



**Report from
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"Social Relations and Forms of solidarity in Small European Villages"

Preface

The municipality of Pergine Valdarno that houses in 2002 the yearly meeting of the association of the European Cultural Villages, has required the University of Siena, that here I am representing, to propose some essays about which the opening conference of 6th April 2002 might refer to. From that was a rough document which I personally worked out.

There was a discussion about it and then it was approved by the Mayor of Pergine Valdarno. Then it was sent to all the villages that would take part in the meeting (see first part). Starting from this hint each village has written its own statement by developing and expounding the proposed headlines.

There has been an interesting meeting and positions have not always been converging but they have been of sure, stimulating and useful.

I have summed up and linked all these positions according to the starting headlines (see second part).

FIRST PART

Hints and proposals for a discussion

I started with a careful reading of "Document on villages" that allowed me to identify some key points that, as a sociologist, I think they have to be analysed and developed. I was particularly struck by the following statement:

"The village is an old and experienced form of territory of mankind.
It is the known world. In the village things and persons are familiar.
It does not matter how much the world changes, which technologies are being developed. There will always be a difference between the familiar and the not-known world. **In this way cities and villages will not grow up together**".

Then I focused about the last line that I have heavy typed to issue a constructive and creative challenge that can be summed up and simplified in the following way:

How can we make these two worlds grow up together, respecting their unity and creating between them a positive interchange relation and not a fruitless isolation ?

The village is undoubtedly the one which brings great cultural, interpersonal and social richness. This richness must not be lost or isolated but has to be brought into cities and into the macro-social world. However, even the contrary is true, that is it is possible to enrich the small village from a social and cultural point of view through the typical "seeds" of the macro-world (according to the famous GLOCAL formula, that is THINK GLOBALLY ACT LOCALLY)

We will give some examples about how to proceed. Every example takes its hints from the document on villages and develops it into two ways:

"The culture of a city is the culture of services. In villages, people are the main element. They are not untrue. The village has meeting-points"

The problem is shown in its two correlated aspects:

- how is it possible to make cities understand how important this feature is for people and how great the presence of meeting points in village is ?
- how is it possible to have in villages a greater presence of useful services or how link them to the service nets of the nearest cities ?

Another example:

" Culture in cities is a product individually experienced by people. In villages, culture is bound to social elements. People experience culture together. "

Consequently:

- How is it possible to make people have a more lively culture, both from an active and interpersonal point of view ?
- How is it possible to make culture of village more updated and linked to the process of cultural and world-wide transformation in progress ?

Conclusions of the first part

The basic proposal is to pass from *multiculture* (co-existence of many cultures, but each one isolated) to *interculture* (relation of interchange and hybridation of several cultures where each one is openly available to take from the others those values and models that are proved to be better and more efficient than theirs own). Practically speaking, we have already a great deal of hints in the "Document on villages" and we suggest to start from it, by applying to each point the above mentioned model of reciprocity .In this way, every matter will be planned in two ways:

- how the best of villages can be brought into cities and
- how the best of cities can be brought into villages.

A further and supplementary hints might concern the legislative devices favouring the above-mentioned process of interchange and the more active participation in citizens for the realisation of public plans of interventions where culture is not separated from the running of existing resources in the territory but is an integral and essential part.

In Italy, the social plans of territory are fulfilled through the 328/00 law. It is a sort of social town-plan locating cooperative societies, associations, etc., in the third field that is the main partner for the realisation of a complete service system. There might be similar laws in other countries. New laws or enlargement of the old ones might be proposed.

SECOND PART

Summary of the reports about villages stimulated by the document analysed in the first part and search for meeting points.

Preface

The proposal of building up bridges instead of walls has stimulated different reactions among the representatives of the villages that took part in the conference in Pergine Valdarno on the 6th April 2002.

Some of them have agreed upon the main theme, others have accepted the challenge and have proposed building ideas, some others have raised objections and sceptical comments. I think that in all the three cases we can find useful hints and contributions and for that reason I will try to give a creative summary.

I will start from the report from Mellionnec because it points out a very important aspect from a sociological point of view that fits not only the French reality but most of the European countries even if in a different way:

"Nowadays rural is no longer synonymous with farmer. 70 % of rural employment is secondary or tertiary employment.

Isolation is no longer a handicap (thanks to) Equal access to information and training.

People want to have urban advantages without the inconveniences.

All this transitions contribute towards facilitating the dialogue between town and country."

To fulfil a project it is necessary to be aware of risks and possible obstacles by getting involved in cancelling, reducing or changing them into something positive. Doubts and concerns, if not prejudicial, are not less important than the agreements that underline the positive aspects of the project. So I have decided to start with the report from Kilingi-Nomme that expresses a concern about the alleged "urban advantages",

a consideration that is worth to be considered carefully:

"What do the cities have to offer us? So called "service networks"?

Moresupermarkets, shops, fancy restaurants, beauty saloons, traffic jams? Even if some of these things might look attractive for someone, they have a very high price, too high price. This price is environmental pollution, drug addiction, social and health problems, and criminality."

A similar objection, even if less deepened, is proposed even by Porrua that implicitly suggests the way how to proceed :

"Changes towards a greater material wellbeing are always necessary, but we ask that it is ourselves in the villages who decide our *adaptation* under our own responsibility."

As a matter of fact, it is not the case to imitate servilely the town and its formulas and initiatives, but at the same time we can not but consider that they concern real needs that must be satisfied in some way.

We can consider the matter from another point of view and see if it is possible to get the meaning of some services and initiatives that are typical of towns *by adapting the form to the needs and characteristics of village*. In other words, we can find the forms and modalities that better suit the environmental, social and cultural peculiarities of some villages or nets of

nearby villages (with regard to the concept of adaptation it is really interesting the case of the central square of Wijk Aan Zee).

Another comprehensible concern raised by Porrua concerns the little environmental sensibility of towns :

"In spite of the positive evolution towards the care of the environment in the last times, we do not think that urban culture is able to develop in a natural way this feeling of belonging and identity in a natural way and with a set of own values, since these come most frequently through the powerful media, obstinated in considering rural culture as a minor form of life, and in many occasions regarding villages as remote or even backward."

Even in this case the question is: how can we transform matters and relationships into resources and opportunities ? The feeling of belonging and identification oneself that is typical of villages and countrysides is of sure more "ecological" since it arises from life in the open air and from stronger contacts with the natural rhythms and processes. This feeling and this awareness can be considered as an important contribution that the village culture can offer the city .Most of reports concern the risks and opportunities that derive from importing culture and services from cities. But I would like to remind that my proposal considered both directions.

I quote again the report from Porrua :

"We are convinced that villages today can bring good things to urban culture, as the importance of rural tourism for city dwellers demonstrates. This is just one of the reasons why our politicians have to be conscious of the value of their support."

Agreement about the usefulness of more interchanges between towns and villages and working proposals.

Aldeburgh agrees upon the idea of looking for cooperation ways between town and village and it appears not to be much worried about risks; it worries, on the contrary, about how find the resources to activate these changes :

"there is no need for us to concern ourselves with making the benefits of city services available to villages. More relevant is the question how countrydwellers, on their generally lower income, can pay the cost of such access."

As the report goes on, Aldeburgh expresses some important proposals and remarks the possibility and positiveness of introducing the use of new media into villages, for instance :

"Here it is necessary to ensure the use of new media also in the cultural sector. The use of new media is indispensable for all future-oriented villages. The technical infrastructure for this is already in place. A decisive factor is that clear targets are formulated and applied to meet the special requirements of the village. The use of new media does not mean an impoverishment of communication in the village. It enriches it. At present there are two very promising projects in preparation in this area which may also receive state funding. Applications and contents suited to the requirements of the rural community are decisive here."

Another interesting proposal is the evaluation of the professional skills of people that leave the city and go living into villages. These skills are potential resources that can enrich the social life of villages but it is necessary to learn how use them.

In Aldeburgh live many retired middle-class people and they "bring many of the skills and attitudes of the city with them, thus supplying one of Professor Cheli' s criteria for better interchange. They also have time and talents to make a strong community contribution through the charitable, cultural and social organisations operating on the local scene."

Such a use, besides enriching the village itself, can allow these people to get much better involved into the social net of the village, by participating actively to its life and contributing for the resolution of a problem that has been rightly pointed out by the report from Strobeck, that is :

"our villages do not become "dormitories" for high earners with a job in the city ."

The problem is serious and probably the best way to solve it is to encourage the integration and participation of the new citizens rather than create laws (walls) that keep them out of villages. Through appropriate initiatives, like the ones Aldeburgh points out and other countries, the social net of the village can be enriched and the new citizens can become active subjects and participants instead of letting them play the part of eternal guests (even in this case it is a matter of transforming problems and obligations into resources and opportunities). The importance of enriching and vitalizing the social net of villages is also underlined by Paxos that points out all that does not require the acceptance of values and market logics but it is, indeed, possible to conciliate it with the quality criteria :

"We should bring the inhabitants of our villages in touch with new quality urban cultural products. We ourselves have been trying to do this for years, organising classical music festivals, festivals of new worthwhile musical trends, photography and art exhibitions etc; **the criterion being not commercialism but quality** .(...)

In cooperation with corresponding local government bodies, **we should create an image of vital communities**, while seeking the creation of laws to help the development of cultural activities in our villages which, as we all know, depend mainly on spontaneous participation.

Culture is a continuous process, which evolves because it is alive. Isolation of the village leads to a sterile future. The uncontrolled influence of the city on the village is destructive.

We believe that the best possible solution can be found in the above suggestions, and we are certain that it is thus possible to achieve, in the best way, **cultural infiltration** from villages to cities and vice versa with positive results for everyone."

Also the report from Wijk Aan Zee underlines that we need some services that at the moment are only or prevalently in towns :

"People in village need special, modern services and therefore they are dependent on cities. There must be a way in between a town with all sort of facilities and a village without any.

We think there are interesting possibilities for the economical situation in villages. To start business in the urban area is very expensive. We think there have to be more attention for the possibilities of small business in villages. (...) We think that big cities and towns has to stimulate small business to establish in villages around. (...) We need creative entrepreneurs as well in the big post and banking companies as in the villages itself."

Tommerup too, is optimistic when it takes into consideration the opportunity of creating mutual advantage bridges between towns and villages even if it rightly underlines that it must be "in a way that allow the village to remain a village".

In comparison with the other reports, Tommerup, however, proposes a further important aspect: the interpersonal relationship. In the other reports and even during the debate in Pergine Valdarno it was stressed the superiority of villages in comparison with towns where the community net of identity, mutual support and assistance -that are typical of villages -are almost completely absent. However, there is even the other side of the picture and the report from Tommerup reminds us :

" My point of view is that perhaps we should learn from the cities and say, social relations in the village are essential but we could try to be less conservative and perhaps learn from social relations in the city, which sometimes goes new ways and perhaps are less condemnatory .The people who live in the villages have to learn to be more open for new people and new costumes. Here you might say people in villages are pleasant, joyful, and open. And I will say that's right, but people are open, pleasant, and joyful whenever it is convenient. I don't claim it has to be like that in your village but I have to admit that sometimes it is like that in my village.

To have good social relations, we some times have to learn to be open-minded and tolerant. My allegation is that we for sure can learn from the diversity of the city ."

Creating a collaboration net to activate shared services and structures

Now I would like to consider and sum up in three points one of the themes that is mostly present in the reports :

- a) Which services, social and cultural initiatives to be imported from urban realities;
- b) How adapt them to the characteristics and needs of villages in order that villages remain villages;
- c) How find resources to fulfil such projects.

I will start from the point c to propose what we might define using the sociological language, the passage from services and initiatives like something promoted, run and used by an only village into shared services and initiatives. That requires a real cooperation among more villages or towns located in the same geographical area that are willing to create a network group. I quote the report from Strobeck :

"We are no longer citizens of just one community , but rather of a region. **The New Village** works with other communities in the region on the basis of partnership to jointly offer the citizen the various village profiles which one community alone cannot provide."(...)

There is a future for villages and regions which put people at the centre of all developments and elaborate an unmistakable, independent profile in cooperation with their citizens.

The challenge for **The New Village** is to create for ourselves the location factors which the citizens require. (...). In order to feel happy in a village we expect a lively cultural life and attractive recreational facilities nearby. Jobs should also be available in the vicinity ."

The report from Tommerup can be considered in the same way:

"One of the things we have success with is corporation with similar villages and municipalities. Then you can offer a high quality of services." (...)
Village life can't just go on as the good life, if we don't develop the services offered to the inhabitants. (...) we still have to develop and think new thoughts."

The report from Wijk Aan Zee points out :

"The traditional way of working in politics must be changed and the key words are: involvement and participation. The local government has to develop new methods with interaction, co-making and room for initiative bottom-up."

Conclusions

As I have stated at the beginning of my intervention my task is the one not to find answers but stimulate a reflexion that can give the possibility to find out new possibilities of cooperation between towns and villages and between villages and villages. It seems to me that many useful and interesting proposals and points of view arise from the different interventions and it is worth to develop each of them. How develop them ? It might be the essay for a next meeting or even for a precise project which we might ask for funds to the European Community. I would like to finish by quoting these sentences from the Wijk Aan Zee report:

"So we hope, that in the relation between government and villages there will be room for experiments and improvisation. It's like the bridge of Pergine Valdarno we started with in this statement: there can be stress and even struggle between cities and villages, but it all depends on communication and tolerance."

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