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## **Transformation of Estonian Agriculture and Countryside**

*Decollectivisation, Destruction and Disillusionment. A Community Study in Southern Estonia*, edited by Ilka Alanen, Jouko Nikula, Helvi Poder, Rein Ruustoo; Ashgate 2001; Aldershot Burlington USA, Singapore, Sydney pp. 438

It gives me great pleasure to recommend *Decollectivisation, Destruction and Disillusionment...* a book prepared by a team of Finnish and Estonian researchers, concerning the issues of rural and agricultural transformation in Estonia. This is an extensive work, numbering 438 pages. It was published in 2001 but the information and findings remain topical, particularly for researchers interested in the issues of the transformation of rural society in post-communist countries. Indeed a few texts have appeared describing the changes in the countryside and in agriculture in post-socialist countries such as Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic but there have so far not been many books on the market presenting changes in the former soviet republics. This book published by Ilka Alanen and his colleagues thus limits the gap existing in European Rural Sociology as regards rural and agricultural system transformation in those countries.

This work edited by Ilka Alanen, Jouko Nikula, Helvi Poudet and Rein Ruustoo is a collection of eight texts portraying the economic and social aspects of the transformation process of state farms in post-communist Estonia. The introduction by Ilka Alanen comprises basic information about the research project, theoretical and methodological assumptions of work. The next text by Helvi Poder "The Historical Background of the Kolkhoz and the Municipality of Kanepi" is a solid attempt at describing the organi-

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sation of agriculture in Kanepi Municipality in three main historical periods: 1) before Estonia's incorporation into the Soviet Union 2) during Estonia's affiliation to the Soviet Union and 3) in the first half of the nineties when the kolkhoz system was done away with. Using both appropriate historical documents and results of sociological research the author presents the system of agriculture and work organisation during the period of great agricultural organisations functioning in the Soviet Union. It portrays not only the political and social foundation of the shaping of the soviet system of agricultural organisation based on large state farms but also its gradual evolution during the sixties and seventies. It presents the gradual softening of the Stalinist system under the influence of economic requirements and the gradual expansion of the sphere of private activity by kolkhoz members. The author draws attention to the fact that beside the early Stalinist repressions in the fifties, the sixties and seventies saw political restrictions being considerably reduced by the creation of a dual system of public life – official, ceremonial and everyday. It was precisely that informal aspect of life which meant that over the years local apparatchiks and even KGB representatives were less and less loyal to official ideology, paying more and more attention to the views of their local milieu. The author points out the high growth of education of kolkhoz workers in the seventies and later "The number of people graduating from secondary schools or universities increased from year to year. The results of a poll performed in the days of the reform in the Kanepi kolkhoz, showed that about 30% of kolkhozniks had graduated from secondary school and 9% of them had a college or university degree" (p. 40).

The next, third chapter written by Ilka Alanen "The Dissolution of Kanepi Kolkhoz" represents the largest contribution to the reviewed publication both as regards content and volume. Here the author discusses: the structure of the former kolkhoz-centric system; the development of capitalist production; relations under the centrally planned economy; the crisis of the kolkhoz system and an outline of the reform; the execution of reform, various farm types appearing after the kolkhoz dissolution and in the final part of the chapter the author focuses on the negative social consequences of liberal reform carried out in Kanepi such as robber capitalism, social anomie and resistance. In this chapter the author portrays the entire complexity of the process of decollectivisation in agriculture after overthrowing the Soviet Union. He draws attention to the ambivalent or even negative attitude of kolkhoz workers towards liberal reforms. He underlines the nationalist roots of liberal reforms and the support for them particularly by the local middle class, including specialists and skilled workers. As a consequence, the author states that the processes of privatisation changes were not free of negative phenomena such as anomie and rejection. According to him the social anomie observed in Kanepi is a consequence of "on the one

hand dissolution of the old system and a disillusionment with promises of Estonia's Singing Revolution, which enthused people immensely, but on the other hand, perhaps even first and foremost, made them realise their real inability to act in a structurally new situation" (p. 268). The chapter by Ilka Alanen is the one which breaks through more than any other the socio-graphic profile of the entire book although here too the theoretical layer is hardly outlined.

The essay *Surly Crem* in chapter four by Jouko Nikula is very interesting. The author draws attention to the significance of informal links in the process of privatisation changes and development of capitalist entrepreneurship in the researched municipality. In his view "A leading position in the old power structure, organisational capital, is without doubt a very important factor in successful entrepreneurship because it provides financial resources and knowledge" (p. 299). Similar tendencies and phenomena accompanying the privatisation of large state farms were also noticed in other post-socialist countries, particularly in Poland. After reading the reviewed book a conclusion can be drawn that the privatisation process in the agriculture of some post-socialist countries, as formerly in the process of nationalisation, was caused not so much for economic as for ideological reasons. During late socialism some state farms achieved considerable potential, the privatisation process often taking place without adequate preparation largely meant the destruction or taking over of functioning resources at a ridiculously low price.

The fifth and sixth chapters, "From Village Soviet to Municipality" and "The Rebirth of Civil Society in Kanepi" by Rein Ruustoo leave the reader somewhat dissatisfied. The titles of these chapters arouse the sociologist's hope for a certain confrontation between the model of civic society and its empirical exemplification. Unfortunately, the author neither makes use of the theoretical frames of analysis of civic society nor of the total community concept. The author however concludes that the "community life of Kanepi was largely under the direction of collective farms, with the goal set to the cultivation of a single agricultural product to the exclusion of other land uses (monocultural plantation), or for production at the meat packing factory. Farmers became farmhands. As this proletarianism progressed a type of landless farmhand emerged. His leisure was increasingly occupied by drinking alcohol and including unsophisticated entertainment" (p. 346). Such a state of functioning of the rural community proves the extent of its internal social disorganisation and atomisation during the times of real socialism. This was not changed by the system of institutions or organisations which was to become the main factor for reintegrating rural territorial communities. The structures of formal institutions dependent on the state and satisfying many of the inhabitants' basic needs fulfilled their role as a system of social protection. They did not however fulfil the role of inte-

gration of the community. In other words, the institutional attempt to reintegrate rural society failed as a plan to reconstruct territorial communities in conditions of intense industrialisation.

Analysing the collapse of the soviet system, Rein Ruustoo essentially refers to an argument known since Sorokin's times, which assumes that the appearance of new forms of social life is primarily the consequence of disorganisation of the old order and its ineffectiveness in satisfying the needs and growing aspirations of individuals. The author provides empirical proof clarifying that the conditions of socio-political changes in the former Soviet Union started taking shape far sooner than in the early nineties. Rein Ruustoo interestingly portrays the reasons for the political evolution of the soviet system, and particularly their core – gradually advancing deideologisation and individualisation of the attitudes of public life in subsequent phases of real socialism. The author thus undermines the image of soviet society, established in political science publications, as being a system deeply saturated with ideology which was ruthlessly supported by a system of party and state institutions until the late eighties. An image appears of society gradually departing from ideological orthodoxy under the influence of modernisation processes. Changes are heading in the direction of vital pragmatism. This can also be seen in the behaviour and attitudes of people belonging to the state apparatus of the old regime. That process was characterised by its cyclical nature and mutual influence of different patterns of behaviour at micro and mezzo level. According to the author, "every reprimand and form of the centre was accompanied by the concealed liberalisation of the local policy a slackening of control over leisure time etc." (p. 350). The author also underlines the significance of revitalisation of nationalist ideologies as a factor mobilising society to system changes. A significant role in this process was played by the Protestant church, the liberal intelligentsia, the social movement concentrating around nationalist and peasant traditions including the Estonian Heritage Society, Estonian Popular Front and Estonian Citizen's Committees. However, an insignificant role in the process of constructing civic initiatives was played by trade unions. It therefore appears that in different post-socialist countries different elements of social structure played a decisive role in the system transformation. Rein Ruustoo's analyses point to the collapse in activity of civic movements and initiatives directly after regaining independence and the fragility of the civic sphere "the links between the local population and political parties were, in many respects, ad hoc (The Rural Union, the Isama Party, The Estonian Conservative People's Party and Estonian Citizens' Union). They slackened or became a matter of tertial interest. The institutions that could offer counterbalance to the anomie [...] and deprivation were weak" (p. 386). This phenomenon appeared to a greater or lesser extent in all the post-socialist countries.

The last two chapters "The Significance of the Kanepi Study" by Ilka Alanen, Jouko Nikula and Rein Ruustoo and "Agricultural Reform in Estonia" by Mati Tamma are, on the one hand, an attempt at a methodological and factual summary of the carried out research and on the other, presenting history and the basic idea of the reform of agriculture in Estonia. In this context I do not quite understand why the text written by Mati Tamma is presented as an Appendix. It contains important information not only for the agrarian policy historian but also for the sociologist analysing social transformation. Books include lists of figures, lists of tables, notes about contributions as well as a foreword. Photographs are also included which were prepared by the members of the research team as well as coming from the archives.

All in all, the authors describe in great detail both the social, economic and political system of organisation of large state farms during the time of the socialist economy as well as the main forces and patterns of privatisation connected with the period of regaining independence by Estonia and the consequences of these changes for the inhabitants of the municipality of Kanepi in Southern Estonia.

The merit of the book is breaking through certain stereotypes concerning changes taking place in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The authors point out the evolutionary nature of these changes which began with the process of gradual deideologisation of public life begun during Krushchev's era and ended with the dissolution of the USSR, whose identity even the members of the old regime were not inclined to seriously defend.

Secondly, the authors point out that the act of decollectivisation like at one time the act of nationalisation and collectivisation of agriculture was not the result of strictly economic conditions but rather a political and ideological act. According to Finnish and Estonian researchers, much as private medium-sized farms at one time had an advantage of the production potential over technically underequipped large state farms, so in the later period large state farms which were subsidised with technical production materials became more efficient than the small, poorly equipped private farms. The problem of size and type of farm was for many years the subject of conflict in various concepts of agrarian policy in post-socialist countries. It seems that in this discussion too much attention is given to the absolute dominance of large-scale and so-called family agriculture and too rarely relativises the significance of the area of production to the type of product on the one hand and the function the farms have to fulfil in the wider economic system on the other.

Thirdly, after reading the book we can conclude that the collapse of the old regime has its sources in the multi-civilisational process of pragmatism of attitudes, individualisation and restriction of the sphere of public

life which also includes societies in the countries of the former Soviet Union. It is hard not to notice the extent and depth of these processes. However, the content of the book encourages a reflection that this is not so much a self-organisational civic society as mass atomised society in which institutional structures are clearly not deeply socially rooted. Could this possibly be another example that liberalisation and political freedom do not automatically lead to a higher level of social engagement?

An advantage of the book is the appearance of mechanisms of macro-social changes through the presentation of events taking place locally. This is not a new idea in community studies but carried out very conscientiously. The authors used various sources of information from official documents and results of surveyed research carried out in the eighties to non-standard interviews carried out with experts singled out by the snowball sampling method. Clearly the choice of such a technique is appropriate in order to understand the genesis of certain social phenomena, but does not contribute much to clarify the range of the observed phenomena.

From the methodological point of view the book is a typically socio-graphic work. Its greatest weakness is the lack of a clear theoretical frame. There are not many references to other research carried out in post-socialist countries. As in many early monographs the unusually conscientious description of facts clearly outweighs the attempts of a partial verification of some theory. Beside the cognitive goal coming down to clarifying the process of transformation the authors have a practical goal. They hope that their research is "need in order to forecast the future and possibly also to formulate an agricultural policy that would be more rational than the agricultural policy of the Estonian government over the past few years" (p. 3). Indeed in the book the reader can find many statements which can help in the shaping of agrarian policy in a post-socialist country, but I doubt whether politicians would wish to make use of these proposals. The rational policy which the authors write about requires moderation and overcoming stereotypes, whereas the agrarian policy realised in the first years after the overthrow of socialism as they point out largely came down to using negative stereotypes as a means of mobilising socio-political-economic behaviour.

I address my critical remarks mainly to the construction of the editorial work. Apart from my reservation to the fact that M. Tamm's text is an Annex rather than a chapter in the book, for the reader used to a factual division of the contents the convention seems rather strange in which many authors repeat certain topics of the analysis and somehow present them from different perspectives. Such is the case in the texts by Helvi Poder, Ilka Alanen and partly Jouko Nikula. In these three texts topics concerning privatisation and structural changes in agriculture are considered.

Despite certain critical remarks there is, however, no doubt that "Decollectivisation, Destruction and Disillusionment" is a book worth recommending not only to rural sociologists but also to agricultural politicians and representatives of social science. I particularly recommend it to those colleagues who are interested in the research of rural and agricultural changes in post-socialist societies.