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**Re-Inventing the Rural: Between the Social and the Natural
XXIII ESRS Congress – Vaasa 2009**

The XXIII Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology hosted by the University of Vaasa took place in Vaasa in Finland (17–21 August 2009). The congress whose main theme concerned the issue of 'Re-Inventing the Rural: Between the Social and the Natural' was organised on three levels: plenary sessions, working groups and thematic symposia, the core problem being the relationship between scientific knowledge and environmental policies and effects it could have on political, economic and cultural sustainability at national and EU level.

The five-day congress was divided into four days of debates which were organised in 37 working groups and over 25 sessions (both plenary and mini-plenary) during which participants discussed the issues of political, cultural and economic sustainability in rural areas, as well as the impact of globalisation, governance, changing population and the agrifood sector on rural areas in Europe – perceived from different perspectives. One-day field trips, which are an inherent part of the tradition of rural sociology congresses, a diversified programme, so that participants could experience how ecological/natural living in Finland can be combined with an urban touch. There was a possibility to see the Närpes region, which is known as having the highest share of immigrant rural workers in the whole of Ostrobothnia, and examples of manufacturing entrepreneurship.

In the keynote speech entitled 'Enacting rural sociology: Or what are the creativity claims of the engaged sciences' the chairman of ESRS, Philip Lowe, accentuated that the 50th anniversary of European rural sociology should be perceived as a moment of special reflection, when rural sociologists should try to answer the question about what it has achieved. Referring to what the sociology of sciences says about the creativity of the social sciences Philip Lowe

showed how two sources of possible scientific creativity – methodological and discursive – could be applied to the history and practice of rural sociology.

The keynote speech opened a discussion which was continued in further plenary sessions, being the first level of the congress. They drew the participants' attention with an interesting approach to the problem of contributions of science studies perspectives to rural studies (plenary session I), participation of rural policies across Europe in the process of promotion of sustainable ruralities (plenary session II) and different dimensions of the adaptation process (plenary sessions III).

Lawrence Busch (UK) referred to the issue of the restructuring process of city and countryside perceived as the effect, which socio-technical changes had on the agrifood sector. While emphasizing the commonplace character of different types of technologies and the appearance of new forms of institutional structures, as well as the usage of methods of social sciences, he pointed out the reasons for which we can observe the current agrifood sector as being dependent on the discussion (at national and international level) that is taking place between neoliberals and their detractors.

The second plenary session was devoted to the issue of the possible input of rural policies in promoting sustainable ruralities. Arunas Poviliunas (Lithuania) in "Lithuanian rural communities in search of power" discusses the current state of development of Lithuanian rural communities in the context of its resistance to social exclusion. Referring to the reestablishment of independence, reform of agriculture and the current public discourse he disclosed the way in which rural communities recovered and emphasized the main conflicts which they face in the search of power. Hilikka Vihinen (Finland) raised the issue of 'Policy and rural sustainability in Europe'. The MTT Economic Research representative spoke about the issue of "Rural community in a globalizing world" in the context of problems (inequalities in access to commodities, spaces and territories, environmental issues etc.) that affect the contemporary world emphasizing at the same time the meaning of the rights to subsistence and justice as the markers of sustainable social and environmental practices.

The third plenary session began with a presentation by Andrew Janison (Denmark) who raised the issue of the way of combining science and politics in the context of dealing with climate change. On the basis of concepts included in two books: 'The Making of Green Knowledge' and 'Hybris and Hybrids' (written with Michael Hård) he emphasized the importance of combining science and politics while dealing with social and cultural challenges of climate

change. A continuation of this presentation was the speech by Sirkku Juhola (Sweden) who observed the adaptation strategies in the countries of Northern Europe. Comparing the situation in Sweden, Finland and Norway he presented the local nature of adaptation as well as a different approach which leads to it. Carlos San Juan Mesonada (Spain) focused on the role of society and the environment in shaping civilisation. The main emphasis of this presentation focused on the economic drivers of desertification and adaptation to drought conditions in Southern Europe and its way of providing policy solutions especially while facing the problem of global warming.

The second level of the congress consisted of IV symposia, the first of which was entirely devoted to Finland. Torsti Hyyryläinen (Finland) presented the Finnish village as a traditional form of dwelling place on the one hand, and on the other – as an important part of Finnish mentality. While acquainting listeners with the history of social studies in Finland Hyyryläinen accentuated the way of understanding new rurality and perceiving the most common place for traditional living – the village – as the place of local development. Marja Järvelä (Finland) continued the issue of traditionally based family farming in Finland and accentuated the way in which the Finnish agricultural system was polarizing. The main question of this presentation referred to the problem of national and EU policies' effects on developing sustainability among the growing global agricultural market. Tiina Silvasti (Finland) closed the symposium with reference to the social and cultural aspects of the development process in Finland. She focused on the concept of the 'entrepreneurial self' which combined with the traditional way of life was affecting the marginalisation process of the peasant way of life as well as social sustainability.

'Mobilities and Stabilities in Rural Space' was the theme of the second symposium, which could be perceived as a continuation of the second plenary session. In the first part of his presentation David L. Brown (USA) checked the level of appropriateness of conventional theory and methodologies which can be used to examine the migration processes in rural areas of well-developed societies. While linking them to other forms of mobility – economic, social and environmental, he presented a research agenda that combined the discussion on rural migration issues with the process of political, economic and social organisation as well as the environmental context. Charalambos Kasimis (Greece) compared two models ('southern' and 'northern') as examples that can be observed, as far as the matter of rural migration was discussed, and accentuated its implication to the population processes and their effects on the sustainability of rural areas. In her paper Aileen Stockdale (Ireland)

emphasized the ways in which migration can mobilize (neo)endogenous rural development. The author showed great interest in the importance of socio-economic contribution of 'middle-class' migrants in the process of transformation of rural areas. The debate was broadly continued during presentations from the working group which was devoted to the same theme. Participants discussed different levels and kinds of mobility and its impact on social capital and population changes.

The question about the agency of the rural was the core problem of thematic symposia III, which began with Michael M. Bell's (USA) presentation. He accentuated the importance of recognition of the active voice of the rural while emphasizing the participation of rural politics in activating the process of different forms of mobility and stability, as well as its implications for science and policies. Keith Halfacree (UK) discussed the more direct character of the agency – perceived as a part of the rural. While referring to contemporary examples of mobility he argued that the contribution of rural scientists in seeking more effective dimensions of rural agency can help to promote an 'interpretative' role in rural experience. Michael Woods (UK) focused on the problem of polarised tendencies: the globalisation process that can lock rural cultures and economies into urban-centric networks on the one hand, and on the other – the specific political agency of rural people who want to articulate the real interest of the rural.

Thematic symposia IV was devoted to the 50th anniversary of European Rural Sociology and it can be perceived as a continuation of the keynote speech. Reidar Almås (Norway) emphasized the different way in which rural sociology developed in North America and Europe and tried to seek the future prospects of European rural sociology as theory grounded, empirically based and policy relevant science. Jean-Paul Billand (France) dedicated his paper to French rural sociology as perceived through the connection between territory, specific way of life and its effects on the environment. Henry Buller (UK) referred to the European Society for Rural Sociology's journal – *Sociologia Ruralis*, with emphasizing its active role in developing a coherent and distinctive body of rural sociological work. Imre Kovách (Hungary) closed the symposium with 'Voices and Challenges from Central and Eastern Europe', where he presented the tradition and origins of rural sociology which characterize that part of Europe. Moving to the contemporary state of rural sociology he showed its representation, theoretical approaches to CEE rural development, as well as theoretical and empirical issues which might be obtained from focusing on rurality in this part of Europe. It is worth emphasizing that papers presented

in working group 5.6 which was entirely devoted to the Eastern European countryside and its change during the last twenty years were a great supplement of Imre Kovach's presentation.

Aside from the keynote speech, plenary sessions and symposia the debate also consisted of discussions within the above mentioned 37 working groups. Because it is impossible to refer to all the presentations in such a short report I will outline those addresses which were directly devoted to the countryside of Eastern and Central Europe in the process of change during the last twenty years (working group 5.6 chaired by: Krzysztof Gorlach, Vera Majerova, Rosemarie Siebert and Paweł Starosta). This working group focused on the effects which transformation processes, perceived from the economic, cultural, political and social level, could have on the development of rural areas in Eastern and Central Europe.

Mariana Draganova (Bulgaria) together with Leo Grandberg and Jouko Nikula (Finland) as well as Tomasz Adamski (Poland) referred to the role which the LEADER programme could have in the development of rural areas. Adamski presented the Polish LEADER as a practical realisation of Rural Sustainable Development and emphasized the problem of Local Action Groups with implementing the idea of neo-endogenous development while dealing with the activity of local authorities. On the other hand, Draganova, Grandberg and Nikula presented features and distinctions of post-socialist restructuring in Bulgaria and Finland. They also accentuated the important role of civil initiatives in the local development in the context of realisation of the LEADER programme. Continuation of 'bottom-up' activity was the presentation of Maiga Kruzmetra (Latvia) who indicated the input of NG structures to the process of rural change and a significant role of social factors in the process of creating sustainable rural development policy in Latvia.

The presentation of Vera Majerova (Czech Republic), Silvie Jucerova and Radim Perlin (Czech Republic) could be treated as the one which began the discussion on the issue of different levels of transformation in rural areas. While Majerova concentrated on the positive and negative aspects of development during last twenty years, Kucerova and Perlin focused on the role of different phases and actors in shaping the Czech countryside. When referring to the issue of the role of different actors it is worth recalling the paper presented by Katalin Kovacs (Hungary) and Maryna Bilynska (Ukraine). While Kovacs presented the Hungarian rural governance from the perspective of local government and policy makers Bilynska presented the innovative policy of rural development in Ukraine as rooted in stability, justice and ecological public health. On the

other hand, Marek Furmankiewicz, Joanna Stefańska (Poland) focused on the role of phases differentiation. The Polish team presented historical and cultural determinants of the structure of partnerships which aimed to coordinate social and cultural development in different Polish regions. Olga Fadeeva (Russia) continued the theme by accentuating the coexistence of different economic structures – perceived as a result of transformation processes in contemporary Russia.

Krzysztof Gorlach, Zbigniew Drąg (Poland), Zemfira Kalugina and Olga Fadeeva (Russia) and Petr Kment (Czech Republic) referred to the environmental issue. Gorlach and Drąg presented an overview of the changing situation of family farms determined by the process of transformation as well as by patterns of inheritance of farms after 1989 in Poland. The second part of their presentation was devoted to the process of class diversification among family farms on the one hand, and its changing position on the market on the other. It is worth recalling the paper of Ilkka Alanen and Juoko Nikula (Finland) who discussed the privatisation process in the context of creating a new class formation in rural areas in the Baltic countries and Russia as determined by the growing role of the large-scale agriculture production and decreasing role of employees. Hanna Podedworna also referred to the issue of the dual model of agriculture and described the expectations and role of Polish farmers in the context of evaluation of changes connected with the development of the market economy after 1989. Kalugina and Fedeeva denied the possibility of the homogenous character of rural and agricultural development in a country as vast as Russia. They proposed a new agricultural development paradigm which should be more oriented on local resources and partnership between the government, business and population as the opposite of state paternalism while Kment focused on environmental behaviour as culturally and historically determined.

At the end of the session Paweł Starosta (Poland) and Davide Torsello referred to the issue of trust perceived both as an effect and as a process. Starosta concentrated on different types of political engagement determined by changing patterns of trust and political participation in rural areas while Torsello, when using the anthropological perspective, presented trust building as a multifaceted process.

In 1995 the authors of the book *East European Communities. The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times*¹ drew our attention to the meaning that state and transformation could have on the development of rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe. It was the unknown role of local communities that was emphasized as particularly important in shaping the countryside. Nowadays we find examples of how local communities have been facing transformation perceived as a process which has been accentuated by the authors of this working group in its title. The issue of governance which twenty years ago was still a matter of question now seems to be significant from the perspective of both the state and the local community. Although it was then almost impossible to evaluate the effects transformation could have on the rural communities it is now the time when we should seek for appraisal of undertaken strategies, take lessons from the best practice examples for which such a conference was a great opportunity to present. Changing patterns of political participation, building rural communities to be based on the rules of civic society, difficulties and benefits gained from cooperation of local communities and local authorities while implementing new development strategies – these are the main issues rural sociologists from Eastern and Central Europe will also be focusing their attention on.

During the congress 466 participants from Europe and North America presented over 460 papers in several working groups and sessions. It is worth mentioning that it was one of the largest congresses in the history of the European Society for Rural Sociology.

¹ Kideckel D. A. 1995 *East European Communities: The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times*, Westview Press, Boulder. There was a review of this book in *Eastern European Countryside* 3'97.

