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## **The Countryside and Farming in Czech Publications**

Not many Czech books on rural and farming topics have been published in the past two years. This is caused by both the economic difficulties faced by the specialized book market and the low interest of publishers in these issues. In a situation when the Czech farming and countryside are undergoing complicated development, this absence of information calls for serious thought. Nevertheless, rural or agrarian issues have not been totally sidelined. The countryside's future ranks among open questions and is connected not only with economic transformation but also with addressing environmental relations and extremely complex social issues.

Let us mention some specialist activities. The Antonín Švehla Foundation, with the involvement of some other institutions — the Czech Agricultural University in Prague, Masaryk's Czech Sociological Society, the Czech chapter of the European Society for Rural Sociology, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Agrarian Chamber — organized a seminar on 'The Czech Countryside at the Turn of Millennium' ('Český venkov na přelomu tisíciletí')<sup>1</sup> in 1997. The Proceedings help to summarize certain findings of research and studies conducted in the Czech Republic.

The main papers included the introductory address delivered by Jan Hron, Chancellor of the Czech Agricultural University in Prague, on *Social Development of the Czech Countryside*. The paper outlines the characteristics of the rural society's exogenous environment, which consists of a number of factors, and breaks them down into four basic groups:

a) social factors characterizing the exogenous environment represented by legislation, relations between the executive and the business spheres, existing lobbies, etc.;

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<sup>1</sup> *The Czech Countryside at the Turn of the Millennium (Český venkov na přelomu tisíciletí)*. Proceedings of Czech Agricultural University and The Antonín Švehla Foundation, Prague 1997, 90 pp.

b) economic factors, which mainly include the trend in GDP development, specific market forecasts, level of investments, consumer outlays, etc.;

c) social factors characterized by the hierarchy of values and criteria in people's decision-making, lifestyle, level of education, population mobility, distribution of earnings, etc.;

d) technological factors, including expenditure on science and research, technology transfer, the rate at which production means grow obsolete, etc.

Social development is currently influenced by a number of factors, such as: the existing decentralization of settlement, lower population density, poor infrastructure, housing stock consisting mainly of single-family houses and farmsteads, frequent ownership of private farms, fewer job opportunities, simpler social structure, greater social control, different types of social communication, and the traditional approach to social roles within the family and household.

The above factors affect social development and result in a number of consequences, among them the increasing rate of unemployment in agrarian areas, dropping farm household income, growing importance of personal farms, declining demand for labour force in agriculture, outflow of skilled young people from agricultural enterprises, and local immigration.

Magdalena Hrabánková, from the Research Institute of Agricultural Economy in Prague, focused on regional policies after 1989. She noted that in addition to its economic function, the countryside must also carry out environmental, provisioning, recreational and other functions.

These functions are now being jeopardized and rural policies should therefore, be part of the State's overall economic policy; they should take into account regional reality, including regional differences, and support local initiatives for the use of local resources. This in principle implies support of local initiatives as part of the rural development policy so as to preserve and protect positive values of the rural society — particularly traditional family life — while preferring young people's growth and their integration within the community, maintaining the cultural and historical peculiarities of the rural area and their development, supporting diversification of production and activities, promoting relations between the farming and other population, and reinforcing societal cooperation, creativity and identity.

The point in this respect is not only to preserve the landscape, but also the integrated development of the countryside with an adequate structure of its settlement. The point is the countryside's development from the perspective of society's needs as a certain democratic principle, which should be supported by matching financial solidarity. This principle is also being applied in the EU's approach to rural development.

Martin Potůček, Director of the Institute of Sociological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, presented some

very interesting aspects of the political framework of transformation reforms after 1989, in his paper *Dilemmas of Czech Social Policy*. He analysed the development of the reforms' political framework, pointing *inter alia* at political parties' programmes and operation, and plans for social policy preferred by them. He also dealt with processes of communication and decision-making in the formation and implementation of social policy; and reported in a critical and extensive manner on the development of the key areas in which the roles of the market, state and civil sector interact — housing, health care, retirement pension schemes, unemployment, and education.

He highlighted some features of the Czech social policy's recent development: the market has been pushed through (and/or penetrated naturally) into areas which had earlier been totally inaccessible to it; under-developed regulatory legislation and anomie have resulted in the market penetrating certain ethically contestable or outright criminal positions (corruption, misappropriation of public property, etc.). After 1989, the State was, for understandable reasons, quite unbalanced and destabilized. When the Communist Party's leadership role was invalidated, its discipline-wielding supervision over the State's apparatus was removed. Staff replacements may not always have resulted in the arrival of sufficiently educated bureaucrats furnished with experience and moral prerequisites. The State's failure has been reflected in the delayed response to arising problems, and a lack of strategic vision, concepts and law making. Related to that was also the low political priority of addressing the public sector's problems, which was looking for a new place, in the shadow of the then running economic reform. One of the manifestations of this failure is also the never implemented reform of the country's regional administration. The civil sector developed under the Government's mistrust in it, with provisional legislation lasting too long while the willingness of the general public to become involved in the civil sector's activity emerged very slowly.

Interesting contributions included a paper delivered by Marie Horalíková, from the Czech Agricultural University (CZU) in Prague, who presented the results of a poll of the CZU Operations Economy Faculty students' interest in farming. Cyrila Marková summarized the results of a comparison between the Czech Republic and some European countries in terms of employment and problems associated with job hunting. A similar tone underlies the contribution of Jan Moudrý, Agricultural Faculty, South Bohemian University, who compared prospering and backward regions in some EU countries and provided information about the EU's funds intended for support of rural development. Emil Svoboda, Mendel Agricultural and Forestry University at Brno, then analysed the strategy of Czech companies involved in the agrarian business.

In his extensive contribution Michal Lošťák tried to show the influence that social constructions built about the countryside wield over the

functioning of the community that they describe, in the context of the social processes actually taking place. Problems of individual social groups appeared in Věra Majerová's paper reporting on the status of cooperation with FAO in respect of rural gender studies, and on the Czech specifics of research into farming and rural women's working and living conditions. In his paper, Ferdinand Koudelka described the establishment and operation of a private farm in the Labe basin between 1990 and 1996.

The publications presented above highlight the extent and complexity of the rural issue. They merely touch upon certain partial problems, but joint expert discussion appears to be the step that is needed towards mutual understanding and search for common premises when views differ.

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A very special publication on the Czech book market is *Countryside, Towns, Media (Venkov, města, média)*<sup>2</sup> by Bohuslav Blažek. The author is well known to the Czech public as a co-founder of the Society for Rural Renewal (1993) and School of Rural Renewal at Libčeves (1997). The book does not aspire to be a standard work of science, nor a description of rural reality; nevertheless, it does contain elements of both. In six chapters: Assumptions and Objectives, Key Terms, The Countryside, Cities, Media, and Documents, the author introduces his concept of a proactive approach to addressing rural problems. The term 'social ecology' which he uses, is understood as a way of acting and a way of polemics between the sciences and the humanities.

The theoretical part, devoted with a historical undertone to perception of the countryside in some of its evolutionary stages, is complete with a Manual of Game Playing Techniques to support the rural population's participation. The city is viewed in the same way — as a settlement unit affected over time by all social and economic changes of each era. The Manual focuses on the participative creation of strategic urban planning.

The 'media' category — as noted by the author — takes a side step from the geographical frame and is a kind of technical link between people. After listing chronologically some mass media, the author reflects on their influence and role in today's world. The subsequent Manual is devoted to communication between self-help groups and their environment and the media.

Another publication worth mentioning are the extensive Proceedings of an annual international conference on Agrarian Prospects, which was held for the seventh time at the CZU Operations Economy Faculty in Prague in mid-September 1998. The broad topic of 'European Integration and Use of

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<sup>2</sup> Bohuslav Blažek, *Countryside, Towns, Media (Venkov, města, média)*, Sociology Publishers, Prague 1998, Ed. I, 362 pp.

Natural Resources' ('Evropská integrace a využívání přírodních zdrojů')<sup>3</sup> was discussed in five sections: Management and Marketing, Economy, Information Technology, Pedagogy, and Social Sciences. Researchers from 15 European countries and overseas (Slovakia, Finland, Canada, the US, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Taiwan, Hungary, Belgium, Russia, the Ukraine, Albania, Scotland and Bulgaria) participated in the conference.

The Economy Section focused on the following issues: Economic valuation of production sources and their utilization; Theoretical aspects of market balance and utilization of natural resources; Tendencies in corporate economics and agrarian sector economics in the Czech Republic and abroad; and Legal protection of natural resources and its enforcement.

The Management and Marketing Section presented papers on: Business organizational prerequisites for using natural and human resources; Integration processes among businesses; Restructuring and revitalization of the corporate base; Legal aspects of organizational changes; and Aspects of strategic planning. Contributions also appeared concerning Competitiveness of farming; Principles of land reform; and individual Commodities and their price trends.

The Information Technology Section looked at the role and functions of information systems in farming; Current trends in system integration; New directions in network technologies; and, together with the Pedagogy Section, Opportunities for applying these methods in a university's educational and research process.

Papers delivered in the Social Sciences Section touched upon several topics — Rural development; Main trends in the formation of the labour market in agrarian areas; Opportunities for young people with agricultural education to find work in practice; Social phenomena; and Processes in the post-transformation period.

Although it is difficult to find many publications on farming and the countryside, we cannot say that scientific discussion on these topics is stagnant. It is true, however, that such discussions take place on academic ground, and may reach the broader public by chance. Let us hope the young generation of intellectuals will change this unfavourable situation in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> *European Integration and Use of Natural Resources (Evropská integrace a využívání přírodních zdrojů)*, PEF CZU Proceedings, Prague 1998.