

The Agrarian Reform – A ‘Divine Thing’

Ideological aspects of the interwar agrarian reform in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia

Introduction

I would like to begin this article recalling a simple but overwhelmingly important quotation from Henri Mendras’ famous book *Peasant societies*: ‘It is true that each agrarian reform is an ideological topic which can mobilize passions and the masses (...) moving one of the greatest myths of mankind.’¹ This is also true for the agrarian reform which had been carried out in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia² during the interwar period. In this article I present the key problems of its political, national, and social aspects and to reconstruct and explain the system of values in accordance to which the said reform had been worked out.

Almost every single agrarian reform involves a set of officially organized and executed interventions in the sphere of agricultural production, soil exploitation, but above all, in land ownership.³ Such interventions are typically related to and justified by a specific catalogue of values, more or less precisely shaped in the form of an ideological narrative. With regard to the interwar agrarian reform in Yugoslavia, the small land estate represents the main element of the ideological system, which has been glorified as one of the most remarkable constituents of national identity.

With regard to historiography on Serbia and Yugoslavia, the interwar agrarian question was not a neglected topic,⁴ which is understandable considering the dominant agrarian populace of interwar Yugoslav society. However, the ideological aspect of the matter is seriously under-researched.

Nevertheless, some essential aspects of the matter were recognized, particularly the fact that the interwar agrarian reform in Yugoslavia was a composite phenomenon, including a complicated net of social, political, and national issues.⁵ Contemporaries from the period when the agrarian reform was being carried out and who were involved in the process understood that the agrarian reform was a complex issue. One of them pointedly described the context in which the agrarian reform was to be enacted: The soldiers who came back from the war were very poor, while large owners – the majority of them of foreign origin – ‘had everything in surplus’; some of the soldiers were captured in Russia where they were in a position to see the Bolshevik solution to the agrarian issue; those who were captured in Serbia could also see that there were no large estates; finally ‘national feeling of the Serbs’, especially of the volunteers, was substantially against large estates, as a symbol of inequality. These volunteers considered the landowners to have been their malefactors, oppressing their ‘brothers’ during the centuries of foreign domination. That is why the agrarian movement also had a national aspect.⁶

In the present paper I reconstruct the basic ideological framework in accordance to which the agrarian reform in interwar Yugoslavia was carried out. I will present this ideological framework in the light of early documents related to the agrarian issue and the debate on the agrarian reform in the first two years of the Yugoslav state, 1919 to 1920. During the period in question, the ideological framework of the reform was developed and encircled, both institutionally and in substance. The main sources I have used for the article are the agrarian legislation, stenographic notes from the provisional representative body of the state, the so called *Privremeno narodno predstavništvo* (Temporary Popular Representative Body), the party press and other sources (books, propaganda materials, articles etc. from that period) which appeared during the intensive debate on the agrarian reform issue.

Agrarian reform in early documents – the foundation of an ideological framework

Although the task of collecting data on the agrarian question in all South Slavic (Yugoslav) provinces was formulated in 1915 by the government of the Kingdom of Serbia, it was in February 1917 that the Serbian government discussed the matter again and issued a promulgation announcing one of its war-aims to be the establishment of the free peasant household in the future liberated and united state of the South Slavs. In addition, it was announced that ‘each person who voluntarily enter the ranks of the Serbian army (...) will be given, after the war, in the liberated country (...) enough arable land for settlement’.⁷ The expectation that the promise of land would incite men to join the army as volunteers suggests that the authorities were conscious of the ideological and motivational potential of the agrarian question.

Furthermore, a self-organized representative body of the Austro-Hungarian South Slavs, the so called Popular Council established in Zagreb in October 1918, announced in the declaration, issued in November 1918, that in the new state ‘each peasant’ would be a ‘participant in state governance’ and that ‘each family (...) will be given enough fertile land (...) without causing damage to anybody. This will be enacted by law’, because otherwise there would be chaos in the state.⁸ In the spirit of this declaration, the Popular Council passed another conclusion calling for an immediate ‘democratic’ agrarian reform and abolishing in the first place the feudal relations, still existing in the certain parts of the state. The Council also demanded partition of the great land estates, colonization, reform of inheritance law etc., proving that undoubtedly understood the importance of the agrarian issue.

In Regent Alexandar’s Manifesto, issued on January 6, 1919, the Regent proclaimed his wishes to begin ‘immediately’ on a just solution to the agrarian issue, emphasizing the demand for abolishing serfdom and large land estates. The land should be distributed amongst poorer farmers, while the expropriated owners would receive proper compensation. The Regent proclaimed: ‘Let us make each Serb, Croat, and Slovenian the master of his own land. In our free state there could be and there will be only free landowners’.⁹

In the Councils’ declarations and the Regent’s manifesto, a few tendencies are present and worth underlining: demand for abolishing feudalism; social justice; a legal solution to

the agrarian issue; establishing free peasant landownership, as the guarantee of the state benevolence towards the peasant masses. Besides, in order to construct an ideological framework for the agrarian reform, it was highly important that the Regent was emphasizing the Serbian model of free landownership: It was meant to be the model for the other provinces and in this aspect it demonstrated an intention to 'šumadinize'¹⁰ the entire Yugoslav area.

The historian Jozo Tomasevich noticed that 'the cornerstone of the Yugoslav post-1918 agrarian reform was the Interim Decree on the Preparation of the Agrarian Reform of February 25th, 1919. It provided the ideological framework for the whole reform. The philosophy of this decree – the idea that the land belongs to those who till it – corresponded to the centuries-old ideals of the peasantry of the South Slav lands.'¹¹ Generally speaking, the Interim Decree firstly prescribed the abolition of serfdom and similar relations in regions where they still existed, secondly heralded the distribution of land to those who did not have any or enough land, with special advantages provided to volunteers and their families, and thirdly announced that the estates belonging to the Habsburg family and those estates which were donated to their owners for the service to the Habsburgs were to be immediately subjected to the agrarian reform. The Decree inaugurated the principle that 'the land belongs to those who till it', insisting that, in order to be given land, one must work on the land oneself.¹²

With the agrarian reform and, in particular, this Interim Decree, according to the historian Mijo Mirković, 'the government itself committed a whole range of revolutionary acts against private property'¹³, which was also noticed by contemporaries. Asman Behman, a socialist, argued that all the government's measures contradicted the principles of a liberal capitalist society and that the government 'killed the principles on which its own ideology stood', simply in order to survive, faced with the social movement of the peasantry or, potentially, revolution. This actually meant that the agrarian reform was an obvious demand of society and that a 'bourgeois government' could not oppose it, hence the government started to justify the reform, recalling moral arguments, as 'the ruling classes have always done'.¹⁴

In order to understand the ideological basis of the agrarian reform, it is not insignificant that initially the Minister of Social Affairs was in charge of the agrarian reform. This fact emphasizes the primarily social character of the reform. In April 1919 the Ministry of Agrarian Reform was established and the parliament enacted without any prior discussion of the Interim Decree. The new Minister of Agrarian Reform insisted that 'the urgency and importance of the subject cannot wait for the regular procedure'.¹⁵ In the following period, right up until the law on the agrarian reform had been passed in 1931, the whole process was based on the government's or minister's decisions and decrees, which was the cause for many discussions, political debates, and criticism amongst political parties.

Agrarian question – 'sacred question'

The agrarian problem was considered to be one of the most important issues facing the new state. Policies created by the Minister of Agrarian Reform were the focus of political debate. In the press, periodicals and brochures from that period, one can read that 'agrarian reform was given the first place amongst other numerous important questions'.¹⁶ The

reform was held to be 'the foundation of social concord, state power, and the material prosperity of the people'.¹⁷ The agrarian question became the factor dictating the political gathering¹⁸ and the crucial merit in forming coalitions in the parliament.¹⁹ Some party functionaries argued that the agrarian reform was the question on which the viability of peace in the country depended.²⁰

Assertions that the agrarian reform was 'not only agricultural or social, but at the same time the greatest national and political question, a question on which the survival of Yugoslavia depends, the survival and guarantee of our national unification and the prosperity of our national culture' were not rare.²¹ In the parliament it was often exclaimed that the agrarian question was the 'sacred question' and that the man appointed to be the Minister of Agrarian Reform must be the 'best in this country, with the largest heart'.²² The agrarian reform was favoured not only by the appeal of a pragmatic *raison d'état*, but also by social, scientific, and cultural reasons, as it was argued.

An ideology which tries to gain support in the modern period must work out some scientific self-justification.²³ This is why it has regularly been emphasized that the agrarian reform did have its scientific reasons, although serious scientific analysis was in fact lacking. Passions and emotions had the greatest influence. Since there were economists who argued that the small landed estates would not be prosperous, one of the most vigorous partisans of the reform discredited them: Their arguments 'are not only doubtful from a professional point of view, but they stink as antisocial, anti-cultural and antinational deeds'.²⁴

The radical partisans of the reform also believed that sometimes 'there could also be too much wisdom. Wisdom which blocked the whole process and which would try to find an ideal solution to the agrarian issue would be neither practical nor fruitful'.²⁵ It was also argued by partisans of the reform that social differentiation was not desirable in modern society. These differences were to be levelled by the agrarian reform, since, as one of them stated, an unlimited increase in wealth was 'not useful for society'. Modern society does not want social differences, he maintained.²⁶ Finally, the agrarian reform had been given the 'force of historical necessity'²⁷, it was considered to be an act of providence, and would ultimately prevail, since the reform was a 'Divine thing' supported by 'the Voice of the Son of God'.²⁸

Legal nihilism and relativism of private property – substantial elements of the ideology

The political parties in the Kingdom, with regard to agrarian issue, could be, conditionally, classified into two main groups: the 'revolutionary' group, centred round the Democratic Party, and the 'conservative' or 'traditional' or 'legalistic' group, centred round the popular Radical Party. However, some essential elements of agrarian politics which characterized both the 'revolutionaries' and the 'conservatives', were legal nihilism and a direct or indirect relativism regarding the principle of private property.

First of all, a legal basis was not the only, but certainly an unavoidable precondition, without which the concept of the rule of law could not exist. This is why even 'revolutionaries'

insisted on a legal solution to the agrarian issue and a legal confirmation of their revolutionary measures. Nevertheless, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, despite a permanent insistence on the importance of a legal solution to the agrarian question, in practice a spirit of ignoring the legal basis of the issue prevailed. The law on the agrarian reform was not passed until 1931, whereas by that year the process of the agrarian reform had been defined by the Interim Decree and a very large number of other decrees, issued mostly by the government and not by the parliament.

Speaking about 'revolutionaries', I would like to present only a few examples: The Minister of Agrarian Reform, Franjo Poljak, from the Democratic Party was eager to defend in the parliament some obviously illegal actions of certain local administrators regarding the agrarian reform. The Minister stated that the basic principle of the reform was that 'the land belongs to those who till it' and that these words said everything about the agrarian reform. 'If when implementing the agrarian reform in that direction something has been done which contravenes the Interim Decree, it may not have been done in perfect legality, but still what has been done merits understanding and approval'.²⁹

On the other hand, there were cases in which a real mockery was made of the law. For instance, the Interim Decree prescribed that whoever had a surplus of arable land and could not work on that land himself would be obliged to give up that surplus of land. Two Bosnian noblemen, whose land had been given to peasants on such a basis, stated that they could work on the land themselves, but were being threatened by the former serfs, to the extent that they were unable to work because of these peasants' threats. The Minister only took into consideration the fact that they stated that they were unable to till their land, not the reason for this, and concluded that by giving their land to these peasants everything had been done in accordance with the Interim Decree, since the two Bosnian noblemen had stated that they themselves were unable to till their land.

The socialists and social democrats, revolutionary in their ideological outlook, also supported revolutionary actions in the agrarian reform. The leader of the Serbian social democrats, Dragiša Lapčević, argued that no compensation was acceptable to the former landowners – neither feudal nor capitalist – and that the agrarian reform should be executed by the people in the same revolutionary way that the people of Šumadija had seized hold of the land during the insurrections of 1804 and 1813. Thus, the law was not a 'fetish' for the social democrats, as they declared, and they would support any illegal action of the government, if it were in favour of a radical solution to the agrarian question.³⁰ To give compensation to those whose large land estates were to be subjected to the agrarian reform was, according to Lapčević, the mere manifestation of 'loyal cretinism'.³¹ The former Minister of Social Affairs, Vitomir Korać, one of the authors of the Interim Decree, in charge for the reform in its beginning, stated in parliament that demands for compensation for the former owners of the land were 'simply parliamentary and a juridical nonsense'.³²

It is true that the 'enemies' of the agrarian reform were trying to avoid and disable its effects by insisting on certain formalistic aspects of the issue, but it was of greater importance that the most radical partisans of the agrarian reform considered any insistence on a legal solution to the issue as unnecessary delaying tantamount to working against the reform, as Vitomir Korać argued.

The radicals were also conscious of the values of the world they were living in, therefore they were careful not to deny the 'sanctity of private property'. Nonetheless, while

'the owners' were recalling this principle, those who did not own anything were recalling an even more important principle: the 'right to life'. This right was, allegedly, endangered by the selfishness of 'the owners', which was the reason for the crisis in the private property principle.³³ Furthermore, a scandal took place in Vojvodina when news became widespread among the starving in the population that mice had caused great damage to the corn belonging to the one of the landowners from Vojvodina. One of the radical partisans of reform stated that it was a clear example of the extent to which 'we have been the victims of the centuries' long prejudice regarding the unlimited sanctity of private landownership and products from the land'.³⁴ The official press of the 'radicals', *Demokratija*, was usually filled with anti-capitalist articles in which there could be found phrases such as: 'the clutches of Capitalism', 'victims of Capitalism' and so on.

With regard to the 'conservatives', the situation was somewhat more complicated. The main force among the conservatives was the Radical Party, for decades the main self-proclaimed defender of the peasantry and its interests. The 'conservatives' insisted, firstly, on the legal basis of the agrarian reform and defended the 'sanctity of private property', especially that of capitalistic origins. This is why the 'conservatives' insisted on full compensation for the land that was supposed to be expropriated from the large capitalist estates. For those of feudal origin, the 'conservatives' insisted on compensation which would cover one third of the value of the expropriated estate. On the other hand, the 'conservatives' presented themselves as the 'protectors' of private property principles, reminding people that the Radical Party, which had been in power in Serbia for decades, was responsible for the laws that prescribed that the peasants could not sell the minimum of unalienable property: their household and certain portions of arable land. That is how the Radical Party 'protected' the peasant, and how the party 'was taking care of its land'.³⁵ Thus, the Radical Party tried to achieve two aims: first, to ensure the support of the large capitalists and, second, to defend the traditional model of property to land existing in Serbian villages, usually described as a 'peasant paradise'. The first was a purely practical aim, reasonable from an economic point of view, while the second was ideological, aimed at preserving the idyllic image of the Serbian village which had become an element of national identity.

In fact, both the 'radicals' and the 'conservatives' insisted on the same two principles, but from different positions: a small peasant estate as the model of preference for the new Yugoslav state and a proper legal solution to the agrarian issue. The differences lay in the way they emphasized one of those two principles. The 'radicals' insisted on the former and argued in favour of legalising revolutionary measures, the right wing referring to (but not insisting on) compensation for the expropriated land. The 'conservatives' insisted firstly on legal solutions which would take into consideration existing laws and legal customs, and wanted to enable a compromise (full compensation for the expropriated land) or even the coexistence of the two models of landed property: the small peasant estate and large capitalist latifundia. In addition, while the 'radicals' insisted on the fact that the small peasant estate was the modern and scientifically proven model for any solution to the agrarian question, and that it should be pushed in the direction of further modernization, the conservatives insisted on the fact that it was a traditional one and an acceptable and desirable model because of that tradition. Finally, the right wing of the 'conservatives' opposed modernization, even arguing, for instance, that in agriculture 'machines are to be used only if a domestic, human workforce is lacking'.³⁶

The final effect of such confusion is understandable: legal nihilism and relativism of the private property principle. The two opposed blocks could not find a proper legal solution, lacking the capacity for compromise, so the entire agrarian reform was based on orders, regulations, and other documents which had a very dubious legal foundation. Private property was regarded by the 'radicals' as something that was not of the greatest importance in the new post-war conditions and, furthermore, Capitalism as such was regarded as a system full of injustice that should be countered by state measures such as the agrarian reform. The 'conservatives' defended the 'sanctity of private property', but from positions that were opposed to the principle itself, glorifying the legal solutions which prescribed the minimum of unalienable land and presenting themselves as the 'protectors' of private property, as those who 'took care' of the peasant and his household – a patriarchal and paternalistic attitude which in turn proved to be championed by the Radical Party.

'The peasant state' – meta-ideological framework of the agrarian reform

'Oh, raise up the body and the tired head
to see the wrong direction you're streaming ahead.
Your people's confused and wondering fate
calls for you again to govern the state.'³⁷

To a certain extent, the ideological content of the discourse on the agrarian reform was the branch of a wider, meta-ideological concept, namely the ideology of peasantism or the peasant state as its materialisation. This was the comprehensive ideology which articulated the agrarian reform itself. The political elite was fully conscious of the fact that the Yugoslav state had a predominantly agrarian population and was also willing to capitalize on this fact in terms of political struggle. However, it was something more than mere political struggle.

According to an article in *Demokratija* in 1919, Yugoslavia was characterized as a 'peasant country', 'homeland of the free peasants'. 'The farmer is the foundation of our state building'³⁸, argued the partisans of peasantism, and the stability of that building depends on the happiness, freedom and prosperity of the peasantry. Some of the vigorous partisans of the reform argued in favour of organizing the state in line with its peasant social base.

In the program of the Democratic Party, which was leading the vanguard of radical partisans of the reform, it was explicitly stated that the Kingdom was 'the peasant state' and that 'interests of the state, nation and democracy demanded this should not be changed. Masses of free peasants are the only true guarantee of democratic government'. The Democratic Party would do anything in order to 'ensure the adequate position of the village in all public and state affairs (...). For higher political and national reasons, the Democratic Party will always remain on the farmer's side'.³⁹

The leading party among the conservatives, as we have already mentioned, was the Radical Party, which traditionally identified itself with the peasantry.⁴⁰ In the party press, *Samouprava*, the party leaders argued that the Radical party was 'a peasant party' and that

the party and the peasantry were the same.⁴¹ However, the new political force also included the Farmers' Union, which argued in favour of direct inclusion of the peasants in the political life of the state, intending to educate the peasantry, elaborating an anti-urban and anti-capitalist discourse, trying to 'gain and secure a strong and enduring participation in all affairs of state politics' for the 'most numerous, most powerful, most useful social layer'.⁴² The Farmers' Union insisted on 'changing this capitalist-citizen's state into a peasant cooperative state'⁴³, sending the message to the peasantry that the past, present, and the future of the country lay with them.

Glorification of the peasantry was mirrored in a critique of contemporary politics. Both internal and foreign politics were, allegedly, successful 'while governed by the armed peasants'. As soon as politics was put in the hands of citizens, it started to suffer defeats.⁴⁴ Even intellectuals, such as Jovan Cvijić and Stanoje Stanojević, glorified the peasantry in a very romantic way. Stanojević, criticizing the Yugoslav parliament, wrote that the former peasant assembly, from the period of struggle against Ottoman rule, could be a model to be followed by contemporary parliamentarians, who were supposed to build up the state. They could learn how to do this from 'illiterate peasants from Šumadija'.⁴⁵

National aspects of the agrarian reform

The agrarian reform was regarded as a task whose national aims were twofold: first, with a view to achieving national unity in the new state, and, second, as an instrument in strengthening what was termed 'our national element' in regions with predominantly foreign ethnic groups. The Yugoslav state was 'the museum of agrarian structures'⁴⁶, therefore unification of the agrarian system was the concern of the day and an important task with regard to achieving national unity in the new state. On the other hand, some regions of the state were multi-ethnic to a degree that the titular nation was not even in a relative majority, therefore the agrarian reform was regarded as a proper means of changing the national structure of these regions to the advantage of 'our national element'.

The glorification of Serbia/Šumadija – the heart of the national aspect of ideological discourse on the agrarian reform

The agrarian reform demanded a model according to which the whole reform could be carried out. The leading idea was to level the differences which existed among the provinces of the new state, so the agrarian reform was given a very important role in the process of national unification. As one can read even from the title of the book⁴⁷ written in 1920, *Agrarian reform and the Democratic Party: national unity, liberation, and agrarian reform*, the process of agrarian reform was seen as one of the most important, since it was meant to equalize the agrarian structure of the country and in this way make its contribution to national unification. Juraj Demetrović, for instance, who was one of the most vigorous defenders of the agrarian reform, close to the Democratic Party, argued that 'the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes are one and a single people (...). The victory of national unity meant at the same time the victory

of democracy and agrarian reform'. The Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, 'concordant and united, are going to become their own masters in their free peoples' Yugoslav country, in which the land will be in the possession of those who till it (...)'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in the program of the Democratic Party, it was stated that the Party 'considers (...) implementation of the agrarian reform and regulation of agrarian relations as the substantial element in the national program of liberation and unification'.⁴⁹ Finally, some experts, such as Milan Vlainac, explained that 'no one should be confused by the fact that now, as has always been the case in Serbia, after each liberation effort, the solution to the question of agrarian reform has been raised in close connection to the liberation itself of the particular provinces'. This is why the agrarian reform became 'so to say, the constitutional element of the question of unification itself'.⁵⁰

The second aspect of the national task expected to be fulfilled by the agrarian reform was the choice of model in implementing the agrarian reform. This second aspect has been historically conditioned by several factors giving preference to the Serbian model of solving the agrarian issue. First of all, the idealized image of the Serbian village in which free peasants lived, the image of Serbia as the 'poor man's paradise', as it has usually been defined, was the core ideological discourse of the reform, but the substance was more pragmatic. That is to say, Serbia insisted on the continuity between the new Yugoslav state and the former Kingdom of Serbia, which is why, with regard to the agrarian reform as well as some other important questions, the Serbian institutions and practices had been introduced and applied all over Yugoslavia.

The agrarian reform, the Regent announced to the peasants, will make the land belong 'to God and to them, as it has been from time immemorial in Serbia'.⁵¹ The Regent also emphasized, in his speech in the assembly in March 1919, that it was 'necessary to transfer as soon as possible, all around the state, the fruits of the internal development of Serbia, which have acquired such a high reputation among our entire nation'.⁵² The President of the temporary assembly, Dragoljub Pavlović, stated that the Serbian 'free hearth [household] was an attractive force' for the other Yugoslavs, and has been their 'leading star'⁵³, while an other politician, Nikola Stojanović, wrote that 'Karadžić's⁵⁴ Serbia, with its national generosity and peasant consciousness, could be an example to be imitated'.⁵⁵ The party newspaper of the Radical Party, *Samouprava*, usually wrote about Serbia's leading role in liberating all Yugoslavs, stating that this role was enabled, among other reasons (political freedom), due to the fact that 'the Kingdom of Serbia was (...) also an example of freedom from an economic point of view (...). Serbian peasants in Šumadija become free owners of their land'⁵⁶, which makes them willing and able to fulfil the 'historic mission of Serbia' – national liberation and unification.⁵⁷ *Demokratija*, the organ of the Democratic Party, wrote in a similar manner about the Serbs as 'bearers of the banner on which "land and freedom" for the poor was written'.⁵⁸

The glorification of Serbia was unanimous. Serbia was considered to be 'a model of freedom in the Balkans', one of the 'most modern European democratic countries'⁵⁹, 'peasant democracy', advanced 'way beyond all other Yugoslav provinces' due to the fact that 'there were neither large landowners and large land estates, nor nobility and a feudal church'.⁶⁰ It was very rare to hear contrary opinions, such as Tihomir Ostojić's elaborated in *Nova Evropa*. Ostojić argued that the image of the Serbs as the nation with 'congenial democratism' was wrong since Serbia was a 'patriarchal society. Democracy is not the same as a patriarchal society. On the contrary, the patriarchal spirit adores personal regimes', which are in opposition to democracy.⁶¹ But, even Ostojić himself argued in favour of 'peasant democracy'.

A very important argument used to glorify the Serbian solution to the agrarian question was the fact that the solution was autochthonous, whereas the distribution of land in the 'new provinces' was 'imposed by foreign violence, irrational and unjust'⁶², and 'that is why it should be liquidated'.⁶³ It was considered self-evident that the Serbian solution to the agrarian question was the most suitable one. This is why the agrarian question was 'the matter of the associated provinces in particular. Gentlemen, this question is to be solved by equalising the economic conditions of the other provinces with our [Serbian] economic system'.⁶⁴ Milan Pribičević, one of the leaders of Serbs in Croatia, emphasized that 'each peasant should love Serbia', 'since Serbia has been raised by the peasantry and has always been fighting for the peasant's freedom'.⁶⁵

One of the leading experts in economic questions and, in particular, the agrarian reform, Slavko Šećerov, argued that there were only two possible solutions to the agrarian reform: 'to follow the democratic Serbian model or the model of the new provinces'. He suggested the first solution and argued that in the other case Serbia would be threatened by the 'great landowners' and the 'clutches of Capitalism'. He expressed his hope that the 'peasant democratism' of Serbia would prevail.⁶⁶

All these and numerous other sources clearly testify to preferences with regard to the choice of model for the agrarian reform, but also to a specific understanding of the new state as an enlarged Serbia.

The glorification of Serbia did not only come from Serbs. The deputy of Croatia, Milivoj Janković, a Croat, wrote that in Serbia

'all (...) people are equal: the peasant and the gentleman (...). There is great difference between gentlemen and peasants' as in Croatia. 'In Serbia a servant is a gentleman as well as a minister (...). The Serbs are real democrats (...) since Serbia is the peasant country (...). The king himself was born in the peasant family'⁶⁷ and he feels best when he is among the peasants (...). In Serbia there are so many good institutions for the peasant, so that we [the Croats, S. M.] should immediately introduce them for us'.⁶⁸

The most explicit was Nikola Stojanović, who stated that Serbia is the 'Piedmont' of Yugoslavia, and Piedmont 'whether you like it or not, gives direction to the whole administration'.⁶⁹

The roots of ideological glorification of Serbia are to be found in the economic liberation of the peasantry in Serbia, which had been achieved in the 1830s. Moreover, in this country, during the nineteenth century, thanks to land legislature, private land ownership was limited by legal obstacles to selling the minimum of unalienable landed property, including the household and small portions of arable land.⁷⁰ This was how the state limited the ownership rights of peasants, but with some other measures the state also made the peasantry dependent on its mercy (with regard to taxation, credits etc.) This situation went together with the specific conditions in the Serbian village, namely that the majority of estates were no larger than 5 hectares. Furthermore, the percentage of estates smaller than 5 hectares was gradually increasing, therefore in 1897 the percentage of these estates in Serbia was 52.77 percent, in 1905 60.14 percent, and in 1931 61.98 percent.⁷¹ Despite the idealization of the image of the Serbian village, the reality was quite different.

Consequently, the 'common and relatively widespread understanding that agrarian relations in Serbia (...) were ideal and successfully opposed to the laws of Capitalism did not

correspond to reality', since, for instance, 'one third of peasant households were incapable of working on the land using their own means of production.'⁷² The Serbian 'peasant paradise' has been described concisely by sociologist Mirko Kosić, who wrote in the 1930s that the economy in Yugoslavia was 'naturally fatalistic', that is: based on the 'mentality from our former economy [from the Kingdom of Serbia], which had been founded on the production of plums and pigs, the two products totally uncertain with regard to their capacity to provide regular surplus to pay state taxes and other tolls. This fact made peasants dependent on state credits, the state's control, and even on its mercy.'⁷³ On the other hand, nowadays historians conclude that

'the small estate and its owner, supported by the state for highly pragmatic reasons (during the years of famine the state relieves him from taxes or repeals his debts) is one of the basic obstacles to the modernization of Serbian society and faster structural changes (...). Attempts at agrarian reforms and colonization were creating dependant peasants who lived on the brink of survival, produced unprofitably, were getting into debt'.⁷⁴

Colonization – ethnic engineering

The other aspect of the national aims of the agrarian reform was to strengthen 'our national element' in regions with significant or predominant foreign ethnic groups. It was planned that this would be done by means of colonization, which favoured 'nationally conscious' elements, 'reliable men' who had been given land but with limited property rights. One of the partisans of colonization argued that the state was supposed to supervise the colonists for 50 years.⁷⁵ Milutin Zebić, a lawyer, considered colonization to be 'organically connected to the agrarian reform'.⁷⁶ The same idea was shared by Svetozar Pribičević, who stated in an interview that there could be no agrarian reform without colonization.⁷⁷ In the press of the Radical Party it can be read that 'colonization of certain parts of our country (...) is the vital question of our people and our state. Kosovo, Metohija, and the Vardar valley have to, as soon as possible, be colonized by our element, in order to curtail the damage caused at one time by the Turkish invasion'.⁷⁸ Finally, national unification also demanded colonization, in order to mix Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, 'bearing in mind the amalgamation of our three-named people'. Peasants would become familiar with each other much better than those living in the towns, 'despite all the jabbering about unity of the latter'.⁷⁹

The idea of colonization was also to curtail emigration from Yugoslavia, by settling colonists from the poor and densely inhabited areas in those with a surplus of land. While 'our people' were forced to flee to America, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians and Germans, enemies of 'our people', occupied 'our land and become masters in many regions'. It was important to create conditions which would enable the acceptance of the expected 'thousands of peasant-emigrants who are just about to return to our liberated country and who should be given the land'.⁸⁰

Special attention in this respect was given to so called Old Serbia (Macedonia and Kosovo), or officially Southern Serbia, to which thousands of colonists were to be sent in order to change the current ethnic structure (Albanian and Turkish majority) which was regarded to be 'the detriment caused by the Turkish invasion'. Colonization of Southern Serbia

started immediately after the Balkan wars, but was halted due to the start of World War I.⁸¹ After the war, some notable politicians voluntarily settled in Kosovo, for instance Milan and Adam Pribićević.⁸² Kosovo was regarded as the province vindicated by the sword from the Turks, Albanians, Bulgarians, and Germans, so 'now, it is to be made happy by our plough, hoe, by our houses, schools, churches. All that is good and as it should be (...)'⁸³

The other area of greatest importance for colonization was Vojvodina, again for the same reason and the same explanation: the national interest. However, in Vojvodina there were also some other problems: It was important to ensure the dignified survival of 'our element', since it was unacceptable to let it become wage worker on the land of German or other landowners. It was considered to be socially and nationally unacceptable. Of course, here the undesirable ethnic structure of certain areas was also held to be the result of foreign rule and consequently it was deemed morally acceptable to change it.

There was also the plan that the Germans from Vojvodina could be settled 'in the Balkans', south of the Sava and Danube rivers, in order to move them from that province. It was acceptable as an idea because the Germans, in spite of the strong anti-German feelings, were considered to be 'an element of order, good workers, good artisans (...). If moved to the Balkans, they could be good teachers to our people regarding the economy, crafts, rearing cattle, and rational life. The Germans are evil masters, but deprived of their power, they are peaceful citizens, who promote culture and civilization', which was necessary for the backward regions in the Balkans.⁸⁴

The ideological justification for colonization was summarized most clearly in an article written by the lawyer Milutin Zebić. Zebić argued that Austro-Hungary 'wanted to weaken "our element" in Banat by settling the Germans there.'⁸⁵ According to Zebić, in 1720 Banat, for instance, had 'an exclusively Serbian character', as well as Bačka and Srem.⁸⁶ On the other hand, 'the wave of Germanisation flooded the lands of the Slovenes', as well in Croatia and Slavonia, the large estates were in the hands of the Germans, who made up only 5 percent of the populace.

'While to the north Austrian and Hungarian authorities had methodically and in accordance with their plan supported and carried out an infiltration of Hungarians, Germans, and Jews into our regions (...)' to the south 'our people were exposed to vigorous attacks and monstrous extermination (...)' Supported by the Turkish authorities, 'the Arnauts came down from the hills (...) and took the best portions of the land in the valleys (...). That is how they are in the majority now in Kosovo. In addition, the population from Bosnia has been settled in Old Serbia (...). Therefore, today when, thanks to the sacrifice of our people, freedom has spread to all our provinces, we can see that we inherited conditions that the enemy had created in accordance to his needs (...). Many of the lands and large enterprises are in the hands of the non-Serbs. Thus, the first task of our politics of internal colonization is (...) to remedy this injustice by strengthening our element and by improving its number and economic conditions.'

Zebić suggested settling the Serbs from Romania and Hungary in Yugoslavia, in order to establish good relations with those countries, revealing his conviction that it was an undesirable situation to have national minorities. Furthermore, he suggested settling Slovenes in the north-eastern part of Serbia, together with the Montenegrins and colonists from

Lika; the Serbs from Hungary and Romania were to be settled in Vojvodina and the southern parts of the country; Metohija should accept the Montenegrins and the Serbs from Banat and Bačka; Kosovo could receive the Montenegrins and Serbs both from Serbia and Vojvodina, while the eastern parts of the country were to be colonized by the population from Herzegovina and Bosnia, as well as by the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from America. 'Our element' is to be colonized near the borders and the main traffic arteries, since 'the trans-Balkan railway will be of great importance for the Serbs and Slavs'.⁸⁷ Hungarians and Germans were to be reoriented towards industry, and if some of them were willing to continue in agricultural activities, they should be settled 'in Serbia, Old Serbia, and Macedonia', which would 'improve agrarian conditions in those border-areas', since Germans and Hungarians were experienced in agriculture. Moreover, the state 'should forbid immigration of non-Slavic settlers, and prevent them from obtaining land'.⁸⁸

It is not very important whether these interpretations were true or false. The focus should instead be on the form of the discourse, lexical solutions, intonation and the message that the quoted text sends. The ideology of the agrarian reform is somehow sublimated in these several areas, which provide the tone of plans which were never achieved, but whose realization would have demanded a brutal violation of the principles of liberal society as well as a authoritarian state structure.

Finally, a good example of the mixture of the two important aspects of the ideology of the agrarian reform, namely neglecting private property and curtailing the negative effects of foreign rule, is provided in the following text, in which a certain priest invites the colonists, as in the tourist guide, to settle in Slavonia: The land of Count Jankovich, the 'renegade' from Serbhood, 'beautiful estates' located in the 'wonderful position and summer vacation area' is an excellent place for settling. 'Brothers, volunteers and other sufferers, demand from the state to settle you in the cultivated and fertile Slavonian plain! Fertile Slavonia is waiting for you (...). Come here, where the sun is shining, where the birds are singing, where the spring is gurgling and watering beautiful Slavonian plains (...).'⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Agrarian reform in interwar Yugoslavia was, more than anything else, an ideological topic. The practical results of the agrarian reform were more than modest, while the discourse on the reform was vigorous, picturesque, and colourful. The reform obviously aimed to solve social and national problems more than to improve agricultural production in the state. This character of the reform demanded an ideological framework, the substance of which was deeply rooted in the system of values elaborated in the pre-war Serbian state. Some salient characteristics of that system were: collectivism, romantic peasantism which developed into peasant nationalism, neglecting notions of private property, and the rule of law. Political parties shared the same values insofar as they understood the aims of the agrarian reform, whose confluence was the peasant state, in its substance incompatible with modern institutions and notions. This is why the agrarian reform was unsuccessful: Without a proper legal basis and lacking in economic reasons, it became a mere political issue, prone to political manipulation and demagogic abuse.

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- 2 The fact is that in the period 1919 to 1929 the official name of the state was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. However, the name Yugoslavia was also used at the same time, so in the following text I will continue to use the name Yugoslavia.
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- 4 See Nikola Vučo, *Poljoprivreda Jugoslavije 1918–1941*, Beograd 1958; Nikola Vučo, *Privredna istorija naroda FNRJ*, Beograd 1948; Nikola Gaćeša, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Banatu*, Novi Sad 1972; Nikola Gaćeša, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Bačkoj*, Novi Sad 1968; Nikola Gaćeša, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Sremu*, Novi Sad 1975; Nikola Gaćeša, *Radovi iz agrarne istorije i demografije*, Novi Sad 1995; Dimitrije Đorđević, *Agrarne reforme na Balkanu posle Prvog svetskog rata*, in: *Ogledi iz novije balkanske istorije*, Beograd 1989, 205–219; Milivoje Erić, *Agrarna reforma u Jugoslaviji 1918–1941. god.*, Sarajevo 1958; Mijo Mirković, *Ekonomska historija Jugoslavije*, Zagreb 1968; Toma Milenković, *Stav Radikalne stranke prema agrarnoj reformi (1918–1929)*, Beograd 1970; Milovan Obradović, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija na Kosovu (1918–1941)*, Priština 1981; Jozo Tomasevich, *Peasants, Politics, and Economic Change in Yugoslavia*, Stanford/Oxford/London 1955.
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- 7 See Erić, *Agrarna reforma u Jugoslaviji 1918–1941*, see fn. 5, 246.
- 8 *Poslanica Nar. Vijeća SHS seljacima*, in: Ferdo Šišić (ed.), *Dokumenta o postanku Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1914–1919*, Zagreb 1920, 247.
- 9 Manifest Regenta Aleksandra narodu, in: Šišić (ed.), *Dokumenta o postanku Kraljevine*, see fn. 8, 299.
- 10 I have derived this verb from the geographical notion *šumadija* which is the central part of Serbia, in which there were no great land estates.
- 11 Tomasevich, *Peasants, Politics, and Economic Change*, see fn. 4, 345.
- 12 *Prethodne odredbe za propremu Agrarne Reforme*, in: Bogdan Lekić, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Jugoslaviji, 1918–1941*, Beograd 2002, 223–225.
- 13 Mijo Mirković, *Ekonomska historija Jugoslavije*, Zagreb 1968, 205.
- 14 Asim Behman, *Političke struje predstavnštva na umoru*, in: *Nova Evropa 8 (1920)*, 316.
- 15 *Stenografske beleške Privremenog narodnog predstavnštva*, May 23, 1919.
- 16 Milan Vlajinac, *Agrarna reforma: opšti pogled*, in: *Srpski književni glasnik 1 (1920)*, 596.
- 17 Milutin Zebić, *Unutrašnja kolonizacija u vezi agrarne reforme*, in: *Almanah Udruženja pravnika Kraljevstva Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, Beograd 1920, 298.
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- 19 Vitomir Korać, *Borba za agrarnu reformu*, Beograd 1920, 23.
- 20 *Samouprava*, November 27, 1919.
- 21 Vitomir Korać, *Čija je zemlja u Jugoslaviji?*, Beograd 1920, 10.
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- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Dragiša Lapčević, *O agrarnom problemu*, Sarajevo 1920, 73 f.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Stenografske beleške Privremenog narodnog predstavnštva*, March 11, 1920.
- 33 *Demokratija*, October 17, 1919.
- 34 Jakšić, *Agrarna reforma*, see fn. 28, 9.

- 35 Samouprava, August 25, 1920.
- 36 Demokratija, July 16, 1919.
- 37 From the poem: Seljaku (To the Peasant), in: Selo, August 1, 1920.
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- 45 Nikola Stojanović, *Seljačka demokratija*, Sarajevo 1920, 23.
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