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Anton Štefánek – the Precursor of Slovakian Rural Sociology

Anton Štefánek was born on 15th April 1877 into a village cobbler's family in the village of Wielkie Lewary in Moravia. When he was 10, his family who suffered health and financial problems moved to Drösing in Austria. That was where the young boy finished his primary schooling in German and where the local priest having noticed his talent urged Anton's parents to send him to secondary school in Vienna with his financial assistance. That was a turning point in Štefánek's life as he had until then been training to become a cobbler and his family's financial means did not allow for the planning of an alternative career. However, good luck alone was not sufficient for a teenage boy from the Moravian countryside to find the beginning of his career in the school discipline of the Viennese metropolis. It was no doubt his adaptability in conditions of a culturally and linguistically diverse environment which had been cultivated since his early childhood spent in the Moravian multi-ethnic and multi-faith countryside. Both there and in Drösing Štefánek had a good social life, making friends with the altar boys. He learnt how to distinguish the complicated religious and cultural mosaic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He declared his affiliation with the Slovak Catholics and assumed Slovak national identity through his German language education and internalizing German culture.

In all, he spent 16 years in Vienna. While still at school he had to start working, mainly as a private coach to support himself and his parents. He passed his matriculation examination with good results and during his

7 years at university Štefánek only completed 6 semesters at the faculty of philosophy. He was interested in the 'fashionable' philosophers – Hegel, Fichte, Kant, Darwin, Mach and Plato – with no particular preference (he did not find a master among his professors). In 1898 he became involved in the Moravian National Democratic Movement in the *Národ* (nation) society under the leadership of Pavel Blaha. He became interested in the question of nation and state in philosophy (he read Plato, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Masaryk). The first issue of "Hlas" appeared that year – a periodical expressing the programme of the democratic fraction of the union of Slovak students which Štefánek belonged to and after terminating his activity for financial reasons in 1904, he continued his work as the editor of "Sloveský obzor" – a similar periodical published in Budapest until 1908.

Until 1918 he devoted his writing to journalism and editing periodicals such as "Ludove noviny" and "Národné listy". He also wrote for other editorial offices. His writing at that time was engaged and didactic. Štefánek supported the idea of the Slovak nation as a democratic community of all social strata and an autonomous part of the Slovak people. At that time he was not interested in sociology, neither from the theoretical nor from the empirical point of view. Between 1918 and 1923 Štefánek devoted his attention to the service of the Czechoslovak nation, organising education and the educational system at ministerial level. In 1924 he acquired a doctorate in philosophy at the Komenski University in Bratislava. A year later he returned to working as a member of parliament, senator and minister. He showed an interest in Slovak academic sociology from an institutional aspect (he took part in the founding of the academic periodical *Šociologická revue* and insisted that sociology be taught at the faculty of philosophy) but his writing continued to be mainly journalistic or doctrinal.

When his political position weakened in the late thirties he turned to academic and didactic work at the Komenski University in 1937. At the age of 60 he was appointed private professor and founded the department of applied sociology. He started studying national sociology and rural sociology but his studies were interrupted with the winding up of the independent university and the takeover of the Slovakian protectorate by Nazi Germany. Despite his work load, financial difficulties and inadequate working conditions Anton Štefánek managed to gather a group of students

and continued his research focus in the area of sociography and field research. That resulted in the publication in 1945 of his chef d'oeuvre “The Foundations of Sociology in Slovakia”.

He continued working at the university until sociology was done away with in 1950 for political reasons.

At that time a generation of young Slovak sociologists came to prominence. (P. Gula, A. Hirner), who differed from Štefánek in many ways but nevertheless a certain continuity was maintained. At that time the number of Slovak sociologists among the staff grew, the periodical (*Sociologický sborník* 1945–1948) was reactivated and Štefánek hoped for the post-war revival of that discipline in his country. However, the growing aversion of the administration led to the closure of academic activity of “bourgeois sociology” – in spite of protests – and the domination of this field by historical materialism until the mid-sixties (Strmiska, Vavakova 1990). In March 1949 Anton Štefánek was sent away to retire. He died on 29th April 1964 in Žiar.

References

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