

## Workers' attracted by to the far right: Narratives of exploitation and the need for affirmation<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*While previous research (Ost 2005, Kalb and Halmai 2011) mainly focused on the losers of the change of regimes, here we interviewed a different group of industrial workers. They are mostly young (below 40), relatively well paid and enjoy considerable job security. We explain the increasing appeal of the far right among them in a historical and ethnographic context. Contrary to the older generation of workers (Bartha 2011), young workers would typically associate negative phenomena with socialism (shortage economy, nomenklatura, secret police, etc.). We explain this through education and the marked anti-Communist stance of the post-1989 mainstream political ideologies. This alongside the general mistrust of the intelligentsia, effectively marginalized left-wing world-explanations and political theories.*

*Interestingly, however, workers used the concept of exploitation in the context of wage differences and Hungary's relation to western countries. The extent to which an ethnicized discourse has been mainstreamed in Hungary is best shown by the frequent discussions of "gypsy crime" and the "welfare dependency of the gypsies". We argued that "gypsy crime" was in fact used to conceal more deeply-rooted feelings of insecurity. The call for more social justice (targeted both at the rich and the "unworthy" poor) alongside a massive anti-Roma propaganda thus appeals to many hard-working people, who have been socialized to be responsive to an ethnicized discourse.*

### Introduction

One of the strongest legacies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mental image of blue-collar workers is that they form a united working class and that the members of this class harbor Marxist or at least left-wing political sympathies and support socialist, social democratic or Communist parties. In the state socialist countries Communist parties claimed to rule in the name of the working class. In the pillarized societies of the West it was taken for granted that workers are voting for the left and until the 1980s the working-class neighborhoods were considered to be

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the electoral basis of the political left. This was true, for example, in Great Britain ((McAllister et al, 2001), in the Netherlands (Becker–Curperus, 2010); and it was also true for the Western European Communist parties where they were important: in France (Platone 1977) or in Italy (Bibes-Alix 1963, Mezei 2015).

The 1980-1990s gravely undermined this image. In the 1980s and 1990s, the embracement of neo-liberal policies by social democratic and socialist parties across the continent weakened the allegiance of trade unions and also that of workers' to these parties. The rising populist, far-right parties became ever more popular among the workers (Taggart 1995). While some authors stress the importance of economic factors, many observers prefer a cultural explanation for why workers choose to support parties with a nativist anti-immigrant, ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and populist political program (Lubbers et al, 2002 and Oesch 2008).<sup>2</sup>

A similar political trend took place in a number of Central and Eastern European countries, where radical populist right wing parties gained substantial workers' support.<sup>3</sup> By studying the rise of the radical right in Poland, David Ost (2005) developed an argument, which focused more on rational choice theory than cultural explanations. Building on his previous study of the roots of Solidarity,<sup>4</sup> he argued that the liberal intelligentsia betrayed the workers, and embarked upon a road of neoliberal capitalism, which effectively impoverished many workers, who either lost their jobs or had to be contented with very low wages in comparison with the earnings of the intellectuals. Thus, the workers voted for the right in order to punish the intelligentsia and the new neoliberal elite.

Kalb and Halmai (2011) offered a different explanation for the increasing appeal of the radical right in former post socialist countries. They developed a structural explanation, where the exploitation of the working class plays a key role in the rise of neonationalism. Contrary to cultural explanations (which stress, for instance, the gendered nature of traditional working-class communities), the authors think that "current neo-nationalistic populisms represent a systemic, structural, logically contingent and socially meaningful phenomena" (Kalb and Halmai 2011, 18). To simplify the key thesis of the book, globalization and

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<sup>2</sup> The expression of nativist was borrowed from Mudde 2007.

<sup>3</sup> In 1989-90 there was very sporadic and weak working-class resistance to the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe. On the Hungarian workers' councils in 1989 see Szalai (1994); Nagy (2012), on the role of unions in the transition see: Tóth (2000) and (2002). For a historically-based explanation see Bartha (2013).

<sup>4</sup> See: Ost 1990

neoliberal capitalism disrupted old, working-class communities and rendered workers more dependent on the whims of capitalists. Right-wing populism offers a panacea for the insecurity of the world and the everyday struggle to make a decent living. Feischmidt, following the argument of Kalb and Halmai, defined neo-nationalism as being responses to the global and local crises generated by semi-peripheral capitalism (Feischmidt et al 2014, 46).

In this paper we operate with Feischmidt's definition of neo-nationalism. Our main research question is what renders workers responsive to right-wing political slogans, or to be more specific, how can we explain the increasing appeal of the radical right amongst them? While the explanations of Ost and Kalb share the assumption that workers belong to the losers of the change of regimes, we intentionally selected our interview partners from a specific group, which can be described as the workers' elite: young or middle aged skilled workers, who are employed by a large multinational company in Western Hungary, one of the most developed regions of the country. The company offers specific conditions for its trusted workers: life-long employment, high wages compared to the average Hungarian wages and the support of labor organizations such as trade unions and enterprise councils. Our interview partners were all men (because men are over-represented in this industry), and they were all organized, many of them serving as shop stewards. In short, we focused on a group, whose members can be seen as winners of the change of regimes, or at least as part of the contemporary Hungarian middle class (Valuch 2014). Hence we cannot be contented with an explanation, which links the growing right-wing radicalization with the protest of the "losers" – no matter how we define the latter.

We recognize that there is a growing interest in the Hungarian right-wing radicalization,<sup>5</sup> but where we do see the novelty of our approach is (1) the application of a *long durée* historical perspective (2) the reconsideration of politics and political culture<sup>6</sup> in

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Tóth and Grajczár (2007) and (2013); Sik (2015); Szalai (2011); Körösenyi (2012); Feischmidt et al (2014); Rudas (2010).

<sup>6</sup> The term "political culture" has a huge literature; we just note here that our definition of political culture derives from Swidler (1986), who makes a distinction between settled and unsettled cultures, which we see as very much relevant for the postsocialist environment and Berezin (1997), who views political culture as the matrix of meanings embodied in expressive symbols, practices, and beliefs that constitute ordinary politics in a bounded collectivity.

work-based communities. While Sik (2015) observed the increasing appeal of right-wing radicalism both in a relatively wealthy city located in Western Hungary, close to the Austrian border and in a city located in a crisis zone, which has been hardly hit by de-industrialization, little if any ethnographic research has been done on the new working-class elite and their motivation of shifting to the right. Nonetheless, we draw on the findings of an oral history project of Szalai (2011) conducted with various groups of young people (including workers), in which she argued that most respondents had insecure group identities and their habitus adapted to the individualistic and competitive logic of global capitalism (many in fact measured human relations in terms of give and take). In our research we likewise found little group solidarity – workers were often placed into different teams and there was little space for socializing at the workplace.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we position our argument between the culturalist and the structuralist, explanations. We argue that neo-nationalism provides a cultural code, a symbolic language through which workers can assert their identity as well as assume membership in the “privileged” middle class. Family histories are constructed in line with this claim and in line with the dominant anti-Communist stance of the public media.<sup>8</sup> When constructing stories of the “gypsy crime”, workers are also apparently influenced by the tabloid press since most of them have no contact with Roma people.<sup>9</sup>

### *Data and methodology*

The paper is based on a historical analysis of the political culture of working-class communities in Hungary as well as 12 life history-interviews and 2 group discussions (with 3-3 workers) conducted with members of the above described workers’ elite in 2015. The main

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<sup>7</sup> Information from the interviews.

<sup>8</sup> In the post-1989 public and academic discourse the history of the state socialist era has been a particularly contested terrain. The Kádár era was often depicted as a criminal regime and the Marxist intellectual heritage was seen as an outdated paradigm. Krausz (2011) showed how the Marxist intellectual roots have been removed from the historiography of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, which the post-1989 mainstream historiography wanted to preserve.

<sup>9</sup> The journal *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* devoted its first issue to the rise of right-wing populism (“Mainstreaming the Extreme”). In the introduction Feischmidt and Hervik (2015) drew attention to the impact of popular media in triggering and spreading anti-immigrant and anti-Roma sentiments.

questions of the semi-structured interviews and the group discussions were as follows (1) family background (2) work career (3) memories of the socialist era (4) reasons to join the union (5) job satisfaction (6) comparison of capitalism with the socialist regime (7) evaluation of the change of regimes (8) satisfaction with the wages and working conditions (9) consideration of migration (10) satisfaction with the government's policy towards labor ("what would you change had you been in power?"), (11) attitudes towards the Roma population (12) attitudes towards Hungarian history. It was agreed with the respondents that we use all interviews anonymously (therefore we use pseudonyms). We used content analysis. The data collection was supplemented with ethnographic observation. All data was used with the agreement of the respondents.

#### *Hungarian workers between the political left and right*

As Gyula R  zler (1938) demonstrated first, after the failed attempt to establish a People's Republic in Hungary in 1919, in the interwar period a segmented workers' society had consolidated instead of having one, the socialist party-dominated, urban working class culture. Mark Pittaway's studies well demonstrated the different political orientation of the different subgroups of working-class communities (Pittaway 2012). One segment was the strata of urban workers, for whom the intertwined world of unions and social democratic party ensured a socialist oriented pillarized community within society. The second segment was composed of workers living in rural dwellings and working for paternalistic employers, whose views could be characterized as conservative right-wing Christian nationalist. Finally, closely knit working-class communities in industrial dwellings such as miners in Tatab  nya were open to radical social ideologies, be revolutionary socialism or social nationalism in the form of the Arrow Cross movement, the most important Hungarian National Socialist Party (Pittaway 2012).

After the Second World War, the newly established Communist regime attempted to impose a militant, left-wing class-consciousness from above on the reluctant workers. Pittaway well demonstrates how this policy met the resistance of workers' communities, which were segmented along skills, age, gender, workplace, living place and indeed, had different political cultures and political orientations. The revolution of 1956, however, forced the Communist regime to make a compromise with the "working class", especially with the skilled elite and develop a new party policy towards labor (Pittaway 2014, F  ldes 1989, Bartha 2013). The essence of this policy was to ensure ever-increasing standards of living,

provide for proper housing and education, and to enable upward working-class mobility. A new workplace policy was introduced, which respected the traditional elite position of skilled workers within the hierarchy of the factory (Pittaway 2014).

The concept that the working class was a unified revolutionary force and it was the ruling class under socialism was central to the legitimizing ideology of the Communist regime. Therefore, research on the workers was a sensitive field of ideology, and any scholar who violated the axiom, risked his or her academic career behind the iron curtain. To mention one famous example: Miklós Haraszti's manuscript, which was published in 1978 under the title *A Worker in the Workers' State* received a wide international publicity. However, it was enough to provoke a trial against the author because he claimed no less than that workers are exploited to the same effect under "actually existing" socialism as under capitalism, moreover, workers are very much conscious of their exploitation. Even though at the trial it was argued that workers actually give similar answers to sociologists, the trial showed the limits of the regime's tolerance. Thus research on workers was limited to lifestyle and satisfaction with the standard of living; workers' political opinions were monitored by party functionaries.

The fieldwork of István Kemény, before he was forced to immigrate, showed that the industrial working class was not homogenous either in its social composition or in its culture, and stratification manifested itself even in the division of labor: commuting workers, who are usually less qualified than their native urban counterparts, occupy lower ranks in production hierarchy and specialists, who often come from traditional working-class dynasties, monopolize the posts of functionaries, foremen and other key positions in production. Kemény (1990) called the attention not only to the fact that there is a great variety in workers' life but also to the fact that there is a huge variation concerning other factors: e.g. the access to resources, relation to work, motivation, perspective, education, upward social and occupational mobility, and social-political consciousness. Indeed, Földes (1989) and Pittaway (2014) argue that the urban, skilled workers were the basis of the social support for the party, and the party sought to win over primarily this stratum of workers.

There was also a rich literature of industrial sociology during the socialist period, which dealt with the role, strategies and bargaining power of workers in production. An early survey was conducted by Lajos Héthy and Csaba Makó in the Rába factory Héthy-Makó (1975) on workers and automation. This survey also contained questions about the workers' trust in enterprise democracy, trade union, and even in the party itself. It is perhaps not

surprising that workers were less satisfied with the trade union than with the party, nor did they hold enterprise democracy to be a participatory one. They in fact thought that they don't have much say in enterprise decisions. But the majority likewise argued that they can't influence even their immediate environment: only one third of the respondents thought that the management is interested in the proposals and innovations of the workers and less than one third agreed with the statement that the enterprise takes an interest in the welfare of the employees. This opinion continued to prevail among the older generation of Rába workers whom Bartha interviewed between 2002 and 2004 (Bartha 2011): many of them claimed that workers were only seen as part of the machines. It is worth recalling that the Red Star Tractor Factory, where Haraszti worked was also part of Rába at that time and he found the same phenomena. In several other works Makó and Héthy demonstrated that there was a wage bargain between the "core" (highly skilled) workers and the management; this well demonstrated the survival of the old hierarchies, which Communists sought to disrupt (see. e.g. Héthy-Makó 1976, Héthy-Makó 1978).

Albeit she did not study working-class communities directly, Erzsébet Szalai had an important insight into the political orientation of the workers under the Kádár regime. From the end of the 1970s, the regime encountered substantial financial difficulties and it made new and new concessions to the market to enable workers to supplement their income through extra work as small-scale entrepreneurs. The consequence of these multiple liberalizations was a newly emerging stratification between those who had access to the limited private economy and those, who had not, leading to the increasing individualization of the life strategies of workers. Szalai observed the rise of a new individualism among the workers already in the mid 1980s (Szalai 1986). To this we add the lack of the credibility of the socialist ideology as observed by Bartha (2013). Thus, the conditions of socialism made workers ready to accept the return to capitalism (Szalai 2004), when global political changes allowed. The individualization of life strategies have had a lasting impact on workplaces, and shaped the post-socialist societal system as it rendered organization efforts of unions almost impossible, save few local cases after the collapse of the compulsory unionism of the socialist regime (Tóth 2000).

After the change of regimes, industrial re-structuring disrupted the state socialist model including universal employment and life time employment security. Anthropologists studying workers in Central and Eastern Europe, indeed, argued that the workers became the new subaltern class (Kideckel 2002; 2008; Buchowski 2001; Kalb 2009; Kalb and Halmai

2011). While sub-alternity was used by Rudolph Bahro (1977) to explain workers' location at the bottom of a knowledge-based division of labor in socialism,<sup>10</sup> the transformation of socialist political economies to market economy have deepened the subalternization of labor according to this stream of authors. Indeed, there was not much research done on workers in the postsocialist era.<sup>11</sup> This is in itself indicative of the loss of the symbolic capital of the "working class".

In this paper we set out to give an ethnographic study of a particular segment of the working class, which can be seen as a relative winner of the change of regimes. We have to add here that given the workers' high mistrust of intelligentsia<sup>12</sup> and the general lack of trust in society<sup>13</sup>, industrial workers constitute a group, which is not easily accessible. We encountered several problems in finding interview partners. Many did not understand what the point was to speak about the past and many were reluctant to help in a research, which apparently did not interest them. This was markedly different in East Germany, where a journal article was enough to attract many respondents.

The paper aspires to contribute to an emergent literature on critical anthropology in East-Central Europe, which, on the one hand, seeks to re-interpret old labor histories and Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies, while on the other hand, we continue to maintain criticism against the existing global division of labor, which nourish a dissatisfaction that the far right can exploit.<sup>14</sup> Through our ethnographic study, we seek to offer a deeper understanding of a certain political culture that our respondents share than what surveys can reveal. Given the fact that working-class cultures remain to be isolated from the Hungarian mainstream, we also hope to bring back a "subaltern group" into the academic discourse, and reveal their motivation to vote for the far right.

While we can only generalize with caution, we can refer here to previous research of Tóth and Grajczár (2013), which showed that Jobbik was relatively successful among young

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<sup>10</sup> See also Konrád and Szelényi (1979). We have to mention here, however, Trotsky's influential critique of Stalinist society, in which he argued that the Stalinist bureaucracy became the main beneficiary of the new Soviet regime (Trotsky 1937).

<sup>11</sup> Research focused on the history of workers (see Bartha 2007), and there is only a recent interest in ethnography (the research group of the doctoral students of Tibor Valuch).

<sup>12</sup> In that sense we can but agree with Haraszti's experience that there is a wide social gap between workers and the intelligentsia in Hungary.

<sup>13</sup> For a review of the literature see Valuch (2014).

<sup>14</sup> For a programmatic book see Linden (2008).



skilled workers. It is, of course, a question, to what extent the working-class position impacts on voting preferences. Whereas Ignácz and Szabó (2014) argue that the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) was overrepresented in working-class quarters of Budapest (see also Pittaway 2014) at the beginning of the 2000's, and Szalai likewise argues for the actual existence of a working class (Szalai 2004), other scholars consider it doubtful that labor/capital division can account for apparent voting preferences in Hungary (see Körösenyi 1996). While we recognize that before 1945, the Hungarian working class was divided socially and politically (Pittaway 2012), we also accept the observation that a certain Kádár-nostalgia was present in the older generations of skilled workers (who were 45-60 in 2002-2004, at the time of an interview project conducted by Bartha 2011). There are several factors that contributed to the erosion of working-class support for the left; at least some of them we hope to reveal in our analysis. *Towards an ethnicized discourse: Working-class narratives of exploitation, blame and insecurity*

The question arises why workers (and working-class activism) turns away from the political left in Hungary. While Tóth and Grajczár (2013) and Ignácz and Szabó (2014) observed the erosion of workers' support for the left, they mainly explained this through a political analysis (the Hungarian Socialist Party supported neoliberal policies, and there was a widespread media coverage of the corruption cases, in which members and leaders of the party were involved. This alongside the famous lie-speech of PM Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2006 gravely undermined the credibility of the political left).<sup>15</sup>

Our analysis is based on the everyday life experiences of the workers as they were narrated in the interviews. Our main research question was why these experiences translate into a discourse that resonates with the slogans of the far right. We refer back to the important research of Szalai (2011), in which she concluded that young people have weak group and generational identities, which render them susceptible to far right-wing ideologies promising them membership in a larger collective and community support. We likewise argue that the lack of the symbolic capital of membership in a class, which no longer exists pushes workers to seek for membership in another larger community, which they apparently find in the nation. We also argue that in spite of their privileged job situation, insecurity remains a dominant experience for many of the workers. During the analysis of the interviews we identified four main topics that contribute to the far right-wing leaning (and in some cases

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<sup>15</sup> In this speech the Prime Minister admitted that his party had lied to the voters to win the elections of 2006.

activism) of the respondents: (1) the construction of family histories (2) the experience of exploitation (3) colonization by the West (4) anti-Roma sentiments. In what follows we will introduce these four elements of the discussions at length.

#### Family narratives and the far right leaning

The Kisalföld region, where the interviews were conducted, has been traditionally a stronghold for the right because the collectivization campaigns of the Communist Party caused much suffering for the smallholders living in the region and many of the interview partners came from peasant or worker-peasant families.<sup>16</sup> We have data of 8 workers' family background but these are all linked with crimes/grievances suffered under the state socialist regime. This was true even for cases when it was quite clear that the parents had different memories:

*I don't know much of the Kádár regime because at the time my parents spoke little of politics although both worked as shop stewards. I remember the two-week holidays at Lake Balaton, which were organized by the trade union. It was programmed, every year. My mother still believes that the old regime was better but I think that today there are much greater perspectives.*

*Károly, 42, skilled worker, trade union leader*

While in the previous research (Bartha 2011) especially older workers expressed a nostalgia for the secure life under the Kádár regime, young people would mainly speak of religious or ethnic persecution their families suffered under "Communism", the lack of personal freedom and shortage economy.<sup>17</sup> One of our interview partners (István, 54), who worked as an activist of the far right-wing party Jobbik, came from a cadre family but as a young man he immigrated to the West (Switzerland). This is how he remembered the socialist regime:

*My family was privileged also in that time [the Kádár regime]. Everybody was in a high position, well-educated, etc. I was a privileged guy also under Communism [he laughs]. I went to the West because I don't like when others tell me where the border is. No one can tell*

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<sup>16</sup> See also Bartha (2013), Sik (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Ju Li (2015) likewise found that old Chinese workers had in fact good memories of the Communist past (community, secure living, upward social mobility). For an analysis of postsocialist memory see Boyer (2006) and (2010) and Todorova (2010).

*me that there is a fence here, which you cannot cross. Communism was an artificial society. Three-four men did the same job as one Swiss worker. However, they supported working-class culture although if you did not want to enter the party or the KISZ [Communist Youth Organization], they would blackmail you.*

*István, 54, skilled worker*

Szalai (2011) found that many Jobbik-activists had grandparents, who suffered repression under Communism. One of our interview partners told us a similar story: his father participated in the 1956 revolution, and as a consequence, a decade later he could not go to university to study despite his good marks, but had to go to work as a worker. An apparently energetic and hard-working man, the interview partner later recouped this disadvantage, but the bitter memory of this discrimination is the key organizing experience of him as far as political choices are concerned. Thus, despite the fact that he even became the member of the Communist Party during the socialist regime, he harbours staunch anti-Communist sentiments and is voting for the most radical anti-Communist right wing political force.

Anticommunism, then, seems to be an important constituent of the “stories of suffering” – as we termed family histories under high Communism. In some cases religion was also evoked to justify the anti-Communist stance of the speakers’ family, which determined their political choice. While in the old generation, many of the interview partners had explicit memories of upward social mobility (moving to better flats, buying cars, going to weekends, restaurants, etc.) in the Kádár regime,<sup>18</sup> younger workers no longer shared these positive memories. Many saw socialism as a criminal regime, which only brought impoverishment and suffering to the Hungarian people. Indeed, memories of the Kádár regime were constructed explicitly around the grievances that the speakers or their families had suffered in the past.

While we recognize that family histories can be indicative of political sympathies even in the second and third generation, we would like to problematize the question of why the parents’ different memories did not influence the construction of the “stories of suffering”. One explanation lies in education and the influence of popular media including the tabloid

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<sup>18</sup> Bartha (2011).

press, which share the deeply rooted anti-Communism of the mainstream political culture.<sup>19</sup> Szalai (2011) referred to this generation as “children of the change of regimes”, and they were indeed socialized in a society, which experienced a radical shift of ruling ideologies. We cannot wonder that they seek to adapt their memories to what they perceive as the majority culture. The erosion of the left-wing political values does not, however, mean the disappearance of concepts such as exploitation and social justice – only, it is left to the radical right to thematize these concepts.

#### Narratives of resentment , mistrust and exploitation

While in 1989-90 only few scholars warned of the danger of peripherization in Eastern Europe,<sup>20</sup> now it is a well-known and well documented phenomenon that many Hungarians have been disappointed with the change of regimes, which failed to bring them the welfare and levels of consumption, which they saw in the advanced capitalist countries such as Germany or Austria.<sup>21</sup> This disappointment was voiced also in the previous research (Bartha 2011), which nourished a strong resentment against the West, and led many interview partners to reject Western ideologies such as liberalism. In our analysis we build on this research but we would also like to add a new element: the competitive and individualistic logic of global capitalism, which renders all positions insecure. Nationalism is used to compensate for this insecurity and assert membership in a “safe” community. As we will see, the defense of national interests was an attractive catchword for many of our respondents – thus, nation is seen as a safeguard against the whims of global capitalism.

The concept of exploitation was addressed at three different levels in the interviews. Firstly, as we described above, many workers constructed their family histories as a history of exploitation by the “Communists” (the old and new nomenklatura). Secondly, at the level of the factory, workers complained about the wage differential between the “direct” (industrial) workers and the “indirect” (white-collar) workers, which they felt to be unjustly large. Károly,

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<sup>19</sup> On anti-Communism in history-writing see Krausz (2011).

<sup>20</sup> For a review of the main paradigms see Bartha (2010). For an early critique of postsocialist transition see Pickles-Smith (1998); Gowan (1995).

<sup>21</sup> For a review of the literature see Valuch (2014). See also, e.g. Ferge (2012), Ladányi (2012), Szalai (2011).

for instance, told us a story in which he had to teach a “freshman” engineer how the motor functioned. Further, the wage differential was also seen as downgrading of the skills of which the workers were evidently proud. This further alienated them from the technocrats and other graduates, who allegedly received high wages from the profit that the workers produced:

*Many engineers think that they are the gods and often they lack the elementary technical knowledge and culture. The working class is undervalued and the management and the engineers are greatly over-rewarded. I don't envy the money from anybody but then the expectations should be equally levelled, too.*

*Károly, 42, skilled worker*

The social distance between intellectuals and workers was also criticized in the interviews. This distance further nourished working-class resentment and mistrust of intellectuals:

*There are managers, who think that you are only a worker, your job is to work eight hours a day and bring profit to the enterprise. Our job is to discipline these people and tell them that their disproportionately high income comes from the workers' wage work on whom he looks down.*

*István, 54, skilled worker*

One of the slogans of the far right-wing party Jobbik is that they come from the “people” whom they represent. Apparently, this slogan is attractive for many young workers, who experience the downgrading of their skills (in terms of material reward) as well as social downgrading (that the intelligentsia looks down on them). The perception of this social distance undermines the credibility of liberal and left-wing intellectuals, who seek to gain support against right-wing populism.<sup>22</sup>

Young working-class activists, thus, turn to the right for orientation and political support. As shop stewards would tell us, Jobbik was the only party, which took trade unions seriously, and demanded the strengthening of their rights. The erosion of the left-wing political consciousness is best shown by the fact that the workers, who established their own trade unions, wanted to remain politically independent and they would explicitly distance themselves from the political left. Károly even argued that the alleged Communist and Jewish roots of labor representation rendered many workers suspicious of trade unions. Thus,

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<sup>22</sup> For a similar argument see Kalb (2009).

workers gave more credit to the far right to defend their interests than to the old and new left-wing political parties.

The third level at which the issue of exploitation was addressed in the interviews has an international dimension, and it refers to the huge wage differential between the money paid by the Hungarian factory and the German earnings. All workers mentioned that this difference was all the more unjust in the light of the fact that they had to work harder than their German counterparts for much less money. Most of them were familiar with the German circumstances because they had worked in Germany or had visited the mother enterprise. While they recognized that their wages were higher than the Hungarian average, most of them would argue that the money was not enough for a safe middle-class life. Some of them would even consider immigration in the hope of higher wages.

Workers were, then, conscious of the exploitation both within the factory and between East and West. These negative experiences – alongside the insecurity of membership in the middle class – nevertheless, translated into the support of right-wing populism. We have argued above that one reason for this lies in the identification of the left either with the discredited regime of “Communism” or with the corrupt politicians and the nomenklatura, who allegedly benefited from the change of regimes.<sup>23</sup> Szalai (2011) found that young people, who were socialized in the new regime, lacked the theoretical knowledge and the vocabulary to formulate a left-wing critique of exploitation. In what follows we seek to identify further elements of the discourse, which leads to the embracement of far right-wing ideologies.

#### Narratives of victims of global capitalism

We agree with Kalb and Halmai (2011) that workers feel insecure against the whims of global capitalism, which may take away even the most safe-looking jobs. Further, they are conscious of the huge wage differential between the Western and Eastern European countries. Interestingly, even though they worked for a multinational company, many of them would explicitly speak of the colonization of Hungary by the West:

*I don't think that it was a good thing that we sold the whole country. We had milling industry, meat industry, shoe factories, we sold everything to the foreigners and now we are buying agricultural products from abroad. Why do we produce cars when this is an agricultural country? Why do we produce rape for the Austrians? Why not wheat for Hungarians? This is*

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<sup>23</sup> Information from the interviews.

*what annoys me in the change of regimes. This can only be solved like in World War II. To destroy everything and to reconstruct everything. Otherwise I don't see a way out.*

*Tamás, 32, skilled worker*

To the question “what would you do differently?” it was a frequent answer that the Hungarian industry should be strengthened, which is expected to facilitate the increase of wages:

*Our friend, Viktor[PM Viktor Orbán], is trying to build a bourgeois Hungary and his father was amongst those, who exterminated the bourgeoisie. We don't have a native bourgeoisie, there are only workers in Hungary, or leaders who come from the working class. But the real working class has no real future in Hungary until we don't have a strong industry of Hungarian capital. Or Hungarian agriculture...While we serve the West in these multinational companies, we cannot speak of workers, we can only speak of a society of slaves. And now you are talking to one of these slaves [he laughs].*

*Tibor, 56, former engineer, skilled worker*

What we would add to the analysis of Kalb (2009) is that vocation and work constitute an integral element of the workers' identity, which is devalued by the experience of peripheral capitalism (“we are a society of slaves”) and the domestic tradition of a “caste” society (great social and material distance between the technocrats and the blue-collar workers – biorobots – as they are sometimes called).<sup>24</sup> Jobbik promises social and moral justice to the people, whose moral order is based on hard work, vocation and self-sustainment:

*I would never go abroad. I think that you should earn your money in the country, where you live. You can make money everywhere. If you don't have the right education or training, you have to go after it and gain it. It is not true that people don't have opportunities. You have to have the will and then you can solve everything.*

*I believe in what I can do myself. I think that if something is wrong in my environment, then I will change it. If I am not satisfied with what I have, I am trying to change it so that I can have enough. I like to be successful. Money does not interest me so much, I like to be successful in what I am doing. This is what drives me.*

*Csaba, 37, skilled worker*

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<sup>24</sup> Information from the interviews.

Jobbik promises corruption-free politics, decent wages and the restoration of the greatness of the Hungarian nation – all attractive catchwords for the workers, who feel exploited by the West. While the mother enterprise demands hard work and personal loyalty to the company, the principle of “equal pay for equal work” has been evidently violated. This renders people particularly susceptible to slogans, which promise social justice and the restoration of moral order in a country, where the majority of the workers live from one pay to the next.

#### Narrating the workers' identity by blaming the Roma

We would like to continue our argument that vocation and work are central to workers' identity. While the technocrats were criticized for receiving unduly high pays at the expense of the workers, the interview partners would often directly contrast the image of a decent worker with that of the “unworthy”, lazy Roma, who live from crime and/or social subsidies. While we recognize that the anti-Roma biases have an extensive literature, here we mainly build on Feischmidt (2014), who argues that there is a strong relationship between Hungarian nationalism and anti-Roma attitudes. Indeed, many of our respondents argued that Roma people are ethnically “unable” to integrate into Hungarian society and their culture renders them markedly different from “ethnic” Hungarians in a negative sense (they are lazy to work, they produce many children in order to get social subsidies, they steal from ethnic Hungarians, and in general, they live at the expense of the society of working people). These stereotypes were frequently voiced both in the group discussions and in the interviews – in fact, we can state that the anti-Roma discourse constituted a significant part of the interviews.

*I think that Jobbik and the gypsies are good friends because Jobbik would not have been in Parliament without the gypsies. I have my opinion of the gypsies because I never heard that a gypsy would have suffered an electric shock because he wanted to cultivate a garden but because he wanted to enter in order to steal from the peasants, who installed the electric wire.*

*Zsolt, 40, skilled worker*

The “gypsy crime”, which has been a favorite topic of Jobbik, has been frequently evoked to justify anti-Roma feelings and the generally held view that Roma people cannot get integrated into the majority society because of cultural reasons. Here we agree with Feischmidt and Hervik (2015) that popular discussion of the “gypsy crime” is influenced by the tabloid press and the media since the stories that illustrate the anti-Roma discourse have often been highlighted by the media (e.g. the story of the criminal, who suffered an electric shock or the



famous case of Olaszliszka, where Roma people killed a man, whose car accidentally hit a child).

*There are moments when if you have a machine gun then you would shoot. In Olaszliszka I would – well, not shoot but I would have beaten the gypsies. What the gypsy kid learns first: to count the social subsidy. They give birth to 86 children because they make a living from their children. It is not that they love children but they would make a living from them. Sometimes you need fear.... It is enough that Jobbik is in the Parliament and the Guard is in the background so that the old woman...whatever she does, they will steal her last money. There is no window which they would not break, and they steal everything. Jobbik is needed, I only don't want them to govern the country.*

*Mihály, 35, skilled worker*

One can, indeed argue that the world of the workers is divided into the employed and the unemployed and the latter – instead of evoking sympathy and solidarity – only serve as scapegoat for the allegedly high taxes and as violator of the moral world, where people get rewarded on the basis of their work. By engaging in an anti-Roma discourse, workers demonstrate their respectability as wage earners and *react* to the loss of the symbolic capital of the working class in postsocialist Hungary. Ethnicity is, then, evoked to explain segregation and discrimination against the “unworthy” poor (although we should note that many “ethnic” Hungarians also belong to the poor).<sup>25</sup>

*In my opinion there is a small part, which does not need to be integrated because they live normally. The rest is hopeless...Their culture is such that they don't want to live normally, you can see it on the 5-year-old kid that this culture is stronger than any other influence, they don't know work, they don't know that you have to work, they just parasite on the state and live from the social subsidies and they are consciously trying to give birth to sick children because then they get more money...*

*Géza, 37, skilled worker*

What we can add to the analysis of Feischmidt (2014) is the experience of insecurity. Workers recognize that they are also threatened by unemployment and subsequent poverty – and Jobbik demonstrates first and foremost strength (“speaking out the truth”, Hungarian Guard, etc.), which promises protection against the whims of global capitalism (strengthening of

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<sup>25</sup> Ladányi (2012).

Hungarian industry) and the restoration of moral order and safety in a corrupt, incalculable and essentially *insecure* environment. In some cases Jobbik appealed to the masculinity of the speaker, who was proud of his independence:

*What is good about Jobbik? They are young, they say what people want to hear. They bring order. Taxation – dictatorship. The American model. I would also strengthen public safety, there is no public safety in Hungary, things have become so loose...*

*Károly, 42, skilled worker, trade union leader*

“Gypsy crime” is thus used as a pretext to hide more deeply-rooted fears of the loss of social status and a safe membership in the middle class. The fear of unemployment and poverty is thus translated into an ethnicized discourse, where the decent “ethnic” Hungarians are threatened by the “lazy and unemployed” Roma people:

*And now the third generation of gypsies are growing up, who are dangerous for Hungarian society. And as despair, unemployment and the loss of perspective increases, gypsy criminality increases, too. This is a social issue. An economic, social and political issue and no one does anything. Solution? We are not forced to buy Western and Slovakian and other products, we can also produce our own food. Krone Zucker Vienna. Why do we need sugar from Vienna? When we used to be one of the largest sugar producers of Europe. All gypsies could find work in agriculture if it were restored.*

*István, 54, skilled worker*

While in the previous research (Bartha 2011) openly racist arguments were used less frequently (and they were mainly targeted at the “Jewish” capital), in this research anti-Roma feelings were openly discussed. We can, therefore, support the argument of Feischmidt and Hervik (2015) that an ethnicized and essentially racist discourse has become acceptable in the wider society. This has been largely encouraged by the sensationalist media and the political culture, which has been massively shifting to the right.<sup>26</sup>

## *Conclusion*

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<sup>26</sup> For a political analysis see Tóth and Grajczár (2013).

The major question of the research was why elite workers with secure positions and „affluent” lives are attracted by the radical right, and why the left failed to profit from a culture of resentment based on the perception of multiple exploitations.

As we demonstrated in the analysis of the interviews, family histories have conditioned workers’ current political choices to a considerable extent. While in the previous research (Bartha 2011) a certain nostalgia for the Kádár regime was present in the interviews, young workers would typically stress the crimes of “Communism” and the grievances that their families suffered in the socialist past – even if the parents had different memories. We argued that this can be explained through the impact of education and the post-1989 mainstream political culture, which has effectively criminalized “Communism”.

In spite of their “privileged” position in the Hungarian working class (Szalai 2004), workers in fact, nevertheless, used the concept of exploitation to account for (1) the wage differential between the technocrats and blue-collar workers (2) the wage differential between Germany and Hungary. Many argued that they, the workers produced the profit, which benefited the owners and the technocrats. These arguments, however, failed to translate into a left-wing political discourse. While in the previous research (Bartha 2011) older workers had concrete memories of upward social mobility and material and employment safety, here we can argue alongside Szalai (2011) that workers lacked the vocabulary and structural thinking to form a class-based theory of exploitation. Dissatisfaction was thus channelled into an ethnicized discourse that the far right propagates.

We highlight here two examples: (1) colonization by the West (2) anti-Roma sentiments. While in the previous research (Bartha 2011) workers would also criticize the selling of Hungarian industry to the foreign capital, this criticism could be explained through the decline of the ex-socialist model factory, where they used to work, in the new regime. In this research, however, we interviewed workers, who work for a highly successful multinational company, which provides for special conditions for its workforce. In their case, criticism is mainly linked with the wider socio-economic experience of peripheral capitalism represented by the significant wage differential between East and West. Social justice, the strengthening of Hungarian industry and the representation of the interest of the Hungarian people – the slogans with which Jobbik operates – were therefore attractive catchwords for many respondents. To this we can add the mistrust of the intelligentsia and the feeling of insecurity against the whims of global capitalism and the chaos of an incalculable world

(“things have become so loose...”), which render workers responsive to the ideology of national radicalism, centred on the display of strength and order.

We argued that neo-nationalism provided the workers with a language and a set of cultural codes through which they could voice their dissatisfaction with the multiple exploitations that they experienced at different levels. Anti-Roma sentiments largely contributed to the ethnicized discourse, which contrasted the hard working, decent Hungarian people with the image of the “lazy and unworthy” Roma, who live from crime and/or social subsidies. The issues of “gypsy crime” and “welfare-dependence of gypsies” are one of the main themes of Jobbik. For some of our interview partners, the Jobbik is the party, which finally has the courage to speak out the “truth” while the left is obfuscating the problem and is letting people alone to cope with “Roma” criminality. While in the previous research (Bartha 2011)), most workers would refrain from open racism, our research supports the argument that racist and ethnicized language has been an acceptable discourse in Hungary. Workers would often refer to stories of “gypsy crime”, which have been highlighted and mainstreamed in the popular media.<sup>27</sup> In our analysis we argued that “gypsy crime” served as a pretext for more deeply-rooted feelings of insecurity including the fear of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion – which Roma people allegedly suffered because of “cultural” reasons.

This leads us to the issue of preferring the policy of strong state and law and order, which is connected to the rejection of neo-liberalism or liberalism (see Bartha 2011). Liberalism appeared almost as a curse word; most interview partners connected with it massive corruption, the selling of the country to foreign interests and the multiple exploitations that they experienced. The interconnection of these themes have created a strong leaning towards the radical right, which for many seems the only party, which is not plagued by corruption and the only party, which really expresses the concerns of hard working people and is finally “speaking out” the truth.

The question of social and moral respectability is a far-reaching one but we found it very important in our explanation for the right-wing political sympathies of workers. Most of our respondents came from conservative working-class and/or peasant families and anti-Communism played an important role in the construction of their family histories and identities. At the same time, national radicalism strongly shaped their perception of exploitation, or rather it gave them a language through which they could voice their

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g. Feischmidt and Hervik (2015).

dissatisfaction with the social injustice they experienced both within and outside of the factory.

Ethnicity was, indeed, frequently evoked (mainly by contrasting Hungarians and Roma but some would contrast Hungarian with Jewish capital). Hungary's social and political problems were often directly linked with the "Roma question". Although very often the interview partners had no direct experience of living with Roma people, they all had overtly racist ideas of the Roma's inability to integrate. Nationalism was also frequently asserted when workers would contrast their wages and standard of living with that of their Western counterparts. The exploitation of Hungarians is thus directly linked with a nationalistic discourse, in which the "stories of suffering" are equally elements of self-justification and self-assertion as the Roma issue. Ethnical solutions were, then, evoked to restore order and social justice in a chaotic, insecure and essentially corrupt world (the strengthening of Hungarian industry, the disciplining of the "unworthy" and "criminal" Roma people). Strength, order and social justice were, indeed, all important elements of the appeal of national radicalism. Workers felt a need to emphasize that they belonged to the "respected" members of the middle class – although their income was considerably lower than their Western counterparts. By participating in the majority discourse they could demonstrate that they were "still" respected members of society. It is worth stressing that while biases existed even before,<sup>28</sup> in the previous research the "Roma question" was not an issue for most of the interview partners. The importance of ethnicity clearly increased in the younger cohort of skilled workers – showing a further erosion of traditional, "old-fashioned" left-wing political values such as solidarity or universal emancipation.

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<sup>28</sup> For a good summary see Binder (2010).

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