



**Essay from
MELLIONEC
Pergine Valdarno**



"Social Relations and Forms of solidarity in Small European Villages"

French contribution to the inaugural conference

For 20 years, 3 out of 4 french people live in cities or their suburbs and this percentage is practically stable from now on. Behind this apparent stability strong changes are occurring which are modifying both urban spaces and rural areas. One thing is certain, the definition of these spaces is increasingly delicate and, for some, the contrast between town and country has become seriously blurred or even non-existent.

Rural zones in transition: since 1975 the rural population has ceased to diminish and a slight increase was even noted. One could even say that an historical reversal is taking place, bringing to an end 130 years of demographic decline in the countryside. The reality is, however, more complex because the rural communes are very unequally affected by this reversal. For example, the rural communes situated near urban centers and therefore living under influence have experienced a stronger demographic recovery. In more isolated zones the growth is almost non-existent. But the retreat has stopped for a good number of communes.

The distribution of the rural population has changed considerably. As a proof, we take the arrival of people from the cities in rural areas, we call them "neo-rural", bringing with them their dynamism and know-how.

Rural diversification is indeed the rule. Nowadays rural is no longer synonymous with farmer. 70 % of rural employment is secondary or tertiary employment. Factories workers, employees, renovation workers and intermediate professions are strongly represented today. This presence is explained by the maintenance of crafts or semi-industrial activities, by a network of services necessary for everyday living, by an increase in transport systems enabling a worker to work in town whilst living in the country (reducing distances in terms of time).

It is in this sense that the distinction between town and country becomes more and more difficult. Firstly, because ways of life bring them closer without a real blending. Also, because the professional activities are not very different.

All regions, in the country as well as in urban zones, have benefitted from an undeniable progress over the last decades. Standards of living, training levels, housing conditions and health have improved everywhere. The population has seen working conditions and everyday living conditions change favourably (even if there are differences in work opportunities between town and countryside). Leisure time and the possibilities of cultural access have also increased.

In parallel, problems linked to globalisation, to the rules that govern the labour market are felt almost identically in rural and urban areas, that is in the way they are adapted to, in the evolution of employment and also in terms of social integration and precariousness.

Another significant phenomenon is the arrival of the English in our countryside, which contributes to a change in social relationships through the sharing of another culture and another language. This happens especially through children in the school framework.

The things that bring town and country closer are :

- new communication technologies: isolation is no longer an handicap. Equal access to information and training. The similarities do not prevent each from keeping their originality.
- The influx of new populations bringing with them their way of life, the return of rural inhabitants after having made their careers in the cities, bringing new demands in terms of nearby services, infrastructure, and culture. People want to have urban advantages without the inconveniences.

All these transitions contribute towards facilitating the dialogue between town and country. We are witnessing for example, the emergence of new decentralised cultural activities. They rely on the dynamism and the vitality of the social fabric. With the help of volunteers, prices are kept low for spectators so that activities are available to everyone. Here are some examples of events that take place in Central Brittany

- Les Vieilles charrues in Carhaix
- Rencontres Internationales de la Clarinette Populaire in Glomel
- KWet party : come to meet the new trend in music
- Les petits riens (the little nothing) : I will develop this example. I think it is one of the best to show the exchange between town and countryside