

# Methodological aspects of the Czech rural areas research after the EU accession

## *Metodologické aspekty výzkumu českého venkova po vstupu do EU*

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**Abstract:** Czech countryside and agriculture entered a new phase of development in May 2004. The transformation period after 1989 has changed the employment conditions of rural population as well as the conditions of economic subjects functioning in the rural space considerably. Its multifunctional character is now shifting from the sphere of theoretical thinking to the expected reality of the nearest years. The fact that the necessary economic prerequisites and their social impacts are closely tied together stresses the necessity of forming such tools of following and evaluating of the rural development criteria which would be able to reflect in a relevant way important indicators of the positive and negative changes in the working and living conditions of the population. The contribution issues from the experience of empirical research and reflects its future orientation, methodological approaches and possibilities.

**Key words:** Czech countryside, European context, methodology

**Abstrakt:** Český venkov a zemědělství vstoupily od května 2004 do nové etapy svého vývoje. Transformační období po roce 1989 podstatně změnilo podmínky zaměstnanosti venkovského obyvatelstva i podmínky fungování ekonomických subjektů ve venkovském prostoru. Jeho multifunkční charakter se z oblasti teoretických úvah přesouvá do očekávané reality nejbližších let. Spjatost nezbytných ekonomických předpokladů a jejich sociálních důsledků klade důraz na vytváření takových nástrojů sledování a vyhodnocování kritérií venkovského rozvoje, které jsou schopny relevantním způsobem zachytit významné indikátory pozitivních i negativních změn pracovních a životních podmínek obyvatelstva. Příspěvek vychází ze zkušeností empirického výzkumu českého venkova a zemědělství a zamýšlí se nad jeho budoucím zaměřením, metodologickými přístupy a možnostmi.

**Klíčová slova:** český venkov, evropský kontext, metodologie

Rural areas can be researched from different sides and viewpoints. It depends on the aim of the research and the possibilities of the acquired empirical data utilisation. Rural sociology has originated as an applied scientific discipline the aim of which was to gather information on the life in rural areas, which were important for its stabilisation and development. Rural sociology can influence the ways of decision making on the work and life in rural areas and sometimes in its history it has even served the purpose.

### METHODOLOGICAL BEGINNINGS OF THE RURAL AREAS RESEARCH

As the official birthplace of rural sociology, there are regarded the U.S., and it is dated by the year 1908.

The applied discipline has a very practical goals connected to the settlement and re-settlement policy of the state. An important impulse to the social problems of the countryside research was given by the American president Theodor Roosevelt by establishing of the "Country Life Commission". Its task was to follow the social conditions of rural life. The first report of the Commission, published in 1911, pointed out, on one side, the considerable flow of capital in agriculture, which was comparable to the industrial capital, and, on the other side, to the numerous problems originating at that time in the American countryside as a consequence of the rapid development of trade and economy.<sup>1</sup>

During a short time, rural sociology became part of the curricula at most of the U.S. universities. By 1925, the

<sup>1</sup> "It was seen how necessary it were to study all factors: land, capital as well as the human and social factor. Since the surplus of the free land was soon consumed and the interest on production increase called for new methods of husbandry

number of these education institutions was registered at 925 (Gillette 1928: 7). Many universities and research places in many U.S. states started extensive empirical researches aimed namely at the practical questions of agriculture and rural life (Charitonová 1975).

The methodology of sociological research for these practical aims had drawn from the possibilities of the period. For the study of rural phenomena and processes, there was above all recommended the *historical method* (to the roots of the phenomena, the so-called *social survey*, which can be characterised as gathering the set of statistical, historical, psychological, sociological, philosophical and other knowledge on the given village or town (today, it would be rather called the monographic method), and the *laboratory method*, which regarded the isolation and following of one element (probably a pre-stage of an experiment). Rural problems were delimited very broadly, sociologists tried to cover the whole extensive and multidimensional reality of the economic and social life. In 1935, the scientific journal *Rural Sociology* was founded in the U.S., which is issued up to the present time.

The American countryside originated and developed in a different way than the European one. The pre-war European rural sociology was influenced considerably by the American rural sociology, however, it issued from the national roots of the individual countries and was dedicated to the problems which were important for them, e.g. the influence of economic processes on rural life, indebtedness of the peasant enterprises, the monographic description of the economic and social institutions in the countryside etc.

In Czechoslovakia, it was not otherwise. In connection with the goals and tasks rural sociology set between the wars, there emerged regularly two aspects: the need for the truthfulness and exactness of the acquired empirical data and the transfer of the sociological learning into the practical decision making. Both aspects had their historical foundation. Learning of the state of the society emerged as an im-

portant prerequisite of the political decision-making and economic development.

The after-war rural sociology (after its renewal at the beginning of the 60s) has not deserted the practical aspects of research (Tauber 1969); it was subjected, however, to the utilitarian goals of the political representation. Methodological approaches issued solely from the quantitative approach. Czechoslovak rural sociology got into the international isolation and had no possibility to develop in a natural way. This regarded also the scientific communities in other socialist countries. The topical orientation of rural area sociological researches copied the ideological patterns of perceiving the society. To be possible at all, the prerequisite of the researches was accepting the large-scale socialist agriculture as the only possible model and the defence of its results. Nevertheless there existed, as in any system, possibilities of a wider scope of research of the rural reality which were represented namely by the orientation on the consequences of the industrialisation of agriculture and urbanisation of rural areas.

## THE OBJECT AND CONTENT OF THE RURAL AREAS EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Monographic researches of the period between the wars usually did not delimit countryside as a special field of research. This corresponded also to the scientific understanding of society of the period. Rural sociology was not perceived in Czechoslovakia as an independent applied discipline, but was regarded as a natural part of the general sociology. A research specialisation aimed exclusively at rural areas there did not exist. This approach was expressed also by commenting of the discussion going on in the U.S., which solved whether rural sociology should build its own theoretical background.<sup>2</sup> A wide research field of most sociologists was rather a rule than an exception and solving of the problems of rural areas belonged to the important tasks of the period.

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on the depleted soil. The same interest in production as well as distribution turbid an intensive interest on the market conditions since just there the contrast between the life conditions of the town and countryside was the most visible. But at the same time in become obvious, that the peasant is not characterised only by his earning function, but that it is a whole complex of social functions, as he is also the husband, father, neighbour, Republican etc., so that the main social problem of the countryside is not to make as much money as possible by the plant and animal production, but that it regards a number of other questions, which are equally important from the personal, national as well as human viewpoint .... So gradually there developed a whole complex of problems which created the basic core of rural sociology." (Gillette 1928: 7).

<sup>2</sup> There were confronted two attitudes – the first accentuated the trend to create a scientific theory of rural sociology based on the enormous quantity of the collected material, the other issued from the opinion of E. C. Hayes of the University of Illinois and was supported by many other sociologists – “sociology is sociology”, what I. A. Bláha interpreted as – “there is no rural sociology, there exists only sociology as such” (Gillette 1928: 10).

The after-war period, more precisely the period from the beginning of the 60s when Czechoslovak rural sociology established as a relatively independent scientific discipline, through the peripetries of the later normalisation period up to the 1989, the object and content of empirical research gradually changed and widened (Křenek 1969). Rural areas were defined by the size of communes up to 2000 inhabitants. There continued the discussion on the importance and influence of the scientific-technological revolution. Its goal should have been increase of productivity and decrease of the laboriousness, improvement of the cultural environment of work and the level of living in the rural areas as such. The economic and social progress was identified with the growth of production and the subsequent consumption; it was understood as the only possible way of satisfying needs.<sup>3</sup>

The research concentrated at two basic areas: the impacts of the industrialisation and urbanisation of rural areas, which were developed and repeated in many different modifications. Ideologically, they were understood as changes connected to the development of the socialist understanding of labour and the socialist way of life in the village. The areas of the industrialisation of agriculture included orientation at the research of working conditions in agriculture, the possibilities of their improvement, the research of the positive and negative impacts of technisation and technological development. The area of problems connected with urbanisation was aimed at the research of the rural population stabilisation, the directions of the migration processes, changes of the life style and value orientation in rural areas, the influence of the urban patterns and the like.<sup>4</sup>

The methodology had little opportunities to develop. It stagnated and issued for a long time only from the information resources of the second half of the 60s, when there existed possibilities of the international co-operation and the methodological literature from abroad was still accessible in the CR.

The period after 1989 shows all the characteristics issuing from the completely base changes in the political, economic and social life of the society. Thematically, rural sociology research was fragmented since there only started the forming and gradual stabilisation of new working groups, each of which was financed from other grant resources, co-operated with different partners and had different publishing opportunities. Only gradually the working teams stabilised and formed

long-term concepts. That is, however, depending on the possibilities of getting grant supports, which are mainly topical and thus are forming the object of research by their aims and rules.

However, the methodology of sociological research undergoes an unprecedented development. After a long time, Czech sociology becomes a part of the European and world empirical research, gets acquainted with other methodological approaches and methods, namely the qualitative ones which were not much known here before 1989 and were practically not used at all.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH OF THE PRESENT COUNTRYSIDE**

The claims put on the methodology of empirical research express the need to cover the most important trends of the present very diversified and multilevel Czech and European countryside which developed in different historical conditions. It is obvious that it cannot be squeezed into the identical conceptual frame, what would not be useful, either. More important is that Czech rural sociology is at present already incorporated in the international research structures and works with the methodological approaches, which are common in the present empirical sociology (Ploeg 2000).

It continues in developing of the quantitative approach to the research of rural areas and gradually levels the handicap caused by the absence of the experiences as well as of the methodological literature of the qualitative approach. However, its difficultness causes that it is still utilised only minimally.

Where do lay the positives and negatives of both approaches? Neither of the two can be omitted in the empirical research of rural areas and agriculture. Present rural sociology is, as well as it were in its beginnings, an applied discipline the aim of which is to bring relevant information useful for the decision-making. We can easily be reconciled to the fact that it will still be rather fragmented in future, since at present the research is financed almost solely from the grant supports proclaimed for the given tasks and aims. Accommodation to this demand increases the chances of the scientist to get the support and at the same time orients him/her to the socially important topics of each period. The choice of methodological

<sup>3</sup> Research of agricultural enterprise and its social system as one of the main conditions of functioning of agriculture can be found in the works of E. Horáková, H. Schimmerling, J. Vavřík, P. Kohn, F. Křenek, E. Němcová and others.

<sup>4</sup> Detailed information on the empirical researches results can be found in the individual issues of the journal *Sociologie venkova a zemědělství*.

tools is, on the contrary, in the hands of the researchers and it is up to them which of the tools they know are able to use and to bring by them the adequate scientific results.

Quantitative research based on the a priori knowledge of the searched environment, the beforehand prepared tools, one-time collecting of data and their mathematical procession, analysis and interpretation will without doubt remain the basic methodological approach also in future. It is supported by the long-term experience, the necessity of quantitative data, the possibility of a wide and relatively cheap utilisation of tools, the way of analysis and data interpretation suitable for the further synthetic processing and use for decision-making. It cannot, however, cover the unknown, unclear or with difficulty identified phenomena in the beginning stages of their manifestation. The necessity of the a priori hypotheses and the binding procedure of their certification exclude the return to certain elements of the environment, their deeper analysis, thinking of the possible interpretations, leaving of one and looking for another pattern for explaining and understanding of the phenomena. The weak point of the quantitative approach is the demand to its unanimity and solid form. It can, in some cases slide into a routine approach to the researched reality and omitting the signals of the changing situation.

Qualitative research can well supplement the quantitative approach. Its (relative) formal freedom allows looking deep into the searched environment, to concentrate on its most important features of phenomena, to return back to them repeatedly and to verify thus the correctness of the explanations and conclusions. However, it depends more on the expert prerequisites and abilities of the researcher to enter more deeply the searched environment and to understand it. The tempting possibility to bring ones own interpretation of the phenomena into the research might present also a serious weak point. To sustain the relevant harmony between the deep subjective interest and the demand of the objective evaluation of the findings is extremely difficult. The qualitative methodology offers, as a means and the way of correcting the subjective inclusion, the repeated presenting of the partial results both to the searched population and the expert public. Both are theoretically possible, but practically very difficult to manage. The researched population can, for many subjective reasons, to distort subsequently (at the evaluation of the research results) the findings, so that they result as a more positive for it or more common. The more original the thinking of the research worker, the bigger non-understanding it can evoke by its conclusions. Evaluation by the expert

public should theoretically avoid the mentioned weak points. The problems might issue, however, from the low number of the evaluation experts, their different (subjective) approach to the searched problematic, the mutual rivalry, lack of time and the willingness to undergo such a tiring task.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the hitherto experiences with qualitative approach in Czech sociology, it follows that on one side is extended considerably the research possibilities, evoked hopes, but also brought about disappointments. In no case it regards a simple and cheap methodological approach. Its attractiveness lays in the great possibilities of the utilisation of own imagination, what is at the same time one of its weak points. A disproportionate concentration on ones own understanding of the searched problem might lead to the concentration on oneself and not on the facts.

However, qualitative approach has become and obviously will be also in future a part of the present rural areas empirical research. Besides West Europe and the Overseas, where it is already known and utilised for decades, it gains a great favour also in the former socialist countries, which lived in scientific isolation until late.

In general, it can be said that rural sociology orients at the identical topics in the Europe as well as in the world – the “local rural development” and the “sustainable development of rural regions”. Methodological tools are elaborated and international co-operation supplies enough space for the mutual exchange of experiences and information. The research result issue, however, from the invention and abilities of the individual research workers and teams.

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