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## 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of “Sociologia Ruralis” – the discursive space for European Rural Sociology

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The European Society for Rural Sociology was founded in 1957 by representatives of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. Three years later in 1960 the Society's journal was founded as a 'bond between the Society and its membership' and 'an important medium for the dissemination of research findings in rural sociology' (Hofstee 1960: 6).

According to E.W. Hofstee – the first President of ESRS – there was a slight interest in rural subjects in pre-war Europe and most papers at that time were to be, in his opinion, general rather than specific, descriptive rather than analytical and with little or no use to the theory or research methods developed in social sciences (Hofstee 1960: 3). In the post-war period rural sociology developed and grew in importance throughout Western Europe and 'even in some European countries behind the Iron Curtain, such as Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia' (Hofstee 1963: 334) but still it 'was far behind [rural sociological research] the United States of America (Hofstee 1960: 4). This opinion was shared by other founders of ESRS, for example by Henri Mendras who (in the same first volume of *Sociologia Ruralis*: 15-34) stressed that rural sociology has no institutional grounds and is taught as a separate part of the course in general sociology at only one European university (the University of Stockholm).

ESRS and *Sociologia Ruralis* as its journal were to stimulate and promote the development of rural sociology, foster comparative studies in rural sociology, encourage international exchange of rural sociologists, bring rural sociology to the attention of national governments, scientific and international

organisations with the purpose of engaging their interest in furthering rural sociological research, education in rural sociology and the application of research findings to practical problems (Hofstee 1960: 5).

Fifty years later the expectations of the journal (and the Society or the discipline as such) are of the same nature. Kees Jansen (Jansen 2009) formulates the demands for European rural sociology to bridge the gap between the natural and social sciences, use more interdisciplinary and problem-solving approaches, use new methodological and theoretical perspectives (e.g. qualitative and reflexive), concentrate on new social problems of rurality and agriculture, such as bio-risk, organic farming, values, attitudes, biographies, gender and identity.

Philip Lowe – chair of the Scientific Committee of ESRS in 2008–2009 – perceives *Sociologia Ruralis* as ‘a platform for asserting European particularisms in the face of post-war American universalism, that yielded evidence and analysis in support of a diverse and culturally heterogeneous rurality’ (Lowe 2010: 324). In his opinion, *Sociologia Ruralis* has furnished a supporting rhetoric for an active, structural and regional policy, presented rurality as dynamic and heterogeneous (by promoting such avenues as Leader or other endogenous initiatives), opened a rich empirical and conceptual agenda. Lowe also stresses that while doing that, the journal and the society came to express elements (theories and research) antithetical to dominant American rural sociology.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Volume of *Sociologia Ruralis* consists of four issues, including one special issue (no. 3: Mobilities and Ruralities). The whole volume includes 24 articles on 7 themes: rural development (including images of rural development), a re-definition of rurality, mobilities, trust, gender (rural masculinities), biotechnologies, advice and extension services in agriculture. There are also (in no. 3) keynote papers from the ESRS Conference in Vaasa (Finland, August 2009) which were discussed in EEC 16’2010.

When analysing the content of the Anniversary volume, one must agree that it is a discursive space where different theoretical and research perspectives meet. The articles in the Anniversary volume picture well the nature of the Journal (as presented by Philip Lowe) – i.e. they use different (or even antithetical) theoretical or methodological approaches (as different as surveys and statistical analysis and case studies or image studies).

There are two problem spheres which are dominant in the volume: rural development and mobility and their effect on the re-definition of rurality (ruralities) and enacting rural voice.

The first theme is discussed by Mark Shucksmith in the context of the need to re-define rural development (pp. 1-15), Ian Convery, Ian Soane and Helen Shaw take up the issue of the role of the LEADER programme in rural development plan achievement (pp. 370-392) and Annette A. Thusesen raises an important question on whether the same programme (LEADER) is elitist or inclusive (pp. 31-46). The discussion on rural development also leads to questions raised by Roberto M. do Carmo (pp. 15-31) about whether entirely endogenous development (based on social trust) is possible or what are the responses to the development challenges based on the ownership structure as presented by Nicola Thompson and Jane Atterton in their paper (pp. 352-370).

The second theme – mobilities – is presented both in a special issue of the journal (pp. 199-310) but also in the discussion on rurality discourses by Frans Hermans, Ina Horlings and Hans Mommaas (pp. 46-64) and the discussion of political conceptions of (second home) mobility by Knut Hilde, Winfried Ellingsen and Jørn Cruiskshank (pp. 139-156).

Mark Schucksmith in his paper *Disintegrated Rural Development? Neo-endogenous Rural Development, Planning and Place-Shaping in Diffused Power Context* asks whether the concept of integrated rural development (IRD) still has any meaning in the context of new rural governance.

The model of IRD emphasised coordinating at local level various sectoral, state-sponsored programmes and was introduced in the 1980s. As the author stresses the LEADER Community Initiative is for many an exemplification of this approach – it was declared to be for local actors to work together to find innovative solutions to rural problems which could reflect on what was best suited to their areas and could also serve as models for developing rural areas elsewhere (p. 3), local areas were to assume greater control of development and sustain local development momentum after public (official) intervention.

These assumptions lead to a great challenge (also discussed by Renato M. do Carmo, *Albernoa Revisited: Tracking Social Capital in a Portuguese Village*, pp. 15-31) – how to mobilise local actors to develop strategic agendas in a diffused power context but also what are the knowledge resources (intellectual capital, local and expert knowledge), relational resources (trust, social understanding) and mobilisation capabilities (the capacity to act collectively, especially in the context of suburbanisation, 'new-comers', lack of civil participation).

Another question that Shucksmith raises is: what should be the role of the state promoting sustainable rural communities in an increasing globalised

context, should it promote continuity or change, diversity or cohesion? What might be the role of the state when the recognition from government towards governance is recognised and the boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred. Not only is the role of state changing but so are the bottom-up structures built up to enhance local development corrupting, as Annette A. Thuesen argues in her paper *Is LEADER Elitist or Inclusive? Composition of Danish LAG Boards in the 2007–2013 Rural Development and Fisheries Programmes*. In her paper Thuesen presents empirical evidence to – what she calls – the democratic problem of LAGs (local action groups): little involvement of the local area population, inadequate involvement of the public in electoral procedures and poor elite-public linkages. The problems addressed by Thuesen lead to questions also raised by do Carmo, Shucksmith or Convery et. al (in the paper *Mainstreaming LEADER Delivery of the RDR in Cumbria: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, pp. 370–392) that is how to enhance inclusive deliberation, collective actions and mobilise local actors. The authors seek different solutions. Shucksmith finds them in what he calls a disintegrated rural development, which is a great challenge because it is multiple, non-linear, complex and continually emergent rural because it is based on the deliberative process. On the other hand, Thuesen argues for an entirely opposite solution: establishing or strengthening meta-governing institutions that are able to influence, co-ordinate and frame the actions of LAGs (the idea also reinforced by RDR – The European Union Rural Development Regulations). Convery et. al suggest the linking of individuals, organisations, agencies and institutions at multiple levels must take place to develop truly integrated and innovative rural development (p. 387).

The rural development discussion is linked to the other dominant issue of the Anniversary volume – mobilities and ruralities. The introduction of the problem of mobility (mobilities) into the debate made scholars reconceptualise rurality. Mobility is perceived as central to the enactment of the rural (p. 199). Rural might not be defined ‘as a realm of long-standing ascriptive ties of family, community, place and ethnicity’ (p. 199) but as a source of activeness on its own. This also means that the idea of rural development must meet the challenges of changing rurality. As Michael M. Bell and Giorgio Osti (in the paper *Mobilities and Ruralities: An Introduction*, pp. 199–204) stress the mobility perspective throws new light both on the nature of rural and on rural studies.

One of the objectives of the special issue of *Sociologia Ruralis* (no. 3: on Mobilities and Ruralities) was to clarify ‘how spatial mobilities – and their

interdependence with stabilities – at all levels (physical, symbolical, relational) affect rural areas and how rural spatial mobilities' (p. 201) change over time, should we expect major changes in rural areas based on changing mobilities? Another objective of the issue was to dispute the contradictory thesis that growth of mobility eliminated classical spatial divisions (among them the rural-urban division). Bell and Osti stress that 'there are at least three reasons that highlight the continuing role of the rural in social differences: the persistence of unequal access to goods, the persistence of place (old and new stabilities of rural social difference) and the persistence of flux (mobilities and stabilities continue to combine in different ways)' (p. 201).

The special issue consists of 6 papers and an introduction. The first paper by M. Bell, S. E. Lloyd and Ch. Vatovec considers rural power or the power of rural. The authors argue that to understand rurality a different perception than the current rural voice is necessary. In their opinion most rural researchers speak with a passive rural voice – they see 'rural as largely defeated, washed over and worn out, its sell-by date exceeded, with little independence as a source of change in its own right, (...), change happens to the rural, the rural does not create change (...), it is passive in the face of the real sources of activeness: capital, technology, globalisation' (p. 209). The authors claim that the rural might and should be heard as an active voice either in categories of rural power, power of the rural, rural constituencies or constituencies of the rural.

P. A. Danaher (*Places and Spaces for Circus Performers and Show People as Australian Migratory Workers*) and Kasimis Charalambos, Apostolod Papadopoulos and Costas Pappas (*Gaining from Rural Migrants: Migrant Employment Strategies and Socio-economic Implications for Rural Labour Markets*) draw our attention to different problems – the education and work possibilities for migrants as an important factor building new types of inequalities. Both papers illustrate Bell's previously discussed thesis that rural space is a combination of mobilities and stabilities that result in the multi-functionality of rural areas.

Arlid Blekesaune, Marit S. Haugen and Mariann Villa in their paper (*Dreaming of a Smallholding*) discuss how rural areas can benefit from the need of town inhabitants to fulfil their dream of rural idyll and have a smallholding which might contribute to the vitality of rural communities. On the other hand, Girogio Osti (*Mobility demands and participation in remote rural areas*) draws a less optimistic image of remote rural areas which might be described in categories of social exclusion and alienation. He builds up the typology of

the social situation of rural areas and based on two dimensions (reversibility and connectivity) and shows that remote rural areas are not only far from the idyll, but also differ from one another. He discovers 4 types of rural areas: liquid, networked, marginal and self-contained – each with separate mobility demands and types of exclusion.

For almost forty years we have witnessed or participated in the discussion on the crisis of rurality ('death of rural', 'end of rural', 'death of rural life', 'the end of agriculture'). In the last few years we have also been facing the institutional crisis of rural sociology. Michael Bell, Sarah E. Lloyd, Christine Vatovec (*Activating the Countryside: Rural Power, the Power of the Rural and the Making of Rural Politics*, pp. 205–225) find its symptoms such as declining membership in rural sociological societies, closing and renaming departments of rural sociology. The authors notice as meaningful the addresses given by the presidents of the Rural Sociological Society (Richard Krannich, 'Rural sociology on the crossroads', 2008) or ESRS (Philip Lowe, 'Reinventing the rural: between the social and the natural', 2009). If we agree with this ominous thesis that the discipline is in crisis the persistence of *Sociologia Ruralis* and its unchanging role as a platform for academic debate on rurality (although considering mainly Western Europe) may be a counterargument.

## References

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