

Final Report – Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

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Introduction

The Visegrad Fellowship at the Open Society Archives (OSA) has enabled me to research an important aspect of my PhD topic using materials from the OSA’s collection. Central to my interest was the intersections of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the everyday experience of society from the vantage point of money within social scientific research. During my stay at OSA, I aimed to discern the ways in which contemporary social sciences – more specifically ethnography and sociology – gradually became permitted and entrusted to map society through their disciplinary scientific practices of empirical research during the early-Cold War period. Tentatively, I hypothesised that economic and social knowledge production on workers’ lives and attitudes was a contingent, two-way and open-ended process, continuously shaped by social processes of institutional negotiations, and broader historical conjunctures, contrary to the totalitarian paradigm which suggest that a coercive vertical relationship prevailed throughout the socialist period in Eastern Europe between state and its subordinated constituting agencies. Key questions that I have addressed included: (1) to what extent did social scientific enquiry influence, reinforce or constrain the objectives of socialist policy-makers in respect to fiscal matters?; (2) how did scientific measurement techniques influence social research on workers’ wellbeing and contribute to the construction of economic and social policy prescriptions?

Research at the OSA

There were three collections at the OSA through the analysis of which I have attempted to answer my above questions: (1) the Radio Free Europe’s (RFE) collection; (2) István

Kemény's documentations of sociological research on the low-income population, the Roma, and workers; (3) and the Public Opinion Research Institute's publications. In the next paragraphs, I should like to elaborate on my experience researching these files.

From the collection of the **RFE's Research Institutes**, the Hungarian Subject Files' Information Items [HU OSA 300-40-4] turned out to be the most fruitful for my research. Qualitative interviews conducted with Hungarian emigrants and Western tourists visiting Hungary portrayed the standard of living of different segments of Hungarian population mainly in the 1950s and early 1960s. These files have allowed me to gain an insight into the everyday life of individuals and their prospects during the years of early-socialism. As first-hand accounts are rather scarce from this period, these sources have proved to be exceptionally valuable in terms of their detailed information concerning socio-economic matters from a unique micro-perspective. Notably for ideological reasons, in these interviews special attention was paid by the RFE to the nationalisation of the industry and its economic consequences; the changing economic conditions of independent smallholders, artisans, and other independent manufacturers; the specific and general taxes levied on society; the everyday conditions of women in work and in the household; and the communist state's promised prosperity which manifested in the general shortage of consumer goods and in their deteriorating quality for many of the emigrants. From the late-1950s, significant attention was paid to social issues such as the increasing number of divorces and the rising abortion rates by virtue of the Kádár-regime's 'extremely liberal social policy', the 'deteriorating moral standards in Hungary's communist society' and 'Marxist-Leninist ideology'. These files have provided me with a solid understanding of various knowledge production practices of socio-economic issues during the early years of the ideological conflict of the Cold War.

István Kemény's documentations of sociological research on the low-income population [HU OSA 368-1-2], the Roma [HU OSA 368-1-3] and on workers [HU OSA 368-1-5] proved to be a remarkably rich collection of interview transcripts. These projects were carried out by Kemény and his research team concurrently during the late-1960s and early-1970s within the Sociological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. One of the novel elements in their research was the introduction of social constructivism as social theory for the analysis of these groups. Kemény argued that analysing people solely on the basis of quantitative and 'objective' research, thus for instance, looking at the lowest decile within contemporary Hungarian populations' income structures (i.e. lowest decile = 'low-income'), is insufficient for reaching a substantial understanding of the origins of these groups' socio-economic conditions. Against the backdrop of the socialist regime's claim that the condition

of being poor has been eliminated in Hungary, Kemény argued that it was more effective to employ 'poverty' as a category of social analysis since people who could not live by socially-accepted conventions were still considered poor by their surroundings. The following quote by a worker further confirms Kemény's assumption:

We do not have a pronounced poverty like starvation. Except in places where the man does not have a trade, or the woman is sickly, or there are lots of children around, well those could be very much behind. Those do not eat the same way, neither dress up as they should. And well, if they do not receive a house, they cannot buy or build one for themselves. And there are such cases where they like to drink...¹

While this interviewee described that he would not speak of poverty as such, he clearly points to some of the factors for which one may appear poor within society. The quote succinctly shows that structural conditions, such as the number of children within the household, the trade of the husband, and the wife's capability to supplement the household's income, were important factors in conditioning a family's living prospects.

In terms of my research, these materials have allowed me to reflect on the various ways in which people thought of their wages, prices, efficiency, gambling, consumerism and household budgeting, together with other various forms of exchange. These files have also helped me to reflect on changing practices of social research in Hungarian scientific life, and crucially its transformation after 1956 up until the mid-1970s. The analysis of these personal files has allowed me to reflect on the ways individual researchers navigated themselves between the regime's ideological constraints, various methodologies of scientific research, as well as the everyday social issues they encountered subjectively while carrying out fieldwork research.

I proceeded in my research with a close analysis of the **Public Opinion Research Institute's** [HU OSA 420] documents. While the Kádár-regime was continuously fighting against opposing voices, it still provided financial resources for professional research on socio-economic issues in designated topics for pragmatic reasons. The institute's main objective was the scientific mapping of attitudes and views, both about the regime as well as of radio and television programmes with special attention paid to gender, age, and occupation. Although these two objectives might seem dissonant at first sight, in socialist Hungary the two rigorously interrelated; for instance, various lifestyles and life situations portrayed in films were used as

¹HU OSA 368-1-5:3/6 Box 3., [Interjúk: Tematikus kivonatok] [2 of 3], 1973.

devices to facilitate the conceptualisation of people's feelings about political, cultural, economic and social issues. In the highly politicised and individualised society of Hungary, everything had political connotations thus objectivity was a crucial means for the system to maintain its image of socialist prosperity and political stability. A nominal independence was granted and continuously preserved by the institute thanks to the interplay of various institutional and personal factors (for instance the institute's director Tamás Szecskő). Crucial for my research was to understand the ways scientific research projects were designed, carried out, its findings presented, and distributed within the institute, as well as the extent to which they served as points of references in discussions of social issues by the Central Committee. Critical source analysis of the institute's confidential publications and its various background research materials was used to achieve this goal.

List of OSA Sources Consulted

HU OSA 368 István Kemény Personal Papers

HU OSA 368-1-1, Box1.

HU OSA 368-1-2, Box 1.

HU OSA 368-1-2, Box 2.

HU OSA 368-1-3, Box 1.

HU OSA 368-1-3, Box 2.

HU OSA 368-1-3, Box 3.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 1.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 2.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 3.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 4.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 5.

HU OSA 368-1-5, Box 6.

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

Hungarian Unit – Subject Files

HU OSA 300-40-1, Box 17. (Békekölcsön)

HU OSA 300-40-1, Box 31. (Bank)

HU OSA 300-40-1, Box 37. (Bank: MNB)

HU OSA 300-40-1, Box 41. (OTP)

Hungarian Unit – Information Items

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 6. (Women; Youth)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 9. (Science: General, Sociology, History)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 13. (Industry)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 17. (Labor)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 18. (Labor; Finance)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 19. (Finance; Economy; Insurance; Standard of Living)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 20. (Standard of Living)

HU OSA 300-40-4, Box 21. (Ethnic Minorities; Social Structure)

HU OSA 420 Collection on the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research

TK 420-1-1, Box 1.

TK 420-1-1, Box 2.

TK 420-1-1, Box 3.

TK 420-1-1, Box 4.

TK 420-1-1, Box 5.

TK 420-1-1, Box 6.

TK 420-2-1, Box 1.

TK 420-2-1, Box 2.

TK 420-2-2, Box 16.

TK 420-2-2, Box 17.

TK 420-2-2, Box 18.