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In the Search of New Paradigms in the Rural Development*

The crisis-driven character of the hitherto development of rustic environments in the industrialized countries (disturbances in the economic development, continuous degradation of natural and cultural environments) brings upon the need for a search for future-oriented ideas, realization of which will allow for preservation of rural environments as integral and functional elements of contemporary industrial civilization. This situation creates new tasks for rural sociology which should not only explain undergoing transitions theoretically but mainly build theoretical and methodological background for the actions that would oppose the existing threats. One of the results of such thinking is a visible awakening in the market of sociological publications dedicated to rural and agricultural issues. This awakening is being observed in Poland where during the last year alone, five monographs significant for the field had been published. Those publications add to the discussion on the presence and future of the rustic environments as well as to the discipline itself for which they are a subject of scholarly research.

Even though the above-mentioned monographs penetrate different aspects of rural and agricultural sociology, (Wierzbicki and Winclawski write about theoretical and methodological transformation premises in thinking about rural communities; the remaining three monographs are the reports from empirical studies on socio-economic and cultural condition of the Polish peasantry of 1980s) each of them is related to at least one of the three hotly discussed issues among rural sociologists. They are as follows:

- rural societies as the source of contemporary rebirth of industrial civilization;
- the methodological basis and social functions of rural sociology;
- the need for forming new ties of the discipline with general sociology;

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From the lectures of the monographs dedicated to Romanian and Slovak sociology, it is clearly visible that the problems of presentation and usage of the permanent and universal cultural values of country constitute an inseparable part of the first phase of conscious sociological thought. This approach characteristic for rural societies of East-central Europe. Among very interesting factographic data constituting the socio-political background of Gusti's (1880-1955) scholarly activity, we find information about his scholarly and ideological ties with the socio-folk-national movements. Those movements considered the countryside to be the basis for the moral rebirth of the entire society, the guardian of metaphysical relations of the nation with the 'eternity', and the values spread by it, as the truest symbol of nation's wisdom. All of it can be true, because, as Gusti said, country was an encyclopaedia of various kinds of life. Similar convictions are found in the ideas of Slovak thinkers who considered the peasantry to be: '... the most numerous and the most useful class of people'. (Tsedik, cited after W. Winclawski, p. 64) They argued (the Hlasids) that the moral rebirth of the nation should happen only when the entire nation acquires the principles of peasant ethics, which because they are deeply rooted in the Slovak country, will allow, on the one hand, for the regaining of true morality and, on the other hand, for sustaining national identity. A slightly different, more contemporary perspective on the issue was presented by Anton Stefanek (1877-1964), the father of Slovak sociology, to whom a big part of Winclawski's book is dedicated. Stefanek focuses his attention on the threats that are brought about by the modernization of the country. Stefanek acknowledges the civilizational role of cities and warns against thoughtless submission to urbanism which, in charge of the technocivilizational and spiritual dimensions of nations, will lead to the disappearance of culture, to stagnation of the millenary laws of development, and to the change in mentality of the nation. According to him, the progress of urbanization brings upon a crisis in all contemporary national cultures of Europe. This progress has been opposed by turning to either socialism, liberalism, Christianity or fascism. As a remedy for such a condition, Stefanek and other representatives of various agrarian movements, call for universalization of folk culture. He represents the conviction that modern society should be dynamic while originating from peasant culture as the one that is nationally self-determined.

The presence of an agrarian orientation of early sociological thought in East-central European countries (also characteristic for Poland and Russia) was, as Winclawski claims, the consequence of the over-representation of rural societies within those nations at the turn of the nineteenth century. This orientation, however, was not exclusive for East-central Europe: to much lesser extent it was present in such countries as Germany, France or even the United States. For that reason alone, one may doubt Wierzbicki's statement that the concepts tied to cultural traditions of the peasantry

treated as the universal stabilizers of rational group behaviour are: 'typical for transitory periods, meaning those with still agrarian societies but with a well developed social conscience and their own intelligentsia as well as protagonists in cities' (p. 28). Wierzbicki seems to regard this as some kind of mutation, thinking in categories of 'still village' and 'already nation' as if there was an impossible-to-overcome gap between the two.

An unintended polemic with such thinking seems to be Maria Wieruszewska's monograph entitled *Wieś w poszukiwaniu jedności społeczno-kulturowej* (*Country in the Search for Social-Cultural Unity*). She focuses her attention on the phenomenon of rebirth of interest in rural societies. She writes that the basis for such state of being are, on one hand, our longing for the values of strong and direct social bonds and, on the other hand, internal changes of the scientific domain (its methodological principles and research methods that tend towards interdisciplinary approach and direct an epistemological reflection towards societies that preserve the basic features of community and directness in experiencing man-to-environment and man-to-man relations). All of the above has various sources; however, according to the author, the following ones are the most important:

1. Unmasking the functions of the energy crisis of 1970s. It showed that the possibilities of the development based on current strategies of industrial growth, extensive industrialization and urbanization as well as capital expenditure 'gigantomania' are being exhausted.

2. Recession and unemployment. They made the 'escape' to cities more difficult, forcing a more thoughtful approach towards the search for a better future through migration.

3. Search for human-oriented technologies (so-called soft technologies). This is a reflection of the appreciation of socio-cultural basis for any development.

4. The more and more prevalent view that material wealth does not bring the desired sense of life and does not guarantee an instant broadening of choices for self-realization.

5. Disturbing transformation of the contemporary culture. This is caused by standardization of creativity, cultural participation, patterns of consumption, values and customs with the subsequent disappearance of original regional and national cultures.

6. The more efficient role of local structures in providing resources and greater adaptability of different socio-cultural systems (with different organizational patterns, values, and strategies for action) to crisis conditions.

Wieruszewska says that those are some of the reasons for which one has to take a serious look at the potential of countryside, rural communities, and their traditions. One has to take a closer look at the good qualities, such as small-scale economic activities that function in symbiosis with the natural

environment, strong social bonds, the tradition of cooperation, high degree of subjectivity and cultural self-identity, which were not fully appreciated in the past.

If we consider a rebirth of society's features in the mass society structures as the alternative direction of development of contemporary civilization in which the countryside (genetically tied to the soil, a cultural environment, a non-anonymous bond natural community, a source of universal existential values, and a place where peasants who work in accordance with the rhythm of the nature live) is to have a special position, then we face a difficult question of the real 'rebirth' potential of modern, often already urbanized rural communities. At least partly explaining the problem are ideas presented by Maria Halamska in her book *Chłopi polscy na przełomie epok (Polish Peasantry on the Turn of Epochs)* and by Krzysztof Gorlach and Zygmunt Seręga in their work entitled *Chłopi we współczesnej Polsce: przedmiot czy podmiot procesów społecznych (Peasants in Contemporary Poland: Object or Subject of Social Processes)*. A still numerous peasant class in Poland as well as its special position in the structures of the socialist state make it risky to transplant the conclusions from the empirical research that is the basis for both monographs into other regions of Europe or even into the reality of the Third Polish Republic. Of course, this does not mean that we should not look for the premises that could fill in, in the broader civilizational terms, the picture of contemporary country.

The premise, quite clearly having its sources in both works analysed here, is that the Polish peasants of 1980s were a group quite different from the rest of the society. And it was not only because they owned farms (a different basis of connection with the global society) but also because of the different conduct of social processes which was different from that of global society's. The peasantry, as Halamska says, straightens its position in the society, peasant industry straightens its position within the structure of the entire industry (more soil in private hands, more new farms, better equipment, etc.). Gorlach and Seręga point out the fact that there are certain discrepancies within the frames of the three basic planes of peasant subjectivity. Those are ownership, society, and group interest. On the plane of ownership, there is a discrepancy between job organization and dependence on nature and state agrarian policy. On the plane of interest, there is conflict between the urge to sustain a family farming and the economic system that does not allow for it. And finally, on the plane on community life, there is a discrepancy between the vision of a functional social order and the effective roles of peasants and a consciousness of existence of the structural blockades that limit their influence on matters of the society as whole. In this rather complicated picture of opportunities and limitations, hopes and fears of the Polish peasantry of 1980s, one notices potentially straightening or weakening approaches to the chances of country renewal. In the earlier group one can classify:

— Stable vision of agriculture organization which is based on family farming as dominating and commonly considered to be the most effective.

— Still high regard for work and diligence in the peasant value system. This is connected with the belief that peasant work carries more value than the work of other socio-professional groups.

— Appreciation of freedom of action and independence in job organization as well as full responsibility for its results.

— Urge to influence local matters with a clear understanding of the marginal role of this influence (most of decision-making is a privilege of variously defined authority).

— Reasonable vision of society and connections between its segments as well as the necessity of cooperation.

The second group is connected with the positive value assignment to modernization ideology, still prevalent myth of the city which considers the village as a symbol of backwardness and lack of wider interest in the functioning of local governments as well as the lack of knowledge of institutional possibilities of influencing local issues.

Fruitful search for an antimodernizational paradigm of rustic communities development requires, as underlined by most authors of the works cited here, a scholarization of processes that are to help in constructing its theoretical frame and filling them with the premises for rational action. In countries of Central Europe (not only in Rumania or Slovakia, but also in Poland — Bujak, Grabski, Znaniecki, Chałasiński — and in Hungary) starting with 1920s and 1930s, researchers of rustic environments' social problems have been pointing at rural sociology as playing a crucial part in the process.

This fact is strongly underlined by the authors of the two biographies. Wierzbicki stresses the aspects of scholarly activity of Gusti in which he recognizes the need for creation of rural sociology as a separate discipline. It would have to comply with certain conditions; those conditions are the defined object of research, defined method, and the existence of the conditions allowing for the construction of a theory. Winclawski describes Stefanek's actions directed at making rural sociology perceived as one with the closest ties to the problems of Slovakia. In the works of the two sociologists from Torun one can also find solid reconstructions of Stefanek and Gusti's theoretical systems whose ideas even today may inspire the further development of the discipline.

We meet those ideas in the attempts of defining more precisely the subject of rural sociology. Even though Gusti claims that it was concerned with 'all factors and conditions defining rural life, including the behaviour of inhabitants' (p. 62), and Stefanek thinks it was preoccupied with 'functioning of rural community as a socio-cultural creation containing original

and valuable national materials and forming itself through years in a spontaneous and natural manner' (p. 171), they both agree that the empirical interests of the discipline are related to the most important structure of the community life. According to Gusti, the countryside possesses some special features making it a very rewarding subject for various elementary research. It is possible because of an easy access (a primary group) as well as because of the possibility of a complex cognition of the social reality of the entire country through the numerous monographs of local rural communities. Stefanek was convinced that the rural community creates, secures, and preserves the national culture while, in the cases of 'non-historic nations', it determines national identity; it also creates a healthy bio-moral basis from which other segments of modern society can learn.

Similarly fruitful are the discussions on methodological basis of the discipline. Gusti seems to be the closest to the modern searches; he assumes that in defined conditions a defined reality is being created; it is expressed through the will of the society expressing itself through human actions within the four basic areas (economic, spiritual, political and legal). As one can see, Gusti ties together theoretical basis of rural sociology with general sociology; he stresses the first one because of its drive to intensive cognition of social reality through a systematic and holistic monographic research.

Rural sociology should be monographic, says Gusti. He also claims that it can either be based on the monographic method or it will not exist at all. The monographic method is the only one that can be acquired by sociology as its own. Wierzbicki rightly criticises Gusti's overemphasis of the monographic method and, connected with it, a weakening of social sciences through limiting their methodological pluralism. It is worth mentioning, however, that there are traces of so-called understanding sociology in the ideas advocated by Gusti. Gusti, like other representatives of this direction, pushes for not connecting empirical research with any 'school of thought' (p. 83), meaning, separation of research from theory in order to free the researchers from the theoretical approach which can distort the way they perceive the reality. Even today it is disputable whether collecting of all 'pure' social data, without any selection criteria provided by theory, creates confusion by generating huge amounts of more and less important data.

Equally interesting is theoreo-cognitive option of rural sociology popular in Slovakia. Winclawski calls it the sociology of the rural folk and the nation at the same time. Its theoretical basis is consciously derived from the conditions of living and processes of awakening of the national identity of peasants. Its methodological functions are tied to the task of developing the conceptual apparatus capable of explaining basic categories of research subject; those are nation, folk, and intelligentsia.

Within the entire field of sociological thought at the turn of the century in East-central Europe, a faith in spreading of sociological knowledge as a

mean of rationalizing ways of thinking of various social groups was clearly visible. Following this, the pragmatic and application functions of rural sociology had been stressed. Gusti emphasized this strongly; he conducted sociological research to extract from its results premises for rational social, cultural, and educational activity. His activities were institutionalized under the name of the Bucharest Monographic School. Alike premises are also noticeable in the activities of Stefanek and other Slovak sociologists; they have built the theory so it could serve the practice. They also strongly underlined socio-technical functions of rural sociology as the discipline about acting effectively, witnessing the existence of the nation, and integrating the folk masses around its issues.

Wieruszewska also talks about methodological basis and social functions of social sciences dedicated to the study of rustic environments. She claims that with modern developments of biological sciences, it would be an anachronism to explain reality using concepts specific for mechanistic thinking. The discovery of significant interrelations of biological, psychological, and social phenomena causes the necessity for acquiring new perspective in perceiving the reality, integration in science (as the condition of holistic knowledge needed for discovering real problems of modernity), and transfer from mechanistic to ecologic ways of thinking ('think globally, act locally' approach) (p. 16). According to Wieruszewska, rural sociology, as the science of rural environments and their problems, should provide arguments for unmasking myths and stereotypes which are shared not only by scholars or politicians. Both the older and newer history of the discipline supplies numerous examples of the ignorance; it has its roots in the dominant forms of scholarly cognition, the governing political doctrine, and the general path of civilizational development. The analytico-logical cognitive model which dominated European science have pushed away those spheres, which being of metaphysical nature, did not fit in the positivistic canon of knowledge. This factor made it difficult to direct one's imagination towards the intuitive essence, about values and social unities (groups and societies). A good example of such one-sidedness, which gives the illusion of acquiring a definite, true and objective knowledge was the countryside. Wieruszewska says that while researching it, two points of view need to be tied together much stronger than in cases of other societies. The first one perceives the environment as a sum of conditions created for individuals to exist, while the second one concentrates on the experiences of a man as an individual in a given environment.

Even superficial analysis of the theo-methodological aspects of monographs dedicated to Gusti and Stefanek and problems of investigating rustic environments, leaves an obvious conclusion, which is as follows:

the countryside as a social environment creates a quite unique structure. Researching it requires concepts and procedures that are not always adequate to the ones proposed by general sociology. This means that there is

an urgent need for creation of new relationships between rural and general sociology.

Wierzbicki directs his reader's attention to the sociological specifics of countryside; he says that a small community was always a desirable and an ideal form for human existence, and is a starting point for the creation of the best society and worthy life. This ideological, using Wierzbicki's vocabulary, point of view was theoretically supported by such prominent sociologists as Robert Redfield and Karl Mannheim, who assumed that starting off with the recognition of the smaller elements of a given system is a starting point for researching more complex systems (p. 87). Cited by Wieruszewska well-known Russian sociologist, Tatiana Zaslawska, represents similar viewpoint. She says: 'The countryside is a natural pattern with a long and complicated history and defined future. The rural world is a form of existence and physico-dimensional organization' (p. 59). The viewpoints presented here, shared by more and more specialists concerned with issues of rustic environments, seem to have significant theoretical meaning, because, as says Wieruszewska: '...they oppose to the treatment of the countryside as a functional subsystem created by society to solve certain tasks. Cognition of the autonomic features of rural system allows not only for instrumental possibilities, based on objectivity, but subjective as well, with the possibility of choice one's own line of development and sustaining one's own perception of exclusive features perception' (p. 59). One could also add that it would allow for the development of the discipline without exaggerated reliance on general sociology as a universal knowledge about society.

This last issue finds an interesting development in Winclawski's work. Following Gulder, he writes that the historic bearers of sociology were bourgeoisie and proletariat co-creating social and philosophical basis for the discipline. It was to reflect their interests and the way the two groups perceived reality. No room for theoretical reflection coming from the specificity of rural life was left. It is not surprising then, that in rural societies of East-central Europe (at the time, still post-feudal in their social structures, moulded as a result of the Russian, Prussian and Austria-Hungarian political order) a new type of sociological thought had developed. It created a theoretical background reflecting developmental interests of rural and rustic societies. Therefore, as Winclawski writes, while the intellectual elites of the West had concentrated on the future (theories of progress) and warned against the social threats of anomy (Durkheim), bureaucracy (Weber) or alienation (Marks), the intellectual elites of East-central Europe existing under the condition of political and cultural enslavement searched '... for the ways of survival and later, regain of independence. Preservation of cultural tradition was regarded as the most effective means of sustaining identity. Threats of deviation were feared in cultural and political assimilation' (p. 12).

Conscious of rather obvious (economic, cultural, political, historic, etc.) transformational limitation characterizing concepts of the forerunners of East-central European sociological thought, one cannot ignore their conviction of the theoretical and methodological distinctiveness of research on rural communities and rural sociology. Another reason for which one cannot ignore it, is the fact that the period in which the theory of industrialized society, (read: West European society) was treated as a universal knowledge about the society seems to be gone. This conviction is visible in the light of contemporary research. In this situation, is general sociology to lead the way of the discipline preoccupied with rural societies?

We finish here the discussion of selected issues from the five most interesting rural sociology monographs of 1991. By doing so, we escape the conflict about the righteousness of separating rustic societies within industrial civilizations.

Referations

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