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Citizens or Consumers?: Environmentalism and the Public Sphere in Postsocialist Hungary

Krista Harper

INTRODUCTION

Much of the most vital activism of the post-1989 environmental movement in Hungary addresses the development of consumer culture and the expansion of transnational corporations in East-Central Europe. In actions against McDonald's conquest of the urban landscape and the ubiquitous presence of advertisements for transnational corporations, activists contrast cherished notions of decentralization and local control with the emergence of an imperialistic, global consumer culture. These issues came to the forefront of environmental debates while I was living in Hungary from 1995 to 1997, conducting ethnographic research on environmental groups. This paper will present several cases of Hungarian activism against well-known transnationals, examining how issues of the public sphere—public space, public access to information and debate, and public participation—are redefined as “environmental” struggles.

I begin with an account of the environmental movement's role in the democratic opposition movement of the 1980s and then launch into discussion of Hungarian environmental activism in the 1990s. In the next section, I introduce the major environmental groups involved in anticorporate activism and discuss Hungarian environmentalists' response to the expansion of McDonald's and Coca Cola's attempts at holiday “goodwill marketing” in Budapest, the capital city. The last section delves into the political implications of environmentalist, anti-corporate activism for the public sphere in Hungary, focusing on issues of local control of public space, marketing and public debate, and the political dilemmas of public participation in a consumer society.

OPPOSITION IN THE 1980s: ENVIRONMENTALISM AND DISSIDENCE IN HUNGARY

The Hungarian environmental movement took off during the mid-1980s and comprised a significant part of the opposition to the state socialist government. Many Hungarians describe the mass demonstrations of 1988 against the damming of the Danube River at Nagymaros as a turning point, when changing the system seemed to be an attainable goal after over thirty years of discouragement and indifference. Led by the Danube Circle, an underground environmental organization, the opposition to the damming of the Danube proved a symbolically rich struggle. The Danube movement, focused on a single, seemingly narrow issue, opened a critique of the state socialist system which called for greater access to information and participation in decision-making and marked the appearance of a green skepticism, which challenged the system's centrally planned economy on ecological, aesthetic, and cultural grounds. Danube activists stressed the need for public participation in decision-making, freedom of information, and greater institutional transparency.

Underground newspapers, discussion circles, and demonstrations against the dam system created a space for debate and criticism of the government. Looking back, many Danube movement participants whom I interviewed characterized their 1980s activism as their introduction to "civil society." The Danube demonstrations brought together activists who formed not only environmental groups, but also feminist and anarchist groups and opposition political parties. For example, activists Zsuzsa Beres and Gyöngyi Mangel told me that they had met other feminists at the Danube demonstrations and went on to form Green Women, an ecofeminist group, and NaNe, a hotline and support center for battered women. The movement to block the dam's construction placed such great pressure on the Hungarian government that it first postponed, and then canceled the project in 1990.

Opposition to state socialism in Hungary consisted of political dissident movements, on the one hand, and participation in "second-economy" activities, on the other. Activists in these movements shared a preference for local control and institutional decentralization, disdain for hierarchical, bureaucratic structures, and disregard for the prescriptive "vanguard" political discourses of the state. This orientation was reflected in the work of dissident intellectuals as they theorized the political dilemmas of opposition to state socialism.

Throughout the 1980s, Hungarians increasingly evaded official networks of economic distribution and political organization. The ability to support oneself through small-scale business endeavors was read as an economic rebellion against centralized, corporate state hegemony.

Peasants fattened pigs for private exchange and consumption, political dissidents opened small pubs and shops when they were kicked out of their official jobs for illegal publishing activities, and millions of Hungarians participated in the “second economy” in one way or another, evading the state monopoly on goods and services.¹ For many Hungarians, establishing a small, family business remains the very image of middle-class prosperity and upward mobility, a theme reiterated in the media in the television sitcom, *Familia, Kft*—“Family, Inc.”

The theme of evading state networks of distribution and political representation was most clearly outlined in the essay “Antipolitics” by Hungarian writer György Konrád.² In this essay, Konrád conceives of a civil society free of state intervention. Konrád took a model of a paternalistic totalitarian state seeking to extend its authority into all areas of everyday life, from work to household provisioning to everyday associational life to leisure. All of these activities under state socialism were to be organized by the state bureaucracy. For Konrád the one-party system and the hegemony of the state called for a politics outside the realm of state politics since there could be no meaningful dissent within a totalitarian state. Antipolitics is activism by default, an escape from the prescribed unity and utopian vanguard politics of state socialist regimes which had brutally squashed student and worker initiatives to democratize socialist institutions in 1956 and 1968.³

East-Central European dissident writers of the 1980s wrote of a public sphere and civil society in opposition to the State. Although the circulation of their texts was limited to the oppositionist intelligentsia and *szamizdat* (self-published, underground) press prior to 1989, their criticisms spoke to the concrete ethical dilemmas arising from daily life under state socialism. Encountering state bureaucracies which were unresponsive to citizen initiatives, limited access to information, and Soviet control from above, environmentalists shared much of the larger opposition’s aversion to centralized state authority and sought to create their own, independent public sphere as a movement community. Many activists who had participated in the Danube movement in the 1980s stressed the importance of forming groups that were independent of the state.

What Konrád did not foresee in his vision of a civil society—a public sphere unfettered by state harassment—was the emergence of a third party, the market, consisting of global, multinational corporations and supranational economic bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Union. As critics of development point out, the restructuring of global economies in the 1980s and 1990s necessitates a reevaluation of assumptions about the relationships

between state, market, and civil society in development theory.⁴ While Konrád and other oppositionists envisioned a state-free sphere of public debate unfettered by a state socialist political monoculture, they overlooked the need for a non-commercial sphere of public debate and action. Their omission is understandable, given that the second economy had been a key site of Hungarian opposition to state socialism.

However, oppositionists of the 1980s failed to theorize any differences between the small-scale farming, publishing, and service industries of the Hungarian second economy, and global agribusiness, media, and service industries such as McDonald's. Furthermore, they completely failed to account for the commercialization of public space that followed the demise of socialism. Although the opposition railed against the state's attempts to transform labor and consumption, they had relatively little to say of the power of business and advertising to transform desires and needs into commodities to be bought and sold. Antipolitics took the rejuvenation or enactment of radical participatory democracy as its ultimate goal. In the mid-1980s, however, few intellectuals believed that the sweeping changes in the party-state system were close at hand. As a result, the problems of democratic practice in a market-oriented, parliamentary democracy were not examined in depth, leaving the task of theorizing to activists as they navigated the post-1989 political waters.

In their remapping of the concept of "environment," Hungarian environmentalists of the 1990s are framing a new political theory of public space and public participation that moves beyond the dissident antipolitics of the 1980s. Along with tremendous problems of economic and legislative restructuring, the transformations of 1989 also presented possibilities for experiments in democracy. Hungarians formed hundreds of civil organizations in 1990 and 1991, including many environmental groups.

During the first half of the 1990s, the environmental movement diversified tremendously, with groups on local, regional, and national levels working on such themes as traffic, air quality, advertising and consumer education, toxic waste management, and river ecosystems. Since the late 1980s, scores of community actions have demanded greater public participation in political decisions that affect local environments, and members of environmental groups have successfully run for local offices. Environmental groups from outside the capital city have gained greater prominence, bringing a distinctive perspective to the movement. The movement has developed communication networks such as the Green Spider electronic network and various groups have formed ties with international environmental organizations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Action for Social Equality, Environment, and Development (ASEED).

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ENVIRONMENTALIST CRITIQUE OF CONSUMER SOCIETY

Environmentalism is an international social movement which draws its compelling sense of urgency from the concept and realities of a global ecological crisis. Nevertheless, environmental activism takes place in specific locales, cobbling together meaning out of specific symbolic associations, enmeshed in specific histories of landscape, industrialization, and development, and positioned in debate with specific adversaries. Hungarian activists' critique of consumer society emerges from their daily experience of the transformation from state socialism to a market-based economy, from their recognition of growing class inequalities, and from a critical view of advertising and the creation of consumer desire.

The Budapest cityscape offers a spectacle of buying and selling, of American fast food restaurants jostling for position in downtown Budapest between hundreds of shoe stores and brightly colored billboards advertising Cherry Coke and Levi's. The shock of the new induces desire, but only the privileged few can afford this seduction. In 1995, Adidas' advertising catchphrase was "Adidas—earn them." In a country where a single pair of Adidas sneakers costs an average month's wages, this slogan takes on a special significance.

What kinds of groups are criticizing the development of a consumer culture? Most of the organizations initiating anticorporate campaigns are small, grassroots groups of thirty to fifty members. The most well-known organization focusing on consumption issues is HUMUSz, the Waste Action Group. HUMUSz is composed of activists from dozens of local and national organizations around Hungary. HUMUSz acts as an information clearinghouse on toxic waste, consumer waste, and advertising. The organization attempts to participate in political decision-making at every level: promoting recycling; environmental education assemblies at elementary schools; lobbying local governments and Parliament; direct actions in front of McDonald's; and litigation against multinational corporations. Students' environmental groups at the high school and university levels, including the Szalamandra Association, Budapest Technical University's Green Circle, and the ELTE Club at Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest, regularly participate in campaigns against multinationals. Greater numbers of schoolteachers are participating in the environmental movement, and numerous environmental education networks have been formed in the past five years. In response to the rampant commercialization of public schools, schoolteachers and parents are forming new alliances with environmental organizations such as HUMUSz and the Clean Air Action Group. In addition, specific actions organized by these groups have attracted the

support of environmental groups across the country and engaged activists in ongoing debates about the growth of consumption, packaging waste, and advertising and strategies to combat these developments.

By examining some of the actions organized in response to advertisements, multinational corporations, and marketing ploys, I will draw out how environmentalists create new environmental issues, build alliances around these new issues, and theorize social change and agency as they plot strategies. In the following section, I will discuss two cases of recent environmental activism: grassroots opposition to McDonald's and the response to Coca-Cola's attempts to co-opt public monuments and urban space.

PLAYING DAVID TO MCDONALD'S GOLIATH

Since 1989, McDonald's has rapidly expanded its presence in Hungary. For its first outlet in Hungary, the company renovated part of Budapest's Western Station, a railroad station designed at the turn of the century by Gustave Eiffel. Today, this restaurant is one of a half-dozen McDonald's outlets strategically placed at every major tram stop on the ring road circling downtown Budapest. McDonald's currently has 55 restaurants in Hungary, and plans to have 100 restaurants by the year 2000. Having saturated its market in the United States, McDonald's further growth is taking place in other parts of the globe. The rapid expansion of McDonald's in Hungary is part of the corporation's drive to open eight new restaurants daily between 1996 and 1998, so that every three hours a new McDonald's opens its doors somewhere in the world.

Hungarian activism against McDonald's was catalyzed by local misgivings about American-style fast food and by the ongoing proceedings of the "McLibel" case. The "McLibel" lawsuit in England, in which McDonald's took two Greenpeace UK activists to court for claiming that McDonald's food is unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable, drew international media attention. The McLibel defense campaign became an occasion for distributing information about the negative environmental and social effects of the fast-food franchise and for local environmentalists in countries all over the world to share their views on McDonald's continuous expansion. Environmentalists exchanged information and stories on websites, electronic bulletin boards, newsletters, magazines, and in countless conversations in pubs worldwide.

Hungarian environmentalists especially relished news of the case, and published McLibel updates regularly. Like other environmentalists worldwide, Hungarian activists were drawn to the "David and Goliath" drama of the case, and delighted in each shot slung at the fast-food giant. Hungarian activism against the expansion of McDonald's touches upon all of the key themes in the environmentalist critique of transna-

tionals: corporate disregard for local particularities and economic relationships, the appropriation of urban space by large international firms, and companies' questionable attempts to present themselves as "eco-friendly."

In Szentendre, a small tourist town north of Budapest on the Danube River, teenagers have played an active role in actions against the expansion of McDonald's. The environmentalist youth group Szalamandra Association organized a successful campaign against a proposed McDonald's. High school students staged teach-ins at elementary schools to discuss the effects of the fast-food industry on consumer waste, eating habits, and local businesses. A group of teenagers formed a picket line when McDonald's executives came to town to check out the proposed site. Szalamandra kids lobbied the local government, got the support of small business owners, and kept McDonald's out of their small town.

For HUMUSz activists, McDonald's represents the antithesis of local control. One article in the HUMUSz quarterly magazine tracked the environmental costs of the Big Mac's global journey—from cattle ranching, to the fossil fuels expended transporting foods over long distances, to packaging waste.⁵ Another article describes the transnational character of a dessert item: "McDonald's apple pies are made in Spain, packaged in Russia, and eaten up by our teenagers. Now that's the path to a unified Europe!"⁶

HUMUSz also organized a direct action prank against McDonald's. In a leaflet entitled "McRescue," HUMUSz bemoaned the fact that McDonald's restaurants didn't have the money to buy porcelain plates, and asked folks to send in a charitable donation: "Be generous—send in a little plate!" The HUMUSz flyers point out that McDonald's is expensive because, unlike food from small, local stalls and restaurants, McDonald's food is transported in trucks over long distances, stored in huge, energy-intensive freezers, and advertised heavily. Even the price of throw-away packaging is on the rise, notes the flyer in mock sympathy, and Hungarian landfills are overflowing at an unprecedented rate. "Somebody must McPay for all this!"

Under normal circumstances, HUMUSz notes, the customers must pay for these production expenses, but in this case, the concerned citizen must rise up to help McDonald's acquire a set of reusable dishes so that they can end this outmoded, self-destructive method of production. The flyer closes with this rally cry: "They have already forced out our small restaurants—but enough about that. People! If it has developed thus, let's at least help fast-food restaurants modernize and become green!"

Ironic appropriation of Stalinist-era rhetoric aside, the McRescue mission succeeded as an activist performance on multiple counts. Activ-

ists got out on the sidewalk and made spectacles of themselves, passing out flyers and wearing clothes decorated with crumpled hamburger wrappers and paper cups. Direct actions and street theater are still relatively rare practices in Hungary, especially in small towns; so passersby took notice and were curious to find out what all the fuss was about. HUMUSz received 792 plates in the mail, which were delivered en masse to the Hungarian McDonald's headquarters. In response, McDonald's sent HUMUSz a reply, thanking the organization for their concern, but stating that they could not accept the plates because only disposable packaging could ensure the smooth, hygienic functioning of their restaurants. In an article summing up the action, HUMUSz activists wrote:

We are not very discouraged; we suspected that McDonald's would not want to abandon its use of throw-away packaging. In Hungary there are no economic or legal regulations that would penalize them, so what would they gain from changing.⁷

This comment reflects many environmentalists' doubts as to the multinational fast-food franchise's openness to real change, despite McDonald's repeated claims to "eco-friendliness."

Of course, this environmentalist critique of the culture of fast-food franchises is not taken up by everyone, and some environmentalist groups like the National Bicyclists Association have accepted support from McDonald's for their annual Bike-to-Work Day. McDonald's proclaims, "Let's take care of our environment!" on its throw-away paper placemats, and contributes to the Earth Day celebrations organized by the Ministry of the Environment. Recycling bins are prominently displayed in thirty-eight of the franchise outlets although HUMUSz activists knew of no recycling facility in Hungary that accepts greasy burger wrappers or waxed paper cups for processing. Responding to numerous queries and direct actions, a McDonald's representative came to the Hungarian environmental movement's national convention and tried to assure activists that most of the waste from the recycling bins is actually processed. However, the representative did not specify what type of "processing" was actually taking place, and many environmentalists remained skeptical of the company's attempts to represent itself as "environmentally friendly."

COCA-COLONIZATION?

Passing by a lamppost on a boulevard in Budapest, I spot a small sticker posted furtively by some eco-anarchist prankster. A visual pun on the famous "I ♥ New York" bumper stickers, these stickers are emblazoned

with the following symbol: "I (hand flipping the bird) Coca-Cola." Coca-Cola and McDonald's have become new Hungarian folk villains, not only among environmentalists, but in popular currency as well. These two logos symbolize the incursion of multinational corporations into public space, the media, and the public imagination, a theme that was articulated again and again by environmentalists in fall 1996, when the Coca-Cola corporation offered to give the city of Budapest a present: to "gift-wrap" the city's Chain Bridge for the holiday season.

In September 1996, Coca-Cola approached the capital city's urban planning commission with their "goodwill marketing" proposal. Initially, five members of the six-member commission supported the proposal, but one commissioner, Mihály Ráday, opposed the plan and published articles stating his position in the press. Ráday, who is also the advisor of the Budapest Cityscape Protection Council and a member of the Clean Air Action Group, brought the issue to the attention of the capital city's environmental groups.

Environmentalists quickly responded with discussions at meetings and on the bulletin boards of the Green Spider, an electronic network for environmental organizations. Many activists drafted letters to city and district officials and the environmental and mainstream presses. In media accounts and in activist discourses, several key themes emerged: historical and local meanings of the landscape, the commercialization of national monuments, outrage at the false charity of "goodwill marketing," and debates about the sudden proliferation of advertising in the public landscape and media.

The Chain Bridge is the most famous landmark in Budapest, pictured on many postcards and on the background screen of the nightly television news. Bombed during World War II and restored to its former glory after the war, the Chain Bridge carries powerful associations as a symbol of modern Hungarian national identity. One environmentalist, Béla Szabó of the Danube Circle and the Green Alternative political party, described the Chain Bridge as a symbol of Hungary's modernization and democratization:

The Chain Bridge is a symbolic Bridge. It's not simply a beautiful, old bridge—the Chain Bridge has a symbolic significance. It was Hungary's first bridge, and it contributed to the following 150 years of Hungary's development. It was the first institution where the nobility also had to pay for crossing—before then, the nobility didn't have to pay taxes . . . Also, there was the battle of the Chain Bridge in 1988, when people held a demonstration against the communists on March 15 [the anniversary of the national revolution of 1848] and the police arrested some of the protesters.

Linking the Chain Bridge to a national history of struggles, including the transition from state socialism in 1989, Szabó criticizes the Coca Cola corporation for disregarding history and national identity. "For a corporation to exploit such a symbolic object does not fit into common sensibilities in Hungary," Szabó told me. "Maybe the Hungarian mentality won't accept this; I won't either."

Environmentalists' opposition to the Coca Cola Chain Bridge was buttressed by media accounts which emphasized the affront to national pride posed by the commercialization of public landmarks. An article appearing in *HVG*, the most popular weekly news magazine, proclaimed, "Over the past few days, the multinational soft-drink producer's bid to decorate the Chain Bridge has triggered a timely cultural scandal." The photo accompanying the article shows the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde in Paris being encased in a giant condom, and the caption reads, "What more must a national monument bear?" The article closes with an appeal to the inherent dignity of a national monument that has weathered revolutions, world wars, and now the onslaught of global marketing:

Of course, the Chain Bridge can survive the fate of being dolled-up for a month, if it is necessary—it has already survived far more . . . There is room for the Christmas garlands, just as there was room at the very same spot for the red star, at another time.⁸

By alluding to the much-despised red star, which to many Hungarians symbolized subjection to Soviet imperialism, the author draws connections between state socialist propaganda, capitalist marketing techniques, and cultural imperialism.

Environmentalists also criticized the idea that decorating the Chain Bridge constituted a charitable "gift" to the Hungarian public. Barnabás Bödecs, a HUMUSz activist, interpreted the proposal as an act of aggressive self-interest rather than charity:

For the community of the capital city and Hungarians in general, The Chain Bridge is a national treasure, and Coca Cola wants to decorate it from head to toe in advertisements . . . How is it possible to decree that a grandiose advertisement constitutes a "gift"?!

Environmentalists were not alone in their skepticism toward the benevolence of a transnational corporation dedicated to expanding its Hungarian consumer base. Several environmentalists wrote letters to newspapers suggesting that if Coca-Cola really wanted to give a gift to the city of Budapest, it could donate money to the emergency services system

or to social services for children, which have suffered budget cuts, instead of transforming the entire Danube waterfront into a free seasonal advertisement for their product and posing this as a “gift” to the citizens of Budapest.

Some media accounts drew parallels between Coca Cola’s “goodwill marketing” and state socialist displays of holiday largesse of earlier years:

It would seem absurd, though not out of the question, to say that the “marketing geniuses” who developed the idea are translating a socialist peculiarity into a capitalist idiom. A lot of people can remember many instances during the Kádár regime when a high-ranking Party official would start a “goodwill” project, extending investment, favors, and other opportunities to enterprises which “volunteered” for the public good.⁹

The writer goes on to point out that Hungarian consumers ultimately foot the bill for Coca Cola’s “gift,” just as state socialist “goodwill” projects relied upon the obligatory participation of “volunteers.” Indeed, the elusive definitional difference between “marketing” and “propaganda” is a quandary for many Hungarians encountering mass-marketing for the first time and for environmentalists seeking to regulate advertising. Hungarian environmentalists target advertising because they believe it intentionally misleads audiences, promotes wasteful consumption, and transforms the landscape into a canvas for commercialization.

The entire Chain Bridge scandal took place at a moment when the regulation of advertising entered into Parliamentary discussion, after a long period of lobbying by environmental organizations. Béla Szabó explained the importance of the Chain Bridge case in light of larger legislative debates:

We shouldn’t allow the whole world to be packaged for business. Especially since they are negotiating the advertising law in Parliament right now. They want to regulate advertising activities if possible, and a large part of the Green movement is fighting very hard for it because it would be a good law. They [companies] shouldn’t be allowed to put billboards and giant posters everywhere.

For environmentalists, the Chain Bridge plan represented the need to respond to a larger trend in the politics of public space in postsocialist Hungary, the proliferation of advertising.

In a posting on the Green Spider network, György Kalas, a HUMUSz activist and environmental lawyer, described the Coca Cola proposal as an invitation for environmentalists to call attention to the problems of

advertising and new forms of consumption. He suggested that activists should use the opportunity to hold officials to their duty of defending public space from the whims of global corporations:

The problem is not that in our most beautiful, historical bridge, a multinational sees only an object on which to hang their advertisements, but that the bridge has fallen into the hands of five well-paid Hungarian experts who are responsible for this plundering.

Kalas reminds activists of the imperative of public participation and the need for citizens to pressure city and national governments to regulate corporate excesses.

A public opinion poll in the 4 October 1996 issue of *Magyar Hirlap*, a mainstream daily, indicated that over half of a sample of Budapest residents who had already heard about the plan to decorate the Chain Bridge were not opposed to the Coca-Cola corporation's offer. However, 38 percent of the respondents "found the offer outrageous." Despite reports of their apathy, many citizens wrote letters of protest to the city council. Ever the jokers, HUMUSz activists sent a telegram to Coca-Cola headquarters stating:

Leave the Chain Bridge alone [stop] Instead, you should wrap up the traffic jams on it [stop] We will gladly help [stop] You should stay home for the holidays [stop].¹⁰

In the end, the Budapest City Planning Commission rejected Coca Cola's proposal. For environmentalists, the entire Coca-Cola Chain Bridge debates represented a much broader trend in postsocialist Hungarian society: the ability of multinational corporations to visually colonize the urban landscape, and the difficulty of keeping public space public.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

What are the common threads that link these stories, and why do Hungarian environmentalists consider the growth of consumer society to be an environmental issue? Garbage and transportation are two key environmental issues that are consistently brought up in relation to globally marketed products. In their campaigns against multinationals, environmentalists draw attention to the externalization of environmental costs such as the disposal of wasteful packaging and fossil fuels expended in long-distance freight transportation. In less than a decade, Coca Cola and Pepsi have introduced aluminum cans and plastic bottles into the Hungarian market, without considering the already existing and highly effective bottle exchange programs and without providing

recycling facilities for the new forms of packaging. These issues provide an obvious link with the global environmental movement's traditional concern for pollution, energy efficiency, and recycling.

Yet Hungarian environmentalists' critique of consumption extends beyond the usual scope of environmentalism, and in doing so, it reopens the question of what constitutes the "environment." At stake in all these actions, whether we are speaking of pranks and street theater, litigation, lobbying, or environmental education, are notions of the public sphere, which are crucial distinctions in postsocialist political theory. In the critique of consumer society, "environment" appears to include public space and information. This "environment" is not merely a reservoir of natural resources, but a habitat for humans and other living things, the social, material, and psychological landscape where everyday life unfolds. Environmentalists press for greater public participation in decisions affecting this habitat, and the environmental theories enacted in their activist practice interrogate the key political theories about democracy and civil society in the age of transnational capital.

Throughout the transformation from state socialism, Hungarians have associated the concept of "decentralization" and local control with democratic participation. With the political transition of 1989, governments across East-Central Europe created new avenues for local self-government.¹¹ Although this decentralizing trend in public administration has recently come into question, local control and decentralization remain powerful themes in contemporary Hungarian political culture.¹² Hungarian anticorporate environmentalists present multinationals as the antithesis of local self-determination. Anticorporate campaigns tap into the larger Hungarian population's concerns about unfair competition for small, local businesses. Environmental opposition to multinationals draws from a rich vocabulary of localism, even as it takes part in global environmental campaigns against corporate power.

Another recurrent theme in these environmental actions is skepticism regarding multinationals' attempts to portray themselves as socially benevolent and "eco-friendly." When environmentalists express disgust at corporate "gifts" and "goodwill marketing," they typically draw comparisons between advertising and state socialist propaganda. After years of fighting for greater public access to information and freedom of the press during the 1980s, environmentalists see advertising itself as a threat to democratic culture. Advertising is viewed as a colonization of the public sphere in two ways: it saturates public space, and it distorts public debate and the flow of information with aggressive, expensive marketing. How can citizens develop a clear picture of their own needs and interests, when everything they lay their eyes upon in the street, in public schools, and in the media, is literally infused with exhortations

to buy things, to share the fantasy, to drink in “the real thing”—the world of consumer goods produced and promoted by multinationals? This question entails a complex critique of the relationship between public space and private, multinational corporations.

The key theme underlying environmental activism against multinationals consists of a series of contrasts drawn between democratic political culture and the emerging culture of consumption, between citizenship and consumership. Consumer society, informed by advertisements making enticing and often outrageous claims, is organized around the creation and individual satisfaction of commodifiable desires. Democratic “citizenship,” on the other hand, is founded on the notion that the citizen, informed through public debate, is a rational subject capable of engaging in political decision-making processes.

Slavenka Drakulic, in *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, notes that for people whose consumer choices have been narrowly limited by the state for decades in East-Central Europe, the allure of consumer goods and advertising offers opportunities to feel like an individual.¹³ While environmentalists recognize the pleasures of consumption, they continuously stress that personhood and citizenship are not commodities to be purchased. They criticize the transformation of desires for political enfranchisement, personal expression, economic security, and sociability (not just being another face in the faceless crowd) into consumer desires, choices offered by the market which can be “voted” in or out with a wave of the pocketbook.

A closer look at environmentalist strategies in Hungary corroborates this rejection of “consumer citizenship.” Despite the fact that Hungarian civil organizations tend to choose legal, nonviolent, and generally non-disruptive forms of protest, the boycott strategy is usually rejected in environmentalist circles.¹⁴ The failed boycott of French goods in protest of French atomic testing in 1995 was sometimes cited by activists as the case against boycotts: few Hungarians could afford to buy Christian Dior in the first place, so the action was ineffectual. The concept of “voting with one’s pocketbook,” a key feature of environmental activism in affluent Western European and North American countries, offers little liberation for the majority of Hungarians whose pocketbooks are becoming thinner and thinner, and who are spending more money on housing and public services such as school fees and public transportation which were once considered “needs,” not choices.

When Coca Cola submitted its Chain Bridge proposal, there was a brief discussion on the Green Spider bulletin boards of boycotting the soft drink. The boycott strategy was rejected because many activists saw boycotts as inadvertently “advertising for the company” that was being targeted in the action. Anticorporate environmentalists in Hun-

gary lay considerable stress on forms of political activism that express collectivity, create public debates, and which reject the conflation of consumer "choice" and critical publicity. One activist wrote persuasively against boycotting Coca Cola on the Green Spider, but he closed his letter with the following call to action: "If, however, we still can't prevent the Chain Bridge packaging [through other means], then I'll see you on the bridge!"

Anticorporate environmentalists recognize that the retreat of the state left new frontiers—"untapped markets"—for corporations to colonize, as well as possibilities for a greater sphere of public participation and personal autonomy. They tend to see environmentalism as a very broad cultural struggle for local or regional autonomy, for the possibility of ways of life that are not predetermined by the short-term goals of profiteers, for the decolonization of desire itself. These activists strongly criticize the commercialization of the public landscape, the introduction of mass-marketing and advertising, and the assumption that democracy and "choice" may be defined in the sphere of consumption rather than in the sphere of political participation. Hungarian environmental activists are redefining the term "environment" to include not only non-human nature, but also the social world of public space, access to information and debate, and public participation in political decision-making.

Notes

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1. See Martha Lampland, "Pigs, Party Secretaries, and Private Lives in Hungary," *American Ethnologist* 18 (1991): 459–479; and Steve Sampson, "The Informal Sector in Eastern Europe," *Telos* 66 (1985/6): 44–66.

2. György Konrád, *Antipolitics*. Richard Allen, trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

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