Fields of Power

Episode 4: Land & Democracy

Ian: Here are some questions that you might have heard if you've made it to this episode, the final episode of Fields of Power. And those are: Why does any of this matter? What does land have to do with democracy? And what does land grabbing have to with the lack of democracy? I mean, somebody might say: as long as the GDP is going up, there's food on the supermarket shelves, and the fields glow yellow with sunflowers in the summer, shouldn't we be happy? Well, I think you might now the answer to this question… no…

Péter: Welcome to Fields of Power, episode 4: Land and Democracy.

Ian: In our final episode, we bring together everyone and everything that we've learned thus far, and try to untangle the bonds between land and democracy.
But before we get to all of that, we´re hungry. So let´s go and see if we can ourselves find a farmer who can wrestle up some food for us.

Kati's Farm

[[Lunch sounds]]

Kati: vegetable seeds mostly…some people are really like traditionalists: "and yes, I want the native Hungarian vegetables, the native tomatoes and the native peppers and I´m like you know the only difference is when that particular pepper variety came to the country ´cause like 200 hundred years ago. There is nothing ancient about it.

Ian: mmm, it´s really good.

Péter: mm.

Kati: can you taste how healthy it is?

[[Laughs]]

Péter: yes. All the vitamin E and C.

Ian: Doesn´t that take the joy out of it?

Kati: My theory is that I eat so much raw vegetables in the garden that actually i can just eat junk the rest of my life.

[[Laughs]]

Ian: You mean when you go around the farm, you are just eating all the time…

Kati: My name is Katalin Ráti and I am a farmer, but I'm also a biologist and an agroecologist. I studied in Hungary and then I did my master's in the Netherlands in Wageningen. And then when I came home, I started to work in the NGO sector, but already with food sovereignty and farming with low income communities in eastern Hungary. But I really had this wish, this dream to garden and to farm. And I was renting a piece of land in the neighbouring village where I grew up but there it was an investment property that the owners wanted to sell for a lot of money that nobody could afford. They still haven´t sold it but it was always like this lingering, the danger that they can sell in any minute so I didn´t do any investment there. There was a lot of wild animals eating everything. But it was a good lesson. And then I just kept dreaming that I really wanted to have my own farm and then 3 years ago I had my apartment in the city and I called my father and asked him would you be really mad if I sold my apartment and he said like you do what you want. He was really supportive actually. And then I found this property and then we started to farm here. This is the third season and the last two years were about constructing the house and I think the next five years will still be about constructing. But that´s normal I guess. It´s getting better and better.

Ian: We went to meet Katalin at her place not far outside Budapest. After a plate of pasta topped with loads of green healthy things, we went for a stroll down her farm. It stretched out behind her house, a thin disorderly collection of beds, beans and surprises.

Kati: Like this one is last year I was experimenting with celtuce, which is a salad that you can eat the stalks from. And now I have also four different varieties of this. Here I have different varieties of kale. From tomatoes, we have this year, like probably 30 different types. And spinach is something, an heirloom from this region. So it's just. We just try to keep the seeds of plants that are rare, I would say.

Péter: and where do you store them?

Kati: the seeds?

Péter: yes.

Kati: just in my kitchen.

Péter: ok, it´s not one of these seed bowls.

Kati: no, no.

Peter: We've come to meet Katalin because she is part of a wider - but not much talked about - farming movement in Hungary. A movement that points towards a different kind of future. A movement that challenges conventional farming, is critical of the unequal land relations we discussed in the podcast so far, and is actively trying to do something about it. Now, when we say movement, don't think of a well-organized, centralized activist group, but rather a collection of

independent - but often connected - farmers, families, businesses that are constantly trying to offer alternatives to the current - and very much broken - economic system.

Ian: We're talking here about Community Supported Agriculture (that's a system that connects consumers with farms, allowing them to buy directly from the grower), but also things like permaculture, regenerative farming, urban gardening, agroforestry, and a bunch of different practices that aim to improve soil health and biodiversity, while also reducing a reliance on chemicals.

Péter: That's a lot of concepts, and each one is fascinating – no doubt about that- but for our story what's most interesting about them is that beyond thinking about farming in a more ecological way, these ideas often also extend to thinking of land, democracy and justice. We want to understand what this movement of alternative farmers means for the future of land and farming in Hungary.

Ian: After the tour we sat down on a bench under a corrugated iron roof, which was occasionally pelted with walnuts from the walnut tree above it,- maybe more often than occasionally to be frank- and Katalin told us about her interest in agriculture and farming.

Kati: *When I started gardening, I always had this amazement with diversity and different kind of plants and crops and tastes. I think it mostly from the gastronomic point of view, but then it also became the reality that it has to be also for diversity, for resilience and diversity, for climate change, resistance and adaptation. And I think it all just kind of comes together now that sometimes you want to grow something that tastes really good and then you go for it and you grow it for that. But sometimes you just grow some things and they happen to be doing really good. And then you need to figure out how to use them. So I think it's a very nice and complex creative process as well.*

Ian: Some might say, that's all well and good, but what Katalin's describing is middle class people playing at being farmers. It's not really real farming. It's a hobby.

Kati: It's true, it's true. But I think it's an experimental project in the sense also for the community of the people who work here, who volunteer here. I would say it's somehow halfway between a hobby because now like it came to a point that we just in comparison, like the first couple years I was farming, I was making money elsewhere and I was pouring that money into farming. Right. So I would say that's a hobby. And now I think we're getting to the point already last year we got to the point that nobody has to put in extra money and the hourly wage is paid for everyone and the farm is self sufficient in the sense of the inputs that we have and the extra external labour. Maybe we have to hire a tractor or something so we can. So it's not losing money anymore and the people are getting paid. Not a lot, but it's comparable to other hourly wages in Budapest, I think. So that's already a step forward. I would say that my goal is also not to make a profit from this in the sense that of course it has to be sustainable, but financially. But it also has to be sustainable in a sense that I want to keep. Want to do it, you know, like on the long term. So yeah, I think it´s an interesting question because I see it with a lot of other people who start from leaving their intellectual jobs and going over to farming and it. I think there is a long transition period. I'm also now part of the market gardening, newly formed market gardening community in Hungary. And of course there is farms that are much more efficient in the sense of like selling produce and producing large amounts of food and giving it to families. I think we're also. You have to find your little niche in this, in this scene. And our niche is more like, I would say half of it is producing vegetables and selling it and also just providing food self sufficiency for ourselves. Like I think that's also a valid goal. But also we are, I think our role as a community plays and, or role as a research place and just an education

garden. Like maybe that's for us a bit more, it has a higher emphasis. But yeah, I hesitate to call myself a farmer sometimes when I'm among farmers.

Péter: Now, we wouldn't want to suggest that a relaxed attitude to making profit characterised everyone we spoke with. For Éva, at Kishantos, it was key that her organic demonstration farm made a profit. Partly this was a question of scale. Katalin provides food for a handful of restaurants and also sells locally. We asked her whether she thought that her gardening project would actually be viable at a larger scale.

Kati: Okay, just to give an example, I was in this female agri entrepreneur competition two years back and they kept telling me like, yeah, this is great, but how can you scale it up? And why do you only provide five restaurants? Why don't you say that you're gonna deliver to every restaurant, right? And I'm like, you guys don't get it. You totally don't get what it's all about. Because like scale up. I think it's not in the sense of like growing this one bigger, it's making sure there are places like this, as many as possible. And we're talking about this with this like newly forming agroecological market gardeners community that what we really see is that what we're doing is everyone experiences that. I think now that if you're doing something good, it attracts people and people want to learn that at one point you get overwhelmed by too many people want to buy your vegetables, everyone wants to make an interview with you. It's not for like me, not so much. I'm sorry, but some people like that newspapers always find them. For me, I never been find by newspapers, thank God. This is a village of 8,000 people. I think we should have at least five, but probably 10 farms like this in this village. Like every street should have a little farm like this and someone who's like part time doing it and just selling it to your neighbours, you know. And to do that I think you really just need to have like open gates. Like you have to be able to show what you're doing to as many people as possible. Because I think that's really how you get inspired. And since it's not, some people try to say that it's really something that you just write a recipe and a how to and you watch some YouTube video. Like I keep coming back to the smart gardening guys, but I find it like a bit because they are really scalable. It's like a very, even in like this economic sense, they're very efficient and they can be scaled to bigger farms. But then it gets like really almost kind of like industrialised, even if it's like organic, but it gets like a little factory and tuk tuk, tuk, tuk tuk. And yeah, it's interesting to see like where's the balance between that? Yeah, but to scale it. Yeah, I would just show it to as many people as possible, teach as many people as possible.

Ian: This push to open up the farm speaks to Katalin´s wider purpose beyond, but linked to, the growing of food.

Kati: And it can be regenerative or organic or permaculture or agroecology. Like, there's a lot of words and a lot of terms that overlap with each other, but I think it's the same kind of goal to like, create a meaningful life, create a meaningful profession, create community, and stop destroying around ourselves and just start building.
I see my friends just from my close circle, how each year there's at least one or two people from my close friends group who just shows up here for the season and gardens with me for a couple months. And then it kind of changes them, I think. Eventually everyone, not everyone, but most of the people I think will get under that kind of like effect of gardens and farms. And even the people you would have never thought that would be interested in that kind of thing were like very urban and very money driven. Even they, I think, end up eventually finding this because it's compared to, I think, a very superficial life that is what we've been kind of brought up in, in Hungary. I think even we were brought up in a new democracy, in a new capitalist system. And it was a very hopeful. Like

when I was growing up in the 90s, I think our parents were like very optimistic about all the goods, all the money, all the well-being, like the financial security that this country can offer in the future for us compared to communism. And I think by the time we grew up, like a lot of us realised that that was a lie. We live a good life, like financially, like we're safe. I was always well off in the sense I could study, I didn't have to work during my university studies and stuff. So. Yeah, but that was a lie often. And we find that that didn't make us happy. And then the world became a scary place and it wasn't going like this towards this awesome democracy where everyone is equal and everyone can just do what they want and they can make a living from it and pandemics and wars and stuff. Like it's a scary fucking place! And then you look for what? For honesty, for real things, for real values, for people, for community, where for a little bit you can just be yourself. You don't have to pretend and you can eat good food and you could be together.

Péter: Now we understand, some of you listening might be thinking: sure, this is wonderful for Katalin, her friends, and the wider community around where she lives. But what does this tell us about bigger questions related to land, farming and democracy. The things you promised us at the start of this podcast series.

Ian: Well, we're glad you asked, because to close this series we want to address this head on, revisiting some of the people we've spoken with as a means to tease out the relationship between land and democracy. So we're leaving Kati and her farm behind and, in a way that's hopefully not too dense, we're going to analyse what we've learnt.

MUSIC

Ian: In the previous episodes we heard about how smallholder farmers lose their land to oligarchs and how this is enabled by local authorities, the Hungarian political regime and facilitated by the EU. But this is not just a story about the last smallholders of Hungary. This is a story about democracy… or rather the lack of it.

Péter: We have not addressed the issue of democracy head on. We haven't said, 'look what's happening here! Here you can see how smallholder farming and democracy are linked. And look here, this is anti-democratic'. But it's always been there bubbling away.

A good place to start thinking about the links between farming, land and democracy is the Kishantos organic demonstration farm and folk school, the farm that was destroyed and forcefully privatised in 2014 and where we started this series. As well as being a farm for producing organic food it was also an initiative that placed relationships, culture, and community empowerment at the centre of learning and life. Éva, one of the founders of the Kishantos farm and folk school also talked about democracy in this sense: as democratic relations between humans, and as democratic relations between humans and nature.

Éva: Kishantos became a centre where we have taught everything what we considered useful for the people. Not only farming, not only organic farming, but democracy, as I told you. Because I strongly believe that the future of the humanity, which is very much questioned nowadays, because all our systems are unsustainable. The only way is to try to turn everything what the human on earth are doing into the sustainable ways.

Ian: Noémi, our go to professor on sustainability elaborates on democracy as a process.

Noémi: I don´t see why people don´t understand the relationship between land and democracy, agriculture and democracy, between rural development and democracy. We need to go beyond the Western liberal paradigm about democracy. So we're talking about democracy that is not just about voting. It's not just about how many parties we have, it's not just about the rule of law. We're talking about democratic values, about justice, about equity, and about the processes through which democratic relations come about, the caring, just, equitable processes. And if you think about democracy as these processes of building just caring and equitable relations, then aspects such as the relation to land, the right for producing and eating healthy food, community building, commoning, talking and listening to others, trying to understand different opinions, building a community based on a diversity of stances, of opinions, for example, a diversity of people come to the fore.

Péter: And as she goes on to argue, the government can play a key role here. … if there is willingness…

Noémi: So it's not just about a good government that provides access to hospitals for their citizens because, you know, you want your citizens to be healthy. But it's a government that prioritises the production of healthy food and the right for eating and producing healthy food for its citizens.

Ian: But someone then might say in response to that, 'yeah, you're presenting a radical little bit hippie idea of democracy. But, you know, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his friends might say, what they're doing is another form of democracy. It's a Central Eastern European idea of democracy in which people want to have a strong state, people want to have a strong leader, and that strong leader needs his people in place, such as his oligarchs, as they're called, maybe pejoratively called in fact, so that the state can respond to the challenges that are thrown at it. Because Hungary is a small country, it needs to have a quite tight knit group of people to be able to protect it from global food markets, international capitalism and the like. So sure, democracy in Hungary doesn't look how democracy looks in other countries, but it still has democratic institutions in place. Orbán, through redistributing land to potentially highly productive small groups of people, is allowing Hungary to be potentially be food sovereign in the future in a way that other smaller countries, those that maybe adapted a little bit more to global norms around liberal capitalist ideals haven't.

Noémi: There's a big difference between a democratic state and a pseudo democratic state, or said it differently, a democratic state and a state that uses the vocabulary of democracy to further undemocratic processes and exclude certain types of people based on racist, exclusionary arguments. So having elections in a state like the Hungarian one is no guarantee for democracy. Which doesn't mean that we should get rid of elections. I'm not against that. But elections without rethinking the type of democracy that we want, the type of democratic and sustainability goals that we want is no democracy. A democracy is, is about democratic relations. It's about giving people the opportunity to living without fear, in a just, equitable way, with nature, with the resources. So if you're excluding some people based on who they are, what skin colour or religion they have, or if they are, you know, farmers or political opponents, that cannot be a democracy.

Ian: This is key, and something we've been pulling at the threads of since the start of the podcast: if farmers are excluded from farming through fear or, longer term, through the degradation of the land, then it undermines democracy because land and democracy are deeply entwined.

The loss of land to speculating oligarchs is also a loss of community and identity.

Noémi: agricultural has a potential of building community , is related to identity. So where your land determines where you come from, where you feel identified and so on. So when you grab land, when you steal land, you're of course grabbing that wealth, but you're also grabbing or stealing the identity of the community on which entire societies rely on

Péter: This loss of community identity is closely tied to farming. But a farmers' identity as a farmer is not set in stone.As land relations change, as new ways of farming emerge, and as younger people are attracted to alternative farming, what it means to be a farmer is shifting.

Kati: so maybe I give you two versions because there is one version that I see from the Chamber of Agriculture. I get the newsletter because there's a mandatory membership, right. For everyone who's a östermelö, which is a producer basically. And there the picture is like, it's mostly like large scale, larger scale. They're farming animals, they want the money from the EU, they want bigger tractors, they are really pro animal products. They always feel like they're attacked by veganism. It's always just a lot of propaganda on why meat is awesome and Hungarian meat production is awesome. But the reality is that Hungarian farms are just getting bigger and bigger and the small ones are going bankrupt. So one, I would say picture of the farmer right now is the oligarch and who has like thousands and thousands of hectares, who has the big, big, big machinery, who takes up millions of euros in subsidies. And like, that's one picture, I think, and that's one reality. And then there's the other reality of farmers who are small scale, I wouldn't say necessarily traditional, so more like small scale, conventional farmers of fruits and vegetables or even arable production who are struggling. And I think the picture of the Hungarians from them is also that they're always demonstrating something. They always, there's always some problem that the, the price for the melons is too low, the price for the milk is too low. And. But I think you hear less and less about their voices. And then there's the traditional farmers, I think, which is now more like intertwined with regenerative and organic. So there is like still the traditional picture of Hungarian farmer is the guy standing in the puszta with his grey kettle and his. And horses and his, you know, like this picture of a German tourist magazine. And there, I think that doesn't really exist anymore, but now there is a generation of young farmers and I would say, okay, then I would call myself one of these innovative new generation of farmers and I think I'm part of that, who are doing things differently and learning from an international context and travelling and reading and watching and participating in whatever opportunity they get to learn and to experience. And it's often, sometimes it's people from families who are farmers, but it's often people who have nothing to do with the land and who have to like, do it from scratch.

Ian: This last type of farmer Kati mentioned, the kind she is, the new generation of farmers trying different ways of growing things, well they don't only have different relationships to the land, and different relationships to one another, they also have different relationships to the buyers of their produce. And different ideas about the market. Logan, the American who works on the organic farm close to Budapest explains,

Logan: so I'm coming from the small farm world where we grow fruits and vegetables that people eat directly. You can easily see the connection between celery or cabbage coming out of the ground

and how it is consumed. But you have farmers at a bigger scale who are growing feed crops, oil crops, maybe even fuel crops. They typically have a deep interest in switching away from these commodities and starting to grow things that either an animal which someone might eat or a human would directly eat. And they're becoming more interested in the potential of relocalizing their marketing chains as well. Because a lot of Hungarian farmers would have pride or take pride in knowing that what they grow from their land goes directly to families in their region.
But the globalised market of the last few decades, especially post European Union accession, has encouraged them to send off their grain, send off their oilseeds, even send off the cattle that they've been raising to somewhere else, to the mysterious black box which is the globalised food commodity market. So they, they're open to change.

Ian: And here we are talking about the EU again. But it's key when thinking about democracy. As we've mentioned a few times, it's EU subsidies for agricultural land that, in part, keep Hungary's oligarchs rich. But at the same time, the EU criticises Hungary for being undemocratic.

So we have an EU system of agricultural and land governance which helps undermine democracy in the country, and an EU leadership that likes to complain about the undermining of democracy in Hungary.

Péter: so when the European Union questions Hungary on the grounds of democracy, it does so in a way that is not related to agriculture. It does so on the grounds of the rule of law or the electoral system, or corruption, or the judiciary, or media freedom. But they rarely point out to the crucial link between land, agriculture and democracy.
So when the European Union questions Hungary on the grounds of democracy, it does so in a way that is not related to agriculture. It does so on the grounds of the rule of law or the electoral system, or corruption, or the judiciary, or media freedom. But they rarely point out the crucial link between land, agriculture and democracy. There are few or no judicial or regulatory means to address this at the EU level - and so little will change unless there are some serious reforms to its institutions.

Ian: Sometimes people like to say Hungary is experiencing democratic backsliding. I never liked that phrase as it suggests something linear and simple. And, moreover, if we did slide back into being peasants in a feudal system it might, in some ways, be a bit better.

Noémi: Actually, I want to reflect on the fact that some say that the current Hungarian regime has come back to a feudal system. And I think this is both right and wrong. So during a feudal system, under a feudal system, an elite has rights from birth to land. So they have a birth right to land which they don't produce themselves, but it's farmers, smallholder farmers, they're tenants who produce the land for themselves also for the elite to generate wealth from that land in Hungary. So there's also an elite, the oligarchs, who don't have right to the land from birth, but it's kind of similar, right, they have right to the land, they have right to apply for lease contracts because they're close to the regime, because, you know, they're the cousin, the son, the daughter of somebody who's close to the regime, so it's getting close to birth right. But the big difference with the feudal regime is that the tenants of the land, the smallholder farmers, who under a feudal regime had the right to live on that land and to produce a little bit for themselves so that they don't die of hunger. Well, this doesn't happen in contemporary Hungary. The smallholder farmers are eliminated, are expelled from the agricultural land they used to farm for some of them, decades and generations.

Péter: In this episode, we said we would be hopeful. But this is quite a depressing note to end the

episode and indeed the series on. Well, some might say, it's very Hungarian to end on a depressing note. And I´m Hungarian, so I´m allowed to say that.

Ian: But we wouldn't call it depressing, rather realistic given the situation of farmers in Hungary. Think back to what just Noémi said. At least under feudalism, farmers were allowed to farm the land, now they can´t! Plus, telling a sad tale and then sprinkling some false optimism at the end is a cheap narrative trick.

Péter: Rather we would like to end with a thought. Hungary is often presented as an exception. In its most simplistic form, the exceptionalist thinking goes: if it wasn't for that terrible Viktor Orbán everything would be okay!

Ian: But to us, this feels very unsatisfactory. It's the system of agricultural subsidies based on land size which allow for the oligarchs to get rich, and which led to the violent displacement, the dodgy auctions, the deaths that we covered. It's what gives the fields their power.

Péter: Which means that the conditions are there for land to undermine democracy across the continent.

Ian: This is not a distant threat. It is not just a story happening somewhere else. The rise of the far right, the spread of authoritarianism, the destruction of our planet- these are not just headlines. They are not just moments in history to observe from a distance. They are happening to us.

Péter: Every law rolled back, every lie normalised, every right stripped away, every degree the planet warms- it all affects us, our friends, our families, our future.
Silence is not neutrality. If we are not questioning, pushing back, and acting, we are allowing it to happen.

Ian: As you might have guessed if you've made it to the end of episode 4, Noémi and Péter are the experts on this topic. They've been researching and writing on it for the last five years or so and have produced amazing articles you should search for (of both academic and popular variety). They asked me to come and help them make this audio documentary and it's been an honour and privilege to learn about their work and play a small role in helping them express it via a different medium.'

All three of us would like to extend our deep gratitude to Kati, Éva, István, Logan, Gabi, and all these farmers, investigative journalists and other citizens who are defending the land and democracy, fight for a better future and sometimes even risk their lives for this noble cause here in Hungary and the in the rest of the world.

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