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**Rural Potentials for a Global Tomorrow
9th World Congress of Rural Sociology
Bucharest, July 22-26, 1996**

It was for the ninth time that rural sociologists from all over the world met for their debates. World congresses are convened every four years, the preceding ones having been organized in Dijon (France), Enschede (Holland), Louisiana State University (USA), Toruń (Poland, 1976), Mexico City (Mexico), Manila (the Philippines), Bologna (Italy), Pennsylvania State University (USA). The Congresses are organized by The International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA), formed in 1964 and making a kind of consortium grouping regional and continental organizations of experts in rural sociology.

The location chosen for the congress or conference — especially if the event is organized in the holiday season — plays a role on its course since some of the participants combine their attendance with their vacation or touring of the region concerned. The controversial location of the successive congress of rural sociology in the capital of Rumania was the reason for the relatively low attendance (ca 200). The list of persons who had applied to attend includes nearly 300 names, including those who did not turn up at the Congress, despite earlier statements of their intention to do so. What was striking was the almost complete absence of representatives from West European countries, except for sociologists exercising some organizational functions in the Association or, for example, heads of subject groups. There were, however, numerous delegations from the Far East. Against that background Poland's presence was particularly noticeable due to the country's strong delegation and rapporteurs from its major centres of rural sociology¹.

¹ On the part of Poland the 9th World Congress of Rural Sociology was attended by: Krzysztof Gorlach (Jagiellonian University), Andrzej Hałasiewicz and Andrzej Kaleta (Nicolaus Copernicus University), Andrzej Pilichowski (Łódź University); Marzena Sobczak (Nicolaus Copernicus University), Paweł Starosta (Łódź University),

Poor attendance at the Congress is occasionally justified by the sociologists' generally waning interest in gatherings of this type. The 4th World Congress of Rural Sociology, held in Toruń, 1976, was attended by 580 persons² irrespective of those accompanying them (or included in the organizational and technical staff). As regards participation in the Bucharest Congress, an additional discouraging factor seems to have been the fear of the discomfort connected with the trip to Rumania.

The choice of Bucharest was by no means accidental. On the one hand, it was meant as an act of recognition for the contribution made by Rumanian rural sociology to the development of that sub-discipline of science, on the other, it resulted from the awareness of the significance of the rural areas and agriculture to the growth of Rumania as a whole. The Rumanian countryside and its population have an enormous potential of non-utilized resources. From this point of view, Bucharest was a very suitable place for discussion on the possible contribution to be made by the rural areas to the development of society as a whole. The hosts appreciated the importance of the Congress which was manifest in its opening ceremony and first plenary session by the attendance of the then President of Rumania — Ion Iliescu. As followed from his inaugural address, the President was conscious of the difficult situation in which the Rumanian rural areas have found themselves, and also of the role which rural sociology was liable to play in finding a way out of the predicament.

The Rumanian organizers showed their pragmatic attitude: the inauguration ceremony of the Congress was made to add splendour to that of conferring the title of doctor honoris causa of the University of Bucharest to Mr Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President of the World Bank.

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A 'negative approach' prevails in the analyses of social problems of the rural areas and community. Numerous hardships and difficulties are taken into consideration which — in its global aspect — is reduced to the peasant, agrarian or rural question. Various more or less burning and noxious problems are the topics of conferences trying to reveal the causes responsible for the rise of a given problem and to find a way of resolving it or, at least, alleviating its negative consequences. Such an attitude is natural: if there is a problem one has to seek a solution to it. However, in the case of rural problems there is an additional factor consolidating that attitude and

Maria Wieruszewska (Institute for Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences), Grzegorz Zabłocki (Nicolaus Copernicus University). Mariusz Kosieradzki and Janina Sawicka (Warsaw Agricultural University) had declared their intention of participating in the Congress, sent the summaries of their reports but failed to attend it.

² Szwengrub, L.M., *4th World Congress of Rural Sociology*, see: *Roczniki Sociologii Wsi*, Vol. XIV, 1976, pp. 259–261.

ensuing from the town-centered orientation of sociology, the specific turn of mind in the approach to the transformations taking place in rural areas. The processes and phenomena infringing the development logic of the industrial society are recognized as undesirable. Hence, the notable amount of space and time taken by discussions on the subject of adjustment of the 'backward countryside' to the 'modern town'.

The organizers of the last Congress decided to make rural sociologists take a different, more optimistic, position on the question of rural areas. The suggestion was that they give up their repeated complaining and, instead, focus their attention on the question: what are the positives that rural communities could contribute to the cause of a common future of the global society? The keynote of the debates was inspiring indeed: *Rural Potentials for a Global Tomorrow*. The merits of the Congress were the responsibility of the Programme Council, headed by professor Frank L. Farmer, University of Arkansas. A total of 176 reports, more or less closely connected with that topic were sent to the Council (not all of them having subsequently been delivered).

Apart from the formal opening session, one more plenary meeting was held: *Gusti's Rumanian School of Rural Sociology, Tradition and Contemporary Relevance*. Two reports were delivered during its proceedings. Maria Larionescu dealt with the rise and activities of the Rumanian school of rural sociology and Virgiliu Constantinescu-Galiceni — with the role of the rural areas and peasants in Gusti's sociological system. The session had its Polish aspect as well. 1991 saw the publication by the Nicolaus Copernicus University of Zbigniew Wierzbicki's book entitled: *Dimitrie Gusti — socjolog niepodległej Rumunii (Dimitrie Gusti — the Sociologist of Independent Rumania)*³. The preceding issue of the *Eastern European Countryside* (2/96) contains a paper by the same author: *Dimitrie Gusti and His School*. Both these works were discussed at the special plenary session by Andrzej Kaleta, who also dealt with the question of perception of Gusti's creative output in Poland.

Further work was carried on by the problem groups. The programme provided for the operation of 28 working teams. Some of them only had one session (1.5 hour), others met in five sessions. This applied to the group tackling the question worded as *The Central and Eastern European*

³ Publication of the said book (besides Włodzimierz Winclawski's: *Lud, naród, socjologia — studium o genezie socjologii słowackiej (The People, the Nation, Sociology — A Study on the Origin of Slovak Sociology)*, Toruń 1991) was an event of its kind. In the former socialist countries, isolated for years from access to world science, there was to be observed, after 1989, an outburst of keen interest in western sociology with almost complete neglect of what was going on in that sphere with their immediate neighbours. Poland seems to have been an exception in that case because her contact with world literature was much easier than that of other countries in the so-called socialist camp.

Countryside in a Global Economy, organized and directed by Nigel Swain, University of Liverpool (UK). It was at this forum that most of the Polish reports were delivered⁴.

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It is difficult to assess the aftermath of the Congress having had the physical possibility of observing and listening to, only a chosen part of its proceedings. A certain, though limited outline of the whole is given in the collection of report summaries published by the organizers. This together with the programme, was a guide to the maze of subjects handled at the Congress. It was due to those two documents that participants could choose the most promising items. The choice was limited, however, because the meetings of some six to nine groups were being held at one and the same time. The author of this paper, eager to take advantage of the 'globality' of the Congress looked for the 'overseas' items.

Four reports were delivered during the session, entitled *The Crisis of Family Farms and the Feasibility of Sustainable Rural Development with Globalized Economy: Japan's Experiences*. Two of them were devoted directly to the problems of rural women, in the other two that thread was present as well, which is easy to understand since the changes in the woman's position within the rural family are an important factor of its transformation. The great emphasis laid on it is natural in view of the fact that Japanese farming rests largely on women's shoulders.

The choice of the session *Local Responses to Global Issues* held by the Iberian working group *Globalization, Social Inequality and Violence in the Rural Areas* turned out a mistake. In spite of the fact that it was English that was the official language of the Congress, and that the said session was presided over by Eflona Thomas, a Welshwoman, it was difficult to understand anything unless one had a command of Spanish. What was interesting was Sulayman Khalaf's (United Arab Emirates) report on agriculture in the affluent Arab communities⁵. Resorting to a

⁴ Gorlach, K., *Family Farms in Poland under the Great Transformation*; Hałasiewicz, A., *Rurality and the Postmodern Time*; Kaleta, A., *Revitalisation of the Central and Eastern European Countryside*; Pilichowski, A., *Formal Rationality of Economic Activity and Family Farming: A Case of Post-socialist Rural Central and Eastern Europe*; Sobczak, M., *Social Welfare in the Countryside in the Transformation Period Toward Market Economy*; Zabłocki, G., *Possibilities of Creating New Jobs in Rural Areas in Poland*. The Polish reports delivered at the meetings of other teams were as follows: Starosta, P., *The Late Industrialization and Peasantry in Poland*; Zabłocki, G., *Decrease of Peasantry in Poland* (in the group *Peasant State and Depeasantization of the Late Industrialised Countries*); Wieruszewska, M., *Democracy — Participation — Elites. Dilemmas of Rural Societies* (in the group *Communities and Changes*).

⁵ The Group *Present and Future Development of Rural Areas*, session 4, *Farming in different regions*.

simplification one could put it briefly as follows: the state constructs and equips the farm, hires foreign workers and then asks an Arab citizen to be so kind as to act as a farmer (who does not even have to bother about marketing his farm produce). All this is a kind of pastime which only the very rich can afford.

Participation in the proceedings of the group: *Rural Korea in a Flux* was both interesting and inspirational. Four authors presented their reports dealing, respectively, with: *Industrialization and the Collapse of Rural Communities in South Korea* (Hyup Choi), *The Comparison of Intergenerational Occupational Status Attainment Process of Korean Farm Family Members* (Young Dae Lee), *Educational Needs of Rural Women in South Korea* (Chija Kim Cheong and Ji Woong Cheong), *Urban-rural Differences in Living Arrangements of the Elderly in Korea* (Ik Ki Kim).

South Korea is an example of a country noted for an extremely dynamic pace of industrialization and urbanization. The past 35 years have seen a violent wave of migration from the country to the cities. In 1960, the rate of rural population amounted there to 72 per cent and in 1995 — to only 22 per cent. At the same time employment in agriculture dropped from 65.6 per cent of the total number of occupationally active population to 12.5 per cent. It is hard to believe that such enormous, simply revolutionary, changes could have taken place without disturbances. All the more so as the applied, centralistic model of economic development was relying on big investment projects implemented in urban centres⁶. The price paid for the quick growth of towns was the decline of rural communities. The demographic structure was afflicted. Ageing of the rural communities is noticeable and many farmers have no heirs or no one to succeed them. The rural women have found themselves in a difficult situation being obliged to take over farming duties to replace husbands employed outside agriculture.

The deliberately simplified presentation of the problems tackled by the Japanese and the Koreans shows how close these problems are to us. Despite far-reaching cultural differences, the inhabitants of the rural areas are faced with the same kind of challenges and have to cope with similar difficulties, whatever the geographical latitude or longitude.

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Irrespective of the above mentioned limitations, impending an overall assessment of the Congress, it is worth trying to answer the question suggesting itself in such a case and namely: did the organizers attain their aims? Did the meeting of rural sociologists from the world over explore the potential possibilities of the rural areas as a well of material and spiritual

⁶ Sang-Bok Han, *Social and Economic Characteristics of Rural Entrepreneurs in Korea*, a report delivered at the 9th Congress of Rural Sociology, Bucharest, 1996.

resources that may be used as a remedy for the problems facing us at the threshold of the new millennium?

A study of report summaries makes us believe that the organizers' success was only partial. As pointed out in the report by Paweł Starosta, scholars frequently concentrate their efforts on descriptions of disintegration of the traditional structure of the rural community instead of rather focussing their attention on the new forms of structures at a local level. This observation can be applied with regard to other matters as well. An element still pronounced in the approach toward transformations in the rural areas is a conservative regret and nostalgia for what is receding into the past. That mood — also to be felt at the Congress — was not overcome by an optimistic vision of the future.

There was an excessive number of regional, if not simply national, groups. Representatives of Central European countries held the debates in their own company, those of the South American ones, likewise. At the deliberations of the Japanese group, the non-Japanese were a few to none. In the Korean group, the author of this paper was the only foreigner welcomed warmly and making Koreans carry on the discussion in English. A world congress is an event meant to encourage and facilitate the exchange of ideas and not to close the respective groups within their own cultural sphere. That was a serious organizational shortcoming on the part of the Programme Council.

No one had expected, it seems, that the Congress would work out some common standpoint or, at least, formulate some final conclusions. Yet, what was missing was a plenary session recapitulating the debates, in the course of which the organizers would have made reports on the proceedings of their groups. There were also some problems of a technical and organizational nature (e.g. lack of foil projectors which created considerable difficulties for some rapporteurs in carrying out the prepared presentations).

The book-show was well prepared, with the latest issue of the *Eastern European Countryside* making an attractive item. The stay in Bucharest, and the trips organized for the participants in the Congress gave them a good opportunity to get acquainted with the socio-economic situation of Rumania.

The shortcomings mentioned above, due to a reporter's duty, did not diminish the significance of the Congress which, in spite of everything, afforded its members the possibility of getting to know the research projects dealt with by rural sociologists in various parts of the world. This is a kind of diagnosis of the topical condition of that sub-discipline of science. And so, though the situation of rural areas generally leaves much to be desired, rural sociology fares pretty well.