

Development of Rural Sociology in Latvia

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The country as a research object. Rural sociology is one of the fields of sociology having a rather long history if compared with the other fields. It firstly appeared in the 1920s. Several factors determined the appearance of rural sociology in the pre-war Latvia.

Firstly, for hundreds of years the Latvians have been a peasant nation, which has always had a disposition to land. Secondly, at that time the majority of Latvian population lived in the countryside, and the agricultural production was the main sector of national economy – the key producer of exports with which this country took part in the world market. Thus the farmers and the countryside served as the values of economic life. Thirdly, Latvia was not an isolated territory, but it was closely connected with the rest of the world.

Periods of research and main problems of research. From the present point of view it is possible to deal with several periods in the development of rural sociology in Latvia:

1. the period up to 1940;
2. the period of the 1970s -1980s;
3. the period beginning with the 1990s and continuing up to nowadays.

Each of these periods has its specific character as regards the organisation and the problems due to the change of political, economic, and social conditions. The structure of scientists, their fields of activities and readiness for carrying out research in sociology change as well.

Main research problems in the first period: 1) formulation of the rural life features by comparing them with the urban life; 2) groupings of land owners before and after the agrarian reform of 1922, which brought essential changes in the countryside of Latvia; 3) differences of inner groups of peasantry and also the peasantry situation in comparison with the other classes of the society; 4) additional work of farmers (smith, miller, craftsman etc.) and agriculture as an additional work too (income gained working in different state and municipal institutions, representatives of the so-called free professions, or works in commerce etc.); and 5) wage labourers in agriculture, considered as a special group of rural population.

Main research problems in the second period: 1) class and professional structure of the rural society, particularly the groups connected with agricultural production; 2) agricultural work (contents and conditions of work, organisation of work, professional orientation to agricultural work, professional training system, and other problems connected with this work); 3) analysis of living environment; 4) system of needs and the level of satisfaction are also to be investigated; and 5) at the beginning of the 1970s the work was started on development programmes for working collectives, also in the countryside, which were the first steps to consider the countryside as a holistic system.

Main research problems in the third period: 1) new social groups – farmers, craftsmen, entrepreneurs, wage labourers; 2) new social structure of the society, the centre of attention is peasantry (farmers); 3) processes of differentiation and stratification of the rural society; 4) more visible attention to territorial approach; 5) rural women, their role and status in the society and family – a more significant object in comparison with the previous period; 6) civil society formation process in the countryside – activities of local governments, non-governmental organisations, and other civic institutions; and 7) rural labour market and life-long learning problematic – one of the focuses of researchers.

Latvia University of Agriculture as one of the research centres. As regards the organising aspect, the time from the 1970s may be considered as the activity of small separate groups in Riga Polytechnic Institute, Latvia State University, and Latvia Agricultural Academy. However, Latvia Agricultural Academy gradually becomes the main research centre of rural sociology. Up to 1991 the guidance of the Rural section of the

Baltic branch of the Soviet Sociologists Association was located in the Academy. As of 1972 regular conferences dedicated to the problems of rural development are held in the programmes of which the reports having results of sociologicistic research take an important place. During the Soviet time the researchers from Estonia, Lithuania, Byelorussia, and Russia met but during the years of regained independence – the researchers from the Baltic and Nordic countries, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland etc. In the years of independence the consolidation of people working on rural problematic (research groups and project teams) has taken place.

Research topicalities. 1. Development of rural concept, as the previous one is not any more connected with the real situation, while the new one has only the administrative and not the scientific meaning. 2. Rural territories are not analysed as a socially territorial totality having a whole problem range, e.g., through a space capital meaning. 3. Whole groups of population (working in medicine, education, communication, trade, building, melioration, social services, administrative departments etc.) living in rural territories have not been analysed. 4. The priority attention is still paid to the urbanization although in many EU countries the process of re-urbanisation or counter-urbanisation is expanding for at least five years. 5. The countryside begins to disappear as a constant research unit, as a complex system; it is often replaced by a regional aspect concentrated to the medium indices in the region.

Key words: research object, research periods, research problems, research centres.