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► To cite this version:

Christian Deverre, Christine C. de Sainte Marie. The ‘ecologisation’ of European Agricultures. A critical assessment of the ecological modernisation and treadmill of production perspectives. 22. Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology : Mobilities, Vulnerabilities and Sustainabilities, new questions and challenge for rural Europe, Aug 2007, Wageningen, Netherlands. hal-02753358

HAL Id: hal-02753358

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02753358>

Submitted on 3 Jun 2020

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Mobilities, Vulnerabilities and Sustainabilities: New questions and challenges for rural Europe

In an enlarged and increasingly borderless Europe different processes of mobility, migration and knowledge flows are creating shifts and tensions in existing social structures and institutions. Flows of capital, people and knowledge increasingly set challenges for the sustainability of rural areas, while they also create vulnerabilities and opportunities for new rural development pathways. The congress will act as a focus to examine – through multiple, and competing perspectives – the ways in which these three spheres – mobilities, vulnerabilities and sustainabilities – interact in and through different rural spaces. A major question to be addressed is how can rural areas and communities meet the challenges of these increasing mobilities in ways which reduce vulnerability but enhance sustainability?

On Mobilities:

Increasing flows of goods and services, people and knowledge are challenging the traditional notions of rural embeddedness and continuity. Rural development, therefore, needs to be understood as a process which takes account of the mobile assets in and across rural space as well as its fixities. In addition, this increased flow for instance, in residential, tourist and labour migration, provides new opportunities and threats to rural social structures. And despite the growth of information and communication technologies, the processes of economies of scale and ‘critical mass’ still seem to create diseconomies for rural communities, with many rural areas facing severe questions over their social viability and sustainability.

Some scholars see these conditions as those which are creating more dependency and poverty rather than autonomy in rural societies; and ones which limit structures of participation, cultural heritage, social inclusion and engagement. Others point at the ability of rural areas to reinforce their viability, to develop new and promising strategies in the field of livelihood diversification but also organization and governance. In addition, they underline how much rural areas have to offer to society at large in terms of cultural heritage, nature and environment and production, but also as a laboratory of new governance and development models. The multi-level state (from the WTO and EU, down to the local municipality) plays an important but ambiguous role in shaping these mobilities and vulnerabilities, and in balancing citizenship as well as consumer rights and responsibilities. Over-regulation and centralism on the one hand and decentralism and ‘bottom-up’ rhetoric on the other, seem increasingly mediated at regional or local levels. Hence while increasing mobilities transcend urban and rural spaces, a key question is what is the right scale at which decision-making for rural areas and development should occur, and how can rural social scientists effectively compare these shifts and impacts in governance processes?

On Vulnerabilities:

It is also clear, as we have witnessed in recent conferences, that rural areas in Europe, to varying degrees, are becoming more vulnerable to different sets of natural/ environmental, social, economic, global and state-driven processes. This is not just a case of the spread of the ‘risk society’. Rather, it involves coping with the variable and growing public expectations about what the function and purpose of rural areas might be, and accommodating often highly volatile shifts in the demands for rural goods and services. For instance, there are increasingly volatile and risk-oriented consumer demands for ‘quality’ foods, amenity and tourist spaces, and areas of environmental management. These are often regionally specific but are also based upon variable consumption cultures and constructions which may be influenced by wider media, such as corporate retailers, tourist advertising, non-rural scientists and ‘experts’, or ethical concerns, but also by global political development and conflicts occurring on the other side of the globe. The growth of metropolitan attraction, liberalism and commodification of

environmental resources, the problems of animal and pest diseases, and the volatile and demanding scientific and technologically-driven processes of uneven economic development, mean that different rural areas are experiencing different sets of vulnerabilities. Some areas flourish while others are in danger of becoming ghettos of poverty. Moreover, the declining competitiveness of conventional agriculture and the growing search for alternatives to the carbon-based economy more generally suggest the need for radical rethinking of the role of some rural areas as productive spaces.

On Sustainabilities:

Clearly it has been common to suggest that the processes of mobility and vulnerability, operating at multiple scales, tend to question the overall sustainability of rurality tout court. Whilst this may be the case, it is also necessary to question how these processes could or can offer more emancipation of rural societies and cultures. There is, for instance, a growth, however marginal, of more socially sustainable alternatives which potentially reward rural societies and their networks more degrees of autonomy and vitality. New networks and nodes of power, association and action are being formed around these more sustainable alternatives (such as in the realms of multi-functional agriculture and agri-food, environmental cooperatives and social and enterprise community initiatives). But questions remain about how long they can survive under prevailing sets of (unsustainable) conditions, or if, or under what conditions, these can be 'scaled-up' to affect larger rural areas and social groups. Do they represent interesting strategies of resistance or broader and diverse 'paradigm shifts' in creating real sustainable alternatives? Or are they indeed nothing more than yet another means by which the state manifests its power – seemingly at a distance but still very much under control?

These newly emerging forms and practices present conceptual and methodological challenges for rural social scientists both within the European realm and beyond. Indeed, rural Europe can no longer be satisfactorily seen simply as a 'bounded space'. With the new member states diversity within rural Europe has become even more impressive – in terms of geography but also economy, socio-political systems and socio-cultural identity. This diversity and the newly emerging forms and practices challenge scientists to go beyond established conceptual dichotomies such as agency-structure, nature-society, private-public, citizen-consumer, and of course, urban-rural. Conceptually we need to examine these shifting boundaries of thought, and develop improved concepts for dealing with the current rural complexities that the combined questions of mobility, vulnerability and sustainability now pose.

The congress will specifically encourage such theoretical and conceptual debate and development around the analysis of these different and often competing rural development trajectories. This will also be timely with regard to changes in EU and global policy frameworks, with the revision of the CAP (Pillars 1 and 2), regional development funding (post enlargement), and the growing pressures upon Europe, and especially its rural peoples, to recognise its global economic and citizenship responsibilities (through not least the WTO negotiations).

More than ever, to meet the challenges of mobilities, vulnerabilities and sustainabilities, rural social science needs to incorporate perspectives from a range of sister disciplines which are also tackling global problems of uneven rural development, rural welfare and environmental and social security. The conference theme will thus aim to encourage this interchange of theories, concepts and methodological approaches in unravelling the tensions and opportunities which exist between more profound mobilities and vulnerabilities on the one hand, and the emerging signs and spaces of new forms of sustainability on the other.

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Chair Scientific Committee 2007 ESRS Congress

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