National Culture: Symbols and Reality

The Hungarian Case

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This paper deals with the formation of Hungarian national culture at the turn of the century, showing how divergent cultural strategies and practices were applied in step with changes in social structure. The peculiarly Hungarian experience results from the dual social structure which divides Hungarian national culture into two independent parts. On the one hand there is the ancient peasant culture with strong ties to oriental tradition. On the other hand there is the urban or bourgeois culture which was associated with modernization. This dual character of Hungarian society and of Hungarian national culture I interpret as the coexistence of symbolic and real dimensions of national culture.

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Approaches to national culture

The present study is an effort to survey briefly with what means and in what phases Hungarian national culture was created, i.e., how culture was "nationalized" in Hungary. At the same time, this case study will enable me to make a few more general remarks on the anthropological analysis of national cultures.

It is widely known that investigating national cultures always entails a number of theoretical and methodological difficulties as well as ideological and political overtones. This holds especially true for Central Europe, where the concept of national culture has been defined primarily by ideological and political factors. Another well-known fact is that the study of national cultures has always – expressly or not – constituted a central task in the social sciences, especially the so-called "national sciences", like literature and history and to a lesser extent disciplines like ethnography or art history. In this the social sciences have elaborated certain patterns, not only as regards national cultures but also the methods applied by the various disciplines investigating them. The interpretation of national cultures from other angles, such as the anthropological approach, has received very little attention until recent years. Thus, naturally, our knowledge of national culture has long been one-sided, and the concept itself problematic. However, a significant turn has occurred in this field of research. On the one hand the rejuvenation of historical science and social history as well as the new interest in the history of mentalities has shed fresh light on the concept of national culture, focusing on the construction of national cultures and their internal structure (Morgan 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). On the other hand, anthropologists have developed new approaches to the study of national culture and its various manifestations.

This anthropological approach focuses not on the cultural, literary, musical or artistic aspects of national culture but on forms of behaviour and other cultural manifestations; these may be observed directly, but also interpreted as culture in the sense of the historically formulated system of shared knowledge, symbols and meanings (Geertz 1973). This perspective provides us with a general conceptual framework which is suitable for interpreting the cat-

egory of national culture as well. According to the most general approach, national culture denotes a way of life and a type of thinking which serves as a general guiding pattern for the members of society. To put it in another way, by analysing these phenomena, anthropology endeavours to grasp the historical process in which the cultural structure of complex or modern societies was formulated and reinforced (Löfgren 1987: 77). If we accept the above premises, we have several problems waiting to be answered. On the one hand, if we interpret national culture as the cultural structure of modern or complex societies, it is obvious that the category does not include the culture of a single stratum or class. It is also obvious that the individuals and groups living in modern societies interpret differently the same social, cultural and ideological phenomena. Consequently, national culture cannot be considered as some kind of uniform, homogeneous structure, but we have to think in terms of subordination and supremacy instead. That is to say, national culture is nothing but the hierarchy of strategies – formulated historically and changing historically – competing with each other. In other words, national culture is constituted by a definite structure of different class cultures and subcultures existing in a given society (in a given historical context). This necessarily leads us to the categories of cultural dominance and cultural hegemony. It is only in the past few years that cultural anthropology has discovered the concept of cultural hegemony and Gramsci's related theory. However, this discovery was much more than a simple adoption, representing rather a kind of critical interpretation (Mouffe 1979; Counihan 1986). It is well known than Gramsci used the term hegemony to denote the state in which one social class secured itself a dominating role in the field of culture, which it was then able to manifest in the specific institutions of "civilian" society. Refining this statement, anthropological experience seems to be proving that the main function of the social structure which achieves hegemony in modern societies is to formulate a mutually acceptable horizon of thinking and action for the cultural strategies opposing and competing with each other. That

is to say, in modern societies the concept of cultural hegemony is not a static, monopolistic situation, but indicates a process which is able to control and direct cultural clashes. Naturally, this interpretation includes the contrasted interests expressed by cultural means, characterizing the "ruling class" of all times from inside. Since in modern society no cultural dominance of complete validity exists, opposing hegemonic culture is not total either; it is far less overt but much rather latent, of an objective character, which does not exclude the possibility of occasional, temporary co-operation (Williams 1977: 113; Niedermüller 1981; 1987a). The interpretation of national culture in the context of cultural hegemony has thus an underlying theoretical interest in cultural dynamism, a curiosity which tries to reveal the historical connections between the changing structure of a given society and its culture-building.

The making of a Hungarian national culture

The modernization of Hungarian society started intensively in the second half of the 19th century. Historical research has drawn a detailed picture of the trend of economic life, the creation of the modern industry, the forms of commerce and financial life, the increasing level of urbanization. These changes also affected the social structure, which had previously seemed immobile and immutable. In the stream of modernization, it took only a few decades for the "modern" social classes to emerge (the working class, the bourgeois middle class, the high bourgeoisie), which also differed ethnically from the elements constituting the earlier social structure (we need only think of the role of the German, Czech, Slovak and Jewish population in the establishment of the bourgeoisie and urbanization in Hungary). At the same time, this formation of modern bourgeois society did not automatically involve the termination or transformation of the strata of the traditional social structure (aristocracy, nobility, peasantry). One of the causes, perhaps the most emphatic one, was "bourgeois development coming from outside", the fact

that Hungarian society on the road to modernization adopted a number of bourgeois institutions, economic, ideological, political and cultural structures from outside, in a ready-made state, instead of developing them in accordance with its own internal laws. The formation of Hungarian society at the turn of the century, the establishment of the new social strata and classes, the organization of the relationships and structural connections within society are all the consequences of this specific bourgeois development. That is how the dual social structure, frequently evaluated by social and historical research in so many different ways, came into existence (Glatz 1974; Erdei 1976; Hanák 1978). However, this duality not only was present at the level of social structure which can be grasped with statistical data and sociological categories, but it also defined the whole process of the establishment of national culture as well. This dichotomy of the social structure was organized into mental and cognitive structures strictly separated from each other and opposing each other. If we now try to grasp the most essential elements of these structures, we shall easily be able to formulate a system consisting of pairs of oppositions. In this model we find, on the one side, the so-called historical classes (aristocracy, nobility, peasantry) who were "Hungarian", who lived "in the country", who had their own "ancient cultural traditions", and who were "national". On the other side we see the so-called modern classes (working class, bourgeois middle class, the high bourgeoisie) who were "alien", who lived in the "cities", who had no "ancient culture", and who were "cosmopolitans" or "international". It is obvious, however, that these oppositions are not the actual social structure but represent it with the help of symbols. That is to say, the concepts in quotation marks indicate forms of behaviour charged with certain symbolic contents. The anthropological approach tries to highlight this complexity behind the sociological fact of the dual social structure. Social experience is rooted in the texture of everyday life, which consists of the uninterruptable series of human behaviour. In certain situations, this behaviour may be filled with symbolic contents. These symbols and

their relationships create the mental and cognitive structures reflecting the differences in the social classes as well as their cultural strategies and practice. The cultural structure which is referred to as Hungarian national culture has been called to life by the social perception and interpretation of the mental and cognitive structures opposing each other, the cultural strategies and symbolic behaviour rooted in them.

Essential connections may be observed between national characteristics and everyday life, as well as the symbolic patterns of behaviour. On the one hand, there has always existed a social psychological level of everyday behaviour on which the products of national characteristics could be built and which they could react back to. On the other hand, the patterns of behaviour transformed into national characteristics were filled with symbolic contents which, disrupted from the actual forms and contents of behaviour, were present in the "edifice" of national characteristics "merely" as symbolic behaviour, symbols, and became norms of behaviour in this function. Here we must recognize that behaviour has no meaning originally; it is interpretation which imparts a meaning to it (Cohen 1985: 17). Thus national characteristics interpreted certain manifestations of cultural behaviour in a way that invested them with symbolic content and erected them as types. (István Bibó – though in a different context – worded somewhat similar ideas as early as 1936: "It must be emphasized that the picture deduced from certain Hungarian individuals – and this refers to all other nations – means primarily the picture of behaviour. Emotional, moral and intellectual characteristics are formulated only through patterns of behaviour, and foreigners can only have an idea about the whole moral and intellectual structure of a nation if the features manifested in the individuals are confirmed in the objective phenomena and performances of moral, political, intellectual culture as well." Bibó 1986: 153.) There is no room here to reiterate the most important statements about Hungarian national characteristics (Lackó 1987). As Péter Hanák has put it (1988: 99): "At the end of the 19th century, the code of

Hungarian norms of behaviour, and indeed the real aesthetic of the Hungarian character were born." And that aesthetic came into being precisely as a result of the mechanism analysed above. At the same time, it must also be emphasized that the basic categories of the "Hungarian national character" not only operated as the symbols of expected, demanded, normative behaviour, but also represented an attitude to a given situation of social history – modernization, bourgeois development. This Hungarian national character – which saw the way of life and world view of the rural nobility as a pattern to follow – had another important feature: parallel to erecting the way of life of the nobility as a model, it appointed peasant culture or its "transcribed" version as the basis of national culture.

Discovering peasant culture

In Hungary – as well as in several other Central European countries – the process of modernization and bourgeois development overlapped the "discovery" of peasant culture, the moment of ideological and social history when the "peasant" became the symbol of the "Hungarian people" and "peasant culture" that of "Hungarian culture". From this moment, the connections between peasant culture and national culture can be traced along two lines. On the one hand, the concept of "folk" was formulated – with important political and ideological functions – and true representatives of this idealized category were recognized only in those elements of the population who lived their lives as peasants and expressed "historical continuity" in their social existence. This conceptual organization automatically eliminated the alien urban society from the category of the "folk" which served as the basis of the nation. On the other hand, the "adaptation" of peasant culture started, a long process in which it was idealized for romantic, sentimental and nostalgic purposes. The most important moment of this transformation was the metamorphosis of the social contents of peasant culture into an aesthetic quality. It can be

proved that the earliest ethnographic collections selected the material of Hungarian folklore on the basis of the aesthetic principles of élite culture, and that the individual ethnographic landscapes, regions, cultural groups, "types of people" were grasped and fitted into national culture on aesthetic grounds, with a preference for folk art, colourful costumes and the "strange" customs. This perception of folk culture gave rise to the picture of a peasant culture, idealized to the extreme and schematic, having little to do with the historical reality of everyday life. This concept of cultural tradition came into existence as a result of identifying the expressive level of peasant culture with the whole of this class culture. In other words, cultural tradition was considered as a uniform ideological space which was constructed from autonomous partial systems (Bausinger 1983). By the turn of the century, this concept of cultural tradition had become one of the main pillars of the edifice of national culture. At the Budapest exhibition of 1896, celebrating the millennium of the Hungarian state, this concept found direct expression when the "ethnographic village" was opened. However, following that event certain changes occurred in the interpretation of cultural tradition and, parallel to it, national culture. Since social-economic modernization was seen to be making radical (and undesired) changes, peasant culture and the "Hungarian character" – national culture – appeared more and more as the possible alternative to urban culture, and at the same time to modernization. A counter to the social deviances related to modernization was found, somewhat anachronistically, in the ideology of "undeteriorated ancient tradition". This is the point where political intensions and ideas directly emerge within the framework of "ancient cultural tradition". In the process of the creation of cultural tradition, the ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity of the peasant communities was equated with the national identity, which may be attributed to the specific state theory. Now this movement was enlarged by constructing the glorious past with a political purpose, although the actors of this past, the peasants, "do not know anything about the message to come which they foretold

with their simplistic presence" (Karnoouh 1983: 444).

This brief and sketchy survey has also shown that this concept of Hungarian national culture, elaborated and applied primarily by the "historical classes", was built on three groups of ideas closely connected to each other. On the one hand, there existed a noblemen's conservatism in the political sense, which "emphasized the national features formed historically – and of course primarily – from the mentality of the noblemen's past (and of the peasants, to a lesser extent), and protected them from bourgeois modernization. According to this view, rapid bourgeois development pushes the autochthonous Hungarian strata, primarily the middle class, into the background while placing the citizens and intellectuals of non-Hungarian origin – German and Jewish – into the vanguard of bourgeois development" (Lackó 1987: 6). On the other hand, national characteristics, which gave articulation to the above-mentioned political situation and social feelings by creating the "Hungarian past" as opposed to the "aliens", fulfilled functions of fundamental importance. And finally, the creation of this "Hungarian past", as well as the very important role it was given in the concept of national culture, were inseparable from the idealized and romantic image of the peasantry and peasant culture mentioned above. These components of national culture were in close interaction with each other and so it is difficult to describe the nature of their relationship in any analytical model. Historical reasearch gives priority to political conservatism, and national characteristics are generally looked upon as the resistance of the conservative strata to modernization and bourgeois development. Without doubting the truth of that view, it must be emphasized that the national characteristics most successfully expressing the conservative viewpoint were primarily those of peasant culture as well as its "transcribed" image mentioned above. For the process of modernization, which started from the second half of the 19th century, singled out some very important features of the Hungarian national character which had been worded at the beginning of the century, and transformed them more and more radically. The result was that, around the turn of the century, certain elements of national feeling and consciousness, such as the concept of the Hungarian empire, the memory of the wars of independence, the noblemen's liberalism, etc., were withdrawn more and more to the level of political rhetorics and national symbols, and the everyday life of society was influenced – indirectly – by the concept of peasant culture integrated into national culture. It has already been pointed out several times that in the present case we are faced with a concept of national culture consciously constructed (and provided with) definite symbolic contents. In this conceptual symbolic construction, the borders of national culture are drawn by the common "Hungarian" past as well as by those who participated and shared in it. People who are not part of this common past – those who are alien, urban, etc. (and let us temporarily waive the analysis of the urban utilization of peasant culture!) – must automatically be placed outside the borders of national culture. And then the nostalgic concept of the "peaceful and common past", the idealized peasant culture, is separated by just one step from the practice which, by referring to, and relying on, this symbolic construction, claims political power. For it is obvious that the existence of a nation in the political sense is realized in everyday consciousness, in the everyday life of a society, to the extent that it is connected to the common store of symbols. The creation of the nation in the political sense, and the construction of national culture are identical with the establishment of common symbols (although the commonness of symbols does not necessarily imply that their meanings are shared). In this concept the nation and national culture operate as a symbolic structure whose essence is constituted by the consistent application of the mechanism of inclusion/exclusion (Cohen 1985: 15). At the same time it must also be noticed that in this concept one of the most important parameters of social existence is belonging to a nation, just as one of the most important perceptual/cognitive categories of the "elaboration" of the surrounding social world is the nation.

Urban culture

So far I have been trying to describe how the category of national culture was formulated by the so-called historical classes constituting one side of the dual structure of Hungarian society. Now the question is how the modern classes related to this approach, and whether an interpretation of national culture different from this was created, and if so, what its characteristic features were. When trying to answer these questions, we are faced with a number of difficulties. The first and most fundamental problem is defining the concept of urban culture. For it is obvious that one of the important characteristics of the category of urban culture is cultural diversity and heterogeneity. Hungarian urban society around the turn of the century – though here I am thinking essentially of Budapest only – is characterized by the co-existence of social groups, strata, classes with different cultural strategies and practices. There was, however, no simple fit between the urban social structure and an urban culture. Boundaries of class and culture could cut across each other. Moreover, it seems that a choice could be made from the individual cultural systems more or less independently of class attachment, ethnic background and religious conviction. Hungarian urban society has strata where it is especially easy to grasp the differences in social and cultural attachment. Péter Hanák has called attention to the fact that in the case of certain strata of Hungarian urban society – primarily the middle class and some of its subgroups – a kind of tension was created between the status as defined on the one hand by the relations of production, and on the other hand by social position, i.e., the relative situation defined by origin, descent, education, culture, prestige, etc. (Hanák 1978). However, bearing all that in mind, we may say that the cultural patterns which are primarily or exclusively attached to the population dwelling in cities and towns may be grouped together and defined as urban culture. For it is obvious that if the city or the town is looked upon as the scene and at the same time the result of a new type of social organization (bourgeois development, modernization), then the behaviour of the people living as "parts" of the city or town necessarily has manifestations which together may be interpreted as urban culture. What is essential for the present paper is not the internal differences of urban culture but the independent character of this culture and its connection with national culture.

There is no room here to survey even the most essential specificities of modern Hungarian urban culture. However, it must be pointed out – though very briefly – that historical, sociological and ethnographic research has revealed and described a whole series of the hidden moments of everyday life which are very important features of urban culture. Let us think, for example, of the housing structure, the different patterns in the use of flats. Here I have in mind not simply the differences in size between workers' flats and those of the high bourgeoisie, but rather the behavioural patterns and cultural contents which are the necessary consequences of the different sizes of the flats. The majority of the workers' flats at the beginning of the century made common family life almost impossible and therefore most of the socialization processes took place not in the family but on local public levels. (One consequence of this fact was that the distinction between private and public spheres of life was completely different here from that of the bourgeois stratum.) By contrast, the bourgeois flat, by separating the intimate and public spheres of life, reflects the different structure of bourgeois existence (Hanák 1984). As another example we may mention family life and its fundamentally new forms. Urban society elaborated new roles for the family members and filled the old roles with new contents. Not only the male and female roles but also the cultural meaning of the individual life cycles underwent fundamental changes and a new type of socialization developed. Changes were brought about in the role played by work in the structure of everyday life, and the whole of everyday life began to be articulated according to sexes; the home, child-rearing, the household, the flat became the intimate female spheres of everyday life, whereas office, work and public life represented the masculine spheres (Niedermüller 1987b). It may be

pointed out that urban culture did not simply renew or transform the earlier cultural practice but organized it according to fundamentally new principles. It is obvious that this way of life – independently of class attachment, ethnic background, religion, prejudices, etc. – was looked upon as alien from the very beginning, and seemed meaningless for the non-urban parts of Hungarian society.

The examples of other – primarily Western and Northern European – countries demonstrate that this urban-bourgeois culture slowly colonized social structure and everyday life to become the uniform national culture. The bourgeois way of life and publicity, social and cultural representation, possessed such an integrating force that bourgeois culture quickly achieved hegemony; it was then able to create a canon of cultural behaviour and a way of life acceptable to the whole society and worthy of being followed (Frykman & Löfgren 1987). In Hungary, however, the situation was different in several respects. It must still be emphasized that for certain layers of the urban bourgeoisie the town, urbanization, bourgeois development, national progress, modern national culture of European character and contents were ideas inseparable from each other and presupposing each other – at least in a certain situation of social history (Hanák 1988: 24). It was not by accident that Ady – one of the most outstanding Hungarian poets in the 20th century – voiced his opinion that "Budapest is the only edifice in this country of which something may come out and on which storeys may be built". Thus there is no doubt that Hungarian urban, bourgeois development also concealed the potential that this culture could be organized into a national culture valid for the whole society or into the basis of a culture like that. However, this potential never became a reality, and the concealed cultural patterns referred to above were stuck at the level of stratum or class cultures, failing to permeate the whole structure of society. Perhaps the main reason for that is – as historical research clearly shows – that the bourgeoisie in the West European sense was absent from the Hungarian towns and cities. There was a bourgeois class, there was an urban-bourgeois cul-

ture, but this bourgeoisie failed to reach an appropriate degree of political-social-cultural organization, its internal structural weakness, the opposing interests within the bourgeois class, being more important than the undoubtedly existing similarities. That is how a process in the opposite direction could take place in Hungary, and the image of national culture formulated by the "historical classes" was able to infiltrate the town and the city, an affecting urban society as well.

Beginning in the early 20th century, a process becoming increasingly intensive may be observed in the Hungarian towns and cities, but primarily in Budapest. A relatively wide section of the bourgeois middle class was gradually pushed to the periphery of the modernization process, denied active participation in the social and political public sphere. At the same time, as a result of "bourgeois development coming from outside", they were not able to construct a coherent cultural strategy and operate their own cultural practice. The increasingly widening gap between the actual social status and the expected position inevitably turned this group towards the approach to national culture formulated by the "historical classes" and, together with it, towards the "discovery" of peasant culture. The significance of this process can hardly be underestimated. This infiltration of peasant culture into urban culture occurred at least at two levels or in two directions. On the one hand, certain segments of peasant culture (primarily music) became important elements of the renewal of élite culture. This is the period when, in the wake of the activities of Bartók and Kodály, folk music and then the whole of folk art began to be referred to as "pure sources". (Naturally, this approach concealed the uncritical utilization of folk music, a protest against its adaptation, but also the mood of the cultural nationalism, the influence of which could not be escaped by Bartók at the beginning of his career either; see Glatz 1984). This interpretation of peasant culture, its integration into national culture introduced a very important distinction. For it did not identify ruralness or peasant culture with national culture. It did not consider the whole of peasant culture as "good", "aesthetic",

"noble", etc., but only certain aspects of peasant culture were deemed worthy of becoming a part of national culture. In other words, the rural nobility's way of life and all its manifestations remained the symbols of infertility and lack of culture, and peasant culture was handled independently of it. According to this concept, peasant culture was not the symbol of something but a historical reality. On the other hand, the wider sections of the bourgeois middle class used peasant culture only in its symbolic connections – independently of its actual contents, – in this way too, trying to strengthen their uncertain legitimacy and identity. In this way, peasant culture ceased to exist in its historical function, and it continued to play a role only in so far as it was able to satisfy the claims of the urban groups referred to above. Thus peasant culture was a basis of reference, with the help of which certain sections of the bourgeois middle class placed themselves within the framework of the symbolic category of the nation. In other words, they created a symbolic capital which was indispensable from the point of view their social survival.

Conclusion

By way of a summary, it may be pointed out that national culture as a process displays a complicated and multi-layered structure. On the one hand, attachment to the nation as a cultural community has its objective distinguishing features, such as certain patterns of behaviour, rites, language, etc. These mental representations are constituted in the process of everyday life, and at the same time manage everyday life in a way that they prescribe valid behavioural and cultural rules for the whole of society or its overwhelming majority. This was the situation in certain European countries (for example, Sweden) at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the "modern" bourgeoisie reworked the connections among people, their forms, the approach to nature, the cultural concept of family, marriage, sexuality, etc. These uniform specificities of behaviour are usually referred to as national characteristics. It is the descriptive range of national culture, rooted in every-

day life. However, the concept of national culture is not always and not everywhere identical with the behavioural patterns and cultural manifestations of the social groups and individuals constituting the nation. Creating national culture – especially in Central Europe – is the result of a "selection" reflecting a high degree of political and ideological consciousness. In Hungary, the core of national culture was constituted primarily by the idealized, romantic and sentimental concept of traditional peasant culture. Peasant culture could be loved, mythified, refused, despised, but when formulating their national and social identity, each social group had to clarify its relationship to this "common peasant (popular) heritage". The level of national culture created in this way may be referred to as the normative symbolic range of this concept. This way of organizing national culture uses different cultural means to draw the borders of the nation or national culture in the symbolic sense, which do not necessarily overlap with the nation in the political or state theory sense. It seems to me that this dichotomy of national culture characterizes national culture as such in general terms too. Naturally, the relationship between these two spheres changes according to the social situation too, not only with respect to the individual peoples but in the different historical periods of the same nation as well. However, national culture is only able to fulfil real functions of social organization if a reflexive relationship that mirrors social reality is established between these two levels.

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