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New Areas of Research in German Rural Sociology

German rural and agricultural sociology which is clearly changing into the sociology of rural areas is not losing its dynamic. New academic periodicals¹ and many books are appearing on the publishing market. These books are generally about rural social changes in one of the most modernised countries in Europe, and also as importantly, about the growing problems for sociologists to describe them. An excellent example are two recent publications by well-known German sociologists: *Agrar-Kultur-Soziologie* (The sociology of agrarian culture) by Andreas Bodenstedt² and *Land-Leben gestern und heute* (Rural life yesterday and today) by Gerd Vonderach,³ synthesising their way of seeing rural and agricultural issues at the time of transition from an industrial to an IT society and summarising the rich achievements – hundreds of publications – of both outstanding German sociologists, the creators of German rural sociology of the so-called fourth generation.⁴

Andreas Bodenstedt's work is an extensive rural and agricultural sociology handbook covering all the themes which have so far appeared on rural sociology, from the history of its early days, institutionalisation, dis-

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¹ An example of this expansion is the quarterly *Land Berichte* which was published in German-speaking countries in 1998, clearly representing a new post-modernist way of thinking about rural and agricultural development. For more detailed information see: *Eastern European Countryside* 1999, No. 5, p. 147.

² A. Bodenstedt, *Agrar-Kultur-Soziologie*, Focus, Giessen 2003.

³ G. Vonderach, *Land-Leben gestern und heute*, Lit, Münster 2004.

⁴ An expression used by Andrzej Kaleta for describing new tendencies in German rural sociology at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. cf: *Socjologia wsi w Republice Federalnej Niemiec* (Rural Sociology in the Federal Republic of Germany), (ed.) A. Kaleta, Toruń 1992, p. 14.

cussing definitions, current problems connected with agricultural culture, the globalisation of agriculture, to taking a stance on detailed issues such as: folk music, voluntary fire brigade, sports fields, country golf courses etc. The author distinguished eight parts corresponding to the development history of rural areas and rural sociology as a science, beginning from the pre-historic period, the Middle Ages and early modern times (chapter: *Stadt und Land in historischer Perspektive* [Town and country in historical perspective]), through the period of industrialised society (chapter: *Landwirtschaft und Land in der Industriegesellschaft* [Agriculture and the countryside in industrialised society]), to the present day and its problems (chapter: *Die Folgen: Global food oder Weltagrarpolitik* [Consequences: Global food or world agricultural policy]). These first three parts refer to the relationship between town and country which for the author are a background for considering rural issues in three distinct periods. The later sections are more about contemporary issues. Referring to historical facts the author broaches the important theme of agrarian culture and the peasant as its medium (chapter: *Agrarkultur – ein alternatives oder überflüssiges Konzept?* [Agrarian culture – an alternative or unnecessary concept?]) and in the next section he develops this theme concentrating on the social potential of agrarian culture (chapter: *Agrarkultur, soziale Potenziale* [Agrarian culture, social potential]). This is the most general chapter, due to having to limit the information presented here which has long been widely and precisely described by rural sociologists, ethnographers and cultural anthropologists. Combining the description of old habits, customs and rural institutions with the problems of the modern countryside: agrotourism, ecology, ancient monument conservation, nature conservation, renewable sources of energy etc. had to lead to limitations which may provoke dissatisfaction in the sources by readers particularly interested in these issues. The next interesting chapter may be complementary to the mentioned problems (*Raum und Region – Land – provinz – Heimat* [Open space and the region – village – countryside – homeland]), clarifying definitions connected with concepts which rural sociology has been referring to for a long time, such as new categories which it tries to include (with varying success) into its basic understanding: space, region, the country, homeland, identity etc. The author devotes the last two sections of his handbook to issues of rural sociology as a science (*Geschichtliche Entwicklungslinien der Land- und Agrarsoziologie* [Historical lines of rural and agricultural development]), its institutionalisation, current status, referring not only to German rural sociology (and the former GDR) but also the example of the USA and Central and Eastern Europe. A summary of this extensive handbook is a reference to theories which rural sociology most often used, allowing the author to draw conclusions concerning the future of rural sociology as

a science (*Land- und agrarsoziologische Theorie* [Rural and agricultural sociological theories]).

The author raises questions which are often provocative from the point of view of the battle of rural sociology for its status as a sub-discipline of sociology. They are very inspiring but often leave the reader without answers.

Gerd Vonderach's publication is of a somewhat different character. While discussing rather modern themes of rural sociology the author refers to his earlier publications. He divides the contents into four parts. In the first – *Ländliche Lebenswelten im Wandel* [Rural areas of life in the process of change] he presents German rural areas; he proposes theses concerning the relations between environmental changes and social change in the countryside and discusses the post-agrarian development of rural areas in Central Europe (these three aspects are discussed in different sub-chapters being separate fragments in the book. The second chapter (*Inzwischen Agrargeschichte: Ostelbische Landarbeiterproblematik* [From the history of agriculture: the issues of agricultural workers east of the river Elbe]) is more historical in character and shows the past of present-day rural and agricultural research, old questions and early research methods. These deliberations are illustrated with German examples (the author devoted another sub-chapter to Mecklenburg). The penultimate chapter (*Landwirte in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* [Agriculture in modern society]) is devoted to the issue of agrarian production in modern society, the specific situation of agriculture as a form of production and farming as a profession – balancing between the market economy (free competition) and supporting and protecting agriculture (protectionism). The author pays particular attention to presenting this issue in the light of protecting the environment and rural cultural landscape and the situation of the agricultural family during the process of change. The last part is a review of the currently popular "gentle tourism" in the countryside, i.e. the rural tourist potential and (in a separate sub-chapter) the issues of labour markets in the countryside and the particular situation of young rural inhabitants (*Sonstige Problemfelder und Reaktionsweisen* [The remaining problem areas and ways of reacting]).

Both books – as I am allowed to judge on the basis of my knowledge of German literature on rural and agricultural sociology, which I try to follow systematically – reflect not only the German point of view but also seem to coincide with the main trends in modern European rural sociology.

The first issue which I think is of particular interest to the authors of both analysed books are the definitional difficulties in rural sociology. Bodenstedt who devotes them a few chapters, criticising the dichotomous view of *town – country*, shows them against a background of economic and social change, bringing about a resemblance between country and town and

agriculture to other types of production. The author even gives one of the chapters a provocative title: *Do differences between town and country no longer exist?*

Vonderach raises similar questions and answers them similarly to Bodenstedt.

It is impossible to correctly define the countryside by applying tough indicators such as: population density, numbers etc. According to Vonderach, agriculture plays an ever lesser role in describing the rural area and the professional social structure in the countryside. Bodenstedt perceives definitions through pointing out pairs of opposing features as avoiding the problem. The tough indicators do not come true because from every point of view which is important from the sociologist's point of view the countryside resembles the town. The search for the *essence* of ruralism or urbanism encounters a barrier of methodological objectivity (how to find accurate and comparative indicators for both categories). According to Bodenstedt the most adequate, yet imperfect, is the attempt to search for a definition by taking into account not the external criteria (administrative or imposed by scientists) but internal ones – defining space by its inhabitants. Vonderach points out the growing share of regions which are neither towns nor villages but something between the two (*Zwischenstädte*).

Many present-day analyses and publications contradict the ideas presented above. Rural sociologists in Germany continue to search for differences between the town and country. The publication by K. Brauer, H. Künemund and S. Scherger is proof of this.⁵ The authors, making use of representative research (considering not only the division into rural and urban areas but also the division of lands of the former GDR and the GFR), detail the differences regarding education, living conditions, marital status, family size, income, health etc. It is difficult not to agree with the fact that certain percentage differences emerge in a few cases. A question however remains: what significance do they have for the sociologist? In other words, in the light of Bodenstedt's question do they enable the revelation of the essence of urbanism or ruralism? If the train of Bodenstedt's and Vonderach's thoughts were to be followed, placing on the mentioned statistics a regional differentiation, the history (of the GDR, GFR) etc. the differences would be of minor significance. Referring to the method of "tough" statistical analysis adopted by K. Brauer, H. Künemund and S. Scherger, monitoring variables could be used, allowing for the detection of ostensible links.

⁵ K. Brauer, H. Künemund, S. Scherger, *Lebenszusammenhänge älterer Menschen im Stadt-Land-Vergleich* [Relationships between elderly people in comparison between town and country], [in:] Lutz Laschewski, Claudia Neu (Hrsgs.), *Sozialer Wandel in ländlichen Räumen* [Social change in rural areas] Shaker, Aachen 2004, pp. 13–31. This article is a fragment of a publication being a summary of a conference carried out by the Rural and Agricultural Sociology Section of the German Sociological Society (Rostock 2003).

It appears that despite criticism the dichotomous view remains popular and that it is difficult for sociologists to take a distance from it is proved by the provocative title of the next chapter of *Agrar-Kultur Soziologie*: "What currently diversifies town and country? questions about relevant questions."

Apart from the theoretical dimension, defining country – town (ruralism – urbanism) has a practical dimension. Making use of EU funds as well as support by the state requires specifying the beneficiary of such resources. As German sociologists have noticed, the variety of definitions is multiplying as are typologies of the village (or even of the region) supporting the transfer of financial resources. As an example following Vonderach the 1995 division into five categories of regions in Germany may be indicated:

— areas with a favourable lay-out, high population density, extra-regional communication routes;

— rural areas which are far from the centre, structurally poor, with few possibilities of work outside agriculture;

— attractive areas with extra-regional significance for tourism;

— areas with relatively favourable conditions for agricultural production;

— poorly populated areas with a growing industry which are usually within reach of large business centres.⁶

These types of definitional problems are also mentioned in the majority of texts by other rural sociologists, people dealing with the development of rural areas. S. Callanan, M. Cuddy, Á. Ni Léime quote the European Commission "...But in reality building an 'objective' or unequivocal definition of rurality appears to be an impossible task (European Commission, 1997),"⁷ giving examples of various definitional criteria used by Eurostat, OECD etc, however according to Bodenstedt using incomplete demographic-economic indicators.

Referring to stages of dependence between country and town as distinguished by D. Ipsen,⁸ German rural sociology at present largely concerns its last phase. According to Ipsen the pre-industrial period characterised dualism (town and country alongside one another), the industrial period mutual balance, the beginning of the XX century the peripherisation of the countryside (the town taking advantage of the country, "colonial" relations) and now there is an end of peripherisation due to the strengthening of regional structures. The region and regionalisms are a frequent topic embarked on by German rural sociology, also present in the publications discussed here.

⁶ Gerd Vonderach, *Land-Leben...*, p. 13.

⁷ S. Callanan, M. Cuddy, Á. Ni Léime, *The Integrated IDARA Results* [in:] Lutz Laschewski, Claudia Neu (Hrsgs.), *Sozialer Wandel in landlichen Raumen*, Shaker, Aachen 2004, pp. 118–125.

⁸ A. Bodenstedt, p. 25, 120.

I would also like to raise another problem, frequently present in modern German sociology and connected with the culture of landscape creation. According to Bodenstedt landscape currently has two meanings in sociology:

— the notion which involves the area of the family and home. In this sense the notion of landscape belongs to the emotional sphere;

— it is a product of nature shaped by man (also called a cultural landscape). In this sense, landscape is limited to the generally technical shaping of the surroundings by man's work and activity.⁹

Vonderach points out that the concept of landscape competes with the concepts of space and region. For him the concept of landscape contains elements of both types distinguished by Bodenstedt. It is old fashioned, not scientific, favourable to people, attainable to the senses as well as being the material form of space connected with human activity.¹⁰ In this view we are faced with both an element of emotion and an element of mechanical shaping of space by man. Landscape shaped by man is also historically variable.

The basic questions which rural sociology tries to answer are as follows: how and why do we want to use and shape the landscape in our country (Germany) in the future?¹¹ These questions should be answered bearing in mind general changes taking place in European society. These can include the "dematerialisation" of paid work, its falling share in our lives as well as the growth of unpaid activity. In Europe the landscape is an area for adventure and not for material exploitation.

Finally I would like to raise a far more popular subject, concerning the future of agriculture in modern society and as Bodenstedt describes it, the real story behind the agro-debate. This is a turbulent debate. Two contradictory political concepts clashing with one another which can briefly be portrayed in the following way:¹²

Structural change in agriculture will be permanent	The consequences of structural change in agriculture are negative and it should therefore be stopped
Highly competitive regions and promising agriculture must be supported	Such divisions are anti-social, opportunities and prosperity should be available to everyone
Pro-ecological behaviour must be taken into account although it is in contradiction with market requirements	The market economy is in any case simultaneous to ecology which is supported by farms

⁹ Ibid. p. 277.

¹⁰ G. Vonderach, *Land-Leben...*, pp. 28–30.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 36.

¹² A. Bodenstedt, *Agrar-Kultur-Soziologie*, p. 103.

This discussion coincides with the drop in number of people employed in German agriculture (currently below 5%) and the drop in number of farms (small ones in particular). As it seems both Bodenstedt and Vonderach are in favour of the gentle version of supporting agriculture, unfolding its protective umbrella, yet without excessive intervention. According to Vonderach this mainly concerns the cultural role of agriculture – landscape protection which should be additionally supported by the state. Bodenstedt draws similar conclusions when writing about replacing a highly controlled policy towards agriculture (e.g. controlled milk quotas), with ecological agriculture, ecological consumption, quality of agricultural products, cultural landscape protection. Multi-professionalism and social security should be a way out of the deadlock connected with agricultural employment.

The situation in the agriculture of the former GDR with different problems from those of West Germany is significant: elimination of the state agricultural sector, ageing rural population, production unprofitability etc. According to Vonderach these conditions require a somewhat different approach. Farms will only be able to adapt to free market requirements with help from the state. Resources should be concentrated on supporting profitable agriculture. The author does not call for the standardisation of such aid bearing in mind the diversity between regions. He proposes leaving extensive farming in those regions with less favourable agricultural conditions (e.g. poor quality soil – Brandenburg) and supporting intensive farming in areas with better conditions for agricultural development.

The selected issues discussed above do not exhaust the subject area in the presented publications. They merely point out popular topics in German rural sociology which are an answer to questions bothering European rural and agricultural sociologists.