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Autonomies on individual and small community level (1850 – 1970)

by the socio-historical example of Jászdózsa and Páty

Theses of PhD dissertation

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I. Problem statement, background of the research

Analyses often show that the tragic events of Hungarian history are explained by the characteristics of the Eastern European social development. Many notable scholars (including István Bibó and Barrington Moore) indicated that while Western societies became more capitalistic and democratic under the leadership of the bourgeoisie after the Middle Ages, Eastern Europe turned into a backwater with the excessive influence of the nobility, preserved serfdom and modernization belated. All these factors led these countries into dictatorships and social cataclysms. Peasantry and village people were blamed by many for the birth of both communism and fascism.

However Thomas Jefferson represented a different view on farmers, describing the yeoman as a pivotal condition to democracy. The land property of the yeoman not only grants economical autonomy but makes strong bounds to the land, making him involved in the fate of his homeland. Sándor Karácsony also believed in the power of autonomies but not the autonomy represented by the county but rather the so called small autonomies found in presbyteries or village magistracy.

The current dissertation seeks the traces and manifestations of these two opposite views in the Hungarian countryside milieu. Hungary was an agrarian county until the end of the Second World War: censuses show that more than 80% of the population (including family members) made a living from farming in 1848. Although this ratio decreased to two third by 1910 and to 48% by 1945, they still formed the largest group in society. Between 1848 and 1945 they owned half of total arable land in Hungary.

First, autonomy can be defined as economic independence based on land property cultivated by the family. On the other hand autonomy was also expressed on the level of small communities including local churches, organizations between the state and individual (e.g. guilds or clubs) or even on the level of village administration.

Historical changes between 1848 and 1970 were complex. Legal approaches describe these years as a transformation from feudal society into a modern one that separated the church and the state and made people more involved in political movements. However, economic analysis highlights the changes from feudalism to capitalism and finally to socialism. These compound processes did not leave intact the villages either.

The village was not independent in a legal but in an anthropological way. The village magistracy embodied this independence. After feudalism faded away village had to redefine its relationship with the state. This meant the uprising of political movements, ideals about freedoms and benefits that this new type of government should guarantee. And those in power – dominantly after the Second World War – viewed the foundations of the village independence as a tool for their plans to create a new kind of freedom, one which rooted in the idea of the “greater good” instead of people and neighborhoods. The main question is how these local autonomies and from-below actions influenced the history of Hungary.

II. Applied methods

The dissertation combines three types of methods: from-below perspective, structuralism and comparison.

Instead of following comprehensive historical models the from-below perspective helps comprehending the mentality of villagers in their own cultural frame and analyzing the interaction between their tradition and the urban originated economic, cultural and political movements. This approach focuses on the effects of historical events in the often timeless everyday life.

This dissertation follows the principles of structuralism because it views the villages as wholes and aims to examine their inner and outer relations. As a matter of fact the villages serve as a frame to reveal the forms of autonomy on a micro-level.

This thesis also uses the comparative method. It attempts to unfold social processes by comparing two villages, Catholic free-peasant Jászdózsa and mostly Reformed serf village Páty. Comparing them to each other instead of conceptual ideals the similarities and differences might serve as a force-field analysis that shows feasible solutions to historical challenges for the Hungarian society.

Comparison innately requires quantitative sources like descriptive statistical data. But this is not sufficient: Modern Age proved that material indicators alone simply cannot anticipate future events. So, the investigation of mentalities, representations and identities is inevitable in order to understand historical processes. Therefore we cannot neglect qualitative methods.

Relatively big geographical distance excludes interactions between the villages therefore it makes generalizing possible. Choosing the villages happened to be nearly random, instead of the aforementioned ones others could have also been examined. Nearly random, because historical research could carry out only on well – documented settlements. Furthermore there is a theoretical limitation, too. In the spirit of Bloch's methodological suggestions comparison needs some basic differences and similarities. Differences are represented by religion and feudal past in the case of Jászdózsa and Páty, but similarities are also visible in the 1780s including population (around 1700 people) or occupational structure (farming is dominant). Archival research revealed another similarity, too: most of the peasants in both villages owned land property, so they had brighter prospects than those former serfs who worked on the large estates' of landlords.

The research is based on archival sources, but because of the large extent of the time span (1850 – 1970) historical sources become superabundant. Complete exploration is not possible even on the level of villages: the pre-1950 documentation of Páty is 5.31 linear meters; and the archive of Jászdózsa contains 1.25 linear meters of documents between 1848 and 1870. (And we did not even mention the communist era which often functioned as a kind of document factory.) So, the history of the one hundred and twenty years is presented only by segments. The land consolidation in the 1850's and 1860's; the First World War and the following years, the Second World

War, the social and economic transformations in 1945 and finally the period of collectivization are those periods that are discussed deeply. These years determined the development of autonomies.

III. Main findings

Although geographic features of the villages differed, agriculture was characterized by the dominance of crops in both. There was a period in the history of Páty when winery gained importance, but this ended after the phylloxera epidemic destroyed most of the vineyard. The closeness to Budapest and its citizens' growing demands on fruit made pomiculture profitable. Even though Jászdózsa's vineyard had a larger extent, it was less profitable because of the economic geographical conditions that made big market hardly accessible to farmers. As the examples of the 1920's show most of the farmer entrepreneurs could run their business for only a year.

Variant patterns in demography could be explained by differences in religion that played an important role in the villages' until the mid-1900. While population in Reformed Páty stagnated, it showed rapid growth in Catholic Jászdózsa making different mobility patterns or life strategies favorable. Local churches shaped mentalities and played important roles in village life. Reformed Church stood by the peasantry's side through the land trials in the 1850s, the priest behaved as a leader not only in religion questions. Catholic Church acted the same way in the 20th century: cases in Jászdózsa show that most important actor of countryside modernization was the priest who supported the improvement of railways and school system, too.

Distinct feudal past had a robust effect on village life only in the first decades after 1848. People of Jászdózsa shared a free-peasant past that made local conditions more capitalistic than in serf villages. Also, the purchase of land was more liberal, the culture was more homogenous and society was more integrated. However, it was not an egalitarian society. Although the so called "redemptors" (whose antecedents redeemed land in 1745) and "irredemptors" did not detach as much as nobility and serfdom, free peasant development polarized society. As the dissertation shows Jászdózsa was characterized by greater wealth difference than Páty where restriction on (former) serf lands limited land fragmentation. It preserved the poor from total financial collapse but also limited the expansion of well-to-do farmers. The existence of large estates allowed farmers to possess less out of total area in Páty than in Jászdózsa where smallholders owned more than 90% of lands. This made Jászdózsa possible to hold back proletarianization until the beginning of the 20th century when this strategy reached its end due the lack of free lands. Therefore Jászdózsa could not allocate "Vitéz lands" or participate in "land reform" during the Horthy era.

There was a „land reform” in Páty in the interwar period, but its execution was contradictory. Fresh made land owners were not able to pay taxes and loan. Improving travel conditions made easier access to Budapest and opened many job opportunities so a slow change started in occupational structure. Compared to Jászdózsa, Páty showed a more active industrial activity (e.g. founding brick factories) but the dominance of farming remained.

The „land reform” in 1945 was the first major intervention in countryside life under in the 20th century. In both places we find small groups that seize power with the support of the Soviet army. They formed land-claimant

committees in order to carry out “land reform”, but most of their decisions were cancelled on county or national level by the reorganized state in the following years. However, their operation caused uncertainty and severely damaged the traditional ethos on private property.

Both villages opposed collectivization that started in 1948. Agitators could hardly succeed in organizing collective farms even with the frequent usage of force and violence. The collective farms’ membership was insignificant in Jászdózsa; and not so successive in Páty either: after a rapid consolidation it started to decline soon. These stories demonstrate how private ownership defeated the big enterprises and how farmers confuted communist propaganda. Local communists were not engaged to socialist modernization project either, but they tried to make compromises between the central party expectations and local will.

Both Jászdózsa and Páty had been collectivized in 1959. This was meant not only the abolition of private property but the end of small-community autonomy, too.

On small – community level the era of Monarchy and Horthy shared similar attitudes toward countryside. The state appeared in everyday life by taxes but it did not aim to transform society. Although minor improvements can be detected, but state neglected villages in general. This attitude limited the development of villages that had to rely on their own sources in order to modernize (e.g. school system, electrifying) which made these projects incomplete. After a while relying on state help also appeared as the debates on education show in the case of Jászdózsa. It happened even in the 19th century that state intervened in order to “solve” local conflicts like conflicts of land consolidation in Jászdózsa or of building school in Páty.

The extent of state intervention was increased and became determinant after the Second World War. Villages were deprived of their long serving notaries and politics started to play greater role in everyday life. The second part of the 20th century subverted traditional farmer society.

“Land reform” in 1945, the daily experience of communist dictatorship and the collectivization campaigns forced the farmers into a mismatched struggle. The autonomy of the village decreased in these years but archival sources also show the growing importance of informal relationships. Cooperation and mutual help was characteristic in the villages before but in these years they served as a tool against the growing power of state. Although technical improvements boosted the effectiveness of communist dictatorship farmers could successively resist its will until 1959 and partly preserved former autonomy. The insufficient operation of collective farms proves that the victory of the dictatorship was Pyrrhic causing social wounds which are still in evidence today.

IV. Related publications

2017

"A megye területén a rémhírek özöne van": Buda környéki és jászági rémhírek a kommunista diktatúra első éveiből, 1948–1955 in: Forrás: Irodalom – Művészet - Tudomány 49:(10) pp. 62-74. (2017)

Párhuzamos társadalomrajzok: A vidéki társadalom átformálásának kezdetei Jászdózsán és Pátyon példáján (1945) in: Csikós Gábor – Kiss Réka – Ö. Kovács József szerk. Váltóállítás : diktatúrák a vidéki Magyarországon 1945-ben. MTA-BTK – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, Budapest. pp. 195-234. (Magyar vidék a 20. században; 1.)

Lázadó falvak: Kollektivizálás elleni tüntetések a vidéki Magyarországon, 1951–1961. [Villages in uprising: Demonstrations against collectivization in the Hungarian countryside, 1951–61]. By Gyöngyi Farkas. in: Hungarian Historical Review: New Series of Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 6:(3) pp. 718-721.

2018

Elvárt magatartás - egyéni viselkedés. A kommunista diktatúra kiépítésére adott válaszok Jászdózsán és Pátyon (1948-1956) in: Horváth Gergely Krisztián szerk. Vakvágány: A "szocializmus alapjainak lerakása" vidéken a hosszú ötvenes években 1. MTA-BTK – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, Budapest 2018. pp. 441-482. (Magyar vidék a 20. században; 2.)

A hagyományos paraszti társadalom felszámolása a Jászságban (1945–1965) in Rubicon Online Plusz (9) pp. 1-9. (2018)

Fejezetek a jászódózsai zsidóság történetéből (1850-1946) in Jászsági Évkönyv 2018. pp. 67 – 85

Rumors for interpreting and foreseeing. Case study on a Hungarian micro region; 1948 – 1955. in. Arhivele Totalitarismului 3-4/2018 (in press)