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Agriculture, communities, and new social movements: East European ruralities in the process of restructuring

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Abstract

This paper examines the usefulness of the new social movements (NSMs) paradigm in the changing context of East European post-communist societies and their agricultural systems and rural communities. Starting with statements formulated in Western sociology in the context of Western democratic societies about NSMs as a protest against modernity, the paper analyses the role of such movements in the still modernizing Eastern European reality. The first part of the paper briefly examines some basic elements of the NSMs paradigm in European and American social science. The goal of this section is not only to identify the basic characteristics of NSMs, but also to identify the typical frames used by them. The second part of the paper focuses on the presence of NSMs in the communist era. Drawing on the idea of NSMs as indicators of a 'post-materialist shift' as well as of 'anti-establishment' and 'pro-participatory democracy', the paper examines the frames of democratic opposition in Eastern Europe before 1989. The final part of the paper considers several selected examples from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to explore the role of NSMs in the process of shaping new ruralities during the post-communist transformation.

Keywords: New social movements; Post-communist transition; Rurality; Eastern Europe

"Oh Lord, you gave me eyes
To see in the darkness,
You gave me ears
To hear the slightest move,
You gave me claws,
signs of my instinct and nature…
Lord, please make people friendly to cats…"
"The Cat's Prayer" by Ola Socewicz, 12 years old, Wroclaw, Poland

1. Introduction: where horses cry and where cats pray

Do horses really cry? Do cats really pray? Such questions in Poland might indicate some kind of paranoid inclination, or philosophical extravagance, or anthropomorphism. However, this is the reality of Poland's commercial export of live horses to Italy and other European countries to fulfill a demand for horse meat that is practically non-existent in Poland. European environmentalists already refer to Polish trucks with horses as "death transports". As Christa Blanke, an activist with the German NGO "Animals Angels" reports: "Horses break their legs in trucks, fall, and trample each other" (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2000). In 1998, Poland's National Chamber of Control (Najwyzsza Izba Kontroli) reported that 25% of controlled businesses exporting live horses from Poland do not meet minimal sanitary standards, while 95% of transport trucks have been overloaded and 40% of exporting enterprises do not meet proper conditions of transport (holes in floors and roofs, metal walls in trucks, etc.). In many cases, horses have fallen out of trucks. They are often beaten, hungry, and thirsty. They might be shot during such a trip (Komitet Pomocy dla Zweirząt w Tychach, no date). As one truck

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driver told reporters: "When they are shot it does not bother me. But the worst is when they cry" (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2000).

Meanwhile in the Czech Republic, the newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes* reported that Greenpeace had warned people to not enter places contaminated by dioxin from the Czech chemical company *Spolana*. The company's plant in Neratovice was flooded in 2002 and the water spread dioxin into the surrounding fields. However, the dwellers of the nearby village of Libiš contemptuously asked Greenpeace: "Where were you 20 years ago?". They raised this same question when Greenpeace members put labels with symbols of disaster in places contaminated with carcinogens. Local inhabitants have probably given up on cleansing their environment of the toxic byproducts of PVC production. "Twenty to thirty years ago it was much worse than now. In the evening I washed my car, and in the morning it was covered with a white powder. The same powder I found on my strawberries, on my cabbage, everywhere"—claimed Mr. Vokoun in describing the practices of the company. "Now we have better environment than in Prague, what the hell do the environmentalists want?", he asked as he pointed his finger towards a group of 15 environmentalists who claim that a small part of the Elbe River and its banks are contaminated areas. But Mr. Vokoun disagrees: "I am fishing there and nobody can forbid me to do it". His position was shared by other local people who argued that: "It is only a circus for television what Greenpeace is doing". However, ecologists warn people they should not enter into marked-off regions and should not let their children play there: "Dioxins are not as hazardous immediately as other poisons when they are touched by people and they see immediate reaction. Dioxins affect for a long time" said Mr. Šuta from Greenpeace. Scientific research could determine the influence of chemicals on the human body. However, many people from the village are sceptical and they claim they are not mutants to be investigated (Plavecky, 2003).

A third story concerns two movements in contemporary Hungary: the so-called 'dance-house' movement and the 'pearly bouquet movement' focused on maintaining traditional folk music and dance. Nagy (2004, p. 5) writes: "these tradition-keeping folk groups presented the folk culture as a whole … music, dance, costumes, and habits were performed as integral unit of the folklore …". Today dance houses are part of the system of cultural and educational institutions, though they do not form a formal network or structure. They are mainly the result of individual or group initiatives. Contrary to original rural dance houses that were organized simply by young rural inhabitants who wished to dance, they have mostly been organized by musicians. Dance teachers are important persons since urban young people no longer learn folk music and dance in the socialization process. This movement's significance is in its preservation of traditional rural culture as part of national heritage.

These three stories provide glimpses into aspects of rural communities, rural culture, animal rights, and protection of the natural environment in three Eastern European countries. What is common to these cases? First, they are quite distinct from the Western media focus on the modernization of Eastern Europe or, at least, its integration with the European Union. Such representations of rural areas and rural people primarily reflect a farming population striving to meet high European standards of food production, struggling for better subsidies from national as well as European sources, and protesting against their governments and European Union agencies. Thus, one might expect rural people to remain entirely within the context of materialist values and culture, focused only on catching up with the West. In that view, there seems to be no place for 'new social movements' (NSM) that focus on post-materialist values and raise questions, not about the standard of living, but about the quality of living. Similarly, academic treatment of the 'NSM' tends to assume these movements to be a unique product of advanced capitalist society.

However, these stories reflect interests often associated with NSMs. Following Woods (2003), we contend that the NSM approach provides insights into contemporary post-socialist rural politics. This, in turn, will raise questions concerning the extent to which: the phenomenon of NSM is, in fact, grounded only in advanced capitalism; a distinct form of NSM is indicated in the post-socialist societies; the level of integration between these Eastern European societies and the developed West is such as to have already begun to construct a convergence of rural political practices? Our approach to these objectives will be to construct an ideal type that reflects the basic contours of the literature on NSM. Our strategy follows Marsden et al. (1993, p. 172) who argue that "top down empirical demonstrations… which begin with descriptions of global tendencies and attempt to predict local responses, remains problematic". Instead, Marsden et al. (1993, p. 172) argue that a reverse approach that seeks "evidence of local action and local systems of relationships in the formation of rural localities in a more internationalized world" is more compelling than the "unreflexive application of structuralist concepts to rural change in which the distinctive role of locality and rurality" are too easily dismissed. Thus, we also follow Woods's (2003) lead by examining possible NSM manifestation in a small number of places, although, our sample draws from among the most newly developing capitalist societies, that is, those which have only recently sought to return to capitalist democracy from approximately four decades of experience with state socialism.

2. NSMs and rurality: some theoretical considerations

Many theorists of social movements have attempted to define the rather slippery concept of the NSM. Much of that discussion can be traced to a surprisingly concise and foundational statement on the matter by Habermas (1981)