

# Time, Ritual, and Post Socialist change in Hungary

by Dr. Lisa Pope Fischer

Dr. Lisa Pope Fischer is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at New York City College of Technology. Her research focuses on Hungarian and American Culture. She draws on theories of space and time to construct an understanding of society's impact on personal experience.

## A B S T R A C T

Time is a social construct and ritual can be a symbolic collective assertion of time reflecting socio-economic change, spatial and temporal constructs. The past plays a role both officially and unofficially in creating a new image. Individuals reclaim past traditions (such as festivals, food, and music) yet fuse them with present day values. Memory recovers cultural practices that reassert a Hungarian identity that the soviet system had suppressed. Within today's troubling post Socialist society, memory and the reconfiguration of time is a tool that reconstructs history and draws on cultural symbols to create meaning. The expression of ritual is one way to explore the constructed and social nature of time. Looking at a Hungarian harvest ritual illustrates the social construction of time which significantly shows a hybrid nature of change yet also the ambiguous disconnectedness with the past and present reflective of the complications of a society in transition.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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## ***Introduction***

The socio-economic frame of a society shapes the use and experience of time in people's everyday lives, hence when a society changes, it can alter people's perception, experience and use of time. Post Socialist Hungary illustrates the hybrid fluidity of the social shaping of time as it transitions from a Socialist society towards a capitalist one. The restrictions of Socialist time are different from Capitalist time and this can encourage agency in people's everyday practices in terms of memory, social relations, and identity and convey the growing disparity between peoples. The change in society reflects in use and perception of time. Furthermore there are recognizable patterns, and these patterns or conventions show an amalgam of change, and growing differences between people that contribute to feelings of uneasiness.

This paper explores the social construction of time as reflected in ritual based on ongoing research in Budapest since 1993 to present. Time is socially and culturally constructed; it can be linked to economics, geography, symbolism, including discourse and cognition (Gell 1996: 327). Rituals illustrate special uses of time: rituals typically are bound in time and space, often separate from everyday activities. They can depict time in the form of history both real and imagined such as a re-enactment of an origin myth or a historical period. Alfred Gell argues:

“From the standpoint of method, the investigation of ritual categories should not precede, but should follow, the investigation of the choreography of mundane social process, which form the background against which ritual reconstructs the world in the image of human desires. Ritual representations of time do not provide a ‘world-view’ but a series of special purpose commentaries on the world which cannot be defined in advance or once and for all, which have to be understood practically, not metaphysically. Because ritual collective representations of time only cohere in the light of their implicit relation with the practical, they cannot be singled out as constituting the unique, culturally valid representations of time operated by members of a particular society. Instead, analysis of collective representations of time must proceed along a broad front, continually charting the interplay between systemic factors, deriving from the spatio-temporal layout of the practical world and the wide variety of symbolic constructs which agents deploy in the course of handling their affairs” (Gell 1996: 326)

This paper aims to analyze a Hungarian ritual as it relates to the current socio-economic changes post communism. After briefly outlining the changes from a Socialist perspective of time to a Capitalist construct of time, this article will discuss and unravel how a grape harvest festival celebrated in the Suburbs of Budapest offers as Gell suggests “special purpose commentaries on the world” derived from the spatial-temporal conditions of a post Socialist society and the symbolic applications by those participating. Much like revitalization movements, with the change in society people look for stability by turning to the past. Individual’s daily practices adjusted to Socialist time, and now with the introduction of capitalism time people must recreate an understanding of who they are and how they comply or counter the spatial temporal changes. Looking at the harvest ritual illustrates the social construction of time, which significantly shows a hybrid nature of change. The ritual reclaims and reinvents the past yet ironically reflects the present transition.

## *Changes in Perceptions and Use of Time*

### *A. Socialist time*

The Communist aims for society shape the social practice of Socialist time. Not all Socialist societies experience communism in the same way due to historical, political and ethnic factors, however, the basic framework of a Socialist society affects how one uses and perceives time. In theory communism aims to create a classless society by having the community maintain the ownership of property. The state demanded a given quota for each factory to produce, and creates centralized redistribution systems in an effort to create equality. Profit did not go to the owner, but was funneled back into the state for redistribution. There was no real incentive for individuals to work faster in order to increase the profit. In reality this system was riddled with problems that created alternative ways of doing things resulting in wasteful work practices where people sometimes felt justified in cheating or skirting the system. Time could be wasted as individuals did not profit. The need to control the population results in restrictive policies including surveillance, monitoring, and censorship. Time becomes a matter of state control as individuals struggle for a sense of personal well-being (Ehrlich and Révész 1995: 21, Verdery 1996: 21, 35-37).

The Socialist state forms mechanisms to control time. “Ettatization”, Verdery claims is the way Communist authorities attempt to control people’s private time (1996: 40). Time could be controlled in a number of ways such as rituals, calendars, curfews, and workday schedules (1996: 40-41). In Hungary for example, St. Stephen’s day traditionally had been a huge public spectacle as people gathered around St. Stephen’s Cathedral to carry the sacred mummified hand of St. Stephen in a holy procession. Religious practices were not officially sanctioned by the Socialist state, as they wanted the populace to unify under the Communist agenda; hence the state initiated a series of public events to displace the St. Stephen procession and divert peoples’ attention from the church. Curfews were in place so that the police had the right to question and intimidate anyone who was in the wrong place or time. In the early 1970s Buda was a notorious Hell’s Angels bike club member with long hair, tattoos, and black leather. He describes police harassment in Hungary;

“I was sitting with friends at the Duna [river bank]. Police said “You are from the 13th district? Why don’t you sit on a bench in the 13th district not the fifth?” If there were more than three people, it was a crime. The police were always looking for identity cards - you could be taken away for

forced labor. No rights! It was crazy. Once at a cukrászda [pastry shop] cops grabbed everyone with long hair and cut it all off. If you have a party, cops came bothering. You would get appointments to go to the police and tell names.”

Clearly people felt intimidated and restricted in their everyday lives, yet this did not affect their ability to strike back. The Communist system required that everyone have a job, and carry an identification card with official stamps that indicated where you worked. If you did not work, and did not have a justified medical excuse, the police could take you to the police station. People in Hungary found ways to avoid this regulation for it was not uncommon for people to have fake jobs, or at least jobs that required little if any work. Gyuszi’s favorite job in the 1970s had been a phone booth cleaner. He was supposed to check and clean a series of public street phone booths in a particular area however no one ever checked if he actually did it or not. He got his official work stamp in his identity card, but perhaps washed one phone booth the entire time. Etatisation is a way to describe how the state controlled time, and this process affects peoples everyday experiences in the form of ritual, leisure time, or work, however it’s oppressive nature encouraged people to find alternative ways of doing things.

The state could control time in terms of the body. Human bodies could be placed in particular activities to enforce an alternative use of time (Verdery 1996: 40). State holidays and events were often huge public spectacles. The huge participation by the population might suggest public acceptance of the Communist State, however, people might be required to attend. On May 1st, Labor Day, companies were required to make a float for a parade, and as a reward they would be given free hotdogs and beer, with perhaps a live concert. Gyuszi describes how school children were forced to wear red scarves and wave the Socialist flag at these events. College students were encouraged to carry political signs in the procession – but for some these events were more about socializing with friends than promoting a political belief. Though the casual observer might think that the population believed and supported the state by attending these events, they might have been forced to physically attend, or they may have had alternative reasons for participating. (see also Ten Dyke 2000).

The state controlled how time was portrayed as history texts were rewritten and censored to reflect the values of Communist society. The national remembrance of the 1956 revolution was not allowed to be recognized until after 1989. Few people visited the National Museum, which

had also been an important site for the 1956 revolution. A small political crowd with a megaphone spoke in front of the Magyar Radio station, which is located behind the National Museum. Most people gathered around the Parliament building where in 1996 they were unveiling a new monument with a flame that burned for those lost in the ‘56 Revolution. Though musicians played nationalistic and folk songs, and traditional dancers danced, the crowd ambled about. Most attention focused on a symbolic grave that stands to honor the young students who were killed in their protest against the Communists. Hundreds of small paper flags surrounded the symbolic tomb. Candles were lit much like the day in November when people visit the cemeteries to honor their dead loved ones. Many surely still remember the ‘56 revolution and its lasting effects. The portrayal of time in terms of history and memory are important factors now with the current changes in Hungary.

### ***B. Hybrid time: Introducing Capitalist time post communism***

The introduction of a Capitalist market economy has changed the construction of time. In contrast to Communist theory, Capitalists believe that privately owned property facilitates an equal and free society. Private businesses intend to make a profit, their power lie in their ability to profit. A democratic society values civil society, free elections, and the private rights of its citizens rather than being controlled by an authoritative state. Each citizen has equal rights, equal chances to succeed, and equal treatment. Like a Horatio Algers novel, despite any obstacles one should face, there is the belief that as long as one works hard enough one will succeed. In reality, there are some complications as there can be a naturalization of power inequities in time and space. Anthropologists study the effects of introducing capitalism on non-Capitalist societies to consider its oppressive use of time and the social practices that develop in response to these limitations (Taussig 1980, Holmes, Ong 1987). David Harvey argues that post modernity entails changes in perceptions of time and space as reflective of cultural and socio-economic change. Time-space compression in the Capitalist world describes “the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space. These enhanced powers of flexibility and mobility have allowed employers to exert stronger pressures of labour control on a work force in any case weakened . . . (1989: 147).

The notions of space and time have changed as international travel and communication has become easier and more importantly faster. As a response people feel dislocated as they become separated or fragmented from their cultural past (1989: 287). The introduction of Capitalist time to post Socialist societies conflicts with Socialist time causing changes in experience (See also Platz 2000).

The difference between Socialist time and Capitalist time affects people's experiences post communism. Capitalist time is linear; minutes, and hours measure it. People are paid by how much time they work. The faster you work the more profit you can make. Because "time is money" it is valuable and should not be squandered. Socialist time is linear as well, yet it has an end goal to attain Communist equality (Verdery 122-123). Whereas Capitalist time is measured by profit, Socialist time is measured by its ability to control. Time in the workplace does not create profit therefore as long as you meet the state quota system, no one cares if you "waste time" on the job (Verdery 47). Verdery argues that whereas Capitalism seizes time in linear daily units, Socialism seizes time through making work irregular, creating unpredictability to time that seems more spontaneous than planned. Time could be wasted and "flattened" to endless waiting (Verdery 57). Individuals developed responses to Socialist time that affect their daily lives, and now with the introduction of capitalism time people are creating new responses indicating the growing disparities between people (See also Platz 2000). Ritual practices can reveal these disparities marked in time and space.

### ***Ritual as Revitalization of Time***

Ritual can be linked to "tradition", "the past," and can be part of a revitalization process to reconstruct a sense of identity in times of uncertainty. During the disillusionment of the transition, Hungarian identity is part of a revitalization process that draws on a reconfiguration of memory. Anthony Wallace argues that in times of societal crisis societies often turn to a "revitalization" process as a response to anomie and turmoil. This revitalization process can reclaim past cultural practices and identity to reassert or reinvent world view, to "construct a more satisfying culture during periods of heightened stress (Wallace 1956:265)". People reminisce about a "simpler" "easier" way of life. Though this memory may be inaccurate, it provides a sense of solace. The use of memory serves as an important tool in this revitalization process. Memory consists of layers: the societal memory, the national memory, the personal memory of the participants, as well as the memory of the ethnographer. A community in the Buda-

pest Suburbs re-enacts a pre-soviet grape harvest festival, a "szüreti mulatság" and in turn re-invents a tradition to create a new social space. The ritual illustrates the symbolic social construct of time as it relates to the difficult socio-economic changes in time and space.

Though each participant in the festival may have their own understanding of the event, the celebration creates a collective alternative in time and space. The grape festival is a pre-soviet practice yet this community celebrates it within the context of post-Socialist society. As such the grape festival represents a tension between the appeal of a simpler agrarian Hungarian society and the present day uncertainty of a society in transition. Socialism suppressed and censored the freedom to express a Hungarian identity. My informants said this peasant tradition was not allowed to be celebrated during the Soviet period. Today, there is the chance to rediscover and reinvent what this Hungarian identity might be. Community building draws on history, the environment, agency, and identity. As Lefebvre (1991:38-39) suggests, a community consists of spatial practice, representations of space, and perceived space. In other words, a community consists of perception by insiders and outsiders. Maps, policies, scientists and politics represent community, yet how individuals live in that space also represents community. Signs and symbols contribute to the production of this lived space. This grape harvest festival symbolically creates an alternative space and time. It is an alternative to socialism and an alternative to post Socialist turmoil.

### ***A. Ritual as a Link to Pre-Soviet Past***

As a peasant tradition the harvest festival links the past to the present. Peasants have important historic and symbolic significance for Hungary and serve as a marker of the tradition, and the past. There is an assumption that the peasant is backward and hence retains past traditions (Hobsbawm 1983). The peasant symbolically embodies what it means to be Hungarian especially in terms of language and folk culture. The peasant as an image of Hungarian identity is paradoxical because it is a "mythical figure". Though pre-Socialist Hungary was primarily an agrarian society, there is no substantial group of actual present day peasants – a class of farmers who toil small plots of land for themselves or for feudal lords. Ironically, the Soviet system touted the peasant as a symbol of hard work, and yet the Socialist government was careful to suppress images of peasant resistance. The symbol of the peasant on the one hand is someone who embodies the traditions of Hungary, and yet they also represent contention. Traditionally peasants

would work in the vineyards and participate in the harvest celebration. The szüreti mulatság celebrates the first press of the wine. In some accounts the festival shares ties to the Catholic Church. Communism suppressed religious practices. In other accounts the festival appears to take place over several days. In a pre Socialist account Károly suggests "Wine is the national drink of Hungarians" (1939: 85). Hence he associates this peasant grape harvest festival with a national Hungarian identity. Communism suppressed assertions of independent national identities. Historical references describe the event as entailing a parade through the village of good looking girls carrying strings of freshly harvested grapes strung onto rods. A band of young men would parade through the village alongside them, stopping house by house to serenade the village with songs. Following the parade was a grand party with ample food, drinking, and dancing. The parties could last several days, leaving the drunken men to sing into the early hours of the morning (Halász 1962:138 -146). A community on the outskirts of Budapest reenacts this event every Fall since 1990. From my discussions with participants, the harvest festivals were prohibited during the Communist era, but now, after 1989, they celebrate the tradition again. Many Hungarians never have experienced such an event and must learn what this "traditional" festival entails.

The original memory, the actual traditional festival, is difficult to represent as no tradition is static or "pure" as things alter, adapt and change over time. Tradition can be an invention (Hobsbawm 1983). A historical representation of this grape harvest festival draws on a collection of references. One clear distinction between the "traditional" szüreti mulatság and the "new" one is that in the past the grape harvest festival was an event celebrated by those who actually grew and harvested the grapes. It was a peasant celebration. Forty years later, the current depiction of this event draws on elements of the traditional festival, yet this is a reconstructed cultural memory that then translates the festival into present day life. I have known Viktor and Katika for several years as I initially met them through a mutual friend when I first began research in 1993. They own a fruit and vegetable stand in Budafok, have been married since 1977, and have two teenage sons. A week before the party, I go to meet Viktor and Katika to accompany them to Eger. Here we will buy wine for the wine harvest festival. We drive two hours in the rain and cold. Viktor and Katika bicker about something, so I silently slink in the back seat of the car. Putting on this festival takes a great deal of stress and strain. We go to the valley of szép asszony where a number of wine caves line up in a row. Built into the side of the hill, these caves keep the

wine at a constant cool temperature. I initially thought we would be sampling from various wine sellers. Viktor, however, heads straight for a wine cellar in the middle. He has done business with this vendor before. They have a rapport and personal connections are especially important in any kind of transaction in Hungary. Once we return to their large suburban home to unload the large plastic canisters of wine, Viktor proudly shows the horse harness and the costumes he bought for his two sons. These were specially made, and are expensive. The boys wear a "csikos" outfit consisting of heavy black boots, large billowy white pants, black belt, white shirt, with colorful wool embroidered vest, and a large brimmed hat. This is the third year that Viktor and his family have put this celebration on, but the first in which his sons will participate. Viktor's 17 and 13 year old sons have been taking traditional dance lessons and horse riding lessons for the past few months. This is an exhausting endeavor especially with the demands of the new school year. The ritual reenacts a harvest festival without a harvest as the wine is bought in Eger. The ritual is a peasant festival without a peasant as they buy expensive "traditional" costumes and must take classes to learn "traditional" dance and horse riding. Therefore, despite the difficulty in reconstructing or preserving a past event, there is a clear distinction between what constituted the old and the new celebrations. Though there is a diversity of participants, one coherent theme is the cultural memory of a peasant tradition.

Being linked to peasants, the festival is associated with evoking a history of resistance and a symbol of ambiguity. Peasant resistance throughout Hungarian history might explain why state socialism condemns the peasant grape harvest festival. The seemingly powerless peasant portrays a source of empowerment due to their ability to skirt those in power. However, Communists portray the peasant as an emblem for its own propaganda. While the state glorifies the simple hardworking efforts of the peasantry, they downplay the peasant's revolutionary ways. Hungarians, however, do not forget these peasant revolutionary ways. The peasant becomes an important symbol for resisting communism. The peasant, hence, is an ambiguous symbol. Being ambiguous contributes to a symbol's effectiveness because it entails "multi-vocality". The symbol can have different meanings for different people. Verdery says a good political symbol "has legitimating effects not because everyone agrees on its meanings but because it compels interest despite (because of) divergent views of what it means" (1999: 31). Celebrating the festival today is a resistance to the Communist past and perhaps paying homage to the trickster identity linked to skirting and undermining the Communist system itself.

## ***B. Ritual Revitalization as a Reflection the Present Day impact of Capitalism***

### *a. Present Day Reflection of Socialist Past*

Today's participants identify with the peasant showing a historical link to the land yet they are not true peasants. Viktor lives on the outskirts of Budapest in a county that still allows people to keep livestock despite the large suburban homes. Post '89 the new government offered to let Viktor's family buy back the land their ancestors once owned and farmed. Unfortunately, after a generation of being green grocer merchants, no one knows how to farm the land anymore. Their family name though is well known in the area and reinstating the festival is one way of expressing their family connection to the land, the harvest, and the farm. It is Saturday the day of the grape harvest festival. Everyone meets at the community center at noon so that a professional photographer can take formal pictures of everyone in their costumes. The procession consists of several men riding horses and three horse carriages, one filled with boys, men, and musicians, the second filled with women, the third with children. Most of the passengers stand in the back portion of the carriage -- there is only a wooden plank seat for the driver. The procession weaves throughout the small streets and neighborhoods, stopping at various spots for the youths to get out of the carriages to sing and dance.

Everyone sings traditional songs as a drummer and an accordion plays. It takes about an hour and a half before they finally return to the community club house. The police escort the procession blocking off the streets to restrict the car traffic that might spook the horses. Last year a horse kicked a parked Trabant car and left a huge gaping hole in its side. The procession re-enacts the past yet displays elements of present day society.

The festival fuses time linking the past to the present illustrating the former Socialist society and the transition to a Capitalist market economy. As Nemedi suggests the peasant is an organizing symbol because of "Distrust of the democratic political machine, growing resentment with Western type capitalism, yearning for simple principle of social justice, and renewal of nationalistic sentiments combined with each other are as effective today as 50 years ago" (Nemedi 1995:74). The festival now reflects capitalism in terms of profit, commodities, and social differentiation. After the street procession the dancers and musicians arrive at the Community clubhouse and the party begins. The entrance fee is 500 forints. Only the

dancers in costume are dancing. I am told in the older days the adults did the dancing, but now it is young adults and children that are dancing the "csárdás". Slowly more people arrive. First families and older people, then later after 10 PM the younger more trendy adults arrive displaying Western mass consumption. They wear more hip modern attire such as Levi's, Niki shoes, and leather jackets -- all with the labels prominently showing. Grapes, kifli (bread shaped like horns), and pretzels hang from the ceiling laced with patriotic red, green and white colored streamers and ribbons. The people who are dancing below try to steal them. Those who are dressed in the traditional costumes, the dancers who were in the procession, try to catch the "thieves". The thieves are then taken to a judge who tells them the fine they must pay. I saw someone steal a pretzel and was charged 400 HUF (about \$2.80 USD). The money from this game is seen as a donation to support the festival. Prestige also seems to be a factor as those with higher status in the community offer to give more money. A sign posted on the door instructs participants unfamiliar with this game on how it is played.

The dance couple that catches the most thieves wins a prize. Katika and Viktor have been working in the kitchen most of the night. Though Katika walked in dressed in her expensive finery, it was not long before she had a white apron on, and those comfy white clogs most workers wear. She has been cooking fresh pizza all night. She also prepared a huge pot of "pörkölt".

She stewed together strips of pork with onions, diced peppers, tomatoes, paprika, sour cream, and a touch of flour, and served it over a plate piled with *nokedli* dumpling noodles -- this dish is seen as more traditionally Hungarian (see also Huseby-Darvas 2003). Viktor had hoped to make a profit, and though the pizza was a big seller, there is quite a bit of *pörkölt* left over. Viktor and Katika have put a great deal of time, effort, and planning, into this festival. Despite their wealth, they spend little time enjoying the event as they work most of the night in either the sweaty hot kitchen or behind the counter serving food and drinks.

The new celebration is linked to profit -- you must pay to enter, you must purchase food and drinks, you pay a fine for the thief game. The new celebration is linked to consumptive display -- the "traditional" costumes are very expensive, the younger generation wears Western style clothing with the name brand clearly showing, Katika wears her expensive outfit when she walks in but soon changes into her work clothes, those with money show off their wealth by paying a higher fine than necessary in the thief game.

Pizza is the preferred choice of food rather than the more traditional Hungarian *pörkölt*. Ironically the peasant ritual – a celebration of the past, is linked to an uncertainty with present day conditions as a result of the introduction of a Capitalist market system.

*b. Reinvention of Time Helps Society Cope With Change*

Linking the past to the present via recounting past traditions can be an important way of dealing with present day society by creating a sense of community. Post communism, after 40 years of domination, there is a certain appeal to a figure that both entails a denied tradition, but also resists domination. Clearly the peasant is an important organizing symbol for Hungarian society today. The symbol of the peasant is a way to deal with the current changes by glorifying a simpler past, and reinstating Hungarian identity. There are many reasons why members of this community would construct a collective memory of this harvest festival. For entertainment purposes, it is a fun and lively celebration that incorporates traditional music, dancing, drinking, and singing. Everyone sings along with his or her favorite songs. I asked how they know these old songs; “they just do” was the response I got. They are typical songs sung at celebrations such as weddings. Júlia feels Hungarian traditions remain constant and strong because “it is in the blood.” Though she was raised in Canada by Hungarian parents, she strongly feels more Hungarian than Canadian. She proudly states how she surprised the community with her “Hungarianess.”

She actively participates in the festival. She is one of the few adults over 20 who wear a traditional costume and she serves as the judge and accountant for the vintage sabotage thief game. She wears a stiff multilayered white petticoat under a richly embroidered red skirt with matching vest. Some women wear red boots but Júlia wears black buckled baby janes with white opaque tights.

Her husband Péti proudly admits to illegally obtaining a government protected feathery leafed plant “*Árvalányhaj*” that he sticks in his broad rimmed hat like a plume – most of the other men wear sprigs of rosemary in their hats. The *szüreti mulatság* lasts well into the night. A crowd of drunken older men has put the young accordion player on a chair on top of a table. The rowdy group sits around the musician insisting on singing loud drunken bawdy songs. The party will last well into the next day. We spend the following day at Viktor’s house. Katika tells me about a behind the scene’s trauma. Little Ferike, Viktor and Katika’s youngest son, was not dancing enough with his partner.

As a result her parents complained to Viktor. There was a big scene in the kitchen when Viktor yelled at Ferike. Apparently the men of the dance couples must be constantly attentive to the girl for that evening (kind of like an engagement just for the evening). Ferike had been infatuated with this girl before, but now he no longer likes her. To make matters worse he and she won first prize for catching the most thieves in the vintage sabotage game and so they have to share the prize cake. This means that Viktor and Katika (being the parents) must go with Ferike to visit the girl at her parent’s house. After this long night of partying and now cleaning, they are too tired. What an added offense.

For community building, the festival serves as a common bond for young and old and brings together members of a community that often share a connection to farming. It is a social event entailing flirtations (such as Ferike’s scandal), or assertions of community affiliation (such as Júlia’s claim of being more Hungarian than Canadian). For some it expresses display, prestige, and the skirting of authority (such as the thief game and Péti’s “*Árvalányhaj*”). For making a profit, it serves as an entrepreneurial venture (such as Viktor’s pizza). A complicated intermingling of different people come together in one space, during this limited time, to participate in a harvest celebration that mixes of past and present.

*c. Ritual Participation and Reconstructing Identity*

The past helps people deal with the changes in the present as reclaiming the peasant grape harvest festival takes place as Hungary changes post socialism. The brief period of euphoria immediately following the fall of communism in 1989 did not last. Many optimistically believed Hungary could now be a free independent country and all their problems would be over. Unfortunately, harsh reality and turmoil sets in. Although Hungary tries to rebuild a civil society, some of the residue of state totalitarianism remains. The far-reaching affects of Communist domination on Hungary’s future are unknown. What is known is Hungary is in a state of transition. Western capitalism seems to be colonializing the country with McDonalds, Burger Kings, and foreign capital. Foreign factories can take advantage of cheap Hungarian labor. Unemployment is a rising problem. Inflation steadily grows. The gap between the rich and poor widens. Russian, Ukrainian, and Chinese Mafiosi infiltrate the country. The pornography industry thrives. Drug use is on the rise. High rates of alcoholism and suicides, a persistent problem in Hungary, reveal the social unrest of the society. The shift to a market system did not bring an immediate cure but rather disillusionment (See also West 2002).

To reassert the peasant as symbol post communism gives meaning to a changing society ridden with instability. Verdery argues that some symbols are essential to political transformation due to their “symbolic capital” (1999: 33). Political transformation she argues is more complex than moving to a market economy. There is a “cosmic” re-ordering of the world. Daily life under socialism continued within or against certain constraints. These rules framed people’s lives. Hence with the shift to a market economy, the rules that framed people’s lives also shift. This change is very disorienting. A symbol that can evoke the past and present is useful in revising the past as societies adjust to post-Socialist change (Verdery 1999: 33-36). The peasant is one such symbol. The peasant embodies a tie to the past before communism, it expresses resistance before and during communism, and reasserts a censored past. The peasant is a mythic symbol that evokes emotion associated with a denied national identity.

To understand why individuals chose to participate in this event would vary from person to person but it does draw people together for a limited time. The young three year old child brought by her parents and gleefully running between the grown ups legs is going to have a different reason for being here than the 45 year old Viktor who watches his two adolescent sons dance and who serves wine and pizza to the guests. What brings together this diverse group of young and old, wealthy and poor, folksy and trendy, is the celebration of a peasant grape harvest festival, the oxymoron of a new tradition. These are individuals participating in a collective representation of cultural memory. Diverse individuals participate in a common event because there is a meaningful cultural “image” of the peasant that is simplified to the extent that it has meaning for the community. The transmission of the image of the peasant is possible because it is meaningful to the group that participates in this event (Fentres and Wickham 1992).

By fusing the past and present, the peasant festival illustrates the interplay of power and memory in the construction of Hungarian identity. As a symbol of the past, this festival recovers a tie to pre-Socialist Hungary. It represents a tradition denied by the Socialist government. The peasant festival reflects a more recent past, as the Socialist system would not let people celebrate it. It re-asserts a tradition denied during the Communist period. Hobsbawm (1983) suggests an invented tradition can express a political voice. The peasant festival can be an expression of resistance. As a peasant practice, it entails a strong history of revolution and resistance. Post socialism, this festival marks the power of these people to reenact a memory

that the Socialist period suppressed. As a representation of post-Socialist Hungary, this festival shows a desire for collective affiliation during a period of heightened stress. The peasant festival is an image of the past as it reclaims the memory of pre-Socialist Hungarian identity. It is a cultural memory that reasserts the power to reclaim a national identity. The politics of memory both at the state level and individual level can influence national identity (Tamaoui 1998). Though the Socialist system tries to censor this cultural practice, Hungarians retain a cultural memory of peasants.

***The peasant is an important symbol of resistance and pride in Hungary.***

This peasant festival fuses the past and present to show a malleability of time as it relates to the socioeconomic changes post communism and a reclaiming of identity. Discourse informs the construction of identity to maintain systems of power (Foucault 1980). People construct identities within the dominant discourse, yet what happens when soviet society suppresses Hungarian identity? Hungarian identity persists in private lives and memories as a counter discourse. It could not have been practiced during the Communist occupation, but now post ‘89 it can. Now the counter discourse during the Socialist period can burst free in the form of ritual expression. Nationalism is a cultural construction. It is “imagined” (Anderson 1983). This imagined national identity draws on the memory of an important Hungarian symbol: the peasant. At a grassroots level, this ordinary community recreates a cultural practice asserting individual agency and identity. Memory is part of the re-imagination of national identity. During the instability of the transition, re-imagining a Hungarian identity is part of a revitalization process. This grape harvest festival exemplifies how a community of people recalls and reinvents the symbol of the Hungarian peasant to reclaim a lost Hungarian identity. To reclaim a proud and assertive symbol is a way to instill this pride and assertiveness in their own lives despite and because of the uneasiness of the society around them.

Post socialism there is a desire for collective identity especially in response to stress of the transition and ritual is a form of collective time that brings individuals together. Each individual has their own reason for participating in this festival yet together they comprise a collective reaction to post Socialist society. Bourdieu suggests that individual is part of a collective practice. “Each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference



between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class" (1977:86). Individual expressions take place within a particular context. Divergent practices and beliefs can comprise a common practice. Despite the diversity of people involved in the festival, they come together to celebrate a peasant tradition. In addition the peasant symbol has multi-vocality in that it can appeal to different people at different levels. Despite different perceptions and perspectives, the community can have a common link to the peasant symbol because its multi-vocality can appeal to different people in different ways. The multi-vocality of the peasant symbol draws the group together into a coherent whole.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, perceptions of time change as reflected in the ritual itself. The ritual represents the past yet it is a reinvention of the past through the eyes of the present. This szüreti mulatság retains many of the "folk" elements of the traditional festival, yet it is certainly more of a reinvention of past symbols rather than a continuous tradition. It is not put on by peasants but rather merchants. They do not wear their "traditional" clothes daily, but rather expensive costumes tailored to look like the traditional clothes. They do not grow grapes nor harvest them, but rather purchase them at a produce market. They do not make wine, but rather purchase it and then sell it at the party. They do not simply dance, but take lessons to learn the traditional steps. Xeroxed signs instruct them on how to play the vintage sabotage game. This does not include a free feast, but rather an entrepreneurial venture to sell food and drinks to the participants, not to mention the entrance fee. Most people preferred the pizza to the pörkölt. If this is not a traditional szüreti mulatság, then what is it and what purpose does it serve?

Perceptions of changing time are also reflected in the ritual as the society changes to a market economy. The peasant festival expresses their new freedom as well as new forms of disillusionment. The society post-communism is in disarray and confusion as it shifts to a market economy. Not only is this a political shift, but also there is a shift in the way people live within this society. Old rules, norms, and practices no longer exist, and in some ways seem to change everyday. It is an expression of distrust and resentment of the shift to Westernized capitalism post '89. Western capitalism is not the instant cure but rather presents new issues of contention that will take time to resolve. In light of this turmoil, individuals resort to reclaiming a past tradition yet they meld together present day values and practices. The current grape harvest festival blends past

cultural traditions with present day market based aspirations. Not only is it a peasant tradition but there is the entrepreneurial intent to obtain a profit (a fee to enter, and a price for food and drink). The festival illustrates their new freedom to celebrate something that was formerly censored. The peasant as symbol embodies Hungarian nationhood and gives refuge to a more simple traditional life. This tradition comforts because it embodies nationhood and empowerment contrary to an unstable society of today. This celebration creates an alternative space that reclaims and reinvents a cultural identity and in the process brings together a community of diverse individuals. Ritual provides, perhaps briefly, a collective time, that brings people together. Ritual highlights the socio-economic changes marked in time and place as people struggle to make sense of societal change.

Ritual can distort time as it represents a "traditional" past yet it is a recreation in light of societal change. Individual's got used to Socialist time, but now people must adjust to the spatial temporal changes of capitalism. The harvest ritual celebrates a recreated Hungarian identity; it illustrates time, as a hazy disjuncture with the past and the present, socialism and capitalism, much like post Socialist Hungary today.

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