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Carmo, Renato Miguel

CIES, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Social capital and rural communities: from generalisation to focalisation

In the last two decades, the concept of social capital has become one of those most analyzed and discussed in different areas of the social sciences and addresses very different social and geographical realities. Certain authors believe that this wide use has resulted in the loss of meaning of the concept itself, in that it covers a complex series of dimensions that are difficult to define either conceptually or empirically. Others have drawn attention to the different more or less harmful appropriations of the concept by a number of national or global political institutions. In spite of these pertinent critical observations, the concept of social capital has become generalised to such an extent that it is impossible to simply refuse to join the debate or try to explore some of its potential when it comes to rural studies.

The analysis in this paper is intended not only to contribute to the debate but also place it within the framework of rural studies. The most pertinent dimensions have therefore defined for a study of two local communities in inland Portugal that are undergoing different social transformation processes. They are São Brás de Alportel, which has experienced considerable demographic growth in the last 20 years, and Alcoutim, which is on the road to significant marginalisation, as shown by indicators such as ongoing aging and depopulation. The study is based on a survey of the residents of each municipality.

This paper endeavours to achieve an understanding of the way in which these different sociodemographic changes interact with the alterations that have taken place in more or less traditional forms of social and interpersonal relations. In order to do this, the concept of a rural community has been used as a starting point for the analysis and enabled us to situate the different dimensions of social capital used in this study. Here, it is not a question of redefining the concept of community, although we consider this a highly pertinent discussion. It is rather a question of understanding the impact of social changes with reference to the fundamental elements and traits that used to characterise rural communities. The idea is to use the analytical potential of the concept of social capital to construct a pertinent, consistent interpretation of social phenomena in local communities.

The presentation begins with a theoretic examination that addresses the most relevant dimensions of social capital and places it in the framework of studies of rural communities. The second part presents data on the different dimensions of social capital from a survey of the two municipalities. The third part contains a multivariate, multiple correspondence analysis, which shows three different profiles of social capital coexisting in the two areas.