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Desacralisation. A New Turn in the Changed Relationship with Land in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the assumption that there was a well-articulated idea behind the rapidly spreading phenomenon of theft after the formation of collective farms in Transylvania during socialism: people thought that what they were doing was not wrong because the real culprit was the socialist state that deprived them of their control over their lands. Had that not happened, they would still be their own masters, existentially complete, and should the supremacy of this state cease one day, they would once again be who they were before. This idea vitalized their expectations and hopes as a sacred aura. After 1989, these hopes came true temporarily, and partially, but, as it turned out, the peasant order imagined as existential completeness did not return. After joining the EU, the generation that went through socialization owning and cultivating their own land and then lived awaiting and hoping as collectivist peasants had to realize that it was all wrong: the new system brought its own shortcomings, frustrations, and disappointments as their world lost its sacredness.

KEYWORDS

land use, land ownership, rurality, Romania, Transylvania, socialism, post-socialism

In a recently published book (Gagyi 2018), I examined the phenomenon of theft from the collective farms formed in the early 1960s. I looked at the historical situation when villagers recently classified as "collectivist peasant workers" were "forced to steal", since "that's how it went down at the collective, some stealing with semi-trailers, some with cars, others with carriages, handbags and baskets, as much as they could, stuffing their sacks full" (Pál Balogh's insightful remark, see: Gagyi 2012:57).

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The totalitarian state has shown its true nature in the process of collectivization. In this grandiose process of shaping society, various central and regional groups of the bureaucracy sometimes interpreted the situation differently, making one mistake after the other, causing significant political and economic damage. The division of village communities has led to moral corruption, the rise of theft, illegal accumulation, and the strengthening of individualism behind the declared communitarianism. The series of food crises that followed collectivization showed that the problem lies not with the concept and construction of structures but with the distortions, lies, and absurdities built into this process along the way. In addition to the distortions involved in the genesis itself, deficiencies in operating skills and morale, as well as less than efficient operation, were major concerns. This is why the confrontation between the state and individuals stabilized in the rural environment. It started already at the beginning of socialist state intervention, and resulted in a universal and radical lifestyle, value, and moral change. In this process, the social behaviour that can be defined as the redrawing of the circles of autonomy of the individuals, families, and communities, and as social resistance, "increased during the first campaign of collectivization; then, after collectivization, with the great advances made by the state, it was partially relegated to farmhouse production. At the same time, it was partly integrated into the large economic organizations, as in the case of other occupational groups, and found its expression in the laxity of work discipline and in theft" (Hunya 1990:92). This phenomenon was also noticed by Romanian researchers: "The disappearance of private property also led to an effect not considered by those in political power: theft, which became widespread in the period 1962–1989 under the conditions of the impoverishment of the rural population and its permanent insecurity" (Dobrincu 2001:197).

In my view, theft, ubiquitous in the collectivist village, has become a reality generally accepted and practiced by society because it had a legitimizing, sacral basis. This kind of theft was not considered a sin within rural communities but was, in some cases, even commended by the community. Perpetrators concealed it somewhat, as their act was contrary to the laws in force and subject to state persecution, but they were not ashamed and at times reassured themselves that stealing had communal legitimacy: "everyone does it, and I'm just like the others."

At the same time, the act was also a form of resistance – of course, "adaptive resistance" (Kovács 2011:5), but every action was framed by the idea, the belief behind every thought, or transcendent point of reference, that if everything returned to the old ways and the collective would disintegrate, "they could farm on their own land again. . ." – their security, autonomy, freedom, and farmer identity, based on their property, would return, and the former community of solidarity and unity would be re-established; the law of "he didn't take, but brought" would prevail again, i.e., there would once again be "decent families" that had it all. According to Pál Balogh, "decent families" were considered those which, illustrating the success of the pursuit of peasant self-sufficiency and independence, lived in such a way that "they didn't take, but rather brought". It is about how much a household (which existed in a reciprocity system with other households) needed resources that can be said to be external to its own and those of its local community: "In village life, you know, back in the day, a decent family had it all within the family: melons, pears, apples, everything. He who directed it sought to have everything, because then he was not in need of any shops, but rather brought things to the market" (Pál Balogh). Also, the "law of the rake" would apply anew. In order to protect the most valuable product, the grapes, which provide the drink for ritual occasions, the vineyards are handed over to the care of the haywards, and from then on, anyone who goes to the vineyard brings a rake – on the one hand,

to make their tracks disappear so that the hayward may see if there were any trespassers, i.e., thieves, and, on the other hand, so that everyone, including the hayward, may realize from afar that they are coming with honourable intentions, knowing and respecting the order, just to look around.

Last but not least, people would be happy once again, whistling and singing in the countryside, which would then change back into a familiar and kind landscape, and order would be restored. Then, at last, the split morality would become whole again, and theft would also cease, for then they would farm again as their own masters and would no longer need to rely upon stealing. In the assumed/accepted crystalline structure of the order, the reassuring, timeless, and cosmic security of their world: its sacredness would be finally restored.

For decades, the people of the collectivized village acted, lived, and hoped according to this faith. Not everyone, of course, and the commuter younger generations, growing up in the 1960s and onwards, have certainly not experienced their situation in this manner, as they did not have any memories from "before," and the narratives of collective memory were not associated with events that they, too, experienced. But it is safe to say that the older generation thought that the wheel of time – because everything that has happened was profoundly immoral – could be turned back; nay, it is even necessary for it to turn back, so they just need to wait for the right moment. Keeping the memories of the past awake, anticipation and readiness took about forty years of the life of the aging generation.

Finally, 1989 came, with the downfall of the so-called socialist system, and it seemed that the waiting was not in vain, and this is finally the right moment. De-collectivization and the time when they can start farming again has come. The people rightly thought that the moment of truth has arrived and now is the time of their return to their former selves, which they were forced to give up and have lost as a result of the violent change of land ownership.

A characteristic feature of de-collectivization was the opening of the space for redefining social statuses within rural society. In this process of self-definition, the former private landowners and then collectivist peasants encountered social strata with different memories and different interests than their own. When the land was taken over, different ideas and expectations met and clashed. The economic and social structure-defining toolkit of the state has changed, and there was a clear decrease in the direct influence on individual existence. It was frequently mentioned at the time that "rural society is being abandoned" – which was true insofar as it had more tools at its disposal to decide on its own. At the same time, in the new socio-economic situation, it was also more heavily influenced by all the consequences of its "past," i.e., its traditional mentality, information shortfall, and market weakness. This was the first major blow that fundamentally questioned the sacredness of the land in the emerging new situation.

Behind the conflicts unfolding and stabilizing in the villages lay the confrontation and tension between the ideas of duty and justice, the behaviours these defined, and the differently organized realities. It is the duty of the descendants of the former farmers to seek to restore the order and, as a first stage, to re-claim *exactly* the former estates. Arguments varied widely, but the most common could be traced back to the histories of suffering of the nation and the families. Blood has been spilled for the land and, once upon a time, during the war, people have suffered to protect it or to gain land as victors. They have served long years abroad to buy their land. They carried their small amount of crops on their backs to the city market so that they could save some money to buy their land, little by little. The reconquest consisted, of course, of a series of ritualized, festive situations: the descendant always had to know exactly on which plot,

surrounded and highlighted by personal memories within the neutral landscape, he should plant his feet again, to be on stable ground.

But it was also a duty to prevent damage to the unity of the family and to ensure the ongoing existence of the common heritage. What would the ancestors say if they saw that they were not asking for and taking back the estate? "They would be rolling over in their graves if they found out. . ." So, it's an obligation for the descendant of the wealthy farmer (in the 1950s, during the class struggle, the *kulak*) to try to regain and then perpetuate the remembered status. Beyond the individuals, it is the duty of the entire local society to establish, maintain, and perpetuate the order that protects the land and regulates its use, just as their ancestors did.

It is also the obligation of the state to support the efforts in fulfilling this duty. If restitution does not take place, nothing has really changed, and there is no rule of law, only the same robber state. In this case opposition and resistance are allowed. Thus, it is most natural to use the methods that have worked so far: tax fraud and theft. And the general distrust surrounding every new political and economic decision is fundamental.

In certain situations, someone who does not fulfil these duties is treated as an outsider and is alienated. He'll have to bear the shame. But this was no longer a uniformly valid principle. The otherness of the younger generation has resulted in extremely difficult situations: "Whoever is in the village, does not sell the land. It's sold by those who have moved to the city, or to Hungary, but those who remained in the village are ashamed to sell the land for which they have suffered when they acquired it, suffered when it was taken from them, and now suffer its restoration. The young people, however, think differently. Some ask themselves if it's profitable and sell it if it's not" (anonymous young man).

But how can there be order if strife and unrest are permanent? For those who were dissatisfied with the decisions of the land allocation committees, the behaviour of their new neighbours (because of abusive ploughing and roads cutting through their property), or the practice of acquiring property by their relatives, have tried again and again to seek justice – aggressively, acting out, or by the long-term re-regulation of everyday relationships (anger and hostility); sometimes trying to reach an agreement with the local authorities (i.e., paying them off), and, at other times, through judicial channels. A few have been able to consolidate (and, even more importantly, to increase) their land ownership directly by participating in local power structures and influencing decision-making (as members of the local council or the land allocation committee).

Since there were many relatives who have moved to the city or even farther away, the seeking of justice took place through activating very wide networks. Those who remained in the village could be the users of the lands of their physically distant relatives. It is therefore worth behaving in such a way as to appear selfless and acting from "true kinship attachment," when in fact this is not the case. The right of ownership and disposal, which bring little direct benefit, was regained for the relatives, consolidating their status, but the right of use was reserved for them. The evidence of this behaviour is that many of them have immediately, or over time, purchased the land reclaimed for their relatives. In other words, this was a primitive form of actually increasing their estate.

Last but not least, there were the newcomers in the village: those who came from elsewhere or from the lower part of society and now wanted to gain possessions. They also invoked justice, saying that they have settled, integrated, and worked in this community, so they can also not be robbed now. They argued that it would be in vain to give back the land to helpless, elderly people who could not do anything with it, while they themselves could indeed produce value through their full workforce. They at least must continue to take part in the use of the land, and thus also

have a right to the produced goods. During the first decade of freedom, local societies restructured not only on the basis of the emerging wealth differences but, even before these, along the arguments for justice and various moral perspectives.

It was both frustrating and sobering that open theft persisted. It spread particularly in communities where the number of newcomers and people belonging to communities traditionally conducting a gathering lifestyle has increased and where the institutions offering protection have been weakened. In these communities, when planning the crop structure, the farmers had to think increasingly about preserving the crops as far as possible, because the harvest was threatened not only by the wild animals but also by some villagers. Stories about thefts from the fields abound: "Shepherds and gypsies are the enemy. They let their animals graze everywhere they're not afraid to do so, on the fields of clover and alfalfa, and aren't bothered by the police or anyone else. If you give them a beating, you're punishable, as they say that you can't take the law into your own hands, but they steal what's yours. . . I have about one and a half acres of clover and alfalfa up there, and when I catch some of them there, they say that I should be killed, 'cause I'm the vilest person there is! They say that God didn't create the land for me! So, I tell them that I'll give them one and a half acres of land and they should sow it. . . But they don't sow, 'cause they have no money" (anonymous man). In addition to individual property, public property was also searching for its new forms. The subjects were forced to cooperate against the state provisions – in the new situation, new forms of protection of their interests had to be developed against the emerging interest groups. The "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1868) has become an actual everyday experience, as some sought to appropriate the benefits of the reclaimed public property.

The whole of the arable land has re-become a mosaic of individual land holdings – and the society also had to reconstruct itself from the mosaic of families and individuals searching for their place. For the time being, however, construction has been largely based on "classical" methods: individuals and groups sought scapegoats and argued about who was to blame for the lack of the desired solid ownership relations, moral order, and economic security. The attacks were targeted first at agricultural professionals and then at the state, local leaders, and members of the elite (land distributors, officials, and entrepreneurs), and even the European Union appeared as a target. The public discourse, operating at the level of generalities, began to state that everything was better in the past – back in the days of their grandfathers, or even during socialism.

No knowledge, experience, or financial resources were created for consistent community building. Rural societies in the Szeklerland proved to have basic cooperative deficits in every sense. The "circle of the restrictions on individual ownership, i.e., the real community of property" (see Tóth 1985:59; individuals, groups, or institutions) either does not work or, if it does, it is only to a limited extent, triggering individuals' opposition invoking "democracy."[1] Cooperation, however, requires bargaining, parties capable of negotiating, trust, and working structures that sanction breaching the bargains.

Slowly, after almost 2 decades, land restitution and EU accession was achieved – but those who once waited patiently became more and more shocked that all this was not, by any means, the order they had been waiting for. The same social solidarity, peace, and public good of the

[1]To put it simply: democracy, i.e., not dictatorship, i.e., when there is freedom, and everything is permitted to the detriment of others and to our own benefit.

classical age (according to their socially constructed memories, i.e., their symbolic reality) that they have lost, then hoped and waited for so much, was never to be re-established.

Not even temporarily?

It couldn't even have been possible. But the path to this realization, the acknowledgment of this sad reality, and this sudden enlightenment has eliminated all mythical relationships and sacred framing.

There was no need for resistance and revolt anymore, but hoping and nurturing illusions has also become impossible. Burdened by the new worries of a new world and stuck on their regained land, people have come to the realization that, although they are farming again, the situation is different from what it was "back in the day." They stole because they were in need, survived, but have not become heroes, and finally had to face the naked and profane fact of their new situation: that their order and hopes are shattered once and for all, and time/change is irreversible. Their ritual thefts, that is, the memorable acts of stealing that were carried out together and even celebrated, perhaps still have some space, a community. Like military stories from the World War, they have a distinguished, even beautiful place within individual and collective memory. But mostly they just talk amongst themselves about these things – the younger generation is preoccupied with other stories.

Stealing from the collective can be regarded as an institutionalized social behaviour. According to Mary Douglas, there are two components of the survival and functioning of (formal and informal) social institutions: the transactional and the cognitive. Naturally, in transactions between individuals one should seek to acquire goods, make a profit, and at least create a balance between the resources invested and gained. But the cognitive side is at least as important: how can all the activities carried out in the institution be justified, how do the elaborated explanations lead to the formation of social order and coherence, and ultimately to submission to a sacred reality (Douglas 2002:37)? The transactional character of stealing from the collective is quite clear. Pál Balogh, who explores the reality of theft, also speaks of this fact, that they were "forced to do it," and even if it is debatable that they stole for physical survival, it is certain that the members of the rural society (and not only they) had to adapt, steal, and conceal their acts because they could not otherwise access certain resources. However, the cognitive aspect, on which Pál Balogh remains silent, is also important, and it can only be understood by knowing the stories and reconstructing the reality, providing an explanation to the question of how they could remain "moral" and "clean" in spite of their stealing. I think it's partly because, according to the perpetrators, this wasn't even stealing but, if I understand it correctly, an act of "original acquisition." This concept is used by Ernő Tárkány-Szűcs,[2] referring to the folk law practice according to which, if someone took ownership of the "bona vacantia" of the forests and fields (e.g., by picking crab apples), thus devoting work to obtain them, he has become their rightful owner by this act. "It would spoil anyway, so let's take it home instead" – this was the general opinion of the goods produced in the collectives. At the same time, it was the state that acted as the initiator, making itself "immoral" and "dirty" through its actions, destroying the social communities of the "decent families" and the village, and interfering with the sacred order of the world, which can and will have to be re-established when this state/interference finally ceases.

[2]Ernő Tárkány-Szűcs (1921–1984) is an internationally recognized scholar of legal ethnography, legal customs, and folk law. The 2022/1 issue of AEH pays homage to his work (the editors).

This will be the goal to strive towards after the cessation of this state and its institutions of modernization, and the new constructed situations, acting against the functioning of the state and its institutions. This is why it is important to retroactively process and interpret the reality of theft as a social institution emerging after collectivization, adopting the point of view of de-collectivization. For now, we understand what has changed when the intervention ceased, at least in its forms suffered and hated so much by the generation of the deprived. The land, though with some delays and as a result of "bad laws," has been returned to private ownership. However, what the members of the older generation awaited and hoped for so much did not materialize. Their waiting did not result in what was so much expected by them. Neither the daily order of the world (their world), nor the sacred completeness was restored. Once again, they owned their land, but they themselves have not become farmers standing firmly on their land in the middle of their rebuilt universe. For example, the order of the family has not been restored – because the young people are gone, and the grandchildren are only available online.

There have been uplifting moments in the past, maintaining the illusion, but these didn't last. An elderly and sick peasant from Kisbacon/Bățanii Mici responded to the question why he is reclaiming his land now as follows: "I'll take out a little chair and sit down on it on my land, and then I'll feel as if even the sky above my land was mine" (anonymous elderly man). Alas, these were just fleeting moments, because he, just like other members of his generation, would soon leave his land and sky behind to find eternal peace in the darkness of the cemetery.

In the process of de-collectivization, the value and meaning of their anticipation, resignation, adaptation, bargaining, and temporary victories (of all the long decades of the prime of their lives) was questioned for one last time. This generation has come to realize that the world has become meaningless and absurd for them as well – a world in which, even in the recent past, as it now turned out, it was not only impossible to think of themselves as peasants, since it was restricted and forbidden, but also not worth it, with the hope of imagining their existence as built on their own land and an "identity tied to the land" being completely futile. The members of the older generation still alive today prepare to leave this world with this heavy feeling in their hearts, in a kind of cultural vacuum, in the face of an empty and desacralized present and future.

The fact of desacralization, its recognition at the social level, and the most important element of the reaction to it: the emptying of the symbolic role of the Earth – all these should definitely be considered as one of the explanations for the disappearance of the peasantry and the "successful" completion of the process of de-peasantization (Kovách 2003, 2012). Recently – i.e., primarily during the decade following the EU accession – the peasantry that is "moral, self-governed, farms on its own land, enjoys its individual liberty, and has a strong identity tied to the land" was replaced by a rural generation pursuing a wide range of professional occupations, and not only leaving the symbolic relationship with the land behind but even denying it.

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