

SOCIOLOGICAL HERITAGE

ERDEI, F.: THE HUNGARIAN PEASANT SOCIETY

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The monograph, an excerpt of which is hereby translated, was published in 1942. The Hungarian history of sociology considers this work on the peasantry, on the peasant population of Central Eastern Europe, unknown in international literature a classical one and rightly so in our view.

The destiny of the work is explained by not accidental events: the career of the author is an irregular one, just as the circumstances of the writing of the work were also irregular. In a brief introduction one can only indicate some factors constituting the basis of our statement. As a consequence of belated social development and modernization the institutionalization of sociology was also belated in Hungary, and speeded up only in the 60s of the twentieth century. Ferenc Erdei could not prepare himself for the role of a social scientist in institutionalized academic workshops and his socialization also took place along patterns that had been left behind in the developed bourgeois societies.

He studied at the Faculty of Law of the Szeged University of Sciences (1930–1934), where his friendship with István Bibó developed, and though their paths separated later, they exercised a strong influence on each other. During his studies he periodically worked in his market gardener father's farm producing onions at the nearby Makó, a town of dynamical *bourgeois* development. The location of his summer recreation and also one of his fieldworks was the native village of his mother, Királyhegyes, "constituting a closed world" and cultivating along *conservative patterns*. The difference between the two settlements was conspicuous, and justly served as the subject of his early works (*Királyhegyes művelődési-gazdasági és társadalmi rajza* [Description of the Culture, Economy and Society of Királyhegyes], 1931); (*Makói parasztság társadalomrajza* [The Social Image of the Makó Peasantry], 1934).

The problem he faced, and that is the topic of the work, or its excerpt as well, was the *belatedness* of the development of the Hungarian peasantry. Erdei, using his own expression, sensed the *metamorphosis* of peasantry, and experienced this transformation as the crisis of peasant communities and values, while he was in quest of the ways of renewal for these communities. His study tour to the West and his more profound study of literature on social science made him realize that the processes were irreversible: overcoming belatedness could be ensured only by the *bourgeois transformation*, and *urbanization* of the forms of economic activity and of settlements of the nature of *estates*.

At first he utilized the set of instruments of social description (sociography), but it was precisely the complexity of the processes thus described (*Futóhomok* [Quicksand], 1936) convinced him that the colorful set of problems branching off in many directions could not be represented without clear-cut concepts and a proper foundation by social theory. For there have been no pure types: the forms of settlement and economic activity of a conservative nature of the

estates, just as the ways of life and value outlook were simultaneously and jointly present in the “Hungarian peasant society”, and the differences ensued from the degree of bourgeois development. He wrote in his monograph published in 1940 and entitled *Magyar falu* [The Hungarian Village]: “The village cultivator is by no means simply a petit bourgeois as yet, and similarly the bigger landowner is not simply bourgeois, whereas there are real bourgeois elements in the village, but the peasantry has also become bourgeois to some extent. Therefore two kinds of systems simultaneously articulate the society of the village, as a consequence of which the Hungarian village is by far not a simple social organization ...”

A magyar paraszttársadalom [The Hungarian Peasant Society] (1942) arranges and describes this intricate pattern of the society articulated in space as well as classifies it under finely characterized types. This work, however, means a further step ahead in another sense as well: paradoxically, refuting the title of the work, it proves that the “Hungarian peasant society” can be interpreted in the medium of Hungarian *society*, in the totality of the society, as its product.

Erdei asserts the outlook of the society as a whole and the method of historical comparison more unambiguously in his work entitled *A magyar társadalom a két világháború között* [The Hungarian Society between the Two Wars] (1943-1944) left incomplete.

Belatedness is more unambiguous in the comparative approach, While in Western Europe, in the capitalist societies developing out of “Medieval formations” the “economic structure and the social structure were mutual products of each other” and were such products that comprehended the entire society, in Hungary bourgeois transformation was characterized by a specific duality. The capitalist transformation of production progressed and as a result of its leading role “the entire society was not transformed into a bourgeois structure”, the hegemonic position of the upper and medium classes of the estate of the nobility was preserved. With Erdei’s wording “a society of a structure of multiple complexity” emerged, though “they were in communication and had linkages”, *but* they “did not merge into a single bourgeois society” even during the inter-war decade.

After 1945 Ferenc Erdei did not venture to complete that work. His manuscript was condemned to oblivion just as much as his work entitled *A magyar paraszttársadalom* [The Hungarian Peasant Society]. As a politician and researcher of agrarian relations Ferenc Erdei remains an important player of the age, but during the time of the dominance of Marxism he himself did not pursue the new edition of *these* works, though he also did not venture to critically revise them. The rediscovery of *this* valuable part of his oeuvre was done belatedly, after his death in the 70s. This is one of the reasons why this work, despite its lasting values, could not make an international career.