

# WORKING CLASS IDENTITIES IN POSTCOMMUNIST CULTURE

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## Introduction

Public discourse in the West about the postcommunist economies of East Central Europe centres on the pace of privatisation, the adoption of capitalist financial institutions, and foreign investment in industries ranging from automotive to nuclear power (Clash 1996, Kraar 1996). The inevitability and desirability of capitalism are assumed, and the central focus is on macro-economic indicators of progress. Little attention is given to the material consequences of, and responses to, economic upheaval among those who are experiencing its costs, including rising unemployment and a growing disparity between rich and poor. Instead, human experience is reduced to questions of preference for the old system versus the new, and responses are reported in aggregates that gloss over distinctions based on class, education, or other significant factors.

For example, *The Economist* reports that “a steadily rising number of East Europeans are happy to live under the rigors of the free market,” and that outside the former Soviet republics, “nearly two-thirds are broadly chirpy about their new system” (“Feeling Perkier” 1996, 48-49). To the extent that class ever enters into the dominant discourse of post-communist transition, it is typically articulated to the emergence of a nouveau riche entrepreneurial class (“Boris on Bond Street” 1995). In addition to masking issues of class, these examples also reveal a logical inconsistency. As Stjepan Meštrović (1993, 1994) has pointed out, Western experts treat capitalism as if it were a rootless, self-sustaining abstraction, severed from history and culture. But at the same time, those “who proclaim the unequivocal moral virtues of capitalism are hardly able to disguise the underlying, ethnocentric assumption that it will be the American brand of

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capitalism that will save the world from history" (Meštrović 1994, 141).

Similarly, reports on the privatisation of the media in East Central Europe assume the universal appeal of the American model of commercial broadcasting. For instance, a recent story in *Business Week* on the impending sale of Hungarian radio and television stations to Western media enterprises describes Hungarian television as a backwater that offers only "a bland fare of peasant dances and dull talk shows." It's no wonder, the writer claims, that J.R. Ewing is "hot in Hungary" (Smart 1996, 58).

The absurd fiction that capitalism and its cultural apparatuses are self-generating forces beyond history and culture demands critical response. Indeed, Fredric Jameson (1994, 281) argues that the most crucial ideological struggle of our time is to challenge the claim that "the market is in human nature." Elsewhere, I have written about complex, sometimes contradictory patterns of resistance and accommodation among Hungarians to the development of consumer culture (James 1995a, 1995b). Here, we focus on the Hungarian working class and explore how their experiences as the targets of transnational mass culture are inflected by the material conditions of their lives.

Specifically, we draw upon a set of interviews to examine how mass culture takes on meaning through its discursive attachment to the symbolising practices and rituals of everyday life: going to work, taking care of domestic chores, relaxing with family or friends. These investigations grow out of concern with how patterns of living and concepts of the self are dialectically preserved and altered under conditions of rapid social change. As such, debates about the dislocation of the subject or identity crises brought about by the globalization of culture are relevant to this study. Before describing the study and its results, we offer some theoretical remarks about identity formation in postcommunist societies.

## Theorising Postcommunist Identities

Michael Kennedy notes that in discussions of the end of communism, problems of identity formation, particularly class identities, are rarely formulated in very complex ways. He writes, "The rhetoric of markets and democracy needs entrepreneurs, consumers, and citizens, but nothing more complicated" (Kennedy 1994, 6). The concept of cultural identity, as discussed in recent social theory, offers a good starting point for trying to develop a more nuanced understanding of postcommunist subjectivities. Following the publication of such seminal works as Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), scholars have understood the nation as the primary locus for the formation of cultural identity in the modern period. With national culture as a touchstone, they have focused attention on the homogenising consequences of global flows of images, information, products, and people in late modernity (Morley and Robins 1995). This work productively illuminates the discursive nature of identity formation as a process that takes place through language, myths, rituals, holidays, and other symbolising practices. In turn, this emphasis on the construction of identity through discursive activities that are sometimes contested and always susceptible to challenge alerts us to its turbulent, fluid nature.

However, the relevance of this literature to our understanding of the cultural experiences of working class Hungarians is limited by two factors. First, it is mainly concerned with the loss of a sense of self experienced in late- or post-modern societies. As Stuart Hall (1992, 274) writes, the "so-called 'crisis of identity' is seen as part of

a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world." In such discourse, the seemingly generic term "modern society" refers specifically to Western Europe and the "neo-Europes" of North America, Australia, and New Zealand (Sörlin, in Waever 1995, 205).

From the standpoint of certain key markers such as industrial development, sections of East Central Europe can be accurately characterised as modern. After, all the main thrust of communist central planning was essentially modernist in its pursuit of freedom from scarcity through the application of science and technology and in its worship of the idea of progress (Harvey 1989, 12). But as George Schöpflin (1994) has written, communism was grafted onto societies where central components of modernist modes of thought — tolerance, flexibility, compromise — were and are opposed by conservative thought patterns, such as tendencies toward superstition, utopianism, and dogmatism. Along these same lines, Meštrović (1994, 145) writes that compared with the West, "the nations that used to be ruled by communism are still predominantly rural and are dotted by Hansel and Gretel cottages more than suburban homes. In general, they are closer to what used to be medieval culture in the West than what passes for modernity today." Given the dissimilarities between modernism in the East and West, discussions of the crisis of identity in postmodernism have limited relevance to our understanding of postcommunist culture.

A second problem: Efforts to sort out responses to the displacement of national cultures as the main site of meaning formation have resulted in frameworks that emphasise tensions between cosmopolitanism and localism. Little attention is given to how this axis intersects with class, although the cosmopolitan is defined partly by his access to economic, educational, and cultural capital, including an ability and willingness to manoeuvre in cultures other than his own (Hannerz 1990). Thus, the prototypical cosmopolitan is a French businessman who speaks several languages, keeps his bags packed, and favours Mozart but is open to Madonna.

According to this paradigm, those people who are economically space-bound are increasingly able to access simulacra of distant cultures through television, film, and shopping mall food courts. This framework is useful for conceptualising the homogenising tendencies of globalization insofar as they are experienced among cosmopolitans, but it is profoundly class-biased in the emphasis it places on "travelling cultures" (Clifford 1992) at the expense of those who stay home. In response to this oversight, let us now consider the experiences of the Hungarian working class, beginning with some economic indicators as background.

## Hungarian Living Standards

At the time of our interviews, 1993, disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the transition to a market economy had become widespread in Hungary. According to Rudolph Andorka (1994), the direct cause was a decline in the standard of living. He reports that structural changes in the Hungarian economy, coupled with the collapse of the export market in the East and a recession in the West, resulted in a 20 percent decline in Hungary's GDP between 1989 and 1993. Over the same period, per capita income declined 12 percent.<sup>1</sup> Almost three-quarters of Hungarians interviewed in 1993 reported that their standard of living had fallen in the last five years. More over, income inequality was becoming more pronounced. In 1993, 53 percent of Hungarian

households had a lower per capita income than in 1992, 32 percent had a higher per capita income, and 25 percent experienced little change. Not surprisingly, then, when asked to evaluate the former socialist system and the current system, 74 percent of Hungarians gave a positive rating to the socialist economy, while only 29 percent rated the current system positively (Andorka 1994, 234-5).

### Study Design

We interviewed eight women and seven men ranging in age from 21 to 71. While three of them had no formal education beyond the primary level, the others had gone on to complete either a three-year trade school or a four-year vocational school. Three are pensioners and two are housewives who stay home with young children. The remainder are actively employed as skilled or unskilled workers (occupations include miner, joiner, mechanic, plumber, nurse's aid, shop clerk, janitor, and porter). About half live in Pécs, a city of 180,000 in the southern part of the country, and the other half live in a neighbouring village of about 2,500. There is an opera house and several theatres in Pécs, as well as a number of cinemas and video rental shops. The village has none of these facilities, although it is linked to Pécs through frequent buses and most of the villagers work in the city. Cable television is available in both locations. While four of our respondents receive only over-the-air broadcasting, the remainder have cable. In addition to the two Hungarian national channels and some regional and local stations, the package typically includes satellite stations broadcasting in German, English, Italian, and French. About half of the respondents, mainly the younger ones, have VCRs.

The questions posed in the interviews revolved around respondents' leisure time activities, modes of relaxation, use of the mass media, and entertainment preferences. In addition, attention was directed specifically to mass culture that originates in the West through questions about their favourite film stars, television programs, authors, and musicians. An analysis of the interview transcripts reveals three main themes: (1) Respondents consistently rate American-style television programs and films highly for their entertainment value. (2) On the other hand, the accessibility of imported mass culture is restricted by the economic and cultural limitations of time, money, and language. (3) Given the years of Soviet domination, respondents are wary of the presence of yet another cultural coloniser. Let us look more closely at each of these themes.

### Imported Culture and Entertainment

In a discussion about television programs and films, Györgyi, a young housewife married to a mechanic, told us that her favourite movie is *Pretty Woman*. When asked for an example of a program or film that she dislikes, she replied that she can't bear to watch *Közjáték* (Interlude), a series of five-minute artistic films broadcast on Hungarian public television, because "it can't hold my attention." Györgyi's responses are typical. Respondents repeatedly criticised the ambiguity, slow pace, and lack of resolution characteristic of Hungarian films. Often, they explicitly contrasted Hungarian and American cultural products, praising the latter for offering action, excitement, and "a good story." Erzszi, a retired dressmaker, put it like this: "I've only seen a few American films, but their quality is better than ours. The problem with Hungarian films is that they have bad endings."

The notion of cultural competency is helpful for thinking about this low tolerance

for non-linear narrative structures or other aesthetic elements associated with elite culture. In his extensive empirical investigations on the social basis of aesthetic tastes in France, Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986) demonstrates how cultural preferences are structured by social origins and educational background. Of particular relevance here is his establishment of a positive correlation between educational capital and the propensity to enjoy a work independent of its content (Bourdieu 1986, 190). While our interviews suggest similar conclusions, they also remind us that modes of cultural competency are historically and nationally grounded. For example, when we measured cultural competency in terms of the ability of our respondents to name their favourite film director, they scored low. (The only name mentioned was Steven Spielberg). On the other hand, in discussions of the contributions of Hungarians to world culture, they almost invariably mentioned the three great composers, Bartók, Kodály, and Liszt.

The streamlined plots of American cultural products are not only valued for their accessibility to working class audiences, they are also appealing as modes of escape from dull routines and difficult economic conditions. Zsuzsanna, a 30-year-old housewife with a primary school education, criticised Hungarian films for revolving around trivial problems or mundane activities such as hoeing a garden. "They have no real story, they just go on and on, and nothing happens," she told us. Her favourite television program is *Dallas*, where the characters are interesting and where "something always happens." Along similar lines, Livia, a young shop assistant, stated that she likes action films such as *American Ninja* because light entertainment allows people to forget their problems for a couple of hours.

The global marketing of American cultural products or their formulaic clones has undoubtedly increased the quantity and variety of popular entertainment available to the Hungarian working class, but we should not make too much of this. While the politics of mass culture as distraction and deception is most fully developed in the capitalist West (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972), it was far from absent in former communist countries. Slavko Splichal (1994, 28) writes about the consequences for the media of tendencies toward liberalisation following the uprisings of 1956 and 1968 in East Central Europe: "The media remained largely state owned and/or state controlled, but their contents changed from an aggressive ideological propaganda into a deideologised entertainment and mass culture." In this respect, then, postcommunism is different only in terms of the degree of commercial cultural penetration.

### Constraints on Cultural Consumption—Time

While imported cultural products are valued as sources of diversion, the limited amount of leisure time available to working class Hungarians restricts their use. In their analysis of time budget surveys, Andorka, Falussy, and Harcsa (1992) report that a great majority of Hungarians engage in secondary economic activities in order to improve the economic situation of their families. These activities are either designed to supplement the household income (through moonlighting, for example) or to avoid the expenditure of money (through do-it-yourself home or auto repairs, for example). A quick look at some figures gives us a sense of how these activities structure living patterns and eat into disposable time.

The most significant aspect of the second economy is agriculture and animal husbandry. As of the late 1980s, almost half of the adult population spent an average of

over two hours a day, seven days a week, cultivating small garden plots and tending chickens, geese, pigs, or other domestic animals. For active earners, this means substantial expenditures of time before or after work. The second most widespread activity involves private house building and maintenance. Andorka writes that in 1988, some ninety percent of new housing was privately built, mainly by family members, relatives, and friends. His explanation of the reciprocal social arrangement shows how individuals not only spend time on their own building projects, but accumulate debts to help others in the future:

*Help is given without the payment of wage, but in the sure expectation that in case of need it will be reciprocated, i.e. those who participate in the building of a house for a relative, colleague or friend (or his children) can expect similar help when they themselves have to build a new house for themselves or for their children (Andorka 1991, 17).*

While all segments of Hungarian society have relatively little free time, the amount diminishes as one moves down the social scale. Andorka, Falussy, and Harcsa (1992, 133-4) estimate that male intellectuals have an average of 4.5 hours of free time each day, while women working in animal husbandry have less than 1.5 free hours. The limited amount of leisure time and the multiple demands of working class routines repeatedly surfaced in our interviews. When asked about their leisure activities, most of our respondents claimed that they have practically no free time. Their lists of chores that must be taken care of after work frequently included tending to the garden. For example, Hilda, a 48-year-old janitor, told us about the plot she and her husband cultivate on the outskirts of Pécs: "It's quite large, 670 square fathoms. There's a vegetable garden, some fruit trees, and a vineyard. Between the weeding and hoeing and harvesting, there's always a lot to do."

Another factor that has a major bearing on the free time of Hungarians is family obligations. Generally, family relations are closer and family commitments are much more binding in postcommunist societies than in the West. Undoubtedly, there are complex, historical reasons for these familial bonds that have to do with the material conditions and demands of life in traditional, agrarian societies. But Schöpflin (1994, 198) makes an interesting observation when he notes that the traditional nature of family relations in postcommunism is partly due to the exaggerated importance of the family as one of the few authentic arenas of social life under communism. Whatever the reason, when we couple strong family ties with the monetary savings that can be achieved by having family members carry out tasks that would be performed by hired professionals under more affluent conditions, we discover another factor that tempers the working class's use of imported popular culture. When we asked Gyula, a 49-year-old miner, about his leisure time activities, he responded,

*I don't know what free time is. After getting home from work, I always have plenty of things to take care of: children, grandchildren, the flat, cleaning, washing, cooking. ... As an average man, I always have some problem to deal with: one grandchild, the other grandchild, my children, one of their cars.*

### Constraints on Cultural Consumption — Money

In a related line of questioning, we asked our respondents when they last went to the theatre, ballet, opera, or cinema. Several respondents replied that when they were

younger, they occasionally went to the theatre or opera, but only one responded affirmatively regarding the present. Klári, a young single woman with no children, goes to the theatre about once a year. Not surprisingly, movie attendance corresponded closely with age and family status. While most people stated that they rarely if ever go to the movies, three people in their 20s or 30s, none of whom have children and two of whom are single, replied that they go every couple of months. In addition, Livia occasionally takes her 6-year-old daughter to see a children's movie.

In addition to the lack of free time, the expense of going to the theatre or the movies was frequently cited as an inhibiting factor. Gyula's response is typical. When asked if he ever goes to the theatre or opera, he replied,

*No. No, not at all, and I'm ashamed of it. When I was in high school I had a season ticket to the theatre. Then, when I got married, my wife and I went regularly. Then the first child came, and then the second child came, and then the TV came. I went less and less frequently, and now even if I wanted to, I couldn't go.*

We asked why not, and he replied:

*Because I haven't got the money. I have to tell you, I've been working for the same company for thirty years. This was my first job, but I've got tough financial problems, even though I've never been taken home [drunk] from a pub, and I don't smoke, and there are weeks that I don't even drink a class of wine. Well, if a guest drops in I always have a bottle of wine to offer.*

Gyula goes on to describe his modest life and the rising cost of cinema tickets, ending with a plea that we understand his economic situation: "I can't afford the theatre or movies, I swear, I'm serious."

In other, more subtle ways, economic barriers to the adoption of transnational cosmopolitan culture emerged. Zsuzsanna, the young housewife, talked about the American clothes she has seen on television. They seem much nicer than Hungarian clothes, she remarked, but she said she wouldn't buy them even if she could afford to. When asked why not, she replied, "Because you should go to nice places in those clothes." Zsuzsanna and her husband used to go to the movies occasionally, but since buying a VCR, they stay home and either watch television or rent movies.

### Constraints on Cultural Consumption — Language

In an essay on the possible contributions of mass media to a common European cultural identity, Philip Schlesinger (1994) notes that in Europe, language is highly articulated to distinct national identities. Europe's differentiated linguistic order is maintained through the use of official languages in state-supported modes of communication, including educational systems and the mass media (Schlesinger 1994, 34). Schlesinger's observations are particularly relevant to Hungary as a small country with its own, distinct language. The Hungarian language has been centrally tied to concepts of the nation at least since independence movements in the nineteenth century, but especially since the Treaty of Trianon following the First World War left a third of the population outside of the nation's reconfigured borders. Based on concerns over the treatment of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries, nationalist sentiments in the postcommunist period have resurrected ideas about the equation of Hungarianness with the Hungarian language.

At the same time, Hungary is experiencing the latest manifestation of a centuries-

long assault on the Hungarian language by successive waves of military, political, and economic invaders. In the latest round, economic advancement is closely tied to the ability to speak a major language, especially English or German. But this requirement is closely linked to occupation, and the ability to study a foreign language is tied to economic factors of time and money. None of our respondents speaks a foreign language, although several understand a bit of Croatian or German through contact with the sizeable minority populations living in the region. Several of them expressed regret at not having mastered foreign languages, mentioning failed attempts. For example, Gyula, who studied German for just one year in the seventh grade, once kept a notebook in which he collected German words, but after awhile, he abandoned his efforts. Only one of our respondents is now actively trying to learn a foreign language. Klári, a nurse's aid, is studying French in order to prepare herself for work as an au pair in France.

Some eighty percent of the films shown in Pécs are American, and most are dubbed into Hungarian. In addition, imported television series or films broadcast on the Hungarian channels or delivered through HBO's Hungarian service are usually dubbed. But the foreign satellite channels broadcast in the dominant language of the originating country. Respondents cited the language barrier as the main reason why they don't usually watch foreign channels. In addition, their remarks reflected the fact that the meaning of certain programming genres is less dependent on language. For instance, Endre, a retired shoe repairer, said that he occasionally watches German channels even though he only understands a few words. With crimes or Westerns, he told us, you can figure out what's happening through the action. The relevance of linguistic competence was also reflected in the fact that sports was frequently mentioned as an enjoyable form of programming. But while the sports announcer's language is not central to comprehension and pleasure, the rules of the game are. Thus, respondents report that they skip over unfamiliar sports such as American football or baseball in favour of soccer, tennis, and other sports that are popular in Europe. Several people did mention NBA basketball, favourably comparing American players to local talent. As one man put it, "American basketball is to Hungarian as a Mercedes is to a Trabant."

### Threats to Cultural Sovereignty

A final recurring theme in our interviews had to do with wariness over the dominance of any alien culture. Ágnes, a 43-year-old widow who no longer works because of physical disabilities, talked about her teenaged daughter's knowledge of American popular music:

*Young people listen to foreign music more than Hungarian music. If you were to ask my daughter, she wouldn't know when the Battle of Mohács was, but she knows all these songs by heart. She doesn't speak English, but she can name all these songs. ... There's nothing wrong with her knowing the songs. What is wrong is that she doesn't know the date of the Battle of Mohács.*

Since that decisive loss to the Turks in 1526, Hungary has experienced only brief periods of independence. Given the long struggle to preserve Hungary's national identity, it is not surprising that concerns over cultural integrity surfaced in the interviews.

In the case of Soviet culture, expressions of resentment were inflected with distaste for abstract aesthetics or overtly ideological works. Endre served for years as the

village projectionist in a local movie house that was shut down several years ago. He tells about the Russian films that he was forced to screen, regardless of their appeal to the villagers:

*I played a film; I don't remember the title, but it was a Russian movie. There were three reels. The first one was about a boy who lives in a block of flats with his sister. The boy is lying on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling where a spider is roaming around. This scene was shown for ten minutes! How the spider is roaming around, and sometimes the camera switched to the guy, and how he was watching the spider. And the girl is yelling out the window, "Natasha, are you coming to the Khomsomol this evening?" That was all that happened in the first reel. After that, there was a five-minute break. At the end of the break, the cashier told me not to put on the second reel, because everybody had gone home.*

Endre pauses, and then continues,

*The posters for these Russian films always had a high-flown phrase under the title — something like, "A work of Russian cinematic art." When I ran into people in the village the next day, they teased me, asking me what work of art I would show next. I was embarrassed. But I played these films because I was obliged to.*

Dezső, a middle-aged joiner, is blunt about the connections between culture imposed from the former Soviet Union and from the U.S. He states, "Perhaps [American films] are useful because we haven't seen films like these for forty years. But the situation is starting to be similar to the last forty years. For all those years, we were watching Russian films. The same thing will happen if they keep playing only American films."

## Working Class Subjectivities in Postcommunism

At the outset, we posed the question of what happens to the identities of working class subjects when they are situated in the privatising and individualising atmosphere of global capitalism. With Meštrović and others, we suggested that abstract, ahistorical treatments of post-modern capitalism result in simplistic, optimistic scenarios that gloss over the lived experiences of postcommunist subjects. We argued that "postmodernism," which Meštrović (1994, 1) searingly calls "a fun version of the apocalypse," must be particularised through its articulation to concrete economic and social circumstances. Through Bourdieu, we maintained that cultural capital might be an important element in working class respondents' evaluations of elite and popular culture under the conditions of postcommunism.

Splichal (1994, 94) persuasively argues that the postcommunist rhetoric of a privatised economy as the cornerstone of democratic, civil society is based on notions of transparent competition in open markets among small, propertied worker-entrepreneurs — conditions that in no way resemble global corporate capitalism. Our interviews revealed that the material conditions of the Hungarian working class have, if anything, declined as a result of the rush to enter into this high stakes game where power is wielded by invisible players, far beyond the ken or the control of the public. The free time of our respondents is severely restricted, and the economic capital they would need to take advantage of any leisure time is practically non-existent. Social and economic statistics indicate that privatisation and transnational capitalism are

upper class, cosmopolitan affairs, beyond the reach of the provincial and village working class.

In terms of cultural tastes, our interviews revealed that the Hungarian working class prefers action-adventure stories modelled along lines perfected by the Hollywood film industry. Their remarks give evidence of their low tolerance for slow-moving, highly abstract products, due partly to low levels of cultural capital and due partly to the exigencies of working class life. Rather than reading the random wanderings of a spider as a metaphor for an existential search for meaning, they understand it as a waste of time. It does not take much cultural capital to decode *Top Gun* or *American Ninja*, and such products do interpellate the workers into the very hegemony that is post-modern techno-consumerism.

But the real lesson here is not what has changed for Hungarian working class identities, but what has stayed the same. While an elite managerial class blasts around Budapest with their cell phones, and while the subways are filled with more and more of the homeless, the working middle class somehow gets by. Their lives are softened by an hour in front of the tube watching *Dallas*, but subjectively, they remain attached to the familial and the Hungarian. When we describe the identities of the Hungarian working class, the interpellations of the post-modern global are elided by the positionalities of nation, family, language, and class. As opposed to the story of the cosmopolitan, this is the story of the local.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes:

1. Elsewhere, Andorka (1996, 92) reports that in 1993, Hungary's economic decline was halted, and the GDP slowly began to rise. But the average per capita real income, following a temporary rise in 1994, dropped below the 1993 level in 1995 and was 13 percent lower than in 1989. Thus, he writes, from a macroeconomic standpoint, the worst of the crisis is over, but at the household level, impoverishment is still increasing.

2. This research was supported by a grant from the Institute for Policy and Social Science Research, University of New Hampshire. The author expresses her gratitude to her research assistants, Gabor Schubert and Judit Skultety.

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