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Report on the XXVII European Society of Rural Sociology Congress

Currently, Europe is a place where numerous changes of a social, economic, and spatial nature are occurring as a result of global geopolitical, natural, or climate-related processes. Rural areas do not exist in a vacuum and thus do not remain untouched by such changes but undergo transformation as well. This issue was addressed by the XXVII European Society of Rural Sociology Congress, hosted in Krakow by the Institute of Sociology of Jagiellonian University on July 24-27, 2017. The working language of the congress was English.

The Congress participants' aims, choice of themes, programmes, and academic profiles demonstrated multiplicity and diversity of the processes affecting rural areas and agriculture. The great complexity of phenomena and the interdisciplinary nature of research approaches were reflected in a large number of thematic working groups. At this year's Congress there were nearly 30 of them; they concentrated on social, demographic, spatial, and economic issues. Rural change was the main topic of this year's Congress, which was reflected in its title: "Uneven Processes of Rural Change: On Diversity, Knowledge, and Justice".

The Congress brought together nearly 400 participants from all over the world; over 150 reports and communiqués were delivered. The inaugural ceremony, with the participation of representatives of the Małopolskie voivodeship, took place in the afternoon on the first day on July 24. Afterwards, the first plenary session was held; the subsequent plenary sessions – four in all – were held on the third and fourth days. These sessions were devoted to broad issues, which are not limited to the rural world, for instance, the question of food sovereignty in a time of globalization, and the principles of producing and disseminating knowledge about rural areas.

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The first session featured a report by Natalia Mamonova¹ entitled “Trapped Between Russia and the West: Patriotism, Food Sovereignty, and De-Sovietization in Rural Ukraine,” and addressed not just the question of food sovereignty but also the processes occurring in post-Soviet rural areas in the context of worldwide debate over land appropriation, the neoliberal food regime, and food sovereignty. The report focused on how expanding pro-European attitudes, redefinitions of national identity, and increasingly widespread negation of the Soviet past are influencing the discourse about traditional small (family) farms. Mamonova spoke about how the family farm, producing on a small scale, has gone from being perceived as a relict of the past to being treated as an alternative to large-scale industrial farming; the family farm is now considered as the kind of farm that could provide all Ukraine and even Europe with healthy, organic food. In Mamonova’s opinion, this transformation could produce an endogenous factor that would lead to food sovereignty in Ukraine.²

The second plenary session (the morning of August 26) was also devoted to food sovereignty. Annette Desmarais PhD from Canada gave a lecture entitled “The Power and Potential of Food Sovereignty: An Agenda for Social Transformation.” Having mentioned when the idea of food sovereignty first appeared, Desmarais discussed its current contribution and potential in regard of rural development. She presented it as a model of agricultural production that respects the natural environment, and as an idea that could inspire young people all over the world – given the problems of unemployment and disappointment with the socio-economic situation – to unite their futures with agriculture. Desmarais’s academic interests center on human rights, social justice, and food sovereignty. Her book *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants* was published in 2007. More than ten years afterwards, she has been doing research with various member organizations of the supranational agrarian movement La Via Campesina.³

The rest of the morning was dedicated to another plenary session, of a less standard nature. Lucas De Man gave a presentation entitled “We, Pig Country.” De Man is an independent Dutch director and theater actor, performer, and founder of New Heroes – a firm, which puts on artistic events in public open spaces. During his presentation De Man used the metaphor of pigs and the world

¹ Natalia Mamonova, PhD, is a researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. She is interested in questions of rural areas and agriculture in post-Soviet countries. Her book *Rethinking Rural Politics in Post-Socialist Settings: Rural Communities, Land Grabbing, and Agrarian Change in Russia and Ukraine* is to be published shortly by Ipskamp Drukkers BV.

² This report is to be printed in one of the upcoming issues of the quarterly *Sociologia Ruralis*.

³ Articles concerning this very issue can be found in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* – no. 24, 2002 and 29, 2008.

of swine husbandry to describe changing conditions. After the performance, for which De Man received loud applause, there was an informal discussions with the audience about De Man's inspiration and artistic activities.

The last plenary session was held in the afternoon of the last day of the Congress. Presentations were given by three outstanding scholars of rural issues: Patrick H. Mooney, Jan Douve van der Ploeg and Paweł Starosta. Patrick H. Mooney delivered a talk on "Truth, Justice, and the Diversity of a Rural Way." He spoke about the role of social movements (which he defined more broadly as well, having collective actions in mind) in the context of rural development.⁴ He tried to define a potentially innovative program of research in the field of rural sociology, noting that the study of local communities requires an interdisciplinary approach that tends, on a sociological base, towards trans-disciplinary (syncretic) studies. Mooney is a professor of sociology at the University of Kentucky, where he has worked for over 30 years. His research interests are social movements and agricultural cooperatives, and also the political aspects of the functioning of the agricultural and food sector.

The second presentation, by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, was entitled "Blind Spots" and concerned issues of what he called "weak points" or "dead areas" in research. In his opinion, the attendant unequal distribution of knowledge and ignorance (being the result of "dead areas" in analyses of rural areas) ensues from the complicated mechanisms that currently govern the production of knowledge. He is an expert in this field, as his analyses concern global agricultural sectors, farming practices, peasants, and agricultural markets. He is a professor at the Agricultural University in Wageningen and an assistant professor of the sociology of agriculture at the College of Humanities of the Agricultural University in Beijing.

The last presentation, which closed the academic part of the Congress, was entitled "Patterns of Social Capital Across Rural Europe," and was given by Paweł Starosta of the University of Łódź. It concerned the correlation between certain elements of social capital and economic growth.⁵ This report had three clearly defined parts. In the first one, the speaker presented the level and diversification of social capital in Europe; in the second one, he characterized the dominant pattern of social capital of rural populations in various parts of Europe; in the third one, he

⁴ Patrick H. Mooney is co-editor (with K. Gorlach) of the work *Dynamika życia społecznego. Nowe koncepcje ruchów społecznych* [*The Dynamics of Social Life: New Concept of Social Movements*] published by Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar (2008). His article on family farms in the USA can be found in no. 1.1 of *Wież i Rolnictwo*.

⁵ In addition to the sociology of territorial communities and globalization, social capital is one of the speaker's areas of interest. He is the author of many publications on this issue.

showed the relationship between levels of social capital and methods of agricultural development in Eastern Europe.

The thematic sessions were held simultaneously, in sections, on the second and fourth (last) day of the Congress. The reports delivered during these sessions concerned both theoretical and practical aspects of the development of agriculture and rural areas. There were 30 in total and they covered the following issues:

- 1) The new relationship between rural territories and rural dwellers: experiences of success and failure between utopia and dystopia
- 2) International perspectives on land reform: rural change and the question of justice
- 3) Declining rural facilities and services: regional models versus everyday life realities
- 4) Countryside connections: staying in the countryside
- 5) Tap for change: ubiquitous ICT, food and rurality
- 6) Poverty, social exclusion and marginalization in a diversified rural context
- 7) On the move: international migration to/in rural areas
- 8) Mobilities, gender, racial and other social inequalities in rural Europe
- 9) Ageing rural communities: experiences and consequences of uneven demographic processes
- 10) Towards inclusive rural places and spaces
- 11) Contested approaches to land-use: sustainability adjustments in social practices in global space
- 12) Population change, economic and environmental transformations, and rural community well-being)
- 13) Shaping methods, shaping voices and the engagement of discourses in an age of uneven rural change
- 14) Diversity and equality: reflections on rural research
- 15) Ageing, austerity and engagement: implications for participation and knowledge production in rural civil society across the life course
- 16) Changing meanings of “the rural” in changing times. What meanings? What actors? What processes? What rural(s)?
- 17) Social movements and citizens’ initiatives: geographies, power relations and determinants of success and impact
- 18) Plural knowledge for agri-food collectives: making spaces for new rural – urban connections
- 19) Rural death: the rural as a liminal space of dying and remembrance
- 20) Multiple knowledges and diversifying rural change
- 21) Evaluation of “innovation” projects and partnerships: challenges, practical experiences and methodological innovations

- 22) Animals in a changing landscape
- 23) Doing art in the country
- 24) Small farms, local and global markets, and food for all: where are the connections, the disconnects, and the potentials – what do we know?
- 25) RC40 Mini-conference: exploring the richness of diversity in alternative agri-food movements
- 26) Conditions for just sustainability transitions within agri-food systems: comparative approaches
- 27) Ethics and sustainable agri-food governance: appraisal and new directions
- 28) Finance, institutions and the governance of European agriculture – implications for sustainable farming practices and food security
- 29) Social innovations in agriculture and local food markets
- 30) “Next-year country”: agriculture and rurality in contemporary North America.⁶

Every session began with a short introduction to the given subject, after which the attendees presented their thoughts, experiences, and research findings.⁷ The sessions usually ended with a short discussion. Such an arrangement made it possible for many persons to give reports and allowed the listeners to increase their knowledge about the questions addressed. Thus, one can say with certainty that participation in the Congress was quite intense intellectual experience.

Among events accompanying the congress there were field excursions and methodological workshops for young scholars. For the excursions, the Congress participants had a choice of ten itineraries. These included, for instance, a visit to the headquarters of the Opoka social cooperative, the headquarters of the Przystań cooperative, “Carp Valley,”⁸ or the Nowizny agro-tourist facility.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the conference, it is impossible to take account of all the presentations and lectures in this short summary. Respect and appreciation are due to the organizers for the care they took in regard both of the level of scholarship and organization (for instance, for interesting field excursions).

⁶ The co-organizers coordinating certain thematic sessions were the Polish scholars – Marta Czekaj, PhD Eng. and Ewa Tyran, PhD Eng. – thematic session no. 24 – Piotr Nowak, PhD (dr hab.) – thematic session no. 28.

⁷ Among the lecturers who are employees of the Institute of Rural Development and Agriculture of the Polish Academy of Science three persons should be mentioned: Professor Maria Halamska, Sylwia Michalska, PhD, and Ruta Śpiewak, PhD. Professor Halamska and Michalska PhD delivered a report entitled “Women in the Rural Social Structure: Aspects of Social Inequalities” during thematic session no. 8. Ruta Śpiewak’s report entitled “From the Quasi-Peasant to the New Peasant: New Social Identities of Farmers Cooperating with Civic Food Networks in Poland,” started thematic session no. 24 on Thursday.

⁸ Carp Valley (Dolina Karpia) has been studied by the Institute of Rural Development and Agriculture since the 1980s. Recently (2010–2011), the influence of the activities of the Local Action Group of the Carp Valley Association on the development of local communities has been studied.

The organizers should also be thanked for having managed to bring together so many excellent speakers to share their knowledge, research findings, and opinions. This was noted by many participants, who expressed very positive opinions about the Krakow Congress in informal conversations.