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LINDBLOOM, Jana (2019): **Transformácia a zánik poľnohospodárskych družstiev.** (The Transformation and Downfall of Agricultural Cooperatives.) Bratislava: VEDA, vydavateľstvo SAV, 256 p. ISBN 978-80-225-1802-7.

Jana Lindbloom, a researcher at the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, focuses on qualitative research methods, organizational studies, economic sociology, property relations and the analysis of public debates on important social issues. Her monograph “The Transformation and Downfall of Agricultural Cooperatives” has recently been published by VEDA, the publishing house of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

The monograph chronicles the process of the post-socialist transformation of cooperatives and its intriguing complexity. It covers the period from the fall of the socialist regime to the present. The interpretation of this thirty-year era analyses all levels of their social and property organization. It examines the legislative framework, but also the socio-political discourse and especially the lived practices of the actual transformation. It analyzes the decision-making of the respective stakeholders in a broader social and economic context. In describing and analyzing the transformation of agricultural cooperatives, the author asks “how exactly has the transformation been accomplished, how precisely have gradual changes been practically achieved, how have various actors and property transfers entered the process, how have new or stronger relations between the participants, objects, interpretations or ex post justifications been established, how exactly has

it actually happened“ (p. 24). Thus, the study focuses on the activities of organizing and reorganizing post-socialist agricultural cooperatives while describing particular practices employed by the actors. In addition to the members of cooperatives, experts, legal consultants or politicians, she also sees two important non-human actors as relevant: nature (land, crops, time) and property.

The author analyzes not only cases of individual cooperatives, but also parliamentary debates, relevant legislation and media outputs (including publications for agricultural management). However, interviews with informants (stakeholders) are the main source of data. In addition to shorter situational interviews, the author conducted 119 planned, pre-arranged and recorded interviews over a period of ten years (2010 – 2019). She conducted interviews with current or former chairmen and members of cooperatives, representatives of agricultural associations, lawyers, private farmers, small farmers, landowners, or investors in agriculture or land. The mosaic of various categories of respondents and types of data enabled her to depict a thorough story of post-socialist agricultural cooperatives in Slovakia. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and also in accordance with research ethics, the interviews are anonymized, and the only information given in the cited statements is the type or category of the informant.

The book focuses on the transformation of organizational and property relations, but the author also touches on many other related and relevant topics – the ideals of post-socialist transformation, the challenges of alternative organizations (companies with employee ownership and workplace democracies), the position of Slovakia and farmers in the EU and in the world of financial capitalism, as well as the social and economic value of agriculture and land in general.

The monograph maps and records the delicate complexity of the transformation process, the organizational and agricultural situation, and decision-making in the midst of it all. It is a multi-layered portrayal of the world of cooperatives and enables the reader to understand the positions, experiences and (conflicting) perspectives of those who have been involved in the transformation and those who have been affected by it.

The chosen method of qualitative research allows the examination of this complex and entangled issue in detail. It is thus possible to point out the diversity of the phenomena, to highlight multiple (internal and external) factors at play, and to observe relevant actors in their context and interaction. Thus, besides providing a precise account of how the subsequent changes happened, the book actually helps the reader to also answer question of why.

The monograph is a brilliant academic analysis and explanation of an issue that has been an immanent (changing) part of (changing) Slovak agriculture and countryside for decades and which has been and still is an important part of lived struggles about the (il)legitimacy of old or

new orders in the world of agricultural cooperatives and agriculture in our country.

By studying the dynamics over time as well as analyzing the processes of establishing a (legitimate) form of property relations at all layers of social organization, the author explains the goals and meaning of the transformation of cooperatives in the context of a new (post-socialist) social order.

“I do not know any scientific work in Slovakia that would describe and interpret the process of transformation of cooperative property in all its phases in such detail, so convincingly and with such knowledge of the subject: from determining shares for members and non-members, through tradable cooperative shareholder certificates (created by Act No. 264/1995) and their concentration in the hands of management or investors (Slovak or foreign), all the way to the ownership takeover by external financial capital”, wrote one of the reviewers of this publication, a leading sociologist and expert in the field of agriculture, Gejza Blaas. At the same time, the reviewer appreciated that the book does not avoid the period of semi-legal (or criminal) privatization of cooperatives through the disposal of assets through managed bankruptcies and the establishment of subsidiary firms. The monograph points to the institutional framework in this process, but also to the economic and social situation in the period after the economic reform as well as to the effects of the Common agricultural policy after the accession of Slovakia into the EU. Contrary to publicly declared ideas from the early 1990s, in a large number of cases, the developments in ownership resulted in the conversion of the legal form, even though there

are still cooperatives which have (formally) maintained their original legal form. “Many current agricultural cooperatives already represent such a degree of organizational hybridity that, apart from the official legal form and a few procedural formalities, they are essentially indistinguishable from conventional private companies,” as the author notes while adding that “agricultural land, both in terms of rent but especially ownership, has been, to a significant extent, seized by (domestic or foreign) investors, who, in fact, are mostly so-called absentee owners” (p. 245).

The high quality and extraordinary scientific contribution of this monograph has also been acknowledged by the fact that it was awarded the Alexander Hirner Prize for the best sociological work published in the previous two calendar years. The committee granting the award also emphasized that the author reconstructed this area of the development of Slovakia after 1989 in its entirety while taking into account all the peculiarities of its historical, economic, and legal character. No one in our country had yet attempted to undertake such an endeavour to study this issue. By an ingenious conceptualization of the multi-layered process and precise analysis of the facts, this publication is an indispensable contribution to Slovak sociology.

However, the wider social impact and significance of this monograph is also unquestionable. It undoubtedly has the potential to attract the attention not only of the scientific community but of the general public as well. Approximately every third Slovak has been – directly or indirectly –

affected by events in cooperatives, either as an owner or as an heir of the shareholder certificates which resulted from the conversion of the originally calculated ownership shares. However, they will not be the only ones to welcome an explanation of what has actually happened to cooperatives and in cooperatives, which shifts both in the definition and practice, and what dilemmas characterize their position and functioning today. With this book, the author addresses everyone. Today, when the development of the situation increasingly emphasizes the issues of food security, environment, sustainable development and quality of life (not only) in the countryside, the relevance and the need for such a text is even more urgent.

This monograph is based on demanding, almost decade long research and deals with the sensitive theme of property rights and property transfers which is extremely important for both science and social practice. It provides an account of one of the fascinating, but also controversial stories of the modern history of Slovakia. This book is thus valuable to contemporaries, but it surely will also serve as a precious document for future generations. Thus, this monograph not only documents one piece of modern history of Slovakia, but has also become a direct part of it. At the same time, this book is a good example of how rigorous scientific analysis and professional terminology can be combined with an engaging and reader-friendly form of writing. The cultivated language, refined style and stylistic dexterity are in line with the quality of the content and add value to the book.

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