

Caring, Repairing, *and* Reimagining: Experiences *from the* Rural World

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In the era of the Anthropocene and amidst a severe environmental crisis, part of humanity has set out to imagine new ways of addressing global warming, hyper-production of goods, and massive waste generation. Academia and public policies have placed their focus primarily on urban areas, neglecting the experiences that the rural world can offer us. Reversing this trend, this article focuses on a rural sector of the Central Valley of Chile to reveal how, through daily and 'artisanal' practices, it is possible to reimagine notions such as creativity, innovation, and adaptability, in the face of changing environments. Specifically, it recognizes the dynamic way in which the inhabitants of rural sectors comprehend objects and the environment; their particular way of living space and time within the local geography; and the role that their tools, technologies, practices, and knowledge play in the daily production of their homes.

Keywords

 material culture
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Caring, Repairing, and Reimagining: Experiences from the Rural World

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On a hillside away from the rural town of San Pedro de Melipilla, in the Metropolitan Region of Chile, lives Eusebio Campos. His property is wide and fenced, and in several spots across his extensive outdoor yard, there are visible traces of human occupation: an orchard, storage sheds, and corrals, along with a motley series of working stations or workshops— filled with tools, furniture, and objects. In these spaces, Don Eusebio prepares *chicha*, shears sheep, repairs machines, polishes and rectifies metal pieces, invents new tools, and adjusts rickety furniture, among other things.

Furthermore, the vast terrain seems to be a repository of used objects, sorted into piles by typology: here, plastic containers; beyond, a stack of tires; on a large stone, butane gas cartridges; under a tree, nails and screws. Perhaps, to an untrained eye, they might seem like piles of *cachureos* (odds and ends); however, we will soon discover that for Don Eusebio, they are raw materials waiting to be used. In his domain, nothing is wasted, everything is transformed, little is bought, and there is virtually no waste. That is the way of life worldview in which he grew up, a characteristic shared by the majority of precarized farmers in the Central Valley of Chile (Aguilera et al., 2012); a physical and cultural space historically marked by precarity and isolation because of the abusive large estate exploitation system that dominated the territory until the mid-20th century (Salazar, 1985).

The farmers who inhabited the Chilean countryside were, to a large extent, landless laborers working as farmhands or tenants for large landowners. In return, they received a piece of land where they produced almost everything necessary to live, in addition to meager monetary compensation that they used to acquire certain industrial commodities such as oil, sugar, flour, coffee, or candles, whose packaging they re-used to create household objects such as clothing, night tables, lamps, or toys (Muñoz, 2020). Although this universe has undergone radical transformations over time (Bengoa, 1999), we have found that many of these guiding principles are still present, in different ways, not only in the rural world but also in contemporary urban environments, especially among working-class groups who are direct heirs of that cultural tradition (Muñoz, 2020).

We are currently facing the worst environmental crisis in history, triggered by unsustainable forms of production and consumption that promote the constant replacement of goods under the motto ‘take-make-dispose’ (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). It is evident that we need to move towards sustainable ways of life that discuss the possibility of degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013) and/or the transition to circular economies that allow the preservation of the value of products and their materials for longer periods (European Commission, 2015). To achieve this, the durability of goods is key (Cooper, 1994; Verbeek & Kockelkoren, 1998), which is based on both durable production and care, maintenance, and repair practices (Graham & Thrift, 2007), issues historically overlooked in sustainability debates (Muñoz et al., 2022). To advance their appreciation, it is necessary to understand the concrete relationships that people establish with their everyday environments, and the role that their particular way of seeing the world plays in this relationship (Ariztía et al., 2017; Fletcher, 2012; Tironi, 2015).

To enrich this debate, it is essential to incorporate and value the perspective of communities and geographical spaces that are underrepresented in the literature on sustainable consumption (Sesini et al., 2020). In this article, from our standpoint as urban residents, consumers, and active participants in the capitalist system, we are precisely asking ourselves: what can we learn from the farmer’s way of life? To do this, we focus on their relationship with objects and materialities to envision a new pact with our environment. Consequently, we observe not only their practices and knowledge but, above all, the cultural and symbolic principles at stake, seeking to reverse “the invalidation, undervaluation, and invisibility given to the knowledge systems and biological heritage of traditional communities” (Cárdenas Grajales, 2010, p. 3).

Methodologically, this research was conducted over three years in different urban and rural locations in the country, to analyze people’s practices and their disposition to intervene, care for, and reuse objects from the domestic sphere; as well as their relationship with the affections generated by these actions.

We worked in nearly forty homes, conducting interviews, participant observation, guided tours, and an elicitation process in which we photographed and talked to people about their most precious objects. Among this variety of data, we have decided to focus this article on a single case study: Don Eusebio. This allows us to illustrate the most relevant aspects of this universe more clearly, and to account for logics and practices that are common to most of the people we interviewed. In this way, we aim to value practices and perspectives that, although they may seem distant, are at the origins of urban lifestyles: the direct heirs of that farmer's cultural tradition (Muñoz, 2020, 2018). This is why we can see some of these logics in urban contexts, especially working-class ones (Muñoz et al., 2022). However, the case of Don Eusebio highlights the specificity of this farmer heritage, characterized by a set of knowledge and practices anchored in a particular relationship with the environment and materials.

In the following pages, we focus on three specific objects of Don Eusebio's house: a broom, an emery, and a soil sieve, whose characteristics account for the relationship that farmers establish with their environments. We chose the broom because it is made with materials that are produced in the same terrain, and it reflects a particular space-time that dialogues with the rhythms of nature, its climate, geography, and seasons. The soil sieve, on the other hand, reveals Don Eusebio's ability to see mutability instead of stability. For him, both matter and its environment are neither given nor fixed, but dynamic entities that are constantly intervened and modified. Finally, we present the emery to illustrate the indispensable nature of both tools and knowledge and trades when it comes to the daily need to intervene and maintain things, their forms, and their functions in isolated contexts.

THE BROOM, A REMNANT OF ANOTHER SPACE-TIME

It was a broom, one of those traditional ones with a wooden stick that ends in a bunch of tied straws, resting on an exterior wall of Don Eusebio's house. When we asked him about it, he told us that it was nothing special, just a typical rural broom made by families using resources cultivated in the same territory. To make the handle, they look for straight, resistant, knot-free, and easily sandable woods; while for the fibers, they grow a special type of corn (*curagua* or *curahuilla*), which is solely used for making brooms. The process begins by choosing the cultivation site, where seeds collected the previous year are sown. They carefully care for their growth, protecting them from rain, frost, or any adverse weather that could affect their development. When summer arrives, the fibers are harvested, dried in the sun, cleaned by beating them, and braided. Finally, they are fastened to the handle with wires. The remaining fibers are stored, either for making other brooms or repairing them as they wear out, eventually returning to the earth.

Figure 4: Don Eusebio's rain gauge. Photograph: Danilo Petrovich.



Like the broom, many of the objects found in the rural home are made by the farmers from materials sourced from their environment. This reflects a relationship of mutual dependence and in-depth knowledge of the inhabited territory and its cycles. Crop cultivation and animal husbandry depend not only on care, but also on the attention, planning, and management of temperatures, rainfall, winds, and soil. An example of this synchrony is the importance of the rain gauge for Don Eusebio, recovered from the landlord's old estate house after the agrarian reform. It has been with him for more than fifty years, allowing him to measure the amount of rainfall and thus plan irrigation, crops, and other land uses. Like other objects, it has been constantly transformed and adapted to the wear and cycles of the material, as well as to environmental changes and its owner's needs.

The daily, productive, and reproductive life (Goicovic Donoso, 2005) of farmers like Don Eusebio takes place mainly within these domestic grounds. These spaces blur the borders between interior and exterior, as well as between the natural and the artefactual, making them diffuse and even nonexistent (Muñoz, 2012, 2020). It is a continuous and dynamic 'landscape' (Ingold, 1993), constantly generated by its human and non-human inhabitants through actions of different types. Objects are an active part of this ecosystem, and also operate as mediating agents, metaphorically (Tilley, 2002) representing, in their constant transformation, the relationship between people and their environments.

Artifacts like the broom are building a landscape and materializing the activities from which they are produced in a social and cultural system marked by the temporality of the cycles of land and life (Chavarría Zemelmann, 2009; Morandé, 2010). For this reason, they are also recognized within a cycle: they are born, grow, live, and are transformed or return to earth, in a universe where 'making' and 'repairing' are part of a not only spatial, but temporary continuum (Sennett, 2009).

THE SOIL SIEVE: THERE IS NO WASTE BUT RAW MATERIAL

We walk with Don Eusebio through his field as he shows us around. Next to his house, under the shade of a *parrón* (a grapevine pergola), we find a small structure made of wood and tin that works as a cellar, where he keeps wood, boxes, a plaster Virgin Mary, cables, and several onion strings hanging from the beams. On the side, there is a table made of scraps of wood, and on top of it, there is a rectangular object composed of a frame holding a sheet of metal with regularly spaced round holes. Don Eusebio takes it in his hands and presents it to us, saying: "This is a *harnero*, it serves for sieving the soil." He explains, "You separate the larger leaves and let the soil pass through below." Then he proudly adds: "I made it. I got it from a *bomba* [gas station], where they were changing the oil to a truck, and they took it off. It had a tremendous filter on it, so I asked the gentleman: 'Hey, can you give

it to me?’ ‘No problem’, he told me”. He mentions that, when he saw it, he immediately thought it would be useful for something, and when he needed a soil sieve, it was there to be transformed.

This creativity and practical sense in using industrial parts, containers, and packaging repeats itself in numerous other artifacts and objects, such as a table that he made from a road sign, a ladle to which he added an extended handle using a piece of iron he found ‘lying around’, and a water cart made from a water tank mounted on a pair of cartwheels.

Figure 2: Water cart manufactured by Don Eusebio. On the background, materials and tools. Photograph: Tomás Errázuriz.



From this logic, we understand that the objects scattered in courtyards and storerooms of farmer houses—as well as, deliberately, in selected drawers and shelves of urban houses—are far from being waste. They are rather valuable raw materials, available to be used at any time (Errázuriz, 2018), either to repair other objects or to give them a new function through design (Brandes et al., 2009). As a neighbor of the same sector told us: “Those who save always have”.

Much of the sustainable ways of life that characterize the farmer living in the Chilean Central Valley are related to the ability to see the potential of the materialities that surround its inhabitants. As Dant points out, “Unlike the industrialised production of commodities, the work of repair does require a complex repertoire of gestures, a variable and responsive emotional tone, and a developed capacity for gathering knowledge of particular objects through all the senses” (2010, p. 3). There are no broken wheels or empty containers, but rather plastics, metals, rubbers, or receptacles that can be reimagined and transformed to meet daily life needs. As Don Eusebio teaches us, showing us an old toy: “First, I will see if it can be fixed; and, if it cannot be fixed, it has copper, springs, aluminum.”

He thus operates from the ‘craftsman’s ethos’ (Sennett, 2009), based on a particular attention and intelligence towards the matter at hand: the result of constant observation and work on materials and their forms.

Therefore, in this way of life, gesture and function prevail over appearance; or as Ingold (2013) states, material and sensory properties prevail over abstract or symbolic ones. Sensory components always appear, reveal themselves, and enter into a negotiation with the primary function they are supposed to fulfill. In contrast to what we have seen in other social groups where class distinction operates (Muñoz et al., 2022), Don Eusebio is not limited by aesthetic considerations regarding household objects: materials are valued exclusively for their quality and relevance. A soil sieve can be round, square, or rectangular, made of wood, plastic, or metal. What truly matters is that it serves its purpose: “If it serves to sieve the soil,” says Don Eusebio, “then it is a soil sieve.”

Figure 3: Materials accumulated outside Don Eusebio’s house.
Photograph: Ricardo Greene.



It is worth mentioning that this intensive and recursive use of materials is made possible by a domestic territory that has the capacity to store them. These are households that, on the one hand, have limited access to institutionalized channels for the circulation of objects, including both cleaning and waste disposal services and the market for goods; on the other hand, they often have ample spaces that facilitate storage. The house then operates as a ‘terminal station’ (Errázuriz, 2018) where diverse resources accumulate, favoring their visibility and availability. Away from the logic of the passing of things marked by acquisition, use, and disposal that prevails in the urban world, they remain in place there, adapting to daily life cycles and needs.

THE EMERY: TOOLS AS AN EXTENSION OF THE BODY

The first time we visited Don Eusebio, we used the excuse that we needed him to straighten out a digging bar that one of us had lying around the house for a while.

We were surprised to see how, despite his 80 years and guided by a ‘sensual knowledge’ of and with things (Dant, 2010), he took the bar, placed it on an anvil, and with countless gestures (sledgehammer blows, grabs, turns) managed to restore it to its original form. He then took it to an old emery he had set up on a table under an outdoor roof. He had rescued the emery among *cachureos* (odds and ends) from a nearby town, and adapted some old discs that belonged to the large estate from which his lands come out after the agrarian reform. He connected the emery to the electrical outlet hanging from a thorn tree, and skillfully sharpened the digging bar.

Figure 4: Don Eusebio's Emery
Photograph: Danilo Petrovich.



For Don Eusebio, reparability is an inherent condition of an environment where cultural practices are far away from the networks of capital. A history marked by the lack of access to industrial products or expert services has reinforced agency over the territory, where boundaries between consumers and producers are erased, and different types of networks are generated. In addition to having the time, knowledge, and skills to intervene in his environment, Don Eusebio has a set of artifacts and materials that allow him to do so. Much like the emery, many tools for various purposes—many of which he created—are scattered throughout the property in an apparently chaotic distribution. However, it quickly becomes evident that each one has a precise place and position. We find them inside the house, as well as in an outdoor shed, and even hanging from trees like fruit—a multitude of utensils and equipment with scrapes and dents that indicate they are used frequently.



Figure 5: Tool shed. Photograph: Ricardo Greene.

Archaeology teaches us that tools and their use expand human capabilities and agency in the world. They operate as an extension of the body, playing a key role in human development (Leroi-Gourhan, 1971), and this is precisely what happens in the rural world. It is not possible to think of knowledge about manufacturing, care, and repair as isolated from the tools that make them possible—they are entities that operate in a network (Latour, 2008). It is the relationship between making and knowing, typical of the artisanal world, that forges a certain intelligence in the hands (Sennett, 2009) and the tools that adapt to them, allowing any object or artifact to become something familiar, understandable, and plausible to be intervened. Don Eusebio confesses in this regard that, “having iron or hammers, I can do anything; if you notice, I’ve got it all.”

The tools are mostly personal: many of them manufactured or adapted by him, which by dint of use have been coupled to his hands and gestures. In several of them, we can distinguish traces of wear, inscribing in the matter the uses they have been put to. Likewise, Don Eusebio’s hands reveal the marks of the tools and the work with which he has built and maintained not only the objects, but also his environment. In any case, Don Eusebio’s craft is not exceptional. He may be an excellent repairer and creator of new objects, but these skills are common—with

greater or lesser skill—among farmers. It is a situated knowledge that is linked to ways of making constitutive of rural territories. In those contexts, when something breaks down, very rarely do they turn to formal and professional expertise, nor do they go to specialized hardware stores. Practical life had and still has to be built and solved right there, within the autarkic limits of the house. What is interesting is that today, even though certain structural conditions have changed, the market has permeated, and many objects—especially electronics—cannot be repaired *in situ*, these practices are still alive and working. The rural world bestows a value, an ethic, and also a joy related to being able to build or repair something by oneself, a matter that we clearly see in Don Eusebio, who, despite having the resources to pay for furniture or services, prefers to do everything by himself.

Figure 6. Hands and tools.
Photograph: Danilo Petrovich.



CONCLUSIONS

Local, rural, and farmer knowledges have long been denigrated and conceived as primitive or a burden for the future (Crosby, 1988; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018), but radical and necessary knowledge is not always found in avant-gardes; in other words, avant-gardes are not always found in the metropolises or centers of power. Sometimes, to look to the future, one must turn to those who, from the margins of the present, keep ancestral knowledge alive (Escobar, 2017), such as the farm-

er ways of life we have just presented, which also reveal alternative, feasible, and sustainable modes.

This article explores some of the social, symbolic, and cultural principles underlying the situated, autonomous, and circular design that the farmer inhabitants of the Central Valley of Chile establish with objects and their everyday environment. The particularities discussed here are aimed at promoting and recognizing them in order to move towards more conscious ways of life. The three selected and discussed objects reveal aspects on which the sustainable and resilient relationship towards change that Don Eusebio and much of the farmer world establish with their environment, are based.

First, the broom highlights the existence of a particular notion of space and time, characterized by continuity between people and their natural and material environments. It represents a unique ontology that challenges naturalistic logic (Descola, 2005) and gives rise to a landscape governed by the cycles of the earth, where inhabitants establish a vital commitment to the entire territory they create and, in turn, creates them. Then, the soil sieve shows the importance of that practical intelligence, of the attentive and creative gaze upon things and materials. Don Eusebio is capable of seeing the potential of things beyond their singular and 'original' form, recognizing their sensory and practical qualities; and from there, their possible uses and transformations. Finally, the emery reveals the role of tools and associated knowledges, as bodily extensions that expand the possibilities of agency over things. This underscores the deep complementarity and involvement between people, their hands, and artifacts, which are mutually molding each other in order to intervene the matter, adapting to a constantly changing environment.

Don Eusebio, like the craftsman described by Sennet (2009), develops, through his practice, a particular knowledge about the material world around him. This knowledge allows him to have not only an active role and responsibility for it, but also the ability to adapt to transformations, and adapt this world to his own agenda. This goes against the grain of a capitalist system of production and consumption that arrogates to itself the monopoly of the creative and innovative transformation of the material environment, while favoring the constitution of global and passive consumers.

The rural households of the Central Valley of Chile call upon us to adopt a situated, conscious attitude towards the material world around us. In the current scenario, we consider this attitude revolutionary, since it questions the dominant logic by enabling a higher level of responsibility, intervention, and decision-making regarding the environment. Incorporating this knowledge and practices primarily requires a change of perspective, recognizing and validating ways of making that have been rendered invisible but which, at least in a significant part of Latin America inherited from the farmer tradition, are still present (Muñoz,

2020); not only in rural environments but even in urban contexts (Muñoz et al., 2022). Valuing and reworking them in the context of climate crisis is vital to move towards a possible post-capitalist future more effectively. □

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