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Hungarian Peasant Studies

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I have chosen to discuss some aspects of peasant studies because they constitute the focal point of interest of Hungarian ethnology and because vanishing peasant subculture constitutes a subject for urgent anthropological study.

The first section of this paper will be devoted to a discussion of some fundamental changes which characterize peasant culture, the second section to a discussion of some of the methods which have been applied to recent peasant studies by Hungarian ethnologists.

It is by now axiomatic even to the nonscientist that the relation of the Hungarian agriculturalist to his fellow man and to society at large has changed dramatically as a result of accelerated industrialization, greater mobility, and government-directed change. Rural society in general has changed in composition, structure, wealth and prestige categories, with respect to the role of women, and in many other respects. In fact, the impact of these spectacular changes has been considered so compelling as to have resulted in the disappearance of the peasant subculture.

Even if this conclusion is accepted with a certain degree of reservation, it is nevertheless a well-established fact that the era in which the peasantry was the chief producer of social wealth in Hungary ended some time ago. When those engaged in agriculture still

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constituted about half of the population, as in 1930 when 51.8 percent and in 1949 when 49.1 percent of all people derived their livelihood from agriculture (Erdei 1964:16)[1], the contribution of agriculture to the national income was only 36.4 percent (Végh 1955:214) and 26.2 percent respectively (Hungary 1957:39). It has shrunk considerably since then, to about 21 percent in 1967 (Hungary 1968:38).

The position of Hungarian peasantry did not differ significantly from that of its counterparts in other European countries for centuries. Opinions of historians differ as to when its relatively disadvantaged position commenced. Some relate it to the end of the Middle Ages when the Hungarian peasantry switched from predominantly crop agriculture to livestock raising as a means of protection against the 150-year-long Turkish occupation. Other historians assign the relative backwardness to the restructuring of European trade patterns in the seventeenth century when long-distance transportation of consumer goods assumed mass dimensions, and the resulting division of labor developed on a continental scale. In this highly evolutionary phase of European economic history, Hungary remained "East European" in character, i.e., exporting agricultural products to the West in exchange for industrial products. While the division of production developed and was shaped by historical events, it was also reinforced by Habsburg policy, which favored the western provinces of the empire, Austria and Bohemia, over those in the east. In all fairness it must be said that Hungary also received

some advantages from its membership in the Habsburg Empire -- in particular, access to an expanded domestic market.

Industrialization reached Hungary in the second half of the nineteenth century. Liberation of the serf took place in 1848, several generations after similar moves in the West, but still one or two generations before such movements in the Balkans and European Russia. One reason for the delay in freeing the serf and introducing a meaningful land reform lay in the fact that these reforms had to be carried out against the interests of the landowning middle class, which constituted the only effective power domain against the centralized and foreign Habsburg power structure.

Urbanization in Hungary also preceded similar developments in other parts of Eastern Europe. However, cities of the Western European type developed only along the perimeter of the country and these were populated largely by burghers of foreign extraction who had little in common with the native peasantry. The cities which developed in the central region of the country, except for the capital, were of rural character.

Drift to urban areas became a natural response to the accelerating process of industrialization. In the 1870s migration had assumed mass dimensions and by the beginning of World War I about 10 percent of the rural population had moved either to the cities or abroad.

The fact that industrialization, urbanization, and the transformation of the peasantry began in Hungary some two generations before the introduction of the socialist system, provided a rural

evolutionary stage quite different from that of other East European countries, with the possible exception of Czechoslovakia and East Germany. The peasantry which was called upon to join the cooperatives in Hungary after World War II had already been divested to a large degree of its traditional values and way of life, while in Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia, the socialist system was introduced to a relatively "unspoiled" peasantry.

Concomitantly with nineteenth century nationalism and social transformation, the romantic exaltation of peasant values gained popularity and became the subject of frequent exposition in art, literature, and drama. The relatively rigid social setting, however, never permitted peasant romanticism to become a decisive influence upon national policy in spite of the numerical majority of the peasantry. In fact, with the growing gap between urban and rural standards of living, peasant life became identified with a state of underdevelopment and was therefore considered as undesirable.

A neoromantic period occurred after World War I simultaneously with the appearance of neonationalism and of peasant parties on the political scene. It was then hypothesized by some populist writers and peasant leaders that if the peasantry could acquire political influence commensurate with that of urban society, it could assume leadership and solve most national ills through the application of peasant values.

The peasant take-over has not occurred, nor has an undistrubed perpetuation of the status quo. Accelerated industrialization and

urbanization could not be halted, and its pace grew faster with the changeover to a socialist political and economic system after World War II.

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Against this historical background, let us take a look at some of the significant effects of cultural change which have occurred in the peasant subculture. Most observers agree that change can be recorded in terms of (1) geographical mobility, (2) social mobility, and (3) the value system.

(1) Geographical mobility has appeared in three forms: (a) migration of youth and young adults to urban areas and to non-agricultural occupations, (b) creation of a new semiurban class of rural youth commuting daily or weekly to the cities, and (c) migration of entire family units to urban areas.

(a) Migration of youth to the cities has reduced the agricultural population from 49.1 percent in 1949 to 35.1 percent in 1960, and to about 31 percent by 1968. It has also increased the average age of the agricultural population, mainly that of the cooperatives, to the upper fifties (Pásztor 1968:42).[2]

The cause of migration can be found in the socialization of agriculture and in the pull of favorable urban working conditions and educational and welfare opportunities, as opposed to correspondingly limited opportunities in the rural settings (Pásztor 1968:47).[3] Counterbalancing this trend is a less intensive but important migration in the opposite direction, to nonagricultural jobs in the

rural areas. Some peasant migrants, after acquiring the technical skills demanded by large-scale mechanized farming with firmly established modern production practices and effective management, return to rural areas as blue-collar workers. In some areas this countermigration amounts to as much as 50 percent of the urban-directed migration.[4]

(b) While migration has primarily quantitative effects on the village population, the commuting semiurban life-style has profound qualitative effects on peasant culture. The magnitude of this new trend is impressive. Of some 4.2 million people who were engaged in agricultural activities in the mid-1960s, only 2.2 million derived their livelihood solely from agriculture; 2.0 million, or almost as many, obtained their income from mixed sources (Hegedüs 1964:65; Márkus 1967:181). In fact, villages whose income was from agricultural production only have virtually disappeared.

A recent sociological survey of eight counties has shown that in terms of residence and place of work, rural youth between the ages of 20 and 23 are distributed as follows:

34 percent live and work in the villages;

35 percent live in villages but work in towns
9.2 percent live in villages and study in towns
} 44.2 percent commute;

21.7 percent have moved permanently (Kiss 1964:185).[5]

Among the motivating forces for a commuting semiurban life the survey found that such attractions offered by urban living as steady and predictable income, regular working hours, better chances for

education and social mobility, and inconspicuous living, ranked rather high. On the other hand, attractions of rural living included less expensive and more spacious housing, the security provided by the household plot in terms of meeting minimal nutritional needs, and the physical proximity of family and kinfolk.

Among the negative factors which promote the semiurban life-style are the uncertainties adherent in the transitional nature of the contemporary agricultural system. In the early 1960s about 66 percent of the agriculturalists worked in cooperatives, 20 percent were employed as agricultural laborers on state farms or at machine stations, and about 12 percent practiced independent farming. The distribution has shifted since, to the detriment of the independent farmer (Hungary 1967:146).[6] The state-farm employee has a steady, year-round income, but only one fourth of the cooperative members have permanent work and an income approximating that of the state-farm or industrial worker. One half of the cooperative members work in crop-producing brigades, which are in demand for only about six months of the year, and consequently they earn about one half of the expected or necessary income (Márkus 1967:181, 187).

(c) The third form of geographical mobility involves the planned move of entire families from the rural to the urban environment. Flight to the cities has been an almost continuous process for the last one hundred years, but now families are making carefully prepared long-range plans for orderly moves, cooperating closely and intensively in the accumulation of the necessary cash and in sending

scouts to the city for the exploration of the most favorable terms for the move. Then, on target time, they sell their property and pack up and move -- in a somewhat similar fashion as agricultural emigrants did early in this century -- but with the intention of permanency.

Mass migration is well reflected in contemporary statistics and ethnographic research papers. For example, the population of Heves county in northern Hungary, which numbered 50,000 in 1960, is expected to number only 40,000 by 1970 if the present trend of migration continues. This will be a loss of 20 percent in ten years (Márkus 1967:225).

Motivation for family migration is said to be the conveniences and better opportunities provided by the city. The commuting semi-urban life-style is too strenuous to be practiced for more than eight to ten years, even by the young. A rural work load still extends from 13 to 14 hours per day, whereas in the city an eight-hour schedule produces the same or higher income. An urban work experience during the commuting period usually creates a strong aversion to farm work.

(2) Social mobility. Geographic mobility has greatly increased the chances for social mobility, but the restructuring of the agricultural economy through the virtual abolition of private land has caused dramatic shifts in the rural social structure itself. Economic and prestige categories seem to continue to correlate highly, but the extent of privately owned land as a traditional

criterion of prestige and social standing has been replaced by the high value of economic and marketing skills, regardless of whether a person works on a state farm, in a cooperative, or on his own land. Mechanical, industrial, and managerial skills, as well as skills in intensive horticulture and animal husbandry, correlate highly with higher income, and are strong forces motivating youth to education.

In the contemporary setting, which is considered transitional toward the long-range Communist goal of a classless rural society, a three-level social stratification seems to have emerged: (a) a managerial stratum composed of professional managers and highly trained specialists, (b) a rural middle class composed of skilled laborers, technicians, and low-echelon bureaucrats, and (c) the common agricultural laborers.

In the latter stratum two subdivisions seem to be recognized: (1) the agroproletariat and (2) the former small landowners. Differentiation between the two subgroups is important because of their conflicting values and interests. The agroproletarian favors fixed working hours and a steady income, the reduction of household plots, and the cessation of payments for land incorporated into the cooperatives. The former small landowner advocates diametrically opposed views: he prefers income commensurate with work performed, greater respect for individual interests, maintenance of household plots, and continuous payments for land use (Erdei 1964:50).

Shifts in economic bases appear to have undermined the stability of the three-generation family as a land-based institution. Although

no systematic research has been found on this topic, various observers suggest that the family continues to be an active economic and social institution of primary importance, even though its members may have assumed new roles in the course of their adjustment to the evolving external conditions.

In the rural family of diffuse sources of income, the role of the family members has changed considerably. The dominant role of the head of the family has deteriorated in favor of a more even distribution of decision-making power. Especially notable is the changed role of women, and more particularly that of the mother, who is also overburdened by a dual role as keeper of the household and as member or employee of the cooperative.

(3) The value system. The economic and social transformation could not have passed without effecting profound changes in the value system, as we have noted before. Available studies seem to agree on a few generalizations. Conflicts between the traditional peasant value system and that of the socialist, urban-industrial society do not spare the family. The older generation does not seem to abandon its values even if it adjusts to tangible demands of the new system: it seeks compromises. One such compromise has to be made in reference to old-age income. Possession of land had been of extremely high value for centuries, because it constituted the base for the welfare of the family and for old-age security. Now that acquisition of land is impossible, many middle-aged and older peasants seek at least a ten-year term of industrial employment to

gain eligibility for old age pensions.

Attachment to land and accumulation of wealth within the household continue to rate high on the value scale, but in modified forms. Except for the few in the private sector, the security felt by the possession of a permanent base is symbolized now by one's home rather than by land. The village dweller in most cases still runs a household rather than a business enterprise (Wolf 1966:2), but in many instances, especially in the presence of commuting family members, the principal source of income lies outside the family base (Hegedüs 1964:68-79).[7]

Old and young equally value saving of produce in kind or in the form of accumulated cash in savings accounts, although members of the younger generation value investments in consumer goods over accumulation of cash. In general, the young adhere almost completely to urban-industrial values. Most of them turn their back on agriculture as an occupation, and attempt to take advantage of the educational and material benefits of the new order. They have made their peace with the system and try to operate within its confines to the best of their abilities. They are less philosophical and more pragmatic than the generations which have gone before them. Independent decision making at a relatively early age, including decisions about marriage, has also become a high value. Recreation, travel, and sports are highly valued. Human relations are less constrained and more informal in all directions, including intersexual relations.

The peasant's allegedly high valuation of physical stamina and

endurance and generally low regard for a soft life have not proved to be lasting, if they ever existed. The young believe in equal work loads, set wages, and guaranteed leisure, and they regard manual labor as inferior and undesirable. They value highly specialized and professional education, and positions requiring such training. In short, professional career-mindedness has replaced a traditional desire for accumulated wealth in land (Erdei 1964:50).

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There seems to be little doubt that the rapid change of cultural patterns in Hungary, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, calls for action in terms of urgent anthropology, and that Hungarian social scientists are aware of it. Their concern has been displayed in feverish research activities characterized by a more intensive and systematic collection of descriptive data related to material culture and folklore. Ever since its inception in the middle of the nineteenth century, Hungarian ethnology as a discipline has existed in the realm of the humanities, and its concern and methods have been historical in character. However, some individual scholars expanded their interests beyond the collection, description, and analysis of artifacts, folk songs and other manifestations of material culture and folklore (Fél and Hofer 1969:5).[8] One can find scattered examples of such endeavors throughout the history of the profession.

When after World War II the urbanization and industrialization process accelerated, Hungarian ethnographers became seriously concerned with "the socialist transformation of the village." In the

early 1950s, after the Hungarian Academy of Sciences created a special research group to investigate the cultural consequences of agricultural cooperatives, several articles appeared in Ethnographia describing the desirable role of ethnographers in the observation of cultural change as manifested in the socialist transformation of rural society (Balassa 1952:481-483) [9] Although such expressions were not followed by organized research or publications, a few individual ethnographers did show interest in the social and cultural aspects of change. These efforts bore fruits a decade later, as witnessed by such outstanding recent publications as the Proper Peasants (Fél and Hofer 1969), a comprehensive monograph, and Church and Religion in a Contemporary Village (Kardos 1969), which examines the impact of communism on social structure, belief, and value systems. It is regrettable that such works are exceptions rather than the rule, and that the highly talented and skilled profession of Hungarian ethnology and ethnography is rather slow in applying concepts of social and cultural anthropology in its important salvage operation for a vanishing subculture and its observation of cultural change.

The profession responded to the urgent need more in quantitative than in qualitative terms. Through strong governmental support it expanded its operations, multiplied its museum collections, created new chairs at universities, involved a large number of lay volunteers in the collection process, held nationwide competitions for ethnographic studies based on firsthand experience by paraprofessionals and laymen, and reached out beyond the boundaries of the country.

In 1960 there were more persons involved in ethnographic research in Hungary than in any other European country, with the possible exception of West Germany and the U.S.S.R.

In qualitative terms, comparative studies became more numerous, and interdisciplinary cooperation more frequent. Comparative studies in folklore and material ethnography were not unknown before. One example of the last century is given by Jankó (1900), an ethnographer well versed in linguistics and archaeology, who did field research in Scandinavia, European Russia and Siberia, and who surveyed the entire European literature on fishing for his study on the genesis of the Hungarian fishing culture. Another random illustration can be found in ethnomusicology of the 1930s, when Kodály published his discovery of the identity of principles underlying Cheremis and Magyar folk songs, and Bartók concluded his comparative work on the folk music of ethnic groups in the Carpathian basin (Erdely 1965:97-98).[10]

Other examples of more recent origin are Gunda's (1966) collection of research papers in his Ethnographica Carpatica, which describes various elements of the fishing, hunting, and pastoral cultures of such diverse ethnic groups of the region as the Bulgarians, Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, and Slovaks; and a volume on the papers read at the Hungarian Ethnographic Congress of 1963 (Ortutaty and Bodrogi 1965).

An interesting and not entirely unique occurrence of interdisciplinary cooperation verging in its totality on the American

concept and method of anthropology is one which was initiated by the Heves County council in 1967. The council called a conference for the discussion of the palóc ethnic subculture of northern Hungary. The participants, who represented the fields of ethnography, ethnology, archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and history worked out a proposal for a ten-year interdisciplinary research plan, outlining the specific objectives and methodology for such an undertaking (Bakó 1968).

In sum, Hungarian ethnology as a discipline focuses its efforts on the subject of the disappearing peasant subculture. This work is being done with sophistication, with increasing application of the comparative method and occasionally of the interdisciplinary approach in the collection of data related to material culture and folklore. Some scholars treat the subject in a broader frame of reference, recording cultural change in terms of social and cultural anthropology. Nevertheless, American anthropologists could make valuable contributions to the knowledge of change in Hungary by participating in the study of this dramatic transformation, and by applying their anthropological concepts and methodologies in the process. Studies of change involving comparative data could be especially challenging and instrumental in explaining the differences in pace and form of the process of change taking place in the various East European countries.

NOTES

1. In fact, according to Márkus (1967), the absolute number of agriculturalists has increased by 200,000 during the two decades.

2. For example, in the village of Zsáka in the county of Hajdú-Bihar, both the Lenin and the Kossuth cooperatives are "cooperatives of the old." The average age of their membership is 57 and 59 years respectively. According to Hegedűs (1964: 94), the age of cooperative members in 1960 when intensive collectivization had just begun, was as follows:

Ages	Percentage	
15 - 20	2.7	
21 - 30	8.2	42.5
31 - 40	16.6	
41 - 50	17.7	
51 - 60	24.3	54.8
61 plus	30.5	

3. In agriculture the worker receives only 60 percent of his earnings during the year. The remaining 40 percent or portion of it, depending on the success of the farming in each year, is paid to him at the end of the year. In industry the worker receives, of course, 100 percent of his wages in regular intervals.

4. By 1968 about 100,000 skilled workers (as compared to 1,000 in 1960) and 5,000 agricultural engineers were working in the agricultural sector of the economy. For these blue- and white-collar workers, agriculture is just another shop or desk.

They have regularly paid vacations, they travel abroad, and they go to the city for entertainment.

5. Disregarding those who left the village permanently, 45 percent of the boys and 23 percent of the girls have turned their back on agricultural activities, and are using the village only as a more or less temporary domicile.

6. The number of private farmers is now probably closer to 2 or 3 percent, rather than the 12 percent quoted for the early 1960s. The number of private farms decreased from 545,000 in 1960 to 95,000 in 1967 (Hungary 1967:162). Only 2.3 percent of the total land and 2.9 percent of the arable land was in the private sector in 1967 (Hungary 1967:72).

7. The trend in urban and rural, capitalist and socialist economies alike, is toward an increase of salaried workers and a decrease in independent entrepreneurships. But the collectivization of the rural sector requires a more complex and more difficult adjustment on the part of the agriculturalists, because salaried state employment in agriculture was not preceded by salaried private employment, as was the case in industry. The agriculturalist used to be his own master on his own land, and the perception of ownership counterbalanced the feeling of alienation from work. A similarity that characterizes the situation of the individual in both the rural and urban setting of a communist society is the fact that decisions for modernization are made on the state level rather than on the individual or local level.

8. "Instead of developing general concepts and common themes of rural life, research workers devoted their effort to the description of discrete regional characteristics and local developments; instead of seeking to outline general evolutionary trends, they concentrated on the illustration of particular concrete phenomena.
"The fact that the endeavors of Hungarian ethnographers were directed to this purpose is largely due to the original inclusion of ethnography among the humanities. Its closest connections were with the history, literary history, history of music and art, and linguistics of Hungary, as well as with anthropogeography. Each of these disciplines explored aspects of nonrecurrent process in Hungary, and their causes and interrelationships, and occasionally members of different disciplines have worked together on a common enterprise. As did the other disciplines, Hungarian ethnography tried to describe, to characterize, and to explain the single and singular complex of cultural features which was typical of the Hungarian peasantry. Recently the necessity of integrating Hungarian ethnography into the general body of research in social and cultural anthropology has been emphasized."
9. Kardos (1969:285) cites ten articles dealing with the "socialist transformation of the village" between 1952 and 1955. Most of them suggest action on the part of ethnographers, or are polemical as to how to achieve the best results.
10. According to Erdely, "this study, entitled Népzenénk és a szomszéd népek népzenéje [Our folk music and the folk music of

neighboring peoples], is regarded as one of Bartók's most important contributions to comparative musicology."

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