

ISA Regional Conferences

The author of this brief information had towards the end of 1996 the opportunity to take part in two of a whole series of regional conferences organised by the International Sociological Association in co-operation with some national sociological associations as a part of the preparative work for the World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, 1998. The main purpose of these meetings is to stimulate the initiative of the member associations and of the individual sociologists in developing empirical and theoretical sociology on a level corresponding to the significant historical changes in both world society and the regions of which it consists. It is hoped that these activities will assist in limiting certain stereotypes in sociological research, partly caused by the quantitative prevalence and great theoretical and methodological influence of North American sociology.

One of these was the regional colloquium *The Future of Sociology in Eastern Asia* (Seoul, November 1996) the character of which distinctly corresponded to this intention.

The conference was attended by many sociologists from many countries of the region. The papers encompassed contributions of authors coming from the Korean Republic, Japan, continental China, Taiwan, Hong-Kong and the USA. The guests from the USA, Singapore, India and Czech Republic contributed to the discussion. It is obvious from the list of countries that the representatives of the 'Asian Tigers,' i.e. societies undergoing rapid modernisation accompanied by extraordinary economic successes, dominated at the colloquium. The search for effective ways to help the rapidly developing East Asian sociology (including sociology in continental China, represented by the contributions of Ma Rong and Huang Pin and, of course, the traditionally advanced Japanese sociology, represented by the presentations of Kokichi Shoji, Hashizume Daizabura and Shurijo Yazawa) face this sudden shift in the historical developments of social reality was significant for the course of the conference discussions.

The introductory speech of Prof. I. Wallerstein, the President of the ISA, opened

the crucial discourse by a critical analysis of 'Eurocentrism' (the dominant North American influence inclusive) in sociology. Wallerstein, on the one hand, defended certain universal contributions of 'European' sociological thought, and on the other hand, stated his hitherto prevailing inability to prevent the separation of social science from philosophy and the humanities – i.e. the search for truth from the search for good and beauty, of scientific knowledge from social and political action, and consequently, the insufficient critical approach to the dominating capitalist social and economic system. A series of contributions devoted to the issue of the necessity and forms of the indigenisation of sociology (Kyong-Dong Kim – Korea, Alatas – Singapore, and many others). In most of them, the starting point was the collapse of Marxism, in which some sociologists had seen certain support in the identification of the problems of national liberation and the endeavour of facing backwardness and poverty. Most delegates spoke somewhat sceptically about the role of the European sociological tradition and also the role of the extraordinarily strong influence of American sociology, in which they do not find sufficient inspiration for the solution of their countries' problems. In several contributions the ideas formulated by contemporary European post-modern, or, at least, non-traditional sociology were mentioned with some optimism, mainly in the framework of the theory of 'risk society' and 'reflexive modernisation'. The most elaborated approach to this topic was demonstrated by the Korean sociologist Han in his paper analysing the process of modernisation and the emergence of civic society in his country. His contribution was inspiring for research into similar issues in Europe.

In several papers one had to notice the explicit criticism of excessive universalism, including the tendency to construct general models of the transformations taking place in various East Asian countries (e.g. in the contribution of Lui from Hong-Kong).

Most of the participants in the discussion considered the oriental schools of philosophical and sociological thought, above all Confucianism with its concept of civic society, to be the most hopeful sources of inspiration (Kyong-

Dong Kim, Sug-Man Choe and Hein-Cho from Korea). Much stress was laid on the respect for traditions, experience, and social psychology of the domestic population. The Korean sociologist Lee best summarised the essence of the discussion concerning these issues by his demand that sociology prove its relevance to history, social reality, and concurrently, the inclusion of the region into the global world system.

An analogous regional conference *The Building of an Open Society and the Prospects of Sociology in Eastern and Central Europe* organised in September 1996 in Kraków in Poland, somewhat differed from the model presupposed by the leadership of the ISA. It firstly paid less attention to the issue of the institutionalisation and self-awareness of sociology and, secondly, focusing on the objective processes taking place in the region, used, to a large extent, the external assistance of several Western scholars, and also in the presentations of the regional sociologists quite naturally respected the European context. This fact symbolised the favourable circumstance that the European post-communist transformation has been for several years a subject of interest for a broad circle of social scientists from Western Europe and, of course, from the USA as well – the latter being represented in Kraków by Prof. I. Wallerstein. This scholar, in his historical and geopolitical analysis of the epoch 1917–1991, beginning with the Russian revolution and ending with the collapse of the Russian empire, posed the question of the historical meaning of the subsequent period of democracy, which will be loaded with many new societal problems and inevitable disputes as to their resolution.

It was the crucial, though not explicitly formulated question of the concept of the post-communist evolution in Europe as ‘transition’ or ‘transformation,’ which corresponded to the ‘all-European’ character of the conference. Coenen-Hunter (Switzerland), being fully aware of certain weak points of the ‘transition approach’ continued in developing it by a sophisticated analysis, applying the concepts of status incongruity, relative deprivation, circulation of élites, and so on. B. Grancelli equally applied to the same process Coleman’s theory

of ‘rational choice’. A clear example of the use of an ‘a priori’ scenario of the transition according to Brzezinski for the analysis of social changes in Estonia was the paper on the mass-media role prepared by M. Lauristin. In accordance with his former publication, the organiser of the conference, Prof. P. Sztompka from the Jagellonian University in Kraków also supported in his concluding speech the ‘transition approach’.

Those who were dealing with the analysis of the real historical processes of the post-communist ‘transformations’ did so mostly in the framework of the ‘modernisation theory’. The well-informed contribution of G. Therborn from Sweden belonged to this type of analysis. He conceived modernisation as an innovative process and laid much stress on the social problems evoked by the contemporary transformations. The Czech case was analysed from the angle of a broadly conceived cultural modernisation by P. Machonin whose abbreviated contribution was published in the last issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* No 2, 1996. The process of modernisation of Slovenian society from the point of view of the role of internal and external factors was the subject of the presentation by M. Novák.

Other contributions to the post-communist transformation stressed, as a rule, partly important aspects of this societal change. M. Marody from Poland in her considerations concerning society after the institutional and political transition focused on the application of the sociological and socio-psychological concept of ‘habitus’. Though she herself polemised with the interesting contribution of V. Yadov devoted to the cultural and psychological analysis of the Russian national character, objectively their approaches rather complemented one another.

G. Skapska from Kraków very openly and critically discussed the hitherto insufficiently developed processes of the emergence of civic society. An accomplishment of this stream of thought was a feminist – in the best sense of the word – presentation from M. Jogan from Ljubljana. A. Sulek from Warsaw analysed the role of public opinion surveys in the transformation process. E. Zdravomyslova presented an extensive study on the developments of politi-

cal sociology during the Russian transformation.

Two studies acquired a significant position at the conference, both also dealing with a certain aspect of civic society, namely with the regional or local level of social organisation. M. Illner from Prague contributed an original general analysis of the contradictory process of decentralisation in the post-communist European countries. H. Kubiak, one of the hosts, presented a voluminous, culturally and historically well-founded study – not by chance created in Kraków – about the role and metamorphoses of the interrelations of national

states and regions in the process of European integration.

Although these two of the first wave of regional ISA conferences differed in some aspects, they both by their contributions proved the justifiability of the idea of an intentional activation of regional and national sociologies as an important condition for further progress in world sociology. The common feature of both was the stress laid on the close connection of sociology with the analyses and generalisations of the ongoing processes of societal transformation and modernisation.

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REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The Social Costs of Economic Transformation in Central Europe

The Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) is calling for proposals for *research projects* that analyze the social impact of the political and economic transition in East-Central Europe and investigate the effectiveness of the social policies proposed since 1989. IWM is also seeking proposals for *activities* that disseminate in the public domain the findings of scientific analysis of social issues and policies and that target ideas for reforms at decision makers. Desired activities include the publication of research findings in a format accessible to non-scientific audiences, the writing and publication of summary reports with concrete recommendations for policy-makers, public hearings, instructional workshops and practical seminars for professionals to discuss policy alternatives.

The RFP describing the competition and the application procedure is available by calling or writing Helen J. Addison at:

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Or by viewing IWM's WorldWideWeb home page:
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The deadline for submissions is *July 1, 1997*.