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Solving the ‘Social Question’: The Influence of Agriculture and Industrialization on the Development of Social Work

In the majority of welfare narratives in Western Europe the rise of modern social work is imbedded in the framework of industrialization. The ‘dark side’ of early capitalism (‘hire and fire’), the movement of thousands of people into the ‘slums’ of the rapidly bursting centres of the new industrial areas, the lack of social hygiene and the absence of shelter against the copious social risks (mainly invalidity and illness) – all these circumstances are enumerated to explain the necessity of modern social politics and the development of effective professional social work..

The exploration of the history of social work in Eastern Europe¹ has taught us, that these narrative have blind spots: they are neglecting the fact that also those countries whose majority still were peasants have been involved in the process of welfare modernization at the end of the 19th century. The social risks in the rural areas were different than those in the industrial centres, but they required improved strategies of social welfare as well.

Therefore, the following contributions tries to point out the special impacts of agricultural conditions on the modernisation of social welfare.

Two aspects are primarily to be discussed within this context: Firstly, the different social structures of European countries – mainly the Eastern European ones - will be described in their relation to the influence of their specific agricultural economy and industrialization. The second focus of interest will be orientated on the effects that the corresponding modes of producing and living (as well as certain ideological and educational objectives) had on the development of welfare systems.

¹ Cf. Hering/Waaldijk: Guardians of the Poor, Custodians of the Public. Opladen 2006

Describing Agricultural Countries

The most impressive description of typical ways of 'agricultural' working and living can be found in the Bulgarian report² and basically applies to conditions in South East Europe as a whole: "The analysis of the economic and social situation of Bulgaria at the beginning of the 20th century reveals a typical rural economy country of small and middle scale farming and prevailing peasant population. The basic economic entity was the peasant household with a family-based distribution of labour. Traditional family and kinship circles played the most important role in the social support of children, elderly people and disabled people. Mutual aid of fellow-villagers was the next important social net." (Bulgarian Final Report³)

To these forms of solidarity based on family and neighbourhood there was no governmental equivalent⁴ until the end of the First World War: "Croatia entered the 20th century as a predominantly agricultural country. Agriculture made 85% of all economic activities, and consequently, the population was in majority rural. Illiteracy rate was 32.2% for Croatia and Slavonia, and 49.5% for Dalmatia. The world wide agrarian crisis had the impact on Croatian farmers as well. Moreover, coastal regions were severely affected by plant diseases that ravaged the vineyards, and provoked a high rise of poverty and subsequent emigration. On the eve of the First World War, around 5.5% of population, mostly male, emigrated abroad – to America and Australia, causing an increase of single-woman households. The peasants in general were heavily indebted and their purchasing power was almost nil." (Croatian Final Report⁵)

But also in the countries where the process of industrialization has begun relatively early (as in Latvia), or where it was given top priority (as in the Soviet Union), the majority of the population still lived outside the cities and worked in field of agriculture.

"At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century the territory of present-day Latvia had become the most industrially developed part of the Russian Empire. This area also included Russia's most important Baltic ports – Riga and Liepaja. There was a particularly large concentration of industrial enterprises in Riga, which produced factory equipment, automobiles, railroad cars, and building materials. The chemical, textile and food industries

² The cited 'final reports' were parts of a research project (2003-2005): History of Social Work in Eastern Europe 1900-1960 (cf. www.sweep.uni-siegen.de)

³ The report on Bulgaria was written by Kristina Popova and Milena Angelova.

⁴ Cf. Kassabova-Dintcheva 2005

⁵ The report on Croatia was written by Sandra Prlenda, Marina Ajduković, Vanja Branica, Marijana Majdak, and Melita Richter.

were also well developed. Still, most of the inhabitants lived outside the larger cities."

(Latvian Final Report⁶)

Since in all Eastern European countries the majority of inhabitants lived in the country, they were confronted with problems which mainly affected the rural population; their situation was characterized by poverty, educational misery and the extremely bad provision of medical care. The poverty of the peasants resulted from the fact that they were not included in the social security systems which were successively established in various countries at the beginning of the 20th century.⁷ The risks involved in agricultural work could therefore not be compensated. The lack of educational opportunities and the rare provision of medical care were caused by the fact that schools and medical surgeries were established in rural areas very slowly: "In 1918 the system of school education was reformed. The system of vocational schools with two levels of education (five and four years) was introduced. Education was offered free of charge, the school became a gender-mixed establishment. Special efforts were made for promoting school education in the rural districts and in the lands of ethnic minorities, where illiteracy rates were high." (Russian Final Report⁸)

In order to improve the provision of medical care, 'hygiene councils' were established in Bulgaria during the First World War: "Hygiene councils were a special form of handling sanitary problems in differently populated areas. The idea behind their establishment was to prevent the spreading of epidemics (...).From 1917 on, 98% of the populated areas organized their own hygiene councils" (Bulgarian Final Report)

There were similar initiatives in Romania where 'health centres' were set up: "In rural areas numerous centres with kindergartens and special health units were established, where children were treated and mothers instructed in hygienic matters. A novelty at that time (1922-1923) these dispensaries functioned in several isolated rural areas of the country." (Romanian Final Report) In the other countries there were comparable developments.

The neglect and bad supply situation of the rural population led to more far-reaching political measures which partly aimed at improving working conditions in agriculture, but partly also at encouraging farm workers to move to industrial regions: "In 1932, the Yugoslavian state proclaimed the Law on Protection of Farmers and the moratorium on peasants' debts, and in 1936 those debts were liquidated. However, the state's primary goal was protection of banks. Particularly small landowners were bad off, sometimes they were even forced to leave the

⁶ The Latvian Report was written by Liesma Ose, Juris Osis und Lidija Shilneva.

⁷ For the farm workers of Soviet collective farms a social security system was only established in the 1950s.

⁸ The Russian Report was written by Yulia Gradszkova, Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov.

land and go to the cities as manual workers (men) and domestic servants (women). (Croatian Final Report)

Political Interests and Ideological Impacts

The history of Hungary provides significant findings which help to understand how the preference of industrial workers over the majority of rural inhabitants was achieved and justified: "Another important feature is that although the creation of a special, compulsory social security for agricultural workers came up already at the turn of the century, it has never been realized. Thus, those in biggest need - the landless agricultural day-labourers - did not receive any benefits of the emerging modern social policy. (...) The main reason for neglecting this group's severe social problems lies in the quasi-parliamentary system of Hungary at this time: The majority of the Members of Parliament were landowners who strongly opposed any compulsory social policy in the agrarian sector. Also, the movement of agricultural workers was not as powerful and international as that of the industrial workers." (Hungarian Final Report)

The decision of Romanian politicians, by contrast, in favour of implementing measures for assistance in urban areas was mainly influenced by eugenic ideas: "The big social and economic differences between the urban areas and the vast rural areas and the insufficient involvement of state and private institutions of social assistance in the rural areas determined different approaches to social work activities and projects. Especially in the thirties, when Romanian discourses on social work stressed on eugenic concerns explained in the language of nationalism in the framework of social policy projects, state's social policies and social assistance concentrated on favourable living conditions in urban centres aiming at mothers and children. Although the idea that the strength of the Romanian nation resided in the protection and cultivation of the 'healthy Romanian peasant family' was quite popular the involvement of private or state social assistance institutions in rural areas (justified with the belief that in rural areas people had less medical or social problems than in urban areas) was extremely weak, and it was argued that eugenic social policies had to be directed more towards urban areas." (Romanian Final Report)

Dealing with Disadvantaged Groups and Minorities

With respect to the Communist states the reports show two ways of dealing with disadvantaged groups. In the 1920s the Soviet Union did not hesitate at all to openly discriminate against minorities: "The 'Commission for improvement of the work and everyday

life of the culturally backwarded people', was created 1926. The term 'culturally backwarded people' meant the native population of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Northern Caucasus, Azerbaidzhan, Siberia, the Far East as well as some non-Christian ethnic groups of the Volga region, like Tatars and Bashkirs." (Russian Final Report) The educational programs which were supposed to help these 'backward' groups, primarily aimed at making them adapt to the state's basic political ideas and its regulations. The fact that they were denied equal rights and discriminated against did not alter because of that.

In the other Eastern bloc countries the principle of equality between workers and peasants was not applied either with respect to fundamental socio-political issues: "Because agricultural workers and the self-employed people did not have equal rights in the field of social insurance, it was one of the incentives to force people to join cooperatives, or to leave the agricultural sector and join the heavy industrial sector." (Hungarian Final Report)

Developments and Basic Conditions of Social Welfare

Analysing these findings, it can be said that a typical feature of the population in the participating East European countries was a high percentage of rural inhabitants; their situation in general was characterized by substandard provision, by illiteracy⁹ and a high need for modernization. It is interesting to notice, though, that not only the division into urban and rural inhabitants was comparable to other European countries (mainly in the south and north, but also in the west), but also that their problems mainly focused on similar issues.¹⁰ In spite of this fact West European research is still based on the assumption that deprivation was primarily a problem of the industrialized centres and that this led to initiating the first processes of modernizing social welfare from 1880 onwards.¹¹

It has been shown that apart from industrialization there were other factors in Eastern Europe which led to changes in welfare work; therefore the question arises what the consequences of the respective relevant impulses were on structuring the different social systems.

In Hungary, which belonged to the Habsburg Empire until 1918, the socio-political measures were similar to those taken in West Europe, but because the country was less industrialized, it was more difficult to turn them into reality: "Hungary was one of the first countries in the world to introduce compulsory social insurance for workers. The 1891 'Sickness Benefit Act'

⁹ The percentage of Bulgarian people who were able to read and write was: men 24%, women 6.5% (1892), men 36%, women 11% (1900), men 41%, women 15% (1905) (cf. Bulgarian Final Report): In the other countries the percentage of people who could read and write was not substantially higher at the beginning of the 20th century.

¹⁰ Even today only one third of the population in Germany, for example, lives in urban areas.

¹¹ About industrialization as the cause of modern welfare work cf. Higgens 1981, Schmidt 1988, Tomka 1903, Wilensky et al 1985

closely followed the pioneering German legislation (1883, 1889) not only in time but also in content. The reason for the early legislation is probably the German and Austrian cultural dissemination and - strongly connected to this - the rising of the working class movement that frightened politicians of the time. 1893 had seen the first legislation on workers' protection in dangerous branches of industries. The Act for compulsory insurance against injuries was introduced in 1907 and affected factories employing more than 20 workers. Although the first piece of legislation made insurance against sickness compulsory, in all industrial companies (regardless of the number of workers employed) the percentage of insured persons amongst the total population was only 3.5 % at the turn of the century. It gradually increased but only reached 6% by 1920.¹² The reason for this discrepancy is the relatively low number of industrial workers and the weakness of implementation." (Hungarian Final Report¹³)

In Romania, a country that is more closely situated to the Balkan, the development of social work was also regarded as a contribution to settling the problem of social inequality. It is an interesting aspect in this context that the existing inequalities within the country were interpreted as class conflicts, though the differences between urban and rural areas caused more tension than the antagonism of social classes. "The definitions of social works present in early Romanian writings on social work, dating from the period between 1900 and 1921, emphasized on social work's roots in Christian principles and those of social solidarism. Social work was defined as another type of Christian missionarism whose broader social goal was to forge social solidarity among different social classes. The authors considered that the need for social work emerged from the differences between the living situations of different social classes. From this perspective, social work was defined as an important factor in providing the social equilibrium necessary for well-functioning of the society and preventing phenomena of social unrest. (Romanian Final Report¹⁴)

In the other South East European countries the arguments in the field of state and voluntary social welfare were based on different premises: "In the 1920s and 1930s, agricultural social problems were a priority in the social discussion: (...) The living conditions of the peasants, raising the level of their educational and 'cultural' standing, and the professionalizing of agricultural labour." (Bulgarian Final Report). The reports from Croatia and Slovenia show that there were similar developments after the Second World War. Before that it was mainly the rural population which became dependent on charity and communal support in desperate

¹² This ratio is much higher in Western Europe: in 1900 9% and 1920 almost 20% of the inhabitants were insured against sickness.

¹³ The report on Hungary was written by Borbála Juhász, Dorottya Szikra und Eszter Varsa.

¹⁴ The Romanian Report was written by Roxana Cheschebec und Silva Rachieru.

situations. Although Slovenia belonged to the Habsburg Empire and was industrialized to a certain degree, the majority of the population (more than 90%) was excluded from the rudimentary system of social security. "The position of those who were not employed or were farmers was worse. The municipalities had to take care for them, and the quantity of support depended on the budget of the individual local authorities. Mostly the support was given in money, sometimes it was given in cloths, coal, food etc. In the urban areas of Slovenia the situation was slightly better." (Slovenian Final Report¹⁵)

Illiteracy, overpopulation in rural areas and extreme poverty were problems in different parts of the Polish and Latvian population. But strategies to cope with these social problems were dominated by the attempt to strengthen national consciousness, because - due to foreign rule and political partitions - this issue was considered to be the most urgent problem to be solved. "The Polish way to the emergence of social work differs significantly from other European countries. One of the main factors for this was the long period of captivity and the consequent necessity to work for the raising of social consciousness." (Polish Final Report¹⁶) For this reason the period of Polish partitions is regarded as the time of birth of civil society, because the initiators of national educational processes were voluntary and denominational organizations; the most important one was the Catholic Church, which people saw as the central integrating force of the Polish people as a whole during the times of oppression and foreign rule. "The church was the last stronghold of independence". Because of these conditions the concept of social work was closely related to the intentions and the protagonists of establishing national identity. "Social care was not perceived independently. It was combined with the following issues: charity, philanthropy, school and educational work." (Polish Final Report)

In Latvia it was also the non-state associations which developed and formed the basis for welfare work: "It should be emphasized that numerous public organizations, societies and self-help institutions that have been founded at the time of oppression partly took over responsibilities of the state in the field of social assistance in the time of independence. Even more – formation and development of these grass-root welfare organizations could be viewed as the starting point of the development of civil society in Latvia as it demonstrated citizens' direct involvement in solving growing welfare problems of the country while the state was not capable of organized activities."(Latvian Final Report)

In Russia the sheer size of the country, the inadequate education of many parts of the heterogeneous population, the backwardness of agriculture and the problems resulting from

¹⁵ The Slovenian Report was written by Vesna Leskošek und Darja Zaviršek.

¹⁶ The Polish Report was written by Izabela Szczepaniak, Agnieszka Malek und Krystyna Slany.

many years of war and unrest confronted the state founded in 1917 and its government with challenges they were hardly able to meet. But here the development of welfare structures was not only determined by different basic conditions in urban areas, the newly-developing industrial regions and the multifarious problems in the country, but largely by the ideological convictions of the new political leaders. In spite of the overwhelming majority being peasants, the much smaller group of industrial workers was deliberately granted more privileges and support. Nevertheless there was an awareness that the rural population needed specific kinds of help, which had to link traditional elements to the requirements of a new society: "In the 1920s the problems of practical realization of the welfare politics were widely discussed. Nikolai Miliutin was one of the theorists who considered the performance of social assistance in rural areas through the system of peasants' committees. He referred to the tradition of Russian peasantry, organizing principles of mutual help in the villages, under the new conditions: 'Mutual help (*Pomotch* or *toloka*) is a well known phenomenon, but until now it was organized by a rich peasant (*kulak*) or a priest. Our task is to restore 'toloka' in a way that corresponds to the ideas of the state system of social provision'." (Russian Final Report)

To sum up the short outline above, it can be said that there are four types of causes triggering the development of social work:

- First there was the 'traditional' West European type emphasizing the consequences of industrialization, which we can also recognize in the Hungary and Romania. .
- Second there was the development characterizing the Balkan states that aimed at dealing with the problems of the rural population. Both approaches resulted from the economic conditions in these countries and provided support to prevent or reduce states of deprivation.
- The two other types were not deficit-oriented, but educative and determined by ideological objectives: due to the political situation in Poland and Latvia it was mainly the longing for national identity that triggered the social welfare development . National identity was the framework for organizing educational institutions and social assistance, mainly done by voluntary organizations, often initiated by minorities.
- The specific orientation of social reforms in the Soviet Union did evidently not aim at the necessity of diminishing the multifarious social problems, but at realizing ideological objectives: the creation of a 'new human being'.