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European Agriculture and Rural Areas on Course for a Common Future in the 21st Century

The International Scientific Conference entitled: *European Agriculture and Rural Areas on Course for a Common Future in the 21st Century* was held at Przysiek, near Toruń, September 17–20, 1996. It was organized by the Institute for Rural and Agricultural Development, the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw; the Institute of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń; the Institute of Agricultural Sociology, Justus-Liebig University, Giessen; and C.N.R.S. — Groupe de Recherches sur les Mutations des Sociétés Européennes, Paris.

The location chosen for the debates on the shape of future agriculture and rural areas of European countries exerted an essential impact on the proceedings of the Conference and its results. The fact that those problems were discussed in Poland — a country striving for admission to the European Union and, at the same time, characterized by a large proportion of the population occupationally active in the dispersed, ineffective, agriculture — was conclusive to the direction of not only the discussion but also of the comparisons and forecasts made by the rapporteurs. This was the position although two thirds of the reports were delivered by guests from abroad who dealt with various aspects of changes occurring in agriculture and the rural communities in their mother-countries against a background of advancing integration of European agriculture. Hence the agricultural transformations with our immediate, and more distant, neighbours seemed to herald changes bound to take place in Polish agriculture as well. And so the search for a common future of European agriculture and rural communities turned easily into attempts at an assessment of the degree to which Polish agriculture was prepared for our country's integration with the European Union.

The three-day debates were split into six problem sessions as follows:

- I — European Rural Areas and Agriculture in a Historical Perspective** (reports delivered by J. Kochanowicz, A. Bodenstedt, C. Servolin and T. Hunek)
- II — Different Systems and Regions in European Agriculture of the Late 20th Century** (rapporteurs: N. Swain, M. Halamska in collaboration with M.-C. Maurel, S. Pisarenko and M. Brzóška)
- III — Rural Areas and Agriculture in the EU Countries** (reports by H. Lamarche, F. Streiffeler, S. O'Reilly and U. Brangefeldt)
- IV — Integration of Polish Rural Areas and Agriculture with the European Union** (panel discussion with the participation of: A. Kaleta, W. Piskorz, J. Plewa, M. Wieruszewska and R. Borowicz as moderator; preceded by a report by A. Woś)
- V — The Course of Progress in European Rural Areas and Agriculture in the Year 2000** (reports by F. Tomczak, P. Starosta, A. Barbič)
- VI — Barriers and Chances for Convergence of Agriculture in an Integrated Europe** (panel discussion with the participation of A. Bodenstedt, D. Durmanov, M. Franklin and T. Hunek as moderator).

The topics of the first three sessions, and the majority of papers delivered in their course showed, that it was easier for the participants to speak about the more or less distant past of the rural areas and agriculture in the respective countries or parts of Europe, than to ponder on the shape of their common future in the 21st century, as suggested by the title of the Conference. The description of changes which took place in agriculture in the West-European countries (above all, under the impact of membership in the European Union) was the subject of the reports presented by: Claude Servolin (*Modern Agriculture — French Experience*); Friedhelm Streiffeler (*Specificities of Some Rural Regions in Germany and Their Impact on the Integration into the European Community*); Seamus O'Reilly (*Development of Ireland's Agricultural Regions upon Association with the European Union — Analysis of Environmental Policy*); Hugues Lamarche (*French Experience Following Accession to the European Community*); Ulf Brangefeldt (*The Development of Agricultural Regions in Sweden upon Accession to the European Union*).

A few reports were not merely confined to the description of the changes involved but also pointed out to the steadily persisting potential of differences and disparities in agriculture and the rural communities of the

respective countries and regions of Europe (inclusive of West-European regions): Andreas A. Bodenstedt (*European Countryside and Agriculture — Common Heritage or Point of Dissent?*); Marian Brzóska (*The Essence of the European Union and Its New Members*); Maria Halamska and Marie-Claude Maurel (*European Farmers: Differentiation of Opinions, Attitudes and Identities*).

The description of changes which took place in agriculture and the rural areas in the EU countries may be treated as a basis for the forecasts of the processes that will be occurring in the countries of Central Europe, when integrating with the Union. The conviction in the future of the European rural areas and agriculture — expressed in the title of the Conference — was frequently substantiated by referring to the processes of globalization and economic integration, intensified by the results of the GATT Uruguay Round.

At the same time, however, the survival of the differences and disparities and perception of the sources of their persistence provoked submitting of the assertions to the contrary: those of agricultural dualism (C. Servolin)¹, of the possibility of new members being admitted to the European Union on terms different from the ones so far observed and less favourable to the rural population of those new member states and, also, of the gap between the eastern and the western part of the Continent being too wide to make one believe in that 'common future' (M. Hallmarks and M.-C. Maurel; and Nigel Swain — *Rural and Agricultural Development Strategies in Central European Countries — a Comparative Approach*; Tadeusz Hunek — *Development Possibilities and Barriers of Modern Agriculture in Europe*; Jacek Kochanowicz — *The European Countryside in the Perspective of Long Persistence*). Some information presented by the rapporteurs was liable to reverse the general vision of the Conference, i.e. provoke to adopting of the assumption that the European rural areas and agriculture once had a common past but that there appeared in some regions of our Continent — in various periods of history — circumstances conducive to changes in agriculture and the rural areas (J. Kochanowicz). These circumstances did not, and cannot come into being in other regions of Europe, and the processes of globalization will not result in convergence nor in greater similarity of the rural communities in Europe.

The latter idea was not challenged during the course of further debates of the Conference. Both the panel discussion and Augustyn Woś's report: *Strategic Problems of Polish Agricultural Development* and that by Franciszek Tomczak — *Directions of Rural and Agricultural Development in*

¹ The term 'agricultural dualism' means coexistence of the highly productive, market-oriented agriculture and subsistence agriculture, making the second source of income for the bi-occupational population (Ed. note).

Europe of the Year 2000 in the Context of Global Experience, did not provide a clear outline of the activities which would bring our rural areas and agriculture, quickly and effectively — nearer to West-European standards. The enunciations of the rapporteurs pointing to the danger involved in simply copying the processes of modernization (Paweł Starosta — *Agriculture and Forestry — Their Future in Europe*; Ana Barbič — *Cultural Identity of the Countryside in the Processes of Globalization*), or to the transitory character of development conditions existing today (Svetlana Pisarenko — *Transformation of Ukrainian Agriculture in the Perspective of Integration with Europe*), all the more strongly restrained the participants in the discussion from making optimistic forecasts.

Recapitulating the results of the second panel discussion (and referring to earlier debates), Tadeusz Hunek formulated the following conclusions pertaining, above all, to the condition and direction of agricultural development in Poland: there is no alternative to economic convergence (including the convergence of agriculture); there is no strong will within the European Union to be joined by the countries of East Central Europe; what is indispensable is the dualism of agriculture and so is a new model of activity in that branch of the economy (other than the peasant or farmer one, but nearer to the type of food business enterprise); agriculture is an important factor of the welfare and satisfaction of society hence the need for stimulating economic activities of inhabitants of the rural areas and for the pursuit of the possibilities of selling food products in third markets.

The Conference was an excellent opportunity for a review of the position held by Polish rural sociologists and agricultural economists on the question of Poland's approaching integration with the European Union. An opportunity all the more desirable, as it afforded a chance for those standpoints to be examined in the light of the experience of other countries, and compared with the opinions of West-European specialists on the premises and probable conditions on which the Polish economy and agriculture may find themselves in the structures of the Union. Nevertheless, the Conference did not embrace all of the factors essential to that process. The point is that the options concerning agricultural policy and rural communities, as represented in the programmes of political grouping dominant on the Polish political scene were taken into account but in a fragmentary way, even by the Polish speakers.

The Conference also furnished a wealth of data enabling a review of the features distinguishing Polish agriculture from that of the West-European countries but far fewer indications concerning the activities liable to result in lessening the disparities in this regard. No satisfactory answer was given to the occasionally posed question about the way of reducing, in Poland, the proportion of the population living by work on their economically ineffective farms. None of the statements concerned would point out

to anything more than the slow, spontaneous process of the concentration of land, demographic succession of generations, migration from the countryside and attempts at the development of pluriactivity in the rural areas. It must be borne in mind, however, that this was not the principal aim of the Conference. Its fruits, i.e. in the form of a catalogue of the qualities deciding on the maladjustment of Polish agriculture to the requirements of the European Union and the list of practical problems awaiting a solution are worthy of very high appreciation. Paradoxically, a factor conducive to many thought-provoking enunciations was the absence of a few rapporteurs which gave the participants more time for discussion and formulation of supplementary commentaries during the second part of the Conference.

Zbigniew T. Wierzbicki, recapitulating all the proceedings, pointed out to the steady process of changes occurring within the European Union and in the directions of its agricultural policy. The speaker also put an emphasis on the trends appearing in world agriculture and economy. The solution according to which we would have to join the Union at the expense of the rural areas and agricultural population is unacceptable to Polish society, continued Zbigniew T. Wierzbicki. Yet, we are faced with the alternative of a non-realistic vision of resolution of the problems of the rural areas, in the case of which it is the government that becomes its author and that of the 'realistic' one, where the problems are resolved as a result of an improbable coincidence. Professor Wierzbicki's assertion seems to be correct, alas, to a large degree and that not only with regard to countries whose agriculture is in worse condition than the Polish one.

The organizers of the Conference are now working on a book comprising materials presented during the proceedings. This initiative is as valuable as the organization of that meeting. Preservation of the results of the searching debates and conclusions — and making them available to broader circles together with topical information on the complex problems of rural and agricultural development in the group of countries which we are trying to catch up with — is useful in every respect.