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**Locality, ethnicity and economy**  
Social-economic transformation in Tarján in post-Socialist  
transition

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## **1. Theoretical problems and methodological framework**

Research of contemporary society and the investigation of the transformation of local societies are of special importance at the turn of the millennia. In Hungary increasing modernisation in the second half of the 20th century, the obvious effect of globalisation in the past decades and the political and economic changes after the change of regime in 1989-1990 have resulted and result in the swift and fundamental transformation of the society. Social sciences interpreted the disappearance of the historically defined peasantry in the 20th century as a result of bourgeois development, which was terminated by the Socialist economic and social system. The modernisation processes of this era were seen as the continuation of a formerly begun but later stuck embourgeoisement. Research projects focusing on the micro worlds instead of macro structures revealed the local-regional variants of these general tendencies and the differences were usually explained with specific features of culture and social structure. Researches carried out after 1989 also highlighted the fact that the inherited social and economic practices in certain cases did not lead to such a successful adaptation to modern market institutions and new social challenges than did in the previous period. These results motivated me to take into consideration not only conditions and inherited patterns, but also the individual and community strategies of making use of conditions and inheritance in investigating a socially-economically successful settlement in postSocialist transition. In my analysis I consistently deal with both of these aspects.

Tarján, situated in Komárom-Esztergom county, in north-west Hungary has such an economic geographic position that could be considered as its most important condition, and which could explain for the successful economic adaptation of the village. But from a more thorough investigation of the village populated mostly by Germans, it turns out that it went through a development relying on inner resources. In this development the elements of mentality attributed to German people, the ethnic identity preserved by the German majority and the strong local identity as a basis for community cohesion also played a role just as well as the reflexive maintenance of local identity primarily by the representatives of the municipal council and the related power centre and its use as capital.

Locality according to its late modern concept means primarily relations and contexts, created by local subjects and operated with the application of necessary local knowledge. The relations and contexts are constantly reproduced at a practical and discursive level, thus they are created by social actions and by the discourses about the contexts that influence and govern social actions. The essence of ethnicity can be grabbed in relations, and it refers to a relation rather than to a substance, but this relationship always has a power aspect as well: ethnicity becomes important in the contest for resources and in this case acknowledgment can be regarded as a symbolic resource as well. But on the example of Tarján I interpret the creation of ethnicity and locality not only as a symbolic resource. I think that the successful economic attitude of the settlement and its residents is to a large extent influenced by the use of ethnicity as an economic resource. Applying the late modern interpretation of ethnicity and locality and a thorough inspection of historical context I try to avoid ethnic particularism in

interpretation. Instead of the traditional concept of community and ethnic identity it focuses on their dynamic interpretation. My analysis relies on three approaches. I take into consideration the impact of external factors, and investigate the role of individual and community strategies in social and economic transition.

The research and analysis was an ethnological one in terms of its methods and perspective and it investigates actions taking place primarily after the change of regime. Although to understand certain phenomena a historical overview was also necessary, but it basically concentrates on the recent past and the present. In order to highlight the conditions of the village and the strategies of the use of these conditions I from time to time look beyond the boundaries of Tarján as a public administrative unit and as an imagined and maintained locality. Therefore where argumentation requires it, I present the vicinity of Tarján and the village's relations in this context.

## **2. The structure of the treatise**

The above-mentioned problems are analysed in five chapters. After the introduction the presented theoretical and methodological framework is discussed in detail. I present the relationship of ethnography and anthropology to contemporary research and a concise history of the relevant contemporary studies of the Hungarian social sciences. After this I give an overview of embourgeoisement and postSocialism as general paradigms and enlist the probable relations of the treatise to these. Finally I highlight the relevant important theories of the social sciences from community to locality as well as ethnicity and identity. The last part of the chapter includes the presentation of methodology.

The second chapter gives an overview about the history of locality from an inner point of view relying on the theory of memory as social practice. I try to present the reconstructed and necessarily deconstructed history of settlement and history as it is mirrored in the memory and knowledge of local people. I make an attempt to compile such a historical narrative that is based exclusively on the knowledge of local people about the past and it also takes it into consideration in what way this knowledge is constructed into history. As a basic source I used local historical essays, supplemented with other written documents prepared by local people, as well as with the sources and the narrated stories. First, I present the authors of local historical essays and those professional 'story tellers' whom are considered by the village community as masters of local history, and then the history of the village is narrated.

In the third chapter I investigate in what wider system(s) of relations the members of the local community position themselves, in what way they form their external relations and how they make use of their conditions. I present four topics in detail. First I discuss the change of economic relations and its effect on the settlement. In the second place I deal with the tendencies of marital relations in the past and present, searching for the reasons of the change. This is followed with the presentation of the various public administrative relations and the relationship to state centralisation. Finally I present the virtual relations realised through internet, thus with the investigation of the settlement's web page I scrutinize what image Tarján tries to form of itself. The outcome of this chapter can be summarised in a way that the villagers are able to make use of the

opportunities offered by external environment for their own success (economic relations, virtual presence), moreover, they are able to transform these opportunities in a most favourable manner (cf. marital and public administrative relations).

In the fourth chapter at first I discuss in detail the standard and possible interpretations of ethnicity and economy. After that I analyse what are those inherited patterns and historical experiences that make an impact on economic practices, at least according to local people. Then I investigate at the level of entrepreneurs (individuals and families) those accumulated cultural and social capitals (skills, mentality, attitude, the supporting role of family, local network of relations) on which villagers may rely when launching and operating an enterprise.

Eventually, in the last chapter I investigate how all these endeavours are related in local politics. I analyse how locality is created, what contexts are formed, in what way these are maintained and what role ethnicity and ethnic identity play in it. After the presentation of the transformation of ethnic self-identity (from being a Swab to becoming a German) observable in other communities as well, and the description of the local political elite, major agents and groups of the public life, I analyze those three contexts that are defined as the framework of transformation: "Tarján is a nice and cosy village", "Tarján makes a living for its people" and last but not least "Tarján is the Swab village where people act together". I present the economic and social transformation of the village along these evaluations.

### **3. Conclusions**

Attaching economy and ethnicity is a relatively new research field in economic anthropology and in sociology of economy as well, but the international research projects have almost exclusively investigated the role of ethnic affiliation of immigrant groups in analysing their economic activities. Out of these reason for me it seemed more useful to study the specific economy, mentality and lifestyle of German (Swab) peasants in Hungary on the basis of ethnographic descriptions. I interpret the well-known stereotypes formed about German people and the bourgeois mentality attributed to them as part of modern awareness and attitude, which was and is interpreted as an ethnic trait only in certain situations. At the same time I claim that these features manifested in economic attitude and referring to work culture and lifestyle have become necessary requisites in defining groups and present several examples of that the people of Tarján explicitly or implicitly use these explications of Germanness, at explaining private or public phenomena.

I have pointed out the impact of these elements of mentality in several fields. It can be detected in public administrative relations of the settlement, local features of agricultural transformation, image making, web page editing, public policy, community strategies. These emerge in individual economic success, moreover, *I interpret the strong entrepreneurial willingness as a contemporary form of manifestation of the economic practices attributed to ethnic German people*. During Socialism it was not small scale production, but the part time jobs related to the professions that after the change of regime resulted in an increased development (take-off) in the settlement. I present life courses of entrepreneurs and point it out that small enterprises rely on acquired

knowledge, family resources and work culture, but partly because of community solidarity and partly because of individual prosperity they utilise them in an innovative and creative way.

The realisation of village concepts of livelihood and a pleasant liveable place proved to be successful and the topos of the solidary village was implemented in practice. However there is no point in narrowing this transformation managed by the local government to a realisation of plans of economic and cultural policy, since a much more complex process has taken place in Tarján. The local municipal leaders realise an identity policy, whose elements are belongingness to Tarján, German ethnic identity, entrepreneurial mentality and ability for prosperity manifested in individual strategies, and self-care. It cannot be denied that by now some sort of Tarján identity has taken shape which intensively relies on the community movements whose aim is to keep alive ethnic self-identity and these movements have got external and internal variants as well.

#### **4. Relevant publications of the author**

**2009** Being Swabian, remaining ethnic German. The characteristics of changing ethnic identities in a Hungarian village. *Etnologia Polona* 27, (2006): 103–116.

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**2005** Esélyek, adottságok és stratégiák. Agrártermelők Tarjánban és Kocséron. [Chances, conditions and strategies. Agrarian producers in Tarján and in Kocsér.] In Schwarcz Gyöngyi – Szarvas Zsuzsa – Szilágyi Miklós (szerk.): *Utóparaszti hagyományok és modernizációs törekvések a magyar vidéken*. Budapest, MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézete – MTA Társadalomkutató Központ, 139–156.

**2004** Leosztott szerepek, kitörési kísérletek. [Fixed roles, attempts to change.] In Sáfrány Réka (szerk.): *Életpályák és mozgásterek: nők a helyi közéletben*. h.n., Magyarországi Női Alapítvány MONA, 49–65.

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