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Local Development and Postproductivism in Peripheral Territories. The Heritage Olive Groves in Almeria (SE Spain)

Planning aimed at achieving integrated territorial development, in the global perspective of combating imbalances derived from the dynamics promoted by the prevailing capitalist system, has come to the forefront of concerns of societies in developed countries following the economic crisis that began in 2008 and its violent social and political corollaries. There has been a rethinking of the meanings of concepts such as “progress”, “development” or “growth”, and this, in turn, has been modulated considering policies, socio-economic situations and also territorial aspects.

One of the prototypical scenarios of the imbalance, which has gained prominence due to arousing growing concern in recent times, is the reality of rural areas in countries with higher income levels. Despite the positive macroeconomic figures in recent years - abruptly interrupted by the global pandemic of 2020 - these territories were affected by a profound comparative imbalance with respect to large cities and coastal areas, which continues to be fueled by strong structural problems that only deepen over time. It is true that there was previously an awareness of this reality in regions such as Western Europe, and that some far-reaching measures have been taken in recent decades to address it. But the insufficient results obtained from this process of public intervention require rethinking a whole system of aid, investment, support and management tools that have failed to redirect a dynamic that seems invariable.

In this context, new paradigms have arisen in the public debate providing tools and positions that are based on another conception of reality that go beyond

partisan and bureaucratic visions, and provide the population of rural environments with instruments with which to intervene for their own benefit, transforming said reality without tutelage or external hierarchical projections. One of these cases is that of endogenous and local development. From a comprehensive and holistic perspective on rural areas and its problems, this geographical discipline provides a modern and useful vision to face the great challenges that beset this part of the territory of developed countries. And it does so by changing the perspective, through the implementation of a new, more intricate paradigm in the new forms of governance and public management that are sensitive to the growing democratic demands of the population and concerned with the obvious environmental problems that beset society, without forgetting the necessary strategic positioning in the complex scenarios of global competitiveness.

This research involves the application of the values and proposals of the endogenous and local development paradigm to a case study of strong symbolism within the Mediterranean world: the rural territory of the province of Almería and the possible sustainable use of the enclaves of patrimonial olive groves located in the area. Through the proposed actions, this territorial element, a historical protagonist in the traditional rural way of life, may constitute an opportunity for the development and social progress of this space in the immediate future. And it does so based on the premise that the traditional method of cultivation of the olive tree and the externalities that it entails can be a point of support for the unleashing

of grassroots social and economic initiatives based on the sustainable use of resources.

The concept of “heritage olive groves” is a contribution based on the function of cultivars with historical roots in their rural context. This concept brings together a whole series of landscape, environmental and cultural values that far exceed their simple consideration as an agricultural activity. Furthermore, this interpretation in its geographical sense currently finds enormous possibilities for its recognition and projection in the post productivist framework of consolidating relationships, which seems unfailingly aimed at positioning agriculture and associated expressions traditional of the rural world in spaces like the Spanish Mediterranean.

First, the general framework of the research is established, where both the ideas of reference in the deployment of the precepts of the paradigm of endogenous and local development in the understanding of the territories are briefly addressed, as well as the main characteristics and challenges that rural Almería presents for territorial development.

Once the theoretical and territorial context is set, an effort is made to empirically contrast the theory with the reality of the territory, proposing a catalogue in which the values of the main landscapes are identified, analyzed and placed in the scientific discourse of patrimonial olive groves in the province of Almería. Their status and properties are individually recognized in a process of critical reflection that lays the foundation for identifying their potential role in development processes conducive to stimulating life in the rural environment in which they are embedded. After this, the second phase of the research closes with the schematic systematization of the main environmental, cultural and landscape values that the territories featuring the traditional olive grove display.

It is important to point out - with the aim of clarifying possible confusion with other processes of recognition of common historical cultivars in recent years (catalogues of monumental trees, historical groves, urban plant elements, etc.) - that in this case, the approach is a process of geographical inquiry, and as such, is centred on a spatial expression that, although it may be delimited in space, exceeds the emblematic landmark in the territory to generate a landscape with all its associated elements (infrastructure, production and components).

In the third and final phase, as a synthetic product of the prior understanding and analysis, a series of strategies and reflections are offered framed in a proposal for a quality brand with strong territorial roots: the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). The study ends by critically

repositioning the contributions made in the contemporary scientific context of the matter, reflecting on the applicability and capacity for territorial transformation.

The sources used include both fieldwork, in which the identification and graphic representation of significant phenomena on the ground have been sought, as well as the compilation of texts from different sources (geographical, historical, marketing, ecological), official statistics and the authors’ own maps that reinforce the defended theories and establish the basis on which to build the subsequent discourse. From this empirical and hermeneutical work, the general theory defended, and the contributions made by the text result in a genuine geographical synthesis.

The legacy olive groves considered, on which analysis and catalogue of their values with the corresponding geographical interpretation, are:

A) Vélez-Blanco Irrigated Area

This is an example of a foothill olive grove, in which heritage and landscape values come into consideration of the olive grove and its intrinsic characteristics.

B) Dispersed Olive Grove in the Filabres Range

In this case, the groves constitute a dispersed structure in different municipalities and along with the arable areas and intermountain depressions at the eastern end of the Sierra de los Filabres, a transition zone between the South and the Spanish Levante.

C) Tabernas and Sorbas Fields

The region of Tabernas and its flat surrounding areas have become the main scene of olive production in the province of Almería. On the one hand, it brings together excellent examples of traditional farms made up of local varieties adapted to the environment of the sub-deserts of Almería; on the other hand, it encompasses the majority of new intensive and high-productivity farms that, mechanized and focused on international trade, have revolutionized the oil market locally and nationally.

D) Alto Nacimiento Olive Grove

A scenic landscape built by human action and focused on the cultivation of the “cuquillo” olive tree, the Nacimiento region offers an excellent example of an irrigated olive grove integrated into the protected natural

area of Sierra Nevada, with enormous possibilities for tourist exploitation within the framework of the rural development initiatives that exist within the area.

E) The olive grove of the desert in Alboloduy

Probably the most striking and special agricultural cultivar in a province where agriculture already is a central focus. At the edge of the sub-desert, on irregular patches of dry land, the olive trees of Alboloduy appear as an example of the struggle of human adaptation to the limits imposed by nature. It is a space threatened by abandonment and by global warming, hence it is catalogued in order to seek its recognition and protection.

F) Alcolea's Olive Grove

This case constitutes the best example of how rural life can revolve around a crop and its territorial expression, with Alcolea as the repository of hopes and opportunities to promote development processes on a local scale.

G) Enix and Felix Orchards

Enix and Felix, in the south of the province of Almería, are the two best examples of remaining Moorish orchards, and within them, we find productive farms of the local native variety "Picual de Almería". In addition, they are an example of profitable and sustainable agriculture in a territorial framework focused on intensive greenhouse farming, a disruptive practice due to the predatory nature of its resource consumption.

The main contribution of this research is to geographically capture the territorial significance and potential opportunities that heritage elements may have for sustainable development, especially those that combine different dimensions, such as environmental, cultural or landscape. This is what we can observe in the case of historic olive groves located in the rural territory of Almería.

As a case study with a presence spread over the provincial space, it is used as the pretext to propose alternatives to the prevailing development model. The reassessment of the way in which territories are managed, in their different perspectives, is not only desirable for pursuing a greater ecological aptitude, but also for developing in a more socially sustainable way and enabling heritage aspects to coexist with commercial viability in the long term, which in turn allows for spatial justice and grassroots local development.

The olive tree in the rural Mediterranean territory in general, and particularly in the case of Almería, is a symbol of the survival and usefulness of its cultivation through the centuries. It was the undisputed protagonist over long historical periods in rural communities during times of subsistence and isolation, either as a cultivated ecosystem, a link in multiple productive chains, or as a landscape icon. In contemporary times, after a stage in which they were generally unnoticed, and in a sense, based on continuity of inherited historical models, some specific initiatives emerged in different locations that sought their conventional commercialization. These initiatives continued to the present day, have been characterized by their local character, in the form of modest investments that have not exceeded - with few exceptions - the scope of the family business. On the contrary, and going further, the legacy olive groves on which these modest initiatives were sustained reaches the 21st century as an exalted index of legacy and heritage, a reservoir of history, culture and landscape, which is key to the study and understanding of the societies that lived from it and that can also, from the identification of these values, reframe its positioning in the current globalized context. This legacy is a far cry from a productivist vision, unattainable compared to what the olive growing and elaiotechnics sector has become in recent decades, but which recognizes its true importance and adds to the local distinctive brand to seek greater economic, social and, of course, environmental impact.