HUMAN AFFAIRS, *8*, 1998, 2, 193–200

THE PHENOMENON OF POVERTY IN THE SLOVAK COUNTRYSIDE

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The social and economic transformation in the post-socialist countries including Slovakia has brought the legitimization of poverty. The paper deals with poverty in the agrarian milieu of southern Slovakia and with the manifestation of poverty in material and social deprivation. The author has tried to find an answer to the question whether it is caused by external factors – shortcomings of the social and economic system, whether it is individually conditioned or, finally, the consequence of both kinds of factors.

Poverty is a global problem. It is a challenge to social politicians, social workers, economists, statisticians, but sociologists, ethnologists, historians, and psychologists are also confronted with it. Poverty varies depending upon the historical and sociocultural context. It may be scattered, temporary, almost hidden or concentrated in a particular geographical and social space, long term or public. The indicators of poverty were, naturally, different in the Middle Ages, in the 19th and 20th centuries, in traditional and non-traditional societies, in urbanized and rural milieus. While in the past poverty was tantamount not only to scarcity of basic vital needs and poor persons wore shabby clothes and starved, the attributes of modern poverty cover a larger area and hunger is usually missing. All forms of poverty, however, have one thing in common – marginalization and social exclusion.

The sweeping socioeconomic transformation which the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia, is going through has brought with it the legitimization of the status of wealth and poverty. This is in contrast to the egalitarianism of the former regime which denied these catagories as social designations. Private ownership is once more guaranteed in the Constitution, searching for riches is approved, in political conceptions the challenge of attaining wealth is the urgent message of the new conditions. However, an accompanying symptom is the legitimization of poverty. Poverty has become a social reality (Možný, I., Mareš, P. 1995: 1).

J. Szalai remarks that commentaries from Western Europe on the question, "why are the poor poor in the post-socialist countries?" often evokes the response "pov-

erty is an inevitable result of the change from socialism to the market economy, whose growth is connected with economic difficulties" (Szalai, J.: 1). This is a true answer, if too laconic and onesided. It does not investigate the essence of the poverty issue, but rather explains it purely technically – the price of economic growth and social progress for the majority is paid for by a clear exclusion of a certain minority section of society.

It remains unanswered whether poverty is primarily a matter of the individual. The roots of this viewpoint lie in a failure of adaptability, in the inability to meet the demands of present-day society, the lack of a work ethic, initiative and flexibility, a stifling of the ability to change roles, or seeing oneself as an individual with the possibility of changing roles. Is it a socially defined problem caused by external circumstances – gaps in the economic and social system, in the social structure, discrimination, and prejudices? Or is it a mixture of external reasons and individual disposition which has been brought to the fore in situations where a society going through sharp developmental changes calls for a new orientation and appropriate reactions from individuals?

The question is also open to what degree present poverty is inherited, passing from generation to generation as a way of life, tied to the past through the lifestyles of certain social groups in the prewar period or the socialism which followed. Mostly this is formed more in visible urban settings than in the countryside, where it is more hidden.

My contribution concentrates on the rural environment. I begin with the question, how did the attitude to poverty in the interwar period appear?

In can be shown that in the Slovak village, poverty was a phenomenon which was accepted and not judged. The existence of poverty was, to a certain measure, connected to the nature of agricultural work. Even well-off peasant families could quickly find themselves impoverished as a result of a poor harvest, drought, cattle disease, or sudden storms. There were of course the effects of bad planning or alcoholism. There were in addition other reasons which I will not discuss due to lack of space.

Slovakia's peasant community in the interwar period was still relatively closed within the borders of a feudal social structure. In the post-war period the forms of patriarchal relations were transformed into a social hierarchy led by the Communist party, organizations of a campaign-type of society springing from a model of serfdom. Hence state paternalism and instruments of social control were enforced more smoothly (Szalai, J.: 7–9).

In the postwar period, modernization created conditions for the improvement of conditions of life and for the progress of the poorest agrarian strata through easier contact with the industrial centres. The living standards of agricultural workers previously threatened by poverty saw a general rise due to the existence of a generous state. The material well-being of country dwellers tied to socialist agrocomplexes, mostly families, family clans, and groups able to profit from these connections, often meant a higher living standard than other highly qualified social groups. This was also maximized by non-financial resources dependent on help from relatives and neighbours, and income generated by various nonwork-related activities.

Of course even in the times of real socialism poverty existed. Those who were economically or politically pushed to the social margin did not make up a numerous group. Their lack of visibility as well as the taboo nature of poverty were reasons why empirical research paid little attention to poverty. Sociological investigation partially delt with it through *"an analysis of inhabitants with restrictive consumer possibilities"*. It should be emphasized that within such analyses, in comparison with other social and professional groups, the lowest occurrence of poverty was found in cooperative agricultural units (Možný, I., Mareš, P. 1995: 12–13). The weakness of the statistics was that it failed to differentiate the formal from the informal economy, failed to define the income which sprang from the exchange of gifts and services. They did not notice that expenses on food were greatly reduced by the self-sufficient backyard economy and in some kinds of work, for example building houses, savings were made through the help of family and neighbours.

With socialism's collapse and the folding of the state's umbrella it was those who had the most dependence on the state, who were most tied to bureaucracy, socialistic distribution and certainties who most found themselves in a state of poverty. These were people who did not enjoy sufficient security and a clear-cut social position with a ready-made network of contacts from the previous regime, allowing some sort of economic independence or the freedom to choose a desired alternative. They included a certain part of country people, mostly agricultural workers, who after the abolition of state farms or the collapse of the cooperatives found themselves without resources for subsistence.

I would like to draw attention to this fact with the support of some empirical research I did in 1995–1996 in the Dunajská Streda area in the villages of Topoľníky (Nyárasd), Okoč (Ekecs) inhabited by Hungarians. The country-estates Jánoštelek, Madéred, Jánošíkovo, Starý Gojáš and Asod, belonging to the administration of these villages, were held until 1990 under State Farm of Čalovo. When the majority of them were abolished or returned to their private owners, the animal industry to which the estates were oriented was stopped, and their redundant farmhands either remained unemployed, or only intermittently in work. They stayed on the estates and came to be regarded by the villagers as a marginal group. Part of this reaction is attributable to the fact that some of them are "intruders" coming from various places inside Slovakia or even from the Czech Republic, although the majority are from Hungarian areas around the towns of Čalovo, Dunajská Streda or Nové Zámky.

The State farm of Čalovo provided its employees who were working on far-away estates accommodation which in the 1970s was expanded and improved. This was a good opportunity for those coming from a family with a number of children and had no other chance of getting a flat and for those living together outside of marriage.

Let me point to the case of one of these estates. The activity on the Jánoštelek farm stopped in 1993 when the farm was restituted and breeding of cattle and pigs finished. Before 1989 the mobility of Jánoštelek inhabitants was considerable. From 1982, over 100 families came and went from this estate. This mobility ceased after 1989 when only 2 families moved. At present 15 families still have homes on Jánoštelek.

The farm, which does not offer work, is inhabited only because the people living there have no other possibility to solve their problem of accommodation. Although not all people living on farms are protected by the social network or unemployed, the great majority of them are. In spite of some differences in their social status, and the lack of traditional links or a commonly lived past, they form an impoverished group from the point of view of the objective conditions in which they live and the subjective attitudes of their members too. The indicator of their poverty is not only material deprivation, i.e. low income which limits the consumption of goods and service, reflected in their standard of living – food, clothes, housing, hygiene, transport – but also social deprivation, expressed in a subordinate position (toward village communities and society at large) and limited family activities.

During the research I have tried to focus my attention on searching for the reactions of individuals, families and the whole community to this adverse situation. In other words, I have tried to comprehend the social changes which impact on the phenomena of poverty on the microlevel, state the diagnosis of poverty and how it is reflected in everyday life. I have used the traditional ethnological method applied in examining small communities, i.e. gathering interviews, biographies of individuals and families. The result is intended to be an insight into the phenomena of poverty in the given environment from various aspects, through the opinions and attitudes of farm inhabitants, concentrated around the most important aspects of material and social deprivation.

The inhabitants of pauperized communities mainly feel their poverty in the material realm. This is comprehensible, as the standard of living of the people living on the farms before 1989, based on income per capita, their housing facilities and other parameters, was sufficient and in some cases even better than average. The time during which people have had the feeling of deprivation is quite short – they have had no time to adapt to life in inconvenient conditions, so different from those transferred from generation to generation and from the customs formed by their life style.

Although in this situation we cannot really talk about inherited poverty, some indices point to continual processes resulting from the way of life of their families during the communist or prewar periods. In the biographies of individuals, diverse though they are, we can trace some common features, such as origin from families with many children, instable families, unmarried parents, illegitimate children, alcoholism, in some exceptional cases also mentally retarded people, as well as children with behavioural problems, can be found. Most of the inhabitants are unskilled workers. They share a common feature – low education.

As regards family histories, the following data has been gathered at the farm called Jánoštelek: five divorced couples out of fifteen families and a certain number of illegitimate children. A similar situation was recorded at the neighbouring farm of Gojáš.

Economically speaking, the status of poverty means low income and income per capita earned from a job or gained from social allotments, and in some case even from occasional work. This causes limited consumption which is just enough for

physical and social survival. The low income level needs the development of adaptation mechanisms that help people to live in very modest conditions. It requires the capability, possessed by only a few individuals, to economize, i.e. to divide expenses and consumption rationally and to try to make some extra money through supplementary activities.

The resources gained by "informal economics" tend to be low. They include cultivating vegetables in small, untidy gardens around the houses, poultry and pig breeding, which in some case does not arise from economic needs, but rather is due to ingrained habits of working with animals.

Some people try to compensate for the lack of resources by occasional work offered by a poultry breeder (in the case of Jánoštelek). He would pay for work in cash or in kind (chicken). Others resort to theft and deviant behaviour. They steal products that are ripe at that moment. During my research mostly corn was being stolen. In those state farms where breeding cattle had been halted, stables and cowsheds were being looted, and in Starý Gojáš also residential blocks abandoned by the former employees after 1989.

The poverty scale is not absolute and can be related to a standard of living which is considered "normal" or acceptable in a certain socio-cultural context. This means that even though the people from the farms, given the criteria of material deprivation, food, clothing and housing, are not literally starving, are not seen in rags and tatters and are not living in huts, still their standard of living is lower in all respects, compared to the recent past, as well as to the present standards of other social groups.

However, the housing level is not so low. The flats are large, people do not suffer from lack of space. Two generations living in one flat are an exceptional case. All flats have electricity, running water, toilets, bathrooms and fully equipped kitchens, etc. The authorities take care of collecting rubbish. But the people are complaining because the flats are not maintained and in bad condition.

In many cases, the inhabitants themselves are to be blamed for this situation. The houses need to be repaired and redecorated, and this requires investments which no-one is willing to pay. The owners are not able to pay for repairs from the low rent they receive, and the inhabitants are not willing to invest their money in flats which are not their own. Thus, some of the houses have dilapidated chimneys, the roofs are leaking, the plaster is falling off, the electrical wires are disconnected. The last case recorded was a broken water pump.

Some of the families, mainly young ones, would like to leave the ghetto of the farm and move into smaller social flats in the nearby village. But as they say: *"The mayor gives social flats to homeless people from Topoľníky, because we still have a place to live in."*

The lower standard of living is reflected in food. Meat, smoked meat and sausages are becoming luxuries. Tropical and subtropical fruits are not consumed at all. The complement to their insufficient food is mainly home products (from gardens and poultry breeding) and stolen products.

However, food, which in the country has always been a representative sign of well-being at ceremonial and festive occasions, remained the main criterion and sign of their infrequent family celebrations, mainly weddings.

Another indicator of decreased consumption is clothing. Restrictions are mostly felt in families with more children, mainly when buying expensive winter clothes and shoes, especially for children. But adults also complain of not being able to buy fine clothes for outings to the town.

Although the inhabitants of farms do not label themselves as "poor", they indirectly point to low incomes and limited consumption. Their deprivation emerges from the fact that they cannot afford the kind of food, clothing and housing they had been accustomed to, and which is normally consumed in the community they belong to. Material deprivation is connected with social deprivation as well.

People living on farms are characterized by the villagers as lazy, drunk, astute at avoiding work. Of course, this description cannot be applied to everyone. *"They put us all in one sack,"* comments some of them. The main reason why they fell into the trap of poverty is that they cannot get sufficiently well-paying jobs.

They are disappointed by the fact that the owners of farms and their tenants have not offered them work on the farms, and gave work to other people instead. They are aware of the lack of trust the owners feel towards them and their work. In general, they are very pessimistic about the possibilities of finding jobs. They think that the job market offers mostly badly paid work, or that getting a job is conditioned by special capabilities and/or financial resources they do not possess. For this reason, they feel socially handicapped.

The attempts of some people to rent land are not motivated by the desire of a proper peasant to have a piece of land of their own and to work it, but by the attitude of the "proletariat" for whom the land has an instrumental value – as a means of ensuring a job and avoiding unemployment. The attitude to work is usually impersonal, looked upon as a necessity, a must, a means of ensuring income and material needs. They do not focus on positive attitudes towards the work they do, on satisfaction or happiness arising from what they do. The most serious job (or most attractive) is considered work "visible at first sight", mainly of a physical kind – even though it is monotonous and exhausting – and/or well-paid jobs.

The people who lived in farms as "short-term unemployed" not long ago have become "long-term unemployed". They have become resigned to their status, got accustomed to it. Some of them are unadaptive and refuse to work at all. The villagers say that people from the farms themselves are to be blamed for this situation.

After 1989 a controversial relationship between the people from the farm Jánoštelek and inhabitants of the village emerged. It was caused by growing feelings of difference between *"us and them, we and the strangers"*.

Village people have the glory of innocence and all the evil comes from Jánoštelek," said one man from Jánoštelek.

The impoverished inhabitants of the farm are, in the eyes of the villagers, a declassed group of strangers, who are not needed by anyone and thus a burden for the

village. The mayor of the village also thinks that *"if there were no people on Jánoštelek there would surely be a lower percentage of unsolved thefts"*.

Compared to the village community, farm people feel themselves to be socially handicapped, cast off into a disadvantageous position with unequal rights. They think that local politics is hostile to them and all the activities are made in favour of the majority, the village inhabitants. The most controversial subject is social allotments. The farm people are convinced that their division is not fair. In fact the village authorities have only a small proportion of social funds, so they cannot meet the requirements of all the applicants.

We could easily suppose that common problems and close neighbourhoods would unite the people from farms. However, the opposite is true. Most families live in isolation and even in the most difficult situations they would not unify their strength in common action. They are closed and do not cultivate friendships. Rude behaviour is not exceptional.

Impoverished inhabitants of farms suffer from deprivation not only on a lower, local level (their relationship towards the village community), but also from deprivation as regards the wider society. People from the farms are not able to find tools and resources for enforcing their rights in the ways of the wider society. They have no idea what to expect from it. Their political attitudes are characterized by indifference, fatality and passivity, but also hostility towards the people with political powers who are not capable of seeing the problems of the "lower classes". As for their political behaviour, the prevailing opinion is that *"politics is the business of those who make them"*. They are indifferent in political affairs and non-governmental activities, but at the same time, they demonstrate adverse reactions towards the removal of the protection afforded by the paternalistic state which in the past ensured the right to work and other social advantages. Without its support they feel cast out on the margin of uncertainity. They quite naturally declare that *"during the communist era life was better"*.

The record which I have compiled from these ghettoes of communities living in farms near Dunajská Streda is certainly not sufficient to answer the question of why the poor are poor. Poverty cannot be explained as a distinct phenomenon, but rather in relation to the wider socio-cultural system of which it is only one component. We have only sketched this context in its broad outlines. Its byword is a tightening of the conditions of the poor as an inevitable result of the transition from socialism to the market economy. Those who were most tied and dependent on the paternalistic or feudal practices of the former regime have been most affected by its disintegration. They compose an unqualified subgroup, of whom agricultural workers are charter members.

Although the majority of these rural inhabitants, employees of the regime that was, lived in a state of material sufficiency, there were even then times and circumstances threatening a slide into poverty. They were: low level of education, unqualified work, origin from poor families with many children, incomplete families, alcoholism, low levels of intelligence. Individuals with these features, living under the

above-mentioned circumstances, were liable to surrender under the pressure of external reasons, they were not able to react to the changes of socio-economic system and they were more liable to become poor. This fact is proved by several biographies mentioned above.

The state of being poor is an extremely negative experience in socio-cultural contexts where the status of poverty is not clearly defined – the inhabitants of farms seldom label themselves as poor. Thus a peculiar situation emerges – people are not able to meet the requirements and values of the wider society. This is caused by nonexistence of values connected with their social status as well. However, in Slovak society the renewal of the public dimensions of the status of poverty is being prepared – it will be based on comparing individuals and social categories at different levels within the system of social stratification.

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