Philip Lowe:

"Rural back on centre stage"

Professor Philip Lowe is a leading figure in European rural studies. He holds the Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy in the Centre for Rural Economy, which he founded in 1992, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Currently he is also Director of the UK Research Council's £25 million interdisciplinary Rural Economy and Land Use Programme. In addition to his wide spectrum of research activities in the fields of sociology of rural development, environmental policy analysis and land use planning, he holds a number of honorary positions in the practical field of rural development. In the UK, for example, he has served as a Board member of the Countryside Agency, a member of the Minister of Agriculture's Advisory Group and Chair of the Market Towns Advisory Forum. Currently he is a member of the Science Advisory Council of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and of Natural England's Science Advisory Committee. He was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 2003 for his contributions to the rural economy.

Professor Lowe is also familiar to many Finnish researchers, not only through his publications, but also through research co-operation and some confidential posts: He is known as a member of the Scientific Board of Agrifood Research Finland (MTT), a desired keynote speaker and opponent. Philip Lowe has been involved with the European Society for Rural Sociology for over 20 years and was the British editor of Sociologia Ruralis. Currently, he is the chair of the Scientific Committee of ESRS and in the following piece we sought his thoughts about rural development and research on the eve of ESRS2009 in Vaasa.

You act as the chair of the scientific committee of ESRS Vaasa. How did you come up with the topic of the conference?

– The topic had to be topical, but also fundamental: what has European rural sociology got to say about the pressing issues that confront the world, particularly the rural world? In the 20th Century, the tendency was to see the rural as a stable but diminishing and retreating entity.

Contemporary global political concerns – like climate change and food security, bring the countryside back to centre stage. They demand that we rethink our attitudes towards nature, even our place in nature. The rural is one of the major interfaces between society and nature. Hence the title of the Congress: 'Re-inventing the rural: between the social and the natural'. The challenge to re-invent is not just one for rural people and areas, but also for rural scientists. The Congress coincides roughly with the 50th anniversary of the emergence of European rural sociology, and so this is perhaps an appropriate time to assess what it has achieved, and what future challenges it should address.

According to the call for papers, rural areas and people in Europe stand at a crossroads. What do you think is special about this crossroads and how are we able to start to move again, and in which direction? Towards the 'new productivism'?

– The crossroads are those to do with stability and change. Modernity tended to represent the 'rural' as unchanging and immobile, both in terms of nature and culture. That served to highlight the 'urban' as dynamic. But climate change, population growth and human mobility mean that change and movement are ubiquitous. The critical questions become how we manage and adapt to change; how do we build the resilience and adaptive capacity of rural people and places.

You ask about the 'new productivism'. Much of what I hear sounds like the old productivism. The characteristic of the productivism that prevailed until the 1990s was that it sought recklessly to boost primary production. Although it claimed to do this with attention to efficiency, that only embraced the so-called factors of production i.e. land, labour and capital. It did not include natural resource efficiency. So we encouraged a form of agriculture that was wasteful in its use of water, energy, soils and caused pollution problems and diminished biodiversity. We must not return to that old-style productivism – of expansion of food production at any cost. No, the new productivism must be constructed on the basis of economic and ecological efficiency, and which thereby protects the capacities of agricultural ecosystems to deliver a range of valued and life-supporting services.

Social economy and social entrepreneurship are key issues when considering the reorganisation of social services in society at large. How do you see them in the rural context?

– On the other hand, the term social economy raises for me the whole basis of the social foundation and rootedness of economic activity. Rural firms and businesses provide vital services to rural communities; they depend on the support and loyalty of their customers and those they employ; and they are often embedded in complex networks of relationships with other local businesses. It is important that regional, economic and business policy recognise this wider social role of commercial service firms in rural areas. Social entrepreneurship recognises the other side of the coin – the value and creativity of not-for-profit and voluntary activities in maintaining the vitality of rural communities. Social entrepreneurship can and should play a particularly important role in the provision of social and welfare services in areas where state or commercial coverage is patchy or non-existent. Again, it is important that policy makers and funding bodies recognise these non-conventional service providers.

Multidisciplinarity has characterised rural research in many countries. Now interdisciplinarity appears increasingly on the agenda. How would you describe your own experiences in interdisciplinary research in terms of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

– Interdisciplinarity differs from disciplinarity and multidisciplinarity in the emphasis it places on interaction and joint working, which brings the knowledge claims and conventions of different disciplines into a dialogue with each other, yielding new framings of research problems. It

is this unsettling promise of interdisciplinarity which is what makes it so challenging. The possibility of new framings allows scope for non-scientific interests to get involved in problem characterisation and setting research priorities. That can seem to be a threat by established scientific interest. The research programme I direct in the UK – the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme – only funds research projects that creatively combine natural and social science perspectives. It includes over 400 scientists from 40 different disciplines. The projects also must incorporate external stakeholders in the design and conduct of the research. The research is addressing novel problems as well as old problems from novel perspectives. Overall, the programme is developing an internal and external networking capacity for scientists such that they become central to society's learning capacity – a crucial role as we adapt to economic and environmental instability on a global scale.

Interdisciplinarity undermines scientific hierarchies and therefore creates resistances, which are seen as difficulties over such areas as control of research budgets, peer reviewing norms for research applications and publishing of interdisciplinary work. These are not insuperable obstacles, but they do need to be tackled.

Rural areas are often considered as a resource or reserve for 'the other' society. Do you think that the importance of the rural areas becomes apparent only when 'the other' has problems to manage?

– I have always deeply believed that rural and urban areas and people are highly interdependent. I do not accept the rhetoric that sees them as having distinct and separate needs and existences. Maybe this reflects my experiences of living in a rather overcrowded island like Britain. I do accept that often national policy isn't sufficiently sensitive to the specific context of rural living. For some years I was on the Board of the Countryside Agency – the former rural development agency for England. And in that position I pushed strongly the concept of "rural proofing". This notion presumes that one doesn't want to build a separate rural policy, but wants to fine tune national and regional policies and programmes so that they take fully into account the specific circumstances of rural areas. It is a cross-cutting device which we try to apply to all policy sectors and programmes.

Sustainability has been a topic for over two decades. What is actual or new in that field in your opinion, or should we already give up the concept?

– The concept of sustainability does need looking at afresh, given the fact that we now face an unstable natural environment. It is important that we bring together the concepts of environmental and social resilience. However, much of the time we are seeking to stabilise the environment while seeking to change our social systems to make them more sustainable.

How should rural land and rural communities be engaged in the search for sustainability?

– I'll answer this by focussing on climate change, which I see as the overarching challenge for our era. How we use rural land is central to the way we respond to climatic change, in terms of both mitigation and adaptation. On the one hand, land is both a source of emissions and a means for decreasing them. Land can produce low-carbon energy – from wind-farms, solar power, biomass crops and anaerobic digestion of waste. Equally, forests and peatlands have potential to 'lock up' substantial amounts of carbon.

On the other hand, especially as space, land is central to our capacity to adapt and adjust to the effects of climate change. Flood management areas, changing cropping zones and shifts in the geographical ranges of species are examples of this. Much of the medium-term growth in greenhouse gas emissions is already in the 'pipeline'. So adaptation is a necessity.

It is important to ensure that short-term adaptations do not add to the long-term problem. Shifts in land use happen over divergent time

scales, ranging from months (e.g. an arable crop rotation) to many years (e.g. afforestation) and may be more or less reversible, which means that much of our decision-making over the use and management of land is quite path dependent. The deployment of land must therefore seek to reconcile the short and long-term perspectives.

Many of the articles in this journal deal with governance in one way or another; they describe multi-level governance, governance gaps and scalar problems in various contexts. What is your relationship to the governance discourse?

– Governance and the social management of markets are central to all of the key contemporary concerns about the management of natural resources and society's responses to climate change. We have to work out our systems of governance over land and natural resources if we are going to tackle such problems.

What is your favourite research topic right now?

– The future of rural sociology as an interdisciplinary field.

What kind of scientific expectations you have for the conference?

– Very high.

How about social ones?

– I hope people will have fun and enjoy visiting Finland.

This is not the first time you have visited Finland. Could you describe what has so far been the most memorable experience of all?

– I always love coming to Finland. I find Finnish people the most welcoming and thoughtful of any in Europe. I enjoy your complex mixture of hypermodernity and 'back to nature' wildness.

Interviewer:
KATRIINA SOINI