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Fertile Links? Connections between tourism activities, socioeconomic contexts and local development in European rural areas

Despite their diversity, European rural areas are facing major changes in economic and social terms, mainly due to transformations in the role, meaning and place of agriculture. These changes have been widely debated over the last decades, from diverse theoretical and methodological points of view (e.g. Cloke, 2006; Cloke & Goodwin, 1993; Halfacree, 2006; Figueiredo, 2003; Marsden, Lowe & Whatmore, 1990; Marsden, 1998; Mormont, 1994; Shucksmith, 2006). Although the impacts of the transformation processes have been diverse in different rural contexts, the general tendency seems to be a profound change in agricultural activities (e.g. Marsden, 1995, 1998; Figueiredo, 2008; Jollivet, 1997; Ramos-Real, 1995). Particularly in peripheral European regions the impacts resulted in a more intense loss of competitiveness and the decline of the productive character strongly contributed to the emergence of new roles and functions for rural areas. The rural that emerges from these processes is frequently presented, both in the academic and in the political spheres, as multifunctional (e.g. CCE, 1988; Oliveira Baptista, 2006).

Without denying the relevance of the concept of multifunctionality and its effective and well succeed operationalization in some cases, it is therefore worthwhile to question the reasons that led to a generalization of this perspective in the last two decades (Figueiredo, 2011). The (agricultural) monofunctionality and the identity based on it, which marked rural areas throughout centuries, seem nowadays to be replaced by a certain functional schizophrenia to which rural areas appear unable to correspond, given the absence of the necessary tools and capacities (e.g. Figueiredo, 2011; Nave, 2003). The agricultural, economic and social crises that characterize

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many remote rural areas of Europe (Ramos-Real, 1995) are also an identity crisis.

These tendencies have been supported by the European Union political strategies regarding rural development since the end of the 1980s (e.g. Figueiredo, 2008; Halfacree, 2006) and resulted in programmes and measures that emphasise the combination of agriculture with other functions and activities, contributing to transform rural areas into consumable spaces (e.g. Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012; Halfacree, 2006). Among the new functions of this rural which is beyond agriculture (Marsden, 1995, 1998), which is to be consumed, leisure and tourism activities seem to play a paramount role. Nowadays, rural areas are "often considered as 'consuming idylls'[2], directly opposing 'super-productivist' spaces (...)" (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012: 19), where spatial (and social) practices are consumption-oriented (e.g. Bell, 2006; Short, 2006). These consumption practices are mainly based on the representations of the rural as environmental and cultural reserves, in a rather positive manner.

Considering the processes described above, rural tourism emerged as their *natural consequence* and as a new entrepreneurial range of activities expected to give a powerful contribution to rural development. Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining rural tourism in a consensual manner (e.g. Keane, 1992; Lane, 1994), a common (yet very broad) definition suggests it as being the entire tourism activity developed in a rural area, motivated by features of rurality (e.g. Lane, 1994; Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2007). In fact, "rural tourism should ideally be, apart from located in rural areas, functionally rural; rural in scale; traditional in character; organically and slowly growing and controlled by local people" (Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2007: 2). Taking this description, rural tourism seems to stand on local activities and specificities, therefore contributing to improve local communities' economy.

In fact, rural tourism is frequently presented (mainly at the political level) as the panacea to solve rural areas' problems and constraints (e.g. Cristóvão, 2000; Kastenholz, 2004; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002). However, empirical evidence has shown that the connections between tourism activities and the broader rural contexts are often faint and fragile, despite the plurality of situations (Figueiredo and Raschi, 2012; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002). On the one hand this fragility can be attributed to the economic and social vulnerability of many rural areas. On the other hand, rural tourism establishments, for their private character and limited dimension, cannot be held responsible for local development (Balabanian, 1999; Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2007; Ribeiro & Marques, 2002, Solla, 1999).

Empirical evidence shows that tourism promoters often act in an 'isolated' manner, sometimes detached from local contexts and specificities,

[2] Halfacree (2006: 57).

although benefiting from them mainly in promotion and advertisement. Frequently they use traditional local features (e.g. landscape, natural resources, food productions, agricultural practices, festivities) to promote the establishments and to attract guests, but in practical terms those features are not materialized in the services and activities offered. In consequence local resources are not being capitalized and valued and the specific character of rural tourism (being attached/ connected to local contexts) is not fulfilled (e.g. Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012; Perkins, 2006).

Some studies have demonstrated that building efficient networks – *fertile links* – between tourism promoters and other local agents and actors can result in successful rural tourism activities and in local development (e.g. Brunori & Rossi, 2000; Brunori, 2007). However, the same researches evidenced the difficulties and constraints in building collective action and synergies among the diverse rural stakeholders, due to their characteristics, to the peculiarities of the socioeconomic contexts (particularly in remote rural areas) as well as to the lack of adequate political and institutional measures, strategies and instruments to foster local cooperation (e.g. Brunori, 2007; Malevolti, 2003; Vieira & Figueiredo, 2010).

Tourism has also an important role in changing the face of rural communities impacting in diverse ways in their environmental, economic, social and cultural structures, processes and dynamics (e.g. Andereck, 1995; Andereck, Valentine, Knopf & Vogt, 2005). In fact, as Butler & Hall (1998) recognize, tourism largely contributes to the formation of places, fostering reconfiguration and restructuring processes that tend to create new ruralities and, in some cases, a rural that is mostly urban in terms of its conception and image as well as in terms of the functions and services it provides to the society as a whole (e.g. Butler & Hall, 1998; Crouch, 2006; Figueiredo, 2011), particularly to address the demands, needs and desires of tourists that wish to experience the authentic local character (e.g. Butler & Hall, 1998; Crouch, 2006; Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012; Meethan, 2001; Perkins, 2006).

In addition, tourism activities may contribute to increase conflicts, among local population and between rural dwellers and tourists and tourism operators, therefore also contributing to reshape rural contexts (e.g. Figueiredo, 2009; Brandt, Haugen & Kramvig in this volume). Conflicts may arise both because of material and symbolic matters, also impacting into the practices and representations towards the rural (e.g. Figueiredo, 2009).

Considering the transformations that rural areas and activities underwent in recent decades, together with, on the one hand the constraints that rural tourism seems to pose in reshaping an already existing reality, and, on the other hand, to face as a new tool for local development, innovative strategies and processes clearly seem to be needed. As the chapters included in the third part of this book visibly demonstrate, innovation is required regarding a wide range of domains. First of all the political and funding

mechanisms context should respond to the new requirements and characters of a changed and changing rurality. Cooperation, collective action, synergies, i.e., efficient networking among all the actors, institutional bodies and enterprises seem to stand out as major tools to promote fertile links which can effectively contribute to improve local economies (in line with the findings of Belletti *et al.*; Rønningen, in this volume; Brunori & Rossi, 2000; Brunori, 2007; Vieira & Figueiredo, 2010). The development of new touristic initiatives based on old or new products and activities (as Rêgo discusses in this volume), together with updated marketing and branding strategies (Spilková & Fialová, in this volume) may also present new market opportunities to meet the new and diverse demands as well as to sustain local economies.

The present book, focusing mainly on peripheral rural areas, aims to contribute to foster the debate about some relevant and not yet comprehensively researched aspects within the several issues related to the liaisons between tourism activities, socioeconomic contexts and local development, especially in what extent tourism, in its various forms and processes, might give an important contribution to rural development. By considering different theoretical and methodological approaches and diverse European rural realities, the book explores the relationships among rural tourism and the complex interactions, conflicts and innovative processes developing in rural territories as consequence of the implementation of tourism activities.

Originating from a working group, organized by the editors and included in the XXIV Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology, held in 2011 in Crete, Greece, the book gathers a selection of eight papers among the nineteen presented at the session, together with two chapters from invited authors. Apart of this introductory chapter, the book is organized in three main parts, comprising ten chapters.

Part One – *Concepts and Visions: is tourism promoting new ruralities?* – deals with the notions and perspectives on the connections between rural tourism and local contexts, considering the diverse expectations and visions between the need to achieve sustainability and the ongoing commodification and new ruralities' construction processes.

In chapter 2, Oliva and Camarero, using a qualitative approach, explore the relationships between rural tourism and local development, analysing the polarization between productive and post-productive rurality in the Navarre region in Spain. The authors also analyse the processes deriving from the social interactions and practices that characterize the touristic experiences. They conclude that tourism do transform rural contexts, by stimulating local economies through the use of marketing and branding strategies which shape new narratives and representations of rurality. However, tourism development may equally originate a global rurality, based on generic features, rather than on local attributes and identities.

The global and hegemonic image of the countryside is also explored in Chapter 3, in which Figueiredo, Kastenholz and Lima analyse, through content analysis of in-depth interviews, how symbols and images of rurality that characterize the point of view of the hegemonic urban culture are more and more detached from the materiality of the rural territories. This phenomenon goes in parallel with the loose of the productive role of these areas and their commodification. The mentioned images and symbols seem increasingly also to be part of the social representations of the local populations regarding the countryside. In this perspective, the authors report about the visions held by both visitors and residents of two small Portuguese villages, evidencing the differences, reflecting different experiences and meanings, but also some similarities and suggesting the existence of globalized views about the countryside.

Chapter 4, by Craveiro, Dias-Sardinha and Milheiras, debates, on the basis of a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, about the perception of local identity by local social actors and visitors, reporting about a research study carried out in a rural post mining area (São Domingos Mine, Southeast Portugal), where cultural tourism is expected to trigger local development. Social actors and entrepreneurs underline the local mining identity as the main local asset, while natural and rural landscape and the peaceful character of country life are by far more appreciated by visitors. This might be consequence of the peculiar character of tourism in the area (most of tourists have family links with the local inhabitants), but is after all in agreement with previous researches, showing the limited interest of tourists in the site-specific cultural dimension. All the stakeholders considered in the study pointed out the need to expand tourist services, in order to contribute to strengthen the role of local heritage in the development of this specific type of tourism.

In Chapter 5, Belletti, Brunori, Marescotti, Berti and Rovai, discuss the real sustainability of rural tourism. Using the concept of tourist configuration, the authors analyse the dynamic relationships between local and extra-local actors to explore the issue of sustainability in two areas of Tuscany (Italy), characterized by different tourism dynamics. While in a first phase, in fact, rural tourism was considered sustainable by definition, as it depends on nature, landscape and culture conservation, nowadays increasing concern exists about the pressure rural tourism creates by its use of limited resources (soil, water, energy etc.). The studied cases evidence that collective action is a relevant aspect to obtain sustainability and stress the need to built strong links to foster cooperation between individuals and institutions.

The second part of the book – *Conflict and complementarities: old and new activities, old and new actors* – focuses on tensions that may arise between the local traditional productive structures and the new actors and activities, debating on how pluriactivity can transform the professional perspectives in rural societies.

In Chapter 6, Brandth, Haugen and Kramvig discuss, using a qualitative approach, the social interaction between entrepreneurs establishing farm tourism business and the local communities. The authors stress that establishing a new business in a rural society might challenge local practices and power relationships, and explore the kind of opposition entrepreneurs can meet, and how they can handle it. The fieldwork was conducted in different districts of Norway on family farms combining agriculture and tourism, and on farms that abandoned agriculture to focus on tourism only, showing that all entrepreneurs experienced challenges in their attempt to introduce new practices and new ideas, but in general these did not result in large and destructive conflicts. The chapter illustrates the negotiations needed to cope with local interests and values.

Chapter 7, by Meiberger and Weichbold, reports about a qualitative study conducted in the province of Salzburg, Austria, exploring the connections between farming and tourism and the factors determining success or failure. Tourism represents an indispensable part of Austria's economy, and it is very tightly tied to cultivated landscape. In particular, tourism yields up to 50% and more of the farm enterprises income in summer farms in the Alps. The authors stress the differences among tourists, with respect to requirements, and the need to carefully evaluate the farms' capacities, the human resources, the need of an active attitude to meet diverse challenges, as well as the large support that can result from networking and cooperating with colleagues, authorities and from family team work. Education and lifelong learning seem to be, among other, relevant factors to gain a professional attitude and pursue diversification.

Multifunctionality and pluriactivity are the topics addressed in Chapter 8, by Koutsouris, Gidarakou, Kokkali and Dimopoulou reporting about a quantitative study conducted in the areas of Lake Plastiras and Dorida (Greece). This rural area saw a quick touristic development in the last two decades, while agriculture was becoming a secondary occupation for most of the inhabitants. As a result, most of the families make a living out of tourism, while agriculture is a secondary source of income, also showing limited connections between the two activities, in particular for the younger generations that are mainly employed in the tertiary sectors (services to enterprises and tourism) and are not pluriactive. In this chapter, taking the local reality analyzed, the sustainability of a development based on multiple activities is debated. Its risks are outlined, given the abandonment of agriculture by the young generations, the commodification of the rural space, the vulnerability of rural tourism under conditions of economic crisis.

Part Three – *Innovation in rural tourism and local development* – enlighten the diverse aspects of the innovation role that rural tourism and related links and networks can exert in local communities, showing that sometimes the very faint connection between local reality and tourism enterprises prevents the development of a real positive action.

Chapter 9, by Rêgo, based on content analysis of documents and on interviews with local agents, focus on the innovative touristic initiatives related to the production of wine, olive oil and other typical productions in Alentejo region, Portugal. The majority of these flagship initiatives are oriented to new demanding, affluent and urban market niches. These enterprises, although based on synergies between farming and tourism, represent somehow a discontinuity with the surrounding environment, and differ from the traditional small tourism units scattered in the territory. However these units possess the capacity to build innovative economic resources, taking their lead from the existing territorial matrix and mobilizing the local knowledge and skills, therefore contributing to revitalise *forgotten* places and, to a certain extent, also to reshape the identity of the areas in which they operate.

In Chapter 10, based on a quantitative approach, Rønningen deals with innovation in rural tourism enterprises in Norway. The author notices that, generally, innovation systems are characterized by relations with universities and research institutions, as well as with financial institutions. These conventional innovation systems are absent in the world of rural tourism, as staff usually lacks the qualification needed to interact with R&D bodies. Yet, previous research proved that Norwegian rural tourism firms are usually able to innovate. The paper explores the character of knowledge base of the examined enterprises, relying mainly on experience, and the exchange of information, ideas, best practices, that can allow defining the network of enterprises as a loosely coupled system. The role of public funding agencies in innovation is also outlined, together with internal driving forces stimulating actions and efforts.

In Chapter 11, Spilková and Fialová, combining qualitative and quantitative data, discuss the possible links between regional branding of products and tourism, based on a field research conducted in Czech Republic. The authors underline that regional or quality branding is a well known and effective tool for promoting typical products of rural regions, but, in addition, it can become also a way to support sustainable development, by creating links among different enterprises. In fact, in the area of study, before the introduction of branding, the agents of the production systems had scarce links to each other; nowadays, the existence of a branding scheme is also used to finalize funding actions, making the support more fruitful. The research focus on the possibility of creating relationships between regional production and tourism activities, evidencing the great potential still unexpressed for fruitful connections, as well as the existing limits related to scarce marketing tools, lack of financial support and distribution channels.

This book provides a collection of studies in diverse European countries encompassing a plurality of rural contexts, agents, actors, processes and dynamics that relate tourism to other activities and to local development. However, the rural regions and the countries addressed in the book

– Portugal, Italy, Spain, Greece, Norway, Austria and Czech Republic – are not representative of all the diversity of rural Europe, of its potentialities and constraints. Although mainly focusing on marginal rural areas and on the contribution of tourism to local development, the perspectives seem to be different in Southern and in Northern European regions. In the first, tourism is more frequently discussed as the universal solution for rural development problems, emphasising the constraints posed by the increasing decline of the productive nature of the rural. In the second, attention is predominantly concentrated on the innovative processes and tools to foster the connections between tourism and the socioeconomic fabrics of rural areas.

Despite the diversity of conditions, originated by different socioeconomic, environmental, historical, political and cultural features and notwithstanding the plurality of forms it may take, rural tourism does exist and it is contributing to reshaping and restructuring ruralities in ways that are difficult to completely foresee. To deeply understand the connections between tourism and the broader environment in which it blooms and of which it conditions the future, further and multidisciplinary research is required, applying innovative methodologies and techniques in different rural contexts with diverse tourism development stages.

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