

BOOK REVIEW

Csíki, Tamás. (2018). *Eltűnt falusi világok: A 20. századi paraszti társadalom az egyéni emlékezetekben*. [Rural Worlds Lost: 20th-Century Peasant Society in Individual Memories]. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Debreceni Egyetem Néprajzi Tanszék. 276. ISBN 978-963-414-378-9

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Beyond ethnographic collection and oral history, Tamás Csíki's book, *Rural Worlds Lost: 20th-Century Peasant Society in Individual Memories*, aims to contribute, along a novel logic and vision, to the knowledge of the life and everyday existence of Hungarian peasant society. In addition to articulating the topic of the volume in a simple yet tangible way, the chosen title is also a methodological reflection as indicated by the use of the plural in "memories": approaching the subject not through the often-generalizing spectacles of the macro perspective but by examining fragmented, incoherent individual memories.

Presenting different forms of narratives, the author analyzes in detail the memories of the principal characters of the peasant world related to the main thematic units of ethnographic collections. In his analysis, he relies not on his own empirical research but rather on statistics, archival sources, folk sociographic literature, memoirs, and – making his work truly exciting and innovative – interviews conducted by Hungarian ethnographers. The main question Csíki poses is whether it is possible to add to the existing historical-ethnographic knowledge base by analyzing memory and memory construction. Although the author would certainly have had the opportunity to conduct and analyze his own interviews, findings and conclusions of this type of research are not lacking in his work, as he succeeds in establishing new interpretive frameworks through secondary – and at times critical – analyses of data systematized by other researchers.

Excluding the introductory, theoretical, and research methodology basics, as well as the summary chapters, the volume consists of seven units. These seven content units examine individual peasant memory in terms of how the characteristic terrains of ethnographic interest appear in it. The volume focuses on the following topics: 1) family, household, kinship; 2) work; 3) production culture, income, market; 4) social stratification; 5) social mobility; 6) everyday life; 7) the appearance of the historical and local past.

The chapters *Introduction – Objectives, Methods, Antecedents* and *Ethnography – The Science of National (Folk) Memory* are organically linked. In addition to professional and thorough theorizing of the chosen topic and outlining the methodological principles, the author also states

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the poetics of cognition: “Based on these, we believe that cognition is defined this time by the unity of personal identity and ethnographic role” (p. 29). This finding is internalized by the chapters insofar as the author pays constant attention to the researcher’s self-reflection. Csíki emphasizes on several occasions that the recollections recorded by ethnographers were born in a reality formed by the researcher and the “informant,” in an interpersonal interaction, whereby the resulting scientific product is influenced by the researcher’s person and his interpretation of narratives (this statement is highlighted several more times later on, for example: pp. 87, 161). Consequently, in the author’s opinion, the “secondary analysis” of the data and the analysis of the narration may reveal information that has remained hidden thus far.

The chapter *Family, Household, Kinship in Peasant Memory* seeks to provide an anthropological reading of actions and interactions, emotions and ways of thinking, habits and rites related to family life in the light of available sources and interprets them from an emic point of view – considering the interaction between the “informant” and the ethnographer (p. 55). The author uses exact wording from the methodology of memory research when he states that, in terms of narrative self-identity, a distinction must be made between the “informant’s” words as expressing a lived experience or merely reflecting upon an experience (p. 58). This distinction greatly aids the researcher in determining what to accept from the recollection as historical knowledge.

The section titled *Memories of Work* expresses a sharp criticism of the 20th-century approach to ethnographers researching in villages in the wake of Lenard Berlanstein and Patrick Joyce: “ethnographers researching in villages were not excited by the cultural turn either, so the informants’ narratives were seen as a source of exact historical-ethnographic knowledge and not as a culturally determined past or present discursive way of working” (p. 90). For example, the chapter seeks answers to questions such as “what image do we get of agricultural employment, social, reciprocal, and wage labor if we try to capture it based on the narratives of former actors?” (p. 98).

The third chapter, *Production Culture, Income, Market – in Peasant Memory*, states, among other things, that the recollectors thought about the use of borders along mental maps instead of specific geographical areas and data (p. 113), and also highlights that economic innovation appears in memory as a form of collective knowledge, even if a particular innovation has been realized by an individual initiator (p. 125). At this stage, the author also asks how customs and traditions and ethical norms may have influenced market transactions (pp. 125–130), but he also wonders how the different characteristics of Jewish and non-Jewish coexistence can be achieved through farming and in the memories of market production (pp. 131–133).

In the chapter *Serfs, Ordinary Citizens, Peasants. The Memory of Stratification*, the author examines peasant memories from the perspective of the former actors of social reality, asking “what perceptions they held of their social environment, how they perceived their status,” while also focusing on whether the analyzed texts reveal anything about the discursive process of group formation (p. 140).

In the fifth part, *The Memory of Social Mobility*, the author reverses the cognition mechanism of the examined topic in the “usual” way: he does not use recollections to illustrate a social situation, but on the contrary, he looks for what we can learn about social mobility from recollected stories (pp. 167–168).

The section titled *The Memory of Everyday Life in Peasant Society* emphasizes that if a contemporary ethnographer wants to get to know the reality of everyday life, he must also make



the experiential world of the past the subject of research. However, as the revival of the past is created by the reflection of the “informant” and the ethnographer, it is not only the content elements of the recollection but also the framework, linguistic elements, and manner of narration that provide a wealth of information. In this chapter, the author admits to the marginalization of the views of ethnographers when exploring everyday life in individual memories, including topics such as clothing and fashion, “folk” nutrition, social occasions such as a pig slaughter, or communal works like spinning.

The seventh and final unit of the volume differs in some respects from the previous sections. In the chapter *The Memory of the Historical and Local Past*, the author examines the memories of King St. Stephen, Dózsa’s Peasant Uprising, Rákóczi’s War of Independence, and the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence, selected from the texts created by ethnographers. As the identities of the informants and the interview situations are not known in this case, the author’s methodological apparatus narrows: he focuses exclusively on the narratives of stories, the use of language, and the examination of possible rhetorical conventions (pp. 225–226).

Overall, Csíki’s volume has many virtues. The author’s continuous change of position between the narrative realities, the reality of the circumstances of the narrative, and the reality of the ethnographer authenticates his claims. His reflections on what the passage being analyzed is suitable for and when the construction or the way of construction is attention-worthy support the critical researcher attitude. Although the author underlines the arbitrariness of selecting passages of text several times, he also explains his expectations of his particular selection; he bases his theoretical and methodological ideas on domestic and international literature, the bibliography of which can be reviewed at the end of the volume (pp. 255–276).

Csíki begins the content units with a broad, dynamic overview of the history of science and research, and, where appropriate, confronts the omissions, political determinations, and methodological errors of ethnography (pp. 74, 83, 90, 135, 149). The author uses professional source criticism, clearly separating the passages from sources of various natures – ethnographic collections, memoirs, biographies, recollections recorded through interviews.

By analyzing the rhetorical elements, the use of time in narratives, the subject and associations of the recollecting individual, the mnemonics of the individual (including elements of removal, highlighting, rewriting, condensation of life history, repetition), the author follows the differentiation of the culture of peasant society. He provides an anthropological reading of the data set examined throughout the volume, not even suggesting a “revelation.” Instead, he constantly calls attention to the diversity and mosaic-like nature of the historical-ethnographic knowledge.

However, in addition to its many virtues, the volume would have benefitted from a more thorough elaboration on certain points. The table of contents orienting the reader is schematic, simplified, and unfavorably articulated. The lack of chapter numbers makes it difficult to navigate the volume.

As recollections and narratives within a unit appear in a mosaic of different geographical localities, eras, political and social contexts, and socializations, a well-developed conclusion of the chapter and an edification about the next unit would have been useful.

Although the author’s specific intention was to draw conclusions from the study of memory and not to examine a particular geographical unit or era, a summary overview of the period(s) that the interviews or sources referred to may have been informative. A more thorough systematization of knowledge and data would be necessary simply because, for example, a memoir



written in 1932 and recalling the preceding seventy years (pp. 168–169) would highlight different features of peasant society than an interview recorded by an ethnographer in 1952 (pp. 171–172).

The aim of Csíki's book was to provide a social history of 20th-century Hungarian peasant society from new perspectives. He wanted to explore the hidden dimensions of peasant memory by reinterpreting archival and data sources, as well as interviews recorded by Hungarian ethnographers.

With his book, Csíki voted in favor of the scientific application of reflection, which is increasingly needed in interdisciplinary social research. Moreover, it encourages contemporary researchers to delve into the materials from ethnographic collections in repositories, to rethink the questions and methods of 20th-century ethnographers, and at the same time to point out the diversity of discursive reality. It also encourages the exploration of a wide variety of concepts from the past that live side by side, are equally legitimate, but “can never come together into a unified knowledge” (p. 254). Tamás Csíki's book is meant primarily for Hungarian readers, but we considered it important to present it for its methodological innovations and the data it provides for the study of Hungarian peasant culture.

