

Books Reviews

"Homo Industrialis" vs "Homo Pre-Industrialis". Proper Peasants, Traditional Life in a Hungarian Village. Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer. Wenner-Gren Foundation Anthropological Research Series. Aldine, Chicago in cooperation with Corvina, Budapest. 1969. 440 pp.

It is with almost carnivorous ferocity that "*homo industrialis*" attacks, subdues, disembodies, absorbs and annihilates groups of "*homo pre-industrialis*" even in most recent history, and in spite of all the humanistic rhetoric modern man managed to fill his libraries with. Patterns of colonialism, neo-colonialism as well as "internal colonialism" are still very much with us, even after they have been thoroughly discredited in the "official" value structures of most societies, following the great "adventures" of the twenties, thirties and forties. "Modern" and "advanced" human groups use their "superior" technology, like shiny, new, lethal industrial toys against other groups which are on differing levels or routes of development without and within their societies. In this respect America's Vietnam involvement is akin to Stalin's agriculture-collectivization drives: millions of peasants get killed by technologically better (or simply: differently) equipped and trained members of industrialized groups. In the final analysis even the official ideological excuses are similar. Oppression in the Union of South Africa, as well as in China, mass murder by the Soviet Secret Police as well as by American soldiers, programmed destruction of peasant cultures in Cambodia and in Hungary are usually carried out in the name of economic, military, protective, defensive, historical "necessity". It is as if "*homo industrialis*" would say to "*homo pre-industrialis*": "I will make you happy even if it kills you" — and then kills him or, what amounts to almost the same thing, destroys his way of life in the "best" tradition of the early religious-military converters-colonizers.

The main body of the research material in the book under review was collected before the Hungarian village of Atány has undergone some radical changes, the book's "ethnographic present" refers to the year of and immediately preceding 1951. By the time the actual book was written, about ten years later, the peasant village was of a completely different nature. The authors refer to these changes only on five pages of this 440 page monograph in a eulogy-like Epilogue.

"(This study) is the portrait of a Hungarian village during the moments preceding fundamental change when the institutions were still living and working..." Today this portrait is no longer typical of Atány; it has become a historical document... "The program of the government to annihilate the social stratum of well-to-do *gazda-s* (self-sufficient farmers) as such has also been realized at Atány; their houses were confiscated, and several were imprisoned..." The general collectivization of the Hungarian peasantry was begun in

1958; Atány's' turn came in February 1959. All the fields were put under the management of the cooperative farms, except for 120 *hold-s* (160 acres)... "Plowing is done with tractors, as is much of the harvest in dry years... There are hardly any horses in the village now..." Since the beginning of the 1950s the extended families have dissolved rapidly, owing to the burden of progressive taxation and compulsory delivery of agricultural products to the state. The traditional organization of labor by families has become extinct in the cooperatives; the members of a family are assigned to different brigades and tasks, according to their age and sex. More and more of the young people turn to industry for employment and move to the towns permanently. The average age of the members of the cooperative is 57 years. The weight of recent events has produced rapid modernization and urbanization of the Atány peasantry. Young persons from the village are now able to adjust easily to an urban environment. Modernization and urbanization have produced many notable benefits for the villagers in the form of better health standards, schooling, ease of communication, and manufactured goods. However, the transition has been possible only at the expense of the traditional way of life."

Beyond nostalgic lamentations over the passing of the old way of life, there also exist some valid questions which are still unanswered by sociology, anthropology, history, economics and political science, such as: when, how fast, by what methods and at what cost should societal changes be induced so as to benefit not only some future generations ("ultimate bliss" in some remote, future was always used to justify suffering in the "Valley of Tears" of the present) but also the present members of a society? These questions are also implicit in *Proper Peasants*. For the necessity of change in the case of Atány was not at all obvious. This village, as shown by the extensive research in the book, was a stable, integrated, well-functioning, viable community, capable even to absorb, and to adapt to former, slower, more "spontaneous", less forced but far-reaching historical changes.

The main body of the book contains a detailed anthropological study (more exactly: ethnography) of the traditional peasant culture of Atány, of the structural relationships among the elements of this culture, and of the nature and function of its various social institutions. After giving a general description of the village's past, geography, agriculture and population, the authors provide a detailed and analytic portrayal of the family as an institution, of the network of social relations, of the way of life and the social strata, and of the community as a whole, in four parts.

The research, which the monograph is based on, is thorough-going and exhaustive, covering every aspect of human life in Atány. The researchers knew what to look for (they have studied more than a hundred other Hungarian villages previously) and they used their experiences excellently. Their visits, interviews and participating observations were evidently well planned and they gained the ready acceptance of the people they were studying. They operated as a male-female team and this, too, had its advantages: at certain phases of the funeral rites, for example, only females are allowed to be present, while

in other situations only males are welcome. The authors state that their study is a "portrait" and, indeed, as the reader goes through the various chapters, he is able to almost enter the life of the people, develop a "feel" for the social atmosphere, begin to identify with individual men, women and children. The tone of the study is very fortunate: it manages to be sympathetic without losing objectivity, it is compassionate without condescension, vivid without dissolving into a string of anecdotal narrative, the authors are parsimonious with their illustrations, yet succeed in conveying real life. The book still leaves one slightly dissatisfied in one area, the study doesn't answer the theoretical and empirical questions: what follows from the analyses, what do we do with the findings, where do we go from here? The study shows us what *is* (or, rather, what *was*) but does not indicate, speculate, theorize, compare, contrast to imply what could be, will be, should be. To put it differently: the study portrays *being* but not *becoming*, like every portrait, it conveys an idea of how the subject looked like at the time the picture was made. True, this monograph could be likened to a painted rather than a photographed picture — it is infinitely more than just a direct depiction — still, one feels that except for the brief Epilogue one is left entirely to one's own devices regarding any broader, deeper, predictive conclusions. The authors are not entirely at fault in this area, it is the genre which doesn't allow too much flexibility beyond analytical description. Perhaps the only alternative for Fél and Hofer could have been to alter the form of ethnography enough to allow for themselves more opportunity to present their conclusions.

The first appearance of the village's name occurs in a document dated 1407, but it may have already existed as far back as in the tenth century. In 1951 the village consisted of about 3,000 people living in 729 houses and working a land of about 13,000 acres. At the time of the study, Atány was already an atypical Hungarian village in that its society and culture were more homogeneous and integrated than that of most other villages in the country or even in the immediate geographic vicinity, its archetypal institutions remained relatively untouched. After a detailed analysis of this traditional, and yet not isolated, social organization, the authors theorize that the basic unifying element of the community of Atány was its uniquely strong and intricate human interrelation system. "The network of human relations, comprising all the various connections of kinship, neighborhood, friendship, and economic cooperation, is closer and stronger in Atány than in most Hungarian peasant villages. Perhaps it has been this strong, dense network of relations which has acted as a wall, preserving the uniformity and continuity of Atány's particular local culture." Atány's is a system where every act, every word, every piece of clothing, every nail in a horse's shoe, every bench in the church, every hour of every day signals something beyond itself and, most importantly, of course, this signal-system is known to all the members of the community, thereby making not only detailed communication possible about practically everything that a person is, but also reinforcing every person's knowledge about himself. Upon seeing a young man dancing in front of a music band at Atány, for example, *homo industrialis* may be able to conclude only that this youngster is having a good time. In this village, however, such an episode

may mean a rite of passage representing in a microcosm the entire complex social system. "Youths stand in front of the musicians to perform the *verbunkos*, the bachelors' dance, at different times because when a youth does so it is a sign to the whole village that he has attained the status of bachelorhood by first fulfilling several conditions. The first of these is the performance of certain agricultural tasks, such as plowing and mowing. Ferenc Orbán, for example began bachelorhood at an early age. When he was not yet fourteen years old, he bought two bottles of beer with the money he got for some eggs and offered a drink to the elderly hired harvester who was teaching him how to reap... In the same year he also plowed alone, and consequently his father allowed him to cut his own bread. Thus he had already passed several requirements of bachelorhood and was ready to stand in front of the band and perform the bachelors' dance."

In the last twenty-five years Hungarian society has undergone rapid and radical changes: from a semi-feudalistic agrarian society it has become a socialistic, predominantly industrial, urbanizing society. This change was chiefly politically motivated, dictatorially enforced, bureaucratically inhuman, overseen by the everpresent occupying Soviet military forces. There is no question about it: the Atány's had to change sooner or later, just as the inept, unresponsive and rigid political and socio-economic organization was ripe for a revolution by the 1940's. But the methods of change meant death, misery, jails, loss of freedom, loss of livelihood and loss of human dignity for millions of the population who have begun to be able to breathe a little easier only since the mid-sixties. And the proud, self-sufficient Proper Peasant of Atány, for whom agricultural work was a vocation and an art, can no longer find his place in the land which meant everything to him.

"The older people try to find a place in the changing Atány world; they have become uncertain, lacking the support of the traditional order. They get their wheat allowance from the cooperative farm, and most of them bake their bread at home, but this wheat is not the same as the wheat they used to grow themselves in the old days. As a former *gazda* put it, "we don't know when it was sown, or the time when it was reaped; the wheat is just brought. One feels there is no summer anymore. Formerly we saw that people were harvesting, meals were being carried out to the fields for the reapers, the crop was gathered in, carts went and returned, stacks were piled in every yard. Now everything is all alike. It seems as if we were not in the same world where we used to live."

If there is an implication to be found in ethnographic portraits such as the *Proper Peasants*, it may be that desirable ends and goals of social change justify only humane means and that the ultimate measure of the skill, wisdom, strength and creativity of *homo industrialis* may be his capability of undertaking societal changes while, in the meantime, assuring dignity to those not as powerful as him.

Károly NAGY