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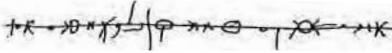
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AFTERWORD

Europe's Guinea Pigs: Globalizing the Agricultural History of Southeastern Europe



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One of the most remarkable features of the peasantry is its resilience to obituaries. No other social group has shown such stubborn resistance towards predictions of social disintegration throughout modern history. The peasants survived Marxist analysts who laid out that the peasants were oppressed and should thus join forces with the proletariat. They survived a comprehensive transformation of markets and modes of production that changed virtually all parameters of agriculture, save for a few biological fundamentals. They persisted through Communist social engineering. They even survived historians such as Eric Hobsbawm who presented the death of peasantry as a *fait accompli*. It is no coincidence that the academic study of peasants ended up in the hands of anthropologists, whose core competence is to make sense of behaviour that nobody else understands. After some two centuries of industrial-capitalist modernity, the peasants are still out there, ready to outlive concepts and categories as they may come to them.

That alone makes this collection of essays a worthwhile endeavour. South-Eastern European peasants are still with us and will be for the foreseeable future, and we better engage with them, lest our view of societies and their histories displays a gaping hole. This holds true for numbers: one can safely guess that between eighty and ninety percent of the people that have lived in Europe throughout human history have been, in one way or another, engaged with

agriculture. And that holds true for our culture: the rural world was the quintessential sphere of European life before the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and it continues to leave its imprint in modern times. When it comes to the peasantry of Europe, the past is not just history. In fact, in South-Eastern Europe, it is not even past.

But then, it is probably time to move the frame of reference beyond the European sphere. Taking stock of the parameters that defined the peasants' existence in South-Eastern Europe in the preceding essays, most look strikingly familiar: precarious economic conditions and the persistence of subsistence production; repeated shifts in the general political and economic framework; the coexistence of nationalistic and ethnic vigour and transnational connections; leftovers from large development schemes born out of bygone utopias; authoritarian states and endemic corruption. None of this is a peculiarity of South-Eastern Europe. From a global perspective, and, particularly, with a view to the colonial and post-colonial world, these conditions are the rule rather than the exception.

Of course, such a designation runs the risk of undue generalization. The concept of the colonial and post-colonial world glosses over a whole host of national, regional and local specifics, as it highlights common experiences at the expense of variations. But then, these remarks follow on the heels of case studies that look at countries, regions, and even single villages in great detail, and,

if that exercise teaches us anything, it is that place and context matter: the previous stories all have their peculiar social, economic, ethnic and ecological conditions, and none of the following shall be construed as denying the significance of these specifics. Yet it seems that there are some common themes that run through these essays, and we should take stock of them both for a better understanding of these case studies and for raising the profile of the field. That is what this essay intends to do.

The history of the European peasantry is usually phrased in terms of diminishment and dissolution. A whole cosmos of morals, along with trades and social strata, disappeared from Europe, but, at least, the peasants had a chance to trade their legacy in for something better (cf. Mooser 2000). That narrative does not work for South-Eastern Europe, lest one wishes to depict an entire century of peasant history as a state of limbo, a kind of waiting room of history that multiple generations of peasants occupied because of some unscheduled delay in the execution of their predestined fate. In fact, looking at South-Eastern Europe may help us recognize alternative paths in modern history. For instance, the persistence of subsistence modes may look less anachronistic when we recognize that West-German peasants were doing exactly the same thing in the years after 1945. After all, you can make a good case for the merits of subsistence agriculture under conditions of uncertainty. After the devastating defeat in the Second World War, with the future of Germany in the hands of foreign powers, maintaining a foot in agriculture was playing it safe (Teiwes 1952, 137).

With that, situating the agricultural history of South-Eastern Europe within a global context does not mean pushing it outside the European context. One can even argue that the peasants of South-Eastern Europe were more exposed to the vagaries of European history in the 20th century than most of their fellow agriculturalists. Perhaps no other social formation in Europe has been

exposed to such a sustained barrage of shifting political currents: nation-building and ethnic conflicts, autarky policies and forced development, socialist collectivization and neo-liberal reforms, land speculation and, most recently, European nature conservation policies. And even when socialism reigned supreme for some four decades, the reality on the ground was full of dynamism and, thus, more akin to a permanent revolution, as Anelyia Kuzmanova shows in the case of Bulgaria. Just like the guinea pigs in a children's playground, these peasants have been toyed with perennially throughout the 20th century.

As countless children have learned, guinea pigs may look defenceless, but they can bite. The same holds true for peasants, and it is gratifying to see how these articles seek to stress their agency under adverse conditions. In retrospect, the Greek currant crisis of the early 1900s looks like the overture to a century of peasant protests. And the tradition continues: as Jovana Diković shows in her article on Serbia, a National Peasant Party can still thrive in the 21st century. But then, the peasants' response does not need to be a political one. They can also seek jobs outside agriculture or become a reservoir for children whose parents migrate abroad for work, as Andrew Cartwright shows for present-day Romania.

Ștefan Dorondel and Stelu Șerban note in their introduction that South-Eastern Europe does not fit any of Terrence Byres' models of agrarian transformation. One could add that the peasants themselves do not perform any better when it comes to matching preconceived models. The peasants in these volumes take on jobs outside agriculture, nurture children that are not their own, migrate to cities and back, and they even display a notably unemotional relationship to their own land holdings. None of that fits squarely with established clichés of peasant behaviour, but that may say more about fading ideas of an idealized peasantry than about the realities on the ground. None of the essays in this volume

suggest that South-Eastern European peasants spent much time reflecting on eternal peasant ideals. But they all attest to their desire, and their struggles under adverse conditions, to make a living.

While the peasants of South-Eastern Europe were somewhat averse to utopian thinking, others were less reserved when it came to imposing their own ideas upon the rural populace. Soviet-style collectivization was merely the most spectacular among a wide range of experiments where peasants figured as mere guinea pigs, and these projects felt no reservations to interfere with things as intimate as personal hygiene; just look at Milena Angelova's discussion of the Bulgarian Model Villages. Furthermore, these Model Villages drew on German and American precedents, as if experts in other countries would know more about the ideal way of rural life than the people of South-Eastern Europe. It is perhaps unsurprising that peasants did not readily adjust to their precast roles, and sometimes the results ran directly counter to the authorities' intentions. As Kuzmanova shows, the socialist project ultimately contributed to the individualization and atomization of Bulgarian society.

Authorities also toyed around with land ownership patterns. Of course, collectivization was the most glaring example, but states were also deep into the land business before and after the socialist period. It is rewarding to look into this issue more deeply, as it was a constant source of trouble and conflict all over the regions. There is probably no need to elaborate on the reasons at great length. Peasants have been many different things all over the world, but they always had land, and, as Cornel Micu stresses in the case of Romania, land was a means of subsistence and a social connector, not just a mere economic asset and means of production.

Of course, land reforms were a pan-European concern, as ownership of land was a key dimension of social inequality. But the chronology is different; in fact, one can justifiably speak of a deep rift between Western and Eastern Europe when it comes to land

reform in the quest for social justice. When Lloyd George, who had waged a hugely popular Land Campaign in Britain in 1913, tried an encore with his Land Programme of 1926, the cause fell through with the voters, and the issue never returned from its grave (Thompson 2010, 259). In South-Eastern Europe, land reforms had barely started at that time, and they became a defining force for agricultural system, if not the single most important factor, as Edvin Zhllima and Klodjan Rama argue for Albania. People also learned how land reform was as much a matter of economy and livelihoods as of political power: Christian Giordano shows the intrinsic links between land reform and nation-building for interwar Yugoslavia. Only Greece had an earlier start in the land redistribution business, as Kaiti Aroni-Tsichli shows, but it seems that is mostly due to the relatively early end of Ottoman rule. Furthermore, there was a notable absence of a sense of urgency in 19th century Greece when it came to redistributing land, something that might deserve more scrutiny.

In short, the land question divided Europe, and it will be interesting to watch whether the redistribution of collectivized land and the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s have closed this gap for good. In the Western half of Europe, peasants saw a lot of things coming their way throughout the 20th century, but, at least, they could be sure that nobody would take away their land. South-Eastern European peasants never had that type of certainty: they worked their land only as long as nobody found that they were too big, too small, had the wrong ethnicity, or that Soviet-style collectivization was the way towards the future. Liviu Mantescu rightly highlights the ecological toll of deforestation in the Vrancea, Romania, but the people's rationale is painfully easy to understand. In a region where land titles were in a state of flux, getting rich quickly with logging permits was a terribly enticing option. Who would want to practice sustainable forestry when someone else might own the forest (or what will be left of it)



sooner rather than later?

Forest use in Vrancea clearly bears the marks of a colonial style of resource exploitation, first by foreign logging companies and then by reparation-hungry Soviets. Yet Mantescu refrains from using the word, and so do most of the other authors. The case against the concept is arguably more political than analytical. Depicting a region as colonial is inevitably insulting, and particularly so in a region with strong national and ethnic allegiances. But then, post-socialist Moldovan peasants seek to move beyond subsistence production and complain about a lack of markets for their products, as Jennifer Cash shows on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork. These peasants do not want to shut the door to the world. But then, how do we call trade relations when the playing field is not level?

Of course, when it comes to insults, nothing beats the title of this essay. For all their misery, peasants usually cherish a certain sense of pride, if only because they do better than the landless, and few would delight being compared to guinea pigs. But then, the metaphor (for it is nothing more than that) may serve to highlight the peasants' precarious place in society: guinea pigs usually evoke instant sympathy, but nobody would like to take their place. For all the diversity of peasant livelihoods that this volume explores, we are talking about a group of people that are almost universally poor (except for those few who made a killing with logging permits), and we have known since Pierre Bourdieu's *La Misère du monde* that there is now a huge diversity of depressed existences (Bourdieu et al. 1993). Unlike Kautsky and Lenin, we can no longer act as if proletarianization was the single uniform mode of exploitation.

Poverty has many faces, but its place in society boils down to a common fate nowadays. Zygmunt Bauman put it as follows:

"For the first time in human history, the poor, so to speak, have lost their social use. They are not the vehicle of personal repentance and salvation; they are not the hew-

ers of wood and drawers of water, who feed and defend; they are not the 'reserve army of labour,' nor the flesh and bones of military power either; and most certainly they are not the consumers who will provide the effective 'market clearing' demand and startup recovery. The new poor are fully and truly useless and redundant." (Bauman 1997)

The remark probably hits a point for the peasants of South-Eastern Europe. Throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, authorities have cherished them as producers, voters, labourers, or dumping ground for children, but rarely have people cherished them as peasants. The shameful Romanian welfare policy that Cartwright is recording – inflating land values until peasants no longer qualify for support – thus carries a bitter irony: conspiring in such a way is essentially the last step in a long process of making these people invisible. If the peasants of South-Eastern Europe would somehow perish from the face of the earth, would someone really miss them?

As Bauman notes, we have somehow lost a good moral case for engaging with the poor. We certainly have lost a clear vision for their social uplift, and particularly so in a region that is now basically a waste heap for the utopias of the 20th century. In fact, one probably cannot close this volume without a remark on how strangely diffuse the peasants look in this volume, and how far they diverge from any idealized vision. "Peasant" is merely a default word that we use for lack of something better, and we do so in spite of qualms about the past of the word: nobody would want to resuscitate the eternal peasants of infamous memory. But then, their undefined place in societies past and present should not be an excuse for negligence. The peasants that these essays discuss are a part of European history, and a part of 21st century Europe. That the rest of the continent no longer treats them as such, or even acknowledges their sheer existence beyond the essentials of modern citizenship, makes it all the more important to give them a voice.

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