THE SYSTEM OF COMPULSORY DELIBERATION AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE LOCAL SOCIETY BETWEEN 1945 AND 1956 IN HUNGARY FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POINT OF VIEW

NAGY NETTA

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I. Issues raised by the research and its goals

In our dissertation we intended to show how the quota system for compulsory delivery of agricultural products to the state, which was introduced during World War II and stayed in effect for ten years, affected the peasant culture and agriculture. Our field of research included seven settlements situated in the Homokhátság region, central Hungary, between the River Danube and the River Tisza. The original purpose of the compulsory delivery system was to provide supply for the public and later to pay compensation for the victims of the war. Although the peasantry was hoping that the government would eliminate the delivery system, no plans for the termination were made following the takeover of power by the communists in 1948. The delivery system became one of the most effective tools in the hands of the Party-state for the purpose of the elimination of the peasant economy. The compulsory delivery quotas were growing from year to year putting an increasingly severe burden on the shoulders of not only the wealthy peasants, but also on the owners of medium sized and small peasant homesteads. The decrees were gradually limiting the scope of activities for the peasantry binding the hands and feet of traditional peasant farmers. Most of the population living in villages situated in the south west of the afore mentioned Homokhátság region – Forráskút, Úllés, Csólyospálos, Kiskunmajsa, Kömpöc, Kistelek, Balágya - practised traditional small-scale farming, with the two most important values being the love of the land and farming. After the war and even more after 1948 the state intervened drastically into the lives of the villages built upon the peasant moral and scale of values. In the Rákosi system the village became the ultimate scene for the conflict of Power and the peasant society.

The history of the period in question has been investigated in depth by historical science, and the phenomena behind the political changes have thoroughly been studied also by sociology and ethnography. The history of the delivery system was discussed in detail by Gyula Erdmann and researchers have also taken note of the application of survival methods and strategies of the peasants. It was Sándor Oláh, who analysed the survival methods of the peasantry in connection with the disintegration of traditional peasant farming, society, and lifestyle in the period of communist dictatorship in Transylvanian villages. The last person to study the “manoeuvring techniques and strategies” of the village people of the present day was Antal Lovas Kiss.
Scientific research in general has failed to lay enough emphasis on the reactions of the local communities and individuals to the excessive intervention of the state into the life of villages in the 1950s. It is also a question how the unbound pressure of the government triggered the immune reaction of the local society, and what kind of cultural phenomena were generated by it. We wanted to find those survival methods and strategies that supposedly contributed to the fact that the population of these villages could survive the anti-peasantry politics of the Rákosi era.

As for the concepts, we used the expressions „survival method,” „survival technique,” „survival toolbox,” „defence mechanism,” and „adaptation method” alternately, while „survival strategy” was used in a much broader sense. Gyula Erdmann calls the act of getting around the decrees peasant counter-menuvering, while Sándor Oláh uses the expression refamiliarization actions beside defence tecniques and survival methods. At the same time Antal Lovas Kiss uses the expression „manoeuvring techniques” to describe a similar phenomenon of the present day.

Therefore we examined how the farming population living around the town of Szeged experienced the period between 1945 and1956 and what survival techniques and self-defence strategies the peasantry activated when the burdens became unbearable. We also discussed how they attempted to go around the decrees of delivery paralysing traditional farming, and whether they adapted it or resisted, and in what form. We wanted to find out if there were any differences between the attitudes of individuals who represented the different layers of society, furthermore who chose what kind of behavioural patterns, and what source they were taken from. On the whole we got a picture of not only the above, but about how local society took the attacks of the state against peasant farming and lifestyle. In addition we will present the delicate elements that show how Power tried to block the traditional operation of village society.

II. The collection and processing methods of the materials

Our written sources include official archive documents (e.g. minutes, court documents) and private documents as well, such as letters, notes and diaries on peasant farming. One of the purposes of our research was to shed light on how individuals, groups, and social layers act and behave in the current of historical events. We applied the Life Story Method assuming that learning about the history of one’s personal


experiences would help us become acquainted with and understand the dynamics of social history processes better. The compulsory delivery system, as a common experience for the members of the peasant society, appeared to be a perfect guide line in the confrontation of the communist regime and the local society and in the exploration of immune reactions and survival strategies. We intended to present the period from the point of view of an individual who had experienced it in person and whose decisions and behaviour had been influenced by politics. This is why we experimented with a special way of editing which resulted in a subjective history embedded in a chronological macro- and micro story.

III. The results of the research

In order to be able to present the peasant society of the settlements in the Homokhátság properly, we resorted to the results of ethnographic studies concerning the peasant household types. These categories can also be applied to the settlements in the Homokhátság region, with one difference, namely that the size of the land belonging to each used to be bigger with different estate borders like in Transdanubia or at the northern borders of the country. In the area in question with the poor fertility sandy soil a farm with 30 acres was still considered to be a smallholder estate, while the size of the smallest estate of well-off peasants started around 40 acres. Consequently the owners of a lot of small and medium sized peasant homesteads became victims of persecution. The Sources showed that this topic is much too complex to be narrowed down to the compulsory delivery of agricultural products, and to consider every single reaction of the peasantry as a reply given to the restrictive State. These reactions in general were provoked by the anti-peasant steps of the communist dictatorship.

The peasants living in the Homokhátság settlements were forced to activate a part of their tool boxes for survival already in the last years of the war. These tools partly derived from traditions (e.g. methods of hiding things), and were partly revived by the wartime conditions (e.g. black market, bartering). The defensive reaction of the peasant society was in fact evoked by the state switching to bound economy (system of delivery, public supply system), the closeness of the battle line, and inflation. Every layer of peasant society was forced to apply adaptation methods.
Following the war the relationship between the State and the village was not yet hostile. The state gave a certain amount of freedom to the peasantry in their actions (see: black market) to ensure the survival of the urban population. After the war during the organization of the local public supply and delivery of products, the administration of the villages represented the interests of the farmers' community. However, with the delivery decrees becoming stricter and stricter the patience of the peasants started to decrease, their survival toolboxes were growing wider and wider, and finally became an organic part of everyday life.

After 1948 the relationship of the state and the village transformed fundamentally as the Party-state launched attacks from more than one stand against traditional peasant farms. Compared to all the great injustice and the attacks against private property the peasants had to suffer, the compulsory delivery of products as a way of curtailment of income seemed to be a minor problem. Nevertheless it must have been the latter that directly triggered off a response from the peasantry in the form of a defensive reflex with regained strength.

On the whole it was the steps taken by the party state that brought about the change of mentality resulting in the sharp and peculiar opposition born between the society and the Power. So between 1948 and 1956 the peasant population of the settlements in question reacted to the anti-village actions of the government with a great variety of new adaptational methods. We have already outlined the ways in which the state tried to hamstring traditional farming and paralyse the operation of the village society. Some of the most severe versions of these were the attempt made to turn the different layers of peasants against each other, condemning the relationships between the wealthy and poor peasants, the prohibition of traditional forms of organizing work, and public humiliation.

We could see that the attempt made by the Party-State to break up the village society did not reach its theoretical goal, namely to turn the kulak against the „working peasants.” Local communities did not draw the line between its members based on wealth, but considering the individual’s attitude towards and faith in the Power. At the same time there was not one unified opinion about the servants of Power either. Cadres (party workers) were judged by the public based on their attitudes towards peasantry, which was confirmed by the local events of the revolution in 1956.
We analysed how the burdens of delivery and other governmental restrictions affected specific peasant farms with the help of case studies. We found that farmers owning 15 acre lands had to confront the authorities all the time at the beginning of the 1950's, although this was the smallest size of land that made self sufficient farming and living possible on the sand.

Archive documents and the press of the period were full of the descriptions of black working and sabotaging kulaks. On the other hand it was them who applied these methods less often partly because they were quite visible to the government and partly because they had the capital to survive on. At the same time if small holder farmers wanted to counterbalance the state curtailment, they were forced to make use of these methods.

We have divided adaptation models into three groups based on the individuals’ attitude to power and law on a resistance-adaptation axis. The first group included solutions where the behaviour of individuals was adjusted to the expectations of the state, they accomplished the tasks imposed on them, and followed the path marked out for them by the Power e.g. buying the agricultural produce to be able to deliver it, giving up peasant lifestyle and becoming industrial workers offering their lands to the state etc. Actions belonging to the other two categories can be defined as turning against the State and obvious resistance. One of them is the open rebellion, which can be manifested in actions or words, individually or as a group. We could only find some individual cases as examples of this in the area in question. These manifestations were mostly sentenced to failure and were immediately sanctioned by the government.

It is the third group that offers the biggest variety of methods, the tools of secret rebellion against power. This attitude, namely that it is not worth it to openly quarrel with the power is rooted in old peasant mentality. It is not incidental therefore that we found ourselves facing the wide spread of various techniques. We listed here a number of phenomena rooted in the inherited peasant knowledge such as hiding, black market, and smuggling, hand threshing and the treading out of the wheat. At the same time it was innovation and technical inventions designed by peasants that brought practical solutions for people tormented by the Power, such as the grain milling machine. There used to be methods in an attempt to prevent or brush aside government restrictions such as transferring land to different members of the family or acquaintances by deed to escape the kulak list. Social and personal relationships used to have an extremely
important role in survival. The patron client relationships connecting the different layers of the peasant society did not seize to exist in spite of all the effort of the state, but strengthened and served as a frame for survival techniques such as hiding and black commerce. The riskiest survival technique included the bribery of caders that is corruption itself.

Beside the survival methods we attempted to map survival strategies based on individual walks of lives. By survival strategy we mean the attempt made by the individual to solve a situation of crisis and the planned course of the struggle. The aim of this was the preservation of the peasant lifestyle and survival itself. We examined the individuals’ circumstances, position in the society, previous experience, scale of values, mentality, attitudes, goals, and all the patterns of their survival strategy. On the whole we could not identify one separate kulak, middle peasant or smallholder survival strategy. The fact that the state "marked out" the path for these layers of peasantry lead to the supposition that there must have been crisis reactions connected specifically to the different layers of peasantry constituting finally complex survival strategies specific to those layers. Survival strategies and methods were equally applied by every layer of peasantry in proportion to their circumstances, capacities, and goals. The only difference was in the potential paths offered by the state e.g. the desperate owners of large estates offered their land to the government, not the middle peasants; it is mainly the poor peasants and paralysed kulaks who chose industrial work.

Grouping the forms of peasant behaviour and the apprehension of the different types of mentality also proved to be difficult, as individual attitudes change also with time. We still found some key concepts that helped us illustrate the possible character types. The „evasive“ managed to avoid confrontation with the Power, but it often meant that they had to give up peasant lifestyle completely. The „sufferers from coercion“ were caluminated and destroyed by the system. The „seemingly acquiescent“ tried to avoid confrontation and thus severe calumination, and attempted to stay peasants all along with the help of every element of their survival tool boxes.

Defensive reactions of the peasant society often failed, ended in disasters, and were followed by sanctions from the state. We strove to paint an adequate picture of how the Power criminalised the peasants in the Homokhátság region with illegal procedures in order to intimidate the others.
The news about the revolution reached the villages on the sand with a couple of days delay. In the local demonstrations the anger of the population turned against the delivery workers by no mistake.

The termination of the delivery system was a great relief for the peasantry, most of whom believed in the future of individual farming. There were some who did not suffer much during the Rákosi regime and some who applied their survival tools so efficiently that they made capital out of it. They were the mostly smallholders who enriched their homestead with farming equipment after 1956.

The best proof of the fact that the peasantry of the Homokhátság put its faith into the future of peasant farming was that many started to plant fruit trees. The forced collectivization put an end to these hopes though. The peasants who could not submit to losing their private property, in this new situation of crisis, tried to refer back to survival strategies that had helped them after the war and later at the end of the 1950’s. These, however, proved to be useless. In spite of all their efforts the farmers of the central Hungary were forced into farmers’ agricultural cooperatives for three decades. In these conditions they developed new methods for adaptation, which could serve as the object of another study.

IV. Publications of the author in connection with the present topic

