
SOCIAL CONTINUITY IN A WESTERN-HUNGARIAN VILLAGE

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This paper summarizes my preliminary ethnographic findings of my PhD research project: 1) what extent Hungarian village society has preserved continuity in terms of social relations (kin, neighborhood, friend, work, patron-client, etc.) and communal character, 2) what sort of social network and shared sets of norms establish relations among villagers today, 3) what the nature of trusted and mistrustful relations are, and 4) what kind of patterns can be followed today. These issues are investigated through an analysis of the drastically changed structure of 20th century local employment (jobs carried out at workplaces, small-scale farms and in the households). Therefore, the main question concerns the relationship between local society and its economy in relation to present national and transnational economies.

The relationship between local norms and the ideology of macro-economic politics and policies is sometimes in opposition in post-socialist countries and, therefore, emerges as a quite relevant research topic for economic anthropologists (cf. e.g. Hann 2003). The collapse of the socialist state and cooperative paternalism (guarantee for job, pension, health service, agricultural acquisition, and selling etc.), a 'great transformation' (Polanyi 1944) to use Polanyi's term, draws attention to transformations that take place in local norms.

I had been carrying out my ethnographic fieldwork in a Hungarian village, Somlóvásárhely, since the summer of 2004. The fieldwork is based on semi-structured, qualitative (biographical and topical) interviews and participant-observation. Applying the concept of '*ethnographic present*' (cf. Köstlin, K. 1991; Sanjek, R. 1991), in the course of my fieldwork, I determined the temporal framework of the collected material as follows: besides contemporary, current phenomena such data are to be analyzed that the members of the local community are able to recollect in addition to historical sources available in archives and libraries.

The settlement

Somlóvásárhely is situated in a small Transdanubian (Western Hungarian) wine-region,

which includes only one hill ('Somló'). Its informal designation is 'the capital of Somló', because it was the largest settlement around the hill, and it was a market town (*mez_város*) during feudalism. In 1871 Somlóvásárhely lost its municipal rights and became a village again. The number of local population rose until the end of the 19th century (in 1890 the settlement had 1920 inhabitants), and since then it has been decreasing. Especially in the inter-war period, quite a lot of villagers emigrated, for example, to the U. S., whereas later, in socialism, people moved to towns within the country. The rate of immigrants was never high. In 2001 the number of local residents was 1,121. As far as religious and ethnic identity is concerned, almost all villagers declared themselves Hungarian and Roman Catholic, and one percent of the inhabitants, professed that they are Gypsy.

The village demonstrates the characteristic features of continuity and change (tradition and modernization). In the post-socialist era, the decline of the micro-regional industry and the unfavorable alteration of the structure of agriculture have forced several villagers to continue or revive traditional strategies. On the other hand, favorable conditions of transportation and vine growing, as well as the relative closeness of towns, provide opportunities for survival: employment, trade and enterprises. In 2004 the rate of local unemployment was under four percent.

The cultivated land of the village comprises 2,321 hectares. Wine growing is the most important source of income locally, whose roots go back to the Roman era (Csoma 1986; Márkusné 2001). About two thirds of the owners are *extraneous* (i.e. their place of residence is not in Somlóvásárhely), meanwhile a lot of local inhabitants are part-time or full-time employees in these vineyards. The significance of agriculture in other sectors (field plant growing, animal husbandry) is falling; in 2001 there were 425 households but in 2000 there were only 189 private farms in the settlement.

The socialist cooperative was transformed into a private corporation at the beginning of the 1990s; at present these successor organizations

cultivate landed property of those village people who leased theirs. The nearby town (Ajka) had been the center of mining and heavy, processing industry since the second half of the 19th century. The building and light industry of the other neighboring town (Devecser) was centrally developed in the socialist period. In 2001 73.5% (Census 2001) of the employees were commuters, who work, in most cases, in these two towns.

In the local community, which has permanently undergone transformations owing to the profound socio-economic as well as political changes ('changes of systems', *rendszerváltások*) of the 20th century, (i.e. nationalization, industrialization, urbanization, re-privatization, capitalization), continuity is observable in social status, economic and employment patterns, occupations both in the local economic relations, the whole social networking and hierarchy of this village community.

Status groups

They are the descendants of the one-time local, wealthy families that launch the most significant (agricultural) enterprises and who are the most important landowners nowadays. In this village there were a lot of families that became the members of the nobility (*armális nemes*) in late feudalism, in the 17–18th centuries (Márkusné 2001: 152–166). Most of them received the title and the rights owing to their former military service and merits in war against the Turks, but they were not given estates. As a consequence, their lifestyle usually remained similar as that of peasants, but they acquired anew noble identity. In Hungary, this was a typical way for social rise at this in the 17th and 18th centuries. This new noble group was more or less endogamous.

According to historical sources on the influential families of that time, the same names can be found later in the era of the 'half-feudal' capitalism (1848–1949, wherein social structure and hierarchy remained similar to the former one), or as nowadays. The same families had the most important roles in the local economy regardless of the actual political-economic setting (i.e. either before or after socialism), and these families are the descendants of those noble families. Their social capital had persisted through all political systems: there is a strong reciprocity among them, they have a considerable number of patron-client relations, and in some cases they hold an office in the local administration or in the wine-region. The

economic capital that they lost during the socialist collectivization was an important basis for them during re-privatization in the 1990s; they are self-reliant, are able to found enterprises, and they operate a local paternalist system. In socialism they had usually non-agricultural workplaces combined with some household plot farming as an auxiliary source of income, which was made possible by introduction of the New Economic Mechanism of Hungarian government after 1968. At present the most considerable entrepreneurs are the men in general, while women work at public institutions of the village such as local council, vineyards' council (*hegyközség*), primary school, and kindergarten.

To demonstrate my observation, I will describe two families who have high socio-economic position in this settlement.

The first family I will discuss here is the one whose members followed entrepreneurial patterns in each socio-political system of the 20th century and occupied several positions. Their ancestors were vineyardists on the large estates of the Church; they had several shops, large plots of land (8–10 hectares), a threshing-machine, and they were also engaged in animal husbandry. In addition, they practiced some cultivation, and employed villagers as servants and seasonal workers to work for them.

After socialist nationalization, one of the descendants graduated from a university in Budapest, and later in the 1970–1980s, he fulfilled several leadership positions (appointed managing director) of the Hungarian Airlines. Later, in post-socialism, he became the first leader of the community of wine-growers (*hegybíró*) and of the vineyards' council. He was the first in the village to establish a company of viticulture together with his brother using 5 hectares of re-privatized land of their family. His nephew had several enterprises in late socialism, and later, he set up another company for viticulture including wine-growing on 4 hectare-rented land, wine bottling and wine-tourism. Presently, he employs quite a lot of villagers. Altogether, the family has been one of the main local integrators of labor in pre-socialism, socialism and post-socialism, too.

Another local group of collateral families that I will depict is those who owned the largest landed property (10–15 hectares) and livestock in the village before socialism. In the first socialist period (1949–1953) one of them was stigmatized

as *kulák*. Later, since the subsequent period of socialism, three lineages of the descendants had followed quite similar strategies; they became agricultural entrepreneurs in the 1970s. They bred livestock and owned tractors. At present, after decollectivization and/or re-privatization, they have some of the largest farms in the village again (8-12 hectares), and they sell grain and livestock home and abroad. They are private entrepreneurs, but the complexity of their farm structure with a lot of agricultural branches rooted in peasant norms (cf. Fél and Hofer 1972).

They have strong co-operations not only between the lineages, but also with other influential agricultural entrepreneurs. They have also become local integrators in the village; one of them cultivates almost all lands in the village and in the micro-region for capital; another descendant sells pigs to most of the local families every year as most of the families abandoned fattening pigs the past years. In addition, they also unofficially provide credit to poor villagers.

The non-agricultural entrepreneurs (joiners, builders, carriers, etc.) have different social backgrounds; they are the descendants of former nobles, or other 'genuine' villagers or settlers (newcomers). They have no family farms or auxiliary jobs, and they do not occupy posts in the village. They are indeed successful, but it is based on their cultural capital (education) or on their individual entrepreneurial facilities and skills. They have strong economic connections with the previous described group.

They are, in essence, the descendants of the former lower and middle strata who are at present industrial workers or employees of the third sector. *Pluriactivité* is a key concept in this case as these people have workplaces, a little vineyard or other sorts of decollectivized land, but they also have seasonal agricultural or other types of jobs. As far as their survival strategy is concerned, they act often exactly in the same way as their ancestors did. They already had more income sources in pre-socialism. In Hungary, in the socialist era (since the New Economic Mechanism in 1968) it was a typical way to work in the 'second economy,' which means that villagers – following peasant patterns (an altered version of mentality described by Chaianov, (1931) – self-exploited themselves, since they worked not only at their official places of work but also in their household farms (*háztáji*) for self-sufficiency and trade. This pattern subsisted after

the socialist regime collapsed with moderated possibilities (no cooperative paternalism any longer). Recently, however these small plots (usually under 1 ha) and small-scale farming units in general, lost their importance due to price cuts.

The most common auxiliary job has been seasonal day-work (*napszám*) in these vineyards in each and every socio-economic system. It can be also noted that these jobs, carried out in the informal economy were/are often the same in each politico-economic era. For instance, if the male members of the family were carpenters in the second economy under socialism, it is very likely that the male members of this very family take up carpentry in post-socialism besides having permanent jobs. This can be observed with female members of a family, too. However, these auxiliary jobs are often more secure than the ones in the formal economy, since several factories and other workplaces had been shut down recently, and their future depends on investments of the Swiss and French owners. Due to the supranational tendencies of the global economy, villagers and urbanites already suffer the consequences of the shut-down of the sewing factories in this micro-region. Their explanation for all these changes, however, is the Chinese over-production and import.

Ethnic minorities have great economic impact on the social-economic structure of the village. From the middle of the 18th century until the 1920s, a large Jewish community lived here. Generally, they were wine-sellers by profession, but most of them moved away from the village a decade before the Holocaust.

Until the beginning of the year 2000, there were only few Gypsy families in this village, however, the number of Gypsy families had increased due to the lack of employment in the cities. The differences in social and cultural views of the villager community and the newcomer Gypsy families, various social conflicts emerged; the presence of Gypsy families raised issues about land ownership and competition for employment.

Gypsy people have no landed property and therefore they are engaged in the sale of cleared-out junk (*lomizók*), something that is not well-appreciated by the local community. These Gypsy families regularly go to Western countries, especially to Austria, at the time of annual clearings of attics, and then they transport nearly everything they find (furniture, clothes, electric

ware, sports ware, garden decoration, etc.) either to their home settlement, where they sell it at a very low price, or they go to the city markets to make some money.

Social networking

All these groups are set into a complex interconnected network of relations; within the various status groups in order to ensure the operation of the small-scale farms and households, some forms of co-operation have become into existence based on either reciprocity, redistribution or market interests. These relations resemble some of the formerly existing hierarchies such as employer-employee or patron-client relationship of the past.

Policies and mistrust

This local 'society of continuity' is connected to a strong conservative political identity. But in spite of these characteristic features, the villagers do not have a strong sense of solidarity, as they say. They, in general, mistrust any authorities.

After the fall of state Socialism, the majority of the villagers voted for a local inhabitant to fulfill the position of the mayor both in 1990 and 1994 (a man from a family of high prestige, whose ancestors were the owners of a water mill in the village). However, since 1998 the mayor had been someone who never lived in the settlement but he worked in the village as the director of the local primary school.

Similarly, when the vineyards' council was organized in 1994, the first elected leader was a man from one of the local families with the highest prestige (see my description of the first family above), but since 1999, this post is fulfilled by a new-comer entrepreneur, who lives in the outskirts of the village.

Lack of co-operation characterizes not only the settlement, but also the whole wine-region, which has a negative impact on wine selling. Civil organizations of viticulture cannot fulfill their function, because people's everyday life is basically determined by their political beliefs. The number of different organizations had doubled; there are organizations for right-wingers just as well as for left-wingers. Consequently, more or less connected to this dichotomy, there is another opposition between local and non-local owners of vineyards. Having a vineyard in this region is not only the outcome of an economically

grounded decision, but it has also become a matter of social prestige. Thus, most owners of these vineyards are townspeople, for instance from the capital of Hungary. Most of the time, these people have neither social nor cultural connection to the local society. The lack of co-operation retards the developing market for locally produced wine of high quality, thus it is quite difficult to find a bottle of wine from this micro-region in a supermarket. Although, few entrepreneurs' bottled wine can be found in some expensive restaurants.

Conclusion

'Community norms' were more or less resilient until the middle of the 20th century in Hungarian villages (cf. Fél and Hofer 1969), but the radical political and economic changes resulted in the parallel existence of the antagonistic patterns and life strategies (cf. e.g. the theory of multilineal *embourgeoisement* by Szelényi, 1988). In addition, in a globalized postmodern era, even these models of biographies are exceeded. *Pluriactivité* of adjusting to the transformations is a common way; mixed elements of peasant-like, entrepreneurial, worker and/or intellectual mentalities (cf. e.g. Hann and Sárkány 2003). But even though in post-socialism, cultural flows and neo-liberal economic ideologies globally determine the new walk of life, differences are maintained and shaped by the local norms and historical roots.

It is difficult to point out what the consequences of Hungary's EU accession (2004) will be in this village. Economic conditions are worse now than before. The villagers know almost nothing about the EU, about their own roles in the EU, not to mention the possible opportunities they may have. Altogether, changes in the structure of the local society, just as well as the improvement of the living standards, are not to be expected.

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