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“Honey, I’ve Shrunk the Space!” Public Policies, Spatial Finiteness and Social Justice in Agrarian Societies in Developing Countries

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The starting point of our communication is a simple observation: today many agrarian societies in developing countries are facing radical changes in the way their resources are managed and shared. These changes arise primarily because geometrical space is imposed as the only possible category capable of managing and sharing resources.

According to current theories, such changes will inevitably take place as the result of demographic growth and its logical spatial consequences, in other words, the progressive disappearance of unfarmed and intermediate spaces. In reality, most of the changes actually observed result from proactive public policies taken at national and international levels. These policies, when supported by in official discourses, are justified by the search for better equity together with an improvement of the general interest. In this context, public actions take two major directions. On the one hand, private ownership of the land, combined with the promotion of agricultural intensification, is imposed as the only mode of access to the land and the resources. On the other hand, conservationist’s approaches to the environment are favoured and result in the rapid extension of a range of protected areas.

Consequently, agrarian societies face new forms of fragmentation and finiteness of space which are exactly what the official programs wanted to prevent. It is thus urgent to question the efficiency and appropriateness of these choices. Do the new modes of land allocation lead to a more "thrifty" management of space? Do they generate new social disparities?

Categorizing and standardizing space, dividing it up, allocating it to specific users for specific use and encouraging individual strategies partially hide the various modes of management based on categories other than space which fundamentally modifies local social balances. This problem occurs with a particular acuteness in mobile and/or cyclic systems having no fixed bounds as, for instance, slash and burn systems or infield / outfield ones.

In this communication we intend to question the legitimacy of such public intervention on such systems. We will discuss how the reduction of spatial liberty and the shrinkage of agricultural space do encourage a better social and spatial justice? We will question both social equity and spatial efficiency.