

**Imre Kovách\*** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3966-1274>

## RUSTICA NOVA. THE NEW COUNTRYSIDE IN HUNGARY AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

**Abstract.** This paper comprehensively presents the complex transformation of rural Hungary after the turn of the millennium. The post-socialist land re-privatization provided land to more than 2 million families, but by the time of EU accession (2004) a highly concentrated large estate structure had already developed. The number of the village population decreased somewhat, but its proportion remained high at around one-third, together with rural towns people 50% in Hungarian society. Despite the surviving and hybrid structures, depeasantization, the disappearance of the traditional peasantry, took place, as a result of tourism, the new type of town-village relations, the cultural reinterpretation of the countryside and its traditions began, but the social disadvantages are still more strongly concentrated in the villages than in the cities.

**Keywords:** depeasantization, land reform, community, traditions, hybridity, cultural re-definition.

## RUSTICA NOVA. NOWA WIEŚ NA WĘGRZECH NA PRZEŁOMIE TYSIĄCLECI

**Abstrakt.** Artykuł stanowi kompleksowe spojrzenie na złożoną transformację obszarów wiejskich na Węgrzech na przełomie tysiącleci. Postsocjalistyczna reprivatyzacja gruntów zapewniła ziemię ponad 2 milionom rodzin, ale do czasu przystąpienia do UE (2004 r.) rozwinęła się już wysoce skoncentrowana struktura dużych posiadłości. Populacja wiejska, w społeczeństwie węgierskim, nieco się zmniejszyła, ale jej odsetek pozostał wysoki na poziomie około jednej trzeciej, a wraz z mieszkańcami miast wiejskich na poziomie 50%. Pomimo zachowanych i hybrydowych struktur nastąpił zanik tradycyjnego chłopstwa, a w wyniku turystyki powstał nowy rodzaj relacji między

---

\* Research professor, Centre for Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Budapest; corresponding member, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, corresponding member Académie d'Agriculture de France, e-mail: kovach.imre@tk.hu

miastem a wsią. Rozpoczęła się kulturowa reinterpretacja wsi i jej tradycji. Mimo to niekorzystne warunki społeczne nadal silniej koncentrują się na wsiach niż w miastach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** depesntyzacja, reforma rolna, społeczność, tradycje, hybrydyzacja, redefinicja kulturowa.

In the decade before and after the turn of the millennium, rural society was affected by the effects of a complete transformation. This period was historically unique in that the consequences of three processes, each of which had a profound impact, were simultaneously taking shape. The final stage of the decline of the rural peasantry coincided with the dismantling of the socialist system and with globalization and European integration, which corresponded to three structural changes. As a result of the total restructuring, radically new processes were set in motion in rural society. “New” is not a normative term here. In the Hungarian countryside today, the social, political and environmental deficits of the triple structural change are at least as great as the positive benefits. The term “new countryside” is used merely to denote the fact that changes are significant in all essential dimensions of rural structures. The diversity of systems of regeneration, economy and power, the variety of actors and their interests, their networks, their values and their courses of action, have created a fragmented social structure. By fragmented structure, I refer to the coexistence of phenomena that are not necessarily linked to each other. One feature of the “new countryside” is the hybrid nature of society and economy. Hybridity is a structural condition, not a synonym for transitionality. It is equally present in the economy, society, politics and spatial structure. The systems and subsystems of market, state/social and quasi-market, project-based redistribution cross and, thereby, block each other. Further research can clarify the essence of this new order of social redistribution. It is certain that, at present, redistributive systems or project-based forms of quasi-market resource allocation are more relevant to rural society than the market. This form of hybridity cannot be sustained at all, or only with very serious consequences and at the cost of an even greater loss of rural influence. The largest percentage of the rural population is employed in services. Even the number of people in industrial occupations is higher than in agriculture. Work in services and industry is largely commuting. A growing share of services is in demand by urban dwellers. A mixed farm structure – large farms, family small and medium-sized farms and part-time small farms – may persist in agriculture despite the concentration of production. The mixed farm structure that emerged at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is a long-standing feature of Hungarian agriculture. Political decisions have repeatedly attempted to abolish certain forms of mixed farming. The land distribution of 1945 was intended to eliminate the large farm, the organization of producer cooperatives (1959–1962) the small farm, and the period of land compensation (1991–1993) the large farm again. The mixed

factory structure was revived after each political intervention. The last decade has favored the concentration of farms, but the land use and structural role of family farms has also stabilized. In times of general economic crisis, partial food self-sufficiency can be a family strategy to mitigate losses. The middle and upper middle-class demand for “healthy”, “clean source”, traditional or organic food may also make part-time production on their own land/garden more popular. The decline of the largest social group in rural society in the 19th and 20th centuries, the peasantry, was complete by the new millennium. The importance of agriculture is a fraction of what it was two decades earlier. No group of agricultural producers can be identified as peasants according to the definitions of the historical category. Changes in the agrarian structure are breaking up the (orderly) elements of peasant behaviour and mentality that survive under socialism. In large farms and family farms, there has been a market shift in production/sales and work culture that was never complete in the 19th and 20th centuries. The peculiarities of the peasant household economy and production described by Tchayanov, the lack of specialization, the necessity of constant workload and the high degree of self-sufficiency, are not at all applicable to today’s full-time farmers. Rural poverty retains much more of the elements of the former middle and small peasantry’s strategies of regeneration. However, the strategies of poverty avoidance or survival cannot be identified with the survival of peasant qualities and structures. The link between urban and rural society is considerably more intense than in the past, due to mobility, the explosion in the technical conditions of telecommunications and the increased demand of urban consumers for rural goods and services. The “interlocking” of urban and rural structures is an essential element of rural hybridity. The countryside is increasingly a place of consumption rather than production. The demand of urban (and foreign) consumers is rewriting the supply of rural producers and service providers. The dynamic growth of nature reserves and the recreational needs of urban dwellers; tourism to resorts, waterfronts, forests and mountains; the demand for traditional food and wine; the second (rural) homes or permanent settlement of urban dwellers in villages; the convergence of rural upper and middle-class values with urban norms; the mass daily encounter of commuters with the city; as well as the influence of the media all work towards the dissolution of the former rural/urban dichotomy. The rural economy is diversifying as a result of the decline in the importance of agricultural production and new values and directions for development (Ángyán 2012, 2014; Pataki et al. 2011). Rural diversification is interpreted by Dezső Kovács as covering the following types of activities: rural tourism, recreational services, value-added activities (selling local food); use of additional buildings/other resources, production of non-traditional agricultural products (Kovács D. 2003a). Rural catering is an important economic activity in some districts and its importance in this respect is that it connects settlements far from the main holiday areas to tourism. Slightly more than half of the nights spent in rural tourism are spent in destinations other than known tourist

destinations. In 1998, according to HCSO data, there were 4,893 rural inns with 26,340 beds and 431,272 nights spent. By 2004, the number of inns had increased to 7,431, the number of beds to 44,364 and the number of nights spent to 495,637. By 2009, there were no changes in the number of hosts, but the number of guest nights increased to 722,000. According to Dezső Kovács's calculations based on municipal registrations, the number of hosts (6,000 in 2000) and nights spent (500,000 nights) is also higher (Kovács D. 2003a). The spread of organic farming can also be seen as a sign of diversification. In 2000, the number of organic farms was only 741, covering 47,200 hectares. By 2001, the area cultivated had increased to 79,000 hectares (Kürthy 2002). By 2004, the number of organic farmers had increased to 1,420 and the area cultivated by them to 128,690 hectares, according to the Organic Farming Control Agency. After 2004, organic farming slightly decreased. In 2009, 2.5% of the arable land was involved in organic farming and the number of producers had increased to 1,800. The share of land under environmental protection increased by one-third between 1991 and 2011 to 892,000 ha (HCSO data). Environmental and sustainability projects create new connections, transform social capital and the use of knowledge forms and can also contribute to the diversification of economic activity (Kelemen, Megyesi 2007). In many municipalities, the feasibility of sustainability projects that aim at local knowledge, the use of local natural resources, food self-reliance and the empowerment of local communities is questionable due to changes in social and economic structures and a lack of confidence (Lányi 2009). Nevertheless, they are an alternative that can create new types of activities, especially in disadvantaged areas, in forms that are separate from larger sectors of the rural economy. It is an unfortunate feature of Hungarian (and Central European) development that the decline of agriculture and the historical peasantry has not been followed by a decline in the rural population. The rural space in Hungary and Central Europe is overpopulated and full of social conflicts, which justifies the elaboration of specific development paradigms.

Peasant culture was considered a source of national culture in both the 19th and 20th centuries. Rurality was an integral part of national image and symbols (Kovách 2001; Csizse, Kovách 2002). Rural depopulation and the related structural reforms of the millennium are not isolated social changes; they have a strong impact on the most diverse groups of Hungarian society, on post-socialist and postmodern national symbols and images (Kovách 2007; Csurgó 2007). The loss of cultural tradition is the most prominent element of rural depopulation. In the social regeneration of late socialism, the economic accumulation of individuals and families was subordinated to consumption goals, which, together with the loss of function of the institutions of peasant society, led directly to the erosion of the values and traditions of the historical peasantry. The institutions of peasant society, the community control over the values, behaviour and habits of individuals, finally gave way in the 1990s to the values of the consumer society, effectively mediated by globalization. The

disintegration of the communities of the historical peasantry began in the 19th century, but was not completed under the socialist system. The values and behavioural patterns of local societies were subject to strong community control until around the turn of the millennium. Community control, dress, consumption, greetings, mourning or celebration in their obligatory, albeit not medieval or unchangeable, forms, were a means of protecting against the dangers of the outside world and minimizing risk. Community control survived the abolition of its economic base, private property, and for a long time the rural population could count on a world of values and norms governed by community control to offer some protection, at least a sense of belonging and common destiny. This was the most important force that held rural societies together in a time of weakening social organization by extended families, churches, schools and other institutions. I believe that the final disintegration of the forms of community control that were historically linked to the peasantry occurred in the 1990s. International research reports that rural communities are far from being lifeless (Starosta 1998; Starosta, Draganova 1999), but in Hungary they are a new system of relations with weak personal and institutional links to the communities of the historical peasantry. Research on contemporary rural communities is one of the great debts of rural studies. One of the reasons for this may be that the last twenty years have been a transitional period in all respects, and research has focused mainly on structural changes. There is relatively little information available on the community organization of local societies. Kotics (2007), in his paper on community research, mentions only one work on rural communities in the present (Borsos et al. 1999). There are many descriptions and data published on rural settlements, but hardly any on community organization and community values (Váradi 1997; Kovács É. 2007). In a period of reorganization, individual strategies may be more successful, and a lack of trust, a decrease in cooperativeness and individualisation may have weakened even the (relatively) closer unity of small communities that used to depend on each other. Studying community is probably not only a debt of rural science. Research in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe shows that local communities are far from dead. Paweł Starosta organized an international comparative study of local communities around the turn of the millennium (Starosta 1998; Starosta, Draganova 1999). Starosta used empirical sociological research tools to examine the functioning of local communities in Poland and Bulgaria. It was found that the community can play an integrative role in the organization of local societies. Instead of community, Starosta proposes the concept of social bonding to study the organization of post-socialist local societies. In his view, the strength of belonging, the absence or existence of a bond, does not depend on the size or composition of the population, but on the extent to which the infrastructure of a given locality is equipped and the conditions are appropriate to the needs of the population. Moral attachment, shaped not by tradition or proximity but by individual values, is a local capital that can contribute to the development of communities. The need for security is also an essential component of rural

societies in transition. In Hungarian local communities, new social bonds are more difficult to form. The fact that, due to rapid and radical privatisation and market transition, social differences in Hungarian rural society were already much greater in the first half of the 1990s than in Czech, Polish, Slovak, Bulgarian and Russian villages (Csíste, Kovách 1995; Kovách 1994), certainly plays a significant role in this. Mónika Váradi (2007) clearly identifies the reasons for the disturbed community relations. Most of the larger landowners of the new era were not from local communities. The potential leadership of the villages is not linked to the locals by ties of belonging. There was no real model group for the new social bond. Land auctions and elections, or, in short, political interference, led to the emergence of strong local conflicts. Judit Tímár (2007) links the changing function of the community to the changing position of gender in society. Men are losing their traditional gender roles, which included representing the family and participating in community affairs, which women are not taking on as their burden of caring for the family has increased. According to Rita Glózer (2007), the erosion of public life is a major obstacle to community formation. Successful local communities are usually coupled with the performance of a charismatic leader, which poses a risk because a change of person eliminates the most important condition for community success. The creation of new social bonds, as Starosta warns (1998), has to do with the development of the municipality. Bernadett Csurgó (2013) identified new ways of creating social ties in successful peri-urban settlements. For some of the displaced urbanites, a stable value is the experience of belonging to a community and it is also one of the aims of moving out of cities. They are able to connect with local people, actively participate in community building and create new social bonds. According to High and Nemes (2007), EU development programmes in particular offer effective forms of community building.

Two major subtypes of social organization of rural space have emerged. The society of deprived regions is diversified not by urban consumption, but by a large mass of dependants. The regenerating regions, which are in intensive material and intellectual exchange with the cities, are at a greater social and mental distance from the declining settlements than from the cities. The idyllic/critical elements of rural images in the media have shifted towards a more negative perception. Urban consumers, on the other hand, are reshaping the image of the countryside, placing the idyllic features that appeal to them, forgetting the more sombre elements of rural reality. Local societies are reviving and recreating local traditions as a cultural reclaiming of their locality. A small-scale cultural revival is taking place in most villages and small towns. European integration provides access to new resources. Grassroots development projects, notably LEADER, are redefining the power relations in local arenas of power. The project-based approach to development leads to the emergence of new, mostly skilled and young groups of actors (the project department and intermediary actors) with a strong interest in successful rural development. Their development activities and interests are currently the only

chance for the development of the depressed municipalities. The highly mixed nature of rural society and the interplay of interests in local multi-stakeholder politics make the adoption of new governance principles and the application of governance techniques the greatest challenge for the coming years.

There are few traditions from the world of the historical peasantry that have survived the second half of the 20th century and strongly link the present to the past, but at the same time we are witnessing a certain rural cultural revival. The dance house movement remains vibrant and popular). We are learning how to prepare old and new dishes, wine culture has been revived, the State Folk Ensemble is “re-designing” folk songs and dances, local elites have found legitimacy for their power in the process of recreating local traditions, monuments and memorials are being cleaned up and new ones erected, the tourism industry is recreating rural values (Kovács D. 2003a, 2003b). Rural images have been given an economic function in the new system of regional and rural development. The competition for development resources encourages local elites to create new discursive strategies and images (Kovács 2002). The planning and expert elites, the influential actors in rural development, can assert their power in the process of cultural re-design of the countryside. In everyday speech, the meaning of “rural” and “peasant” is devalued, but the consumer classes that come into contact with the countryside, tourists and other visitors discover its rural values and treasures (Kovács D. 2003a). Household economic pluriactivity, which was the economic strategy of the middle-classes, is increasingly being adopted by urban dwellers, who are becoming more understanding of peasant and rural history. New rural traditions are being invented and recreated. What might be the cultural consequences of the rural depopulation of the countryside if the intimate link between the past and the present, and even more so with the future, is broken? In the late industrialized regions of Europe (Granberg, Kovács, Tovey 2001), the creation of modern nations was effectively linked to peasant traditions. The loss of tradition in Scandinavia, Ireland and the Mediterranean countries was an organic process compared to what happened in Hungary. The creation of modernity involved peasants and post-peasants and met their interests. In Hungary (and in Central and Eastern Europe), the loss of tradition and the creation of tradition are ongoing, but so far outsiders, rural elite groups, settlers, and expert classes have been more active in the cultural redefinition of the countryside than the descendants of peasants still living in rural settlements.

## References

- Ángyán J. (2012), *Föld- és birtokpolitika alulnézetből*, Megyei esettanulmányok.
- Ángyán J. (2014), *Mi lesz veled magyar föld, mezőgazdaság, vidék?*, [in:] B. Andrásfalvy, J. Ángyán, G. Márai, G. Molnár, E. Tanka (eds.), *A magyar föld sorsa*, Agroinform Kiadó, Budapest, pp. 101–108.

- Az állami földbérleti rendszer értékeléséhez. IV. jelentés a földről. Gödöllő, [http://www.kielegyenafold.hu/userfiles/file/IV\\_jelentes\\_a\\_foldrol\\_20121215\\_NG\\_2013042\\_2.pdf](http://www.kielegyenafold.hu/userfiles/file/IV_jelentes_a_foldrol_20121215_NG_2013042_2.pdf)
- Borsos E., Csité A., Hella F. (1999), *Rendszerváltás utáni falusi sorsforduló Ökörítőfűlpösön*, "Szociológiai Szemle", pp. 95–119.
- Csité A., Kovách I., (1995), *Posztszocialista átalakulás Kelet- és Közép Európa rurális társadalmában*, "Szociológiai Szemle", vol. 2.
- Csité A., Kovách I., (2002), *Vidéki történet*, [in:] I. Kovách (ed.), *Hatalom és társadalmi változás. A posztszocializmus vége*, Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, pp. 219–309.
- Csurgó B. (2007), *Képek és képzetek a mai magyar vidékről*, [in:] I. Kovách (ed.), *Vidékiek és városiak*, L'Harmattan – MTA PTI, Budapest, pp. 45–67.
- Csurgó B. (2013), *Vidéken lakni és vidéken élni*, Argumentum, Budapest.
- Glózer R. (2007), *Falusi politikák. Közösségtanulmány. Módszertani jegyzet*, Néprajzi Múzeum – PTE-BTK Kommunikáció-és Médiatudományi Tanszék, Budapest, pp. 147–160.
- Granberg L., Kovách I., Tovey H. (eds.), (2001), *Europe's Green Ring*, Ashgate, Aldershot–Burlington–Singapore–Sydney.
- High C., Nemes G. (2007), *Social Learning in LEADER: Exogenous, Endogenous and Hybrid Evaluation in Rural Development*, "Sociologia Ruralis", no. 47(2), pp. 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2007.00430.x>
- Kelemen E., Megyesi B. (2007), *The Role of Collective Marketing Initiatives in the Hungarian Agriculture*, "Eastern European Countryside", no. 13(1).
- Kotics J. (2007), *Magyar közösségkutatás története a 20. században*, [in:] É. Kovács (ed.), *Közösségtanulmány. Módszertani jegyzet*, Néprajzi Múzeum – PTE-BTK kommunikáció- és Médiatudomány Tanszék, pp. 23–43.
- Kovách I. (1994a), *The Privatization and the Future of Family Farms in East-Central Europe*, "Sociologia Ruralis", vol. 34(4), pp. 369–382. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.1994.tb00819.x>
- Kovách I. (2001), *De-peasantisation of Hungarian Rurality*, [in:] L. Granberg, I. Kovách, H. Tovey (eds.), *Europe's Green Ring*, Taylor & Francis, pp. 66–89. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255811-2>
- Kovách I. (2007), *A múlt és jelen vidékképe. Bevezetés*, [in:] I. Kovách (ed.) *Vidék- és falukép a változó időben*, Argumentum, Budapest, pp. 7–11.
- Kovács D. (2003a), *Falusi vendéglátás Magyarországon*, Agroinform Kiadó, Budapest.
- Kovács D. (2003b), *A falusi turizmus hagyományai*, Mezőgazda Kiadó, Budapest.
- Kovács É. (ed.), (2007), *Közösségtanulmány. Módszertani jegyzet*, Néprajzi Múzeum – PTE-BTK kommunikáció- és Médiatudomány.
- Lányi A. (2009), *Porcelán az elefántboltban. Az ökológiai politika kezdetei Magyarországon*, Heti Válasz Kiadó, Budapest.
- Pataki Gy., Bodorkós B., Balázs B., Bela Gy., Kelemen E., Kohlheb N. (2011), *A vidékfejlesztés demokratizálásának lehetősége: részvételi akciókutatás a Mezőcsáti Kistérségben*, [in:] Gy. Pataki, A. Vári (eds.), *Részvétel – akció – kutatás: magyarországi tapasztalatok a részvételi-, akció- és kooperatív kutatásokból*, MTA Szociológiai Kutatóintézet, Budapest, 28–51.
- Starosta P. (1998), *Inhabitants' Feeling of Social Bonds with Rural and Small Town Communities in Bulgaria, Poland and Russia*, [in:] L. Grandberg, I. Kovách (eds.), *Actors on Changing European Countryside*, Institute for Political Sciences, Budapest, pp. 104–131.
- Starosta P., Draganova M. (1999), *Social Identification with Local Communities and the Globalization Process in Rural areas of Eastern Europe*, [in:] Ch. Kasimis, A. Papadopoulos (eds.), *Local Responses to Global Integration*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 133–152. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429445736-7>
- Tímár J. (2007), *Társadalmi nemek, aprófalusi- és közösségtanulmányok*, [in:] É. Kovács (ed.), *Közösségtanulmány. Módszertani jegyzet*, Néprajzi Múzeum – PTE-BTK Kommunikáció- és Médiatudományi Tanszék, Budapest–Pécs, pp. 115–133.