THE NEW POWER OF OLD MEN: PRIVATISATION AND FAMILY RELATIONS IN MESTERSZÁLLÁS (HUNGARY)

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Gender and privatisation both figure prominently in studies on postsocialism. However, they are seldom dealt with together. Most of the literature on gender in the ongoing transformation focuses on the diminishing political participation of urban women, on questions of feminisation of poverty and of identity formation (Einhorn 1993, Rueschemeyer 1994, Funk and Muller 1993, Gal and Kligman 2000). We know little about the situation of rural women, their participation in privatisation and the new rural economy. Some studies deal with the consequences of privatisation for rural women (DeSoto and Panzig 1995, Bridger 1996, Pine 1996). Still, we know almost nothing about the way gender roles are shaped by and are shaping the privatisation of land.

On the other hand, most anthropological studies on property focus on the gap between western economic concepts of private property and the actual solutions on the local level. These are described, for example, as "fuzzy property" (Verdery 1999). Such concepts mainly argue against simple neo-classical or neo-liberal notions of private property and try to explore why private property seemingly "does not work" in formerly socialist countries. By concentrating on this process of invention, ethnographic case studies often contrast an "East European community" against a "western outside."

Emphasising this contrast, it seems that the main anthropological discussions linking forms of property to inheritance and family relations have been almost forgotten. Goody (1976: 3) pointed out that property transmission not only helps the reproduction of the social system, it is also a way in which interpersonal relations are structured. Thus, by the re-invention of private property in formerly socialist states, property transmission in families may regain relevance and may change interpersonal relations as well. Therefore, we should once again have a closer look at inheritance and power relations within families.

This article explores the connections between age and gender in the case of Mesterszállás, a small Hungarian village in the Great Plain. First, a short description of the presocialist family structure and the changes collectivisation brought into that system will be given. Taking into account the overall changing economic situation for the rural population due to the collapse of the socialist system, the changes privatisation brought for the domestic power balance are described. In this particular case, I argue that in the course of reinvention of private landed property, old men regained some of their power in the families.[i]

Landed Property in the Presocialist Hungarian Peasant Family

Ethnographies describe the presocialist structure of peasant society in the Hungarian plain as very much dependent on landed property (Fel and Hofer 1969). The control over land was decisive for an individual's position in the family and in some of the potential conflicts. This control was dependent on age and gender. Landed property was seen as male, and despite the law that foresaw equal shares for both sons and daughters upon inheritance, women normally inherited less land than men. This situation changed slowly in the 1920s and 1930s when daughters increasingly received equal shares.

Labour organisation was very much dependent on the *gazda*, the head of the family, who made all decisions on production and work in the fields for all family members. His wife, the *gazdaasszony* managed the household, thereby ruling over all younger women living in the household. In a typical case, both would maintain their power until death. Land meant social security for the elder generation because

as long as they lived, they were entitled to care by the younger generation. There was little chance for a younger couple to become independent before the death of their parents, and those who tried often ended up in very unfortunate circumstances (Bell 1984: 62). The elder generation therefore played, through their control of the landed property, a crucial role in the lives of the younger generation.

Most of these features of the presocialist peasant family fit into the collected life histories from Mesterszállás. Due to the scattered form of this settlement, the life of women may have been more difficult, because upon marriage, young women had not only to leave the home but moved far away from their family and neighbours. Old women often remember the bitter solitude of the isolated farm, the *tanya*.

Collectivisation and the Family Structure

Collectivisation changed this structure of power within families profoundly. It was especially the positions based on age that were altered. With the loss of control over landed property due to expropriation or more or less voluntary entry into the co-operative, the elder generation lost much of their power in the family. This is especially true for the head of the family who previously decided about the labour of all family members. By working in the collective farm the younger generation now had its own income and would sometimes even earn more money than the *gazda* did. They also had access to their own household plot and could, with the help of the co-operative, engage in private production. Though often co-operating with their larger family, they were no longer solely dependent on the landed property of their parents. With increased standards of living in Hungary, especially in the 1960 and 1970s, and cheap credits available from the co-operative, young couples would, by building their own house, separate earlier from their parents, forming their own household.

On the other hand, the elder generation also gained more independence. With the implementation in Hungary of a pension system for the workers in agricultural co-operatives in 1958, one of the previously lifelong, property-bound rights was very successfully substituted by a state-guaranteed, work-related right. Old people were no longer solely depended on their children in their old age. Swain emphasises the importance of this measure for the rural population: "The significance of this source of income which did not depend on labour cannot be overestimated" (Swain 1985: 39). Overall co-operation within families for production in the socialist private sector took place, but for the means of production the whole family now depended on the co-operative more than on privately owned property. Bell describes the changes as follows:

> Collectivization removed the material basis for parental power in families where children remained home. With the loss of control over his land, the *gazda* lost much of his dominance in the family. He was no longer the leader of an enterprise, but at best the family's representative in the collective farm (and later not even solely that). He no longer really had the authority or the arena in which to direct his grown children at home (Bell 1984: 196).

In regard to gender roles within families, socialism had a contradictory influence. As in other socialist countries, the "women's question" was thought to have been solved by eliminating private property and integrating women into the workforce. In Mesterszállás, as elsewhere, more women than ever before acquired employment outside their home. Still, due to the socialist division of labour they mostly worked in "typical" female sectors of agriculture such as vegetable gardening and poultry or in the administration of the co-operatives. In the latter cases, they were superior to ordinary male members, but as in other sectors of the socialist economy, the overall hierarchy was male-dominated. Women mostly held lesser-paid jobs and were rarely to be found in leading positions in the co-operative. Nonetheless, with the rise of Hungarian agriculture and especially socialist private household production in the 1960 and 1970s, women contributed considerably to household income. This production was mainly associated with women, who, while their husbands worked in "official" workplaces, managed animal production at home and intense crop cultivation. Due to this development a lot of women in Mesterszállás never worked "officially." Thus, on the one hand, their contribution to the family income increased as did their influence; on the other hand, a lot of them do not have their own pension today and are dependent on their husbands. This gender

division was, more than in other socialist countries, supported by a strong policy facilitating women to stay at home with their small children..[ii] In 1989, Hungary had the lowest rate of women's employment of all former socialist countries. Still, for a lot of the middle and younger generations of women, socialism meant liberation from hard work in family agriculture altogether. In Mesterszállás, it also meant the liberation from the lonely life of the scattered farms because most families built new houses in the village centre. Most women described moving into the village and shorter distances to the shops, medical centres, schools and so forth as lessening the hardships in their lives. In regard to landed property, which officially remained in the hands of the co-operative members, women had the same entitlements as men. They received the same small annual fee paid by the co-operative for the use of members' land and received also equal shares of inheritance. Due to the downgraded importance of landed property this was only of minor importance in socialism, but then became important in the 1990s, when property regained relevance for land claims.

Privatisation and Family Relations

Due to the political circumstances at the beginning of the 1990s, the idea of moral compensation for past suffering became prominent in public discourse. Consequently the postsocialist legislation on land privatisation favoured claims on the basis of land lost in the course of expropriations in the first wave of forced collectivisation in the 1950s. Other claims involved member land, which was brought into the co-operatives by "voluntary" entry and small shares for workers without one of the former entitlements. Due to the importance placed upon pre-socialist property and moral compensation, lost land was distributed mainly among the older generation. Young people had fewer historical entitlements and, if the local co-operative broke up, they could even lose access to land previously guaranteed by their workplace.[iii]

In Mesterszállás, the latter was not the case in the beginning of the 1990s. The co-operative remained in operation and even increased the territory for private production associated with it. Mainly peppers could be grown by each member and as much as anyone wanted to be responsible for. Seeds, fertilizer and so forth were sown by the co-operative, hoeing and harvesting was done by the respective families. The product was mainly sold to the drying plant owned by the co-operative. Until the mid 1990s this, together with private pork production, was a good income supplement for the village population, which on the whole experienced decreasing standards of living and increasing unemployment. But by 2000, because of lower prices for meat and the bankruptcy of a nearby slaughterhouse, the local population suffered severe losses. Also, since the beginning of bankruptcy proceedings at the local agrarian co-operative in 1999 – which were concluded in 2001 – private production of work-intensive crops has slowly decreased. All in all, the perspectives for small-scale agricultural production are getting worse.

Privatisation and intergenerational conflicts

One consequence of privatisation is that young families have no or almost no land of their own. At the same time they have lost the possibility of working a household plot and access to cheap means of production furnished by the co-operative and often have had to give up animal production for the market altogether. They cannot work their small plots alone and cannot buy fodder because it has become too expensive. Some of these families increasingly have fallen out of agrarian production, which until now constituted a considerable part of their income. If they have parents, who now have landed property, they often try to work more of the elder generation's land, but they have to convince their parents of their capacity to do so. Even if they convince them of their agricultural capacities, this often leads to new conflicts about the use of the land.

For example, in the beginning of the nineties one couple in their thirties who built a house about 150 kilometers from Mesterszállás and worked in a children's home, decided to come back to their parents' village. One reason to come back was that they thought they could work part of the man's father's land. Coming back, László found work in the local co-operative, but could not convince his father, who already worked some of his land alone and left the rest in the co-operative, to leave some land to him. In the face of a crisis in the co-operative László changed jobs to the mayor's office where he gets paid less. Additionally, by leaving the co-operative, he lost the chance of receiving a household plot. The couple thought of

supplementing the loss in income by increasing private production. Finally, László convinced his father to try one hectare together. This was the source of ongoing conflict in the year 2000. László wanted to use fertilizer; his father did not. The young couple started off hoeing; the elders thought it was too early. Conflicts continued for the whole year about the right time and way for watering, harvesting and so on. Finally, after all the disputes and work they had less peppers than expected and they could not sell them for a good price.

In another case, the father handed over his land to his son, Mihaly who works it as one of the largest entrepreneurs in the village. Until privatisation the son and his wife also had their own house in another settlement and were living from their own earnings as a painter and a bookmaker. Since he took on private agriculture, Mihály concentrated on grain production and did not engage in animal husbandry. However in 1999, his father decided to buy an old stable from the co-operative and bought some calves, which the young couple now has to look after.

These young families, who used to earn their living during socialism from paid work, lived separately from their parents in their own houses, are relying now on their parents for the sources of production. Landed property is once again in the hands of the elder generation and with the lack of other possibilities, young people become dependent on their decisions. Even if fathers have enough confidence in their sons, they still have considerable influence on decisions about production. The new property regime changed the structure of potential roles and conflicts between generations.

Private land and gender

In the examples above mostly men, fathers, and sons are mentioned. This is not an accident; rather, it makes clear that apart from age, gender is of major importance. With re-privatisation men and women have the same legal entitlements to compensation. Women may have had slightly fewer claims than men due to the more distant pre-socialist inheritance practice mentioned above, but this can neither account for the differences found in actual engagement in the process of distributing the land, nor for the lack of female agrarian entrepreneurs today.

The initial observation in Mesterszállás is that women did not engage in the privatisation procedure. In general they delegated their compensation entitlements to near male kin. Out of 158 interviewed persons, 63 stated they have had personal entitlements for compensation for lost land; 31 of them were women. In 21 cases, a male family member managed these entitlements for them. Only seven women stated having managed their entitlements themselves and three sold them. On the other hand 26 men managed their entitlements themselves and no man (and no woman) had his (or her) entitlements managed by a female member of the family. With regard to public actions in the privatisation process, it can be said that women were almost invisible. All members in local land commissions were male and, in the land auctions, where all people with such entitlements could take part in receiving their share of land again, almost all participants were men. There may have been discussions within families about this matter, but in public the men were the actors. As indicated above, in Mesterszállás there are no female agrarian entrepreneurs. In theory, it is possible, all the more so since they are not obliged to sit on a tractor themselves, but could manage the working of the land by renting it out or contracting machine work. Yet, even women whose husbands were engaged in part-time or full-time agriculture often do not know how much land they have in their own name or what exactly is produced in what amount on the family land. One woman stated in a questionnaire, that she could not answer the question about the best term for their family agriculture, since this was her husband's “affair” (No. 56, 09/27/1999, 31 years old). In the same interview, she stated that their main source of income was the family agriculture. Decisions to leave the co-operative and to start private agriculture were strongly dependent on the existence of male family members; families who had the same compensation entitlements as the now successful entrepreneurs, but “only” had daughters, left the land to the co-operative. For example, Márton has 65 hectares in the co-operative. Asked why nobody in the family works the land, he said: “I have two daughters” 04/09/1999, 72 years old). He did not explain further. The sentence tells us everything. Asked further, what if he had a son, he says: “then we surely would do it [work the land].” In network interviews conducted with nine agrarian producers, 92 male persons were named and only 19 female. Concerning the question with who would one talk about an important decision, only one named his wife.

The question arises, if socialism had not changed anything in the relationship between gender and landed property, why did women not take part in privatisation? The possible answer is as contradictory as the position of women was during socialism. For some women, socialism meant liberation from the hard and lonely life on an isolated farm. Going back was not a positive prospect and they did not romanticize this past, as some men did. One woman, whose son is one of the new private farmers, still has some of her compensation vouchers at home, saying: "I worked enough in the fields (*határon*); I don't need that any more" (DN 05/25/1999). Those who during socialism ascended into "clean" jobs had in the beginning of the 1990s the structural advantage of being employed in sectors that were not among the first to shrink. Therefore, a lot of them only lost their jobs more recently. Additionally, the intensive private production, which was primarily associated with women, also only recently came to an end. With the beginning of the 1990s it was not foreseeable for a lot of women that their main form of agricultural production would have no future. With the decline of co-operative farming, all the means and rights they provided (household plot, seeds, channels of distribution) changed or even disappeared. Their contribution to family income decreased and so it seems their influence in the family. This tendency is increasingly obvious the more the family relies on agriculture, which in Mesterszállás is very much characterised by specialised grain production in which female engagement is especially low. Additionally, the traditional female part in the agrarian production, milk and pork production, is losing more and more importance during the postsocialist transformation. This is mainly due to macro economic changes and a loss in markets and is locally visible in low prices and bankruptcy cases in diary and slaughterhouses.

Ten years after the beginning of changes, the reluctance of women to engage in privatisation has become an economic disadvantage that may also alter their position in the family. This seems to be especially true in larger family businesses. In all of the successful families who work land of more than 100 hectares, women did not talk or know very much about their husband's agricultural business. Three of these agricultural entrepreneurs were in their fifties and sixties and the women did not take part in any conversation about agriculture at all. In the two young families in their late twenties and early thirties with young children, the women lost their jobs due to closure of firms, but would like to go back to work. One of them, Eszter, used to work in the drying plant of the local co-operative, where she also got to know her husband. Now the factory only works irregularly and after her maternity leave of three years, she did not get her old job back. She then tried to get financed schooling for another profession, but failed. So she has no personal source of income that may alter her influence on decisions about the spending of money in the family. For example, she stated that her husband "only buys machines" instead of investing in their household, in furniture, or even their own house (they are living together with his mother) for example. In 2002, her husband bought some of the old stables of the co-operative and wanted to start at least some pig breeding. He did not sell the milking machine, despite his own allergy to cows and knowing that his wife do not want to go into animal breeding at all, because, as he said: "you never know."

Emese, the wife of Mihály, in the example of the successful entrepreneur above, also lost her job due to the transformation. Her father-in-law then decided that she should take care of the calves he bought against the will of the young couple. Since she has to get up very early and cycle three kilometers to the stable, she did not welcome this arrangement. However, she agreed to do it, and continues to take care of the animals two years later. She also looked for a job, but without much hope. Officially, she works in her husband's business, but only for social security reasons. She said: "I would like to go back to work, not for the money but for myself" (DN 06/16/2002, 35 years old). Thus, despite their relatively successful husbands, both of these women would prefer to work outside the family business. Paid work made up an integrated part of their identity, but there does not seem to be much of an opportunity to regain it.

Conclusion: The new power of old men

I have tried to stress the connection of property and interpersonal relations in the postsocialist context. In the particular case I detail, one major result is that, in the course of the reinvention of private landed property, old men regained some of their power in the household. At first glance, it may seem as if gender identities were "frozen" during socialism

and that nothing really changed. However, the outcome in this case is part of a complex development in which socialism was at least partly successful in transforming gender identities. The women in the examples prefer or would prefer to work, which means that work constitutes an integral part of their identity. This also means the right of a "free choice" between working or staying at home does at least at the moment not function as an acceptable alternative to the socialist right to paid work. These and other former and long-standing social entitlements must be included in the analysis of changing property relations, as they build the frame in which property rights gain relevance for interpersonal relationships. In conclusion, the analysis of postsocialist property relations may help us to better understand some of the traditional problems about the connection of property, power and interpersonal relations.

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Endnotes

[i] The fieldwork took place in 1999 and 2000. Informal talks were recorded in the form of a diary and semi-structured interviews with experts and biographical interviews were taped. The quotations from taped interviews are marked with date and name, quotations from informal talks with diary note (DN). In addition, a survey was conducted in 113 households. The questionnaire addressed the composition of households, basic sociological data, opinions on the system-change, compensation, property in land and its use and prospects for the future. "Side remarks" during these interviews were also noted in the following cited with Number of the interview, date and age of the speaker.

[ii]These incentives were introduced in 1968 (Haney 1999) and were widened further until the early 1990s.

[iii] For more details on the privatisation process in Hungary see, for example, Harcsa, Kovách, Szelényi (1998) and especially Mesterszállás see Thelen (2001).