

Iwona Leśniewicz

The Future of Peasant Culture — Decline or Revival

Europe's Green Ring, Leo Granberg, Imre Kovách,
Hilary Tovey, Ashgate Publishing Company,
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Europe's Green Ring by Leo Granberg, Imre Kovách and Hilary Tovey is a collection of texts dealing with the transformation processes in the peasant culture of fourteen European countries (Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, East Germany, Estonia and Russia) known as the 'Green Ring'. The main aim of the work is to show the weakening importance of the peasant stratum in local communities nowadays as far as shaping the socio-economic, political and cultural reality of a country.

The sequence of texts is not accidental. It constitutes an arrangement determined by the complexity of the processes of the structural transformation in rural areas. The first part, *Central and Eastern European Countries in the Green Ring* is an overview of post-communist countries, whose experiences together with the transformation of the agrarian structure are considered particularly complicated and turbulent. The second part concentrates on the changes in rurality in the Mediterranean countries: Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Then the authors present the transformation of the structure of the countryside in Northern Europe — Finland, Scandinavia and Ireland. The collection ends with a prognosis for the future of peasant culture, the peasantry within the framework of the 'Green Ring'.

Four texts which I found particularly interesting, since I am familiar with the socio-political situation in Central Eastern Europe, are about changes in the peasant culture of Poland, Russia, Greece and Hungary. The Greek example deserves consideration due to the phenomenon of feminization of agriculture. The choice of the above mentioned texts correlates with the interests of *Eastern European Countryside* as regards rural issues in Central Eastern Europe.

Krzysztof Gorlach and Paweł Starosta, the authors of the text on Poland examine the issue of the decline of peasant culture in Poland and the prospects of its revival in the light of change at two levels: the agrarian structure and local rural communities. In feudal society the peasant class stood opposite the ruling landowning class. The negative connotations of the term 'peasantry' derived from the low position of the peasants in the social stratification. Nowadays, the 'peasantry' are the opposite of 'townspeople'. Gorlach and Starosta put forward three hypotheses concerning rural changes in local communities. The first negates the superior role of territory in the process of integration of local rural communities as a result of modernization processes in the countryside and the influence of mass culture on the normative system. In the second hypothesis, the authors point to changes in the concept of localness. The last hypothesis is about the narrowing of basic ties in local rural communities. The authors see the Polish countryside as a phenomenon of social atomization, in other words, a weakening of ties. Empirical data show that the role of the neighbourhood which was once the basis of social relations in the countryside has undergone considerable debilitation. This tendency was noticeable as early as the 1980s when almost half of the rural population no longer attached much importance to neighbourhood contacts. In the era of the system transformation the workplace has become one of the most important points of social interaction. Social gatherings and cultural life play a secondary role. Neighbourly help has lost its former meaning. According to the authors ties in local rural communities only exist in extreme situations.

The lack of economic stability in Poland also contributed to the financial depression of the peasant stratum. Small, unprofitable farms and low qualifications, inadequate to labour market requirements place the peasants on the periphery of the system transformation in Poland. The destruction of imported agricultural goods by farmers, as a protest in defence of their own interests (which took place in Poland in 1998) is according to Gorlach and Starosta a symptom of the downfall of peasant culture. According to the peasant system of values agricultural products used to be considered as the fruit of the hard work of the peasant together with Mother Earth, earth being an autotelic value, the highest of all values. The destruction of the fruits of the earth violates the traditional normative rural system, perceiving them as an ordinary commercial product, commanding no respect. According to Gorlach and Starosta the atomization of the rural population and the changes in the peasant normative system which I have mentioned above are the beginning of the decline of peasant culture.

Some cases mentioned in the country reviews testify against the decline of peasant culture. When referring to the Hungarian countryside a revival of peasant culture can be noticed in the growing interest in folklore among Hungarians — dance, cuisine and art. Imre Kovach indicates outright the

power lying dormant in rurality: "New, powerful actors of rural development, designers and intellectuals are strengthening their own class position in refashioning the rural [...] new consumer and leisure classes are appearing in the countryside discovering the treasures of rurality".* I believe that we also have the phenomenon of folklore and peasant culture fascination in Poland. Therefore, rather than talking about the decline of peasant culture we should look at it as a transformation heading towards commercialization.

The Russian countryside is interesting in this context. After the fall of state agriculture two groups of peasants came into being. The first are self-sufficient farmers, brought up in the spirit of peasant culture, cultivating traditions and passing down information about farming from generation to generation. The second group of farmers which appeared after the fall of the state economy lack a peasant tradition since the vast majority of their ancestors were not peasants. In the age of kolkhozes and sovkhoses they worked on state farms where they were only responsible for the production process. Therefore, they do not have the complex agricultural qualifications to run private farms and they lack experience in this field. They have to learn about farming from scratch. Peasant culture can be talked about with reference to the first group of farmers who have a strong social and family solidarity. Land is not a source of earning a living, it satisfies personal existential needs.

The transformation of peasant culture in Greece seems interesting due to the rare phenomenon of the feminization of agriculture. This is described by Ch. Kasimis and A. G. Papadopoulos, pointing to the growing process of feminization of farms, particularly not very large ones. Moreover, two thirds of female rural inhabitants are employed in the agricultural sector. The feminization of Greek agriculture contributed to the social mobility of women, their rise in the social hierarchy. On traditional peasant farms women used to be the gratuitous labour force, they were not farm owners and did not participate in the decision making process. Nowadays, there are more and more cases of women owning farms. Thus the patriarchal model of a farm typical for traditional peasant culture has lost its monopoly in favour of the matriarchal model contributing to cultural changes.

A theme which links the texts in this work is the more or less clearly formulated thesis that rather than vanishing, peasant culture continues to exist while undergoing constant change. Yet these changes are unique in both time and space.

Europe's Green Ring deserves attention because of the possibility of comparing experiences in the European countryside in the field of changes

* Imre Kovach, *De-peasantisation of Hungarian Rurality* [in:] Leo Granberg, Imre Kovach, Hilary Tovey (ed.) *Europe's Green Ring*, Ashgate, 2001 p. 86.

in peasant culture. The texts are readable regardless of geographic region thanks to placing the issues of changes in the peasantry in the wider socio-political context of specific countries. The book edited by L. Granberg, I. Kovach and H. Tovey is recommended to whoever is interested in the changes in peasant culture in the rural areas of Europe.