

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON LABORER COMMUNITIES IN NORTHEAST HUNGARY

Ph.D. thesis

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The thesis analyzes the *lifestyle* of laborers settled in colonies in Northeast Hungary, both in terms of tradition and changes. The research focuses exclusively on laborers living in small settlements, called colonies. The reason of this is that these group-settlements show all the characteristics associated with the laborer lifestyle, and also that in these communities, in contrast with fringe communities or with laborers living in the capital, both the collective and individual traditions can still be found.

Several unique patterns characterize the life of the laborers living in the area. First of all, the living environment is completely different; the surrounding is urban, but the style of life isn't. Compared to the "traditional" urban lifestyle, in these communities a special two folded lifestyle exist; the laborers live very close to the natural environment. Because of this they have a specific relationship with spatial structures; and also with other social classis. In Hungary the deepest gap is not between social classes, poor and rich, man and woman or elite and popular, but between urban and rural.

The aim of my thesis is to present the results of a basic research carried out on specific details of the unique lifestyle of these communities, to help understand and value these colonies and to serve as a basis for following researches on the topic.

In the given northeastern area there are several colonies or settlements that have colonies. The research included Rudabánya, Ormosbánya, Rudolftelep, Borsodnádásd, Pereces, Kurityán, Lyukóbánya, Edelény, Sajószentpéter and Alberttelep.

The research serving as the basis of the thesis was carried out between the spring of 1996 and the fall of 2004. My goal was to locate informants who, because of their age and life, can and, because of their personality, are able to answer my questions. Choosing my key informants, the most important thing was their relationship toward the colony itself. I tried to locate those who lived in the colony for a long time, who came from laborer families or are themselves laborers and who have a broad overview of the life of the community.

For the description I have chosen the views of ethnography, ethnology and sociology to produce an interdisciplinary analysis of the topic. In order to find the facts I have carried out a traditional cultural anthropological fieldwork. Beside the classical methods like interviews (lifeway-, genealogical-, and ethnographical interviews), visual documentation and the analysis of material culture I also used the modern computer techniques to work with my collected data. Of course the work couldn't be finished without focusing also on archival materials, which were found in local collections and the county archives.

The fieldwork was divided into three phases. Firstly I worked with a complex questionnaire, after which I taped structured and semi-structured interviews. Finally, I documented everything visually, using cameras, taking pictures. With the questionnaire I gained access to 310 informants, I taped and videotaped 207 hours of interviews in 17 colonies with 79 informants. My questions were structured within the frames of the classical life-style interviews, but I also included questions on genealogy and labor.

My hypothesis was that the lifestyle and culture of laborers living in rural settlements is a specific and unique form of the laborer culture. It has its own logic, its rules and norms are , by a special compilation technique, self-made. I looked at this communities as socially autonomous class. In some cases, just like in the ones used in this thesis, the communities can be understood as subcultures. It is because of the geopolitical, technological and historical situations. In this research it meant that the

relationship between two different but neighboring social class can be closer than that between two subcultures of the same social class.

I wanted to prove this hypothesis with the traditional methodology of the cultural anthropology, but early on in my research it became clear that the totality of the laborer culture can not be understood exclusively by using empirical methods. Therefore I changed the basic view and tried to capture the whole through the sometimes colorful, sometimes average partial truths and their interferences.

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In contrast with the former researches and studies, the laborers of the area don't feel the existence of really deep gaps between themselves and other social classes. The basic point of self-definition is mainly the category of farmer, but they focus more likely on similarities than on differences. In these definitions the most important thing is the work itself, not the form it takes, the processes it involves or the lifestyle it creates. The boundary lies not between farmer and laborer, but between workers and employers or leaders.

According to my presumptions the natural environment, the preexisting patterns and the opportunities serve as reasons to the specific two-folded lifestyle the rural laborer colonies live by. My research didn't prove this hypothesis, for only a quarter of my informants can be characterized with this pattern. The reason is to be found in the symbolic usage of the rural-laborer character. It is because of the symbolic meaning of the farming that, although it isn't done by many of the laborers, it is still a very important part of the identity of rural laborers. The relationship toward farming and lands, their stories, the interpretation of farming as leisure activity shows us how important this symbolic part is, even though its real economic value is long forgotten.

The deepest gap between the hypothesis and the research can be found on questions on sexuality. Stereotypically, among laborers the sexual culture isn't really complex, more so, the common belief is that the laborers have a very loose morality in terms of sexuality. My research didn't prove this belief. Sexual life, sexuality are taboos. If we try to find the explanation to the difference between the common belief and the actual situation we can't settle on the answer that it is because of their rural background. Even the fear from an unwanted pregnancy is barely enough to give an explanation. From the research it is clear that the roots of the problem lay in the asexual thinking originated from the factory work. The living in a colony is added into this, for there weren't any real intimate space to engage with sexual acts. Everything is displayed, the whole life is lived right in front of the eyes of the family and the community. Because of the mixed community the organic structures of sexuality couldn't develop. Another problem is that the sexuality was also taboo in the bigger social system, so it wasn't possible to follow a norm "broadcasted" by the regime itself.

Another common belief is attached to the relationship of these communities toward alcohol. It is generally believed that factory work and alcoholism go together. My research proved this, although I would argue that the situation is much more complex. Among the known social classes laborers are pole leaders in terms of alcohol consumption. Although the laborer culture has a different understanding of the tolerated level of alcohol consumption, it is also true that drinking alcohol became a must during the years. In their culture drinking alcohol is not the sign of a marginal life style, but a "tool" to express solidarity, brotherhood, masculinity and collegiality. It catalyzes good mood, it helps to overcome the monotony of everyday work and the psychological crises caused by it. The monotony of factory labor, compared to farming and its closeness to nature, requires more intensive forms of leisure, more dynamic forms of social activities. These could be gained by, among other things, drinking alcohol.

The former researches done on laborer culture didn't focus on the question of crime, and specifically on stealing and robbery. My research proved that the stealing of collective goods is a very important part of the laborer culture from the middle of the 20th century. Stealing of collective goods doesn't question the autonomy of private property, it doesn't break any moral norm, the community doesn't understand it as crime. More so, the stealing of collective goods strengthens the position of the

individual in the community, the micro culture think of it as a way to move up in the social scale, as part of the fighting for survival. The stealing has many symbolic meaning, it is between legality and illegality, there is a silent agreement on not taking it as crime. The stealing is a masculine characteristic, it helps to gain a better hierarchical position and also helps to maintain it.

The relationship toward property and buildings is very interesting in laborer communities. In many ways it is ambivalent. On the one hand, they know that the colony gives them a comfortable living environment. On the other hand it is known that the price and value of their house and property is very low. Therefore they don't think of the house as a real investment, even if it is their private property. Their worldview, their financial position and their lifestyle is highly effected by this. There isn't a real need to own a house, from generations to generations there are other goods that are much more important to have. To show status and position they buy luxuries.

The paternalism of the factory also resulted some shifting in using the salary. The factory itself made decisions, took responsibilities in many ways, so the laborers autonomy couldn't develop in many questions. The young generation, the children growing up in this didn't feel the lack of freedom, they saw this as something that is good for them. This system existing through generation resulted, that after the collapse of the political and institutional structure, the former laborers lost track. Many of them became unemployed because of the crisis of industrial sector, and they weren't able to take care of themselves.

My research couldn't find any ethnical difference between the colonies. In spite of this, we have every reason to assume that in these rural colonies the differentiation between ethnic groups existed. In practice I meant that they had an understanding of the origin of a certain family or individual, but the personal network was much more important. One had to build up and maintain this network in order to avoid being called a stranger. The ethnicity was only important in the times of the social-, political changes, wars or border revisions. Those who did everything to assimilate were able to get inside the body of the nation. Only those who didn't want to be part of the assimilation process, like the Romani people, were marginalized.

There were several stereotypes that were proved by the research, that were general in the area I focused on. The average laborer is secular, votes for the left wing and has a certain nostalgia toward socialism.

They aren't radical atheists, their relationship to religion isn't really realized by them. They are not believers, but this isn't an important fact in their life, it is a minor question. They simply don't think of religion, they only let themselves to be non-believers. The causal thinking, the style of production, their education in natural sciences predestinates their secular views.

Their view of disease and illness is also unique. Those who worked as laborers for a long time has, as an unavoidable effect of the hard factory work, some kind of serious illness. Their relationship toward disease and illness therefore differs from that of the larger society. The imperfectness of the body, should it be acute or chronic, doesn't mean social marginalization. The ill worker, because of the insurances, is still able to take care of the family and also the illness, just like the hurts in a battle, show how hard the worker labored.

Between the workers of today and the laborer colonies there isn't any connection. The colonies can not be understood as culture-creating environments, they are only geographical locations where laborers lived and live together. Those who are still living there think of the colony only as the setting of the past, it reminds them to the former times, it declares their status within a community. There aren't any coordinating power anymore, after the colony-creating central will and the factories vanished. And, because the existence of the colonies was based on the paternalistic view, the laborers currently living in them can not produce a micro cultural integrity.