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The State of Rural Sociology in Hungary 1995–1999

Rural sociology has a very specific position in Hungarian sociology: historically it is one of the first branches of sociology which came into existence well before World War II; the Section for Rural Sociology of the Hungarian Sociological Association is one of the largest and most active sections of the Association, however, institutionally the field has a very weak position in academic life: only one Department of Rural Sociology exists today, that is the one at the Agricultural University of Gödöllő. Nevertheless, at research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Science (HAS) and at various universities there are many social researchers who have specialized in rural studies. In this report I want to introduce Hungarian rural research during the period 1995–1999, but in order to understand its main results and concerns we have to take into consideration how rural studies featured in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The 1980s: the question of embourgeoisement

The main concern of rural social research in the 1980s was small-scale agricultural production, the relationship between large and small collective farms, and relating to these issues the nature, scope and future prospects of rural embourgeoisement. Many researchers pointed out that small-scale agricultural production (in the 1980s it put out 40 per cent of the agricultural production, there were more than 1.5 million households taking part in small-scale farming in a country with under 2 million rural households) was not a purely economic phenomenon destined to disappear with modernization (as communist ideology predicted), but rather a unique channel of social mobility which made it possible for many to attain such social positions which were less controlled by the communist regime. The embourgeoisement debate was prominent not only in rural sociology but in Hungarian

sociology generally: researchers taking part in the discussions worked out a new model of Hungarian social structure that seemed to fit better than any previous model to the long-term transformation of Hungarian society.

1990–1995:

registration of the rapid agricultural transformation

It is rather a peculiar adventure, that the embourgeoisement debate reached its intellectual peak when the socialist system started folding up. In the period of political transition some of the best known rural researchers had become engaged in the political arena: some were elected to be members of Parliament, others got positions on the advisory bodies of the democratic political parties. A few internationally known rural researchers moved to the then emerging professional markets of rural and regional development. Those who stayed in academic life turned their attention to the dramatic agricultural changes starting in 1991: they registered the transformation (and in many cases, the dissolution) of collective farms, how new private (family) farms came into existence, who would be the losers and the winners of the transformation process.

Since 1995:

diversified rural studies, the emergence of policy oriented research projects

By the second half of the 1990s social changes influencing rural studies have quietened down (the organizational structure of agriculture has been stabilized) the scientific 'markets' for rural studies have widened (international research projects financed from abroad, new funding opportunities in Hungary). There is also a third factor that furthered rural research, namely the emergence of institutions of rural and regional development. The prominence of developing markets for rural research cannot be stressed enough, for policy-makers at national, regional and local level need the knowledge and expertise of rural researchers in elaborating, setting up, implementing and monitoring development projects.

So far, one of the main attributes of Hungarian rural studies has been the dominance of the sociology of agriculture, while other fields of rural research, e.g. community studies, political economy of agriculture have been less practised. However, in this regard — coincidentally with international trends — there has been a noticeable shift in the second half of the 1990s. If we consider the theoretical framework of recent rural research, we see that micro-level, empirical studies have the preponderance over those attempting to create models on rural structures and processes. Nevertheless, research projects inspired by the network approach and cultural studies

have also appeared on the scene, they focus on the social construction of the countryside.

In the second half of the 1990s many rural issues have come to the fore of social controversies:

— 1997: farmers' demonstrations, in which many dozens of thousands of farmers worrying about the economic prospects of agricultural production took part, showed the cabinet's inability to create favourable economic conditions for farmers;

— in many villages Romany and non-Romany ethnic groups come into (in some cases bloody) conflict with each other;

— rural unemployment and poverty that concentrates on backward rural settlements;

— in order to prepare the country for EU membership many institutional changes (e.g. setting up regional and rural policies) have to be made which are unpopular with established groups (e.g. creation of regions that would decrease the political influence of existing counties);

— in the developed, western parts of the country re-industrialization has also reached rural settlements, where appearing foreign investors — albeit creating new jobs and thereby mitigating unemployment — cause new types of social tensions (e.g. employment of low-paid female labour, exploitation of the environment, etc.);

— environmental issues esp. waste management, location of waste deposits, etc.

Social research into rural issues focuses upon the following concerns:

— Agricultural transformation, cooperatives, family farms (HAS Centre for Regional Research — Budapest and Pécs branches, HAS Institute for Political Science);

— Rural development, regional development (Agricultural University of Gödöllő, HAS Centre for Regional Research Pécs and Miskolc branches);

— Local elites, local leadership (HAS Institute for Political Science);

— Poverty, ethnic conflicts and Romany in the village (Eötvös Lorand University, Budapest University of Economics, HAS Institute for Political Science);

— Europeanization of Hungarian rural areas (HAS Institute for Political Science);

— Environmental controversies in rural settlements (HAS Institute for Sociology).

Hungarian rural researchers take part in many international research projects. Among them I would like to emphasize the importance of the COST A 12 'Rural Innovation' project, in which rural researchers from more than a dozen European countries (Hungary as the only post-communist country) are taking part.

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