

BEYOND THE PLAN: PLOT FARMING IN HUNGARY

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In Hungary the peasantry as a social category has been brought to an end by a well identifiable process: the collectivization of agriculture. In brief, collectivization means, that traditional farms hitherto controlled and worked by individual families are brought together into larger units of production to be worked and managed by the body of members, who partake in the revenues in proportion to their input of labour and land. Since 1960, concluding a process extending over ten years, the proportion of independent peasant farms in Hungary has become insignificant.

In socialist Eastern Europe, typically, government programmes have aimed to restructure and control far larger social and economic domains than it has been the case in Western Europe, where political programmes related to agriculture, for example, have been much less ambitious and more piecemeal (Franklin, 1969). In Eastern European countries, particularly those that went ahead with collectivization, it has been a question not only of change but of guided, planned and, many would argue, imposed change. The questions which arise with greatest urgency are, undoubtedly, in connection with the effects of political programmes and economic strategies, on the social contexts of production. The economic and social function of the former peasant families have undergone fundamental changes as a consequence of collectivization, the analysis of which is by no means finished; in fact it is only gathering momentum in Hungary since the 1970s. Assessment of social variables associated with the outcome of specific political and economic programmes demands special attention. Even in a country where collectivization has been only partial, for example Yugoslavia, it has been shown to what significant extent the social context of production may hamper or restrict the outcome of economic and political programmes (Barie, 1978). The question is of equal relevance to Hungary.

In the course of the collectivization campaign in Hungary, the options open to the peasantry were very limited or at least heavily channeled toward specific directions. Options were open, however, as regards the engagement of family labour in

various sectors of production such as, for example, non-agricultural employment in industry or collectivized agriculture. The terms of engagement of the former peasants in the various sectors - both agricultural and non-agricultural - is a crucial question. As it will be argued in this study, the form this engagement takes, had, and continues to have, significant consequences on the development of the different sectors themselves, which may coincide with or diverge from, the aims of central economic planning at various points. For example, since the 1950s, there has been a vast influx of manpower from agriculture into industry, allowing the completion of its planned growth. On the other hand, the emergence of a new and resilient sector of private production, alongside collectivized agriculture, was quite unforeseen and unbidden. The unplanned development of the plot farming sector is inseparable from collectivization itself.

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In Hungary, the model followed in the course of collectivization was the Soviet model or, more precisely, the collective system of agriculture as it was by the 1950s in the Soviet Union. However, in Hungary collectivization took place with significant variations from the stricter Soviet model; for example, simpler and more varied types of collectives were tolerated than has been the case in Russia (Erdel, 1979:250).

Collectives in Hungary were envisaged as organizations integrated in their village of base. Terminology reflected this aim; throughout the 1950s and 1960s the "collective community" (termelészövetkezeti közösség) was a standard term (Erdel, 1952; Markus, 1967). Identification of collective and village followed from the assumed relationship between the peasant family and the collective. Socialist policy makers reckoned that peasant families rather than individual members would be the constituent units of the collective membership. Collectivization policies did not originally envisage or aim at the dissociation of the process of production from the rural family. The proclaimed aims were not only to draw individual farms into common units of production but also to draw rural families into a collectivity based on common interests and commitment. This was not specific to Hungary; policies in relation to the peasantry were relatively homogenous throughout Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in order ' . . . to create and maintain the monolithic unity of socialism . . . ' (Hegedus, 1977:90). In Yugoslavia the collectives were briefly hoped to 'revive the zadruga spirit (Baric 1978:274) and in

the Soviet Union the collective farm was envisaged as ' . . . not merely a unit of production but an elementary social cell . . .' (Yanov qu. in Osipov, 1972).

Collectivization in Hungary has developed otherwise through a dynamic of its own, the analysis of which falls outside the scope of this paper. The element of this development that relates to our theme, is the commitment of family manpower to work within the collective and outside it. The initial economic problems of the collectives and their inability to ensure the livelihood of their members made it necessary to allow members to retain small plots of land in private cultivation. The plots (standard size: 0.57 ha.) could be of very high quality land nonetheless; for example, in vine-growing regions the majority are scattered on the hillsides where the best vineyards are, but mechanical cultivation favoured by the collectives was not practicable.

Official justification for the plots were the following:

- 1) to enable members of the collective to produce food for their own consumption so that the collective could concentrate on commodity production;
- 2) to ease transition from individual farming to collective farming;
- 3) to exploit existing facilities of peasant farming which could not be usefully employed in collective farming;
- 4) supplement income of members and thus check wholesale abandonment of agriculture;
- 5) that assets specific to each sector could complement one another to mutual benefit (Fazeka, 1976:155).

These justifications imply the temporary character of plot farming within the socialist agricultural system and were formulated under the assumption that when collective farming has been firmly established, plot farming will wither of its own accord.

Since 1959 however, plot farming as assumed a far greater role than had been ideologically designed for it. Although the plots occupy only 15% of the country's agricultural land, they provide more than one third of the national agricultural output; in 1978, 26.3% of crops and 45.8% of livestock have been produced on the plots (Varga, 1980).

Although in Hungary collectivization contributed significantly to the modernization of agriculture as a whole and promoted steady economic growth overall, it has failed to supply enough agricultural product either to cover the needs of the market nationally or the members themselves. During

the 1950s this was attributed to the lack of machinery and large-scale farming technology, insufficient production capital, the half-hearted attitudes of members or, often, to sabotage.

Since then, particularly from the mid-1960s significant progress has been made and the collectives have greatly improved their production, strengthened their organization and accumulated capital, without however, being able to cover the country's total requirement of agricultural products, which have themselves risen together with higher standards of living. The need for the production of plots is as vital today as it had been in the 1950s, and it is likely to remain the case in the foreseeable future.

Plot farming developed towards intensive commodity production relatively quickly, competing with collectives at first by tying down manpower and interest and, later, by competing on the market, although plots produce products for which the collectives are less well adapted (such as fruits, vegetables, livestock) or cannot produce in large enough volume.

I propose to examine forms plot farming takes, through the example of one Transdanubian village, Pecsely, although the versatility of plot farming cannot be made fully apparent by the example of any one village. In Pecsely, the diversity of possibilities is obscured by the predominance of vine-growing, a branch particularly suited for plot farming, which precluded the need to innovate and diversify, as it has been the case in some other regions (Kuczsi and Kovacs, 1982). For example, stock raising which is a preferred production branch in plots, is relatively underrepresented in Pecsely. But, from the point of view of the social variables associated with plot farming, the limitations arising out of regionally specific constraints are less essential, although they have to be borne in mind.

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In spite of their territorial insignificance - covering less than 10% of the local agricultural land - plot farms in Pecsely are of considerable relevance to the villagers; the plots provide large revenues, tie down significant manpower and occupy a central position in the villagers affective interest in a way the collective does not.

In Hungary there are altogether about 1.6 million plots, and more than five million people, that is half the population,

lives in households engaged in plot farming (Varga, 1980). In this national context therefore it is hardly surprising that in a village which offers attractive plot farming production possibilities, the majority of villagers are involved. Household plots are commonly derived from membership in the collective but there are in addition so called "complimentary plots" which are not connected to collective membership and can be bought, leased or inherited. Nationwide, more than half of all plots are of this kind. Since 1967, members of collectives are entitled to a plot on an individual basis, not as families, regardless of the number of family members in the collective, as it was the case before. This reform acknowledges the economic significance of plots as well as the fact that the units in the collective membership are not families, but individuals.

In Pecsely, a village of 191 households only 31 do not have plots of any description; these are commonly households of elderly people, too weak or ill for physical labour, though they are not necessarily the oldest villagers, for there is a fair number of villagers, both men and women, well into their 70s or 80s who still control and work a plot.

Immediately after mass collectivization in 1960, the tendency was the maximal incorporation of land into collective farming but by 1970 it had become apparent that not all land could be usefully fitted into the large-scale farming programme; the cultivation of marginal land was therefore abandoned. In order to restore these to use, many being valuable hillside stretches - a system of long leases was instituted on very advantageous terms. Thus in practice there is no shortage of land for plot farming, on the contrary, it is still rather the amount of wasted vineyards that constitute a problem.

The plots are valuable because a standard size plot vineyard may net considerable revenue, often as much as the average yearly wage from the collective. Many families work two or three times the standard size. Production costs are kept low in spite of commercial sprays and fertilizers, because the plot farmers have all the equipment they need and the family supplies the bulk of the labour. In 1979, for example, the highest income in Pecsely was in the region of 100 thousand forints, which is almost three times as much as the average yearly pay in the local collective. But variations between households and over consecutive years are great. Exact figures for incomes derived from the plots are hard to come by, as people are not forthcoming with precise amounts, but the estimate of informants, that on average

incomes from plots amount to about half of the family's total income is consistent with national averages (Enyedi, 1979:79).

There appears to be a close correlation between overall family assets and the scale of plot farming in which they are engaged. The wealthiest families, judged by their housing standards and assets such as a car, are those that have the largest and best plots in addition to employment of one or more members in the collective or industry.

Plot farming in Hungary today is not a continuation of traditional farming; it is not 'the same, only smaller'. The structure, function and meaning of plot farming is new, even though certain features of traditional peasant farming have been perpetuated in it, such as for example, the use of family labour and local networks of reciprocal help.

Versatility in form and function are important new features of plot farming; plots may be innovative or traditional, market-oriented or for household consumption and may be specialized to a greater or lesser extent. The purpose plots fulfil influences considerably their form - plots which serve mainly to satisfy the elderly parents emotional attachment to traditional farming are quite different from plots established with specific material goals in view.

Engagement in plot farming falls into distinct types, even in Pecsely, where specialization in vine growing is predominant. The older, former middle and small peasants typically produce for the market but remain within the traditional framework of techniques and branches of production for which they both have the means, equipment and local network of reciprocal help. They re-invest a certain production capital year after year but investments in modernization of farming are limited to the purchase of small mechanical implements or the conversion of vineyards to the widely spaced rows, ie., the "cordoned" system, which allows less labour intensive cultivation. Although attentive to market demands this type of plot farmer avoids branches of production which are perhaps more profitable but are less prestigious in terms of traditional evaluation, such as for example, pig fattening. The profits of plot farming are generally destined to some pre-set purpose - house renovation, building or the purchase of a car. The independence allowed by plot farming and emotional attachment to the land play major roles and material gains are often secondary. They

maintain habits of very low personal consumption, and the main beneficiaries of the profits of their plot farming are their children. Few plot farmers of this type make exact calculations in terms of investment-return; a vague sense of "it's worth it" is more typical, which determines how much physical labour they are ready to devote to the plot. For many, the main benefits of plot farming are in the farming itself.

The formerly landless are likely to find less satisfaction in farming; they do not aspire the reputation of "good farmer" and the purpose of their plot farming is beyond farming itself. They convert the material benefits of plot farming into general improvements of their lifestyle - mainly by creating homes better equipped with modern comforts.

The younger age group of plot farmers, now in their 30s or 40s, are often skilled workers and engage in plot farming more out of calculated choice, carefully assessing how its profits compare with earnings from other sources and adjusting the plot's production to the market. The younger plot farmers in Pecsely all have some other employment, but a job often chosen in function of the requirements of plot farming; one that allows flexible work hours or allows access to facilities that can be put to use on the plot, too. These young men are more likely to innovate, to engage in new types of production branches which do not have a local tradition or are not prestigious in terms of traditional evaluation, such as pig-fattening or sheep farming. They are more interested in modern techniques and devices - automatic pig-feeding devices, for example - than the older farmers. For them plot farming is a means toward a goal - to achieve an ideal modern lifestyle - and as such engagement in plot farming is claimed to be temporary until these goals are reached. How temporary or otherwise their engagement in plot farming really proves to be remains to be seen.

The level of plot farming in which a family is engaged may be associated with several factors, such as for example, former status. The former landowner families had a better starting point in spite of the leveling effects due to the removal of most of the land from private control through collectivization. The former independent small farmers had better houses, more equipment, winecellars, livestock and, more importantly, the lifelong attachment and habit of farming for themselves. Vineyards became crucial assets in

plot farming; the former landowners found it less difficult to focus their attention and ability to that sector, than the former landless who had formerly not owned vineyards. Better equipped and better housed, the former landowners also lacked the pressing need to invest in the acquisition of these. Within the collectives themselves, the former landowners proved to be in better position to secure for themselves the better paid positions, as team drivers or branch managers, for example. Indeed the former landowning families have, in Pecsely, seized their initial advantage and remained among the most prosperous in the village.

Nevertheless one also finds a good proportion of formerly landless families who have made excellent material progress and control, today, lucrative plots.

Besides the starting point of families - their former status - it was of great significance at what point in its domestic cycle a family was in the 1960s. The greatest advantage could be reaped from the dual arrangement of plot farming and collective membership after that time, in the improved economic climate of the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, the families where the household head and his wife were at the time in their 40s had a distinct advantage; in the prime of their strength yet experienced in farming. With the help of their teen-age children they could adapt to new conditions, store up enough working years in the collective to qualify for good pensions and accumulate enough funds to set up their children independently. Less advantaged were the villagers who at that time were older, that is about 50 or 60, whose children had left the village to settle elsewhere and who consequently had little help with plot farming, could not accumulate enough working years to qualify for adequate pension and did not have energy or incentive to exploit plot farming fully.

The ready market for wine and the tradition to produce wine for the market has made it relatively easy for the villagers of Pecsely to change over from traditional farming to commodity production. A crucial aspect is how family labour is allocated and put to use on the plots.

In Pecsely, those working an average of 8 to 10 hours in the collective or non-agricultural employment, work, in addition about 2 hours on the plots. The plots mobilize significant after hours work and the daily, weekly and yearly work schedule of the villagers has been re-structured to accomodate full exploitation of the plots. Sunday and other

holidays have become working days almost entirely devoted to the plots. Likewise, the paid yearly holidays are not used for the purpose for which they have been designed, that is, taking proper rest, but are taken piecemeal, as the plots demand, not only to work them but also for example, for errands which arise in connection with the plots, such as the purchase of implements.

Plots are rarely individual affairs and involve family groups of variable composition, not necessarily only those living in the same household. Women and elderly parents play a major part in plot farming. The plots can be worked on a flexible work schedule which can be fitted in with the household chores and its pace may be adapted to the declining strength of the elderly.

Labour division in plot farming conforms in some ways to the traditional labour division on the pre-collectivization farms. There is commonly one main worker, acting as the 'chef d'entreprise'; he or she keeps watch over the plot and is the main worker and decision-maker. Around every individual in charge of a plot, there is a ring of helpers of various description. The degree and scope of such help varies considerably, ranging from regular daily help to once-yearly participation in the vintage. Members who help regularly are recruited mainly from among the immediate family - wife, parents, and children. A number of sons and daughters retain this link with the parental household even though they no longer live in the village. Those that do still live in the village in a separate household are likely to have their own plot, in which case they help one another on a reciprocal basis as the need arises. It is common for an elderly parent to be in charge of a compounded family plot while the rest of the family - either living in Pecsely or away from it - come to help with the larger tasks. More distant relatives may give occasional help, but never on a regular basis; strict reciprocity is in order. Married brothers or sisters do not as a rule work a plot jointly as the immediate family does. In addition, friends, neighbours, fellow villagers, and hired labour may be recruited occasionally. Basically then, plot farming engages three kinds of labour: 1) the main person responsible who is principal decision-maker; 2) a first ring of helpers from the immediate family who also benefit from the income from the plot; 3) a second ring of helpers who may have a plot of their own, do not benefit from the income of the plot in which they help out but either receive reciprocal help or are paid on a daily basis. A network of reciprocal help on the plots is dense

and is an important ground for interaction between the villagers, following the pattern of traditional contacts through the families of the village.

Ownership rights over the plots do not necessarily determine the way in which they are worked and managed. Plots derived from collective membership of a son or daughter, may be principally worked by an old but energetic parent or a son may work the plot of his enfeebled father. The income from the plots is often turned toward the building of a house or the purchase of a car within the close family circle, regardless of who actually does most of the work on the plot or whose membership in the collective makes the plot available. The older parent typically, retains very modest, traditional consumer habits and is more prepared to take upon himself demanding physical labour. The main beneficiaries of his efforts may be his children or grandchildren whose more costly urban-style living is financed from the revenues of the plot.

The limitations of plot farming are set by the availability of family manpower rather than land. Family labour is by its nature limited, vulnerable to loss of members through moving away, sickness or death. Hiring labour is expensive in the long run and its availability is limited. Fully expanded exploitation of plot farming may have to be drastically reduced if even one family member opts out. It is particularly vulnerable to the loss of the older, main worker in charge and such loss invariably leads to the rethinking of the extent of plot farming by the family.

Families place high value on the eventual rise of one or other member in the social order and education leading to non-agricultural occupation are paramount aspirations. The family members' engagement in various economic sectors is recentralized through the upward striving aspiration of the family and plot-farming is the sector in which the family is engaged at a unit. The problem facing many families is the setting up of the young independently, complete with all amenities considered desirable. In the present circumstances of chronic house shortage and the high costs of housing, plot farming offers essential means towards this goal.

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At it has been seen, it is characteristic to plot farming that its units of common interest are small, based on family household and local networks. In a system such as the

Hungarian, where centralized control over socio-economic processes has been the paramount aim the status of plot farming is ambiguous, comparable to the situation appropriately formulated by E. R. Wold (1968:2):

. . . the formal network of economic and political power exists alongside, and intermingled with various other kinds of informal structures which are interstitial, supplementary and parallel to it . . . (because) . . . the formal table of organization is elegant indeed but fails to work unless informal mechanisms are found in direct contravention.

The controversial position of the plot farming system follows from two main features: first, it is based on private, small interest groups as opposed to the socialized sectors and, secondly, it is a sector through which the equalizing distribution of incomes of the socialized sectors are modified. But, after almost two decades of official quasi-oblivion, a new trend is taking shape since the 1970s, aiming at the integration of plot farming to the collective system and plots are often represented as part of the collectives. For example, F. Donath (1977) argues that since members may renounce their share of plot land and receive compensation in cash instead, plots are nothing but "a part of the members pay in kind." He thus stretches the concept of collective farming to include the plots as well, in an attempt to play down the differences inherent in each. This seems laboured, stretching the meaning of payment in kind rather far, for, in fact, plots are no more than an opportunity for members to work after hours; it also ignores that more than half of the plots countrywide do not arise from collective membership at all. Such interpretation does not alter the fact that it is a question of two types of relations of production which are fundamentally different: large-scale industrialized production on the one hand and small-scale private enterprises on the other,

However, from the technical point of view undoubtedly there is reason to view the two sectors as complementary. For the plots to be able to focus on specialized labour-intensive branches of production it is essential, for example, that the production of grain and fodder be carried out by mechanized means in the collective. On the basis of this, J. Tepicht (1973:15-45) has proposed that the sectoral

integration of peasant production previously achieved at the family level, is now organized on a national scale, through the complementary relationship between the collectives and small plots. But it remains useful to distinguish the technical, from the socio-economic aspect of plot farming; the former allows, indeed requires integration, while the latter does not.

It would appear that the present tendency to view the plots as merely branches of collective farming serves to justify their existence and support. Significant new development in this direction has taken place in Hungary since the economic reforms of 1968 (see F. Donath, 1977) and, mainly since 1980, with more supportive stand in relation to plot farming or rather what it represents in terms of individual enterprise and small-scale, self managed interest groups. The reforms of 1980 and of January 1982 allow unprecedented scope for individual enterprises and associations, both within agriculture and outside it, through several types of concessions and incentives. For example, they extend the fields in which private enterprise may be engaged; secondly, a number of new forms of small enterprises and associations, such as small cooperatives, service groups and business communities are legalized; lastly, new forms of cooperation between state-enterprises, collectives and individuals are made possible. These alternatives are inventive and novel and widen the scope of individual and family enterprise well beyond the domain of plot farming.

From the initial suppressive stand in relation to plot farming throughout the 1950s, trend has been toward increasing acceptance of the integration of plot farming into what Wolf has called "the formal table of organization" (E.R. Wolf, 1968:2). It is probably not unjustified to view this as, albeit belated response, to the way in which families related to the collectives, engaged family manpower in various sectors, restructured labour-division and work schedule, to include, and indeed create, a new sector of production for themselves.

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