

Perception of “Others”
Poverty, Social Exclusion, Scientific Discourse and Knowledge in the State Socialist
Hungary*
/Research Report/

The issue of poverty and social exclusion in the East Central European region is of foremost interest and has been examined in a variety of studies. The range of case studies reaches from the states of Central Eastern Europe to the former Soviet Union, which were once bound together by the political doctrine of state socialism. In these countries, research on poverty, social exclusion and related issues makes up a large part of current scientific output, as scholarly communities have recognized the importance of the shift and the necessity to analyze the social status and everyday life of the excluded groups within the former state socialist societies.

Background of the Research

It is well-known that in the past system the investigation of social stratification was an essential question that also affected the very legitimacy of the system. Contemporaneous representations of social conditions were written in the spirit of the worker-peasant-intellectual trinity, so these were obviously the products of a power discourse. Consequently, in Hungary, sociology could come to exist as a discipline after the 1960s. However, until the change of regime, a number of topics were also considered taboo. Officially, it was hardly possible to speak about poverty, and discriminated social groups were completely left out from discourse. Even when sociological works carefully referred to these phenomena, they were impelled to describe them euphemistically: individuals and groups were labelled as having “multiple disadvantage” or as “struggling with integration difficulties” or they were

* It has been a great pleasure to have the opportunity to conduct research at the Open Society Archives. I would like to thank the entire staff of OSA for their assistance in my research. I especially would like to thank my supervisor, István Rév for both his helpful and critical comments. I am also grateful to Iván Székely and András Mink, who provided me with advice and recommendations; to Robert Parnica, Judit Hegedűs, Gabriella Ivacs, and Örs Lehel Tari for navigating me through the archives; and to Katalin Gádoros for her administrative support.

disapprovingly referred to under the terms of faulty behaviour or deviance. Social historians researching the history of the former state-socialist countries must face the phenomenon whereby language and concepts used in the period are strongly permeated by the ideology of the past system. Yet on these—ideologically pregnant—discursive grounds, certain works of literature, art and film, or socio-graphic works could accomplish a special mission, which tried to deconstruct the myth of the working class: sociographies attempted to capture the everyday life of those suffering discrimination.

Critical sociology research under state socialism was characterized by a particular angle, as it strove to uncover the forgotten phenomena in the society of that period. A pivotal component of this research was the assumption that members and groups of the society preserved some habits rooted in their traditions, even within the state socialist political climate, and strove to create a degree of relative autonomy for themselves. This leads to the realization that there is one structure of society, constructed virtually by the underlying power, and there is another, which subsists underneath the first structure and made invisible by the institutions of the dictatorship. (Zoltán Zsille, among others, in his imperative *Study in Black and Red* emphasized the subsistence of a society beyond institutions.) Empirical research from the end of the '60s, led by István Kemény, focused on revealing various phenomena forgotten by the discourse of the time. For this, there was a need for new methods, rather than applying the earlier categories used for statistical inquiry, imbued with ideological meaning. Thus, fieldwork and in-depth interviews reappeared in the toolkit of sociology. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the concept of “lifestyle” occupies a central position in the work of István Kemény, through which he depicted the societal organization and everyday relations of the time.

After István Kemény gave his infamous talk at the Hungarian Academy of Science on poverty—with the euphemistic title “Study of the life conditions of the population with low income”—he was temporarily removed from the Institute of Sociology. The final report of the study, which was written in 1972, was made secret and locked in the safe of the president of the Statistical Office. (Characteristically, copies of the study made their way round social science circles of the time.) A study of Gypsies led by István Kemény ran practically simultaneously in 1971. Researchers produced a precise diagnosis of the problems of Gypsies, of poverty and the "reproduction" of disadvantage at a time when poverty was a taboo topic and the regime continually referred to state subsidies to Gypsies in relation to their class

status. The research examined a sociological problem, poverty, and a series of connected phenomena concerning Hungarian Gypsies. This started a discussion lasting decades—first in a limited and then later in a widening public forum—between the regime and “science” focusing on the topic of Gypsies and an ensuing group of social problems. The false messages of the regime and the sociological facts formulated in opposition set the agenda for public discourse about Gypsies. In the interest of deepening historical knowledge it is necessary to investigate what the impact of this discourse was on the perception of “others” in Hungary.

In 1977 István Kemény immigrated to Paris, but his intellectual impact was not banished by the regime. Without his influence, presumably the study of Otilia Solt, *The poor of Budapest in the seventies* (1976) or the SZETA [Fund for the Support of the Poor] movement would not have materialized. In Paris, the sociologist along with Péter Kende established the Hungarian Pamphlets (*Magyar Füzetek*), which published works banned at home, including the “publication” of the poverty study as typed scripts. He followed and criticized Hungarian news through his writings as well as notes read in Radio Free Europe broadcast.

On the Sources

As Habermas wrote about regime change in Central and Eastern Europe, “as a revolution that is to some degree flowing backwards, one that clears the ground in order to catch up with developments previously missed out.” Relying on Habermas’ concept of “rectifying revolution” (*nachholende Revolution*), an archive in possession of documents compromising the authority of official institutions and with the ability to generate “second circulation,” may begin such a “rectifying” archival revolution, through current publicity, especially by making information widely accessible (e.g., by making public on their website various studies previously only available in endowments, formerly published as *samizdats* and typed scripts, but still not available in libraries). Oral history research, based on similar projects initiated by Western archives, of those ordinary people who experienced the previous regime still, albeit for a limited time now, can serve a similar purpose. Moreover, studies presenting the previous regime based on such sources can also have a restorative effect. My research, in which I strive to write the counter-history of Kadar-era, is part of this endeavor. I plan to dedicate three main chapters to the analysis of poverty and exclusion that was the main object of my research at OSA.

My work has involved the routine activities of historical research, such as comparative critical analysis and synthesis of information derived from the close reading of sources. Documents to research are housed mainly in the Open Society Archive. The survey extended to the personal papers of András Hegedüs (HU OSA 361-0-2, HU OSA 361-0-23), the files of Pál Schiffer (HU OSA 356-1), István Kemény, the *szamizdat*-collection of Gábor Demszky (HU OSA 302-1), János Kis (HU OSA 355-0-1), György Krassó (HU OSA 397-0-1, HU OSA 397-0-2) and Géza Sáska (HU OSA 383-0-2), and the collection on the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research (HU OSA 420-1, HU OSA 420-2)— all to be found in the Open Society Archives. Abundant use has been made of the material of studies and interviews dealing with the history of Hungarian sociology; first of all I have leaned on the reminiscences and interviews of the project “The voice of the 20th century” (HU OSA 409). Additionally, I have conducted library research and reviewed relevant literature on the topic of my project.

Microhistories

Poverty: The Concealed and Hidden Phenomenon

Pál Schiffer in his film from 1971, “Letters to a State-Lottery Winner” (*Levelek az öttalálatoshoz*) illustrates the story of a lottery winner, along with the public reaction in Hungary to the winning of a waiter from Gyöngyös. These letters—unique writings depicting poverty under state socialism and mechanisms of exclusion—are available at the Open Society Archives. A particularly interesting aspect is that these letters were created nearly concurrently with the first research on poverty in Hungary, and the history of its formation can be entirely reconstructed through the legacy of István Kemény’s work, preserved in OSA. These documents pliantly present the situation of those groups, who are also described in the language of sociology in research on poverty. In addition, these documents are also sensitive to the fact that although the so-called socialist state produced a strong system of dependency in the society, nevertheless it seems that people placed little trust in the support of the state.

Latest research reveals that one of the basic functions of social policy in Hungary was legitimizing state institutions, the state and the regime itself. This regime did not allow any assertion of true interests, let alone public or collective action. In addition, the dictatorship was also linked to power practices that were founded on prejudice and marginalization of

various minority groups and the poor. Post-colonial theory holds that the narrative of colonization created the institutions and infrastructure that maintained it. The spread of the theory holds that colonization is not necessarily tied to the history, time and space of colonization. Thus, the state socialist regime was post-colonial at least in this sense, treating exclusion and subjection as unalterable conditions, which in most part were related to the functioning of state institutions.

Social Mobility and Possibility of Modernization

The entire documentation of the shooting of the film titled “Cséplő Gyuri” is available in OSA. Based on this, one can have an insight into how the protagonist of the film was selected for the role, how he was brought from a Gypsy settlement in Németfalu to Budapest, how the film was screened in various parts of the country during gatherings, how the audience was affected, and how the filmmakers argued with the local communities. Even the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research conducted a survey regarding the reception of the film. Exchange of letters between the protagonist of the movie, his family and village and the moviemakers, along with the topic of these letters (primarily financial difficulties) can also be demonstrated. The tragic death of Gyuri Cséplő (not too long after the shooting of the movie, at the age of 25, because the body of the destitute man could not endure hard physical labor, according to medical documents) has raised the question among the moviemakers how it would be possible to break out of poverty and Gypsy settlements. The question whether there is another perspective that relativizes the value system, which was at the time the basis of evaluating social processes (and remains one that we use in retrospect), did not occur to them. A more detailed assessment of the sources reveals that there was such a different perspective, and Gyuri Cséplő indeed thought differently in his real life about the worlds depicted in the film, rather than the protagonist, whose path of “advancement” he was supposed to embody.

During state socialism, sociological research—on the basis of created conceptual language—could align with both the ideology of the period’s regime and the methodology and perspective of mainstream Western sociology. By formulating the modernising function of state, sociologists obviously were attempting to influence the logic of the party state, while at the same time creating a legitimising base for the regime executing the modernisation of society and the economy. Expansion of the modernisation thesis can also be interpreted as proof that sociology spoke a common language with state power even in the 1980s, and

through the “widening of public opinion”, sociology started to gain an influential, mediatory role. It should also be mentioned that the thesis on modernisation—in terms of its genealogy and not its validity—did not take notice of numerous actors in society of the era. People living on the periphery of society, the discriminated and the underdogs of the transformations—in other words, those who experienced the *de facto* shrillness of state socialism—were neglected in the modernisation concept.

The decades of industrialization can be interpreted as the creation of “simple modernity,” a linear and uni-dimensional process of rationalization. All modernization principles and states view themselves and their times as the beginning of the future, as its depositories. The basic phenomena associated with modernization—industrialization, urbanization—are viewed as the only possible logic for social progress. Recent historical studies, however, refute the validity of the narrative. The theory of multiple modernity and studies written as its result draw our attention to the fact that modernization was not a singular phenomenon; that it affected various social groups and actors in divergent ways.

Collaboration vs. Resilience

This chapter is an attempt for adaptation of the concept *resilience* to the period of state socialism, and especially the Kadar-era. I first review the theoretical interpretations of the society at the time, and then, through in-depth interviews conducted in relation to poverty and Roma-related research of the era, I analyze the individual and collective resilience, or flexibility that allowed the marginalized and excluded groups to retain their resistance in the face of consolidating authority. The reason why individuals were not capable of collective action is illustrated in research describing societal atomization under the dictatorial period. In this chapter, I examine in-depth interviews from the time, conducted as part of the research on poverty and Roma in the seventies and eighties, as narrative sources conveying individual and collective experiences. Based on this, I portray the conduct of repressed individuals and communities as flexible essence-retaining survival and a complex behavioral and relational system against the dominant power—a conduct that cannot be easily described as resistance or collaboration—based on which one can assess not only the endurance of the state socialist regime, but also its collapse.