

ON VALUE AND CRITERIA:  
MIHAIL M. CERNEA, A SOCIOLOGIST WITH UNIVERSAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

The recent election of members to our national academy, the Romanian Academy, is a good opportunity for our broader scientific community, as well as for the public at large, to get to know more about scholars whom they perhaps know too little, although these scholars occupy an important position in the science both in our country and in the world.

This brief essay is about one prominent scholar elected now as full member of our Academy, the sociologist Mihail Cernea. But even more, through this essay's "case in point" I want to address a key broader topic that concerns me, and is now discussed frequently.

**Keywords:** election of new full members in the Romanian Academy, scientific community, scientific value, impact, criteria.

ON VALUE AND CRITERIA OF SCIENCE IMPACT

The base thesis of my argument is that the metrics for assessing scientific value should be the actual impact of a scholar's products and contributions. Professor Mihail Cernea's scholarly contributions – materialized in theoretical concepts, methodology, social policies that he articulated and have been embraced and applied by international development organizations and by a number of national governments, research models etc. have acquired a world-class influence and impact in his domain, development sociology, both at the academic level and at the ultimate level in the case of sociology, the level of actual social practice. Thus, his contribution and the public response to them offer a compelling example for my general argument about the relevance of *measuring actual impact when we need to evaluate academic value*.

In most cases, we make clear distinctions between different notions, such as: an individual and his activities; teaching and research; national and international;

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theory and practice; social practice at the micro-levels and social practice at macro-levels; normal and pathological social situations; education and instruction; academic/university activity, on the one hand, and hands-on applied work, such as for instance involvement in government work or in action-oriented international organizations, on the other hand.

Mihail M. Cernea is a challenge to these dichotomies as he accomplishes the unusual, impressive, apparently impossible feat to be excellent in both components of all these polarities. Cernea's life story and academic career defy stereotypes. His impact is high and has been proven present at many levels: the academic level, the level of development organizations, the essential level of social practice and the life of large human collectivities, from micro to macro, on the normal and on the pathological, and at the level of many institutions.

When we talk about value in research, about *what it means* to have scientific impact, we need to rely on facts, criteria and practicable measures of intellectual influence in order to assess value and genuine scientific impact. For this goal, the citations of one's work in the writings of other scholars is a relevant measure of validation and allocation of intellectual credit by the most competent community: one's professional peers. By this measure, Professor Cernea's impact and intellectual influence in the social and human sciences about development to which he belongs, ranks very high, as I will show below. But first, how did I come to know about his work?

#### A DISCOVERY ON "GOOGLE ADVANCED SCHOLAR"

Decades ago, when Cernea worked in the 1960s–early 1970s as a researcher in our Academy's Institute of Philosophy, I did not know him. Only occasionally would I hear from one of my friends in that Institute about the name of one Mihail Cernea. However, only a few years ago, while indulging in my habit of navigating through the internet the domains of different sciences, I came across Mihail Cernea's name and research. That was some three decades after Cernea reestablished himself in 1974 in the United States. As mathematician, I pay constant attention to numbers, and the Hirsh Index value attached by Google Scholar to Cernea's name was amazingly high. I decided that I must find out more.

The data provided by Google Advanced Scholar inform the reader that Cernea has over 30 works cited, individually, more than 30 times, so his Hirsch index is over 30. Recall that this index is defined as the largest integer  $n$  with the property that the author has  $n$  publications, each of them with at least  $n$  citations. This is an exceptional value of this parameter on the Hirsch Index, beyond levels normally reached in research institutes. In general, values above 20 are considered exceptional. The attention of scientists to Hirsch is explained by the fact that it

shows the extent to which an author has managed to attract the interest of others by many publications.

However, the roots of his today's Hirsch index germinated earlier, in Romanian soil. Cernea began his career as sociologist in Romania, as researcher at the Romanian Academy's Institute of Philosophy, and in his youth he read and was inspired by works of the "sociological school" created by Dimitrie Gusti, Henri Stahl, and Anton Golopentia before WW II, and by its goal of "social reform". But postwar circumstances in the "socialist" Romania of the 1960s were different, and Cernea grew to develop his own theoretical framework reading Gourvitch and French sociologists, Merton and American sociologists when he got their books, and of course Marx, trying to absorb also modern sociology. In early '60s, with his teammates at his research institute, he took a courageous leap engaging in field based empirical social research.

To begin with, it is worth recalling that even from his start, in mid-1960s and the '70s, Cernea made his early mark on the evolution at that time of Romanian Sociology. Despite that period's lack of freedom, Cernea achieved two things that today only few know about: he was a leader in reintroducing empirical sociological research in Romania after almost two decades of its prohibition; and he reconnected Romania's rural sociology to the universal agenda of rural sociology, affirming our sociology within high academic and development institutions of the western world.

#### STEPPING ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Cernea's sociological research in Romania attracted the interest of American sociologists who visited his research group, and he was invited for one full year at the Californian social science center in Stanford, Palo-Alto. Later, he succeeded to meet the quality standards of an institution such as the World Bank, which in 1974 invited him to join its experimental division testing a new approach to reducing rural poverty. Over time, however, Cernea turned the tables: he begun to propose new standards for that world-level financial institution itself, and namely – higher *social* standards. He militated for such new standards by initiating and writing for the World Bank what it did not have at that time: *a set of innovative social policies and social methodologies to guide its development programs*. Among these, the policy on population resettlement, together with what is widely known in the international literature (and on Google) as the "*Cernea model of Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction*" in resettlement, are credited to have helped protect and improve the livelihood of uncounted numbers of people affected by forced displacement around the world. Cernea waged both intellectual and bureaucratic battles within that big institution, won many if not all, and got the World Bank to officially adopt new policies that he crafted and advocated. Due to these policies,

the World Bank changed its practices in some essential respects, and further “telescoped” the new social policies and norms to other international and national development institutions.

Cernea immersed himself into the sociology of development at a time when it was at its beginnings, and when it had only few theoretical concepts and even fewer methodological tools. Anthropologists had approached the economic problems of development long after the economists did, having focused more on traditional cultures, not primarily economics. But Cernea managed to transform this disadvantage into an opportunity, treating the gap as an open space to fill with what sociology could produce in terms of both theory and tools. One of his landmark successes along this line was to convince the World Bank that the tools of *social* analysis must be instated with full status in designing development projects, in tandem with economic analysis. As a result, in 1984 the World Bank formally adopted “sociological appraisal as part of the methodology required for approving all its projects, as is economic analysis.

Throughout his work in Washington, Cernea recruited, built, and intellectually led what would likely be called a school in an academic surrounding, but what the World Bank labeled in its formal organizational terminology “Social Units” or a “Network”: in plain language, that was an internal sub-community that grew to some 150 sociologists and anthropologists, employed full time. That had an impact on these professions at large, as the “official” demand for these skills increased. The effects reverberated also within many developing countries receiving World Bank programs, as in turn these countries needed to employ over the years domestic sociologists for working on these programs.

Among the some 30 books and monographs authored and edited by Mihail Cernea, *Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Development* became the one with the highest intellectual and real action impact. In it, he innovatively argued for re-orientating the World Bank’s development paradigm and projects towards their “social actors” in virtually „every case”, and putting “People First”. The work had a profound international echo and was translated/published into several languages (Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese, Bahasa), bringing Cernea wide recognition in both the social sciences and in international development communities.

This is when, once again, objective and quantified measurements of value as provided by Google Scholar help us confirm. In referring to the impact of a scholar, we have to distinguish between the immediate impact and the long term impact. Obviously, the latter is more significant than the former. It is more significant to learn that the influence of one’s work is active several decades after its publication than its visible impact in the two or three years after its publication. As a matter of fact, his most citations are of the second type. But how long is the

interval of time where a work, an idea, a result, a theory is powerful enough to endure and survive, to remain in the attention of the scientific research community?

Cernea's book-manifest *Putting People First* had received more than one thousand citations and is still under the attention lens of social scientists. We read Google Scholar twice, once in January 2012 and then in November 2012, while writing the present essay. Google Advanced Scholar recorded in January 944 citations; now, on November 9, 2012, it has 1 002 citations. His first ten works (in decreasing order of their citations' frequency) had in January 2012 a total of 2 673 citations; by November, they rose to 3 293 citations, although many of them were published a long time ago. We realize that Cernea proved to be not an author of a lucky but passing fashion, but the trigger of a strong and enduring movement of ideas. Note that citations considered by Google Advanced Scholar are for the most part of authors who publish in journals and publishers with highly selective peer review criteria.

Recognizing the importance and significance of these quantitative parameters, it is necessary to emphasize the ideas that they convey. Cernea received the two most prestigious scientific awards for development social anthropology in the USA, with impressive dedications: the Solon T. Kimball Prize (1988) "... to honor your outstanding contributions to applied anthropology and public policy and for expanding the influence of development anthropology as a science" and the Malinowski Award (1995), granted him "... in recognition of your career dedicated to social sciences and their application to the needs of people around the world". In turn, the *Romanian Sociological Society* honored him with its *Omnia Opera Award*, for his lifetime contributions to Romanian Sociology and to making it known in the world (in 2012, just 4 months before his election as full member of our Academy). Much is to be said on Cernea's excellent example of how one can serve a country, while being geographically far away from it.

My last word about criteria of true scientific solidity, enduring value and impact accomplishments in a social science like sociology is that the ultimate test and measure is the criterion of *praxis*. That is, whether a sociologist's writings and work influence and change for the better social reality, the texture of human communities' everyday lives, even in only some relevant aspects. By this metric, as the above evidence shows, some of the world's major development institutions and some of the world's highly respected professional societies of scholars, have spoken conclusively, independently, and on record.

Professor Mihail Cernea honors sociology and social sciences in Romania and universally, and Romania can be proud of having this sociologist with universal impact as one of its most representative scholars.

