

Critical reflections on the *New Rurality* and the rural territorial development approaches in Latin America

Visión crítica sobre los enfoques de la *Nueva Ruralidad* y el desarrollo territorial rural en América Latina

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical approach to the New Rurality and the Rural Territorial Development (RTD) perspectives, which nowadays are hegemonic for governmental organizations and Latin American academies. RTD's core requirements, which are functional for neoliberal policies resulting in the loss of food sovereignty, the globalization of agribusinesses, and migration as a consequence of peasant agricultural weakening, were critically reviewed on the basis of the principal challenges faced by Latin American rural areas. In light of the above consequences, it is thought that changes in such areas are based on neoliberal rurality rather than on the purported New Rurality. By stressing the need for a global historical view that reintroduces the Latin American critical thinking tradition, the urgency for public policies that stop neoliberal prescriptions and seek to strengthen peasant and indigenous agriculture in order to encourage rural development based on food sovereignty, democracy, equity and sustainability were established.

Key words: neoliberal rurality, crisis, food sovereignty, peasant agriculture, agricultural policy.

RESUMEN

Se presenta una aproximación crítica a las nociones de la Nueva Ruralidad y el Desarrollo Territorial Rural (DTR) que actualmente son hegemónicas en el ámbito de las instituciones gubernamentales y ganan espacio en la academia latinoamericana. Con base en una consideración de los principales desafíos que enfrentan los espacios rurales latinoamericanos, se pasa revista crítica a las prescripciones centrales del DTR, mismas que resultan funcionales al encuadre neoliberal de políticas que han propiciado la pérdida de la soberanía alimentaria, el predominio del agronegocio transnacional y la emigración, como principales expresiones del debilitamiento de la agricultura campesina. Consecuentemente se argumenta que las principales transformaciones de dichos espacios, más que a una pretendida nueva ruralidad corresponden a una ruralidad neoliberal. Al resaltar la necesidad de una visión histórica mundial que recupere la tradición del pensamiento crítico latinoamericano, se postula la urgencia de políticas públicas que rompan con las prescripciones neoliberales y se orienten al fortalecimiento de la agricultura campesina e indígena para impulsar un desarrollo rural con soberanía alimentaria, democracia, equidad y sustentabilidad.

Palabras clave: ruralidad neoliberal, crisis, soberanía alimentaria, agricultura campesina, política agrícola.

Introduction

Latin American farmlands constitute a very complex framework because they entail a wide range of dimensions, such as food production, raw material supply, democracy and sustainability issues, poverty alleviation, and the promotion of a more appropriate relationship with urban areas and the global economy.

From a general and far reaching point of view, Latin America's rural areas support the Primary-Exporting Model, which resulted in a close link between the countries of said region and the global economy in the last third of the

19th Century and up to the 1929 recession (Sunkel, 1970; Ocampo, 2004). Subsequently, by means of nuances developed over time and space, farmlands, and more specifically producers, subsidized the Import Substitution Industrialization. Farmlands contributed money raised from agricultural exports in order to finance industrial machinery and equipment imports, produced cheap raw materials and surplus food that enabled the agricultural industry to work at low wages and consumables costs, provided a strong disciplined workforce, and consolidated an internal market of agricultural products. On the other hand, policies employed to stimulate industries were often prejudicial to the traditional agricultural sector (Baer, 1972).

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The strong reconsolidation of Latin American farmlands in the 1980s must be seen as a result of the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) depletion and its definitive collapse caused by the 1982 debt crisis (Valenzuela, 1992). The subsequent recession resulted in neoliberal restructuring.² Said background set off the weakening of internal food production, the dissolution of the farm-household, and the deagriculturalization phenomenon as a consequence of trade liberalization and public expenditure reduction policies made with international financial institutions (Rubio, 2003).

The main objective of this article is to provide a critical reflection of the Rural Territorial Development's approach, as well as the New Rurality concept on which it is based, so as to identify its conceptual constraints and, more to the point, the differences between said approach and the principal challenges faced by Latin American rural areas. Moreover, the need for public policies that stop neoliberal prescriptions and seek to strengthen peasant and indigenous agriculture so as to encourage rural development based on food sovereignty, democracy, fairness and sustainability is stressed.

The aforementioned reflections bear great importance, given that the RTD's approach rules Latin American organizations that develop policies regarding farmlands and support academic views lacking a critical perspective on the constraints entailed in such approaches, among which the most notable is that it benefits government policies that weaken the rural world.

The discussion is based on the principal challenges faced by Latin American rural areas and a review of the RTD's requirements. Our hypothesis is that the economic emphasis of RTD reduces the scope for rural development and favors an inappropriate characterization of the changes that have taken place since the 1980s, leading to the present review.

² Neoliberal policies were widespread in Latin America in the context of the global process of capitalist restructuring carried out during the Fordist Regulation Regime crisis, which opened the way for neoliberal globalization (Hirsh, 2001). In addition, the rise of neoliberalism in Latin America can mainly be explained by the depletion of the ISI in the seventies and its subsequent collapse with the above mentioned debt crisis, and also by the Southern Cone military dictatorships that imposed monetarist policies at the start of that decade. From this perspective, neoliberalism in Latin America must be understood as government policies that aim to redefine the functions of the State with the purpose of a new export-oriented insertion in the global economy through a sudden opening of regional economies to global markets, curtailing state functions in the promotion of national industry and enforcing privatization processes around the region (Valenzuela, 1992; Ramírez-Miranda, 1997).

Lastly, the need to encourage rural territorial development processes in the context of a global historical view that determine the most common challenges along with conflicts of interests and powers involved in said development is also stressed.

Challenges in Contemporary Latin American Rural Areas

A panoramical approach that seeks to identify the general characteristics of Latin American farmlands must be seen as a methodological resource for elucidating the main challenges and evolution processes they face without discrediting the environmental, technoproductive, and sociocultural diversity by which they are distinguished. Necessarily, this approximation will be prevented from being exhaustive.

The main thing that must be identified is the complexity of rural areas, which will require an inter- and trans-disciplinary approach, along with a global historical perspective. As a result, discussions on rural development policy frameworks, among which the most notable is RTD, must start from the characterization of the global cumulative processes faced by Latin American farmlands.

In the last two decades of the 20th Century, by order of neoliberal governments, Latin American farmlands were subject to unfavorable and sudden trade liberalization in combination with a reduction in farm-household expense subsidies, which sought to consolidate an agricultural exporting model (primarily based on fruits, flowers and vegetables) in accordance with the United States' food hegemony. Said restructuring resulted in the weakening of peasant production, the hunt for non-agricultural income sources, an increase in migration, the loss of food sovereignty, the globalization of agribusinesses (regarding crop exports), and the import of basic grains.

The devaluation of rural producers (Rubio, 2003) led to the growing concern over poverty issues (Kay, 2006). As the United States flooded Latin American markets with food at dumping prices in order to dismantle internal production with the connivance of neoliberal governments, academics made every effort to supply documentary evidence on the New Rurality concept, which is characterized by the devalued role of agricultural activities in rural incomes and the general economies of rural areas.

The rural reaction to the abovementioned devaluation and exclusion process inherent in neoliberal policies was crucial

to the rise of popular governments in the early years of the 21st Century.

The evolution of the Latin American political scenario in the first decade of the third millennium corresponded with the decline of the United States' global leading role, which reached a critical point due to the food, energy, and financial crisis of 2008 (Rubio, 2011). It is important to stress that China's and India's economic dynamism in the 1980s (Bustelo, 2008) exerted a strong influence on Latin America, which led to a rise in raw material prices since the 1990s and mainly at the beginning of the current century; hence several countries reintroduced the primary-exporting model. The rise of popular and redistributive governments has provided the possibility of channeling key resources into social expenditure and developing infrastructure (Rubio, 2013); however, said possibility has been questioned due to the political and environmental implications of neo-extractivism (Hidalgo, 2013).

Nowadays, Latin American farmlands face long-established problems and obstacles derived from their participation in the global capitalist restructuring process. Said challenges largely exceed the RTD's scope.

Guillermo Almeyra (2012) put forth that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the Latin American rural framework, which destroy the Nature and rural way of life, are massive migration and farmland abandonment, the environmental predation caused by large mining industries, water capitalist use through large dams, and the globalization of monoculture agribusinesses.

When taking into account the core basis of the former situation shared between the Bravo River and the Patagonia, it is possible to establish a more accurate framework of the challenges faced by Latin American farmlands. According to this, the longestablished problem regarding rural poverty has its roots in migration, a basic feature of Latin American farmlands that became part of the global capital accumulation process because rural incomes precluded the social development of rural areas³. The globalization of monoculture agribusinesses, whose prototype are large companies that create green deserts so as to produce soy, along with forestry and biofuels plantations, causes the loss of food sovereignty in Latin American countries as a

consequence of the profit-oriented production, a dismantling that has lasted three decades.

The promotion of mining industries and large hydroelectric power plants constitute capitalist restructuring requirements that Latin American rural areas must meet at the expense of their natural patrimony. In fact, the importance of gold, which is seen as a valuable reserve in comparison to Dollars and Euros due to their devaluation, fuses with the growing demand for the so-called rare earth metals, a source monopolized by China that is indispensable to Information and Communication Technologies, as well as to aerospace and alternative energy sectors. Said factors led to an avalanche of transnational mining companies in charge of exploiting gold and traditional minerals and conducting prospecting studies.

Large projects related to the creation of dams and aeolian energy sources are aimed at searching for a change in energy production that reduces the impacts of global warming through renewable sources and restoring the capitalist profitability that has been affected by high oil prices.

The above perspective on the elements that haunt and characterize Latin American farmlands is enriched with the observation of the weakening of their environments, production, societies, and institutions, which results from neoliberal policies (Ramírez-Miranda, 2011). If production weakening is by definition the loss of food sovereignty and social underdevelopment means migration, the inevitable result is the environmental and institutional weakening of Latin American farmlands, constituting a red flag within the RTD's scope.

It is widely known that Latin American rural areas are facing a rapid degradation of their natural resources, which results in the loss of forests, soil erosion, rivers and water body contamination, alterations in the hydrologic cycle, genetic erosion and a notorious vulnerability to the meteorological phenomena derived from climate change. According to this perspective, the history of Latin American farmlands also encompasses an account of natural patrimony deterioration, which starts with the resource dispossession derived from the primary-exporting model in the later years of the 19th century and ends with the current reintroduction of mining and agricultural exports that was preceded by the structuralist and productivist approaches of the industrialization period that date from the 20th Century.

The weakening of Latin American countryside institutions is largely reflected in the lack of governmental bodies

³ Therefore, Aragonés *et al.* (2009) established that Latin America takes part in global capital production through a capital accumulation pattern based on migration.

among extensive rural territories and public institutions in extremely relevant areas, such as technical assistance. Said weakening results from neoliberal policies whose principal aim was to dismantle state systems related to profitable production so as to gain more competitiveness and favor the agricultural exporting model. Shortly afterwards, both organized crime and the weakening of rural society led to ungovernable issues, the abandonment of lands and farms or the forced displacement of rural populations (Ramírez-Miranda, 2011; Fajardo, 2012).

Neoliberal policies, New Rurality, and Rural Territorial Development

In order to face the aforesaid problems regarding Latin American farmlands, comprehensive definitions not included within the RTD's conceptual scope and a reconceptualization of the so-called New Rurality are required.

Latin American sociologists, economists, and geographers have shown preference to the concept of New Rurality over Neoliberal Rurality. This has been the case despite they are referring to the elements that explain the situation of Latin American farmlands amid neoliberal globalization, particularly when inspecting those elements from a global, historical, and structural perspective.

The aforesaid preference shows the blurring of metanarratives derived from the weakening of Latin American critical thinking (Altamirano *et al.*, 2009). For this reason, the so-called New Rurality constitutes a sort of watershed that was imported from Europe (Rojas, 2008) for the classification of different conceptual twists that are not consistently explained due to the rejection of more comprehensive theoretical categorizations. For instance, the conceptualization of neoliberal globalization does not depict it as a capitalist phase that leads to changes in urban and rural areas, the disjointed subordination of agriculture to industry, and alterations in rural society (among which the most notable is deagriculturalization) that are reflected in migration increases and the development of non-agricultural income sources.

When considering the nine elements that characterize New Rurality according to Schejtman and Berdegúe (2003), a more accurate historical and conceptual classification of such matters can be made.⁴

⁴ Despite the fact that there is a large bibliography on RTD's different scopes and on New Rurality, this paper only discusses Schejtman and Berdegúe's

The aforementioned authors' classic text regarding the RTD established three characteristics through which New Rurality can be depicted: the accelerated insertion of rural economies into the globalization process; the dissolution of local, regional, national, and global food market borders and distinctive characteristics; and the indispensable requirement of global competition posed to rural economies (Schejtman and Berdegúe, 2003).

It is important to stress that such characteristics clearly depict the agribusiness export predominance in neoliberal globalization. On the other hand, it can be stated that: (1) the insertion of rural economies into the globalization process is partial and uneven, since some relevant social groups and regions are excluded from the production sectors and are classified as consumers or workforce reserves; (2) the dissolution of food market borders and distinctive characteristics only takes place in a few transnational agribusinesses, thus direct producers are exempted from such phenomena; and (3) the indispensable requirement of global competition posed to rural economies sets forth the unawareness of persistent Latin American local market links.

The New Rurality concept is mainly supported by the fact that: (1) differences between the agricultural and rural sector identities cannot be distinguished, (2) half of the rural income is derived from non-agricultural activities, and (3) nonagricultural jobs are not related to farming activities.

These statements cannot be empirically refuted; they are the core basis of the so-called New Rurality in addition to the argument of the alleged dissolution of the borders between rural and urban areas. However, what is not taken into account is the fact that agriculture's role in rural development has lost importance since the 1980s due to the weakening of rural economies resulting from trade liberalization policies. Rural producers were forced to develop non-agricultural income sources, since agrarian production could not guarantee the successful development of rural families in an adverse context. Moreover, neoliberal governments contributed to the relative loss of the connection between agrarian incomes and the general economies

fundamental work (2003) because it depicts the connection between the aforesaid concepts more clearly. Other outstanding papers on RTD are those of Sepúlveda (2003) and Echeverri and Moscardi (2005). As for the New Rurality concept, Pérez (2001), Gómez (2002), Echeverri and Ribero (2002), and De Grammont's (2004) papers are among the most outstanding. Relevant papers discussing the difficulties involved in the theoretical and conceptual consolidation of the New Rurality's approach are those of Kay (2005), Arias (2006), Ramírez (2003), and Ruiz and Delgado (2008).

of rural areas by prioritizing funds for household expenses over production subsidies.

The abovementioned authors state three additional facts through which New Rurality's critical deficit can be distinguished: (1) globalization and privatization processes reveal market flaws; (2) rural changes have also undermined institutional effectiveness; (3) democracy has spread and been strengthened in almost every country; and local governing bodies have started to play leading roles.

It must be stressed that the fact that markets are controlled by a reduced number of agribusinesses constitutes not only a flaw in markets, but also a basic feature of the neoliberal agricultural exporting model (Rubio, 2003).⁵ At the same time, the loss of institutional effectiveness must be seen as a change in priorities that affect the vast majority of producers. Lastly, the starring role of local governing bodies does not lead to democracy strengthening unless it promotes citizen interests and effective participation. Furthermore, if such a role is not aimed at effectively decentralizing financial resources and authorities, it can turn into a mechanism through which national governing bodies will run away from their responsibilities.

The fact that rural cultures are transformed by leaps and bounds and that globalization reaches, for better or for worse, not only economies but also cultures is evidently related to migration, which has proliferated since the 1990s. Therefore, what is depicted herein is a basic characteristic of neoliberal rurality rather than an innovative rurality.

A decade ago, Schejtman and Berdegué pointed out that the environmental sustainability requirements that rural activities must meet are nothing but a quality standard posed by international consumers and derived from environmental awareness. On the basis of said premise - and making no reference to the serious environmental deterioration derived from mining - it is important to stress that the empirical deployment of environmental awareness still needs to be proved, especially when taking into account soy production in Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay, along with the intensive use of pesticides in agricultural export plantations.

⁵ The current position of Schejtman (2010) is at least ambivalent. He agrees that the financial crisis ended by upsetting the assumption of the ability of the markets to be foolproof mechanisms of economic regulation and also underlines the presence of flaws in the credit, technology, information and work markets, or outright absence of them. However, he keeps the idea of external markets as driving forces for territorial development.

To sum up, what is actually comprised in the New Rurality concept is nothing but a group of changes derived from neoliberal reforms that have come into force since the 1980s. On the basis of said premise, and making no reference to political or historical perspectives on deagrarianization, the RTD sets forth its public policies, which are aimed at achieving a change in production and institutions within a given rural area so as to reduce rural poverty (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2003).

The RTD's approach synthesizes and formalizes a consensus among multilateral organizations on the need to provide local areas with a more leading role by means of a more comprehensive view of rural society based on territories. However, it does not elucidate the tendencies derived from the capitalist restructuring process -for it is not determined to do so-. Therefore, rural areas face a contradictory logic; on the one hand, governments agree on the RTD's approach regarding the decentralization and multifunctionality of rural areas, local strategies and social participation planning, social coordination and joint responsibility promotion, citizenship development, and empowerment. On the other hand, said governments also agree that companies put pressure on communities to promote the creation of resorts, large mining industries, and large hydrologic or aeolian energy sources within their territory.

As a matter of fact, the RTD's approach entails relevant sustainability factors, such as environmental resources management and environmental services market development. Territorial organization as a decentralizing tool and a source for developing further knowledge about rural development also comprises progressive perspectives, such as equitable development, poverty alleviation, human development and democracy, among others. Nonetheless, it mistakenly assumes that said characteristics can be achieved without reforming neoliberal policies that undoubtedly weaken rural society.

One of the most debatable points within the RTD's approach is that, although it promotes local and territorial organizations, it extols the globalized markets empire and, consequently, the neoliberal macroeconomic policies. Hence it sets forth a group of economic premises, among which the following are the most notable (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2003): (1) competitiveness is crucial to the survival of production units; (2) technological innovation is vital to increasing impoverished rural population incomes; and (3) external demand is the basis of productive transformations and increases in productivity and income.

With regard to the aforementioned premises, it is important to stress that: (1) the vast majority of Latin American production units do not abide by a business-oriented logic, though they are entailed in Markets⁶; (2) increases in impoverished rural population incomes are closely linked to production asset conservation rather than to innovation; and (3) local and regional markets are more relevant than international demand when it comes to restoring rural income and society, both of which have been affected by neoliberal policies.

Rural development based on food sovereignty, democracy and sustainability

In the context of global capitalist restructuring, Latin American rural areas face development conflicts which are also territorial disputes, hence there is a need to identify their main actors: governing bodies and their institutions, international development organizations, globalized monoculture agribusinesses, mining companies, transnational companies in charge of developing large energy sources and, obviously, rural families and communities.

A rural development model based on rural political participation and aimed at settling the aforesaid territorial disputes must be proposed through critical thinking. In order to create such a model, projects that provide current peasant and indigenous agriculture, in their broadest sense, with a leading role through which both can develop within a sustainable, equitable, democratic and sovereign scheme must be promoted.

The question of development is central to the Latin American agenda and appears with force in both academics and in social movements (Gudynas, 2012). Recently, at the *Symposium on Rural Development with Territorial Approach* held in Bogota, Molina (2010) introduced sixty papers and examined some key elements of rural territorial development underlining rural poverty persistence within the context of deep inequities in the distribution of property.

A wide range of perspectives that contribute to the debate on said matter – such as Esteva’s proposal (Esteva, 2009) to reject the development concept due to its proved inefficacy and alienating implications, along with the *sumak kawsay* approach, which has strong roots in indigenous

cosmogony (Chuji, 2009) - agree on the fact that world is threatened by predatory capitalism and extractivism. Thus, critical perspectives on neo-extractivism provide very interesting nuances, such as in Bolivia and Ecuador, where governments brought neoliberal policies to an end, although they have not made structural changes to become detached from global capital reproduction yet.

In light of the abovementioned example, the RTD’s approach, when not deployed within a neoliberal context, can be effective. For instance, through its agricultural role, it can be appraised with regard to its benefits rather than to its products while taking into account the importance of food production to national sovereignty. Moreover, links between small cities and surrounding farmlands, as well as between urban and rural development can be stressed in combination with how agricultural and non-agricultural activities complement each other so as to reverse the inequality between rural and urban areas through public policies that set forth the importance of the rural environment and culture to cities. As Machado (2010) stated, rural development is a political problem, a matter of the model of general development and of the political model adopted by our societies.

It is important to finally note that the reintroduction of global historical perspectives will help to make a critical review of RTD’s approach and the New Rurality concept on which it is based. Furthermore, it will promote the re-evaluation of relevant works as well as the critical analysis of “postmodern views that, as Perry Anderson summarized, followed as governing principles ‘a structure with no history, a history with no subject, and knowledge with no truth’; hence, the appearance of antitheoricism and antihistoricism, both of which cut out the thinker’s ability to take over the core lines of reality” (Sader, 2008).

Conclusion

The renewed bet on development must be aimed on the appropriation of rural territories by rural producers and inhabitants, since neoliberal policies dispossessed them of their lands for three decades. In order to achieve such goals, territorial patterns must be reassessed and peasant and indigenous agriculture, along with the communities must be strengthened by means of public policies derived from a strong local participation - which implies reconstructing the principal social actors within regions - and an effective democratization process through which governments can allow societies to use their initiative, given that “a democracy that does not lead to a social, political, economic,

⁶ In Mexico, one of the most business-oriented agriculture countries in Latin America, there are 5 325 223 rural economic units; 73% of which are classified as subsistence family units and 8.3% as rural economic units in transition. Only 18.6% of the rural economic units are classified as rural enterprises (FAO-SAGARPA, 2012).

cultural, ethnic, gender, and ecological emancipation shall lack meaning and promote apathy rather than popular participation and will become an instrument of old elites instead of enlarged citizenship areas which allow the fight for social democracies...” (Sader, 2008).

Meeting said requirements as well as dismantling the neo-liberal framework based on social polarization, financial oligarchies, and the dispossession of peoples and the natural patrimony of communities might be the fundamental tasks to be taken into account in rural territorial development. In conclusion, if the large priorities underlining neo-liberal policies remain untouched, the RTD will not achieve its main objectives and small-scale local development will not be sufficient for summer on Latin American farmlands.

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