

*Gerd Vonderach*

## NEW TASKS FOR RURAL SOCIOLOGY

### Abstract

The social changes which have taken place in the living conditions of the inhabitants of rural areas in Central Europe justify the question about the differences between them and city dwellers. At the same time, the problem arises of precisely defining the increasingly distinctive subject of rural sociology and agricultural sociology.

The author sets out to investigate the contrasting factors starting from questions concerning the shaping of the landscape, particularly those rural areas which are still partly open. Two further areas of investigation are the massive increase in commuting, which has involved most of the rural population for a considerable time, as well as social activity and the resulting cooperation between rural inhabitants, increasing their possibilities of sensibly spending leisure time.

Keywords: rural and agricultural sociology, lifestyle, rural population.

### INTRODUCTION

The social changes which have taken place in the living conditions of the inhabitants of rural areas in Central Europe justify the question about the differences between them and city dwellers. At the same time, the problem arises of precisely defining the increasingly distinctive subject of rural sociology and agricultural sociology.

Firstly, there seems no doubt that farmers represent a marginal section of both the entire population and of the rural population. Agriculture can no longer be perceived as a sphere due to which in rural areas there is a link between way of life and the dominant type of business activity, which used to determine the close links between rural sociology and agricultural sociology. Specific agricultural problems bring sociological analysis closer to other sub-disciplines of social science: economic sociology, nutrition sociology, environmental sociology as well

as developmental sociology, if it includes the problems of the agricultural population in developing countries.

On the other hand, rural inhabitants, i.e. the population of smaller settlements, as a result of post-war modernisation processes started imitating the socio-professional structures, organisation and way of life of the city population which is confirmed in many recent studies on this issue (see B. H. Becker, 1997; Hainz, 1999). If we add the diverse and increasingly close ties with urban inhabitants, the problem arises of the superfluity of rural sociology. Specific characteristics of rural social life, generally connected with a small number of inhabitants can be penetrated within the sociology of the commune. However, if we consider a future for rural sociology, at last liberated from agricultural sociology, we have to find new, more interesting areas of research for it. This does not seem particularly difficult if we pay greater attention to present-day rural areas and people living there.

The most interesting include the area connected with shaping the landscape, particularly the partly open landscapes of rural areas. Their transformation – elicited by social changes and changes in social perception, using and creating structures in open spaces – can be a fascinating field of sociological investigation. Also by contacts with agricultural sociology, since agricultural land nowadays and in the past has been the largest part of rural structures.

Another, equally important issue will be the mass development of commuting. This not only concerns rural inhabitants who travel to work in town, which is a phenomenon in itself. It also includes people who for professional reasons move from one place to another, large numbers going to school as well as those travelling in the countryside with provisions or for recreation. They all provide reasons for treating modern life in the countryside as an exceptionally mobile type of existence.

Another area should be explored not because it is particularly connected with rural areas, yet because it is gaining particular significance in rural conditions. What I have in mind is social work and the consequent interaction between rural inhabitants, allowing for the use of various services. Such unpaid social involvement in matters of maintaining an adequate standard and quality of life in the countryside which is generally poorly equipped with professional services, as well as communal and social infrastructure, seems to be more important than in town. There is therefore no reason why new rural sociology should not deal with this issue.

## SOCIAL CHANGE AND LANDSCAPE CHANGE

As opposed to the “region”, describing particularly the territory with specific economic and social structures, the “landscape” in the generally understood

meaning of the word is linked with a more concrete, emotionally experienced area, reflected in the consciousness of people living there. We recognise an even stronger mental and social phenomenon, a way of historical thinking, undergoing cultural change. *As long as we move around in an area, we recognise landscapes, if they look like paintings* (Ipsen, 1997, p. 7. Also see the article "Landscape – painting, concept and description", Hahn, 1999). It is difficult to reconcile the idea connected with paintings and aesthetic values with purely academic concepts. In geography this concept of landscape is gradually being moved aside but many areas of applied geography – landscape gardening, landscape architecture, landscape ecology – are experiencing a revival because partly in agreement with the interest in natural studies they can be defined in categories of planning. For the sociological prospect of perception and clarification of the landscape and for the practice of landscape and social change, it seems that the pre-academic view seems more significant (see G. Vonderach, 1999).

The landscape is constantly undergoing change. It changed before the arrival of man and without his influence, it is changing faster since being cultivated by people and transformed into a cultural form. Natural and cultural landscapes do not have to contradict each other in every inch, since the latter do not entirely lose their natural features, although they evolve under the influence of anthropogenic usage.

Forms of utilising space change along with changes in lifestyle and production, reflecting new features in the living practice of humankind. Although the future will fully reveal the landscape consequences of the high rate of technical and economic change – and also social and cultural – taking place here and now, nevertheless we notice the changes taking place in all types of landscape although they are not uniform in character. Thus the need for making a relative statement about "total landscape" (Sieferle, 1998), assuming the typical character of changes taking place in diverse agricultural landscapes, as a result of applying identical means and production technologies of industrial agriculture. The case of an extremely uniform style of rural building meanwhile indicates that it does not have to unify the landscape because diverse conditions of the settlement define the ways of utilising it. During the intensive utilisation of agricultural land parks, landscapes and attractive leisure and entertainment areas are created, while other areas lose their economic value, which perhaps creates the opportunity for their more natural development. It is, therefore, impossible to be totally sure of anything in this regard. On the one hand, in many regions there is the phenomenon of settlement zones invading the rural landscape resulting in a mixture of town and country, the creation of something rather like an "in-between town" (Sieverts, 1997), leading to a shrinking of the landscape to an "in-between space" or "in-between landscape". On the other hand, due to excessive migration leading to depopulation and restriction of business activity, some areas – particularly in

Eastern Germany – have become excessively rural (Weiß, 2002), since the backwardness of agriculture did not become absorbed by greater activity in other areas. However, the majority of rural areas spread between these two extreme cases, standing out – in comparison with large urban agglomerations – with a growing population and intensification of non-agricultural functions, a growing attractiveness as a place to live in and growing number of commuters. This is where the potential is growing – sometimes conflicting – for the diversified use and shape of the landscape.

Human encounters with the landscape become real in a complexity mutually infiltrating, changing and pluralistic types of behaviour and orientations, going from one landscape to another. They acquire ways of living and farming reflected in them, forms of planning and social structures, cultural ideas and legal standards. They apply various methods of possessing space – from those which are hardly or not at all institutionalised (walking, running, swimming, mushroom picking) to far more permanent possessions, carried out according to title deeds, ownership or usage, often connected with the exclusion of usage by others. The owners of specific pieces of land, people who occasionally spend time there or travel across it, as well as various social groups and individuals have different intentions, they have conflicting interests, make demands, they take action and create legal procedures. The diverse influence on institutionalised form of access to the land and its utilisation is made by the change in ways of production and social power structure, as in the changes in life style, habits and customs, ideas and cultural standards, which are expressed in various contexts, including situations of conflict.

Over a longer period of time social changes currently taking place in Central Europe will also result in changing ways of utilising and shaping the landscape (see G. Vonderach, 1994; 1997; 1999), the development of services and the dematerialisation of paid work, more commuting, individual mechanisation, a limitation of working time and an increase in leisure time while maintaining a high standard of living. This goes along with changes in lifestyle, including rural areas whose inhabitants hardly differ from town dwellers.

The industrialisation of agriculture – mechanisation, use of chemicals, specialisation in cultivation and breeding – led to an increase in productivity, when compared with the medieval cutting down of forests, since when areas used for agriculture dominated the landscape. An increase in productivity led not only to satisfying the food needs of the population but also to over-production, which led to the lessening of pressure on intensive exploitation of all agricultural land. The speeding up of structural changes in Eastern Germany resulted in the appearance of large stretches of fallow and wasteland, which has mostly been degraded by industry and excavation or used by the army.

Table 1

## Utilisation of land in former West Germany

	1960	1997
Housing estates, leisure areas, transportation routes	8.5%	13.3%
Agricultural areas (including marshes and wasteland)	57.5%	52.8%
Forests	28.7%	30.2%

Source: Rach, 1987, p. 28; German Federal Republic Statistical Yearbook 1998, p. 18.

Due to EU agricultural policy there is growing competition of production costs which also leads to a limitation of the area and intensity of cultivation. Although the drop in the intensive exploitation of agricultural land is not yet clearly visible (see table 1) which is meant to happen mainly due to their growing fallowness and actions in favour of extending agricultural production, it is highly likely that in the future agriculture will be carried out in a smaller area but of top quality soil (Schlitz – Harsche, 1992; Succow, 1995).

Together with the reduction of areas exploited agriculturally there is also a clear growth in inhabited and communication grounds, which should be associated with the „use of the landscape” (Tösdorpf, 1984). The main contribution to this is the growing number of plots destined for housing – a visible symbol of improvement in standard of living and living conditions as well as the changing lifestyle – resulting in the expansion of towns and villages far beyond the earlier boundaries, and in some regions even the appearance of so-called “in-between towns”. There is also a growth in use of rural space for recreation, tourism, sport and settlement for people of post-productive age. The extension of communication routes, enforced by growing numbers of commuters, leads to the fragmentation of the landscape (Jaeger, 1992).

The slow, yet systematic growth of forest areas – particularly visible when we refer this positive phenomenon to the shrinking and neglected forest of the industrial period – and their reconstruction, from monocultures (particularly pine) to mixed forests which are more like natural forests.

Due to the growing or changing influence on the direction of socio-cultural changes some of the indicated subject areas – leisure time, rest and tourism; the forest as a landscape phenomenon; links between environmental protection and agriculture as well as people with animals – seems particularly interesting for rural sociology.

The greater significance of landscape for organising leisure time, rest and tourism is beyond discussion. Settling or actively spending leisure time in rural areas is a basis for the economic development for many villages and small towns.

Meanwhile, for some of them this means degradation of the landscape and social life (Krippendorf, 1980; Puhe, 1987; Röck, 1987), which imposes the search for new forms of tourism and leisure, in accordance with the requirements of protecting the natural and socio-cultural environment (Bramer, 2001; Kramer, 1983), thus paving the way for a new field of sociological research.

Forests, despite their extensive areas and considerable economic value (often unappreciated), significance for environmental protection, recreation and tourism and no less significant psychological and cultural values, have not yet experienced some significant show of interest by sociology (in contrast to ethnology, see Lehmann, 1999; Schriewer, 1995; Braun, 2000).

The link between environmental protection and agriculture is very important, not only for agro-economic and ecological-political reasons, but also from the aspect of cultural change and social conflict which occur between the users of the land and those involved in its protection. Rural sociology must make its contribution in understanding these issues, consulting, e.g. projects for extending naturally protected areas (see A. Vonderach, 2002).

The exploitation of the land is also connected with new relations between people and animals. They appear both in the treatment of wild animals as a "quasi nature reserve", included in the institutional protection as well as granting some pets the status of "animal partners" and including them in the system of social contacts, recreation and leisure (see G. Vonderach, 1999).

Impulses promoting sociological intervention into the links between social and landscape changes can include the following: the division between using space into productive and consumer ways; area segregation or integration of managing space, landscape as an area of experience; opportunities for creating landscapes of the future. The former means a division into an area used for business activity and earning money, i.e. used productively and an area used for living, recreation and leisure, i.e. consumer use (G. Vonderach, 1999) underlining that their clear distinction is often impossible. This also refers to the state and communal exploitation of the land for the development of infrastructure, communication routes, military installations etc. and the requirements of natural environmental protection whose activities have all the features of creating "public wealth". Modern social changes generally lead to erasing the boundaries between managing *productive* and *consumer* space. In addition, some *consumer* ways are free of charge, e.g.: mountain climbing, hiking, swimming in lakes. Others are connected with *productive ways*, if the individual *consumption of the landscape* requires people who provide paid services, e.g. transportation of people.

The sociologist who deals with forming and exploiting space within the context of social change cannot only look at one-dimensional official and statistic data reflecting ways of managing it. S/he has to do far more, searching for the relevant space and variety in relation to the specific fragment of activities, needs,

interests and legal regulations, which are a complexity of change connected with the type of landscape. S/he will also have to try to recognise the consequences of social changes and changes in lifestyle, appearing in the relationship between man and the landscape. He will notice the distinction between development plans and reality, not always in agreement with assumptions, often constructed on the basis of contrasting conditions. Thus, on the one hand, correcting the deformation of the landscape and segregating its diverse functions, e.g. its agricultural functions and the protection of natural resources. On the other hand, the most favourable adaptation, the integration of various functions of space, connected with restricting its one-dimensional usage.

Far deeper links between the landscape and society should be taken into account, than those which are perceived both in real and model plans of space management or studies characterising the actual state of utilising space. An "understanding" sociologist who tries to clarify the living practice of the individual from the perspective of his/her subjective impressions, asks about reactions, experiences, expectations resulting from his/her links with the landscape. Achim Hahn's reflections on this matter are useful about "landscape as an area of experience" or "the point of reference for various practices and social relations" (Hahn, 1999a, p. 53), who defines the hermeneutic idea of such an experience: *Landscape as an area of experience remains connected with the practical patterns of behaviour and its relinquishment. The clarity of the landscape here means: understanding the symbolism reflecting the essence of a particular landscape* (p. 54), quoting Auweck: *We generally reach the essence of the landscape through the psyche and sensual feelings* (Auweck, 1993, p. 244).

The expected regression of intensive exploitation of ploughland, meadows and pastures, forest areas, the closure of old opencast mines and industrial works – these forms of productive space management lead to rather slow yet systematic and significant landscape changes in Central Europe. Together with new opportunities (Succow, 1995) and wider possibilities of acting within the framework of different options, the question arises: "How and why do we want to use and shape the landscape in the future?" (G. Vonderach, 1999, p. 83; idem, 1997). Within the framework of public debate – with the participation of not only experts and planners, since the organisation of space is firstly connected with people living there – both problems concerning consumer growth should be discussed as well as new possibilities of environmental protection. The task for sociologists taking part in such a debate should be a separation of social ideas about the desired landscape of the future from agriculture of past centuries, from the dominance of productive functions, threats to the natural environment and not less important, from the current way of life (cf. Muhar, 1995 and 1999).

## COMMUTING AS A WAY OF LIFE

Commuting has become a dominant feature of the way of life of people living in rural areas, although the social type of migrant has changed. During the post-war period of development of West Germany these were farmers (peasant-workers) who supplemented their incomes, daily travelling to the nearest town, where most of them worked as non-qualified or trainee workers, while most farm responsibilities were carried out by their wives. The number of commuters varied according to the region, its level of industrialisation and the fragmentation of the agrarian structure. At that time commuting went from generation to generation or happened as a result of abandoning farming as the only source of income, due to structural changes in agriculture. Apart from work in industry peasant farmers mainly found employment in building, which gave them and long distance migrants the opportunity of seasonal work. The social form of this early commuting was characterised by collectiveness – mutually spent time during travelling, mutual work in industry and the communal nature of the social organisation of the rural-peasant residential environment. In the early fifties, Herbert Kötter saw in the peasant-workers travelling to towns the main factor of modernisation of the rural way of life and values system, although on the other hand, he saw in them the guarantors of maintaining in the villages *a large part of the peasant, conservative way of thinking* (Kötter, 1952, p. 103).

In the early 1960s, a higher standard of living was accompanied by greater mechanisation which changed the habits of migrants (see Wilke, 1998) the majority of whom began driving to work in their own cars. The number of commuters rose constantly not only due to growing structural changes in agriculture. It also rose because those with cars but without farms could work in town while continuing to live in the countryside thus limiting depopulation. Many villages where agriculture was disappearing while their inhabitants' professional mobility was growing began to fulfil the role of lodgings for commuters. The growth in number was also affected by the rural population of places located further away from railway lines, who due to their own transportation went to the trouble of driving to work while reducing the amount of time devoted to their farms. Thus the growing professional diversity of commuters individualised the phenomenon of commuting.

The wide use of cars had a fundamental influence on changes in the socio-professional structure of migrants as well as influencing the growth in number of inhabitants in rural areas and the changes in their socio-professional structure. Many townspeople could move to the country, fulfilling their dreams of having their own houses due to lower property prices and continuing to have jobs in town. The re-structurisation of industry, resulting in the reduction of simple jobs, led to the improvement of migrants' qualifications and the widening of serv-



ices partly improved the academic standard and feminisation of their professional structure. The main development of the last few years towards widening the services sector increases the number of commuters between country places. A crucial factor is the car and also the widening of reasons for moving beyond the professional sphere and linking them with accommodation, education, supplies and recreation needs.

The extent and development of commuting is more difficult to establish than it first seemed. We think of commuters in the professional sense when jobs are located away from the place of residence, thus demanding some form of transport. Statistical data only register those cases which involve moving beyond the boundaries of the commune, without taking into account the distance of the movement. On the other hand, distances between districts of urban agglomerations numbering a million do not currently have much significance, as well as between places situated further from each other yet within the boundaries of a larger rural commune. Another difficulty in numerically grasping the phenomenon of commuting was created by administrative reform, carried out in West Germany in the sixties and seventies, as a result of which many settlements which were formerly independent became integrated into larger communes or even towns, resulting in the disturbance of the administrative and statistical picture of the analysed phenomenon. Thus the data are indicators of the analysed data, nevertheless they show the extraordinary growth in commuting for professional reasons, which the majority of rural inhabitants of working age take part in.

According to national registers from 1950 to 1987 we can state that the number of commuters crossing the borders of the commune tripled. Due to the statistical effect of joining communes due to administrative reforms mentioned earlier, their numbers dropped during the second part of that period. In 1987 about 10 million people commuted to work, i.e. 37% of the working population (Ott – Gerlinger, 1992, p. 79) In 1961 barely one out of five people commuting to work used a car, 26 years later (1987) this was the case for four fifths (idem, p. 112). The expansion of this phenomenon is well illustrated by data from Lower Saxony. Registers carried out from 1961 to 1970 noted a doubling of the number of commuters in both most important agglomerations of commuters located in the north western part of that trade union country which was the result of the fall of the industrial town of Emden. There was a 77% growth due to the collapse of Oldenburg as a services centre (Stat. v. Nds. Bd. 91. Jb. Nds. 1973) The most recent period of development, during which commuting between communes became common is illustrated by later data. Between 1987 and 1998 when the number of jobs in the southern regions of Lower Saxony remained stable and in its central part it rose 11%, in its rural communes it rose 21%. During the same period the number of those travelling to work increased which in that unionised country was 43% of all professionally active people (Schaffner, 2000). This phenomenon is even more

clearly reflected by data from rural communes – e.g. in the commune of Hatten (south of Oldenburg) towards the end of June 1997, 571 employed were local people and 671 were people commuting to work (data from the Employment Office in Oldenburg).

Regardless of whether the official data reflect the scale of the analysed phenomenon in a better or worse light, the question arises whether “statistical” commuters see themselves in that light. It can be assumed that together with the popularity of travelling to work and more easily covering further distances the identification with commuters has weakened. These include mainly those who have to cover longer distances between their homes and their work, consider replacing daily travel to work by an alternative permanent migration or commuting on a weekly basis. The rural sociologist will also have to ask him/herself about the prospect of studies on the influence of commuting on socio-cultural changes in rural areas.

Suggesting possible subject areas, lets first point out that expansion and changes in such migration processes require clearer perception and wider research. Many phenomena of rural social life – the decline of agriculture, the growing role of the services sector, changes in lifestyle etc. – cannot be adequately analysed without a functional link with the processes of professional and extra-professional commuting.

Within that framework a closer look should be taken at those taking part in this process for professional reasons, since apart from the majority of people living in the country and working in town, there are also those who live in town and work in the country and others living in one village and working in another. The two last categories of commuters enrich rural social life – contributing to its growing attractiveness as a place to live in, creating its socio-cultural resources, reinforcing the formal structures of rural residential areas being the employees of key social institutions: schools, offices, banks, businesses, surgeries, specialised shops and services providers etc. – not only by their work whose effects remain there, yet also because they are often highly qualified professionals. This group now includes many teachers who work in the countryside yet prefer to live in town and also architects, managers, craftsmen, civil servants and representatives of other professions requiring a high level of knowledge and skills. Observing this variety from the perspective of distance between work and residence, we may talk about short-distance commuters, not experiencing particular inconvenience in their daily lives as well as long distance commuters experiencing the inconvenience of daily travelling to work or longer (generally weekly) absence from home. Let us distinguish the autochthonous commuters, i.e. those who have to leave their homes in the countryside from those who come to the country from town. Apart from those travelling for professional or educational reasons, a dis-

tion should also be made between those having to travel within the region for shopping, dealing with official matters, doing sport or other leisure activities.

The sociological investigation of the individual commuter, reflected in the social experiences of most modern rural inhabitants, if this is to lead to adequate revelations and innovative research procedures – requires new ideas and theoretical prospects. Recent discussions bring four interesting points of view symbolised by the slogans: “multi-location” i.e. many “living places in the region”; “everyday lifestyle”; social practice “good life” as well as the subjective appreciation of “rurality” as a category.

The concept of “regional living spots” (see Hahn, 1999; 2003) refers to the daily life of the individual spending time in different spots, as a typical situation for commuters. This also refers to rural places which are more or less regularly visited by rural inhabitants for reasons not connected with their professional activity. Such a multi-location of living practice within regional boundaries, becomes a characteristic feature of many modern or post-traditional biographies, firstly involving the overcoming of the distance between different locations. The structure of contrasting activities undertaken in different places demands considerable organisational effort for commuters and requires their coordination with family needs, e.g. looking after children, running the household or other important daily activities. All of this requires time management particularly under exceptional circumstances.

The analysis of this problem is connected with the concept of “everyday lifestyle” worked out by Günter Voß and others (Voß, 1991, Wilken, 2002) partly referring to concepts used by Max Weber, where reference is made to the integration of various aspects of people’s lives, taking place in their daily activities, treated as the arrangement of a system, which is a feature of the individual’s creativity (Voß, 1991).

Commuting – if this occurs together with running a farm, considered as an additional or casual source of income – is a link between two separate areas of financial security. For a large majority of participants of current migration phenomena this type of organisation of their daily lives is totally alien since their situation requires an efficient way of managing non-material aspects of their lives. Achim Hahn has interesting thoughts about post-traditional way of life of the rural inhabitants particularly commuters – referring to the *Return to the ethic of the good life* (Seel, 1991) he talks about “the practice of good life in the country” (Hahn, 2001; Hahn – Steinbusch, 2000). He sees good life as a kind of creation of existence... *from the perspective of aiming at success* (Hahn, 2001, p. 55) creating a biography whose high quality depends on the possibility of fulfilling one’s plans and self-fulfilment.

According to commuters “good life” in the countryside in most cases includes a positive attitude to “rurality”, although the ideal of rurality can be seen in two

different ways. For the village inhabitants travelling to work "rurality" is generally a high level of social integration, not necessarily only within the boundaries of their own local village, yet also – according to Stefan Beetz – a wider rural area where *a daily and biographic connection between different places occurs* (Beetz, 2000, p. 63). Newcomers from towns look for a different kind of "rurality", identifying with it: a nice landscape, proximity to nature, wide open space for personal freedom and possibility of development, linking all of this with the ownership of their own home (Johaentges, 1996). They continue to be rural "townspeople", maintaining contacts with the town for not only professional reasons and avoiding closer social contacts with the local population (Steinbusch, 2000; 2001).

### SOCIAL ACTIVITY AS AN ASPECT OF RURAL QUALITY OF LIFE

In Germany a growing interest in social activity has been observed for some time, which was marked by the Bundestag which appointed a committee in 1999 "The Future of civic engagement" with the task of... *working out concrete political strategies and instruments of voluntary support, without the financial aspect, engaging citizens in the realisation of the common good* (Bürsch, 2001). The committee has so far published five reports on various topics and is working on another five, while also inspiring The Federal Ministry on matters concerning the Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) to organising wide empirical research on issues of social activity (Freiwilligensurvey 1999 – BMFSFJ 2000/2001). They were carried out by the Infratest Burke Sozialforschung, which in 1999 together with the cooperation of other research stations carried out a telephone survey on a representative group of 15,000 German inhabitants, aged over 14. The problem of the semantic ambiguity of the concept "social activity" was solved by the categorisation of the question about activity in one of the 15 mentioned areas of potential engagement, which were supplemented by a question about information on the topic of *tasks or jobs undertaken voluntarily or free of charge*.

About half of the respondents confirmed their involvement in something described as "voluntary work" in the questionnaire, a third in "non-paid work", and the rest in "projects", "civic initiatives" and "self-help activities". Trying to define not only the extent of this engagement, yet also its potential and the hardships, it was confirmed that a third of those researched was currently involved in social activity and among the remainder a third had once also been involved in such activity. Potential readiness for such activity was manifested by 37% of those questioned – already involved but wanting to widen the scope; earlier involved but interested in new areas of activity; and as yet not involved but express-

ing an interest in social activity particularly in the sphere of social policy, environmental protection and health which may have to be considered as a sign of a drop in interest in the classic areas of social activity and the appearance of new ones. A "dynamic model of involvement" with a high level of mobility is dominant – many types and areas of social involvement in various phases of life, taking place after each other or criss-crossing and a high level of readiness to change the area of involvement – which is most worth propagating. It was also noticed that in most cases people get involved in social activity by personal example and encouragement by "people of importance" and friends and acquaintances in one's immediate social environment. Since this type of social milieu which can in a sense be identified with the neighbourhood, still functions in rural areas that is where it contributes to social activity.

Social activity, neighbourly self-help and various other forms of social involvement have a long tradition in rural areas and are also of considerable significance for many areas of social life (see Rückert-John, 2001).

According to the Freiwilligensurvey 1999 it appears that among rural inhabitants the share of those involved in voluntary work is higher than in towns, particularly in areas such as: leisure time and social life, voluntary fire brigade, the church. A stimulating significance should here be seen as the result of a more integrated local environment, since the greatest social involvement is shown by the indigenous village inhabitants living in large households, people closely linked with the church and those strongly identifying themselves with the place they live in. Among the rural population there are also traces of the process described in sociological literature as a transition from "old" to "new" voluntary work (Behr, 2000). This means that nowadays voluntary work is more motivated by personal needs of identity and self-realisation as well as "the principle of biographic adjustment". This means a preference for the more flexible and temporarily limited forms of social activity and departure from the unlimited membership in social institutions (associations, circles, unions etc.) with fixed structures and functions. Involvement moves from being in structures and fulfilling a role to more collective forms of self help and help towards others with wider and less defined areas of activity, which can be analysed as a phenomenon of a wider process of "individualisation", according to Gerd Mutz, present not only in social activity yet also within the spectrum of paid work (Mutz, 2002, p. 28.)

Academic research in rural sociology also points to a growing differentiation of rural social organisations, still considered as an important factor in the integration of village communities, particularly those which as a result of reforms have lost their administrative independence and in addition to that many social institutions – schools, offices, churches, shops etc. – moved to central places (see Jauch, 1975; Kromka, 1975). Significant changes in rural social life which have taken place in recent years have also left their mark on the social area covered by

associations (see Jauch, 1980; Hainz, 1999; S. Becker, 2000; H. Becker – Hainz, 2002) within which a strong position was held by specialist recreational organisations, grouping rural inhabitants (Rückert-John, 2001, p. 27) because they... *get involved in the activity of an organisation not because it functions in the place they live in, yet mainly because of a specific type of interest, which can be carried out beyond their own community. Organisations of this type no longer group together representatives of entire local communities, but certain fragments* (Jauch, 1980, p. 50).

The growing number of organisations in the country and the modern nature of their activity is an expression of wider diversification of the social and cultural structure of the rural population. *Their colourful wide spectrum reflects a significant and growing pluralisation of needs connected with leisure time* (H. Becker – Hainz, 2002, p. 109) in many cases realised with the help of external offers by associations not acting locally. Numerous competitive associations and their local branches representing various milieus are not conducive to the community of experiences, as a result of which they separate rural inhabitants from one another instead of bringing them closer together. Since most of them emerge as a result of civic initiative without taking notice of formal structures, the hitherto strong local political significance is disappearing (H. Becker – Hainz, 2002). Despite that, they definitely contribute to an improved quality of life in the country, improving the attractiveness of their local environment, as much as the landscape and favourable living conditions. The constantly growing number and variety of rural associations causes difficulty in the functioning of the more traditional ones, *...with a standard spectrum and programme* (S. Becker, 2000, p. 80) many of which complain about falling numbers and the growing age of members and the deficit in social involvement. Social organisations acting on the cultural level are significant for the growing attractiveness of the rural environment (galleries, musical events etc.), sport, recreation as well as social life. The growth of small local museums and regional chambers, emerging and generally functioning due to voluntary activity are worth visiting (A. Vonderach, 2002).

Growing social involvement and its significance for the process of change in rural areas open provide interesting prospects for rural sociology which include: changes in individual motivations tending towards involvement in voluntary work and its “biographic adaptation”; social diversification of the social workers; the significance of this involvement as a measure of quality of life and the attractiveness of living in the country. Previously standard interview techniques were used whereas questions concerning the place of voluntary work within the framework of modern individualised forms of life of the rural population seem to be closer to the quality method.

Priority includes the problem of individualisation and pluralisation of biographies and plans of modern rural inhabitants, within the context of self-realisation

during free time from paid work, due to the readiness of getting involved in voluntary work and its significance at different times during an individual lifetime. An important gauge of this issue is the movement of the motives of engagement into voluntary activity – from traditional to more open, initiated and temporarily restricted, seen as a phenomenon of “individualisation”.

Another aspect of interest in social activity is connected with the differing structure of the rural population, mainly with a very different professional composition, mainly consisting of commuters. It is also important to get to know the different forms and levels of social involvement, from those which consist of initiating activities and leading organisations, through the specialised cooperation to simple participation.

The analysis of the influence of existing institutions of civic society on the rural population should be considered of particular importance for rural sociology, the quality of life in the countryside and the attractiveness of living in a rural environment. This is not only a matter of having access to social activity but specifically using institutions, organisations and mechanisms which have arisen due to voluntary activity, supplementing the limited infrastructure of rural areas and being of great importance to the inhabitants.

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