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In search of inspiration: Pioneers and promoters of rural sociology

Abstract

This article refers to Gerd Vonderach's publications showing the relevance of discovering and (re)using the existing output of the social sciences. With reference to the terms *Pioniere* and *Ideengeber*, this paper introduces selected classic figures of the social sciences in German-speaking countries and the discussions and controversies that have arisen in the course of analysing their work.

Keywords: rural sociology, classics of rural sociology in German-speaking countries, institutionalisation of rural sociology and agriculture, rural social research

Gerd Vonderach's publication *Pioniere und Ideengeber sozialwissenschaftlicher Erkenntnisse* is a contribution to this discussion. Once again, the author has taken on the task of introducing readers to figures whose contribution to the development of science he considers of value. He explains in the introduction that their selection is not accidental, rather, it is a tribute to the often forgotten

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or simply underestimated contemporary output of these researchers, which has been an inspiration for him personally (in his previous scientific work). It should be mentioned that this study is not extensive and the reader expecting a comprehensive discussion of the achievements of the cited figures will not find it in Vonderach's publication. Such, however, was the intention of the author, who—it should be stressed again—by recalling selected scientists, highlighting their biographies and discussing the most important issues they dealt with, wants to draw our attention to the pioneers of the social sciences, thus encouraging us to learn more about their ideas and works.

Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890) is the first figure discussed. His difficult childhood, described by the author as *being on the edge of normality* (Vonderach 2021: 11), did not prevent him from receiving a thorough education, including a scholarship to study in Berlin and Paris. There, he became fascinated by the (revolutionary) social movements of the time, and he undertook an analysis of these movements. He included his reflections in *Geschichte der sozialen Bewegung in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage*, considered *one of the most important interpretations of the nineteenth-century revolution, a classic of the social science literature* (Vonderach 2021: 12). His outlook was innovative for the time, for he was not interested in the particular heroes of the revolution, but in the actors; he wanted to *recognise the laws 'that govern the movements of political and social life'* (Stein 1972, cited in Vonderach 2021: 13). He was looking for the causes of the revolution, which he saw in social inequalities, tensions arising between privileged estates (referring to France: the clergy—first estate, nobility—second estate) and the unprivileged, i.e. the so-called *tiers-état* (third estate), which included free peasants and bourgeoisie. He also drew attention to the condition of the state itself, namely the poor financial situation and the lack of necessary reforms. It is the relationship between state and society that is Stein's further contribution to sociology. He provided an extensive discussion of the relationship in his work *System der Staatswissenschaften* (1856), where—in contrast to the German political science of the time—he considered society in isolation from the state, as an independent category. Stein noted that the life of human communities *is shaped by the constant clash of society and state*, and this creates the *true history of nations* (Stein 1972a, cited in Vonderach 2021: 16). When discussing Stein's work, his concept of the welfare state is also worth noting. As Vonderach notes, *Stein's concept influenced Bismarck's social insurance legislation and established the specifically German idea of the*

welfare state, moreover, Stein's formulation of the task of state social policy to enable citizens to participate in political and cultural life, in addition to social security in emergencies, remains relevant today (Vonderach 2021:17).

The second figure discussed is Georg Friedrich Knapp (1842–1926), who, in connection with his most popular book *Staatliche Theorie des Geldes* (Knapp 1905), is usually associated with economic science. An English-language version of this work was published in 1924 under the title *The State Theory of Money*. As Vonderach rightly notes, the publication attracted world attention and became a fundamental work of economics (Vonderach 2021: 21). Knapp proposed a nominalist theory of money (the chartalist school of monetary theory). In summary, in the view of the theory, money is just a name for an abstract unit of account, given by an act of state. It is worth adding that the idea of *chartalism* presented in this book not only was but still is, one of the most inspiring in economics. Just take a look at recent publications and discussions that relate directly to Knapp's analysis.¹

No less important a publication by Knapp—and particularly relevant for those interested in rural and agricultural sociology—is the paper titled *Die Bauernbefreiung und der Ursprung der Landarbeiter in den älteren Teilen Preußens* (Knapp 1887). As Vonderach notes, Knapp was the first to examine the liberal reforms and their effects in the eastern parts of Prussia in a comprehensive and original way (Vonderach 2021: 22). For his analysis, he employed the term *peasant liberation* (*Bauernbefreiung*), understood as the state restructuring of the rural labour regime. Using existing data (the Prussian archives), Knapp analyses the reforms in the countryside through the prism of various communities, including peasants, blue-collar workers, agricultural and day labourers, looking in particular at the tensions arising between the “court” defending its interests, the ministers responsible for the changes (not necessarily independent of the “court”) and the peasants and workers. The effects of the reforms are assessed by Knapp in a very vivid way, with a particularly colourful description of the so-called Insten²: *resignation*,

¹ Contemporary studies include: Dirk H. Ehnts, *Knapp's 'State Theory of Money' and its reception in German academic discourse*, Working Paper, Institute for International Political Economy Berlin, No. 115/2019, Berlin School of Economics and Law, Institute for International Political Economy, Berlin, or Juan Ramón Rallo, *Georg Friedrich Knapp Was Not a „Chartalist”*, *History of Political Economy* 2020, 52(4):773–793

² Namely, day labourers in agriculture. They usually received housing and cow fodder from their feudal landlord for their work.

physical neglect, apathetic look, harsh facial expression can only be overlooked by those who are not used to anything else (...) those who (also, EP) give the impression of slavery in every respect: poorest lumberjack in the Black Forest, the last wild haymaker in the canton of Uri, belong to a higher level than our inhabitants in the vast provinces of the east (Knapp 1927, cited in Vonderach 2021: 27). Peasant liberation generally led to the creation of two classes, the liberated peasants and the agricultural workers, the latter of whom remained – to use a word usually reserved precisely for peasants here – a troublesome class. It was a community whose living conditions left much to be desired. Their migration from the countryside contributing to the lack of labour in agriculture (the so-called *Landflucht*) also proved to be an issue. It is also worth mentioning that this is the period of the first village survey conducted in 1848 by the Prussian Königlich-Landes-Oekonomie-Collegium. A little later, in 1873, a survey was carried out by the *Congresses Deutscher Landwirte*, and in 1891/92 the Verein für Socialpolitik carried out an extensive survey, the results of which were compiled and used by, among others, Max Weber in his well-known work on the conditions of agricultural workers in East Germany by the Elbe River.

Ignaz Jastrow (1856–1937) and Marie Jahoda (1907–2001) – pioneers of labour market research – are consecutive researchers cited in Vonderach's publication.³ With the progressive industrialisation of Germany in the nineteenth century, self-employment was increasingly replaced by remunerated work, *The expropriated, socially insecure remunerated worker, whose work was repeatedly interrupted, was in a situation of unemployment dependent on help for the poor or occasional communal intervention work (..) In the late 19th century, when most workers lost their jobs, they had to go and ask for work from one company to another, often as itinerant poor people; this was called "looking around"* (Vonderach 2021: 32). This looking around (*Umschau*) and asking around for work would certainly be difficult to quantify and report on, but the increasingly professionalised employment industry (both communal and private), the emergence of employment registration offices (one of the first being the Employment Registration Office in Stuttgart, established in

³ The figures of Ignaz Jastrow and Marie Jahoda are also introduced to readers in another (earlier) publication by Gerd Vonderach 2012, *Arbeitsmarkt-Akteure im historischen Wandel. Beiträge zur Entwicklung der Arbeitsmarktforschung*, Aachen 2012, Shaker Verlag, a discussion of which can be found in Eastern European Countryside 19/2013.

1865) and subsequent regulations such as social security, meant that official statistics could be collected. However, basic standardised criteria (methods) as well as vocabulary were lacking. We owe such obvious concepts as the labour market (in its modern sense) to Jastrow, who introduced the term in 1897. According to Jastrow, the concept itself was present in the language, but in principle it was understood most often as newspaper job advertisements, and since *For the further development of reporting, in the interest of the larger groups whose participation was indispensable, it was necessary to develop and disseminate a keyword defining the subject that expressed an analogy with the market for goods and securities in a concise and clear way* (Jastrow 1902, cited in Vonderach 2021: 45), it is the formulation of the labour market that he has adopted for his reporting. Jastrow was the first to systematically collect and analyse labour market data (from local employment records), which he reported initially in the *Soziale Praxis* journal, followed by *Der Arbeitsmarkt* (the establishment of this new journal proved necessary as the volume of data was growing and the old formula of reporting in *Soziale Praxis* was not possible). It is hard to argue that Vonderach's observation that Jastrow's analyses are so professional that it would actually be difficult to distinguish them from contemporary compilations. As an example, the paper includes a table with employment statistics for September 1896 in 22 selected German cities on the number of jobs offered, jobs filled, jobseekers, number of jobseekers per 100 job offers (all broken down by gender).

Vonderach brings us closer to this often arduous and exhausting adventure of Jastrow's control—in terms of concepts, methods, standardisation—of the very dynamic reality of labour markets at the turn of the twentieth century, presenting successive detailed data/dates on newly established institutions and activities (offices, conferences/congresses, associations, periodicals etc.). He also introduces Jastrow as a man who, despite his great merits to science and society, remained somewhat on the periphery of both political and scientific life. His career was not supported by his Jewish background and political views that were away from “the mainstream” (a socially sensitive liberal).

Marie Jahoda's sociological study of unemployment, known as the Marienthal-Studie, was slightly different. In 1932, a group of researchers led by Paul Felix Lazarsfeld began to study the population of the village of Marienthal (Austria), most of which was affected by unemployment (as a result of the closure of a nearby textile factory). As many as 77% of

the families did not have a breadwinner. Initially, these families received financial support from the commune, but this was time-limited and ceased after a maximum of 52 weeks (this is how long temporary benefits could be received). The researchers were interested in the psychosocial consequences of being unemployed. The research did not begin with hypothesis development, conceptualisation and operationalisation of key issues for the researchers, but with a relatively short list of basic questions, e.g. what are the respondent's plans for the future? What was the first reaction to unemployment? The researchers also resorted to community animation through courses, training, etc. This *also provided the research group with inconspicuous insights into home conditions, as well as individual and family behaviour or experiences* (Vonderach 2021: 70). It should be noted that the researchers' aim was to confront the opposition of qualitative and quantitative research. According to Jahoda: *Our idea was to find procedures which would combine the use of numerical data with immersion (sich einleben) into the situation. To this end it was necessary to gain such close contact with the population of Marienthal that we could learn the smallest details of their daily life ... As this report proceeds, it will become clear how we have tried to build up a comprehensive picture of life in Marienthal, while at the same time accommodating complex psychological situations within an objective framework that is supported by relevant statistics...* (Jahoda et al. 2002).

In the final report,⁴ the researchers referred to the described community as the *Weary Community* (*die müde Gemeinschaft*), identifying four basic attitudes towards the unemployment situation, ranging from coping in (spite of) a difficult existence through to resigned and desperate. Very interesting findings concerned the perception of time, which flowed differently for women (heavily involved in household work) and men (whose main activity was "doing nothing"). As the researchers described it, having lost their jobs, time no longer matters as much as it used to, and the inhabitants of Marienthal, without taking up anything new, drift (in time) towards emptiness and disorder.

The Marienthal village study is a combination of a plurality of research methods (home visits, observations, interviews, meal registers, work cards,

⁴ Last English edition of 2002, *Marienthal: the sociography of an unemployed community* (London, Routledge).

etc.) and community engagement (courses, political meetings, etc.). This is – in modern terms – a study in action.

The qualitative way of exploring the world through story analysis, proposed by Schapp, resonates with the methods used by Jahoda and the team. Wilhelm Schapp (1884–1965) is another figure cited by Vonderach. A philosopher and lawyer, Husserl's doctoral student – Schapp was interested in the study of stories/tales about people and phenomena (unemployment for instance). He stressed that the interpenetration, the overlapping of stories, the contexts in which we are all entangled (both the teller of the story and the person who records and analyses it), make this method of the study extremely demanding. The interconnections, the interweaving of individual stories, create the content of the subsequent stories. It is, therefore, difficult to set its (stories/tales) “boundaries” because ... *stories can hardly be described as relatively independent individual biographies, as they are often closely intertwined. Sometimes they run parallel to each other, in which case they condition, promote or inhibit each other, e.g. family history and concurrent professional history* (Vonderach 2021: 63).

In the case of stories, a conversation (preferably an interview) is the appropriate method to find out about them, when necessary *focusing on the problem*. However, the “shortcomings” of such talk are also highlighted, *If I tell someone a story from the past, I do not recreate it in all its details as I used to, but reconstruct it in the context of a narrative that refers to it but is not identical with it* (Müller 1987, cited in Vonderach 2021: 58) To record such a story well, the listener should be involved. *In the listener the ground must be prepared. Must be open to stories. The stories must fit into the horizons that exist with the listener. If this is not the case, interest in history soon wanes* (Schapp 1976, cited in Vonderach 2021: 57). A separate issue considered is representativeness, the possibility of building generalisations based on usually a few or a dozen stories. It is considered from the perspective of not estimating the scale of certain phenomena but of understanding their mechanisms. Therefore, to study a given problem, a sufficient number of cases must be selected to be able to analyse this mechanism. Types or “*case series*” are, therefore, sought, and representativeness understood statistically is not the goal here.

In his publication, Gerd Vonderach mentions two more figures, more contemporary to us, who (like the aforementioned Marie Jahoda), were already working scientifically after the end of the Second World War. One of them is Herbert Herbert Kötter (1916–2003), a prominent rural and

agricultural sociologist. I shall mention here only a few of the most prominent issues from the point of view of rural sociology because Vonderach devoted a separate article published in *Eastern European Countryside*⁵ to a thorough discussion of these issues. Kötter was interested in social phenomena at the interface between the rural and urban worlds. At the beginning of his scientific career, he studied farmers who worked in a nearby town (Darmstadt). The research used a variety of methods, from questionnaires to expert discussions or case studies, and resulted in the doctoral thesis *Struktur und Funktion von Landgemeinden im Einflußbereich einer deutschen Mittelstadt* (Kötter 1952). As Kötter noted, under the influence of urban commuting, commuters' lifestyles were changing, and these differences, although leading to a certain disintegration of the rural community, should not be judged negatively. In later stages of his career, he also explored the problem of this type of circular migration (the so-called *Pendelwanderung*), devoting his postdoctoral thesis *Landbevölkerung im sozialen Wandel* (Kötter 1958), in which he analysed the blurring of previously clear boundaries (in the socio-cultural sense) between the urban and the rural world. Kötter was also interested in the impact of industrialisation on agriculture, to which we owe not only an increase in production but also, unfortunately, as he points out, unnecessary overproduction and environmental pollution. As he notes, what is privately rational leads to macroeconomic and social irrationality, hence, questions of ethics become increasingly important in agriculture (Kötter 1995, cited in Vonderach 2021: 83). Multifunctional, ecological agriculture, the emergence and development of "hobby" and care farms, environmentally friendly land management and the protection of cultural landscapes may become postulated solutions.

The last of the inspirational figures cited by Vonderach is Rolf Peter Sieferle (1949–2016). He is perhaps the most controversial figure of those discussed in Vonderach's publication, whose recent book on the issue of migration "Finis Germania"⁶ (the title plays on a phrase meaning "the end of Germany"), has aroused a great deal of emotion in the world (not just the scientific one). We should add that earlier works on the subject have not been left unheard, and Vonderach refers to these earlier studies. Considering

⁵ Gerd Vonderach, *Herbert Kötter—an outstanding German rural and agricultural sociologist*, *Eastern European Countryside*, 2010 No.16.

⁶ Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Finis Germania*, *Manuscriptum* 2019.

all these books, one can notice a clear scepticism, Sieferle's criticism of the problem of the influx of immigrants into Germany. In his opinion, both the scale and the dynamics of this process threaten the disintegration of nation-states (including Germany), which will not be painless. National cultural and social capital is therefore under threat. He criticises Germany's open, *adventurous, high-risk* migration policy (struggling with the spectre of its wartime past—an attempt to redeem its guilt), which he believes is ultimately destined to lead to *social catastrophe* (Sieferle 2017, cited in Vonderach 2021: 96–97). It takes a negative view of the popular narratives justifying it, refugee (doctrine of salvation), demographic (filling labour market gaps), innovation in the sense of innovation and diversity/adventure, so-called *multiculturalism*. However, he is under no illusions when writing about the likely, inevitable Islamisation and Africanisation of Europe. According to him: *European civilisation is currently in a process of self-destruction, which is mainly driven by coping with the pressure of immigration* (Sieferle 2017, cited in Vonderach 2021: 98). Sieferle's views on migration are described by some historians and politicians as right-wing extremism and "Finis Germania" has even been called *the first anti-semitic bestseller after 1945*⁷ (Platzdasch 2018). On the other hand, we have voices cooling down this discussion and presenting Sieferle's analyses in a broader historical perspective (as he did), and himself as neither Holocaust denier nor anti-Semite, but provoking a rethinking of the migration narrative. *Mr. Sieferle neither denies nor minimizes the Holocaust. He describes it as a "Verbrechen," or "crime." Nor does he traffic in any obvious kind of anti-Semitism. In a letter he wrote three weeks before his death to the blogger-novelist Michael Klonovsky, who is close to the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany party, he warned the party to keep its distance from the anti-Semites ("a delusional, irrational and ignorant ideology") who would inevitably gravitate to it. But Mr. Sieferle is critical of Germany's post-war culture of Holocaust memory, which he argues has taken on the traits of a religion. The country's sins are held to be unique and absolute, beyond either redemption or comparison* (Caldwell 2017).

Let not these controversial issues obscure our picture of Sieferle as an outstanding historian studying the relationship between man and nature,

⁷ Opinion delivered by historian, publicist Volker Weiß at the opening of the conference of the Center for Research on Anti-Semitism at the Technical University of Berlin.

whom Vonderach describes as a *pioneer of environmental history, analyses the changes in the relationship between human communities and their natural environment over the millennia* (Vonderach 2021: 88). From the point of view of a rural sociologist, this strand of his scientific activity is certainly the most interesting. In one of the most popular publications *Rückblick auf die Natur. Eine Geschichte des Menschen und seiner Umwelt* (Sieferle 1997), he presents the relationship between man and the environment from the Palaeolithic to the Anthropocene, the transformation of the energy system and the still unfinished industrial revolution with its social, cultural and landscape effects are discussed. The landscape as Sieferle understands it evolved from the natural (hunter-gatherer times) through the agricultural and cultural, transformed in turn by the process of industrialisation into the so-called *totalen Landschaft* (total landscape), whose physiognomy Sieferle describes as completely unplanned, as the product of many unconnected undertakings. Incidentally, I would like to mention here another brilliant German explorer of nature, whose works have inspired and continue to inspire scientists, ecologists, politicians, etc. to this day, namely Alexander von Humboldt. Wandering through South America in 1800 and 1801, he created and developed a theory of human influence on climate change. For example, he wrote that the destruction (tree felling) of forests by planters in America, which he observed, was leading to the devastation of the environment (the drying up of springs, the barrenness of mountain slopes, on which water after heavy rains floats unhindered and – instead of gradually seeping in and slowly recharging rivers – causes floods that devastate the country). He noted critically that these were short-sighted and foolish solutions (Wulf 2017: 87, 141). His innovative vision of nature, so beautifully (literally) painted on the famous *Naturgemälde*, captures the interconnectedness of nature, i.e. nature as a global whole, a *complex web of life in which man also functioned* (Wulf 2017: 141). How relevant these words are nowadays.

The last figure I would like to mention is Gerd Vonderach, author of the publication to which this study directly refers. I propose to treat him too as the eponymous inspirer. In many of his works dealing primarily with *labour* (including but not limited to: labour markets, unemployment, transitions/evolution of occupations/professions) and *rural areas* (including but not limited to: rural traditions/museums, lifestyles and farming, rural tourism, local leaders, regionalisms), he offered original research perspectives using primarily *Verstehen* sociology to analyse the material collected. He inspired

the development of rural sociology in Europe, including Poland, both as a mentor of Polish scholars visiting Germany, co-author of the first textbooks on European rural sociology and as a supporter of the Eastern European Countryside journal affiliated to the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (since 2004 in an institutionalised form as a member of the Advisory Council). The reader will find detailed information both on this topic and on Gerd Vonderach's biography and scientific achievements in a jubilee book published in 2021 and dedicated to this scientist (Bohler and Sterbling 2021).

Summarising the achievements of all these figures, it is worth asking ourselves whether they have anything in common. I do believe so. Above all, I would draw attention to the pluralism of research methods, not closing oneself off (either in terms of research methods or theoretical background) within the "borders" of one's own scientific disciplines. Another issue is social activity, which they combined with academic work. Creating policies, preparing reforms, expertise, holding important offices, editing magazines are all roles that they did not reject. Let us mention just some of them here: Knapp as the founder of the Verein für Social-politik, Jastrow as an unpaid city councillor of Charlottenburg (on behalf of the Liberals) and, as such, acting as head of the Employment Certificate Department, Jahoda as a politician, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Austria, Kötter as head of the Human Resources, Institutions and Agrarian Reform Department of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and finally, Sieferle as an advisor to Angela Merkel's government on climate change.

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