



KRISTA HARPER

“Wild Capitalism” and “Ecocolonialism”: A Tale of Two Rivers

ABSTRACT The development and pollution of two rivers, the Danube and Tisza, have been the site and subject of environmental protests and projects in Hungary since the late 1980s. Protests against the damming of the Danube rallied opposition to the state socialist government, drawing on discourses of national sovereignty and international environmentalism. The Tisza suffered a major environmental disaster in 2000, when a globally financed gold mine in Romania spilled thousands of tons of cyanide and other heavy metals into the river, sending a plume of pollution downriver into neighboring countries. In this article, I examine the symbolic ecologies that emerged in the two moments of environmental protest, as well as Hungarian activists’ reflections on the changing political ecology of the region in their discourses of “ecocolonialism” (*ökógyarmatosítás*) and “wild capitalism” (*vadkapitalizmus*). [Keywords: environment, national identity, political discourse, Eastern Europe, Hungary]

TRANSBOUNDARY ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AND PROTEST IN EASTERN EUROPE

Once, two rivers flowed from the arc of the Alps and the Carpathians down onto a great plain. Over time, through human migrations, the rise and fall of empires, and the diplomatic marking of maps and treaties in crystal-chandeliered chambers, the basin of these rivers came to coincide with the modern nation-state of Hungary. One river was dammed by two governments; another was poisoned in an industrial disaster spanning several nations. The first river became the site of dissident protest under state socialism; the second river was mourned with funereal pomp at the dawn of a new century.

These two rivers, the Danube and Tisza, have been the site and subject of environmental protests and projects in Hungary since the late 1980s. Hungary has experienced significant friction with its neighbors over development and pollution on these rivers. Virtually all popular and scholarly accounts of Hungary’s transformation from state socialism note the role of the movement against the damming of the Danube as a site of dissident protest. In the early 1990s, the Danube dispute transformed into a lawsuit that invoked discourses on national sovereignty, sustainable development, and historical symbolism, in addition to scientific evidence. A second transboundary environmental crisis occurred in the region in 2000, when an Australian-owned mining operation in Baia Mare, Romania, spilled thousands of tons

of cyanide and other heavy metals into the watershed of the Danube’s largest tributary, the Tisza River. The disaster provoked an outpouring of patriotic sentiment in Hungary, but it also resulted in new forms of cooperation between bureaucrats and activists from across national borders.

Among natural geographical features, rivers have a unique quality: They flow and move, crossing different landscapes and territories.¹ Transboundary river issues are particularly interesting to scholars of environmental politics, not only because they provide an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a “good neighbor,” ecologically speaking, but also because they present the opportunity to reflect on how environmental issues are framed within different national political cultures and constituencies. More generally, environmental crises make explicit the operating myths of social institutions involved in the management of natural resources, and sometimes provide moments for the transformation of these myths (Gunderson et al. 1995). In the case of the Baia Mare cyanide spill, an environmental disaster opened an unexpected context for participants to reflect on and produce new discourses on the changing ecological, political, and economic conditions of Central and Eastern Europe.

Recent work in environmental anthropology pays close attention to how social–natural environments are constructed, transformed, and maintained through symbolic practices (Tsing 2001). In her review of historical

transformations in anthropology's orientation to ecology, Aletta Biersack (1999) cites symbolic ecology and political ecology as important trajectories for ethnographic research on environmental politics. Symbolic ecology attends to the role of language and social practices in creating a "sense of place" and cultural values around nature; political ecology examines how particular power relations result in the transformation of the social and natural environment. Post-structuralist political ecology examines how normative configurations of the state, civil society, and market are constructed in various contexts through discourse and practices (Brosius 1999; Escobar 1999; Paulson et al. 2005; Peet and Watts 1996). In the case of Hungarian environmental struggles, the success of environmentalism as a social movement depends largely on activists' ability to frame environmental issues symbolically, and to deploy representations of nature and society in order to persuade policy makers and other citizens to support their cause.

Across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, environmental movements played a key role in the critique of state socialism.² Since the change of systems, environmental protests throughout the region have generally been smaller in scale and focused on a wider array of issues than the mass mobilizations of the socialist era. Contemporary protest movements, however, continue to work on environmental issues, developing new frames of ecological and social changes accompanying the region's political-economic transformation. In this context, environmental activism has not merely shifted with (or in response to) shifting configurations of power; environmental protest has also produced new meanings and analyses of the emergent political ecology of postsocialism. In this article, I examine the emergence of a specific analysis produced by environmentalists: new discourses on "ecocolonialism" (*ökógyarmatosítás*) and "wild capitalism" (*vadkapitalizmus*).

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hungary's environmental movement. I conducted field research for 16 months from 1995–97. During this time, I participated in several Budapest environmental organizations' activities, including weekly or monthly meetings, protests and public events, informational tabling in public settings, press conferences, and informal gatherings in bars, restaurants, and outdoor retreats. I interviewed members of over 30 environmental organizations in Budapest and the countryside. Both media accounts and many research participants stressed the centrality of the Danube movement in the development of dissident politics in the 1980s; consequently, I conducted interviews with at least eight activists who had participated in the 1980s in the Danube Circle, a key organization within the Danube movement. I also spoke with a number of environmentalists who were involved in Danube activism outside the capital city of Budapest but were not members of the Danube Circle. I asked participants about the origins of the environmental movement, the history of environmental protest under state socialism, and the significance of the Danube movement. I also tracked participants' spontaneous

comments about past environmental activism, noting how these were indexed with other speech about activism, the environment, and the transformation from state socialism. I collected documents about the Danube movement ranging from Western media accounts to environmental movement accounts published in Hungarian in activist newsletters, pamphlets, and books about environmental politics.

Conducting fieldwork on the aftermath of the Baia Mare cyanide spill in June–July 2000, I interviewed representatives from government offices and activists from Hungarian environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were centrally involved in responding to the crisis. I collected media and activist accounts, as well as official reports on the disaster. I also spoke with representatives of environmental NGOs from Romania and the federal Republic of Yugoslavia who were visiting Hungary to participate in the European Commission's Baia Mare Task Force, a committee established in spring 2000 with the mission of investigating the disaster.

In their passage to the lowland marshes and seas, rivers traverse national boundaries, historical landscapes, and diverse cultural imaginations. Environmental problems and protests along the two rivers reveal tensions between communities, nation-states, and transnational actors ranging from financial institutions to environmental organizations. The tale of the Danube pitted dissident environmentalists against central planners in the socialist state and became a social movement "epic" during a period that has since become a historical "epoch" symbolizing the change of political systems (Abelmann 1996). The tale of the Tisza involved a disaster spanning several nations and provoked a new public awareness of multinational capital as a force of environmental change in the region. In both cases, environmentalists played on the symbolic ecology of the two rivers to marshal public support for environmental protection, invoking themes of state socialism versus democratization and national patriotism versus international solidarity and "Europeanness." In the process, environmentalists did more than simply play on symbolic attachments to the landscape. Environmental protests generated new frames for political critique and transformation: "ecocolonialism" and "wild capitalism."

THE TALE OF THE DANUBE: STATE SOCIALISM, DEVELOPMENT, AND DISSIDENCE

The Danube River was the object of one of the largest independent social movements in Eastern Europe during the Cold War—an environmental movement that eventually became a political threat to Hungary's socialist state in the late 1980s (Enyedi and Szirmai 1998; Persányi 1993). For Western audiences, it is by far the most well-known story of Hungarian environmental activism, having made appearances in magazines such as *Mother Jones*, *Audubon*, and *Amicus Journal* (Hinrichsen 1989; Ridgeway 1992; Schapiro 1990).

Czechoslovakia and Hungary had been considering a joint hydroelectric project since the early 1950s. The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) encouraged the development of plans to dam the Danube at Gabčíkovo, Czechoslovakia, and Nagymaros, Hungary. The Soviet leadership viewed the project as a symbol of industrial progress and socialist–internationalist cooperation, alongside the more practical goals of providing a better river navigation for military defense and producing hydroelectricity (Fitzmaurice 1996). The global oil crisis of the 1970s hastened the dam treaty to the negotiation table, where it was ratified by the two countries in 1977 (Sibl 1993).

The Gabčíkovo hydroelectric facility in Slovakia was originally to begin operations in 1986, with the Hungarian Nagymaros station following in 1989. These plans were later revised when hydrologists found that the flow of the Danube at that particular point in the river was so attenuated that for the dam system to generate electricity, water would have to collect and be released in a flushing action, producing surges downstream (Carbonell and Yaro 1989). Construction on the Czechoslovak side began in 1978, but in early 1983, the two governments postponed the project for several years because of economic difficulties.

During this hiatus, the Hungarian National Water Conservancy Office commissioned an environmental effect study of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam System (GNDS). Published in 1985, this report (known as “the Hárđi report”) reflected Hungarian misgivings about the project. Science journalist and Danube Circle leader János Vargha published a series of articles against the continuation of the dam project in the major weekly news magazine *HVG*.³ These articles attracted the attention of a small group of Hungarian biologists, journalists, historians, and artists, who began meeting in the afternoon to discuss the Danube. After a few unsuccessful attempts to form a legal organization called “Friends of the Danube Landscape,” the group organized illegally as *Duna Kör*, or the Danube Circle.

Until this point, environmental groups in Hungary had been few and focused on monitoring bird and wildlife populations and protecting habitats. The Danube Circle stood apart from these groups in its use of direct action and underground publishing to ensure that the public would have access to information and a role in decision-making processes. The issue attracted an assortment of activists who saw the damming of the river as a symbol of the state socialist system’s disregard for the aesthetic and historical importance of the landscape and the exclusion of avenues for public participation.

Former members of the 1980s Danube Circle described their group as a hive of dissident activity. The Danube Circle produced and distributed underground newsletters *szamizdat* style to avoid state censorship, with readers typing six carbon copies at a time and passing along copies to trusted friends.⁴ As the controversy gained public attention, members of the Danube Circle gained the confidence to start a petition drive that sought to make the dam project a major issue in the parliamentary elections; they collected

over 10,000 signatures via informal social networks. Radio Free Europe broadcast information from the Danube Circle’s newsletters and updates on the number of signatures collected in the petition drive, stirring public doubts as to the viability of the GNDS.

Events on the Danube picked up speed in 1985. That winter, Austrian Greens and environmentalists camped in the snow to protest the damming of the Danube at Hainburg, on the Austrian–Slovak border (Wastl-Walter 1996). Thwarted in Austria, contractors and bankers moved east, lending Hungary several billion dollars to continue construction of the Nagymaros dam. In exchange, Hungarian officials agreed to pay off the loan with two thirds of the nation’s share of electricity generated by the hydroelectric facility over a period of 20 years. Construction of the Hungarian portion of the GNDS resumed. At the end of 1985, the Danube Circle received the Goldman Right Livelihood Award, commonly known as the “alternative Nobel Prize.”⁵

As construction gained momentum, the Danube movement grew more openly confrontational. In 1986, police broke up a march organized by the Danube Circle, an event activists later called “the battle of the Danube” (Galambos 1992; Láng 1993). Activists expanded their contacts with international environmental organizations. Legal, registered organizations such as the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Klub defied official censors to publish articles by scientists and professionals exposing adverse effects of the dam in newsletters and journals (György 2000). Environmental groups outside of Budapest, such as Reflex Environmental Association in Győr, formed to protest the dam system.

After the gathering of 40,000 protestors at the parliament building in September 1988, there followed another petition drive and a number of subsequent demonstrations, highlighted by a human chain across a bridge spanning both Buda and Pest. These mobilizations brought together many individuals and small activist organizations and spawned a number of new environmentalist, feminist, and anarchist groups (Vári and Tamás 1993). In October, the Hungarian Parliament imposed stricter environmental protection conditions on construction and operation. Following this decision, both environmental activists and public officials demanded more scientific information on the environmental effects of the GNDS. A year later, the new democratically elected parliament resolved to abandon construction (Deets 1996; Fitzmaurice 1996).

The change of systems in 1989 and the new government’s decision to withdraw from construction shifted the focus of Danube movement from domestic dissent to the complex issues of international environmental conflict. Following the change of systems in 1989 and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1991, the new Slovak government devised Variant C, a plan to complete the Gabčíkovo project without Hungarian cooperation. Environmentalists in Hungary had to tread a fine line between invoking the national pride that had mobilized thousands to the protests of a few years earlier and attempting to forge new alliances with the international environmental

movement. In the Eurochain protest of 1991, 60,000 Hungarians and Austrians, and a smaller group of Slovak environmentalists, formed a human chain along the Danube, crossing the borders of the three countries (Snajdr 1998). In this demonstration, postsocialist Hungarian demonstrators presented themselves on equal footing with activists from Western Europe.

Slovak authorities enacted Variant C in October 1992, diverting the Danube into a 30-mile concrete channel at the end. Within a few days of diverting the river, the water-table level dropped several meters. Animals died by the thousands as ponds and secondary channels were drained and plants became desiccated. The new Hungarian government became embroiled in an international lawsuit over the dam system with the new Slovak Republic (which sought to expand its part of the dam), and nationalist politicians in the two countries sought to make political hay of the conflict. Citing Principle 21 of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration ("States have the responsibility to ensure that they do not cause damage to other states"), Hungary took its case against the Slovak government to the European Commission. The Slovak government, in turn, countersued, claiming that Hungary had illegally abandoned the 1977 international treaty agreeing to construct the GNDS. The case was stalled for years as the court dealt with war criminals in the former Yugoslavia. When the court finally came to a decision in 1997, neither Hungary nor Slovakia gained a clear victory, and the two countries continue negotiations over sharing use of the river (Deets 1998). The Danube remains a touchstone in Hungarian political culture; in the election cycles of 1994, 1998, and 2002, parliamentary candidates included the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros dam negotiations in their campaign position statements.

The Danube movement continues to occupy a special place in Hungarian collective memory of the change of political systems. 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 30 years of discouragement. When asked how the Hungarian environmental movement started, most environmentalists mention the 1980s movement against the damming of the Danube River as a key origin point.

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!" Hungarians associate environmentalism with narratives of democratization, drawing on heroic stories of the oppositionist activism of the Danube Circle. 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.

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 that 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. Participants in the Danube movement successfully framed the dam issue as an example of the nation's subordination to Soviet imperialism, which coerced Hungary into committing to a project that would sacrifice a culturally valued landscape in the name of socialist friendship.

In addition to criticizing Soviet imperialism, the Danube movement was among the first mobilizations to expose emergent inequalities between Western and Eastern Europe. Although the Soviet Union still held political power, by the 1980s, Hungary was increasingly beholden to international lenders for the loans that financed the country's consumer-oriented "goulash communism." After Austrian environmentalists prevented the damming of the Danube at Hainburg, the Austrian power company offered a loan package to debt-ridden Hungary to dam the river further downstream. Had the Hungarians completed construction of the dam, today Austria would receive most of the Hungarian share of the system's hydroelectric production without having to modify its own stretch of the river (Lipschutz with Mayer 1996). In return for the development loan from Austria for a project promoted by the Soviet Union, Hungary would not only provide Austria with the raw material of electricity but also accept the negative environmental effects of large-scale hydroelectric production on its own territory. Hungarian environmentalists were among the first to recognize the potential for "ecocolonialism" in East-Central Europe. During the Danube events of the mid-1980s, activists from the Danube Circle and Slovak Union of Nature Protectors (SZOPK) warned that Hungary and Slovakia should not become "electric colonies" of their richer neighbors.

In addition to questioning state priorities for industrial development, the Danube movement demanded greater public access to information and decision making. The 1980s demonstrations attracted feminists, peace activists, anarchists, and other people who felt marginalized from the party's political process and the official social organizations sanctioned by the state. The demonstrations of 1988 were, for many Hungarians, a turning point in the creation of an alternative civil sphere (Körösenyi 1992). The underground newspapers, discussion circles, and demonstrations against the dam system created new venues for debate and criticism of the government. Looking back, many research

participants characterized their Danube movement activism as their introduction to “civil society.”

THE TALE OF THE TISZA: DEMOCRACY, DISENCHANTMENT, AND DEAD FISH

After playing a prominent role in Hungary’s transformation from state socialism, river issues returned to the headlines in 2000 when the Danube basin was once again threatened. On January 30, a dam holding tailings (liquid metal-processing by-products) from the Aurul SA gold-mining operation in Baia Mare, Romania, breached and released around 100 thousand cubic meters of water containing high levels of cyanide, copper, zinc, and other heavy metals into the nearby Sasar and Lapus streams. Within three days, the toxic plume had flowed into Hungary, where it reached the Tisza River, a major tributary of the Danube. Within a month, the spill had passed through Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, and back into Romania before entering the Black Sea at the Danube Delta.

Cyanide is highly toxic, and its effects are acute—it blocks cells from uptaking oxygen. Cyanide disperses from the environment quickly. Heavy metals, by contrast, accumulate in sediments, plants, and animals, increasing in toxicity over time (and up the food chain). In this accident, the cyanide immediately killed thousands of tons of fish, poisoned waterfowl, and threatened many communities’ drinking water supplies, although few injuries to human beings were reported. Meanwhile, heavy metals were deposited in the river’s sediment, where they will continue to affect life-forms for many decades. The disaster affected about two thousand kilometers of the Danube basin. “After Chernobyl, this is the largest ecological disaster ever to hit Eastern Europe,” stated Dr. Zoltán Illes, chairman of the Hungarian Parliament’s environmental committee.

The cyanide concentration measured 32.6 milligrams per liter when the pollution plume reached the Romanian–Hungarian border on February 1, 2000, a concentration level three hundred times higher than the 0.1 milligrams per liter level recognized as “heavily polluted” by the Hungarian Ministry for Environmental Protection (Hungarian Ministry for Environmental Protection, Directorate for Environmental Protection 2000). When the plume met the Tisza River in northeastern Hungary on February 3, 2000, the cyanide level had dropped to 13.5 milligrams per liter, still a highly lethal dose. In Szolnok, a city of 100,000 on the banks of the river, the city’s water intake system was closed down and clean drinking water was brought in trucks. When the spill reached the Hungarian–Serbian border on February 11, 2000, the cyanide concentration had dropped to 1.49 milligrams per liter, still almost fifteen times the “heavily polluted” level. At the end of February 2000, a research team of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) detected the plume at the Danube Delta in Romania, registering at 0.058 milligrams per liter, almost six times the Romanian Environmental Protection Agency’s permissible concentration level for cyanide (UNEP 2000).

However, the Tisza River’s troubles did not end with the Aurul SA cyanide spill. In spring 2000, additional toxic spills and catastrophic flooding sent more contaminants down the Tisza. On March 10 and 15, 2000, tailings dams containing high concentrations of heavy metals broke at another mining facility near Baia Mare, releasing over 20 thousand tons of mud contaminated with lead, zinc, and copper. These spills did not contain high levels of cyanide nor did they match the scale of the Aurul SA disaster. The heavy metal spills did, however, damage the upper reaches of the Tisza that had been spared in the earlier cyanide spill. In April 2000, following the second wave of toxic contamination, a record-breaking flood struck the Tisza basin in Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. This “flood of the century” spread sediment from the earlier spills across the Tisza floodplain, endangering soil safety and making it difficult to monitor the long-term effects of the toxic disasters of spring 2000. In the fall of that same year, there was yet another toxic spill into the river at Baia Mare.

The responsible mining operation, Aurul SA, was a joint venture begun in 1992 between the private Australian mining company, Esmeralda, and the state-owned Romanian mining concern, Remin, and was financed by the German-based Dresdner Bank. The Romanian government heralded Esmeralda’s involvement as an opportunity to introduce more environmentally sound mining and extraction practices in the already heavily mined region. The plant received an operating permit following an environmental impact assessment and began processing in April 1999. The fine levied on Aurul SA by Romanian authorities came to US\$166, obviously an insufficient sum to cover the existing damage or to deter irresponsible behavior in the future. The fine was small because Aurul SA was deemed to be in compliance with Romanian standards. The Tisza cyanide spill had far-reaching effects on natural resources, industries, and public health in several countries. Until the spill, the Tisza river system was an area of impressive biodiversity. To be sure, prior to the disaster several stretches of the Tisza had chronically high concentrations of heavy metals caused by upstream industrial plants and agricultural runoff. Yet, despite a century of river pollution, the Tisza had remained home to over 60 species of fish, and Tisza basin wetlands had provided food and habitat to endangered bird and mammal species as well.

Hungarian officials recorded the collection of 1,240 metric tons of dead fish as the cyanide spill passed through Hungary (Hungarian Ministry for Environmental Protection, Directorate for Environmental Protection 2000). Yugoslavian sources reported major fish kills along the Tisza, and dead fish were observed on the Danube as far south as Belgrade. Fish-eating birds and mammals were among the first casualties. A white-tailed sea eagle, one of a small population painstakingly reintroduced to the Hortobágy National Park, died from eating poisoned fish. From the source of the spill to the point where the Tisza meets the Danube, the wave of cyanide destroyed the plankton and

small insects on which Tisza wildlife's food chain depends. Although many of these microorganisms returned after the passage of the plume, whether the Tisza's riverine ecosystems can be restored remains to be seen.

The cyanide spill affected the agriculture and fishing sectors in several countries. Farmers in the region of the spill reported the death of cows following the disaster, and they were unable to sell eggs, apples, or milk as public perceptions of the region's pollution were heightened (Baia Mare Task Force 2000). Commercial fishermen in both Hungary and Yugoslavia also suffered great losses. Fishing on the river was officially suspended for four months, resulting in the unemployment of over two hundred fishermen in Hungary. Fishing was again permitted in mid-June 2000 as new stocks of fish were released into the Tisza. Hungarian fishermen feared, however, that demand for fish would be low because of consumers' fear of contamination.

The disaster affected public health although it did not result in any deaths from cyanide poisoning. Groundwater wells were poisoned in villages near the site of the spill. Szolnok, a Hungarian city of 100,000 on the banks of the Tisza, had to import tanks of drinking water until the plume of pollution passed.

In addition to ecological and economic considerations, the cultural importance of the Tisza generated tremendous public concern in Hungary. The Tisza runs through the Great Plain and is associated with the Hungarian war of independence and late-19th-century peasant life in the national imagination. The river is celebrated as the "blonde river" in lyrical poems memorized by Hungarian schoolchildren. When news of the cyanide spill reached Hungary, thousands of citizens flocked to funeral processions for the Tisza. The Aurul SA cyanide spill was followed by another toxic spill on the Tisza on the Hungarian national holiday (March 15, 2000)—a coincidence that nonetheless made an enormous impression of the Hungarian public, increasing the sense of environmental pollution as a specifically national crisis. The immediate aftermath of the spill was intensively covered in the media for many weeks. As one environmentalist recalled, "In the case of cyanide, you have [something] really spectacular in terms that, fish are dying, and you have these huge dead fishes... so it was a visual contamination" (interview with author, June 29, 2000). In summer 2000, less than six months after the spill, a glossy coffee table book about the river and the disaster appeared in bookstores.

Although the Hungarian press and public responded almost immediately to the disaster, and local agencies and NGOs dealt with the immediate effects, state institutions proceeded much more slowly. In mid-July 2000, the Hungarian government filed a claim against the Esmeralda corporation for AUD\$179 million (US\$106 million) in damages, claiming that it was pursuing reparations from Esmeralda first, because the company was the project manager for the tailings pond at Aurul SA. Meanwhile, Hungary has been slow to pursue compensations from Romania for the Aurul SA spill for reasons that reflect shortcomings in

the institutional setting and a history of politically charged transboundary problems with neighboring countries.

SYMBOLIC ECOLOGIES OF LANDSCAPE UNDER STATE SOCIALISM AND POSTSOCIALISM

Politically charged symbolic representations of environmental problems on the Danube and Tisza rivers reflect shifting anxieties about national borders, political life, and the uneven development of East-Central Europe at different moments in contemporary history. The field of symbolic ecology attends to the widely varying social construction of nature through language and symbolic practices: how the "environment" is culturally constructed as an object to exploit, protect, or preserve. 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 (Williams 1977). Anthropologists and environmental historians have studied how some landscapes, animal species, and other symbols come to symbolize nature itself and how others are disregarded entirely (Einarsson 1993; Kuletz 1998). As we shall see in the case of Hungarian environmental struggles, the success of environmentalism as a social movement depends largely on the ability of activists to frame environmental issues symbolically and to deploy representations of nature and society to persuade policy makers and other citizens to support their cause. Three key oppositions within the symbolic ecologies of state socialism and postsocialism are explored here: state socialism versus dissidence, nationalist versus internationalist identity, and "Europe" and its regional margins.

Symbolic Ecologies of State Socialism and Dissidence

Transboundary controversies over natural resources in Eastern Europe are influenced by the relatively recent revisions of national borders following World War I and World War II and the presence of large ethnic minority groups. Over time, both nationalist and internationalist rhetoric have played a part in political struggles over natural resource use. For many Hungarians, the fate of the Danube and Tisza Rivers is entwined with that of Hungary as a nation-state, and Hungarian discourses about the rivers reflect a preoccupation with borders and territorial integrity. The two rivers cross national borders that have moved back and forth many times during the 20th century, leaving pockets of ethnic minorities on both sides of the border. Following World War I, the Treaty of St. Germain established Czechoslovakia as a sovereign nation, and the Treaty of Trianon redistributed the eastern lands of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy into the modern nation-states of Romania, Hungary, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In the process, Hungary lost over half of its previous territory, and neighboring nations became hosts to substantial Hungarian ethnic populations, a situation that continues to the present. Today, the number of ethnic Hungarians living abroad is estimated at 1.7 million in Romania,

600,000 in Slovakia, and 340,000 in the former Yugoslavia. Although Hungarians gave up the dream of regaining these territories and populations following World War II, the twin themes of lost lands and “stranded” ethnic brethren living beyond national borders continue to infuse national political culture and policy making in the 21st century.

In Eastern Europe during the state socialist era, the border was anything but porous. Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech coined the term that would dominate Western accounts of state socialism until the last days of the Cold War. Within national boundaries, barbed wire fences and watchtowers surveying national boundary territories were visible markers of security and control of the population. On a daily basis, Eastern Europeans were aware of state censorship of television and radio news broadcasts and print media from Western Europe. Officials did not see state policies to control Western borders as strictly insular, however, because travel and exchanges between Eastern Europe and other socialist countries (such as other Eastern European countries, North Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and Cuba) were actively encouraged in the name of socialist internationalism. Through these exchanges, party leadership sought to replace nationalist ideology with an ethos of socialist brotherhood and internationalism. As a project originally conceived in the late 1940s by Stalin himself, the GNDS offered a concrete symbol of the marriage of internationalist sentiment and centrally planned development.

The imbroglio between Hungary and Slovakia over the damming of the Danube began in the last decade of the Cold War and continued through the 1989 Revolutions and the Velvet Divorce of the Czech and Slovak Republics in the early 1990s. In the 1980s Hungarian environmentalists’ anxieties about the Danube issue were framed in terms of Soviet domination and an ecological critique of the socialist state’s central planning bureaucracy (Persányi 1993). One environmentalist pamphlet offered the following assessment of the political conditions leading to the dam project:

Until recently, the dominant ideology in industrial societies has supported gigantic technical establishments, neglecting the destructive effects of such aggressive interference with the environment. In particular, this happened in East-European dictatorships where the forced increase of industrial production was the norm. Every other view-point was subordinated. [Danube Defense Action Committee 1992:3]

In an interview with a U.S. journalist, Vargha explained the sense that the opposition to the dam presented a strategic moment for dissidents:

The Danube issue became a very important political question because it was one of the last projects of the fundamentalist wing of the Communist Party. People thought that if it was possible to stop this dam, we can change the whole system. And if we’re not able to do that, everything will remain the same. [Schapiro 1990:74]



FIGURE 1. The Danube Circle’s logo.

The monolithic dam on the Danube became a metaphor for not only the ecological fate of the Danube but also for the larger fate of citizens attempting to make room for public participation and democratic reforms.

The Danube movement organized public protests that drew attention to the power relations obstructing public participation in environmental decision making. One environmentalist, Marta Takács, described the significance of the 1986 “Battle of the Danube”:

They were the first to organize a significant demonstration at Batthyány Square. They wanted to organize a march, and the police didn’t exactly beat them up, but they intimidated and busted up the demonstration. This was the only environmental protest that the police concretely obstructed like this. [interview with author, October 15, 1996]

Environmentalists in the Danube movement not only revealed and framed an environmental problem but also made the power relations that led to the problem explicit through their protest actions.

Environmentalist Anikó Fehér suggested that one need look no further than the Danube Circle’s logo to understand the meaning of the Danube movement (interview with author, October 10, 1995). She described the logo (see Figure 1), a stylized blue zigzag truncated by a white band, as a symbol not only of the physical dam blocking the natural circulation of water but also of the intellectual obstruction that was a symptom of censorship and bureaucratic control of the public sphere under state socialism. The Danube movement was not only, strictly speaking, about the Danube—in the sense of the rivers’ ecosystems, sediment, and flow—but also about the free circulation of information and ideas. Whatever the Danube movement was “really” about, it encouraged Hungarians to consider the need (and the possibilities) for greater public access to information and

participation in official decision making. "We had to become oppositionists," the Danube Circle's leader, Vargha, told me, "to secure the basic human rights that would allow us to protect the environment" (interview with author, October 2, 1996).

Hungarian Danube activists of the 1980s took advantage of increasing opportunities for contact with the world of international environmentalism. Through contacts with Austrian environmentalists and journalists, they gained media attention in the Western press. When Danube activists Vargha and Judit Vásárhélyi received the "Right Livelihood Award" in 1985, the issue gathered momentum and exposed a split opinion within the state bureaucracy. Some party leaders were threatened by the Danube Circle's international notoriety and denied Vásárhélyi permission to travel to Sweden to accept the award. Official organizations attempted to censor the publication of stories about the award. ELTE Klub reported that the Danube Circle had received the Right Livelihood Award in its newsletter. Upon seeing the published article, the officer of the university's Communist Youth League (Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, or KISz) insisted that the editors place stickers over the article on every single copy of the newsletter (György 2000). The state's attempts to control the movement of the Danube Circle activists backfired, however, as many participants saw the irony of the "internationalist" state preventing an activist group from interacting with Western European members of the international environmental movement.

As one of its first acts following the 1989 revolution, the new Hungarian government made a point of withdrawing from the 1977 Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros dam treaty with Slovakia. Hungarians strongly associated environmentalist sentiment with the country's new identity as a democratic nation. Danube movement leader Vargha spoke at the opening convocation for the new parliament (Schapiro 1990). Environmentalism simultaneously symbolized Hungarian's attachment to the national landscape and their enthusiastic embrace of Western Europe and the larger world represented by the international environmental movement.

Symbolic Ecologies of Nationalism and Internationalism

Hungarian Danube activists called on patriotic themes and national identity in their pre-1989 rhetoric against the dam. The Nagymaros site was located at the Danube Bend, directly below the historic castle of Visegrád, site of the Hungarian royal court during the Renaissance. The Danube Bend is a place of great natural beauty, where the river makes a dramatic 90-degree turn to the south, and it has long been a popular destination for Hungarian and foreign tourists. Danube activists succeeded in spreading the perspective of the dam as a Soviet-style industrial monument that would intentionally blight a nationally beloved landscape. Writers in the Danube movement compiled collections of stories, essays, and poems about the river, and artists produced several photographic exhibitions and books about the river.

Judit Vásárhélyi, one of the founders of the Danube Circle, described the patriotic appeal of the Danube in drawing people to the movement: "It was the first time after the 1956 revolution that raised attention and a feeling of identity appeared in people that *this* is a part of our nature, a part of our land" (interview with author, April 10, 1996).

In the postsocialist period, there has been a reassessment of nationalist and internationalist loyalties throughout the region. When the Slovak Republic enacted Variant C, the diversion of the Danube into a channel for hydroelectric production, media accounts emphasized rising nationalist tensions between the two countries, reporting on a soccer match where Hungarian fans hurled abuse at the Slovak players. Hungarian politicians from new political parties on the right claimed the issue as an affront to the nation, while left-liberal politicians presented the disaster as a test for the two countries to demonstrate that they could resolve their differences legally through the European Court. Environmentalists generally avoided framing the case in nationalistic terms and instead presented the river as part of the world's shared natural heritage in the transnational Eurochain protests of 1991.

Although postsocialist Hungarian politicians enthusiastically took up the mantle (if not the actual political commitments) of environmentalism as part of their new identity, the opposite was true across the border in the Slovak Republic. Following the "Velvet Divorce" of the Czech and Slovak Republics, Slovak politicians drew heavily on a nationalist rhetoric that portrayed the nation emerging from a history of foreign domination by Czechs and Hungarians. In this narrative, the continuing construction of the Gabčíkovo barrage system and hydroelectric plant was framed in terms of industrialization and national development. Whereas Hungarians came to associate the dam project with Soviet domination, Slovak prime minister Vladimir Meciar presented the Hungarian government's withdrawal from the project as yet another example of foreigners thwarting Slovakia's aspirations as a modern nation (Fitzmaurice 1996). As the case gained international media attention and international environmental organizations publicly criticized the new Slovak government, Slovak environmentalists suffered a setback in public trust that stymied their effectiveness as a social movement for many years to come (Snajdr 2001).⁶

Responses to the Tisza cyanide disaster of 2000 demonstrated an evolving perspective on threats to the nation and nature in Hungary and Romania. In the immediate aftermath of the Aurul SA disaster, Hungarian soccer hooligans pelted the Romanian team with dead fish. The second and third spills originating at other facilities in Baia Mare happened at the time of Hungary's national holiday, reinforcing the perception of the spills as a threat to the Hungarian nation. Environmental philosopher János Tóth writes, "As a well-known saying goes, the Tisza is the most Hungarian of rivers" (Tóth n.d.:3). Hungarian officials were reluctant to get embroiled in a transboundary conflict that could potentially whip up nationalist tensions. Both Hungarian activists

and several officials indicated that pursuing the matter with Romania could create a nationalist backlash and pose difficulty for the substantial Hungarian minority population in Romania.

Funerals for the Tisza river in Budapest, Szolnok, Szeged, and other cities echoed earlier public funerals in the nation’s political memory, including the reburial ceremonies of revolutionary political leader Imre Nagy and internationally renowned composer Béla Bartók (Gal 1991; Verdery 1999). Like previous funerals, these ceremonies indexed a range of political sentiments, including both national patriotism and international solidarity. In taking up the motif of the funeral procession, environmentalists across the country applied the postsocialist phenomenon of the “political lives of dead bodies” (Verdery 1999) to what I call the “political lives of dead fish.” This appropriation of culturally embedded symbols allowed environmentalists to communicate that environmental problems remain a crucial part of the transformation from state socialism.

In both Hungary and Romania, environmentalists’ response to the disaster framed the cyanide spill in international terms: the international environmental movement. Whereas Hungary has decades of contact with the international environmental movement, Romania’s environmentalists have operated with fewer international connections. Romanian environmentalists expressed shame in their country’s lax environmental laws but predicted that the bad press the country was receiving in the international media would attract the support of international organizations such as Greenpeace (Martanovschi 2000).

Most strikingly, the Tisza disaster was the first environmental problem in which European Union (EU) accession featured prominently. Hungary entered the EU in May 2004, and Romania (along with Bulgaria) is tentatively expected to join the EU in 2007. “Europe” was mostly present in the 1980s Danube movement in terms of the ecological perspectives of international environmentalism and the (mostly Austrian) environmentalists with whom they collaborated. In the case of the Tisza River disaster, belonging in Europe became a major reference point for both environmentalist discourses and official environmental policy.⁷ Rather than entering yet another international lawsuit against a neighboring country on the eve of Hungary’s accession date, Hungarian officials decided to pursue compensation for damages through a civil lawsuit against Esmeralda, the Australia-based mining company operating the Aurul SA facility. Romanian activists, for their part, bolstered their demands for stronger environmental regulations and more public participation in decision making with the greater goal of EU accession. In an essay on the Tisza cyanide disaster, Romanian activist Viorel Lascu, president of the Regional Center for Ecological Supervision of the Apuseni Mountains, criticized Romanian politicians for not taking the environment seriously enough in the country’s plan for EU accession. He stated, “Romania’s journey towards Europe passes through Hungary, and this is why European integration means the two countries work-

ing together” (Lascu 2000:20). By summer of 2000, anxieties about the transnational environmental disaster were reframed as a growing awareness of other threats to the nation, poor parts of the region, and nature: the circulation of investment from foreign banks and companies.

“WILD CAPITALISM” AND “ECOCOLONIALISM” IN THE NEW EUROPE

This tale of two rivers reveals how natural resources (especially freshwater) have been managed under different political-economic systems. These histories of environmental protest were stimuli for political critique and transformation, as well as allegories of political culture. Research participants’ accounts of Danube activism during the 1980s presented the struggle as pitting “civil society” against the state. Reflecting on her own experience, one activist stated, “The Danube movement was our first introduction to civil society (*civil társadalom*)” (interview with author, March 5, 1996). During the 1990s, many environmentalists came to see ecological destruction in light of postsocialism, economic transformations, and globalization. A number of my research participants began to speak of “wild capitalism” (*vadkapitalizmus*) and “ecocolonialism” (*ökogyarmatosítás*) as a source of environmental problems, developing their own analyses of the region’s political ecology.⁸

Late in my initial fieldwork in 1997, some activists began to use the terms *vadkapitalizmus* and *ökogyarmatosítás* to describe East-Central Europe’s particular vulnerabilities to environmentally harmful projects and technologies. Activist Márta Takács, for example, complained, “Now, nature conservation is seen as an obstacle holding back development and marketization. It’s this *vadkapitalista* (“wild capitalist”) perspective that we are up against” (interview with author, October 15, 1996).

Hungarian environmentalists related “ecocolonialist” exploitation to the East-Central Europe’s poverty relative to Western Europe and their fellow citizens’ lack of information, environmental awareness, and experience in community organizing. Balázs Barány, a wildlife protection activist later involved in the activist response to the Tisza cyanide spill, hailed the political changes of 1989 as a time when spaces for greater public participation were made possible. He expressed strong reservations, however, about the social and ecological effects of the economic changes that went hand in hand with the change of political systems. According to Balázs,

Unfortunately, by the time of the political changes, it was already clear that many companies that had fallen on hard times in Western Europe because of their negative environmental effects still tried to expand and turned toward Eastern Europe as soon as the borders opened up. . . . Immediately those companies inundated not only Hungary but the rest of the newly opened countries—Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, etc.—to sell their industrial technologies. And they did sell their products, products that were no longer acceptable for Western Europe. [interview with author, October 8, 1996]

Citizens' high level of environmental awareness in Western Europe means that many people are informed about environmental risks and are effective at organizing to oppose developments that endanger the environment. According to Balázs, Western European companies and multinationals were able to take advantage of East-Central European countries' relative lack of environmental regulations, legislation, and public awareness of environmental concerns. He explained,

We Hungarians were unfortunately very inexperienced in these matters. We didn't pay enough attention and when we figured it out it was already too late. To this day one gets the impression from the West that they don't take us seriously as partners but are just palming stuff off on us, saying, "This is good enough for the *keletiek* [Easterners], this is good enough for the Hungarians." [interview with author, October 8, 1996]

Balázs viewed the opening of East-Central Europe's markets as an unfortunate opportunity for environmentally questionable technologies to be promoted under the guise of economic development. These deals foreclose rather than augment the possibility of sustainable development in Hungary (Pavlínek and Pickles 2000). In many respects, Balázs's perspective resembles the scholarly literature on path dependence, which states that the policy decisions made in the course of the postsocialist transformation are both historically determined, or path dependent, and historically determining, or path making (Stark and Bruszt 1998). After the path takes shape, once plausible alternatives come to appear unnatural and irrational.

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.⁹ In contrast, Western consultants and political elites throughout the region portrayed the market as a positive force of nature that would help postsocialist countries to evolve into ecologically modern capitalist democracies (Wedel 1999).

In their response to the Tisza cyanide disaster, Hungarian activists turned this naturalistic metaphor on its head, lamenting the environmentally destructive qualities of "wild" or "savage" capitalism (*vadkapitalizmus*) and its inevitable result, "ecocolonialism" (*ökógyarmatosítás*). When I asked a Hungarian activist from an international environmental organization whether there were any lessons to be taken from the Tisza cyanide spill, he stated, "This is the usual—we call it 'ecocolonialism'" (interview with author, June 29, 2000). The term *ecocolonialism*, however,

was not limited to Budapest elites within the environmental movement. József Hamar, president of the Tisza Club in Szolnok, Hungary, stated, "Aurul is the perfect example of ecocolonialism [*ökógyarmatosítás*]—taking advantage of the lack of regulations and unemployment. It was an accident, but the causes are not mysterious, they are precisely these" (interview with author, July 6, 2000).

These contemporary activists worry 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 in the context of debates over the construction of a toxic incinerator in a Hungarian village, Zsuzsa 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... power through the "nondecisions" of a fragmented state held in check by the private sector. [2002:155]

Today's 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 the post-1989 "age of market triumphalism," civil society groups such as environmental organizations may act to protect the state's ability to regulate in the face of neoliberal market ideology (Peet and Watts 1996). 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.

Having experienced the degradation of human health and the environment under both socialist and capitalist regimes, today's environmentalists in Hungary express skepticism toward both systems. Postsocialist activists question the industrialist orientation and concepts of progress shared by state socialism and industrial capitalism. Hungarian 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. Contemporary 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 rendered postsocialist countries vulnerable to environmental degradation and other risks. Environmentalists demand alternative pathways to economic development, and they

struggle to make their perspective heard in an environment where neoliberal models of progress have become hegemonic. This evolving perspective on the global economy marks a shift, not only in the issues environmentalists choose to work on but also in the way activists imagine power relations. Although 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.

KRISTA HARPER Department of Anthropology and the Center for Public Policy and Administration, University of Massachusetts–Amherst, Amherst, MA 01002

NOTES

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1. Living with the downstream flow of water inspired some of the first attempts at town and regional planning: Laws and zoning regulations placing abattoirs and tanners downstream from cities were among the earliest environmental regulations placed on the books in European cities (Pfiester 1991). The peculiar ethical dilemmas of resource use along rivers has inspired an entire literature on "upstream–downstream" issues in environmental ethics and policy, a field focused on resources and pollutants that flow across communities and countries (Scherer 1990).

2. The Hungarian environmental movement of the 1980s is widely acknowledged as a major force in the opposition to state socialism (Enyedi and Szirmai 1998; Lipschutz with Mayer 1996; Persányi 1993). Other examples of environmentalist dissent under state socialism abound: For example, the Ukrainian independence movement was fortified by independent activism in the wake of the Chernobyl explosion, and in the Baltics, antinuclear groups spoke out against Soviet domination and environmental risks (Dawson 1996). Similarly, Bulgaria's *Ekoglasnost* movement played a major role in protesting the priorities of the socialist state (Baker and Baumgartl 1998).

3. Throughout this article, I use the names of environmentalists and officials considered public figures who granted me permission to use their names. For all other research participants cited here, I use pseudonyms.

4. *Szamizdat* is the Hungarian form of the Russian *samizdat*, meaning literally "self-published," in evasion of official state censors.

5. Since awarding the Danube Circle, the Goldman Right Livelihood Award has bestowed awards to such luminaries of international environmental and human rights activism as the late

Nigerian environmentalist Ken Saro-Wira for his opposition to oil pipeline expansion in Ogoniland in 1994 and the leaders of India's Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement in 1991) for their struggle against a colossal dam project.

6. Slovak environmentalists had quietly organized against the damming of the Danube in the 1980s (Snajdr 1998). Their campaign was not as overtly oppositionist in tone as that of the Hungarian Danube movement; organizations such as the SZOPK focused instead on more narrowly defined nature protection issues and in providing and disseminating dissenting scientific expertise. In the early 1990s, the nationalist Meciar administration led a campaign presenting environmental activism itself as a threat to the nation. According to Meciar, environmentalists opposing the construction of the dam were, in fact, opposed to the fledgling republic's economic development as an independent nation. He publicly accused several well-known Slovak environmentalists of being Hungarian secret agents (Snajdr 2001).

7. "Europeanness" and "Easternness"—or "Westernness" and "Easternness"—constitute an enduring symbolic tension in Hungarian political culture since the period of the national revolution in the 19th century (Sinkó 1989). The East–West dichotomy maps onto other symbolic dyads such as past–future, traditional–modern, culture–civilization, nationalist–cosmopolitan, and underdeveloped–developed (Niedermüller 1989). Frequently, a single national symbol becomes the locus of rival interpretations in East–West associations, as anthropologist Susan Gal (1991) observes in her account of composer Béla Bartók's funeral.

8. The use of the term *vadkapitalizmus* was not restricted to environmentalists. According to Angelusz and Tardos 1996, 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: The other 40 percent exhibited a downright "anticapitalist" orientation (Zsolnai 1998).

9. Although Stalinist-planned economies did undertake monumental projects to transform the natural landscape (Feshbach and Friendly 1992), ecological hubris has not been limited to the state socialist world: The very capitalist city of Chicago had a public works project in the 1870s that reversed the flow of the Chicago River (Cronon 1991).

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