

# THE RURAL IMAGINARY OF THE URBAN READER:

## The mythic dream of a house in the country

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Brasileira de Pesquisa  
em Jornalismo

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**ABSTRACT** This research is an attempt, within a socio-anthropological approach, to understand an apparently common phenomenon: the dream many urban dwellers have of owning a house in the country. The investigation is carried out among readers of the *Globo Rural* magazine, a publication which specializes in agricultural matters. The subscribers live in the city of São Paulo and they do not own any kind of property in rural areas. The purpose of this study is to try to apprehend the motives of this imaginary vision, thus contributing to the debate on the relations between country and town, as well as to an understanding of the interaction between subjects and symbolic cultural products in contemporary urban daily life. Faced with the complex relationship between man and nature and the historical condition experienced in a metropolis at this turn of the century, it is perceived that when dreaming of a house in the country, urban readers of the magazine do not simply turn nostalgically to a rural past. In fact, they express their deep criticism of the civilizing model of urbanity in the metropolis at the present time, and, looking ahead, they imagine a better future away from the city in a rural environment, closer to nature, in a place with more solidarity, away from violence, heavy traffic, pollution, and therefore with improved quality of life.

**Key-words:** rural journalism; imaginary; mythic dream; house in the country.

### INTRODUCTION

The fact that millions of people are dazzled by the glitter of life in the city does not usually bring us much disquiet. We all know that cities are among the most beautiful creations of humanity. Leaving rural environments for urban environments seems to be the natural way in the history of humankind, as much as it is expected that we move from wild life to civilized life, from the world of nature to the world of culture. But why then is it so frequent that urban dwellers dream of a house in the country? Octavio Paz says, in the preface to the catalogue of the Museo de Bellas Artes, in Santiago, Chile, that “estamos condenados a buscar

en nuestra tierra, la otra tierra; en la otra, la nuestra". Among artists this condemnation would be treated as creative freedom. And in uneventful everyday life, how does this search come about? Many studies have been conducted on the needs that cause migration from rural areas to the urban centers, as well as on the fascination that cities exert as responses to great human needs such as work, education, health, culture, leisure, etc. However, few questions are raised concerning the enchantment that the rural universe brings to bear on urban populations, particularly on inhabitants of large cities.

In São Paulo, attention is drawn to a noteworthy phenomenon: the number of dwellers interested in reading a publication specialized in agricultural economy and practices, and that also deals with some other topics related to life in the countryside, grows day by day. This is the case of *Globo Rural* magazine, published by Globo Press in São Paulo since 1985. This does not seem to be an isolated fact, but part of something one could call a spirit of the times. Nowadays, not only in São Paulo, but in other large cities in the country, we witness, or take part in the growth of phenomena such as the diversified market of "natural" products; the opening of restaurants serving typical food; ecological and rural tourism to farm hotels; the use in towns of cars such as pickups and jeeps, which were previously regarded as models of rural vehicles; the opening of *country wear* clothing shops; the top sales of country music records; the crowded broadcast rodeos; the countless pay-and-fish emporiums in city surroundings; the training of top executives, done by professionals from the human resources area, in the challenging environment of jungles and mountains; the wide audience of soap operas with rural themes; the opening of ball rooms specialized in country dances for the academic public; the offers of leisure farms for selling and renting; the isolated rural luxury condos and other marketing expressions. The case of *Globo Rural* magazine and its increasing number of urban readers is thus circumscribed as part of a market of symbolic goods.

In this study, I worked with a group of metropolitan subscribers after a strict selection among readers, chosen from the broad universe of the São Paulo state capital, by means of questionnaires, telephone interviews and personal talks. I tried to document the current life of these people in the city of São Paulo, their rural memories and the future they imagine for themselves in the countryside, with the rural house they dream of. One of the main aspects is the aggressiveness and speed with which the process of urbanization occurred in Brazil. Within only four decades, from the mid-forties to the eighties, the proportion between rural and urban

populations has inverted. Nowadays, 80% of Brazilians live in towns. In the state of São Paulo, 93% are urban citizens, and its capital is one of the three most populous cities in the world. The full conurbation includes 39 districts, where more than 17 million people live. It is in the context of this “excessively urbanized” environment that *Globo Rural* readers tell, in the chapter “The eye that sees”, who they are, where they work, and what they think and feel at the present time as experienced in the city. The urban space emphasizes the image of concentration, and the big city appears excessive in its very nature. It concentrates population, politics, law, science, religion, art, buildings, technology, media, money, markets, corruption, violence, traffic, noise, ruins, demolition, the real and the virtual, crowds and loneliness. It concentrates conflicts and contradictions, paroxysms and paradoxes, ambiguities and anguish.

### **Pastoral set of ideas**

The disorders of our time have never been so often discussed before, as well as the uneasiness to which post-modernity has led us. There is the feeling of not belonging, of “deterritorialization”, of being a foreigner in place and time, of the trap of speed, of accelerated history, of disunity, of factual superabundance. We are subjected to an emphasis of the ephemeral, of the *on-line*, of the frenzy, of the instantaneous, of the *just in time*, of the “tyranny of urgency”. “Consequently, there is no more ‘forward’ or ‘backwards’; what counts is exactly the ability to move and not stand still”, Zygmunt Bauman observes. We move compulsively in order to remain in the same place. In what the eye sees today in the city, we cannot obviously find the urbanity that Lévi-Strauss saw in the small towns in the interior of São Paulo state in the thirties: the urban as “a kingdom added to nature by men”. Actually, the very city of São Paulo had seemed to him at that time an untamed city, similar to many American cities, built to be renovated with the same rapidity as they are developed. Revisited by Nicolau Sevcenko at the end of 20th century, the capital seemed to reveal to him that the dream was aborted: “a nightmare was set in its place, made of horror, nausea and misery. All around the city, a dense poverty belt configures the picture of a Prometheus Bound. The miserable ones, relegated to their own fate, do not see any alternatives but to make a living out of leftovers, odd jobs and the scavenging of consumer residues thrown in the dumping grounds of the city. (...) Compact layers of signs, billboards, banners and graffiti transform the scenery into a fuzzy abject mass, submerged in clouds of gases and deafening noise, and wrapped in a closely knit shroud. Gardens and

leisure are lacking, as well as respect, solidarity and compassion". It is in this context of gaps and excesses, of breaches and connections, that the media turn texts and images into instruments for somehow reordering cultural practices.

It is on the basis of this accelerated brutal and recent "metropolization" that we can understand why many Brazilians recall their rural life. As they reveal in the section "The remembrance reviews", most readers that participated in the research had contact with the country, be it a farm, country house, small town or rural village; or even the city peripheries where they first appeared, on the rural outskirts of São Paulo city. But often, as the study points out, in spite of the mythical power of the native land, of the primeval paradise, the longing for the place of origin can hide the longing for a time, especially a childhood time, and for things that the city lacks, like picking fruit from a tree or swimming in a river. Besides the imaginary fossils excavated in the Garden of Eden, we also find other archetypical images in the dream of the house in the country. For these readers, there is where their first fatherland is, their native land, their backyard, their paternal home, their mother. This longing for the countryside can be interpreted yet as an expression of mythical feelings that man, even the most urban and modern, carries in relation to nature, with which he had a more harmonious and intense connection at the time of primitive communities. Such contemporary rural yearning appears, at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, more confusing and transgressive than the pastoral set of ideas known at the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. What is desired now is neither to mythicize urbanity as a more developed way of living, nor to mythicize rurality as the safest and purest of worlds.

### **A wakeful dream**

One of the main points of this study is the discussion, in the chapter "Imagination sees through", about how the imaginary manages to survive in a world which grows more and more rationalist and in a city where time and people pass by faster day by day. Here, in the readers' descriptions about the rural house of their dreams, it is possible to identify the presence of primeval and archetypical images such as earth, fire, water, wood, trees, fruits, birds, etc. The house in the country that readers dream of will be built with simplicity, using plain bricks or a prefabricated model in wood. The furniture, also made of wood, will be colonial style, confirming the strongly desired rusticity. The dreamers of the refuge in the countryside even want a porch surrounding the house,

where they can breath clean air, gaze at the horizon and experience the same admired freedom that the singing birds enjoy in the branches of the many trees around the house. There should be green all around. There should be clean abundant water; earth, bountiful mother, that will continuously yield vegetables without pesticide; fruit should be abundant, to be picked by hand and eaten on the spot. The house in the country is expected to be the best in coziness, as solid as the firmest on earth, feeding on temporal and spatial roots, clinging directly to the earth and not hung up in a building. This house would bring these readers closer to their relatives and warmer neighbors. With animals they would retrieve an old bond; along the paths they would recover the pleasure of being a pedestrian; in the clear sky they would know the phase of the moon correctly; in the river water, which rejuvenates and purifies, they could swim and fish again. And there, rain would be welcome, without the city's concerns with overflows and floods.

For many readers, the reading of the *Globo Rural* magazine not only brings back sensations experienced in the past but also stimulates, in the present, feelings and wakeful dreams that, in their imagination, create in a mythical form the rural house they dream of, to be built in the future – be it for visiting on weekends, or to move to for good after saving some money or when retirement is due. Remembrance as well as the wakeful dream can occur unexpectedly inside a crowded bus in the traffic jam after a day of work, in a stumble on an irregular cobblestone in the sidewalk, in a simple perfume that passes over us in the street. But it is also true that we sometimes try to stimulate it, in the coziness of a hammock, in a rocking chair, on the pillow minutes before sleeping, or even in the reading of a journalistic publication such as the *Globo Rural* magazine, wondering as the text is read and the pictures contemplated, moving away from the present so as to see again and see through.

### **The best of two worlds**

Whether deliberately or not, wondering takes place also as a “praise of slowness”. The reading of this massive product, even though we are reluctant to admit it, is capable of organizing meanings and things and, in a precarious way, it is even capable of causing rich aesthetic sensations and nourishing spirits that long for transcending in time and space. If the role of preserving symbols and myths was assigned in the past to religion, and was later transferred to the great arts and eventually to the cinema and to science itself, nowadays some journalistic stories can provide, within their own limitations, in readers having little intimacy

with literature, the indispensable luxury of fantasy and poetic experience. Rather than praising journalistic production, the intention here is to draw attention to the social responsibility of professionals in the area, whether they are reporters, editors, directors or owners of mass media.

Thus, the geographical, technological and cultural borders between rural areas and the urban world begin blurring, although the former had always been seen before as the place of social precariousness, the place of absences and disqualifications – lacking electrical power, water supply, hospitals, schools, roads, transportation, telephone, television, cinema and state authorities. The countryside, which used to be the place of isolation, is seen now as the possibility for better community life. And the city, which was the materialization of sociability and the way of being together, starts to concentrate the lonely and the cruelest forms of violence. Against pollution from the metropolis, the countryside offers nowadays fresh air, clean water and healthy food; against urban noise, silence; against accelerated time, extended time. Against the linearity of historical time, it offers the circularity of mythical time, in the rhythm of the seasons; against the quadratic form of walls and gates of houses in the cities, the round form of the countryside; against the geometry of urban streets, the unexpected rural geography; the circular countryside versus the quadratic city. The natural feminine countryside – offering rest, nutrition, disarmed protection, cycles – replaces the built-up masculine city - offering work, preset timing, provisioning, armed defense. The rural area which used to be the place of absences now becomes the place of presences.

The magazine readers, as double-constitution rural-urban citizens, dream of urbanized Arcadias, the city in the countryside, ‘the best of two worlds’. They show a Rousseau-like sensibility for the desire of proximity with the natural world, revealing as the counterpoint their discontentment with the city way of life. Those urban readers, as countless other Brazilians trampled in their universe of traditions by the brutality of urbanization and modern economy processes, manage to associate cultural and affective dimensions from rural life with the contrasts of contagious rhythms of modernity, seeking to revitalize daily life in rustic utopias or to recover a revitalized relation between past, present and future. If imagination acts as a psychic dilation, the wakeful dream widens the imaginative horizons of human potentialities. The mythical dream of the house in the country is a way to reject the disenchantment with the world and to insist on hope.

This is not meant as a call for a simple return to nature, nor as a

dissidence of modernity, nor a denial of the comfort brought by new technologies, nor a salvation by community, and not as a way of replacing great fantasies that have moved and still move us toward the cities and toward the technical-scientific world, with small domestic and naturalist fantasies. It does mean transforming the discontentment with the present into hopeful scenarios for the future. That is why, when someone says 'I want a house in the country', it does not mean that this person is naïve, a eulogizer of the past, an impertinent nostalgic. To see nostalgia without pertinence in this dream is like attributing to dreams the irrationality which we do not want to admit in diurnal life itself. The reader who dreams of the house in the country is saying 'I do not want violence', 'I do not want traffic jams', 'I do not want polluted air and polluted rivers', 'I do not want to be disrespected as a citizen', 'I do not want individualism nor the lack of solidarity'. This is criticism which should not be disregarded by village neighbors and work colleagues, by governors, businessmen, civic institutions, sociologists, anthropologists, researchers in general and, of course, by the press.

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