Decolonising neorurality. Co-optation processes and limitations of social economy practices among southern European neorurals.

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Abstract

Neorurality is frequently associated with social economy projects, commonising processes, enhancing alternative food production and distribution systems, and re-framing imbalances between central and rural areas. However, neorurality has also turned into a brand and institutional project that enhances rural gentrification, essentialisation, and exploitation of both land and people. In this paper, we compare different 'neorural' experiences in the context of southern Europe to assess whether it is worth using neorurality to label emerging post-capitalist solidarity economies. Our discussion aims to explore the divide between emancipatory-oriented neorurality, based on the autonomous household practices constructing new commons and multispecies solidarities, and a modernity-driven neorurality integrating emerging rural social economies within the digital platforms (e-commerce) and the logistic sector. We conclude with a discussion about the perils and pitfalls of describing emerging social solidarity economies in the context of southern Europe as 'neorurality'.

Introduction

Neorurality is an appealing word that reverberates images of horizontal social solidarity economies, new forms of equal socio-organisational and economic processes and more ecocentric relationships with the more-than-human world. Back-to-the-land trends of many ex-urbanites started to inhabit the collective imaginary of activists, while alternative food networks are now often seen as a strategic tool to construct local communitarian autonomy against the Goliath of corporate food regimes. This is particularly more present in the South of Europe as in Spain (Sampedro and Camarero, 2020;Oliva and Jesús Rivera,2020; Baylina et al.,2019), Italy (Ebbreo, 2020; Orria and Luise 2017), Greece (Figueiredo et al., 2020; Papadopoulous and Fratsea.2020; Nikolaidou et al., 2017) and Portugal (Figueiredo et al., 2020). Besides, this trend has become present also in media discourses. One of the best visual-

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cultural references of this growing rural imagination among urban activists is the web series *Libres*[3], portraying a group of activists moving to an abandoned village in Spain to start a rural occupation. Additionally, there is growing number of TV shows about this subject, such as the episode of *'Portugal aqui tão perto'* (Portugal, so close) dedicated to neorurals[4]. These pictures of neorurality emerge as a brand that essentialises certain features of the rural world, neutralising how the same celebrated features are rooted within socio-ecological and historical power asymmetries. In this paper, we aim to discuss and deconstruct 'neorurality' as a category in an attempt to show the pitfalls, perils and limits of using this label in the prefiguration and construction of autonomous social solidarity economies.

Drawing on previous comparative research on neorural discourses in southern Europe (Mateus and Nicoletta, in submission), in this paper, we propose a broader reflection on the use of the idea of neorurality as a way to describe emerging social solidarity economy in the context of the post-2007 crisis in southern Europe. We are inspired by the decolonial ethos that shows how the distinction between backward and modern disguises racialised, classist and anthropocentric understanding of human and non-human populations a concealing that legitimises the structural power of global capitalism in the name of European white superiority. As decoloniality scholars have extensively argued during the past decades, modernity perpetuates an understanding of under-capitalised societies as backward and intellectually inferior through what Mignolo (2007) has called the logic of coloniality. The decolonial ethos can be described as an attitude that aims to unravel how essentializations based on class, race, or gender enforce and reproduce material, ontological and epistemic power relationships. In this research we use this perspective of decolonial ethos as our lens to explore how current institutional and economic articulations of neorurality can reproduce power asymmetries in Europe, confining rural areas and subjectivities to a subaltern position enforced by an essentialised understanding of these areas and its human and non-human inhabitants.

Elaborating on the discussion held during the Social Solidarity Economy conference in Lisbon in November 2023, we sketch a similar argument grounded on understanding the

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[3] https://libreslaserie.es/ accessed on 07/03/2024. Eloquently, the director of this independent web series is the same of La Casa de Papel, the *Netflix* series.
[4] https://www.rtp.pt/programa/tv/p29221/e15#google_vignette accessed on 07/03/2024.

urban and the rural as co-constitutive socio-ecological spaces. As for the logic of coloniality embedded in any categorial, moral and political distinction between the modern and the backward, we venture that the distinction between the urban and the rural intimately hides authoritarian and proto-corporativist understanding of human and non-human populations that legitimise functional specialisation of specific socio-ecological configurations within the global division of labour. We propose a hazardous formulation in understanding how essentialised differences between urban and rural settings are reproduced. Notably, urbanisation is a central feature of modernisation projects, which starts from understanding the rural as a backward socio-ecological formation functionally constructed for the needs of urban classes. If, as Harvey (2003) argued, the shape of the city is the crystallisation of the class conflicts, we recall a similar argument in thinking about rurality: what the rural produces and experiences is entangled with the urban elites' needs.

We aim to deconstruct the idea of 'neorurality' to show the entanglement between its definition in the academic, institutional and media debates and how this can result in functional specialisation of emerging and consolidating social economies in rural areas in order to fit them in the global capitalism. We start from a preliminary definition of 'neorurality' as a social and demographic movement of people with an urban background, who move to the rural areas as a means to improve their quality of life and, whether collaterally or not, to contribute to the development of rural areas. To deconstruct this idea, we will do so by referring to our situated positionality as scholars and activists from southern Europe. Working and coming from Portugal and Italy, with a solid normative underpinning towards alternative forms of life as a means to fight global corporate capitalism, we doubted the call for a neorural future promoted by academic and institutional discourses in a context historically constructed as agrarian periphery by core European countries. As a preliminary statement needed, we are well aware of a different definition between the agrarian and the rural, where the former is understood as merely a food production system while the latter is a more complex social system occurring in the countryside that integrates tourist and ecological facilities as well as the care of the landscape. Yet, we believe that there exists a conceptual overlap in the current European common sense, even among social activists, about the two terms. In this sense, we will refer to rurality as composed of also agrarian

activities and, consequently, a product of a historically contingent socio-economic configuration of modern capitalism.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. In the first section, we discuss the idea of neorurality as emergent in various literatures, underlying the multitude of meanings, which makes it a floating signifier in the current debates, a vagueness that can represent a source of limits and co-optation in the elaboration of anti-capitalist prefigurative politics. Drawing on broader socio-historical reflections, the second section highlights the paradox of referring to agrarian practices and rural life as potential socio-economic alternatives to the crisis of capitalism in the neoliberal era. We do so by referring to the fact that southern Europe has been historically constructed as an essentialised *Other* compared to a frugal and industrial North and, for this reason to its agro-tourist specialisation. A brief recall of the historical, sociological approach of world-system analysis allows us to contextualise this essentialisation in a more long-term path of capitalist dynamic to inquire how southern Europe's 'rural' essentialisation is currently positively articulated to economic competitive strategies. In the third section, we summarise and discuss some case studies object of previous research on emerging economies in rural areas of Portugal, Italy and Spain underlying their potential alternative or their functioning within existing hierarchies of power. We first discuss the case of Cooperativa Minga in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal. A group of ex-urbanites aiming for the possibility of developing personal life projects in a rural area created a cooperative that works as a common financial and organisational structure. This structure facilitates the development of its members' autonomous productive, commercial and services-directed activities, which resemble a proper social solidarity economy. Moving to a subregion of southern Italy, we identify a neorural discourse promoted by an assemblage of different institutions, public organisations, foundations and private entrepreneurs that articulate a particular meaning of rurality, namely, neorurality as a possible strategy of economic development to fill the gap of state marginalisation of these regions through techno-managerial functional specialisation in a global economy. Furthermore, we discuss the case of NHC (Nature Hospitality Consulting, previously named Rural Promo), a Spanish private agency, and we mention the British real estate platform Pure Portugal to broaden the picture. Finally, in the fourth concluding section, we propose a provocative discussion of 'neorurality' as semiotic devices produced by academic, institutional and media discourses functioning as a fantasy that concours to omit

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fundamental power conflicts in the current global scenario. Such omission, we venture, can dangerously capture activist normative approaches to 'neorural' organisational experiences into a device for embedding social solidarity economies within functional productive specialisations of southern Europe.

What is Neorurality, and who are the Neorurals*?*

Catchy and promising words are often attractive in our current times of multiple intersecting crises. Neorurality is undoubtedly one of them. The idea of restoring rural life from the disaster of industrial society with new tools and imagination to survive the global socio-ecological catastrophe attracts scholars interested in prefigurative politics. It is for this reason that, in the past years, the concepts of 'neorurality' and 'neorurals' have circulated in the broader spectrum of social sciences, getting beyond the disciplinary specialisation of rural and agrarian studies (Rivera and Mormont, 2006; Trimano, 2006). Confronting this growing interest, there have been attempts to systematise the enormous literature produced on neorurality (Yi and Son, 2022; Dal Bello et al., 2022). These literature reviews highlight huge differences of meaning within the academic field, which articulates and inquiries the cause and consequences of counter-urbanisation from a multitude of strategic programmatic reasons. While there is no univocal interpretation of the concept of neorurality, all these studies identified emerging social formations oriented at affirming, resisting, or reframing the relationship between the rural and the urban (Rivera and Mormont, 2006). For instance, Snikersproge (2022) makes an analysis of the history of neorurality from the 60s to current times organising it in 'waves' which move from idyll perspectives of rurality to the creation of alternative societies and to a more recent 'lifestyle migration'. When trying to characterise neorurals, some authors resort to the origin of the new residents such as the work of Oliva and Rivera (2020), while other authors use the vision or motif of moving as the differentiator factor in defining neorurality (Rivera and Mormont, 2006). More than giving a closed definition of neorurality and neorural, this research points to these concepts as open labels, a floating signifier of the current academic debate and political action in thinking strategies to survive our dystopian present.

The pioneering works of Halfacree (2007; 2012) explored new meanings of rurality and the counter-urbanisation that started in the late 70s. Figure 1 shows a Google Ngram graph of how the word 'neorural' appeared in English publications between 1950 and 2020.

It is visible that the intellectual interest in neorurality has coincided with the cyclical crisis of global capitalism, i.e. in the crisis of the Fordist era started in the late 1970s and in the aftermath of the 2007 financial crisis and the following austerity decade. In this context, several scholars have pointed out that neorurality can be interpreted as a strong critique of the society of knowledge and that it is entangled with radical anti-capitalist ethos (Calvario and Otero 2014; Wilburn 2013). However, neorurality has also been a brand for small and medium food firms to engage in market competition with a symbolic added value (Orria and Luise 2018). Hence, the radicality of the current back-to-the-land trend is still the object of investigation.

Fig.1
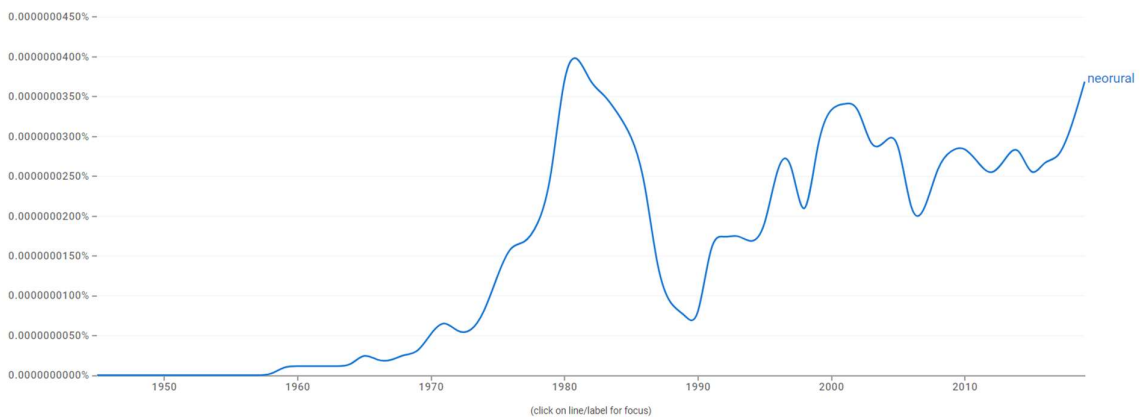
Yet, neorurality is far from a clear definition. In this defining mess, institutional research enterprises only seem to have a clear definition of another tangential concept: rural innovation. At the level of European Union governance, the concept of rural innovation fills a series of projects in the Horizon 2020 rural portfolio[5], namely a stream of research activities embedded in EU programmes and expert discourses reinvigorating a rural 'qualitative modernisation' framework, while neorurality doesn't seem to have a clear definition neither to be frequently present in these projects. This new focus on rural areas has produced a field of institutional knowledge and policy intervention to address the causes and consequences of demographic decline in rural areas and infrastructural marginalisation, as well as to implement legislative innovations to foster the development of opportunities for economic

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[5] An overview of the EU Rural Horizon 2020 projects dealing with challenges and opportunities of rural areas can be found here https://sherpa-repository.eu/rural-h2020 accessed on 07/03/2024.

and social sustainability in rural areas. This perspective often sees demographic decline as the leading cause of rural areas' institutional marginalisation and tries to address it through policy managerialism. For these institutional research apparatuses, neorurality emerges as the perfect developmental opportunity for economic and social sustainability in rural contexts. Despite this increasing academic, media and institutional debate around neorurality and its imaginative and prefigurative power, neorurality remains a political and semantic battlefield that needs to be decolonised in order to enhance social solidarity economies and open a new space of socio-ecological autonomy. To explore this political and semantic clash, we first need a socio- historical contextualization of strategic essentialization of southern rural Europe.

The colonial construction of Southern rural Europe

In the post-2007 crisis, southern European scholars have addressed neorurality as socio-organisational resistance (Anthopoulous, Kaberis and Petrou, 2017). In Italy, the case of AFN (Alternative Food Network) also seems to be one of those practices that open up a myriad of possibilities for a post-capitalist future and various practices of resistance against the global corporate food regime, especially in moments of crisis and institutional negligence (Fonte and Cucco, 2017; Maestripieri, Giroletti and Podda, 2018). While this is indeed a way of resisting and self-organising, from a global perspective, the recall to ruralism regarding southern Europe shows a deep contradiction. Indeed, in the historical development of the world-system, southern European countries have been constructed as agrarian peripheries of an industrial-centred system: while in Manchester, there was an industrial revolution, Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy became socio-ecologically specialised in agrarian production. In our view, this is one of the sources of what Manuela Boatça (2010) has signalled as the 'difference from within' in European modernity.

In Southern Europe, the emergence of ruralist ideologies during the XX century symbolises the functional specialisation of rural areas within Western modernity. Ruralism, in fact, was strongly grounded in fascist ideologies and politics, which put rural communities at the centre of a national developmental strategy focused on the rural patriarchal family, roots and blood. In Portugal, the construction of a national identity and the abstract idea of a Nation-State during the dictatorship period is based on the creation of regionalisms (Álvaro

Domingues, 2017). The artificial creation of traditions and archetypes for each region to create a local identity was initially related to the imposition of a patriotic feeling. Nowadays, it is used as a counter-narrative of urban symbolic domination of rural lifestyles. José Vieira (2023), in his movie and article on *baldios* – common lands – in Portugal, refers to the significant change that occurred during the dictatorship. This author mentions that these lands were used by local communities and supported poor people's livelihood, who used these lands for grazing but also to get resources like wood, olives or wild berries. With dictatorship, these lands were transferred to the state with the justification that they were being misused and that they should be more productive. Many of these lands, especially in Alentejo – Portugal's most 'productive' region– were converted into big wheat fields to feed the nation.

In Spain, Franco's appeal to *campesinos* is indicative of a reactionary articulation of rurality as a central sector of the nation and of a fascist discourse (Duran, 2012; Macho 2016). A similar fascist-corporativist appeal to rural life has also been strong in the case of Italy. After being at the centre of the Mediterranean division of labour, with the Republic of Venice as the core of the world-economy, the Italian peninsula engaged in the global division of labour as an agrarian periphery. This peripheral position informed the 'politics of improvement', which exploited natural and human resources as the main path for engaging in the world economy of the 18th century(see Barca, 2010). Later, the newborn Italian state and its state technicians had as the main project transforming Italy into the main agrarian economy of Europe. Drawing on the socio-ecological infrastructures of liberal agrarian project, the fascist regime later constructed a mystic of the rural world as one of its main ideological projects (Armiero, 2014). Italian fascism celebrated the rural civilisation and the patriarchal family as the demographic and social basis of the Empire while looking at the city as a container of political conflict and moral degradation (Di Michele, 1995). Fascists celebrated and promoted a vision of rural groups in a nationalistic ideology, emphasising the pristine landscaped and idyllic pastoralism of the Italian countryside (Cinotto, 2022). The tropes of the rural world were lately reproduced in the Italian constitution, with the contribution of catholic economists that saw in the rural household, a small property run by a paternalist and patriarchal family and oriented to the market, the bulk of a new socio-economic order in the postwar years.

This trope of rural economies as a central feature of Mediterranean modernity promoted by authoritarian powers has come back in recent decades. Paradoxically, the essentialisation of southern rural Europe has subtly returned during the austerity regime of the European Union following the great financial crisis of 2007. PIIGS has been an eloquent acronym that marked a strong separation between an industrial, modern and efficient North of Europe and a backward South. Yet, this essentialisation has worked, again, to reinforce the specialisation of southern Europe as an agricultural plantation exporter and tourism destination region – even though lately also, a new green extractivist discourse and a centrality in the new logistics sector is becoming increasingly important too. While neorurality seems an exit strategy to escape from the hell of the fall of Western modernity, as scholars, intellectuals and activists from southern Europe we are still dealing with understanding what ruralism has meant in southern European societies and which power asymmetries fixed in urban-rural divide are still working in our current socio-ecological setting.

From this point of view, neorurality is not a neutral label that helps new social solidarity economies to build common consciousness. On the contrary, it seems more of a troy horse that co-optates small producers and communitarian practices that were able to escape from the industrialisation and nationalisation of agrarian practices within the current project of agriculture 4.0 and to the digitalisation of the rural areas. While research and development centres and manufacturing are transnationally distributed, a new entrepreneurial subject is now integrated by competitiveness strategies that see quality food production and ecological services as the main productive specialisation of southern European rural economies. In doing so, they reinforce the main dominant trends in current capitalism such as platform capitalism and logistic expansion.

Shades of Neorurality

In September 2022, we met in Évora during the Conference of the Portuguese Anthropological Association. Our encounter was signed by the recognition that, despite our shared political-normative understanding of neorurality, our research activity and projects on neorurality were going in two opposite directions. Indeed, we compared our knowledge based on our own research project using different methodologies and approaches: the case of Portugal was

analysed through ethnography and participant observation field work of 6 months by one of us; while the other of us addressed ethnography findings of the Italian case through a semiotic approach to political ecology and political economy aspects of the green restructuring of southern Italy. While the study of the neorurality in the Portuguese context was leaving some hope in the understanding of neorurality as an emancipatory project, the case of a small sub-region of southern Italy offered a less merry picture, where institutions and state-cadres invited young professionals to invest in rural areas as a means of enforcing (certain) economic activities. Comparing the main lines of our projects allowed us to explore the discrepancies of findings about neorurality and invited us to further research and reflections, namely through the research of other cases such as the Spanish one of NHC or the British company Pure Portugal.

In the case of Portugal, the Cooperativa Minga represents an indicative case of emancipatory practices in rural areas. Cooperativa Minga is a multi-sectorial cooperative that emerged during the post-crisis period of 2014-2015. The initial group of eight people grew to include more than 150 members. Now, it encompasses a wide range of services and products, from architecture, consulting, carpentry, design, programming, and agroforestry to agricultural and arts and craft products. This project is similar to cases reported of contestation of neoliberal policies implemented in Greece during the crisis of 2007 (Nikolaidou, 2020). In Minga, the rural milieu is taken as a scenario of opportunity for social innovation, solidarity and resilience from below. Here, agro-touristic productive specialisation is not the goal of the socio-organisational practice. On the contrary, many different activities are organised and promoted, and the social economy enhanced by the cooperative is grounded on ideas such as autonomy and diversification. More importantly, even though most of its members would be considered neorurals by the current sociological canon, they do not identify with this label. When confronted with the idea that this term could define them, most rejected the idea and mentioned previous connections to rural areas that they had in childhood or during other periods of their lives. However, they also recognised that their presence in this small town had a strong influence in the territory, for example, in the rise of housing prices but also the shift of phytopharmaceutical-dependent agriculture to other practices such as agroforestry or permaculture. This non-identification – or the wish of non-identification – with this term can be an answer to the institutional encasement of a

specific type of neorurality that is not aligned with the purpose of this group of people. At the same time, recognising some characteristics of neorurality in this group might enable them to face the possible co-optations of their life projects, namely criticising members that engaged in only elite green tourism.

On a contrasting case we see the scenario in Southern Italy. Here, several new initiatives have emerged in the past decades that innovate and reinforce the 'back-to-the-land trend'. A growing literature on alternative food networks has documented many cases where there exist several attempts by groups to practice new ways of food production and circulation linked to a new way of living in rural areas (Fonte and Cucco, 2017; Maestripieri, Giroletti and Podda, 2018; Ebbreo, 2020; Vitale and Silvini, 2017; Vitiello 2014). Italy is also the country where Slow Food emerged and successfully disseminated, thanks also to a controversial alliance with Coldiretti, the Association of Italian farmers, in the construction of the 'quality turn in food production' (Fonte and Cucco 2015; Bukowski, 2014). However, these potential projects of social solidarity economy have been accompanied by an interpellation of back-to-the-land from above. Indeed, public and institutional discourses started to promote neorurality as a feasible driver of development, especially for the southern region. To be clear, this promotion has not been relegated to rural action and programmes but broadly circulated in institutional discourses. In the Portuguese case, there is a clear example of this when a local municipality pushed towards the specialisation of Minga when this institution invites the cooperative to represent the town in events driven to promote one specific 'regional product', such as the red onion fest or the tusk fest. In the Italian case, one of the clearest examples of this interpellation from above is the case of the SVIMEZ, the most significant economic expert institution in southern Italy that, in the years following the financial crisis, inserted agriculture, tourism and new cultural initiatives in the new drive of development of the 'backward' south. Around this rural imaginary, a vast number of private and public initiatives promote food production and natural and cultural heritage as valuable assets to compete in the global economy. In a region characterised by high unemployment and migrations, the rural imaginary seems to construct an entrepreneurial subject oriented to a productive specialisation of producing good food and keeping a good landscape through eco-tourism for northern tourists on holiday and private funds to invest in. Following this broader project, several academic-driven organisations, such as Rural Hack, are promoting

the digitalisation and implementation of agriculture 4.0 innovations – such as the implementation of software-hardware digital technologies in agriculture – to small producers to improve the productive efficiency and the perfect allocation of quality food in national and international markets. These examples of interpellation from above of back-to-the-land suggest that neorurality is often the object of institutional projects that see in the techno-managerial innovation of rurality as a strategy for economic growth and competition of southern European economies, usually framed as inherently backward and inferior.

From the comparison between similar research questions but different findings, we decided to look at Spain and Portugal as cases where investigating counter-urbanisation projects is the terrain where private organisational processes and financial infrastructure invest in the essentialisation of rural areas. In fact, we quickly found that rural imagination is cultivated by private agencies that invite urban people to invest and live in the countryside for a multiple number of reasons. Still, all are linked to the structural power relationship of the global economy. Here, it is worth citing two indicative cases. The first one is the Spanish private agency NHC, previously named Rural Promo[6]. NHC is a private consulting company located in Madrid but with some activity all over Spain. It offers both services to local government institutions in rural areas and to private clients that aim to start their business in rural areas, with or without moving there. Even though, at first glance, this seems an important agent for fostering the autonomy of neorurals in Spain, a closer look reveals that this company is an agent of commodification and institutionalisation of neorurals and in tourism specialisation of rural areas, becoming an example of how socio-organisational and discursive elements are entangled in the production of urban-dependent rurality.

The offered packs of services are based on a discourse of 'Experiential Marketing' in selling more or less temporary experiences of rural idylls. Services directed to local government institutions vision the attraction of human and financial capital to rural areas. This is made either by the capitalisation of endogenous resources for tourism or by the selling of local employment positions. On the other hand, services directed to 'rural entrepreneurs' focus on helping build a luxury rural tourism-directed business, from consulting to the design of market and business plans or the building of the needed infrastructures. Although these

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[6] At the time of this writing Rural Promo has modified its name and focus more on natural hosting https://naturehospitalityconsulting.com/ accessed on 07/03/2024.

discourses are set on top of concepts like sustainability and repopulation, this proposal replicates a model of landscape commodification, presenting this as the only viable or most manageable solution for the rural entrepreneur and for challenges that neorurals face when moving and establishing themselves in rural areas. On the other side, by promoting a discourse of 'modernising the rural', it perpetuates an idea that rural practices and organisational systems are outdated as well as works as an incorporation strategy to integrate deviant intents of autonomy from technology. Besides, instead of focusing on promoting/ helping neorurals to establish and to solve long time known problems such as the lack of services, low mobility, hard accessibility or low political representability, these strategies just envision the creation of capital (in the case of private clients) or attraction of external capital (in the case of public institutions).

With another profile, Pure Portugal Property[7], a UK-based platform, is another way of reproducing the essentialisation of a pliable rural setting, enhancing the domination of a white owner-investor settling in southern European areas to enjoy good weather, landscape and food while leaving untouched the power asymmetries that characterised stereotypes about southern rural Europe. On the website, you can read, 'Looking for property for sale in Portugal? Be it a smallholding, building plot, land for permaculture, off-grid living, or even a beachside villa or village house where you can just relax and 'Live the Good Life?'. Here, what neorurality could appear is almost self-evident: an assemblage of (white) foreign owners enjoying the advantage of 'backwardness', buying properties for a small amount of money, living with foreign income and shaping the rural areas according to the need of a global urban class looking for a place to have a break from the productive north.

This short summary of different case studies shows that neorurality is anything but a straight trampoline to describe emerging social solidarity economy and commonising processes. On the contrary, the same word, neorurality, that we carried in our normative political orientation can actually be a powerful discursive device to let enter practices of reproduction of global division of labour and insertion of the rural areas into the circuits of platform capitalism and global logistics. This understanding of neorurality as a buzzword able to be strategically shaped for different ideological projects, thus, should be framed in broader

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[7] https://www.pureportugal.co.uk/ accessed on 07/03/2024.

reflections about the historical positionality of southern Europe as embedded in a logic of coloniality.

Conclusion: Neorurality as white-urban hedonist fantasy

We inscribe our research about neorurality in the broader planetary movement that is currently attempting to break the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2007), namely, to decolonize any essentialized identities that reproduce and enforce global power asymmetries. Through this ethos we venture that Southern Europe should be considered geohistorically as an area socio-ecologically constructed as an agrarian periphery and, thus, composed of coloniality of power. The industrialism of the mid-90s has put modernisation as the core of a strategy of increasing the well-being of the Mediterranean population. The industrialisation project's failure is bringing economic and institutional discourse back to the myth of Mediterranean countries as the garden of Europe where upper classes from the core countries can come to spend their holidays in idyllic nature, eating good food and enjoying good weather. In this sense, neorurality seems to be a way of capturing the myriad of attempts to despecialise social economies in a series of services and spaces that support the ideas of the current projects of Mediterranean elites facing a global crisis. The cases discussed above let us venture that neorurality, as a label to describe potential social solidarity economy, might be dangerous if not contextualised in the broader global logic of coloniality. This is for at least three kinds of reasons:

First of all, neorurality is a buzzword that comes from (primarily Western) academic debates, media communication and institutional discourses: it does not emerge from grassroots dialogues. In our research, it is rare to find people proudly calling themselves neorurals. Still, it is very likely to encounter media discourses and policy papers interpellating new rural heroes as subjectivity for the EU Green New Deal. As a category, neorurality is an empty sign that can carry meanings that cage southern European territories in their productive specialisation and result in the co-optation of attempts at autonomous life projects in rural areas. From this point of view, our positionality as scholars is highly problematic: we risk reproducing the logic of coloniality that has been hegemonised by institutional discourses and private agencies composed of an interpellation of a new entrepreneurial subject called to save the rural inhabitants by applying urban knowledge and

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global technofix. By doing so, we concur to fix specific ideas of rurality rooted in a logic of coloniality.

Secondly, the pre-fix neo also has powerful implications in describing the current status of the southern European countryside. As a consolidating literature is documenting, southern European extensive plantations profit from a racialised workforce (Corrado 2017; Iocco et al, 2020; Avallone, 2017), while neorurality is usually only used to refer to young white Europeans that move to the rural areas and step into a 'rediscovery' of the cultural heritage of rural communities. Such framing denies that the vast average of agrarian work is currently carried by a racialised workforce that inhabits the rural areas of southern Europe (Sampedro and Camarero, 2020). In this sense, the use of the term neorurality reproduces a coloniality of knowledge whereby only white skilled people are seen as a population worthy of being considered as 'neorural'. This is so, we venture, especially because of economic competitive strategies promoted by southern European state apparatuses as well as a modern and neoliberal version of the fascist fabrication of rural culture and identity.

Finally, as for the case of postmodernity where post- is added to the word and modernity remains still at the centre of the planetary debate, neorurality fixes a certain vision of 'the rural', as a particular and contingent form of human-nature relationships. While it is true that agroecology and regenerative practices can be considered one of the main features of counter-urbanisation, it is also true that the constant opposition between the urban and the rural fixes an eco-culture centred on the idea that the more-than-human is the terrain of human intervention. A pluriversal approach should challenge and deconstruct European rurality as a certain socio-historically contingent human-nature relationship.

For these reasons, neorurality should be avoided as a way of describing social solidarity economies and commoning processes, and it should be framed through the prism of the logic of coloniality applied to what Manuela Boatça (2010) calls multiple Europes. As we have tried to argue, this should be done on the basis of two main reasons: first, southern European countries have been historically shaped as agrarian peripheries, and now, in the current conjuncture, we seriously run the risk of playing the game of economic elites' attempts of re-transforming Mediterranean Europe in the garden of core European countries, where upper classes come to spend their unforgettable holidays at the expenses of local human and non-human population. Secondly, when referring to neorurals, we deny

uncomfortable aspects of current Mediterranean economies and food production: the export of tasty Mediterranean food around the world relies on racial capitalism based on the exploitation of the racialised workforce in export-led extensive plantations (Perrotta and Raymaekers, 2023). So far and from our situated knowledge, thus, neorurality appears to be a buzzword, inviting people to invest in the countryside from a dominant-white position and, in doing so, outshining the enormous socio-ecological injustice that historically constitutes the global rural and its logic of coloniality.

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