



City versus Village: Central European and American Perspectives

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As part of its framework research programme *The Intellectual History of the City* conducted by its director, Ferenc Hörcher (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest), an international conference took place at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in October 2017 with the title *Modern Capitals and Historical Peripheries – Central Europe from the Perspective of Contested Modernities*.¹ It was organized by Gábor Kovács (Hungarian academy of Sciences, Budapest) and Tomas Kačerauskas (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius) within a bilateral project supported by the Lithuanian and Hungarian Academies of Sciences, entitled *Conceptions of ‘Creative City’ within Central Europe. Historical Images and Empirical Indices*, in cooperation also with the Anglo-American Institute of the University of Debrecen represented by Ágnes Györke. In its Call for Papers, the aim of the Conference was formulated in the following way: ‘The planned conference is going to deal with the philosophical, historical, literary, and visual representations of the classical cultural dichotomy of urban centre versus the forgotten countryside in twentieth-century art, culture, and the humanities within an interdisciplinary framework.’ The accepted speakers’ papers tackled this issue from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the history of philosophy, the history of political thought to the different cultural studies, including literary and film studies. Here we present only two samples of these papers, revised for the present printed publication, offered as tasters in a somewhat random way of these exchanges of the exciting recapitulations and (re)constructions of the region’s past and present debates on modern urbanization processes and their advantages and/or misgivings. As the Conference took place in Budapest, the papers published below deal particularly with the intellectual history of Hungary, one concentrating on the Communist period of the country, while the other one is a comparative exercise, analysing a Hungarian and a contemporary North American author from the interwar period, in the context of the Spengler-inspired style of cultural criticism.

1 See the homepage of the Conference at the following link: <https://peripheries.webnode.hu/>.

As I assume that the reading of the papers might profit from some background knowledge, let me first make an effort to try to demarcate the intellectual stake of the venture, and then shortly comment on the two papers themselves in a cursory way. As the conceptual opposition in the first part of the title of the conference (Modern Capitals and Historical Peripheries) suggests, the core idea of the organizers was to have a closer look at the deep-seated conflicts or, to put it in a milder way, the diversions of perceptions of metropolitan and rural areas within the Central and Eastern European intellectual history and public mentality, caused by a forced, belated, or simply unjustly one-sided modernization process. The pattern is well-known: due to socio-political reasons, and in particular to top-down efforts of the central authorities, powers of material and intellectual progress were concentrated in metropolitan centres, while far-away or even nearby rural areas were left untouched by the slightest efforts or even ideas of reforming. This dichotomy between the living standards, lifestyles, ways of thinking and forms of self-expression of populations of modernized capitals and innocent country-sides, lagging behind the former in all their major social, economic, and cultural markers, was a returning theme of the generations of intellectual commentators and social critics who were contemporaries of these shocking signs of unequal growth, or even unbridgeable schisms within particular political communities. Some of the witnesses to it saw in it a proof of Central Europe's preserved innocence, which helped to save at least the rural regions from the social and political corruption of enforced industrialization, while others called for a speeding up of the process of urbanization to make up leeway. The conflict between the two types of explanation took the form of the opposition between Westernizers and nationalists (narodniks – zapadniks, populists – urbanites).

Just to give a single example, the legendary 20th-century Hungarian political thinker and politician, István Bibó, who – although himself an urban intellectual – stood quite close to what is translated to English as the movement of 'populist' writers (in Hungarian: *népi írók mozgalma*), claimed that what we witnessed here was an almost unavoidable part of *The Miseries of East European Small States*.² On the other hand, new generations of the intellectual history of the region tend to warn to hold back from typically partisan discourses of belatedness: they claim that what distorts the historical reliability of this approach is nothing less than the misguided application of a foreign pattern to the historical process of the region.³

2 István Bibó. 2015. *Miseries of East European Small States*. In: István Bibó: *The Art of Peacemaking: Political Essays*. New Haven–London: Yale University Press. 130–180.

3 See for example: *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe*, eds: Balázs Trencsényi, Maciej Janowski, Monika Baar, Maria Falina, Michal Kopecek. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. For an overview of the differences between the approaches of Western and Central European historians, see the present author's paper: Ferenc Hörcher: The V4 Cooperation and the European Schism over the Migration Crisis: The History of Political Thought in the Service of Political Analysis. In: Fekete Balázs, Gárdos-Orosz Fruzsina (eds),

But is there an alternative to this approach? Here, new developments in intellectual history and cultural studies might offer helping hands and call attention to the weaknesses of a purely economic or social historical approach. As can be seen in the two papers below, different methodologies are available to tackle the issues in the various disciplines. Gábor Kovács's paper is a proof that reliance on the comparative method still promises fruitful in intellectual history. He compares the often surprising similarities between the approaches of a Western and a Central European scholar of urbanization, namely that of the American urban theorist, Lewis Mumford, and of the Hungarian social historian, István Hajnal respectively. Melinda Harlov-Csörtán, on the other hand, is conducting a research into the rising discipline of cultural heritage studies and approaches the issue of the conflict between urban and rural subcultures in Hungary from the point of view of a relatively new disciplinary background. Let us see what the two different approaches offer the reader.

Kovács is an expert of interwar intellectual history in Hungary, within a Central European (mainly German and Austro-Hungarian) historical background. His hero, István Hajnal, is himself a recent invention of the canonizing effort of revisionist history writing in the Hungary of the transition period. Being both a social historian and a paleographer, Hajnal represented a rather eccentric form of historical writing. Reintroduced by László Lakatos, among others, in the early 80s, his output is bravely claimed to have 'suddenly burst into public consciousness as an oeuvre comparable with and compatible with the *Annales*.'⁴ Although he became a corresponding member of the Academy in 1928, a full member in 1939, and was a professor of Modern History at Budapest University from 1930 to 1949, he represented a subcurrent in the interwar period and was put on the agenda of a renewed Hungarian historiography as an alternative to mainstream inter- and postwar authors in the 1980s. The novelty of the author of the paper we publish here is that Kovács discusses Hajnal's views on the historical background to the famous interwar debate of Hungarian intellectuals between urbanites and populists first behind the background of the cultural pessimism of the influential German thinker, Oswald Spengler, and secondly comparing them to the critical discussion of the Megapolis by the American urban theorist, Lewis Mumford. The rather telling similarities and dissimilarities between the three of them allow the non-Hungarian reader to gain an insight into the novelty and originality of the non-trivial Hungarian historian as a social critic. Also, Kovács hints at the fact that in spite of his intellectual milieu of Hajnal, which was not far away from the

Central and Eastern European Socio-Political and Legal Transition Revisited. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH–Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2017. pp. 231–247 (Central and Eastern European Forum for Legal, Political, and Social Theory Yearbook).

- 4 Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor: Fine-Tuning the Polyphonic Past: Hungarian Historical Writing in the 1990s, in: *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, eds. Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor. Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2007, 1–100.

populist writers, he achieved to paint a rather nuanced picture of the moral of the debate about the relevance of cities in European history.

The second paper is the work of a PhD candidate at the Atelier Department of European Social Sciences and Historiography, a university unit established with the Annales school in the mind of its founder in the 1990s.⁵ As opposed to a well-established disciplinary background in the case of the article by Kovács, Mrs Melinda Harlov-Csörtán's paper was written as a contribution to the newly emerging and by now rather fashionable discipline of (cultural) heritage studies, as its title already suggests. The author refers directly to the by now classic work of Lowenthal,⁶ which is claimed to lead to the establishment of this new discipline, in order to embed her work into its intended academic environment.

We can also learn from her title that the paper has a rather strong thesis, which is summarized by Harlov-Csörtán in the introduction the following way: her topic is the 'multifaceted transformation process, through which vernacular culture almost totally disappeared from Hungary and yet became a subject of research and positive evaluation, took place between the 1950s and 1980s.' In other words, she presents two opposite tendencies: the social transformation, which led large portions of the rural population to move into urban areas or just simply adopt urbanite forms of life, contrasted with the new interest in the vernacular culture of the country, expressed by forms of heritagizing its objectified (tangible) monuments, including its vernacular architecture as well as its forms of self-expression in the genres of folk songs, folk dance, and handicraft. The strength of the paper is to use economic and political history as a background to a recapitulation of the reborn interest in folk art, which led to novel institutional arrangements, and the heritagizing efforts of the political and cultural elites of the late 60s, 70s, and 80s in communist Hungary to explain certain successes of the political elites of the 70s, which led, however, to a form of indirect rebellion against the regime by large segments of urban intellectual elites in the same time and later on.

The hope of publishing these essays together is to both raise awareness of the rich cultural traditions characteristic of this region and to differentiate competing discourses, cultural practices, and accepted ways of self-understanding within these cultural traditions. It also provides an opportunity for the reader to see how the recent methodological innovations within cultural studies modify the historical narratives of the region. Finally, it can also be seen as an argument to approach the region's visions of its own past and present autonomously, without simply and indiscriminately applying the external standards of mainstream Western historical canons.

5 Atelier was founded by social and urban historian György Granasztói in 1988 and led by him until 2007.

6 David Lowenthal: *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.