

TWO LANDSCAPES: COMPARING ECOLOGY MOVEMENTS IN SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY

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This paper broadly compares environmentalism in Hungary and Slovakia, with a specific focus on Slovakia's green movement under late-socialism and after. Nature activism in both countries was not directly controlled by the Party, and in each case individuals pushed the boundaries of activism and redefined notions of protest and dissent. But the way these two movements emerged were quite different from one another. In Hungary, the movement coalesced around a big "international" Soviet-style mega-project. This was the flashpoint. In Hungary, the Nagymaros dam project was an infringement – a monument of unhappy partnerships, and a symbol that fueled nationalist rumblings. In Slovakia, the whole notion of megaworks was not an unwelcome idea. But the differences between Hungarian and Slovak greens are more than the story of a dam controversy. While Hungary's movement had its origins in the Danube River, Slovak greens emerged from the conservation of folk dwellings in the mountains. In Slovakia – the weekend amateur, the Catholic, the writer, the sociologist – instead found traction in the notion of human conservation. I explore these differences and examine how things change in the post-socialist period.

Keywords: Hungary, Slovakia, environmentalism, ecology, activism

In comparing socialist period environmentalism in Slovakia and Hungary one finds that, in both cases, activists pushed the boundaries of conservation and redefined notions of protest and dissent. In each context the ecology issue was not controlled by the Party or the regime, and both green movements used the environment and environmental problems as a weapon of critique, as political surrogate that attracted other dissidents and ordinary citizens to the cause of ecology, and as a platform for future activism.

But the precise ways in which these two movements emerged were very distinct. In Hungary, the movement coalesced around the Nagymaros dam project – a huge Soviet style scheme that threatened to place ideology writ large on the river itself. This was the flashpoint and the focus of Hungarian activism. In Budapest and beyond, the Danube project became an issue for the student, the civil servant

as well as the scientist and the scholar. In fact, the Danube project was the symbolic wedge that split the developments in each of the two communist states widely apart. In Slovakia, the whole notion of megaworks was a welcome idea – a place of one's own, a clear indicator of the regime's cooperative stance towards Moscow. Interestingly, prior to 1989 it is important to note what Slovak greens did not challenge. It is also important to note that Hungary's environmental protests emerged in a context of political reform, and pluralism, and burgeoning national pride. Both processes clearly fed off of the other. In Hungary, the Nagymaros project was an infringement – a monument of unhappy partnerships, and a symbol that fueled nationalist rumblings and encouraged open debate.

This paper examines how Slovak greens formed around a broad range of local issues linked with urban life, essentially creating an ethnography of environmental degradation and regime neglect. Unlike Hungary's single issue rally point, the total experience of environmental danger was an important aspect of the articulation of ecology as a political problem and a key motivator for civic activism despite a context of severe regime repression. In the post-socialist period, environmentalism in both Slovakia and Hungary experience a loss of popularity, with each movement engaging in local conversations with national identity and cultural and social change.

Turning Culture into Nature

The Slovak Union of Nature and Landscape Protectors was formed in 1969 by several groups of nature enthusiasts interested in, among other things, watching birds, picking mushrooms, and cleaning up parks and forests. Known as *ochranári*, these volunteer groups of amateur conservationists were not included in the communist Party structures and its *nomenklatura* system. They were even allowed to exist outside of the National Front, the pseudo-independent coalition of pre-war parties and civic associations that lent the regime the pretense of political diversity.

The reason these amateur environmentalists were left out of politics in Czechoslovakia can perhaps be found in the way that official Marxist ideology placed a particularly sharp boundary between nature and culture. Marxism considered the natural environment to be a set of material resources – passive objects to be controlled, subdued and consumed according to the principles and with the guidance of scientific rationality. By contrast, the communist regimes of East Europe and the Soviet Union privileged culture as the explicit and primary subject of political and ideological domination. Thus the struggle of Marxism was to be not with nature but with anything the regimes perceived as cultural dissent. Whether emerging from the arts, education, religious organizations, and even from within the

Party itself, dissidents were characterized by the state as deviant and therefore dangerous (Komaromi, 2003, Ramet, 1995).¹ After all these were the people that threatened socialism with the weapons of culture (Flam, 1999).² Thus even in a context of particularly severe repression of cultural dissent in Czechoslovakia, the Slovak conservation union enjoyed the rare status of apolitical independence.

It was in the framework of this volunteer nature organization that a young geographer from the Slovak Academy of Sciences named Mikuláš Huba, formed a new division of *ochranári* with his friends in Bratislava that did not particularly care about mushroom-picking or bird-watching. Rather the object of devotion of Huba's group was the humble *drevenice*. Drevenice were wooden cabins, scattered throughout the countryside, often in isolated places. These cabins bore no images or icons of history or personalities, but were the dwellings of nameless common people of no real consequence to communist campaigns to reshape the cultural environment into what Ruggs (1985) calls the *socialist landscape*. So unlike the old Jewish quarter of Bratislava, much of which was destroyed by regime-led urban development projects to build housing and bridges in the 1960s and 1970s, *drevenice*, as rural relics, had been simply forgotten. They had been left to decay on the sides of mountains, in lonely river valleys and on the edges of crowded socialist cities.

Huba's group of *ochranári*, which was assigned the number 6 by the Union's central office, included Peter Kresánek, an architect, Huba's brother Marko, an art teacher, and several friends and colleagues who vacationed in the summer in the Mala Fatra Mountains. It was here along the isolated slopes of Podšip where, over the course of a few years, the volunteer group fixed up a cluster of *drevenice*. As their work progressed, they organized brigades to hunt for similar other old buildings that had been neglected on the edge of villages or abandoned woodlands.

For Huba and his friends, folk architecture was a form of nature conservation – as important as other more conventional spheres of ecology. The members of Number 6 viewed these huts as the work of “anonymous architects of our national culture, the peasants and shepherds, woodcutters, and miners” who had lived a life of harmony with the natural world (*Ochranca Prírody*, 1987, 21). While such work appeared inexplicably altruistic from the perspective of the offices of state monument protection, local party bureaucrats let it continue. After all, the *ochranári*'s volunteer efforts actually fit well into the rhetoric of productivity commonly heard in workers' slogans.

And so, alongside the communist-period's garden culture, and a burgeoning trekking and tramping movement, this new form of conservationism grew in quiet opposition to the regime's philosophy of planned, progressive development and its mission to modernize rural landscapes (Bren, 2002; Dowling, 2002). In fact Number Six brigades mingled directly with the rural poor and celebrated tradi-

tional village life. This same sphere of so-called anachronistic society had been examined nearly a decade earlier by the Slovak documentary film maker Dušan Hanak. In Hanak's 1972 film, *Pictures of the Old World (Obrazy starého sveta)*, the rogue director recorded the stark but rich narratives of elderly rural Slovaks who despite living in abject poverty exhibited a deep sense of independence and endurance in the face of state socialism's demand for conformity and progress. Hanak vividly documented the elements of traditional village life, such as tools, songs, art, and architecture, which the regime criticized for their "aesthetics of ugliness." In fact, Hanak's work was banned by the Communist Party. The film was not shown publicly in Slovakia until after the Velvet Revolution. Hanak's villagers were strikingly similar to the elderly residents who lived near the *ochranári's* conservation projects which, like the people themselves, seemed to have been at best forgotten and at worst purposefully ignored by normalization.

In my book *Nature Protests*, I describe in detail how the *ochranári* emerged as an independent volunteer movement with the freedom to choose their own subjects of concern, and to develop an activism that combined the subjects of both culture and nature protection within a singular endeavor (Snajdr, 2008). Throughout the 1980s, Number 6 members, now numbering in the dozens, restored some 400 buildings across Slovakia's landscape. However, in addition to carrying out the work of preservation, Number Six volunteers would gather after the day's tasks to discuss a range of ecological and social problems and to debate issues that went far beyond folk architecture, issues like pollution, healthcare, and inevitably, political philosophy. If the preservation of *drevenice* was a unique conflation of culture and nature in the form of recreation, the *ochranári* built on this conflation to directly confront the regime's repression of culture.

As their group began to attract a growing number of dissident types, the *ochranári* in Number 6 decided to challenge official discourse on the environment. They were initially inspired by the experience of Poland's Ecology Club – which, even after martial law was declared in 1980, remained as a viable (and critical) civic association within the framework of Polish socialism (Bochniarz, n. d. – personal communication). Developments in Hungary also encouraged Slovak greens to challenge official discourse regarding the poor state of the environment. In the early 1980s, a public petition began to circulate against the planned Gabčíkovo-Nagymarosdam project (Berg, 1999). But rather than single out any particular environmental issue, the *ochranári* decided to assess the total condition of the local environment around the city of Bratislava. In order to augment their own expertise and experiences, they asked scholars and scientists at universities, hospitals and technical institutes to help them out with information. In October of 1987, the *ochranári* published their research. They disguised it in the form of an appendix to the group's meeting minutes.³ The title of the report, *Bratislava/nahlas*, was a not so veiled allusion to Gorbachev's recent Soviet reforms:

nahlas, the Slovak adverb ‘loudly’, invoked the Soviet leader’s concept of *glasnost* (openness or “voicing” in Russian) policy of increasing openness or *glasnost* (voicing). In the spirit of this new political development in Moscow, the report’s authors boldly identified themselves on the inside cover, and listed the names of professionals that they had consulted.⁴

The truly unique aspect of *Bratislava/nahlas* lay in its vividness and comprehensiveness as a critical representation of daily life in Slovakia’s capital city. The report combined highly technical concepts with easy to read ethnographic detail. It explicitly identified Bratislava neighborhoods, industries, and parks. And while each of its sixteen chapters focused on a specific type of pollution or health issue, together the work presented a disturbing portrait of a city and its people suffering from an environmental catastrophe. For example, the report opened with alarming descriptions of the city’s air quality, accounts of workers being hospitalized for brain damage due to inhalation of hydrogen mono-sulfide – a major pollutant of the city’s large chemical industry – and terrible levels of particle pollution due to auto traffic exhaust. The city’s water quality was dangerously compromised from the dumping of unprocessed petroleum waste into the Danube River, the lack of comprehensive treatment of household sewage, and the seepage of by-products from Slovnaft and other petroleum and chemical factories into Bratislava’s ground water.

Bratislava/nahlas also described how poorly diluted, low-level nuclear waste from hospitals found its way into the public sewage system after undergoing an ineffective dilution process. The region’s soil was contaminated by chemical ash and dust and suffered serious erosion resulting from mechanical plowing. In addition to these maladies, noise pollution was everywhere and living conditions in cramped and incredibly dense apartment blocks were unhealthy and lacked important services. Healthcare was of low quality, and hospitals lacked sufficient beds and medicines for patients. Moreover, Bratislava had the highest number of tumor-related deaths in Slovakia and alarming rates of cardio-vascular disease and infant mortality. According to the report, roughly a third of all children in the city had had cases of infectious pneumonia in 1986. Finally, over 70,000 residents in Mlynská Dolina were also threatened by a planned nuclear power plant slated for construction in this quiet Bratislava suburb.

The authors of *Bratislava/nahlas* never explicitly implicated the regime as responsible for these maladies. Instead, they electrified the public by simply describing reality. *Bratislava/nahlas* exposed the socialist world to be not an orderly and purposeful society with the promise of equal opportunity, but an environment that was not only disorderly, but downright dangerous to human life.

The regime, of course, was caught off guard and unable to effectively or substantively counter any of the arguments presented in the report. Instead, the state relied on the usual tactics of totalitarianism. First, the secret police tried to confis-

cate the text. But the *ochranári* had made over 3000 copies and after reading the report, people simply passed the document on to friends. The police next attempted to interrogate the authors of *Bratislava/nahlas*, but individual names could not be matched directly to particular chapters. Finally, the authorities attempted to publicly discredit the report's contents.

In *Pravda*, in a piece entitled "*Nic nového pod slnkom*" (Nothing new under the sun), the *ochranári* were accused of manipulating data and misrepresenting information so that the group could subvert the state (Piškorova, 1988). But the article did not directly respond to any of the specific claims in the report. The *ochranári* responded to the allegations by requesting to meet the article's author. They soon discovered that the piece had been written – not surprisingly – under a pseudonym. Pani Piškorova, the purported author, turned out to be a seventy-two year old woman caring for her eighty-year-old invalid husband. Upon meeting members of Number 6, Piškorova not only told them that she did not write the article, but also that she admired their work, and joined the group that day. The Party finally resorted to simply accusing the *ochranári* of being "enemies of socialism".

But by this time, no one was listening to the regime. They were instead flocking to the conservation Union's meetings and asking doctors about their own well-being. From its humble beginnings in 1977 with 20 members, Number 6 membership exceeded 600 by 1988. Its popularity spilled over to other divisions of the Union of Nature and Landscape Protectors whose ranks more than doubled to 30,000 in less than three years. If the preservation of folk architecture brought culture into the realm of nature, *Bratislava/nahlas* brought the environment and ecology to the urban arena of socialist culture. The Slovak environmental movement debuted through ethnography of a city – an ethnography that proclaimed the experience and suffering of everyday urban life. This move, involving the demystification of public discourse, elevated the *ochranári* to an elite civic status.

The rest of the story is perhaps better known. On November 18, 1989, Jan Budaj, an *ochranar* and author of *Bratislava/nahlas* became one of the main speakers leading mass demonstrations during the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia. The *ochranári*'s modest Bratislava office, where they had planned their excursions into nature in a pursuit to save culture, became the central headquarters of Public Against Violence, the civic union that finally wrested power from the communists.

While Hungary's environmental movement had its origins in the fate of the Danube River, Slovak greens emerged – quite gradually and rather inconspicuously – from the conservation of rural culture. They honed their activism within the framework of the preservation of what were considered by the regime as meaningless, harmless anachronistic folk dwellings. In Slovakia the idea of preservation found traction with the weekend amateur, the Catholic, the writer, and the ethnographer. It is important to note that the notion of big dams was not a topic

addressed substantively by the *ochranári*. In fact, in the entire text of *Bratislava/nahlas* – and in most other writing by Number six throughout the 1980s, including their periodical *Ochrana Prírody* – there is almost no reference to Gabčíkovo. It was as if this topic was strictly taboo – certainly too dangerous an issue to raise in the context of Slovak society. This fact suggests the unique way in which activism was able to emerge by approaching a comprehensive picture of environmental degradation without including prominent, but politically sensitive projects from the perspective of the regime.

It was only after the Velvet Revolution that Slovak environmentalists attempted to speak out about the Gabčíkovo side of the dam project – much to the detriment of their cause. When they joined international activists from Hungary, Austria and other European countries in the early '90s to protest the project, the result was a public relations disaster and the end of any political capital that Slovak activists had gained from the Velvet Revolution (Snajdr, 2008). Not only did the *ochranári* fail to play a major role in shaping the ecological agenda of the post-socialist state, but they lost a significant amount of public support after their open criticism of the controversial dam project. It was as if the movement, defined so firmly around the notion of describing local reality, had slammed against a wall created by the symbolic politics of the future. In other words, the Gabčíkovo dam came to symbolize the national consciousness for Slovak society – whether actual or virtual – whether realized or hoped for. And as the issue of Slovak independence gained momentum after the collapse of communism, no comprehensive environmental narrative, along the lines of that described in *Bratislava/nahlas*, could compete with the assertion of post-socialist Slovak identity.

Post-Socialist Greens

Moving ahead to the mid-1990s, very different manifestations of Slovak environmentalism and activism emerge. It is a Saturday morning in September of 1995. A line of people patiently stand along the perimeter of a quiet Bratislava square to wait for *Eduscho*, an Austrian coffee chain, to open its doors for business. The company had advertised an offer of free coffees to promote its newest store across the Danube. Suddenly, a swarm of activists from *Za Matku Zem*, one of Slovakia's newest environmental group, bursts out of a nearby alley towards the French Embassy, a stately, renovated building directly across from the coffee shop. The two-story, bright yellow embassy building stood out among the many dilapidated structures of Bratislava's historic but decrepit *staré mesto* in the city's center. The *Za Matku Zem* activists, all of whom were no older than eighteen, first charged the embassy's main entrance, handcuffing their wrists to its wrought iron latches. Other activists then locked themselves in the same way to a smaller side

door. The rest of the group linked their arms through metal tubes, forming a human chain around the entire building. The people in line for free coffee twisted their bodies and craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the action across the square. Though obviously interested in the developing drama, no one was willing to abandon their place in the line. A few shoppers, however, managed to chuckle at the clearly frustrated embassy staffers, who by this time had arrived for work.

The members of *Za Matku Zem* spent most of the day chained to the French embassy. It was the same day that France had resumed a new round of underwater nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific Ocean. The blockade attracted dozens of reporters and cameras, and not surprisingly, a squadron of Slovak police.

The action ended 8 hours later when Juraj Rizman, *Za Matku Zem*'s spokesperson, approached the press, flanked on either side by police and embassy employees. "We have delivered a petition to the French Charge de Affairs. He has assured us that our views on nuclear testing will be heard by the French government" Rizman announced to a circle of cameras and microphones. Then the demonstrators unlocked their human chain and carried away their equipment. The square quickly returned to the quiet landscape it had been at the beginning of the day. The other "human chain" which had lined up for a free handout at *Eduscho*, had vanished long before the protest had finished. The coffee special had ended, as advertised, at noon.

Za Matku Zem's blockade of the French Embassy marked the very first direct action protest carried out by a homegrown Slovak environmental group. In this demonstration activists were, for the first time, not targeting their own government, but rather were trying to show the public that Slovakia could and would make environmental demands of other countries as well. At the same time, the blockade also signals yet another shift in an emerging post-communist environmental discourse. *Za Matku Zem* measured the success of the action not by its impact on the French government, but by how many papers and television news channels covered the story the following day. The specific demands of the demonstrators were secondary to local media representations of the event itself, a prevailing orientation within Western environmental activism which De Luca (1999) calls *image politics*. DeLuca argues that the success of demonstrations in the U.S. is really evaluated by media portrayals, what he terms the *image event*, rather than any actual change of policy or practice. Before their human chain *Za Matku Zem* activists had called a couple of "friendly" journalists the day before from papers such as *Sme*, which generally targeted a younger readership.

Za Matku Zem's demonstration highlights a fundamental difference between Slovakia's green movement during and after socialism. While bold in its effort to attract attention and clearly well-coordinated in its aim to interrupt the functioning of 'everyday life' – at least for the staff and employees of the French embassy – the action had to compete with the realities of the post-socialist transition. These

included an open and diverse political landscape, a population heavily concerned with economic problems, and a country separating itself from the complex relationship between Czechs and Slovaks in a common state. By contrast, the *ochranári* enjoyed the spotlight of dissent in a political environment that rarely witnessed a challenge to the legitimacy of the Party and its authority over society. At the same time, both movements addressed common issues in an uncommon and provocative fashion.

Comparing the Cases

Four important trends appear to be shaping post-ecological activism in both Slovakia and Hungary. First, the diversification of the movements into smaller, interest-framed, locally-oriented groups and associations marks the shift away from a broad-based support network among the population and toward a single issue activism. This is particularly the case for Hungary's movement, but also applies to Slovakia's experience. As Berg points out, Hungarian greens suffered a collapse of popularity quickly followed by a diversification of ecology issues, programs and activism (Berg, 1999, 241). But Berg also notes how the environment, as an issue, makes it onto the institutional agenda of the Hungarian state. And Krista Harper observes that post-socialist Hungarian politicians "enthusiastically took up the mantle (if not the actual political commitments) of environmentalism as part of their new identity" (Harper, 2005, 228). By contrast, the broad based political support has never been a sustainable resource in Slovakia. Issues such as nuclear energy independence and the movement to pursue an autonomous state beyond the framework of the Czechoslovak model dominated Slovakia's transition from socialism, and thus substantially shaped the national political agenda.

Second, the issue of national identity plays a prominent and unique role for each movement. Harper again shows how in Hungary, greens have reconditioned the dialogue about environmental activism to focus on the threat of unregulated multi-national corporations in an ethnicized landscape – a narrative which resonates among a relatively homogeneous Maïar population. Hungary's fight against socialist dams on the Danube shifted, with little upheaval for the movement, to a battle against "wild capitalism." In the case of Slovakia, young greens have challenged the state and its role in asserting national independence and criticized it for not addressing environmental issues that are international in scope or that involve collaboration among independent states to resolve – such as nuclear energy and water systems. Activists in Hungary, on the other hand, appear to promote a national narrative of preservation, protection and pride in formulating messages of environmental protest. The recent economic and political crisis in Hungary over

financial instability and underemployment has ignited an East versus West dialogue within the society about “eco-colonialism” and the environmental exploitation of foreign investment (Harper, 2006).

Third, and not insignificantly, both movements have emerged within the same space as a powerful, and growing, international environmentalist community, which has sought to set and in some cases control agendas within local movements. In this sense, greens have struggled with another form of eco-colonialism – namely the power of international environmental groups, who along with multinational corporations, seek to control activist agendas and position the fault lines of ecological debate in the new Europe. Prior to *Za Matku Zem*’s blockade, international NGOs such as Greenpeace, had dominated activism in the newly independent country. Greenpeace pushed the agenda of protest towards anti-nuclear discourse and focusing the energy of young Slovak activists, who were attracted to the thrill of direct action tactics, to launch a critique of their own government’s post-communist energy policies. As Slovakia began to break free from this hold, groups like *Za Matku Zem* experimented with a range of protest narratives representing the diversity of Slovakia’s post-regime issues (Snajdr, 1999). In one campaign, the notion of consumerism was linked with animal rights. In another, the Mečiar government was compared with the practices of Slovak fascism. But even *Za Matku Zem* members have appropriated the appearance if not the power of the Western/global activist.

Finally, regardless of whether there has been official support of or focus on environmental problems on the part of the state, and whether the movement couches ecology within an explicitly nationalist frame, environmentalism in each country shares a process of what Harper (2006) has termed “micro-cohorts” whereby each new generation of activism is defined by a specific and unique orientation towards an ecological issue that is bound within the larger political, social and economic context. This process, as exemplified by the case of *Za Matku Zem*, and similar to those experienced by Hungary’s post-socialist movements, suggests a shift in what Agrawal (2005) has termed *environmentality*. If totalitarian *environmentality* unwittingly imbued ecology with an accessible, and in some cases covert, discursive unity, it formed an arena in which seemingly harmless behaviors, like interest in landscapes or walking in the woods, took on a poignantly critical and amplified character. Post-socialism, by contrast, highlights how easily and how quickly ideas about the environment can be inverted and reinterpreted – a condition which I suggest is ultimately post-ecological. Where *ecology* is a modern political formulation (Worster, 1977) that posits integrated and interdependent relationships between people and their environment, *post ecology* is a period in which power structures, institutions and ideological perspectives undergo rapid and intensive political, economic and cultural transitions. As Slovakia and Hungary join Western Europe in the twenty-first century, it will be interesting to see

where, how and in what forms of environmentality emerge and to understand the linkages between environmental activism, political power and cultural transformation.⁵

Notes

- ¹ Some of the most famous dissidents appeared under Czechoslovakia's highly repressive regime, including Vaclav Havel, the post-socialist's state's first freely elected president. Havel signed *Charter 77*, a petition protesting what the signers characterized as the regime's poor human rights record and which originally included the signatures of over 200 Czech citizens, but increased to over 1000 individuals by 1988. Interestingly, only a few Slovaks signed the document, including the writer Dominik Tatarka and the former Communist Party member, Miroslav Kusy (Day, 1999, 225).
- ² A dissident was a person who rejected the system but who still held some belief in their ability to change it in some way. Havel (1987). See also Gilligan (2003) on dissidence in the Soviet Union and Joppke (1995) on the East German dissident movement.
- ³ The *ochranári* produced minutes for all of their meetings. However, these minutes were circulated only among members of the group and were not really intended for public use.
- ⁴ The sixteen chapters of the report were divided into three parts. Parts One and Two covered conditions in the natural environment, including air, water, land, radio activity, noise pollution, and the urban environment, the condition of industry and transportation and buildings. The third part described the situation facing the social environment including social and cultural infrastructure, services, health and social groups.
- ⁵ This is where my current research is focused – away from the brigade – where the message of ecology was as much about community as it was about freedom – toward the blog – where the movement is de-centered, certainly disembodied, but freer than ever before.

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