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**Uneven Processes of Rural Change –
XXVII European Society
for Rural Sociology Congress in Cracow**

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the main issues discussed at the XXVII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress “Uneven Processes of Rural Change”, held on 24–27 July 2017 in Cracow, Poland. Both the title of the Congress and its keynote speakers focused on rural communities and different ways in which they respond to and cope with new social, demographic and economic challenges, depending on their varied potential across rural areas in different parts of Europe. The paper offers a review of the Congress speeches and may therefore serve as a pretext to analyze participants’ interest in rural community resilience and resilience of social systems as part of grassroots processes aimed at dealing with new challenges.

Keywords: resilience, rural sociology, The European Society for Rural Sociology, rural change

Rural areas in modern Europe face changes that are both multifaceted and multidimensional. Rather than being isolated, these are interrelated processes which reflect external meta-trends. Research presented at the recent editions of the Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology (hereinafter: ESRS) take these changes into account, forcing researchers to adopt a wider perspective in their studies. In consequence, many classic concepts, once effective in explaining the phenomena and processes

occurring in rural areas, seem to be no longer adequate and therefore fail to capture the complex character of today's rural Europe and changes experienced in the region. It is a problem faced not only by researchers but also by practitioners, policy makers, members of the business community and representatives of NGOs.

New questions about uneven processes of rural change in Europe require answers, searching for which inspired the organizers of the XXVII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress "Uneven Processes of Rural Change: On Diversity, Knowledge and Justice", held on 24–27 July 2017 in Cracow, to address these issues. The processes of changes in rural areas were analyzed in terms of three interrelated perspectives: "Mirrors and the Richness of Diversity"; "Rural Change and the Creation of Multiple Forms of Knowledge (Whose Truth? Whose Voice?)" and "Rural Change and the Question of Justice (Winners and Losers)". These three aspects formed the cornerstones for the debate and inspired the keynote speakers and presenters invited to the Congress from all European countries and outside Europe, including representatives of various fields in social sciences and practitioners of different professions.

In his speech *Truth, Justice and the Diversity of a Rural Way*, delivered as part of the plenary session, Patrick H. Mooney (University of Kentucky) talked about "inadequacy of outdated concepts" applied in the analysis of rural change processes in "our multiple post-era". He presented McAdam's and Fligstein's recent revision of field theory as a promising alternative in studies on interrelations between justice and legitimacy of knowledge, enabling a dynamic and innovative analysis of rurality. In this context, the keynote speaker emphasized the particular role of social movements as a significant factor in the emergence of new phenomena and in the reconstruction and diversification of rural structures. He proposed an approach that is focused on the relative (inter-)dependence of theoretical fields and allows to overcome the traditional "rural-urban" dichotomy.

The "inadequacy of outdated concepts", and consequently, the need to reformulate the theory and practice of rural sociology in contemporary Europe, was also addressed by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (Wageningen University). In his speech *Blind Spots*, the keynote speaker highlighted the importance of exploring the so-called "blind spots" in rural sociology, areas in which research has thus far been insufficient. He argued that uneven distribution of knowledge (the eponymous "blind spots") is a result of complex

mechanisms that currently govern its production. This uneven distribution reflects and strengthens inequalities, fueling unexpected diversity and often contradictions of developmental trends that currently characterize rural areas. Rural sociology as such is not free from these burdens and is therefore limited in solving many of the problems it tries to explore. The author suggested challenging this way of thinking in a radical way.

Unequal distribution of knowledge and its consequences were also addressed by Annette Aurelie Desmarais (Canada Research Chair in Human Rights, Social Justice and Food Sovereignty at the University of Manitoba). In her speech *The Power and Potential of Food Sovereignty: An Agenda for Social Transformation*, she pointed out that ever since the introduction of the idea of food sovereignty by La Vía Campesina in 1996, which was to fight dispossession, strike disparities in wealth and poverty, along with politics that disempowered many in rural areas, crises affecting rural communities seem to have escalated significantly. Arguing that all of these crises also demonstrate the need for and the power and potential of food sovereignty, Desmarais explored the potential of food sovereignty and its contribution to development. The practice of food sovereignty offers not only environmentally friendly models alternative to mass production in agriculture but also entails fight against growing social inequalities in local communities, thus constituting a strategy of survival and stimulating resilience in the disintegrating economic macrosystem.

A similar tone was adopted by Natalia Mamonova (Erasmus University Rotterdam, International Institute of Social Studies), a representative of the young generation of rural sociologists¹. In her presentation *Trapped Between Russia and the West: Patriotism, Food Sovereignty and Desovetization in Rural Ukraine*, Natalia Mamonova explored how the rising pro-European patriotism and the redefinition of national identity in opposition to the Soviet past transformed popular discourses on traditional small-scale farming. She argued that in the past production of food by small family-run farms was perceived as a strategy of survival for vulnerable communities and thus a relic of the socialist past. Such strategies were expected to disappear

¹ As Prof. Krzysztof Gorlach, Chair of the Local Organizing Committee (Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University in Cracow) pointed out during the Congress Opening Ceremony, by inviting the young scholar to its plenary session, the ESRS revived its tradition of promoting young, talented researchers.

in the nearest future. However, contrary to these expectations, to many Ukrainians small-size agriculture is nowadays a sustainable alternative to large-scale industrial farming, providing an opportunity for small food producers in Ukraine.

The ideas presented during the plenary sessions were perfectly complemented with the presentation by Paweł Starosta (University of Łódź), entitled *Patterns of Social Capital across Rural Europe*. In his speech Starosta talked about social capital that might be recognized as an important source of socio-economic development. Numerous studies seem to confirm this claim, pointing to a positive relation between some components of social capital and economic growth at the national level. The speaker characterized social capital through the prism of its three components: social trust, acceptance of cooperation standards and size of social networks. Characteristics of the dominant patterns of social capital were outlined for rural populations in various parts of Europe. Similarly, relationships between the level of social capital and certain measures of economic development in rural Europe were elaborated upon.

Following the main theme, the discussion on the processes of rural change and the three elements of diversity, knowledge and justice led to reflections about Europe in transition. Plenary speeches seem to have put less emphasis on differences in developmental strategies represented by various rural areas, their ability to respond to change and (theoretical) helplessness of rural sociology in terms of new challenges resulting from inequalities between different European regions. However, as Christian Giordano (2010) argues, “[...] contrary to the expected outcome of the classic conceptualisations of transition often based on an occidental modernisation vision, a simple west-to-east institutional and organisational transfer did not occur” (p. 6). In terms of studies on the dynamics of structural changes in the social and cultural space of Central and Eastern Europe, the potential of theories based on the universality and uniqueness of western modernity to offer some valid explanations is significantly limited. The assumed universality of theoretical models of transition, founded on neoliberal concepts of humans and society, entails an epistemological oversimplification. This applies in particular to the rural areas in South-Eastern Europe which did not manage well with the paradigm of rationality imposed on it by western economics and with adapting to the westernization of economy and society.

Consequently, the rural communities in these areas were forced to develop completely new social, cultural and economic solutions, which came as a surprise not only to their observers and external researchers but also to decision-makers in these states of Europe. As it turns out, the modality of socio-economic and political changes in Central and Eastern Europe appears to be much more complex and contradictory (Giordano, 2010).

Problems related to changes in the rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe were however addressed in the speeches presented as part of the thematic sessions (in the total of 30 thematic groups). Researchers dealing with rural areas in this part of Europe discussed the conditions of living in the country by referring to: access to labour market (Reka Geambasu and Megyesi Boldizsár); quality of life (Jorde Jakimovski, Emrla Uksini and Filip Filipovski); poverty, also as a factor that blocks the formation of civil society (Krisztina Németh, Ani-Mari Sätre, Leo Granberg and Alla Varyzgina); and social changes in the country (David Brown and László Kulcsár, and Csilla Obadovics, Emese Bruder and Hakan Ünal talked about population ageing and its consequences in rural areas).

In their speeches, researchers studying Central Europe referred also to the issues discussed in the presentations of the keynote speakers:

- Rurality and its changing meanings (Working Group 16: *Changing Meanings of “The Rural” in Changing Times. What Meanings? What Actors? What Processes? What Rural(s)?*), addressed among others in the presentations about rurality “borrowed” by the city (Lukáš Kala) and about the illusive dichotomy “rural-urban” revealed in analyzes of social networks that exist in these spaces (Bernadett Csurgó and Megyesi Boldizsár);
- Challenges related to the internal potential for a change in rural areas, raised by Paweł Starosta, were also discussed by: Radim Perlin, who in his speeches wondered who the actors behind such change could be; Tomáš Pilař and his team, who studied the role of local action groups (LAGs); and Liga Paula, who pointed to difficulties related to measuring the level of such potential and opportunities that come with it;
- Searching for potential to change in selected operations: introduction of environment protection services (discussed by Agnes Roboz in the context of environmental justice); development of food

networks (Ruta Śpiewak); food social movements (Diana Šumylé, Lina Pareigiene, Erika Ribašaukiene)' and movements related to agricultural production (Majda Černič Istenič).

The problem of differences across Europe was particularly strongly emphasized during the sessions of Working Group 6 (*Poverty, Social Exclusion and Marginalization in a Diversified Rural Context*), where attention was paid among others to the symptoms of marginalization and peripheralization: the countryside as the periphery of the periphery (Lucia Máliková in Slovakia; András Vigvári, Cecilia Kovai, Tamás Geröcs in Hungary; and Věra Majerová in the Czech Republic), and differences in developmental paths and inadequacy of western solutions to the specificity of Central Europe (Katlin Kovács and Nigel Swain).

This line of thought was additionally complemented by the speeches in which the perspective of rural community resilience to crisis emerged, including crises caused by unsuccessful development projects. Resilience to crisis is an ambiguous category, often used interchangeably with other concepts, such as “adaptive capacity”, “positive capacity”, “positive trajectory” and “ability to bounce back”. Understood in this manner, it is an approach that emphasizes five main aspects of resilience: resilience as an attribute of the community, its inherent and dynamic part, allowing it to adapt to adversity, leading to positive outcomes for a community undergoing changes in terms of its functionality, and allowing it to comprehend the process of change (evaluation of its condition before and after the crisis) (*Definitions of Community Resilience: An Analysis*, A Carri Report, 2013).

Building community resilience is a process of seeking opportunities for sustainable development in a turbulent and volatile environment, which by using the community's resources leads to its strengthening and empowerment. It also includes the community's ability to learn based on knowledge and past experience. It manifests itself for example in its willingness to restructure, modernize or (if necessary) completely abandon its previous standards, practices, procedures and social behaviour patterns. Consequently, it entails its readiness to accept changes (including the radical ones), ability to create new meanings, opportunities and solutions. It is a thesis that results from the proposals popularized by Douglas Paton, Professor of the University of Tasmania and one of the most well-known (most frequently quoted) researchers of resilience (School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, Tasmania, Australia, 2007).

D. Paton (2007) defines community resilience not only as an ability to deal with tensions and external disturbances resulting from social, political, economic and natural changes (disasters, etc.), but also as an ability of communities to persevere (cope with, survive) and resist external turbulences while preserving their own social infrastructure. In this definition he recognizes the role of community resources, identifying resilience as the community's ability to "return to the form" and use its physical and economic resources effectively in order to minimize the consequences of a crisis, a disaster, etc. (Paton, 2007).

The aspects raised by Paton are entering the contemporary discourse of rural sociology researchers, as reflected also in the speeches presented at the XXVII ESRS Congress. Some of the speakers focused on explaining how communities manage new challenges by availing of their resilience for example in handling: natural disasters (Margaret Currie et al.) and negative effects of food distribution system – by developing alternative networks in Sweden (Rebecka Milestad), Hungary (Orsoloya Lazanyi), the Czech Republic (Petr Jehlička), Wales (Rebecca Jones Eifiona Thomas Lane), Finland (Fulvio Rizzo) and Romania (Teodora Capota).

The concept of resilience was discussed by many authors (Anna Pluskota, Márton Lendvay, Elgars Felcis). Some of them talked about communities and their different adaptability skills (Karl Bruckmeier, Gunilla Olsson), while others wondered how to study these processes and to what extent traditional research tools and language allow to capture their very essence (Katerina Psarikidou).

Some of the questions presented above, including the ones about the ability of rural areas to adapt to challenges and about opportunities arising in connection with differences/inequalities across Europe, will surely be addressed at the next XXVIII ESRS Congress: "Rural Futures in a Complex World", which will be held on 25–28 June 2019 in Trondheim, Norway².

² For more information on the theses presented in the article please see: http://www.esrs2017.confer.uj.edu.pl/program_box.

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