

COUNTRY VISIONS IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

BÁLINT CSATÁRI

Introduction

A number of recent things have spurred me to write this lecture. One was the arrival of a book entitled “Country Visions” at our library, the most recent UK volume of “rural studies”, edited by Paul Cloke. I found the distance in terms of attitude/perception and the way of thinking between our rural areas in East Central Europe and the spirit of the studies included in this book much greater than I did two and a half decades ago, when I published a review of “Key Settlements in Rural Areas” by the same author in the Geographical Bulletin. The study that I liked the most examined changes in the perception of the countryside in children’s books published after World War II. ‘Indeed’, I thought to myself, ‘in a place where 75% of the population are urbanites, this might be an important issue for the general social perception of rural development and play an important role in forging the socio-economic solidarity required for the long-term sustainability of the countryside’.

The second thing came roughly a week later, when a lady journalist from a popular Internet-based magazine in Budapest called me. She sounded like someone who had never been to the Great Plain. Asking about the scattered farms in the area lying between the Rivers Danube and Tisza, she asked the following question in a tone that could not have been more natural, ‘And would you mind telling me if they still lead a life like that described by Zsigmond Móricz in his short story “The Little Orphan Girl” around 1930?’ Móricz, who was often regarded as a disciple of Reymont, the Polish Nobel laureate, did, indeed, write quintessentially about the peasantry and the countryside in the Hungary of the 1930s. But so many things have happened in East Central Europe since that time. The title of the above UK book may remind us of the fact that we are not quite familiar with the “country visions” which the generation that grew up surrounded by the state socialist propaganda extolling villages capable of large-scale agricultural production might have today, one and a half decades after the start of the transition. Not to mention their children growing up...

An even more shocking thing than the latter one was the guidelines on rural development ‘prescribed’ by Brussels for the new 2007–2013 period, which I downloaded the other day and compared with the Hungarian Government’s draft

documents on rural areas yet to be approved. The distance that I sensed figuratively was even greater here than in the case of the book.

Thus, there are a great number of professional, scientific and social issues that arise concerning rural areas and their future in both East Central Europe and Hungary.

Questions

- What is the likely cause of this concrete and figurative sense of distance?
- What are the most important and the general rural problems that are common to East Central Europe as a whole today?
- Is there a possibility other than religiously following the road that took developed Europe half a century to go along in order to stabilise its own rural areas?

We should, though, mention at this point that agricultural production will never be as heavily subsidised here in the rural zones of the recently acceded countries as it was in both Western and Southern Europe.

- Are there any general and truly adaptable models, or are we simply performing experiments?
- Are we fully aware of the fact that responses of any merit to global challenges can only be provided locally?
- Are we also fully aware of the fact that truly useful knowledge should be provided to the rural societies capable of reviving themselves in order that they and their local communities can respond to current and future challenges?

The countryside, spheres of the countryside and the trends therein

Many have provided a definition of the rural space (e.g. an index of rurality) in order to channel, through the definition of these special areas, major activities and programmes aimed at their development.

However, there has been no truly good definition of ‘rurality’ as a sentiment, mindset or a way of life in the post-communist countries, even though – as the Bruntland Report on sustainability points out – a working definition would also be crucial to the protection of the environment, the production of wholesome and quality food, water management, clean air, landscape heritage and moral support for the local population. Here in the large region, the countryside has almost invariably remained the symbol of backwardness, a lack of progress and a periphery that lags behind other areas economically and socially. Curiously enough, this perception lingers even when actual data on the given area do not justify such a perception. Hence, it is worth giving a thought or two to the most common problems of the post-socialist countryside of today.

Without a doubt, rural landscape and rural nature have a high environmental value. Apparently, hundreds of Dutch and German owners of farms in the Great Hungarian Plain, who use such farms – these one-time scattered homesteads – as their second home, are clearly aware of this. The reason for this is that in developed Europe the rural landscape and rural resources have been gaining in importance for decades now, which is partly the result of a deliberate rural policy pursued there. In our region, although nature protection overall has nothing to be ashamed of compared to that in Western Europe, stringent protection measures are rarely welcomed by the local societies or the farmers affected.

Firstly, because restrictive regulations laid down exclusively on the basis of landscape protection as a priority do not consider local societies to be part of the landscape, and ignore the wisdom contained in the saying, “Animals are only part of the landscape, while man not only constitutes part of it, but also shapes it”.

Secondly, there are no resources, or a determination to tackle the numerous tasks related to landscape protection in a manner that commands sufficient social support. What can be read on the relationship of Hungary and the European Landscape Convention, available on the website of the relevant ministry, is highly illustrative: “Tasks related to the Convention: Hungary has already fulfilled some¹ of the tasks set in the Convention, since the protection of the landscape is regulated by law, and strategies on the landscape also address the issues of landscape protection, management and planning. The training of professionals responsible for the evaluation and operation of landscapes also has long-standing traditions. Both the population and local stakeholders are involved in decision-making mechanisms (e.g. public debates for the members of local communities, one-to-one meetings with members of the public)”. Unfortunately, from this it also follows that the amount of EU funds for agrarian environment protection granted to assisted areas is far below what is needed and available in terms of both proportion and territorial distribution. The NATURA 2000 project, too, has only been promulgated provisionally rather than officially.

Another major issue is the relationship between agriculture and rural development. Agrarian activity performed to a high standard and adjusted to the diversity of rural characteristics is a necessary, but inadequate condition for the future survival of these areas. Envisaged changes in the European system of agrarian aid in the near future are likely to severely affect agricultural businesses, which have had an interest in the concentration of production and which now operate as large estates. Furthermore, a different system will not be conducive either to maintaining production in rural spaces with fewer advantageous agrarian features. Agrarian aid and development (the so-called EU CAP Pillar I) prioritising almost exclusively farms engaged in competitive market production over family farms that bring di-

¹Highlighted in bold by the author.

versity, sustain the landscape, protect the agrarian environment and are in business partly for social reasons, are wrong, because – among other things – they do not take into account the damage done through the decay of the neglected rural environment.

In Hungary, the costs of labour lost to days spent on sick leave and those of medical treatment needed because of the severe allergic diseases caused by ragweed (the Hungarian name ‘parlagfű’ [‘parlag’ means ‘fallow’, ‘uncultivated land’] aptly refers to the fact that it grows in uncultivated fields and orchards)² are many times over the budget appropriation that the government earmarks for ragweed control or for the support of small-size family farms that contribute to the preservation of the landscape. Typically, this problem is the vestige of post-socialist sectoral planning rather than area-based planning. Communication is non-existent between health care, nature protection and agricultural management groups. Rural areas are unable to act independently, as they were gradually dissuaded from doing so over the past decades – another after-effect of post-socialism.

Curiously, though, what is today an issue of large-scale versus small-scale production ceased to be a problem in the final decades of state socialism. Now it is the case once again. Small-size, partially self-sufficient family farms, which used to be household allotments linked to large-scale farming, operated in the 1980s in a manner that would today be expected from the new generation of production and sales co-operatives. However, the re-establishment of these new forms of co-operation is much harder than the preservation of the older forms would have been. The reason for this is that it would entail finding a solution to at least some of the related community, welfare and social problems (e.g. elderly care, financial support for schools and, at least partial, development of rural infrastructure). What was called the agricultural co-operatives movement found solutions to such problems on, one could say, a daily basis. The relatively strong solidarity and community of the Hungarian rural societies were both reflected in what was called the Hungarian model of socialist large-scale farming, which was, undoubtedly, tailored to their specific circumstances. When the model was no longer used, these functions either became fragmented or weakened.³ Thus, farms engaged in large-scale production based solely on a market basis and entrepreneurs⁴ do not support the countryside or the locality, or only do so in exceptional circumstances.

What is completely unprecedented in the history of the countryside and what is an important factor in terms of local awareness/consciousness is that farmers in

²Approximately 2.5 million persons suffer from allergies in Hungary, the primary cause of which is ragweed. Ragweed is one of the most common types of weed in Hungary, covering an area of approximately 5 million hectares, with 700,000 hectares heavily infected.

³Paul Cloke pointed this out in a report on his journey in rural Hungary at the time of the political changeover.

⁴Not infrequently, they are referred to as ‘green barons’.

outer areas of villages often do not seem to know who owns the adjoining cultivated land. They used to: it belonged to them, a fellow farmer in the village or the landlord. Today it may easily belong to the grandchild of a farmer who fled the village in 1949 and now lives in the capital city, has not been seen ever since by his fellow farmers who stayed on, and it is often the case that the grandchild leases out the land under a share-cropping agreement to an agricultural business registered two villages further off. It is safe to say that, in addition to the spatial separation of land ownership from land cultivation, the frequent comparing, for political reasons, of farms engaged in competitive market production with family farms that are in business for social reasons gives rise to the most severe of conflicts.

A third set of major problems associated with the town and the country relationship and, partly, as a result of such a relationship, is in area and rural policy. The new system of borough councils that evolved in the rural regions of East Central Europe after the political changeover, in the era of transition provided perhaps too much legal leeway for some areas without being able to give anything in return for the state socialist town and country relationships that quickly fell apart. It is not only the scarcity of funds that lies at the heart of the problems, but also the 'helplessness' of rural societies, ageing, long-term unemployment, a dysfunctional system of institutions that are increasingly difficult to operate and poor accessibility due to poor transport infrastructure. These social conflicts were further aggravated by those who fled the town for the country; since – be they the nouveau riche or town-dwellers who lost their jobs – they added to income differences and the resultant tension.

Basically, the conditions, in terms of public administration, area management, the efficient operation of area supply systems as well as the planning and organisational foundations of area and rural development, for implementing the new EU recommendations that stress the town and country relationship are missing in East Central Europe. It is no wonder, then, that often even senior officials in rural areas are at a loss as to how to interpret these recommendations. They do not know what to make of the 'synergy' between regional, social and rural policies or the 'complex and integrated' territorial interaction between such policies when such policies do not function themselves. Be it the 'synergy' or the 'complex and integrated' approach, it is no different from what used to be called 'common sense'. Only such sense is no longer common.⁵

⁵The translator's note: 'józan paraszti ész' ('good common sense' or 'horse sense' in English) contains a derivative of the word 'peasant'. The author here made a pun in his final sentence. This pun is, unfortunately, almost untranslatable. I found the way I rendered it in English to be the closest approximation of the author's original intention.

Possible visions for the countryside

In conclusion, the way the rather intricate, diffuse and diverse rural conflicts outlined in this paper can be resolved in the future is quite a challenging issue. To begin with, is it possible to project various scenarios for the development/transformation of these regions at all? Can one really propose any 'visions'?

One vision is obvious enough. Changes in the rural landscape in East Central Europe occur with a lag of several decades after their counterparts in Western Europe. In essence, there will be three types of rural space: (1) a suburban rural area under strong urban influence, undergoing agglomeration; (2) a rural area under a more moderate urban influence, producing marketable agricultural products and capable of revival; and (3) a peripheral, ageing rural area that lags behind other areas and faces depopulation, hardly capable of revival. (In the third case, the situation may be further aggravated by diverse ethnic problems.)

The delay in following trends poses two serious threats, especially to space types (1) and (2). Under the market economy conditions that have evolved recently, changes in the rural space and the manner it is utilised in, often without any restrictions, occupy the rural space more intensely than is desirable; they 'devour' it, destroy the landscape and mercilessly exploit the environment.

Another major vision is about the shared future of agriculture and the countryside. That is, at one end of the spectrum (A) there is a competitive, high tech-based, heavily subsidised agricultural sector, which plays an increasingly minor part in providing a living for the economically active rural population; at the other end (B) there is the "low tech"-type, extensive or intensive bio-farming with landscape preservation and agrarian environment protection as its priority. The question is how they correlate in space and time and in terms of active employment and in their ability to provide a living. Quite recently, a third possibility (C) has also arisen, which envisages the countryside as an alternative energy supplier (energy grass, bio-diesel, bio-ethanol, bio-mass), but alas the ability of such a rural area to provide a living is hardly likely to be any stronger than that for type (A) agriculture.

Finally, in order that the visions offered by the third major scenario can be turned into reality, the resources and the natural and cultural heritage of the rural areas need to rise in prestige. Version (I) envisages the sustainable revival of areas having a fundamentally rural nature, with long-standing traditions of tourism, where the preservation of the post-material heritage of the countryside will come to take centre stage. Version (II) is based on 'authentic' rural tourism offering new local values; one that does not consider the local population to be some unwanted distraction in a sanctuary; rather, it asserts that it is a social group preserving/salvaging heritage, which serves the public good and which, by their very existence in such places, creates irreplaceable values. In this respect, Version (III)

could be a diversification of the economic activities pursued in the areas suitable for such activities. This could mean mobile places of work and, in some cases, the development of local services with sophisticated methods, which could also strengthen hierarchically structured civil communities.

And if, – based on the possible and necessary spatial variations of the basic versions of the above-mentioned visions of development – the environmental, economic, social and settlement rehabilitation of the rural spaces in East Central Europe takes place, relying on new local ‘in situ’ knowledge and being capable of creating new harmonies, we will then also be able to write essays on what “Country Visions” is actually about.

We could, for instance, write essays on ‘rurality and animality’, ‘psycho-geographies of rural space’, or ‘spiritual embodiment and sacred rural landscape’. Or are they the very topics that we ought to be studying now?

References

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