

The Environment in the Process of Differentiation of New Social Fractions in Depopulated Areas of Spain

*Key environmental considerations in the way from big cities to extreme rural areas*¹

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Abstract: The environmental factors present a strong relevance in the analysis of the rural areas in the western European countries and United States of America. An aspect with few studies in this research sphere is the relevance of the environmental dimension in the social change in rural areas and in the constitution of new social fractions.

The present contribution study, in comparative and conceptual perspective, the environmental considerations in the constitution of new social fractions, associated with counterurbanization process.

Key-words: Migration city-field; Environment; Rural areas; Social change

Introduction

Geographical literature has repeatedly demonstrated the relevance of the non extractive approach in the analysis of recreational and environmental dynamics in rural areas. This approach opposes or occasionally complements the more traditional approach (agricultural and extractive approach) in geographical studies (Thrift, 1987, Walker, Fortmann, 2003).

These environmental and recreational functions, although long standing traditions in Western European countries, have acquired a growing relevance in the last two decades, not only in the sectorial policies of the most relevance in rural areas, but also in the association between rural and environmental issues, perhaps owing to a growing influence of the urban perspective of these areas.

In any case, successive studies have reported the numerous and very different approaches to rural Europe (Smith, Phillips, 2001). This occurs in a context of reevaluation of the natural and environmental resources in western countries, associated with reorientation of European rural policies, both horizontally and in terms of social groups. *Green issues* acquire a new relevance and are often confused

with lifestyles. It has also been described that the revival of rurality studies in the United States is associated with the introduction of environmental considerations, arising from research into the exurban population that migrates to rural or intermediate areas (Friedland, 2002). Therefore, revival of rural popularity would arise from a differential categorisation by broad sectors of the population, especially the urban population, connected with an idealised view of rural and natural landscapes. Therefore, the debate about the new rural environment, would be associated with the spread of new social groups in rural areas, rather than to traditional elements and activities of these areas, such as agriculture. Rural and agrarian, and even natural, would be accepted as socially different constructs with a variable degree of interconnection.

Very varied representations of rural environment by urban-rural migrants have been described largely as a consequence of the importance of environmental factors in the decision to move towards rural areas. In this framework, environment can be accepted as a subjective and cultural concept (Short, 1992). It is, therefore, possible to qualify it as a clearly pluralist and symbolic character (Smith, Phillips, 2001; Daniels, Cosgrove, 1988). In any

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case, significant variations exist in the concept of rural environment depending on the areas concerned. Many studies have revealed the possibilities of conflict due to the generalization of consumption activities compared to only traditional productive activities (Cloke, Park, 1985; Hinrichs, 1996). Somewhat persistently, authors who have studied the consumption approach, have described the dependent character of farmers relative to the new social classes in rural areas (Cloke, Thrift, 1990), resulting in the appearance of farmers and new social classes, directly and indirectly, as two homogeneous social groups with conflicting interests. However, from an environmental perspective, processes of change in rural communities caused by the installation of new social groups can be much more complex, in terms of evaluation of the environment and the management of environmental resources.

In any case, recent studies have revealed a dearth of research in this area of social change in rural areas, relative to other aspects of rural restructuring processes (Little, Austin, 1996). Furthermore, comparative studies about the different fractions of new social groups in one area are almost non-existent. The present work aims to analyse the relevance of the environmental dimension in the generation of these new social groups and to examine the relevance conferred to environmental factors in the construction of non urban space, in an exploratory way owing to the lack of previous studies. The definition of the new middle classes has been studied in a wealth of literature about rural and social geography in the last decade. Although there is no complete consensus about the composition of this social group, its main characteristics are self-employment, easy promotion, high wages and a high level of education (eg. Hoggart, 1997, Cloke, Phillips, Thrift, 1995, Murdoch, 1995, Paniagua, 2002a). Other typical characteristics concern their spatial behaviour (good mobility and free choice of residence), a high evaluation of the countryside and sensitivity for environmental resources (Cloke, Thrift, 1990, Halfacree, 1994, Hoggart, 1997, Gare, Arran, 1995, Paniagua, 2002a). Owing to all this, this social group can be used to analyse discussions from a consumption perspective of rural areas and environmental values (Woods, 1997, Paniagua, 2005), in the framework of contraurbanisation processes.

Coounterurbanization, New Social Groups and the Social Construction of the Concept of the Rural Idyll

Normally, studies on counterurbanisation focus on the economic-environmental separation as a motive for the possible generation of conflicts with traditional populations. The present work focuses on environmental aspects between urban-rural migrants, separating the analysis into two parts: the influence of environmental-rural aspects in the motive for the migration and, analysis of the influence of environmental aspects in the development of activity in rural areas and in the discussion about the countryside. In this way, changes can be studied, that have been largely ignored previously, between the first stage of movement and setting up and a second developmental stage of the individual's lifestyle and activity in the destination. On the other hand, studying two fractions of the so-called new social classes in rural areas in the same study areas, it was possible to analyse the changes in the environmental discourse mainly relative to their activity.

The environmental constructivist perspective of the rural idyl is not a new concept in academic circles, since it first appeared in the Sixties and its use has spread in the Seventies in Anglosaxon countries and has become increasingly complex, with wide ranging contributions (Demeritt, 2002). In this framework, it is surprising that there are so few studies that refer to the influence of different social groups that reside in rural areas (Little, Austin, 1996). Initially, the concept of the rural idyl was used to explain the general attraction of urban populations to rural areas for environmental and leisure reasons (Hoggart, Buller, Black, 1995). Over the years, this concept has been used in an increasingly complex way, since it has been argued that rural areas are social spaces in a geographical framework. Understanding rurality as a social construction, this is influenced by the social, ethical and cultural values that prevail at any given time.

In any case, the notion of countryside and rural issues is usually aimed at satisfying the interests of the social group that creates it. It is widely accepted that this rural image in western countries is very influenced by environmental factors and by the defence of traditional values and that this perception

generates a general attraction of urban residents to the countryside (Champion, 2001; Gorton, White, Chaston, 1998, Paniagua, 2002a).

In Spain, this attraction to rural areas is shown by surveys carried out over the last decade. Public opinion polls about the environment conducted by the Centro de Interpretación de la Realidad Económica y Social (CIRES, see annex) in 1992 and 1994 have shown that, given the choice, four out of every ten people would live in a small village. In contrast, only a very small proportion of the population would choose to live in a city (Paniagua, 1997).

The surveys described suggest that, given the choice, more than 75% of inhabitants of villages or rural counties would prefer to live in the same type of place or, in nine out of ten cases in a house in the countryside. This satisfaction with their living environment is not as common in the large towns and cities since 21% of these would prefer to live in a small village. This percentage increases to 30% if individuals who would prefer to live in the outskirts of the city are included. In a COAG (1999) study, 80% of the individuals living in rural areas interviewed wanted to continue living in the same place.

Similarly, 24% of those interviewed showed their willingness to spend their holidays in a village, in the countryside or in the mountains (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas – CIS, 1999, see annex), and two of every three individuals interviewed living in urban nuclei visit the countryside at least once a year (COAG, 1999).

Moreover, there is also a clear idealisation of the sensitivity and behaviour of village inhabitants towards the environment. People residing in smaller counties can be considered to be more closely related and to show a greater respect for their natural environment. Therefore, half of the population interviewed considers that village inhabitants are more environmentally sensitive than urban residents (Paniagua, 2001).

The Influence of Environmental Factors for Establishment in Rural Areas

The relevance of environmental factors in urban-rural migration has not been given constant attention (Paniagua, 2002a, 2005). As mentioned previously, its analysis is important to establish

the relevance of the environmental dimension that is presently attributed to rural areas. Literature on this aspect usually describes its secondary character. Halfacree (1994) proposes that environmental or rural motives only explain a small number of cases of establishment in rural areas, but that its importance varies greatly among the different areas, studies and working methodologies. In a review of works focusing on the motives behind migrations, environmental or rural motives for setting up in rural areas varied from very low percentages (5 to 8%) to significantly high percentages (around 40%).

Similarly, the importance of environmental factors, in the case of urban-rural migrations, varies considerably in relation to the distance moved, and migrations on a regional scale are largely explained by factors related to quality of life or environmental factors (Boyle, Halfacree, Robinson, 1998:143), which, in the whole sample, take second place. Moreover, their importance also varies in relation to the rural areas of the destination (Smith, Phillips, 2001).

On the other hand, there is a good deal of confusion between rural and environmental categories, largely caused by the dispersed answers and the associations between both of these in the reasons behind the establishment or the permanence in a rural area. There are, therefore, a wide range of meanings for environmental that can condition setting up in rural areas. Rural or environmental combines with personal values assigned to rural areas (peace and tranquillity); social values of small communities (belonging to a community); identification with a landscape, either in a general sense (the countryside) or associated with some specially attractive place or area. Each of these facets of rural attraction combines numerous meanings or responses that define specific and extremely varied views of rural, ranging from natural to a sense of community, with intermediate concepts associated with the landscape, social atmosphere, leisure, agriculture etc. (Bunce, 1982).

On the other hand, it has also been emphasised that environmental factors have a pronounced selective influence depending on the social group concerned (Hoggart, Paniagua, 2001). Usually, a key group for this type of analysis concerns the so-called new social classes or new service classes (Paniagua, 2002a, 2004). This social group has been described as one that characterises postmodernist

society and is distinguished by its concern for the environment and environmental sensitivity (Merting, Dunlap, 2001). Moreover, individuals in this group are characterised by their freedom to choose their residence and to move about.

Analysis of the environmental attitudes of this socioeconomic group can be used to interpret the view of the countryside held by selected sectors of urban populations and associations between environmental and rural aspects (Smith, Phillips, 2001). It can also be used to identify consumer practises among the different sectors of the middle classes. Smith and Phillips (2001), designed several social groups based on their construction of rural aspects. He distinguished three main study groups of urban-rural migrants, based on assessment of: the place of origin (locals and new arrivals) (biological perspective); the sense of identity of the rural community (social perspective); and finally, on the aesthetic value of the landscape (natural perspective).

With this approach, different points of view about rurality are distinguished without clearly differentiating the social fractions of new residents that generate these opinions. In other words, a classification is applied to the final product: opinion of rurality. Here, we aim to differentiate the opinions according to the new service class that holds them. Hence, we admit that each social group has their own, albeit permeable, opinion about rural-environmental matters, that would be largely conditioned by factors of urban-rural migration and by the organisation of their activity in the destination area.

Environment and New Social Class. A Review of Surveys in the Nineties in Spain

As mentioned previously, one of the most characteristic groups of the so-called new service classes are the liberal professionals. This socioeconomic group has traditionally shown a deep concern for environmental issues (Merting, Dunlap, 2001). This is confirmed by some opinion polls carried out during the Nineties in Spain. For example, the CIRES survey of 1994 shows that almost 90% of liberal professionals are concerned about the exhaustion of natural resources. In contrast, this is much less acute in other self-employed socioeconomic groups such as the farmers, only half of the

farmers interviewed expressed concern about these matters. Also, individuals with liberal professions who were interviewed were more likely to consider that none of the other natural resources are currently scarce (four out of ten). Consequently, the group of liberal professionals is distinguished in their clear sensitivity and concern for the environment, more pronounced than any other social group. This finding can be related to information about these issues and their usually high cultural level (Yearley, 1991).

Recent surveys about the environment in Spain show this trend. Studying the results of the survey carried out by CIS-96, 41% of professionals considered damage to the environment to be the most important problem, compared to an average value of 24% of the other socioeconomic groups.

In the huge dilemma of development versus environment, according to the CIRES poll, 83.3% of liberal professionals and experts interviewed consider that protection of the environment should take precedence over fomenting development, both on a general and national level and in the place of residence (Paniagua, 1997, 2001). Hence, 71.4% of professionals would be prepared to reduce their standard of living to protect the environment. There were more than 20 points difference between this and the second socioeconomic group that supported this option.

This socioeconomic group considers environmental policy to be important but on a par to policies generated to resolve other important socioeconomic problems, and give it a flexible character, to be decided in each individual case. In this line, 86% of the study group consider that economic development must be compatible with nature conservation (compared to 72.1% of the general population). Therefore, 86% of the members of this socioeconomic group (compared to 73.1% of the general population) consider that strong measures must be taken and that the economic activities potentially harmful to the environment (building of roads, housing estates, factories etc.) should be stopped. To culminate this environmentalist perspective, 72% of professionals consider that the environment should be protected even if these entails economic costs (compared to 50% of the general population). Consequently, 66% would be willing to pay

an extra tax to finance environmental conservation and protection (compared to 47.1% of the general population).

On the other hand, the group of professionals shows a clear interest in news about the environment and consider themselves to be better informed than the population as a whole. Therefore, environmental conservation is considered to be an immediate and important issue by nine of every 10 individuals interviewed, when the average is seven. In this context, 81% of the interviewees consider urban pollution to be a very serious problem compared to 71% on average. Also, 48% of professional consider that the environment of their nucleus of residence has been damaged over the last ten years, compared to 37% of the general population.

In conclusion, according to available opinion polls, liberal professionals can be characterised as clearly being the most environmentalist and postmaterialist, in agreement with international studies of these matters (Merting, Dunlap, 2001, Yearly, 1991). It is, therefore, necessary to take note of the importance of environmental factors in the displacement of this group to rural areas.

The Relevance of Environmental Questions in the Constitutions of New Social Class

Normally, contributions about urban-rural migration factors in new social classes have established three large groups of influencing factors that are usually interconnected Paniagua, 2004, 2005)²:

- Economic and work-related factors: including the search for work and the creation of their own remunerated job. The rural environment is regarded as an opportunity to do this.
- Environmental factors: these include elements of very varied nature, from those related with the physical environment (pleasant scenery), together with those related to the rural habitat, and those associated with the size of the population or

the tranquillity associated with the reduced population density (Paniagua, 2008).

- Intermediate factors: related with a specific lifestyle or with being their own boss. These kinds of factors unite economic or work-related elements, such as improved working conditions or ambitions, and those of a purely work context, together with an evaluation of the rural environment as an attractive place to live. Determination of the weight given to economic and rural-environmental aspects has merited the attention of several studies (Willians *et al.* 1989; Halfacree, 1994; Paniagua, 2002 a). However, there is no general consensus about the constitution of this type of factors, or about the relevance of environmental or economic elements, in spite of the numerous detailed studies about urban-rural migrants (Paniagua, 2002 a and b, Willians *et al.* 1989, Willians, Jobes, 1990).

In spite of the diversity of factors that influence migration and establishment of new social classes in rural areas, there is a large degree of complexity within each group of factors. More specifically, among the environmental factors one important characteristic is the very wide ranging concept of the environment in the study group, associated not only with its physical characteristics, but also with individual experiences associated with selected values related to rural areas (peace, tranquillity). Hence, environmental factors can be divided into three main areas, as mentioned previously: the area associated with the physical and constructed environment; with the social environment; and the “rural atmosphere” or individual attributes assigned to the environment. In any case, changes in the physical structure of the land and in the population are much more evident than changes in the social environment that are much more difficult to analyse.

It is, therefore, necessary to separate the study of environmental factors into the decision-making phase for urban-rural migration and into a second phase of setting up and working in the rural communities. As described previously, the consideration

² This paper present the main conclusions of a research with some extension in the time, in extreme depopulated areas, mainly in Castile and Leon (Spain), with special attention to qualitative field work (semi-structured interviews and participant observation) developed between 2003-2004 and a special and specific analysis and elaboration by the methods of opposite social groups.

of environmental-rural factors can change the consideration and the weight in both phases. Harper (1991) emphasised the factors that influence the decision-making process in the migration process, suggesting its distinctive nature.

Liberal Professionals

As mentioned above, liberal professionals form one of the most representative groups of post-modern society (Castells, 2001), and are characterised by a continual sensitivity and concern for the environment (Gare, Arran, 1995). Their relative spatial freedom relative to their work and their work-related responsibilities often means that they can choose their place of residence (Hoggart, 1997; Cloke, Thrift, 1990; Paniagua, 2002a).

The concept of the environment

The environment in this social group is usually associated with characteristics and values of a life style considered to be typical of areas with reduced population size, specifically, tranquillity, peace or the quality of life typical of villages (especially, the pleasures of living in the countryside compared to the city), as well as a more positive perception of the physical environment. In any case, there are a series of intermediate factors between environmental and economic or work-related factors, based on a change in lifestyle, cultural values and community relations (Paniagua, 2005, 2008). Within these multiple interpretations of environmental, there is a clear association with the concept of rural. In this way, numerous attributes usually assigned to rurality are also assigned to the environment (Paniagua, 2005). Environmental and rural concepts are largely shared, due to the vague definition of each of them. Belonging to a community, the value attributed to small places, the tranquillity, the possibility to start up where relationships between people are valued and given importance, become more relevant than the scenery, understood as morphology, that has more of an aesthetic value than as a natural resource.

Environment and the decision to migrate

Usually in the literature, the main motives for setting up in rural areas are economic ones, in

around 8 out of every 10 cases. Factors such as flexible working conditions, the willingness to accept professional risks, opportunities for enterprising professionals and the ability for self-organisation, are all important factors to take into account. Many of these factors that influence the individual setting up can be summarised in a wish “to be my own boss” (Paniagua, 2002 a, 2008). In any case, these factors associated with urban-rural migration, must be understood in terms of a clear professional and vital idealisation of the rural environment with its environmental characteristics.

Environmental motives generally have a secondary importance and can only be considered to be conditioning factors in very few cases (Paniagua 2005). In general, they are associated with a life-style that is considered to be typical of villages and is described as “the pleasure of living in the countryside”.

In accordance with other authors (Hoggart, 1993), the morphological and constructed environment is the least important in the migration phase. This is only a relevant factor in very few cases. In all of these it is mainly associated with the constructed environment, with traditional or rural architecture. These are usually triggered by the inheritance of a property with traditional architecture. This is usually the family house that has belonged to them for several generations. Individuals moving into these properties usually intend to reform them. There were only two cases in which the cultural landscape (agriculture) or the natural environment was considered to have an important influence, in an antiurban context.

The intermediate conception of the environmental influence is associated with the social environment and is distinguished by “a wish to live here” or “a liking for living in the countryside”, that corresponds to a stereotype view of the social environment of rural areas with a reduced population size, in some cases associated with professional plans and in others associated with the perception of a certain quality of life. Only in a few cases was the return to the village associated with collective recreational events (village fetes) and to the social network absent from the urban nuclei from where the migrants have come (Paniagua, 2002a, 2005).

The main focus, closely linked to the previous one, is the rural atmosphere, which includes an antiurban feeling, and other characteristics

associated with life in the country, where tranquility, peace, or alternative lifestyles, such as “free living” are found. In the case of individuals returning to their native village, the identification with values associated with the place is important, values they have not found elsewhere (such as tranquillity and peace). Personal identification and refuge are the key elements to their motives (Paniagua, 2005).

Environment and professional activity in the countryside

Setting up and developing a professional activity in a rural area can alter an individual’s perception of their physical and social environment either positively or negatively. Moreover, the interaction between their perception of the rural environment and their job can also be studied.

One of the first observations is that almost two-thirds of the individuals interviewed mentioned the environment when discussing their life and activity in rural areas. Consequently, the rural-environmental medium acquires more relevance in the second phase of the installation of liberal professionals. However, this should not be interpreted as a better evaluation of the physical or constructed environment, but instead as more importance given to the social environment and the “rural atmosphere”. The landscape is now barely mentioned although occasional references are made to traditional architecture or to the collection of buildings in the village. References to the social atmosphere are important and they tend to compare the virtues of rural life with life in the city. Negative opinions are also expressed associated with the difficulty to integrate. Direct relationships, social integration, trust and friendships with the inhabitants are the most highly valued social characteristics, associated both with developing their work activity and with their daily life.

Indeed, the reduced populations of rural areas and the problems this entails of lack of inertia and initiative are impediments for developing a professional activity and tend to oppose the sense of community.

The key to the rural atmosphere is “social prestige” that is achieved in rural areas based on self-organisation and in the worth given to the individuals opinion on both professional and non-professional issues. Although tranquillity

and calm are still mentioned they have acquired less importance.

Often, a possible environmental conflict between social groups in rural areas has been described (Cloke, Thrift, 1987), arising from some degree of economic transformation and substitution of activities or the emergence of new activities associated more closely to a consumer perspective (environmental) for rural areas rather than of extractive (Woods, 1997). Recent articles based on empirical studies seem to question this point of view (Harvey, Works, 2002: 389). The incorporation of people to rural communities, that form part of the so-called new service class would not affect either the opinions or the interests of agriculture and farmers since these would be complementary (Paniagua, from 1997). It has been suggested that conservation of a landscape, in the most part cultural, interests both the new residents as well as the farmers. In any case, this relationship of complementarity and conflict based on environmental issues and resource management can be analysed by social fractions of the new service class. The most interesting result is a lack of any relationship, except for the case of conservation of traditional architecture. However, this does not take place directly with the farmers but instead is related to the appointment of the new service classes in local councils.

Independently of these strategies, in which conflict arises with traditional social groups based on the service and construction sectors, there seems to be largely either an absence or complementarity of interests with the farmers about environmental issues, expressed via the ethical relevance of the farmer in the management of environmental resources.

Environment, New Social Class and Environmental Activities

This fraction of the new service class has usually been underestimated. It is distinguished by the professional activities of experts that became highly qualified in urban areas and then moved to the countryside with the aim of dedicating themselves, either completely or partially, to environmentally based activities usually associated with use of land and environmental resources. Several statistical

studies have warned of the tendency to form an environmental mastergroup (Willians, Shaw, Greenwood, 1987). However, there are no published works that support a relationship with the counterurbanisation process based on qualitative data (Paniagua, 2002 b, Willians, Shaw, Greenwood, 1987).

The environment: the relevance of the landscape

As with the social fraction of liberal professionals, in this group the rural environment is associated with a group of physical elements and values of a somewhat dispersed nature. However, there are many more references to the environment in a broad sense that tend to relate to a physical and cultural image of the environment. The landscape, especially related to the chosen place of residence, to a specific image that is accepted as optimum in the environment chosen to live and to develop the activity, emerges as one of the central points of environmental-rural issues. Specifically, the constructed landscape, together with the quality of life of the micro rural areas of residence, are the sustaining elements of the discourse.

The influence of the environment in the migratory process

Since this concerns a social fraction that associates its urban-rural movement with a total or partial change of job and to the development of a business related with the natural or constructed environment and open air activities, motives associated with the environment appear constantly, either mainly or secondarily. In eight of every ten individuals interviewed references are made to environmental motivations, focused on the natural or architectonic environment, in the “rural atmosphere” and with less importance given to the social environment of rural areas (Paniagua, 2008).

The natural and architectonic environment is shown in the migrants’ discourse as the most important factor in urban-rural movement. Inheritance of family country houses and the need to pay their costly renovation trigger a change of job and seasonal or total migration. There are also cases, although very few in which traditional houses have been bought or monumental buildings have been renovated, e.g., there is one case of renovation of a

Romanic church. In these cases, great care is taken in the choice of location in relation to the activity to be developed. The traditional house is described as a microcosm that encloses the concept of man’s adaptation to Nature (Paniagua, 2005). Another secondary theme concerns Nature or the countryside, associated with a different way of living, or in other words a change in lifestyle. Nature is understood as a single entity and is not dissociated into its different components. Only one of the individuals interviewed mentioned rivers, mountains etc. In any case, within the discourse there was always a more implicit rather than explicit association between Nature and quality of life.

The second central point concerned the “individual atmosphere”. There is a strong antiurban feeling associated with excessive competition and stress. That is compared with an idyllic view of the countryside based on the moral satisfaction of living in the country, associated with values such as freedom, tranquillity, going back to one’s roots. The change in lifestyle associated with a rise in the level and immaterial quality of life are, certainly, strong reasons for migration. The third focus is based on social environment where the idea of the pueblo is conceived as a social space. In this case, the city and the pueblo are two different complementary worlds: with people returning to their home village, the idea of the village is replaced by that of a social environment of family and close friends.

In any case, these three areas are interconnected, especially those corresponding to the physical and constructed medium and the social environment.

Activity and Environmental Resources

As individuals become integrated in their activity, references to environmental resources appear almost constantly. The main point of the discourse is the social environment, based on problems of living together and conflict between the traditional population and the newcomers (Paniagua, 2002a).

Similarly, there is also the dissociation between the rural and farming environment, reflecting a different perception of the village-locals and agriculture-farmers. Nevertheless, a positive view also arises of the rural community, associated with tranquillity and doing things more slowly, that allows people to enjoy their surroundings.

The second point is related with the physical and constructed medium from an economic and functionalist perspective that includes an environmentalist and demanding discourse when there is an environmental problem that reduces the economic results of the activity. There is an insistence to renovate the patrimony both of traditional houses and also of the commercial centre of some villages leading in some cases to making demands to local councils and in other cases to the creation of civil societies to protect the patrimony. This results in the movement of rural communities in these matters and the search for subsidies. A more protesting and conflictive discourse arises when collective natural resources such as woods or waters are threatened (Paniagua, 2005). The double importance, environmental and economic, of the natural resources is always present. But this conflict does not occur with the local communities but with the heads of the regional environmental institutions. Immigrants acquire leadership positions in local conservationist movements, pulling forwards the traditional local populations.

The third point, centres around the so-called individual atmosphere, where feelings of freedom come into play again, of mixed lifestyles and work activity, relaxation in the activity, moral satisfaction (relative to the moralising influence of Nature on the individual) perhaps all these perceptions can be summarised in the expression: ‘...I love my life more than I love money...’ (Paniagua, 2002b), suggesting an integration of the individual with the environment surrounding him.

Conclusions

Environmental considerations present a clear and growing importance in studies of rural areas in Western Europe. However, some aspects and approaches have been little used to date. One of these is analysis of the environmental dimension among the different fractions of the new social groups. More specifically, the socioeconomic group of professionals presents a clearly pro-environmental character compared to other occupational groups. They show a high level of environmental concern, both for general issues and for rural ones. They see in the countryside its positive attributes and also a place where they can improve their work opportunities compared to the city. However, detailed processes

of counterurbanisation have constantly suggested a secondary character for environmental motivations, consisting in an apparent contradiction. On the other hand, the spatially selective nature of the new social classes in their movement to environmentally and aesthetically attractive rural areas, especially in areas with few population (Hoggart, Paniagua, 2001), contributes to studying the environmental basis of urban-rural migration. Similarly, some recent studies also suggest few work possibilities and of poor quality in remote rural areas (Green, 1999), that implicitly suggests the value of the environmental motives in these areas. Halfacree (2001), based on a qualitative approach, has already suggested the influence of rural factors (environmental) in the so-called rural idyl, especially in pastoralism, that covers both social elements and ones related to the landscape.

As Hoggart (1997) indicates, studies on social change in rural areas usually only differentiate newcomers from locals, in a far from precise manner. The newcomers encompass individuals with very different activities in the rural communities, in spite of forming a similar social class in their urban origins (Paniagua, 2005). This results in the construction of a differentiated discourse on the rural environment and the establishment of different relationships with the traditional community. Whether the environmental resources are integrated or not in the activity of the new middle classes in the rural areas is a relevant factor in the weight of the environmental-rural dimension in the discourse, both in the phase that refers to the migration process and afterwards in the setting up and development of the activity. Immigrants dedicated to activities related with the rural environment give this the most importance. Different environmental aspects are also important in their discourse with aspects related with the landscape and architecture playing an especially relevant role.

On the other hand, the environmental discourse changes between the initial migration phase and the following setting up phase, in both fractions. However, the weight within the discourse seems to remain the same. What we have called social environment becomes important here, either in a negative sense (contrasting with an initial idealisation) or in a positive sense (reinforcing the village idea) and can cause either an increase or a relocation of the newcomers.

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Annex

List of survey polls use:

CIRES. Centro de Investigación de la Realidad Económico y Social:

Survey on environment. December 1992. Survey on environment. December 1994.

CIS. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas

Survey n.º 2231. December 1996; Survey n.º 2322. March 1999. Survey n.º 2405. December 2000; Survey n.º 2423. June 2001; Survey n.º 2454. April 2002