The Hungarian Agricultural Miracle? Sovietization and Americanization in a Communist Country. By Zsuzsanna Varga. Translated by Frank T. Zsigó. The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2021, 323 pp.

Zsuzsanna Varga's comprehensive account of the political economy of Hungarian agriculture during the Cold War exemplifies the international and transnational turn in research on agricultural and rural history. The book is ordered chronologically and consists of seven chapters. After the introduction, which outlines the research approach, chapter one offers an overview of the Stalinist system of socialist agriculture and exports to East Central Europe. Chapters two, three, and four cover the phases of the collectivization of Hungarian agriculture and the retrenchment to private farming from 1949 to 1961. Chapters five and six deal with the transfer of Western knowledge and technology, including "closed production systems" from the USA, after the conclusion of collectivization. Chapter seven evaluates the successes and limitations of the "Hungarian agricultural miracle" in the wider context. In the conclusion, Varga synthesizes the central insights of her study.

Using a rich body of macro-, meso- and micro-level sources (official documents, international press, oral interviews, etc.), Varga explains the shifting route of Hungarian agriculture between the onset of land collectivization in 1949 and its definite abandonment in 1989 within the framework of "transnational comparison" (i.e., the combination of comparative and entangled approaches). She highlights two transsystemic transfers of politico-economic institutions, technology, and knowledge to Hungary: first, the "Eastern transfer," which transplanted the Stalinist system of socialist agriculture, regarded as an "inner colony" for industrialization, into a pre-socialist mode of farming built on private property and market orientation; second, the "Western transfer," which transplanted a capitalist production system into a socialist agriculture based on the Soviet model. Varga argues that Americanization was one sort of solution to performance problems caused by Sovietization in the 1960s. By the 1970s, a "hybrid agriculture" had emerged in Hungary that applied the latest Western agricultural technology on state farms and producer cooperatives created on the basis of the Soviet model. The end of food shortages and the growth of agricultural surpluses were labeled as the "Hungarian agricultural miracle."

Varga clearly shows that the Hungarian agricultural transformation during the Cold War was not a well-paved path but, rather, a rocky road. Waves of state-

led collectivization according to the Soviet model were interrupted by phases of de-collectivization that reflected the destabilization of the socialist regime, mediation by its agrarian lobby, and peasant agitation. While the Soviet model was implemented, negotiated, and adapted top-down by the Hungarian state apparatus, the adoption of Western technology and knowledge emerged bottom-up through partnerships of state farms and producer cooperatives with private companies from beyond the Iron Curtain. The resulting division of labor involved large-scale state and collective farms specializing in capital-intensive arable production as well as small private household plots specializing in labor-intensive vegetable, fruit, and livestock production. The study shows institutional and technological transfer between countries with different political and economic systems can increase agricultural performance, provided that actors at sub-national levels gain agency to mediate between systemic imperatives and everyday priorities.

Although Varga does not refer to James Scott's notion of "high-modernism," her monograph contributes to the debate on state-led agrarian change in the twentieth century. The emergence of a both Sovietized and Americanized mode of farming in Hungary highlights the limits of top-down development schemes by authoritarian nation states and their technocratic planners as well as the potentials of bottom-up initiatives from the countryside. Rather than state-enforced "high modernism," the emergence of a Hungarian "hybrid agriculture" indicates a case of "low modernism" that shifts national economic performance through informal and formal institutionalization of sub-national grassroots activities. The creative adaptation of state-imposed collectivization by local actors – which was quite risky, as indicated by show trials against cooperative leaders – is framed in terms of a "successful alternative" to the Soviet model.  From the prevailing socioeconomic perspective, this conclusion seems reasonable. However, doubts arise concerning the "successful" and "alternative" character of the "Hungarian agricultural miracle" when one shifts to a socio-natural view. The Western technoscientific package adopted by Hungarian state farms and producer cooperatives as well as the state-enforced Soviet model they struggled with rested on similar agro-industrial imperatives: the replacement of muscle power by machinery and agrochemicals based on fossil energy, the dissolution of the symbiotic relationship between arable and livestock farming, and the shift of both land and labor productivity according to the needs of industrial society. Seen from a socio-natural angle, the transnationally induced modernization of Hungarian agriculture during the Cold War might appear much "higher" (in Scott's terms) than from a purely socioeconomic view.

This critical comment should not cast a poor light on the rich evidence provided by the monograph, but rather indicates a direction for future research on the "Hungarian agricultural miracle." The well-researched and well-narrated account of the Hungarian agricultural transformation will be of great value not only for scholars of rural and agricultural history, but also for anyone interested in the international and transnational history of Communist Europe during the Cold War.

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