

THE COURSE OF LIFE AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

The author's aim is to itemize the problems of sociological studies of the courses of life on the basis of some of his own empirical investigations, to show the correlation between basic biographical components, between cyclical, calamitous, and historical aspects of the courses of life, and to give reasons for the constituting of special sociology of the course of life.

In Chapter I („The Concept of the Course of Life“) he differentiates between the basic dimensions (time, horizontal and vertical space, value), and the components of the course of life (biophysical constitution of man, family cycle, professional career, leisure activities.) He characterizes the central concepts of biographical dynamics, such as phase, situation, crisis, mishap, event, semantic opposition of everyday to extraordinary occurrences, continuity and discontinuity, stability and innovation. After comparing a sociological approach with psychological and historical approaches, the author differentiates between the terms „life cycle“, „life history“ and „course of life“ (the last term is considered by him to be most adequate for sociology) and he gives the following definition of the course of life as an object of sociological research: the course of life is a trajectory of man in the socially historical space and time, a sequence of changes of the social position and roles of an individual as a result of his intentional and practical activities within the given objective possibilities (personal, group, social, natural-historical); it forms an autonomous dynamic structure, a composition of components and activities (biophysical, in the family, professional and during leisure time), which are a means for satisfying the needs of man as well as the needs and requirements of the narrower and or broader collectives in the course of discontinuously continuous biographical time of man.

Chapter II („The Course of Life as an Object of Empirical Research“) is based on empirical researches of the courses of life of metal-workers, farm mechanics, co-operative farmers, employees in lower and higher positions, university specialists. The main objective of this empirical part of the whole research work is not to give a picture of the Czechoslovak society of the 1970's and 1980's, but to verify the possibility of using different methods (statistical investigations, case studies, analyses of biographies, typology) and, above all, to formulate on this occasion some problems, which are connected with a conception of the course of life as a whole and of the mutual interaction between the family, profession, and leisure activities during the biographical space of time. Within this framework, a number of concrete problems are formulated, such as cumulation of starts in life, transformation of family cycles

(for instance, due to the effect of nontraditional forms of partner relationships or leisure activities of the partner), differentiation of professional careers, promiscuous relations between working time, time spent in household activities, and leisure time, different types of the courses of life depending on a different organization of relations "profession — family — free time", historical changes in the life of several generations in a South Moravian village.

Chapter III ("Articulation of the Course of Life") is devoted to a more general sociological consideration of the character of those relations; this chapter focuses its attention on an analysis of cyclical moments in the course of life, on their connection with the "sociorhythms", and at the same time it points out the sociologically important transformations of the life cycles under the effect of crises, mishaps, and historical processes.

From this point of view, the author characterizes sociology of the course of life as "chronosociology" and "historical sociology", which is not only sociology of the life cycle or sociology of the life history, but which represents the sociology of specification of differences (and socially communicated correlations) between cyclical time ("age") and historical time ("period").

Chapter IV ("Theory, Methods, Practice") returns again to theoretical-methodological problems; it discusses the development of sociology of the course of life in Western Europe (especially the works of D. Bertaux, M. Kohli and L. Rosenmayr) and it deals with the controversy over the biographical method (and over so-called quantitative methods in general). The author further deliberates about social-gnoseological preconditions for the formation of sociology of the course of life in Eastern Europe; he considers the founding and development of special sociology of the courses of life to be a current task. Sociological approach overcomes the artificial contraposition of quantitative and qualitative methods, of explicative and interpretative sociology. Sociology of the course of life represents an explicitly interdisciplinary thematic sphere of researches in social sciences.