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The Need for a Local Study — — Methodological Aspects of Studying the Post-Socialist Countryside

This article seeks to present methodological and epistemological aspects of studying the restructuring of rural communities in post-socialist countries. The findings are based on the studies of rural villages made by the author in the Republic of Karelia (in Russia) and in Hungary (Varis 1994, 1996, 1998; Klementev et al. 1996). The object of the study has been to focus on rural restructuring and transition by analysing the socio-economic processes and their appearance at the local level and additionally to compare them in these two post-socialist areas. The localities have been studied by means of a case study, in which restructuring is analysed from the historical and geographical perspectives in order to explain the starting points for transition today.

This paper focuses on the importance of local research when studying the fast-changing post-socialist countryside. General and sectoral factors, which affect the development at a local level, can only be outlined later, after some time has passed. Whereas researching the local level from the point of view of different factors the kind of reactions, which are generated when the social change is rapid, can be determined. The paper is concluded by an epistemological model about the significance of the local study.

Rapid change in society — challenge for locality study

The concepts and approaches of the study are based both on locality research and resource community studies, both of which have used the case study research method.

According to the locality research approach a community is considered as a laboratory of restructuring (Newby 1986, 210). A locality can be the object of an intensive study of restructuring and development, because both internal and external forces affecting restructuring can be examined (Urry 1995, 63). According to the multicausal theory of local development, the

external forces are outlined as general broad-based processes, sectoral processes and policy-related factors (Neil & Tykkyläinen 1998). They reflect the development in localities, each of them having its own specific local features like resources and human agency. Therefore, in the analysis of local restructuring it is necessary to take into account the combination of different factors, which interplay with one another.

The resource community studies have traditionally specialized in peripheral and small communities (Tykkyläinen et al. 1992). A distinctive feature for resource communities is that they are only specialized in one type of production (Tykkyläinen & Neil 1995, 32—33). Usually they function around one production unit.

The methodology of the study is comprised of intensive research with extensive supporting methods (Sayer 1992, 243), which are carried out using case studies. A case study can be characterized as an empirical study of a community, or at most, a few communities, studied comprehensively and concretely. The case study method has been justified because it makes it possible to illuminate concrete cases with all of their points and features instead of only announcing the average figures (Rannikko 1989, 42; Oksa & Rannikko 1994, 30—34). The case study thus aims at the very deep analysis of a particular case. The detailed study of localities is important because the consequences of certain general processes can vary decisively from one place to another.

According to Feagin et al. (1991, 6—7), when describing the features of the case study as a research method, a more detailed method of case study permits the grounding of observations and concepts about social action and social structures in natural settings studied at close hand, provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus permitting a more holistic study of complex social networks and complexes of social action and social meaning, can furnish the dimensions of time and history to the study of social life, thereby enabling the investigator to examine continuity and change in lifeworld patterns, and encourages and facilitates, in practice, theoretical innovation and generalization.

The idea of the case study method is to emphasize analytical generalization (Yin 1994, 30—32). It focuses on the socio-economic processes which can be identified in the restructuring of a case and are therefore possible to generalize regionally and spatially. The problem of generalization is usually solved in qualitative studies by using existing researches and statistics and referring to them in all phases of the study (Alasuutari 1994, 217).

The emphasis of using quantitative and qualitative research material is connected with *the speed of change in a society*. When the speed of change is high, the existing categories and classifications are not valid for outlining and conceptualizing the changing conditions. That is the point when studying the post-socialist transition. The old structures of society are being

replaced by structures which might not have existed before. The society system is reforming and the expected result is unfamiliar, because the event is unique. Consequently, the theoretical concepts are not transferable as such, because the system undergoing change has been based on the logic of socialism, not capitalism. Quantitative study needs more supporting concepts, because the collecting of research material is based on the choices made earlier (Bryman & Cramer 1990, 61—62). Microanalyses are therefore needed at the local level in order to react to the change and analyse it as soon as possible.

Villages illustrating the change

The case studies have been made in peripheral rural communities both in Russia and Hungary. Two fishing villages, Virma and Gridino, and one forestry village, Koivuselkä, are studied in the Karelian Republic in Russia. The village studied in Hungary, Hunya, is economically based on agriculture. Because the development varies spatially the purpose of the study is not to compare the communities themselves, but the processes which have occurred in their development. It is aimed to prove that the spatial development of socialism was very heterogeneous contrary to fallacious notions presented in Western public discussion.

Some common features of the case villages can be defined: peripherality; the villages are considered remote and rural in their regional context, certain production units based on a particular natural resource have been decisive for the life of the villages, so they can be considered as resource communities, and individual survival strategies are based on combining several types of income sources.

TWO FISHING VILLAGES BY THE WHITE SEA

Two case studies (Varis 1994 and 1996) have been made in the coastal fishing villages of Virma and Gridino, which are located by the White Sea. Settling them arose from the geographical basis: the location beside the White Sea led to fishing being the source of livelihood and has guaranteed good connections to other areas via water routes. In both villages, the settlements arose at about the same time in the 16th century.

The economy of both villages has been based on fishing, and its institutional organization during socialism was the *kolkhoz*. In both villages, a fishing *kolkhoz* was founded in the early 1930s. The catch consisted mainly of herring, salmon and cod, and the gathering of seaweed was also important. The *kolkhoz* dominated village life until 1960. At that time, both *kolkhozes* were considered “millionaire *kolkhozes*”, i.e. they had exceeded their quotas.

At the turn of the 1960s the economic rationalization of rural areas, based on economic planning and political negotiations, started in the Soviet Union.

It was implemented in the form of the liquidation of the no-prospect villages. The policy saved the fishing kolkhoz in Gridino in the 1960s, but not the one in Virma. Since that time the development of the villages began to differentiate.

The reorganization of the fishing production and the industrialization and urbanization processes further deteriorated livelihood possibilities in both villages; as a result, the population of the villages has declined during recent decades. Nowadays, Virma has only 50 and Gridino 150 permanent inhabitants. Virma has experienced a relatively more devastating depletion of its population than Gridino. When the fishing kolkhoz ceased operation, the fishermen of Virma became employed by the village sovkhoz whose headquarters were located in Belomorsk nearly 40 km away. Thus, due to the distance to the production centre, the influence the workers previously had over their employment diminished remarkably. Soon after that the administrative unit of the village, the village soviet, was suppressed and moved to a nearby village, bringing to an end even the last vestiges of local authority, causing the inhabitants to lose their faith in the future and the village started to decline.

Gridino also faced the urbanization and outmigration of the young people, but the kolkhoz was saved. The kolkhoz had some specific functions like gathering seaweed. Because of its isolated location it could take care of this sector of the fishing industry and was therefore useful. The saving of the kolkhoz also safeguarded the services which it maintained. Therefore, a school and some other services still exist there, making the village viable for the younger generation. Even nowadays during transition the economic function of the village is operating in the form of a kolkhoz.

The system shift in Russia, followed by transition, meant enormous economic crises like hyperinflation. The privatization of production units started and changed the organizational structure that people had been used to all their lives. It caused uncertainty and confusion among the local people. Social problems increased and people were ready for more control and order. Nowadays, especially Virma has a new function as a summer village. The urban people originating from the village spend their summers there, not for leisure, but to grow their food in the small garden plots next to their homes. They also send their children to stay with grandparents in the summertime, because of the healthy climate and sufficient food in the countryside. Gridino is sharing a similar new function in the countryside. The kolkhoz continues to operate, and through it the inhabitants of Gridino are still attached to the production and the division of labour organized by society.

KARELIAN FORESTRY VILLAGE KOIVUSELKÄ

The forestry village of Koivuselkä was founded in 1949 when after the War the forest industry expanded and new foresters had to be settled

(Klementev et al. 1996). Koivuselkä is situated in a dense forest so access to the work sites is easy. Thus the development of the village has been dominated by the transportation of logs.

In the mid-1950s all the agricultural *kolkhozes* in the surrounding villages of Koivuselkä were closed down and outmigration for employment in forestry and industry started. By the end of the 1970s the remaining population of the surrounding villages had concentrated in Koivuselkä. After the peak period of forestry in the 1950s, the village population has declined from 1,200 to the current 400 inhabitants.

After the War the utilization of forest resources was intensified in the Karelian Republic. The development of Koivuselkä became intertwined with the development of the forestry sector and its regional division of labour. Koivuselkä was part of a logging company which was privatized in 1994. The occupational structure of Koivuselkä adapted to its role in forestry and supporting services.

Koivuselkä was originally founded as a temporary settlement. Nowadays, the temporary character of the village has blurred. The housing barracks are still there, although they were originally meant for no more than twenty years' residence. They are mainly inhabited by old people. Because of the age and the original function of the residences they are poorly equipped, so the living standard in the village is low. During the economic crisis, the Koivuselkä forestry unit has not been able to achieve its annual quota because normal logging activity has not been taking place. After privatization, the status of Koivuselkä's branch office of the logging company was downgraded in the enterprise's hierarchy, which meant the moving of earlier operations elsewhere. The privatization of the logging company also meant reorganizing the service sector. As a consequence of that, the services deteriorated and some of them even disappeared. The situation was exacerbated by the economic crisis, hyperinflation, increasing prices and delayed payment of wages and pensions. The transition period has been very trying for the village and has forced people to create different types of self-sufficiency. Gifts of nature are well exploited in the village as well as small private garden plots around houses. In that way people can supplement their subsistence and get additional income above their wages or pension, or at least some income at times when salaries or pensions are not paid for months due to the economic crisis of the state.

HUNYA — AN AGRICULTURAL VILLAGE IN HUNGARY

Hunya is a small village with an independent local government in Békés county on the Hungarian Great Plain (Varis 1998). It has a population of 880 inhabitants and covers an area of 3,259 hectares. The distance to the county seat Békéscsaba is 40 kilometres and there are several smaller centres nearby. Even though the distances are not significant, mobility is restricted

by the road connections, which are considered poor, and by the high cost of using private cars. Location together with infrequent public transportation connections makes Hunya an inner regional periphery in Békés county.

Originally Hunya was a typical *tanya* village, a living place outside the central settlement the role of which was played by Endrőd (later Gyomaendrőd). Since the 1950s the population has concentrated in the village centre which has a regular street pattern and has complied with an urban building plan typical of rebuilding village centres during socialism.

The population in Hunya is ageing, over 41 per cent of the population are pensioners. Most of them are old women. In the academic year 1997—98 the village comprehensive school has 71 pupils. Based on the age structure, Hunya can be characterized as a village of elderly people.

The economic base of Hunya is agriculture. The conditions for agriculture are especially good as the area of the village has been estimated among the best agricultural lands in the whole of Hungary. Agriculture operated in the form of cooperative farms during socialism. The main products of the cooperative farm were pigs and poultry. In recent years, it has concentrated more and more on the production of seeds, especially the cultivation of hybrid maize seeds which was the second economy of the villagers during socialism.

Another significant employer since the beginning of the 1980s in Hunya has been a sewing factory cooperative which provides work for women. After privatization it has functioned as a kind of limited liability company. The local government maintains public services. Commercial services are nowadays run by private entrepreneurs. The services also have an important role in providing employment in Hunya.

After the system shift in 1989/1990 privatization started in Hungary, and Hunya experienced the same events as all other rural areas. People claimed and received land compensation for the lands which were collectivized in the 1950s and 60s. The cooperative was broken up, but it was immediately formed anew. Some of the members of the old cooperative also joined the newly-formed cooperative. Joining was voluntary and people leased their land to the cooperative. The cooperative maintained its position as the most important production unit in the village. It also partly fulfilled its social function because many pensioners leased their land to the cooperative and remained as pensioner-members of it. But the newly-formed cooperative could not maintain the cultural services that the former one had, which is considered a significant drawback by the local people.

Following privatization, the strategic choices made by the households varied. In addition to joining the newly-formed cooperative, one choice was to found or join a private enterprise. An agricultural company, a family cooperative and some agricultural entrepreneurs and private lorry firms emerged in Hunya. Some people started family farms and became smallholders. Then there are households with mixed strategies: one family

member has stayed in the cooperative and another established a private enterprise or is working outside the cooperative. They have been cautious and left "one leg" in the cooperative, while testing new opportunities in private entrepreneurship.

Comparing the development in the research areas

The collectivization of agriculture and other rural industries has been the primary starting point of restructuring in the socialist countryside. In the Soviet Union it took place at the turn of the 1930s, and in Hungary in two waves at the turn of the 1950s and 60s. In rural villages it meant the formation of one production unit which was based on the natural resources of the area and the development of the villages was linked to the development in each sector of production.

In the case villages of Virma and Gridino in Russia the modernization and technological development of the fishing industry prevailed, and corresponding development trends in forestry took place in Koivuselkä. Based on the Soviet Union's internal regional division of labour, the task for the Karelian Republic was to produce forestry-related products. The countryside saw the emergence of forestry infrastructure in the founding of forestry villages and recruiting of a new labour force. Because of the aims of industrialization in the Soviet Union, production was rationalized while the urbanization of the countryside took place. As a result of the policy implemented, the population in the countryside started to deplete when the central government only selected villages with the most production potential to survive. The resultant cross-sectoral activity manifested itself in the workers of the no longer functioning agricultural and fishing *kolkhozes* gravitating towards jobs either in the forest industry or in the wood-processing plants in urban areas.

A different development path was chosen by Hungary when, soon after collectivization, it started to implement the policy of New Economic Mechanism (NEM). The strict adherence to centrally controlled plans became a thing of the past as decision-making was delegated more and more to the regions and they were given more freedom of choice. An economic policy decision greatly affecting the countryside was the minimum wage decreed for the workers of cooperatives, resulting in the increased feeling of financial security among people and in the more settled and permanent employment. Also in Hungary the aim was toward socialist industrialization, evidenced by intense urbanization. The social structure of the countryside changed when people began to vacate the scattered settlements and concentrate either in rural centres such as Hunya or they moved to cities to work in industry.

Technological development also took place in the agricultural sector, and the progressive cooperatives were able to specialize in their production or to support the second economy of their members. This happened in Hunya,

where the cooperative purchased a modern irrigation system enabling the village to undertake the cultivation of hybrid maize seeds. The work was manual labour, carried out mainly on the half-hectare plots outside the cooperative working hours. In this manner, extra income was earned over and above the wages from the cooperative. The transition economy and especially privatization of land have had an interesting consequence in the change of position of the second economy in a household economy. The second economy of socialist times has become the primary economy during transition in many households. It has been possible to form a new type of livelihood on the bases of earlier trials.

The main feature separating the rural privatization of Hungary from the one in Russia has been the privatization of land. In Hungary after the system shift the land has been privatized more or less successfully, whereas in Russia the state still owns the land in practice and only the plots for private houses have been privatized, and some forests and farmland are in private-type use by farmers on a lease basis.

Collectivization took place in Russia almost 70 years ago, so generations that remember private ownership no longer exist. On the other hand, the modern concept of private land ownership was never known in Russia. Conversely, in Hungary the older generations still recall the time of private ownership as even after the War in 1945 the land reforms were implemented enabling peasants to get their own smallholdings. This can be seen in the attitudes of people towards privatization and the market economy in general. In Hungary the older generations support privatization more than people in Russia where the younger generation has often idealized or had erroneous fantasies about an easy life and getting rich through the business opportunities offered by the new market economy. Waking up to economic difficulties, unemployment and social problems has caused criticism of the transition policies both in Russia and Hungary. The main features of restructuring during socialism and the transition period in the case villages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The main features of restructuring during socialism and the transition period in the case villages

factor		Virma, Gridino and Koivuselkä in Russia	Hunya in Hungary
general	s o c i a l i s m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collectivization - impact of forestry - no-prospect village policy - perestroika - industrialization - urbanization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two waves of collectivization - NEM policy - socialist market economy - industrialization - urbanization

general	t r a n s i t i o n	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - economic crisis - privatization - political liberalization - unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - economic problems - privatization - political liberalization - unemployment - adapting to EU
sectoral	s o c i a l i s m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - technological development - modernization of production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - technological development - modernization of production - strong second economy
	t r a n s i t i o n	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - privatization of socialist enterprises - establishment of joint-stock companies - drawback in investments - breakup of state social sphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - breakup of socialist cooperatives - compensation and redistribution of land - newly-formed cooperatives - reestablishment of peasantry
locality	s o c i a l i s m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forming kolkhozes in Virma and Gridino, which become millionaire kolkhoz - founding of Koivuselkä forestry settlement - kolkhoz closed in Virma - kolkhoz goes on in Gridino - peak-time in Koivuselkä in 1950-60s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cooperative founded - the cooperative in main position in production - centre of village grows
	t r a n s i t i o n	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Virma as summer village - Gridino kolkhoz privatized and goes on functioning - Koivuselkä loses its status in hierarchy of forestry company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - socialist cooperative is broken up and newly-formed cooperative established - land ownership to private possession - new smallholders - local government strengthens
individual	s o c i a l i s m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - joining kolkhozes - recruitment to forestry work - strict social control - young people move away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - joining cooperative - strict social control - young people move away - second economy becomes important

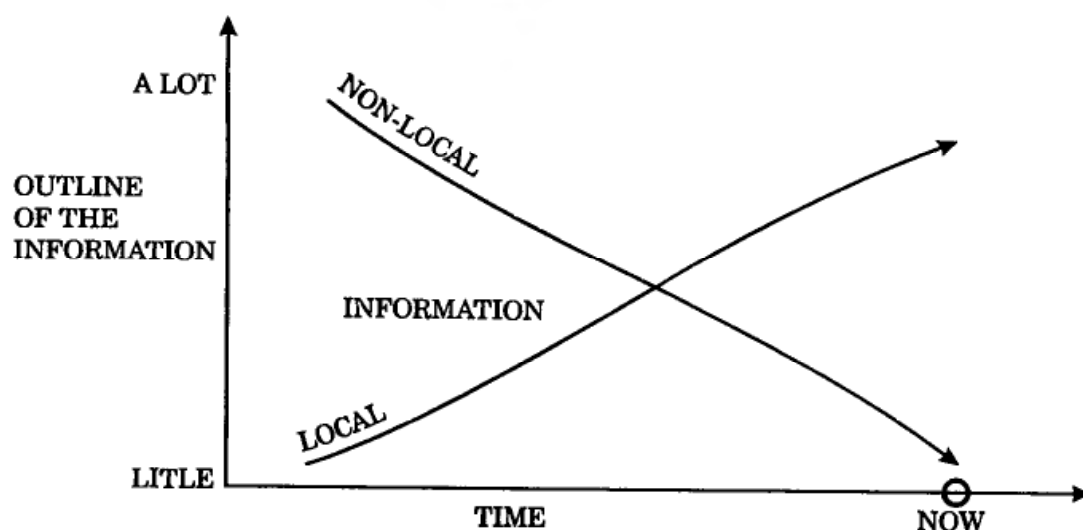
factor		Virma, Gridino and Koivuselkä in Russia	Hunya in Hungary
individual	t r a n s i t i o n	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - self-sufficiency with gardens and gifts of nature - economic and social problems - unemployment - liberalization of mental atmosphere - political freedom - uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identity of landownership is born - individual initiative and entrepreneurship - economic and social problems - for some households second economy becomes primary economy, for some households second economy remains important - liberalization of mental atmosphere - political freedom - uncertainty

Conclusions — Epistemological model of studying the post-socialist countryside

Recent transition in the post-socialist countryside has been fundamental. When concentrating the research on the period of transition one gets new and up-to-date information about the question how the dramatic change in the system of society from socialism to capitalism, "the system shift", occurs at the local level. On the one hand, the study has distinct features of basic research. On the other hand, there is also an epistemological justification for the research (Figure 1). The strength of the local study is its topicality. Historical examination is emphasized at the general and sectoral levels (non-local), where the clear events and processes, including political ones, can be outlined. Instead, it is difficult to find out about the reactions at the local and individual levels because time has passed. It is only possible to get some subjective viewpoints of the past through the memories of the old people.

Figure 1

The epistemological model of studying the rural restructuring



When coming to the present time, the relations of the outline of non-local and local information are turning vice versa. The emphasis turns to the local level, because there is now exact information easily available about this moment, close to the past and close to the future. Instead, the ongoing spatial and historical processes have not yet been outlined. As a consequence, the study at the local level has importance, because new and up-to-date information about the ongoing restructuring processes in the speedily changing context can be found.

The local studies are important because the speed of change in transition societies is high. When the old structures are replaced by new ones the interpretation of the effects of changes needs new conceptualization. On the other hand, in order to interpret the ongoing transition, the dynamics of processes originating from the past have to be taken into consideration. The starting points for transition vary in different societies and the local results of restructuring are dependent on the local specific features. Therefore, adapting the concepts appropriate for one system of society for another must be done with caution.

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