

# INTRODUCTION

*by*

E. W. HOFSTEE

*President, European Society for Rural Sociology  
Wageningen, Netherlands*

At the end of 1957 the European Society for Rural Sociology was founded by representatives of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. It was not accidental, I think, that this society came into being. If it had not been set up at that moment by the men who did it then, it would have been founded by others a little later. It was in the air.

It is well known that interest in rural sociology was slight in pre-war Europe. Indeed, geographers and sociologists wrote a number of papers on rural subjects, but most of these were general rather than specific, descriptive rather than analytic. They made little or no use of sociological theory or of the research methods that had been developed in the social sciences. And the authors knew too little of the concrete problems in the countryside and of agriculture to have been able to contribute substantially to the work of policy-makers. The change in this situation since the end of the war can be ascribed to a number of factors, among which the following are the more important:

- (1) Throughout Western Europe interest in the social sciences and particularly in sociology has increased.
- (2) The sociologist is now more concerned with the elucidation of precise factual data, using modern research techniques.
- (3) The work of American rural sociologists, their techniques of analysis and the results obtained, all have become better known in Europe, partly as a result of the visits many younger European research workers have paid to the United States.
- (4) Agricultural economists are more and more convinced that narrowly defined research in economic behaviour cannot fully explain its background, and must therefore be supplemented by sociological research.
- (5) Agricultural extension officers are gradually learning that their work, if it is to be successful, cannot be based solely on their experience, but must be supplemented also by the findings of

research, for instance, on why and under what conditions farmers adopt or reject recommended new agricultural techniques.

- (6) The welfare of the rural population has become of greater general interest and political concern, in part as a result of growing urbanization and industrialization, and of improving communications.
- (7) The thesis has been accepted that large-scale plans for the improvement of the social and economic welfare of agrarian regions (land reform, land reallocation, the equipment and settlement of reclaimed areas, etc.) should be based in part on the findings of exact sociological research and be drafted and carried out by teams that include a rural sociologist.

The importance of rural sociological research was stressed at several recent congresses related to agriculture and rural life. At the European Conference on Rural Life, organized by FAO and ILO, meeting in Bad Godesberg in 1957, this interest was given practical expression by a resolution inviting FAO to organize a European Working Party to seek means of improving rural sociological research in order to advance Europe's rural welfare.

Rural sociological research, while it has developed in most European countries in the post-war period, is still far behind that in the United States of America. There many universities and colleges, particularly the Land Grant Colleges, offer courses in rural sociology; but in Europe only a few institutions of higher learning teach this discipline, and even fewer act as centres of fundamental research. The number of research workers adequately trained in rural sociology is still relatively small, and they are not always fully accepted by the various institutions responsible for the improvement of agriculture and rural society.

On the one hand, rural sociology is growing in importance throughout Western Europe, and more and more people are interested in its findings, but on the other, it is still weak in many respects both academically and practically. It is, therefore, necessary to join forces, nationally and internationally, in order to overcome these shortcomings as quickly as possible and to satisfy more fully the growing demands.

If rural sociology is to develop as a science in Europe, co-operation is essential, especially international co-operation. Although American work can be of great value to us, conditions and problems in America are different from those that we have to face. Rural sociology in Europe will be greatly aided by an international comparison of the problems studied, the research methods used, the scientific

findings and the practical results. With international co-operation, comparative studies in different countries will become a possibility. These will furnish a broader and deeper understanding than could ever be derived from the sum of a number of unrelated investigations. International co-operation will be the basis of growth of our discipline, both in Europe as a whole and in the individual countries. Support from their international organization will help rural sociologists of every country to develop research and training.

Representatives from many countries meeting in Wageningen in 1957 to discuss this matter were unanimous in their conviction that, for the stated reasons, it was both feasible and necessary to set up a European Society for Rural Sociology. Its aims, according to the consensus of this inaugural meeting, are the following:

- (1) To organize congresses and other meetings of members, at which information and opinions can be exchanged, current and planned studies be discussed, and the practical application of research findings studied.
- (2) To foster comparative studies in rural sociology in different European countries.
- (3) To encourage the international exchange of rural sociologists and students in rural sociology.
- (4) To set up a documentation centre in rural sociology, which would be able to furnish bibliographic and research assistance.
- (5) To issue a journal devoted to rural sociology, which will both report on current developments in the field and publish relevant research studies.
- (6) To bring rural sociology to the attention of national governments, scientific institutions, and international organizations, with the purpose of engaging their interest in furthering rural sociological research, education in rural sociology, and the application of research findings to practical problems.
- (7) To carry on any other activities that will further these objectives.

The machinery of the Society has gradually begun to move. At the moment of writing it has about 350 members, and we expect this number to increase considerably in the near future. Already in 1958 the Society held its first congress in Brussels and Louvain. This congress, which a generous subsidy from the Belgian government made possible, was attended by about 250 participants. About 60 papers were read on "Rural Migration"; they were published in the proceedings of the congress, and issued several months ago.

A second congress is scheduled for 1960, to be held in Oslo. Its subject will be "Changes in Rural Social Organization".

In close co-operation with the FAO Working Party on European Sociological Problems modest international studies in rural sociology have been started.

And now one of the most important of the aims of the Society, the Society's own journal, has been realized. Last year we hoped that the first issue would be out some months ago, but the administrative and organizational problems are more time-consuming in an international venture. We are happy to be able to present this journal now both to our members and to other readers. We hope that it will not only further rural sociology in Europe – its first purpose – but also act as a bond between the Society and its membership.

The Society is very much indebted to Mr. Hirsch, who accepted the principal responsibility for editing the journal, and to Mr. Mendras and Dr. Gerl, who will assist him in this difficult task. We hope that the journal will gain the support not only of our membership but of all those interested in rural sociology, and that it will become an important medium for the dissemination of research findings in this field.

## PRÉSENTATION

par

E. W. HOFSTEE

*Président, Société Européenne de Sociologie Rurale,  
Wageningen, Pays-Bas*

La Société Européenne de Sociologie Rurale fut fondée à la fin de 1957, par des représentants de Finlande, Suède, Norvège, Danemark, Allemagne de l'Ouest, Pays-Bas, Belgique, Grande Bretagne, Irlande, France, Suisse, Autriche, et Italie. La création d'une telle société n'était, je crois, nullement accidentelle. Et, si elle n'avait pas été réalisée par les hommes qui l'ont menée à bien à ce moment-là, elle l'eût été par d'autres un peu plus tard. C'était dans l'air.

On sait que l'intérêt pour la sociologie rurale était assez faible dans l'Europe d'avant guerre. Certes des géographes, et des sociologues avaient écrit un certain nombre d'ouvrages sur des sujets ruraux, mais la plupart d'entre-eux étaient d'ordre général plus que particulier, descriptif plus qu'analytique. Ils ne faisaient que peu, ou même pas, usage des théories sociologiques ou des méthodes de recherche qui