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Contradictory populist ecologies: Pro-peasant propaganda and land grabbing in rural Hungary

Péter József Bori [a], Noémi Gonda [b,*]

[a] Independent Researcher, Hungary
[b] Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Box 7012, 75007, Uppsala, Sweden

Right-wing populist ecologies are animated by tensions between anti-environmentalism and rural romanticism (Menga, 2021). Exploring the intersections between right-wing populism and land politics in Hungary helps us understand how populism predates political discourse on rural livelihoods, and how it coopts emancipatory environmental and agricultural claims. At a time when the environment is being degraded and family farming is in crisis, we argue that emancipatory ecologies must work to debunk the (pseudo-)ecological claims of authoritarian populist regimes and to rethink the future of rural areas.

Despite – or because of – decades of Soviet rule that sought to erase the idea of the individual peasant family and that forcefully collectivised most productive land, agriculture and the countryside today sit at the core of Hungarian national identity. While the agricultural sector makes up only 3.5 per cent of Hungary's economy, we are reminded time and again in poetry, literature, and pop culture that we are a nation of farmers, peasants and rural dwellers. Singer Péter Máté (1947–1984) sang of '*listening to the voice of bread*' and of '*walking the path of agricultural fields*' in a song devoted to the love of his nation. Likewise, while being marched off to a concentration camp, poet Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944) wrote about the idyllic, slow rural life that he hoped to live again.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has understood the importance of rural identity since his 2010 election campaign, using a disgruntled countryside and a pro-European, pro-family farm discourse to secure a two-thirds ruling majority. His victory has radically transformed the Hungarian countryside over the past decade. His economic policies have made life more difficult for farmers and the rural sector in general. Indeed, Orbán's regime has systematically worked to dismantle the Hungarian countryside and family farming by allowing land to accumulate in the hands of politically connected oligarchs, resulting in significant land concentration. Whilst Hungary's agricultural area increased by over a quarter million hectares between 2013 and 2016, more than 30 per cent of small farms disappeared in this same period (Gonda, 2019). The mechanisms of land concentration have been clear. Using the refugee crisis in 2015 as a diversion, for instance, the Orbán regime implemented a 'thunderstorm' privatization process purposefully designed to exclude small- and medium sized farmers. The auctioned land was mostly state-owned land that had previously been leased long-term to small- and medium-scale farmers. This tenure system was a legacy of socialism: until 2014, 23 per cent of the country's land – approximately 1.7 million hectares – remained in state property (Ángyán, 2015). But in 2015, most of this leased land was placed for sale by the state as large tracts, with an asking price that small- and medium-scale farmers could not match. At the same time, local residents (including leasers who had been cultivating auctioned land during the previous decades) were pressured and intimated by 'overlords' and thus refrained from making offers. Moreover, evidence suggests that bids by one oligarch or interest group were not countered by other bids – indicating that these deals were arranged prior to the auctions (Ángyán, 2018).

Other processes relating to land grabs have been more visible to the public. In July 2021, a company run by Lőrinc Mészáros, the infamous gasfitter from Orbán's home village who became one of the wealthiest individuals in Hungary through corrupt public procurement deals, announced its plans to expand control to over 500–700 thousand hectares of land. Experts in agriculture argue that Hungarian farmers would not willingly concede control to Mészáros, and that the announcement can only mean that the government plans to favour the role of 'integrators' in Hungarian agriculture. 'Integrators' are corporations owned by some of the country's wealthiest businessmen that control every component of the production process: they supply farmers with input (seeds, manure, pesticides, etc.) and purchase post-harvest produce from them. While this contractual arrangement provides some security for farmers, transactions are frequently done at below-market prices, and the pre-harvest contract often leaves farmers unable to exit such exploitative cycles. This land concentration and the integrator

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: peter.j.bori@gmail.com (P.J. Bori), noemi.gonda@slu.se (N. Gonda).

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model have created a 'modern-day feudal system' in which smallholders are often forced to sell or lease their lands to landlords, and to take up agricultural employment on these lands, or, more often, to give up farming all together (Ángyán, 2020).

Land grabbing is only the most obvious of the destructive rural practices of the Orbán regime. Under Orbán, we also see the dismantling of sections of Hungary's most prominent agricultural university, reducing the supply of young, progressive agricultural experts. In many cases, grants and tenders aimed at supporting young farmers are awarded to politically connected persons. In other cases, unrealistic and unattainable requirements tied to the grants drive recipients – usually small- and medium-scale farmers – to bankruptcy, debt and burn-out. Farmers pursuing non-conforming agricultural practices – such as permaculture or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – and who are affiliated with opposition parties or alternative-knowledge platforms face repeated controls, food safety checks and tax audits. A culture of fear, in which speaking up against local oligarchs can result in being excluded, for example, from receiving the European Commission's Single Area Payments, brings up memories of darker times in the country's history.

And yet, populist pro-peasant propaganda continues to hide systemic exclusions while contributing to the consolidation of the regime. In March 2014, for instance, just prior to the elections, Orbán announced that '*The countryside is the country's goldmine*' (Mandiner, 2014), and he promised to protect Hungarian land and to give to rural dwellers the chance for better livelihoods. But the following year, the 'thunderstorm' land auctions took place, showing just *how* and *for whom* he meant to exploit this goldmine.

As the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic petered out in the summer of 2020, Orbán called on the Hungarian populace to prioritise local products in a promotional video posted on his personal Facebook page (Orbán, 2020). The video explains that such patriotic consumer choices will not only ensure Hungarian national sovereignty in the face of global crises, but will also benefit the environment: imported goods have often travelled thousands of kilometres, so by choosing local produce we also choose to protect nature. Images of farmers and other local producers standing proudly conveys that local producers must be protected, as the country and its economy depends on them. In the run up to the 2022 elections, as political developments briefly seemed to be slipping out of Orbán's control, he turned once more to his playbook, announcing that '*… it is time to settle Hungary's debt to the countryside. We must restore the dignity and power that was taken away from rural areas. We must finally give to the Hungarian countryside what it deserves*' (Origo, 2021).

As has been the case for the past decade, there is no doubt that populist ecologies à la Orbán will help to expand capitalist and extractive frontiers under a new guise. By discursively placing authority in the people and by co-opting environmental claims, populist ecologies disempower small-scale farmers in the name of empowerment and deplete agricultural land in the name of sustainability. Yet, the Orbán regime's populist political rhetoric is certainly not enough to keep farmers on his side. Through a near-total control over rural media platforms, Orbán has been able to maintain his image as the strongman the country needs. Much like Rodrigo Dutarte in the Philippines, who has promised to rid the city of disorder (Saguin, 2021), Orbán promises to rid the countryside of the dangers of migration, rural decay, and empty villages and, by extension, to reverse *Homo Hungaricus*' long-term exile from nature (Isaacs, 2021).

There are two possible, but by no means guaranteed, avenues towards rural emancipation, by which we mean fundamental alterations to political, economic, and socio-natural relations, practices, values, and meaning-making (Nightingale, Gonda, & Eriksen, 2021). The first avenue entails alternative political stances, such as that put forward in 2021 by a diverse alliance of Hungarian political opposition parties with the aim of toppling the Orbán regime. It is yet to be seen what such an alliance can offer to the countryside, and whether it will promote an understanding of democracy different from Western blueprints, which preserve the power of large corporations, and which outsource resource depletion to poorer, less regulated locations.

The second avenue concerns prefigurative agricultural practices, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), permaculture, and small-scale and regenerative farming: political-ecological practices that consciously attempt to create a desired future world in the present, a 'new society in the shell of the old' (Breines 1989, cited in Naegler, 2018, p. 506). These initiatives rely on alternative knowledges of agricultural production and are today most often advocated by young, progressive farmers, who question what Orbán supporters consider to be 'sustainable' and 'competitive' practices. Yet, many of those implementing prefigurative alternative farming practices come from a privileged position, and some of them obtained access to land through speculation on land prices by their family members. Thus, in order to develop their alternative initiatives, they have possibly forced other farmers to leave their land.

Such contradictory practices are everywhere. We have learned in our recent research, for instance, about land concentration under the banner of alternative farming, and about the far right and racist practices of some small-scale alternative farmers. Moreover, European subsidies, while intended to support smaller farms, have been used by the Orbán regime to strengthen oligarchs, and have contributed to the emergence of 'non-local' and absent farmers (Krasznai Kovács, 2021) who, in turn, support the regime. We must question the role of European agricultural policies in hampering environmental sustainability and contributing to the destruction of democracy within its own borders. At the same time, we must politicize alternative farming initiatives with a stronger focus on the tenets of democratic governance. A fragmented and decentralized agricultural sector that builds on grassroot alliances can circumvent and question central power, but only if the 'shell' of the old world is also cracked.

In sum, the pro-peasantry, pro-rurality message promoted by Orbán and his regime in 2010 is virtually unchanged over a decade later. The countryside, on the other hand, is more concentrated, more exhausted and more exclusive than ever before. The appropriation of the narrative of rural revival, by a regime that has actively impeded sustainable rural development and equitable access to land is characteristic of the inherent contradictions of populist regimes. Such pseudo-emancipatory motifs are key to maintaining the façade of a pro-peasant government, and, thus, rural electoral support. By promoting these ideologies, these regimes are also given free rein to restructure the countryside under taglines of sovereignty, sustainability, and nationalism. While official policy and discourse call for a rurality based on diversified local farms and businesses, the regime continues to support business-as-usual and speculative agricultural practices that drain the Hungarian countryside of both farmers and nutrients. Emancipation in this context is not easy to imagine. Not only does it require debunking the contradictions of populist ecologies, it also demands engagement with the political tensions within emancipation itself. Scholar-activists and their strategic alliances can play a particularly important role in uncovering these tensions. Only by putting our energies together and calling out the harmful realities of populist ecologies, can we expect to reshape social-natural relationships in a meaningful way.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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