

CRICHECO - Crises and Changes in the European Countryside

Context

The GDRI programme which is now being set up is based on two observations.

1. In Europe today the countryside appears to be changing profoundly in ways hard to understand, and heading in a direction no one can predict. It is torn between contradictory demands: to guarantee the food supply without destroying the environment and biodiversity, to intensify agriculture while managing ruinous surpluses, to keep producers in business for the sake of a secure food supply or to turn them into gardeners in order to preserve rural landscapes, to encourage successful farming enterprise while maintaining a network of farms struggling to survive. The present debates on the Common Agricultural Policy illustrate the tensions that divide governments and societies. Moreover, Europe has little time to make these choices since the CAP is due for renegotiation in 2013.

2. On the global scale, the huge progress in systems of production, the ubiquity of local, regional, national and international markets, and current tensions over the price of agricultural products, all remind us forcibly how the weight of events can determine the future of rural populations. Ever since the much-debated Agricultural Revolution in the nineteenth century, production has grown and exchanges increased at a dizzying pace in response to irresistible demand pressure, despite the occasional false step and despite recurring shortages. The problem of ensuring food supplies for the next thirty years is huge, for we will have to feed a planet inhabited by some nine or ten billion people. By the year 2050, agricultural production will need to be raised by 70 per cent and it is generally understood that the price volatility of cereals will become a major problem by around 2020. The urgency of the problem was highlighted when food crises returned to the headlines in 2008 and 2010 and there was a rush to acquire long-term leases on available land. These pressures on producers raise legitimate questions about what will happen to the landscape as a result of the agricultural intensification in their wake; while at the same time there is increasing nostalgia for the “landscape of yesteryear”.

On the other hand, while it is true that the countryside is in crisis and that management of rural landscapes and spaces is in flux, this is not something completely new. Periods of change have followed on from each other since the dawn of time and the history of the countryside has been studded with crises since earliest Antiquity. There is no such thing

as a clear break between a rapidly changing modern rural world and a traditional rural world of fixed landscapes, fossilized societies, immobile economies and slow-moving politics. Not only have rural societies undergone enormous upheavals but rural landscapes have been profoundly transformed and state intervention considerably reinforced for the purpose of regulating production and exchanges. In other words, what we see before us today is only one more episode in a series of successive transformations undergone by the countryside throughout its history. The present crises and changes have a past. They can only be understood through reference to the times which shaped them, and historical experience provides the best tools for understanding their nature and impact.

Aims

The participants in the GDRI programme intend to analyse the impact of the historical crises and changes in rural societies through eight main lines of enquiry.

1. **Food crises and agricultural crises**, which have been extensively studied by historians but which need to be looked at again in the light of recent research.
2. **Agrarian and social crises** appear to be inherent in old regime societies, but their mechanisms and consequences need to be re-examined, as their symptoms may be seen across much of the world today.
3. **Landscape changes across history**. It is wrong to think of landscape as an invariable and natural framework for rural societies. We have to look at the process of change as it actually occurred in order to analyse how populations reacted to these sometimes violent alterations in their environment and responded to the changes brought about by human activity.
4. **Climatic and environmental changes** must be taken into account over the medium and long term, to identify their influence on the way of life and on conditions of production but also their impact on changes in agricultural specialisation and product development.
5. **The stratification of rural society**. Rural society has always been strongly marked by social cleavages, despite the many bonds that hold it together. The place of rural people and their way of life in the relations of production and the stratification of wealth need to be studied so as to better understand present-day societies.
6. **Public policy** is also an important issue for study. Ever since the eighteenth century states have continually aimed, directly or indirectly, to alleviate crises in the countryside, to speed up, slow down or influence

the direction of changes and so contribute to developing and shaping the rural world.

7. **Agrarian reforms and attempts at reform** in the past, which sought gradually to eliminate the hold of the clergy on rural society, and then to do away with feudal rights and redistribute land ownership; the process, the extent and the limits of these reforms require a thorough re-examination, as do

8. **Family strategies**, more or less specific to peasant households, which were taken up as a defence against the upheavals in the structure of production and in the labour market brought about by industrialisation.

Organisation

This project is designed to follow on from GDR “Histoire des Campagnes Européennes” and from the European Action COST Progressore (completed in 2009). These helped bring rural history out of the seclusion, caused sometimes by the specialisation and often by the national self-centredness that still handicap this field in France, and to bring together effectively researchers from all over Europe who are working on the same topics. More broadly it aims to reinforce and build on existing but still compartmentalised networks and to intensify contacts, cooperation and comparisons at the international level. Its purpose is to reinforce scholarly cooperation in Europe on the subject of how the countryside is facing up to the crises and changes of today and how it did so in the past. Nine teams will organise conferences in the participating countries. The work of these meetings will be presented in articles written for submission to high quality journals or else published in English in the form of a series of volumes of collected papers. This series, *Rural History in Europe*, published by Brepols, is already underway, with five volumes now in print.

The partners of this GDRI were almost all involved with the COST programme already mentioned and were among its most active participants. That cooperation resulted in twelve workshops (including one at Lund, one at Munster, one at Rennes and one at Lisbon), of which the proceedings have been published or are about to be published; and a final conference, held at Gerona. However, beyond these meetings organised in a European framework, there were and there still are other links that allow groups to join together bilaterally or multilaterally. Thus there has been intense cooperation and ongoing collaboration with Gerona over the past 10 years, with meetings that have become annual events. Joint sessions have been organised with members of this group and colleagues from Lisbon at major international conferences, as at the ESSHC in Glasgow this April. The members of the GDR (mostly from Paris and Rennes) are part of the broader CORN (Comparative Rural

History of the North Sea Area) network, which covers all of North-West Europe and is based in Ghent and also in Louvain. We are responsible for a large share of the four-volume publishing venture *Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe (500-2000)*. There have also been regular contacts with Albacete through the two French groups working on the sections on the History of Families and on the Comparative Rural History of France and Spain.

The GDRI will help improve the synergy of this network of partnerships, formed around the GDR over 8 years. Up to now the different groups have only been in contact with each other in connection with specific projects. Now, the GDRI will not only play the role of catalyser in funding the larger projects but will also bring together researchers who want to escape from harmful isolation and make it possible for them to compare and confront their concepts, methods and results. It will gather together a smaller number of countries than the previous structure, but it is intended simultaneously to bind the partners more closely together and to mark out more clearly the range of questions to be studied. It should serve as a matrix for developing a European programme. By concentrating on the crises and changes of the rural world over the very long term it will open up new perspectives and themes for reflection in the face of the cyclical economic hardships and structural changes which the countryside is suffering and living with today.

At a time when the European countryside has undergone several decades of spectacular economic, social and environmental change, when the European Union is about to introduce crucial readjustments in its Common Agricultural Policy, and at a point when famines are returning to the world at regular intervals and the volatility of food prices has again become a problem even in Europe, and when the struggle for the control of agricultural land has resumed yet again but now on the international level, this programme should provide some tools to face up to these new challenges. The project will organise a network of researchers in nine groups from seven countries and strengthen existing links between groups. It will mobilise historical experience and propose new ideas and new ways of thinking about the problems that trouble the rural world today. It will make it possible to investigate problems raised by food crises, agricultural and agrarian crises, social crises, and the changes to the landscape, climate and society caused by these crises. It will also make it possible to examine critically the solutions devised by the state and by families to these problems, and the changes in land ownership which are their consequence. It is a project that will look at developments over the very long term across a wide geographical area: these two approaches provide the experimental framework that will allow us to provide answers to today's challenges.