

"Marginality in the context of the New Rurality: Application to the Case of Malargüe in Mendoza, Argentina"*

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Introduction

In Malargüe, the southernmost department of the province of Mendoza, two different rural realities coexist: a small area with intensive farming around the urban centre, and a larger area where goat-grazing prevails (Figure 1). Whereas structural problems continue to affect extensive and transhumant cattle raising in the most fragile areas of the territory, in recent years the intensive agricultural development of vegetables, forestry and fodder has grown in the peri-urban area.

From the perspective of the theoretical framework of marginality, both areas have different relations to the processes that characterise marginality. This was one of the ideas that guided the study of the rural area of the department. On the other hand, with respect to the thematic framework, the situation of livestock and agricultural producers of the large rural area of Malargüe has usually been studied with an agronomic approach. In theory, the scarce number of geographic studies focussing on the limitations and possibilities of both activities have failed to address the problem from the conceptual framework of marginality, from the perspective of the "New Rurality", or from an integrated view of Geography. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to expand the criteria used to characterise these areas and stress the importance of the features that have traditionally defined rural spaces as well as their possible relations to the features characterising marginal areas. Defining the marginalisation processes in Malargüe in turn clarifies and further specifies other aspects of the local and regional socioeconomic context.

1. The concept of marginality in the context of the "New Rurality"

The latest studies on rural development continue to highlight the contradictions that affect rural areas. On the one hand, they face the loss of traditional features, a decline in agricultural and livestock activities and a decrease in dispersed settlement. On the other hand, more importance is given to country life, rural tourism and recreation, to the protection of nature and culture, and to the diversification of non-agricultural rural activities. These processes, which involve a gradual blurring of traditionally rural characteristics and the economic growth of certain non-rural activities, give rise to a debate centring on the rural-urban dichotomy or the rural-urban continuum. The challenge arises to look at the so-called "new rurality" in greater detail, as the studies taking this perspective do not focus on the rural alone. (Figure 2) This new disciplinary outlook studies the presence of spaces that become restructured to meet tourist and environmental interests, and areas with large agro-industrial complexes; or on the contrary, it may address depressed, marginal areas, or those lacking economic potential (Manzanal 2006: 33-34).

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Figure 1. Malargüe. The two types of agricultural and livestock activity in rural areas.

Source: DOADU (Environmental Management and Urban Development Department), 1999: Goat Herding Settlements (*Puestos*). SIAN (National Environment Agency), 2002: Routes, Hydrography, Districts, Departments. Real Estate Records Administration, 2001: Urban and Rural Areas

One of the aims of this study is to explore the concept behind the term “marginal”. Thus, it is necessary to consider its meaning to find associations with rural areas and with the processes that currently characterise them. The adjective “marginal” (from which the noun “marginality” derives) is used to designate a living creature or object located outside the boundaries of the group to which it originally belongs. In society, the term “marginal” refers to those who are asocial and lack the capacity to adapt and become part of society (George 1991). In the past, these deficiencies were associated with urban contexts where the population was settled in areas that were not integrated into the system of urban services and lived in precarious houses, on illegally-seized land, or under poor environmental conditions that had an impact on their quality of life and working conditions. Simultaneously, it was noted that marginality affected other key aspects of society, as it led to poor participation in politics and unionism and exclusion from decision-making processes at the workplace, in different institutions and within larger social structures. (Germani 1980: 12-13).

More recently, the group of geographers who form the International Geographical Union (IGU) has been trying, for more than a decade, to: 1) understand the process of marginality through the analysis of factors affecting the dynamics and structures of spatial marginality at various scales; 2) analyse marginality as a consequence of human decisions and define the role of social actors in those processes; 3) design comparative studies aimed at identifying various types of marginality and the trends they follow; 4) analyse public policies that address the social and economic problems of marginal areas, and 5) study community responses to the effect of global changes on the marginalisation of land and society (IGU Commission 2008).

The multiplicity of study objectives, coupled with the disparity in the definitions of marginality – following ecological, economic, social, cultural, political, localization and even perceptual criteria- make its study difficult. Experts that study the conceptual frameworks of marginality stress the importance of the socioeconomic aspects of the process, its evolution and dynamism, as measurable by different study scales, and suggest a flexible and open approach to define and characterise it (Leimgruber 1996, Schmidt 2001, Cepparo 2008). Others are more conclusive when they state that marginal areas are located on the outer periphery, and that it is in those places where the socioeconomic and cultural context is weaker and more vulnerable (Andreoli and Tellarini 1989).

Trying to define marginality is then a complex matter, as its origin is multicausal and multiple interacting scales and times are involved in its identification. In addition, the definitions attempted may respond to diverse study objectives. Among the most traditional criteria included in the concept of marginality are difficult access, remoteness from the most dynamic population centres, and limitations arising from the physical characteristics of the land. More recently incorporated criteria include: difficulties to become part of the globalised world, imbalance in the local and regional political and socioeconomic systems, lack of continuity in public and private decision-making processes, persistence of ancient cultural characteristics of the community, and personal or collective resistance to change. Broadly speaking, socioeconomic, political, cultural and even perception indicators contribute to identify

marginal areas more clearly than other parameters usually associated with marginality, such as environmental limitations or distance to main cities or regional markets.

However, whereas the terms “marginal” and “marginalisation” suggest inequality, disadvantage and segmentation, the reverse process opens up other perspectives. Dynamic processes initiated by the increase in the value of available land or resulting from the boost of innovative and encouraging decisions emerging from institutional management bodies and local private initiatives committed to solving community problems have an impact on the process of demarginalisation. In fact, the influence of dominant markets, the search for renewed resources, and the advancements in the technology of communication are so intense and constant that they have led to the gradual incorporation of places that formerly seemed to be lagging behind with respect to the international economic systems (Leimgruber 1994:8). These situations urge us to consider the contents and processes of dynamism as opposed to marginalisation.

The two faces of marginality may show simultaneously or alternatively in the same territory either in its urban or rural modalities. They make communities behave differently: Communities may remain unchanging despite the evident benefits of change, or else readily accept models that usually come from abroad and frequently ignore the local and regional potentialities or limitations (Cepparo 2005: 60).

Returning to the subject of the original use of the term "marginal" within the context of cities, in the face of evident urban-rural contrasts, it could be said that the term was first used to make reference to the rural origin of migrants arriving in the cities, and to the fact that they kept -within the context of urban culture— the traditional behaviour, rules and values of the rural areas as opposed to the modern features of cities. These characteristics gave rise to the idea of “rural marginality” that is, in essence, similar to urban marginality, according to the general characteristics of the process. Nevertheless, all the manifestations of rural marginality seem to be more pronounced. Such is the case of personal relationships and institutions, values, behaviours and archaic attitudes manifest in the different spheres of community life. In many cases, there are additional defining characteristics: the lack of a sense of belonging to or participation in the regional network, and the total or almost total exclusion from the national market and modern consumption (Germani 1980: 14-15).

On the other hand, extending the concept from the urban to the rural context makes it possible to relate it to another concept derived from marginality: the distinction between centre and periphery. This notion can be linked to a kind of coexistence or juxtaposition of archaic and modern areas, or to an asymmetric interdependence relation whereby the development of the central areas would depend on the marginal areas. This way of understanding marginality is not only similar to the centre-periphery notion that has been traditionally used worldwide, but also refers to the existence of a global developed urban area as opposed to an underdeveloped rural area.

The same contrasts arise from another theoretical approach on marginality that takes into account the tensions existing among economic or institutional agents that may develop discriminatory attitudes toward other economic sectors or geographical areas, those that are left aside or unattended. Such is the case of agricultural and livestock activities that are abandoned or forgotten (Germani 1980: 16-17). In these areas, a marginal exploitation may be taken to be excluded from the market because of its products' lack of competitiveness.

As the conceptual analysis and empirical studies of marginality broadened and deepened, other characteristics were added: at present, some authors state that the challenge for studies on rural areas lies in coming to an understanding of the varied economic dichotomies, whether ephemeral or lasting, and their potential for reversibility and irreversibility, with a view to formulating rural development policies. They also evaluate the

viability of the proposals for local development in rural areas, and the possibility of achieving the inclusion of impoverished rural areas or of extremely vulnerable and marginal areas (Veiga, in Manzanal 2006: 35).

3. The different, the forgotten, the marginal: renewed concerns of Rural Geography

When studying Malargüe, the southernmost point of the province of Mendoza, from the conceptual framework of marginality, special attention should be paid to the characteristics that have traditionally defined rural spaces and their possible relations to the characteristics of marginal areas. In this respect, when Pacione (1993:31) describes the characteristics of rural areas, he includes some of the aspects considered within the concept of marginality. He mentions the following characteristics: 1) socio-cultural: strong adherence to traditional values, fear of change and a deeply-rooted sense of community; 2) occupational: predominance of primary activities, particularly agriculture, forestry and cattle-grazing; and finally, 3) ecological: extensive open field areas with small scattered facilities, and usually isolated and inaccessible landscape.

Current political, socioeconomic and cultural policies have gradually introduced changes in the characteristics and organization of rural spaces, and as a result new topics of study have emerged in addition to traditionally acknowledged features. As a result, while traditional concerns continued to be discussed, new burning issues were begun to arise. Some of the most important traditional concerns addressed by studies are the physical shapes of farming or grazing land, the density and distribution of communication networks, the level of technical development, the structure of population nuclei and socioeconomic developments, and the flow between rural areas and other rural or urban spaces (Molinero 1990: XIV and XV and Cubero 1993).

This thematic multiplicity has conditioned the relation of Rural Geography with other disciplines –regional economy, sociology, political science and planning- leading to renewed interpretations. Among the most important recent topics are the incorporation of rural areas into the global dynamics, the introduction of market mechanisms in rural areas, the development of the already mentioned “new rurality”, the conflicts arising from the demands of economic blocks and the impact of national and international forces on rural localisms.

Other studies worth mentioning deal with the analysis of the links among local rural agents, the participation of the public powers in agropecuary production planning, and individual and collective power in decision-making processes aiming at the improvement of rural development in marginal territories. These are followed by studies focussing on sociocultural aspects, the relation between farmers and institutions, the preservation or disappearance of habits and customs, the pursuit of a harmonious encounter between rural activities and the environment, and the rural population’s perception of rurality.

Cloke (1997:371) is eloquent when he refers to the dynamic process of re-emergence of rural studies, and to the rejection of, or reversion from, the traditional “rural inferiority complex” (Figure 3). This process is a result of the growing theoretical interest of young, innovative geographers and social scientists in rural areas and societies. With the increase of theoretical-conceptual debates related to the New Rural Geography, a “return towards the cultural” and the so-called “neglected rural geographies” is also taking place. The latter expression may be interpreted as referring to the Rural Geography dealing with the process of marginalisation of “the others”, that is to say, the population who, because of their number or condition, is not usually attractive as an object of study or analysis (Little 1999:438). In

other words, those groups which, in general, are not taken into account in rural studies, but who actually inhabit or travel the countryside.

Postmodernism has been closely related to this renewal of “the rural” and with the *study of diversity and plurality in rural contexts*. This interest in updating rural research was sparked by a 1992 study by Christopher Philo, which pointed out the need for Rural Geography to consider not only economic aspects but to incorporate also a social and cultural perspective. According to Philo, for this purpose, it was necessary to increase the number of studies on these “neglected rural geographies” (Philo in Murdoch and Pratt 1993: 411-421). To confirm this, the author points out that “present rural studies value the treatment of contingency and identity in rural groups and communities other than those traditionally studied, on which external changes have an impact, as well as the influence of everyday spaces and localisms” (Ibid. 411-412).

In fact, numerous studies deal with the building of identity and a sense of belonging in rural society, the multiple cultural meanings associated with country life, and the more recent issues of the “rural idyll” and “particular rural experiences” (García Ramón 2000: 24-27). Precisely, Murdoch and Pratt insist that the differences be considered with the same intensity as the territorial and social similarities. This is what Philo calls “the margins”. For this reason they believe that “we need to understand how particular identities, cultures and communities begin to exist and how some of them are capable of imposing themselves on others” (Philo in Murdoch and Pratt 1993: 422-425).

When these considerations are projected onto the object of this study, the correspondence between the new trends in rural studies and the phenomenon of marginality and its distinctions becomes evident. Hence the importance of the subject matter and the objectives of this study, which attempts to explore the permanence and generation of spaces and communities which are “different”. It is about “other actors” from “other places”, who are not only scarcely known but also different from the generality of the agro-industrial oases of the Cuyo region and even more so from the rest of the regional economies. These “others” can be identified either as a reduced number of growers who are interested in staying in their territories to continue with extensive cattle-grazing in an area with both natural and economic limitations, or as a group of farmers who are attempting to give dynamism to an emerging type of agriculture by investing in each link of the intensive production chain, as for example seed potatoes, in spite of living in an area with a long-standing tradition in the fodder industry, cattle-raising and mining.

4. Marginality and its derivations in the department of Malargüe

The rural area of Malargüe generates contradictory views and is hard to define, as it constitutes a complex scenario with overlapping characteristics. On the one hand, it is located in a peripheral location with respect to the rest of the province of Mendoza and the more dynamic area of the country, and displays traits of social and economic marginality and features which are typical of a scarcely populated area. On the other hand, it receives large-scale investments in tourism and has hydrocarbons, mining and water resources of a high strategic value. The combination of these characteristics makes Malargüe an undeniably complex scenario, what with projects for local development faced with a great imbalance of strengths and weaknesses, and a lack of coherence between the territorial offer and current public and private policies for the use of resources. There are also several controversial issues to be settled, even more so within the framework of the global socioeconomic pressures of the beginning of the 21st century and of a Nation-State without territorial integration and traditionally oriented to give priority to the solution of problems in the more vital economies of the country, specifically that of the Pampa region.

The disparity between the two realities of Malargüe's agropecuary sector stems, on the one hand, from factors that are deeply-rooted in rural contexts: a greater dependency on territorial aptitudes, and a very strong localist sentiment, as is the case with the goat herders ('puesteros') of the more extended rural area. On the other hand, changes in national and international economic, social and political systems have led agricultural producers to respond faster and with more flexibility, and have generated greater and better international relations. At present, these relations are more frequent and dynamic and they are originating an increase in the production of intensive crops.

The characteristics first described above apply to the situation of minor livestock breeders, who are dispersed throughout Malargüe's vast and arid rural space, where the communities have not been able to adjust their "production structures" to the requirements of the global economy. These small societies constitute impoverished rural sectors which suffer serious environmental limitations. They are linked to production circuits which are imbalanced or weak for competition. They are deeply-rooted in ancestral cultural traditions and cannot embrace innovation or make the decisions which would enable them to escape the exclusion in which they are immersed.

In this sense, the situation in Malargüe's extensive rural area undoubtedly displays several of the typical characteristics of marginal territories and their tendency towards marginalisation. The impact of large distances and isolation, local environmental limitations, the cost of transport, difficulties in the implementation of a development project that could integrate all the links of the goat milk and meat production chain, and a closed or weak cultural environment constitute evident signs of marginality. Furthermore, the minimal population density, the scarcity and basic condition of the available services, and the elementary diversification of production make the situation even more difficult and cause the fragile economy to stagnate, slow down its rate of progress, or hinder continuity. What is more, situations of risk arise due to discontinuity or weakness in decision-making or in the implementation of actions which would reactivate the economy and the attitudes of the rural community, or motivate other socioeconomic alternatives. Projects for local development implemented since the mid 1990's by the Municipal government under the form of the Plan Arraigo de Puesteros (Social Integration Plan for Goat Herders) have not been effective enough to revert the situation.

In areas closer to the city of Malargüe, a few growers have attempted a transformation and diversification in the economic orientation of their farming activities. State organisms and the members of the community have shown greater commitment when faced with the demand to protect and safeguard local production. In fact, dynamic diversification processes seem to be at work in the projects by private peri-urban growers, based on the coordination between the territorial offer and the municipal management of the urban area and its area of influence. This scenario reflects a slow but clear tendency towards demarginalisation.

Finally, the strong influence of cattle-grazing activities should not be overlooked when attempting to explain the results of the studies on the marginality processes undergone by the two agropecuary realities described. Extensive cattle-raising has been for decades the main setting shaping the structure and the processes characterising the rural area in Malargüe. Farmers are immersed in the context of Malargüe's cattle-grazing tradition, in a distinctive landscape and production system, in the micro-scale of their activities, and suffer the environmental and economic problems that are peculiar to cattle-farmers and goat herders. Even though growers tend to move away from that legacy and tourism and mining companies have diversified the local economy, the department of Malargüe has not lost its identification with cattle-raising and goat-herding and their cultural derivations.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the issue of marginal areas presents ambivalences and conflicts which are difficult to deal with and involves criteria that hard to define. There is no single answer or a single model to follow, but conceptual approximations intending to account for various intervening structural and temporal processes. Moreover, there are no precise patterns of marginality due to the complex, confusing and ever-changing reality characterising marginal regions.

Isolation, or the difficulty to move between centres is the factor that is most frequently related to marginality in societies. However, *theoretical constructs emerging from studies on the subject from the perspective of the central countries, together with the results of research carried out by us in Southern Patagonia and in the Southern area of Mendoza, have revealed the complexity and broadness of the theory of marginality and its derived processes: namely, marginalisation and demarginalisation.*

The study of the dynamics of the two rural systems in Malargüe has contributed to the development of new approaches which enrich the concept of marginality and the explanation of the socioeconomic evolution of Malargüe's rural area. It should be noted that the activities which have successively or simultaneously characterised Malargüe's economic evolution do not seem to have been competing, but rather mutually-enriching forces, due not only to the introduction of new infrastructure, services, and functions, but also to the combination of diverse sources of employment. This scenario does not seem to display the typical features which in theory characterise marginality and its territorial impact. However, from an alternative point of view, the occurrence of advance-retreat cycles in each of the activities and the strong imprint left by extensive cattle-grazing and transhumance -with all their ensuing social, economic and cultural consequences- have caused great imbalance and pose the question of whether the marginalisation process has actually come to a halt in rural areas or is, on the contrary, advancing.

The cultural traits and behaviour of social groups, the modality of local and national decision-making, and personal and collective attitudes in the face of risk and difficulties have been, up to this stage in our study, the most important factors when it came to defining marginalisation, much more so than environmental limitations or the isolation of rural areas.

Meanwhile, according to the concepts developed by the IGU geographers, the effects of economic globalisation, characterised by a constant search for new and integrated markets, and technical production reforms in each community tend to integrate, gradually, those contexts which seem distant from the main economic systems, thus contributing to the demarginalisation of communities and territories. Nevertheless, if Manzanal's ideas regarding the challenges of rural development are related to the types of marginality considered in this study, a new interesting point of view emerges. The author considers it is important to bear in mind that while the macroeconomic model drives population out of the production system, causing society to become polarized and increasing the mass of the unemployed and the marginalised, actions designed to promote rural development do not significantly contribute to the integration and development of the rural marginalised population. This is to say that, while territorial integration is making progress, a concomitant negative mechanism is generated in which policies focalised on certain sectors prevail that fail to discern between excluded and non-excluded sectors. This paradoxical situation could motivate further research into the processes triggered by the phenomenon of marginality, particularly in contradictory rural areas such as Malargüe's.

Therefore, it is necessary to study these regions in greater depth in order to define them thoroughly and contribute more than just a set of characteristics emerging from their localization, their economic inactivity, their social inertia, and even more so in the case of agrarian sectors located in economically peripheral regions. They must be rigorously analysed in order to facilitate decision-making, since it is possible to break with the “persistence” or “resistance” which seem to prevail in these areas. The future of a region also depends on its communities. Hence the need for an in-depth study of their current situation, their perceptions, and their strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, thorough research into cases such as Malargüe’s is essential, as well as the comparison of results with those obtained by studies previously carried out in Southern Patagonia. The ultimate aim should be not only to provide a scientific definition of *types of marginality* but also to make a contribution to public and private decision-making that may lead to the fulfilment of local participative actions and the generation of policies for rural territorial development tending to the inclusion of the depressed or marginalised areas of the population.

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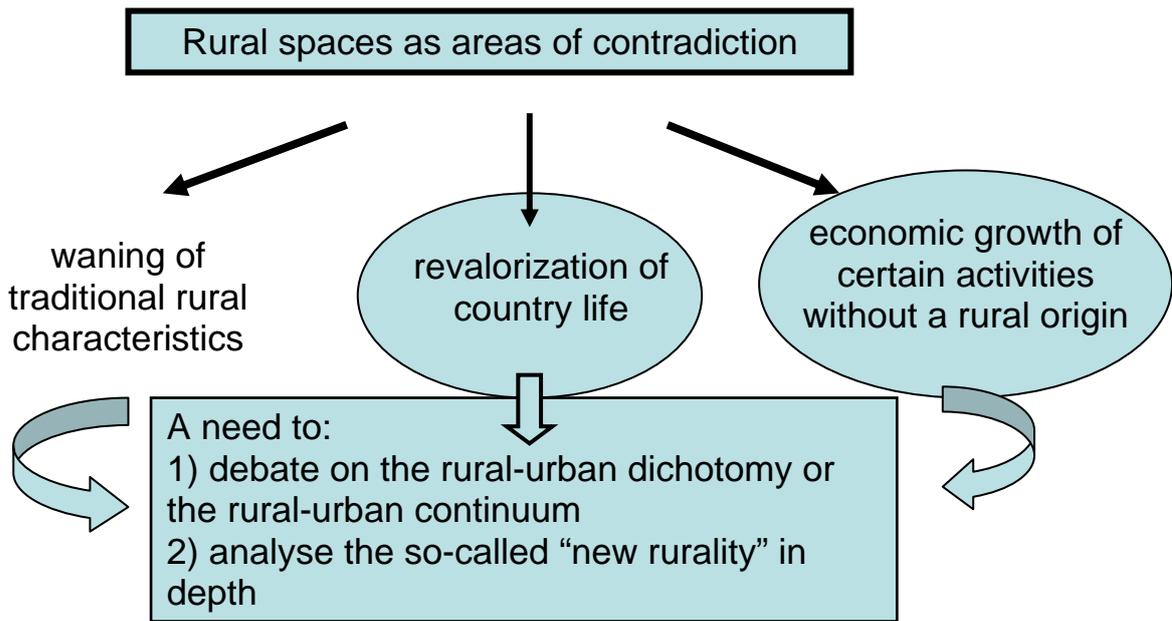
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Figure 2



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- Disciplinary orientation dealing with:**
- re-structured spaces, based on environmental and tourist interests,
 - spaces connected to large agroindustrial complexes,
 - depressed, marginal areas, or areas with no potential economic use.

Figure 3

