

LANDSCAPE AS A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF TERRITORY: SOCIAL VALORISATION AND DEVELOPMENT FACTOR - UTOPIA OR REALITY?

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I. THE REDISCOVERY OF LANDSCAPE IN MODERN SOCIETIES, A RECENT PROCESS

The rural landscape is a result of interaction between society and the environment in which the latter has settled. This occupation leads to the specific organisation of spaces so that they may be valued according to the relationships that develop between physical-ecological and social-economic structures. This makes landscape a complex concept, a result of the combination of many diverse factors - natural, historical and functional. However, it also acquires symbolic and subjective value by being regarded as a reflection of the cultural heritage and identity of a people.

Over the last twenty years, landscape has been rediscovered in the so-called post-productivist societies. This recovery is linked to three processes: its social revalorisation, its perception as a «new» resource and, finally, the organisation and management of the changes taking place in the territory. Parallel to the progressive growth of awareness concerning the need to introduce measures aimed at managing territorial transformation, we have seen the widespread appearance of a line of action designed to revalorise certain landscapes. This latter process is linked to landscapes being considered as a «new» resource due to current economic dynamics and, in turn, their social revalorisation as a factor that affects human well-being and quality of life. To the traditional function of producing raw materials, we have added a new function, that of providing services that are largely focused on rural and/or residential tourism. Landscapes, seen as a distinguishing feature of territory, and its associated patrimonial resources have become the cornerstone that sustains activities related to so-called rural tourism, where cultural and natural landscapes are one of the main selling points. It is definitely an asset when compared with the faceless banality resulting from dynamic economies based on the intensification of agricultural holdings and the expansion of urban uses. As well as rural tourism, the process of urban diffusion affecting rural and natural areas also considers the quality of the landscape, synthesised in the beauty of the views and

the attractive settings, as one of the main resources that these territories have to palliate their characteristic marginal economic situation, compared with the over-development of coastal areas that involves all kinds of congestion and contamination problems.

II. TERRITORIAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND REPERCUSSIONS ON THE QUALITY OF LANDSCAPE RESOURCES

The processes that endanger the new functionality of landscapes in the short or medium term are linked to activities that encourage their degradation through the replacement and/or intensification of land use and also to those that lead to certain agricultural-forestry-pasture practices being abandoned. The intensification of agricultural practices (mechanisation, geometrisation and enlargement of holdings, etc.) focused on achieving a competitive activity has significant repercussions on the landscape. These practices lead to the progressive simplification and homogenisation of landscapes by attempting to eliminate those aspects that are not easily adapted to the new productive approaches. A second process is associated with the desertion of farmland in areas of little agricultural vocation and which were cultivated at times of significant demographic pressure. The exodus from the countryside, this being understood as the loss of assets and the simplification of numerous tasks due to the low profitability of agricultural-forestry-pastoral holdings, has led to the degradation of landscapes that are not only of great cultural value but are also havens of biodiversity. The progressive spread of residential use in rural areas has normally led to the growing degradation and dismantling of existing landscapes as the result of interweaving urban uses with farmland, something that is not simply limited to a loss of ecological and aesthetic quality, due to the fragmentation of landscape units, but has also affected the social and cultural values of said landscapes. This has led to a process that makes landscapes more banal and homogenous, together with a loss of uniqueness and, as a result, of identity. Landscapes thus tend to simplify their internal complexity with the introduction of urban uses that repeat patterns adopted in other territories. Models based on the intensification of uses are approved without taking into account either the unique features of these landscapes or the potential visual, territorial and environmental impacts derived from these actions both in the present and in the future.

These transformations are largely associated with the socio-economic dynamics that have been growing in force since the mid-twentieth century, and also with recent processes linked to the new functionality of rural and natural landscapes. The pressure of some of these processes can cause landscapes to change from being attractive and valuable areas that symbolise lifestyle quality and well-being, to «no go» areas that generate an overall adverse reaction and the rejection of observers and «expel» those who decided to settle there, thus limiting the development options of these territories, given their loss of «value», this being understood in terms of landscape quality.

III. EUROPEAN INITIATIVES FOR THE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION OF TRADITIONAL RURAL LANDSCAPES

The debate on the transformations and valorisation of landscapes has extended far beyond the academic and professional fields, reaching broad sectors of the population and has become one of the leading topics of national and European political discussion. The organisation, management and intervention practices affecting landscape lie within the framework of the *European Landscape Convention*. This convention encourages governments to target the term landscape, which is «*something more than territory*», and then develop policies (general and specific) that allow for the diagnosis of their status and the identification, where necessary, of landscape conflicts in each unit, setting landscape quality goals in a second stage.

Nowadays, landscape is not solely associated with ecological and aesthetic values, and importance is given to factors relating to the quality of life of citizens, collective memory, local identity and even their patrimonial value as territorial assets. These principles are included in numerous initiatives affecting landscapes. The European economic and social cohesion policy provides significant funds aimed at palliating social-territorial imbalances in the different regions of the community, by promoting activities that contribute towards the social, economic and environmental development of the most marginal territories. At the same time, any new activities must ensure that environments and landscapes are preserved, as they are a most important asset of these territories, and the LEADER initiative is a significant example of this. Agrocultural policies also reflect the functional transformations undergone by rural areas: from initiatives of a highly production-oriented nature where agricultural and stock-raising activities were regarded as priorities and even able to produce profit, we have moved on to others that prioritise the multi-functionality of these settings. This means that we have progressed from looking at the problem of the rural environment from a strictly «*agricultural*» point of view to another that is more «*territorial*». Of the initiatives focusing on preserving rural landscapes with a pluri-functional approach, we should mention the *Rural Area Management Programmes*. With these programmes, agriculture is no longer a merely productive activity and becomes «*landscape agriculture*», regarding one of its main aims to be the preservation of landscapes that support other activities. Programmes aimed at improving the environment (LIFE-environment) have also taken into account, albeit in a minority of cases, the territorial and environmental effects of the degradation of agrosystems and the funding of initiatives aimed at maintaining them.

IV. PAUSE FOR THOUGHT: IS LANDSCAPE REALLY A FACTOR FOR DEVELOPMENT?

The evolution of European societies since the mid-twentieth century has largely involved a progressive loss of geographical knowledge, of the understanding of the very nature of their settings, along with the intensification of agricultural practices and the progressive degradation of traditional rural landscapes. Over the last twenty years, we have witnessed the «*discovery*» and «*revalorisation*» of landscape. Although this process has generated numerous positive aspects, there are still certain shadowy areas that are mainly linked with certain factors that are inherent to the very concept of landscape, including those that highlight questions related to its intangibility and its value understood in terms of externality.

It is true that recent decades have witnessed an intense process of revalorisation and management. However, from the point of view applied, our understanding of the complexity of the concept we call landscape is far from real. For example, society as a whole is able to perceive and, above all, apportion historical and patrimonial importance to a particular architectural construction such as a cathedral, even though said society lacks any artistic training. On the other hand, when people observe a landscape, they assign it a negative or positive value according to the perception of it that they receive, even when they have more problems recognising any historical importance related to its lengthy configuration process. Rural development policies, based on the pluri-functional nature of landscapes, aim to internalise a number of their defining externalities so as to help generate incomes and encourage people to settle in marginal areas. Rural tourism is one possible option for slowing the physical and social deterioration of these territories, by converting these natural, landscape and patrimonial resources into products. However, landscape has a purely passive function at times, as it is used as a resource that attracts visitors but has very few initiatives aimed at preserving it. The implementation of practices that link development and conservation may appear logical and simple at first glance, but this is not the case from a practical, applied point of view. In addition, the application of regulations aimed at valorising and preserving landscapes is also deficient, particularly those aimed at «*the need to satisfy the desire of people to enjoy a quality landscape*» or to avoid the degradation of so-called «*normal*» landscapes. For example, the last twenty years have seen an improvement in the planning of historic town centres and suburbs, but the management and organisation of the landscape of much of the territory has worsened. The underlying causes to this process can be summarised, albeit in a very generic fashion, as the pressure of the urban sector on non-building land, given the negative definition of the latter compared with building and urban land, but also by the very high profits generated by urban speculation.

Real protection of landscape as an environmental element that also has social, cultural and environmental value must go beyond mere legal protection. We need to change the mentality of broad social groupings, making landscape an asset and right of society as a whole. We need to ensure that the adoption of sustainable policies for the management of resources, including landscape, goes beyond a mere declaration of intentions. We need territorial management to be the ultimate aim of all initiatives affecting territory and not simply a resource supporting actions based on obtaining quick profits.