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Changing “Social Functions” and the Future of Rural Societies

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What means “social life”?

Humans as “social beings” do not live alone. In order to be full members of social groups they are obliged to act “socially” during their life-span, i.e. in such a way as to ensure the continuance of human communities.

The German social philosopher, *Max Weber*, defined the social as “social functions”, which humans must fulfil, if they want to be integral members of the human community. These functions may be named or grouped differently (as often done), or (sub-)divided, but on the whole, it is these six whose active fulfilment only means conscious and full human life.

Table 1. Social functions– from the viewpoint of human individuals.

Function	Characteristics	Tendency
Topo-social	To settle down and live (on the surface of the earth), to build settlements in suitable locations. <i>The importance of this function is increasing</i>	➔
Bio-social	Upkeep of the human race, consider all interests of all members of the community in the generative cycle, <i>decreasing in importance for about two generations</i>	➠
Eco-social	Economic activities and stabilisation of resources, increase of economic product, creation of wealth and stocks, <i>heavily increasing in importance</i>	➔
Migro-social	Horizontal migration of the population (in space), vertical migration of people within the social hierarchy, <i>also with very strong increase of importance</i>	➔
Political	Holding an assertion that says of “one deserves recognition”; democratisation and tolerance against differently minded persons may stabilize their position but to get accepted individual targets can charge the community	<i>Trend orientation</i>
Cultural	Active contributions of social groups (and individuals too) to the regional or national culture; gains in outreach and importance thanks to the dissemination of information technology– but: <i>heavy losses of the function due to attitudes and choice of the population</i>	➠
➔ Increase of importance		➠ Decrease of importance

What changes did the “rural space face” as economic location?

Despite the innumerable attempts to improve local conditions in rural areas, their situation remained adverse – and this is probably due to the permanently valid contrast of “central” and “peripheral” locations.

Up to our days rural areas obviously cannot oppose to anything equivalent to “agglomeration advantages” of central regions with urban structures - also not helped by the most modern communication techniques. Therefore, for the debate on factual policy items of this really explosive regional problem it is important to clearly systematize the very complex causes of the facts involved. One is anyhow, that *Jean Fourastié’s* essential forecast concerning the socio-economic sectors failed – more or less – the rural space. For as substantial we can take the swelling of the secondary sector during almost two decades that did not happen in this space category. The rural areas slid from the primary sector into a kind of “post-tertiary” social condition, and that means deficits in regional economies and a decay of resources that finally result in the rise of unfavourable regional imbalances.

Rural space is characterised by a spectrum of important regional types structured by fundamental spatial problem constellations, i.e. the spatial situation in general, specific agricultural potentials, the regional economic potential and also the respective dynamics in regional development. All spatial problem situations are distributed differently in the types of rural space defined in table 2.

Table 2. Rural structures today – represented by typical problems.

Locational criteria	Regional range (from ... to)	
Agricultural potential	Less favoured areas with aggravated economic conditions, low productivity	Favourable areas with good productive conditions and natural advantages
Accessibility in space	Remote areas in borderlands as well as the “internal periphery” of some (Austrian) Länder	Areas close to centres with comfortable market and selling conditions
Economic level	Economically weak areas with little GDP and high shares in agriculture	Economically active areas with medium GDP and low shares in agriculture
Dynamic of development	Stagnating areas with declining population, without economic growth or in permanent economic crises	Dynamic areas with strong economic and demographic progress
Rural space = low population density, high portions of unbuilt areas		

This problematic of the regional structures must be seen as a sign of regularity, which starts in course and steers regional development processes; their background is the often cited “basic political, economic and social conditions”, on which the possibilities of evaluating the resources depend on the decisions taken in the assignment of means.

Table 3. the characteristics of the location of rural areas in “West and East” – the result of 50 years of diverging regional policy.

Results in the “old“ EU	Fields of action	Results in CEEC and NIS*
Passive sanitation: „Rural blights“ ¹	“Regional Policy“	Active sanitation: „Systematisation of settlements“
Rather good rural infrastructure	Improvement of rural infrastructure	Partly very low standard; agricultural cooperatives for decades are the very innovators of infrastructure
In prosperous regions: “cereal-saturation” and “grasslandisation”; often shift to marginal land	“Regionalisation“ of production	At a national and regional level: spatial distribution of production commands
The Heritage of capitalism: Endangered agriculture (near to agglomerations, traffic emissions, accidents in industries); environmental impacts of the intensification agro-production	Pollution and devastation of the environment	The Heritage of socialism: Emissions (heavy industry, motorised traffic); in highly productive regions: strong effects on the natural lebensraum (by “checks”)
Under population: Emigration of active persons; high shares of elderly people; Little social tensions, (partly) cultural and political lethargy	Demographic deficits, unemployment, social cohesion	Overpopulation: “overage” inhabitants; majorities without labour; High social tensions, Participation in political life unpopular

* Central and East-European countries, New independent states.

¹ This term stems from urban geography in the U.S. (e.g., Dickinson, MacKenzie), who called urban slums abandoned by the former population “urban blights”.

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However, rural areas in Central Europe are additionally concerned with a “West-East gradient” into the economic level, and not only in the interior of countries (Austria, Germany, Poland, Hungary etc.), but also as border-crossing. It is a fact that different ways taken by the rural areas in their economic history West and East of the iron curtain diverging development levels arose which are the result of decades of “national European land politics” and their respective regional policies. The existing imbalances appeared immediately after the fall of the former closed borders, causing strong demands on the social and economic policy, and furthermore producing serious problems for the future. The following systematic are to clarify the change of qualities of location of rural areas.

In this perspective the present socio-economic situation in the rural areas is the direct result of five different spheres which exert influences on shape and development of this category of space:

- the goals of the individual states concerning spatial development and planning policy;
- with which the general condition of the rural infrastructure is closely connected;
- the economic objective of “regionalization” of the agricultural production as well as the restructuring of the sector being an inevitable follow-up;
- quality of life related to the environment and/or the ecological state of the rural areas;
- possibilities for creating a demographic renewal of the rural societies.

Changing social functions – the reaction of the society

The reaction of the rural society to these development attempts was inevitable; it took many decades and in general was a passive one. Each one of the described circumstances represents a topic of extensive and comprehensive (applied) field research in regional policy. It appears substantial that the demographic restructuring of the rural society is already so strong that the original coincidence of “rural” and “agricultural” disappeared, while as a new socio-economic differentiation similar to urban groups (with different regional characteristics) developed. In this context the term “suburbanization” is often used, but is playing down, the real situation. Because this would imply eo ipso new investments, the evaluation of location advantages, dynamic development and the will to an overall renovation.

But the new social differentiation is, as already suggested, not only the result of 150 years of emigration from the rural and mountain areas – well-known overall in Europe – but also that of a reverse movement of millions of people out of the cities towards their nearest and farthest surroundings. Both processes caused serious economic and demographic consequences.

Figure 1. Socio-economic differentiation in rural “Middle Europe”*, 2000.

Regional type	Socio-economic groups			
	Agriculture	Industry, crafts	Services	Non-active**
Main agricultural areas				
Peripheral regions				
Less favoured areas				
Peri-urban areas				

*In this graph Austria, Switzerland, Bavaria.

**Unemployed, pensioners, sustained persons. The height of the lines does not represent the surface of regional types but their demographic weight.

With the passing of generations we generally can observe that both the social behaviour of individuals and that of the social groups changes. The transformations during the post-war period were not a novelty, but the generalized appearance of changes across all regional and national societies is probably a unique phenomenon in terms of history. The manifested shifts in priority and weight of the social functions, which occurred in the process of recent society changes, are the result of increasingly materialistic attitudes in the way of living of the large majority of European (and other) populations which so far constantly became richer and richer. Therefore the social rating of *Max Weber's* social functions in the today affluent society can be characterized by:

Topo-social factors. Since 1955, e.g. in Vienna, the average residential space enlarged from 22 to 38 sqm per inhabitant; more dwellings than ever (in Austria several 100.000) stay empty; the demand for secondary homes led to a boom of continued construction, first to be seen in connection with deficiencies of the urban development, but now it becomes a motor for private investment in the (temporary) extension of the personal living space. So rural areas get the benefit of more "topo-social function", because satisfying it is much cheaper here than in the cities. The consumption of land by building since 1900 roughly increased by 400% in comparison with 20% growth of the population; about 13% of the Austrian permanent residential area (over 500.000 hectares) are built up.

Bio-social factors. Natural population growth at present is absent not only in Austria, but in the whole Europe; a reverse development occurred, from the birth rate sank rapidly since the 1960s; 40% of the women aged between 15 and 45 actually remain childless, education is more and more given to strange hands. The same happens in the case of old people's caretaking and most important planning projects of today are senior home concepts; so, the shrinking importance of the family becomes drastically visible. The generative behaviour of the agrarian population closed up to the urban, maybe two or three generations later, but it could not be avoided.

Eco-social factors. Supply of all goods for a high standard of living and material prosperity increased for many years; despite the dominant unemployment in some countries more people are integrated into the working process today than ever before; social welfare and particularly individual consumption became socio-economic values for policy to calculate; the securing of an "up-to-date" standard of living for the majority of the population has attained an enormous material range – not looking at the real shape of its elementary components (citizen rights, personal liberty, stability of the social order). But on the other side, the work of the farmer is worth practically "nothing", if we keep essential that his revenue and living comes from the price of primary products. What keeps us "together" in physical terms (to eat and to drink) costs not more than approximately 10% of mass incomes; from this amount the farmer, due to his respective (varying) production, receives just between 5% and 15%, that is between 0,5% and 1,5% of the total expenses for consumption – no miracle that agriculture is fighting for survival and cannot come along without monetary transfers, actually called "decoupled payments".

Migro-social factors. The redundant territorial mobility of the people (commuting, weekend trips, and tourism) achieves gigantic dimensions in time and distance in Europe, as well. Traffic jams at all seasons witness that fact. In addition, the changing of residence is increasing. Thus, for instance, in the new urban quarters of the Federal Republic of Germany, the frequency of residence removals per household was one change in only 18 months, sometimes yet in shorter time. Whereas a correlation of leisure mobility with incomes and motorizing degrees is evident, probably no rural area can keep up with urban traffic masses, but they must tolerate their effects patiently.

Political factors. Objectively seen the responsibility of the individual is increasing together with the increase technical progress, but the question is whether individual consciousness of responsibility also develops. The "assertion of ones own recognition" becomes more difficult without the support of institutions and unions. The preference of certain groups, the influence of unions and syndicates, lobbying and other forms of pushing interest are able to violate basic principles of legal order as e.g., "movements in the basic democracy" did before short. On the other hand – with certain fluctuations – the abstinence from factual policy in broad parts of the population and especially among the youth cannot be overseen.

Cultural factors. The consumption of culture today surpasses by far the active participation to cultural life. A boom to pseudo and sub-cultural bargain offers, commercialised culture, primitive entertainment, horror and trivial literature takes place. The expenditure for culture in a family, with children, neighbours and friends becomes stunted in favour of easily accessible passive pleasure and leisure consumption. This development does not stop before the rural area – on the contrary: in the rural sphere an ordinary man’s scene of cultural life often shows a more trivial situation in this concern than in the city.

Do social functions change in the East like in the West?

The answer to this question is No, and after the so-called Eastern enlargement the rural areas of Europe presented themselves as highly differentiated spatial entities. Because the results of the changing weights of social functions hitherto turned out rather different in Western and Eastern Europe, according to different starting positions and different ways of development here and there. There are more than 4 attempts to clarify how the main trends of the “re-weighting” become visible in the two halves of Europe.

Table 4. The paralleled re-shaping of social functions in Europe – West and East.

West European countries	Central and East European countries
Topo-social Function	
Increase of residences, many of them not used, more secondary homes, heavily increasing settlements	<i>Consequences of “planned decay”: often deficit status of houses and infrastructure; population concentrated in rural towns</i>
Bio-social Function	
Birth rate very low, population decrease, education also in rural regions increasingly in strange hands	<i>Regions with extremely overage population; reproductive cohorts emigrated from many districts</i>
Eco-social Function	
Supply of needs and accumulation of richness generally increasing, in agriculture shrinking revenues and pushing away of smaller farmers; more employed people, out of which up to 45 per cent women	<i>After economic crashes widespread poverty; unemployment regionally different, up to 80 per cent of potentially actives; crucial importance of subsistence; speculation for the absence of land owning not realisable so far; shadow economy</i>
Migro-social Function	
Mass tourism and traffic increasing to amounts which were unimaginable one generation ago; the shift of residence in both directions (from rural to urban areas and vice versa)	<i>“Re-migration” of millions of urban-industrial residual population to rural communes; secondary homes and property of foreigners hardly to control and strongly increasing</i>
Political Function	
“Holding and assertion of ones own recognition” maybe stabilised by laws, but broad political lethargy and abstinence; on the other hand considerable identification with the region, very active public participation, often supported by “NGOs“	<i>Real regional autonomy largely making; so political aims (e.g., activation of “endogen“ human resources) not realisable via public (state) institutions; in some countries progress in communal autonomy (Poland, Czech Republic)</i>
Socio-cultural Function	
Consumption of culture overweighing the active participation in cultural life; trials of “revitalisation“ of folk art show differing success	<i>Traditional cultural consciousness in customs and behaviour maintained in living expressions of music, dance, handicraft and fine arts</i>

This overview on the one hand is pointing out the increasing stress, reinforcement and expansion of markedly materialistic social functions: high and increasing demands on housing and settlement quality, supply of needs and wealth slide into the centre of vital interests, mobility without regard of the costs are features of today’s life-style in “Western“ societies. Sometimes it seems that also the societies in transformation countries hold of nothing more important than to come to the respective achievable standards and politicians should guarantee them as fast as possible the participation in thus de facto distorted social functions. By many this is taken as a substitute of “liberty“, and due to tactical political considerations, e.g. at elections, this process will remain a priority for coming years, as well.

On the other hand we are watching repulsion and diminishing of the markedly idealistic social functions: the care for the descendants and their education becomes delegated, the political function and the personal sensibility for what the assertion of ones own should be. The increase of passive consumption of culture instead of active participation in cultural life is a deplorable fact.

Result: How disconnected is Europe’s rural space?

The above discussed elements of “re-weighing” of social functions at present have a large influence (not only) on rural societies and on the value of agriculture. Consequences for the importance and role of the villages and their future “socio-political condition” can be foreseen; here we can contribute only with a few comments to the main criteria with a Central East Europe perspective:

What concerns the topo-social function, a wave of the pent-up demand is to expect undoubtedly expected in the East of Europe, because in the decades of communism not only the development and even the simple maintenance of infrastructure totally failed, but also the daily needs of the people could only be satisfied by “means of the system”. In reality they were neglected in inconceivable ways, and particularly in the rural areas the necessary recovering process can, and surely will have similar “materialistic” effects as in Western Europe.

The deficit of the birth rate is not yet the rule in all rural areas of Central Eastern Europe, but in many regions the “average” of the rural population with (negative) concomitant phenomena was spreading. At least for the next generation a wave of consolidation among farm enterprises can be expected, first of all in the small-farm areas of Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, because everywhere the potential successors will be making.

Maintenance of economical activities in Central and Eastern European states very often means not more or less than saving of the bare life, at present reality for millions of families/enterprises only by subsistence; it often is a unique hope to survive a crisis whose duration is not yet estimable. “Stocks and wealth”, the achieving of which is an essential eco-social function; they are unattainable for the rural and the urban majority as well. On the contrary, unemployment and bitter poverty in rural areas of the larger EU accession countries of 2004 and 2007 create extremely serious problems, and probably still more stronger ones in the New Independent States. Conflicts between local farmers and absent proprietors of land strengthen the situation additionally. The cartographic attempt of drawing the “regional probability of poverty” in Central East Europe may clarify this. For the elaboration of graph 2 an estimation for “NUTS-2” regions (partly modified) resulted in the compiled regional differentiation. The indicators (variables) used are: share of persons employed in agriculture, unemployment rate, level of rural income

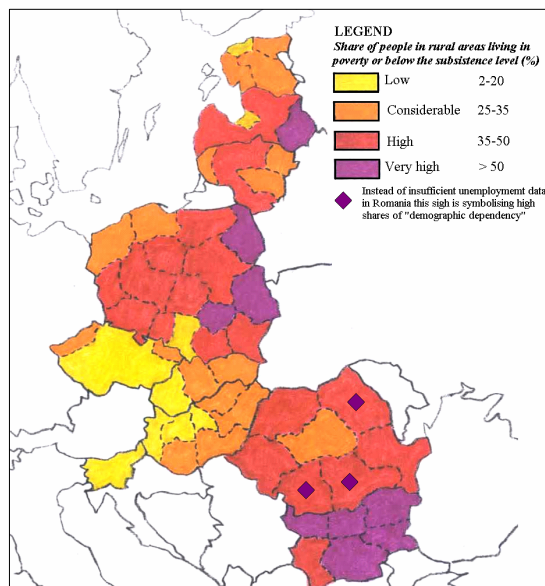


Figure 2. Regional probability of poverty in the accession countries of 2004 and 2007. The used “indicator method” is setting a spectrum of indicator-points as sums for the different regions; in this case 1, 2, 3 and 4 points correspond to <10, <20, <40, >40 % agro-employment <10, <20, <30, >30% unemployment rate >250, >150, >75, <75 EURO monthly income thresholds. In the graph the four separate classes of poverty due to point sums of 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 and 9-10 show a rather realistic differentiation of regional poverty in the 10 accession countries.

The territorial mobility of the masses in the Western states became the manifestation of a human “territorial movement“, which surpasses all conceivable borders by the achievements of the traffic engineering – a development, with which the agrarian East of Europe cannot keep up by any means. After the political turn in many parts of the countryside a step back to the age of horse and carriage occurred. But above all the low level of national education is a major complaint in many parts of the rural European

East, where the aspect of formation as a component of general social politics was missing for decades.

Chances for advancement due to knowledge and education do not exist for the social layer of agricultural workers.

Finally we can state that the cultural function in the sense of active contributions to the regional culture cannot be reached by the information technology in the East of the continent yet – perhaps only a question of the time.

The rural East is obviously not yet so much touched by the global “trivialisation” of the business culture (wherein the region meets even with some peripheral parts of the “old” EU-15), but is full of traditional vitality manifested in living customs and behaviours, great festivals, representations, and last but not least fine, arts as forms of cultural expression.

As specific for Eastern Europe we may certainly consider that the process of the “re-weighting” the social functions, which is partially slowed down. Furthermore and in contrast to Western Europe these are enormous deficits in the structure of buildings (size and quality of residences, traffic network, technical infrastructure, public administrations). It may also be that consciousness of what political function in rural areas is that people in certain reform states do not consider so far.

Particularly what we know as being functional municipalities can be found in a state of initial form in many regions – the communes as the basic cell of co-existence and social welfare are not yet the major players in the ruling territorial-administrative systems.

The real and legitimate needs of the human society

Individual demands versus targets in social policy

Finally we may add still one more (non-pathetic) pleading for the orientation of regional policy on the basis of human existence. For when we recognize that the interaction of social ambitions and true activities is out of the balance then the question arises why that is so, and which are the consequences.

Wouldn't it be possible that one design of political responsibility is to open people's eyes for the necessity of equilibrium of the social functions, because they are not less than the very fundamentals of genuine community?

Table 5. Balanced social functions – an important political target.

Demands of the affluent society	Targets of social policy
<i>Space “required” by man, in quantity and quality</i>	
Ongoing increase of residences, speculation (unused flats), “parked capital” in secondary and tertiary homes, increase of the “private owned territory”, the luxury level of infrastructure	Sufficient “living centres” in numbers and size; fixation of a realistic backlog demand of residences and housing space; priority of sufficient “primary residences”
<i>“Maintenance of the human species” or how genders and generations meet themselves</i>	
Natural population growth remains abolished, share of childless women probably still increasing, education of youngsters and care for oldies in strange hands everywhere and also in rural areas	Increase of the social ranking of educating the young generation and caring for weaker members of the society; abolition of social and materiel discrimination of “bio-social” achievements
<i>Supply of needs + means of living or maximizing of income, productivity and fortune</i>	
Supply of needs and accumulation of richdoms generally growing, in agriculture shrinking revenues and pushing away of smaller farmers; more people employed, of which between 40 and 70% of women	People must be able to perform their entire role in the society; public support for economic needs of families, esp. with respect to the coincidence of professional and private interests
<i>“Mobility in space” (housing, working, leisure), “mobility in the hierarchy” (social and professional advancement)</i>	
Ongoing intensification of spatial mobility (for work and leisure); no end of the developing “territorial movement” to see so far	Realisation of justice in chances for all socio-economic groups in using of their lebensraums in horizontal and vertical mobility
<i>“Holding and assertion of ones own recognition”: Contributions to the ongoing evolution of the society</i>	
“Holding and assertion of ones own recognition” stabilised by law, the growing danger of technical means creating the “citizen of glass” leads to more political lethargy, abstinence and/or violent resistance	Practicing human social behaviour as a “political aim”– versus striving for power, prestige and display behaviour – a call and challenge for the political elite
<i>“Cultural consciousness” in the respective social environment</i>	
Consumption of culture overweighing the active participation in cultural life; some success in the “revitalisation” of cultural events, “inter alia” supported by enlargement impulses	Discovery of personal cultural interests and their use to personal satisfaction and to the strengthening of the society’s traditional consciousness

Fulfilled social functions – a basic principle of vivid communities

That humans in their life are ready to give priority to substantial things has much to do – if not everything – with the principle of striving for “conscious”, “valuable”, “fulfilled” but also “simpler” or “alternative” life. If we look at the socio-economic beginning which is only referring to the topic of “redistribution” of the efforts for social functions, we will find substantial criteria here. The starting aspect is that the greater the need of compensation for insufficient living conditions is, the better the social functions are fulfilled. Therefore their consideration in principle should be a measure for every active regional policy in rural areas.

Whether socio-economical imbalances in the rural areas are remediable or not will surely depend on whether this space category in the long run will be regarded as equivalent to “central places” or not. A political or technological “philosopher’s stone” will not be found and any incentive idea for rural regional policy in the future can exist only where credible confession to the endangered lebensraum is alive. Then social functions will mean:

Care for a sufficient and adequate living place in a well-arranged “ambient”; thus the discontent with the urban living conditions, the phenomenon of the weekend escape boom out of the cities and the search for (very expensive) secondary homes should be diminished and the waste of open cultural landscape prevented.

Strengthening the role of the family, since socialisation of children (and their parents too) nowhere will better succeed than in the socially protected sphere of a family; however, this concerns also the sustainability and protection of a considerable amount of rural communes.

Stabilization of the socio-economical role of the beings as a whole, the rural area is an example for the fact that in our era of specialization, vocational and private interests are artificially separated from each other, and only an understanding of the entirety of these interests prevents that on the side of the material needs and on the other hand the consumer’s renouncement becoming exaggerated.

The exercise of the human behaviour within the community in the direction of becoming a “political goal” that can be realized in the rural municipality more directly than elsewhere; furthermore, to that belongs also the promotion of tolerance and subsidiarity in place of aspirations for power, prestige thinking and display behaviour.

Flexible and adapted use of the lebensraum by human mobility between both the habitats and the socio-economical levels; in the rural areas the priority is entitled to the “ascent in the hierarchy of the society”. It should make possible the stabilization and also the elevation of the quality of life.

Finally, *the promotion of the living cultural activities* and not of the (passive) consumption of “cultural entertainment”; to guide people in discovering their own (mental) interests and talents and use them for their own joy is worth earning the largest political attention.

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