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Still an Awkward Class: Central European post-peasants at home and abroad in the era of neoliberalism

The paper builds on the author's intimate knowledge of Eastern European village life over four decades. Before, during, and after socialism, villagers ("peasants") have always been incorporated into wider structures, while at the same time challenging standard social science theories. Their greater ability to reproduce themselves "outside the market" is the basis of their distinctiveness; this corresponds to a persisting distinction between town and countryside and has implications for political mobilization. The paper develops binary comparisons at two levels: first, between capitalist and socialist paths of rural development; second, within the latter, between the productive symbiosis accomplished in socialist Hungary and the stagnation of non-collectivized Poland. Some of these latter contrasts have persisted in new forms in the era of EU membership. Finally, the author expresses some personal nostalgia for the days when rural community studies constituted the bedrock of ethnographic writing about this region.

Keywords: peasants, anthropology, households, globalization, agribusiness, migration, reproduction.

Introduction

One of the problems I have with the vast scholarly literature on “neoliberalism” and “globalization” is that grassroots investigations of more remote, marginalized communities tend to be neglected. This applies with particular force in social anthropology, a discipline that has traditionally specialised in penetrating remote communities and uncovering realities that are not visible in the aggregate statistics which absorb the attention of other social scientists. The observation is also valid within Europe. Foreign anthropologists who carried out case-studies in more or less peripheral European villages after the Second World War always knew that these places could not be seen as microcosms, that they were part of larger societies; but there was a sense in which they remained at least partly autonomous; they constituted distinctive social worlds, with forms of hierarchy and legitimisation differing from those found in the “modern” urban sector. Half a century later, in most parts of Europe, the proportion of the population living in the countryside has declined greatly and relatively few anthropologists spend a full year living in a face-to-face village community, as they once did. The traditions established by Bronisław Malinowski have been modified – watered down, one might say. Europeanists nowadays, like anthropologists in other regions, are likely to do their fieldwork at multiple sites. The action seems to be with migrant workers, the unemployed, urban social movements, the state, English-speaking NGO activists (“civil society”) – everywhere except in the countryside!

However, in Europe and world-wide huge numbers of people still reside in rural areas, most of them producing agricultural goods for their own subsistence as well as for the market. Large sections of urban populations continue to maintain rural links. Quite a few of these town-dwellers contrive somehow to produce significant income flows, including some of the food they consume, through mobilising rural household resources. The globalization of agribusiness has by no means eliminated older interdependencies between cash-cropping and subsistence-oriented production. A few anthropologists have sought to rethink the concept of the peasant, e.g. by investigating “post-peasant populism” in Central Europe¹ or by linking “post-peasant futures” to new theoretical agendas concerning identity and value on a global

¹ Juraj Buzalka, *Nation and Religion: The politics of commemoration in South-East Poland* (Berlin: LIT, 2007).

scale.² Yet by and large socio-cultural anthropologists, who previously gravitated instinctively to the pre-industrial countryside, seem increasingly content to leave these futures to be investigated by rural sociologists, human geographers, political economists, and other specialists. This shift is conspicuous in Europe. The discipline that has traditionally specialised in studying the exotic “Other” no longer finds the European countryside very interesting. After almost half a century of the Common Agricultural Policy and a decade after the major eastern expansion of the European Union, the rural sector has surely been comprehensively modernised across most of the European continent. Perhaps the waning interest of social anthropologists is conclusive evidence of “the final phase”³ of European peasantry?⁴

In this short paper I want to consider the peasants of Central Europe in a long-term historical context in order to show why in my view the countryside should still be a location of empirical and theoretical interest to anthropologists and others. I use the term peasant deliberately. Older readers will recognize that my title is a play on the title of a classic study of Russian peasants by Teodor Shanin.⁵ This “awkward class” always posed a problem for Marxist theories because, although evidently dominated and exploited by rapacious elites, many smallholders in Russia and elsewhere nonetheless had secure rights and often full legal ownership of the land they tilled and of ancillary means

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2 Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in global perspective* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1996).

3 S. H. Franklin, *The European Peasantry: The final phase* (London: Methuen, 1969).

4 Two reviewers have questioned these introductory assertions, so perhaps I need to qualify them and be more precise. Obviously, I am suggesting a generalised view of the contributions of foreign anthropologists. Numerous important studies of rural Eastern Europe have been published since 1990 – but Gerald Creed, David Kideckel, Martha Lampland, Carol Nagengast, Frances Pine, and Katherine Verdery all draw heavily on their earlier community studies carried out in the socialist era. With few exceptions, the newcomers tend to gravitate to other locations and to avoid this genre. As for the “native ethnographers”, my impression is that they too have increasingly focused their attention elsewhere. A recent collection presenting “anthropological perspectives from home” does include some village studies, but these are outnumbered by contributions addressing multinational enterprises, the military, punk subculture, the gay-lesbian movement, and transnational migration (László Kürti and Peter Skalník (eds), *Postsocialist Europe: Anthropological Perspectives from Home* (New York: Berghahn, 2009)). I do not wish to decry the trend that is common to both the foreign and the native researchers, only to take note of the fact that the country receives less attention than used to be the case.

5 Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society: Russia 1910-1925* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

of production. I shall argue, drawing primarily on my own research in Hungary, that the dictatorship of the proletariat in the People's Democracies enjoyed a paradoxical success by increasing the importance of household commodity production in the countryside, which in turn was the key element in a significant redistribution of national income in favour of the former peasantry. I also suggest that, in the postsocialist years, the reversal of this massive shift is the key factor behind not only economic dislocation but also the political anger to be found in the rural sector.

The word peasant was already being called into question by the time I began research in 1970s Hungary. In the interdisciplinary "peasant studies" literature of the time, inspired by sociologists such as Shanin and Bogusław Gałęski⁶, many scholars preferred the term "post-peasant", while neo-Marxists opted for labels such as "petty commodity producer". I found out that in Hungary that the old term *paraszt* had emphatic negative connotations in the post-collectivization years.⁷ Villagers themselves preferred to use official categories such as *kistermelő* (small producer). To my surprise, when I went to Poland a few years later with a new research project, I found that the traditional Polish word for peasant, *chłop*, was still very much alive, albeit in tandem with a more official census category *rolnik*, which is generally translated into English as farmer. The socio-linguistic differences between these two socialist states evidently had something to do with the fact that, unlike Hungary, Poland had not implemented mass collectivisation. I found that family-farming, much of it still primarily oriented to meeting household subsistence needs, dominated the Polish countryside.⁸ I was also rather surprised to find that the peasants I lived with in the Beskid Hills had very little sympathy with the *Solidarity* movement, which erupted soon after I had begun my fieldwork. The alliance of intellectual "dissidents", blue-collar workers, and the Roman Catholic Church, about which I had read a great deal in Britain, did not impress my village interlocutors at all. To my surprise, even the Church was sometimes criticized, for anticlericalism ran deep; only the newly elevated Pope, formerly Archbishop Karol Wojtyła, was a genuinely unifying figure. I shall return to this point concerning political alliances at the end.

6 Bogusław Gałęski, *Basic Concepts of Rural Sociology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972).

7 Chris Hann, *Tázlár: a village in Hungary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

8 Chris Hann, *A Village Without Solidarity: Polish Peasants in Years of Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

From peasants to farmers: questioning ideal-types of modernisation and neoliberalism

Before looking at Central Europe in greater detail, let me outline some of the stereotypes of the world-historical transformation known loosely as industrialisation, which began in North-West Europe a little more than two centuries ago. Western social theory has understandably emphasised the new factories and the stark contrast between the owners of capital and those who own nothing but their labour (power). The relationship between factory owners and their workers clearly differed from the archetypal relationship of a feudal estate. Even in Eastern Europe, serfdom was abolished in the course of the nineteenth century. Rural districts were still characterized by considerable inequalities, but the great estates of the past were generally on the wane by the beginning of the twentieth century. All over Europe, many villagers, not only dispossessed “rural proletarians” but also the children of poorer small-holders unable to establish viable economic units, left the countryside to seek work in the new factories. Millions migrated overseas, because opportunities were lacking at home. In some countries, notably some parts of Britain, a proletarian class emerged within the countryside, but this was the exception. More common was the situation in which most village households retained at least some access to the means of production. Over time, more successful households increased their capital stock (tractors, combine harvesters etc.). They expanded their acreage at the expense of the less successful, whose members eventually departed for the towns. The overall picture is one of gradual urbanization accompanying industrialization. The size of the agricultural population falls in line with the declining contribution of this sector to national income. Eventually, the rural population stabilizes. It may even increase in certain favourably located areas when urban elites start to relocate to villages to enjoy higher quality of life as daily commuters; in some rural areas there is the phenomenon of the *dacha* and the second home.

What makes these rural transformations problematic (“awkward”) for social theorists is the continued significance in many countries of the family as the key unit of production as well as consumption. Instead of exploiting the labour of dispossessed neighbours, the farmers of Western Europe expanded their capital equipment while continuing to rely on the labour of family and close kin, as in the traditional,

subsistence-oriented peasant household.⁹ Moreover, mitigating against the harsh Marxist language of exploitation we have also to recognise the persistence of traditional values and national heritage. The countryside has always been a fertile source for pastoral mythologizing of community.¹⁰ It is still sometimes suggested that Western farmers are not really concerned to maximize their profits. Rather, as stewards of family-owned land they are supposed to devote themselves to taking good care of the environment and to making it available as a consumption good for stressed urbanites.

So much for stereotypes of rural development in the capitalist West. The equivalent account of the socialist path to industrial modernity is necessarily different. The exodus from the over-populated countryside to the new industrial factories here takes place much more abruptly due to collectivization, which is commonly taken to be a much more comprehensive and dramatic intervention than any burst of enclosure in the West. In contrast to capitalist modernization, the socialist variant aspired to replicate industrial divisions of labour within the countryside. Especially in the form known as the State Farm (Russian: *sovkhoz*; in Poland the PGR), but also in the more widespread collective or cooperative farm (*kolkhoz*; *spółdzielnia rolnicza*), complex new hierarchies were imposed. It generally took some time before the members of agricultural cooperatives came to enjoy wages and pensions comparable to those of urban factory workers. In the interim, they were remunerated according to “work points”, supplemented by the allocation of a “household plot” for subsistence gardening.

Compared with the more gradual nature of most capitalist development, the breakneck pace of socialist industrialization did not allow for the urban housing stock and associated infrastructure to keep pace with the expansion of the factories. The resulting “under urbanization”¹¹ meant that many of the new factory workers had little choice but to leave their families at home in villages. Both long-distance commuters and the “worker-peasants” who travelled to the factory on a daily basis continued to regard the village as their real home and to participate in agricultural work on a part-time basis. Rural-urban links persisted in Western countries as well. But they did so for longer period of time and

9 Alexander Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

10 See Gerald Creed's contributions to: Gerald R. Creed, (ed.) *The Seductions of Community. Emancipations, Oppressions, Quandaries* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2006).

11 Ivan Szelenyi, *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

had more important consequences in socialist countries, partly because of the structural problems of under urbanisation, and partly thanks to the opportunities offered by socialist rural institutions, to which I shall turn in the next section.

It can be seen that neither the capitalist nor the socialist path quite fits the ideal type according to which urban industrialization is characterised by the dispossession of smallholder producers in the countryside, a severance of rural-urban links and the dominance of wage-labour in both sectors. The distinctive, recalcitrant features of the countryside have not been eradicated in the decades of neoliberalism. Recent years have brought massive changes in the technologies and social relations of food production, as in all other sectors of the economy. All over the world, more and more peasants have been dispossessed through what has come to be known as “landgrabbing”; the power of multinational agribusiness is greater than it has ever been. However, smallholders remain a force to be reckoned with. For example China, the world’s most populous state, has implemented radical market-oriented reforms, leading hundreds of millions to seek better lives through work in the cities; but most of those migrants still have rights over land in their natal communities – they have *not* been dispossessed. In Europe, cut-throat competition characterises all markets including those for agricultural products. However, to a greater extent than in any other sector, market outcomes are mitigated by state policies, above all by the policies of the European Union. Capitalized family-farmers leave their fields fallow and their machines idle when it pays them to do so, due to the payment of EU subsidies. They keep their hedges neat and preserve the “cultural landscape” not because of an altruistic concern with aesthetic tastes of urban tourists, but because these activities, too, are subsidized by Brussels. In short, the world which the rural populations of postsocialist Central Europe joined when admitted to the EU in 2004 is, despite the prevailing ideology of neoliberalism, to a considerable degree a *non-market* world. But before exploring recent adaptations, I want to show how socialist modernization played out for the post-peasants of Hungary and Poland.

Collective farms which worked and peasant farms which did not

Comparisons between Hungary and Poland have always fascinated me. The two historic Christian kingdoms of Central Europe have enjoyed very different histories in recent centuries. Whereas the Polish state

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disappeared with the partitions of the late eighteenth century, Hungary rose to share imperial grandeur with Austria in the last half-century of the Habsburg Empire. The rebirth of the Polish state coincided with a national humiliation for Hungary, which lost most of its territory at the Treaty of Trianon (1920). In terms of their social structures, during the inter-war decades both states remained predominantly rural in character, with aristocratic and gentry elites still more prominent than representatives of the new industrial capitalism. The peasantry, comprising well over half the population, was commonly perceived as the most urgent socio-political issue. Attempts to ameliorate poverty through distributive land reform in the 1920s had little impact (as elsewhere in Eastern Europe). Following the Second World War, the peasants were still the most numerous social class, socially immobile and barely integrated into the entitlements of citizenship. Further measures of egalitarian land reform were again largely unsuccessful, because few of the newly established smallholders had the human or capital resources to manage viable family farms. The peasant parties were the strongest political forces in the last democratic elections, but they were eventually eliminated by communist parties that had a clear agenda to industrialize and to collectivize agriculture as rapidly as possible.

As a result of socialist policies the proportion of the rural population, and more precisely that of the agricultural labour force, began to decline from previous levels, though it fell more slowly than might have been expected according to Western precedents. After four decades of the People's Republics, agriculture's contribution to GDP was still relatively high in both Hungary and Poland: around 8%. However, statistical similarities concealed quite different paths of socialist modernization in the two states. I set out to understand these differences better through my fieldwork projects. The divergence began in 1956, a year of political crisis in both Hungary and Poland. Whereas the former recovered to complete mass collectivisation in the years 1959-1961, the Polish socialist authorities were never strong enough to implement such drastic measures. In contrast to Hungary, the *rolnictwo* sector remained dominated by smallholders, who owned the plots which they farmed; but I found that published statistics of ownership and production were an inadequate guide to what was really going on in the two countries.

Tázlár, the village which I studied in Hungary, was located on the Great Plain, 120 km south-east of Budapest. I chose this location because of its unusually flexible form of collective farming. Because of the scattered settlement pattern, it would have been economically irrational

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al to obliterate farmhouses and their high-value vineyards and orchards in order to impose large-scale agriculture. In any case, the sandy soils of this region were unsuited for the production of cereals. The ideology dictated that some form of cooperative had to be created. Accordingly, a small collective sector was institutionalised, which expanded gradually over the years as segments of the peasantry moved away to the towns and new industrial jobs, allowing their land to become available for collective use. Most village households continued to farm their inherited family plots, an acreage much larger than the “household plot” allocated by cooperatives in other regions. Membership of the cooperative did not require work in the collective sector, and to a large extent the traditional rhythms of peasant life persisted. However, the cooperative provided essential assistance with inputs such as fertilizer and cheap feed for domestic animals. It also facilitated marketing, such that commodity production in the household sector expanded and came to exceed pre-socialist levels. Many of those active in producing commodities in their backyards had at least one household member who travelled to an industrial workplace: to one of the factories in nearby Kiskunhalas, or even as far afield as Csepel on the outskirts of Budapest. The former allowed for daily commuting, whereas the latter implied less frequent returns to the village. The outcome was that, by the mid-1970s when I went there, Tázlár had a dynamic household sector. This exemplified not the superiority of the peasant family vis-à-vis the cooperative, but the successful symbiosis of collective farming in Hungary generally. This was based in most communities (though not in Tázlár, due to the local specificities) on the “household plot”.¹²

This version of “market socialism” allowed considerable continuity with the old peasant economy. At the same time it enabled a great improvement in rural living standards, most visible in the modernization of the housing stock. Here, too, there was a symbiosis between public and private: the local state initiated electrification, piped water and general infrastructural improvements, while residents themselves took responsibility for improving their accommodation, e.g. relocating to the village centre and installing modern bathrooms and kitchens. Some built separate houses for their children. As a result, the historic “civilizational” gap between countryside and town narrowed, especially after the members of agricultural cooperatives began to receive pensions comparable to those paid to industrial workers. Some urban

12 Nigel Swain, *Collective Farms Which Work?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

residents were envious of the opportunities for accumulation that were available in small-scale farming; they too engaged in small-scale farming in their spare time, either in “auxiliary plots” close to the city or in their natal village, if this was not too far away. It has been estimated that household-based production was responsible for up to half of Hungary’s total agricultural output in the last decades of socialism. These products were highly competitive on international markets and brought in significant amounts of hard currency. During this period, about 60% of all Hungarian households were involved in some form of farming; about one third of these restricted their work to self-provisioning, while the remaining two thirds, i.e. 40% of all Hungarian households, produced agricultural commodities for sale on the market.¹³ Agriculture’s share in GDP and the size of the rural population both declined, as was to be expected in the course of industrialization. However, in comparison with most Western countries, the declines were gradual, because so many industrial workers still lived in the countryside and engaged in agricultural activities, for subsistence but also for the market.

I chose to work in Poland because the northern neighbour presented so many striking contrasts to Hungary.¹⁴ Following the failure to collectivize, socialist policies to privilege heavy industry and inhibit private enterprise in all sectors brought stagnation to the countryside. Limited measures to encourage “agricultural circles” and later (under Edward Gierek in the 1970s) to modernise the agrarian structure by promoting “specialist” farmers did little to improve productivity or to ensure the supply of food to an expanding urban population. Due to under-urbanization, worker-peasants were just as conspicuous as in Hungary¹⁵; but unlike Hungary, there were few spinoffs in terms of agricultural commodities. It always seemed to me that these elemental market shortages, in comparison to the abundant provisions available in Hungary, played a major role in successive political explosions in Poland, hastening the eventual collapse of the socialist political economy. However, in spite of low levels of production for the market, some accumulation was possible in the Polish countryside. Socialist ideology

13 István Harcsa and Imre Kovách, “Farmerek és mezőgazdasági vállalkozók,” in *Társadalmi riport*, ed. Rudolf Andorka, Tamás Kolosi and György Vukovich (Budapest: TARKI, Századvég, 1996), 104.

14 Chris Hann, “Rural social change in Hungary and Poland,” *Cambridge Anthropology* 6 (1-2) (1980): 142-60.

15 George Kolankiewicz, “The New ‘Awkward Class’: The Peasant-Worker in Poland,” *Sociologia Ruralis* 20 (1-2) (1980): 28-43.

inhibited private investment in production but it was more tolerant in the sphere of consumption: millions of peasants therefore invested what cash they earned (or the remittances they received from the USA) in new housing. Far from being dispossessed, they made long-term investments in their village homes, endowing their children by adding another story or erecting a new dwelling, since the housing market in the city was effectively closed to them. This resembled what their Hungarian counterparts were doing, but the circumstances were very different, since in Poland there were few synergies with the local state.

The bad news for Polish consumers and economic planners was in some ways marvellous for the foreign anthropologist, who could find a splendid laboratory for investigating peasant traditions first documented in the era of the partitions. Serendipity led me to the Lower Beskids (adjacent to the fuzzy boundary with Bieszczady), to a community called Wisłok Wielki, close to the Slovakian border. This settlement had an ethnic and religious history that diverged greatly from the mainstream, even within the region of Galicia, to which this region had belonged in the partition era. It was also untypical in that its remoteness rendered daily commuting to industrial jobs difficult (although some residents in the 1970s did travel to work at the socialist sawmills in Rzepedź; in previous decades they had migrated as far as Silesia to work in the mines). Despite these specificities, I argued that the ways in which the Polish colonists of this section of the Carpathians had recreated peasant economy since the 1950s bore faithful witness to the general contradictions of socialist rural political economy in Poland.¹⁶ In many respects, such as the importance of the Roman Catholic parish, the world documented by Thomas and Znaniecki¹⁷ had not been fundamentally disturbed. As everywhere in Poland, but especially in the more remote areas of the east, the majority of farms were small and poorly capitalized. There was a state farm and a large state forestry undertaking in the region, but there was no fruitful symbiosis of the kind that had evolved in Hungarian socialism. The inhabitants of Wisłok Wielki were hardly integrated into the national society. Both geographical mobility (in terms of rural-urban migration) and social mobility (e.g. via access to higher education) were significantly lower in Poland, compared to the Hungarian countryside. However, a few villagers were constructing large modern houses, some even

16 Hann, *A Village Without Solidarity*.

17 William I. Thomas and Florian W. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1918-19).

Hungary had embarked on a rather successful socialist modernization of its quasi-feudal social structure, whereas in Poland, in the absence of a strong socialist sector, the ensuing stagnation of agriculture was disastrous for all concerned – except for the visiting anthropologist, curious about the persistence of “tradition”

before they had acquired a tractor. Generally, the proportion of the population living in the countryside and engaging in agriculture was even higher than in Hungary and among the highest in Europe; but in comparison with Hungary, productivity was low. Polish households had retained stronger property rights, at least superficially. They owned slightly more productive capital (tractors etc.) than their Hungarian counterparts. I nonetheless concluded that Hungary had embarked on a rather successful socialist modernization of its quasi-feudal social structure, whereas in Poland, in the absence of a strong socialist sector, the ensuing stagnation of agriculture was disastrous for all concerned – except for the visiting anthropologist, curious about the persistence of “tradition”.

After socialism: agribusiness and marginalisation

The last two decades have brought great changes to both Hungary and Poland. There has been a certain convergence after the very different policies pursued under socialism, but it is also possible to detect new differences. In Poland, neoliberalism in the form of “shock therapy” had less initial impact on the countryside than it had on the industrial sector (with the exception of the terrain farmed by cooperatives and PGRs). The Hungarian success story in agriculture came to a sudden end with the loss of important markets in other countries of the ex-Soviet bloc, and above all with the measures to decollectivize land and break up collective farms. Flexible forms of collective in the region of my fieldwork experienced much the same fate as other regions. A small minority benefited, in particular former officials of the collective farms (“green barons”) who were well placed to acquire land as private property and build up farms that would be viable in new conditions.¹⁸ The majority of households which had successfully produced agricultural commodities in the framework of socialist policies lacked the capital to develop in this way; sharp processes of differentiation ensued in which “farms with peasant characteristics” (*paraszti jellegű gazdaságok*) dominated.¹⁹ Similar processes took place in Poland. They unfolded with particular clarity in terms of class formation through the privatisa-

¹⁸ For an overview of these developments throughout Central and Eastern Europe) see: Nigel Swain, *Green Barons, Force-of-Circumstance Entrepreneurs, Impotent Mayors. Rural Change in the Early Years of Post-Socialist Capitalist Democracy* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Harcsa and Kovách, “Farmerek es mezőgazdasági vállalkozók,” 120.

tion of cooperatives and PGRs.²⁰ In both countries, the strengthening of an embryonic elite capable of practising capitalist agribusiness and competing on Western markets was accompanied by the emergence of a much larger group of persons and households who felt themselves marginalized in the new divisions of labour and in effect pushed (back) into the condition of the peasant. Institutional transformations and changes in the statistical classifications, including recognition for the first time of the rural unemployed, make comparisons with the socialist era difficult. But it is clear that in both countries the numbers of persons working in agriculture declined, and agriculture's contribution to the national economy fell sharply.²¹

A decline in the agricultural labour force and in the contribution of agriculture to GDP does not necessarily mean a decline in rural population. The chaos of the postsocialist decades has induced significant migration from town to countryside, reversing the familiar trend of modernisation under both capitalism and socialism. In Poland, the overall share of rural population continued to rise after its entry into the EU. However, the national figure of almost 39% disguises considerable regional variation. In the south-east, where I carried out my fieldwork, the proportion is almost 60%, whereas in Silesia it is only just above 20%. Within each province, significant migration has taken place to periurban villages that provide commuting access to major cities. Although tourism may compensate in certain locations, in general the more remote settlements have continued to stagnate.

20 Michał Buchowski, "Property relations, class, and labour in rural Poland" in *Postsocialist Europe*, ed. Kürti and Skalnik, 51-75.

21 According to Halamska (Maria Halamska, "The Polish Countryside in the Process of Transformation, 1989-2009," *Polish Sociological Review* 1 (173) (2011): 39-43), the share of agriculture in Poland's GNP fell from 7.2% in 1992 to 3.1% in 2002, before stabilizing at around 4% after Poland joined the European Union (2004). In Hungary the share has fallen steadily to reach a record low of 3.1% in 2012. Measuring 'deagrarianization' is complicated. In Poland it is still the case that almost one third of the working population contributes *something* to farm production, while 7.2% "glean the majority of their income from current work in agriculture" (Halamska, "The Polish Countryside in the Process of Transformation, 1989-2009," 40). These figures are considerably higher than EU averages and can be attributed to Poland's conspicuous failure to modernize agriculture in the socialist decades. As for Hungary, official figures indicate a decline in the agricultural labour force from 15.5% of the total in 1990 to just 5.5% in 2001 (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, *Népszámlálás 2001*, Vol. 28 *A mezőgazdasági tevékenység jelenlősége a foglalkoztatásban* (Budapest: KSH 2005)). However, these figures do not include those whose main occupation is outside agriculture or who are unemployed, but who still undertake some agricultural work "part time".

Maria Halamska, after drawing attention to these trends, analyses “the development of a new model of agriculture” in Poland²². On the one hand, the number of tiny farms is decreasing. EU subsidies have improved the situation of full-time family farmers, some of whom began to invest in their farms when designated “specialists” in the 1970s. The overall trajectory of those in this group suggests resemblances to the capitalized farmers of other European countries. On the other hand, Poland continues to have a much larger number of subsistence-oriented, “quasi-peasant” farms than any other country in Europe. It seems that more than 40% of farming households “produce only for the farmers’ own needs”.²³ They are able to detach themselves from the market in this way because one or more members of the household draw income from outside agriculture. In the postsocialist decades, older patterns of the worker-peasant or *pluriactivité* have taken new forms. In addition to allowing access to Brussels farming subsidies, EU membership also opened up Western European labour markets to rural migrants from Central Europe. The response has been staggering. Stereotypes of the “Polish plumber” in Britain are well founded: for example, swathes of the informal economy in one area of North London that I happen to know personally are dominated by young men from the Zamość region. Relationships between these migrants and their families at home are not so different from those analyzed by Thomas and Znaniecki a century ago.²⁴ The remittances they send enable relatives at home to keep going *outside* the market. According to a pure market logic, they might be expected to sell up and move out, thus permitting a smaller rural population and a more rational pattern of mechanized farming. But the opening of transnational labour markets enables households to avoid this step – and thereby to hold on to a measure of continuity with the self-sufficient peasant economy of old.

22 Halamska, “The Polish Countryside in the Process of Transformation, 1989-2009”, 43-47.

23 Ibid., 45.

24 As in the past, migrants regularly distort the census figures. It is likely that a part or even the entirety of the increase in the rural population would disappear with a closer focus on *actual* residence. Even if registered for some purposes in London, many “Polish plumbers” do not deregister in their natal villages. I have not returned to Wisłok Wielki since a brief visit in 2005, when the main change I noticed was the establishment of a new Roman Catholic parish with a resident priest. I was told that production and the agrarian structure had not changed significantly in recent years, and that embryonic touristic development did not begin to compensate for the loss of jobs at the socialist sawmill in Rzepedź.

Similar dualism seems to be developing in at least some regions of Hungary. However, due to the rationalization which took place in the collectivized decades and the way in which decollectivization was implemented (pre-socialist boundaries were not respected rigorously, which led to extremely inefficient fragmentation of ownership in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania), the lingering “peasant” sector is nowadays smaller in Hungary. Traditional peasant ideals of self-sufficiency at the level of the household were undermined by the symbiosis with socialist cooperatives, though ironically, as we have seen, this interaction led to an extraordinary increase in the proportion of final agricultural output that was formally attributed to small-scale producers (households). Since the demise of that socialist synthesis, many Hungarian villagers have simply given up small-scale agriculture altogether. The long-term decline in the size of the rural population was reversed in the 1990s, as in Poland, but in contrast to Poland the decline has resumed in the last decade. The present figure is just over 30%. Village residents are demoralized but, as in Poland, given the investments they made in their homes in the socialist era, they have no incentive to move to towns. Many own small, non-viable estates, which if they are lucky they can rent out to a new private farmer. These landowners typically withdraw then from production altogether, even from subsistence production on their remaining garden plots. As Bea Vidacs has shown (forthcoming), many villagers have given up the traditional ritual of pig-sticking, because it is cheaper to buy meat at the local branch of a German-owned supermarket (*Lidl* or *Pennymarkt*). The observer might say that Hungarian villagers have entered a new stage of modernity, compared to the decades of late socialism, because they expend less energy on dirty, demanding, labour-intensive tasks and have more free time to watch television or play cards in the Culture House. However, many feel nostalgia for the socialist decades, in which they worked incredibly hard, but enjoyed the fruits of this labour (in terms of consumer goods, above all housing) in ways not open to them today. The levels of international migration appear to be lower in Hungary (not only is Hungary a much smaller country but fertility levels have been historically low in comparison to rural Poland). The rural unemployed have also benefited since 2010 from a nationwide employment creation scheme.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is not difficult to un-

25 Alexandra Szőke, *Rescaling States – Rescaling Insecurities. Rural citizenship at the edge of the Hungarian state*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Central European University, Budapest 2012).

derstand why, especially among disaffected rural youth with no prospects of emulating the achievements of their parents and grandparents, support for extreme nationalist parties and anti-Roma and anti-Jewish sentiment are widespread in Hungary today.

On the basis of these brief illustrations we can see that the Central European countryside is certainly not immune to wider forces of globalization and neoliberalism: supermarket penetration as well as new migration options and EU subsidies to farmers have all had an impact, in Poland as well as in Hungary. The details continue to vary as a consequence of different histories. I argue that the history of the socialist decades was decisive in shaping present patterns in both countries. The reactionary political currents which are particularly virulent in rural Hungary today are surely related to the sudden decline of the rural-agricultural sector after 1990. In this respect, as in many others, Polish rural sector shows greater *continuity*. However, we should not forget that both relative and absolute poverty indicators for the rural sector remain roughly twice as high as urban levels.²⁶

Conclusion

Poland remains a *locus classicus* for the study of that vast group classified by Teodor Shanin as the “awkward class”, because its peasants have never been easy to accommodate in the standard classifications of modern social theory. The sheer size of this population suggests that we should pay serious attention to it, both in Poland and abroad. This agenda was first tackled a century ago in the pioneering work of Thomas and Znaniecki²⁷. Of course, the situation is different today. It might be argued that peasantry has lost much of its historical distinctiveness, that other social classes have become equally “awkward” as they improvise pluralist strategies of survival to reproduce themselves in postsocialist variants of neoliberalism, irrespective of whether they live in towns or in the countryside. But the possibilities to accomplish this social reproduction via “self-sufficiency” remain very different in the countryside; in most of eastern Europe, the historic gulf between town and countryside has still not been bridged to the extent it has as a result of the more gradual, long-term evolution of the rural sector in north-west Europe.

26 Halamska, “The Polish Countryside in the Process of Transformation, 1989-2009,” 51. I have not been able to trace a comparable figure for Hungary, but I suspect it would be similar.

27 Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*.

The legacy of socialism without mass collectivisation continues to make Polish case quite different from that of neighbouring states. In Hungary, the era of neoliberalism has brought a sharp decline in the position of farmers and the standard of living of the rural population, vis-à-vis the *urbanus* population. In Poland, by contrast, neoliberalism has arguably helped the rural sector as a whole to overcome at least some of the consequences of backwardness and isolation that persisted under socialism. This is evident in improved pension provisions for farmers, and in the narrowing of the gap between rural and urban fertility rates. At the same time, the present transnational constellations continue to facilitate the persistence of large numbers of households, especially in "Poland B", i.e. the less developed eastern provinces, which operate according to the rhythms of the peasant economy of old rather than the agribusinesses of the twenty-first century. The countryside remains poor, in relative and in absolute terms. Compared to most Western states, the rural population is large in both Poland and Hungary – much larger than warranted, an economist might say, for an efficient agricultural sector. One conspicuous result of the socialist era, when households in both countries found it easier to invest in consumption than in productive machines, is a large stock of improved housing in the countryside, often scattered outside village centres. This provides millions, including transnational migrants, with an anchor or refuge from the constraints of neoliberal capitalism. One should not begrudge these post-peasants their refuge, but nor should one confuse them with the gentrified village residents of the Home Counties, who commute to London by suburban train. It is necessary to look behind the statistics to see the huge differences which prevail within Europe and which now contribute to the reproduction of its transnational class structures. In combination with the fragmented ownership structure, the post-peasants who remain, as Maria Halamska puts it, "outside the market" in their villages are a major long-term hindrance to the emergence of a more efficient agrarian structure, as they were under socialism; they are clearly "inside" the world of neoliberal European capitalism.

Finally, I want to recall the political configuration of the late socialist era in the hope that lessons can be learned. I take it for granted that young Poles who criticise neoliberalism today and engage creatively in *Alterglobalisation* movements of any kind are not so different in motivation from those of my generation who, disillusioned after 1968, were attracted by the oppositional stance of Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń and others, and followed every whimsical statement phrased by Leszek

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Kołakowski in his Oxford exile. The British communist historian E. P. Thompson famously tried to enlist Kołakowski for a critique of capitalist society on a pan-European level. The Polish philosopher, despite his impressive oppositional credentials, rejected this invitation to supranational cooperation, and went on to make it clear in his writings that he no longer saw any emancipatory potential in Marxism. The entire red *Bildungsbürgertum*, as the Warsaw milieu around Michnik has been aptly described by Agnes Anna Arndt,²⁸ opted in the end to wage a *national* struggle against the authorities of the People's Republic. There was no attempt to forge international alliances, not even with similar dissidents of red origins in neighbouring socialist states such as Hungary. To an outsider such as me, it seems that two decades after the "shock therapy" applied by Leszek Balcerowicz, both workers and peasants continue to pay high price for the revolution to which Polish intellectuals made such important contributions. One can only hope that the current generation of young idealists, incensed by the unfairness of neoliberal capitalism, will not repeat the betrayal of those earlier intellectuals, incensed by the repressions of Marxist-Leninist socialism. In retrospect, the villagers in Wisłok were quite right to be cynical about the *Solidarity* movement in 1980-1. Although its articulate leaders claimed to be speaking for the entire nation, it is clear in retrospect that the largest constituencies lost out, both in town and countryside.

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²⁸ Agnes Anna Arndt, *Rote Bürger. Eine Milieu- und Beziehungsgeschichte linker Dissidenz in Polen (1956-1976)* (Doctoral Dissertation, Freie Universität, Berlin 2012).

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Tytuł: Ciągle niewygodna klasa. Środkowo-europejscy post-chłopi w kraju i za granicą w dobie neoliberalizmu

Abstrakt: Artykuł oparty jest na posiadanej przez autora pogłębionej wiedzy dotyczącej wschodnioeuropejskiego życia wiejskiego w ostatnich czterech dekadach. Przed socjalizmem, a także w jego trakcie i po nim mieszkańców wsi („chłopi”) zawsze włączano w obręb szerszych struktur, stanowiąc wyzwanie dla klasycznych teorii z zakresu nauk społecznych. Podstawę ich odrębności stanowi większa zdolność do samoreprodukcyj

„poza rynkiem”, co odpowiada utrzymującemu się podziałowi na miasto i wieś oraz niesie konsekwencje dla mobilizacji politycznej. W artykule rozwinięte zostają dwuelementowe porównania: pierwsze, między kapitalistycznymi i socjalistycznymi drogami rozwoju obszarów wiejskich, oraz drugie, w obrębie tego ostatniego pomiędzy produktywną symbiozą dokonaną w socjalistycznych Węgrzech i stagnacją nieskolektywizowanej Polski. Niektóre z przeciwieństw między tymi ostatnimi utrzymały się w nowych formach w okresie członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej. Wreszcie, autor wyraża osobistą nostalgię za czasami, w których badania na wspólnotami wiejskimi stanowiły fundament etnograficznego opisu tego regionu.

Słowa kluczowe: chłopi, antropologia, gospodarstwa domowe, globalizacja, agrobiznes, migracja, reprodukcja