

**Continuities and Discontinuities in Kádár's Hungary:
Everyday Life in a Socialist Town****Sándor HORVÁTH**

The image of socialist cities generally influenced the image of industrial cities in Hungary in the socialist period. Stalintown (Sztálinváros) represented the typical image of a 'real existing' socialist city in Hungary. It did not meet the utopian ideas of an ideal socialist city, but its building stock as well as its spatial structure reflected the architectural developments of 40 years of a centralised and planned economy. As an industrial and 'socialist' city Stalintown became a symbol of 'socialist life' in the fifties.* The image of Stalintown in the propaganda shows a town in which technology and nature no longer negate each other, where urban setting and countryside no longer confront each other as aliens, where factory and home are not separated by long distances which devour time and energy. In this healthy complex of work and residential area, the worker was promised to have space enough to develop his personality, and unlimited possibilities to follow his bent in a cultivated existence bound up with nature. Stalintown accordingly was constructed in the 1950s as a model community in Hungary in order to represent the 'communist dream'.

* Also the Finnish radio broadcasted reports on the building and life in Stalintown in 1952. See Dömötör to Budapest 29 Nov. 1952. MOL, KÜM, Finn-TÜK-XIX-J-1-k-21/a, 01155/5. 18.d. [Ed. note]

At the beginning of the rapid industrialisation in Hungary, during the period of the first Five Year plan (1950-1955), a party and a government decision ordained the building of a metallurgy works closely attached to a new town, nearby an old village (Dunapentele) on the left bank of the Danube. The preparatory work commenced in the spring of 1950 and on 2nd May the construction of the ironworks and the town began. The constructions attracted labour force from all parts of the country, and from very different social classes. At the end of 1950 the population of the village even reached 4200, while the number of people working on the building sites was 7100. In spring 1953 the population of Stalintown had already reached 25,000.¹ In 1960 it exceeded 30,000, in 1970 44,000.

The vitality of the town was represented by the age structure of its inhabitants: Stalintown was an industrial city of the 'youth' and, as the propaganda suggested, the town was built according to the wishes of the people who live in it, bedded in green parks and lawns, threaded by shopping streets, modern houses with central heating, laundries. Its houses were gay with colour, comfortable within and worthy of their inhabitants, built in a simple style of architecture, devoid of fussy decorations. The images of heroic founders and 'classless society' were also common pictures to show the 'socialist lifestyle' of workers in a 'socialist town'.²

In memoirs and police reports there is another 'story' told about this 'socialist city': Stalintown was a town of 'juvenile delinquency', and there were more pubs and prostitutes to be found than in the whole county.³ The cultural conflict involved in urban adjustment can be shown by the story of the most known pub of Stalintown, called *Késdobáló* (*To the Knife-Thrower*). The story of this pub represented the most important conflict between 'urban' and 'villager' lifestyles, which had a very significant role in the official language. The pub was opened at the foundation of the town in 1950. The pub-goers were mainly semi-skilled workers and bricklayers. As the occupational structure changed in the town many articles were published in the local press about scandals in the pub. The pub started to become

the symbol of 'non-urban' and 'non-socialist' life and its customers were described as "criminals" and "villagers". At the end of 1954 the municipal authorities closed the pub to urge the spread of 'a socialist lifestyle' through the "town of socialist workers". Pubs had a special importance in the public sphere of Stalintown. The immigrants created in them a distinctive social institution of their own that symbolised not only a rejection of some of the cornerstones of official lifestyle but also an acceptance of alternative public modes of sociability and solidarity.⁴

One of the persistent myths about the socialist cities has been the notion that most people accepted the opposite mythology of the town centered around acquisitive individualism, gold rush and chaos of socialist cities. The conventional discourse about an undifferentiated 'culture of socialist cities' suggested that almost everyone shared the same set of values. A look at the pubs, family trials or youth cultures of socialist cities calls into question this myth of cultural consensus. The myth of solidarity was one of the first myths which appeared in the mythology of Stalintown, and the myth of the heroic founders and solidarity belonged to the identity of the towns' inhabitants. The culture of Stalintown pubs was an alternative but not a countercultural phenomenon. The official discourse suggested the pub-culture was a countercultural phenomenon because of the official efforts, which tried to stigmatize every non-planned and non-official phenomena. These efforts generated a public debate about the pubs. In this debate pubs and their customers were represented as 'non-urban' and 'non-socialist' phenomena.

For many members of the 'upper classes' and the members of local authorities of Stalintown, pub-going and public celebration represented the image of many forms of working-class recreation. However, many of them similarly viewed workers who drank on the common as affronts to modesty and conventionality. The notion of public was a more limited one which did not encompass many forms of public celebration, like pub-going.

The city center and the main street had a special importance in socialist cities: the main street in Stalintown thus had the function to represent a place in a socialist city where people parade

primarily on 1st May, and this street was designed to have additional functions attached to sociability. The main street of Stalintown, according to the ideal of the time, got the name of Stalin (after 1961 it got a new name: Ironworks Street). Stalin Street had to be the busiest street in the town, filled with active people and traffic, and it had to represent the public life of 'socialist people'. The planners of Stalintown designed little flats to raise the level of collectivity in the town. However, the inhabitants of the town did not want to meet each other on broad streets but in little pubs.

The local authorities thus perceived this form of working-class recreation as a challenge to the dominant culture, to family and factory, to socialism and property. They responded to this assumed challenge with a variety of campaigns aimed at changing or restricting pub-culture through disputes in the local newspaper, police steps, and administrative proceedings. The Stalintown Police had been implementing a policy of constraining pub-culture after 1954, introducing a classification system for pubs on the basis of social class. The police recognized acceptable and unacceptable pubs, according to their customers. The first and second class pubs in the downtown area could be tolerated because of their affluent customers, but the third or fourth-class ones were associated with semi-skilled workers and bricklayers, so the police directed their activities primarily against these "underclass institutions". The main idea was that the town center must be cleared. In the first years the police did not regard pubs and drinking as a primary target for police action. As the occupational structure of the town changed and a new myth of its founders had to be constructed the arrests occurring in pubs rose quite dramatically. It is also clear that the arrests in pubs depended not only on this policy but also on the manpower levels of the police and official expectations. The criminal rate in Stalintown was the highest in Hungary in the fifties, not because of the high immigration rate of criminals, but due to the distinct control of the socialist towns and the special attitudes of policemen towards the arrests of semi-skilled workers taking part in pub scandals.⁵

According to the ideas of city planners the spatial structure of Stalintown had to be clear and transparent in order to control the everyday activities of people living there. Working class youth created an alternative subculture, which expressed the rejection of the dominant culture for contemporaries. The discourse in the local newspaper concerning this phenomenon shows the typical social conflicts between the local authorities and working class boys represented in the image of the town. This particular kind of delinquency of working class boys, or "hooliganism", in Stalintown was the product of a public discourse, which rejected the consumption of western goods to demonstrate that a socialist society could function better than a capitalist one. The ideological concept of equality determined the new form of youth delinquency: the consumption of western music and dance (such as jazz, beat and rock-'n-roll), western or extravagant clothes (blue jackets, black shirts, and coloured shoes), the use of slang words and expressions.⁶

Stories about this form of "hooliganism" (*jampecek*) were frequently published in the local newspaper as part of a campaign for raising the general level of urban culture. The working class youth wearing extravagant clothes and dancing rock-'n-roll was described in these articles as gangsters or bamboozled boys following the remnants of the old way of life. The struggle against hooliganism meant the struggle against any sort of individualism, and its main function was also to demonstrate that a socialist community could be more fair than a capitalist one.

The interclass conflicts were frequently represented in the language of the local authorities of Stalintown by the different lifestyle of rural people coming to the town. Stalintown, as other socialist towns, was growing at a rapid rate and much of the growth was directly attributable to a massive rural immigration. The people with rural background were characterized by the official discourse leading disordered, untidy lives, almost totally devoid of the local community. Instead, their social relations were characterized by spontaneity and capriciousness and that is why they were often placed at the margin of society. Their lifestyle was often characterized by stories about their raising ani-

mals in bathrooms, scandals in pubs, immorality of country girls, who came alone to work at the factory, etc. This discourse led them to participate in the local society only in limited and highly selective ways.

The process of adjusting to urban life was represented as a constant struggle of people to maintain the integrity of family and personal life in a strange new setting. Many of the migrants, however, expressed pride in their own origins. On the other hand, a man from a rural background who moved to Stalintown into semi-skilled factory labour could feel that he was lucky to have such a good job; a man from an urban middle class background who moved into the intermediate ranks of industry could feel blocked, but the one who became an engineer could feel satisfied. This experience was not universal, but it was common. In the first years of the town many peasants worked to earn money for specific purposes back in their own communities, for example, for the purchase of agricultural equipment, and thus were more interested in money than in working conditions. Others, who migrated only to work in Stalintown, decided to stay near to the factory because they did not have other options, but it did not mean that they lost their connections to their own communities. Many of the migrants tended to enter the unofficial tertiary sector of urban economy, working as vendors on the black market, domestic servants employed by affluent families (such as engineers, physicians, heads of factory), and in various "services". The cultural conflict involved in urban adjustment had a significant role in the discourse, but its main function was to demonstrate the official attempt which tended to represent in Stalintown a classless society and to level urban – rural differences. It is doubtful if there have ever been totally harmonious communities, peasant or otherwise, whose members always got along perfectly together. Although the image of Hungarian villages has suffered in the past from overly romanticised interpretations, the image of the villagers of socialist towns had the function in the official discourse to represent the disorders of local society.⁷

The barracks in Stalintown were basic shelters for the majority of the rural population till 1965. At the beginning of the fifties they relentlessly met the eye of anyone who walked the town's central streets, but having built the central area the barracks were relocated nearby the factory, which was far away from the town. After 1954 the blight of these barrack-slums could be more easily ignored, because the local officials tended to cleanse the inner town area. Slum sensationalism, however, became an especially popular subject in the local press at the end of the fifties because of the transformation of public policy-making, which seemed now to be much more on the side of raising the living standards than at the beginning of the rapid industrialisation in Hungary. In Stalintown the barrack-slums became the subject of a new type of popular reform journalism.

Newspaper discourse on barrack-slums and judicial proceedings against people living there highlight the transformation of images and stereotypes of barracks. This discourse was a dramatic essence of the story of Stalintown, because the bricklayers who built the houses usually lived in barracks for many years whilst the flats went usually to the engineers and the skilled workers. However, it was the petty crime and violence of the barrack-slums, which filled the first pages of Stalintown's more sensational newspaper. The inhabitants of the slums were identified as deviants in order to uphold the legitimacy of the centralised flat allocation system. The main economic function of the slums in Stalintown was that the 'dirty work' was done. The existence of slums in the discourse generated by the local newspaper and officials, however, helped to guarantee the status of those who were not living in such poor conditions, but in planned flats. Social mobility was a particularly important goal of the state socialist system, and people needed to know exactly where they stood. The discourse about the barrack-slums in Stalintown also encouraged all those living in planned flats to feel fortunate for being spared the poverty, which officially did not exist in socialism. From one point of view, however, the barrack-slums could even be optimistically viewed as an integrative element – a sort of staging area in which the rural immigrant was

initiated into the mysteries of the life of the first socialist town, where he could learn new forms of solidarity, acquired new social skills, but this view was not highly represented in the local press. In the history-writing the barrack-slums of socialist towns served as “dark stories” of the socialist period to substantiate the opponent political point of view.⁸

The official discourse and the image of families living in Stalintown were particularly influenced by ‘the myth of the declining family’. This image was evidenced by the high rate of divorce and abortion, and had the function to foster the idea that in urban, industrial societies, the family is no longer the unit of economic production. However, oral history interviews and private letters of villagers living in Stalintown show that the people concerned maintained close kinship ties and even kept many of their former practices in the town.⁹ The official image of families in Stalintown and the urban paradigm of family life of socialist cities worked for the macro-level characteristics of the city. However, it did not hold true at the neighbourhood and family level, which were more integrated and personal. The villagers in Stalintown regularly visited their relatives in the countryside; the first generation of immigrants tended to settle in urban areas where they already had kin. The immigration into Stalintown was a kin-related migration similarly to other industrial cities.

The emancipation of women, however, was a principal issue of socialist propaganda: the typical working class families were sexually segregated in Stalintown. Husbands and wives had separate family roles; the husband was the breadwinner as a result of the high rate of unemployment or low wages of women. Working class husbands spent their free time with other male companions, women with other women, and most of social life took place among relatives, neighbours and workplace friends. In spite of the fact that the divorce rate of Stalintown was one of the highest in the country, the marriage rate was also extremely high. One reason for the high rate of married people was that only married couples could obtain a flat.

Socialist towns are myths. They are constructions of the imagination. This is not to say, for example, that Stalintown,

Nova Huta, Eisenhüttenstadt, Dimitrovgrad or Magnitogorsk did not exist. Nor is it to dispute the extraordinary living conditions that characterized the everyday life of people living in new socialist towns. I do not mean that socialist towns were not real. Socialist towns were, after all, a universal feature of Eastern bloc countries and from a microhistorical perspective they can represent the main issues of the social history of these countries in the post-war period (such as urbanization, migration, gender roles, culture of consumption, making of the working class and especially the social limits of state control). Their reality, however, lay in the constructions of official and unofficial conviction, and in the belief of public knowledge, rather than in the material conditions of everyday living. To discuss socialist towns is to deal with discourse, and the concepts they communicated, rather than the state ordinances or social geography of the new towns built in post-war socialist countries. The struggles over pubs, behaviour of the youth, immigrants with rural background and barrack-slums in Stalintown helped the growth and development of interclass conflicts. These conflicts fostered the definition of 'socialist' modes of behaviour, socialist towns and the boundaries of the various social groups. These tendencies determined the myths of Stalintown and generally influenced the mythology and imagination of socialist cities in Hungary.

Many historical analyses tend to view the Stalinist period as the 'ideal-type' for examining state-socialism, and the post-Stalinist period as an 'ideal-type' for examining the so-called social process of 'destalinisation'. This phenomenon can lead to an ahistorical analysis. For example, there are many historical analyses which argue that at the end of the fifties economic policies turned decidedly more pro-consumption in Hungary. If we describe post-Stalinist regimes in terms of a 'social contract', the state ensured rising living standards in exchange for popular political calm, for the so-called Kádárist social compromise. This kind of description can work for the macro-level characteristics of Kádár's Hungary. However, it did not hold true at the level of everyday life, which can be characterized by considerably more continuous social phenomena than discontinuous ones.

NOTES

- ¹ Weiner, Tibor, Sztálinváros. [Stalintown] In Sztálinváros, Miskolc, Tata-bánya. Városépítésünk fejlődése. [Development of Building of our Towns] Ed. Sós, Aladár – Faragó, Kálmán – Hermány, Géza – Korompay, György. Budapest, Műszaki 1959, 17-88.
- ² Weiner, Tibor, Új forma új tartalom. [New Form, New Content] In Üzenet. [Message] Dunaújváros, Dunaújvárosi Tanács VB. Művelődési Osztálya 1963, 83-91; Palotai, Boris, Egy nap Dunapentelén, [One Day in Dunapentele] In Dunapentelén épül a békemű. Budapest, n.d., 8-17; Palotai, Boris, Új emberek a Dunai Vasműnél. [New People at the Metallurgy Work of Danube] Budapest, Népművelési Minisztérium, 1951; Ember, György, Sztálinvárosiak. [People of Stalintown] Budapest, Művelt Nép 1953.
- ³ Történelmi Hivatal. [Office of History]. O – 13582; Tapolczai, Jenő, Egy elnök naplója, [Diary of a President] Budapest, Kossuth 1977. 41; Interview with Ferenc Lombos. In Új Tavasz '80. Dunaújváros. [New Spring. D.] Dunaújváros, KISZ Dunaújvárosi Városi Bizottsága 1980. 19-23, Földes, László, A második vonalban. [In the Second Line] Budapest, Kossuth 1984, 197-198; Miskolczi, Miklós, Város lesz csakazertis...[It must be a Town] Budapest, Szépirodalmi 1980, 13-30.
- ⁴ Horváth, Sándor, A Késdobáló és a jampecek. Szubkultúrák Sztálinvárosban. [Pubs and 'Hooligans'. Subcultures in Stalintown] *Korall* 1 (2000), 119 – 136.
- ⁵ Fejér Megyei Levéltár. Fejér Megyei Rendőrfőkapitányság iratai. [Fejér County Archive. Documents of Police of Fejér County].
- ⁶ *Sztálinvárosi Hírlap* [Stalintown Journal] 1951-1959; Fejér Megyei Levéltár. XXIII / 502. Sztálinváros Városi Tanácsának VB jegyzőkönyvei, 1951-1960 [Minutes the Sztálinváros City Council Implementation Committee, 1951-1958].
- ⁷ Horváth, Sándor, A parasztság életmódváltozása Sztálinvárosban. [Transformation of Lifestyle of 'Villagers' in Stalintown] *Mozgó Világ* 6 (2000), 30-40.
- ⁸ Horváth, Sándor, Városi szegénység, bűn és bűnhődés Sztálinvárosban. [Urban Poverty, Crime and Punishment in Stalintown] *Fons* (3) 2000, 405-458.
- ⁹ Dobos, Ilona, Egy folklórgyűjtő feljegyzései [Notices of an Ethnographer] Budapest, Kozmosz 1984; Áldozatok. [Victims] Budapest, Kozmosz 1981; Fejér Megyei Levéltár. [Fejér County Archive] XXXI / 18. Dr. Tirpák Endre ügyvéd iratai. 6. d. 6/17. Private letters; Interviews with Contemporaries (S. Horváth).