



Gábor Gyáni

Migration as a Cultural Phenomenon

For a long time conceptual explanations of mass migrations rested on economic and social premises. The notion of chain-migration, for instance, was given considerable reinforcement with the adoption of the economic “cost-benefit” terminology, as was the phenomenon of transplanted networks. In time, however, scholars began to consider structural mechanisms less and aspects of individual selection more. The latter included giving greater attention to cultural factors. However, mass physical relocation, explained with reference to series of individual decisions either accepted or encouraged by the community, goes against the attachment to place necessary for the strengthening of the nation state, which finds form in the institutionalization of citizenship. Growing internal (national) integration and the social disintegration that accompanies mass migrations makes it necessary to devise compulsions that encourage and hasten assimilation. Under its influence, the significance of foreignness and the phenomenon of otherness as a fact of everyday life intensifies. In the case of Hungary, this is illustrated the most clearly by the metaphorical conflation of Budapest’s alleged “foreignness” with its alleged “Jewishness.”

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For a long time the decisions of multitudes to migrate were explained primarily with reference to material needs and promptings. Both in public discourse and in scholarship poverty was considered the most powerful stimulus to venture to new lands, and it was considered self-evident that material considerations explained the floods of masses to urban settlements, as well as the decision of huge numbers of Europeans to depart for the Americas. Over the course of the past several decades, however, there has been a change in approach regarding this question. Gradually there has been increasing recognition of the fact that while pressing economic exigencies often influenced (and influence) trends in migration, in fact it is the motivational mechanisms that raise awareness of economic interests that determined and determine the intensity of processes of migration, including both destination and scope. When scholars began to pursue more nuanced inquiry into the influences of push and pull factors, it became possible to offer an analysis according to which the decision to migrate was almost never motivated solely by material considerations. In other words poverty or impoverishment alone were never enough to prompt people to leave their homes and set out for unfamiliar lands.

While economists referred in their explanations of trends and tendencies to the distinction between so-called push and pull factors as early as the 1920s and 1930s,¹ historians by contrast only began to adopt and adapt this distinction and these terms in the 1960s.² The fact that these terms first came into use in the study of economics explains why their adoption often involved the implicit or even explicit use of the cost-benefit analytical perspective in examinations of the social phenomenon of migration. This later led to the widespread acceptance of chain-migration as a concept of general validity. Chain-migration implies that migratory processes are induced by the destinations themselves, if not initially, then with the passing of time. Thus the role of pull factors is decisive. The emergence of chain-migration as an explanatory principle in the dynamics of migratory processes also implies that the decision to migrate cannot be explained by the influences of material promptings, at least not entirely. Thus the theory of migratory networks came to the fore, a theory that was dubbed “transplanted networks” by Charles Tilly³ and was used decades later to great advantage by historian John Bodnar,⁴ who himself drew on the scholarship of Rudolph Vecoli.⁵ Network theory also rested on the foundations of the principle of cost-benefit, as the more recent definition of the concept illustrates:

Migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin [...]. Network connections constitute a form of social capital that people can draw upon to gain access to foreign employment. Once the number of migrants reaches a critical threshold, the expansion of networks reduces the costs and risks of movement, which causes the probability of migration to rise, which causes additional movement, which further expands the networks, and so on.⁶

1 Sune Åkerman, “Theories and Methods of Migration Research,” in *From Sweden to America. A History of the Migration*, ed. Harald Runblom et al. (Minneapolis–Uppsala: University of Minnesota Press–University of Uppsala, 1976), 19–75, 56.

2 Julianna Puskás, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940* [Hungarian Emigrants in the United States: 1880–1940] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982), 20–32.

3 Charles Tilly, “Transplanted Networks,” in *Immigration Reconsidered*, ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79–95.

4 John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

5 Rudolph J. Vecoli, “Contadini in Chicago: a Critique of ‘The Uprooted,’” *Journal of American History* 51 (1964): 404–17.

6 Douglas S. Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal,” *Population and Development Review* 19, 3 (1993): 431–66, 448–49.

The fact that scholars and historians came to focus less on masses of migrants and increasingly on individuals in their study of migratory processes was also related to the above-sketched changes in the explanatory models. The individual migrant became the primary subject of research, not the general economic and social circumstances of the local communities of migrants or macro-groups (such as poor peasants). The narrowing of perspective seemed to favor the rise of sociological and, even more so, psychological approaches and theories. Sociological explanations of migratory processes in general set out from the premise that the subject in the interactive process of migration is not the isolated individual, but rather the person (or agent) who himself or herself is deeply embedded in societal processes. In this case, however, the influences underlying the decision to migrate are felt primarily on the cultural and social level, and first and foremost in the network of personal relations.⁷

In the course of the adaption of the structural and functional sociological approach of Talcott Parsons⁸ considerable emphasis was given to the concepts of norm, status, and institution. According to this approach, changes in norm, status, and institution alone were enough to explain trends in migratory phenomena, both from the perspective of the place of departure and the place of arrival.

The psychological analysis of the proliferating promptings that thus influenced patterns of migration also did not seem an inaccessible path of inquiry. In this case the conceptual point of departure was the following: who was it who sensed the external influences that prompted and even enticed people to migrate, and when and how? Thus the distinctive personality characteristics of the migrating individual (who was potentially mobile) became the focus of study, and from this perspective the selective mechanisms of migration seem adequately explainable. One still could not completely ignore the incentives and motives of the process of this selectivity that lay beyond individual agency, more precisely above the individual level, in the economic and social structure. Nonetheless, an increasing number of scholars on the subject agree that in the course of arriving at an explanation one must also take into consideration factors that are first and foremost cultural (one might even say spiritual or psychological).⁹

7 Åkerman, "Theories and Methods," 64–71.

8 See Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

9 Kjell Söderberg, "Personal Characteristics and Selective Migration," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 9, 1–2 (1977): 127–55.

Thus if we propose that a physical change of place is the consequence of a series of individual decisions in which cultural forces also play a part, then we must give thorough consideration to the cultural-historical problems of social diversity, the vast majority of which arose precisely as a consequence of migrations. This mix is relevant with regards both to ethnic diversity and the composition of mass society in large urban centers. I address these questions separately in this essay.

Migration Versus Nationalist Attachment to Place

The first big wave in the internal and interregional (even intercontinental) migratory movement came in the nineteenth century, a period of history during which the modern European nations and nation-states developed or were becoming more firmly established. Drawing on the work of Ernest Gellner, we tend to associate national development with modernity, by which we mean market economies, class-based societies, and the liberal constitutional state. According to this interpretation, the modern nation as a construct is both a precondition and a consequence of cultural homogenization: “The general emergence of modernity hinged on the erosion of the multiple petty binding local organizations and their replacement by mobile, anonymous, literate, identity-conferring cultures.”¹⁰ Modern (national) societies burn with the fever of continuous growth, a force that drives them ceaselessly to reject traditions. One of the natural concomitants of this unparalleled dynamism is the similarly ceaseless physical change of place of huge masses of people, which is both a source and consequence of social mobility as well.

Gellner’s influential (if also often passionately contested) theory of nation and nationalism thus links the concept of modern (industrial, urban, civic) society to the process of national and cultural homogenization, a process that occurs in the symbolic sphere. One discerns a paradoxical temporal coincidence that was widespread across Europe at the time, namely the concurrence of the process of national homogenization, itself a precondition of economic, social and political modernity, and the immensely intense process of internal and intercontinental migration. The mutually reinforcing relationship between the two is self-evident, expressed for instance in rapid urbanization, unbridled industrialization, and in general the spread of notions that placed increasing emphasis on the individual.

10 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 86.

Thus migration itself is one of the indispensable driving forces and fundamental mechanisms of the process of modernization. The question arises, what is the effect of migration, which by its nature creates disorder, disarray, and diversity (heterogeneity) on national homogenization, which is also an essential goal of modernization? This is the real problem here, or more precisely the riddle, a riddle that merits a thorough inquiry that does not simply fall back on customary approaches or explanations.

The pressing need for national integration and the creation of a unified nation arose over the course of the long nineteenth century under circumstances in which migration had evolved to an earlier unknown scale and, as a result, the possible sources of social disintegration had proliferated. Earlier (and for a relatively long time) scholars and historians emphasized this latter consequence of the process of migration in the modern era by using the metaphor of uprootedness. At the same time they used this notion as a principle of explanation to which they also attributed a narrative function. As a social reality, this scholarly notion of mass uprootedness created by migration, however, merely represents a mapping of the ambivalent relationship of nationalism with any human phenomenon that constitutes a challenge to sedentariness. This is entirely understandable, since migration and the destabilizing consequences it has clearly do not pave an easy path to the fashioning of an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s term. On the contrary migration seems to set the stage for immeasurable and lasting internal social differentiation and chaos. The indisputably paradoxical nature of the situation lies in the fact that migrants continuously put the “engineers” of national inclusiveness and exclusiveness to the test. Indeed they put the liberal nation state itself to the test, and even themselves, since the formation of the nation as an imagined community takes place through simultaneous gestures of inclusion and exclusion.

One should not forget that under these circumstances, actual or symbolic migrants almost always found themselves standing at a crossroad. They were continuously faced with two dilemmas. The first, if they were to integrate into a (modern) national community, they would be compelled to pay the price of “membership” (as it were), namely some loss of distinctive cultural identity. Acculturation involves some assimilation, in other words to some degree the abandonment of one’s original ethnic/cultural identity and the replacement of this identity with another. True, their chances of mobility in a modern society would improve, and this would offset the cultural loss. The second, if, in contrast, they did not wish or simply were unable for whatever reason to integrate (or

assimilate) then their chances of mobility would decrease. Of course in this case they would not suffer a crisis of identity and they would not be compelled to change their cultural affiliations.

Thus from the perspective of integration on the one hand and the maintenance (whether by choice or not) of a distinct, separate cultural identity on the other, the decisions that were reached with regards to the question of migration are of great significance, since migration eases even if automatically does not occasion direct connection with the process of national assimilation. If an individual conspicuously and successfully managed to resist the forces that otherwise would have prompted migration, then he or she would be able better to resist the inducements (sometimes spontaneous, sometimes violent) of national assimilation. The possibility of adapting to the majority (national) culture arises on the one hand, while on the other one has the chance to escape this kind of national assimilation (which in the given case amounts to the adoption of the Hungarian cultural identity) by departing for other lands, for instance beyond the seas. The mass influx of Slovaks residing in the lands of the Hungarian kingdom into Budapest offers a paradigmatic example of the first, while the departure of Hungarian Slovaks in equally large numbers for America is an example of the second. If the Slovaks moved to the Hungarian capital, they nonetheless grew distant from the culture of the Slovak people more rapidly and utterly than those who remained in the communities of their birth.¹¹ In contrast, among those who left for America quite the opposite trend can be discerned. Influenced by their decision to migrate to the other side of the ocean, they became crucibles of Slovak national consciousness.¹²

One explanation for the latter phenomenon lies in the fact that the Slovaks who emigrated to the United States did not integrate into any kind of “mother” (more simply put majority) nation, but rather formed (by choice or compulsion) somewhat discrete communities, strengthening and in some cases even creating for the first time an awareness of their own ethnic-national identity: “In the second wave of American immigration, the period of the so-called ‘New Immigration’ from the 1880s, the American public was not very friendly to

11 László Katus, “Szlovák politikai és társadalmi élet Budapesten a dualizmus korában,” [Slovak Political and Social Life in Budapest in the Dualist Era], in *A pesti polgár. Tanulmányok Vörös Károly emlékére* [The Citizen of Pest. Essays in Memory of Károly Vörös], ed. Gábor Gyáni et al. (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 1999), 137–51; Gábor Gyáni, *Identity and the Urban Experience: Fin-de-Siècle Budapest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 173–79.

12 Ladislav Tajták, “Slovak Emigration: its Causes and Consequences,” in *Overseas Migration from East-Central and Southeastern Europe 1880–1940*, ed. Julianna Puskás (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990), 86–7.

immigrants. In the interests of their own survival, the immigrants were forced to join together and economically support themselves on an ethnic basis.” This in fact enabled them to acquire experiences of national emancipation even before members of the Slovak national community in the Hungarian lands, which in part explains the phenomenon noted by Elena Mannová and Roman Holec: “Before the First World War, the American Slovak community already financially supported the Slovak national movement in the Kingdom of Hungary.”¹³

The Hungarian Jewry, which was similarly mobile but which unlike the Slovaks migrated only internally in this time period, from rural settlements to urban communities, constitutes an example of a group of “aliens” who were particularly susceptible to assimilation into the national community. In contrast, Hungarian Roma and Ruthenians, who were markedly immobile, successfully resisted the pressures to assimilate.¹⁴ This may well be the reason why, as Hungarian historiography ascertained long ago, “assimilation did not much effect territories inhabited predominantly by national minorities, the dividing lines did not change discernibly.”¹⁵

Thus to no small degree the ability of individual local ethnic communities to resist the pressures to assimilate culturally determined the effectiveness of the nationalities policies of the era. Gérard Noiriel came to a similar conclusion in his assessment—and reinterpretation—of the French version of the melting pot. Noiriel characterized the process of French national assimilation as a form of forced integration, and in doing so contested the widespread notion according to which the political nation is a distinctively French historical model.¹⁶

In the case of migration we are speaking of more, however, or rather of something other than a mere phenomenon of allocation of a work force on the labor market (to summarize briefly the manner in which historians have often addressed this question). Nor is migration simply the expression of some development in the history of settlements and population shifts (the manner

13 Elena Mannová and Roman Holec, “On the Road to Modernization 1848–1918,” in *A Concise History of Slovakia*, ed. Elena Mannová (Bratislava: Historický ústav SAV, 2000), 185–240, 191.

14 Viktor Karády, “Egyenlőtlen elmagyarosodás, avagy hogyan vált Magyarország magyar nyelvű országgá?” [Uneven Magyarization, or How Hungary Became a Hungarian Speaking Country], in Viktor Karády, *Zsidóság, polgárosodás, asszimiláció. Tanulmányok* [Jewry, Embourgeoisement, Assimilation] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Kiadó, 1997), 151–96.

15 István Szabó, *A magyarság életrajza* [A Biography of the Hungarians] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990), 243. Original edition: 1941.

16 Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot. Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

in which social history has tended to regard it). Migration (including overseas migration) has immeasurable historical significance from the perspective of the evolution of social (national) integration. Emigration, then, can (also) be understood as the latent manifestation of individual everyday decisions (for the most part unconscious) taken in the matter of national assimilation. This decision is not particularly influenced by when this “national assimilation” takes place, or even whether it really takes place or not.

If this conjecture is correct, then the contradictory situation, so often referred to as paradoxical, is perhaps not as contradictory as has been presumed. As I have noted, the physical movement of people and peoples in Europe reached massive proportions precisely when social integration as a process characterized by movement towards national homogeneity reached its peak. Earlier the suggestion was also often made that the growth in the tendency to emigrate offered a kind of choice in the face of the pressures to assimilate to a national culture, a response that could be seen as affirmative or negative. This was entirely independent of the question of the actual reasons and exigencies that lay behind an individual’s decision to emigrate (for instance the hope of earning higher wages, flight from famine, or simply the desire for greater personal freedom).

Oddly enough, the process of national (cultural) homogenization met with the greatest successes where the communities were the most diverse, both from the ethnic and the social perspective, namely the big cities, which were homes to growing migrant communities. It is commonly acknowledged that integration, or rather assimilation, has always been the most palpably rapid in the melting pots of large cities. From this perspective, migration is an important stage and motor of cultural enervation and dissimulation, a catalyst that exercised its influence through the mechanism of rapid urbanization. If one regards migration as a cultural phenomenon *par excellence*, then it is reasonable to venture the following contention: the masses of people who made the decision to move to the cities were addressing a question in which the fundamental issue at hand was the issue of social integration. Thus while the decision to stay or depart may well seem at first glance to be determined merely by economic considerations, its consequences and often (if not always) the promptings that underlie it touch quite directly on the successes and nature of the process of national homogenization.

I do not believe, however, that migration as a cultural phenomenon is entirely independent of the broader historical context. Migration can only have this significance and these implications in relation to the endeavors towards

internal integration that accompanied the processes of nation building of the nineteenth century. Borrowing the distinction drawn by Robert K. Merton, the cultural significance I ascribe to migration is relevant with respect not to its manifest function, but rather to its latent function. Merton sets out from the premise according to which in sociological scholarship the conscious *motives* of social behavior are often conflated with the objective *consequences* of this behavior. By doing this, Merton contends, we confuse motives with functions. In order to preclude misunderstandings, he suggests drawing a distinction between manifest and latent functions. Merton defines manifest functions as “those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system.” By contrast, latent functions are “those which are neither intended nor recognized.”¹⁷

Over the course of the twentieth century migration (or more precisely immigration) in Canada and the United States, countries the cultures of which could hardly be said to have resembled the nation-building cultures of Europe, did not really play this kind of cultural role, neither in the manifest nor in the latent sense. This is precisely what gives true meaning to the notion of the cultural melting pot and the various models of assimilation that are associated with cultural pluralism. In this case of this kind of cultural mix, the kind denoted by the metaphor of the melting pot, integration is not uni-directional assimilation, a matter of carrying into effect a dictate issued from “above.” It represents rather the evolution of a new national identity through the admixture of diverse groups. According to the models of cultural pluralism, immigrants are no longer expected to acculturate. This allows for ethnic enclaves to develop and thrive, and also to become the foundation of a kind of community built on the coexistence of structurally separate constituent societies. It would be inappropriate in the case of North America to speak of assimilation, since the adaptation did not take place according to the rules familiar from the nation building processes of Europe of inclusion versus exclusion.¹⁸ This is why American scholars of migration today speak of “incorporation,” instead of using the term assimilation (or integration) to describe the processes in question.¹⁹ And they use this term in reference to the mechanisms of social integration with which today some

17 Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (revised ed., Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), 51.

18 See Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life. The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

19 Silvia Pedrazza-Baily, “Immigration Research: A Conceptual Map,” *Social Science History* 14, 1 (1990): 43–67.

European (primarily Western European) societies are gradually compelled to acquaint themselves (and indeed accept) in part because of unanticipated consequences of immigration that took place after the Second World War. One thinks of the communities of Turkish immigrants in Germany, Muslim (primarily Pakistani) communities in England, and Arab immigrants in France. These developments are for the most part unknown in Hungary. However, if one thinks of Chinese immigrants in Hungary and the questions of identity and belonging these communities (and the reception they are given by the “national” culture) raise, it gradually becomes clear that these issues will soon be (or already are) of pressing immediacy in Hungary as well.²⁰

The Big City as a Metaphor for Alienness

The disarray, diversity, and chaos of migration come about when there is a flood of people from villages and rural homesteads into cities. The process of urbanization, which is a crucial part of the formation of the modern nation-state, is a paradigmatic example of modernity. Whether we are speaking of emigration or internal migration, the intense physical movement of people (and peoples) that is always one of the primary stimuli of urbanization directly imperils the basic values of human existence that seem (and for a long time have been understood as) natural and fundamental. It disrupts the life of a community and an individual by undermining attachments to stability (permanent settlements, continuity of place), an ideal that never dies out entirely, even in so-called modernity. It is worth noting that the shift that occurred in the speed with which people traveled, a change that was brought about by rail travel in the nineteenth century, had a dramatic and even a traumatic effect on the notions of time and space as they had been traditionally grasped, and more specifically on the human perception of time and space.²¹

With regards to the contradictory responses with which continuous mass migration was met in the context of modernity, the historically new concept and construct²² of national identity lies at the heart of the matter. Bound to

20 Pál Nyíri, “Kivándorolni hazafias? Peking szerepe a kínai diaszpóra identitásépítésében,” [Is it Patriotic to Emigrate? The Role of Beijing in the Construction of Identity among the Chinese Diaspora], in *Diskurzusok a vándorlásról* [Discourses of Emigration], ed. Endre Sik et al. (Budapest: MTA Politikatudományi Intézet, 2000), 82–91.

21 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 2007).

22 See Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991).

spatial terms that correspond to the territorial assertion of the nation state as the embodiment and prerogative of political power and will, communal identity wins a new meaning, a meaning that, crucially, is invested with exclusive and absolute validity. In the ideological and cultural sense, the universalization of national identity, expressed in “biological” metaphors, stem from this. This constitutes as assertion of the “natural” obligation of belonging, which applies with equal force and validity to everyone who was born, lives, and will die in the sacred homeland.

So what became of the multitudes that choose, instead of remaining in the communities of their birth, to emigrate in search of a better life? First, one could ask what became of those who did not happen to have been born in a country like Hungary, but who made their new homes there? If one applies the biological metaphor so prominent in the discourses of “authentic” national identity in order to describe their place (their identity), they were “rootless,” in part because they had left the physical place of their origins (the place of their “national” identity) and thereby had lost their “roots,” and in part because they were not laying new roots in the “national” soil. As people who had come from “outside” (from abroad), from the ethnic or denominational perspective they were aliens and remained rootless for the rest of their lives. Second, one could ask what became of the floods of people who migrated into the cities (in the case of Hungary this meant primarily Budapest), thereby moving merely to a different kind of settlement, from village life to urban life? Regarding their “classification” from the nationalist perspective, the designation of their place in the allegedly “natural” social order of the “homeland” was no less categorical. This question arose in the context of the discourse on Budapest at the turn of the century in Hungary, and this discourse had a vibrant kind of afterlife in the interwar period.²³ But at the same time one can hardly afford to overlook the fact that the entire problem was directly affected by experiences and view of physical mobility, i.e. the physical change of place, something that was made possible, at least in part, by increasing social mobility.

The identification of “alienness” as such was closely tied to the discourses on civic and bourgeois culture and life and on Budapest itself. If one considers, for instance, the writings of László Németh, an author of fiction and essayist who expressed his views on the subject on many occasions, one finds an unsparing assessment of Budapest, not to mention congruence or rather overlap of his

23 Gábor Gyáni, “Budapest Beyond Good and Evil,” *The Hungarian Quarterly* 46, Winter (2005): 68–81.

disapprobation of bourgeois society and Jewish society. Németh was of course by no means the first or only person to write of the “alluvial character” of the big city, which in his view was what gave the city its non-Hungarian character from the perspective of national culture or society. Quite unsurprisingly, when he writes on this question he makes frequent use of geographical and biological (botanical) metaphors. Budapest, he contended in one of his writings, came into being by “sucking in” the great hoards of peoples living in the “Hungarian Basin,” i.e. the plain lands, and then swelled to number 1.5 million.²⁴ In his essay *Kisebbségben* [In the minority], which to this day continues to be a subject of heated debates, Németh used a similar metaphor but wrote in an even more condemning tone: “In the half-century since 1860 this Budapest has done nothing other than swell, as the capitalist order and the new centralized state have commanded.” And he does not fail to mention the bloated city’s character as an “assortment of wash and waste.”²⁵ The “natives [of the city] are Germans and Jews [...] and those who have been swept there, the fortune hunters of a multi-lingual empire of twenty-million people: fewer Romanians or Serbs, more Slovaks and Schwabians than would be proportional, and in the middle Hungarians.” If one acknowledges this, Németh notes, one can hardly be surprised to see that “here Germans and Jews have been more at home than Hungarians.”²⁶ He draws the conclusion: “under these unfortunate circumstances a ‘provincialism of the capital’ had to develop in Budapest, which was saved from complete apostasy not so much by the Hungarians who stood out so conspicuously as by the fact that its non-natives had also come from the provinces as the acolytes of a dilute Hungarian-ness.”²⁷

In Németh’s assessment, Budapest was just like the Hungarian bourgeoisie and middle class, which both were the products of the monstrous capital city: it was a Hungarian province created by them. When Németh writes critically of the phenomenon of the middle class, again he often uses biological metaphors, for instance, in a lecture held in the city of Kolozsvár (or Cluj by its present Romanian name) in 1940:

24 László Németh, *A Medve-utcai polgári* [The Medve Street High School] (Budapest: Magyar Élet Kiadása, 1943), 32–3. The characterization of Budapest as “alluvial” is Németh’s turn of phrase.

25 László Németh, “Kisebbségben” [In the Minority], in: László Németh, *Sorskérdések* [Questions of fate]. Edited and with notes by Ferenc Grezsa. (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó–Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1989), 408–82, 442–43.

26 Németh, “Kisebbségben,” 443.

27 Ibid..

It was necessary to build a new, modern Hungarian state [following the Compromise of 1867], with a plethora of bureaus, with an administrative intelligentsia and other kinds of intellectuals, and industry and the economy had to grow with it, the most dizzying pace of growth that Europe had ever seen at the time. This Hungarian state and Hungarian intelligentsia grew steadily. I cannot say whether it swelled tenfold or twentyfold over the course of a half-century, but it is quite certain that the swollen city had far less in common with Hungarian traditions and the millions who remained at the bottom than what it replaced. [...] Why did the threads, which elsewhere [in France, in Germany] grew thicker, break among us? Every rapidly growing organism draws what it needs from where it finds sustenance. The bureaucratic capitalist state drew the necessary intelligentsia from where it could be found the most quickly and readily: the people of the cities [...] To our misfortune, however, there were many aliens among the inhabitants of the cities.²⁸

It is quite telling that Németh chose the title *Ágak és gyökerek* [Branches and roots] in an essay in which he recommends, as a kind of antidote to what he saw as the alien mentality and social life of Budapest, “those who wish to be Hungarians and truly to display Hungarian identity.” “We must be Europeans, naturally,” he wrote. “But like the French or the English, true to place. For them, as West Europeans, for us, as East Europeans. For true Balkanism is not to be at home in the Balkans, but rather to be there and not be at home.”²⁹

The popular practice of classification that was part of the nationalist sentiment and manner of thinking lurking in this rhetoric drew a clear distinction between ethnic qualities (groups) on the basis of an assumed link between individual and place. Regarding the culture of Budapest and the notion of the alienness of the Jewry (and the German speaking communities) so closely interlinked with Budapest culture, it is worth considering the question in the broader context of social history and the history of mentalities. I offer a modest attempt to do so in the following.

What was it, then, about Budapest that made it “Jewish” in the eyes of Németh and others? Principally, it was the fact, that it was “bourgeois.” And what made it that made the city “bourgeois”? Primarily the fact, that it was “Jewish.” Was a numerical minority really capable of exercising such an influence

28 László Németh, “Kisebbségből – kisebbségbe” [From Minority—to Minority], in Németh, *Sorskérdések*, 635–38, 636.

29 László Németh, “Ágak és gyökerek” [Branches and Roots], in Németh, *Sorskérdések*, 609–611, 611.

on the whole of the urban population?³⁰ And if so, then how? The answer that is often given to this question is the following: social mobility gave this numerical minority an exceptionally large influence.

At first in Budapest only the middle class is alien [non-native]. But then the middle class grows rich and a certain percentage becomes upper class. By the time the mentality of the rural schools, which itself has undergone a change, in turn changes the profile of the higher order of educated people at the university, in literature, in the arts, in scholarship and in the press an almost unchangeable situation awaits the new army of intellectual life: the false-Hungarian lifestyle that has developed in the meantime of the industrialists, wholesalers, financiers of Budapest, which again has become alien.³¹

The majority (and not only the majority in Budapest, but the majority in Hungary) sought to find the “Hungarian” in the city, which was vain of its Hungarian character and indeed presented itself as a model to be followed, even if it was “for the greater part Jewish, Schwabian, and international.” Yet Budapest was a false place, a “European quarter,” and not “the splendid, magnificent *flower* of our *roots* and *tree of life*.”³² The hostility to the city at the time was aggravated by the intricate intertwining of the notion of the Jewry as a non-native element with the milieu of urban society. This “European quarter” was also foreign to allegedly “authentic” Hungarians, according to Németh’s maxim, because it was dominated by an alien, Jewish spirit (although not all Jews lived in Budapest, a city in which they were, furthermore, a numerical minority). And while only part of the upper classes of Budapest consisted of members of the Jewry, much as at most only individual segments of the middle class were comprised of Jews and furthermore the bulk of the political and in particular the intellectual elite could hardly be said to have been Jewish,³³ this in no way seemed to cast into doubt in Németh’s mind his contention concerning the fundamentally “Jewish”

30 The proportion of people of the Jewish faith in Budapest at the time certainly never exceeded 24 percent of the total population of the city, but in all probability was lower than this. See Károly Vörös, “A budapesti zsidóság két forradalom között” [The Jewry of Budapest between two Revolutions], in Károly Vörös, *Hétköznapok a polgári Magyarországon* [Everyday Life in Bourgeois Hungary] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1997), 187–205, 200.

31 Sándor Karácsony, *Ocsudó magyarság* [Magyar Awakening] (Budapest: Exodus, 1942), 319.

32 Karácsony, *Ocsudó magyarság*, 322, 324 (my emphasis).

33 For more on the social and denominational composition of the Hungarian (Budapest) political elite at the time see Gábor Gyáni, György Kövér and Tibor Valuch, *Social History of Hungary from the Reform Era to the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 164–68, 319–26.

character of the city. These facts were rendered rhetorically meaningless through the frequent use of terms like “elzsidósodás” (“Jewified”) and “elzsidósodott” (“gone Jewish”), and in the anti-Semitic political vocabulary of the Horthy era “zsidóbérenc,” or “Jewish hireling.”

The expression “gone Jewish” implies that a “Jew” has also undergone a transformation to some extent, for in order to be able to assimilate to the other, to the “pure” Hungarian, he must strip himself in part of his foreignness or alterity. How else would he be able to exercise an influence on the Hungarian or induce the Hungarian to adapt to him? These questions foreground the complexity of the issue of assimilation as it was conceived of at the time.

Assimilation demands mutual accommodation, in other words some resignation of the self, from everyone, and anyone who participates in this interaction clearly both is able and desires to become someone different. However, regarding the question of who assimilates and who is assimilated, perceptions are likely to vary. This is in part because at least on the level of everyday life this process is experienced more as one of dissimulation, an experience that gives both sides the sensation of loss, including those who do not partake, i.e. who do not choose to be assimilated. An orthodox or rural Jew could easily think that the neolog Jews of Budapest had irrevocably estranged themselves from the “flock” (to borrow a Christian metaphor), and thereby also from their own identities as Jews. Christian inhabitants of Budapest or (even more so) of a rural community, on the other hand, could easily have felt that by “going Jewish,” Budapest had become entirely foreign to them, even if it had donned a “Hungarian guise.”

Seen from the perspective of everyday social practices, actual historical experience is never entirely congruent with the views held by the “social imagination.”³⁴ A more penetrating inquiry into lifestyles, for instance, reveals that the urban (“Jewish”) character of consumption, social survival strategies (such as the education of children), and numerous other practices of the urban community was in general an integrating factor at the time, which put Jews and Christians, Hungarians and Germans almost without exception into a well-defined bourgeois and urban social order.³⁵ This was not the case beyond

34 For more on this concept see Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie. An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6–7; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), in particular 23–30.

35 See Gábor Gyáni, *Parlor and Kitchen. Housing and Domestic Culture in Budapest, 1870–1940* (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2002); Gyáni, *Identity and the Urban Experience*.

the borders of Budapest, where the organizing principle of daily life in most cases was not urban bourgeois society (even if some trace of this is nonetheless discernible in places). Nonetheless, a non-Jew living in “Jewish” Budapest could give voice to the stock phrases according to which Budapest was a hotbed of Jewish influence, even if in his everyday life he was in no way immune to the “Jewish” (bourgeois or middle-class) culture strictly speaking (indeed Németh, who was born in Budapest and for the most part lived there, does precisely this). This, however, is at most an ideology, in other words a distorting representation, to borrow from the ideas of Mannheim.³⁶

Those whose everyday lives and lifestyles in contrast were not “Jewish” could explain the foreign character of Budapest (particularly with reference to the “Jewification” of the non-Jewish population of the city) with the contention that it stemmed from the essential (and inevitable, unchangeable) strangeness of the city. In other words, for them Budapest was a kind of Moloch that devoured the hapless people continuously flooding into it, people who originally had not shared its character, in other words, Hungarians. Seen from the outside (from the provinces, and from the social substrata), the “Jewishness” of Budapest thus was no longer merely a matter of ideological conviction, but rather was understood as a genuine experience that resulted from the manifold nature of lifestyles at the time, the large-scale diversity, and the tremendous (historically almost paralleled at the time) dissimilarities. This latter variety of the discourse, however, still has little in common with the actual world of metropolitan society, which was experienced and indeed was portrayed as a kind of other. Nonetheless it speaks to (and of) the exterior conditions of the conceptual and sentimental construct of otherness and the actual circumstances, bound up with social life, of the ways in which this otherness was experienced at the time.

Epilogue

One of the concomitants of modernity has been the mass movements of peoples. Indeed mass migration can even be seen as a clear manifestation of modernity. When one considers the phenomenon of mass migration in the context of the constructing the nation state, however, then from the perspective

36 The following citation, for instance: “Ideas which later turned out to have been only distorted representations of a past or potential social order were ideological.” Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936), 204.

of modernity it can at times seem dysfunctional, for it exerts its destructive influence as a process that upsets integration and can cause newly forged unities to unravel. Social imagination has often foregrounded this aspect of processes of migration in order with the passing of time to nourish ideological imaginaries. The widespread use and acceptance of the metaphor of rootlessness remained powerful for some time thanks in part to nationalist discourses, but also to the sustenance it was given as a species of scholarly theory. It constitutes a striking example, pregnant with significances, of the manner in which terminologies weighted with meaning and assumption are fashioned.³⁷ Almost limitless physical and social mobility as a precondition and consequence of modernity (and also one of its primary virtues) collided with the principle of continuity of place that was so dear to nationalist doctrines. In this context, migration became a frequent subject of harsh assessments on the part of those according to whom continuous mass movement gives rise to a form of foreignness and otherness that cannot be undone. The true peculiarity and significance of migration as a cultural phenomenon may well lie in this.

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³⁷ For a single, but all the more striking example, see Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted. The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made American People* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1951).

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