
MEMORY, SPACE, AND TIME PERCEPTIONS IN A POSTSOCIALIST VILLAGE OF SOUTHERN SLOVAKIA

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the way social actors perceive time and space in a period of high instability and change. The main thesis is that in conditions of uncertainty and profound transformation, the mental categorization of places and time is a dialectical process linking people to their past. This is done through the use of memory. The past can become an idealized cognitive domain, even when the actors themselves have never directly experienced it. In turn, such idealization leads them to mentally exclude those categories and social facts that belong to a period that is not remembered with pleasure. The past, as reconstructed in the words and through the actions of people, becomes in this way a venue for conveying their present choices, aspirations, and needs.

The role of memory in shaping social responses to historical changes has been widely discussed in the anthropological literature (Cole and Gay 1972; Kuchler 1988; Tonkin and Whitehouse 1995; Roseman 1996; Sant Cassia 1999). Several approaches have pointed out that memories are used by people to attribute significance to their past deeds and to reinterpret them in order to make sense out of the present (Behar 1986). In this way the past becomes epitomized to conceptualize a present that, in many situations, is difficult to interpret because of instability, uncertainty, or general hardships.

Another approach looks at the past as an imagined (and often invented) reality, which actors build in their attempt to reconstruct the time-space relationship. In the work of David Sutton (1998), the inhabitants of the Kalymnos Island of the Greek Dodecanese archipelago make use of analogies and metaphors to attribute meaning to their history and transmit this to their everyday life. This is reflected by the invented tradition of dynamite throwing at Easter time, a ritual that islanders trace back to the episode of the "rock war," conducted against the Italian soldiers during

the Second World War. The interesting side of this tradition is that, whereas in the past it was the women who threw stones at the Italian soldiers to protect their men from imprisonment, the dynamite throwing is a male-only tradition, which became imbued with ideas of masculinity, honor, and prestige.

A somewhat similar analytical approach is provided by Maurice Bloch (1998), who investigates the different uses of memory among the Sadah in Yemen, the Merina in Madagascar, and the Bicolanos in the Philippines. Bloch demonstrates how the two types of memory proposed by the western philosophic tradition (Platonic and Aristotelian) are never mutually exclusive. Platonic thought has proposed the idea of an immanent truth beyond memory, where all actions and human conquests in the form of knowledge do not contribute to increased memory. Everything is already imprinted in the mind of the individual from his birth; it is only a matter of revealing this internal memory. On the other hand, Aristotle's insistence on the importance of experience for penetrating the world of ideas leads to a completely different conception. Here memory is external, shaped, and continuously enriched by experience and knowledge, and the world needs to be discovered every day. Bloch shows that there is no one way of relating to the past and the future; therefore, these two models of memory cannot be taken as isolated entities. This is because "recalling defines the person in relation to time by invoking, or not invoking, notions of the past interaction with an external word which contains truth and falsehoods, permanent and impermanent elements, which is, or is not, in a state of continual creative dialectical flux" (Bloch 1998: 81).

In line with this argument, this paper demonstrates that actors, at determinate time and space points, choose what to accept of their past, and convey it in the form of

memories that serve the purpose of their everyday social life.

The postsocialist transformation

The changes that followed 1989 have been characterized as contradictory, complex, and many-sided in a rich body of social science literature on the problem.¹ The postsocialist transformation, encompassing overall change, has strongly highlighted the dichotomy between novelty and tradition (or continuity). The opening of new markets, capital investment, and the aggressive invasion of western European and transnational companies have provided enormous benefits to local societies in terms of work opportunities and improvement of infrastructures and of national economies. However, wide sectors of the local population, unable to cope with the transformation, are excluded from these benefits. What is worse, they have been particularly hit by the side effects of capitalist shock therapy. Poverty, the dissolution of kinship and community ties, migration, and interethnic turbulence are only some outcomes of the post-1989 era. It is of no surprise if people resort to strategies and decisions that are strongly reminiscent of their close past, but adapted to the changed reality.

Elsewhere, I have argued that there are two main strategies that proved particularly useful to survive the postsocialist transformation: investment in social and personal networks, and the ambivalence between ideas and actions (Torsello 2003a, Torsello and Pappová 2003). These constitute two strategic lines of conduct in the sense that they are intentional choices and patterns of behavior aimed at a specific goal, that of adapting to the transformation. These social and economic strategies are directed towards diversifying and rendering extremely flexible the range of responses to uncertain situations and instability.

As Pine (2003) elegantly argues, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, time and space have

become inextricably linked dimensions in Central Eastern Europe. Indeed, it would be unjust to state that before it was different. Most ethnographies on the socialist and the postsocialist periods have contributed to disprove the idea that socialism was overall a period of stagnation and uniformity (Hann 1980; Swain 1985; Lampland 1995). But the idea that time is presently accelerating and that space has increasingly become “temporalized” (Pine 2003: 318) needs due consideration. The opening of new borders after 1989 has accelerated the movement of people, and also put in discussion — sometimes violently, sometimes peacefully — the very existence of these borders.

However, the temporal and spatial expansion is not only a macro-phenomenon. People who have experienced postsocialism have learned through it to assess what existed under the previous regime, and this knowledge is still in the process of formation. Having lived under socialism is one of the strengths of the people of Central Eastern Europe, since it has given them the tools to attribute meaning to the still-hazy present. Therefore, one of the ways to understand how people construct the present is to start from the manner in which they recall the past.

The village: historical background

Kráľová nad Váhom (in Hungarian Vágkirályfa) is situated in the southwestern part of Slovakia, in the fertile and largely agricultural region of the Danubian Lowland at about 45 km distance from Bratislava, 90 from Vienna, and 120 from Budapest. It lies on the western bank of the Váh River, only four kilometers away from the present administrative and industrial center of Šaľa (about 22,000 inhabitants). The village is inhabited by 1531 persons, 723 of whom are economically active. The population is 83.1 percent ethnic Hungarian², 15.5 percent Slovak, and 1.4 percent of other ethnic

¹ See Hann 2002 for a comprehensive bibliography.

² The region where the village is situated constitutes the southern Hungarian minority belt of Slovakia. The Hungarian minority in Slovakia constitutes over 500,000 people, making Slovakia the second country (after Romania) for concentration of Hungarian minorities.

composition (Štatistický Úrad Slovenskej Republiky 2001).

The village belonged historically to the northern territories of the Hungarian Kingdom. In 1918, after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the village became part of the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic. The community belonged to Czechoslovakia throughout the socialist period except for the World War II interval (1938-1945) when Hungary occupied a part of the southern Slovak territory, including the village region. In 1950, socialist collectivization was begun on the whole Czechoslovak territory and the process continued violently until the end of the 1950s, encountering a fierce resistance by village peasants. It was only in 1960 that the socialist cooperative was able to start farming all village land. Afterwards, in 1973, a merging of the cooperative transferred the institution's management board from the village to the town of Šaľa, unifying this with four other neighboring cooperatives. The 1960-1970 decade constituted a dynamic period for the region. The steady industrialization and urbanization processes brought into the region a vast inflow of workers from the regions of central Slovakia. Also, many villagers found employment in the local factory and in other industrial centers in the capital, Bratislava.

Following the end of state socialism (1989) and the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia (1993), the village presently belongs to one of the most dynamic and economically active regions of Slovakia. The creation of two large industrial plants with foreign capital in the region has counterbalanced the restructuring and downsizing process of the socialist chemical plant, which in the 1970s was the main employer in the village. Moreover, in the early 1990s, a number of small, family-run, enterprises have emerged out of some villagers' desire to create private, productive spaces.³

³ There are only five such enterprises left today: the noodle factory, a construction company, two agricultural enterprises, and a poultry farm. The decrease in number (there were 12 in the early 1990s) is testimony to the

Written memory

Árpád (b. 1939) was a staunch Party member who during socialism worked in the town construction company as technician. He comes from a small peasant family that, after the death of his father, fragmented its property among four heirs. Árpád worked seven years in the cooperative and later found employment in the town factory. He has a brother and a sister living in the village and his father-in-law lives in his neighborhood. None of his village relatives were enthusiastically active in the Communist Party, but nobody blamed Árpád for his ideas. Unlike other villagers, who remained relatively isolated after 1989 due to their political ideology, Árpád is today a trusted village personality who takes an active part in the community's social and cultural events. Árpád is a person trusted by most villagers. He is extremely industrious and talkative and enjoys drinking and chatting in company.

One winter afternoon I was lazily spending my fieldwork time in his house. He lives in a two storey house of the cubic, unequivocally socialist shape. I was allowed to take a seat on the first floor, the one where only distinguished guests and family members are let in. Comfortably sitting in a socialist-brown armchair, I waited for him. He was frantically rushing from one room to the other bringing me something to "study" (*valami amiből tanulhatsz*): a collection of documents tied by a red-white-blue ribbon. They were yellowish papers that contain the past in a mechanically repeating form: death, birth, and marriage certificates and sometimes inheritance acts. His eyes shone as he opened the pile of documents and he could not remain silent: "Look, look at them, tell me the truth, isn't your saliva dripping? (*Nézz, nézz rájuk, nem csurog már a nyálad?*). He explains that he knows what it means to be a "scholar" and therefore he understands my impatience to

uncertainty of the last decade and of the initial enthusiasm with which people embraced the idea of starting private businesses, often without a real calculation of the costs and risks.

discover the secrets of the notarily described village past.

Árpád believes himself to be a careful researcher. He owns hundreds of documents that date back to the 18th century — he never revealed to me how he obtained them — and a number of elegantly edited volumes (in Hungarian) on the period of the Hungarian fascist invasion of Slovakia. He is very proud of showing me these treasures and he reads them often, judging from the speed with which he is able to find information in them.

One day I accidentally entered his garage, thinking that he was working there. I stood astonishingly staring at one wall. Like prehistoric graffiti, coal-like black inscriptions pictured on the wall his family genealogy. The symbols were very elementary and his childish handwriting completed the picture. He was a bit embarrassed at my discovery; that was for him an element of disorder (he was always praising the orderly way he stored old treasures), and he shyly admitted, “I needed a big space to picture out my family tree.”

The sudden passion for drawing family genealogy is not a feature of Árpád alone. I came across other villagers who, after 1989, became enthusiastically active in searching the archival documents and diving back into their families’ remote past. Even at the village elementary school, the call of the past could be heard. The teacher once assigned her pupils to draw their own family trees, which needed to contain at least four generations. I myself witnessed this homework: little Anna (8 years old) was excited to ask her grandparents about those family members she had never even heard of before. Her grandparents praised this initiative, commenting that the time had come when people should not be afraid, but know their past in a proper way.

What does this revival of the past mean for the villagers? The answers are multiple. First, one of the most significant achievements of the end of state socialism has been the freedom to openly declare one’s family origin. Villagers stress that during the previous

regime it was the less educated people, “the bottom” of society who came to power and imposed the directives, dictated by the communist party, of public behavior. One could not be openly proud of coming from a wealthy peasant family, as well as of having ancestors who occupied leading offices in the past (for details see Torsello 2003b). The very ownership of land and animals had to be concealed and these were the main parameters on which in the past people built prestige and trustworthiness. Hence, the reacquired freedom to situate one’s social origin has been seen by some as a conquest, which needs to be sanctioned by more profound knowledge about the families’ past vicissitudes.⁴

The second point, as highlighted by many ethnographic works on postsocialism, is that the profound change of the 1990s has instilled in people a sense of uncertainty of the present and future. This has led them to seek confrontation with the past, as the only temporal and spatial dimension they could control. Thus, the act of drawing family genealogies has the meaning of seeking back what seems lost, or what people fear may be lost in the immediate future: the harmony of family and kin ties, the cohesion within the domestic and relative sphere, a place in time where no great institutional revolution can penetrate and shake the little securities that make up the vagaries of the everyday. This is visible in two processes: the way in which people perceive space and the way they categorize others.

Memory as space perception

The Central Eastern European countries have historically been invested by numerous spatial changes. There is no single country that did not experience enlarging, shrinking, and resizing of its borders. Kingdoms and civilizations have for millennia occupied this

⁴ Of course this is not the case for the families who came out of their conditions of poverty and social marginality thanks to socialism. Some of these families are today able to maintain the privileged statuses that they gained during socialism, but some remained isolated and suffered more than others from the violence of the postsocialist transformation.

part of the European continent, imposing different idioms, creeds, and mentalities. Slovakia is a (small) model for this kind of spatial-temporal mobility. Within Slovakia, one of the youngest eastern European states, its regions have experienced different historical fates during the course of the last century. The region where Kráľová is situated, belonging to the Magyar-speaking regions of southern Slovakia, was occupied by Hungary and changed its political status in the period 1938-1945. Although this short period did not bring significant changes and improvements in the socioeconomic conditions of the village, it significantly contributed to the confusion of the geography of the place. Toponyms and area names reacquired the terminology of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and in a few years the efforts made by the Czechoslovak state to reinvent or translate place names seemed lost. Then history changed its course again, and not only once.

What is the outcome of this stratification in the place-naming process? The most obvious one is the confusion that can still be read in people's interpretation of the space surrounding them. This confusion is, however, not a negative phenomenon: people are not confused about the geography of their living space, they all know what to call this or that area, with a punctuality [sic] that often seems unreal.⁵ It is a kind of creative confusion, in which the memories relative to the socialist period intertwine with vaguer memories of the pre-socialist period and with knowledge of the place under the Hungarian Crown (*a Magyar Korona alatt*).

Visiting the land belonging to the village, a newcomer takes in a picture rather common in the southern Slovakian rural landscape. One large portion of the cultivated land is undivided and spreads in large patches over

the flat, fertile Danubian Lowland. Upon close observation, however, a number of small plots become evident. These privately farmed bits of land have their individual identity, visible due to the different crops cultivated there rather than the almost invisible wooden poles meant to delimit property. The plots extend eastwards, where they become indistinguishable from the inhabited area. Westwards, the main road linking two towns suddenly cuts the village land in two definite portions: the private and the cooperative land. While accompanying me along the twisted field paths, one informant, himself a farmer of a plot of land smaller than 1 hectare, was proud to show me the village's cultivated fields. He pointed out to me the land that had belonged to their 'ancestors' (*ősi föld*) and that had given *kenyér és munka* ('bread and work') to generations of villagers. Pallóci Dűlő, Zsellér Birtok, Kutya – he could name every single part of the fields (*határ*). This was done using the old Hungarian toponyms which I thought had been forgotten by today's inhabitants.

The same informant, confronted with a cadastral map dated 1976 had some difficulty discerning the position of the toponyms, all indicated in Slovak and often not coincident with the original Hungarian ones. He suggested that the problem was that the cooperative has changed the geography of the place, by merging the private plots and building the central irrigation system and a large animal breeding plant. Even though most of the Slovak toponyms were simple translations of the original Hungarian ones, he insisted that many of the new denominations did not coincide with the old ones. Anyhow, he still was able to point out to me exactly the position of the Hungarian placenames on the map.

I tried to interrogate more villagers on the position of the old toponyms and the reactions were somewhat similar. Some knew more or less where the socialist (and sometimes pre-socialist) Slovak toponyms were situated; others did not. Interestingly, with the exception of a few Slovak families living in

⁵ I have never met a villager who was not able to locate a place on the cadastral map of the community. Even old toponyms all seemed clear to them; the question was only whether to use the old (Hungarian), or the more recent (Slovak) place denominations.

the village, most of them knew the exact positioning of the Habsburg denominations.

One possible explanation for this accurate knowledge of the distant past would be to consider the village as part of the northernmost belt of the Hungarian minority. Knowledge of the pre-socialist Hungarian toponyms would be in relation to the emotional attachment of Kráľová's people to their history and to Hungarian culture. However, I reject this view since among those who were able to locate the Hungarian place names were families who did not define themselves as Hungarians, first of all because they do not speak Hungarian at home (Torsello 2003a). Why should they be concerned to remember old-fashioned names if they are not attentive preservers of the local Hungarian culture?

The possible answer is that many people want to remember their past; they do not like to be alienated from a portion of their history which, after the demise of state socialism and the privatization of land has become relevant again. This is for a practical reason: old cadastral maps and ownership documents have become crucial tools in the process of land restitution after 1992, and people had the opportunity to be educated on their own past again.

As Bloch pertinently underlines, once the historical discourse falls on the field of long-term memory,⁶ then the individual, with his (or her) desires, emotions, and interpretations, comes to the fore (Bloch 1998: 82). In this sense the scarce knowledge of the socialist toponyms can be interpreted as a deliberate choice of some villagers to refuse the spatial arrangement that was produced in a period of forced land collectivization, violence, and, not

least, uniformization of the village's social and economic features. This cognitive process is extremely selective. It shows the way in which people choose to remember their present, rather than expressing a simple mechanical product of the uncertainty of the present times.

Embodied signs of memory

Another expression of how village people choose to remember today has to do with the way people are categorized and addressed on the basis of their past deeds and present qualities. Elsewhere I have argued that values and morality become imbued with the social features of a determinate historical period and absorb them in sometimes conflictual ways that allow people diversification of action and ideas (Torsello 2003c). For the purpose of this paper it is important to point out that people make sense of their social world through categorizations and analogies that are structured on the dominant values of the period in which they live.

Categories and analogies are the basic tools that the human mind uses to build its cognitive maps, to make sense of the present. The tricky point is when these categories do not belong to the present, but are instead reconstructions (not always faithful) of the past. This is what happens when frequent and profound social changes are at stake.

The most evident example is the binary distinction between "peasant" and "proletarian." Today some villagers still use the term "peasant" (*paraszt*), or "son of peasants" (*paraszt gyerek*) to refer to those with a respected family origin, i.e. those whose ancestors owned land and worked hard on it. The distinction becomes one between families of "peasant" descent, considered as a positive attribute, and families who were 'proletarian' (*proletár*). This does not mean that socialism made all people "proletarians," rather that those families who did not have land in pre-socialist times are designated with

⁶ The distinction between short-term (or working) and long-term memory is of primary importance in the cognitive sciences. Stimuli and information are encoded by the human brain in a way that allows the functions of the "limited" capacities of the working memory to chunk and store them. On the other hand, long-term memory is responsible for more complex processes such as those related to judgement, evaluation, and analysis (see D'Andrade 1995:42-3).

an epithet that originates from the socialist period.⁷

I asked one informant to explain to me what he meant by "peasant." This is his answer:

Once all villagers were peasants. However, one has to distinguish: those who had land and worked it with their own forces were the small peasants (*kisparaszt*). Those who employed other work were the rich peasants (*gazda*). The landless could not be called peasant, even if this is the work they did for all their life. Today we know who came from those families who had some land and who didn't. This is why one can distinguish: it is a matter of respect for what our ancestors achieved and did. (Antal, b.1930)

People today tend to evaluate the past retrospectively. Building categories such as "peasant" and "proletarian" straightly means that their perception of the past is accompanied by mental models: the former is a mental model of the pre-socialist and the latter of the socialist past. This is done because, as D'Andrade (1995) observes, the human mind prefers to adhere to simple models, especially in conditions of high uncertainty and profound changes. However, one should not draw hasty conclusions. It is a matter of fact that today villagers have a critical consideration of what their life was under socialism (especially those who were deprived by the socialist system of the means of production and social status that distinguished their families in the more distant past). Most villagers agree that democracy has, if anything, granted them the right to speak freely and not disclose their family origins. However, social classes have not reemerged out of the ruins of the totalitarian regime. The new prestige is based on different scales of value: personal success, career,

economic wealth, individualism, personal networks, and working mobility. This has little to do with being the son of a rich peasant family. Conversely, even though one's family is categorized as "proletarian," one's social position and esteem may be high in the small village society. This is because personal qualities and achievements have come to play their role, too, as a result of the historical change that made the old values and meters of judgment obsolete.

Then, why do people insist on categories such as "peasant" and "proletarian"? It is, again, a way to give meaning to their past, through simple analogies that condense a whole historical period in a word, a single expression of critique of what the past was (or could be) and what the future ought to be.

Memory and objects

The search for a material thread in village history finds one more concrete example in the custody of objects and utensils that belonged to "traditional" village life. The word "traditional" (*hagyományos*) has never been used by villagers when referring to such objects; it is a mere analytical convention and it is worth noticing that when I asked them to explain when and on which occasions these objects were used, they simply said "long ago" (*régen*) or "once in the past" (*valamikor*). These objects have their own material and spatial identity, but they seem to lack a precise temporal dimension, as if all the past epochs had become one.

The same villager who shows fervent interest in collecting old documents and in drawing family trees also has an extremely interesting garden. Árpád's garden is 7 acres in size. It is, as are all village houses, accompanied by a pantry and a shed, which contain a messy variety of utensils, tools, tins cans, and all kind of objects which may (or may not) be of some use in the garden. Among them, covered with dust, are mixed a series of objects that Árpád deems as precious as his books. They are things such as an old pair of peasant boots, a plough, a sickle, a scythe, a sack for carrying grain to the mill, a spindle, an old peasant robe made of hemp, and a number of

⁷ Of course, the members of the "proletarian" families are not, with very few exceptions, proud of defining themselves as such. Interestingly, instead, they show the same propensity to classify the descendants of rich peasant families as "sons of peasants."

other tools used in the pre-socialist period by the village peasants.

These objects are not stored in windows or kept in the best room of the house, as the books are; they are mixed up with the other tools he uses daily in the field and in his garden. Árpád confessed not to be the only one to have such a "folkloristic" collection in the village, and he promised to show me something very impressive one day. Over two years after the end of my fieldwork I had occasion to visit the village some more times. On one of these occasions, Árpád excitedly informed me that, with the help of the village mayor and two more families, he had succeeded in organizing the largest exhibition of old tools to be held in Kráľová.⁸ I was lucky enough to be one of the first visitors.

The whole main hall of the Culture Hall, situated in the village center, was occupied with tables and shelves containing objects, dresses, pictures, postcards, and even some ornaments of the old church. There were more than 400 items, exposed in a simple and sometimes inaccurate way. One could find an old oil lamp, some porcelain plates, and behind the table a plough. The order did not seem to matter; what mattered was that all these objects had been jealously kept by village families who finally had found the courage to expose them publicly. This is the comment of the mayor:

We had such an event in socialist times, but the objects were very few and many eventually disappeared. This explains why people then felt reluctant to contribute part of their family histories to the community, even if only for a few days. This time it is different: we collected double what we had expected, and all families came to arrange their own things. This

is why there is no apparent order. (Dávid, b. 1949)

During the exhibition I took many pictures and all the villagers who attended were eager to call my attention to this or that object, ready to conclude, with a kind of melancholy tone "it was another world" (*az más világ volt*). It looked as, in that moment of open reconciliation with the past, when finally there was nothing to be afraid of in showing off the treasures of the family, the important thing was to become part of that past, even through the use of memories disclosed in the shape of simple, daily objects.

Conclusion

I have listed several aspects of the use of memory to reconstruct and attribute meaning to the past in a postsocialist village. Although different, the examples above share a common, basic feature: there is a critical interpretation of the past, and this is used to make sense out of the present. Villagers' interest in their ancestors' life histories, their preoccupation with categorizing families in the community, the attachment to old objects and old place-names are all expressions of the need to keep alive the contact with the past. This is, as I indicated, an outcome of the socialist period, and of its ideological censorship and leveling of social differences. However, these memories are not used to divide people; on the contrary, they unite them. History is not used as a device to build social differentiation. In this, one could say that socialism was successful: it eradicated social classes, and made it difficult for them to reappear afterwards. Interpreting history is a dialectical process in which actors strive to strike a balance between what is useful for themselves (memories in the shape of family trees) and what is part of the community's present (objects, places). In this sense, Bloch's plea for looking at memory as a multiple, diversified, and fluid stream finds full justification.

The people of Kráľová needed the postsocialist transformation to become free to explore their past and to build mental models. These models allow them to categorize the

⁸ The village had already organized two such events in the past, one in 1982 and another more recently in 1994. For richness of objects, however, they cannot be compared to the one held in 2004.

past easily and fruitfully. Memory is, in this way, not an impetuous stream of events that overlap as in a Joycean novel, but the selective use of facts, ideas, and beliefs that are recalled by individuals as soon as the present conditions urge them to do so. The uncertainty of the postsocialist transformation, in Slovakia as in all Central Eastern European countries, has called for an attentive interpretation of the past, as one of the strategic ways in which people can proceed on the ways towards changing and not forgetting the everyday features of their social world.

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