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The Multidimensionality and Ambivalence of Inequality and Diversity in European Rural Areas

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The central theme of last year's XXIV European Congress of the Association of Rural Sociology was Inequality and Diversity in European Rural Areas. The congress participants concentrated their attention on four main issues such as the role of growing inequalities on a global scale: the role of food, natural resources, rural areas, the multidimensionality of inequality and the significance of diversity; what are the implications for rural sociology, diversity in space and rural areas as well as the consequences of diversity and inequality – implications for the governance of European states and institutions.

It seems difficult to have chosen a better theme for the 2011 Congress. Issues connected with inequality and diversity in European rural areas are particularly legitimate within the context of the ended European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Hence the speakers had the opportunity of expressing themselves on an issue which was both highly significant and topical. Many important statements led to both official and unofficial discussions the temperature of which was at times as high as that outside. Last year's congress took place in Chania, Crete from 21 to 25 August, in other words during the peak of the tourist season when it gets very hot.

The congress organisers assumed that alongside globalisation there has been a growth in diversity on a micro and macro scale (between individuals, groups, territories and states) which depending on the specific context can be either a threat or an opportunity for European rural areas – it can lead to both inequality and development, social empowerment. Defining diversity in such ambivalent categories, provides researchers with wide cognitive opportunities the expression of which was the wide range of lectures and lively discussions. The conceptual combination of inequality and diversity enables the grasping of

the multidimensionality of social inequality, social exclusion of their sources and undertaking an analysis of various forms of combating social exclusion in rural areas. In the conceptual combination of social exclusion and social diversity (particularly regarding rural areas), the congress organisers pinned their hopes upon a significant contribution to the theoretical, empirical and political debate concerning highly important social issues.

The diversity of statements was reflected during the keynote speakers' presentations from the very first day of the congress. The audience had the opportunity to hear about poverty, inequality and social exclusion from various points of view.

The first paper *Food Inequalities (old and new) and the long pursuit of Food Democracy* was presented by Timothy Lang from City University in London. The speaker argued that with reference to food policy, shaped and realised in the 20th century the productionist paradigm, now in the 21st century is a dysfunctional paradigm which simply no longer fits. We are currently struggling with many problems as a consequence of that paradigm, planetary boundaries have grown, the food system's impact on soil, water, climate, land use and biodiversity are now all serious. The social implications are also considerable – food culture is distorted, social inequalities in the field of consumption have deepened considerably. T. Lang raised a few crucial questions – what is driving this food world?; is 'Food democracy' useful?; is there a 'Food Democratic Transition'?; does this help to understand the present features of the world of food? In reply to these questions he assumed that striving towards Food Democracy, a situation in which all people will be fairly, healthily and equally fed, lies a long way ahead which should be a meeting point for policy makers, governments, food companies as well as scientists.

The next presentation which was both fascinating and widely discussed was by Mark Shucksmith from Newcastle University in England – *Inequality, Power and Injustice in Rural Areas: Beyond Social Exclusion?* M. Shucksmith began by emphasising that with growing social inequality in Europe many sociologists are returning to the issues of inequality, poverty and injustice in rural areas. In his opinion that implies the necessity for both theoretical reflection about the mentioned issues as well as a review of research methods. The aim of his paper was turning towards new directions in class analysis, giving particular consideration to Pierre Bourdieu's concept in his new formula in which he rejects his earlier ideas of classes as being exogenous and fixed. Having rejected the definition of classes in fixed and exogenous terms, while treating them as a discursive social construct which undergoes constant

change, resulting from contestation, symbolic struggle, Bourdieu expresses class formation in categories of a constant, fluid process which is inseparably linked to a given place. This statement seems particularly significant – it throws a new light on to the former ways of understanding and explaining inequality, poverty and marginalisation in rural areas. It is of utmost importance that such a perception of inequality, poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion draws the researcher's attention to the relativity to a concrete place, time etc. of issues undertaken by him. M. Schucksmith underlined that his approach requires concentration on variously assessed (historically, locally) practices which serve to reinforce inequality and marginalisation or processes which we (social researchers) call "social exclusion". Combining the elements which point to the inseparability of processes forming social classes with a concrete location gives researchers of social inequality in rural areas considerable new cognitive possibilities.

I would here like to mention the next paper which was presented by Kai A. Schafft from Penn State University – *Ways of Knowing and Ways of Seeing: Thinking about Poverty and Inequality and Social Exclusion in Internationally Comparative Contexts*. This paper was the second in the first plenary session entitled *The Multidimensionality of Inequalities*. The speaker presented reflections about the understanding of social inequality, poverty and social exclusion of an American researcher educated in the USA who had also broadly drawn from European thought. Although rural sociologists from the USA frequently worked on the academic phenomenon of poverty and social inequality, the theoretical concept of social exclusion rarely served them as an explanatory tool for making sense of the lived experience of deprivation and inequality. In order to show three various ways of understanding poverty and their implications on the research on different aspects of social inequality K.A. Schafft presented three studies – one European and two American, suggesting the various ways in which understandings of poverty in each instance has suggested a more relational understanding of inequality. This requires the researcher to have imagination (which Mills called sociological) so as to perceive poverty, social inequality and social exclusion in all their possible aspects. He concluded that the rural sociological imagination is at its heart an applied imagination. Hence the theoretical usefulness largely depends on its practical usefulness.

Mario Giampietro (ICT Barcelona) dealt with the arrangement of organic and industrial agriculture in his lecture *Characterising the Metabolic Pattern of Rural Communities: Facing the Yin-Yang Tension of Industrial versus Organic*

Agriculture. In his analysis of traditional versus industrial agriculture he presented their 'dark' sides, pointing to various examples of inequality. These inequalities are currently generated by recommended models of agriculture. The speaker stated that an opportunity for developing economies are two magic words – multi-functionality and relinking urban-rural. He underlined that the future of agriculture will not be 'discovered' by academics, it must be created through negotiation and progressive adjustments.

On the second day of the congress, in the second plenary session entitled *The Changing State of Rural Inequalities*, participants had the opportunity of listening to two lectures on social inequality, exclusion and attempts at assimilation of the excluded in the rural areas of post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well Central Asia.

The second plenary session was opened by a lecture by Ildikó Asztalos Morell (University of Uppsala) who presented a paper concerning *The fish, the net and the sea: Othing and the multiple marginalisation processes of the Roma in the context of post-socialist rural transition*. She underlined that the discourse about the marginalisation of the Roma living in post-socialist countries aroused much tension and is often highly politicised. Within the context of considerable allocation of both human and financial resources in the so-called Roma issue on the one hand, and on the other their negligible effectiveness many tensions emerge which are articulated in a particular manner by right wing social groups or political movements. The speaker presented four studies of practices connected with aid for the Roma and their assimilation, drawing attention to shades of assimilation, alternative ways of avoiding such shades of assimilation, and she outlined an example of failed integration. In her conclusion she referred to the title of her lecture, i.e. the fish, the net and the sea with the purpose of conceptualising methods of dealing with poverty along the underlying models and intentions. I. Asztalos Morell also emphasised that the most pressing issue is tackling the normative aspects of differentiating terms of entitlement along categories of the deserving and undeserving poor and how these categories intersect with gender and ethnic inequalities.

Max Spoor (ISS/Erasmus University, Rotterdam) presented a paper entitled: *Multidimensional Social Exclusion and the "Rural-Urban Divide" in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. He used a unique method of measuring social exclusion, i.e. the Multidimensional Exclusion Index [MEI]. This is a tool which makes it possible to capture social exclusion in categories of exclusion from social services, civic life and social networks. M. Spoor based his conclusions on research carried out in six countries – Macedonia, Moldova,

Serbia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine. The research was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The speaker began by introducing the above mentioned three aspects of social exclusion – he defined them and then presented those aspects of social exclusion in the context of rural-urban division, referring to empirical material in the researched countries. He then talked about the drivers of social exclusion. The fifth part of his presentation was a detailed analysis of the multidisciplinary index of exclusion. I shall concentrate on the conclusions presented by the speaker, the first of which was his statement on the enormous differences in MEI in the researched countries. It emerges from this research that in the context of social exclusion, alongside the economic aspect, an important (most important in many cases) aspect is the exclusion from social services. Social exclusion is a problem which is much more frequently observed in rural areas than in towns, hence spatial exclusion is a significant, fundamental factor clarifying the differences analysed by the speaker.

Due to the limitations in this paper I have had to restrict my report which does not in any way mean that the remaining presentations were less fascinating. Making choices among the presentations during the plenary sessions (I am aware of this being an arbitrary choice) I chose those topics which I consider most relevant to those discussed in EEC. Hence I have paid greater attention to presentations dealing with inequality, diversity, poverty and social exclusion and those which referred to the rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe as well as other post-socialist countries.

The third plenary session *Financial Crisis and Adjustment Policies: What Impact on Rural Areas?* was opened by George Stathakis (University of Crete) who gave a presentation entitled *The Fiscal Collapse of the Greek Economy and the Global Crisis. A Political Economy Perspective*. The speaker presented the “history” of Greece’s debt (1974–1993), he described the period of prosperity and Greek stability (1995–2008), then raised several fundamental questions which he attempted to answer. There were questions such as: Why was the public debt created? Why was it not financed by taxes? Why was the public debt not reduced during the boom period?

The next speaker, Tassos Haniotis (European Commission) pondered on how the economic crisis affects rural areas (*Financial crisis and adjustment policies*). Among his conclusions, the following deserves mention: food supply responses become more uncertain, changes in demand pattern changes are the real challenge, whereas the idea of sustained development should be at the centre of future reactions to the economic crisis.

Dimitris Diakosavvas from the OECD presented a paper *Towards a Green Growth Strategy for Food and Agriculture: Issues and Challenges for Policy*. He defined green growth as the pursuit of economic growth and development, while preventing environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and unsustainable natural resource use. He analysed the link between green growth and agriculture. Recognising the key role of agriculture in that growth, he argued that the analysed link is exceptionally complex.

Governing Diversity and Addressing Inequalities: What Role for Regions, National States and European Institutions? That was the subject of the fourth plenary session which consisted of one presentation by Elena Saraceno (Advisor for the EU Commission) who explained the *Institutional Approaches to Rural Diversity and Inequality in the European Union*. E. Saraceno stated that although institutional solutions concerning inequality and diversity in varied areas of rural Europe require diverse approaches, such approaches or solutions are not currently applied. She also underlined that current solutions are more suitable for developed than developing countries whereas sector policies have created powerful interest groups, not interested in integrated territorial approaches.

In the last part of the plenary, *The Sociologia Ruralis* lecture, Jo Little (University of Exeter) gave a lecture on *Fit Farms and Fat Camps: New Perspectives on Nature, Well-Being and the Body*. According to J. Little the change in perspective in perceiving and treating nature, well-being and the body are largely the result of current problems in food production, its availability and consumption. The speaker discussed the therapeutic industry, presented the main theoretical directions in understanding well-being and the body, drew attention to the role of nature, rurality, wild nature in the body industry and in the construction of therapeutic spaces.

The organisers divided the parallel sessions into seventeen subject areas around which twenty nine working groups were formed. The EEC reader could find particular interest in one of the subject areas about rurality and agriculture in post-socialist countries: *Post-Socialist Agricultures and Ruralities*. There were two working groups on this subject. One of them *Sustainability, Transition and Change in the Rural Areas of South Eastern Europe* discussed such issues as the significance of territorial resources, structural changes in the agricultural sector and in rural areas, issues connected with sustainable development and relevant opportunities in the countryside. The group analysed requirements for the development of rural tourism and pointed out the necessity of creating a territorial policy in the development of rural areas and local communities.

Discussions in the second working group, *Post-Socialist Agricultural Development in Eastern Europe* oscillated around the issue of social capital in agriculture, models of land usage as well as attitudes towards ways of land usage, the ambivalent relationship to diversification in agriculture and in the countryside. In this group there were also papers concerning structural change in agriculture, development and challenges in agriculture and the agricultural sector after 1989. There was a debate about the future of family farms, women farm owners, generations on the rural labour market and also issues of structure, conflict and cooperation in agriculture.

Issues referring to the rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe were not only discussed in the working groups. Other groups also had presentations regarding migration, rurality, new forms of civic engagement in the countryside and new forms of social cohesion (trust and social capital) in rural areas. In addition, those who were interested had the opportunity of observing heritage, religious tradition in secularised rural communities and getting to know about nostalgia for the soviet past. An interesting proposition was that which presented the effects of action research of a local development effort in rural areas.

In conclusion I would again like to raise the question of diversity. During the congress diversity was not only one of the main topics of analysis (apart from inequality), but it can also be referred to the multitude of issues raised during parallel sessions, sometimes going far beyond the main topic. The presentations were not only diverse regarding subject matter, but also from the point of view of quality, better or worse, some being innovative and others imitative (diversity and inequality). I am aware of the fact that that is what such meetings are about. I would here like to consider the ambivalence of such diversity and was thematic diversity the strength or weakness of the Congress? This is a question about its implications, its added value. I am not talking about the evident value of exchange of ideas, points of view between academics, practitioners, etc. I am simply wondering about what emerges from such a meeting for the fundamental issue of inequality in rural areas. Quoting the words of one of the main speakers, Timothy Lang, we can ask: "How can academics help?" Is the laconic and somewhat provocative response: "We have much to do" sufficient? To what extent can the views of academics be useful? It would be good to maintain the hope that the Congress was not merely a meeting of academics who exchanged thoughts, ideas and observations in the wonderful surroundings of magic Chania. An appropriate reply to the question raised above could be a paraphrase of Mario Giampietro's statement –

another, better future of rural areas will not be “discovered” by academics, it must be created by means of consultations or even negotiations with all those interested in the future of rural areas. I am convinced that anticipating such a future, regardless of its form or shape none of those anticipating does not assume excluding diversity (in its negative aspect) and social inequality from rural areas. It is a truism which I shall however repeat that social inequality is permanently embedded in social reality and hence in the reality of rural areas. Of course, that does not mean that the intellectual effort of academics is merely a Sisyphean task, we do indeed have much to do!