

Call for Papers

Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 67 (2027)

Rural Societies in Transition (19th to 21st Centuries)

In recent years, rural societies have become the focus of media coverage. In France, Germany and the Netherlands, farmers have demonstrated against government agricultural policy, falling prices for agricultural products, neglect of infrastructure and ignorance of the needs of rural populations by driving tractor convoys, setting up road blockades and burning tyres. While rural societies were often romanticised as a harmonious alternative to urban life, they often experienced ongoing conflicts and inequalities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout Europe, rural societies and the lifestyles of people living in the countryside, by the water or in mountainous regions have undergone fundamental changes as a result of modernisation processes in agriculture and constant interaction with urban society and political centres.

Various academic disciplines discuss the construction, or rather deconstruction, of the idea of rural space; the discursive power of the urban-rural divide; and the lasting consequences of the globalised economy. While the dichotomy between urban and rural areas is certainly evident, it exerts too strong an influence on the perception of rural societies as remnants of the pre-modern era. Rural societies can be found in agricultural communities, fishing villages and specialised agricultural regions, as well as in towns shaped by industry and commerce. However, how did societies in these areas develop against the backdrop of economic transformation processes and the cultural hegemony of the city as a model of life in the modern age? The editors of the *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (AfS) take this question as a starting point from which to examine the specific living conditions, social changes and political developments in rural areas from the early nineteenth century to modern industrial societies at the end of the twentieth century.

Rural ways of life, and the transformations they have undergone, have shaped, and continue to shape, a large part of society. They should not be viewed as an exception to the norm. For example, in 1925, over a third of the population in Germany lived in villages with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. By 2010, around 29 per cent of the population still lived in so-called medium-sized centres with populations of up to 20,000 and the basic infrastructure of educational institutions, healthcare and cultural offerings. What long-, medium- and short-term changes did these societies experience? Which continuities shaped community life? How were village societies and small communities organised? What self-images were created and what were the visions for the future of rural society? The focus will be on the perspective of the country and its society, with an aim of capturing a **social history of rural areas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries** that goes beyond the idea of »being different from the city«, instead attributing an independent role to modern rural societies.

Inequalities *within* and *between* rural societies

Economic development in Germany and Europe in the modern era has brought about major structural changes to working, living and housing conditions. This has led to a transformation, but not necessarily a reduction, in various dimensions of inequality. Political processes have influenced the way in which such inequalities have been addressed: in Europe, through the gradual abolition of feudal practices from the early nineteenth century onwards; in the German Empire, through the abolition of servant regulations in 1919; in Latin America, through land reforms; in Eastern Europe and the GDR, through the collectivisation of agriculture; and in Italy, through the abolition of the sharecropping system in the 1960s. This topic area includes ownership and power relations in rural areas; the role of the state, administration, churches and religion; the structures of education, media and transport; and the repercussions of economic crises, global interdependencies and political intervention. How did functional differentiation in rural societies change from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries? How was inequality addressed in rural areas, and what changes and consequences can be identified? Inequalities *between* rural societies should also be considered.

Agricultural economics, the environment and social inequality in rural society

The emergence of agricultural capitalism and technical innovations in agricultural, fisheries and forestry production in nineteenth-century Europe initially led to the formation of rural class societies. These gradually dissolved over the course of the twentieth century, either disappearing entirely or being replaced by other structures of social inequality. The roles of labour and trade in rural societies underwent fundamental changes during these processes, resulting in repeated, massive transformations of social conditions and ways of life. These trends were reinforced by the global interdependence of worldwide agribusiness and environmental influences (such as the overuse of resources and climate change in the twentieth century). How did structural changes in the agricultural economy and ecological challenges affect rural areas in European and non-European societies? What social and political strategies emerged among the rural population? Who were the relevant actors?

Rural societies since the 1970s

From a contemporary historical perspective, the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a significant structural shift in industrial development (»After the Boom«), which profoundly impacted social developments and political options. Since the end of the twentieth century, financial and production crises, the ecological consequences of modern industrial lifestyles, mobility and migration movements, and an increase in authoritarian, anti-democratic movements have shaped social coexistence. Modern communication media are changing the pace and content of social discourse. The primary sector has seen a surge in technologisation and digitalisation, leading to a steady decline in the number of farms while the area under cultivation is on the rise. Rapid growth in tourism in certain areas, coupled with out-migration – particularly among the younger generation – has transformed rural societies across Europe. Meanwhile, EU subsidies, inflationary monetary policy and rising commodity prices have made investments in agricultural land attractive to corporations, pushing up land prices. What changes can be identified in rural societies in recent decades, and how can these developments be explained? Do the economic cycles of industrial society also apply to rural areas, or are different cycles at play here? Furthermore, how do the current romanticisation of rural life on the one hand and the tendency to attribute political backwardness to rural areas on the other affect the self-perception of actors in rural societies?

At a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on 25–26 June 2026, we would like to discuss and further develop ideas for contributions, suggested topics and general questions on the subject of the *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 67 (2027) outlined above. We invite all interested scholars to submit proposals to afs@fes.de **by 15 January 2026**. Proposals should not exceed 3,000 characters (including spaces) and may be written in German or English, as may the presentations and subsequent articles. The editorial team of *AfS* will subsequently select contributions for the inclusion in the volume. Manuscripts should be around 60,000 characters in length. The submission deadline for contributions is 31 December 2026.

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