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Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Building Communities, Protecting Resources, Fostering Human Development (Xth World Congress of Rural Sociology, Rio de Janeiro, 30 July to 5 August, 2000)

For Portuguese speakers the Rio congress of the International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA) was a cornucopia of possibilities, an embarrassment of riches — two congresses, for it was simultaneously the XXXVIIIth Brazilian Congress of Rural Economy and Sociology of Sociedade Brasileira de Economia e Sociologia Rural (SOBER), and literally thousands of papers to choose from (there were 1,400 participants in all), from all over the world, and from all over the 8,547,404 square kilometres that is Brazil. The SOBER papers were, naturally enough, in Portuguese, and so too were the bulk of the IRSA papers if they had a Portuguese name attached to them. But I suspect that most readers of this journal are not Portuguese speakers, and, for those of us who rely on English and perhaps French and German at international gatherings, the pickings, although extensive, were far less rich.

The organizers had tried their best with the set-piece occasions. The opening and closing speeches and plenary sessions all had simultaneous translation into English and Portuguese as appropriate. But with so many sessions, and so many papers per session (some were time-tabled with less than 10 minutes per paper), the only rational decision was to leave it to the speakers themselves to provide a multi-lingual presentation. Given that it could not be expected that paper-givers be able to present in Portuguese and English (let alone all four official languages of IRSA — English, French, Portuguese and Spanish), the policy decided on was to encourage all paper-givers to give their paper in one of the four official languages and present a summary in one other. Regrettably, and all nationalities were equally guilty on this point, this request was widely ignored. English-

speakers presented papers in English, Portuguese-speakers in Portuguese, and Spanish-speakers in Spanish.

The organizers had made a policy decision not to schedule the English and Portuguese papers in separate sessions. The paper titles were translated into English, and the only suggestion that a given paper might be in Portuguese was that there was a Brazilian name attached. The reasoning behind this decision was that the organizers wanted to increase international dialogue rather than create language-based ghettos. But given the fact that paper-givers had not made their papers accessible in other languages, it created frustration rather than communication. It seemed at times as if there was some sort of anti-imperialist agenda being played out in this dialogue of the deaf. The Brazilians rather enjoyed the reversal of roles, the fact that Yankee imperialists (North Americans being the major English-speakers in their experience) were having to sit in silence, uncomprehending, as Brazilians held the floor. But at an international conference, it is not only the native English speakers who use English as their scientific language. Most of the readers of this journal are probably not native English speakers, yet English is our *lingua franca*. The sufferers from the Brazilian dialogue of the deaf were not just the Yankee imperialists, but also participants from other smaller, non-imperialist nations, including all of the participants from Central and Eastern Europe.

Not that researchers from Central and Eastern Europe were present in large numbers. The distance and the expense meant that many of the names on the participants' list did not turn up in reality. Some of the more senior Eastern European researchers managed to find the necessary funding, as did some western researchers who work on Eastern European themes, but many of the familiar faces and names that have figured in this journal were unable to make it. In the sea of Latin American contributions, Central and Eastern Europe was rather poorly represented. In fact, it is probably fair to say that the problems of Central and Eastern European rurality did not receive sufficient voice at the Congress. Certainly, apart from some very general references to the problems of socialist economies in the context of the differential weights given to market, state and society in Cornelia Butler-Flora's contribution to the first plenary session, and Larry Busch's closing paper which referred to failing markets in Eastern Europe, the plenary sessions (that I attended, but it was impossible to attend them all) paid no serious attention to the region or how its problems might affect the rural sociology agenda.

The poor representation of participants from our region was particularly so in workshop No. 17 — *Planned and Post Planned Economies* — that I was responsible for organizing. On paper, there were ten paper-givers, from all over Central and Eastern Europe, from Russia and from China. In the event, only a fraction of this number, and only one from Central and

Eastern Europe, turned up. This did indeed mean that paper-givers could spread themselves more than usual. There was not the normal rush to squeeze in as many words as possible into one's allotted ten minutes. Papers were presented in full and discussed at length, in fact a good discussion developed. But the session lacked breadth, and in mass conferences like this was, breadth is important. The emphasis in the session was on rural development and rural non-farming issues rather than agriculture, although my paper argued in a general sense that there remain distinctive features to the problems of agriculture and rural society in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and that to deny this is to deny centuries of different development and the constraints of the past on the present. Junior R. Davies, an economist rather than sociologist by training, gave a paper based on his research into non-farming rural households in Romania.* Andrzej Hałasiewicz, currently employed in the Polish Ministry of Agriculture complemented this with a paper outlining the Polish SAPARD and World Bank rural aid schemes.

Other researchers from our region chose to give papers in workshops not devoted to the particular problems of Eastern European and post-planned economies. Their papers can be split into those which focused on the position of farmers and farming, and those that addressed the question of rural development. Of the former, Krzysztof Gorlach presented a paper analysing class diversification in the context of 'post-tradition' family farms in 'post-modern' Poland to the enormous workshop on *Family Farming in Late Modernity* which continued under a rotating chairmanship for the whole of the congress. He offered a second paper to one of the sessions on *Rural Social Movements* which built on the diversification noted in the other paper and considered the adoption, by those defending the case of 'real farmers', of more western patterns of protest. Ilkka Alanen and Karl Bruckmeier contributed with Eastern European topics to Imre Kovách's workshop on *Tradition, Detraditionalisation and Peasants*. Alanen focused on non-modern forms of community spirit that had emerged in the Soviet era and how they operated in relation to the break-up of socialist agriculture, while one of Bruckmeier's findings was that the model of post-traditional rurality held less well in Eastern Europe than in the west, although it was somewhat closer in the former GDR than Russia.

In the area of rural development, László Kulcsár, contributed two papers, one written with David Brown, the other with Csilla Obádovics. The first was presented to the session on *Constructing Coherence: Analysis and Design for Endogenous Rural Development* chaired by Gaston Remmers, the second to that on *Rural Development and Local Democracy* chaired by

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* An article referring to this paper appears on p. 51 of this issue of Eastern European Countryside.

Göran Djurfeld. The first paper considered inter-household exchange and informal economic activities in Hungary following the post-socialist decline in employment, the second considered the "community answers" to rural development, an analysis of the initiatives developed by 200 rural micro-regions under Hungary's SAPARD plans. Csilla Obádovics also contributed a paper to the session on *Demographic Change and Rural Populations*, examining rural demographic change between 1990 and 1999, a theme that was also pursued in the case of Slovenia by M Istenic who also chaired a session on *Rural Cultural Identity: From Traditions to Modernity*. Focusing on a different aspect of the general theme of rural development, Paweł Starosta presented a paper on the role of local organizations in community-building to the workshop on *Local Organization* arguing that in societies with weak democratic traditions, such as Central and Eastern Europe, local organizations do not become structures strengthening the public sector. Finally, in as much as areas of the former GDR were covered in their paper which touched among other things on LEADER and rural development, there was an Eastern European component to the paper of Rosemarie Siebert and Regina Grajewski presented to one of the sessions on *Promoting Participation in Rural Development.*

At a meeting of this size one inevitably misses far more sessions that one attends. There was a relatively large Croatian presence at the Congress, but I did not attend any of the sessions at which their papers were presented. However, unlike most of those mentioned so far (Rosemarie Siebert and Regina Grajewski being the only exceptions), two sets of Croat paper-givers were sufficiently well organized to get their papers ready in time to be published on the congress CD-ROM. Zoran Grgic and Ramona Franic offered a paper on dairy farming in Croatia. The paper is economic in focus, but provides useful information on the dairy sector of Croatian farming and confirms the picture that Croatia is characterized by small family farms. The paper by T. Žimbrek, D. Žutinić and V. Par is more generally socio-economic in focus and based on a survey of 892 households. Although optimistic in tone because of the dramatic improvement since the immediate post-war period, it reveals that the average farm has only 6.4 hectares of arable land (9 hectares of agricultural land) with 38 per cent of household income coming from non-farming activities outside the household, and only 2 per cent of farms are considering introducing new production.

Other than these papers from Central and Eastern Europe, the tiny minority as I have stressed, there was the usual mixture of highly theoretical contributions, and very empirical pieces, studies of small communities, and analyses of commodity régimes. My personal selection included Frederick Buttel on developments in rural sociological theory, Farshad Araghi and Phillip McMichael questioning post-modernism, Bernado Sorj arguing that the discipline of rural sociology was imploding, Mark Shucksmith on social

exclusion and reflexivity, Reidar Almås on contrasting mountain and coastal communities, Joachim Ewert on South African wine producers, Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele on 'fast food' and 'slow food', M. Teubal and J. Rodriguez on agro-food systems in Argentina, a paper by an unscheduled presenter whose name I failed to note on the processing (rather than fresh) tomato industry, and H. A. R. Lanz on the mentality problems associated with debts, distrust and failing co-operatives in North Eastern Brazil. These produced the standard conclusions: that rural sociological theory is inadequate and not at the forefront of sociological theory generally; that there are conditions where rural development works, and others where it does not, and it is difficult to identify just what these conditions are, except that they are linked somehow with historical experience and traditions of dependency; that alternatives are possible; but when producers get involved with the global food industry, in the long term it is usually the global food industry that wins. But if the overall message was not new, many papers presented it in a fresh and original fashion, in a way which made it well worth crossing both the Atlantic and the Equator to hear.

I have concentrated, of course, on the academic content of the congress. That was our reason for being there. But it would have been a sin to travel to Brazil and not sample the culture, the food, the caipirinha, the sweet limes, the cashew juice, the papaya, the music, the people, the dancing, the football, the beaches, the vibrancy of a poor, unequal, yet open, welcoming, relaxed, unjudgemental, and apparently prejudice-free society. Some of us had the times of our lives.