

# RURALITY AND FUTURE-MAKING

## *Comparative Perspectives from Europe, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean*

22nd - 24th of May 2019

NSG, University of Cologne

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This conference brings together three GAA regional working groups – Anthropology of Europe, the Middle East and the Mediterranean – to explore rurality as a reserve and resource for future-making in their interconnected and transnational regionalities. It invites participants to explore situated practices of future-making in order to trace how rurality is achieved, marked and (de-)stabilized in different places. Through concrete ethnographic case studies, we aim at conceptualizing the ‘rural’ beyond well-known center-periphery dichotomies. Well aware that ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ can only be “understood as a continuum irreducible to the polarity of one or the other term” (Chio 2017:362); we use the rural lens to create an anthropological laboratory (Albera 1999) which enables us to “write against established categories” (Horden 2014:9). This conference invites researchers to reflect on the various perpetuated methodological urbanisms, ruralisms and regionalisms, i.e. the persisting preoccupation of ethnographers with urban spaces and research in geographically and/ or politically bounded categories like Europe, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Most of these categories contribute to the construction of our methodological iron cage as Wimmer and Glick-Schiller pointed out in the term *methodological nationalism* (2002:302). With the focus on *rurality* as an anthropological laboratory and lens, we aim to challenge earlier essentialist approaches and at the same time emphasize its contradictory and thus productive potential.

While overall, the rural population may be on the decline, it may well increase in absolute numbers in specific places. And while rural population may predominantly rely on agriculture for a living, in various regions its share of GDP is diminishing. Poverty remains particularly pronounced in rural regions. In North Africa, this becomes evident in the inadequate access to education, health services, electricity or clean water (Barnes 2014). Moreover, the demographic exodus out of vast rural areas in parts of Southern Europe challenges not only individual but also communal lives as well as national political agendas. Nevertheless, grand visions of future-making by politicians and entrepreneurs remain geared towards rural regions – whether it be in terms of large-scale agricultural projects for the continuous fragile and fragmented landscapes of the Mediterranean, irrigation and electrification schemes for the exploitation of its natural resources, or in the form of touristic development agencies for purported isolated areas. Also, in various countries along the Mediterranean shorelines, governments continue to rely on networks and patronage systems in the rural hinterlands as its basis of power.

But rurality is not only played out as a resource for large scale politics of modernization, it can also be used as a socio-ecological reserve that people maintain to diversify their opportunities and resources in times of crises. Large-scale modernization schemes and their risks are thus mitigated by individual strategies to provide for alternative options and material foundations in case of failure. One de-centered perspective on rurality is Hauschild’s emphasis on the rural hinterland as material and political *reserve* which encompasses various available resources to ensure, expand and delimit agency (Hauschild 2008:217f.).

For a long time, Eastern and Southern Europe, the Mediterranean as well as the Middle East have been approached by their presupposed outstanding rural character in anthropological inquiry; like the notorious ‘honor-and-shame’ complex, ‘the rural’ can be seen as a “gatekeeping concept” for anthropologists who had been working in these areas (Appadurai 1986:357). This is apparently present in classical anthropological studies on ‘Mediterranean countrymen’ (Pitt-Rivers 1963, Davis 1977) as well as in the rich corpus of peasant studies from Southern Europe to the Middle East – a body of research and literature that has provided essential impulses in the formation of anthropological theory. Arguably, anthropological research in recent decades has shifted away from the countryside to the metropolises, predominately exploring the rural through the lens of the urban, bureaucratic elites, cultural entrepreneurs and tourists’ promises (Deeb/Winnegar 2012:539). Against this background we want to promote a symmetrical anthropology of the rural, which opens up new perspectives for research. Finally, we invite scholars to expand and multiply Horden and Purcell’s (2000) perspective on the Mediterranean to Europe as a whole and the Middle East. Their emphasis on the ruptures and connectivities of “human micro-ecologies” (Horden 2012: 28) pervading the karst landscapes of the Mediterranean and encompassing Southern Europe, parts of the Middle East and North Africa, can help us comparatively zoom in on webs of microregions in which rurality takes on different forms and meaning and is played out differently at different locales.

Research topics and questions for the conference may entail:

- How and for whom does the rural/hinterland/landscape figure to be a meaningful space of social relations and livelihoods?
- The ‘rural’ as backdrop for processes of globalization or the recursive rural impact on globalization
- What are spatial and power implications of the Mediterranean as an imaginary category?
- What are the perceptions of “rural Europe” and what kind of histories and future-making imaginaries do they imply?
- The ‘mediatized Mediterranean’: rurality, infrastructures and media
- How can we conceptualize local/global, rural/urban and periphery/center binaries in a more productive way?
- The ‘rural’ in development practice and discourse and in changing modernization narratives
- Migration and other rural (im-)mobilities?
- Rurality, Scale and Migration
- Rethinking the ‘rural’ with reference to Horden/Purcell’s historical ecology and its defining features of rupture and connectivity
- The ‘rural’ as cultural identity and heritage – the entrepreneurial potential and imaginary for ‘the touristic gaze’

The conference language will be English.

If you are interested to present a paper, please send an abstract (200-300 words) to [rural-future-making@uni-koeln.de](mailto:rural-future-making@uni-koeln.de) by December 31<sup>st</sup> 2018.

We are planning to publish the proceedings of the conference in an edited volume. To facilitate the process, please adhere to the following deadlines:

Dec 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018 – deadline for the submission of abstracts (200-300 words)

Jan 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019 – notification of acceptance

May 22-24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 – Conference

Oct 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019 – deadline for the submission of papers (10.000-12.000 words)

Conveners:

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