

Land: Distribution, Concentration, and Social Meanings

Global contexts and local perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The analysis argues that the social history and meaning of landed property is far from a closed process, and makes the important point that land should be seen as an integral part of the human world, society and culture. As such, we need to map out the roles and meanings that land assumes in particular social situations. In this sense, the land is a kind of social actor, not an entity outside society, independent of it, *behaving* and *changing* in a certain sense. Thus, the study sees land as endowed with agency in relation to human society, a land that can be seen as elastic even in its physical extent, as the wrangling over restitution has shown. The first three parts of this paper will review the social meanings of land and the issue of land reform. The fourth part illustrates the evolution of these meanings through some concrete examples of Transylvanian rurality.

Keywords: land, property, land reform, social meanings, agency

1. Introduction

The distribution of land and access to it was one of the central issues and driving forces in peasant society. In the emerging capitalist economy of the 18th and 19th centuries – when peasant groups gained access to land and could own it with few restrictions – a distinct ‘hunger for land’ became apparent. Beyond cultural horizons, this desire for land may have been the unifying factor across the various strata of peasant society, which was otherwise divided in many ways. The landless peasants and agrarian proletariat sought land to gain independence, while those already owning land, regardless of its size, sought to acquire more.

This land hunger, in many ways, defined the peasantry over long periods, influencing decisions on marriage, forcing peasants into poverty, self-exploitation, and even emigration in search of work overseas. Peasants were willing to go to great lengths to acquire land – though within the moral and practical boundaries that shaped peasant societies (see Szabó 2006). The 20th century disrupted this process, and the intense desire for land, often portrayed with a pejorative tone, was relegated to literary and cinematic representations. However, it did not entirely vanish; it transformed. In this paper, I argue that while the interest in land has persisted, the actors and contexts driving this interest (or ‘hunger for land’) have shifted. To understand this transformation, we must undertake a contextual, historical, and contemporary analysis of the complex social and political processes that have shaped our ideas and practices around what was once the primary means of production: the land.

Building on the above, this paper focuses on two key aspects: the peasant world¹ and the evolving and changing social meanings of land ownership.² It begins by reviewing historical dimensions of land tenure, followed by an analysis of these meanings in contemporary contexts. By employing both diachronic and synchronic approaches, the paper integrates global frameworks with local perspectives, arguing that the social and symbolic history of land tenure is far from a concluded process. Additionally, land carries significant symbolic content, which is crucial to understanding recurring land-related phenomena. This dual perspective is essential because the distribution and inheritance of property within families appear to be closely tied to state policies (Hann 1998, 4), highlighting the interaction between local and broader external influences. Furthermore, I contend that land should be understood as an integral part of human society and culture (cf. Micu 2014), requiring us to map the roles and meanings that land assumes in specific social contexts.

In this sense, land can be viewed as a kind of social actor: a source of subsistence and a connector within society (Micu 2014, 133). It is not

- 1 Given the limited space to review the various works and definitions of peasantry, I will define ‘peasant’ here in a simplified way as an agricultural worker who owns part or all of the means of production and organizes production within family units aimed at self-sufficiency. This definition primarily applies to the peasantry that existed from the emancipation of serfs until the end of World War II and the onset of collectivization in Eastern Europe. However, I must emphasize that traces of peasant society in Transylvania, as I also argue in the next chapter, can be observed even after this period (and that the legacy of the estate-based society also plays a role in the development of these patterns).
- 2 The paper focuses on land tenure, land under or capable of being under production, although it would be tempting to explore these meanings in other contexts such as the nature–culture divide, situations of cultivation and natural state which are not always self-evident (e.g. in the case of land under forest management, or pastures and meadows turned wild), land as landscape, national land or national landscape.

an entity separate from society, nor independent of it. In certain ways, it behaves, changes, and influences its surroundings. More precisely, the human relationships and interpretations surrounding land imbue it with additional meanings, giving it an almost behavioral capacity. In this regard, we can say that land possesses agency. Of course, this is only valid if we accept the concept of more-than-human agency (Cianchi 2015). Here, I consider two aspects of agency: intentionality and impact. If we recognize human agency in relation to nature and the ecological environment – indeed, to life on Earth in general (as the widespread use of the term Anthropocene suggests) – then we must acknowledge that human intentionality has been questionable over the past 150 years; while its impact in the last 20–30 years has been minimal (Otto et al. 2020): we never intended to harm nature or cause climate change, and now that we are trying to reverse it, the challenge has become difficult to overcome. In this framework, I attribute agency to elements of nature, including land, as they influence the development of relationships within the human world.³ I want to emphasize once again that I do not attribute agency to land itself, but rather to the systems of relationships that emerge from the interaction between land, human society, and culture. In this sense, land influences these relationships: it becomes a source of competition and conflict, shapes identities, and fosters alliances.⁴ Furthermore, land can be viewed as elastic even in its physical extent, as demonstrated by disputes over restitution (Verdery 2003) and recent changes.

Keeping the issue of property central to the argument, the first part of the paper will examine key features of land tenure, highlighting how one of the main drivers of change lies in the duality within both the broader peasant framework and the transformation of agricultural systems. In the next section, I will explore the social meanings of land, drawing on economic anthropology's approaches to distribution and production, with a focus on property rights. The third part will address land reforms from the perspective of the state, group formation, and legitimation, as well as market mechanisms, and will outline the long-term fluctuations I observe in land tenure relations in Transylvania since the emancipation of serfs. Finally, in the fourth part, I will illustrate the local development of these meanings through concrete examples from rural areas in Transylvania.

3 A good example of the agency of nature – although the author himself does not seize the opportunity to exploit this aspect – is that in the border dispute between Vrancea communities and Ojdula, the Vranceans who won the case invoked rivers and ridges as natural boundaries that, unlike the changing boundaries of empires and administrative units, do not change (Măntescu 2014, 109–110).

4 It is far from my intention to view land – whether through a materialist lens or a Stewardian core approach – as the sole or even the primary factor shaping these relationships.

2. The question of land tenure from the point of view of the disintegration of the peasant world and changes in agricultural systems

Some estimates suggest that without modern agriculture – relying solely on gathering and hunting, the energy extraction methods that preceded the first agricultural revolution – the Earth's carrying capacity would be approximately five hundred million people (Mazoyer–Roudart 2006, 19). In contrast, the current global population is around eight billion, which is sixteen times that figure. This population requires sustenance, necessitating access to land. From this somewhat simplistic perspective, we can grasp both the historical changes related to land ownership and the contemporary conflicts, including explicit struggles over land acquisition. Initially, land tenure systems were relatively flexible, but they have evolved into increasingly rigid frameworks globally and in specific regions due to rising population demands and food needs. The Anglo-American journalist Simon Winchester addresses this topic in detail in his book (Winchester 2021), where he identifies the first significant demarcation and maintenance of boundaries in the Bronze Age, when two farmers established strict separations between their plowed and cultivated lands (Winchester 2021). These boundaries, which have varied across eras and cultures, have shaped our understanding of land ever since. Two additional examples of differing land tenure concepts across time and culture include the conflicts between colonizers and indigenous peoples (Winchester 2021) and the transformations in feudal land tenure relations in the Carpathian Basin, from initial occupation to the emergence of private property (Fülemile 1987).

This study employs a dual perspective, global and local, to examine the characteristics of land-related processes. It highlights the existence of intense competition for land at the global level and the simultaneous occurrence of land abandonment in specific contexts, such as Transylvania. It is evident that the question cannot be examined in isolation; it must be considered within the context of other factors. It is therefore proposed that the issue be examined from the perspective of the disintegration of the peasant world, the changing relationship between state power and the inhabitants of rural areas, and the question be asked as to how we have gone from land-hungry peasants to the rural households of today that are giving up the land. The framework is thus constituted by two interrelated dimensions: firstly, the transformation of the peasant world in general, and secondly, changes in agricultural systems. In this context, I wish to highlight a duality that characterises both our perspectives, namely the transformation of the peasant world and the change in agricultural systems. From this dual perspective, it is necessary to inquire as to the underlying causes of the observed changes in land transaction patterns, including acquisition, retention, and transmission.

A substantial corpus of literature has been produced on the subject of the peasantry (and its dissolution). This protracted process has been and continues to be a significant area of concern for scholars engaged in the study of peasant groups in Eastern Europe (see, for example, Cartwright 2001; Dorondel-Şerban 2014; Fox 2011). As there is no consensus on the definition of 'peasantry', there is also considerable debate on the process itself. While some argue that the term is no longer applicable, there are still those who advocate the perpetuation of peasant practices. It is not my intention, nor is it feasible within the confines of this paper, to further this debate or even to resolve it. It is this very quality of being situated between two extremes that we find of interest, and which also provides the framework for our approach to land tenure. I concur that it is no longer possible to speak of peasantry in the context of the significant social reorganisations and modernisation efforts (chiefly serf emancipation and collectivisation) that have occurred in recent history. However, it is evident that the peasant mentality and associated practices, which were a fundamental aspect of these socio-economic systems, have demonstrated remarkable resilience. State reforms could hardly eradicate them. The barrel analogy proposed by Ferenc Erdei has been used to illustrate the longevity of peasant practices across historical periods (Erdei 1942, 60-61). In light of the aforementioned evidence, it can be argued that Transylvania still exhibits a dualistic heritage, comprising both peasant traditions and practices centred around the household, which are becoming increasingly marginalised, and large-scale farming operations. This is one of the dualities (or in-betweenness) that is of interest to us.

A similar dichotomy can be observed in the transformation and spatial distribution of agricultural systems. This also fits into a broader framework, namely that of the two principal regional approaches to agriculture in Romania. One region is that of historical Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains, where a mosaic landscape structure is maintained in agricultural systems that are based on traditional peasant practices. The other region is that of large-scale monoculture agriculture, which is located outside historical Transylvania (Meikle 2012). It is also necessary to consider the natural and geographical aspects. The hilly-mountainous areas of Transylvania have never been conducive to large-scale agriculture, whereas the lowlands outside Transylvania and the Carpathian region were particularly suitable for it. It is also important to note that these regional differences are often highly variable. In this sense, Transylvania can also be divided into several internal regions, which also influences the distribution of land holdings and the relationship between them. In the floodplains of the larger rivers (Mures, Olt, Someş, Târnava Mare, Târnava Mică), and in the agriculture of the eastern Transylvanian basins (Ciuc and Covasna), we can observe the aforementioned localised practices outside Transylvania. In contrast, the hilly and subalpine regions exhibit a greater degree of continuity in peasant practices. However, both areas are characterised by

the expansion of large farms and the abandonment of agricultural land. As József Gagyí aptly observed, there has been a process of detachment from the land, which he described as the detachment from the land's umbilical cord (Gagyí 2009, 141).

Consequently, while global land grabbing is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly visible, a parallel restructuring of attitudes towards land is also taking place in Transylvania. The abandonment of agricultural land, the afforestation of former pastures, the conversion of meadows and ploughland into pasture, and the blurring of boundaries between parcels are among the most notable changes. Additionally, the legal or semi-legal acquisition of land by large farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs – in short, the narrowing of the fields – can be observed in many locations. However, a comprehensive analysis of this issue has yet to be conducted. Nevertheless, its significance is beyond question. Land was the central factor in the social structure of peasant societies, and contemporary social scientists are observing a radical transformation of this central role. It is evident that regional variations may exist with regard to the manner in which this separation occurs. However, it is typical that land cultivated prior to the implementation of collectivisation or during the existence of collective farms is either taken out of cultivation or, at best, left in pasture. However, for those engaged in this process, it is imbued with significant meanings, as land is not merely a means of production but also a fundamental aspect of identity.

3. Land: a means of production and a social form

It can be reasonably assumed that all scholars would concur that land, in addition to being a vital resource and a means of production, is a highly intricate social entity in its own right. For those engaged in agricultural pursuits, the social implications of land may not be a primary concern. Nevertheless, these implications cannot be ignored, as they shape ideas about land, the distribution of land as a resource, rights of access and their limitations in ways that vary across different eras and cultures.

It is important to state at the outset that the intention of this article is not to challenge the fundamental premise that land, irrespective of its historical and geographical context, serves as a primary source of food. This is the case for hunter-gatherer bands, horticultural tribes, nomadic pastoral societies, peasantry and industrial agriculture, as well as for alternative forms of production that have emerged in the post-industrial era, such as organic farming, permaculture and community farming. Nevertheless, this enumeration demonstrates that the meanings of land can be highly diverse. For instance, consider the case of a large agricultural enterprise and an alternative form of farming that entails a certain degree of commitment. It is evident that significant shifts in agricultural practices, such as the advent of productive farming, animal husbandry, and ploughing during the first agricultural revolution, and

the subsequent renewal of agricultural production technologies in the era of the industrial revolution, are inextricably linked to land.

The concept of land can also be examined in terms of its association with common and private property,⁵ as well as in broader terms of property and disposal (Tárkány Szücs 1983). The question of common and private property, and the assumption of communistic and individualistic societies, has been a significant topic of discussion in the history of cultural anthropology. Furthermore, given that land constituted the primary means of production up until the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the ownership, rights and restrictions associated with land were pivotal in determining the functioning of society (Winchester 2021). Consequently, the meanings of land can be examined in terms of the principles of distribution (Polányi 2004), as well as in terms of the modes of production (Wolf 1995).

In the view of Károly Polányi, the different distribution principles can be distinguished precisely in terms of the integration of land and labour. In his analysis, Polányi posits that kinship provides the institutional framework for reciprocity, while redistribution is provided by chiefdoms and the market is disembedded from the framework of social institutions. He is aware that these systems of distribution emerged concurrently with the advent of agriculture and are present in all cultures. However, he considers them separable precisely on the basis of their dominance. The foundation for this assertion is the degree to which the systems of distribution and the social institutions that underpin them integrate and mobilise land and labour. In a system of reciprocity, the kin group assumes the role of proprietor and exercises control over access to the land. The group offers its members the opportunity to engage in labour on the land and provides them with other resources. In redistributive systems, this function is assumed by leaders or, more broadly, by a central authority that distributes land entitlements, occasionally revoking them or imposing limitations, while mobilising labour. Ultimately, the ascendance of the market leads to the commodification of land and labour, whereby no social institution is able to exert control over them.⁶

It is evident that for Károly Polányi the schemes of distribution are pivotal in the formation of his system. Similarly, for Eric Wolf (and for Karl Marx on whom he is based), it is production that serves as the foundation for the division. However, it can be postulated that the

5 Property: the ability to own objects, things; but also, the relationship between people mediated by objects. It is worth noting, however, that the notion of property as we know and practice it, which is applied in most cases and which prescribes the exclusive access of a person and the exclusion of others, is a Western concept and results from modern development (Hann 2005). This also puts questions of common and private property in a different light (see Berthoud 2014; Barnard 1993) and offers the opportunity to have a different look at the questions of different property regimes regarding land in Transylvania.

6 Although we do see some form of social regulation of land in many market-based societies. But more on that later.

aforementioned division is also correlated with the modes of production, for the sake of simplicity, the kinship, the tributary and the capitalist modes of production. It is not my intention to base my argument on the foundations of neo-Marxism. Nevertheless, if we accept, beyond class conflicts across historical periods, that the ways in which productive forces (labour and labour tools) and relations of production (forms of property and property relations) are organised can determine the social structure of particular periods, or at least form part of it, we cannot ignore the fact that in a given historical context production was organised by kin groups, in another historical period it was subordinated to different powers, and in still other periods it was based on purely market-based economic logics. Moreover, land played a pivotal role in these processes.

A consideration of the example of the Hungarian society of estates and the question of ownership reveals that land ownership systems permitted the conferral of disparate entitlements upon the various social orders. In regard to land ownership, serfs were granted only the right of use. The physical or legal persons above the serfs already had the right of possession, but the right of final disposal belonged to the top of the social hierarchy. This was evidenced by the fact that the king could grant and take away estates (Tárkány Szücs 1983). The circulation of land in society was relatively limited, and apart from donation and inheritance, it was only infrequently subject to market transactions (just as the market itself, although present, was marginalised alongside the mechanisms of redistribution). The use and ownership of land in feudal systems was surrounded and described by an extraordinary number of rules and legal customs at various levels, given that land was indeed the most important means of production and embedded in the hierarchical structures of power that characterised this period. Those engaged in contemporary land-related activities would be well advised to take account of the historical context.

4. Land reforms, market mechanisms and counter-processes

Chapter 25 of Leviticus is one of the first land reforms (Leviticus 25). While the law of land restitution was arguably never fully respected, it is notable that there was a religious and ecclesiastically codified text that land should be returned to its original owner every 50 years (Fager 1987). Similarly, servants and slaves must be released from their obligations. Furthermore, the law addressed social justice, equality and economic considerations (Warriner 1969). In his 1987 publication, John Powelson provides a comprehensive historical overview of land reform, tracing its evolution from ancient high cultures to contemporary contexts in Brazil and India. He makes the intriguing observation that the institution of land ownership is contested when there is a surplus of land, but emerges when land becomes scarce. Or, at the very least, they indicate

the necessity for such a reform (Powelson 1987, 308). Furthermore, scarcity was a defining feature of medieval and subsequent modern Europe (Powelson 1987, 309), compelling authorities to implement land distribution policies. However, from the end of the Middle Ages onwards, we can also consider the emergence of the capitalist market and its effects on the land tenure system, as evidenced by the practice of enclosures. In response, there were a number of central initiatives aimed at maintaining small peasant production (Powelson 1987, 80-81). England's history is, of course, particularly relevant in this context. A similar pattern can be observed in the history of France and Spain, where the growth of large estates has resulted in the decline of smaller holdings (Powelson 1987, 82-88).

It can be argued that the history of land reform is as old as that of human settlement and agriculture. This also indicates that those in positions of authority have historically sought to regulate land tenure as a means of influencing the functioning of society. If we consider the long history and broad geographical scope of land reform, it becomes evident that the end of estate-based societies marks a pivotal point in this historical trajectory. The Habsburg Empire provides a suitable geographical framework for analysing this phenomenon across the Carpathian Basin. A comprehensive examination of this region reveals a discernible pattern of land concentration, irrespective of the distribution systems in place. This concentration can be observed in both administrative and market-based systems. Furthermore, it appears that those in power are frequently interested in either halting or, if feasible, reversing the concentration of land. This is a fundamental aspect of contemporary land reform. In the context of the past 250 years, this has resulted in a distinctive dual fluctuation of land, shaped by both administrative measures and capitalist influences.

The Carpathian Basin offers a good opportunity to investigate these issues: in the 18th century, in an effort to curtail the expansion of noble estates, which were also engaged in trade, the Habsburg monarchy sought to either halt the growth of these estates or, at the very least, to establish a framework for the relationship between serfs and the nobility. The serf emancipation of 1848 constituted the final stage in this process, effectively halting the expansion of large estates while also facilitating the redistribution of land. By the end of the 19th century, however, the relatively free commodification of land led to a strong concentration and the emergence of a new unequal land tenure system. This system was characterised by a few large landowners and their large estates, or a large number of small landowners and the little land they owned, or even a landless agrarian proletariat. In Transylvania, this process was concluded at the conclusion of World War I with a change in governmental authority and the implementation of a land reform initiative. The land formerly belonging to the extensive estates (which were primarily under the ownership of Hungarian churches and noble families) was distributed among small peasant farmers, war veterans,

and other social groups. Following the conclusion of the World War II, a further land reform was enacted, which was swiftly followed by the implementation of collectivisation, namely a new consolidation of land ownership. Following the political changes of 1989, the Romanian authorities initiated a programme of land redistribution, which resulted in the re-emergence of numerous smallholdings. The fragmentation and household-associated small-scale production were subsequently halted by market mechanisms and EU measures, and then reversed at some point in the mid-2000s, when the creation of large estates became dominant once more (with, it should be noted, regional variations and differences).⁷ The asset that was subject to these fluctuations was the land. It formed the basis for power arrangements and peasant aspirations, shaped identity and the structure of villages, and represented inheritance chains. The subject in question is imbued with meaning, significance and agency; it has the capacity to affect people's lives.

The transformation in land tenure cannot be adequately characterised by the notion of capital accumulation alone (Piketty 2014). It is not sufficient to consider land as an arbitrary form of capital, as it cannot be transferred freely in certain periods,⁸ nor can it be moved. Furthermore, land is a vehicle for the accumulation and representation of social meanings, symbolic capital and prestige. The symbolic content was also recognised by the Kabyle peasants, who were the subject of study by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1978). Furthermore, these symbolic contents have been observed in other contexts, including the Transylvanian Szekler examples (Oláh 2004) and the case of the Romanian peasantry (Micu 2014).

Furthermore, land can be defined as a fictitious commodity, along with money and labour, in accordance with the terminology proposed by Károly Polányi. It is not produced by us. In this sense, land is a given, part of nature,⁹ and it is only under the influence of market conditions that we perceive it and treat it as a commodity.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is somewhat paradoxical that despite the dominant definition of value in economics and economic anthropology being that of labour,¹¹ the value of land in this sense is particularly challenging to define. The land is not a result of human activity or work. However, the land itself and the status of use are often linked through work. In traditional peasant societies,

7 For a somewhat more detailed description of these reforms, see the end of this subchapter.

8 Even after the capitalist transition, at the end of 19th century Transylvania still had a high proportion of land holdings (especially: pastures and forests) with limited transaction potential (Egyed 1981, 201).

9 Although, as we know, the question of where to draw the line between nature and culture remains (see Hirsch 2005).

10 Just as human labour is an integral part of a person. But here too the market separates the two dimensions.

11 The theory of one of the founders of classical economics, Adam Smith, is further elaborated by Chris Gregory (2009). Value in the Marxian view is also mostly labour value.

the ability to work and the actual work itself have been seen as the means by which economic agents are entitled to use a given piece of land. Consequently, in both medieval and modern Hungary, the additional labour invested in the cultivation of vineyards was compensated by the fact that these were not subject to the system of feudal obligations. As long as the user and/or proprietor could work the land, their right to it was not challenged (Égető 1985). Similarly, members of the Szekler communities who were engaged in land clearance asserted that they should not be required to relinquish their holdings to the community (Imreh 1973, 135-136).

The concept of land is often regarded as a mere commodity; however, this perception fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Furthermore, land can serve as a conduit for the formation of groups and the establishment of legitimacies (and their subsequent delegitimisation) at various levels. Consequently, the distribution and concentration of land hold multifaceted meanings (cf. Micu 2014). The boundaries of the Szekler forest estates, which were used collectively for an extended period, even by multiple villages, began to be defined in the 17th-18th centuries. This was due to the fluctuating size of the communities and the diverse utilisation of the forest (timber and firewood for domestic purposes, charcoal and lime production, grazing, hay-making, and gathering). These factors rendered the establishment of fixed, rigid borders impractical. From this period onwards, there is a growing body of written evidence attesting to the existence of conflicts over access rights, which often gave rise to significant tensions (Kolossváry 1975). In the village of Cobătești/Kobátfalva in Harghita County, local memory preserved the story of a conflict over a forest estate in the early nineteenth century until the early 2000s (Pap 2007), which serves to illustrate the importance of forest land.

Furthermore, the role of land in the relationship between the state and the everyday people is worthy of consideration. The state may initiate the redistribution of land use rights, the distribution of land (cf. Micu 2014), or even its concentration (Verdery 2004a), or it may oppose or at least criticise the market-based concentration of land. The absolutist monarchies of the 18th century, including the Habsburg dynasty, were acutely aware of this, despite the often unsatisfactory outcomes of their urbarial reforms (Fülemile 1987, 56). Their policy of protecting the peasantry entailed both the regularisation of the status of land held in common by nobles and peasants, and the central codification of the – often vague – serf obligations that were recorded only in local customary law. This was not, however, a land reform in the strict sense of the term. Among other consequences, it resulted in the creation of a new category of commons in forests and pastures, comprising individuals who had previously been serfs (Petercsák 2008, 23).

The argument is situated within a broader context through the lens of enclosure in England. In an industrialising England, which was also undergoing the expansion of market distribution systems, enclosure

served as a means for landowners to transition to capitalism, displace smallholders, and facilitate the emergence of free labour, which was a prerequisite for industrial production systems (Polányi 2004, 62-63; Thompson 1963, 217-218). It is perhaps unsurprising that during the Tudor period, there were multiple efforts to counteract the practice of enclosure (Polányi 2004, 63-64).

The serf emancipation of 1848 constituted a significant turning point in the history of land reform. It should be noted that not all classes living under feudal subordination gained access to land. For example, the cottars were excluded, as they did not have the same rights to land as serfs under feudalism. However, the reform did create the possibility of ownership for large swathes of the peasantry. The equivalent of the 1848 reforms in the Romanian principalities was the serf emancipation and land reform of 1864, which also contributed to the strengthening of the small landowner class. Concurrently, the latter half of the 19th century was marked by a rise in capitalisation, with land, now regarded as a market commodity, also entering this cycle. Ákos Egyed's analysis of the situation in Transylvania at the end of the nineteenth century reveals a notable consolidation of land ownership, encompassing both peasant-landlord and smallholder-rich peasant relations (Egyed 1981, 193-199). The land distributed in the mid-19th century began to concentrate in the hands of a few owners.

The next significant land reform in Transylvania occurred under the new Romanian rule. Following the conclusion of World War I, the newly established Romanian state employed land reform as a means of bolstering the economic position of the small and middle classes, while also providing compensation to war veterans and war widows. In addition to the social interpretation of the reform, there is also a national-ethnic reading. In Hungarian historiography, the reform was not simply aimed at breaking up large estates and strengthening small and medium-sized estates. It was also concerned with the distribution of Hungarian secular and ecclesiastical property. However, the official position denied the ethnic aspect and simply referred to the structure of the distribution of landed property (Bíró 2002; Cartwright 2001, 55).¹² In this instance, land serves as both a social and a national legitimisation tool (cf. also Giordano 2014). Furthermore, the 1945 land reform can be regarded as a means of establishing social legitimacy. The newly established power structure, which had been shaped by Soviet influence, sought to establish its legitimacy. In a country that was still predominantly agrarian at the time, the distribution of land to the peasantry, or alternatively, to war veterans, appeared to be an appropriate means of achieving this. Furthermore, it served as a means of temporarily deflecting suspicions of collectivisation. The land reform was accompanied by the nationalisation of large estates, including

12 This is underlined by the fact that, in addition to specific local examples, two different laws applied to the Old Kingdom (the two principalities) and the newly annexed territories (cf. Szabó 2013a, 74).

commons. Once more, this can be interpreted from a national-ethnic perspective. The Hungarian aristocracy, the churches and the Szekler commons were stripped of their remaining land holdings.

Nevertheless, the distribution of land was swiftly followed by a period of concentration in the aftermath of World War II. This was no longer a market-based phenomenon; rather, it was embedded in the administrative, centralising policies of a redistributive system. The process of collectivisation transformed property and property rights in several waves, creating a hierarchy of property rights (state property, collective property and private property, cf. Verdery 2004a). At the same time, state authority was no longer built solely through the manipulation of land tenure; instead, it was established through direct means of fearmongering (conceptual trials, labour camps). The state extended the concept of administrative tenure (Wolf 1973, 389) to encompass both state-owned and collectively owned land. Furthermore, it intervened directly in the management of agricultural holdings, given that agriculture and the rural population constituted the primary means of centralised resource extraction for state purposes (Verdery 2003, 41).

The land reforms that followed the changes of 1989 also had significant political implications. There is a consensus in social science that restitution, and in particular the manner in which it was implemented, was primarily political in nature, rather than driven by economic considerations. The land reform re-established a multitude of small and middle peasant estates, while also serving as a gesture of compensation for the adverse experiences of the socialist regime (Cartwright 2001; Verdery 2003). In this manner, the socialist system was placed in a kind of parenthesis, as if the moment of a new beginning could be set in the pre-socialist era (Giordano-Kostova 2002, 77). However, this land reform was also followed by a process of concentration, both at the national and local levels. In Romania today, a small number of landowners possess a considerable proportion of the country's land, while a significant number of landowners have a relatively modest holding (Fox 2011, 51-52).

Concurrently, market-based concentration is reinforced by global processes in which land tenure is becoming increasingly significant due to food production, food crises, subsidies for cultivated land, capital inflows from Western/developed countries and land grabbing in the Global South (Sassen 2013; Borras et al. 2011). This is occurring alongside the struggle of smallholder farms, which advocate sustainable development, with agricultural corporations promoting cheap mass production as the sole solution to overpopulation (Ploeg 2008).

5. Local perspectives on land and land tenure relations

In the two preceding sections, an attempt has been made to present a historical and global context in which land becomes the object

of social programmes and a social actor to which we ascribe agency. It is important to note that the presented picture is, by necessity, an exaggerated one, due in part to the constraints of the available space. The following section seeks to address this oversimplification by examining some local interpretations of the significance of land. It should be noted that the list is not exhaustive. The location is Bahnea/Bonyha, a settlement situated in the valley of the Târnava Mică/Kis-Küküllő river, which has experienced a decline in prosperity in recent times. Of the aforementioned major processes, the villagers recall collectivisation and reprivatization with the greatest clarity, and both subjectively and objectively, these had the most significant impact on their lives. In addition, the effects of the 1945 and 1921 land reforms must be considered, albeit in a non-personal, tangential manner. In an interview, one of the interviewees, who was born on a farm of tens of hectares created by the commassation, also mentioned the processes of the late 19th century. The articles of law, regulations and decrees are thus reflected in the lives of everyday people, and even at this level, we can observe the double effect: the authorities both grant and revoke land ownership, and land can be bought and sold on the market.

5.1. Land divisions, collectivisation and (hidden) ethnic meanings

The aristocratic family of Bahnea/Bonyha was subject to the same changes in the social meanings of the land as the ordinary inhabitants of the village. The Bethlen family¹³ was affected by both the Communist Party's pursuit of power and the ideological conflict it engaged in with the former establishment during the construction of the regime. Additionally, the Romanian state's efforts to utilize land control as a means of establishing social and national legitimacy preceded and coincided with this period. As previously stated, an ethnic interpretation of the 1921 land reform suggests that one of its objectives was to disintegrate the Hungarian noble and ecclesiastical estates. Furthermore, the history of the Saxons in the area must be taken into account when interpreting this situation. The post-World War II regulations, which also affected property rights, made the existence of this ethnic community virtually impossible (cf. Cartwright 2001, 55; Verdery 1985). It is therefore unsurprising that, in the (secret) inter-state pacts established from the 1960s onwards, a significant number of people sought to emigrate or resettle (Verdery 1985). This process was then massively and apparently definitively completed after 1989 with the opening of the borders.

13 At the end of the 19th century, the most important owners of Bahnea/Bonyha were the Bethlen family (their presence and farming in the village can be documented from the 16th century). Their holdings of well over 1,000 hectares at the end of the 19th century, with estates in other villages reaching almost 1,500 hectares by 1910, were also significant at Transylvanian level. I refer to the exact source of the data on them in my book. On the family see Szabó 2013a.

Prior to the implementation of the land reform legislation in 1921, the Bethlen family possessed a considerable estate, comprising nearly 1,500 hectares of land, of which 200 hectares were kept in their possession for agricultural purposes. This remained a substantial estate within the local area. However, as a result of the family's inability to maintain it, one of their mansions in the village was demolished and their distillery was sold. Some of the estates (both arable land and plots inside the village) that had been dispossessed were distributed to villagers. Subsequently, a number of individuals were allocated plots for houses, and new thoroughfares were established. The land distribution list, compiled at this time, includes both Hungarian and Romanian families. On the correction list, which removed families from the original list, there are predominantly Hungarian names. In 1945, the remaining property was confiscated, and the family was exiled to a forced settlement. The new streets that were subsequently established in the village, the houses that were allocated, the land that was distributed, and the collective farm that was being established were located and operated on the land, in the estates, and in the castles of the Bethlens. The transformation in the social function of the land in the village had both beneficiaries and sufferers. The Bethlen family did not return to the village. The castle, which is still standing, is currently under the purview of the Transylvanian Reformed Church. The edifice underwent a comprehensive and extensive restoration in 2020 and is currently utilised as a cultural and event centre, an exhibition space and a castle hotel.¹⁴

In the context of property rights (and within this, land ownership) as an administrative instrument and its ethnic implications, it would be beneficial to provide a more detailed commentary. The term 'land reform' or 'nationalisation' is used in historiography to describe the events. But these measures must be interpreted in the context of a specific family. A documented history spanning at least four centuries was disrupted following World War II, a period during which shifts in the conceptualisation of land assumed a significant position. In 1921, the newly established state apparatus overthrew the previous aristocratic social order by seizing control of the most important resource, land, and subsequently reinforced the new order by distributing land. Following the World War II, the consolidation of power was achieved through a dual process of nationalisation and land redistribution. The pursuit of total power then led to the implementation of collectivisation and the attainment of total administrative control of land. It could be argued that the process of land titling, the removal of land from the control of peasant society, the abolition of the possibility of autonomous control over land, and the creation of new administrative boundaries, initiated the process described above by József Gagyí as the 'detachments from the umbilical cord of land'.

14 See *castelbethlen.ro*. Accessed 9 August 2024.

5.2. Unfinished reprivatisation and the legacy of socialism

It is often the case that land reforms fail to achieve their stated objectives, despite the laudable intentions that underpin them. Rather than functioning as instruments of equity, as they should, they frequently fall short of this goal (Powelson 1990, XIII). In addition to the fact that land reforms are frequently designed to increase state control and extract surpluses (Powelson 1990), there are also numerous shortcomings in their implementation, which can even lead to conflict (Rusu et al. 2011; Verdery 2004b). This was particularly evident in the context of the land reform in Romania following the 1989 political transition (Verdery 2004b).

Collectivisation and reprivatisation can be seen as the most significant period in the 20th century of changes in the meaning of land. Neither of these can be considered simply as changes in (property) rights. We know that, although peasant households had been the actual owners of their land for just over a hundred years at the time of collectivisation, over the course of these few generations strong emotional attachments had developed between owners and their land that placed land tenure above simple patterns of ownership.¹⁵ It is therefore important to understand collectivisation in this context. The land, desired by peasant society (and it is crucial to emphasize that it was precisely this desire, the goal of acquiring land, in addition to the way of life) bound together peasant society; a society that was already highly stratified by the end of the 19th century. This same land, in the context of collectivisation, could become a burden and could serve as a basis for the accusation of being anti-establishment. Mentalities regarding land underwent a significant transformation. As the highly sought-after assets rapidly transformed into a burden, many individuals opted to formally transfer the land to another party. Furthermore, the process of reprivatisation was not without its own set of implications. It introduced a new set of rights and obligations, which not all individuals were willing or able to assume (Verdery 2004b). The issue of land restitution also evokes a complex array of emotional responses. In conversation in Bahnea/Bonyha, the once flourishing farm and cultivated fields are frequently mentioned, whether in reference to the count's time or to the period of the operation of the collective farm. This defines the way of talking about land in a kind of nostalgic framework. The use of idioms such as "waste fields" and "rabbits grazing" imbues these descriptions with a moral dimension. The land, the ideal cultivation of the land, respect for the land, and work were central tenets of village morality, and may still hold normative significance.

This is why there is so much discontent among the general public when they perceive the process of reprivatisation to be unfinished, frequently accompanied by a pervasive anti-elitism (Szabó 2016). In the majority of cases, the process of reprivatisation is perceived as technically

¹⁵ Which, obviously, is nuanced by the status of cottars, serfs or free peasants: for example, free peasant communities owned land before serf emancipation, so their ties may have been earlier.

incomplete, with the relevant authority failing to issue title deeds or provide clarification on the matter.

And I went to the council and said why don't they do titlu (title deeds). They made titlu for everyone, everyone has titlu. I went and told all of them that they should make a titlu for him, that there should be a titlu, because it was like that for young married couples [...] The land had not even been measured. I was there last winter, I even annoyed the person who deals with the land, he photocopied the little paper I brought, but there is no titlu, even now, even today they have not made a titlu for me.

Some land was also returned to the Bethlen family. The family's lands also appear in the narratives of land restitution, in the discontent, in the descriptions of alleged speculation that go beyond simple technicalities. The land has been reclaimed by the family. But the fate of the land is still not settled in a reassuring way: *The [count's] pasture was rented out for a smoke. A... now present [...] here. And gave it away to another. They call him [...], he keeps animals.* This detail gives an interpretation of incompleteness embedded in local contexts. The next one evokes both local and external contexts: *52 hectares of the [count's] forest have been measured out. The head of the forestry office in [the nearby city], [...] out of mockery, some steep slopes there and such useless land that goes to the forest, measured out 52 hectares there. The gypsies are stealing the wood from it.*

However, reprivatisation is not only legally and technically questionable and incomplete. Neither do mentalities allow socialism to be put in a bracket (Giordano–Kostova 2002), socialism lives on, defining life as a kind of inertia (Skalnik 1993): *How many times have I repeated it, it's not your land, you can't step on it. They got used to it, communism had beaten it into them, the tractor too, as it turns around, here is my land, it turns around, go through it, because that's what we were used to in the collective. All I'm talking about, because the former tractor drivers in the section, he turns around, because that's how he's used to it.*

All the above, the legacy of socialism and the incompleteness of the process of restitution is compounded by the fact that the state of affairs recorded at the time of collectivisation was taken into account during reprivatisation. While the land of the Saxons had been taken away by the state power before collectivisation, and they were thus not only slaves on their own land like everyone else after collectivisation (*...the unfortunate ones had everything taken away from them and were working as day labourers for the state farms. On their own land*), but they did not even receive the (partial) social justice that members of other ethnic groups did.

5.3. Land and ethnicity after the regime change

The relationship between land (including land distribution and land use) and ethnicity has also been highlighted in peasant studies (see Cartwright 2001). It has been proposed that land acquisition may also be associated with an increase in ethnic tensions (Krieger–Meierrieks 2016). Furthermore, ethnicity has been a factor in land reforms in Eastern Europe, whether overtly or covertly (Giordano 2019; Verdery 2004b). In Bahnea/Bonyha, the ethnic composition of land tenure in the post-regime change context can be elucidated in relation to the interactions between the Roma and non-Roma populations, as well as the dynamics between Hungarians and Romanians.

The first issue is more openly critiqued by locals from both directions. The Roma population has expressed discontent, citing a lack of land allocation (and a general exclusion from resource utilization). Conversely, non-Roma residents have attributed the inability of the Roma to maintain the fifty acres of land they received in the land distribution to the aforementioned factors. The analysis does not merely concentrate on land-related conduct (specifically, the sale of the land in question), but also on the local moral attitudes towards work (specifically, the assumption that Roma people are unwilling to work). In other words, it refers to the centuries-old practice of the ability to work and to use and keep land, whereby the right to use and keep land is contingent on one's capacity to work it. Despite the evolving connotations of the term, the land remains a pivotal aspect of the local work ethic. *Here, every Gypsy was given fifty acres of land. And they sold them. (...) And I say to them: when you were in the collective farm, you had fifteen [acres of land]. And you had pigs and chickens. We can't work it. And I say: how big is your family? Well, four people. Okay, I say, if you buy four hoes, in two days you'll get fifty acres hoed.* This excerpt from an interview illustrates the continued prevalence of subsistence agriculture in local household farming practices. Maize, which is perceived by local communities to be able to be produced almost entirely by human labour, plays a significant role in this system (cf. Cartwright 2001, 198). This is why the Roma's renunciation of the fifty acres plots is of particular significance in this context, as they have effectively relinquished the potential basis of their household. Once more, the concepts of work and land ownership are inextricably linked in these views.

With regard to the second relationship, namely the land tenure aspects of the Hungarian–Romanian issue, it was only possible to obtain passing remarks, given that the discursive ethos of local life is organised around peaceful coexistence.¹⁶ It is also important to consider the local discourse regulating coexistence, as this is informed by the question of primacy, which continues to be a recurring issue in relation

¹⁶ This does not mean that the locals do not recall ethnic conflicts. But remembering them does not dominate public discourse.

to Transylvania. This is also linked to the concept of territoriality.¹⁷ The debate is also evident at the local level, where the question of “who came first” – from which the right to a place is presumed to derive – is a common topic of discussion. While not a daily occurrence, this debate is nevertheless frequent in local discourse. They provide legitimacy and, conversely, delegitimise. It is evident that Hungarians envisage Hungarian primacy. In order to challenge the legitimacy of this, the Romanians frequently invoke the Saxon primacy, which is also based on the village’s former Hungarian name of Szászbonyha (Saxon Bonyha).¹⁸ Both Hungarians and Romanians are maintaining the narrative of the late arrival of the Gypsies.

For local Hungarians, land is the centre of identity and local survival, and the basis of a legitimate (and primordial) presence vis-à-vis the other ethnic group. ...*I always tell my people that land should not be sold. At least not that, because if there is no land, there is nothing. You are a tramp... if you have land, you have food! Right, professor? I say to my people, I don't care about the others, they didn't have any.* Land is an important component of group formation: those who own land belong to an ethnically definable group.

5.4. Land and non-locals: globalization, colonial aspects

The question of land and non-locals/foreigners provides an additional lens through which to examine the aforementioned issue, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of its complexities. As previously stated, on the basis of Károly Polányi’s work, land can be considered a commodity only in a fictitious sense. It is a given, not the result of human activity. Furthermore, land is linked to the nation, and thus its trade is subject to regulation in many cases, just as the flow of labour is often regulated by national policies. The ownership of land, or the potential for acquiring such ownership, is frequently associated with citizenship. Furthermore, in a broader historical context, it is linked to membership of a particular group. Nevertheless, land is currently one of the most sought-after commodities on the international market. Its acquisition, although a regular occurrence, often attracts the attention of analysts (Wolford et al. 2024). Furthermore, various forms of land acquisition can be observed at the Romanian level (Ciutacu et al. 2017).

The region of Bahnea/Bonyha and its surrounding area is home to a significant number of foreign entrepreneurs (involved in the wine

17 At the beginning of this paper, in Footnote 2, I said that I would not go into the relationship between nation and land, but I must stop here for a moment: territoriality is in most cases a *sine qua non* of nationalist aspirations. The cardinal question of the existence or non-existence of a nation is whether it has a territory over which it has exclusive (i.e. exclusive to the exclusion of other nations) rights. We all know this question well in relation to Transylvania.

18 Nevertheless, the primacy of the Saxons cannot be proven on the basis of the current sources (cf. Szabó 2013a).

industry and the catering sector, for instance). These individuals are typically the most economically successful, yet they often limit their interactions with the local population. Additionally, the region has witnessed the emergence of entrepreneurs with a keen interest in agricultural pursuits. In any case, their activities with regard to the acquisition and utilisation of land can be seen as introducing new incentives within land value systems. Such actions have given rise to discussions that encompass resentment towards outsiders, both at the local and national levels, as well as concerns pertaining to potential speculation. *Oh, yes. Well, the German took it out, but the people were fooled by him too. The fourth or fifth contractor to come out of here, we had an Italian and then a German, now the second German, and he also fooled the people. What was the point of that? He rented the land and cultivated it in the first year, it was beautiful, everything was fine, but he had to sell the harvest, because he had to use rented machines, and he had to pay the labourers to come here to harvest and plough. And the crops were taken away, and he couldn't pay the people.*

As previously stated, collectivisation introduced a novel system of relations with the land, transforming what was previously a source of aspiration into a liability. A comparable transformation transpired following EU accession, whereby land has become a liability for numerous individuals within the context of evolving global patterns. These same global dynamics render small-scale farming unsustainable (due to global competition and agricultural prices) and even morally devalued, given the emphasis on development, innovation, and creativity in the new economy.¹⁹ In the context of ongoing technological advancement and an increasingly uncertain profitability landscape, those who have traditionally engaged in agricultural activities, the descendants of former peasantry have limited options for maintaining their livelihoods. This has resulted in a shift towards alternative forms of land acquisition and concentration. The theme foreshadows the contemporary issues of land grabbing²⁰ (Sassen 2013), while referring also to the national context: *The whole county of Timiș²¹, and most of Romania, is now foreign property. Every thousand hectares of land is sold. [...] It is no longer part of Romania, it is no longer Romanian agriculture. It is foreign agriculture.*

The evolution of the concept of land (estate) and productive land is clearly a matter of national interest. However, it also has a global perspective, which is complemented by a strong future-oriented aspect.

19 We also observe counter-processes in Transylvania, though they remain sporadic, and their reach and success are uncertain. A future study could focus on critically examining these reform efforts, which, in reality, attempt to revive traditional peasant practices.

20 Locals perceive foreign investors as having different financial resources, which they use to secure dominant positions, often raising doubts about their intentions. The entire process is commonly described by the locals as unfair.

21 The special importance of Timiș county is also highlighted by researchers. See Ciutacu et al. 2017, 149.

Land, like any other commodity, is becoming increasingly traded on a global scale, despite the fact that it is subject to various forms of protection in many states. The global trade in land, which is often conducted in a manner that is not entirely equitable, and the expansion of large corporations, have now become significant subjects within the social sciences (Ploeg 2008; Sasken 2013). Furthermore, the local population also perceives their own circumstances within the broader global context, including international policies, the Cold War, and an overall sense of a bleak future.

It wasn't necessary to use the nuclear arsenal to buy off the former socialist countries; they were bought with money instead. They devised a plan to give young people a short-term job abroad while the elderly stayed here, and then the old ones would say to each other, "What should we do with the land? Let's sell it, my son. There's nothing else to do because the young don't need the land." Meanwhile, someone else arrives – the one who employed the young abroad – and comes here to buy up the land. [...] They collect the lands; the foreigners buy them up. After a while, the young people won't have jobs abroad anymore, and they'll come back home. But then the grandchildren come along, and where will they work? What will they do? They'll ask, "Didn't my grandfather have anything?" And they'll wonder, "Where should we go now, west or east?" The local industry isn't functioning, there's no agriculture, and my grandfather gave away the land.

The local opinion, which considers the duality of the situation at two levels (the abandonment of agriculture and the departure of the locals from agriculture, on the one hand, and the activities of investors and the resulting loss of job opportunities in agriculture, on the other, as well as contrasting family farming with large-scale industrial agriculture, and highlighting the tensions between the West and the East), is in alignment with the existing literature. This literature posits that family farming would not only provide jobs for younger generations but would also connect them to a long tradition that involves not just production but also landscape management (Ciutacu et al. 2017, 148). The involvement of foreign investors in Romanian (and, more broadly, Eastern European) agriculture is a matter of significant concern (see Ciutacu et al. 2017).

6. Conclusions

The importance of land is a concept that has been central to human thought and practice across a vast span of time and cultural contexts. The primary meanings of land are obviously tied to food production, as is the case in Bahnea/Bonyha. However, in recent times, due to global contexts, this very connection has been challenged. The discourse of “we feed the country” is now only sustainable at a normative level; the contribution of Romanian agriculture, particularly small farms, to the country’s food production is increasingly declining (cf. Szabó 2013b). The significance of land is subject to change in accordance with the evolution of human society. We are currently witnessing a radical transformation of a long-standing historical process. The ownership of land has traditionally played a central role in rural societies, but this is now undergoing a significant transformation. Nevertheless, the associated knowledge remains discernible, and the connection to the land continues to be anchored in these long histories. However, as societal structures evolve, alongside global relations, consumption patterns and numerous other factors, the meanings attributed to land are also subject to continuous evolution and adaptation.

In this sense, one could argue that land is also a social actor (which could be further elaborated by perspectives that are necessarily omitted in this study, such as those related to landscapes, the nature–culture axis, and national landscapes/land). The concept of land gives rise to a number of significant issues, including those pertaining to ecology (Hirsch 2005; Măntescu 2014), property rights (Măntescu 2014; Micu 2014), political regimes (Verdery 2003; Ploeg 2008) and the globalisation and postcolonial relations (Sassen 2013). It constitutes an integral element of significant social ideologies and legitimations (Polányi 2004; Wolf 1995; Verdery 2004b), exhibiting a tendency towards fragmentation and concentration. This is exemplified by the observation of land reforms, which invariably demonstrate fluctuating periods of fragmentation and concentration. It is beyond dispute that land is integral to social relations and human–nature interactions. It has the potential to influence these relations, and thus may be regarded as a subject with agency.

This agency also implies that land is an integral component of local communities, encompassing social structures, moralities, and ethical concepts. It was previously regarded as an integral component. Nevertheless, this appears to be undergoing a process of dissolution in the present era. The long-term conceptualisations of the significance of land, its symbolic meanings, and the nature of relationships between the state and the local population, and among the local population itself, are being subjected to scrutiny. There is a tendency among people to revert to older forms of knowledge and understanding in discussions about the land, which they perceive to be more stable than the current

situation. Nevertheless, the very foundations of these positions are being challenged as new economic regimes reshape the very meanings attached to land. A lack of connection with the land can result in a loss of identity. The knowledge presented here is becoming increasingly marginalised as the land is becoming less and less a part of the local, everyday worlds, thereby preventing the actors in these worlds from establishing connections.

In local contexts, it is primarily entrepreneurs who continue to seek land ownership. However, the context of this new phenomenon, which has been dubbed “land hunger,” is already that of global demand. In this context, national and international aspects, as well as the struggle for land in connection with food security, become prominent. In this sense, the desire for land remains, albeit in a transformed form. Furthermore, upon reconsideration of the previously presented fluctuation of fragmentation and concentration, it becomes evident that such a phenomenon is entirely natural.

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