Agrarianism and Modernization in Inter-War Eastern Europe

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The aim of this text is to provide a broad picture of agrarianism as an ideology, especially in Eastern and Central Europe during the inter-war period, summarizing the main features in contemporary political programs and discussions on agrarianism in order to create a framework for further analysis. The text will focus on explaining the agrarianist view of history, and on the mechanisms of social change, political power, and the organization of society. Moreover, some historiographical notes on earlier studies on East European agrarianism will be included, focusing on their understanding of the origins of agrarianism, its character, and its destiny in the region.

In Eastern Europe, agrarianism arose in a historical context characterized by numerous agrarian crises and rural uprisings, and in a situation in which agriculture and society were rapidly modernized. The rural population had rapidly increased, causing overpopulation and a great scarcity of land. Mechanization threatened the rural labourers with unemployment. Economically and politically, many parts of the region had been kept in a semi-feudal condition up to the eve of World War I. This made Eastern European agriculture lag behind Western European agriculture in most aspects. One of the prime scholars on interwar agrarian conditions in Eastern Europe, Doreen Warriner, has roughly characterized this difference by stating that the farms of Western Europe were twice as large, carried twice as much capital to the acre, produced twice as much corn to the acre, yet employed only half as many people as the farms of Eastern Europe.¹ The Eastern European countryside was, further, overpopulated in proportion to its arable land and harvest capacity, and many small peasant holdings could not feed the families living on them. This problem was popularly referred to as land hunger, and the proposed solution was mostly a demand for more land. With the end of the World War I, and in the liberal spirit of the time, universal suffrage and democratic institutions were imposed from above, giving the peasants an

immediate political weight through voting privileges that they might not have enjoyed if democracy had been introduced at a later stage of economic development. Welcoming a democratic system, many peasants claimed that the economic changes and programs for modernizing society, imposed by liberals and socialists, could not be interpreted as progress. Instead, they considered the changes to be a threat to rural society, which in their view possessed distinctive virtues. The ideology of agrarianism sought to provide an answer that would promise to preserve and defend peasant virtues within a society in the process of modernization.

Agrarianism does not rest on any consistent philosophy or set of writings. Instead, agrarianism should be viewed as a pragmatic ideology, one which was inspired by other ideologies and social thinking, and developed in response to concrete social situations and problems in agrarian society. A basic perception in Eastern European agrarianism was the conviction that it was a third force in politics and economy, falling between liberalism and socialism. By claiming that ideas imposed by liberals and Marxists were not progressive, but instead a threat to rural society, agrarianism confronted the two dominating paths of modernization. However, agrarianism shared many ideas with liberalism and Marxism, and drew inspiration from science as well as nationalism.

Agrarianism primarily became a political and ideological force in Eastern Europe during the inter-war period. During that time, parties with an agrarianist ideology existed in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia (Croatian and Serbian), Czechoslovakia, Poland, Estonia, and Latvia. Most of the parties also gathered in what was called the Green International in Prague, an organization intending to unite the agrarian interests against the socialist international, the international industrial capital, and the bourgeoisie interests. However, despite their ideological similarities, these parties domestically used different methods and represented diverse political paths. The most influential party in the period was probably the Bulgarian Agrarian Union. The party was formed at the turn of the 19th century, and was partly based on the rural cooperative movement. Under its leader, Alexander Stamboliski, the party held sole power in Bulgaria between 1919 and 1923. It carried out a radical land reform, and provided agriculture with cheap credits as well as expanding primary education. At the same time, it exercised anti-urban politics by coming down hard on public administration, closing higher education for a short time, and introducing mandatory manual labour duties for all citizens. Through its own majority in the Bulgarian parliament, the party began to exercise an almost dictatorial rule until its leader was murdered and its power taken over by the army in 1923. The Croatian Peasant Party held considerable domestic influence, but represents another path. This party was

formed as a political movement by the brothers Stjepan and Antun Radic at the turn of the 19th century, and found some support in the rural self-help movement. The party had strong nationalist sentiments, and soon turned into a nationalist party representing the whole Croatian population in the Yugoslavian parliament, until Stjepan Radic was murdered in the Parliament in 1929. A third path can be illustrated by the Estonian, Latvian, and Czechoslovakian agrarian party during the whole interwar period. These parties represented the rural interests in their national parliaments, and gained strong political positions by proving to be reliable coalition partners in many governments. The Estonian and Latvian paths ended in 1934, when both parties became the backbones of the authoritarian regimes, as a result ofabilities of the Estonian and Latvian political systems to handle the economic crisis and competition from right-wing extremism.

Judging from the empirical examples, agrarianist parties did not appear in either traditional and stagnated societies, or in modern and dynamic societies. Instead, they appeared in societies in a mood of transition, and where the gap between urban and rural society was widening. It is also worth noting that the most radical peasant parties occurred in Bulgaria and Croatia, two of the most backward agrarian societies in Eastern Europe at the time. On the contrary, the parliamentary-oriented and moderate parties appeared in relatively developed areas such as the industrially developed Czechoslovakia and the relatively ruraly developed Baltic states. The same is true for the domestic conditions in Poland, where the progressive and cooperation-oriented agrarian party was strongest in the more developed western areas and the radical and confrontation-oriented was strongest in the poorer eastern parts of the country. It is finally worth noting that in countries where a relatively wealthy self-owning class of farmers existed before the land reforms, as in Estonia and Poland, the agrarian movements were not able to join in a single party. The party representing the wealthier farmers also often traded their claims for radical land reforms for other benefits when they gained access to political power.

In the agrarianist spectrum, two principal types of agrarianism can be noted, a farmer-oriented, development-friendly agrarianism, and a peasant-oriented, traditionally-minded agrarianism. This distinction follows the definition of the peasant as a basically self-sufficient agriculturalist, tilling the

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land in accordance to traditional knowledge and holding to the village, and the definition of the farmer as a mostly self-owning, market oriented and specialized agriculturalist. The difference between these two tendencies is also reflected in political methods. While peasant agrarianism advocated the use of force as an expression of the peoples’ voice, farmer agrarianists preferred working through legal and parliamentary channels. It is also a question of origin, as farmer-oriented agrarianism mostly evolved in societies with a liberal public sphere and an ongoing class formation, while peasant-oriented agrarianism evolved in autocratic societies with a negligible bourgeoisie or labour movement. Most of the Eastern and Central European peasant movements and parties should primarily be characterized as farmer agrarianism, while peasant agrarianism was exemplified by the Russian agrarian socialist and agrarian populist movements. The focus in this overview is on the development-friendly farmer agrarianism.

Sources

In trying to isolate the most fundamental ideological principles of European agrarianism, I will study the programs and publications of different agrarianist movements in some detail. The principles of the Croatian Peasant Party’s are available in translation, as is the case for quotations from Croatian, Bulgarian, Czech, and Polish peasant leaders. A common feature and problem of these programs is that they were developed in the inter-war period, after the ‘parliamentarization’ of the agrarianist parties. Thus, the programs were intended to adapt the parties to mass political practices, while also serving to defend and clarify previous actions. The works of the Croatian Peasant Parties ideologist, Branko Peselj, and the Bulgarian ex-minister George Dimitrov are of special interest. Both authors published interpretations of inter-war agrarian politics in the Balkan, and also developed ideological programs which treat agrarianism from an agrarianist viewpoint. Their works were written after World War II, in the anti-communist spirit of post-war Eastern European agrarian movements in exile, and can therefore be expected to tone down the influence of socialist ideas and to interpret the meaning of democracy in a parliamentary and politically liberal context which was not familiar.

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6 Herceg, Rudolf, Die Ideologie der kroatischen Bauernbewegung (Zagreb 1923); Peselj, Branko M., Peasant Movements in Southeastern Europe, an Ideological, Economic and Political Opposition to Communist Dictatorship (PhD. Georgetown University 1952); Bell, Peasants in Power; Livingston, Stjepan Radic.

to the interwar agrarianists.\(^8\) George Jackson has noted that the intention of the agrarianist authors writing after World War II was “to see an order and consistency in the peasant movements” which the movements did not possess.\(^9\) It is important to keep this remark in mind, but the consistency of agrarianist ideas as presented in previous studies on agrarianism is also useful in creating a framework for further analysis.

### A Note on Earlier Studies of Agrarianism

Agrarian societies all over the world have experienced (or are experiencing) developments in times of industrialization and modernization similar to those Eastern European.\(^10\) Agrarianist ideas and movements appeared in postcolonial Africa as well as in 21\(^{st}\) century Latin America, either as concepts for rural development imposed by foreign aid donors or as populist rhetoric appealing to the rural population. As a contemporary phenomenon, agrarianism in Latin America is most visible in Venezuelan rural politics as well as in Mexican and Brazilian land right movements.\(^11\)

Historically, agrarianist ideas have also had a strong position in America, where agrarianism has been more associated with positive ideas and developments than in Europe. Despite the often racist appeal of the southern movements, the ideas of self-owning and independence, so deeply related to American identity, are seen as the prime characteristics of this ideology and its related movements.\(^12\)

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\(^8\) A Peasant International including Eastern European peasant parties in exile was initiated in New York in 1950.
In Europe, the study of agrarianism has primarily been subordinated to the study of agrarian movements and political parties. Agrarianism in the German-speaking areas has basically been viewed as being anti-democratic. The prevailing view is that German agrarianism rejected democracy and introduced populist rhetoric that helped to undermine the Weimar democracy, to fan anti-Semitism, and to pave the way for the National Socialists. Besides the link to the fall of German democracy, studies of German and Austrian agrarian movements highlight the important connection between agricultural improvement, organization, and political influence, as most of these movements were deeply rooted in rural cooperatives.

A similar approach is visible in studies of Eastern European agrarianism. Agrarianism is characterized as a reactionary ideology based on a myth of the past, and on anti-industrialism and anti-modernity. Most writers tend to take the position that these rural ideas were a thoroughly negative development, one which cut off the peasants from the Enlightenment. As in the studies of German agrarianism, a connection is made between the populist appeal of agrarianism and the rise of authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe during the inter-war period. Special interest has been given to the radical Bulgarian agrarianism in the 1920 and its attempts to re-structure the entire society in accordance to an agrarianist agenda, an attempt that ended in an agrarianist authoritarian regime and was abolished by a military government. The interest in these negative experiences of agrarianism in practice is to some extent balanced by studies of the Czechoslovakian agrarian party and its participation in the democratic process through the interwar period. In the long term, a link can also be seen between the agrarianist parties in the interwar period and the agrarian parties that supported commu-

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14 Puhle, Hans-Jürgen, Agrarische Intressenpolitik und Preussischer Konservatismus im Wilhelminalischen Reich (1893-1914): Ein Beitrag zur Analyse des Nationalismus in Deutschland am Beispiel der Landwirte und Deutsche Konservativen Partei (Hannover 1966); Hunt, James, C., The People’s Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany, 1890-1914 (Stuttgart 1975); Eidenbenz, Mathias, „Blut und Boden“: Zu Funktion und Genese der Metaphern des Agrarianismus und Biologismus in der nationalsozialistischen Bauernpropaganda (Bern 1993); Rüdiger, Mack, „Antisemitische Bauernbewegung in Hessen (1887 bis 1894)“, Wetterauer Geschichtsblätter, no. 16 (Friedberg 1967).

nist governments in Eastern Europe after World War II, especially in Poland and Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{16}

The general approach to Eastern and Central European agrarianism places the history of agrarianism and agrarian movements into an important context of anti-democratic development, but it also sheds light on their ideology and political influence. One of the most important aspects of the interwar Eastern European agrarianist movements was their influence on the extensive land reforms carried out in most parts of Eastern Europe after World War I. These reforms established a framework for the social and economic structure and development of the Eastern European societies in the interwar period and were decisive for which methods were used to solve the inter-war economic crises.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the strong position of the Estonian and Latvian agrarian parties in the inter-war period, and its focus on rural issues in order to improve social and economic conditions are widely recognized, agrarianism as a special issue has not been thoroughly studied in the Baltic States. The economic practices of the agrarian organizations and the politics of agrarian parties during the democratic and authoritarian periods have, however, been studied and provide the necessary framework.\textsuperscript{18}

Most studies of Eastern European agrarianism have been made within East European or Soviet studies. The importance of agrarianism is thereby placed in a secondary position to the rise and development of communism in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{19} The progress of agrarianist organizations and ideology is studied in relation to communism, and as its adversary. This approach makes agrarianism appear non-ideological and particularly local. In the anti-communist approach of this literature, agrarianism is often described as even more simplified and unstructured, as it lost the power struggle to communism. A similar approach to agrarianism is also visible in studies made by Soviet academics. Here, agrarianism is considered as having good intentions, but being naïve and doomed to failure, because it fell into the trap of bourgeois thinking and supported private property. The disciplinary context pro-


\textsuperscript{17} Kofman, Jan; Stemplowski, Ryszard and Szlajfer, Henryk, Essays on Economic Nationalism in East-Central Europe and South America 1918-1939 (Warsaw 1987); Kofman, Jan, Economic Nationalism and Development: Central and East Europe Between the Two World Wars (Boulder 1997); Kõll, Anu Mai & Valge, Jaak, Economic Nationalism and Industrial Growth: State and Industry in Estonia 1934-39 (Stockholm 1998).


vides Western as well as Soviet academic studies with a Slavic bias, visible not only in the focus on movements in Slavic countries but also in the choice of sources and interpretations of the intellectual influence. Consequently, the Eastern European movements are viewed and studied with an eye to Russian rural populism, and they are expected to share similar characteristics. This connection is rejected, especially in studies on Polish agrarianism, which primary stress the influence from Western European agrarian movements. The overestimation of a Russian populist influence, and the neglect of the influences from pre-Marxian socialism, Christianity, and British and French rural-oriented thought is especially visible in the approach to agrarianist ideas and basic perceptions of agrarianism. Despite those limitations, most of the studies provide useful information, bringing forward problems and sources that otherwise would have remained hidden behind the barriers of the many native languages.

The Mechanisms of History

A natural point of departure in characterizing an agrarianist ideology is to identify its understanding of history. History, in a western understanding, organizes events into a framework with a beginning, a present, and a future or end, and gives single events a meaning. All of the major ideologies have their own understanding of history and their own historical framework, in accordance to which they interpret the present and make forecasts of the future. History is thus given a legitimizing and imperative function.

Agrarianist ideology was clearly based on a western understanding of time as linear, and on ideas of progress and development. Basing his thought on a dialectic idea of evolution, one of the theoreticians of the Croatian Peasant Party, Rudolf Herceg, claimed that the main historical force in society was class struggle. According to Herceg, the bourgeoisie, whose historical mission had been to introduce civil liberties, had broken the power of the aristocracy. The bourgeoisie, however, only represented a minority with narrow class interests, and would therefore lose its power to the workers. Using the civil liberties introduced by the bourgeoisie, the peasants would finally gain the power by the ballot. The peasantry would not use its power to defend the interests of a single class, but rather would build a society based on social justice and the prevalence of peace, based on the peasantry’s values. The historical role of the peasantry was obvious, as its way of life was the most basic and authentic, and as all societies were built upon the wealth that the peasants produced. The belief in the moral superiority of the

21 Herceg, Die Ideologie, p. 30-45.
peasant class was further based on the idea that the peasantry was the only class that had no interest in exploiting the labour of others.22

The mechanism of history was understood in a similar way by the leader of the Bulgarian Peasant Union, Aleksander Stamboliski. In Stamboliski’s dialectic, the development of humankind and society went through the stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilisation. Each of these stages had a characteristic mode of production and organization. In the earliest stage of society, mankind lived by hunting and gathering. There was practically no social differentiation, although there was a division of labour between man and woman. The domestication of animals and plants gave way to a new stage, barbarism, based on agriculture. Here the idea of private property was formulated, and thereafter followed an increasing social differentiation. No longer fighting only against nature, as in the former stages, humans then began to fight each other. Finally, the stage of civilization arrived when mankind was able to appropriate the achievements of science and human enlightenment.23

Stamboliski believed that a turning point in history would appear once the ideas of civil and political rights began to spread through the lower strata in society. When the people adopted these ideas, they would rise against the old social order of the monarchy, clergy, military, and bureaucracy. The rising people, however, did not form any unity, but would instead, after the victory split into different economic interests.24 The final battle would then take place between the two most divergent interests, the urban and the rural societies, which embodied two opposing cultures.25 Stamboliski’s dialectics were flavoured with romanticism and related theories of society from the natural and social sciences, such as Darwinism and Marxism. Thus, he believed that conflict, competition, and struggle were natural, and were the engine in history that created higher forms of society. Therefore, according to Stamboliski, the political and social order prevailing at any given time was not determined by the means of production, but by those who possessed the physical and organizational power.26 The relationship between evolutionary and revolutionary change however, is not clear. According to Stamboliski, violence and power were manifest and important forces in history, and could lead to change in society. At the same time, like many other agrarian leaders, he emphasized pacifism and the fundamental need for social order and harmony.27 This should probably be interpreted as meaning that evolution was

22 Herceg, Die Ideologie, p. 49, p. 65; Radic, Stjepan, „Die bäuerliche soziale Bewegung ist für die Bauernvölker die einzige echte Demokratie”, foreword in Herceg, Die Ideologie, p. 18.
23 Bell, Peasants in Power, p. 59.
24 Bell, Peasants in Power, p. 61-63.
25 Jackson, Comintern, p. 42.
26 Bell, Peasants in Power, p. 62; Radic, Die Ideologie p. 4-5.
27 Bell, Peasants in Power, p. 63; Peselj, Peasant Movements, p. 72; Radic, Die Ideologie, p. 3.
seen as the main force for good in the development of the society, but that revolutionary means could be needed to eliminate powers that hindered evolution. In this sense, a belief in evolution could be combined with radicalism. The relationship between revolutionary means and a claimed need for stability is one of the contradictions of agrarianism. Studying the short history of agrarianist Bulgaria, it seems as if Stamboliski practiced pacifism in international relations but not in relation to his political opponents in the domestic arena.

In an attempt to create a consistent agrarian ideology based on science, George Dimitrov, a prominent Bulgarian politician in the inter-war period and the leader of the international peasant union in the 1950s, combined dialectic ideas with a biological approach. In his bio-materialist view, neither history nor economics was capable of explaining the dynamics of nature and society. In his view, the human was dependent on his instincts, his animal nature, and his intellect to move forward. Instincts provided the fundamental principles, while the intellect made it possible to undertake and accumulate experience over generations. Man’s intellect and capacity for rational behaviour also made him the leading creature in nature, and gave him a superior position. Dimitrov thus attempted to intellectualize the idea of agrarianism beyond its claimed simple origins. He created a link between tradition and biology, the foundation for much of the environmental neo-agrarianism of the late 20th century.

In its understanding of history, agrarianism broke with tradition, in that society was understood as going through a slow process of transition towards something better. But it was also deeply rooted in a traditional understanding of society as being firmly rooted in agriculture, and as being subordinated to the cycles of nature.

The Peasant and the Land

The central concept, directly related to its popular appeal, of agrarianist ideology was the peasant’s tie to the land, enclosed in a peasant mystique. The relationship between the peasant and his land was complex. It contained material, emotional, and spiritual aspects.

The land was mostly considered to be not given to the peasant as an individual, but rather as the head of the family, which was the most basic unit of production and consumption in society. Thereby, the individual was equated with the family in the language of most agrarianist writers. The common work of tilling the soil bound members of the peasant family together. The

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interdependency of the family members, within every aspect of life, made them inseparable. According to the agrarianist viewpoint, it was useless to speak of humans as separate from the family.\textsuperscript{30}

The material and economic ties between the land and the peasant family were obvious, as land was the prime source of income, giving the family its daily bread. In the peasant mind, humans could not be autonomous in relation to the farm they inhabited and the soil they tilled. The relation between the land and the peasant was, according to many agrarianists, special and nearly impossible to understand for those who were not tied to the soil.

A mystical understanding gave the land a life, a soul, and a will of its own. In this spirit, Ante Radic, the ideologist of the early Croatian Peasant party, envisioned the soil as the peasants’ fellow combatant in the fight for social justice. He claimed that the land itself demands a true peasant master to cultivate it with love and care. In order to obtain this, the land was willing to “shake off the yoke” of the landlord. To characterize the relationship between the man and the soil, he wrote that “the soil is like an honest woman; soil too wants a legal husband; it wishes to have a man who does not merely use it and extort it, but who loves it at the same time.”\textsuperscript{31} Here, he not only reproduced a traditional gender-coded view of Balkan village life but also emphasized the understanding of the female as close to nature and the male as representing culture. His status of a superior creature not only gives man an exceptional position, but also great responsibility.

According to most agrarianist ideologists, the responsibility for land and society could only be fully assumed by an independent man who owned the land that he tilled.\textsuperscript{32} The idea of private ownership was thus essential to Eastern European agrarianism. This distinguished Eastern European agrarianism from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century British agrarian radicals or 19\textsuperscript{th} century Russian agrarian socialists, who claimed that land had such an essential value that an individual could never ‘own’ it. The agrarianist position on land ownership maintained that the means of production should be in the hands of those who utilize it and who invest labour in it. Therefore, land should not be used only to accumulate capital or for speculation. Labour was seen as a central value and as a duty towards oneself and the community.\textsuperscript{33} The peasants therefore saw themselves not only as the creators of their own wealth, but also as the builders of a just human society and culture.\textsuperscript{34} Stamboliski and Dimitrov made labour and the private ownership even more essential when they described it as a human instinct.\textsuperscript{35} Emphasizing practical work must be under-

\textsuperscript{30} Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{31} Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{32} Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism” p. 411; Montmarquet, Agrarianism, p. 78, p. 176-177.
\textsuperscript{34} Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism”, p. 414.
\textsuperscript{35} Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism”, p. 411; Bell, Peasants in Power, p. 59.
stood from an emancipatory perspective, and was an idea directed against the landowning nobility who owned more land then they could till and had others to till it for them.

The agrarianist view of the individual and society and their relationship was thus based on the idea that humans became free and independent through ownership and work. Possession of the means of production provided the individual with a sense of security in relation to the present and the future. This understanding was central for all agrarian parties, and is best visualized in their claims and arguments for land reform in the first years of the inter-war period.

In the inter-war period the demand for land to be given to the rural population was one of the question that attracted the most voters to the agrarian parties. For many landless peasants, the right to own land became a ticket to social change and freedom. From an agrarianist perspective, the right to own land was linked to the realization of full citizenship. But, in practice, a claim for every man’s right to own land became a utopian and impossible demand, since in fact increases in population were creating land shortages and prompting emigration to other countries.36

Peasant Democracy

Herceg’s perception of the moral superiority of the peasant was followed by his conception of the peasant as a natural democrat, an idea that in one way or another was expressed in most of the attempts to formulate agrarianist programs. The roots of peasant democracy were to be traced in history to the natural freedom in ancient society, a golden age.37

Generally the agrarianists were opposed to every kind of dictatorship, which was considered degrading to humanity and human dignity, and was against the peasant’s democratic nature.38 The idea of dictatorship was also regarded as a concentration of power that made it impossible to achieve social stability.39 Dictatorships, moreover were unable to represent the masses and the will of the people, nor could they guarantee the influence of peasant interests and morality. According to the Czech agrarian leader Antonín Svehlan, ties to the land were also the basis for the peasant’s deep-rooted humanism and respect for his fellow human beings.40 In return, the peasants needed and demanded “clear and stable conditions.” These could not be obtained if the power was in the hands of a small group or a single person, but

37 Bell, *Peasants in Power*, p. 60, p. 64.
39 Jackson, *Comintern*, p. 43.
only if the power was in the hands of the entire people. According to one of the leaders of the Polish Peasant party *Piast*, peasants had a compelling desire for sane and orderly progress, and would never be “the supporters of a dictator, either openly or covertly.”41 Ideally the desire for order and the rule of law made the peasants pacifists who were resistant to violent changes and revolutionary trends.42 Change could only be accomplished by means of hard work.43

The popular election of local political institutions by universal suffrage through secret ballots was of fundamental importance for a functioning representation of the people.44 The need for the direct participation of the people in decision-making, whenever possible, was declared.45 This could be best achieved through public referendums and by public initiative with respect to referendums and legislation.46 Public initiative meant placing recourse to the referendum in the hands of the people or peasantry. The local initiative is an action by which the people can directly accept or reject any change in the legal or administrative system of the state by a gathering of signatures. The idea of referendums and public initiatives was not peculiar to agrarianists, but rather an idea that was often advocated in public debate of the times. It can be found in many constitutions written after the turn of the 19th century. The implementation of such ideas and institutions rested on the conviction that the constitution, and with it the legislative principles, should be the primary means to organize state power while guaranteeing the influence of the people. The public opinion however, could not be expressed only through parliamentarism. Many agrarianist parties instead favoured corporative ideas, with legislative bodies based on occupational groups and other interest groups. In defining agrarianist democracy, most programs of agrarianist parties also added the principles of equality before the law, as well as civil rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of publishing, and freedom of assembly.

The emphasis on the collective is central to the understanding of man’s position in agrarianist ideology. It must be remembered that agrarianists viewed the family, not the individual, as being the most fundamental unit in the society. According to Peselj, a human’s value as an individual in peasant society was attributed to it because of its contribution to the collective. This was considered self-evident, since no human could live and work without interaction with others. According to him, society could be viewed as a body, and the individual “families” as cells. Cooperation and order between

42 Jackson, *Comintern*, p. 43; Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism” p. 401; Biondich, *Stjepan Radic*, p. 79.
43 Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism”, p. 401.
the cells was essential for maintaining the health of the organism. The rights of individuals were thus limited so that they could not be used against the collective. This is an idea that to some extent is contrary to liberal understanding, where it is the freedom of the individual that primarily has to be protected against the collective. According to agrarianism, the liberal view on individual freedom was empty, as it was not tied to the well-being and survival of the community. Liberal individualism was instead seen as the expression of an excessive individualism, one which stood in sharp contrast to the agrarianist organic perception of society. The agrarian understanding of citizenship was thus primarily built on the family and the collective, and to some extent measured by the family’s contribution to the collective. In reality, the picture seems to have been different. Making the family the political entity in a male-dominated and hierarchical world, and tying citizenship to ownership of course also had implications on the ability of women to assume their place as citizens. Commenting on the liberal ideal of the equality of all humankind and their right to political participation, Peselj did not reject the idea, but added in defence of the family that “women peasant voters [would] always follow their peasant husbands in their political ideas and actions.”

The agrarianist understanding of democracy and citizenship was also closely tied to the belief in social and economic rights, and thereby the idea of an economic citizenship. Individual and political rights could only be exercised if certain social needs were fulfilled. Only then could people be free enough to take an independent position. For the agrarianists, the idea of social justice for the majority of the people was equated with the possibility of owning land.

In agrarianist writings, humanity and dignity were primarily considered as characteristics bound to the peasantry. The peasantry was viewed as a group, a class, or an occupational group, which in most cases was the same as the ‘people.’ This understanding clearly linked the agrarianist views to the romantic understanding of the peasant and of peasant society that was present in the nationalism of the time throughout Europe. Peselj distinguished rural work as uniting the family, while urban work split the natural family. The urban family and its members are therefore, to some extent, considered incomplete in comparison with the rural family. In some cases, the will of the peasantry and that of the people were considered equal, by virtue of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population in Eastern Europe was rural. An obvious condition to exploit under such circumstances was the difference between the urban and the rural populations. In the Croatian case,

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47 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 64.
48 Radic, Die Ideologie, p. 4.
49 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 69.
50 Biondich, Stjepan Radic, p. 68.
51 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 108.
52 Radic, Die Ideologie, p. 18-19.
the agrarian party also turned into a predominantly nationalist movement, idealizing the peasant and making the rural equal to the Croatian in relation to the foreign urban. Stamboliski openly declared his hatred for the cities and their inhabitants, on the grounds that peasant virtues were wholly absent in urban culture. The cities were inhabited by parasites like lawyers, brokers, and bankers who made their living by exploiting people who worked with their hands.\textsuperscript{53} Even if this statement should not be taken seriously and its importance is overestimated, its presence demonstrates the way in which agrarianist statements might not attach the same human value to all people.\textsuperscript{54} It is further an example of how reliance on instincts can easily degenerate into populist rhetoric.

Organizing Society

From the agrarianist perspective, the will of the ‘people’ was best expressed in the political process through institutional arrangements that permitted the peasantry to make decisions about concrete issues. In general, agrarianists viewed the state as an oppressive lord, by no means representing the people. The chief agrarianist proposal concerning the organization of state power was therefore decentralization. This was expressed in two ways. First, emphasis was placed on the importance of local self-government, as an extension of the idea of constructing a state from the bottom up. One of the ideologists of the Croat Peasant Party, Antun Radic, argued that since the village commune was the administrative unit which was closest to the peasants, it was the institution best suited to organize schools, aid agricultural development, and solve social problems. Commune officials should be trained in agriculture and be good models for the people.\textsuperscript{55} This would ensure the economic and political autonomy of the local communities. In keeping with the ideas of the Bulgarian peasant party, the local community was considered sovereign, and was endowed with a far-reaching independence in the judicial system, which included the popular elections of judges.\textsuperscript{56} This view of village society approached the communitarian and anarchist idea of the village as the core of all kinds of political, cultural, social, and educational activities.

For Antun Radic, the state had only two tasks: upholding the rule of law and providing social and economic assistance.\textsuperscript{57} With the prime power of society thereby positioned within the local communities, power on the state level had to be re-organized. In accordance with the view held by Stam-

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54 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 64.
57 Biondich, \textit{Stjepan Radic}, p. 70.
\end{flushright}
boliski, this was best accomplished through occupational organizations representing the people. These organizations should grow out of the principal occupational groups which, he believed, represented the true economic interests of society. Existing political parties would be set aside, as they represented an old form of organization and were trapped in the idea of economic liberalism. Consequently, they were unable either to freely discuss economic problems or to cope with the problems of modernization. Occupational organizations, represented in proportion to the size of their membership, would be able to openly discuss the development of the society, and more fairly distribute its burdens and benefits. From the agrarianist perspective, the influence of agrarian morality and the agrarian point of view would automatically ensure the prosperity of all other occupational organizations, as their situation in a peasant society would be connected to the well-being of the peasantry. An occupational organization, compared to a parliamentary, could better assure the agrarianist longing for social stability, as occupational organizations were assumed to change only gradually from the peasant’s viewpoint. This system of occupational organizations, together with the use of the referendum and public initiative, combines the idea of stability over time with a pragmatic approach to day-to-day problems.

Turning from ideological principles to practice, the peasant leaders were allotted a special, but not superior, role in changing the society. A belief in the peasant instinct and admiration for the peasant’s pragmatism, in preference to intellectual constructions and reasoning, formed the basis of the ideal of the active peasant leader promoted by agrarianism. To the peasants it was more important for their leaders to share their concerns and interests, and thereby to respond to their will and needs, rather than to be educated or to follow a political program. In line with the peasant mystique was the idea that peasant leaders were not creators or inventors of an agrarian ideology but rather interpreters and tribunes of the peasant views and expressions. Only such a bond between the leaders and the people would ensure that other interests or the market did not seize power. When confronted with the danger that deference to the common will could escalate into a situation in which the majority oppressed the minority, agrarianists often responded with the argument that such a result was better than the opposite.

A crucial issue facing many peasant parties was how to organize the economy of peasant farming. In order to concentrate the resources and ef-

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58 Bell, *Peasants in Power*, p. 60, p. 64.
59 Dimitrov, ”Agrarianism”, p. 401.
60 Bell, *Peasants in Power*, p. 66-67. In Stamboliski’s mind, the principal occupational groups in Bulgaria would be the agrarian, artisan, wage-labourer, entrepreneurial, commercial, and bureaucratic, but he thought that the more the economy developed, the more occupational groups would be needed; Bell, *Peasants in Power*, p. 64.
61 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 59.
forts of the local community in defence against destructive market forces, most agrarianist parties promoted a system of locally-based non-compulsory economic cooperatives. This emphasis on private ownership and voluntary membership distinguished agrarianist cooperatives from the forced collectivist ideas promoted by the Bolsheviks. The focus on cooperative production may not only be understood as an ideological principle but as an idea born out of reality. Many agrarianist parties obtained their main organizational support from rural self-help organizations such as cooperatives, already from an early stage of formation.

The cooperatives were designed to coordinate the economic activities of small family-owned farms and their means of production, with respect to the social and economic interests of the community. They embodied many of the agrarianist views on the local community, including self-governance and mutual social responsibility.

Family farms retained their property, but shared in the control over the production and distribution of goods and in dividing profit among the members. The cooperatives were intended to act in all spheres of the economy, production, consumption, and banking. The cooperative thereby contained the three principles on which the economic life of humanity was based: private property, responsibility towards the community, and cooperation in voluntary associations. The first two principles were natural according to the basic agrarianist views on land ownership and the importance of the local community. The third reflected the agrarianist approach to economic efficiency. It was considered that only a personal interest in production and organization could produce efficiency in all of the steps from production to consumption. Production within a cooperative framework would also eliminate the exploitation of labour, as the farmers were both labourers and owners of the means of production. Finally, the cooperative organization of the economy would ensure that land was not subjected to speculation. Instead, long-term responsibility was secured by the transfer of the land and responsibility for the land from one generation to another.

These cooperative principles were not only valid for agriculture, but ideally for the entire society. Most agrarianist parties believed that industrial workers should share in the ownership of the factories and own their own homes. Yet despite its importance, more precise forms and means of cooperative work were absent from most agrarianist party programs. At the same time, it is worth noting that the late 19th century witnessed a widespread

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63 Dimitrov, “Agrarianism”, p. 413; Mitrany, Marx Against Peasant, p. 559; Bell, Peasants in Power p. 169-170; Peselj, (1952) p. 124-126; Biondich, Stjepan Radic p. 77.
64 Peselj, “Peasant Movements”, p. 128.
popularity for cooperative ideas and solutions, adapted both to different theoretical perspectives and to practical circumstances.

For an ideology based on a dialectic understanding of history, it is logical to explain what has been and to predict what the future has to offer. A concise vision of the future or of a utopia, however, was not formulated by the agrarianist writers of the pre- and inter-war period. Such visions were expressed instead in the more concrete proposals for the organization of the state and the economy. The main characteristics must, however, be described as a cooperative society based on family-based, private ownership of land, the local community, and the decentralized organization and distribution of power in society.

The absence of a clearly formulated agrarian utopia may be understood as an expression of the agrarianist intention to deal with concrete issues rather than abstractions. This can be seen in the way agrarianists referred to living examples of visions and utopias, such as the references to the Danish and Swiss small-scale cooperatives used by the Rumanian agrarian movement.

The Roots of Agrarianism

To broaden an understanding of the agrarianist ideology, it is also of importance to trace its ideological roots and influences through its differences and similarities with other contemporary political ideas.

In relation to Western liberalism, agrarianism shared a dogma of democracy and the freedom of the individual in relation to the state. At the same time, it opposed economic liberalism. According to a common agrarianist view, economic liberalism represented an excessive individualization of society, because it refused to consider the distribution of wealth, and paid attention only to economic values. While a liberal economy encouraged economic growth, the social costs were great. It thereby had done much harm to the traditional peasant society, and was thus considered to be a system that favoured the urban bourgeoisie and gave them the means to exploit the peasantry. Furthermore, a liberal economy created an instability that was hostile to the basic character of the peasant society.

Agrarianism considered Marxism’s lack of democratic political values to be dangerous. In a strong state, where the peasants were not guaranteed full political influence and were denied the right to own their land, the peasants would revert to the serfdom of feudal society. Likewise, the idea of the

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forced collectivisation of agricultural work and property was viewed as a fundamental threat, striking at the very roots of agrarian society.

According to Jackson, the influence of the Russian populists was directly evident in the development of the ideology and programs of the Slavic parties. Ante Radic, the formulator of the first Croatian party program, was according to himself a devoted student of Russian populist literature. This was especially evident in Radic’s manner of identifying the people with the peasantry, an idea common to most agrarianists. The founder of the Polish Peasant Party _Piast_, Boleslaw Wyslouch, studied in St. Petersburg and also became heavily influenced by the works of populists. One of the founders of the Rumanian populist movement, which later on was to be the backbone of the Rumanian Peasant Party, had been involved in the Russian populist movement. Both the Bulgarian and Serbian Parties were influenced by the Russian populists, based on the notion of Slavic solidarity.71

There is no sense in questioning these influences, but there is also another, not always as pronounced picture. Peselj, as an example states that the populist influence had little, if any, influence on the Eastern European agrarianists. Instead, he claims that influences on the Croatian party came from the contemporary Christian Democratic movement, with which the agrarianists had a common understanding of family values, a belief in God and the need of order.72 Peselj’s position may be coloured by his intention to define agrarianism as far removed from communism as possible, but his arguments are as good as others. In the same manner, but not with the same intention, Bell does not discuss the influence of Russian populism at all in his study on Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian Union. Instead he presents the influences on Stamboliski from contemporary Marxism and the natural sciences as well as French and German philosophy, and Stamboliski’s studies in Germany. The influence from west is interesting, as it is also highlighted in Peter Brock’s study on Polish populism. He shows how contemporary British agrarian thought influenced the Polish populists and how it was adapted to the Polish conditions. The ideas of the Polish populists were later an inspiration for the Russian populists, who transformed them further before they were ‘re-exported’ to Poland and Bulgaria.73 The Russian influence on the populism is primarily visible in the introduction of revolutionary means and the Russian-mannered collective ownership of land; ideas that were not common among the European agrarianists.

Beside the populist influence, more pure forms of Marxism are often claimed to have had an influence over the Eastern European agrarianism, especially in areas where the communist parties were strong. This influence

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71 Jackson, “Peasant Political Movements”, p. 286-287.
73 Brock, Peter, _Polish Revolutionary Populism_ (Toronto 1977).
is surely accurate. As radical movements seeking support among the less well-off in society, agrarianists and communists often tried to find support among the same groups. Mutual influence within such a situation would be highly likely. Moreover, the influence from intellectual Marxism is visible in the more theoretical parts of agrarianism, such as the dialectic understanding of history.

Some emphasis must also be placed on the influence of cooperative ideas upon agrarianism. This influence is seldom highlighted, but is worth considering since many of the agrarian parties had their roots in the cooperative movement. When foreign influences are considered in previous studies, such as Henry L. Roberts’ study on Romania, it is often done to highlight the failure of economic politics. What Roberts then misses is the importance of examples like Denmark and Switzerland, not only because of their influence, but also for the creating of models and living utopias for the movements in Eastern Europe. As sources of influence, the cooperatives both offered intellectual viewpoints and practical experience. The cooperative system then became a living tradition of agrarianism and a practice to which many of the peasants could relate and which gave them a basic understanding of the agrarianist ideas. The cooperatives were further a grass-root movement working, promoting, and developing ideas even when the agrarianist political movements were in the shadows.

The Problems of Agrarianism

Assessment of the agrarianist parties has often been negative. On the one hand, it has been claimed that the parties held utopian views, were politically illiterate, and did not achieve what they had promised. On the other hand, their failure paved the way for authoritarian regimes.

In one country after another, the agrarianist parties lost power to authoritarian regimes. The process began with Bulgaria in 1923 and continued with Poland in 1926, with Yugoslavia in 1929 and with Romania in 1931. In Estonia and Latvia the agrarian parties, or at least their leadership, were the backbones of the authoritarian regimes after 1934. Only in Czechoslovakia did democracy remain until 1938, and the Czech Agrarian Party could take part in the government by various coalitions.

In his anthology on ideologies in 20th century Europe, Feliks Gross has explained the failure of agrarianism as a failure to formulate a fully developed philosophical system or a social myth of a perfect state. The absence of a fully developed philosophical system, like the Marxist, was also identified as a problem by contemporaries, for instance, one of the leaders of the

Green International, Milan Hodza. He urged for the formulation of a scientifically-based ideology – much like the one formulated by Georg Dimitrov – which would deal with all aspects of society, the rural as well as the urban.  

This, however, seems more of an intellectual explanation, with an overbelief in the role of the ideology, as well as an underestimation of the importance of real politics. Another author who is mostly sympathetic to the ideas of agrarianism, David Mitrani, finds the causes of the failure of the agrarian parties to contain both internal and external factors. On the one hand there was difficulty in organizing the peasants and an underlying conflict between the principles of democracy and wishes for a radical change of the social order from the other side. On the other hand, the agrarianist parties in Eastern Europe did not receive support or sympathy from western European movements or governments.

Mary Samal, in her dissertation on the Czechoslovakian party, instead finds the main cause largely in external factors, stating that “all the Peasant parties of eastern Europe were cheated of their legitimate claim to power by the alliance of the crown, army, Socialist parties, and the bulk of the urban population.” It is true that these institutions and movements often were the major opponents of agrarianism, but they were seldom united.

Assessments of the agrarian parties should also, to some degree, be dependent on the intentions. Most important is whether land reforms were carried out primarily to create social justice or to create a prosperous agriculture. In the first case, the agrarianist politics were partly successful, and their influence remained even when the parties were not in power. In most cases land reforms failed, as the land reforms, alone, could not provide the necessary conditions for economic progress or sustainable agriculture. Land reform could even be contra-productive, as the reforms in many countries created plots that were not large enough to feed the families living on them, or the holdings were too small to be able to accumulate capital. To make small-scale agriculture, as promoted by the agrarianist, lucrative, agriculture had to be intensified, and specialized, something that needed capital and a marketing structure that could support the farmers. A solution which at least partly would help to solve that problem was at hand in the agrarianists programs by their promotion of the cooperative. In that sense, the failure of the agrarian parties was not so much the lack of a fighting program or a lack of ideas, but a lack of implementation. In areas and countries where the corporative system was developed, and where the government took an active role in supporting the cooperatives, as in Estonia, agriculture was more successful, and could even generate capital to the surrounding society.

However, it is worthwhile to note the fact that the agrarianist parties, even if they might had an lasting influence, were in power for only a very short

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75 Jackson, Comintern, p. 47.
76 Small, The Czechoslovakian, p. 9.
period. As Mitrany points out, the agrarianist movements should not be dismissed because they could not hold onto political power, since, by those standards, few Eastern European political parties were successful.77

Conclusions

The text presents the main features of the political programs and discussions on Agrarianism, and creates a framework aimed at explaining the agrarianist view on history, and on the mechanisms of social change, political power, and the organization of society. Agrarianism was the rural-based ideology that was central to most of the Eastern and Central European agrarian political parties in the interwar period. The Eastern European agrarianists viewed the movement as a third force in politics and economy, between liberalism and socialism. By claiming that ideas imposed by liberals and Marxists were not progressive, but instead a threat to rural society, the ideology confronted the two dominating paths of modernization, and claimed to offer solutions that would neutralize the negative consequences of capitalism and socialism alike. As Agrarianism eventually lost the political struggle, its place in the complex history of interwar Eastern Europe is mostly forgotten or neglected.

77 Mitrany, *Marx Against the Peasant*, p. 130.