

GREEN CARNIVORES, MAD COWS, AND GENE TECH: THE POLITICS OF FOOD IN HUNGARIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Introduction

Anthropologists and sociologists, from Levi-Strauss to Bourdieu, have observed that consuming food is a profoundly social act through which people express relationships and perform concepts of social order. Historically, food has provided a rich political symbol and rallying point, from the Boston Tea Party to the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 in colonial India, when Muslim and Hindu troops rebelled against their British officers upon learning that their rifle cartridges were greased with suet and lard -- foods considered impure according to religious dietary taboos. Food features in Eastern Europe's history of political conflict; for example, the December 1980 Solidarity strikes in Poland were touched off by government announcements of Christmastime food shortages (Kubik 1995). Since 1989, food and daily provisioning has become the most immediate medium through which Eastern Europeans experience the vast political and economic shifts following the collapse of state socialism in their daily lives.

Perhaps no other area of contemporary political action has as much to say about food as the international environmental movement. In the past decade, Greenpeace activists have battled McDonald's and Monsanto, the chemical agrobusiness giant. Grassroots environmental groups in Cuba, the U.S., Argentina, and Mexico have advanced the cause of organic agriculture. The Slow Food movement, which began in the mid-1980s as a neighborhood action against the construction of a McDonald's outlet at the Spanish Steps in Rome, went on to forge connections between gastronomical and ecological survival and has established chapters throughout the globe (Petrini 2003, Stille 2001). Food safety scares, from Alar-coated apples to mad cow disease, have spurred alliances between consumer advocacy groups and environmental organizations in North America and Western Europe (James 1993, Strydom 2002). How do environmental activists politicize foods, and how does this process differ cross-culturally? Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork among environmentalists in Hungary in

1995-97 and 2000, I explore political discourses on food, diet, and risk.

Green Carnivores? Environmentalism and the Political Meanings of Food

One of the first things I observed during my fieldwork was the difference between North American and Eastern European environmentalists' orientation to food. Shortly after my arrival in Hungary in 1995, I discovered that many of my preconceptions about environmentalist practice were culturally specific to North America. Looking for urban environmental groups where I could do fieldwork, I sought out natural foods stores and herbalist shops. I expected these shops to have bulletin boards with flyers for environmental organizations, as is often the case in the United States. As I found no such flyers in these *bio-boltok* ("bio-stores"), this approach bore little fruit, and I located research participants through other means.

As I got involved in environmental groups and began socializing with activists following meetings and demonstrations, I soon learned that the vast majority of my research participants were *not* vegetarians, at a time when vegetarianism had become somewhat of a "litmus test" for environmentalist commitment in the United States. While the vegan diet—free of dairy products, eggs, and any other animal-based foods—was gaining popularity in the United States for ethical and health reasons, it was almost completely unknown in Hungary, as in most of Eastern Europe.

A small number of Hungarian activists opted for a vegetarian diet in Hungary in the early 1990s because of the ecological advantages to eating low on the food chain or because of an ethical decision to avoid meat out of concern for animals. These few eccentric souls endured countless restaurant meals of rice, frozen peas and carrots, and deep-fried cheese triangles served with tartar sauce or blackcurrant jelly—a meal that could hardly support any health-based arguments for vegetarianism. At home, they fared better, drawing from an array of meatless Hungarian

recipes traditionally prepared for Lent, *főzelék* (creamed vegetable dishes), recently introduced Middle Eastern and Asian foods, and salads.

Initially, I was flummoxed by Hungarian environmentalists' apparent indifference to health and dietary practices that have been associated with environmental politics in North America for over a decade. This perplexity caused me to reflect on the different roles food consumption choices play in environmentalism in the two settings. There was no shortage of interest in the politics of food among environmentalists throughout Hungary. Activists railed against the spread of McDonald's and other fast-food chains and organized against Nestle's and Pizza Hut's attempts to invade Hungarian schools through ostensibly charitable contests (for detailed analysis of these issues, see Harper 1999a and 1999b). The point to be taken is not that food is politicized in North American environmentalism and not politicized in Eastern European environmentalists, but that food is framed in markedly different ways as a political issue. These contrasting environmental discourses on food are illustrated in the environmentalists' responses to the "mad cow disease" crisis of 1996 and in the ongoing European debates on GMO crops and foods, cases I will examine at greater length in the sections that follow.

Responses to the Mad Cow Crisis in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Hungary

The British, Americans, and Hungarians all reacted differently to the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis. The case of BSE illuminates differences in cultural perceptions of food safety and risk, as well as the political stakes of framing food as an environmental issue. BSE was identified by officials in the United Kingdom as early as 1985 (Adams 1998). BSE is a degenerative disease affecting the brain and central nervous system in cattle—hence its popular name, "mad cow disease." By 1987, British scientists had made the connection between BSE and the common livestock feeding practice of supplementing cows' usual diet grass and grain with industrial feed containing offal and bone-meal from sheep and cattle infected with scrapies, another degenerative disease affecting ruminants. After over a year of debate, the British government put into place a ban on livestock feed containing animal offal, and the problem of mad cow disease receded from public memory.

All this changed when ten cases of a new form of Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease (CJD) in humans were linked to the consumption of BSE-infected beef in early 1996. In other words, a highly transmissible disease affecting the brain had jumped species. The British public was gripped by fears about food safety, consumers across Europe lost confidence in the meat and dairy supply, and hundreds of thousands of cattle were destroyed. Responding to citizens' anxieties, the European Union imposed a ban on British beef, causing sales to plummet further.

Prior to the mad cow epidemic, environmentalists in Europe viewed the nuclear industry as the primary technological threat to health and the environment. The BSE crisis placed the industrial food complex at the center of British, and indeed European, public debates about technological risks. As sociologist Piet Strydom observes, biotechnologies quickly assumed a symbolic importance once reserved for the sites of nuclear disasters:

Previously, names such as Marcoule, Gorleben, Windscale/Sellafield, Harrisburg, and Chernobyl were regarded as the most embittered social conflicts in advanced modern history. At the turn of the millennium, this symbolic quality accrued to the biotech industry... (Strydom 2002: 33)

Like the threat of radiation, BSE poses an invisible, imperceptible, and latent danger to health. Unlike nuclear power, however, mad cow disease poses new issues of transmissibility and traceability—meaning that it is even more difficult to follow the epidemiological trail back to its specific point of origin in the feedlot or slaughterhouse (Torny 2001). Individual consumers' purchasing decisions, therefore, do little to protect them from contamination. Many Western European consumers realized their limitations as consumers and pressured the European Union to regulate and contain the crisis.

While British environmentalists, like other Western Europeans, continued to pose questions about the larger health and environmental risks posed by British industrial agriculture, the general public gradually lost interest in BSE. British officials eventually succeeded in quelling public fears by reframing the issue in economic terms as the "beef crisis" and rallied citizens around the patriotic cause of supporting farmers who suffered from the European Union ban on British beef (Adams 1998: 185). The certainty of economic

losses trumped the uncertainties of applying the “precautionary principle” to the industrial food complex.

In the United States, media reports of BSE were framed almost immediately as an economic issue affecting the livestock industry, rather than as a threat to health and the environment. Nevertheless, a few journalists and public figures took a stand on mad cow disease. Those critical of industrial livestock production framed the issue in terms of consumer safety. The Consumers’ Union published several articles on BSE in the widely circulated magazine, *Consumer Reports* (“Can It Happen Here?” 1997). Oprah Winfrey discovered the power of the American beef industry when she invited an expert on BSE to appear on her show in 1996. Upon hearing about the British epidemic, Winfrey exclaimed that she would never eat another hamburger. Texas cattle ranchers filed a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against Winfrey on the grounds that her comments had harmed beef sales. Winfrey later won the lawsuit, but the case revealed the high stakes of criticizing American beef producers (James 1998). What is interesting to note is that in North American discourses on BSE, the media presented individual consumers and negatively affected corporations as the politically salient “stakeholders.”

Having already learned some lessons about food and environmental activism earlier in my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe Hungarians’ response to the “mad cow disease” scare of 1996. Once again, I was surprised by environmentalists’ reactions to the BSE crisis that was riveting the Western European public. More than one of my research participants responded to news of the mad cow epidemic by saying, “Who needs British beef? We’ve got good Hungarian *kolbász* (pork sausage)!”

Environmentalists’ faith in the traditional Hungarian diet was not solely based on the simple fact that no link had been made between pork products and BSE or CJD. Environmentalists trusted in the safety of the domestic sausage supply because they believed it was produced in smaller farms and processing facilities and therefore had the credibility that Eastern Europeans more generally attribute to homegrown produce (see also Hervouet, this issue; Gabriel, 2003 and this issue; Smith, this issue). In the case of pork farming by small-scale producers in East-Central Europe, this perception is largely borne out by fact—even as new European Union harmonization policies favor the larger,

multinational producers who, environmentalists believe, are more inclined to use the industrial feeding practices implicated in the BSE crisis (Dunn 2002).

Gene-Tech Guinea Pigs?

The BSE crisis of 1996 alerted consumers and environmentalists throughout Europe to the risks posed by industrial agriculture. Following the mad cow scare, environmentalists took a growing interest in the issues surrounding genetically modified organism (GMO) crops. In mid-1997, Marta Takacs,¹ a student activist in the university-based environmental group ETK, began a campaign to inform Hungarians about genetically engineered foods. I asked her why she chose to work on this particular issue. She told me that Hungarians knew absolutely nothing about the genetically engineered soy and corn products that were already entering the market. Marta believed that Hungarians should be informed so that they could examine the health and ecological risks and organize against growing and importing genetically engineered crops. She hoped that her campaign, which was kicked off by a public debate, would spur on public pressure for research and state regulations on gene technologies.

An early product of the gene-tech campaign were postcards printed with stickers with biohazard symbols saying “*Genpizskalt – Ne Vedd Be!*” – “Genetically Contaminated – Don’t Swallow It!” Activists were encouraged to stick the stickers onto packages of food containing soy and corn products – the most common genetically modified foods on the market.

I attended an international environmental conference with Marta in June 1997 in Amsterdam, where she shared news and information with an environmentalist from Poland. The Polish activist related a story to demonstrate how Western European companies take advantage of the Poles’ relative lack of environmental awareness. A German biotechnology corporation genetically engineered potatoes in the laboratory, but it needed to test the new potatoes in a field trial. The company planted a field with the biotech potatoes, but local environmental activists in Germany kept digging up the potatoes at night and obstructing the field experiment. Finally, the company leased a plot of land from a Polish farmer just across the border. The biotechnology researchers were able to continue their experiment unimpeded because Polish citizens had never even

heard of genetically manipulated potatoes, let alone developed opinions for or against them.

Upon her return to Budapest, Takacs shared this story with other members of the ELTE Klub. György “Piros” Lajos, the editor of the club’s *Gaia Sajtószemle* (“Gaia News Review”), was especially fascinated by the Polish environmentalist’s story. Earlier that year, Piros had begun a series of editorials in the newsletter, “Reports on the Colony.” These satirical editorials integrated current events into a dystopic science-fiction narrative in the style of Orwell or Huxley (two writers much loved by Hungarian environmentalists). Each piece in the series was presented as a corporate/colonial officer’s letter reporting to the home office on events in a new colony. Piros’ next installment in the series included a commentary on genetic technologies:

In Parliament, three representatives of the opposition criticized the progress of beneficent gene technology. They argued for ethical regulations on scientific research and spoke of philosophical and moral questions. One of them even had the nerve to suggest that importing genetically manipulated foods means that poor countries have become the laboratory guinea pigs for the rich countries. (György 1997)

The passage touches upon environmentalists’ very real anxieties about the changing political ecology of post-socialism: the devaluation of the 1980s dissident dream of grassroots political participation and the fear of slipping into the “Third World.”²

In the following year, Takacs and other environmentalists stepped up their efforts to raise public awareness of GMOs. Takacs was selected as a member of a citizens’ and experts advisory board on GMOs. As a member of this group, Takacs was able to forge an unusual alliance between the environmental movement and the agricultural lobby. While environmentalists framed the GMO issue in terms of biohazards in the early months of the campaign, the framing of the GMO debate shifted to two themes of “better living through Hungarian science” and “wholesome Hungarian food and farms.”

The first theme emerging in the GMO debate was that of pride in Hungarian scientific and technological achievements. Since environmentalists are often worried about the possible hazards caused by new technologies, they

run the risk of being labeled “anti-science.” Piros, in his “Report from the Colony,” expressed the concern that politicians would dismiss environmentalist misgivings about gene-tech food would be dismissed as anti-progress: “The Greens and the parliamentary opposition united to demonstrate their anti-science attitude” (György 1997). Hungarians take great pride in the large number of world-renowned, Hungarian-born scientists³, and so being labeled anti-science is tantamount to being branded as anti-patriotic. When environmentalists lobbied for a moratorium on nuclear power in the mid-1990s, they were particularly concerned that Hungarian-born Nobel Laureate Edward Teller traveled to Budapest to make the case for nuclear power.

The case against GMOs, however, benefited from the association of patriotic sentiment and scientific achievement. In 1998, Hungarian-born geneticist Árpád Pusztai appeared on a BBC news program and stated that, based on his research on the health effects of GM potato consumption in lab animals, he would not eat GM foods. Pusztai went on to say, “it is very, very unfair to use our fellow citizens as guinea pigs” (“Fears Erupt” 1999). Two days later, Pusztai was suspended by his research institute in Scotland, and his lab was dismantled. As Pusztai defended his decision to go public with his research findings in a popular forum, the Hungarian general public gained interest in the GMO issue.

The second theme, “wholesome Hungarian food and farms,” drew from popular perceptions of homegrown Hungarian agricultural produce as healthier and better tasting than imported foods. This pride in Hungarian farming is neatly encapsulated in the saying, *Magyarország Európa éléskamrája* (“Hungary is the pantry of Europe”). This discourse on food resonated with the general public and appealed to Hungary’s prospects for economic growth in its large agricultural sector. Having recently witnessed the European Union’s ban on British beef, Hungarian farmers feared a similar reaction to GMO crops. This fear was borne out as individual countries such as Italy imposed bans on GMOs, with the European Union following suit with a moratorium on new GMO products put in place in 1998. Instead of lobbying for the deregulation of agricultural biotechnologies, Hungarian farmers allied themselves with the environmental lobby and pushed for Parliament to regulate the introduction of GMOs.

With the support of both environmentalists and farmers, the Hungarian Parliament passed a 1999 GMO law that surpassed even the European Union's regulations in stringency. Although the United States is currently challenging the European Union's ban on GMOs at the World Trade Organization, at press time the EU and Hungary are standing by the moratorium.

Naturalizing the Market through Unnatural Foods: Environmentalist Responses

In the preceding sections, I examined differences between Hungarian, American, and Western European attitudes toward vegetarianism, the "mad cow" scare, and GMO crops and food products. I believe that the differences indicate contrasting ideological deployments and interpretations of food in socialist, post-socialist, and Western market-based economies.

In Britain and the United States, contemporary environmentalism is framed in terms of individual consumer preferences as much as it is in terms of government regulation of industry. In this setting, dietary practices are considered a consumer-activist strategy: exerting freedom of choice by "voting with one's pocketbook"--and stomachs. By choosing not to eat meat, British and American vegetarians demonstrate their ideological commitments, making the personal world of consumption political (James 1993).

Because of their experiences under state socialism, environmentalists in Eastern Europe tend to frame consumption issues in a different light. In marked contrast with British and American environmentalist lifestyles and strategy, Hungarian activists resist "making the personal political" and "voting with one's pocketbook." They prefer instead to locate decision-making in a more collective, public arena and criticize the voluntarist underpinnings of green consumerism. Hungarian environmentalists reframe food consumption issues (and in particular food safety) as complex social problems requiring collective, society-level solutions, and not as consumption choices of rational, atomistic individuals.

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¹ I have assigned pseudonyms to protect research informants’ confidentiality.

² For further discussion of Eastern Europeans’ discourses on slipping “out of Europe” and “into the Third World,” see Jennifer Patino’s excellent essay in this issue. For a more detailed analysis of post-socialist political ecology, see Harper 1999b.

³ The list of Hungarian Nobel Laureates is includes five chemists, three biologists, and three physicists, in addition to several economists and literary figures.