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**The Polish and Hungarian Countryside
a Decade after the System Transformation**

Rural Societies under Communism and beyond. Hungarian and Polish Perspectives, (eds.) Paweł Starosta, Imre Kovach, Krzysztof Gorlach, Łódź University Press, Łódź 1999, pp. 388

Until recently Poland and Hungary were under the rule of real socialism. They currently hold similar positions in the reform race, the pace of which is largely measured out by the European Union. These are not the only features which link the two countries. According to Paweł Starosta, Imre Kovach and Krzysztof Gorlach — the editors of *Rural Societies under Communism and beyond. Hungarian and Polish Perspectives* — what bound Poland and Hungary together was until recently being considered the “happiest barracks in the communist camp”, due to their considerable independence from the authoritarian state power. Admittedly, as the authors point out, this independence manifested itself in different areas (economic in Hungary, political and cultural in Poland) yet this is an exceptional feature in communist countries. Each of them does, however, have features distinguishing it from the other. One of the most important is the Poles’ greater tendency to negate the former system (54% as compared with 30% in Hungary), their greater inclination towards democratic reactions, lower trust in political institutions.¹

However, the similarities and differences between the Polish and Hungarian countryside before and after the system change are of greater importance as far as the topic of the book is concerned. Since the intention was to analyse this topic systematically, eleven issues were singled out each of which is discussed by both a Hungarian and a Polish author. They are the following issues: the most important problems of the system of agriculture

¹ Introduction; the authors quote the work of R. Rose and Ch. Hapfer, *The Comparative Method*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994.

and rural communities (Imre Kovach, Maria Halamska); land (Ivan Oros, Andrzej Pilichowski); farmers (Istvan Harcsa, Krzysztof Gorlach); changes in state and collective agriculture (Katlin Kovacs and Zsuzsanna Bihari, Elzbieta Psyk-Piotrowska); rural families (Ildiko Asztalos, Ewa Malinowska); rural youth (Andras Csige, Krystyna Szafraniec), democratic institutions in rural areas (Antal Bohm, Maria Wieruszewska), social and economic inequalities (Rudolf Andorka, Andrzej Kaleta), a change in the set of values (Eva Tall, Józef Styk), changes in the ownership structure (Imre Kovach, Paweł Starosta).

The topic may also be arranged in wider categories, which appear in various texts, regardless of the formal subordination to the issue chosen by the editors of this volume. The most important of these are the following: the historical conditions of the situation of the Polish and Hungarian countryside; the consequences of the turning point of the political system, particularly the structural ones: on a macro level — the countryside in the social structure and the national economy; on the mezzo level — changes at local level; at micro level — a portrait of different groups of inhabitants (the family, youth, women, farmers) as well as social and psychological consequences — the system of values, quality of life, evaluation of career opportunities.

Something which is particularly interesting is to look for an answer in the discussed book to the question about the causes of the condition of the countryside and agriculture today. One of the causes could be the different ways of collectivizing agriculture in both countries and, consequently, the policy applied by the state towards private agriculture and farmers' attitude towards it. Hungary was characterized by a large regional variety of nationalized farms, managed by an educated administration and experts. The connection of this area with private agriculture — functioning half-legally — decided about the success of market socialism.² Nationalized agriculture quickly became subject to modernization; an increasingly rational division of labour was introduced (I. Oros).

Meanwhile, in Poland private farms were in the majority (over 3 million). Their presence was not totally accepted by the authorities which was expressed amongst others by the blockage of development possibilities and the limitation of internal transformation. Indeed, as Maria Halamska points out, the room for manoeuvre of the centre was not unlimited, generally due to consumer pressure, which had various results: on the one hand, it influenced the reinforcement of the position of private agriculture and on the other, the inability to fully implement the principles of rationality by state and collective agriculture.

² D. Kideckel, *East European Communities. The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times*, (ed.) David A. Kideckel, Westview Press, Boulder-San Francisco-Oxford 1995.

1990 saw the beginning of changes which largely determined the present shape of the countryside and agriculture. In Hungary the aim of the implemented changes was primarily, as described by Ivan Oros, the rapid redistribution of land and the rapid development of private agriculture. In Poland the aim was the quick introduction of agriculture onto the free market or rather the introduction of market principles into the realm of agriculture. What brought the two countries together at that time was the lack of a coherent, carefully studied policy towards the countryside and agriculture, which would include the complexity of rural life.

As far as the type and level of impact by the former system are concerned in each of the discussed countries this heritage takes rather a different shape. In Poland, where this impact is more clearly defined, the effect of "repressive tolerance" (K. Gorlach) is indeed the fact of leaving communism successfully at the same time as a negative selection of farmers, as well as the lasting tendency towards family farming (M. Halamska) and specific attitudes towards owning and running farms: the feeling of "dependence on ownership", rather like the feeling of slavery or "limitation by ownership", which means the impossibility of fulfilling one's plans and intentions; but also the feeling of "ownership control" and fulfilment (Halamska).³

The result of system changes in agriculture is similar in both cases. A clear distinction between farms follows. In Hungary farms are tending to shrink in size (a reduction in acreage and size of herds) and linking the running of farms with another type of professional activity, but on the other hand, particularly in families with farming traditions (favoured in the process of agricultural privatization) — there is a growth of farms, particularly their acreage. However, agriculture is not an inviting type of business and that is why young people who are pro-market inclined more readily choose activities away from agriculture (I. Harsca). The Hungarian countryside nowadays, as is the case of Poland, can to a certain extent be characterized by negative selection.

Something similar is happening in Poland. There is a differentiation between farms, mainly due to the elimination of subsidies, food surplus on the market, the lack of guaranteed prices. Small farms are disappearing and the owners of half of the small farms are supplementing their incomes by work outside agriculture (L. Kocik).⁴ On the other hand, a category of

³ The author here refers to a study by K. Gorlach and Z. Seręga, *Chłopi we współczesnej Polsce: przedmiot czy podmiot procesów społecznych* (Peasants in Poland today: subject or object in the social processes), PWN, Warszawa 1991.

⁴ The number of farmers supplementing their agricultural incomes by other areas of business in 2000 was over 70%, approximately 6 million people. See M. Halamska, *Charakterystyka społeczna polskich rolników* (The social character of Polish farmers) [in:] *Chłop, rolnik, farmer? Przystąpienie do Unii Europejskiej — na-*

farmer-businessmen has emerged (approximately 10%). This is a group which, at the beginning of the transformation assumed a pro-market attitude. They were mainly young, well educated people with a spirit of enterprise (K. Górlach) who considered that free market principles should be applied to agriculture: food prices should be regulated by the market, the state should not establish minimum prices or guarantee the purchase of the entire produce (A. Pilichowski). However, all in all, 90% of Polish farmers consider that the state should play a greater role and as many as 60% apply the wait-and-see strategy — they don't invest nor do they quit agriculture in spite of its low profitability.⁵

The system changes also affect other groups of rural inhabitants. Rural women are one of these groups. The changes in the Hungarian countryside are of a specific nature, particularly in the light of the fact that in the eighties due to the women's liberation policy women's professional activity was particularly high (higher than the average in the OECD countries, comparable with Scandinavian countries, I. Asztalos). Nowadays, this group is becoming increasingly polarized. The axes of this polarization are education, family size and children's age as well as professional activity. The dominant trend is the return towards traditional roles. This is mainly caused by changes on the labour market and national policy (since 1995 nursery schools have been eliminated, jobs are no longer guaranteed after prolonged maternity leave). Unemployment and professional inactivity are frequent among Polish rural women — 38% are unemployed, 1.2% of these being farm workers (E. Malinowska). The majority of the unemployed in Poland are women who lose jobs more easily than men do and there are no job offers for them. This can, among others, be connected with the stereotype of the unemployed woman, the conviction that women adapt to unemployment more readily than men do due to strongly identifying with their family role.

Young people also have a specific position in the countryside, since they are viewed in both Hungary and Poland as the real losers in the transformation process. In Hungary the status of most youth is similar to that of the young living in city slums (A. Csíste), particularly due to family incomes, the level of education (almost 60% of rural youth in Hungary have either primary or vocational education); the kind of family they come from (with a low level of education and prestige, and the inability to support their children's educational efforts). The situation is similar in the Polish countryside where young people, like everyone living there, hold marginal so-

dzieje i obawy polskiej wsi (Peasant, farm worker, farmer? Joining the European Union — the hopes and anxieties of people in the Polish countryside), ISP, Warszawa 2000, p. 12.

⁵ Idem, p. 23–25.

cial positions (K. Szafraniec). Rural youth can be called borderland people living at the intersection of cultures and groups, belonging to them while not fully belonging to any one of them. This finds expression in the tension between growing aspirations and falling opportunities.

Apart from current economic and social problems the countryside is forced to make choices concerning its future. This future may be viewed at different levels: the development of institutions, changes in the development paradigm from modernization to revitalization (as suggested by A. Kaleta), the influence of globalization on the possibilities of overcoming the unfavourable situation of the countryside and agriculture. Comments on this issue refer among others to the capital at the countryside's disposal, by asking questions about whether the countryside is capable of overcoming the resistance towards the dangerous and marginalizing democracy and liberty (M. Wieruszewska), does the clear marginalization and underdevelopment of the countryside not also sentence it there in the future, under the influence of world trends? P. Starosta and A. Kaleta present rather an optimistic future vision of the countryside. Both authors do indeed emphasize the significance of the current bad condition of the countryside as well as unfavourable world trends, but both assume that the social order is dynamic in essence and the situation in the Central and East European countryside may undergo change. What kind of change? It is important, according to Paweł Starosta that one ideology should not be replaced by another but that the real condition of the countryside should constantly be identified and the results of this identification should be taken into consideration in programmes taking place in the countryside, such as the concept of revitalizing the countryside discussed by A. Kaleta.

The study presented here is a rich picture of the Polish and Hungarian countryside before and after the system transformation, it is in fact an attempt at carrying out P. Starosta's hypothesis — identifying the condition of the countryside and agriculture and is as such very successful. It is an exceptional study because for the first time a book has appeared showing both these countries alongside one another. This is the effect of immense work by an international editorial team, consisting of outstanding experts on rural issues. The scope of the theme discussed here is particularly important. Issues raised so meticulously in this book have probably never been discussed in such a manner (a constant confrontation between Polish and Hungarian reality) or so widely (all the important problems concerning the functioning of the countryside have been included).

Collecting this material and preparing the book by editors from various countries must, of course, have been time-consuming. This fact does, to a certain extent, affect the timeliness of the texts. Most of them date back 6 to 8 years (1993–1995), judging by the literature their authors refer to as well as the empirical data used. This is not of much significance for the

texts analysing the historical conditions of the discussed phenomena. However, the past five years — for both countries here discussed — have been a period of intense negotiations with the European Union, and so also debates and resolutions concerning the perspectives (threats) of the countryside and agriculture in these countries. For the same reason, the last five years have been a period of further structural change or rather attempts at implementing change (particularly in Poland). Now, ten years after the turning point of the system the transformation tendencies outlined by the authors seem clearer than at the beginning of the nineties — e.g. attitudes towards the free market, landownership, career opportunities. Nowadays, it is possible to speak with greater certainty about rural inhabitants being the losers in the transformation. The perspectives of change which must come about, are more clearly defined nowadays. It is, therefore, unfortunate that the discussed book does not reveal these issues.

In addition, the texts presented here, although being a very interesting document concerning changes reaching the Polish and Hungarian countryside, however — despite the intentions of the editors — are not totally comparable. They have a different level of generality and a different level of detail. Perhaps an adequate commentary by the editors providing an evaluation of the presented data and being a bridge between the texts would make it easier for readers who are newcomers to these issues.