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## **Sociological Research on Rural Areas in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia**

Nowadays, rural areas present a very fruitful field of work for sociology; however, unfortunately, various phenomena of rural life have either not yet been included in sociological research or the research has been inadequate. The majority of papers published in the field of rural sociology do not represent the result of thorough, theoretically and methodologically well-grounded research; they are, primarily, presentations prepared for a specific purpose, to be read at conferences organized by scientific institutions. Therefore, there is an obvious discrepancy between the number of published papers and their thematic diversity.

Concerning the period between 1990 and 1998, most authors point to problems which attracted sociological interest in the former Yugoslavia. These problems include: migration from rural areas to towns, aging of the rural, primarily agricultural population, aging households, transformation of family relationships, backwardness of rural settlements, etc. The new, as yet insufficiently studied areas of sociological interest include religious life in rural settlements and possibilities of developing a small-scale economy in conditions of ownership transformation.

One of the greatest problems of rural areas nowadays is no doubt the decrease in the number of inhabitants. Numerous papers have been dedicated to the low birth-rate of the population in rural areas and to the migration of that population to towns, but a number of other problems should be studied along with them. For example, social stratification in rural settlements, the appearance of new social groups significant both because of their economic and other features, primarily the moral ones which conflict with the traditional views on rurality.

In addition to the study of inter-generational relationships in families, the institution of marriage and kinship, sociologists should also direct their attention to the family budget. Sociological analysis of the family budget does not represent a deviation towards economic determinism, but an intention

to explain the 'behaviour' of the contemporary family in rural settlements, its attitude to biological reproduction, the education of children, investment in households etc, from the standpoint of financial possibilities. The family budget is an indicator of the possibilities of changing the way of living in rural families, as well as an indicator of economic and social differentiation among rural households.

The observation of current trends in agriculture (new cultivars, plant protection, mechanization etc.) is not just an economic issue or an issue concerning bio-technical sciences; it is also a sociological issue. Quality of their production, possibilities for product placement, organization of work within households etc. depend on the farmers' attitude to innovations.

Interesting topics for sociology could also include negative socialization when engagement in agricultural production and life in rural areas are concerned; this socialization takes place both inside and outside the family.

Research on the significance of part-time farming has also been neglected. In the former Yugoslavia, part-time farming was seen as a transitional phase in the process of transformation of agricultural households into non-agricultural ones. However, at a time when working in state enterprises is, in most cases, no longer a privilege, when it is easier to lose a job than to find one, the advantages of part-time farming and double sources of income should be emphasized. The return to rural settlements, or more precisely to the tilled fields and plots near houses, pronounced during recent years, to a certain extent enabled the alleviation of poverty which became the 'trade-mark' of the majority of inhabitants in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

These are just some of the possible subjects of research the sociological study of which would contribute to overcoming the current problems of rural areas. Furthermore, apart from neglecting a number of phenomena from the contemporary life of rural areas, rural sociology in the new Yugoslavia is also characterized by a neglect of empirical research. In Yugoslav sociology, including rural sociology, empirical research is treated as a 'lower' level of scientific work. In most cases, research on contemporary rural settlements is reduced to the bookish pondering on the problems of rural settlements without proper argumentation. Authors write on the basis of their own experience, their great 'expertise' about the situation in the region which they left several decades earlier is usually personal. At best, they remain at the level of the analysis of papers written during the expansion of rural sociology. Reaching conclusions on the basis of articles written in the 1960s and 1970s creates a distorted picture of contemporary life in rural settlements and, certainly, does not contribute to their revitalization.

In rare empirical research, questionnaires and interviews are the most frequently used techniques for the collection of original data. Research with the opinion poll as an instrument for data collection uses question-

naires with closed-type questions. In that way, adjusting the instrument to achieve faster and easier data processing, they limit informative possibilities of research. At the same time, among the approaches used in the application and development of theory, the most frequent is the approach which arranges empirical data about some current problems of rural areas according to the existing notional framework, which does not lead to a higher level of abstraction.

The use of scientific interviews also points to a number of disadvantages of a methodological nature. Some authors generalize on the basis of the data collected in interviews with several respondents; for example, with nine or less respondents of different sex, age, educational background, occupation. The number of questions is very low.

In addition to the mentioned sources, censuses also present a significant source of data. Analysis and interpretation of these data, in most cases, remain on the descriptive level. The role of statistical data is reduced to showing how widespread a phenomenon is in society at a given moment. That way, the sociologist accepts the rough picture presented by quantitative data, not trying to 'familiarize' as much as possible with the studied environment and to observe differences and various manifestations of social life in it. Finally, it could be observed that the use of statistical data resulting from the regular activities of work organizations located in the rural environment (for example, farmers' cooperatives) is significantly lower.

As far as time is concerned, two approaches in the sociological study of rural areas could be specified: a) research on the current situation, b) research on development in time. The first, dominant approach is characterized by the description of the current state of some social phenomenon or institution in rural areas. The phenomena or institutions are discussed outside historical processes in which they originated and developed.

Research on development in time starts from the fact that social phenomena change in time, so that in contemporary rural settlements, besides the current scope of phenomena, there are also those from the previous social epochs which should be taken into account if one wants to study the current state.

Neglecting the comparative approach is also evident. Factors of various directions and significance affect social phenomena and institutions in rural areas: legislature, agrarian policy, urbanization, mechanization, migration, tradition etc. All of these factors make a network which, depending on the intensity of the factors' influence, creates a specific social atmosphere differing from region to region and offering significant 'space' for future sociological research. Therefore, the comparative method should also be used to view one social phenomenon in various social environments. Maybe a division into most significant sociological zones — as far as the subject of research is concerned — could be introduced in the new Yugoslavia,

following the typology developed in the middle of this century by Cvetko Kostić (1958). This would increase systematicity in the data collection and stimulate the use of the comparative method, pointing to particular varieties of the studied phenomenon created under the influence of a different social atmosphere in the sociological zones. Since it is impossible to take into account and study all settlements with precision, only the representative ones should be singled out; on that basis, one could specify the average in the social life of a region.

Content analysis is also neglected in sociological research; it is a methodological procedure which would, for example, enable the easier processing of the abundance of documents created after World War II and pointing to the characteristics of the influence which Communist ideology had on the position of rural settlements and their inhabitants.

Although science could be very closely related with practice, sociological scientific work is still not viewed through the prism of usefulness. Confined to a couple of problems, sociological research does not offer concrete facts on which practice could rely in its planning process.

Deep changes taking place in contemporary Yugoslav society as a whole and consequently in rural areas, cause rapid changes in social phenomena and institutions; they change their forms, structures and functions, escaping, it seems, thorough sociological analysis. A romantic and nostalgic attitude to rurality and scientific papers written by some authors in the form of political reports on the basis of their 'expertise' in the problems of rural areas cannot contribute to overcoming the crisis rural areas are experiencing.

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