

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Krista M. Harper**

---

2006

# Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activism and Postsocialist Political Ecology in Hungary

Krista Harper, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/krista\\_harper/4/](https://works.bepress.com/krista_harper/4/)

## INTRODUCTION\*

This is a book about people seeking social change, during a period of social change of historical proportions. The historical change in question is Hungary's transformation from state socialism--part of the larger process of globalization. Over the course of the transformation from state socialism, Hungarian environmental activists produced and mobilized new environmental discourses articulating a new cultural and political logic: post-socialist political ecology. In a diverse array of issues and campaigns, environmentalists criticize rising social and economic inequalities, the proliferation of environmental risks and global consumerism, and limited access to political participation.

Having experienced the degradation of human health and the environment under both socialist and capitalist regimes, contemporary environmentalists express strong skepticism toward both systems. Post-socialist activists question the industrialist orientation and concepts of progress shared by state socialism and industrial capitalism. Hungary's environmental dissidents of the 1980s attacked the state's scientific bureaucracies and criticized central planning. They demanded institutional accountability, arguing for freedom of information, more transparent bureaucracies, and public participation in planning decisions. Environmental activists' continuing vision of grassroots democracy traces its roots to their critique of state socialism. Their emerging concerns about environmental inequalities, however, stem from a growing awareness that integration into the global economy made post-socialist countries vulnerable to environmental degradation and other risks in new ways. Environmentalists demand

---

\* Pre-publication version; for published version with complete bibliographic references, please see Harper, Krista (2006) *Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activism and Postsocialist Political Ecology in Hungary*, East European Monographs/Columbia University Press.

alternative pathways to economic development, and they struggle to make their perspective heard in an environment where neo-liberal models of progress have gained hegemony.

This evolving perspective on the global economy marks a shift, not only in the issues environmentalists chose to work on, but also in the way activists imagine power relations. While dissident environmentalists imagined themselves as society organizing itself against the party-state, many Hungarian activists came to identify themselves as part of a global social current running against waves of multinational capitalist expansion. In this vision, environmental activism protects the post-socialist state from its own weakness by shoring up citizens' opposition to potentially harmful development plans. Whether operating in a socialist dictatorship or a capitalist democracy, Hungarian environmentalists see their role in demanding, publicizing, and even creating scientific information and ethical arguments that challenge the status quo.

Environmental dissidents of the 1980s imagined a utopia of grassroots public participation, freedom of information, and self-organizing communities and small businesses. Hungarian activists of the 1990s retained these ideals, but the realities of the post-socialist transformation rendered them skeptical of the ecological modernization model proposed by advocates of global marketization (Hajer 1995). Now that Hungary has moved from the first decade of post-socialism into the nation's first decade as a member state of the European Union, environmentalists continue to fight for participation in the policymaking process. *Wild Capitalism* interrogates how the meanings of "environment," "citizenship," and "civil society" have changed as environmentalists reinvent themselves as part of the imagined community of international environmentalism and grassroots globalization.

In the pages that follow, I outline methodological and theoretical strategies for understanding the emerging post-socialist political ecology of East-Central Europe. I explore the contributions of ethnography to scholarship on environmental movements and post-socialist transformations, drawing upon my experience of field research in urban Hungary. Environmental and anti-nuclear movements played a significant role in 1980s dissident movements in Poland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic states as well as in Hungary (Dawson 1996, Jancar-Webster 1998, Nahaylo 1999, Pavlínek and Pickles 2000, Snajdr 1998). I choose to focus on Hungary's environmental movement because it mobilized large numbers of participants in the 1980s, offered a particularly trenchant critique of Soviet-era industrialization, and maintained a consistently active political presence in the years following the political transformations of 1989. I trace the trajectory of environmental activism, from its roots in 1980s dissidence, to the "environmental transition" following 1989, through contemporary environmentalists' increasing integration into networks and discourses of "grassroots globalization." Hungary's historical transformation presents a window onto the changing political ecology of industrial societies following the Cold War and the collapse of "actually existing socialism"—a shift I call "post-socialist political ecology." Environmental activists act as "revealers" of this emergent paradigm (Melucci 1992), making explicit the connections between democratic practice, changing social identities, and the political economy of the environment. Finally, I provide a chapter-by-chapter preview of the book.

### **Ethnography and Environmentalism: In the Field in the Street**

The first time I lived in Budapest, in fall 1993, I met the members of *Zöld Nők* ("Green Women"), Hungary's only eco-feminist group. The Green Women introduced

me to Hungary's environmental health problems, feminist issues, and the 1980s oppositionist scene. They had gotten to know one another during the Danube demonstrations of 1988, and they regaled me in stories about the Danube movement. When I returned home, I planned on doing more research on Danube activism.

When I returned in the summer of 1995, however, few environmentalists were interested in discussing the Danube. Some environmentalists were weary of the glorification of the Danube movement and its personalities. In the early 1990s, hundreds of small, grassroots environmental groups were forming outside the capital city, and groups in Budapest were turning their attention to new problems of consumer waste and suburbanization. Even those who had been active in the Danube movement were experiencing combat fatigue. In 1995, Hungarian environmental groups were working on diverse environmental issues and fretting about what to do when their initial five-year seed grants all expired at once. Discouraged on the Danube front, I determined to study Hungarian environmentalism as it transformed into a post-socialist social movement.

In August 1995, people all over the world gathered in demonstrations against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. The Hungarian action against nuclear testing at Mururoa, organized by a fledgling Greenpeace chapter and some members of the Clean Air Group., was my introduction to participant-observation in a social movement setting. Held in the middle of summer vacation, the protest drew less than a dozen of protesters, and I was quickly enlisted to hold up a large banner we marched from the French embassy steps to the posh downtown storefronts of Christian Dior and Air France on Váci Street. The action was covered in several national newspapers, along with a photo of me holding a bedsheet emblazoned with the slogan, "*Éljen Chirac—Mururoán!*" ("Long live Chirac--in Mururoa!") while attempting to take fieldnotes (Figure 1).

Although the Mururoa action was considered somewhat of a flop within the environmental movement, it propelled me into a wider network of activists.

Ethnographic research offers the opportunity to ground knowledge in place, but the selection of that “place” is a complex process that shapes the path of what follows (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). By the time of the Mururoa demonstration, I already knew a handful of activists from Hungary’s environmental movement. In the weeks that followed, I worked on finding a home within the movement. Budapest offered the best prospects for keeping track of local, national, and international environmental issues, but I also wanted to get to know environmental groups outside the capital city. For many weeks, I attended the civil organization afternoons at the Eco-Service office, an environmental information clearinghouse in downtown Budapest. On those afternoons, Eco-Service offered free photocopying to local grassroots activists as a way of fostering informal networking, and I was able to meet a variety of people from smaller organizations in Budapest.

In the end, I relied on my acquaintances from Green Women and the Clean Air Group to get settled in my research site. I helped the Clean Air Group gather signatures for a petition on public transportation at street fairs and a summer music festival, and I attended a few meetings. Through these contacts, I finally found my research home in the ELTE Klub, now known as ETK, a student environmental group at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. I had met several of the group’s members in a human ecology course at the university and through Clean Air Group events. The members were friendly, and many of them were curious about environmentalism in the United States. The group, active since the early 1980s, was well integrated into the national environmental movement. ELTE Klub’s newsletter, the *Gaia Press Review*, harnessed

the members' impressive language skills to translating environmental articles from German and English.

Perhaps most important for the purposes of my research project, ELTE Klub was relatively free of old antagonisms between members and between other environmental groups. One member told me, "We try to be the 'good children' of the movement and get along with everyone." Indeed, ELTE Klub had working relationships with nature protection groups, old dissident environmental groups, peace activists, religious organizations, and international environmental NGOs. ELTE Klub's ability to network with a wide range of groups allowed me to get to know many different parts of the movement without having to negotiate old conflicts.

Beginning in December 1995, I participated in the weekly meetings of the ELTE Klub, as well as the group's demonstrations and social events. I made a regular practice of doing the rounds, dropping by the offices of environmental organizations to learn about upcoming events, chat with activists, and pick up flyers and information. I participated frequently in the activities of several other Budapest environmental groups, including *Bokor* Eco-Group, Clean Air Group, Danube Circle, and the Green Circle of the Budapest Technical University.

I attended national-level meetings, press releases, planning sessions, demonstrations, and social events regularly. I went to conferences and training sessions given by environmental groups on a range of topics. I traveled to three annual meetings of the Hungarian environmental movement where representatives of activist groups from all over the country discussed national strategies. At these meetings, I made contacts with activists in the countryside whom I later visited for interviews. To gain a better understanding of how Hungarian activists fit into the larger world of international

environmentalism, I accompanied an ELTE Klub member to an international congress on sustainable development and social justice in Amsterdam in June 1997.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to my work with activists, I gained an understanding of how environmentalists' views overlap and conflict with those of Hungarians at large through mass media, popular culture, and daily interactions with non-environmentalists. When new acquaintances asked me why I had come to live in Hungary, I told them about my research, and they almost always responded with their opinions on environmentalism. I also got to know activists from the feminist, peace, and Roma (Gypsy) civil rights movements, all of whom offered their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the environmentalist world-view.

I used several methods to develop a picture of environmental activism as a perspective and a set of practices—collecting activist life histories, conducting interviews, participating in the everyday activities of environmentalist groups, and observing debates and demonstrations. Since I was concerned with transformations and continuities in environmental activism over the course of the transition, I often used a methodological strategy of tracking an issue or activist through time. I also looked for issues that activists perceived as completely novel, like consumption and advertising. In some cases, I paid attention to groups, people, and discourses that were considered external or marginal to the environmentalist cause, such as animal rights and peace organizations. By looking at unexpected alignments of activists and issues, I sought to comprehend how environmentalism takes shape in specific cultural and political contexts.

### **From the Danube to the Global: The Trajectory of Hungarian Environmentalism**

Although environmentalism is a global social movement, the meaning of environmental politics is constructed at the level of local practice, as activists creatively



translate environmental issues into novel cultural idioms and political processes.

Hungary's environmental movement emerged at a time when the peaceful revolutions of 1989 were as yet unimaginable, but when frustration with the socialist state was growing among the general public. The 1980s movement against the damming of the Danube River, while ostensibly a single issue mobilization, launched a multivalent critique of the state's "nature regime" (Gille 1997). In the wake of the political and economic transformation from state socialism, environmentalists confronted the renewed power of market forces. The 1990s witnessed a concomitant shift in environmentalist framing of issues and strategies. Toward the end of the decade, activists developed an awareness of the limitations of a capitalist nature regime and increasingly framed local and place-based issues in global context. Tracking environmentalism's trajectory from Danube dissidence, through the experience of the post-socialist "environmental transition" and "wild capitalism," to its intersection with the "grassroots globalization" of contemporary international social movement networks, I trace a genealogy of post-socialist political ecology as it has emerged in Hungary.

### *Danube Dissidence and Beyond*

When asked how the Hungarian environmental movement started, most environmentalists mention the 1980s movement against the damming of the Danube River as a key point of origin. Many Hungarians describe the mass demonstrations of 1988 against the damming of the Danube River at Nagymaros as a turning point for the political opposition to the government, when changing the state socialist system seemed to be an attainable goal after over thirty years of discouragement.

The Danube Circle, an underground environmental organization, emerged in the early 1980s as a result of a series of debates about the damming of the Danube. While

government engineers presented the case as a simple issue of technological know-how, journalist János Vargha wrote a number of articles on dissenting scientific opinions about the project. The Danube Circle coalesced around a small group of journalists, social scientists, artists, and natural scientists that opposed the damming of the Danube River at Nagymaros, 50 kilometers north of Budapest. The Danube Circle gathered a wide following as the Danube issue became a focus point for the political opposition to the state socialist government.

The Danube Circle found a symbolically rich site in the opposition to the damming of the Danube. The Danube movement, while 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 challenged the system's centrally planned economy on ecological, aesthetic, and cultural grounds. Underground newspapers, discussion circles, and demonstrations against the dam system created a space for debate and criticism of the government. Looking back, many participants in the Danube movement characterize their 1980s activism as their introduction to "civil society."

Early in my fieldwork, I learned firsthand how the Danube cause came to represent and legitimize environmental protest. When I joined Budapest activists in their demonstration against French atomic testing, an old woman stopped and confronted one of them: "Why don't you pick an issue closer to Hungary? I liked you environmentalists better when you had a *real* cause, when you were fighting for the Danube!" Her response reflected the extent to which many Hungarians associated environmentalism with narratives of democratization, drawing upon heroic stories of the oppositionist activism of the Danube Circle, a theme to which I return in the next chapter and throughout this

book. The multivalence of the Danube cause, with its patriotic evocation of the cultural heritage and natural splendor of the Danube landscape and its claims toward citizen participation in planning and decision-making, appealed to both nationalist and progressive strands of Hungarian political culture. Most people I met, from cab drivers to students to vendors at the flea market, mentioned the Danube movement as an important and respected environmental cause.

In this context, the movements of the 1990s seemed for a time to be less organized, less focused, and less potent (Vári and Tamás 1993, Jancar-Webster 1998). Although activists in the 1990s often deplored the small size of the environmental movement and spoke wistfully of the Green heyday of the late 1980s when demonstrations could mobilize thousands, the Hungarian environmental movement remained one of the largest and most influential social movements in Hungary. While activism in Budapest cooled off after 1989, there was an explosion of new groups in the countryside and in smaller cities that contributed new voices and issues to the national movement.

During the 1990s the number of registered groups grew steadily at a rate of approximately 30 new groups annually (Regional Environmental Center 1997: 48). With 726 environmental NGOs active in 1994, Hungary had the largest environmental movement in East-Central Europe, and this number did not reflect the several hundred local chapters within the Hungarian Nature Protectors' Association and the Hungarian Ornithological Association (Regional Environmental Center 1997: 13). Although the number of registered groups is not always an accurate indicator of collective action on the ground, clearly, environmentalism has become an important area of political action.

In the 1990s roughly two-thirds of the organizations were in small towns with the remaining groups in Budapest and other large cities (Regional Environmental Center 1997: 48). Hundreds of activists communicated with one another on the *Zöld Pók* (“Green Spider”) computer network and exchange information on the Green Spider’s bulletin boards. Green Spider contributed considerably to the ability of groups in the countryside to exchange information and participate in nationwide debates, despite their physical distance from Budapest. In addition to environmental groups, several peace, social justice, and feminist groups also communicated via Green Spider. Activists participated in lively online debates, and often people would discuss these exchanges while waiting for a meeting to begin or while conversing over beers. Online and face-to-face, they began to link together the disparate environmental problems faced by activists in the countryside, cities, and the global environmental movement more broadly.

*Environmental transitions<sup>2</sup> and “wild capitalism”*

Environmental activists who came of age protesting the socialist state laid the blame for environmental problems on the absence of democratic public participation and the socialist ideology of productivism (Persanyi 1993, Fisher 1993). In the years immediately following the political changes of 1989, policymakers’ understanding of environmental problems drew from this dissident account but added a new solution to the problem: the global market. In his 1990 address at the opening of the Regional Environmental Center in Budapest, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s director, William K. Reilly, stated the following:

The lifting of the Iron Curtain has revealed to the world that authoritarian, centrally planned societies are much greater threats to the environment than capitalist democracies. The same policies that ravaged the environment—the

pursuit of all-out, no-holds barred economic development, without regard for either human or natural resources—also wrecked the economy. (Reilly 1990: 2)

Reilly's characterization of the environmental issue is an example of the Cold War triumphalism of the times, when Western experts and Eastern elites promised that the market would provide the strong medicine required to cure socialism's many ills. Marketization and foreign investment, in this view, would provide the "engine" for environmental progress by making capital available for investments in new environmental technologies from the West.

In fact, policy representations of state socialism as ecological villain and capitalist democracy as environmental savior proved somewhat inaccurate. To be sure, the central planners of the socialist economy externalized environmental burdens of industrial production onto citizens (Gille 2002). Planners' vision of catching up with (and even surpassing) the capitalist West's economic growth led to the creation of some of the most polluted landscapes on earth—environmental "hotspots" that continue to harm the health and economic opportunities of the people who live nearby (Feshbach and Friendly 1992, Carter and Turnock 1993).

Ten years after Reilly's statement, however, the processes of privatization and marketization have not resulted in an unqualified environmental success story. In many cases post-socialist governments shunted aside environmental concerns as they attracted foreign investment with pollution waivers (Clapp 2001, Pávlínek and Pickles 2000). Research suggests that the most environmentally innovative firms in Hungary were typically state-owned companies producing exports, and Western companies, contrary to earlier predictions, did not tend to develop new environmental technologies or products (Zsolnai 1998).

Images of natural order feature prominently in post-socialist political development discourses on social order. The symbolic process of “naturalization,” as feminist scholars have observed, legitimizes social and economic power relationships as foundational truths (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 5). In contemporary representations of East-Central Europe, the binary opposition between “nature” and “culture” corresponds to the “capitalist”/“socialist” binary (Verdery 1996: 78).

In the market triumphalist discourse that emerged after 1989, the state’s efforts to control and tame market forces were likened to monumental Stalinist public works projects that reversed the flow of rivers—examples of hubris in defiance of natural laws.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Western consultants and political elites throughout the region portray the market as a positive force of nature that will help post-socialist countries to evolve into ecologically modern capitalist democracies. Hungarian activists turn this naturalistic metaphor on its head, lamenting the environmentally destructive qualities of “wild” or “savage” capitalism (*vadkapitalizmus*).

Hungarian environmentalists believe that without the constant vigilance of citizens, multinational capital and short-sighted local entrepreneurs will override the common good and appropriate land, resources, and the public sphere itself for their own profit. Writing about the shift to laissez-faire development policy, Gille states:

If state socialism was mostly characterized by power through the incalculable, professionally ungrounded, and politically unchecked decisions of the state, the present is characterized by what Gaventa (1980) would call power through the “nondecisions” of a fragmented state held in check by the private sector. (Gille 2002: 155)

Contemporary environmentalists challenge the “naturalness” of the market economy not only by demanding that the state take actions to protect the environment, but also by challenging the underlying assumption that there are no politically legitimate alternatives to global capitalism. In a market economy as in a centrally planned socialist system, the environment can only be protected through the constant vigilance of citizens.

Having seen the social and environmental effects of the transformation to a market economy, Hungarian environmental activists would probably agree with EPA director Reilly on one thing: that the “pursuit of all-out, no-holds barred economic development, without regard for either human or natural resources” remains a major obstacle to sustainable development. During the 1990s, many environmentalists came to see ecological destruction in a different light of post-socialism and globalization. A number of research participants began to speak of *vadkapitalizmus*-- “wild capitalism”-- as a source of environmental problems. The use of the term was not restricted to environmentalists; it was part of the national lexicon of market skepticism during a time when polls showed only 15 percent of Hungarians identifying with “liberal” attitudes toward private property, with 40% exhibiting an “anti-capitalist” orientation (Zsolnai 1998). The pejorative use of the word *vad*, or “wild,” in this context deserves further inspection, for it reveals how nature and the market were being constructed in post-socialist Hungary.

The first sense of “wild capitalism” draws upon a variety of post-socialist discourses on the market as a force of nature. Beginning with dissident critiques of state socialism and Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” rhetoric, the attempts of socialist states to transform society and the economy were portrayed as exemplars of human artifice and hubris. This characterization is partly rooted in the Communist Party’s own

rhetoric of progress: society overcoming nature. Dissident intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, drew on organic models of society as a self-organizing (*önszerződő*) system, an image that persists in environmental circles today. In the “triumphalist stage” of the post-socialist transformation (Wedel 1999), Western experts and local elites presented the twin transition of market capitalism and parliamentary democracy as the next organisms to evolve from earlier socialist life forms. Presenting the new social order as part of the larger natural order, they sought to legitimize policies that caused major social and economic dislocations in people’s everyday lives.

There is a second sense to the term *vadkapitalizmus*, however, in which capitalism is not merely “wild,” but also “savage.” From the vantage point of many Hungarians, marketization and privatization enriched a small group within society while producing shockingly tangible social inequalities. Environmentalists, in their negative characterization of “wild capitalism,” somewhat ironically contend that if the market is indeed a force of nature, then it should be tamed and regulated. As suggested by the title of a recent book by a Hungarian environmentalist, *Vissza a Koszmikus Rendhez* (“Back to the Cosmic Order”), they have their own claims to organic order (György 2000). Environmental activists offer their own alternative evolutionary theory for society: grassroots networks of citizens pushing their way through the neglected garden of 1980s green dissidence to demand sustainable development and global justice.

#### *Hungarian Environmentalism and “Grassroots Globalization”*

In May 2000, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) held its convention in Budapest. Delegates to the meeting arrived at the downtown conference site, the ornate and beautiful Vigadó concert hall on the banks of the Danube. On this day, however, the view of the river from the Vigadó steps was blocked by a crowd of several



hundred Hungarians gathered in the square in front of the hall. The university-based environmental group ELTE Klub, a always a reliable troupe for street theatre, was putting on a performance in which an activist dressed as a businessman kicked around a large globe. Members of the Budapest Technical University's Green Circle and the Clean Air Action Group assembled in the square. There on the banks of the Danube, a chant rose up from the crowd and was repeated over and over, "Re-mem-ber Se-at-tle!" (György 2000a: 1). Although not one of these activists had been physically present at the November 1999 demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, they "remembered" those protests as part of their own history of struggle.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the mid-1990s, I observed a transformation within Hungarian environmental activism: from the dissident-style movement of the 1980s symbolized by the Danube movement to the movement for "globalization-from-below" that later came to be symbolized globally by the Seattle protests of 1999 and the World Social Forum meetings. From the demonstrations against the damming of the Danube in the 1980s, environmental protest has played a key role in Hungary's political life over the course of the transformation from state socialism. Environmentalism emerged as a major dissident political force, and in the 1990s, the environmental movement diversified to include a wide array of problems facing citizens, communities, and environments in the wake of East-Central Europe's entry into the global economy.

Roland Robertson describes globalization as a dual process: "Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson 1992: 8). Following Robertson, anthropologist Kay Milton suggests that anthropologists should attend to

environmentalism, both as cultural response to globalization and as a new, global activist identity (Milton 1996).

Hungarian environmental activism in the 1990s exemplifies both aspects of Robertson's globalization. Targeting multinational capital's incursions into emerging post-socialist markets, activists respond to the political-economic compression of the former "Second World" into the global system. Since 2000, new "alternative globalization" organizations such as Central and Eastern Europe Bankwatch Network, *Védegylet*, and *Más Világ Lehet* ("Another World is Possible") have formed to address environmental issues, joining older environmental groups. Participating in transnational networks and campaigns, Hungarian environmentalists increasingly think about and experience local conditions within a global frame of reference. Remembering the socialist past and "remembering" Seattle, they identify themselves with an environmentalism that is global in scope and grassroots in practice.

### **Toward a Post-Socialist Political Ecology**

[A]rticulating environmental and social change as co-constitutive moments of transitional societies is also about constructing a theory of environmental and social change. (Pavlínek and Pickles 2000: 30)

Since environmentalism is a social movement that conceives of social problems, impacts, policy, and change in terms of a telescoping scale--from local to global—it provides unique opportunities for those interested in the study of situated globalization. Post-socialist political ecology brings together debates on civil society and democratization, the emergence of new political identities, and anthropological contributions to political ecology and environmental theory, three fields of inquiry I sketch briefly here. Finally, post-socialist political ecology serves as a tool for

understanding the position of the former Second World in globalization processes and offers the perspectives of Green activists who have “seen both sides”—that is to say, state socialist and capitalist regimes—and are still searching for democracy, social justice, and sustainable societies.

### *Eastern Europe and Civil Society Debates*

Environmentalism emerged as one of Hungary’s predominant dissident political forces in the 1980s, ushering in the political changes of 1989. “We had to become oppositionists,” the Danube Circle’s leader, János Vargha, told me, “to secure the basic human rights that would allow us to protect the environment.” While the political climate has changed since the mid-1980s, Hungarian environmentalists have consistently maintained a concern for democratic processes and the development of civil society up to the present day.

For the environmentalists involved in the Danube movement, at least, “civil society” meant an escape from the state’s claims to represent all of the interests of all of its citizen-workers. Like other dissidents in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, many environmentalists conceived of their actions in terms of civil society organizing itself against the state (Arato and Cohen 1992, Kubik 1994, Michnik 1985). The title of one of Vaclav Havel’s most well-known works, sums up this conception of civil society perfectly: *The Power Of The Powerless: Citizens Against The State In Central-Eastern Europe* (Havel 1985).

The limitations of this rights-based, Lockean perspective on civil society became apparent to environmentalists as Hungary shifted to a market economy. Before 1989, production, consumption, and institutional decision-making were all ostensibly located within the state. After 1989, environmental activists found themselves fighting battles on

multiple fronts: against the nation-state (though not always), but also against a diverse array of corporations and financial institutions. Over the course of the 1990s, environmentalists continued to frame their actions in terms of “civil society,” but their concept of civil society underwent a subtle shift from the liberalism advocated in dissident activism to a more Gramscian notion of civil society forming a wedge between the state and market institutions.

In their essay, “Liberation Ecology: Development, Sustainability, and Environment in an Age of Market Triumphalism,” Richard Peets and Michael Watts connect current debates on the nature of civil society with environmental justice struggles around the world (Peet and Watts 1996). Contemporary theories of development develop normative configurations of the state, civil society, and market. Like Gramsci, Peet and Watts conceive of civil society as a participatory, mediating space between state and market, although they acknowledge that it may equally impose strictures on individuals (Peet and Watts 1996: 21). In the post-1989 “age of market triumphalism,” however, civil society groups such as environmental organizations may act to protect the state’s ability to regulate in the face of neo-liberal market ideology. In the Hungarian context, this shift in the role of the nation-state has meant a shift in activists’ understanding of their own political role. In this evolving perspective, activists moved from the “society-versus-the-state” model of 1980s environmental dissidence to the more recent model of citizen watchdogs guarding public goods from laissez-faire market exploitation facilitated by a weak state.

### *Environmentalist Identities*

Related to debates about the nature of civil society are issues of citizenship and political identity in post-socialist environmentalism. A number of social identities

surface in the accounts to follow in this book. On the one hand, environmentalists position themselves as citizens, scientists, and parents and according to age, gender, ethnicity, and religious identity. On the other hand, many environmentalists establish activist identities through rejecting other forms of identity, such as “consumer” or “Hungarian nationalist.”

I explore how environmentalists in Hungary connect identity and subjective experience with place-based politics and concern for the public sphere. In her analysis of Slovene protests against the removal of a Baroque fountain in a public square, Veronica Aplenc explores issues of affect, emotion, and attachment to place in civic activism (Aplenc 2001). In a similar vein, environmentalists make subjective connections between public spaces and events, personal experiences, and political practice by collecting and analyzing activist biographies.

Arturo Escobar envisions grassroots environmental movements in terms of “historical subjects struggling for the reappropriation of their natures and the redefinition of their identities” (Escobar 1998: 388). Escobar’s work illuminates current conditions of Hungarian environmental activism because it highlights the political struggles over *definition*—the definition of social actors who can legitimately make demands for environmental improvements, as well as the definition of resources, public space, and the public sphere. Environmental anthropology must take into account the production of environmental identities in settings around the world (Agrawal 2005).

### *Political Ecology and the Anthropology of Environmentalism*

In their discourse on “wild capitalism,” Hungarian environmentalists articulate a particularly trenchant ecological critique of the neoliberal orthodoxy that dominated the transformation to a market economy throughout the region. Examining activists’

interpretations of the “environmental transition,” I draw from several theoretical and methodological approaches, including symbolic ecology, historical ecology, and political ecology. Based on my fieldwork in an urban, industrialized setting, I attempt to bring social theories of risk into dialogue with these strands of environmental anthropology.

Anthropologist Aletta Biersack describes the transformation from early ecological anthropology’s “New Ecology”—an approach pioneered in the late 1960s by such anthropologists as Roy Rappaport and Andrew Vajda—to the “new ecologies” of contemporary environmental anthropology (Biersack 2000). The “New Ecology” ushered in a renewed interest in the material conditions of human populations inhabiting specific environments and adapting to specific environmental niches and ecosystemic events (Milton 1996, Biersack 2000).

The most common criticisms of the “New Ecology,” in its early incarnation, were that it privileged a functionalist interpretation of human activities and that it marginalized the concept of culture in its ecosystem analyses (Biersack 2000, Milton 1996). Much of the work by ecological anthropologists in the late 1970s and 1980s attempted to resolve these problems. Ecological anthropology developed as a theory and was defined in relation to the key debates of anthropology in the 1970s: the extent to which nature or culture shapes human endeavors and the question of whether materialist (often Marxist) frameworks or idealist approaches (such as structuralism and symbolic anthropology) should take precedence in anthropological theory (Ortner 1994). While the “New Ecology” stood firmly in the materialist camp, the “new ecologies” outlined by Biersack emerged out of anthropologists’ attempts to bridge the material and ideological through an analytical focus on discourse and social practices.

Biersack contrasts the “New Ecology” with three new approaches to the human-environment relationship, which she calls the “new ecologies”: symbolic ecology, historical ecology, and political ecology. The “new ecologies” attempt to avoid the “either/or of idealism versus materialism” (Biersack 2000: 7), paying special attention to how eco-systems are shaped by our knowledge and other symbolic practices, historical transformations, and political-economic relationships. Together with more ecosystem-oriented approaches of human ecology, the “new ecologies” comprise a large part of the work being done in the field of environmental anthropology.

Symbolic ecology attends to the widely varying social construction of nature through language and symbolic practices. Scholars of symbolic ecology have studied diverse “senses of place” and the cultural aesthetics and poetics of nature—the “structures of feeling” associated with particular landscapes and environments (Feld and Basso 1996, Williams 1977). Work in this field is relevant to the anthropological study of environmentalism because it helps us understand how the “environment” is culturally constructed as an object to exploit, protect, or preserve. Anthropologists and environmental historians have studied how some landscapes, animal species, and other symbols come to symbolize nature itself, while others are disregarded entirely (Einarsson 1993, Pyne 1998, Kuletz 1999). As we shall see in the case of Hungarian environmental struggles, the success of environmentalism as a social movement depends largely upon activists’ ability to frame environmental issues symbolically and to deploy representations of nature and society that persuade policymakers and other citizens to support their cause.

Historical ecology, closely linked with scholarship on environmental history, examines how specific environments came into being. From this perspective, landscapes

and ecological relationships are cultural artifacts, or “the embodiment of past activity,” as Tim Ingold writes (Ingold 1992: 50). In the decade following 1989, environmentalists responded to dramatic changes in urban and rural landscapes. Urban ecologist Alice Ingerson states:

To paraphrase Marx, people consciously make and remake urban landscapes, starting from patterns of use and ownership not of their own choosing. Anthropologists may be able to use “culture” to capture the conscious choices involved in making land urban, and “political economy” to capture the unchosen circumstances of that making. (Ingerson 2001: 245)

Historical ecology contributes to environmental theory and practice by making explicit the social practices, political decisions, and unchosen “non-decisions” that have produced a particular landscape. In so doing, it lays particularly essential groundwork for understanding the political ecology of postsocialist societies.

Political ecology provides a method for studying the political economy of the environment. Influenced by socialist critiques of the capitalist exploitation of land and labor, political ecologists study how environmental resources and sinks are used, who benefits and who suffers from a particular pattern of resource use, and how societies make decisions about production, consumption, and waste that transform the environment (Boyce 2002, Johnston 1994). Anthropologists and geographers working from the political ecology perspective have attempted to bring Foucauldian perspectives on discourse, governmentality, knowledge, and power in conversation with materialist approaches to political ecology (Escobar 1999, Brosius 1999, Agrawal 2005).

Although much work in political ecology has focused on rural areas, the present study treats urban environmental struggles within a political ecology framework. Paying



attention to urban environments requires us to acquaint ourselves with an area of social scientific research that has until recently been ignored in political ecology: the study of environmental risks. While rural political ecology tends to focus on issues of land distribution and use, urban political ecology places public health, environmental risks, and quality of life concerns alongside more traditional natural resource issues (Pellow 2002, Gottlieb 2001).

### *Globalization and Post-Socialist Political Ecology*

While hundreds of books and articles have been published on globalization (and on environmental movements' role in promoting or opposing it) in the past decade, scholars are only recently beginning to write about the post-socialist transformation in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a process of globalization (Stryker and Patino 2001, De Soto 2000, Hemment 2004 and Dunn 2004 are notable exceptions). Social scientists constructing general theories of globalization have, for the most part, paid little attention to the former Second World in their attempt to understand newly emerging linkages between the Global North and South. I believe that this is a mistake: globalization scholars must understand the experience of Eastern Europe if they are to grasp the political implications of the collapse of state socialism and the subsequent devaluation of socialist projects around the world. Eastern European studies, therefore, should continue to attend to the specific historical antecedents of post-socialist transformations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. At the same time, we should not lose sight of how post-socialist societies are embedded in the larger phenomena of globalization—of which “1989” was both a symptom and symbol. Ethnography, as an epistemology located at the meeting point of the local and the global,

provides the ideal starting point for understanding the connections between post-socialist transformation and globalization.

Contemporary, “post-essentialist” political ecology offers a framework for considering symbols, discourse, and identity, as well as political, economic, and social practices, in its assessment of human environmental transformation (Escobar 1999). Bridging the old materialist/idealist divide in cultural theory is one of my chief goals in developing a theory post-socialist political ecology—both for the sake of providing a richer empirical account of the “environmental transition” and for making sense of environmental sustainability, modernity, and social justice after the Cold War. In their 1996 essay, “From Marxism to Postcommunism,” Michael Kennedy and Naomi Glatz urge social scientists studying contemporary Eastern Europe to act as “ridge-riders between the social transformations of Eastern Europe and the intellectual transformation in Marxism occasioned by them” (Kennedy and Glatz 1996: 438-39). As an anthropologist studying post-socialist activists’ struggles to change society, I find it doubly urgent to make sense of the transformative power of environmental movements in a setting where many citizens (environmentalists included) quite vocally express their exhaustion with the “radiant future” of state socialism and with utopian ideologies more generally.

## **Chapter Preview**

Ethnography is a critical tool for tracking how environmental issues are defined and used and how people become environmental activists. In my research, I was particularly interested in changes over time, as Hungary shifted from a state socialist society to one with a democratically elected government and a largely unregulated market economy. How did Hungarian environmentalists create a distinctive political voice for

themselves? What practices and meanings of environmental activism have held constant over the course of the transformation from state socialism? What has changed over the years?

The first two chapters investigate the creation of environmentalism as a social movement and activist identity in Hungary. The first chapter, “The Making of the Hungarian Environmental Movement,” discusses the activist narratives about the emergence of environmental activism in Hungary. The 1980s movement against the damming of the Danube River established environmentalism as a form of political opposition under state socialism and is widely acknowledged as the origin point of today’s environmental movement by both environmentalists and the general public in Hungary. Nevertheless, activists related multiple stories about the founding of the environmental movement that reflected their own distinct interests, locales, loyalties, and points of entry. I examine one environmentalist’s published chronology of the environmental movement, showing what his origin narrative reveals about struggles for legitimacy within the movement, and what constitutes “environment,” “civil society,” and “politics” as cultural categories at different points in time.

Chapter Two, “Chernobyl Stories and Anthropological Shock,” investigates issues of knowledge and power in environmental struggles, presenting several stories about health and environmental risks. The tenth anniversary of the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe generated a creative outpouring of stories about scientific knowledge, environmental risks, and public participation. Chernobyl stories reveal twin processes in the development of environmentalist identities, which I call the politicization of knowing, and the politicization of caring. These stories exemplify sociologist Ulrich Beck’s

concept of “anthropological shock,” the crisis in daily life and knowledge provoked by environmental risks.

The next part of the book moves from the theme of activist histories and identities to consider how Hungarian environmentalists frame specific post-socialist environmental issues. Chapter Three focuses upon activist responses to the post-socialist growth in advertising and the introduction of global consumerism into Hungary. Many environmentalists view the rise of consumer society as an obstacle to the development of a democratic public sphere. They frame environmentalism as a political discourse on citizenship, freedom of information, and public participation that is threatened by the propaganda (advertising) and sinister motives of multinational corporations. Activists' campaigns against advertisements and contests constitute a critique of consumer society more generally and express activists' fears about the commercialization of the public sphere. I compare environmentalists' fears about advertising as a source of propaganda and misinformation with earlier environmental activism in the 1980s, which focused on increasing public access to scientific studies and using scientific information to challenge centrally planned projects. Hungarian environmentalists speak of the public sphere in both the physical sense of public places and the more abstract sense of a public space of citizenship and debate.

Chapter Four, “Eco-Colonialism,” introduces the theme of mounting inequalities, exploring the appearance of a new environmental discourse in Hungary. Early in 1997, some environmentalists began speaking and writing about “eco-colonialism,” a term referring to East-West relationships in the political ecology of post-socialist Europe. Because Eastern European countries are poorer and have less entrenched citizens' action

and environmental groups than Western Europe, they are more vulnerable to environmental exploitation.

In Chapter Five, I pose the question, “Does Everyone Suffer Alike?” Much of the success of environmental movements hangs on the belief that everyone suffers from environmental degradation, whether rich or poor. Hungarian environmental groups have been particularly successful at presenting the environment as a consensus issue. Recently, however, activists have grown increasingly aware that those who suffer most from the increasing socioeconomic disparities of the post-socialist period are more vulnerable to environmental degradation and illness as well. In this chapter, I describe environmental problems facing Roma (Gypsy) communities in Hungary’s post-socialist “Rust Belt”. I analyze some of the obstacles to building Roma-environmentalist coalitions present activists’ recent efforts to address the social and environmental effects of the transformation from state socialism.

In the Conclusion, I discuss how the experiences of Hungarian environmentalists change the way we should think about social movements, the environment, and struggles for a better world. As East-Central Europe is integrated into the European Union, global markets, and global environmentalist networks, Hungarian activists provide a provocative new perspective on environmental politics after the Cold War. I point to the broader implications of the Hungarian environmental movement for the development of political ecology.

---

<sup>1</sup> The congress was coordinated with the European Marches Against Unemployment and Social Exclusion, which followed the path of European Union’s economic summits.

<sup>2</sup> Here I borrow Petr Pavlínek and John Pickles’ term.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the very capitalist city of Chicago had a public works project in the 1870s that reversed the flow of the Chicago River, proving that ecological hubris is not limited to Stalinist planned economies (Cronon 1991).