

MARTOR



Title: “Sociological Aspects of the Peasants’ Cooperatives in Southeastern Europe: Serbia and Romania Compared”

Author: Srdan Šljukic

How to cite this article: Šljukic, Srdan. 2001. “Sociological Aspects of the Peasants’ Cooperatives in Southeastern Europe: Serbia and Romania Compared.” *Martor* 6: 271-274.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-6-2001/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

Sociological Aspects of the Peasants' Cooperatives in Southeastern Europe: Serbia and Romania Compared

Srdan Šljukić

Department of Sociology, University of Novi Sad, FR Yugoslavia

It would be very difficult to challenge the claim that says that the modern societies possess stronger ability of adaptation than all the other societies (Parsons, 1992, p. 9). The power, which the modern societies are able to express both inside themselves (through control and development of the resources available) and to their surroundings (i.e. other existing societies), has been mainly rooted in the extremely high degree of their social integration, based on highly developed division of labor. This integration has been achieved by certain institutions and in all three spheres of social activity: economical, political and cultural. In economy, the main integrative mechanism has been the market; in politics, it is the principle of citizenship; in the sphere of culture, very general and stable value system is crucial. A specific social structure (in its vertical dimension), with the absence of sharp lines between social strata and the presence of intensive social mobility, is also an important characteristic of the modern societies. Furthermore, it is not disputable that all modern societies are of Western origin. However, it is also true that their traits can be (and have been) successfully copied and implemented in most of the other societies.

In spite of the huge migrations from rural to urban areas and the overwhelming influence of the urban way of life in villages, it cannot be said

that there are no rural-urban differences in the modern societies and that agriculture is not important any more. It must be pointed out that the agriculture of these societies allows them, apart from satisfying domestic needs, to export a very large quantity of food products, which appears to be a powerful lever of the world domination. One of the institutions that contributed to this situation has been, by all means, the agricultural (farmers', peasants') cooperative.

In the USA farmers' cooperatives are „(...) the key component of rural economies“ (Thompson, 2000). According to the ICA (International Cooperative Alliance) sources, in 1993 there were 4 244 agricultural cooperatives in the USA, with more than 4 million members and the turnover of 82 billion US\$. Since the early '90s their role at the market has been growing. If we look at agricultural cooperatives in the EU now, we shall find out that the leading countries are France (turnover of nearly 74 billion of US\$), Germany and the Netherlands (Cote and Carre, 1996). It should not be forgotten that in the case of the cooperatives it is not only the economy that matters: cooperatives in rural areas strengthen social solidarity and contribute to rural development.

The intention of „the rest“ of societies to enlarge their evolutionary capacity through the

process of modernization should be considered quite natural. In fact, most of the societies in South-Eastern Europe have been facing the task of modernization for the third time during the last two hundred years. They faced it firstly after the liberation from the Turkish rule in the nineteenth century. The second attempt was made by the new political (communist) élites after the World War II. Finally, the breakup of the socialist systems did not put the necessity of modernization into the archive of history: on the contrary, the same question, this time as in the form of „transition“, was raised once again.

Since Serbia and Romania have always been (and still are, to the great extent) „the countries of peasants“, one could expect to find a developed cooperative movement in both of them, which would be an indicator of the ongoing process of modernization. However, this is not the case in Serbia, and it is even less true for Romania.

Peasants' cooperatives in contemporary Serbia do exist, but not to the extent that would be desirable in the present economical and social circumstances. The first type of agricultural cooperatives in Serbia is, actually, represented by the cooperatives inherited from the former (socialist) system. These cooperatives, which had somehow survived all hardships they were exposed to during the previous four decades (forced collectivization and its failure, a period of „general cooperatives“ and a period of „self management“), have been engaged in various activities, like primary production, food processing, input supply and output marketing, etc. A great part of their assets, which had been taken from them by the state since 1953 and transformed into so-called „social property“, has not been restored as cooperative property yet, though the Law (adopted five years ago) says it should be done. Their internal structure and social relations still have a lot of hallmarks of the socialist system.

The new legislation – the laws on cooperatives and agricultural cooperatives adopted in the Republican (1989) and Federal (1996) par-

liament – was mostly adjusted to the European standards and it enabled the appearance of totally new, spontaneously formed agricultural cooperatives (engaged mainly – but not only – in input supply and output marketing) that had been absolutely impossible before 1989. We consider them to be the cooperatives of the second type, which in itself can be divided into two separate subtypes. Namely, some of the new peasants' cooperatives can be called the „real peasant cooperatives“ because they have really been formed by peasants for peasants, as they have also been led and controlled by peasants. However, in the second subtype we put those agricultural cooperatives that have been established by entrepreneurs who had been searching for a way to do some trade in agriculture and a way to avoid, at the same time, the taxes that have been imposed on corporations by the state. There is no doubt that the Serbian peasants have got the point when they call these cooperatives „private cooperatives“.

Although it has got its superstructure (regional federations of cooperatives, the Cooperative Alliance of Serbia and the Cooperative Alliance of Yugoslavia – the last one being a member of ICA), the cooperative movement in Serbia stays relatively weak, fragile and exposed to the will of much stronger actors on the agricultural scene.¹

If we turn now to Romania, we shall find out that the situation with agricultural cooperatives is much worse than in Serbia. The statistics of the ICA reveals that in Romania in 1997 there were no agricultural cooperatives at all (ICA, 1998, p. 72)! Unfortunately, this happens to be mainly true, since if we apply the definition of a cooperative adopted by the ICA², peasants' cooperatives in Romania hardly exist.

Romania dealt with her *kolkhoz* system in the most radical way, which cannot be found in any other country in Central and Eastern Europe. The socialist agricultural „cooperatives“ were totally dismantled by an agrarian reform that looked a lot like the agrarian reforms car-

ried out in many countries of the region after the World Wars I and II and was achieved, without any doubt, mostly for political (and ideological) reasons. However, it is still possible to recognize two forms of organization in the Romanian agriculture that at least look like cooperatives, though they are not.

Agricultural societies are a sort of descendants of the agricultural cooperatives that existed through the socialist period. Since a lot of people who got their (or their parents' or relatives') land back were not able to till it (due to old age, absenteeism, lack of skill or capital, engagement in the other sectors of economy, unclear land ownership situation, etc.), the simplest solution was to „give“ the land to someone to till it for them. „Someone“ usually happened to be the management of the former socialist cooperatives, who just used the opportunity and became the managers of new-formed agricultural associations. In spite of the fact that these associations do have some characteristics of a cooperative, they do not satisfy, due to many reasons, all the requirements of the definition.

The other phenomenon worth mentioning are the family associations, which surely represent a form of cooperation among the Romanian peasants. However, this form of cooperation is, actually, of a traditional kind. This means, above all, that there is no written and legal contract among the members of family associations, which allows us to classify them as a pre-modern form of cooperation among primary groups (families and neighbors). The cooperation we have been speaking about is a modern form of cooperation, which occurred for the first time in the middle of the 19th century.

It is important to notice that both forms of organization are engaged mainly in production (which is usually not the case in the West) and

that they have not built any superstructure, though in 1999 there were 3 573 agricultural societies (the average size of a farm was 399 ha) and 6 264 family associations (the average farm 139 ha) in Romania, with 16% share in total agricultural land (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: OECD, 2000, p. 82).

What are the causes of the differences between Serbia and Romania, concerning cooperatives in agriculture? And more, what are the causes of the underdevelopment of the peasants' cooperatives in both countries?

One of the causes may be the different destiny of the Serbian and the Romanian peasantry. Although the more distant past, above all the fact that the feudal structures had had a fairly long life in Romania, should not be neglected, the impact of the recent history, namely, the differences that arised during the socialist period (let us just mention the fact that forced collectivization did not succeed in former Yugoslavia) should be considered more significant. The second cause should be seen in the present power relations among the various social groups in these two countries, especially among political élite(s), agricultural élite(s) (old and new) and the peasantry.

If we now try to look at the things from the wider perspective, we could conclude that the power relations among different social groups are also the main obstacles to modernization. Nevertheless, the influence of the environment (the West, but not only the West) is important, too, since „(...) they are trying to shape us according to their needs, not to their image“ (Lazić (ed.), 1994, pp. 256 - 257). The impulse of modernization must come from the inside – if not so, we shall have a peripheral society, not a modern one.

Notes

1 According to the statistics of the Cooperative Alliance of Serbia, there are 985 peasants' cooperatives in Serbia today.

2 The definition of a cooperative can be found on www.ica.org.

Bibliographical References

COTE, D. and CARRE, G., 1996, „1995 Profile: Agricultural Cooperation throughout the World. An Overview“, in *Review of International Cooperation*, Vol. 89, Issue 1.

LAZIĆ, M. (ed.), 1994, *Razaranje društva (Society in Crisis)*, Beograd, Filip Viönjia.

PARSONS, T., 1992, *Moderna društva*, Niö, Gradina.

OECD (ed.), 2000, *Review of agricultural Policies: Romania*, Paris.

ICA (ed.), 1998, *Statistics and Information on European Cooperatives*, Geneva.

THOMPSON, J.L., 2000, „Borders Are No Longer Barriers for Coops“, in *Rural Cooperatives*, Vol. 67, Issue 2.