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*Sociocultural Transformation in East Central Europe:
The Case of the Hungarian Peasant-Worker in Burgenland**

The following essay will analyze the role of the peasant-worker in the transformation of East Central European rural society and culture. Peasant-workers are one of the most important agents of change. In search of power and a new identity, this village-based proletariat is growing in number and influence within the social framework of the slow-changing traditional peasant village. While the power and influence of the peasant-worker may be increasing, it is also true that the cost of such mobility in terms of labor, family unity, and long-term obligations to relatives and friends is threatening the very essence of this stratum. The examples of four peasant-worker families are used here to illustrate the problems of occupation, role allocation, decision-making, and life styles. The location of the investigation was Unterwart (Alsóör), a Hungarian village in Central Burgenland, Austria, only a few kilometers from the Hungarian border in a linguistically separate region called Obere Wart. Although the village fell to Austria after the Peace Treaty of Trianon in 1920, its socioeconomic development paralleled that of Hungary until the 1930s. In terms of rapid industrialization and supplementary income opportunities, the economic policies of the Third Reich were highly favorable to the Austrian agricultural sector. But it was only after World War II that Unterwart became unique: with its sister village Siget in der Wart and the Magyar sections of Oberwart, it remained the only Magyar agricultural community in a free or capitalistic economic system. Unterwart and Siget in der Wart are the only homogeneous capitalist Hungarian villages, and as such they present excellent comparative material for studying how two political systems affect a single ethnic group. The present paper is the first step in this direction: it intends to analyze only Magyars in Austria, the Unterwarters.

The Peasant-Worker in East Central Europe

A considerable amount of agreement has been achieved recently between West and East European social scientists concerning the evolution of European peasantry during the past thirty years.¹ Whereas the process of social change is and will always remain a subject of much dispute, the ultimate result of this evolution, the

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1. Among the studies which have recently explored the phenomenon of the peasant-worker, and have applicability for Burgenland are: Andrei Simić, *The Peasant Urbanites: A Study of Rural-Urban Mobility in Serbia* (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973); Walter Biselle, "The Peasant-Workers in Poland," *Studies in European Society* [hereafter *SES*], 1 (1973), 79-90; Ryszard Turcki, "Urbanization—Real and Latent," *Polish Perspectives*, 5 (1962), 10-17; Dyzma Galaj, "Attitude of the Rural Population to Part-Time Farmers," *Polish Sociological Bulletin*, 5 (1965), 117-23; Bogslaw Galeski, "From Peasant to Farmer," *ibid.*, 5 (1965),

disappearance of the East European peasant way of life, is an empirical reality that can hardly be contested. With the exception of a few pockets of peasantry in Eastern and Southern Europe, this social formation has been successfully replaced by the farmer, the rural proletariat, and other formations often referred to as post-peasant agriculturists. Once the very essence of Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian and other societies, the centuries-old peasant culture has all but vanished from the continent. In East Central Europe the peasant value system has been replaced by a cosmopolitan, urban, and in some instances a socialist ideology, all of which by their very nature and in varying degrees oppose the peasant heritage.

This highly complex social transformation has thoroughly affected East Central European society. One of the most significant structural changes within the rural society occurred in the family. Once the unit of agricultural production, the family is no longer a workshop. Even though East Central Europe's food supply is still drawn largely from small private plots, labor opportunities and agricultural specialization (via industrialization) have contributed to the nucleation and structural realignment of the family. The Slavic extended family is disappearing along with strong family and community affiliation. With rare exceptions, the village is no longer a cohesive corporate community but merely an administrative and residential unit. National political forces have penetrated local political power, social stratification, belief system, inter-class or stratum relationships, kin and family dynamics, and folk customs.

From an anthropological perspective an essential question is the process of peasant transformation. In order to arrive at meaningful conclusions one must look at all the agents of sociocultural change. One of these agents, the primary focus of the present paper, is the peasant-worker. This social formation in East Central Europe has been the subject of a number of investigations during the past few years.²

Peasant-workers are a village-based proletariat who derive their primary income from employment outside their home but who also return to their village either daily or on weekends to fulfill family and communal obligations. Typically a male and the primary wage earner of the family, the peasant-worker leads a dual life that is characterized by long hours of non-agricultural as well as agricultural work. Since non-agricultural labor opportunities are highly limited within Unterwart, he has to seek employment outside the village. Most peasant-workers (of the fifty-four peasant-worker households in Unterwart) are hired as construction workers, factory hands, road and railroad workers, and smiths.

84-97; William Lockwood, "The Peasant Worker in Yugoslavia," *SES*, 1 (1973), 91-110; John W. Cole and Phillip Katz, "The Proletarianization Process in South Tyrol," *ibid.*, 1 (1973), 39-66; John Friedl, "Industrialization and Occupational Change in a Swiss Alpine Village," *ibid.*, 1 (1973), 67-78; Ferenc Erdei, *Város és vidéke, Szeged* (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1971); Rudolf Andorka, "A magyar községek átalakulása a társadalomstatistikai adatok tükrében," in Tamás Hofer *et al.*, eds., *Faluk* (Szolnok: Magyar Néprajzi Társaság, 1974), pp. 197-210; Harvey Franklin, *The European Peasantry: The Final Phase* (London: Methuen, 1969).

2. The entire first volume of the promising but unfortunately discontinued journal, *East European Society* (July 1973), was devoted to the peasant-worker and worker-peasant problem.