



SAD SOCIALISMS - AND EVEN SADDER POSTSOCIALISMS ?

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Introduction

The passing of Claude Lévi-Strauss, widely considered to be the greatest socio-cultural anthropologist of the last century, is my cue to offer an explicitly personal review of this discipline and what it has to tell us about the forms of human social life it has recorded in recent decades in Eastern Europe.¹ At first glance the connection is preposterous. Lévi-Strauss (1955) famously distinguished between 'hot' and 'cold' societies. He was committed intellectually and emotionally to the latter, to the peoples traditionally classified in the German tradition as *Naturvölker*, the 'people without history', as they were termed by Eric Wolf (1982). Lévi-Strauss was concerned not so much with the sociological functioning of the communities he visited in Brazil, but with their systems of kinship and mythology and what these might reveal about human cognitive universals. This French structuralism had a considerable impact on the social anthropology which I studied in Britain, but (despite an early infatuation) it came to seem unhelpful in understanding social transformations in modern Europe. The peoples of Europe undoubtedly *do* possess a history. In Eastern Europe, the temperature remained hot throughout the twentieth century, before reaching a final ugly boiling point in the Western Balkans during the 1990s. Here too, in places such as Srebrenica, one could observe elements of human society stripped down to their bare essentials, comparable to the Bororo and Nambikwara Indians studied by Lévi-Strauss. However, I shall limit my discussion to the countries I know best in the northern zones of the ambiguous realm of *Mitteleuropa* or 'east-central Europe', where social transformations have been a little less dramatic than they have been in the Balkans.

Rural modernization, varieties of nostalgia, and Europe

Whatever Lévi-Strauss may have taken from Marxism, he did not engage with the politics of the Cold War and the events which transformed Eastern Europe several times during his long life. For me in the 1970s, however, this region was every bit as exciting and 'other' as the postcolonial societies being studied by my fellow graduate students. I carried out rural fieldwork in Hungary and Poland. Some of the changes I documented were similar to those that other social scientists were investigating in other parts of Europe, and indeed all over the world. These processes could be summed up as modernization, or the demise of the traditional peasantry (see Franklin 1969). Some of the emotions unleashed in these processes were not so different from those which touched Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, and which have been felt by countless Western anthropologists since the nineteenth century. One difference in Eastern Europe was the extraordinary readiness of modernist socialist regimes to invest in a discipline which had been pioneered by their bourgeois predecessors in order to grasp the





essential features of the preindustrial peasant culture (see e.g. Mihailescu, Iliev and Naumović 2008). I was impressed by the abundance of local museums, skansens, folk music and dance houses when I went to Hungary in 1975. The *tristesse* of drab new housing estates in “under-urbanized” (Szelényi 1983) cities was compensated by the brilliant colors of folk costumes and the rhythms of peasant dances, which were appealing to young urbanites – so much so that they formed the ‘dancehouse’ socio-cultural movement, which flourished in an uneasy relationship with the cultural bureaucracy of the state (Striker 1987).

Of course, socialist modernization differed in many ways from its capitalist counterpart, notably in the restrictions it imposed on political contestation and the extent of the market. Even within the socialist bloc there was significant variation. After 1968 Hungary pursued a ‘market socialism’ course that left considerable scope for individualist accumulation strategies, especially in the countryside, even though agriculture had been nominally collectivized. Poland had a very different agrarian structure: small peasant farms dominated, rather than collective or state farms based on Soviet prototypes. Yet I found that Polish villagers had greater difficulties in pursuing ‘primitive accumulation’ than their Hungarian counterparts, since power holders feared that private ownership of the means of production could become the basis of ‘capitalist’ stratification in the Polish countryside. Folk-art souvenirs for tourists and open-air museums were supported by the Polish People’s Republic as well, but their resonance in the wider society was not what I found in Hungary. It seems to me now that young Poles were less interested in reviving ethnic dance houses in the cities than their Hungarian counterparts because their own peasantry was not caught up in a headlong modernization drive to anything like the same extent. Polish villagers were hardly a *Naturvolk*, but given the inefficiencies in the macroeconomy, many households were obliged to be self-sufficient to a degree that was remarkable by standards elsewhere in Europe (Hann 1985).

Today both Hungary and Poland are full members of the EU. Farming is very largely a family matter again in both countries (though decollectivization in Hungary was pursued pragmatically enough to allow some large socialist enterprises to persist in new capitalist forms). The new private owners of land benefit from EU support policies. However, many small-scale farmers complain of discrimination. In some parts of Hungary there is bitterness concerning foreign ownership. Nostalgia for the last decades of socialism is found almost everywhere in the Hungarian countryside. If one counts the number of registered clubs and associations, there has been a positive transformation of civil society in rural Hungary. But if one visits the villages, one finds that many of these new associations exist on paper only, and the people who were so industrious in the socialist market economy point out that they no longer have any incentive to work at all, since small-scale farming is no longer viable. As a result, people have more time for local history clubs or other forms of nostalgic recreation. In the village I know best, teachers and elderly peasants have formed a zither orchestra; its music differs greatly from the folk music that has become celebrated nationwide (and even entered the repertoire of world music), but annual concerts have proved very popular within the community. However, the energies of some villagers flow nowadays into extremist political groupings, which typically hold foreigners EU officials and ethnic minorities responsible for all their current economic woes.





Postsocialist nostalgia is also found in towns and cities, including capital cities.² The phenomenon is far from innocent. In both rural and urban sectors, Roma have been the victims of savage attacks by vigilante groups. Even in Poland, where poor economic performance was central to social discontent and its expression in the *Solidarity* movement, there is much nostalgia for the securities that have been lost. Research at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology has shown that the eastern areas of the country have suffered from new forms of social exclusion, and that this tends to be reflected in conservative, 'post-peasant populist' political behavior (Buzalka 2007). This is what I have in mind in suggesting in my title that the melancholic sense of loss following the socialist era has been followed by new, unexpected and even more nefarious threats. This plays out in elections: extreme right-wing parties are nowadays prominent at the highest levels of politics in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Full membership of the European Union has done nothing to mitigate these developments, nor has membership of the Eurozone (in the cases of Slovakia and Slovenia). On the contrary, although the economic crisis which began in 2008 has shifted attention to a north-south cleavage in Europe, the (re-)emergence of the former socialist states as a semi-periphery of the capitalist world system is strikingly apparent, e.g. in the statistics for labor migration.

The incidence of violence has also been documented elsewhere, notably in the former German Democratic Republic, where I have lived for the last decade. Here nostalgia is called *Ostalgie*. It has generated some amusing films, such as *Goodbye Lenin* and *Sonnenallee*. Tourists can take trips around Berlin Mitte in revamped Trabants and stay in 'authentic' *Plattenbau* hotel rooms. But here too, as in Hungary, the *Wende* has led to new forms of violence, especially against Turks and black asylum seekers. There is another side of eastern Germany which tourists do not get to see: unemployment rates are still double those prevailing in the West, and the better educated and skilled sections of the labor force tend to seek work in the old *Bundesländer*. It is therefore unsurprising that the successor to the former ruling Communist party still enjoys massive grassroots support in the east. Many 'ordinary' east Germans are tired of films and literature exposing Stasi abuses: not because they want to defend the Stasi, but because the relentless focus of Western-controlled media and tiny groups of intellectuals on these phenomena leaves no room for all the positive elements that millions recall from their experiences in the DDR (cf. Boyer 2010).

Of course, eastern Germany is a special case of *tristes postsocialismes*. For one thing, these regions were more developed than most parts of Eastern Europe when they became socialist; the peasants had already vanished, and so socialist rural modernization was less central to the narrative in this case. More importantly, the GDR was the only part of the former Soviet bloc to be swallowed up in its entirety by a Western state. Attitudes to Europe differ accordingly: eastern Germans tend to be more positive about Brussels, since they are well aware of the benefits they obtain from farming subsidies; they also understand that infrastructural improvements and investment incentives derive in part from EU support policies, as well as from transfers from western Germany. There is some evidence that the EU has gained popularity in more peripheral regions as well, e.g. in eastern Poland, where it is seen as more trustworthy (less corrupt) than power holders in Warsaw or the provincial capitals. In general, however, attitudes towards the EU in Eastern Europe are deeply ambivalent.





This is not surprising in view of the shabby, piecemeal way in which the Union has expanded, and the discrimination and hypocrisy shown towards those who are now nominally full members, as well as those still waiting in the queue. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the EU is still viewed by many of its members not as a Christian club, but as a club in which Western Christians are determined to retain their privileges. How else does one explain the delayed entry of Bulgaria and Romania? An exception could be made for Greece in 1981 because their Orthodoxy was a regrettable modern deviation from that people's noble Hellenic heritage; but the privileging of Croatia ahead of the Orthodox and Muslim components of former Yugoslavia confirms the pattern.

A most unlikely couple

Socialist ideology proclaimed an alliance of the workers and peasants. The reality was usually quite different, though the exact constellations varied from country to country. It became very clear during the last decade of Polish socialism that these groups were not united in government, but they could not unite in the oppositional *Solidarność* movement either: on the contrary there was continuous friction between the representatives of urban and rural groups. Let me concentrate now on Hungary, the country with which I have maintained closer contacts over the years. I have already referred to Iván Szelényi's theories of under-urbanization. This urban sociologist is also well known for his innovative work with György Konrád, in which these two Budapest scholars theorised 'intellectuals on the road to class power' (Konrád and Szelényi 1979). It is a complex work, but its basic idea of a 'new class' emerging to thwart the equality promised by socialism was hardly new. If one source of inspiration came from Yugoslavia (Djilas 1957), another came from the Hungarian Karl Polanyi, from whom Konrád and Szelényi adapted their key concept of 'rational redistribution'. In late socialist Hungary, the power of apparatchiks was still more important in many domains than the principle of the market. Even though the latter grew in significance after 1968, key goods such as urban housing were controlled and allocated by the members of a new intelligentsia. Later the Russian term *nomenklatura* was used to label this 'class', but I have in mind a more broadly construed intelligentsia of white-collar employees who could live rather well in late socialist Budapest. Most of those that I knew (of course I cannot claim that my friends and acquaintances were representative) were generally not directly interested in politics, nor in property accumulation. Their incomes as students or cadres, as academics or freelance editors, were generally low. However, their housing was assured (it was often inherited), and transport was almost a free good, as were theatre and opera. Members of this group, or stratum, could afford to eat and drink well in a marvelous city by the Danube, built by the *Mitteleuropa* bourgeoisie, but now accessible to wider publics for socialist prices.

By the standards of most Western European countries, this 'rational redistribution' was somewhat peculiar. Poorly paid but well educated intellectuals could attend the best concerts for a fraction of what they would have had to pay in the West. The pop music was not bad either, and there was no shortage of alternatives to the dance houses. Thanks to generous translation policies, they also had enviable access to world literature; it is hard to imagine that a work such as *Tristes Tropiques* would be





translated unabridged into Hungarian today (*Szomorú trópusok*, 1973), because today it would have to depend upon a hard-headed commercial decision; the generous subsidies formerly authorized by a Culture commissar have been greatly pruned.

I found the countryside also to be rather strange, at least when assessed by the standards of Western economists (Hann 1980). In villages which had only recently acquired electricity and piped water, farmers were doing just the opposite of what the urban intellectuals were doing. They were building themselves large new houses, fitting them out with lavish bathrooms, trading in their Trabants for Zhigulis and, by the 1980s, even for imported BMWs from the West. They financed this through their own hard work, exploiting themselves and family members in activities that were extremely labor intensive, such as fattening pigs in the back yard, and wine production using traditional methods.

Of course, I am simplifying massively with these ideal-types. Some sections of rural society were not living as well as others; there was significant differentiation between and within regions, within settlements, and even within families. Not all white-collar workers in the cities privileged intellectual enthusiasms: many pursued strategies of primitive accumulation analogous to those of villagers, e.g. building or buying second homes by Lake Balaton or along the Danube, not to mention cars, the key symbol of a privatized modernity. What struck me was the fact that the party known officially as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party did not open up comparable opportunities for its core constituency, the industrial working class. As Eastern European societies industrialized at breakneck speed, the typical factory worker was subject to a discipline that denied him (or her) the scope to mobilize household labor in supplementary activities. The so-called 'peasant-workers' formed a large group almost everywhere: workers obliged to commute to their factory jobs because no housing was available for them in the under-urbanized cities. This pitiful group lacked the free time to take advantage of the market incentives which galvanized other villagers, yet they could not profit from the subsidized perks of urban residence either.

When Western economists came to look at Hungary in the 1990s they quickly concluded that all this was out of kilter, *ungleichzeitig*, to use an old German term. To begin with, given the country's level of development, villagers were living too well. Farmers' incomes would have to decline in the new market economy, along with the size of the rural labor force. As for the intellectuals: they were even more of a puzzle, since so many of them did not have real jobs at all (by the criteria of the new market economy). They certainly could not be allowed to carry on as hitherto. In short, Budapest would have to become more like Vienna again; the blow was softened by privatizing housing at very advantageous prices and the continuation of many subsidies, e.g. in the energy and transport sectors. On the whole the Hungarian transition can be described as 'gradualist' rather than the path of 'shock therapy'. But the pattern of winners and losers was nonetheless clear.

I suggest that it is the disaffection of these two groups, which in their different ways both did so well in the last decades of socialism, which is responsible for much of the sinister, sometimes explosive, reactionary politics which we can see in much of Central and Eastern Europe today. These groups had





little in common. The urban intellectuals tended to deride the crude economism which prevailed in the countryside, whilst villagers were always suspicious of non-productive 'cosmopolitan' elites in the capital. However, each of these large constituencies had plenty of scope to pursue its interests in the 1970s and the 1980s. The frustrations they have experienced under the new conditions are, it seems to me, a key factor in explaining the new political trends. The inflammatory leadership of parties such as *Jobbik*, but also of some elements in FIDESZ, comes from educated urbanites, people who do not have the skills and qualifications to succeed in the new economic system and translate their *ressentiments* into nationalist rhetoric and worse. Such people find a ready audience among the 'post-peasant populists' in the villages and small towns, where the old paths for material improvement have been closed. Both groups have experienced a substantial decline in living standards, not necessarily in *absolute* terms as measured in per capita income levels, but in terms of perceived, *relative* loss, a reversal of the socialist telos of progress.

Conclusion

Anthropology is an inherently conservative discipline, devoted from its inception to the celebration and salvage documentation of 'disappearing worlds' of human socio-cultural diversity. Thus, most researchers of Hungarian *néprajz* investigated the preindustrial practices and world view of the Magyar peasantry, while a minority sought to uncover more ancient traditions which had survived among small peoples of the USSR who were somehow related to the Hungarians. The Lévi-Straussian variant of anthropology elevated the 'cold' societies of indigenous Americans as prototypes of 'savage thought' everywhere, profoundly incompatible with modern civilization. Many studies in the bourgeois modernization paradigm have emphasized how local communities display resilience to homogenizing externally-induced changes; this remains true of much of the literature on contemporary 'globalization'. Social anthropologists of the British school were primarily interested in synchronic analytic descriptions of what they observed in their fieldwork. Some of them adapted their functionalist methods to urban, industrial settings. Yet many still sought out the 'face to face' community which exemplified the agrarian past, as I did in my fieldwork on the Great Hungarian Plain in 1976-7.

I found there a village which had only recently consolidated itself as a nuclear settlement, and villagers who, after the turbulence of the early socialist decades, had embarked on a path of rapid material accumulation. I was interested in showing how these small-scale farming activities exemplified the ambiguities of Hungary's 'market socialism'. Villagers were looking forward: they were abandoning their isolated homesteads in favor of the modern conveniences available in the village centre. It was no coincidence that a romanticizing nostalgia for the preindustrial peasantry was to be found not in the countryside, but instead among urbanites in Budapest. These sentiments were stronger in Hungary, where collectivized agriculture brought rapid modernization, than in countries such as East Germany, where the agricultural sector had already declined greatly before socialism, and Poland, where the failure to collectivize had led to a stalemate which inhibited large-scale modernization.





No one expected the regimes to collapse so quickly. Few observers predicted that, once they had gone, so many of those who had previously condemned socialist appropriations of property and restrictions on liberties would come to value the accomplishments and entitlements of that era much more positively. In the second section of this paper I discussed these ambiguities among two large social groups which had little to do with each other, though they exemplified the two complementary strands of Kádár's market socialism. Both flourished under that system, but have struggled since 1990. In the countryside, the major benefits of EU subsidies accrue to relatively small numbers of capitalist farmers, the 'winners' of the privatization processes of the 1990s. Villages such as the one I studied, with poor natural endowment, have very few winners and many losers. Production levels have fallen sharply, young people seek work abroad, and no one wants to buy the large modern houses constructed in the last decades of socialism with the money earned through intensive household-based farming.

The intellectuals who some observers thought to be on the road to 'class power' in the 1970s looked somewhat scornfully at places like my village, and at the extravagances of 'goulash socialism' generally. They were content with modest incomes because their jobs were secure and they could participate in flourishing cultural spheres, popular and high. Some state redistribution served only the interests of elite officials, for sure, but most subsidies of 'rational redistribution' were enjoyed by broad swathes of citizens, from academicians to wide reading publics, from elite sportsmen and women to the mass membership of trade unions, with their recreational networks. The impact of 'the market' has gradually undermined all this, creating uncertainties in the towns analogous to those now experienced in the villages. As with farming subsidies, EU membership has opened up new possibilities for a few (those with the necessary linguistic and other qualifications), but there have been many more losers than winners. As a result, Europe becomes for many another scapegoat, structurally not so different from the way in which Roma and Jews are regularly scapegoated. I explain the current political orientations of both of these groups in terms of relative decline compared to the lives they led under socialism – or rather, to the lives of their parents and grandparents, for the more aggressive symptoms are often to be found nowadays among those too young to have personal memories of the Kádár era, who may disavow it completely, even as they demonstrate a vicarious malignant nostalgia for the world that has been irrevocably lost.





Notes

¹ This short paper is based on a lecture delivered in Belgrade on 14th December 2009. The conference “Beyond the Wall. Twenty years of Europeanisation as seen from the former Yugoslavia” was sponsored by Notre Europe, a Foundation closely connected to former European Union President Jacques Delors. This circumstance combined with the recent death of Lévi-Strauss inspired me to give the original lecture a pretentious French title: “Tristes socialismes; et plus tristes encore postsocialismes” and to highlight a European dimension. I have rewritten the Conclusion and added a few references and notes for the present publication, but this version is otherwise only lightly modified from my original English text.

² For a recent selection of (mainly urban) case studies from across Eastern Europe, see Todorova and Gille 2010. Many aspects of postsocialism (the utility of this term is still contested) are covered in Hann 2002. For a recent collection which draws out the reactionary political consequences of recent socio-economic trends, highlighting the region’s incorporation into global capitalism, see Kalb and Halmai 2011.

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