonment of this kind of communities is the excess of attention being given to survival activities at the expense of those that fulfill another human needs and potentials.

This brings us to the next representation we feel will be worthwhile to explore: the countryside as a space characterized by hard lifestyles.

The corporeal confrontation with the new reality that new farmers undergo is usually linked to the dissolution of those romantic conceptions of the rural world that had dominated in earlier stages of their trajectories. Almost all of the young farmers I have worked with, recognized in this line that they were quite surprised at the beginning by the physical conditions of farming and the kind of life that it implies in comparison with that of the larger city. Farming was felt and experienced as a challenge that required them to modify many of their previous habits and expectations.

Nonetheless, one of the characteristics of these projects is that their members always try to think in collective solutions that discharge them from the level of commitment and dedication associated with farming labour. For example, organizing themselves so everybody can enjoy a period of holidays, take some rest if they so need it, have some free days during the week, sharing the work, etc. For that reason we could say that the image of the hard lifestyle that agriculture implies is always confronted and negotiated by these young farmers. As we can see in the declaration of this woman who had just started an organic farm and cosmetics project:

*“I am not going to do something like this if I am going to be as exploited as in other places. Sometimes it seems that someone has put this idea into our minds, and so, if we work from sunrise to sunset we cannot complain because life in the countryside is very hard... Well, I need to have money and time. I am not going to give up my holidays or be exploited. And this is something that consumers should understand because sometimes, when you tell them that you want to earn 1,000 euros per month or to have two days off they glare back at you”.*⁶

Anyway, as long as they are able to accept and assume the implications that this work involves⁷, they usually express a special feeling of satisfaction with their lives

⁶ One of her ideas for improving her working conditions was the possibility of hiring small distributors to deliver the vegetables to the different groups of consumers of Madrid with which she worked. This is an interesting position given that it challenges one of the main principles of this kind of alternative food networks. That is to say, for her, the idea that the direct contact between farmers and consumers always represent a direct benefit for both was not clear: *“it’s true, it’s very idyllic for the urban consumer that the farmer with his dirty hands come to you to give you his vegetables, but I think it’s not fair. At the end, it’s a lot of work for him”*.

⁷ In fact this is one of the main exit door of farming for these young people. Although we are stressing in this paper the ways of entrance into agroecology, we should not forget that many of the farmers of these cooperatives end by leaving their projects. The exit trajectories are usually linked to the principal problems they find as young people without agrarian backgrounds: the economic ones (precariousness, lack of funding, land access difficulties...), the relational ones (inside their projects and in relation to the wider community where

and themselves. Working in the field, seeing the evolution of plants, becoming dependent of natural cycles or actually being able to feed their friends and families out of the capitalist market system, is part of that *“generosity of land”* that they so deeply appreciate to the extent that it is often declared as the main reason to keep on farming. *“On one hand it can be hard, but on the other the earth is extremely generous”*, stated Julián.

Finally, linked to this perception and experience of farming appears the conception of the countryside as a space of autonomy mentioned before. Agriculture labour is thought in this point as a key to live in accordance to a set of political ideals: *“the countryside is the proper means for emancipation. You establish relationships with living things without intermediation. You have several resources for survival and it is easier to gain autonomy. Moving to the countryside is to take a “pro-action position” against liberalism and individualism”*, declared a rancher belonging to a communitarian agroecological project.⁸

To conclude this section we could state that the contrast between the city and the countryside underlying the imaginaries of the rural world that we have explored is a metaphor of a conflict of values, of a contrast of different ways of ordering the world, which does not necessarily have to have any correspondence with the physical spaces. In Williams’ words:

“The emphasis put on commitment, on charity, on the open doors for every needed neighbor is usually used by a retrospective radicalism tendency as a contrast to the capitalist progress (...). This leads to an evident crisis of our values. Because this retrospective radicalism against the crudity of the new pecuniary order, is often conceived as an approach that supports the criticism of the nowadays capitalism, as a perspective that implies humanitarian feelings and that is usually associated with a pre-capitalist world” (2001:64).

The conception of rural life that operates in these farmers’ experiences condenses all the terms displayed in the first column of the dichotomies shown before: slowness, limits, efforts, communities, sustainability, etc. Values and horizons towards which this agroecology movement is looking for. Nevertheless, Gallar’s thoughts must be looked at:

“We are assisting to the invention of tradition and to the mystification of a rural peasant past from which only good characteristics are selected: the ecological administration of natural resources, the integration and sociability of the community, the preponderance of use value as a symbol of anti-capitalism, the cooperation gestures, the value of austerity, etc. And they obviate the structural

they move), the working conditions (physical and of commitment) and the difficulty of fitting farming with other kind of professional and existential expectations inherent to middle class urban western people.

⁸ It is interesting to notice how when this subject talks about a *“pro-action position”* he is taking distance from what could be formulated as a *“speech position”*. This sort of difference is a constant in the discourses of the farmers with urban backgrounds. Another farmer explained to me, for instance, that since he had started working in the farm he felt much more *“legitimated”* for discussing with all those that, from an outsider position, demanded to organic agriculture and its farmers a level of purity impossible to achieve. In these kinds of discussions it is easy to observe the contrast between the imaginaries of organic farming and the rural world depending on the moment of their paths: before starting an agrarian project and once the project has started.

conditions of these behaviors and the structural characteristics of a traditional rural world marked by strong social inequalities” (2011: 300).

But despite the images of peasants and rural life held by these young farmers are in many occasions very far from the daily reality of the actual rural world, its strength as a myth falls on the proposal that it conveys. It carries a re-signification of rurality as a territorial and symbolic concept, opposed to the development and modernization models, and itself able to sustain a political project of transformation that mobilizes certain social sectors, as for instance, these young farmers.

Conclusions

In many western countries, we are living through an increase in the number of young people keen on starting diverse agrarian activities. And although this tendency may still be relatively small in global terms, its social significance should not be underestimated.

In the case of the agroecology cooperatives that we have examined the decision of becoming a farmer is in most cases linked to a certain ethical and political positioning. In other words, the varying reflections about how to confront the present socioecological crisis, about the responsibility of the youth in constructing a sustainable world or about the proper methods to overcome the capitalist food system, play a major role when talking about the ways in which they explain the labour path they have chosen.

On the other hand, these kinds of questionings are interlinked with a more “personal” reflection about the sort of life that they consider is more worth living. As we have seen numerous times, the political and ethical questionings that prevail in these social spaces always act upon these two interconnected levels. It is not only a matter of building a more sustainable and fair social (and food) system but of being able to enjoy themselves within their current space-time, a living where they can establish certain relationships both with others and the environment. A life sometimes described as being “*more human*” or “*less capitalistic*”. Hence, they are not looking for the possibility of running a farm regardless of the conditions. On the contrary they are specially motivated by the chance of constructing an alternative network of relations organized in accordance with their own social, political and moral principles.

The biopolitics of these movements is not only present on the farmers’ side, but passes through all of the actors concerned by these cooperatives. In this way, consumers are directly affected by this kind of ethical/political reflections and share a common moral economy that sustains these alternative food networks. Furthermore, without the commitment of consumers with these young farmers, led by such core values as solidarity and responsibility, they could hardly undertake these agrarian projects that allow them to fulfill their mentioned living ideals.

In any case the dominant imaginaries of the countryside and the rural life within the scope of this social universe, as we have examined, are in many cases behind the interconnection that these subjects do between those “*other ways of living*”

and the labour of farming. The representation of the rural world that these actors share summarizes the values and feelings that they deem to have been lost in modern urban societies: tranquility, community, autonomy, contact with nature and its rhythms, simplicity... And despite the fact that these images are usually confronted to the material conditions of their practices once they have started their agrarian projects, they still retain its strength as a mobilizing myth.

But is this worry about *“how to live a good life”* compatible with a collective strategy of political transformation? In other words, is it possible to suggest that this sort of *subjective concerns* may find a central space in political practices and that they do not necessarily mean a withdrawal into oneself reflections and worries?

As Goodman and Dupuis (2002) remind us, the discussions about the real political reach that alternative food networks may have are very frequent among the authors concerned by this movement. Besides, this is not only an academic discussion but a quotidian one in all these cooperatives. It is interesting nonetheless to bring up in this point the reflections that many of these farmers do have on that subject. For them, social transformations may need to precede strictly political revolutions. Hence, they consider their cooperatives as *“seeds of changes”* that could *“create an archipelago of realities that resist the dynamics of power, and step by step may encourage wider process of social transformation”* (Fernández Durán, 2003).

However, what is unquestionable is that a transition to sustainable models of food production nowadays is an ineludible task that our societies have to confront. The social and ecological crisis that we are undergoing does not leave us any other option (Riechmann, 2014). And in that transition young farmers who are willing to create and experiment with new methods of organizing the food system play a central role.

As many food activists point out, for being able to achieve the transfer to the countryside that a sustainable society requires, there are two critical levels of conditions. The first one is related to the encouragement of public policies that facilitate the settlement of people in rural areas and a second one that revolves around the necessary changes in the subjectivities, desires and expectations of young urban people. For that reason, an exploration of the myths, reasoning and feelings that mobilize them for undertaking this transition becomes a fundamental part of the understanding of the possibilities of constructing a sustainable food system.

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