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Innocent Arnošt Bláha — Founder of Modern Czech Sociology and Rural Sociology

He was born in 1879 and died in 1960. He grew up in the Czech countryside in a lower middle class family. After finishing grammar school he entered the seminary, which he left two years later. He started studying philosophy at Vienna University and then continued in Prague and Paris. At the Sorbonne he followed E. Durkheim's lectures. From 1903 he worked as a teacher at a grammar school in Prague (and then again in Prague from 1919 to 1921), and from 1904 to 1919 in Nové Město in Moravia. At that stage he started doing research (having obtained a bursary he spent the academic year, 1908/1909 attending further studies in Paris) with the intention of preparing his doctorate. He obtained a doctorate from Prague University in the spring of 1908 after having presented his thesis concerning the psychology of the small town. His post-doctoral lecturing qualification was published in 1914 (*The City. A sociological study*). Not having obtained permission from the authorities to lecture at university, he continued teaching at a Prague grammar school. It was not until the beginning of 1922 that he was appointed professor at the Masaryk University in Brno. He had connections with this university for the entire duration of his professional activity.

He was a pupil of G. Masaryk and Emil Durkheim, and a leading authority in Czech sociology during the interwar period, the founder of the so-called Brno School of Sociology, which was associated with world sociology and determined the position of Czech sociology. He did not, however, achieve world fame, much like many other outstanding sociologists from Central and Eastern Europe. This was due to linguistic barriers (Bláha published his sociological monographies in Czech) and the concentration of his academic research on matters concerning his own country. His creativity went beyond the boundaries of his fatherland, yet this was only known by a narrow group of professionals. Bláha published a few brief articles in the Parisian *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* and in sociological periodicals in the USA, Germany, Italy and Poland. Therefore, when an honorary book celebrating

his 65th birthday was being prepared, articles were sent from abroad by among others: W.A. Bonger from Holland, E.E. Eubank and P.A. Sorokin from the USA, V. Ganew from Bulgaria, D. Gusti from Rumania, A. Niceforo from Italy, G. Richard from France, F. Znaniecki from Poland.

Bláha the sociologist was utterly engaged in matters concerning his own society. His activity and creativity were firmly grounded in the historical-cultural reality of "small nations" (Masaryk's expression) of Central-Eastern Europe, which had until not long before strived for the consolidation of national powers with the intention of acquiring independence, and after 1918 strengthening its position in Europe by stressing its own cultural identity. The sociology of the Brno professor was firmly engaged ideologically (he was also a journalist), much like sociological creativity in this part of the continent at the turn of the century and in the first half of the twentieth century. This sociology was characterized by an interest in the matters of the nation, the integration of specific strata of national society, including the nationalization of the peasants as a group representing a serious demographic potential and social power. That sociology marked the particularly important role of the intelligentsia in the nation. This manifested itself particularly in this group maintaining national identity as well as in raising the cultural level of the popular masses.

After starting to work at the university, Bláha intensified his academic activity at the expense of journalism. He began writing academic texts which were strictly sociological (from 1930 to 1951 he published a periodical *Sociological Review* in Brno, which became the organ of Czech sociologists). During the years 1922—1930, rural issues dominated his writing giving way to issues concerning the intelligentsia in the thirties (his *Sociology of the intelligentsia*, published in 1937, is one of the greatest achievements of Czech sociology and Central-East European sociology).

In the area of rural sociology he published a book, *The sociology of the peasant and worker* (1925, reissued in 1937) as well as a few extensive articles such as, among others, *The city versus the countryside* (1925), *Towards a sociology of the peasantry* (1925), *Rural sociology* (1927), *The significance of village research as the study of an example* (1928). These works provided a basis for the formation of Czech rural sociology during the interwar period. A host of researchers in that country were raised on this reading material.

The monography of 1925 was the first modern analysis of the peasantry in the history of Czech sociology undertaken in socio-psychological categories, with a critical approach to the existing theses concerning the Czech peasant by the author, Josef Holička. Bláha broke with romanticism, with an obsessively peasant viewpoint of the countryside, with the idealization of the peasant and the exhortation of upkeeping "peasantness" as an alleged condition of maintaining national identity. He proposed an academic analysis, making use of the current output of American sociology (particularly Ch. L.

Galpin, W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, J. M. Gillette). Aware of the rural distinctness as portayed by Amercian sociologists, he stated that *from the comparison between the American countryside and our countryside interesting cognitive effects can be acquired* (1928). Assuming that an essential characteristic of the peasant is “zemitost” (permanent settling of and attachment to the land), which over the centuries identified this land as being Czech (the attachment of the peasant to place, faith, language and culture while the higher levels of the old Czech society gave way to Germanization), underlines that the peasant’s isolation now hinders the modernization of Czech society. *Undertaking rural research one cannot forget — he wrote — that the countryside is only a part — important — but only a part of the life of the nation as a whole. Harmonious development of the nation can only base itself on the consensus between the city and the country* (1925).