

Introduction: Agrarianism as Third Way

Between Fascism and Communism and between Capitalism and Collectivism¹

The masses entering the political stage in Europe after 1918 – a phenomenon becoming reality through the significant enlargement of the suffrage up until the universal and equal suffrage in many East Central European countries – came as a shock to many conservative and liberal politicians and intellectuals. Several questions were open for them: Could the newly founded parties representing the peasant and the workers be integrated into the political systems of constitutional monarchies or parliamentary democracies? Could barely literate and uncivilized peasants and workers ever turn into citizens?

These fears were voiced by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his book *The rebellion of the masses* (1930):

‘Share our existence with the enemy! Govern with the opposition! Is not such a form of tenderness beginning to seem incomprehensible? Nothing indicates more clearly the characteristics of the day than the fact that there are so few countries where an opposition exists. In almost all, a homogeneous mass weighs on public authority and crushes down, annihilates every opposing group. The mass – who would credit it as one sees its compact, multitudinous appearance? – does not wish to share life with those who are not of it. It has a deadly hatred of all that is not itself.’²

After liberal democracies and parliamentarism had failed and been replaced by authoritarian regimes in many European countries by the 1930s, Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) identified the modern phenomenon of men in masses as the social basis of authoritarianism.³ Opposed to this bleak vision of the interwar period is the one cherished in all East Central European historiographies. According to this, the period between World War I and World War II was a ‘golden epoch’ for the newly founded or significantly enlarged states of East Central Europe, a time of well functioning parliamentarism, economic boom, and flourishing cultural activity.⁴ The fact that in all East Central European countries – with the exception of Czechoslovakia – serious deficits in integrating peasants, workers and ethnic and religious minorities on the one hand and dysfunctionality of the political system on the other had led to the establishment of authoritarian regimes in the 1920s and 1930s is explained not by internal political processes but rather by pointing at the unfavourable external context.⁵

Both these narratives are being questioned in this volume from a perspective of peasant movements and parties, of Agrarianism as their ideology as well as from the perspective of professions, institutions, and state agencies dealing with the property to land. One of the most challenging problems of the East Central European democracies in the interwar

period was without doubt integrating the peasantry politically and economically into the sphere of the citizen.⁶ Peasant movements and cooperatives can be assessed in this context as the peasants' and peasant representatives' agency in this process. However, peasant movements are by no means an East Central European specificity, but they are typical phenomena in agrarian societies which are touched by processes of capitalist transformation and industrialization.⁷ Peasants seek for a mode to express and for means to cope with some of the ruptures caused by those processes and the different institutions of the peasant movements provided for therefore. The ensuing ideology, Agrarianism, perceived the economic and cultural transformation of agriculture and country side as a threat. Agrarianist ideologues, however, were not simple romantic conservatives who tried to cling to the past. When they argued for the preservation of the peasant family and the village as the most important element of a future national and state structure, this was already a reaction on the disruptive elements of modernization.

Whereas peasant movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America tended to evolve into leftist authoritarian regimes,⁸ in East Central Europe similar challenges and ideas coalesced to form a distinct ideology. The specificity of Agrarianism as a development ideology can be defined as the search for a Third Way between Fascism and Communism and between Capitalism and Collectivism. Its roots can be found in the quest for peasant emancipation and land reforms in the nineteenth century, and its high time was the interwar period, after the German, Russian and Habsburg Empires had collapsed in World War I. The significant enlargement of the suffrage and sweeping agrarian reforms provided for the basis of peasant parties' ascension. They had a significant impact on the young nation states' political culture and their election results catapulted them into coalition governments in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia. In Estonia, Latvia, and Bulgaria, peasant parties provided even the basis for peasant-authoritarian regimes.

The strength and variety of peasantist thought and movements is reflected by several international organizations,⁹ amongst which the Green International in Prague (1922–1938) is the most important.¹⁰ Concomitantly there has been founded a Catholic peasant movement with the Central Union of Agricultural Professional Associations (*Zentralverband der Landwirtschaftlichen Berufsvereinigungen*) in Vienna (1922–1926) as its centre.¹¹ In 1923 the Red Peasant International (*Krestintern*) enriched the ideological peasantist spectrum.¹² The Green International had a second period of activity from 1947 until the end of the 1970s in the USA, but its activities in exile never had the same impact like in the interwar period.¹³

The ideological roots of Agrarianism¹⁴ can be found in the romantic vision of the peasant, in the Catholic social doctrine and the Russian Narodnik movement. When incorporated into the East Central European national movements,¹⁵ most of the peasant movements tried to adapt their doctrine to nationalist requirements, and blended it in the same time with liberal notions. The Agrarianist doctrine's value system rested on the preservation of customary rights, family, and religious traditions. Agrarianist ideologues argued for the peasant as being the moral, economic, and political basis of society, and more concretely, for a communal self-government, the advancement of cooperatives, and the broadening of the school system. Last but not least, the single most important political point was the claim for a sweeping agrarian reform, whose result they called 'democratized private property' regime.¹⁶

In the wake of the Great Depression and its aftermath, the Agrarianists perceived their movement politically as caught between Soviet communism and the European trend towards Fascism. They sought for a model which would enhance the peasant majority populations' participatory rights and possibilities in the respective national system, without de-stabilizing their young nation states. In contrast to the more conservative peasant movements in the industrialized Western European countries, the Agrarianist ideologues were faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, peasant parties were main beneficiaries of the peasants' inclusion into the political system, represented by the significantly enlarged suffrage. On the other hand, the political representatives of the peasants perceived themselves as being in the middle of a decisive battle for the preservation of traditional, patriarchal peasant societies, which were in danger of getting disrupted by processes of urbanization and industrialization. Accordingly, they shaped the peasantry in their discourse as repository of national values and identity, and accused the traditional political parties and, in tendency, parliamentarism as such, as unable to neither fully include the country side politically into the system, nor to preserve national identity.¹⁷

To posit national identity in the peasantry, however, is identical with following and proclaiming an ethno-national concept of the nation and of citizenship.¹⁸ In a state shaped in this way, ethnic and religious minorities structurally would have no place as equal citizens. The mentioned dilemma made the East Central European peasant parties vulnerable for the lure of modern collectivist forms of shaping the nation and the political process, such as the Italian Fascism and the German National Socialism.

Even more pronounced than in the field of politics is the Agrarianists' search for a Third Way in the field of economy.¹⁹ From Estonia down to Yugoslavia the agrarian reforms of the interwar period had created a numerous class of small peasant economic units.²⁰ But the overall majority of these small farmsteads were convicted to subsistence economy due to their small and dispersed plots, lack of agronomic Know-how, and to scarcity of capital. To these economic odds must be added legal restrictions of the land market and inefficient institutions, which together prevented well-to-do peasants from purchasing land and consolidating their farmsteads to medium-sized and large units. In this respect, the Agrarianists were forced to vehemently defend the same liberal-individualistic property which obviously provided their followers with only a meagre livelihood.

To this they reacted with a specific model for a property and economic regime, which can be characterized as the core of Agrarianism's search for a Third Way. The small and medium-sized peasant farmsteads – politically legitimized as democratic property after the agrarian reforms – should be gathered into cooperative forms of organization and production. While keeping the principal of liberal-individualist property untouched, this new form should nevertheless allow for economies of scale on large land plots, common purchase and utilization of modern technology, and the common marketing of the produce. Not the least, the Agrarianists perceived the cooperative as an institution which could ensure the conservation of traditional forms of society under new and modern guise. While the quest for a political Third Way had made Agrarianism vulnerable for folkish, corporative and fascist ideas, so the economic Third Way led them in the vicinity of communist collectivism in agriculture.²¹

This volume focuses on agrarian movements, cooperatives and peasant parties and their quest for a Third Way in nineteenth and twentieth century East Central Europe. More

specifically, it is the merger of traditional value systems with a ‘democratized’ property regime emanating in the interwar period which is of special interest. Due to the growing political significance of peasant parties and to the considerable efforts of Agrarianist thinkers to come forward with consistent models of the property, economic and political systems the overall peasant movement had considerable impact on transforming the rural societies of East Central Europe. To analyze and understand the Agrarianist voice and the peasant institutions, especially in the interwar period, is indispensable for getting a clearer picture of this period and region. Only against this background one can begin the endeavour of analyzing the governance of the countryside of East Central Europe in the interwar period and beyond.

The volume is a product coming from the conference *Tradition and Modernity in East Central European Rural Societies* which took place in June 2008 in Berlin.²² The conference brought together two research projects with similar interests which both had been financed by the Volkswagen Foundation (VolkswagenStiftung) from 2005 to 2009: first, the Leipzig-based project *Land Law, Cadastre and Land Registry in Eastern Europe, 1918–1945–1989. Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia in Comparison*, led by Hannes Siegrist, Stefan Troebst, and Bogdan Murgescu, and coordinated by Dietmar Müller;²³ second, the project *Agrarianism in East Central Europe, 1880–1960* at the Europe University Viadrina in Frankfurt an der Oder, led by Helga Schultz, András Vári, and Alexander Nützenadel, and coordinated by Angela Harre.²⁴

The contributions to this volume are sub-divided in two sections. The first section focuses on specific concepts of property and on their most concise institutionalizations, which are the land reforms in the interwar period and the communist collectivization. Dietmar Müller and Alina Bojină analyze the juridical and geodetic administration of property to land in twentieth century Romania. Based on the history of professions and institutions dealing with property to land, they try to unravel the following paradox: While one can recognize a steadily growing pretension of the state to define and regulate the property regime to land in the twentieth century until 1989, the real and effective state knowledge on the existing property relations in the countryside did not measure up to this. For the new Romanian regions after World War I the administrative depth concerning property was even reduced due to the unification of the legal and institutional systems. Ironically, this type of administrative knowledge was probably in the communist regime at the lowest point, exactly when the pretensions were highest. The low administrative depth – here analyzed as a precarious condition of the cadastre and land registry and as the low level of professional autonomy of lawyers, notary publics, and geodesists – mirrors the inferior status of the countryside in the state elites’ action concerning economy, law, and administration. Against this background of the overall governance of the countryside a genuine Agrarianist concept of agriculture having the peasant in its centre had few chances for realization.

Srdan Milošević brings new evidence for the characterization of the Yugoslav – and other East Central European – agrarian reforms as being mainly led by ideological, political, and social considerations rather than by economic thought. With some differences across the political parties in Serbia concerning the modus and the radicalness of the agrarian reform their leaders agreed on several important points, which Milošević subsumes under the slogan of ‘Šumadizacija’. First, homogenizing Yugoslavia would mean to extend the

Serbian property and political regime, which was characterized by small farmsteads and clientelism, to the whole country. Second, by the way of an agrarian reform and colonization which marginalized ethnic minorities the titular nation of the 'Serbs, Croats and Slovenes' should dominate the countryside economically. The danger of an ethnically configured Agrarianist project is most clearly illustrated by the Serbian Radical Party which finished their metamorphosis from a peasant to a clientelist state party already at the turn of the century. Their style of conducting the agrarian reform in the interwar period went along with a negligence of and contempt for formal administrative and law proceedings.

Cornel Micu who participated like Alina Bojincă, Srđan Milošević, and Dietmar Müller in the *Land Law* project, continues the critique towards the alleged Romanian success story concerning the agrarian reform in the interwar period. The focus of his chapter on collectivization and social change in communist Romania is on the reasons for a fair amount of peasants being attracted by the communist regimes' new property regime. The exploding membership figures of the Communist Party and the significant enrolment of the peasants in different forms of collectivist associations cannot be sufficiently explained by direct physical violence from the regime. Comparing the level of exerted violence in the countryside by the communist regime with the interwar period or before there is no exceptional upsurge to be recognized. As part of a positive explanation, Micu points at some reasons for the rising welfare and consumerism in the countryside, at new ways for upward mobility in communist times like expanded education and the pull-factor of industrialization, which opened the way for a large village-to-city migration.

Stefan Dyroff highlights in his contribution the important point that the agrarian reforms in East Central Europe have been an eminently transnational phenomenon. Many influential individuals from Western European countries held property to land in East Central Europe – be it as a result of family or of business connections. They were hit by the expropriations of the agrarian reforms, and some of them, especially when they successfully mobilized the diplomatic support of former Entente-states like France and Great Britain, could significantly raise the level of compensation. Citizens from losers of World War I like Germany or Hungary or minorities who considered themselves as part of these nations could count on their countries help as well but this proved to be less successful. In both camps these political and economic lobby activities were considerable and produced dozens of articles, pamphlets, brochures, and learned treatises. Dyroff used these different kinds of literature in order to map the authors and institutions, but in the same time he points at the fundamental political nature of it which does not allow for reading it today as disinterested expertise.

The second section deals with the relation between property and the Agrarianist ideology. Katja Bruisch is opening the debate with a contextualized analysis of Alexander Chaianov's *Theory of Peasant Economy* which can be characterized as one of the most influential Agrarianist writings. In his works, Chaianov was looking for an explanation for the phenomenon of the surprising tenacity peasant households could mobilize in their competition with the allegedly superior forces of capitalism and wage labour. Drawing on *zemstvo* activism and the underlying 'theory of small deeds', Chaianov, like other Russian economists, enriched their approach with the German Historical and Austrian School to finally develop his special marginal utility approach for the Russian peasantry. He thereby provided economic and political arguments for the consumption-oriented

peasant households to be an alternative way to modern agriculture, without necessarily being merged into cooperatives.²⁵

Jovica Luković focuses on the Serbian Union of Agriculturists and adds an additional dimension to the available typology of Agrarianism. The Union's doctrine represented a distinct agrarian-socialist outlook which was particularly strong in South Eastern Europe. The incorporation of the 'Group for social and cultural work' around Dragoljub Jovanović decisively shaped the Union's ideological profile. He brought in both the results of the social-democratic agrarian debate from the 1890s and the concept of the Russian social agronomist and neo-populist Alexander Chaianov. The intellectual contribution of Jovanović and his group was to draw attention to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the Yugoslav peasantry. In their treatises they avoided traditional tropes such as agro-romanticism and ethno-nationalism, as well as the customary socialist repertoire. Dragoljub Jovanović's analysis and policy recommendations for the peasantry's exit from their miserable condition makes him – along with the Romanian Virgil Madgearu – to an archetypical exponent of a south-east European Third Way between Capitalism and Communism.

Taking the Russian influence on East Central European Agrarianism as starting point, Fredrik Ericksson, Johan Eellend, and Piotr Wawrzeniuk analyze the roots and processes of peasant movements in the Baltic states in comparison with Sweden and Galicia. Johan Eellend focuses on the way leading Agrarianist ideas were put into practice in Estonia. Beginning in Tsarist times, fundamental social and economic changes could be discerned in the Estonian province. Thereby, the Estonian peasantry experienced a large scale mobilization and politicization especially in the guise of their integration into the national movement. Due to this considerable efforts of mobilization, the Estonian peasant movement developed explicit notions of the future shape of state and society which proved very influential for interwar Estonian politics, not the least for the agrarian reform.

In her common chapter on the agrarian press in Sweden, Galicia and Estonia, Fredrik Ericksson, Johan Eellend, and Piotr Wawrzeniuk are focussing on notions of modernity and rationality by the turn of the twentieth century. They especially analyze the notions of collective working and owning as they were voiced in the cooperative movements and the peasant parties. They posit the thesis, that 'modernity' was a predominantly masculine project in all three countries/regions, whereas the differences derived from the political role of the peasant cooperatives. In the cases of Estonia and Galicia the cooperatives were assigned a major national role, whereas they had a more conservative role against the Left in Sweden. Furthermore, the authors provide an analysis of broadcasters and receivers of the Agrarian Press.

Daniel Brett completes the studies of agrarian movements with an analysis of the Polish and Romanian cases. He aims for a more nuanced evaluation of the communist takeover of power in these countries between 1944 and 1947 which traditionally is being depicted as a deed of the Red Army in collaboration with the small indigenous communist parties. He begins his *longue durée* analysis of the respective peasant parties – as main pillars of the interwar political system – in the middle of the nineteenth century. The peasant parties in the Habsburg provinces of Transylvania and Galicia developed in a significantly different context than their counterparts in Romania and the Russian partition of Poland. Especially the important role of the national question in the Habsburg peasant parties lead

to major problems of integrating the parties to nationwide peasant parties in the interwar period, and to integrate these into the general political system. In the interwar period the focus is on the interaction between local peasant party organization and the centre, both of their party and the state bureaucracy. As a case study, Brett picks the peasantists from Cluj-Napoca and analyzes that the peasant party was only to a small degree able to shape the political and socioeconomic changes according to their values.

Finally, Traian Sandu is closing the debate with a study of the Romanian fascist Iron Guard. His central thesis is that the Iron Guard was only to a small degree able to meet the challenge of transforming their rural electorates' traditional mental and social structures – e.g. being faithful and loyal to the church and the monarchy – into a modern mass movement. The value system of the countryside had been shattered in World War I and the Great Depression, but this partial void could not be filled by a peculiar mix of traditionalist ideology and mythological view on history with modernist concepts. Corneliu Zelea Codreanu's main body of followers had the same first generation urban background like himself and they shared the same romantic traditionalism combined with the populism of the uprooted. The Iron Guard's inability to mobilize the peasantry for its purposes can be interpreted as one of the main reasons for the King Carol II successful *coup d'état* in 1938.

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