

TOWARD THE MIDDLE CLASS – WITH DETOURS? (SOCIAL CHANGES IN HUNGARY 1945–1995)

TIBOR VALUCH

Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Budapest,
Hungary

The history of Hungary in the last 150 years, and especially in the twentieth century, was rather stormy and fraught with seminal turning points. Looking at only the post-war period, we can identify at least four major landmarks, which fundamentally influenced social changes in Hungary: the end of World War II, the communist take-over in 1948–49, the 1956 revolution, and the change of regime between 1988 and 1990 that restored the bourgeois democratic state organization. The emergence of bourgeois society after the war was soon interrupted for several decades by the communist seizure of power. The expansion of a Stalinist social structure, however, was itself torpedoed by the 1956 revolution. Midway through the era of the Kádár regime, a precarious process of bourgeois development started, which then slowed and finally, prompted by the shift in political power, came to be rekindled at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In this brief discussion I want to concentrate on exploring and analyzing the sociohistorical processes, the changes in the system of values and social psychology that reflected the social changes in Hungary during the last fifty years.

Hungary suffered severe losses in military, civilian and material resources during World War II. As a result of the war some 800,000 to 900,000 people were killed and forty percent of the national wealth of 1938 was destroyed. The extensive migration of some 450,000 to 550,000 people between 1945 and 1948 also greatly influenced the Hungarian population. The relocation of German minorities forced 170,000 to 180,000 thousand people to leave the country. At the same time, 60,000 to 80,000 people, who had fled from the atrocities of the war or were displaced by the constantly shifting boundaries, came to Hungary from the neighboring countries. Due to the Slovak–Hungarian exchange of citizens, 90,000 Slovak citizens of Hungarian origin entered the country and 60,000 thousand Slovaks left Hungary.

During the decades after the war the only instance of mass migration occurred as a result of the 1956 revolution. Not counting those who soon returned, 180,000 people left Hungary. Including the refugees of the 1956 revolution, a

total of 420,000 to 430,000 thousand people emigrated, legally or illegally, between 1945 and 1989.¹

The population of Hungary was 9.2 million in 1949, 9.96 million in 1960, 10.71 million in 1980, and 10.37 million according to the 1990 census. Natural increase started a slow decline from its maximum of 11–12 thousandth in 1953–1954, stabilized at 2–4 thousandth by the early seventies, then after the temporary baby boom of the seventies it slipped further down. Due to the decline of births and the increase of deaths, during the early 1980s the natural increase of the Hungarian population first stopped then reverted into a natural decrease, a process that still continues during the 1990s. The childbirth rate stabilized at the European average of 11–12 thousandths in 1989–1990, while the death rate at 13–15 thousands is on a steady rise. The mortality of middle-aged men has especially increased during the last two decades.

The ratio of the sexes has shown some fluctuation between 1949 and 1990 but there have always been more women than men. For every 1,000 men there were 1,081 women in 1949, 1,073 in 1960, 1,064 in 1980, and 1,081 in 1990. The age structure, however, has changed more dramatically. Those younger than nineteen years of age made up 31.7% of the population in 1949. This ration had fallen to 27.2% by 1990. Those aged twenty to fifty-nine years constituted 55.7% of the population in 1949, but only 51.3% by 1990. Those who were sixty years old, or older, formed only 12.6% of the whole population in 1949 but had increased to 21.5% by 1990.

The ratio of the economically active population gradually increased during the 1950s and 1960s by an average of 3% each decade. At the middle of the 1970s, however, this trend took a U-turn, and ever since then the percentage of economically active adults has been on a gradual decline. The main reason for this decline was the decrease of adults, who were able to work. The ratio of economically active adults within the whole Hungarian population fell by 4% and 7% during the 1980s and 1990s respectively. The latter figure can indisputably be attributed to the consequences of an emerging market economy. The number of economically active adults was 4.1 million in 1949, 5.1 million in 1970, 4.5 million in 1980, and 3.7 million in 1994. The employment of women has considerably increased in Hungary over the last fifty years. Women constituted 29% of the economically active population in 1949. This proportion had risen to 44% by 1975 and 46% by 1990. The ratio of dependents and economically inactive to the economically active indicates a noticeable change in social circumstances. Between 1949 and 1970 the ratio of the economically inactive population was gradually declining; then from the 1970s it began rising. In 1975 there were 107 inactive people for every 100 who were economically active, 117 in 1985, 129 in 1990, and not less than 174 in 1994. This dramatic increase was at least in part due to a never-before-seen surge in unemployment. The dynamic transformation of the social structure is indicated by the rise in the per-

centage of highly trained professionals and executives from 2% to 11%, and by the improvement in the ratio of plain white-collar workers from 5% to 22% between 1945 to 1990. During the same period the ratio of semi-skilled and skilled blue-collar workers increased from 32% to 50%. At the same time, the percentage of independent farmers plummeted from 32% to 1%, and the ratio of self-employed tradesmen and retailers shrivelled from 8% to 4%.

Directly after the war Hungary became a satellite state within the Soviet sphere. Consequently it could not escape the radical shift toward single-party dictatorship and the total subjugation of social, economic and political changes, which inflicted forced social mobility and considerably changed the status and environment of several social groups.

In the view of the relevant data and considering the political and ideological conditions of the era, we may label the social changes in Hungary for the decades after 1948 as "precarious modernization." On the one hand living standards, the material and technological conditions of life, have continuously improved in Hungary; on the other hand modernization in Hungary has meant almost exclusively the development of heavy industry. Due to the autocratic and dictatorial political climate the social and economic flexibility of Hungarian society considerably worsened. Although the transformation of the social structure in many respects was similar to that of the Western European states during the era, there were striking differences as well. The existing socialist system was able to maintain a material increase in the 1960s and 1970s, but beginning in the early 1980s failed to deliver even that. All the same, general living standards were impossible to raise. Moreover, by its very nature, primarily through its refusal to tolerate community initiatives outside the sphere of the family, the system to a considerable extent contributed to the weakening of social interaction, to the abolition of "slight solidarity," which is indispensable for the proper operation of a "normal" society. The serious problems in human relationships are clearly indicated by the fact that certain deviancies, such as suicide and alcoholism, showed most unfavorable tendencies in Hungary from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The modernization after 1948 was also precarious because for a long time it subdued genuine cultural trends that could have promoted progressive values; because it failed to bring about the society's ability to handle and resolve conflicts; and also because it impeded the evolution of behavioral patterns in civil society.

Key data support, such as the radical transformation of the employment structure and the soaring level of education, indicate that a process of modernization took place. For instance, the ratio of the population engaged in agriculture decreased from 53.8% in 1949 to 15.4% in 1990. Yet, a 1988 survey showed that nearly 45% of the adult population were in one way or another involved in small-scale agricultural production. This unusually high ratio is the result of the social, political and economic conditions of a peculiar twofold

structure and reveals that the quality of the modernization process was markedly different from that of Western Europe.

If we examine education, we can see that from the end of the 1940s the restructuring of the educational system was accompanied by a steep rise in quantity. By reducing the number of illiterates and increasing the ratio of skilled labor and university graduates, education contributed to the lessening of the existing cultural inequalities in Hungary. This relative equalization is demonstrated by the fact that in 1949 roughly 80% of those over fifteen had not finished elementary school, while in 1994 some 80% of the population over fifteen had completed at least the eight-year elementary education. In 1949 only 5.5% of the population finished secondary school, but by 1960 their ratio was 16.5%, and in 1990 it stood at 23.6%. The post-war decades brought dynamic quantitative changes in Hungarian higher education as well. In comparison to 1938 the number of students in full-time higher education more than quadrupled by the end of the 1980s. Between 1950 and 1990, approximately 400,000 students had attended and graduated from full-time university programs, and an additional 300,000 got their university degrees through part-time and correspondence courses. Consequently the number of university graduates in 1985 was six times the 1949 level; and the number of university teachers and professors was nine times that of 1938. However, despite the undoubtedly favorable statistical trends, Hungary still trailed behind Western European countries in the number of university students at the end of the 1980s.

Another symptom of precarious social modernization was the relatively low level of the service industry and the noticeable slackening of social morals in the sixties and seventies.

A distinguishing feature of the Hungarian social structure was also the fact that parallel with the "first economy" of state ownership, there existed a loosely defined "second economy" of private enterprises and market forces. It all resulted in a "Janus-faced society."²

Under political pressure the transformation of the social structure in Hungary was spectacularly accelerating between 1950 and 1975. Mobility in Hungarian society gradually became more open and intensive after 1945. However, the openness was seriously curtailed by the late 1970s and early 1980s. Afterwards the chances of changing one's social status gradually dwindled away. Apparently the ratio of the urban population grew more slowly than the number of job opportunities in the cities, while industrialization did not bring about the development of infrastructure and the extension of urbanization.

Social transformation in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s shows situational similarities with colonization, when the representatives of foreign powers and foreign values forced their authority on a conquered nation by any means avail-

able. The indigenous people did not have the slightest opportunity to determine whether or not they wanted to accept or refuse the foreign impositions.

The per capita national income in Hungary was \$120 in 1938, or 60% of the European average. World War II considerably reduced the national income, and the 1938 level was only achieved again in 1949. The 1950s brought some notable fluctuations, but by and large as compared to 1949 national income was on the rise. The increase prevailed until the early 1970s. On the other hand, despite forced economic development, the gap between Hungary and the economically developed countries was further widening during the post-war decades. Moreover, Hungary's inept reaction to the 1973 oil crisis started yet another period of relative decline. By then it was obvious that the country was unable to maintain the living standards and economic improvements, which were financed with foreign loans. The policy of restraint in the 1980s failed to bring any noticeable success; then the collapse of the eastern markets was a further blow to the Hungarian economy. Consequently the GDP was down by 20% as compared to the end of the 1980s.

Although personal consumption had been almost entirely subordinate to the goals of industrial development before 1956, the consistent increase of living standards became a pivotal aspect of the Kádár regime. As a result the following two decades between 1957 and 1978 brought a significant and steady improvement of living standards. Real wages more than doubled during the period. Personal consumption per capita increased by 150%, more than ten times as many durables were purchased, and three and a half times as much household energy was consumed. The tide turned at the end of the 1970s. From 1979 the directors of economic policy tried decisively to limit wages in order to restore the balance in the economy. The widest strata of the Hungarian population were directly affected, as the reduction of real wages was all too noticeable. In comparison to what came afterwards at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the devaluation of real wages was a moderate 0.6–0.8% a year between 1979 and 1987. Individuals could make up for the lost income by moonlighting and working overtime. Between 1988 and 1995, however, real wages dropped by 3.0–3.3% every year. *Real wages in 1995 were only 73% of the 1978 level.* Declining living standards became a general phenomenon, and only those could maintain their previous lifestyles, who were able to complement their income with extra work or dip into previously amassed capital.

Although the inequalities of income generally decreased between 1948 and 1970, the equalities demanded by the prevailing ideology were never realized. Moreover, due to the "second economy" the income gap between the different social and economic groups was again gradually widening by the end of the 1970s. Material growth during the socialist era demanded strenuous efforts from the population. Although the average time spent at work was decreasing for both men and women between the 1960s and 1980s, the amount of time devoted

to small-scale agricultural production and generally to the "second economy" dynamically increased, especially among the male population. Considerable time was needed to manage household and ancillary farms. Men who were employed full-time spent on average one and a half to two hours, and pensioners spent four and a half hours working on the household farm. Employed women spent a daily two to two and a half hours on the far. More time consuming activities were usually scheduled for the weekend. With so many hours spent working, obviously most people had little time left for cultural activities and entertainment.

Another factor that necessitated household and ancillary farms was the persistence of shortages. In the early 1970s commercial chains were so underdeveloped and their standard of service so inept that the rural households had to produce their own food. Selling the small surplus also provided them with extra income, which was an important part of their subsistence and contributed to the material growth of the family. Short of capital and bound by economic regulations, people could invest nothing but their individual work. As the surplus income was almost impossible, or at least very difficult, to reinvest in production, the profit from household and ancillary farming was usually devoted to personal consumption. If we consider the ratio of household durables within the entire national wealth – between 1960 and 1974 it nearly tripled from 73.3 to 180 billion *forints* – the material growth resulting from the consolidation of the Kádár regime is obvious. The size and structure of households also changed considerably. The size of the average Hungarian family was gradually getting smaller; and there were fewer children per family. Both in rural and urban areas there were considerably fewer extended families living in the same household. In the villages the multigeneration, cohabitant family model was replaced by a new trend: young couples were starting a family and life in their own household. It subsequently became accepted that married couples moved into their own homes and lived independently from their parents.

Household work had a significant economic role in Hungary after 1945. From the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s Hungarian households showed an increasing tendency to alleviate the burdens of housework through modernization of homes and consumer services. Between the 1950s and 1970s the costs of maintenance and general expenses more than doubled in household consumption. Money spent on personal travel increased tenfold between 1955 and 1975. There were also important structural changes in the purchase of durable goods. Until the late 1950s the typical durables one could buy were furniture, bicycles, stoves and traditional fireplaces, motorcycles and radios. Starting with the 1960s electric household appliances, washing machines, spin-driers, refrigerators and television sets became leading consumer goods, while from the early 1970s the motorcar became one of the most desirable purchases. The nature of household expenditure heavily depended on location as

well. In the 1960s and 1970s the village population spent much less on services and public transportation than city dwellers; on the other hand, they spent considerably more on travel.³ Further differences by region were manifest in the use of household utilities. Rural areas were usually less saturated with household amenities than city homes. This was true probably because people in the villages were more concerned with maintaining their small farms and acquiring the necessary agricultural tools than with buying general household durables. In urban households exactly the opposite was true.

The most radical change of lifestyle in post-war Hungary occurred during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Large numbers of people moved from villages to cities during the 1960s and 1970s, thereby changing not only their homes but their lifestyles as well. Their living conditions also changed dramatically. They usually left their old belongings at home and decorated their homes according to the norms of their new environment. The radical change of everyday utensils finally swept through the villages during the 1970s. The dichotomy of innovation and traditional values is evident in the fact that in most new village houses, which were built in the 1970s, the traditional “clean room” – decorated and almost never used – was preserved in a somewhat transformed version.

As opposed to the earlier era of socialism, household and fancy articles, some of which represented social standing, both became attainable in the 1970s. Despite the difficulties of purchasing the “right” article and the “poor” choice, a significant proportion of Hungarian society might have thought that they could form their private spheres as freely as they wanted, accumulate wealth, consume food and drink, buy all sorts of goods and property beyond their physical needs.

In the decoration of urban homes during the 1950s and 1960s the traditional concept that the home should reveal its owners’ social status had been somewhat neglected. In interior design most people wanted to follow the patterns of their corresponding social group. The central goal of most Hungarian families in the 1970s was to have a home of their own; and following the example of the reference group, they crammed their personal space with all kinds of objects.

Under state socialism people, following emotional impulses, organized their personal space in a hedonistic fashion and identified themselves with the citizens of twentieth-century consumer society. They did not follow the puritanical, practical and sensible model of the bourgeois home but chose instead the object-driven ideal of consumer society.⁵

The transformation of habitation in Hungary during this period showed the revision of cultural heritage and customs as well. The new lifestyle was centered around private spheres and personal space, which revealed a yearning toward an identification with Western European consumer societies. Hungarian homes, however, had on average very few rooms. Consequently it was difficult

to separate different activities within the house and preserve personal space for the individual; and this would have been the epitome of modern bourgeois habitation. Significant changes in this respect only happened after the end of the 1980s.

By confronting the country's role in and contribution to World War II, Hungarian social consciousness had a brief opportunity for democratic change immediately after 1945. However, the political shift of 1948–49 put on hold for several decades the development of modern national identity and left open such important questions as the "identity of small nations," – repeatedly postulated by the 1947 Paris peace treaty – or the assimilation of the Jews. For decades after 1948 the value system of Hungarian society underwent major changes. The values most directly stemming from Marxist ideology were forced on society most intensively between 1948 and 1956. Collectivism was carried to the extreme, along with the suppression of national feelings and an overt disdain for human rights. The forced "modernization" of the 1940s and 1950s in Hungary resulted in the strengthening of individuation, atomization and secularization, which created a new trend of social integration. Behavioral patterns of the pre-war era were less and less important, while the new behavioral norms of the communist power elite promoted disintegration.

The era after 1956 can be divided into two distinct periods. The first period lasted until the mid-1970s was characterized by the ideological neutralization of Hungarian society. The second period lasted from the late 1970s until the end of the 1980s and brought about a gradual deviation from Marxist ideology and its values. In the 1950s the authorities demanded of society an unconditional acceptance of, support for, and identification with the goals set by the political leadership. From the 1960s on the basic requirement increasingly became a silent acceptance and respect for the ideological and historical taboos of the existing political system. The change of attitude was appropriately, if infamously, summed up by János Kádár in 1962, "Whoever is not against us, is with us."

The new system of values – an apolitical attitude that overestimated the tranquillity of private life and formally aligned with the "expectations of socialist power" – did not change much between the mid-1960s and late 1970s. A gradual departure from these values started in the early 1980s and accelerated at the end of the decade. An idiosyncrasy of the Hungarian value system in the 1960s and 1970s was that several individual values remained highly stable, and this relative stability prevailed during the 1980s as well. Under the circumstances the high level of individuation in Hungarian society at the beginning of the 1980s was remarkable. The principal reason is that parallel with the slackening ideological pressure, the values and behavioral patterns connected to material wealth came to the fore. During the 1960s and 1970s, despite the apparent problems, family played an important role in everyday life.

Although the power structure did not change significantly after 1956, the method of the exercising power gradually became more sophisticated. As opposed to the practices of the Rákosi regime, “politics” no longer intended to convert society by all available means but rather tried to neutralize it. According to the more pragmatic approach of the Kádár era, the reconsideration of the past became the most important ideological question.

The most poignant means of consolidation in order to exert an apolitical effect is dehistoricization. The new political course did not want a new look at the past. [...] The authorities can only prevent society from owning a historically articulated political consciousness by eliminating the picture of the past itself.⁶

The first step in this direction was the total eradication of the events of 1956. Aware of its defeat and personal connections to the revolution, Hungarian society became a partner in this effort. Due to this suppression, however, “the Revolution of 1956 was not remembered by Hungarians as the eternal past should be remembered.” As a consequence Hungarian national consciousness lacked a

major political landmark that determined the following twenty-five to thirty years in every possible respect. Whoever casts 1956 out of his memory, cannot form a clear political consciousness about these thirty years. [...] Dehistoricising 1956 makes it impossible to have a real insight into the social situation.⁷

The system inflated technological and economic development and offered to society material growth as a pragmatic vision of the future. They added a glimpse of a “career society” where the big steps ahead were not viable any more – especially after the late 1960s – but small promotions seemed to be ensured. Solidarity was replaced with rivalry. Human relations, mostly family ties and friendships, were invariably inflated and the network of connections and mutual help remained a practical, working system. Outside the scope of connections, however, relationships were plagued by severe distrust. A possible reason for this could be that the political system usually tried to regulate social behavior with coercion, by disciplinary correction and legal penalties. At the same time, they prevented the forming of spontaneous behavioral patterns, self-regulating social norms, and systems of connections that went beyond the private sphere and operated outside the control of the authorities. One cannot disregard the fact that by its very nature the system was interested in creating and maintaining an air of distrust. Because in this situation the members of society were exposed, defenseless, and never knew when those with whom they had no direct connections used the authorities against them.

From the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s the economic reform and the emergence of the second economy caused serious changes in social consciousness. The reform process was aimed at improving the macro conditions of everyday life, while the extension of small farms resulted in the creation of a new lifestyle, a new strategy for life, and new way of thinking. By the late 1970s the private economy – in part legally and in part covertly – occupied a principal role in the life of Hungarian society. As a direct result the values it promoted, such as diligence, talent, inventiveness, and quick reckoning were considerably strengthened. From the late 1970s the values of private life had a share in shaping national consciousness and expressed a sense of identity independent of the political system. A major move in this direction was the rediscovery of Hungarian minorities living abroad. Nonetheless, the dual nature of the value system, the way of thinking, and the behavioral patterns did not have only positive effects. An obvious problem of social psychology emerged from the findings of a 1988 survey, which stated that 15% of the adult population suffered from moderate or severe neurosis. The decrease of life expectancy indicated the presence of social deviation and that modernization as well as the consolidation after 1956 has taken their toll. A major factor in this sphere must be the extreme tension of everyday life, or in the words of Péter Józán, the “symptom of unfortunate social adjustment.” The crisis in morals and values was more prominent in the period, while alienation became a notorious phenomenon in Hungarian society. In the 1970s and 1980s the majority of the population felt that they could achieve only part of what they had set out to accomplish; and their lives depended not so much on their personal will as on the often inscrutable goals of the political elite. The sense of defenselessness became ever stronger; and people came to feel that they were in part independent citizens and in part subservient subjects. From the late seventies

intellectual values became dominant and instrumental, sometimes exceeding moral values, and almost exclusively determining the trends in the structure of value systems. Even though the communist party had started the strengthening of individuation, atomization and intellectualization, their independence prevailed after the fall of the regime. [...] There is every reason to think that 1990 was not only the grave of an old regime and system but the cradle of a new, healthier society as well.⁸

The last issue that I would like to consider is the assessment of social processes during the period. Is it possible to interpret what happened in Hungarian society between 1945 and 1995 as an essentially steady march with smaller or greater digressions towards the middle class?

I do believe that it is more sensible to say that the process of developing a bourgeois mentality was drastically interrupted at the end of the 1940s in Hungary. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the rapid expansion of the

second economy started the wide-scale restitution of bourgeois values and mentality, which until the mid-1980s remained almost exclusively confined to the economic sphere. The Hungarian people, when working in a state firm, or factory, or taking part in public life, in as much as their limited rights allowed, were thinking and acting as humble subjects. When working in a small-scale agricultural farm, or from the early 1980s, in a small legal enterprize, they were doing their jobs, or managing their own enterprises, with a quasi-bourgeois sense of responsibility and proprietorship. Until the late 1980s and early 1990s the striving citizen could only develop his economic freedom and autonomy, if his limited social and political status remained unaffected. By reforming the political order and restructuring the economic system – a process involving serious sacrifices, such as the steep fall of real wages and living standards, and the soaring unemployment that touched a half a million people – the new order made it possible for the dual society, value system and social consciousness, to finally become one.

Toward the middle class – with detours? This is what I asked in the title of my discussion. The answer is yes. The two and a half decades of socialism after 1948–1949 were a long and almost fatal detour in the twentieth century history of the Hungarian bourgeoisie. Nevertheless an overt advance towards the middle class was resumed again after 1990.

Notes

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8. László Füstös and Árpád Szokolczai, “Értékek változásai Magyarországon 1978–1993” [The Changes in Values in Hungary, 1978–1993], *Szociológiai Szemle* (1994): no. 1, 57–90.

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CONTRIBUTORS

George BISZTRAY	University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
Csaba FAZEKAS	Miskolc University, Miskolc, Hungary
Éva FIGDER	Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
Maren HOBEIN	Köln, Deutschland
László KÓSA	Eötvös Loránd Universitát, Budapest, Ungarn
Miklós LOJKÓ	Pembroke College, Cambridge, UK
Éva MARTONYI	Université Catholique Pázmány Péter, Piliscsaba, Hongrie
Ignác ROMSICS	Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
János SZÁVAI	Université de Paris-Sorbonne Paris IV, Paris, France
Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK	Indiana University, Bloomington, IND, U.S.A.
Gábor TOLCSVAI NAGY	Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies, Helsinki, Finland
Tibor VALUCH	Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Budapest, Hungary
Tibor ZS. LUKÁCS	Central European University, Budapest, and Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

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