

AlterRurality

exploring representations and 'repeasantations'

Rurality may be a cradle for new forms of human settlement.

AlterRurality is suggested here as a field to be explored, a new representation to be invented: a moving constellation of concepts, natures and practices inspired by rural values.

It is neither a nostalgic claim for a return to lost nature or for an idyllic rural life, nor does it reduce the rural habitat to an urban perspective. Rather, it is an attempt to re-invent peasantry: to re-inscribe rurality as prospective and innovative ways of being into contemporary society.

What is it that organizes rurality?

This book explores perceptions reaching underneath landscapes and aesthetics, suspending messiness, addressing different modes of economy and governance. Can we fertilize new grounds for human habitat? Can we harvest new insights, seed wisdom otherwise when living bodily, in a renewed ethical and sensorial contract with nature?

We then need to build up a new imaginary, one of AlterRurality. And, using the very stakes of architecture, to draw futures that may emerge from such representations: futures of 'repeasantation'.

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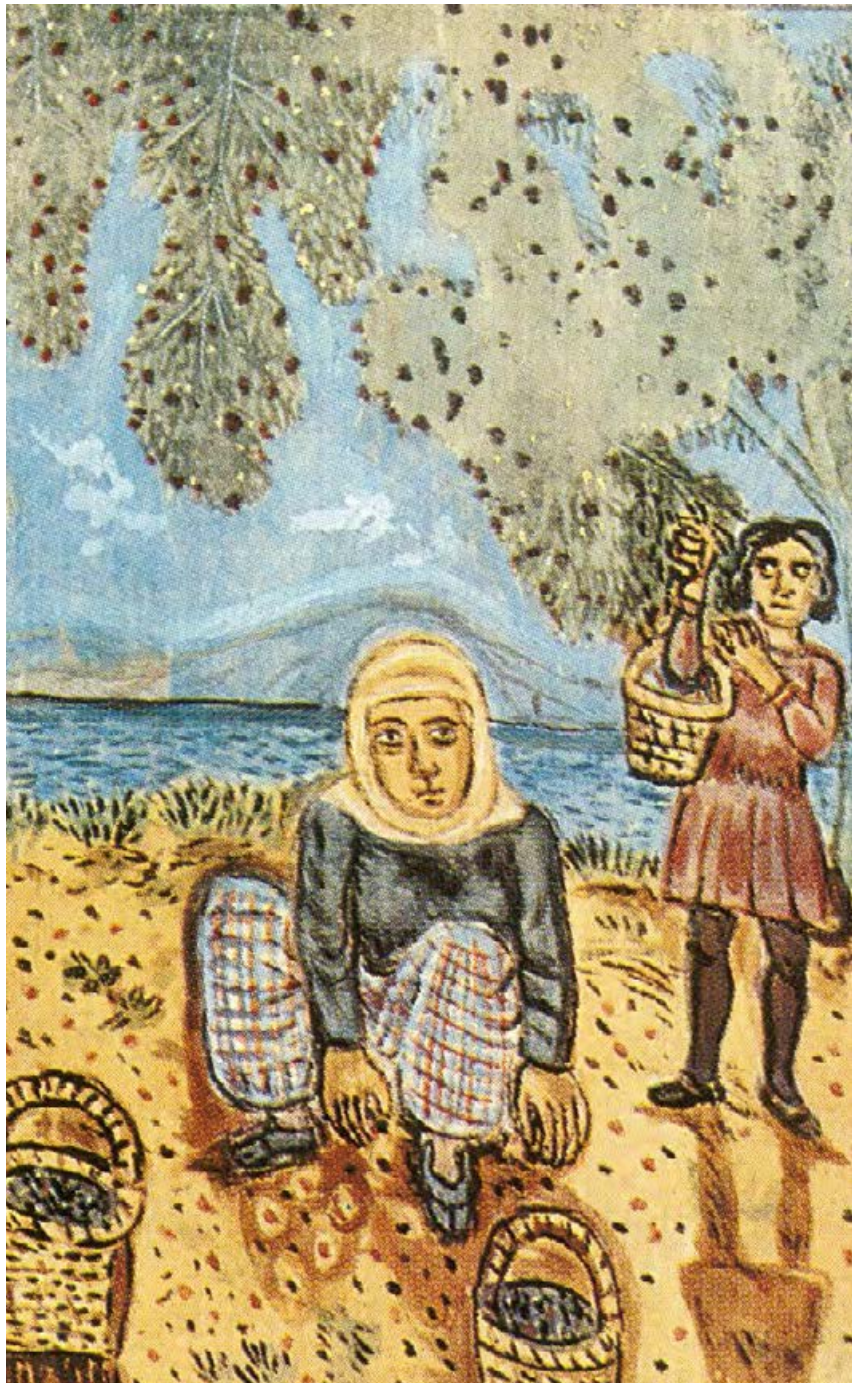
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1. Theofilos Chadjimichail, Gathering olives, Mytilene 1913, detail

Crete: rurality is never lost

Interchanges between urban and rural in Crete after the '50s

Nikolaos Skoutelis

The pattern of rural settlement, cultivated areas and pastureland on the island of Crete has its origins in an internal organization that dates back to the Minoan era. Due to the geomorphological form of the island and to its position between the Aegean and the Libyan Seas, the network of Cretan ports, roads and cultivated farmlands has remained almost unchanged for centuries.

Today, this island of 8,336 km², with a population of 621,000, continues to evolve within an urban framework that was founded during the period of Venetian rule (1212-1669). During that long period a large number of people came to Crete as part of the gradual Ottoman occupation of the Aegean islands and harbors. In those times, the city was considered a fortified port and its people as staff, supporting the commerce and the defense of the central authority. By the end of the Venetian period, the people of the Cretan cities included 11% mercenary soldiers from Croatia, Germany and Switzerland.¹ In the 17th century they remained on the island and Turkish soldiers were added to this mixed population. Peasants were divided into *villani* and *franchi*, both subordinated under the central authority's justice during Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman rule, with minimum differentiations between these apparently separate living conditions. Others were free workers, changing place and profession. Villages were located in the interior, the four main cities on the north coast. No attempt was ever made by the central administration to create a different type of society and, until the late 20th century, this peasant sociability was dominant, even in urban society. There was no industrial revolution, or, indeed any kind of industrialization comparable to that of central and northern Europe two centuries earlier.²

The village has always been considered the base for farming families and shepherds who worked on the mountains during the mild season and in the lowlands during the winter. Farmers from Tsikalariá, Nohiá, Margarites and Thrapsanó made ceramic jars wandering across the

island, leaving to the women the cultivation of the fields.³ An inner mobility of population between lowland and highland villages and between the villages and the towns was a feature of local rural and urban society until the late '50s.

Between 1922 and 1928 the 23,000 members of the local Muslim population moved to Turkey, while Greeks from the surroundings of Izmir, approximately 46,000 people, came to live on the island, taking on cultivation of lands abandoned by the Cretan Muslims and forming a new blend of people involved in city life after the Second World War.⁴ With all the country's resources destroyed, assistance was provided under the Marshall Plan, but many men and women left their inland villages, either for Athens, or for Iraklion and Chaniá in Crete, but mostly for Australia, Belgium and Germany.

In the 1960's the agricultural population formed 62% of the total workforce.⁵ The exodus of the rural population between 1950 and 1970 had the character of almost total abandonment of villages but not of cultivated land, which was maintained by older inhabitants and by extended family, resident in towns usually no further than 50 km from their village.

During the next decade, the 1970's, more than half of the emigrants to Germany came back, building houses in the surroundings of Iraklion and Chaniá, close to their relatives who had already built before them, on productive lands, with no planning provision or legal permission. From the 1960's onwards, increased urbanism, combined with the lack of town planning, led to an unnatural clientelism between politicians and citizens, which still results in unauthorised building today.⁶ Internal migrants worked more in the construction sector and the so-called "Germans", in the commercial sector and in rising tourism. In the 1970's, a period in which taxation was almost nonexistent, peasants began to perceive the land around cities as an object of speculation - and they bought it up whenever possible. At weekends, they returned to their villages, to tidy up properties and celebrate marriages, baptisms and local feasts, thus recreating the atmosphere of the rural life of their parents, listening to the Cretan lyra and dancing, assuming the local dance postures as the Minoans used to do.

Officially, in 1971, in Crete, the active population in agriculture decreased to 48.72%, but production was assured by large local

cooperatives.⁷ In August all peasants and large numbers of city dwellers assisted in gathering grapes; between November and January, the same applied to the olive and citrus harvests. Apart from real farmers, public-sector employees, builders, merchants, even doctors and engineers, spent at least two weeks on family land, not only participating in the growth of family finances, but also in peasant sociability that remained dominant; throughout the 1970's the Hippy congress was held in Matala. Meanwhile the young generation was studying in Athens, in Great Britain, in Italy and in the U.S.A. listening to rock music.

On 28th May 1979 Greece became the 10th member of the European Community and in November 1981 the Socialist Movement (PASOK) was sworn in as government. In 1981 the active population in agriculture fell to 29.49 % and again to 24% in 1991.⁸ During these two decades, the European Community promoted financial programs designed to limit the rural exodus and create alternative activities in the countryside. Such *external constraints* led to high borrowing rates, for activities that could not become profitable as they were not integrated into any general planning. Other forms of social assistance have always been provided by the EU, although without increasing local awareness and new kinds of entrepreneurship, due to an evident lack of political will. Local communities, half living in the village and half in big cities, or better on their outskirts, preferred a kind of inertness encouraged by EU subsidies, which permitted exploitation of finances and shifting of final accounting far into the future. More peasants broke up their land by building small pensions and *typical* restaurants and others sold parts of it to contractors, so holiday houses with swimming pools for pensioners from Northern Europe were built in the fields. During this decade peasants began to perceive their own land as an object of speculation and placed more and more pressure on politicians to maintain the status of *un-zoned buildable* land, at the very time that the European Union was trying to apply environmental protection measures.⁹

In Crete, by 2001, only 23.42% of active inhabitants cultivated the land, while 29.49% were employed in the secondary sector and 55.57% in the tertiary sector. Of the latter 55.57%, 9% worked in the construction sector and 13% in tourism.¹⁰ The construction and tourism sectors created a fictitious glamour of the local economy even after the 2004 Olympic Games. After the elections, in October 2009 the new Socialist government began applying measures for fiscal consolidation and promoting new entrepreneurs, talking about *green development*.

Unemployment began to increase from 12% in that period, to 26% today, but only one primary sector of production had the possibility to be elastic, ready for adjustments, able to absorb some of the manpower.¹¹ That *green development*, according to the Greek Socialists, or better an instrument of what is called sustainable development, became a mélange of different activities around a central pillar, that of Renewable Energy Sources (RES). The diffusion of the urban landscape into the natural one, now, is visible even on the mountain peaks.

During this last decade, the peasants began to perceive not only cultivated land, but also pastoral and mountainous lands as part of the great speculation, as the new face of greater exploitation, and they further pressured politicians to maintain the *status quo* of labyrinthine land-use laws. In the contemporary context of European regulations, which should turn Greek peasants into farmers, as equal members of a wider urban society, these last have not had the last word: they are attracted by the new economic power of RES but, at the same time, they know that all natural resources, including water, can be commercialized. Politicians are not well thought of, but they continue to mirror tribal sociability as behavior, despite being unconvinced of the applicability of the European directives in the South, because they are connected directly with the habits of the past. Specifically, Greek law provides a great number of opportunities to transform wise laws, through explanatory instructions, into a guide to disastrous results. The last two years, this attitude has been aided by so-called *fast track* holdings imposed by fiscal consolidation measures.¹²

In Crete, the terrain and the historical conditions have led to a proliferation of small agricultural lots and, at the same time, enormous areas of privately owned mountainous land that serves only for pasture. Crops and livestock are raised on small family-owned units. The surface area of small fields ranges between 100 and 1,000 m², usually inherited land, dispersed around settlements, with some larger fields, between 1,000 and 10,000 m², in the lower fertile lands, close to the cities. For the past sixty years, land has been cultivated with minimal technical upgrade, but it has become more and more specialized. Now, in 2014, olive-tree cultivation covers 52% of agricultural land, and vineyards 10%, especially in central Crete. Most citrus orchards are located in the protected valleys in the west of the isle and most greenhouses in the south.

In this context, both before and after the economic crisis of 2008,

European funding and associated laws describing radically new politics and contract farming were applied as financial opportunities, but never as a strategy aimed at converting locals into citizens of a European state. Cretan peasants not only remain unconvinced, they are not interested. Family and village consciousness comes first, in these peasant families, where some of the sons become farmers, one a merchant or engineer and one a doctor or lawyer in a big town. The need to feed urban growth is ingrained in their hearts, from late medieval times, as part of natural stability, because they have always considered the city instrumental to their complete and closed world.

Family cohesion, family enterprises, local habits and feasts, have consolidated Cretan peasant consciousness, which remains the main one. Members of the extended families often participate in all kinds of social events in order to redefine the connection with that native land and demonstrate a sense of duty to the village. Entertainment with traditional music and dance is a dominant preference that exists in parallel with the contemporary lifestyle.

What makes people spend time in the villages is not simply nostalgia for a lost world. That world continues to exist, creating a contemporary aspect of that old culture, which seems a parody of the original one, more burlesque in the opinion of the sociologists, but functional, and keeping alive the rural identity of the Cretans. The Greek translator and novelist Claire Mitsotaki describes this substance in her novel *Flora Mirabilis*: “*The Countryside, as long as it still belonged to the old rural world, with its roughness, its isolation, its absurdity of mores and its total contrast to the city,*



4. Vení, Axós, Anógeia, the highest positioned settlements on the Psiloritis Mount.

was an area condemned to oblivion, mainly because it couldn't be considered theatrically in itself. So, in other words, from the moment it did not adopt a commonly acceptable imaginary figure about what it is, how it is and the way it should proceed, from the moment it was not subject to an educational system. Misled by fantasy, sidelined in a dark zone of that which has not yet emerged into the world, the Countryside was in a situation of perpetual precocity, keeping for itself an unrealistic entity. It was the country of the human ore. Source of life and wet nurse of the city".¹³

In the writer's mind, every society tries to simulate its own imaginary figure, except in the rural ones, where it cannot happen. Modern times translated the countryside values into the aesthetic category of *landscape*. Georg Simmel was one of the first intellectuals to explain the term, connecting the individualization processes that derive from the division of labor, and the exploration of the conditions of tragedy of the spirit in the modern world.¹⁴ In the same terms, Alois Riegl introduces an individual, totally subjective process, which gives a newly created value to the monuments: *the value of the olden*.¹⁵ In his essay he argues that human creations and nature arrive at a new balance, capable of moving everybody's sentiment into a total unity between time, artworks and their materials. These new terms tried to make visible the conditions of the relationship between humans and nature, in any case, instruments for the transformations that introduced mobility in rural areas, traditionally static.



5. Collecting olives with the whole family.



6. Traditional musicians in the early '50s

Postmodern society, using the term "environment", tries to move its instrument of control, from the aesthetic field to the managerial one, promising a durable development in a balanced countryside. In our times, which prioritise energy and infrastructures, the subjective gaze to the lands of the globe, is the gaze of the economic colossi. In these terms rural societies and their economies are considered more as part of the natural, less as civil, or economically integrated. As a result, rural society is not considered at all, from the moment that ecological theories present many weaknesses for convergence. It is also evident that this happens because industrial and economical criteria have not yet found technical applications that can be legitimized by any ecological manifesto.

Urban sprawl continually needs new manifestos as a theoretical base, in order to excuse the rape of nature by our civilization. The Austrian architect Josef Frank concludes in 1931 that "*our world is paved with manifestos and we dislike it if they don't change each week. This is the tragedy of modern architecture...*".¹⁶ In our century, in this conceptual framework, Alan Berger introduced the term of *drosscape*, as the newest contribution in the discussion about land and city. In the continuous expansion of the urban, "The designer, as the strategist conducting this advocacy process, understands the future as a being under perpetual construction"¹⁷, a continuous flow of people and things, where "what we succeed to superintend by the gaze, or inside a instantaneous horizon is not yet a landscape, but in the best situation the materials to build one".¹⁸ In the continuity of this urban construction, there is no time for

restructuring data, as an essential condition for the definition of the term landscape. Here dominates only the sense of movement, as the only creative force and as a goal in itself.

Even in Crete, this movement as dominant phenomenon is evidenced by the expansion of urban style constructions and the assumption of a globalized lifestyle all over the countryside. At the same time, mobility between towns and rural areas continues to create a fertile interchange. The elasticity in everyday labor forces we described regarding the last fifty years is increasing, partly because there are fewer immigrants, Albanians, Bulgarians and Pakistanis working in the fields, due to the economic crisis. Very recently, between 2008 and 2010, there was an increase in agricultural employment in Greece, as more than 30,000 people returned to their fathers' farms.¹⁹ Furthermore, small groups of unemployed baccalaureates are trying to introduce alternative cultivations on less expensive lands. This kind of contemporary trend, especially in Crete, highlights once again that people from the urban concentrations, due to economic and social conditions, continue to share both urban life and *rurality* in a mature and dense way.

Due firstly to the abandonment of rural life, and secondly to the failure of the system of continuous growth, in the information era, the re-habitation of our natural land seems to be the new challenge. People should come back, consolidating a new residential establishment, depending on a real economy, in the real world. In Greece, the *domestication* of the peasantry has failed because of the law's insufficiencies and the European incapacity to create real discussion, the only solution could be through a consensual process, capable of containing diversity.



3. Theofilos Chadjimichail, Gathering olives, Mytilene 1913.

We have discussed historical circumstances and topographical and climatic diversity as forces that created the *Cretan lifestyle* as a dual consciousness between rural and urban, more rural than urban. This collage of social and political jumble with no clear direction today, has created the conditions for the continuous presence of rural sociability, which concretely takes part in daily life. Such a situation could possibly lead to the required alternative to current purchases, with selective use of the available technologies and better substantiated political directives.

Today, for 621,000 people, the rich, well-connected network of rural settlements in Crete creates a contemporary model of balanced growth and a social profile that is both urban and rural. The Cretan example, due to its size, probably presents a valuable auspice to be considered as an alternative, but with no signs or theories linked to any external economic domination.

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Cover: Rurality 1 studio (Versteegh 2012). project detail.
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Impressum

Title: AlterRurality

Subtitle: Exploring representations and 'repeasantations'

Key-words: architecture, rural, urban planning, design, ethics, '

Editor: Pieter Versteegh

Co-editor : Sophia Meeres

Layout and graphics:

Elisa Bordonaro

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Edited in Fribourg by Pieter Versteegh for the ARENA Architectural Research Network

Printed by CreateSpace, available from amazon.com and createspace.com

ISBN: 978-1494319571

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