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Rural Society of European Peripheries

Rural Society of European Peripheries, (ed.) Knapie E. and Müller E., 2007,
Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde, Heft 7, Leipzig.

The process of European integration and globalization is transforming not only Europe's economic centres (i.e. in Western Europe) but is also distinct in its peripheral regions which – according to liberal modernization theories – continue to be the rural areas of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe in particular. In the Europe of 27 there are immense differences between numbers of those employed in agriculture and the countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe have a particularly high number of people active in the agricultural sector. It is not surprising that it is exactly those countries which feel the pressure of globalization of the world economy on the implementation of adaptation processes, i.e. changes in agrarian structure.

This is more or less how the idea behind the reviewed book can be expressed, being the outcome of an international conference *Rural Areas in European Peripheries*, organized by the Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde in Leipzig from 23 to 25 February 2007, where almost 50 academics from 17 countries discussed the following issues:

- rural communities and the changing significance of their rural space (land);
- rural communities and the attractiveness of rural areas;
- rural communities and agriculture;
- rural communities and the diversification of rural incomes.

Before embarking on a polemic I would like to present an outline of the book consisting of 8 texts which are papers drawn up as an introduction to the debates of the four above-mentioned working groups and the summing up of discussions which took place, including ideas about future research issues.

The problem of the changing significance of rural space (land) in rural communities is only reflected in one study (Franz Greif – *Rural Society and the Changing Aspect of Rural Space*), devoted to the process of revaluation of the social functions of rural space. When rural space loses significance as a productive area, its material-mercenary dimension grows and strengthens (the standard of housing and surroundings, income, mobility and communication) but ideological values (bio-social equilibrium, concern about less powerful members of the community; mutual interests and cultural identity) recede into the background. This revaluation of the meaning of space should find clearer reflection, both in the development policy of rural areas which is inadequate in supporting ideological values, expressed by the ideas of local and regional subjectivity, as well as in academic research, which now more than in the past concentrate on threats coming from development projects supported by the EU and making an inventory of potential polarisation trends.

The second issue raised in this book – the growing attractiveness of rural areas – is given more attention and is analysed in as many as three essays (Michael Woods – *Attractive Ruralities? Re-thinking European Peripheries in the Global Countryside*; Marina Todorović – *Rural Societies and the Attractiveness of Rural Regions*; Guillaume Lacquement – *The Rural Society on the Peripheries of Europe. Rural Society and the Attraction of Rural Regions*). Each of them reports that the whole of Europe is experiencing a growing attractiveness of rural areas although a question also appears: what kind of rural area is most attractive? The reply, always tainted by a high level of subjectivity depends on the expectations of the interested party (where people earn a living, where they live and where their leisure facilities are), and is highly diversified by the status of the local rural inhabitant or newcomer. New research challenges which appear as a consequence, are connected with the categorisation of groups of people wishing to function in rural areas and the structure of satisfied needs as well as the development strategies of rural areas considered as being unattractive.

In the next two working groups the issues which were discussed were more economic in character – agriculture (Section: *Rural Communities and Agriculture* represented by essays: Krzysztof Gorlach – *Rural Society and Agriculture. Some General Considerations and a few Historic Remarks*; Maarit Sireni – *Smallholdings in Finnish Agriculture. Changing Roles of Female Farmers*) and the need to supplement farmers' incomes in particular but also of other rural inhabitants (Section: *Rural Societies and Diversification of Sources of Income*, represented by articles: Axel Wolz – *Rural Society and Diversification of Employment and Income. Major Factors of Influence and Repercussions on Rural Development*;

Józef Benedek — *The Formation of the Rural Population's Income and the Possibilities for an Integrated Development Policy in Rural Regions*). All four of them essentially reach a similar conclusion. Regardless of the relationship between agriculture and rural communities (Gorlach) the role of the former as an instrument for developing rural areas is weakening, regardless of whether it is a question of large or small scale social or residential agriculture, which is experiencing a revival in its ecological role, or whether we penetrate the more traditional farms in Eastern, Southern or Western Europe, which are increasingly being run by women (Sireni). The second type of agriculture does not guarantee a decent income either, hence the growing role of distinction in sources of income in rural areas. The decision makers regarding the development policy of rural areas must become aware of this fact and work out instruments which are more favourable to diversification. And this is where interesting research areas emerge: the effectiveness of agricultural activity in conditions where the male labour force has to migrate to work in towns; the role of agricultural consultancy and NGOs in conditions in which for most farmers agriculture is merely a secondary source of income.

A cursory review of the contents of this publication does not give the impression that it carries new issues or ways of portraying them. Instead it seems to be rather a useful inventory of a few issues which have been previously discussed both in rural sociology and in agricultural economics. It is not without simplification, particularly because it seems to have rather a narrow perspective of European rural areas, contaminated with orthodox liberalism. At least some of the authors seem convinced that their peripherality or lack of peripherality is chiefly determined by agriculture, characterised by a percentage of the entire engaged labour force. Meanwhile it is merely a question of changing the perspective — assuming e.g. a more ecological point of view, connected with the level of openness or closing energy cycles and it transpires that whatever is peripheral fits into the main stream of sustained development, whereas agriculture which only employs 2% of the labour force but is entirely dependent on external energy supply, is positioned on the margins of the dominant development trend.

Even if we accept this narrow and one-sided point of view, the title of this publication suggesting that it focuses on issues of modern rural development in Europe's peripheries seems hardly relevant. Despite the critical position as regards the justification of using the term peripheries/peripheral, the problems of the countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe should be dominant in this book. Meanwhile, they are only represented in three essays, embarking

on rather global or universal issues – Górlach – Poland (the declining role of agriculture as a dimension of life and development of rural communities); Todorović – Serbia (the growing attractiveness of rural areas as places to live and work in) and Benedek – Romania (the need to create new non-agricultural jobs and incomes as a fundamental problem of the development policy of rural areas) – where it is difficult to identify the specificity of peripheral regions of rural Europe. On the contrary, the suggested choice of texts indicates that in Europe's peripheries we have the same or very similar problems in its centres of development, therefore the division into peripheries and non-peripheries becomes even more controversial.