

*Władysław Adamski**

**Evaluative Remarks
on “Eastern European Countryside”****

In 1993 when the first, rather slim volume of this newly established sociological title was distributed free of charge among its prospective readers, it was not at all certain whether it would survive on the market. But three years later, beginning with volume 2/96, the Editors proved they could produce and distribute new volumes annually. There has so far been an impressive collection of publications, offering more and more in-depth sociological insight into the processes and problems of post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern European countryside.

Browsing through the contents of those nine volumes, which I received for evaluation, I found them unusually informative and inspiring as a source of high quality sociological expertise and interpretation suitable for both professional research in the field and policy makers. Thus the Editors fully deserve to be congratulated for their effort aimed at implementing the ambitious idea of setting up a new periodical focused on post-socialist rural/agrarian issues. Their achievement can be observed as a real success story.

What I perceive as highly valuable, up-to-date and innovative in this editorial venture is its persistence on in-depth presentation of analyses and evaluations of so-called “unintended outcomes” of the – generated “from above” processes of post-socialist restructurisation being imposed on to rural areas. Such an attempt to humanise the politicians/economists’ temptation to thoroughly rebuild societies according to another set of imported

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** On 21 July 2004 a meeting took place in Toruń to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the periodical EEC, during which Professor Władysław Adamski, a sociologist from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, presented his evaluation of the periodical.

patterns of institutional transformation, resulted in the Editors' *credo* which says that sociology should fight against "the excessive modernisation of agriculture, and doing this it must participate in the creation of a new 'philosophy of rurality'."

We can find a further elaboration of the above-mentioned idea in the programmatic papers opening issue numbered "O." According to Christian Giordano the main task of "Eastern European Countryside" lies in "the investigation of the specific *historicity* which the rural population in their everyday life design and carry out, on the basis of inter-disciplinary as well as structural and cultural analyses." As far as "structural dimension of rural/agricultural transformation is concerned, the European politicians" – according to Nigel Swain – "have ignored the central sociological, realities created by forty years of the socialist system of which they so thoroughly disapprove" (Nigel Swain).

How have these intentions declared by the Editors been realised? In vol. 2/96 they are most clearly exposed by Nigel Swain's comparative study on rural employment and unemployment in four central European countries. In this author's conclusion we find an open statement which says that the creation of non-agricultural jobs in rural areas depends on the creation of new democratically accountable authorities at the regional or district level. Continuation and elaboration of this approach with reference to the notion of "sustainable development" is consequently, theoretically and empirically, developed in another two studies in vol. 3. Thus Ana Barbic advocates "the switch from the bottom – down to bottom-up approach or rather the combination of both" as the most efficient way of managing the post-socialist rural development; and Lavdosh Ferruni claims that in most of rural areas of Albania the first priority is not given to the "environment or production, but rural livelihoods, stressing both the satisfaction of basic needs and long-term security."

Another crucial dimension of post-socialist structural dynamics, observed in the rural *milieu*, we can identify in a number of articles and research studies, which deal with highly diversified backgrounds and manifestations of the *issue of agency*. What are the actors (winners) vs. excluded (powerless – losers) of these processes of systemic change? There is a striking polarisation of patterns disclosed by specific country monographs. From the dominance of family household owners (hereditary peasants) or the young vs. old generation as is typical for Poland (see: K. Szafraniec: "Peasants as moderators of change), to a lesser extent this pattern is also disclosed in Hungary (see: D. L. Brown and L. Kulcsar). On the other side of this dimension are the processes of rural restructuring going on in the societies of former USSR – where the spirit of "homo sovieticus" – still prevails, (as demonstrated by Ilkka Alanen on the data from Baltic coun-

tries), or to the revival in Siberia of the old patterns of Russian communal life, emerging under the pressure of harsh living conditions produced by market economy rules (as presented by Igor Volgin).

Beyond these extreme forms of adjustment one should locate such a way of property restructuring as one described by Ch. Giordano and D. Kostova in Bulgaria, where the bulk of new landowners appear to be neither peasants nor capitalist farmers, but just land leasers, permanently living outside the countryside, mostly in urban settlements, i.e. those people poorly linked to the rural environment.

The variety of these seriously documented, new emerging "actors" in post-socialist rural areas, as well as accompanying them the sharp deficit of organised labour among the employees making their living in the new capitalist agrobusiness (not to mention the traditional peasants) – constitute fertile background for the outburst of radical and often even violent protest actions, aimed against the government policy of rural ownership restructuring, as well as against the inadequate social protection (see: Katalin Kovacs. The 1997 "Peasant Revolt").

Of course, I am fully aware of the fact that these characteristics of the most relevant, in my opinion, topics raised by "Eastern European Countryside," are chosen selectively. They do not mention and thus pay due justice to the great majority of articles, research reports or book reviews, which were published in nine issues of this Annual. However, I am convinced that most of the positions omitted in my review pin-points to the qualities which deserve to be highly praised as a unique collection of in-depth reports on the historically shaped, specific cases of rural transformations. These qualities present themselves as an excellent set of data and analyses to be quite easily utilised as a fruitful background for their further cross-country and cross-cultural comparisons. An encouragement for those who will eventually be ready to undertake such a challenge, can be found in Nigel Swain's conceptual study (see: *A Framework for Comparing Social Change in the Post-socialist Countryside*). Highly provocative in this respect is especially this author's final hypothesis, putting an emphasis on the long term persistence of a dual structure of post-socialist agriculture," marked by the tendency for coexistence of extensive and self-supply farms with the relative absence of the genuinely peasant family farms.

On the basis of the evaluated periodical's achievements to date we can predict its no less bright future. Among external conditions justifying such prospects, as well as new opportunities and intellectually rewarding challenges now opening before the Editorial Board, we should link primarily with the most recent enlargement of the European Union, and in particular with respect to the east-ward extension of its common agricultural policy.

How this EU pressure and strategies of change exerted on the rural development of the new – accession countries will contribute to their catching-up modernisation and how these processes should be analysed or eventually – critically evaluated by sociologists, seems to be a top priority agenda for the new editorial guidelines for “Eastern European Countryside.”