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The Sociological Legacy of Ferenc Erdei: The Double Structure of Hungarian Society

Abstract

A critical sociological point of view of the first half of 20th century Hungary helps us gain an insight into a historically and socially divided society. Ferenc Erdei a sociologist, sociographer and politician analysing mainly the period between the two World Wars comes to the conclusion of a society divided by social gaps.

This essay's main idea is to show how a sociological approach strived to find a way out of this historically unequal and distorted social and settlement structure in order to give rise to social development. Retrospectively it seems that historical evidence of Erdei's life was embedded in his scientific analyses of a society with pseudo-feudal and then totalitarian characteristics.

Erdei can be characterised as a rural sociologist and a sociographer who described the Hungarian countryside as an underdeveloped, traditional and socially deprived entity lagging behind the industrialised and economically developed 'western' cities and towns. He tried to find a synthesis between the national-traditional movement and the western-capitalistic establishment to lessen social inequalities.

Keywords: countryside, peasantry, double structure, settlement policy, decentralisation, east-west dichotomy

Ferenc Erdei – a Researcher of the Hungarian Countryside

Born in 1910 into an agricultural family growing onions in the southern Hungarian town of Makó, he was raised as a respectable member of peasant lifestyle. This symbolic bias towards the peasantry and values of village dwellers always preserved a responsibility for dealing with and analysing the social problems of the countryside to which he never turned his back. His

home town formed an affection of local patriotism in his behaviour that added a special flavour to his scientific splendour. Studying law at the university of Szeged he started his scientific career by publishing sociographic studies and at the same time taking part in social debates which led to him ending up in jail due to his strong criticism of the prevailing regime in 1932 (Kulcsár, 1988). The combination of science and political expression remained characteristic of his behaviour and later again led him into prison in the changeable mid-20th century Hungarian political era.

After having finished university his scientific intrigue turned towards village life and farming cooperatives. His trips to Western Europe (Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland) allowed him to examine the way villages and their agriculture were organised and he could compare the status of the Hungarian countryside as something far more remote and underdeveloped at the time (Kulcsár, 1988). Those study trips set a critical and scientific view which made Erdei find a way out of the underdeveloped and culturally traditional Eastern European countryside characterising Hungary in that period.

His first sociological publications included *The Peasants* (1938) and *The Hungarian peasant society* (1942) which were mainly sociographic studies about settlements and their social lives. At the same time he joined political movements, like the National Peasants' Party and the People's Front which made him work out the programme for the folk high school system (Kulcsár, 1988). He took part in literature as a sociographer and set a political bias towards folk traditions in Hungarian literary art. At the time two big literary traditions had been formed in Hungary, one was the folk movement, the other was the so-called 'westerners'. This double-sided constellation of a national-folk tradition and the 'westerners' developed at that time. The presence of this double standard can well be observed in present-day Hungarian political thinking just as in literature or social philosophy, which mark Hungarian social culture from this point of view as rather 'Eastern-European' as opposed to a civic western social environment. Thus Erdei's analysis of Hungarian social structure was an essential and innovative view.

Although it is his scientific achievement one has to consider, in this essay we can hardly neglect his political attitudes and activity, as social science and politics merged together in his biography and could hardly be separated. His first big political act was participating in the Farm Reform (which is a clear example of how his political and scientific work merged) and participated in organising the National Assembly in 1943-1944. As minister of Internal Affairs

in the caretaker government of 1944 and one of the leaders of the National Peasant Party he could manage agricultural reform throughout the country but soon after that he quit the government and concentrated on scientific and party matters. He became a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1948. From the late fifties he started to concentrate on agricultural economics and social problems of agricultural co-operatives. He was the secretary general of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) from 1957 until 1964 and later the head of the sociological committee within the same institution (HAS). From 1970 he was again chosen for the position of secretary general but then as the reformer of the Academy. Due to his unfortunate death in 1971 he could not accomplish his aims but still had a long lasting effect on the development of social sciences in Hungary.

As a sociographer his trilogy¹ based his scientific view on settlement policy and sociology and concluded his scientific deductions in his work entitled *The Town and its countryside* (Erdei, 1977) which explored a historical aspect of Hungarian settlement development from both a structural and functional approach.

According to his views the basis of Hungarian settlements as a tradition could be traced back to the nomadic lifestyle of Hungarian tribes before the foundation of the state in 1001 AD. When Hungarian tribes flocked into the Carpathian Basin creating a special settlement system based on farming, this brought about a close-to-nature settlement structure minimising the inequalities among elements of settlement hierarchy. For instance, the system lessened the differences in settlement hierarchy as the necessities of agricultural production had the emphasis and not settlement structure itself. The foundation of Hungary in 1001 AD changed this settlement system to the western tradition of towns and villages which, however, could not be sustained efficiently throughout the 150 years of Turkish (Ottoman) occupation. Thus a combination of the ancient Hungarian and the western settlement system was brought about historically creating two special forms: the market town and the homestead². Analysing the functioning of market towns he highlighted their social importance: on the one hand, these settlements did not differ from

¹ *The Hungarian Town* (1939), *The Hungarian Homesteads* (1942), *The Hungarian Village* (1940).

² The latter had two different eras from the point of view of permanent dwelling. In the first era people lived in the nearby village or town and moved to their homesteads only in the agricultural season, while in the second era homesteads provided the place of their permanent living and work.

the western town system, on the other, these could function as centres of the countryside, offering cultural and other facilities to the people in villages and homesteads in the area (Erdei 1977). His view thus focused on a traditional background yet incorporating a modernising necessity in the underdeveloped Hungarian countryside.

Erdei's concept on trade towns and their relations to homesteads was rather an idealised depiction of the countryside. The main theme of this concept was that the dwellers of homesteads could lean on and utilise the services in trade towns as centres of homestead areas and as such, a kind of symbiosis could be accomplished. However, this idealised description gave rise to criticism focusing on the historical data and geographical distribution of homesteads that contradicted Erdei's ideas. In addition to his idealised concept his own political endeavour had changed by the fifties when he supported the programme of grouping homesteads into village-like settlements, which proved to be a mistake in the long run (Kulcsár, 1988). His main work about the Hungarian countryside was his concise publication on Hungarian towns and the countryside (Erdei, 1977). This aspect of Erdei's lacked the disturbing and much criticised idealised picture of villages and rather focuses on historical facts and sociological points of view. It was a less romanticised form of writing, following a less literary tradition (as opposed to other Hungarian sociographers, who rather emphasised the literary standard, e.g. Gyula Illyés) leaning on factual social data, concrete historical events and processes. His masterpiece in this aspect is the family tree of Hungarian villages including types like regular peasant villages, tiny peasant villages, special peasant villages (referring to some irregular structural factors like large population, geographical deformity etc.), estate villages (which once belonged to big land owners) and other civic villages which stand for a mixture of forms like industrialised villages, dwelling villages and ultimately holiday resorts (Erdei 1974).

When analysing deeper village structures Erdei concludes that this settlement type and peasantry should not be considered as a part of nature but rather as a social phenomenon and should be dealt with as a sociological problem. The first half of the 20th century was a period of generation shifts, because the generation of emancipated serfs and that of the 1st World War had different socio-psychological and social attitudes which led to conflicts among generations of villagers. Religions also had a profound effect on the social structure of villages which could be traced back to the historic roles of different denominations. Based on his lamentations he emphasised that village

policy should not consider the settlements of the countryside as those standing alone as part of nature because it could lead to a static view of villages referring to an unchangeable entity characterised by permanent underdevelopment (Erdei 1977). He suggested a holistic approach, namely that the village as a settlement category should be analysed in a broader sense including social policy and the historical environment in which it evolved. Thus he proved that the village was not a general category but one that differed depending on the given national and social culture and tradition, since villages were representations of social development. He also underlined that differences of peasant and village policy should be differentiated as peasants formed a different social class regardless of settlement type. He analysed the special position of village society, namely that the constraints of the peasantry itself led to the drawbacks of village life and at the same time village conditions preserved the constraints of the peasantry. His scientific belief could be summoned in the following: villages and the countryside should be considered as a social phenomenon deriving from complex historical processes and traditions. In his scientific stance villages are not idealistic places where traditional values are to be preserved and society consolidated but these settlements in Hungary are sources of drawback effects that should be handled and ways of development should be sought in order to lessen social inequalities (Erdei 1977). Thus village policy should include a separate view on settlements and the peasantry, who seemed to have lost touch with mainstream social development in the first half of 20th century in Hungary.

At this point one should turn to the other main characteristics of his scientific achievement, that is another much criticised, however still prevailing view on Hungarian social structure between the two World Wars. Although serfdom was abolished in Hungary in the 19th century as a consequence of the 1848-49 revolution and freedom fights but the vast majority of the peasantry remained at a very low status of wage labourers, in a so-called quasi-serf position in a society with practically no ownership. The agricultural reform of the mid-1940s with the participation of Ferenc Erdei tried to provide an adequate answer to the challenges of the problems of social stratification at countryside level. As sociologists like Rudolf Andorka later summoned, there seemed to be two 'Hungaries': one resembling that of an underdeveloped country somewhere in the third world, while the other close to the standards of a western region (Andorka 1997). According to Erdei's concept the gap is a social phenomenon and is rooted in the controversial historical and traditional processes of the countryside.

Erdei's concept of Hungarian social stratification called the 'double structure' was based on the analysis of the social development from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries until the mid-1940s. According to this concept Hungarian society had two 'upper structures' and one lower layer which can be called outcast or as one beyond society. The upper and lower layers symbolise the social gap of a developed and an underdeveloped society, which can be understood as a modernised, industrialised society confronted with poverty-stricken social groups working in agriculture (Erdei 1987). The upper structure consisted of two further parts parallel to one another; the historical-national (traditional) structure and the modern civic structure and this structural division led to a number of consequences in literary and political life, often ending in fierce ideological and social debates between the 'national traditionalists' and the 'westerners'. Thus the three spheres of the structure could be analysed as having two gaps: one between the upper and the lower and one between the two ideologically different, but socially similar groups.

According to Erdei the three spheres could be understood as having different social roles and functions. The historical-national structure acquired its functions back in the feudalistic period, running big land ownerships and estates or organising the state and the church. The prominent members of this group were the historical aristocracy, the clergy, the traditional middle class and the national petite bourgeoisie. The modern civic structure could be described by capitalism, industrialism, trade and commerce and the free intellectual movements. Within this group one could identify social classes like the civic middle class, the industrial and financial capitalists and the civic petite bourgeoisie. The peasantry, mainly comprising wage labourers as a whole was situated below the historical-national structure, parallel to it was the working class under the modern civic structure (Erdei 1987). Both groups developed ways of catching up with civic development; the civic peasantry and the higher layers of manual workers could increase their social status in the long run, however, only few could catch up in this process at the time due to lack of wealth and education.

The main theme of the double structure was to identify the pseudo-feudal structural characteristics of Hungarian social stratification, on the one hand, in the case of a traditionally based and historical group, and on the other, a socially deprived class, that could not keep pace with modernisation and social development and functions as a group 'beyond social structure' (Erdei 1987). He analysed alternative ways of social development, one based on the rising of

the civic peasantry, the other on the socialist way of the proletariat united in production communities. As a pioneer sociologist he preferred the first option, however, as a decision making politician he chose the latter (Kulcsár 1988). Examining Erdei's scientific career one should conclude that his two egos – the sociologist and the politician – could hardly be separated, however, on the time scale there was a shift from a peasantry focused point of view (especially aiming at the social development of the first half of the 20th century) into a socialist type of co-operative and working class based societal standpoint (Erdei 1974). The main criticism arguing the double structure came from historians who claimed that the upper structures of Hungarian society were not that much divided, moreover looking at marriages, family bonds and kinship relations the double structure could not be proved due to e.g. intermarriages leading to the argument of a hierarchically split and unequal society.

Erdei's belief in the rise of the countryside was elementary. According to his view, villages could catch up with urban development and have a cultural influence on towns. Provided that Hungarian village life and town life were not separate entities the terrain for civic development would not be exclusively that of the towns and at the same time national-traditional values would not be predominant requisites of villages but could spread around in towns as a consequence of balanced settlement development (Erdei, 1977). His main principle was that village and peasantry policy should provide enough possibilities for civic engagement and development in the countryside in order to achieve the goal of an outbreak from eastern underdeveloped settlement structure.

The east-west dichotomy and a historically distorted social structure could be analysed in two ways: on the one hand, as an obstacle to the capitalisation and civic development of Hungary, and on the other, as an ideological contradiction between a traditional-national (eastern) and a modernising-capitalist (western) attitude. The main legacy of Erdei is his approach in analysing society in this historically based and inequality-stricken format at the same time, which created the idea of double structure in society.

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