Everyday Life under Communism and After

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century and particularly during the latter half of this period, Hungary experienced multiple waves of political change that caused a series of political, economic, and social transformations which fundamentally influenced how Hungarians conducted their everyday lives.¹ Even if this analysis were only to examine the years during World War II or the two periods marking the greatest shifts in Hungary’s political atmosphere—namely, the communist takeover and subsequent adoption of a state socialist system in the late 1940s and early 1950s, or the shift to democracy that began at the end of the 1980s and brought about a return to a market economy—these historical events would amply demonstrate the depth of change that took place. In accordance with the rest of Europe, the kind of modernizing and civilizing processes that occurred during the twentieth century in Hungarian history were not only technological in nature, but also resulted in societal transformations and shifts in mentality. This volume comprises my attempt to trace, analyze, and interpret this genuinely complex process of transformation. To do this, I have adopted a unique perspective achieved via an interdisciplinary approach combining aspects gleaned from history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, and statistics, for the purpose of reconstructing “from the bottom up” how everyday people from various social groups experienced these changes.

Within the fields of social history and sociology in Hungary, research regarding the phenomena and historical changes related to everyday life has received less attention in the past few decades than the topic either necessitates or is due. This remains true in spite of the fact that the historical changes displayed by family, household, or

¹ This volume does not aim to provide a historical overview of Hungary’s entire political and economic history during the period under examination. As necessary, background information will be added in order to aid the reader’s understanding. For a more comprehensive examination of this period, see Ignác Romsics, Hungary in the Twentieth Century (Budapest: Corvina-Osiris, 1999). For an overview of Hungary’s most recent history, see Árpád von Klimó, Hungary Since 1945 (New York: Routledge, 2018).
everday activities play a definitive role in influencing social processes on both the micro and macro scales. Interpreting either the past or the present cannot be imagined without possessing some knowledge of how individuals live, organize, plan, and conceive of their lives. Such considerations invoke the corollary questions of what maintaining an existence demands on a daily level, what social conditions and surroundings are required, what types of objects are used in the course of everyday activities, and how all of these circumstances change.

Although the 1930s saw the partial emergence of a Hungarian middle class, the 1948–1949 communist takeover rendered it impossible for this type of social class to continue expanding. Once this occurred, the loss of property and general decrease in economic opportunities negatively impacted lifestyle, consumer patterns, social relations, and behavioral norms in a way that led to their homogenization. Within a set of changed circumstances, the late 1960s marked the initial regeneration of the kind of lifestyle differences that could meet a “quasi” consumer society’s norms at a higher average level than that previously experienced. After the nation shifted to democracy, these differences grew within the conditions brought about by a market economy.

As these waves of change and transformation occurred, it is therefore highly necessary to determine where some form of continuity can be detected in relation to where a state of discontinuity proved stronger. I strive to answer the question of what consequences emerged due to the ruptured spread of a middle class in Hungary and how these circumstances impacted everyday life, as well as the ways in which members of various social groups adapted to Sovietization while simultaneously exploring how the process of reestablishing a middle class emerged and developed in the decades marking Hungary’s post-communist period. Although the issues of culture and leisure activities naturally form an essential aspect of everyday life, examining these areas would have exceeded the limits imposed by an exploration that essentially takes the history of consumption as its focus.

Within the period under examination, in many respects the late 1960s and early 1970s represent a turning point given the fact that these years saw the unfolding of an infrastructural revolution characterized by the emergence of modern mass communication, the spread of motorization, and the improved comfort level of homes. Beyond
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these factors, increased access to electricity altered the basic quality of life in a way that was both fundamental and extensive. An additional significant turning point that occurred toward the end of the last century was the transformed culture and spread of infocommunications, a process that engendered multiple, complex layers of social and lifestyle changes. Although I only touch upon these issues at this point, the first chapter of this volume contains a thorough and detailed examination of the theoretical questions and interpretations attached to their discussion.

As the present work explores the larger topics mentioned above via the parallel histories of consumerism and modes of lifestyle, in some cases it consequently proved difficult—or perhaps even impossible—to maintain a separation between certain subjects. Given the very nature of the phenomena under examination, my analysis cannot be linked to exact dates or moments in time due to the fact that daily life patterns alter in ways that both emerge from and build upon a variety of intersecting processes.

Consumer consumption lies at the core of daily life while simultaneously occupying a definitive role in the fulfillment of material demands. Among other factors, the manner in which given individuals or social groups consume demonstrates how they interpret their own culture, as well as indicating the social parameters that determine their potential opportunities. Consumer habits generally display a direct and palpable connection to the ways in which consumption contributes to the formation of personal identity. In his classic work, The Theory of the Leisure Class, Thorstein Veblen argues that levels of consumption and the possession of objects that signify prestige also act as suitable indicators of social status. In other words, commodity goods not only serve the purpose of satisfying one’s demands and desires, they also demonstrate a sense of personal significance to the outside world. Consumption therefore comprises an aggregate of signs and symbols that are connected to the given culture, society, and economy. Beginning in the late 1960s, this type of “conspicuous consumption” increasingly came to the fore in Hungary and was accompanied by the parallel rise of an ever-stronger rivalry that shaped the lively and lasting race to “keep up” with the consumption of others. These factors paved the way for a relatively broad section of individuals—those capable of attaining a newly won degree of social mobility—to strengthen their positions and sense of social consciousness.
In this compilation of the research I have conducted in these areas, I introduce the characteristic trends and changes that defined everyday life during the lengthy half-century that followed World War II without employing the conventional kind of periodization that typifies a traditional reading of historical events. The resultant question to be posed is that of what—from a political and historical viewpoint—precisely connects various periods; what underlies the decision to choose the late 1930s and early 1940s as the starting point for this overview of the history of lifestyles in Hungary? One possible answer to this question lies in the process of modernization that began roughly in the 1930s and (due to its life-changing contributions in the areas of electrification, transportation, communication, and housing conditions) continues to influence our world even today. Another important factor can be found in the level of adaptivity and creativity with which some social groups in Hungarian society adjusted to the changes caused by politics and modernization during specific eras. The third reason for choosing to examine such a lengthy period is explained by the fact that certain political systems and events affected quality of life differently: at times, political conditions enforced limitations that led to noticeable alterations in both lifestyle and the manner in which daily life could be conducted or arranged. In essence, however, social habits, tradition, expectations, value systems, and individual creativity determined how innovations were accepted or developed and the trends that defined Hungarians’ quality of life. These factors in turn gained a long-lasting hold upon Hungarian society.

Organizing the structure of this book in a way that would integrate both this volume’s thematic and chronological demands presented a definite challenge. Of all the available possibilities, I eventually chose to situate single thematic units—such as consumption, norms, and processes—within the analysis of long-term trends, thereby reducing the chance that the same themes would be repeated.

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