

FADING REGIONAL BORDERS? THE VIEWPOINT OF RURAL ECONOMY AND WAY OF LIFE

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Abstract: The paper discusses the rural economic factors of the regional differences and their fading that started roughly with the second agricultural revolution and got an impetus with collectivization and – after re-privatization – with the decline of agrarian activities and arising of new forms of consumption. Thus the paper analyzes on one hand the process of uniformization accompanied by the spreading of globalized – or at least nationalized – patterns of lifestyles that are no longer connected to the local resources: for example the technologies allow the production of new plants, and the trade allows new ways of consumption. On the other hand deals with the new forms of regionalism that affected the economic life of different communities which aimed at renewing their relations to local resources both internally and externally by selling the elements of their surroundings and way of life: the ecological and regional reforms emerged in last years had in their focus the use of local resources, the preservation of local types of production, the awareness of local values and cultures, consequently the regional groups started to reformulate again their differences. My aim is to find and to analyze the main aspects of these processes.

Keywords: man–nature relationship, economic activities, regional differences, uniformization, regionalism, green consciousness, commoditization

Introduction

In Hungarian ethnography, and also in most European ethnological schools, like the Scandinavian and German, the regional differences of culture had constituted an important approach for long periods.¹ Papers of this approach dealt with the problem of ethnic groups, the cultural borders, the diffusion of different cultural elements, the mapping of differences etc. No doubt that these differences existed starting with folk dresses, housing types, customs, religious life, dietary traditions, forms of agrarian activities, cultivated plants, animal husbandry, occupations and crafts. If one looks at the previous enumeration, one can easily observe that a part (or even the majority) of these cultural phenomena is re-

¹ Cf. ANDRÁSFALVY 1980; FEJÓS 2002: 70.

lated somehow to economic activities based on the relation of men to their natural environment: the simple technologies prior to second agricultural revolution allowed only certain economic activities depending on natural, geographical and climatologic conditions, thus the different groups living in different environments had different economic life which was reflected in their way of life and material culture.

Taking these assumptions into account in this paper I would like to analyze some aspects of the differences from the view of economic activities through both historical and contemporary examples presenting meantime the changes of these differences that occurred in the last 200–300 years. The framework of the study is the economic life of the Carpathian Basin in the 18–20th century, however the main focus will be on the fields I know, some Transylvanian rural settlements' life and changes in the second part of the 20th century. Analyzing these aspects and periods I focus on one hand on the merges of different economic regions and on the other hand on the re-appearance of some aspects related to economic life that are used to reformulate the unique character of given regions.

I consider these aspects useful, because the natural environment intertwined with economic activities constituted an important part of the regional division of the folk culture, determining to a greater or lesser degree the lifestyle and material culture of a certain group. It is no doubt that the simple technologies with limited set of tools limit the exploitation of the environment augmenting the dependency from the nature. To reformulate Maurice Godelier's suggestion about the complexity of the structures of production: the simpler the technology, the greater the dependency.² With these limited technologies human groups were forced to develop their capacities to use a certain environment, thus the environmental diversity resulted in cultural differences, and this could be true not just regarding hunters-gatherers, but also for peasant societies in Europe. The Hungarian ethnographer, Béla Gunda, who carried out fieldwork in 1940s among mountain people in Transylvania on the man–nature relation, described that according to locals' memories at the end of 19th century the *moji* cultivated regularly only the onion, the other plants (fruits, berries and other plants) used in their kitchen and household were wild coming from gathering, creating a peculiar dietary system, but also describes that with rangers, teachers and foreign workers (Italians) new patterns had been spread and cultivated plants replaced gathered ones particularly among wealthier peasants.³

The former environment of the Carpathian Basin, its economic role and change

At the end of the Turkish era in the Carpathian Basin the cultivated areas alternated on one hand with large, swampy inundation basins, covered with moors, lakes, reeds and forests and on the other hand *puszta* (waste, uninhabited land), and in the mountains with deep, often undivided forests. The struggle between man and nature that started under the Romans and began again at the end of the middle ages in the Carpathian Basin seemingly ended with the victory of the nature, creating a wide range of varied environments with sometimes and some places minimum human intervention. In the given circumstances the resident groups adapted to their environment and learnt how to use it for their purposes,

² GODELIER 1981: 24.

³ GUNDA 1966: 38–41.

and how to extract the required energy from the nature mixing the cultivation and animal husbandry with different gathering activities, fishing and hunting. The mixed economic activities and the way of life were closely attached to the nature owing to the simple technologies and limited set of tools, reflecting not just in the economy of the Turkish-occupied territories (where the lack of population decreased human intervention), but in the lifestyle of unoccupied territories as well. These mixed patterns of life (that were to be found not just in occupations, crafts and diet, but in the clothing and housing) differed from place to place depending on the natural resources available in a certain place and constituted a basis of what we would call now regional culture. The Szeklers⁴ preferred as raw material for their buildings the timber, meantime at the central part of Transylvania – known as *Mezőség* – the houses were built using the mud in various ways. These differences resulted in peculiar features observable even today – obviously, if one looks at houses built before WW II.

And though the market played a role in their life linking the different regions, as long as it was a sectional market with defined products and limited range where the change was culturally set,⁵ this change of goods didn't lead to the fading of the regional borders. Summarizing the above ideas one can see that people's foodstuff and raw material came basically from their near surroundings consequently as the environment changed from place to place, the ways of life of the different groups altered too.

But something happened as the Carpathian Basin had been re-conquered: the struggle between men and nature was re-opened and local groups formerly with environmentally embedded economic activities started to move on the nature–culture axis towards culture. As the demand for saleable foodstuffs all around Europe increased, the pressure on producers with more or less self-sufficient economy became greater, and Eastern-Europe started to be transformed into a large grain-field being included in world economic system as agrarian region. The newly returned landlords recognized the salient chances to be part of an economic process that might fulfill their demands for expensive manufactured products from west, and tried to increase their share of the yields. One way to reach such a high aim was to re-conquer as much land as possible from nature through drainage, and deforestation, through changing the original vegetation cover.⁶ The landlords expanded their estates at the expense of the peasantry, so the latter expanded its arable fields at the expense of the nature. The social struggle got an environmental side being reinforced by central reforms and bans of the Habsburgs who encouraged the production of potato, maize, and tried to regulate the deforestation. The new plants slowly but surely found their place in the popular nourishment displacing former and often local foods.

In the capitalist era, after emancipation of serfs, between 1848 and 1914 (or 1945, till the communist takeover) the process started in the 18th century continued with more impetus and almost every possible land suitable for tillage had been transformed in cultivated soil leading to less dependency from natural environment and food gathering. The channelization and deforestation gained momentum in these times, and the landscape changed

⁴ A group living in mountainous regions in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin.

⁵ EGYED 1981: 210–212; WOLF 1966: 40.

⁶ ANDRÁSFALVY 2007.

radically: the system of lakes, the moors, and the forests, the untouched vegetation disappeared gradually weakening the importance of fishing, hunting and gathering, diminishing the role of the local environment in subsistence. The social struggle also continued: as part of a long process the upper strata tried to vindicate the right of hunting for themselves, the fishing moved towards poaching as it was regulated and peasants forgot the old skills connected to natural resources.⁷

Beside all these the agricultural revolution started in Western-Europe in the 17–18th century characterized by new agricultural inventions, new methods and new crops made its influence felt stronger and stronger: even if it was a slow progression, the mechanization of agriculture did not stop as the cash crop overwhelmed self-sufficiency and food-producers could afford to buy new tools and machines that were more adapted for cultivation.⁸ The new agricultural professional knowledge and the new plants that appeared or spread in this period reinforced the transition and the withdrawal from the natural environment, as the better crop results and the varied new cultivated plants diminished the role of the gathered food so often used as emergency food and also in usual diets. Regarding new machinery, one cannot forget the new, iron-made plough that replaced the old one (a wooden-made tool, partially mounted with iron) and made possible the breaking of new soils thus expanding the cultivated land at the expense of the wild ones. And if the new plough involved new lands in agricultural production, the sowing machine based on seed drill and the horse-drawn hoe made this production more effective, resulting in much-improved crop yields improving also producers' position on the market: if you produce marketable goods, you earn money that can be spent for additional equipment. It is ironic and shows the effects of international market that the extension of arable lands completed at the fall of the European grain-boom⁹ when the cheaper wheat from Americas and Australia arrived to European markets beating down the prices and causing strikes among agrarian wage-workers.¹⁰

The market in the 19th century got more and more importance even if in some regions it was an indirect effect, because large strata of peasantry were not able to sell or buy regularly. But the expanding market linked more and more communities making its influence felt in two ways: from the end of the 19th century we have information about farms that produced food directly for western markets.¹¹ On the other side the consumption was influenced as well, the goods made in factories slowly and gradually displaced the home-made products. In this context one cannot disregard the endeavour of capitalism to direct every service and product to be sold and bought on the market with no direct change of goods between groups. The cheap and uniform products started to displace the hand-made ones, so craftsman communities dissolved turning into proletarians or peasants. It is the example of Torockó¹², that after a flourishing period entered in a decline owing to cheap industrial iron and railway network. To sum it up: the market and the railway linked distant places and communities, altered and internationalized production and competition, spread new

⁷ JAKSA 1998

⁸ BALOGH 1972; EGYED 1981: 212–220; VARGA 1972.

⁹ BORSOS 2003: 117.

¹⁰ GUNST 1998: 438; WOLF 1982: 312–313.

¹¹ BALOGH 1980.

¹² A miner and ironworker community in the Western Romanian Carpathians.

patterns of consumption and new products, and delivered better technologies rendering local features less important.

It is no doubt, however, that the capitalism and the self-regulating market did not change entirely the former differences: most of the peasants continued to rely on environment, ran their farms as the environment made it possible, and ate what they managed to extract from nature with those rudimentary technologies. Though in the 19th century they came under markets influence, they – and even the smallholders and sharecroppers – strove to self-sufficiency in food-consumption until collectivization. Moreover, the capitalism created new differences: the remote, mountainous regions for example still remained closely attached to their environment in much senses. They were not able to engage in commodity production continuing their subsistence economy and as a consequence they could not afford products from markets that would require cash. These differences are conspicuous if one compares the rural Saxon regions with the Szekler ones in Transylvania: the Saxons living in the center and around cities were engaged in market production and the Szeklers from the mountains could reach only the petty-commodity producer position. Thus the Szekler communities with lesser cash reserves were forced to apply technologies that did not require cash so the natural resources and the old patterns for example in housing remained prevalent.

On the other hand the increase of the urban populace meant at the same time an augmented demand for special products and around cities or near to transportation lines appeared communities specialized on vegetable or fruit production.¹³ But in these cases was not only the environment to make this progress possible: beyond man–nature relationship one has to regard the newly arisen market-based relations between consumers and producers in which nature (and gathering, fishing and hunting) lost its role in livelihood and shifted towards leisure creating no longer a basis for regional differences. The influence of the natural environment was decreasing, contrary to the economic and social environment.¹⁴

Radical changes – the collective farms and the socialist modernization

Although we know that the socialist system in Romania encountered at the beginning with lack of resources thus relied on hand-work and old, hand-made and wooden-made tools as the industrial production increased – the Romanian socialist system putting a special stress on steel industry and machine production¹⁵ – the collective farms were equipped with new, more effective machines (tractors, sowing machines, hoes, harvester-threshers and so forth) which led again to increased human intervention in the nature. The new machines allowed new plants for production and thus seemingly better extraction of energies from nature. Beside the new machinery and new plants that had appeared in production and altered the landscape, the shift on nature–culture axis was augmented by another special factor: in order to assure supplies for urban workers and to reduce the autonomy of rural population, the socialist leaders planned the agricultural production on every level defining from the center given quotas for every county, every commune and every collective

¹³ See BÁLINT 1962; BOROSS 1973.

¹⁴ BORSOS 2003: 117

¹⁵ VERDERY 1983: 39–48; VERDERY 1996: 26.

farm not taking into account the special features of the environment. As István Rév stated regarding to this period, every collective farm could have been seen as a duplicate of the national or county-level structures.¹⁶ Thus collective farms were under double pressure: they had to complete the fixed quotas and they had to complete these quotas for varied plants determined from the center. The surroundings had been changed radically and at the same time each commune's agricultural structure became similar with a lack of local features. The situation became more complex as the socialist power controlling all the resources limited the access of the people to the natural resources: the forests had been taken away assuring no longer the raw materials for housing, the hunting became a privilege of the party members.

But the transformation did not consist just of changes in production: in her book about the life and economy of the rural socialist Romania Katherine Verdery at some point analyzes the budget structure of villagers who became collective farm workers and/or peasant-workers with partial food production and incomes from wages at the same time. The author points out that the new incomes – because the food in a great proportion was produced by each family for their own consumption – were spent among others (educational expenditure, bribery) for building new houses and acquiring new furnishing and also new equipment.¹⁷ Obviously, these new products had been shaped in socialist aesthetics uniformly spread in all the country, thus the differences that existed in housing based on different raw materials and different lifestyles gradually became blurred as the faces of villages transformed.

The present-day situation

In the spring of 2009 together with the students of the Department of Hungarian Ethnology and Anthropology I launched a small project to describe the structure of some smallholders' households in different settlements – I was curious if there were any similarities/differences between the households' economic activities (including production and consumption) of different regions from Western Transylvania (lowlands) to its eastern parts (hills and mountains). Although the research hasn't been finished yet, the results called my attention again to a phenomenon that I met with few times before: students found several rural households where the cultivation or animal husbandry did not exceed the level of leisure- or hobby-farming. These families – although living in villages and owning plots just good for food production – reduced their activities saying that if they have calculated all the costs (the price of machineries, chemicals and even their work) the products on the market would be available for a more favourable price. Though I cannot formulate a final statement on the percentages, among families with large autarchic economic activities – including sometimes even the bread-baking as a symbol of peasant independence – we found quite often families (and young families with labor force) with no such activities, and families that renounced even to the production of vegetables. “Why should we make dirty our hands, watch if the rain comes or not, and struggle with the soil? – they asked. We simply go to the village store and buy everything we need at a better price.” To polarize the

¹⁶ Rév 1996: 142.

¹⁷ VERDERY 1983: 61–62.

situation: in the livelihood of these people – though being rural population – the environment doesn't play a role: they sell their labor force on the market and with earned incomes they buy everything from the market where they can find products originated from all over the world. They forgot how to use their natural resources in regular ways as alternatives for cultivated foods. Thus the self-regulating market that started to make its influence felt in 19th century with the changes of the post-socialist transition displaced self-sufficiency though at the beginning of re-privatization the most post-peasants had been engaged in a sort of autarchic agriculture. But the economic structures and agrarian politics hadn't allowed development, and the food proved to be cheaper on the market, so the agricultural activities of smallholders decreased and finally neither their production, nor consumption can be depicted with regional features. On the other side one could find the families of favoured regions with large farms where the agrarian activities (large-scale grain-, potato- or dairy-production) still constitute a basis for living. Nevertheless, their consumption also shows the unifying effects of the market: they buy noticeable quantities of food from the stores, their nutrition distances from the local resources and their houses are built following some new, non-regional patterns.

If one looks at the houses built in the last decade in Transylvanian villages hardly can link the new buildings with regional patterns. A house built like this can be built everywhere: the incomes are realized with selling their work (in the case of agrarian and non-agrarian entrepreneurs: products) on the market, the raw materials are bought with that income on the market, and the patterns come – in my view – from a more uniform popular taste with less observable regional borders. These houses are meant to display the owner's fortune, his taste and aspirations, and his capacity for catching up with certain patterns.¹⁸

I know, I gave a little bit somber – and meantime simplifying – view of the changes and the present situation despite we know there are still regional differences. The diet customs, the cuisines do not change overnight, neither the centuries old economic behavior. The great transformation couldn't have been completed and led to something that could be labeled (extending Wallerstein's and Wolf's ideas) "dual economy" typical for peripheries with groups and activities integrated by the market and on the other side socially and environmentally embedded activities with weak or no ties to market¹⁹. While their work and consumption is integrated (they are workers and consumers), their independent production is not supported or facilitated by any means. Nevertheless nowadays there are former peasant families with no food production, but there are still families trying to avoid the market. People always have looked for better opportunities, if they needed, they offered resistance – to capitalism, to socialism and to market again – preserving some control over their lives and some peculiarities of their livelihood.²⁰ During socialism food shortages were com-

¹⁸ SZABÓ 2009.

¹⁹ There is no room to explain longer, but it is worth a footnote that the other approach (that can be called market-based regionalism) to interpret the dual economy is related to the access to markets, since capitalist markets have created new differences based on resources and agriculture: there are some regions (or families in some regions) where due to favourable conditions agrarian activities afford affluence, consequently new patterns of consumption. The question is however how these new differences are displayed. WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel 1974: 18; WOLF 1982: 307, 353.

²⁰ Cf. SCOTT 1998: 127–130.

bined with self-providing that included cultivation, animal keeping and gathering. This is the dual economy of socialism: in the collective farms the agriculture was mechanized meantime the activities on the household plots reminded to ancient methods.

But despite their craftiness people are also vulnerable – as we know capitalism and the nationalizing states sometimes together, sometimes separated by different interests encounter with autonomous communities trying to render them loyal subjects of power.²¹ On economic level this can be done by uprooting and linking them to the centers augmenting their dependency from external resources and services. Regarding the smallholders' production: for the local farmers in Transylvanian villages nowadays it is made more difficult or they are banned to sell their products to their community thus they are forced to compete with greater producers on market or to close their farms becoming wage-workers and consumers on a global market. The dairy producers for example who usually bred 1 to 3 cows for their own use and for some profit are forced to modernize their smallholdings or they aren't allowed to sell their product.

The rediscovery of differences and the new regional ideologies

Two intertwining phenomena, however, counter-fight the effects of global market and nationalizing state: the first is the regionalism so often used in trendy European political discourses and the second is the ecological and cultural reform (green consciousness) with its constituents. Thus I try to grasp some aspects of the newly formed and branded regions – that is, the practical side of the folk culture used as basis for delimitation of regions in a decentralizing climate of the European and local politics. Zoltán Fejős called the attention in a paper that new regionalisms to a greater or lesser degree often use the old historical or geographical regions in order to create their basis using also the elements of the regional folk culture to represent the regional identity.²² The other aspect is that regionalism is enhanced by new patterns of consumption that could include the preservation of ecological and cultural diversity, stress on using local resources, the preservation of local types of production, the awareness of local values and cultures and so forth. Starting from the slow food movements that encounter the effects of the fast food through green and landscape reforms having in their focus the preservation of old housing types, the replanting and reintroducing of different ancient grains and fruits, and different animals that are believed to fit more in the environment until the local cooperatives trying to attract consumers from super-markets the process has a complex structure. This complexity is increased sometimes by tourism in which the local, the authentic, the different from mass consumption is overvalued – and consequently overpaid.²³ Tourism creates a breeding ground for localities whatever they would consist of as far as they are saleable. Obviously, these regions do not correspond entirely to the former ones and do not mean the rebirth of the forgotten economic patterns or way of life, but the regional politics could give an impetus to localities to be reformulated and branded bringing the locals closer again to their environment. Perhaps, it is needless to emphasize again that beside man–nature relationship the social and economic factors are at least as important as the natural environment.

²¹ APPADURAI 1998: 178–199.

²² FEJŐS 2002: 80.

²³ And let me just take no notice of tourism as an element that spreads transnational patterns and blurs the regional differences.

In Transylvanian settlements there are a lot of such endeavours and events that aim to preserve (or sometimes to invent) something special and unique claiming the label of authenticity. Among these new phenomena there are several within which some natural peculiarities, special elements of the local cuisines or special crafts constitute the starting element of a local festival and local branding. I'll enumerate just few of them focusing on Hungarian communities: Kommandó/Comandău – mushroom, Torja/Turia – polenta with cheese, Gyergyószentmiklós/Gheorgheni – cranberry, Varság/Vărșag – raspberry, Farkaslaka/Lupeni – charcoal, Parajd/Praid – stuffed cabbage, Décese/Decea – cherry, Kis-Küküllő/Târnava Mică, Szilágyság/Sălaj – wine (and wine-road), wine-contest, Kalotaszentkirály/Sâncraiu – rose-hips²⁴ (see the map). In many cases one can observe a shift from production to consumption meaning that beside products (that in some cases are saleable to a lesser extent), the production process itself undergoes a change of commoditization and the experience of taking part in something unique and authentic is sold as commodity: the people of countryside produce no more food, but sceneries.²⁵

Some of these festivals are organized by communities that are or would like to be engaged also in rural tourism targeting mainly tourists from Hungary and to a smaller degree from other regions of Romania (outside Transylvania). The festivals use a local product (or a product which is believed to be local, or labeled so) and try to display the regional or local identity. But local festivals that consist of various elements among them folk ones cannot be seen just as simple and innocent events to fight against patterns of mass consumption and cannot be regarded as communities' victory over global flows²⁶ or they are not just the means to enhance the local ties and identities by presenting some products and folk groups: very often they are scenes of the symbolic struggle of different elite groups and/or they constitute a basis for legitimacy. Besides these festive occasions there are some other projects to call the attention on local values linked to natural resources, like a project for preserving old houses in Csík/Ciuc region (including the use of raw materials and building types), re-launching the tradition of the local mineral baths and opening a mineral water road in the same region, or to reinforce the production, processing and selling of local (both cultivated and gathered) fruits in Udvarhely/Odorhei region. From our point of view the main problem connected to these programs is still about their effect and use on everyday level.

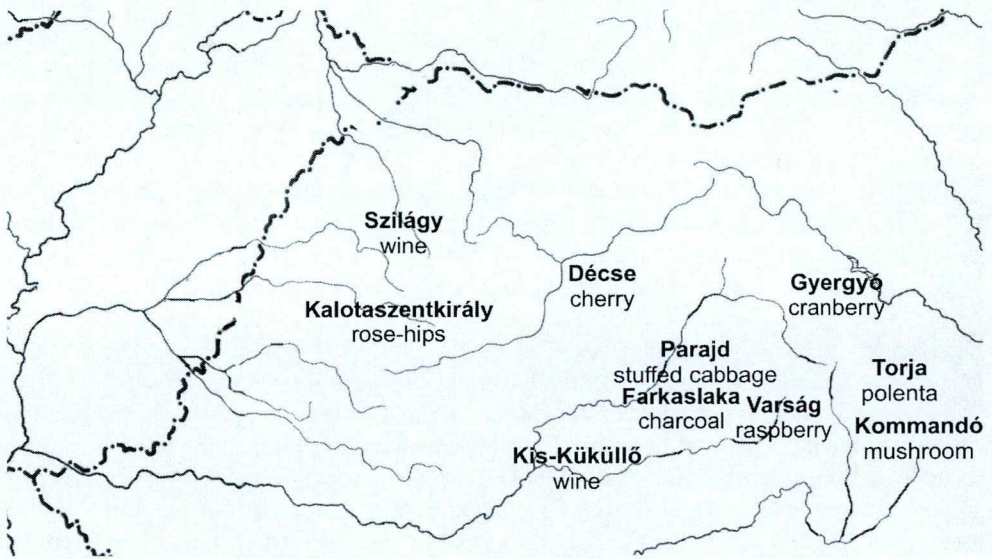
Yet, my worrying question is to what extent these aspirations of local or non-local elite groups, the political discourses or the discourses regarding the new patterns of consumption mean direct effects on the everyday life of the people living in certain areas. I wonder whether everyday people can afford the healthy lifestyle and if they can afford it, whether they want to follow it. As I said, the local communities do not change quickly and a pattern once admitted can hardly be replaced. Let's cast a glance at vernacular architecture again. Specialists always complain – understandable in a manner – on the new patterns that changed the old forms, structures of houses and used raw material, but they are often dis-

²⁴ The names in Hungarian/Romanian and the newly branded products.

²⁵ HEIKKILÄ 2003: 265.

²⁶ COLLOREDO-MANSFELD 2005: 222.

posed to forget that a house and the auxiliary buildings are not only the places of living and livelihood but the imprints of the local taste, local pressure and local symbolic struggle.²⁷ And if the old patterns of production and consumption, the traditional forms of houses cannot be perceived as battlefields for local power, the new patterns surely can. The capacity to spend money for different products, including foodstuff – working against of the old and still strong pattern of separate self-sufficient smallholding – is often seen as one of the surest signs of one's fortune, even if the big, beautiful, comfortable (in one word: modern) house leads the list. Ironically, often the handicraft activities (pottery, woodcarving, basket weaving) finding a niche on the market and embedding in cultural tourism result in houses presented earlier. Thus the effects and counter-effects work simultaneously: a study showed that in a village of rural tourism the guests ate the authentic products (bacon, cheese, boiled eggs, home-baked bread and onion), while the hosts consumed food bought in the village store.²⁸



The map of Transylvania showing some Hungarian localities with new local brands and festivals.

Concluding remarks

I hope I have succeeded to demonstrate the complexity of regional differences connected to economy and way of life. The local groups moved away gradually from their natural environment which was altered and integrated in culture as arable land, nevertheless depending on regions some features of environmentally embedded activities have been maintained.²⁹ But the general way of changes led to vanishing of the differences

²⁷ SZABÓ 2009.

²⁸ DANIEL 2009: 89–90.

²⁹ BORSOS 2000: 181.

connected to natural diversity due to multiple effects from which I highlighted the new technologies, and the capitalism and socialism³⁰ that directed every service to the market or to be centralized and aimed at rendering people dependent wage workers and consumers. Notwithstanding, some elements of diversity in Transylvanian rural economic activities persisted and the new ideologies reformulated them in different level. But it remains a final query to what extent these new patterns exert an influence over everyday level, and this question drives us to a more general one: how do the cultural patterns are shaped and spread? In my view the local ways of life are more and more under the influence of a national or even global popular taste that can hardly be regionally localized. These new tastes are shaped also by demands: while in traditional peasant communities demands were culturally limited, nowadays these communities adapt newer and newer demands being supported by the general influences of markets. And one could raise questions regarding the ways these new ways of regionalism get close to everyday people through these new market-based logics.

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³⁰ It is worth mentioning that not only the economic changes of the last centuries but also the administrative regulations contributed to the re-shaping or disappearing of regional borders (see FEJÓS 2002, HEIKKILÄ 2003).

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