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JAIRO BAQUERO MELO

Middle Classes and Rurality: The Expansion of Urban Middle Classes and New Social Inequalities in Colombia

ABSTRACT In this article I analyse the relationship between rurality and middle classes. Few recent studies on middle classes have examined the role of rurality within middle class expansion processes at the global scale. I conducted a critical analysis of rurality and the middle classes in light of a recent proliferation of studies on global middle classes. This proliferation may be reflective of an evolving political and academic discourse within mainstream institutions, aimed at promoting the expansion of urban middle classes. Consequently, a critical analysis of this political and academic discourse attending to the various impacts of the expansion of urban middle classes on nature, and on rural areas and populations, is required. I applied mixed research methods in a case study of Colombia. The results indicated a paradox inherent in the expansion of middle classes. On the one hand, this expansion is aimed at reducing general social inequalities, and yet, on the other hand, it increases rural (and urban–rural) inequalities. Moreover, the expansion of urban middle classes reproduces land concentration and has negative impacts on nature. Concurrently, connections between urban and rural populations, along with new ruralities encompassing urban middle class populations, are evolving under the banner of sustainability. These trends reflect the complexity of structures of inequality in the connections between rural and urban populations.

KEYWORDS middle classes, rurality, environment, land distribution, social inequalities

I. Introduction

In 2015, Colombia's president, Juan Manuel Santos, made the following statement:

“What we wanted to do in 2010 was [to build] a country with less poverty, more jobs, more security. Today we can say with pride that we are already a middle class country [...]. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) stated that 55 percent of the Colombian population belongs to the middle class [and this] has been achieved through the development of various social programs.” (Portfolio 2015)

This statement reflects the recent and growing interest, worldwide, in the expansion of middle classes. This interest is related to the political goals of governments in emerging countries that seek to showcase positive economic and social outcomes, including the reduction of inequality and poverty.

This widespread interest in middle classes has prompted an increasing number of studies specifically on Latin American middle classes (e.g., Angulo et al. 2014; Lopez/Ortiz 2011; Stampini et al. 2015). Moreover, it is reflected in the following statement issued by the IDB and cited in Stampini (2015: 1):

“Between 2000 and 2013, Latin America considerably reduced poverty (from 46.3 to 29.7 % of the population). [...] [However,] the region remains characterised by substantial vulnerability that also affects the rising middle-class. More specifically, we find that 65 % of those with daily income between \$4 and [\$]10, and 14 % of those in the middle-class experience poverty at least once over a 10-year period.”

In this article, I critically analyse the relationship between rurality and middle classes to assess the effects of global middle classes on nature and rural populations. These effects include environmental harm, new resource demands to attend to rising urban consumption, and a radical distribution of land between small and large properties. A review of recent literature on middle classes reveals the lack of a deeper understanding of the role of

rurality in processes of middle classes expansion at the global level. Here, I critically examine a proliferation of studies on global middle classes, which proliferation, I argue, stems from a political and academic discourse within mainstream institutions that have championed the expansion of urban middle classes. Moreover, a critical interrogation of the impacts of the expansion of urban middle classes on nature, and on rural areas and populations, and an examination of the complexities of these relationships, is required.

My main argument is that a paradox exists in relation to the middle classes. The expansion of urban middle classes may generate positive political outcomes and effects within unequal societies, which are more prone to violent armed conflicts than are more egalitarian societies. However, an issue that has received less attention in the literature is the role of rurality in the expansion of urban middle classes. The resulting paradox is that contemporary societies have been seeking equality at the cost of harming nature, with increased extraction of natural resources constituting a response to the expanding middle classes. Thus, the worldwide expansion of urban middle classes is in some way generating new rural inequalities through processes of primitive accumulation.

Although the concept of ‘rurality’ is contested, it nevertheless requires elucidation. Within the field of rural sociology, rurality has been associated with analytical elements such as “the identification of areas with low demographic density, the importance of agriculture in the economic structure of a region, and the cultural characteristics of populations, including their values, beliefs and behaviour” (Llambí/Pérez 2007: 40, author’s translation). However, transitions from, and transformations of rural areas have also been identified within the literature. Structural changes have been evident in rural Latin America, which include changing relations between populations and territories. The emergence of peri-urban areas, connections forged with cities, new and more frequent transport systems connecting rural and urban areas, and the linking of the rural and urban labour markets are some manifestations of these changing relations (Binswanger et al. 2016; Pérez/Farah 2006; Reardon et al. 2001). Studies on urban–rural interdependencies have revealed the existence of a rural ideal that is linked to “the state of being ‘close to nature’ and having enhanced feeling for the territorial community and associated social rela-

tions” (Johansen/Nielsen 2012: 781). Accordingly, scholars applying a territorial approach have observed a striking change in land use from a primary focus on agricultural production to the consumption of nature and landscapes. Attempts to define rurality involve an understanding of nature based on everyday individual perceptions. These elements of perception may include “open land and landscape[s], great views, the high sky and the feeling of being influenced by nature and the weather” (Johansen/Thuesen 2011 cited in Johansen/Nielsen 2012: 782). These characteristics of rurality suggest that there is a need to consider the physical and social dimensions of rural areas and populations, to critically examine the degree of disconnection between rural and urban areas and to consider land uses and their transformations.

This discussion has particular salience in relation to contemporary Latin America, where debates on development policies are polarised. This paper presents an analysis of the Global South literature, focusing on a case study of Colombia, which has been experimenting with diverse development processes. On the one hand, a rapid process of urbanisation that has accelerated in recent decades can be attributed to the effects of the armed conflict that led to forced peasant evictions. Thus, the earlier trend of rural-to-urban migration has been reinforced at an accelerated pace as a result of violence and primitive accumulation. Urban growth has led to the emergence of new neighbourhoods in marginal areas along with new demands for, and increases in, employment and education. Thus, in the view of the Santos government, Colombia has risen to become a middle-class country. On the other hand, a historical pattern of land concentration, the formation of large estates or *latifundia*, the presence of millions of poor peasants (including *colonos* and landless peasants) and the agricultural production of both permanent and transitory crops, such as coffee for national and international markets, are characteristic features of the socio-economic structure of rural areas. These two sets of contradictory processes have prompted a debate centring on development. For policy designers, one option entails expanding the urban middle classes at the cost of developing large industrial plantations and reducing the exploitation of small-scale farmers (Berry 2014; Lipton/Saghai 2017).

The study on which this article is based stems from my earlier historical research on Colombia’s agrarian reform. This research was conducted

for my doctorate and focused on land conflicts and agribusiness expansion in the country. In addition to that, the present study draws on my recent research on global value chains and their relation to peace-building efforts within several Colombian regions. Both research projects involved fieldwork conducted in rural areas, and focused analytically on two main elements: (i) the effects of laws granting land rights in a context of violence, and (ii) rural production processes and land uses in the context of globalisation. I gathered information through interviews conducted with peasants, public servants, leaders of social movements, members of NGOs and victims of the armed conflict, with the aim of analysing rural issues.

Key research findings from my earlier investigation revealed a lack of political will to introduce land reform in the 1960s and 1970s. Colombia's armed conflict has its roots in rural inequalities, since the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP) and other guerrilla groups evolved as peasant movements in opposition to the dominant classes. At the end of the 1980s, paramilitary groups emerged to defend the interests of elites. Those groups were responsible for forced displacement and the reproduction of land concentration. Rural development policies have led to significant exploitation, along with chaos and peasant protests in rural areas against the impacts of a process of economic liberalisation that was launched in the 1990s. Land ownership schemes have also been initiated, encompassing individual and collective properties that benefit indigenous communities and those of people of African descent. In 2011, to counter the effects of violent displacement, the government implemented land restitution policies, and, more recently, it has signed peace accords with FARC-EP.

The study's methodology involved the application of mixed methods. On the one hand, the analysis drew on statistical data on middle classes, and data on production and consumption (e.g. food and construction sectors) derived mainly from secondary sources. On the other hand, it included qualitative analysis derived from my previous and recent fieldwork. I conducted fieldwork in the rural areas of Chocó and Urabá (in the main banana producing region) between 2011 and 2014, and in Huila (one of the main coffee growing regions) between 2016 and 2017. I held interviews and conducted focus groups and workshops, while also engaging in participant observation within peasant organisations and cooperatives of coffee growers.

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents a revision of the concept of the middle classes, including the relationship between rurality and middle classes, drawing on recent literature on this topic. The next section focuses on three main analytical elements, with the aim of deepening the analysis of rurality and middle classes. These elements are: the negative impacts of the expansion of urban middle classes on nature, land concentration trends as they relate to the middle classes and new ruralities, and relations between urban and rural areas, conceptualised in terms of the middle classes. Lastly, conclusions are presented.

2. Literature on middle classes

The evolution of the concept of ‘middle classes’ has occurred concurrently with the evolution of societies and the social sciences. Thus, Marx (1986 [1867]) identified just two classes, namely the *bourgeoisie* and the proletariat, leaving no clear space for an intermediate class. Instead, he conceived of a *petite bourgeoisie* or a set of traders and professional workers who sold their labour and usually bought labour from others. Weber (1978 [1922]) conducted a more complex analysis of the middle classes that considered power relations and domination. He held that individuals’ socio-economic positions are determined by the economic activities that they choose, which may, or may not, guarantee a set of opportunities. Weber included peasants, artisans, public servants, employees of private firms and those developing liberal professions within the middle classes. Within the doctrine of functionalism, middle classes have been viewed in terms of the kinship of, and relationships between, agents who share values and attitudes that may lead to the reproduction of their class position (Parsons 1940). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the middle classes were mainly associated with economic activities and their positions within the labour market and were equated with classes of white-collar workers. For example, a labour movement existed in Germany that included a working class and a new middle class. The delineation between these two groups was determined by the educational factor and by job types, thereby limiting social mobility. In a different context in the United States, employees’ organisations were based on occupational or industrial

segments that increased the chances of social mobility (Kocka 1980). A sort of division existed between a lower middle class and an upper middle class, bearing political risks when the social mobility of the lower class diminished.

For these reasons, middle classes can be considered an element or outcome with political consequences. They produce “political affects, hierarchize people, prioritize projects, create and unmake nations, [and they are] related to other categories such as nation, democracy, economic growth, and the future” (Krishna 2015: 1-2). The formation of middle classes is thus related to processes of democratisation, economic growth, and prosperity.

Recent studies have sought to analyse and measure middle classes through the identification of several middle classes. Savage (2015) identified five intermediate social groups situated between the extremes of the elites and the precariat. These groups are the established middle class, the technical middle class, new affluent workers, the traditional working class, and emergent service workers. Studies have also been conducted on what has been described as the upper middle class that emerged during the post-World War Two period. In Western Europe and in the United States, this class embodies particular political and cultural behaviours. Moreover, it exhibits two main characteristics, namely exclusivity and fragmentation. Exclusivity is associated with desire for the political status equated with that of the elites. Fragmentation occurs through modes of political behaviour and individualism that are associated with cultural practices (Gayo et al. 2013).

Recent studies on middle classes share several characteristics. First, they emphasise that middle classes constitute an urban phenomenon. Specifically, the authors of these studies claim that there is an absence of middle classes in rural areas, because rural middle classes now live in cities, with only eight per cent of Colombia’s middle class remaining rural (Angulo et al. 2014: 177). Second, given their definition of middle classes based on monetary income indicators, these studies display an economic bias (Lopez/Ortiz 2011: 2). Thus, they downplay the fact that middle classes are complex and heterogeneous and include diverse social and socio-cultural elements (Neubert 2014: 23). Third, it can be argued that institutions such as the World Bank and university economics faculties have

prompted a proliferation of studies on middle classes. It is conceivable that the widespread interest in middle classes can be attributed to an increased interest in the study of inequalities in developed countries, as exemplified in Piketty's acclaimed study (Piketty 2014). The discourse on middle classes also plays a political role. Middle classes are associated with the rise of democracy and the deactivation of social conflicts in highly unequal societies (Krishna 2015: 3).

In this article, a relational approach, following Wright (1979; 1997), was adopted for defining middle classes. Consequently, criteria such as ownership of the means of production, education, and position held with the labour market are applied in the definition and identification of middle classes. Middle classes are conceived as being unstable and usually occupying contradictory positions. Middle classes not only occupy transitory positions. As noted by Wright (1979; 1997), the reason why middle classes occupy contradictory positions is because individuals may simultaneously embody the characteristics of several social classes. Thus, middle classes can acquire the characteristics of both lower and upper classes.

2.1 The existence of rural middle classes

Previous studies that have analysed rural middle classes have defined these classes mainly in relation to economic activities and consumption (Banerjee/Duflo 2008) and to a wealth status index (Shimeles/Ncube 2015). The first of these definitions was derived from an analysis of economic activities and consumption conducted in 13 countries spanning Asia, Latin America and Africa. Accordingly, Banerjee and Duflo (2015) identified middle classes as households with daily per capita expenditures (valued at purchasing power parity) in the ranges of US\$2–\$4 and US\$6–10. Whereas middle classes differ from the poor, these groups also share some common characteristics, including their budgetary allocations (the fraction of income spent on food). Urban dwellers spend much less on food than do rural dwellers (Banerjee/Duflo 2008: 11). Moreover, “in rural areas, the middle class seem less directly connected to agriculture (farming business) than those with low incomes” (Banerjee/Duflo 2008: 12). Because rural middle classes own land in contrast to the rural poor, they are less likely to be self-employed or wage workers in the agricultural sector. Instead, they are more likely to be local entrepreneurs or salaried

employees outside of agriculture, with 14 per cent–36 per cent of these households engaged in pluriactivity, including non-agricultural businesses (e.g., small stores, construction, services and running telephone booths) (Banerjee/Duflo 2008: 13). The economic activities of these rural middle classes include small businesses operated by business owners and involving small investments and few employees.

The second definition derives from a study of African middle classes conducted by Shimeles and Ncube (2015), who critiqued the application of per capita consumption expenditure to measure middle classes in previous studies. In rural areas, subsistence farming contains the inclusion of non-marketable products in the consumption basket. Thus, Shimeles and Ncube (2015: 3) applied an asset or wealth status index as an alternative measure, which they calculated using data extracted from the Demographic and Health Survey. They noted that household assets are accumulated to provide a buffer against shocks and to improve living standards through, for example, provision of tap water and better roofs, floors and bedrooms (Shimeles/Ncube 2015: 1). Their proposed asset ownership index is based on four key criteria: water sources, housing condition, access to electricity, and ownership of durable assets.

2.2 The relationship between middle classes and rurality

There are at least two gaps evident in the existing literature on middle classes. On the one hand, the emergence of urban middle classes may be equated with dispossession and inequalities in rural areas. Thus, counter-narratives that negate the positive effects of the expansion of middle classes require analysis. We need to ask whether greater equality in rural areas (including an expanded layer of middle-sized property owners) could constitute a counter-narrative to policies that seek to expand the global urban middle class at the cost of rural resources and populations.

On the other hand, discourses and policies on rural development are polarised. They pit large-scale and industrial agriculture against small-holders and peasants. Consequently, it is necessary to examine whether any space exists that benefits middle-sized farmers. Moreover, the relationship between land concentration and rural dispossession should be recognised. Migration from rural to urban areas (as portrayed in the modernisation discourse) is also associated with increases in the urban consumption levels

of middle classes. The property structure tends to be bi-modal. However, advancement of middle-sized properties contributes to the creation of a rural middle class. This necessitates overcoming the problem of microfundia. Microfundia relates to the ongoing process of subdivision of small properties into new smaller properties. Farmers usually subdivide their lands into pieces to give them to their children. Their children use those lands to establish with their families and to harvest. This process increases the number of small properties. The reduction of the microfundia is necessary to enable a significant number of peasants to come out of poverty and reduce their vulnerability (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2011: 50). As noted in a UNDP statement:

“[A] more democratic property structure is one that enhances the proportion of middle-sized owners. These actors can promote improvements in terms of technology, income and employment creation [and] better use of land and the environment. All of these actions will contribute to building democracy and peace in rural areas.” (UNDP 2011: 50, author’s translation)

3. Problematising the relationship between rurality and middle classes

Applying a critical perspective, I identified a recently developed political and academic discourse that draws attention to, and defends, expanding middle classes as a necessary strategy for overcoming inequalities and deactivating social conflicts. As mentioned at the outset, this discourse contains a paradox. On the one hand, it is aimed at reducing inequalities, mainly in urban areas, by championing policies directed at the provision of basic necessities for urban populations. On the other hand, the largely negative impacts on rural areas and populations resulting from the expansion of urban middle classes have received scant attention in the literature. Paradoxically, the reduction of urban inequalities is coincident with the rise of rural inequalities as well as of inequalities between urban and rural areas. In the following sections, I present three main analytical elements that feature in the relationship between rurality and middle classes. Two of these elements relate to negative impacts on nature and land concentra-

tion. The third element can be viewed as a counter-element, which includes the effects of the new ruralities and the urban–rural nexus based on an analysis of complex effects in terms of inequalities.

3.1 Negative impacts on nature

Some scholars have claimed that the global middle classes constitute a threat to planetary survival (Krishna 2015), and exist at the cost of rural populations and nature. The middle classes are a global phenomenon (Chakrabarty 2009) that brings with it global and entangled historical change (Krishna 2015). The origin of middle classes is bounded within nation-states, and this is key to understanding the global impacts of those classes, as evidenced in countries like India and China. The insatiable consumerism of global middle classes, aimed at achieving lifestyles modelled on those in the West, is on the rise in Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, this consumerism is not sustainable in environmental terms (Patnaik 2012).

Postcolonial scholars contend that middle classes were created as part of the modernisation process implemented in industrialised countries. The goal of creating middle classes is shared by capitalist and industrialised societies worldwide, and is an aspiration for developing societies (Krishna 2015: 4). These scholars further contend that capitalist expansion and colonialism were responsible for the emergence of the European middle classes. Moreover, as observed by Luxemburg (2003[1919]), the constitution of these classes has been associated with ongoing processes of primitive accumulation, including plunder, forced labour and slavery (among others). The vagueness entailed in the definition of the concept of the middle class has been instrumental for global and national capitalist elites, because the middle class operates as a myth that serves as “a model against which non-[W]estern historical developments are judged” (Joshi 2010, cited in Krishna 2015: 4).

Two key elements that highlight the negative impacts of the rising middle classes on nature are forced evictions of rural populations and the harming of the natural environment. The first element can be traced to the urbanisation process that occurs as a consequence of rural-to-urban migration, and/or through forced evictions of peasants and indigenous populations. Urban prosperity is achieved at the cost of ongoing primitive

accumulation or rural dispossession on a global scale. This includes the construction of urban housing, which requires materials such as cement, sand and those used in the production of bricks, the extraction of which creates pressures on mountains and mines. For example, at the global level, energy consumption figures (in kg of oil equivalent per capita) increased from 1,597.7 in 1994 to 1,738.4 in 2004 and to 1,920.7 in 2014 (OECD/IEA 2014). In the particular case of Columbia, energy consumption rose from 608.5 in 2004 to 711.5 in 2014 (OECD/IEA 2014). Moreover, the production of grey cement, used in the construction of houses and infrastructure, increased from 767.7 thousand tons in 2009 to 1,110.4 thousand tons in 2015 in the country (Quintero 2016).

In terms of dietary patterns, meat production has increased in recent years. Figures for 2014 for global meat production were 59.2 million tons of beef, 110.4 million tons of pork, and 86.3 million tons of poultry meat (Miazzo/Pisani 2015: 6). Increases in meat production at the global level were mainly caused by increases in poultry production between 2000 and 2014 (59 per cent of the increase), whereas pork and beef production rose by 30 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively.

In fieldwork carried out in Huila department, I found that several dams have been constructed, such as El Quimbo and Betania, aiming to produce new energy sources. There are proposals to build new dams, for example in Oporapa, a village whose inhabitants are mainly coffee growers. This coffee culture has been put at danger because agriculture would then be replaced by this new extractivist economy, affecting the land rights of peasants. It may also produce environmental harm. Local populations have been instigating collective action to resist the impacts (for example a popular referendum against the construction of this dam in Oporapa). My fieldwork in lower Atrato in Chocó also revealed that an expansion of monoculture crops such as palm oil produced the forced eviction of peasants from their land. This displacement was carried out by rural elites connected with paramilitary groups with interests in seizing and concentrating lands.

Consequently, the rise of the middle classes in recent years has also entailed land grabbing processes (Borras et al. 2012: 845), including scaled demands for minerals, land grabbing in response to the changing dietary patterns of global middle classes, and new demands for energy sources.

These processes have been associated with the construction of dams as well as the expansion of crops such as maize, soybeans and palm oil for industrial use, resulting in local land and labour conflicts. Consequently, these processes have generated new ways of regulating land and nature that favour the reproduction of the global middle classes.

3.2 Middle classes and land concentration

An association exists between middle classes and land ownership. The implementation of land use and ownership policies usually leads to the polarisation of two socio-economic groups: large landowners and smallholders. Governments generally promote development policies aimed at integrating peasants as waged workers within agro-industrial production systems. This perspective on development leaves little room for the existence or participation of middle-sized landowners in production systems. Thus, the role of middle producers tends to be downsized in terms of land ownership and production. The case of Colombia is illustrative. The country's Gini coefficient for land concentration is 0.87 (UNDP 2011). The agrarian structure mainly comprises extensive and inefficient livestock farms. Historical violence inflicted by guerrillas, the official army, and paramilitary groups, accounts for a total of more than seven million internally displaced people (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC] 2017). In recent years, the government has promoted extraction-oriented development policies (chiefly focusing on mining) and new energy sources (dam construction and agro-industrial plantations of monocultures such as palm oils to produce biofuels). In parallel with these development initiatives, national and local governments have championed carrying out social policies such as income transfers, education and health subsidies. One of the outcomes of this socio-economic and political structure is a land distribution structure and rural property ownership pattern including land concentration that leaves little room for middle-sized properties.

Table 1 presents the structure of land distribution in Colombia in terms of family agricultural units (Unidad Agrícola Familiar [UAF]) in 2009. The UAF is an indicator related to property size, productivity and the number of property owners. In terms of area, middle-sized properties accounted for just 18.2 per cent of Colombia's territory. The shares of these properties and of their owners in terms of the total number of properties

and property owners in the country were just 4.99 per cent and 5.8 per cent, respectively. Small properties and microfundia together accounted for 29.6 per cent of the country's total area, while large properties accounted for 52.2 per cent of the total area. These large properties, which were owned by 1.15 per cent of the total number of property owners, accounted for just 0.86 per cent of the total number of properties in the country.

Range – Family agricultural unit	Area (per cent)	Number of Properties (per cent)	Property Owners (per cent)
Microfundia	10.5	80.49	78.31
Small Properties	19.1	13.66	14.72
Middle-sized Properties	18.2	4.99	5.83
Large Properties	52.2	0.86	1.15
Total	100	100	100

Table 1: Rural property structure in Colombia measured in ranges of family agricultural units (UAF)_I in 2009

Source: Adapted from UNDP 2011: 50, based on Acción Social 2010

While conducting fieldwork on coffee production in rural areas, I found that the structure of land ownership was characterised by diverse elements. On the one hand, there were families owning an average of one or two hectares. Other families that had acquired between five and 10 hectares for coffee production could be classified as belonging to the middle class. My field observations revealed that the economic situation of families with one or two hectares was the worst. Over time, parents are compelled to divide their properties to provide their children with land,

thereby reproducing microfundia. This situation is demotivating for families and has led to a loss of interest in working in the countryside among the youth. Lack of land rights has prompted many youths to move to the cities (El Instituto para el Desarrollo Rural de Sudamérica [IPDRS] 2017) where they often live in conditions of poverty. On the other hand, the official discourse of local governments is that for a family to live decently (with a monthly income that covers subsistence), each family of coffee growers should have at least two hectares available for coffee production (interview conducted with members of the Comité de Cafeteros del Huila 2016). However, the ongoing reproduction of microfundia in these coffee-growing regions does not feature in this discourse.

This polarised property structure generates high levels of land concentration that are reflected in the Gini coefficient. Several problematic outcomes emerge from this trend. Inequality has been one of the underlying causes of the onset and prolongation of armed conflict in the country. The persistence of inequality in rural areas could pose a challenge for the future implementation of peace agreements between the government and FARC-EP. However, in practice, the government has focused its attention on urban populations. A statement by the president articulates this interest in the promotion of urban development: “A sustainable long-term peace is not possible if we do not make the country a fairer country, and the best way of creating the most equitable country is by [providing] a good education to everyone [along with] equal opportunities” (Portfolio 2015).

With the influx of millions of displaced persons into the cities, and with fewer landowners accumulating large properties, the creation of an urban consumerist and educated middle class is a major political goal for the government. A policy of land restitution has also been implemented to return land to displaced populations. However, there have been obstacles to the implementation of this policy, including the murders of local peasants and leaders claiming their land rights. Moreover, identifying who is entitled to land restitution has been problematic because of the resettlement of abandoned lands. In some cases, new settlers were brought in by regional elites after evicting the former owners. These processes reveal the complexities of the current settlement situation in Colombia’s rural areas, where implementation of the peace accords is yet to be accomplished.

3.3 New ruralities and the rural-urban connection

Rural middle classes are heterogeneous and exist in relation to so-called new ruralities. The relationship between rurality and middle classes crosses a first axis relating to the identification of rural populations. The debate on new ruralities has included discussions on the characteristics of rural populations. Far from being static, the rural space is a dynamic one in which diverse processes of change are unfolding. Changes within rural populations are also evident alongside those of the rural landscape.

Rural populations are heterogeneous and are composed of several social groups. In the 1990s, Colombian rural areas encompassed heterogeneous social groups such as settlers, landless peasants, tenants, agricultural workers, service workers, modern landowners, traditional landowners, traders, livestock breeders, and sectors of the mafia (e.g., drug traffickers) (Zamosc 1992). These social groups have had impacts on the structuring of middle classes and on relations between social classes within rural settings.

A relevant element here relates to rural economic activities. In the past, these activities were mainly associated with agriculture and the extraction of raw materials. However, in recent decades, rural populations have evidenced economic diversification, incorporating activities such as construction, retail trade, tourism, and food processing (Llambí/Pérez 2007; Pérez/Farah 2006).

The relationships between rural and urban areas and inhabitants are complex. New forms of identification of rural populations based on the relations between urban and rural settings are evident. Although urban middle classes are consumers of rural goods and landscapes, new middle classes that can be identified as “new peasantries” (or *neocampesinos*) have also emerged. These groups mainly comprise youths (though older individuals are also included) who are ‘tired’ of the urban lifestyle, chaos and pollution of the cities, and are seeking rural places and lifestyles enabling them to reconnect with nature. Various groups are experimenting with new ways of living in harmony with nature. An example of this trend is Aldea Feliz, an ecovillage in the municipality of San Francisco in Cundinamarca. This group aims to recover bygone community practices, including collectively harvesting their food and engaging in biocon-

struction. They promote environmentally friendly practices, a collaborative economy, and solidarity developed through their own system of education (home schooling) and governance. A new road connects San Francisco and Bogotá, which are in close proximity to each other. The community is not isolated, and its members work online, for example as web designers.

This ecovillage is illustrative of a global trend. There are almost 10,000 communities worldwide pursuing sustainable goals, most of which are located near big cities. This trend originated in Scotland and India several decades ago, and more recently, it has taken place in other countries. Colombia has an integrated network of 17 eco-villages (Pérez 2016). The social, cultural and environmental impacts of these projects require investigation. It is possible that such settlements and villages may produce complex local outcomes in terms of social inequalities. It is thus necessary to scrutinise interactions between these groups and local people to examine whether or not existing inequalities between rural and urban spaces are being reproduced. It is also possible that these new communities have positive impacts through the training and education of local rural populations. Further research is necessary on the possibility of an emerging interchange of local and external knowledge, and of developing collaborative new economies and new types of relations with nature.

4. Conclusion

This article has presented a critique of recent studies of middle classes. The prevailing political and academic discourse on middle classes contains several paradoxes. On the one hand, it promotes policies aimed at reducing urban inequalities within unequal societies. On the other hand, it appears to offer a prescription formulated within multilateral institutions and mainstream universities to be implemented by countries in the Global South. However, governments and multilateral institutions have not conducted studies to examine the negative effects of expanding global middle classes on nature. Thus, this article provides an analysis of the impacts of expanding middle classes in rural areas.

In contrast to studies that have traditionally applied income and consumption indicators in relation to middle classes, this article has focused on the relation between middle classes and rurality. Recognizing that rurality is a contested category and that rural areas have undergone structural changes, I have attempted to conceptualise alternative relations between these categories. I identified three main elements of these relationships: the effects of middle classes on nature; the impacts of middle classes on rural land concentration; and the effects of the new ruralities and connections between urban and rural areas in relation to the middle classes.

The first of these elements involves the spread of urban middle classes that has produced environmental impacts resulting from intensified extraction and the use of raw materials to produce goods for the global middle classes. These exploitative processes include the extraction of natural resources, land grabs, displacement of rural populations and their relocation in peripheral urban areas, and the dissemination of a consumerist culture. The second element relates to the formation of land use and ownership policies that tend to polarise socio-economic groups, such as large landowners and smallholders. The third element relates to new ruralities and new forms of identification of rural populations, based on the relationship between urban and rural settings. Concurrent with the consumption of rural goods and landscapes by urban middle classes, alternative lifestyles and projects aimed at harmonious reconnections with nature are being developed by new middle class populations, identified as ‘new peasantries’. However, the impacts of these processes in terms of inequalities require further investigation. The configuration of new and complex rural spaces connecting urban populations seeking alternative lifestyles within eco-villages with traditional rural populations may produce new forms of inequalities that reproduce existing social urban–rural inequalities.

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- 1 The family agricultural unit (Unidad Agrícola Familiar– [UAF]) is a property unit related to property size, productivity and the number of property owners. It generates at least two legal minimal income wages in terms of production. The UAF's value includes the quality and potential use of soils. The UAF ranges for micro-fundia, small properties, middle-sized properties, and large properties were 0–0.5, 0.5–2, 2–10 and 10, respectively.

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ABSTRACT In diesem Artikel analysiere ich die Beziehung zwischen Ruralität und Mittelklassen. Wenige rezente Studien zu Mittelklassen haben die Bedeutung der Ruralität im Prozess der Mittelklassen-Expansion auf globaler Ebene analysiert. Die vorliegende kritische Analyse der Beziehung von Ruralität und Mittelklassen entstand vor dem Hintergrund eines starken Anstieges an Studien über globale Mittelklassen in den letzten Jahren. Dieser Anstieg spiegelt möglicherweise den sich entwickelnden politischen und akademischen Diskurs innerhalb von Mainstream-Organisationen wider, durch den die Expansion der urbanen Mittelklassen befördert werden soll. Deshalb ist eine kritische Analyse dieser politischen und akademischen Diskurse zu den vielfältigen Auswirkungen der Expansion der urbanen Mittelklassen auf Natur und ländliche Gebiete sowie die ländliche Bevölkerung notwendig. In einer Fallstudie zu Kolumbien verwendete ich ein Set unterschiedlicher Forschungsmethoden. Die Ergebnisse deuten auf ein Paradoxon hin, das mit der Expansion der Mittelklassen einhergeht. Die Expansion zielt zum einen auf die allgemeine Reduktion sozialer Ungleichheit ab, befördert zum anderen aber Ungleichheiten in ländlichen Regionen und im Verhältnis von Stadt und Land. Darüber hinaus vermehrt die Expansion der urbanen Mittelklassen Landkonzentration und hat negativen Einfluss auf die Natur. Zugleich fungieren die Beziehungen zwischen urbaner und ländlicher Bevölkerung, und auch neue Formen der Ruralität, die städtische Mittelklasse-Gruppen miteinschließt, unter dem Banner der Nachhaltigkeit. Diese Entwicklungen verdeutlichen die Komplexität von Ungleichheitsstrukturen in Verbindung mit ländlichen und städtischen Bevölkerungsgruppen.

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