Globalisation, Feminisation of the Labour Force, and Postproductivist Rural Areas

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One of the explicit objectives of *The New Role of Women in Social Development* is “to examine the problem of the economic and regional restructuring of rural areas in the current context of the globalisation process and the new role of women in rural development” (p 7). Each of the thirteen articles in this book, edited by Maria-Dolors Garcia-Ramon and Mireia Baylina Ferré, may be considered a partial response to the following question: In what way has the globalisation process affected women’s lives and the places in which many of them live and work: the rural areas of the Iberian peninsula?

All the articles emphasise the rise of new forms of employment in rural areas, aimed at capturing female workers, which alters women’s daily lives, their relationship with their environment, and their role in the family. The studies in the book, primarily constructed on the basis of qualitative information, analyse the significance of women’s work in activities that mediate between the global and local spheres, particularly the agricultural industry (confections, meat, anchovies), rural tourism, homeworking, and telework. The implantation of many of these activities in Iberian rural areas is intimately linked to their roles in the context of Europe (particularly the agricultural and tourism industries). In all of them, women appear as the protagonists of the possibility of their effectivisation. Certain representations linked to a supposed sexual division of labour, according to which women are assumed to surpass men in certain traits (sensitivity, patience, delicacy, meticulousness, and responsibility), and their presumed unwillingness to accept jobs far from their homes or full-time are arguments adduced to assert their complete suitability for flexible, precarious, or informal employment, with low pay and without social benefits or any type of unionisation. In this way, culturally constructed gender differences are
reinforced by the norms that now obtain in the world of work, which become a means of ensuring the continuity of the reproduction of capital.

But not only gender difference is redefined in the context of globalisation; spatial differentiation is also associated with it. In fact, the rural areas, where these women live and work, and to which part of the investments are directed, are often losing population. In opposition to the positions arguing that global capital makes a tabula rasa of geographical differences, the articles in The New Role of Women in Rural Development show that, in its search to minimise its costs and maximise its benefits, it values the particularities rural areas offer in environmental, human, economic, and cultural terms. This is applicable not only to rural areas in general but also to different contexts on the Iberian peninsula, as demonstrated by analyses in Galicia, Andalusia, Catalonia, and northern Portugal. Different locations offer different opportunities to attract particular activities. In this context, rural areas are transformed. The editors have chosen the term “postproductivist” to refer to a space where agricultural, industrial, and service activities are combined. In some cases, the rural area is valued in terms of landscape, as happens with tourism (pp 193–196); in others, it ceases to be defined solely by agricultural activities, to become the receptacle of industry or data-processing as well; and often it is conceptualised as a hybrid, a place that has ceased to be rural yet does not become merely urban and is hence considered “rurban” (p 246).

It is these characteristics acquired by rural areas that make it possible to identify multiplicities of space–time relationships, often strategies of adaptation to the spatiotemporal compression proper to capital (Harvey 1996:210–247). In this way, it is possible to identify the juxtaposition of the seasonal rhythms of agricultural activities or demand for agroindustrial products with the temporal and spatial discontinuities of women’s personal histories (migrations, life cycles), and with the lengthening of women’s working days in order to reconcile job responsibilities with those of the family in a home that, in so many places, has ceased to be solely the sphere of domestic activities and has been incorporated into the arena of jobs (p 223). In the same way, facing competition from multinationals, some handicraft industries rely on the appellation d’origine as a strategy that, with its local roots, contests the deliberate volatility that is hegemonic in the global economy.

Lastly, I would like to offer a few reflections on the differences observed today between the English-speaking and Hispanic worlds in the treatment of the subject of rural geography and gender. From the points of view emerging in the former school of thought, a treatment of the rural question crossed by gender difference from a feminist
perspective, such as the one offered by the text in hand, could be considered a nostalgic reading of the first approaches to gender studies in the United States and England in the 1980s. In the Spanish context, the force of the analysis is placed on the invisibility of women’s work, on how many different things they have to do, and on their new activities. In the English-speaking world, according to Garcia-Ramon and Baylina Ferré’s overview, these subjects have now been replaced by others, which give priority to the professionalisation of agriculture, political activity, and the process of empowerment linked to the transformation of identities (p 44). Perhaps this difference in treatment deserves to be analysed as much in terms of social processes as in epistemological terms.

From the first point of view, the differences between these two traditions’ types of problematisation should not be read as a lag but as the result of political, social, and economic processes that take place in every historical and spatial context. In fact the Iberian peninsula lived through its transition to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s; many of the transformations covered in the text have more to do with the particularities of the combination of the political changes, the conditions of Spain and Portugal’s entry into the European Union, and the consolidation of the inequalities of the globalisation process in the areas in question. Perhaps it is these particular processes that urgently need to be narrated in the Iberian academic context. The studies being done in Spanish geography could serve as inspiration for those in other Spanish-speaking countries where globalisation is also leaving its strong imprint on rural areas, as in Latin America. The process of feminisation of rural work on this continent has not been worked on much from a spatial perspective.

From the epistemological point of view, on the other hand, in the English-speaking academic world, one of the current discussions centres on the construction of identities. This is an aspect given little attention in the book under review. In fact, many of the fragments of interviews cited could be used to deal with the process of transformation of women’s identities starting from their entry into the workforce. Perhaps if readings of this type had been made, the subtle transformation of subjectivities between genders, between social classes, and between age groups and the consequent redefinition of roles would have been analysed. This type of treatment could have been accompanied by qualitative analyses that would have taken into account the position of men with respect to women’s new roles in the rural world.

Beyond these specific observations—that the incorporation of postmodern positions could have helped to interpret the interviews—I believe that the text in question is a contribution to constructing a pluralistic academic realm in which many voices and experiences can
be heard and an horizontal dialogue among specialists with different spatiotemporal trajectories can be established (Minca 2000).

References