

The Plow and the Stallion: Political Turmoil in a Working-Class District of Budapest

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In 2014 and 2015, several major demonstrations have taken place in Csepel, the 21st district of Budapest. At the beginning of 2014, members of the socialist party rallied at a local library against a commemorative book launch of József Nyírő, a well-known nationalist and anti-Semite writer who died in exile in Spain after the Second World War. On 24 June 2015, citizens surrounded the Workers' Home (*Munkásotthon*), a landmark independent cultural centre on the list of the district council to be nationalized.¹ A few weeks later, leftist and liberal political parties repeated their action by organizing an evening demonstration during which hundreds carried torches chanting anti-government slogans coupled with 'Save our Workers' Home'. Conflicts between concerned Csepelers and the right-wing district council did not abate. During the spring of 2016, hundreds of citizens gathered, voicing their objection to closing the rapid transit system connecting them to downtown Budapest and replacing it with the yellow streetcars (*villamos*) familiar on the streets of the inner city. One of the demonstrators succinctly summarized the gist of their objection: 'The present transport system is fast and works adequately but the slow streetcars will not be as useful to us. Actually, we do not want the Budapest city council decide what is best for Csepelers.' What was specifically behind these conflicts? Even by glancing superficially at these diverse actions, it will be obvious that these demonstrations were just the tip of the iceberg. In this chapter I shall describe how and why these urbanites responded to fundamental political and economic transformation following the collapse of the socialist system and how, in turn, they continue to struggle with remnants of the 'damned' system (*átkos rendszer* in local parlance).

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For more than a quarter of a century, anthropologists and other social scientists have sought to understand how socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe and how the transformation to a democratic and capitalist system occurred. I begin with the question of whether there is a need constantly to compare what socialist working-class urban life was like to what is observable now since even people interviewed in 2016 logically summarized that ‘that was a different socio-economic and political system’ not comparable to the current one.² Yet it is important to see, as one informant put it wryly, that ‘many of the present problems are indirectly connected to state socialism but more directly relate to the period of transition that characterized the 1990s’. In Csepel, as elsewhere in the greater Budapest urban agglomeration, the post-1989 era is marked by an increase in the tertiary sector with specialized industrial, high-tech and logistics but in the district specifically, this change is coupled with a slowly ameliorating unemployment and an increasing infrastructural development observable throughout the former industrial areas. Why the recent turmoil then?

In this chapter I shall use my anthropological fieldwork in Csepel, originally visited in 1985–1986, and suggest major political developments crucial to understanding urban transformation as experienced by inhabitants. As I was connected to the Csepel Works officially, most of my informants, approximately 100 individuals and their families, came from a working-class background, and several managers and political figures were second-generation intellectuals. Subsequently, many of them have remained my continual inspirations as they have offered me their ideas and explanations about their changing lifeways. To comprehend fully the complexity of comparing Csepel today and 30 years ago, I rely on the idea of the sociologist Ivan Szelenyi—himself a former resident of Budapest—who claims that socialism created a different type of urban development from those observable in Western cities (Szelenyi 1993, 61). According to his thesis, in the socialist city there was less crime, poverty and concentration of wealth, services were backward compared with those of Western cities, the availability of goods, resources and labour was also monochrome and limited compared with the excesses in capitalist urban centres. His view—‘less marginality’ and ‘less diversity’, in his words—is markedly different from political science observations which strictly emphasize politics as anchored to dictatorial rule of the communist party, repression of individualism, large-scale corruption, shoddy goods, lack of infrastructure, and suppression of religion and cultural differences. Even since the political transformation of 1989–1990, scholars have increasingly used the phrase ‘post-socialism’ as a general framework to emphasize the legacy of communism in the East Central European economy, politics and culture (Hann 1994; Kürti 1991, 1997).³ One idea has gained primacy: that the exit from socialism is a long and arduous process, a reason why more and more research highlights the inchoate nature of new social engineering as well as special cultural transformations of former socialist countries on their road to full-fledged capitalism. A retrospective look at Csepel’s 30-year history reveals why Szelenyi’s idea is for several reasons a useful starting point in comparing the cultural transformation of

an urban environment in one location. For one, my fieldwork underlines Szelenyi's 'less marginality, less diversity', since Csepel, with all its difficulties and political quagmire, is definitely less marginal and more diverse today than ever before. The second main reason has to do with the question of whether post-socialist Csepel reveals 'less diversity' in politics, to paraphrase Szelenyi, since the past 26 years show a remarkable political turbulence that needs to be stressed in order to balance the anthropology of urban politics in settlements that were part of the Soviet bloc's power centres. In other words, the prominence of left-liberal rule during 1990–2010, its sudden demise and the past six years of right-wing governance offer a unique and divergent trajectory that requires explanation from the perspective of Csepelers who felt both the benefits and the disadvantages of remaining a 'Red town'.

Previous research on the early years of post-socialist transformation highlighted the enormous social consequences following the collapse of large state enterprises and institutions followed by the loss of jobs, unemployment and the marginalization of industrial workers. The first years of post-socialist transition have been studied by anthropologists, though most, we must admit, remained marginal to mainstream anthropological theorizing (Buchowski 1996; Hann 1993; Kürti 1996; Kürti and Langman 1997; Sampson 1996; Verdery 1996; Watson 1994).⁴ Economists, urban planners, geographers, sociologists and political scientists have also paid increasing attention to the post-socialist city and the changing spatial and economic environment following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Andrusz et al. 1996; Czepczynski 2008; Diener and Hagen 2015; Hirt 2012; Tsenkova and Nedovic-Buric 2006; Walker 2011). A new ethnographic approach has also been employed to assess how ordinary citizens have experienced the enormous social and urban transformations of the past two decades (Gille 2007; Giordano et al. 2014; Heintz 2006; Kideckel 2008; Lankauskas 2015; Prato 2011; Ten Dyke 2001; Tsypylma et al. 2011). However, the Hungarian capital has not occupied the centre of anthropological interest, similar to local political processes, especially those concerning parties and institutions that have also been neglected in anthropological analyses (Kürti 2002a).⁵

CSEPEL AND RED CSEPEL—TWO CITIES IN ONE

The years 1989 and 1990 were generally referred to as the 'springtime of the peoples', and surely what followed is not easy to capture. Much had changed in Budapest, still the one and only political, cultural and economic hub of the country, a reason why one can often hear the phrase 'hydrocephalous country', a sarcastic expression of its primary and elevated status. Just like elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc, in 1989–1990 Hungarians experienced the lifting of Soviet domination, as the Soviet Union collapsed, the abandonment of single-party rule in favour of multiparty representation and free elections in more than 40 years. Key figures in this transition were (mostly) Budapest intellectuals keen to abolish the presence of political parties in workplaces and allowing the

dismantling of former state enterprises. This concerned most state enterprises (but not the railroads, for example), including the former behemoth of the Csepel Works, once employer of 40,000 labourers. As several new, much smaller, companies emerged, other plants simply vanished in the process.

The largest city in Hungary, halved by the River Danube and incorporated in 1873 from Buda and Pest, Budapest is an average-sized capital in Europe. Its population size is comparable to that of Bucharest, Vienna or Warsaw; Prague is somewhat smaller, Berlin larger, the Italian, French and Spanish capitals are vastly different both in population size, density and composition (Kürti 2002a). The city of Budapest comprises 23 districts. The 21st is Csepel, a fairly densely populated area comprising 722,226 residents living in a roughly 2575 hectare territory. The district is connected by two bridges to Budapest, the Danube just divides at the northern tip of what is properly called Csepel Island. This large, bean-shaped island is 48 kilometres long, with 12 settlements, including its largest northern part, Csepel proper. The island's population is about 165,000, most commuting to Budapest and its greater metro industrial-commercial hub to work, school and entertainment. Csepel is not old, though archaeological finds attest to its early medieval and even earlier history, and it was incorporated in 1717 when the court sanctioned German and South Slavic migrants to settle on the island. Similar to other agricultural settlements, Csepel had its own jurisdiction and locally elected municipal council. In 1892 a major transformation altered the local culture: two Jewish industrialists, Manfred and Berthold Weiss, bought a sizable property and started what later became known as the Weiss Manfred Iron and Steel Works. It was the beginning of massive industrialization: steelworks, a paper mill, a truck factory and even an aeroplane factory provided jobs for tens of thousands workers. In 1950 the incorporation into greater Budapest completely altered the local political life; from then on, decisions were made in downtown Budapest.

Through the socialist industrial planning, Csepel experienced population growth during the 1980s from 73,000 to 90,000 residents by 1990. The new incomers were mostly from the countryside, with a sizable Roma population who found work as unskilled labourers in the various factories. With the dismantling of state factories and the advance of economic uncertainties, families opted to leave instead of remaining in the district without jobs. By 2010, the population had dwindled to 72,226 (Szabó 2013, 484). With this, the number of wage earners also dropped significantly (Szabó 2013, 13). Despite the population loss in Csepel, the suburban belt of Budapest—comprising about 78 settlements—experienced steady growth. By the late 1990s, a quarter of Hungary's population lived in this agglomeration where new industrial and infrastructural developments contributed to the capital's primary position in the economy and politics.⁶

The ethnic composition has changed even though altogether 63,026 individuals have declared their Hungarian nationality and Hungarian as their mother tongue. The only significant minority population is the Roma, who number around 1185 persons, while a few hundred individuals belong to German and

Romanian ethnic minorities (Szabó 2013, 319). Many people I talked with assured me that unofficially the number of Roma may be twice as many (Kürti 2002b, 221–222). In the early 1990s, only the German-speaking (referred to generally as Schwab) and South Slavic minorities were visible in the cultural and artistic life of the district. This all changed in 1994 when the new minority law of 1993 (Law LXXVII) came into effect, allowing minority governments to elect their representatives (Belánszky et al. 2006). Suddenly in Hungary, numerous such administrative units were created, existing side by side with municipal governments. In Csepel, four minorities (Armenian, Bulgarian, German and Roma) were successful in creating their minority governments. In 2010, two more ethnic groups (Greek and Romanian), in 2014, another one (Ukrainian). Currently, there are seven minority governments in Csepel and their leadership is composed of a small group of three elected representatives.⁷

In tandem with the emergence of small ethnolinguistic minorities, religious diversity has also been less complex than one might imagine, an aspect of local culture that reinforces Ivan Szelenyi's model of 'less diversity'. Roman Catholics number 19,732 individuals and Protestants 6193, while more than 25,000 individuals did not wish to declare their religiosity (Szabó 2013, 381–383). There are smaller Baptist, Jewish, Greek Catholic and evangelist congregations as well, and among the middle-managerial level new alternative religions (the Faith Church) are also popular.

With the many new small family-owned businesses, the large percentage of unemployed of the early 1990s (around 15%) has given way to a healthier 6.3% (Szabó 2013, 488). However, this is still higher than in most districts of Budapest; only the inner districts range between 7% and 8% unemployed. Population in the inner areas still lives in multistorey housing projects built mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, and these urban enclaves (*panelek*, or *lakótelepek* in Hungarian) are easily recognizable from their monochrome and unkempt appearance. In the more outlying areas, one-family plots, with gardens dotting the landscape, their small size and especially the lack of animals are clear indications of the urbanized, working-class milieu.

During the 1980s about 30,000 Csepelers found work in the large factories and in particular in the enormous Csepel Works, a conglomerate of a dozen heavy industry plants. Seeing the Csepel Works for the first time in the mid-1980s, I, too, was struck by its size, ear-splitting din and lively atmosphere, and the contradictory images it projected.⁸ People moved in and out of the factory and at the gates, through which only those with identification badges could pass, banners, signs and packed stores signalled a strong lifeforce. Outside the main gate, single-family workers' houses, with their small vegetable gardens, reminded the visitor of the remnants of the interwar working-class culture. All these are gone now owing to rapid road construction cutting through the district along a north–south axis. The main square, named after Saint Emerich (*Szent Imre*), is where several churches, a police station, the city hall, stores and a bus station can be found. It is still the political and religious centre, just as it was during the 1980s. There are numerous ten-story apartment complexes

dominating the district's landscape, many built during the 'glorious' years of Stalinism and state socialism.⁹

In 1990, Csepel suddenly became a non-communist, left-liberal city: the communist party was voted out of office, but many former communists filled the seats of the district's council for the next four years.¹⁰ Many people had two or three jobs: their time, which had been regulated by the party, trade union, or the communist youth league earlier, was now under the constraints of the market and money. Monitored by the stock exchange, multinational corporations and transnational trade agreements, Csepel's economy has been in the grip of international players. Signs of the old system were demolished and removed both inside and outside the factory gates. The large Lenin statue, at the entrance to the factory, was removed from its pedestal and shipped to a warehouse. Some street names were also changed, a practice widespread in Hungary at that time as names of martyrs and politicians of the communist movements fell out of favour and were replaced by other names.¹¹ The heightened nationalistic policies since the early 1990s also contributed to the erosion of socialist and liberal values, a move visible across the former Soviet bloc (Waterbury 2010). Csepel is no exception and in my earlier analysis I called attention to the nationalistic appeal among citizens, with the Transylvanian connection being especially strong in Csepel: cultural programmes usually include Transylvanian Hungarian music, dance and literature (Kürti 2002b). Today the town's international cultural connections are secured with eight cities (called sister-cities, or *testvérváros* in Hungarian), among them two Hungarian settlements in Transylvania, Romania.¹² Interestingly, the young mayor of Csepel is also a Transylvanian Hungarian, born in the city of Nagyvárad (Oradea) in 1981.¹³

Surely one of the most visible signs of the economic transformation, one that hurt most of the workers, was the dismantling of the large industrial enterprise, the Csepel Works. Privatization resulted in numerous smaller firms, important large factories were quickly purchased by foreign concerns while others were converted to East–West joint venture companies. Despite these 'revolutionary changes', however, as one of my former informants told me, a lot had not been transformed by the dismantling of the communist state and the cornerstone, the Marxist-Leninist party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). What he mentioned was a well-known issue in the labour movement: despite all the slogans about democracy and market reforms, workers remained at the bottom of the social ladder.

LOCAL POLITICS AND THE CULTURE OF VOTING

At the 1990 local elections (there were two rounds), citizens overwhelmingly favoured new politicians: out of the 35 representatives, 21 were elected from the Free Democrats, 8 from the Young Democratic Party (FIDESZ), and the rest of them represented socialist, Christian democratic and populist parties.¹⁴ Only two leftist parties (Munkáspárt and the Szocialista Párt) were able to send

councillors to the newly elected town council, and as usual such minorities had no real input into the decision-making process.¹⁵ With such a strong political platform in the hands of coalition partners, governing the district seemed smooth and straightforward at the beginning, but this did not persist. The first four years of the 1990s were dismal both for the municipal government and for citizens. The beginning of the decade witnessed the most turbulent economic transformation in the history of Csepel since the Second World War. A major collapse of the steel and heavy industries resulted in massive job losses, with thousands of workers becoming unemployed overnight. One of my former informants from the Machine-Tool Factory reminisced: ‘We didn’t know who to turn to. When I went to the unemployment office, they could not offer any jobs. When I went to my former union boss, he told me that they did not close the factory, it was the government.’ I then asked one of my district representatives, a Free Democrat, but he just laughed and said: ‘We didn’t cause the collapse of the heavy industry, it was the communists!’ Such sentiments were echoed by others as well and while residents agreed that communists were the culprits, the liberal first government was blamed for its political inertia.

Not surprisingly, most residents became disillusioned with the new political power established in 1990. Soon, one of the final straws that caused the government and the Free Democratic coalition to collapse was the case that involved development of a sewage project and the question of independence of the district from Budapest. The mayor and most of his party representatives concluded that the separation from Budapest and regaining its former independent status would prove beneficial to the district council and citizens alike. Large projects and major investments would make a profit and Budapest would be unable to siphon resources away in terms of both taxes and manpower. The mayor believed that a major sewage-treatment facility could serve several neighbouring districts, and building it would generate hundreds of jobs and would boost the district’s coffers. In order to put pressure on Budapest city council, Csepel’s leaders organized a referendum on the issue of independence from the capital.¹⁶ The result was disastrous for the mayor and his supporters: Csepelers voted unanimously to remain as the 21st district of Budapest. This sealed the fate of the coalition of the Free Democrats and the FIDESZ in 1994 at the new municipal elections.

In this generally depressed economic climate, when Csepelers were worried about either their unemployment benefits or, alternatively, losing their jobs, all eyes turned to the parliamentary and local elections. In 1994 the socialist mayoral candidate secured his victory by receiving the majority of votes (34%, or 6871 votes). His opposition, the Free Democrats’ candidate, was second with 21%, the Democratic Forum’s candidate received 18% of the votes and, interestingly, two independent candidates also garnered 11% and 7% of the votes, respectively. The socialist victory in Budapest’s outlying districts was not unique to Csepel: many voters in Hungary turned away from the nationalist agenda of the ruling government and voted for the Socialist Party.

In the post-1994 period, until 2010, Csepel was ruled by the socialists. The mayor's (Mihály Tóth) popularity was at its apex in 2002 when 17,000 people (63%) voted for him, but slow economic growth and meagre infrastructural progress eroded his success four years later. At the 2006 elections he received only 47%, or 14,044 of the votes (his right-wing challenger only 10% less). As elsewhere in the country, a small but vocal extreme right wing has also appeared in politics. The xenophobic and anti-Semitic party, the MIÉP, attempted to enter municipal politics but most Csepelers remained uninterested: in 1998 about 8% of voters (slightly fewer than 2000 people) voted for its candidates. 'We are Csepelers, we are committed democrats, liberals and socialists' was the statement I often heard in working-class and intellectual families then. Juxtaposed to each other, these concepts have existed since the 1980s and firmly became household expressions. At that time, socialist party leaders often emphasized to me the importance of 'socialist democracy', a phrase the opposition debunked as antithetical to one another. However, for most of the 1990s and 2000s, it seemed as if time stood still in Csepel and the district was firmly in the grasp of a steadfast socialist leadership. Unquestionably, one of the successes of the socialist mayor and his team was the creation of an up-to-date wastewater treatment plant that started operation in 2010, a project that caused the liberals to fall in 1994. Financed by the European Union (EU), construction of the plant took two years and costs about EUR0.5 billion. Now not only Csepelers but the rest of Budapest's biologically treated wastewater flows into the Danube (about 350,000 cubic metres per day). This alone, however, was insufficient to save the mayor's crumbling political hierarchy.

The 2010 municipal election was a watershed both nationally and locally. After a major electoral victory, the right-wing FIDESZ managed to have a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian parliament. A few months later, during the local elections, in Csepel there were three candidates running for mayor. The national ruling FIDESZ party supported its candidate, Szilárd Németh, a former wrestler, teacher and school principal of a working-class family background and already an MP.¹⁷ Challenging him were the socialist party and the extreme-right candidates. The turnout was not as high as expected: out of the 62,000 voters only about 23,000 citizens went to the polls. The FIDESZ candidate garnered 11,805 votes (50%), the socialist János Szenteczky was second with 8698 (37%) and the right-wing candidate (József Pákozdi) received 2772 of votes (11%).¹⁸ 'We suffered four years of right-wing rule, now we will do better,' commented one resident whose optimism was bolstered by her inclusion in the socialist ward voting list. Others remained sceptical: 'Do you know what these socialists want? More power, more money of course,' said another voter.

Trusting in their unshakable decade and a half rule, socialist party members and citizens with leftist leaning had high hopes for the next election in 2014. With mounting attacks from the right and the mayoral office and the lack of solidarity among the socialist party, members created a divide and it split into smaller parties. In the struggle, the former mayor, Mihály Tóth, was sidelined, and he decided to retire and quit politics. Gyula Horváth was nominated by the

Democratic Coalition to run for the prestigious position of mayor, and while he managed to garner 35% (9000 votes), this was only enough for second place. The ruling national FIDESZ candidate, Lénárd Borbély, won 47% (12,158 votes). The right-wing party had received a second chance to start another term in office. This underlined the fact that Csepelers had completely turned away from the left and continued to abstain from politics: voter turnout was low as usual, only a little more than a third of eligible voters went to the polls.¹⁹ However, the sudden turn of events signalled residents' disillusionment with socialist promises and the scandal reaching extraordinary proportions. The Christian, conservative ideology of the FIDESZ assured a victory for the party with a slight majority: together with the mayor they now possess 12 seats in the 21-seat municipal council. Some of the former socialist candidates expressed their growing concern that altogether 3000 Csepelers voted for the extreme right-wing (Jobbik) candidates. In fact, József Pákozdy secured a seat on the municipal council on the compensatory list but in none of the election wards in Csepel did his party receive more than a few hundred votes. This signalled, as one local resident assuredly claimed, that the working-class families of Csepel 'will never support the extreme right'. He recalled the dismal winter days of 1944, when the Arrow Cross and one German military unit intended to ship the valuable factory machinery to Germany, but workers together with union leaders boycotted the military action, saving most of the machinery (Kürti 2002b, 79–80).

Victory of the right wing brought rapid and expected changes to Csepel after 2010. The town received a new coat of arms—the previous one depicted a plow, a sheaf of wheat and the river (symbolic of the past 100 years of agricultural activity and the connection to the Danube)—plus a standing white stallion and a medieval crown on the top of the crest. In refashioning Hungarian local politics according to the mainstream Christian and conservative ideology emanating from parliament and the ruling right-wing national government, the image of the white stallion is based on the thirteenth-century legend in *Gesta Hungarorum* describing the head stable master receiving land from Árpád, the mythical conqueror and founder of the first royal dynasty.²⁰ An obvious mythomoteur, tracing Csepel's history to a medieval legend releases the municipal government of one responsibility: it can completely elude the town's red heritage together with its associated heavy industries. Moreover, its political direction since 2010 has been legitimized by a novel symbol.

Similar to 2010, the 2014 municipal election was a milestone in the district's history since it reinforced right-wing rule and the continuing disinterest in party politics by the population at large. Out of the 62,688 eligible voters, only 26,287 Csepelers turned up at the polls (there were only 25,794 valid ballots).²¹ As a reminder, in the first free election of 1990, only 28% of the district residents were interested in casting their votes (Kürti 2002b, 227). In addition to general voters' apathy, the 2014 municipal election was hampered by the many candidates (five) running for the position of mayor. Yet, even if the left-liberal parties decided in favour of supporting one candidate only, the

number of votes cast for him (mayors and previously all council presidents have been men) would not have been enough to challenge the right-wing candidate.

What can this brief and admittedly cursory survey of the past 25 years of local elections illustrate? It is easy to see that change has come slowly to this working-class suburb. While elsewhere in the nation's capital most of the district mayors became FIDESZ and Christian Democrats, or alternatively independent, in Csepel the socialists managed to secure their power base until 2010. In fact, most of the time, the mayor and his fellow socialist representatives received more than 50% of the votes. With the changing climate of attitudes, especially dissatisfaction with political scandal, corruption and crime, Csepelers could not let socialist rule continue. In 2010 and then in 2014, they made their voice heard: by allowing the right-wing candidates to win, they voted the left out of power. As a result, the expression 'Red Csepel' has become synonymous with socialist corruption and mismanaged policies.

FROM ECONOMIC MIRACLE TO MAYHEM

How was this 180° turn in political culture possible? To understand the ousting of the socialists from city hall in 2010 and again in 2014, disgruntled Csepel workers offer an answer. As János, a middle-aged informant, recounts, socialists have not paid sufficient attention to peoples' needs, especially those of former workers of the Csepel factories who found themselves without jobs. By the mid-2000s, 'most of us became sceptical about socialist leaders only wanting to maintain their power without social bases'. One woman argued:

When I was laid off from the Csepel Works, actually the Iron Works, I was without a job. Two years later I was rehired by a smaller company that proudly declared that it will save the factory from bankruptcy, but that only lasted a year or two. None of the promises by the socialist mayor and his party came through. I am without a job since 2004.

One unemployed informant even suggested that 'It was the socialists who sold out our town. They allowed, even supported complete privatization of state companies and many managed to live well-off from the bonuses they received. To top all that, they became corrupt politicians in the process, skimming as much money as they could for themselves.'

The collapse of the large Csepel Works conglomerate resulted in many smaller national as well as international companies. There is now a truly global business climate in the city: besides a few Hungarian, there are Austrian, Chinese, German, Dutch, Swiss and American-owned companies producing ferrous and non-ferrous metal tools, objects and high-tech valuables.²² During my fieldwork in the 1980s in two large factories (Machine-Tool Factory, Szerszámgépgyár, and the Non-Ferrous Metal Works, Fémű), I was interested in what happened to workers. As both companies faced serious privatiza-

tion and reorganization issues, many found themselves suddenly unemployed. The former company became a German-Hungarian joint venture in 1991, a deal which lasted for only 18 months. Through high-level negotiations, a new deal was struck and a buyer from Singapore (Excel Machine Tools LTD) made an offer the Hungarian government could not refuse and the Far Eastern company became the sole owner of the factory.²³ Another successful buyout occurred between the Transformer Company and Siemens, the latter obtaining all the shares in 1996 and thus becoming the sole owner of the firm (today Csepele Siemens Zrt). The new business and industrial conditions forced workers into making one of two choices: either opting for retraining or searching for employment elsewhere. Several of my acquaintances from the 1980s managed to retain their positions. Some have been elevated to high managerial positions, a possibility facilitated by their language skills, education and non-corporate networks. One of them became so disillusioned with politics, however, that he quit his party and decided to stay away from all national and local elections.

Other factories from the once-famous Csepele Works did not fare well. The Tube Factory (Csepele Csőgyár Rt.), providing employment for 6000 workers, had lost the majority of its workforce by the mid-1990s. With only a third of its original workforce left, it was divided into four independent but closely associated units. Workers and trade unions opted to abandon plans to obtain the majority of shares in order to create an employee-owned company. In reality, both groups were more interested in saving jobs than in risking profit. This resulted in a situation that characterized most industrial buyouts: managerial elites were able to obtain ownership, often with the financial backing of the state, or alternatively by inviting foreign investors. The Tube Factory, however, was not able to live up to the expectations set by international competitors: after few years of struggle the company filed for bankruptcy and was eventually dissolved.

The privatization process of the Csepele Metal Works (Vasmű) was somewhat different. The factory had 10,000 workers but by 1991, when the company was converted into a shares company, it retained only 1000 workers. Employees had a chance to buy property coupons but after initial excitement most of them decided, as one older worker I befriended in the late 1980s put it, 'to get rid of the cheap and worthless coupons'. With a joking gesture (flipping his finger), he pointed to a framed picture on the wall: it was a photo of him standing at the factory entrance with one of the coupons next to it. As he argued, workers saw little possibility of saving the Csepele Metal Works in light of the growing uncertainty of market conditions. Finally, in 1995 an American buyer (Universal Automotive Inc.) saved the company and most of the workers from unemployment. After 2004, however, the Americans pulled out and the company, or what was left of it, remained solely in Hungarian hands (Szabó 2009, 91). By that time my acquaintance became an embittered pensioner nostalgically mentioning the 'glorious days' when the smithy at the Csepele Metal Works was working at full speed.

While the closing of factories in Csepel was ubiquitous, not all suffered the same fate. The Dunapack paper factory was successfully amalgamated in 1990 by the Austrian family-owned paper and packaging Prinzhorn Group. Now it is the sole provider of high-quality paper and packaging products with state-of-the-art technology and a skilled workforce. The American bike company, Schwinn, and the similar Csepel factory reveal an interesting development, which exemplifies the flow of multinational capital and the reorganization of the industrial urban workforce on a global scale. Since the mid-1980s, Schwinn began experiencing a decline in its sales that forced the company to follow the international trend in shifting away from road bikes to mountain bike models. Feeling the squeeze of rising costs and the change in technology, it closed its plants, first in Chicago in 1983 and then in Mississippi in 1990. By this time the company's annual sales had dwindled to 900,000 bikes a year, about 10% of the total bikes sold in the USA annually (Dzierdak 2002, 79–80). However, most of the bikes were from overseas plants, China and Hungary. Schwinn had a 42% ownership stake in the Csepel plant. Eliminating production in the USA and firing workers in Illinois and Mississippi, Schwinn managed to boost production by hiring laid-off workers in Csepel, a large and skilled workforce without jobs since the closing of the gigantic Csepel Works. By the late 1990s, however, high-level corruption engulfed the Russian owner and he sold the company to Hungarian buyers.²⁴

Other US firms were also potential investors: Powergen, for instance, bought considerable stakes in electric power production in Csepel in 1990–1991; by 2000 the American firm announced considerable losses, a reason why it sold its stakes in the Csepel companies. The new owner, interestingly, was also an American company (NRG Energy Inc.) from Minneapolis, but it too decided two years later that the Hungarian move was not of benefit to the company and sold Csepel.

‘THE CORRUPT AND BLOODY CITY’

It has been admitted to me by both left- and right-wing politicians that local political life, led by the socialists since 1994, received a major blow when in 2009 a double homicide that shook the district made national headlines in the media for weeks. Even so, many years later, when Csepelers converse at the dinner table, bar or bus stop, one murderous incident occupies their imagination. An intricate story with a connection to major politicians, a disgruntled school principal and even the police chief, the case could easily provide ample material for an Agatha Christie murder-mystery. A main figure in the Csepel socialist party, a school principal of an alternative grade school founded and funded by a private foundation, Gábor Deme, repeatedly took money from the school's treasury to finance his lifestyle and growing mortgage payments. By forging bills with the help of his wife, an accountant at the school, he managed to cover up his actions for a while but was discovered during an audit. When confronted by the director of the school's foundation (József Takács), himself

a leading figure in the socialist party and a former deputy mayor, the principal admitted his guilt and offered to pay back the stolen money. A meeting was arranged at the school between them to which the director brought one of his teachers as an eyewitness. Aware of the time running out, the principal hired the school's security guard (Tamás Kun) to silence the director, who was ready to inform the public about the entire corruption. The meeting went according to schedule: the principal ordered the security guard to use his weapon and in no time the director lay dead from bullet wounds. The murderers demanded the keys for the server room from the teacher in order to erase the recordings from the security cameras. Pleading for his life, the teacher was unable to find the keys and was killed instantly. According to plan, the security guard wounded his arm and rushed to call the police and ambulance with the ridiculous story of an unknown masked assailant committing the horrific murders, which he had witnessed.

The fabricated story collapsed immediately when the police discovered a hidden tape recorder in the teacher's pocket. The execution of the two men being recorded, it was an open-and-shut case for the courts but not without further ramifications. As it turned out, socialist politicians as well as the local police chief were also involved. Before the fateful evening, the principal actually asked for help from the socialist member of parliament (MP) representing Csepel (György Podolák), but the two men could not agree on what actions to take. The school director also searched for high-level accomplices and visited the local police chief just hours before the murderous event; apparently he was ready to speak to the chief about money laundering and corruption within the socialist party involving several individuals. The police chief (Mihály Császár), who was immediately forced to retire after the case came to light, admittedly suggested that if there was sufficient evidence charges should be promptly filed.²⁵ Strangely, no actions followed, though later some documents concerning the stolen school money turned up at the police station.

The murder case occurred at the worst possible time for the socialist party when the economic recession was at its height and politicians were eagerly readying themselves for the approaching elections. The opposition took immediate action and following the uproar in the wake of the murderous incident, two right-wing MPs (Lénárd Borbély and Szilárd Németh) started a vicious mud-slinging campaign against the socialist leadership. The main targets were the mayor of Csepel (Mihály Tóth) and the president of the local cell of the socialist party (János Szenteczky). Both were accused of corruption and involvement in a public housing scam of recently refurbished apartments sold to friends and relatives below the market price. In fact, one of the beneficiaries named was none other than the police chief who was also compromised in the murder case. As the case unfolded, it became obvious that the mayor's assistant, a director of the district's utilities and service company (Csevak Zrt) and also in charge of supervising the sale of apartments, was a leading figure in the socialist party. Eventually, the case ended in court but it was dismissed owing to insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, by the autumn of 2010 with the

approaching municipal elections, the mayor and his comrades lost face and, in the words of the mayor, ‘we could only look at the election-time with increasing trepidation’.

After the fateful election of 2010, the relationship between the FIDESZ-led municipal council and the opposition politicians escalated into a mutually resentful, onerous rivalry. To publicize the ‘corrupt’ socialist leadership, a 150-page report was published by city hall, aptly titled ‘Red Csepel’, with an obvious reference to the survival of communist corruption in the district (Ábel 2011). The booklet, with a print run of 35,000 and distributed to all households free, was obvious overkill. At the time, power was firmly in the hands of the right-wing FIDESZ, which won a decisive victory at the polls. The mayor’s office did not retrench: a complete audit and revision of previous contracts was ordered. One of the questionable contracts—the building of a housing complex with roads managed by Csevak—amounted to more than HUF2 billion (roughly USD6 million). The president of the socialist party again was responsible for overseeing it, whose money-laundering scheme was unearthed. Consequently, he was fined by the courts for budgetary inaccuracies and money laundering, a charge he still vehemently denies. More than that, he was also fined for slander, a charge involving a 2010 election leaflet in which he used language that accused his opponents of being involved in political corruption. Mr Szenteczky is still a member of the city council, having secured his place on the left-liberal coalition compensatory list.

CONCLUSIONS

As former Soviet bloc countries comprise an ever-increasing proportion of global, especially EU, political and economic developments, there is a pressing need for more in-depth studies. On a granular level, there are few examinations of the actual roles that cities and urban industrial centres play in this. Existing anthropological analyses heavily favour rural agrarian small communities, a hallmark of classic ethnographic fieldwork practices in Europe. And although the scholarly literature now pays greater attention to political processes, we still do not know the full impact of global and national alterations on urban environments and their people. There is accordingly an enormous need—and enormous opportunity—for empirical, first-hand observations of the challenges city neighbourhoods face, and also how they negotiate and respond to these. As East-Central European states struggle with their socialist legacies and attempt full integration into the European polity, these inquiries will only become more vital.

The case study of Csepel presented here illustrates that, we, as anthropologists, are well situated to investigate the ways politics, economic transformation and concomitant ideological conflicts figure in the construction of new urban processes, class restructuring and local lifeways. Anthropologists working in post-socialist Hungary have not focused on how these processes are contested and negotiated from the perspectives of parties, institutions and concerned citizens, long a hallmark of political science and sociology. The challenge for

anthropologists of urban cultures clearly is, first, to adopt a broad-based cognizance of how national and local politics are played out in the neighbourhood in order to examine not only the actual workings of power relations and their institutionalization but also the impact of these on the lives of those investigated. Second, fieldwork, meeting face to face with informants and gathering information from various sources and analysing local media, are crucial aspects of the quest to achieve a multifaceted understanding of the ways in which politics and economic transformation are played out and negotiated in the local context. Long-term fieldwork in one location allows a penetrating anthropological analysis of economic and political transformation from the perspectives of individuals and families. In the last quarter of a century, the complex political transformation in Csepel, a working-class town of mythical proportions fabricated from real as well as imagined conceptions during the height of Stalinist state socialism, reveals that class conflict and political interests can change dramatically. Csepelers, whether they wished it or not, were planted in the vortex of an official working-class movement during the 1950s and 1960s; symbolic pilgrimages by Soviet leaders to Csepel were highlights of Budapest's international image-making, especially solidarity with the Soviet Union. This legacy lingered on for much of the transformative period that followed the collapse of the communist system after 1989, albeit most of it slowly eroded and turned increasingly against the city's socialist leadership as a result of unexpected social conflicts.

To save the district's diverse industry and reorganize the remaining companies, the municipal government ordered an urban development feasibility study. Assessing local capacities, the study calls for large governmental investments to create new jobs, restructure existing industries according to international standards and maintain local interests by allowing a healthy progression of social engineering in the coming years. It will be interesting to see how Csepelers, workers and intellectuals alike will respond to 'rejuvenate the factory town with a sustainable framework that can also serve as model for other rust-belt areas' (Ongjerth 2013, 5). The coming years will sustain or challenge the idea of whether Csepelers will maintain the current conservative, national worldview emanating from current governmental circles or, alternatively, will rely on their working-class identity. Based on the above ethnographic example, it is easy to summarize that after major and chaotic industrial restructuring, Csepel certainly took a more central place and became more diverse in both economy and politics than it was in the 1990s and certainly in the 1980s. One thing is sure: with the arrival of transnational corporations and full-scale globalization, Csepelers' local identity has been cardinaly altered.

NOTES

1. The municipal council decision of July 2015 declared that the Workers' Home should 'again belong to the residents of Csepel' and nationalization should take place. In 1991 the right of management of the Workers' Home was transferred

- by the eight remaining founding factories to an independent foundation (Csepel Munkásotthon Alapítvány). Since subsequently all the companies went bankrupt or were amalgamated into new or joint ventures (there were no more founders left), this right was transferred to the courts. This forms the basis on which the municipal government seeks to possess the institution.
2. On the Hungarian working-class movement and politics during socialism, with comparative insights into East Germany, see Bartha (2013). For an English labour historian's view, see Pittaway (2012).
 3. Socialist, Soviet bloc, communist and 'second world' are terms utilized across the disciplines to refer to the Marxist-Leninist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Consequently, post-socialist and post-communist refer to the successor states that once belonged to the Soviet orbit. Some countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America were also part of that international 'fraternal association'. There is a growing literature on the usefulness and diverse meaning of such diverse terminology (see, for example, Giordano et al. 2014; Hann 2003; Kürti and Skalnik 2009), but that belongs to a different analysis.
 4. I have dealt with some of the specific problems of East European anthropology, its nature and contents in another publication (Kürti 1996). I discuss specifics of urban anthropology in Hungary (Kürti 2014) in the context of the debate on the relevance of 'anthropological research in the city' (Prato and Pardo 2013; Forum 'Urban Anthropology' 2013, 2014).
 5. For a joint attempt by Chris Hann and me to analyse local political transformation, see Hann and Kürti (2015).
 6. On the economic and social development of Budapest in English, see Izsák and Probáld (2001).
 7. The numbers of citizens voting for these minority representatives are few and far between, and, since 1994, continually dwindling. In 2014, for instance, only 252 Roma residents were registered to vote, only 84 turned up at the polling booths; comparable figures for Greeks are 26 and 14, and for Ukrainians 38 and 13, respectively. These figures are from the National Election Bureau 2014 Municipal Elections website (http://valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2014/990/990_0_index.html, accessed 10 September 2017). On the minority elections and representations, see Belánszki et al. (2006).
 8. For the description of Csepel and my fieldwork there, see my earlier English publications (Kürti 1989, 1990, 2002b).
 9. I have described some of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist years in Hungary in an earlier publication (Kürti 2013).
 10. During the early 1990s, these individuals were acrimoniously referred to as 'parachuters' (ejtőernyős)—that is, those who parachuted from communism to democracy and successfully managed to retain their privileged positions.
 11. In 1990 the street named after the Second World War mayor (Kalamár) was changed. In 2011, four more street names were eliminated: Council (Tanács), Supermarket (Áruház), Ságvári and Bajáki (the last two were communist martyrs). The new names are Károli Gáspár, Görgy Arthur, Popieluszkó and Mansfeld Péter, respectively. See *Csepeli Hírmondó* (2011). 30 May.
 12. These are Vámosgálfalva (Gănești), a town of 3500 people, of whom about 2400 are Hungarians, and Nagyszalonta (Salonta), a settlement in Bihor county, with a population of 17,000, of whom about 10,000 are ethnic Hungarians.

13. Much information about the local government, including the mayor, can be found on the official Csepel website (<http://www.csepel.hu/onkormanyzat/polgarmester>, accessed 10 September 2017).
14. For those not familiar with the current Hungarian party system, I recommend the English-language studies by Korkut (2012) and Tóka (1998).
15. Interestingly, in the past 26 years' municipal elections, no communist candidates of the Workers' Party (Munkáspárt) received more than 10–11% of the votes in any of the voting districts. It is only this party that claims legal continuation with the pre-1989 Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. The party has about 2000–3000 followers in seven working-class districts of Budapest. Csepel is one of them, but the party's homepage has nothing whatsoever on its activities there (<http://budapest.munkaspart.hu/>, accessed 10 September 2017). Since its inception in 1990, the Workers' Party has had a single candidate (Gyula Thürmer), but neither him nor any of his colleagues ever managed to win seats in parliament or become mayors.
16. Budapest city council is made up of elected representatives as well as the mayors of the districts. It has a president who is also made lord mayor in a city-wide election. The districts and the city council are on equal terms with no hierarchy between them; in other words, the lord mayor does not rule over the districts. Each district is under the supervision of its elected council. The districts are divided into voting wards, or districts, that send one elected councillor to the council.
17. Before 2014 the law allowed MPs to be mayors.
18. Figures for the Csepel municipal elections are calculated from the National Office of Elections, 2010 (http://valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2010/564/564_0.html, accessed 28 June 2016).
19. In fact, of the 62,688 eligible voters, only 26,266 people cast their votes; at the final count there were only 25,794 valid votes in the ballot boxes (http://valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2014/990/990_0_index.html, accessed 10 September 2017).
20. Before deciding, the municipal government conducted a public survey in which 65% of respondents opted for the coat of arms depicting the white stallion. Csepel is a toponym referring to a thicket or shrubs, which is more accurate especially in light of historical records: the Island of Csepel was for centuries used as royal hunting ground. For the medieval history of the settlement, see Bolla (2010) and contributions in the publication by Kubinyi et al. (1965).
21. For official election results, see the National Election Bureau 2014 Municipal Elections (http://valasztas.hu/hu/onkval2014/990/990_0_index.html, accessed 10 September 2017).
22. The largest energy-producing company in Csepel was owned by the Swiss Atel AG, until 2009 when it was merged as Alpiq Holding AG. Csepel Steel Pipe LTD is a Dutch-owned leading tube and pipe company and Csepel Grinding Manufacturer Co. is a Chinese firm. The plastic tube manufacturer Pipelife Hungary is owned by the Austrian Pipelife International GmbH.
23. See the Csepel Holding NYrt 2013. évi üzleti jelentés, Budapest, 29 April 2014 (http://www.csepel-holding.hu/DATA/vezetosegii_jelentes_2013_CSH_KU.pdf, accessed 10 September 2017).
24. The Russian Semion Mogilevich, a well-known crime figure who was involved with the Schwinn Company through an intricate global financial network criss-crossing Canada, the Cayman Islands, the Channel Islands, Israel, Hungary and

the USA. Some of the business deals and itineraries can be read about in the series of hearings of the Canadian Securities Commission, which also includes the Hungarian Schwinn (<http://www.osc.gov.on.ca/en/10645.htm>). While in Hungary, Mogilevich received Hungarian citizenship by marrying a Hungarian woman.

25. The case was made into a documentary in 2014: *The Double Homicide in Csepel—Power by All Means* (A Csepeli kettős gyilkosság—hatalmat mindenáron) directed by Attila Csarnai and Dávid Géczy.

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