July 2001

Chernobyl Stories and Anthropological Shock in Hungary

Krista Harper
University of Massachusetts - Amherst, kharper@anthro.umass.edu

CHERNOBYL STORIES AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL SHOCK IN HUNGARY

KRISTA M. HARPER
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The Budapest Chernobyl Day commemoration generated a creative outpouring of stories about parental responsibilities, scientific knowledge, environmental risks, and public participation. I examine the stories and performances elicited by the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1996. In these "Chernobyl stories" activists criticized scientific and state paternalism while engaging in alternative practices of citizenship. The decade between the catastrophic explosion and its commemoration coincides with the development of the Hungarian environmental movement and the transformation from state socialism. Chernobyl Day 1996 consequently became an opportunity for activists to reflect upon how the meaning of citizenship and public participation had changed in those years as well. First, the Chernobyl explosion drew into question the authority of scientific expertise and Cold War notions of technological progress, provoking the "politicization of knowing" for many activists. Second, personal memories of the 1986 disaster reflect how Chernobyl presented everyday life dilemmas that caused many parents and professionals to see themselves as citizens and environmentalists, a process I term the "politicization of caring." I analyze the political implications of framing the environment as lifeworld, drawing from sociologist Ulrich Beck's concept of "anthropological shock." [environmentalism, civil society, science/technology, postsocialism, Hungary]

In April 1996 I joined Hungarian activists in commemorating in the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. I had been in the field for eight months, and I recognized many familiar faces among the environmentalist and other activists present. But the sight of one figure in the milling crowd on Vörösmarty Square gave me a jolt. Dressed all in black rags, a tall person—I could not tell if it was a man or a woman—pushed a black baby carriage. A shocking, scarred mask obscured the person's face. Instead of being shaded by a parasol, the carriage was overshadowed by a paper maché mushroom cloud. Inside the carriage lay a mutilated baby doll. The figure stood silently throughout the afternoon, wheeling the pram in a small circle near the exit of the subway.

I hurried across the square to rehearse for Chernobyl Day street theatre performances with my friends from the ELTE Klub, a university environmental group. None of my friends knew the true identity of the ''nuclear parent,'' and by the time we were through with two rounds of performances, the figure with the baby carriage had disappeared from the square as quietly as it had come.

The Budapest Chernobyl Day commemoration generated a creative outpouring of stories about parental responsibilities, scientific knowledge, environmental risks, and public participation. In the following pages I examine the stories and performances elicited by the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1996. The decade between the catastrophic explosion and its commemoration coincides with the development of the Hungarian environmental movement and the transformation from state socialism. Chernobyl Day 1996 consequently became an opportunity for activists to reflect upon how the meaning of citizenship and public participation had changed in those years as well.

Hungary borders the Ukraine, and is about 800 miles away from Chernobyl. The cloud of radiation from the explosion was swept northwest by wind currents and rained down most heavily in northern Europe. While the level of radioactive precipitation in Hungary did not compare with those heavily affected regions, radiation in the weeks following the explosion was significantly higher than usual. More significantly, the ''cultural fallout'' of the explosion, as played out in people's everyday lives, practices, and beliefs, had far-reaching effects (Stephens 1995).

The continuously unfolding nature of radioactive disaster requires analytic approaches to culture that highlight the transformation of meanings and practices over time. Anthropologist Sharon Stephens

studied the emergent cultural meanings Chernobyl among the Sami people of Norway (Stephens 1995). In Norway, nuclear fallout from the explosion rained down over regions populated by Sami herders, contaminating lichen upon which their reindeer feed. The Norwegian government banned the sale of reindeer meat for several years. Chernobyl not only affected the Sami's economic activities and residence patterns, it also changed their perception of the landscape, their eating habits, and many other cultural practices symbolically marking them as an ethnic group. Stephens' concept of ''cultural fallout'' resonates with Victor Turner's description of culture as a complex, somewhat accidental, palimpsest of meaning: '' . . . the culture of any society, at any moment is more like the debris, or 'fall-out,' of past ideological systems, than it is itself a system, a coherent whole'' (Turner 1974: 14).

Adriana Petryna, in her ethnographic work on Ukrainian social worlds after Chernobyl, discusses how the disaster permeates both personal lives and post-Soviet political culture (Petryna 1995). In Petryna's account of Ukrainian reactions to the disaster, the politics of life after Chernobyl have led to a cultural focus on injury and state compensation—a political culture where victimhood provides a persuasive logic for citizenship. Hungarians' experience of Chernobyl was characterized less by acute injury and more by dislocating experiences of uncertainty.

The 1986 Chernobyl explosion hurled plumes of radioactive fallout across national boundaries, from the Ukraine to northern England and beyond. The transnational scope of the catastrophe resonated with a growing environmental discourse on global interdependence (Sachs 1992). Anthropologist Eeva Bergland, in her ethnography of German environmentalists, observes that many activists traced their environmental politicization to the Chernobyl disaster (Berglund 1998). In the years since 1986 Chernobyl has become a key symbol of the global environmental movement, a cautionary tale about technological hubris, state secrecy, and environmental risk. In the following pages I trace the cultural ''half-life'' of Chernobyl in Hungary, showing how long-lasting impressions of the catastrophe have changed the meanings of personal and political life for environmental activists.

Telling Chernobyl Stories

While conducting fieldwork in Hungary in 1995 and 1996, I often asked activists to tell me the story of how they came to be environmentalists. So many of them recounted personal memories of the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe as a turning point that I began to refer to these narratives generically as ''Chernobyl stories'' in my fieldnotes. For many Hungarian activists born in the 1950s, the Chernobyl explosion was a moment when their previous beliefs about science, technology, and citizenship were transformed. Chernobyl Day 1996, the tenth anniversary commemoration of the disaster, fostered different types of Chernobyl stories, as young environmentalists planned street theatre performances dramatizing an event and its implications for the contemporary environment. Drawing from environmentalists' memories of Chernobyl and the performances of Chernobyl Day 1996, I explore how Hungarian activists present technological risks as spilling over the confines of scientific expertise into family and professional life, thus opening up issues of public participation.

Parents' Stories of Chernobyl 1986

Although Chernobyl has become an international symbol of environmental crisis and the limits of technological progress, it left a particularly strong impression on Hungarians who had young children at the time of the explosion. Olga Fodor, an elementary schoolteacher turned activist, described Chernobyl as a key event in her environmental awakening. She was three months pregnant at the time of the explosion. Although the official broadcasts claimed that the level of radiation was low, state health officials advised pregnant women not to venture outdoors or eat fresh fruits and vegetables for several weeks.

''I spent most of May and June inside my apartment,'' Olga recalled. She ate very carefully for the rest of her pregnancy, worrying constantly about the effects of the fallout. Faced with so many questions about the safety of her normal activities and eating habits, Olga did not know whether to trust the advice of the public health bureaucracy. When her son was born, he was healthy but he had strange marks on his skin. Olga asked her son's pediatrician whether the marks could have been caused by Chernobyl's fallout. The doctor said that they were probably just birthmarks, but it was possible that Chernobyl could have caused the discolorations. In years since the catastrophe, Olga has met many other mothers who believe Chernobyl may have affected their children's health and who share her

worries about the potential, hidden effects of the invisible radiation.

After her son's birth Olga spent over a year reading up on environmental issues while on GYES (*Gyermekgondozási Segély*), Hungary's long, state-subsidized maternity leave. ''When I was on GYES,'' she explained, ''I was free of my job responsibilities and had more time to become politically active.'' When Olga went back to her job as a teacher, she tried to integrate environmental issues into the curriculum.

Now that her son is in school, Olga spends much of her spare time organizing neighborhood actions and participating in national and international campaigns. She organized an Earth Day celebration in the seventeenth district, the modest but pleasant suburb on the eastern edge of Budapest where she lives and works. In a campaign against a nearby hazardous waste dump Olga has harnessed the support of local parents and pediatricians. Through her local activism she has earned the nickname, ''Green Olga,'' from her students and neighbors. Olga has worked on organizing the national Green Alternative political party. She has also ventured into international-level activities, participating in a vigil against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific and collecting signatures against the refurbishment and expansion of nuclear power facilities in East-Central Europe. When I asked Olga why she engaged in so many different types of activism, she replied, ''Protesting isn't just spontaneous, it's a habit (*szokás*)—you have to develop it.'' Her experience of the Chernobyl catastrophe prodded her to develop the ''habit'' of activism.

An environmentalist from northern Hungary, Gyuri Farkas, remembered the night he learned about the Chernobyl explosion on the evening news. Hearing the news report on television, Gyuri realized that he and his family had been working on their garden plot all weekend. While planting spring vegetables, they were exposed to fallout in the topsoil. Gyuri's young children had been outdoors as well, playing in the dirt. Celebrating the arrival of spring, his family had feasted on a salad of fresh, tender lettuce. Knowledge of Chernobyl transformed Gyuri's enjoyment of an ordinary spring day into horror, as he realized his whole family's vulnerability to imperceptible, radioactive fallout.

Gyuri told me about this experience while explaining how he came to a career in environmental activism. He had always enjoyed taking walks in nature, but Chernobyl prodded him to get informed about environmental issues. At his job in the city beautification division of the officially sponsored Patriotic People's Front, Gyuri's attention focused more and more on the environmental aspects of city and regional planning. In the late 1980s the Patriotic People's Front was a hotspot for institutional reform from within. It played an important role in the transformation from state socialism by encouraging the creation of community organizations that later became non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In 1989 Gyuri and others brought together many of Heves County's small environmental groups, founding the organization *Életfa* (''Tree of Life'').

These stories about Chernobyl present environmental concern as part of parental responsibilities and, to a lesser extent, career trajectories. Gyuri and Olga trace the origins of their environmental activism to the realization that the state's scientific bureaucracies were incapable of protecting their children from the effects of technological catastrophe. If the ministry of public health gives ambiguous advice, if the news programs' reassurances leave one with more questions than answers, what is a parent to do? Both Gyuri and Olga responded to their feelings of uncertainty by reading about environmental issues, and they became less trusting of the state bureaucracy's scientific experts. Learning about science, the environment, and technology became a part of their parental responsibilities and a task they integrated into their professional lives.

A Scientist's Awakening to Environmental Risks

The next story foregrounds issues of professional responsibility after Chernobyl. In 1986 Klára Hoffman was working as a a biologist in the Radiobiology Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. That April the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in the Ukraine exploded, spewing out clouds of radiation that traveled west over Europe. As she and her colleagues conducted their usual experiments in the clean rooms of the Radiobiology Institute in the days after the disaster, they noticed a threefold rise in background radiation. Klára and her colleagues started testing ordinary things from outside the lab. Some vegetables purchased for dinner registered unusual isotopic particles. ''Some of my colleagues took samples of the dirt on top of cars parked on the street in downtown Budapest,'' Klára told me, ''There was every kind of isotope in the dust! They told me there was a periodic table, sitting right on top of those cars!''

That evening Klára returned home after work, her head heavy with the research findings. She and her family watched the news report on television. Her boss, the director of the radiobiology lab, appeared on the screen, reassuring the Hungarian public that the Chernobyl explosion posed no threat to them. He said that the level of radiation in Hungary was very low, and advised people to avoid eating lettuce and to wash their fruits and vegetables before eating them. ''Every official person lied about it—my boss too,'' Klára recalled ten years later, tapping out each word on her kitchen table for emphasis.

Klára was shocked and disgusted that her supervisor at the Radiobiology Institute had downplayed the dimensions of the Chernobyl catastrophe and its potential dangers to the Hungarian public. ''I did some measurements, and what he reported was not the same,'' she insisted. When she returned to the labs, she learned that all radiobiology research following the week of the disaster had been designated ''classified,'' and only the heads of the Institute had access to the information. She and her colleagues had no access to their own research results.

Klára's experience in the labs that spring radically changed her beliefs about knowledge, technology, and public participation. She described this shift as an unfolding process:

> Later, as I thought more and more about what had happened, about how many questions I had that went unanswered, I wondered whether atomic energy was as good as they said it was—whether it was any good at all. Whenever an accident like this occurs, there are hundreds more waiting to happen. I thought about it more and more, and finally it occurred to me that somehow we needed to start thinking differently. But at the time I wasn't an environmentalist, I just thought about these things on my own.

This shift in Klára's thinking had repercussions in political and professional terms. Klára sought out like-minded scientists and in 1988 they founded the Independent Scientific Workers' Union, a trade union that made freedom of information its primary goal. In 1990 she quit her job as a biologist and found work at the Regional Environmental Center (REC), an international foundation funding environmental NGOs across East-Central Europe. Leaving a few years later, Klára has worked as the main producer of environmental programming at Magyar Radio ever since. Activism has become a critical component of Klára's life: she is a founding member of Hungary's only ecofeminist group, Zöld Nök, (Green Women) and participates in a peace organization as well. In the years since Chernobyl Klára has completely altered her career, moving from biology to the NGO sector to journalism.

Commemorating Chernobyl Day 1996

Today the Hungarian environmental movement includes not only people who remember Chernobyl as a threat to their children but those threatened children as well. On the tenth anniversary of the catastrophe several youth-oriented environmental organizations designated Vörösmarty Square a ''nuclear-free zone'' for a day. Decked out in gas masks, high-school students from the environmental group Szalamandra greeted passersby at the entrances to the square. They handed out ''passports'' to the nuclear-free zone, which were printed with facts about the dangers of nuclear industries. ELTE Klub, a university-based environmental group, put on street theatre performances assisted by members of other environmental and human rights organizations. Chernobyl Day fell on a weekday, when hundreds of pedestrians passed through the square to the subway station. A mix of college students, tourists, and commuters stopped to watch speeches and performances by environmentalists, Irish musicians, and Hungary's only all-female punk rock band, Tereskova.

One of the street performances portrayed the catastrophe itself. Several students constructed a ''control panel'' out of cardboard and Christmas lights. In the performance actors in white lab coats busily milled around, moving in a pantomime of technical confidence. Suddenly the lights on the control panel started blinking erratically. The scientists clustered around the control pan, heatedly arguing about what to do next. One of the Irish musicians beat a drum furiously as the crisis mounted. Finally, the scientists threw up their hands, unable to prevent the disaster. The drumming ended with a loud crack. Actors dressed in black and covered with yellow radiation symbols crept into the control room silently. As they lay their black gloved hands on the scientists, the victims fell to the ground in slow motion. As the radiation moved out into the square, the masked players touched actors sitting in the audience, who quietly joined the nuclear scientists lying on the ground.

In this performance scientists are initially proud of their remarkable ability to transform the most basic unit of the natural world, the atom. But although they have tremendous technological expertise, scien-

tific experts do not completely control technologies that can destroy the environment. When the ''control panel'' fails, not only the scientists are touched by radiation, but also the ''innocent bystanders,'' the random assortment of downtown pedestrians who have momentarily paused on the square. The dramatic ''die-in'' at the end of this play demonstrates the ''democratic'' character of technological catastrophe, which slowly, silently affects everyone. This street theatre performance implied a call for citizens' participation: if decisions about risky technologies affect everyone, all citizens should have access to the decision-making process.

Understanding Chernobyl Stories

In many respects Hungarian environmentalists' Chernobyl stories resemble the ''litanies of complaint'' described by anthropologist Nancy Ries in her work on Russian conversation during perestroika. Litanies are a ritualized form of speech in which the speaker lists a series of worries, grievances, or problems (1997: 84). Ries' Russian informants, for instance, frequently began litanies with a complaint about daily hardships like shopping for food and clothing, then scoped outwards to the geopolitical uncertainties presented by perestroika.

Litanies perform a variety of social functions. Ries maintains that for Russians, litanies create a social bond, ''the fantasized bond of connection to and belonging in some kind of moral community—a community of shared suffering'' (1997: 87). By referring to common experiences of affliction, litanies identify the speaker with social categories, including profession, class, gender, age, and life experience. Most importantly, litanies posture the speaker as an innocent victim of powerful individuals or social forces. Ries states, '' . . . litanies are a genre that asserts the innocence of the relatively powerless (which is, paradoxically, a form of moral power . . .)'' (p. 89).

Although litanies call attention to injustices and hardships and reify social identities as sharers of suffering, they do not necessarily rally forces for social change. Possible solutions for problems, if they are offered at all, tend strongly toward the magical and rarely toward the practical. Commenting on Russians' performance of litanies, Ries states:

> By constantly affirming the profound powerlessness of the self and of the associated collectivity, litanies reinforce a sense of hopelessness and futility and undermine attempts to imagine or invent even small-scale solutions to local problems (1997: 115).

Far from spurring on activism, Ries maintains that the recitation of litanies unintentionally promote and reinforce political cynicism and despair. Thus, the moral power claimed through suffering remains inert.

The Chernobyl stories told by Hungarian environmentalists resemble litanies in their invocation of a community of exposure and potential suffering. Gyuri's and Olga's stories call upon the common life experiences of Hungarians born in the 1950s who were parents at the time of the disaster. Olga, in particular, has connected with many other mothers in her parenting cohort, comparing the state of their children's health and searching for telltale infirmities. In her current campaigns against hazardous waste dumping Olga continues to draw support from this community of shared anxiety.

Chernobyl stories also share with litanies their identification with innocent victims and their recognition of knowledge/ignorance as a power relationship. Like litanies, Chernobyl stories present innocent victims threatened by malevolent outside forces. In Gyuri's and Olga's stories children and the environment are connected by their innocence, their lack of awareness of invisible, radioactive perils. At Chernobyl Day 1996 the phantom environmentalist pushing the baby carriage mobilized the symbol of the child as endangered innocent. This theme of threatened innocence is also extended to adults in Chernobyl stories. In the Chernobyl Day street theatre performances, for example, ''innocent bystanders'' are harmed by radiation.

Chernobyl stories resemble litanies in that they identify knowledge and ignorance as a power relationship. For Gyuri, ignorance about the catastrophe meant not knowing enough to protect his children from exposure to contaminated foods and play areas. Klára's experience working in a scientific lab during the Chernobyl crisis alerted her to the politics of state secrecy, as she saw discrepancies between her research findings and the advice given by public authorities. Moreover, the power dynamics of knowledge and ignorance were not left behind after the change of political systems in 1989. Hungarians frequently discussed their fear that Western Europeans perceived Eastern Europeans as ''stupid Easterners'' (*buta keletiek*), made backwards from the experience of state socialism, a point I have discussed at length elsewhere (Harper 1999a, 1999b, n.d.). Another performance at Chernobyl Day portrayed a cynical nuclear industry selling outmoded nuclear technologies

to ''dumb Easterners''—East-Central European countries seeking foreign investment and development. In this case environmentalists seek to protect citizens from their own innocence—their lack of knowledge about technology, the practice of citizenship, and the ways of the market (see Harper 1999b).

While Hungarian activists' Chernobyl stories share similarities with litanies, they depart from the genre when the speaker locates a possible solution to technological and environmental problems in public participation. Chernobyl stories are invoked as a call to action or as a station on an individual's journey to the activist life. For example, the last time I interviewed Klára, she was preparing a week of radio programming for the Chernobyl anniversary. When I arrived, she herself was doing an interview—documenting the story of a Hungarian woman whose husband had worked on the clean-up crew at Chernobyl. A few years afterwards he died of cancer, and their child later died of leukemia. Klára patted the woman's hand to comfort her as she told her story into a tape recorder in the office at the radio station. The woman called for other Hungarians whose lives were affected by the catastrophe to join together, to share their stories, and to oppose technologies that could bring about future disasters. She and Klára were creating a public forum out of what might have been a private litany confided over the kitchen table (Ries 1997).

While litanies often stress speakers' powerlessness against bureaucrats and the state, and larger malevolent forces, activists' Chernobyl stories expose the limitations of the state and its bureaucracies. In the following sections I explore two key features of the Chernobyl stories told by Hungarian environmentalists. Under state socialism the legitimacy of the state was linked to the twin claims of its technical expertise and its ability to provide for citizens, and the disaster threw both claims into scrutiny. First, the Chernobyl explosion drew into question the authority of scientific expertise and state bureaucracies and led to what I term the ''politicization of knowing.'' Second, living with the uncertainties of environmental risks simultaneously exposed the limits of the state's ability to protect its citizens and of citizens to protect their homes and families. This dilemma provoked some Hungarians to seek solutions in civic activism, a process I call the ''politicization of caring. Environmentalists' Chernobyl stories of 1986 and 1996 highlight both the limits of scientific expertise and the need for citizens to participate in decision-making about environmental and technological risks.

Science, Cold War Ideologies, and the Politicization of Knowing

In 1986 discourses on Chernobyl were intertwined with Cold War discourses on science and the state. From the space race to the arms race, science and technology played a prominent symbolic role in the geo-political conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Official state discourses and institutional practices reflected the ideological importance of science and technology to notions of civilization and progress on both sides. For example, in the early 1960s the Soviet space program sent Valentina Tereskova, a model woman factory worker, into space. In doing so, they showed that the Soviet space program was so far ahead that they could even send an ordinary woman into orbit, demonstrating that Soviet science was as committed to egalitarian principles as it was technologically advanced. The Hungarian ''riot girl'' punk band that played on Chernobyl Day somewhat ironically took its name from Tereskova, the first woman in space. If Tereskova was the zenith of the Soviet technology, Chernobyl, some twenty-five years later, was its nadir.

Sociologist Zsuzsa Gille delineates three dominant frameworks for analyzing the relationship between state socialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation. The ''party-liner'' view, advocated by Party officials during the socialist era, viewed environmental problems as a problem of private greed and short-sightedness to be corrected by state ownership and central planning. In contrast, the ''pro-market'' view, held by many Western observers, traced environmental degradation of the environment in socialist societies to the failings of the labor theory of value to account for nature. A third view, one held by many environmentalists East and West, finds fault in both socialist and capitalist systems. This critique lays the blame for environmental destruction on modernity, with its faith in technology and its insistence upon constant economic and industrial expansion (Gille 1998).

In the Cold War atmosphere of 1986 journalistic reports tended to take either the pro-market or ''party-liner'' perspective. News commentators in Western Europe and the United States, for example, frequently referred to Chernobyl as the ''communist reactor,'' associating the disaster with the Soviet nu-

clear arsenal rather than playing up resemblances between Chernobyl and the ''capitalist reactor'' at Three-Mile Island. The Chernobyl catastrophe came to stand in for all the failings of the state socialist system. Hungarian journalistic accounts, by contrast, downplayed the effects of the explosion. Nevertheless, many citizens found themselves questioning the state's reassurances when confronted with everyday life after Chernobyl. The personal memories of Olga and Gyuri attest to the profound doubts about official scientific claims sparked by the Chernobyl disaster.

In 1996 the third view, which faults both socialist and capitalist systems for their disregard for the environment, gained widespread acceptance among environmentalists East and West. According to this perspective, the Chernobyl explosion was caused by technological hubris rather than by socialism per se. Consequently, the transformation from state socialism to a market economy has not decreased nuclear peril. Hungarian environmentalists expressed their fears along these lines in the second street performance, in which post-socialist countries are preyed upon by a crafty nuclear industry businessman from the West. In this Chernobyl Day performance activists remind the audience that the shift to a market economy does not guarantee a reduction in environmental and technological problems. In fact, the vulnerable economic position of post-socialist countries may translate into the environmental marginalization of Europe's East, unless checked by an active and informed citizenry.

Klára's story about her work at the radiobiology lab poses dilemmas of citizenship, professional responsibility, and scientific expertise during the Cold War. When I asked her how she became an environmentalist. Klára began:

> The first event that turned me towards environmentalism was the Chernobyl accident in 1986. At that time the institute was doing environmental measurements—on air, water, milk quality, et cetera. I wasn't very aware at the time, but I filed it away in my head, that human accountability cannot weather this type of catastrophe.

Klára's scientific measurements of fallout in the very substances of daily life—the air she breathed, the water she drank, and the food she ate—provoked a shift in her professional and political life. Even as a scientific expert with access to technology and information, she was unable to challenge public policies around Chernobyl because of institutional opacity and bureaucratic closure. Nevertheless, Klára insisted on the centrality of scientific research in making claims about environmental degradation, saying:

> Science has disappointed me many times—especially apropos of Chernobyl. All the same, I still believe that when environmentalists assemble their arguments, they should try to base them scientifically, in terms of measurements and calculation.

Klára's personal experience as a worker in the radiobiology laboratory laid bare the political processes within scientific bureaucracies and galvanized her commitment to grassroots environmental activism. In a sense, the moral of Klára's story is that she had to act as a citizen so that her interpretation as a scientist could be heard. Klara's transformation to activism does not result in a rejection of science, but rather, in the politicization of knowing.

In 1996 Hungarian activists passed out postcards with radioactive symbol stickers in commemoration of Chernobyl Day. The postcards read ''In memory of Chernobyl,'' and then give instructions on how to use the stickers: ''Stick these on ten-forint coins!'' By sticking the symbols onto coins, people could exchange a reminder of the accident's tenth anniversary when purchasing a newspaper or a coffee. In practice, people stuck the stickers on their clothes, backpacks, and subway turnstiles. Taking a closer look at the stickers, one can read the names of multiple nuclear catastrophes around the border: ''Chernobyl 1986, Three-Mile Island 1979, Hiroshima 1945.'' Chernobyl exists within a worldwide nuclear landscape, which activists can only traverse and transform through the politicization of knowing about risks. By invoking this series of tragedies, activists reinscribe Cold War discourses on technological progress and replace them with global environmental concerns about technological risks.

Paternalism, Parenthood, and the Politicization of Caring

Chernobyl stories expose transformations in the state's twin claims of technical expertise and its responsibility for providing for its citizens. Under state socialism the state sought to supplant many functions previously assigned to the family, for example, health care, housing, and childcare. In socialist East-Central Europe official state discourses tended to portray society as an extended family, casting the Party as a parental figure and citizens as children (Verdery 1996). Hungarians jokingly refer to the government as *''Állam Bácsi,''* which literally

translated is ''Uncle State.'' This personification reflects the different faces of the state under socialism. On the one hand, it represents the state as ''Big Brother,'' as during the 1950s Stalinist era. On the other hand, ''Állam Bácsi'' also conjures up the image of the state as an indulgent uncle during the *fridzsider szocializmus* (''Frigidaire socialism'') of the 1960s and 70s. Although the ''Állam Bácsi'' metaphor personifies the state as masculine, the welfare-providing aspects of the state also had maternal associations (Haney 1999).

By the mid-1980s the Hungarian state's authority was not only based on the threat of Soviet violence, but also on its ability to provide for citizens and its claim to scientific and technological expertise. Although Hungarians could not expect any sort of direct participation in governing, they had come to expect that state bureaucracies were managed by experts. Chernobyl marked a crisis when the state failed to protect its citizens. Olga's and Gyuri's stories highlight the dilemma of being a responsible parent when trust in the state's welfare bureaucracies and scientific expertise falters and the personal havens of the home and the body are shown to be vulnerable to outside threats. Recounting how the Chernobyl explosion permeated everyday practices like eating salad, Gyuri weaves a tale of the visceral incorporation of environmental concern. Other environmental and anti-nuclear movements worldwide have mobilized activists through their identity as mothers caring for children (Bellows 1996; Brú-Bistuer 1996; García-Gorena 1999; Glazer and Glazer 1998). Similarly, Gyuri, Olga, and other Hungarian activists related Chernobyl back to reproduction and the family, their role as parents resonating with notions of ecological stewardship and the precautionary principle. Their activism, rooted in lived experiences of uncertainty and the inability to protect their families from the threat of nuclear fallout, may be characterized as a politicization of caring.

As one may observe from the biographies of Klára, Gyuri, and Olga, many Hungarian environmentalists described the cultural fallout of the Chernobyl explosion in their daily lives as a catalyst in their personal environmental awakenings. At work, Klára found herself in the middle of a scientific controversy that exposed the politics of scientific bureaucracies under state socialism. At home, the everyday life problems of caring for children in the invisibly poisoned environment caused by the explosion provoked people like Olga and Gyuri to learn about issues and organize. Because science was so closely identified with technocratic state socialism, the Chernobyl crisis caused citizens to begin questioning the parental and technocratic authority of the state. Confronted with a disaster that a paternalistic state and its scientific bureaucracies could not contain, they became conscious of previously bracketed responsibilities. The scale of Chernobyl somehow caused them to see environmentalism as a parental or professional responsibility—as a public vocation, rather than a private litany of worries.

Conclusion: Environmental Movements, Technological Risks, and Anthropological Shock

Anthropologists and sociologists studying social movements have noted that one of the central practices of activism is the mobilization and translation of symbols and discourses (Kubik 1994; Melucci 1992; Gal 1997). For Hungarian environmentalists, Chernobyl expanded the horizon of environmentalism by showing the home, workplace, and streets as sites of vulnerability to environmental risks. Writing on public responses to the Chernobyl explosion in Western Europe, German sociologist Ulrich Beck characterizes the disaster as a moment of ''anthropological shock'' which definitively changed the way people think about technology, certainty, and the environment (1995). Faced with the threat of radioactive contamination that cannot be tasted, seen smelled, or otherwise sensed, Western Europeans experienced the disaster as a ''collapse of everyday life.'' The term ''anthropological shock'' refers to the incommensurability of scientific knowledge about environmental risks and the everyday experiences of people living with these risks. Elsewhere, Beck (1988) analyzes the effects of environmental and technological risks on the organization of society as a whole.

In the case of Chernobyl, citizens had to act upon the precautionary recommendations (often contradictory) put forth by scientists at a moment when the fallibility of technological and scientific expertise was dramatically exposed (Wynne 1989). Beck claims that the anthropological shock generated by the Chernobyl catastrophe has a profound impact on notions of citizenship and personal responsibility precisely because ''[o]ur notions of individuality, of self-determination, of one's own life, are founded upon personal access to reality'' (1995: 66).

In Hungarian activists' stories about Chernobyl

personal experiences as parents and professionals provide a critical meeting point for familial, medical, and environmental forms of knowledge. The problems of children's health and increasingly permeable environments suggest an environmental politics that blurs ''public'' and ''private'' boundaries. Personal memories of the 1986 disaster reflect how Chernobyl presented everyday life dilemmas at home and at work. Parents, for example, deliberated over what foods they could safely feed to their children, given the possibility of exposure to radioactive fallout. For professionals, the explosion posed the problem of how to behave in a state bureaucracy in crisis. Faced with these dilemmas, parents and professionals began to see themselves as citizens and environmentalists. These activists drew new political awareness from the crisis in everyday practices of eating, working, and caring for children in the weeks following the Chernobyl explosion. Through the politicization of knowledge and the politicization of caring, they attempt to reconcile this lost ''personal access to reality'' with the reinvigoration of civic activism.

Unlike the older environmentalists who related the 1986 catastrophe to their awakening, many of the young activists planning the Chernobyl commemoration of 1996 could scarcely remember the event being commemorated. One might ask, ''Why memorialize the tenth anniversary of the explosion at all?'' Chernobyl Day did not focus on specific, local environmental struggles; rather, it was an event expressing environmentalism as a human right. Activists put forth ''the really rather obvious demand of non-poisoning,'' as Beck phrases it (1995: 65). Back in 1986, however, Hungarians did *not* hit the streets to make this really rather obvious demand. At a Chernobyl Day planning session one environmentalist pointed out that the 1996 commemoration in Budapest was a chance to redeem that lost moment. The young Hungarians who participated felt that it would be improper for the anniversary of the catastrophe to pass unmarked. Most of the activists participating in the day's events were in kindergarten or grammar school at the time of the explosion. They have come of age during the transition from state socialism. If Hungarians had limited freedoms of information and association under state socialism, participating in the Chernobyl Day events established that at least some citizens were interested in exercising these political freedoms in the 1990s. In their street theatre performances young Hungarian environmentalists bring the global ''Chernobyl story'' of the limits of expertise into conversation with their own concerns about the creation of new markets for nuclear technologies in the post-socialist periphery. Chernobyl Day 1996 portrays a public turning point in environmental thinking as well, a moment for environmentalists to simultaneously create and demonstrate their model of citizenship in one of the main squares of Budapest.

Observing the anniversary demonstrated that Hungary's activists belonged to an international imagined community of environmentalists in which Chernobyl has become a key symbol. The Budapest Chernobyl Day was part of a transnational environmental event spanning Europe, the ''No More Chernobyls'' campaign. Similar commemorations were being held simultaneously across the continent. By participating in Chernobyl Day, Hungarian activists included themselves in a demonstration of transnational citizenship and environmentalist solidarity. The participation of both Western and Eastern Europeans in Chernobyl Day 1996 demonstrated that the environmentalist call for greater public access to decision-making was among the most significant cultural effects of the explosion, ten years later.

Environmental discourses, symbols, and identities do not appear out of nowhere. They are the product of translations between daily practices and local and global political cultures, or as Arturo Escobar phrases it, ''the micro-level of everyday practices and their imbrication with larger processes of development, patriarchy, capital, and the State'' (1992: 420). In Chernobyl stories, Hungarian environmentalists present the environment as the vulnerable world of everyday life, expanding the definition of the environment to include the home and the workplace. The ominous, pram-pushing figure at the Chernobyl Day demonstration mobilized the symbol of the baby carriage, carrying parents' private worries of children's exposure to radiation out into the street. Through the politicization of knowing and the politicization of caring, Hungarian activists drive environmental risks out of the official province of scientific bureaucracies or the narrow confines of the home, and into the public sphere of citizens' actions and grassroots participation.

NOTES

Acknowledgments The author's field research in Hungary was supported by an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunity fellowship (1995) and a Fulbright IIE Graduate Research Fellowship (1996). She thanks the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst for providing the time and space to develop the ideas in this article. An earlier version was presented at the 1998 Anthropological Association annual meetings as part of a panel on ''Environmentalism as Master Narrative.'' The author thanks Don Brenneis, S. Ravi Rajan, and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback. Anna Tsing, Kristin Bright, and Lyn Jeffery also read and commented on early drafts. To protect research participants' privacy, all names used here are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES CITED

Beck, U. 1988. *Risk society: Toward a new modernity.* Beverly Hills CA: Sage.

_____. 1995. *Ecological enlightenment: Essays on the politics of the risk society.* Trans. by Mark Ritter. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press.

Bellows, A. 1996. Where kitchen and laboratory meet: The ''Tested Food for Silesia'' program. In *Feminist political ecology: Global issues and local experiences,* ed. D. Rocheleau, B. Thomas-Slayter, and E. Wangari. New York: Routledge.

Berglund, E. 1998. *Knowing nature, knowing science: An ethnography of environmental activism.* Cambridge, UK: White Horse.

Brú-Bistuer, J. 1996. Spanish women against industrial waste: A gender perspective on environmental grassroots movements. In *Feminist political ecology: Global issues and local experiences,* ed. D. Rocheleau, B. Thomas-Slayter, and E. Wangari. New York: Routledge.

Escobar, A. 1992. Culture, practice, and politics: Anthropology and the study of social movements. *Critique of Anthropology* 12(4): 395-432.

Gal, S. 1997. Feminism and civil society. In *Transitions, environments, translations: Feminisms in international politics,* ed. J.W. Scott, C. Kaplan, and D. Keates. New York: Routledge.

García-Gorena, V. 1999. *Mothers and the Mexican antinuclear movement.* Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.

Gille, Z. 1998. Two pairs of women's boots for a hectare of land: Nature and the construction of the environmental problem in state socialism. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 8(4): 1-22.

Glazer, M., and P.M. Glazer. 1998. *The environmental crusaders: Confronting disaster and mobilizing community.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Haney, L. 1999. ''But we are still mothers'': Gender, the state, and the construction of needs in postsocialist Hungary. In *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world,* eds. M. Burawoy and K. Verdery. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Harper, K. 1999a. Consumers or citizens? Environmentalism and the public sphere in post-socialist Hungary. *Radical History Review* 74: 96-111.

_____. 1999b. From green dissidents to green skeptics: Environmental activists and post-socialist political ecology in Hungary. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz.

Kubik, J. 1994. *The power of symbols against the symbols of power: The rise of solidarity and the fall of state socialism in Poland.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Melucci, A. 1992. Liberation or meaning? Social movements, culture, and democracy. *Development and Change* 23(3): 43-77.

Petryna, A. 1995. Sarcophagus: Chernobyl in historical light. *Cultural Anthropology* 10(2): 196-220.

Ries, N. 1997. *Russian talk: Culture and conversation during Perestroika.* Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

Sachs, W. 1992. *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power.* London: Zed.

Stephens, S. 1995. The ''cultural fallout'' of Chernobyl radiation in Norwegian Sami regions: Implications for children. In *Children and the politics of culture,* ed. S. Stephens. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Turner, V. 1974. *Drama, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society.* Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

Wynne, B. 1988. Sheepfarming after Chernobyl: A case study in communicating scientific information. *Environment* 31(2): 11-15, 33-39.

Verdery, Katherine. 1996. *What was socialism, and what comes next?* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.