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Herbert Kötter – an outstanding German rural and agricultural sociologist

Herbert Kötter (1916–2003) was the best known and most significant German representative of rural and agricultural sociology after the Second World War. He was born on 6 December 1916 as the son of a peasant. After the end of the war – which he took part in as an officer and then prisoner of war in the USA – he studied agriculture at the Justus-Liebig College (later University) in Giessen. His cooperation with the Darmstadt Middletown Survey not only drew him towards rural and agricultural sociology but also gave him the opportunity to prepare his doctoral dissertation on rural districts which were subjected to urban influence, as a result of which he became a recognized young academic. In 1954 he became an associate and later director of the Bonn Forschungsgesellschaft für Agrarpolitik und Agrarsoziologie. The postdoctoral thesis he wrote at the time “Landbevölkerung im sozialen Wandel” (The rural population and social change) is until this day considered one of the most important achievements in German rural and agricultural sociology. In 1964 Herbert Kötter was appointed professor of rural and agricultural sociology at Giessen University where he was Rector in 1968/69. In 1969 he became professor at the department of Sociology of Economics and Agriculture at Bonn University.

He had a wide circle of international contacts. In 1958 Herbert Kötter participated in the founding meeting of the European Society of Rural Sociology and in 1978 became a committee member of the World Society of Rural Sociology. The core of his interests – alongside his didactic work as a university lecturer – shifted towards consultancy and development policy. Between 1960 and 1980 he went on many academic trips and missions, representing West Germany at numerous international organisations, holding the post of head of the Commission of Human Resources, Institutions and

Agrarian Reform at FAO in Rome. He was also a valued consultant in various government circles – the Ministry of Agriculture (1964–1982) and the Ministry of Economic Cooperation (1970–1982); he headed working groups dealing with rural and agrarian development issues of numerous foundations and academic societies: Fachbeirat der Zentralstelle Ernährung und Landwirtschaft der Deutschen Stiftung Internationale Entwicklung (1980–1996); Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgruppe für Weltkirchliche Angelegenheiten der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (1984–2000); Gesellschaft für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften des Landbaus (1965–1968) or Forschungsstelle für internationale Agrar- und Wirtschaftsentwicklung in Heidelberg (1978–1999).

His academic achievement in the field of social change taking place in rural areas has not run out of date, it continues to be useful for rural and agricultural sociology, its tasks, directions of development and recognition of problems.

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As has already been mentioned Herbert Kötter became permanently affiliated with rural and agricultural sociology as a result of participating in the Darmstadt Community Survey, the aim of which was an analysis of the affinity between town and its surrounding rural environment. The initiative was taken by Nels Anderson – a sociologist who was a consultant to the American occupation authorities at the time – who in the specific circumstances of Germany's war destruction wanted to repeat the famous American Middletown Survey. The idea was to encourage sociological empirical research in Germany at the time and to raise the academic standard of the young generation of researchers. The running of the Institute for Social Research in Darmstadt (1950–1951) was entrusted to Max Rolfes (researcher in agricultural studies in Giessen) and the well-known Frankfurt sociologist, Theodor W. Adorno. Kötter's doctoral thesis "Struktur und Funktion von Landgemeinden im Einflußbereich einer deutschen Mittelstadt" (The structure and functions of rural districts under the influence of the average-sized German town) (1952) was an empirical sociological study which was considered as a pioneering work in those days. Its author wrote about the *growth in reciprocal influences between town and country and the generally friendly processes of migration from country to town* (p. VII). He presented the social type of peasant with two professions, travelling to work in an urban factory, integrating the urban and the rural in a new way: *those with two professions contribute to the emergence in districts*

surrounding the towns a certain valuable part of conservative, peasant outlook on life. The concept of “peasant” should be associated with a way of thinking linking the past and the future with land cultivation (p. 103). Kötter’s study provoked a problem which absorbed him and the then emerging west German rural and agricultural sociology for the next decades. In the chapter on rural and agricultural sociology prepared for a sociology handbook academically edited by Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky (1955), emphasis is on the then subject of that sub-discipline.. *largely covering the position of the rural population in industrial society, dominated by the rationality of the town* (p. 205) The dynamic of social development in Germany in those days was characterised by a sharp division between town and country, a distinct separation between industrial regions and agricultural areas. Particularly during the time of industrialised small peasant farming *social structures appeared which were of a mixed and transitory nature* with typical socio-professional categories: two-profession peasants and those commuting to work in industry. That type of migration may be considered as an example of *disagrarisation of the economy* at the same time as a ruralisation in life style in industrial society where many people favour the rural way of life (p. 227). For Kötter that was already then a reflection of the *process of dissociation of the countryside moving from a coherent community to a diverse society* (p. 232).

In the earlier mentioned postdoctoral thesis “The rural population and social change” (1958) we find a theoretical broadening of these points which have a fundamental significance for German rural and agricultural sociology. Kötter recommends a return to research on.. *mutual relations... between the rural and the urban, the industrial and agrarian sector of our society* (p. 8), by using notional categories, theoretical concepts and interests of the then sociology of industrial society. The cultural consequences of unequal development of new technologies and delayed behavioural structures made it the central problem of rural sociology, whose purpose was meant to be the successful modernisation of rural society with the help of studies based on methodologically accurate research. Agriculture and the rural population appear as part of the process of diversifying modern society, with a higher level of integration. Since it is more and more difficult to define and separate the concept of “countryside” in this changing process, Kötter proposes the concentration of rural sociology on the *relationship between man and his surroundings*. New functions of rural areas result from this; functions towards centralised industry, as well as towards a largely non-agricultural population

living there and towards *man in industrial society* for whom they are a place of leisure (p. 158).

Two decades later – in cooperation with Hans-Joachim Krekeler – an article appeared “About the relationship of sociology between town and country” (1977), in relation to which René König, editing “The Dictionary of empirical social research” in several volumes, accentuates even more clearly the tendencies outlined by Kötter. In the changing towns and villages (p. 17...) as a consequence to the extreme mobility of industrial society, caused not only by the commuting labour force but also by mass tourism, *new forms of associations appear... which can no longer be identified with the categories ‘urban’ and ‘rural’* (p. 8). The intensification of contacts between town and country, supported by the processes of socio-cultural diffusion, result in the disappearance of differences between both forms of settlement and the shaping of new relations between people and the open space. Their research, so far barely touching the essence of change in social relations emerging in the newly created space, should be the main topic of interest of urban-rural sociology, or settlement sociology. In addition, in the analysed article we have a transfer of the way of approaching problems of modernisation typical of industrial countries to the so-called third world countries. In industrialised countries the process of cultural diffusion of town and country is something beyond discussion and well recognised, meanwhile in developing countries the gap between these two forms of settlement is deepening, since modernity is the exclusive domain of urban agglomerations.

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Herbert Kötter’s later studies reflect a new way of approaching the analysed phenomena, now seen from the perspective of turning to post-industrial society. Previously having accentuated the necessity of modernising agriculture, now in his article “Agricultural economy on the way to post-industrial society” (1987) he clearly points to problems which have appeared in the meantime, analysing them in the study “The sociology of rural areas”, prepared for the “Dictionary of spatial planning” (1995), in the fragment devoted to... *rural areas in transition to post-industrial society* (p. 869...). In his “Lebenserinnerungen” (Memoirs) he also draws attention to problems with *the transition to post-modernism*. (2001, pp. 210–244: *About the role of agricultural studies in post-modernism – in search of a leading direction*).

In the past half century dominated by the paradigm of rural sociology research its place was in the processes of industrialisation (together with agriculture). However, despite its inevitable successes industrialisation is now in the spotlight (1995, p. 869). He describes the juxtaposition of man and nature which has taken place as *a phase of moving to a post-industrial society*, pointing out with considerable concern to the vagueness of its outlines. According to Kötter, nowadays just as during the time of transition from agrarian to industrial society, we climb up to the peak of the crisis called *equality in inequality*.

Kötter brings the agrarian issue in this historical process down to three phases: (1) industrialisation, i.e. transition from pre-productive to productive agriculture, which required political and institutional changes, the implementation of which the so-called developing countries have not yet managed to achieve. (2) Industrialisation allowed agriculture to achieve a high level of productivity. (3) As the first sector of the economy agriculture faces the problems and contradictions of late industrialisation, appearing in the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, in which its structural overproduction is intensified by the *irrationality of agrarian policy* which is artificially aimed at maintaining growth (1987, p. 26).

In post-industrial society not only agrarian policy but economic policy in general must redefine the concept of growth and social needs in order to limit overproduction and introduce for public consumption the new phenomenon of restriction with the purpose of reducing burdens on the natural environment. Since a so-called deficit of rationality arises within the system, as private, singular rationalities lead to its economic and social irrationality. (Memoirs 2001, p. 229). *The transition to post-industrial society is not primarily only a technical problem but a question about change in the perception of values and aims of economic performance. If we become aware of the growth of wasteful extravagance of prosperous society, undoubtedly threatening its existence, we will introduce a strategy of restriction, requiring a transition from the logic of production of a society of plenty to a society in which economic logic is steered by a logic of need* (1995, p. 869).

Overcoming problems appearing during the transition to post-industrial or post-modern society, in Kötter's case is preceded by a question about the concept and premise of new economic ethic. *From many points of view in post-modern society socio-ethical economic dilemmas are also more and more relevant to agricultural science* (2001, p. 232). He describes them as being of cardinal significance, pointing to global problems of nutrition, energy and environmental protection (2001, p. 233). He is critical as regards the

unquestioning modernisation of developing countries, worthy of something better leading to the destruction of more traditional, autochthonic agrarian societies (p. 241).

However Kötter is also aware of the fact that *calling for more moral principles... should mean the return to a humane union and solidarity with nature and humanity as a whole* and individualised success patterns cannot dominate in world economic development (2001, p. 239). He aims towards a new economic ethic oriented at creating a world economic order where *individual moral principles which are not anchored in the group order will not have a chance* (p. 240). This new order should not be protectionist but rather aimed at the market (p. 239). In the free market economy attaching importance to moral principles represents a framework to the overall order.

According to Kötter in agriculture and in the rural areas of developed countries the changes in the phase of transition..*belong to those observed here and now* (1995, p. 869). (1) This is reflected in multifunctional agriculture which apart from food production covers a wider range of other functions, e.g. environmental protection. (2) In conventional agriculture the area of cultivation is dropping drastically as is the need for manpower, on the other hand (3) many farms are beginning to specialise, turning towards a demand for high quality production and a growing consumer health awareness. In his "Memoirs" (2001, p. 235...) Kötter even talks about... *the socially potential effectiveness of quality change of the area into an ecological farm or forest which is close to the natural one* (4). The development of traditional family farms is more problematic, as... *the forms of leasing and cooperation in many cases allow for flexibility,... and for that reason the new patterns regarding ownership, management and work, open new prospects for farmers.* (1995, p. 870). (5) Extensive forms of agricultural economy appear in some regions which are more conducive to nature, at the same time (6) many 'two-profession' farms are transformed into hobby farms (7). There is no doubt that the significance of tourism in rural areas will rise and that will affect the landscape. (8) (p. 870). The more peripheral areas may become depopulated which may mean an acceptance to return to wild areas or considered as such, requiring protection and care. (9). Kötter generally assumes that the *advancing functional and structural diversification of society and its economy will be accompanied by a diversified scale and way of changes taking place in specific regions; and* (10) *that rural areas are being and will increasingly be included into a global world system* (p. 869).

In both the earlier and later phases of his academic activity Kötter clearly stressed that in highly advanced industrial societies rural areas are neither *economically, socially nor culturally explicitly separated and talking about rural areas will become more and more incorrect* (1995, p. 866). Since the population involved in agriculture in typically agricultural areas is becoming a small minority, he suggests that ‘agricultural sociology’ be considered as part of the ‘sociology of the economy’, concentrating on the work and living conditions of people professionally connected with agriculture and agribusiness (p. 867). In contrast to the ‘sociology of rural areas’, dealing with the connections between people and the open space which they influence... through values and aims of the social and economic order, as well as the current knowledge and technical possibilities at their disposal (p. 867). They can be clarified by applying the axiom recommended by Kötter according to which: *social structures functioning in rural areas find themselves under the constant pressure of changes resulting from the transformation of their internal and external components* (p. 867).

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Herbert Kötter introduced an important stimulus into rural and agrarian sociology for perceiving the development of life in the countryside in the perspective of its links with the town. His later research on the social change during the post-industrial period and its consequences for agriculture and way of life in rural areas are of great significance, making it easier to clarify current and future phenomena as well as formulating assumptions of their academic cognition.

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