

# THE “WHISKY ROBBER”: CRIMINALITY AS A MORAL DISCOURSE IN POST-'89 HUNGARY

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On October 27th of last year, a special crime squad of the Budapest police tracked down and arrested Attila Ambrus, a serial bank robber who had escaped from prison four months earlier. With his capture, the Budapest police closed a chapter in a story that had dominated the Hungarian media and public interest for much of that year. A Transylvanian émigré and former ice-hockey player, Ambrus had captured Hungary's popular imagination with his clever outwitting of authorities, gentlemanly behavior, and – most notoriously – his habit of gulping down a shot of whisky before each crime. Inspiring comparisons to Bonnie and Clyde, Arsene Lupin, and Robin Hood (as well as Robin Hood's Hungarian counterpart, Sándor Rózsa), the “Whisky Robber” became known as perhaps the closest thing to a Hungarian “national hero” in the ten years since the end of state socialism. As a Hungarian sociologist – and Whisky Robber fan – commented, “The [current] Government is busy trying to revitalize old legends and found new traditions – they prepare silk flags and employ hussars for celebrations. In the meantime, a bank robber creates himself as a hero.”<sup>1</sup>

Before investigating the implications of this statement, I should first outline the facts of the case. Although Ambrus began robbing banks and travel agencies in 1993, he was first arrested six years later, in January 1999. At that time, the police only had information linking him to eight robberies. Thanks to Ambrus's immediate confession, however, that number expanded to twenty-seven, with the total amount stolen estimated between 100 and 200 million forints (approximately 400 to 800,000 dollars by today's exchange rates). Despite his initial cooperation with authorities, Ambrus became discouraged when he learned that he would be charged with attempted murder as well as armed robbery, since once, during a narrow getaway, he had fired his otherwise never-used gun at his police pursuers.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, on the morning of July 10 of last year, seven months after his arrest, Ambrus managed to escape from the city's highest-security prison in full view of its video surveillance. It took the police four months to find him again (in a small apartment in the Zugló district of Budapest) – during which time, it should be noted, Ambrus successfully added two more bank heists to his total.

At the height of his popularity (the months following his escape from prison), the “Whisky Robber” inspired tee-shirts, websites, a seemingly endless stream of gossip concerning his disappearance and whereabouts, and countless articles in both local and international papers either supporting Ambrus or decrying the moral climate that could idolize such a criminal. As the often-repeated comparisons to Robin Hood and Bonnie and Clyde suggest, the popularity of Ambrus's exploits were usually given a political reading, in which the crimes of a clever social underdog expose the hypocrisy and corruption of the economic and political establishment.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in Hungary there are few institutions more universally despised – or considered more incompetent and corrupt – than the banks and the police. The state's costly bail-out of national banks was widely perceived as a scandal, and trust is so lacking in these public institutions that a couple of years ago a rumor by a Postabank employee sparked a run on deposits that almost closed the bank down. On the other hand, the police are blamed for using their power to harass everyday citizens while failing to extinguish larger infractions or the presence of organized crime. Thus, the argument goes, rather than rely upon political or economic power, or the brute force for which the Mafia is well-known, Ambrus used intelligence, style, and careful preparation in order to openly commit crimes that are minuscule compared to the embezzlement, fraud, and other forms of corruption that business and government officials secretly get away with every day.

Despite the seeming transparency of this explanation, I would like to start my discussion from another angle, in the hopes of making explicit the genre conventions that make such a reading so “obvious.” After all, when I first began to investigate the Whisky Robber's widespread popularity, some of the people I interviewed dismissed my interest, telling me that he was a media phenomenon – a character created to sell papers – and nothing more. And indeed, Ambrus's exploits appear tailor-made for the logic of late capitalist

media: a form of communication whose first task, always, is to ensure its own reproduction. Such a logic requires both accident and continuity: the reliable production of spectacularized breaks from everyday life in the form of ongoing “scandals” and “events.”<sup>4</sup> This is what makes serial crime so uniquely suited for mass mediation in a way that isolated criminal incidents are not. In fact, this is what sparks the attempt to read such incidents as serial ones, to create a sense of narrative urgency, of a mystery that “the media feel compelled to enlighten.” (Ivy 1996:12) Serial crimes, in their mass-mediatized form, are thus crucial in producing the periodic sense of eventfulness that both undermines and reinforces “a stabilized sense of the everyday.” (Ivy 1996:12)

Yet if the media can be said to depend upon such crimes to ensure the cycle of continuity and novelty upon which their circulation relies, serial criminals are equally dependent upon their mass-mediated representations. Indeed, Mark Seltzer argues that serial crime is a crime of mass mediation itself. (Seltzer 1998) In an age of statistics, of “mass technologies of registration, identification, and reduplication,” (Seltzer 1998:3) serial crime is what happens when the criminal experiences himself as a *type* of person. Such a criminal does not merely dehumanize his victims, but also experiences himself as dehumanized: a non-person, a non-individual, “the mass in person.” (Seltzer 1998:7) Thus, both his personality and his crimes themselves are patched together out of mass-mediated representations of the criminal as a type. (Seltzer 1998:5) That is, the criminal internalizes public and expert bodies of knowledge concerning criminality, producing a “looping-effect” by which, as Seltzer explains, the concept of the serial criminal “tend[s] to lift [itself] up by [its] own bootstraps: feeding on the representations and identifications that thus become inseparable from that concept.” (Seltzer 1998:107)

While this model may be problematic, it is useful in highlighting how the repetitive, routinized nature of serial crime epitomizes the modern understanding of criminality itself, which is crucially based not upon criminal *acts*, but rather criminal *characters*: not dangerous behavior, but dangerous individuals. Criminology – both as a modern science and a popular form of knowledge – thus depends upon the recognition of a criminal *type*. This grows out of a moment in the nineteenth century when the development of criminology and photography converged in specific ways, creating technologies of registration and identification precisely oriented towards making the criminal character visible. Recent literature has demonstrated that this recognition follows a visual logic, but I would argue that it can follow a narrative one as well.

The power of this logic is that once a few elements or signifiers of such a character are recognized, the rest of the story can be easily filled in, whether in the media or in private discourse. For example, the first newspaper article I was able to locate that used the term “Whisky Robber” was published in the fall of 1996 and described the serial criminal (accused at that time of ten robberies) as gentlemanly, calm, non-violent, and disdaining the use of masks or gloves. Terming him a “Hungarian Arsene Lupin” and a “modern outlaw/highwayman [*betyár*],” the article half-jokingly suggested that it was possible that he was giving his money to the poor – an obvious reference to Robin Hood and the Hungarian Sándor Rózsa. (Veress 1996) Thus, Ambrus was considered to embody an almost archaic or anachronistic mode of criminality, the “social bandit.” As Ernest Mandel explains in his study of the development of the modern crime story, “social bandits” emerged at the moment of transition from feudalism into nascent capitalism, expressing a populist revolt against the contemporary order. They were thus “robbers of a special type, whom the state (and the oppressor classes) regard[ed] as outlaws but who remain[ed] within the bounds of the moral order of the peasant community.” (Mandel 1984:1)<sup>5</sup> In Hungary’s current era of “wild capitalism” (*vadkapitalizmus*), such crimes have undeniable appeal, given what many consider to be an “unjust social order and its irrational political institutions.” (Mandel 1984:4) At the same time, Ambrus’s intelligence, meticulous preparation, and polite behavior also inspired references to the more modern stereotype of the “gentleman criminal”: the cool-headed professional who, unlike organized criminals executes his crimes with elegance and style rather than violence.

In both cases, it perhaps goes without saying that the Hungarian public’s familiarity with such criminal genres is based less upon historical knowledge than upon the fictional representations of these types in popular novels and Hollywood films. This accounts for the durability of these narratives: more than three years later, the depiction of the Whisky Robber has not altered, even in the smaller details. If, before Ambrus’s arrest, media coverage treated the identity of the “Whisky Robber” as a mystery, a narrative puzzle

to unravel, then what is important is how after his arrest, media reports sought to integrate his autobiographical details into the genre conventions that were already established.<sup>6</sup> That is, the identification of the Whisky Robber as an individual, Attila Ambrus, was accompanied by the immediate conflation of that individual with pre-existing narrative conventions concerning his criminal “type.”

Indeed, the capture of Ambrus merely reinforced the power of the myth his crimes inspired. Ambrus was discovered to be good-looking, well-spoken, and perhaps most importantly, tremendously hungry for media attention. An avid collector of articles about his exploits, he was more than happy to live up to the expectations generated by his criminal persona. For example, even though he claims to have preferred the original media and police appellation “lone wolf” (*magányos farkas*) to the term “Whisky Robber,” Ambrus nonetheless continued to drink his infamous shot of whisky before each crime. (Gál and Ambrus 1999:27) After his arrest, Ambrus spent his period in custody granting numerous interviews to the media (including one televised encounter with Lajos Varju, former head of the police’s robbery sub-division), working on his autobiography (Gál and Ambrus 1999), and negotiating to sell his story to an American film producer (with the proceeds earmarked as compensation to the banks and travel agencies he robbed). And just as his crimes had relied upon the same costumes, scripts, and techniques in a conscious effort at self-iconization, after his arrest Ambrus attempted to trademark his moniker itself, the “*Whiskys*.”<sup>7</sup>

The Whisky Robber’s much-vaunted “charisma,” I would argue, was thus as much a function of narrative cliché as of his own personal qualities. Of course, these popular accounts needed some sort of factual basis, and this point was exemplified in the debate surrounding Ambrus’ escape from prison. Did he use bedsheets, shoelaces, or a telephone cord to rappel down from a four-story height? Nonetheless, such “factuality” then became the ground for acts of story-telling whose effectiveness depended upon their ability to evoke mythic resonances. For example, both Ambrus’s love of his dog and his trick of hiding his gun in a bouquet of flowers – which he then presented to female bank tellers – were read as evidence of his humanity. After all, the argument goes, if after his twenty-seventh robbery Ambrus hadn’t returned home for his dog before heading for the border, the police (who had captured and extracted a confession from his confederate) would never have been able to catch him. And according to the Hungarian proverb, “no one who likes flowers can be a bad man.” (*Aki a virágot szereti, rossz ember nem lehet.*)

Such arguments were effective not merely because the public was looking for reasons to justify why they found Ambrus appealing. (After all, who cares how much corrupt bankers or politicians love their dogs?) Rather, such seeming trivia were cited as corroboration of Ambrus’s inherently moral character. Again, the fact that these details were in themselves clichés is crucial here. For, as the proverb about flowers suggests, “recognition” of Ambrus as a romanticized criminal type summoned not only a narrative structure but – given the “obvious” comparisons to Robin Hood and Sándor Rózsa, a moral message as well. By implication, Ambrus was also such an “honest” criminal, a friend of the poor who did not hurt anyone. It was thus beside the point that Ambrus kept the stolen money for himself, spending it on gambling, women, and exotic vacations. In the same way, the fact that Ambrus on several occasions resorted to physical aggression in order to carry out his crimes failed to impact substantially his mythic status as non-violent.<sup>8</sup> What was important, instead, was that the Whisky Robber made such an effective “story” [*sztori*]. Moral lessons were drawn from the narrative type Ambrus was considered to embody, rather than from his criminal behavior itself.

I shall return to the implications of this claim in a moment, but for now I want to emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that the Whisky Robber was a mere “media creation.” After all, the cultural values that dominate Hungary’s media are for the most part recognizable and familiar territories of contestation for the Hungarian public. The question, instead, is why was the Hungarian public ready for such a “story” and the moral critique it was assumed to contain? Why, for instance, were the lines of group identity drawn in such a way that Ambrus was not condemned as a foreigner robbing Hungarians of their hard-earned money, given that Ambrus emigrated from Romania in 1989? Or, as one of my anti-Whisky Robber informants argued, why didn’t the Hungarian public “realize” that bank failure could lead to the loss of private savings, or mandate state assistance that would be indirectly financed by the taxpayer? I raise these issues not to pose “truth” against “myth,” or to insist there were two types of discourses: one fantastic, invested in the Whisky Robber as a romantic figure, the other, sober and rationally citing the “facts” of the case. Rather, I mean to

ask why this particular narrative of the anachronistic “gentleman bandit,” and not other possible interpretations, was so successful and tacitly accepted even by those who did not agree with it.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, there are a number of socio-economic reasons that can account for the mythification of Ambrus into an archaic and inherently moral criminal type, previously only familiar to Hungarians from movies, novels, and popular legends. To begin with, the Whisky Robber appeared virtuous merely by not siding with institutions so widely despised in Hungarian society – the police, corrupt public and business officials, and the mafia. That is, to state one popular explanation, given the public’s historic mistrust of the state and its officials, Hungarians were not so much pro-Whisky Robber as anti-police. Moreover, the fact that Ambrus openly committed and later freely admitted to what were considered small-scale crimes was seen as an expression of his “honesty.” He thus, many argued, exposed the hypocrisy of those who abuse positions of political and economic power, and seek to hide their greater criminality or justify it via quasi-legal means.<sup>9</sup> After all, the logic goes, despite the police’s attempts to counter their image of incompetence by publicizing their successful efforts in locating Ambrus last October, what does the arrest of one more or one less small criminal matter? As the Hungarian saying goes, the Whisky Robber was just one “small fish,” while the “big fishes” continue to swim undisturbed.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, by acting alone (and in a highly public and spectacular way), Ambrus was considered to have attacked the facelessness of the post-socialist political economy itself, in which, to quote Katherine Verdery, “the visible hand of the state is being replaced by the invisible hand of the market.” (Verdery 1996:219) (In other words, according to popular conception there is still a “They” out there that controls everything, but it is even more difficult to locate or identify.)

Even the fact that Ambrus was avowedly only out for himself failed to undermine his perceived morality. Given the prevalence of, or at least resignation to, everyday criminality against the state (tax fraud, minor cheating, etc.) Ambrus might be considered merely exemplary of what Violetta Zentai calls Hungary’s “culture of complicity,” in which private vices become identical with civic virtues. (Zentai undated:8) Moreover, Zentai argues, earning money in post-communist Hungary is subject to a different moral conceptual scheme than that of spending it. By whatever means, making money evokes suspicion, carrying associations with the mafia and corruption. Spending money, on the other hand, is “harmless, it contributes to other people’s business success, and the origin is not relevant”<sup>11</sup> – a logic Zentai rightly targets as an inverse Protestant ethic. (Zentai undated:9) Even though Ambrus did not give his money to the poor, my interviewees told me, he spent it the same way that they would have given the same opportunity. In fact, one informant stated that she admired that Ambrus did not use his money productively, storing its value through the purchase of a house or car, but rather “re-invested” his illegal gains back into the economy.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, to this informant, Ambrus’s habit of spending money freely and carelessly, and then turning back to crime each time his money ran out, proved the “purity” of his criminal acts. He did not steal for the money, but rather for an exercise of wits: for the sake of the meticulously-planned and well-executed robbery itself.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Ambrus’s crimes could thus, however perversely, be read as an expression of more generally-held cultural values, this is not to say that Ambrus’s crimes were considered an implicit support of the status quo. Instead, the success of this “social bandit” narrative, embodied in comparisons to Robin Hood and Bonnie and Clyde,<sup>14</sup> might be better understood as a systemic critique, which I would illuminate through reference to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the wish-image. As Susan Buck-Morss explains, the wish image, in this case the figure of the “noble outlaw,” is a dream symbol that seeks to break from the present by evoking a “cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols” from the distant past. (Buck-Morss 1989:116) Such archaic images thus become the means to articulate the potential of the present and the frustrated desire for the new. This logic is perhaps exemplified in the discourses concerning Ambrus’s intelligence and professionalism, which make visible the hope of living in some kind of meritocracy where brains and diligent effort are rewarded, even if success must be achieved by extra-legal means. Indeed, even the police themselves praised Ambrus as highly professional (*profí*). Similarly, my informants’ insistence that they were financially unaffected by the Whisky Robber’s crimes (over and over again, I heard “it doesn’t hurt me”) reflects the sense of alienation that is one of the most obvious legacies of state socialism. But it also materializes the yearning for an autonomous private sphere, unaffected by the invisible, unpredictable, and incomprehensible economic forces that have already wreaked havoc on the financial stability of so many Hungarians.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin's concept of the "wish-image" usefully nuances our understanding of the Hungarian public's ever-growing atomization and cynicism about the possibilities of financial stability in post-'89 Hungary. Still, what is missing from such analysis, and the socio-economic critique from which it derives, is the way in which the notion of the "Whisky Robber" as a criminal "type" and moral touchstone has extended into larger discursive realms. That is, the question is not merely which social frustrations the popularity of the Whisky Robber illuminates. Rather, it is how the icon of the Whisky Robber himself was used to engage with topics or issues far removed from those I have previously discussed.

Indeed, the Whisky Robber quickly became a crucial point of reference in a number of already over-politicized public and media discourses. In a cultural environment where the schism between the government and its opposition is ever-widening, the phenomenon of the Whisky Robber and his extensive popularity provided a potent symbol for commentators across the entire political spectrum. For the social-liberal opposition, the Whisky Robber's notoriety appeared to both highlight and obscure what they considered to be the much greater criminality and corruption of the current center-right government. For conservatives, on the other hand, the popularity of the Whisky Robber was an indictment of Hungary's disintegrating value system, and the social-liberal critique was a mere attempt to discredit the current government (particularly the Minister of the Interior).<sup>16</sup>

And just as newspaper and television editorials used the Whisky Robber to critique current politics, everyday discourses also relied upon him as a reference point to illuminate other issues. Given the growing public frustration and disinterest in party politics, however, there was no evidence that an individual's support or rejection of the Whisky Robber was influenced by his or her political orientation. Instead, the Whisky Robber was cited in discussions ranging from the ethics of advertising (a German company reportedly considered asking Ambrus to be the spokesperson for an energy drink), the perceived immorality of the legal profession (the public questioned whether Ambrus's lawyer was in contact with him between his escape and subsequent arrest), and the power of the media (the possible negative impact of a controversial television broadcast of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* was compared to that of Ambrus's well-publicized criminal acts).<sup>17</sup>

In many public and private domains, therefore, the Whisky Robber undoubtedly appeared to be a "good thing to think with" (to paraphrase Levi-Strauss's well-known formulation) at this moment in what might be termed post-post-communist Hungary. As I explained earlier, the power of the ready-made criminal "type" is that once "recognized," everything appears to unfold. We automatically know what he is like, his weaknesses and strengths, who his enemies and allies are, and most importantly, the moral or political issues at stake. By discussing the Whisky Robber, a "criminal type" whose persona derived from well-known narratives of criminality and social conscience, observers thus sought to extend his apparently self-evident "explanatory power" to illuminate other issues.

Yet, I would argue, the very flexibility of possible interpretations of the Whisky Robber does not point to a semiotic density, but rather to a vacuum. Regardless of how much their opinions of Ambrus diverged, what these narratives shared was the assumption that the "Whisky Robber" could be invoked as shorthand signifier of moral criticism. But what is crucial here is that rather than inspiring new insights, the Whisky Robber embodied the *idea* of critique, giving observers the opportunity to make arguments long familiar to the Hungarian public. That is, more important than the specific virtues the Whisky Robber presumably embodied was the fact that he was read as a *symbol of moral critique itself*, whether used positively or negatively. The seemingly self-evident nature of the Whisky Robber phenomenon meant that he could be used as a discursive trope in order to "explain without explaining," without clarifying the issues, offering new insights, or providing possible solutions.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he functioned as an empty cipher, made to signify simply through serving a specific place in various predetermined narratives.

Hence the irony is not merely that a serial robber became an emblem of moral criticism. While his popularity assuredly reflected real frustrations among the Hungarian public, as a cultural icon the Whisky Robber was unable to do the social or symbolic "work" undertaken by previous generations of "noble bandits." For as Ernest Mandel argues, the apparent similarity between contemporary criminals and the "social bandits" of previous eras is merely a formal one. The attempted resurrection of such anachronistic figures in the present time fails, he argues, because in today's context, such "rebels" are "disillusioned and cynical," no longer motivated by social causes and knowing both what they are fighting *against* and what

they are fighting *for*. Instead, “[t]hey no longer believe in anything, except perhaps the possibility of finding some small niche of personal happiness in the short term. Their rebellion stems . . . from a rejection of society as it is, but not from any notion that it might be possible to replace it by a better one.” (Mandel 1984:132-133)

This lack of any positive symbolic content is perhaps most evident in the discourses surrounding the Whisky Robber’s popularity itself. Although a number of polls taken after Ambrus’s escape indicated the public’s almost unanimous support (*Financial Times* (London), July 20, 1999:11), more recent studies conducted since his second arrest have suggested that even at the height of his popularity, no more than one-third of the population supported the Whisky Robber. Of greater interest, however, is that those polled seemed to think that their negative view of Ambrus was a minority opinion: that is, even though they themselves did not consider him a “hero,” they assumed that the rest of the public did. (*Népszava*, November 20, 1999) Thus, the popularity of Ambrus’s crimes was such a crucial part of the “social bandit” narrative shared both by his supporters and detractors that even those who did not support him took his public acceptance for granted. Whether liked or not, he was undeniably perceived as opposing all the same things many Hungarians are against. In this way, the perhaps phantasmatic “popularity” of the Whisky Robber itself became a pretext for drawing negative conclusions about the moral state of society, and for justifying – rather than critiquing – one’s own personal sense of alienation. In fact, by emphasizing the Hungarian public’s self-perceived impotency and victimhood, the icon of the “Whisky Robber” was very effective in moralizing everyday criminality in Hungary (such as petty thievery and tax evasion), while at the same time asserting its difference from “real crime,” which is always committed by a “Them,” whether that be the government, the *nouveau riche*, the mafia, or gypsies.

In closing, it is helpful to return to the (usually) ironic assertion that the Whisky Robber represents the closest thing Hungary has known to a “national hero” in its ten years of post-socialism. (Indeed, given that the star-making apparatus of capitalist media was not in place before the political transformation, this claim might be extended back even further.) Such a statement is particularly important given the memory politics of Hungary’s current political climate, in which the symbolic status of past heroes has been a source of great contention. The past decade has witnessed attempts to discredit almost every important historical figure from Hungary’s twentieth-century – including the interwar period, the 1956 revolution, and the opposition movement during late socialism. Meanwhile, the present government continues its controversial campaign to unify Hungary’s national community around potent, yet highly contested, historical symbols (most recently, the crown of Hungary’s first king, St. Stephen). Enlivened by myth, yet unburdened by historical controversy, the success of the Whisky Robber may rest in his symbolic “emptiness” itself. That is, he is not a national hero so much as a *stand-in* for one, a useful channel through which to funnel very diverse, and often contradictory, political and social debates. At this moment, perhaps the only individual who can become a hero is such a person: an empty and ephemeral figure, but one that provides glamour and nostalgia as well, giving body to the public’s fantasies and frustrations without offering the means or imagination to satisfy either.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> György Csepeli, professor at the Institute of Sociology at ELTE University, quoted in Hildebrand 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> Or so his lawyer, former Parliament representative György Magyar, reported (*Népszabadság*, July 12, 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> For English-language examples, see Hildebrand 1999, Jordan 1999, Lebor 1999, Kosztolányi 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> This logic is indebted to Ivy 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Hobsbawm 1965 and 1969.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Magyar Hírlap's* coverage of his arrest on January 18, 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> In Hungarian, *Whiskys* (alternate spelling: *viszkis*) literally means "the one with the whisky" or "the whisky guy." In this way, Ambrus was defined by his practices of consumption – and in particular, the glamour associated with the consumption of a Western product. Similarly, I often heard from my informants that "before the system change, we couldn't have had a criminal like this – we only knew it from television." The Whisky Robber thus ironically became a positive element in the very potent discourse concerning Hungary's entrance into the West.
- <sup>8</sup> Several other aspects of Ambrus's criminal career were similarly effaced. Perhaps most crucial is that despite being termed a "lone wolf," Ambrus committed several of his robberies with a partner. Mention of these confederates has been almost entirely lacking in media coverage of Ambrus's crimes. In addition, the fact that Ambrus robbed local travel agencies as well as banks (thus undermining the argument that he only attacked faceless institutions) has also received relatively little attention.
- <sup>9</sup> Frigyes Solymosi describes such white-collar criminals, who maintain a respectable façade to mask their wrongdoing, as "pleasant-looking, well groomed middle-class" people who "plant cacti in their free time, are fond of birds and bring flowers to their secretaries." (Solymosi 1999, quoted in Kosztolányi 1999).
- <sup>10</sup> "Egy kis hallal kevesebb [one less small fish]." This reference can be found both in newspaper reports ("Egy kis hallal kevesebb," *Népszava*, November 8, 1999; "Jelentem, Attila gólt kapott ["I report that they scored a goal against Attila" – a reference to the popular slogan "Whiskys:29, BM (Belügy Minisztérium, Ministry of the Interior):1]," *Népszabadság* October 29, 1999), and on email discussion boards on Hungary's popular Index website ([www.index.hu](http://www.index.hu)).
- <sup>11</sup> For example, one of my interviewees had known Ambrus casually because they both trained at the same sports facility. When I asked him his impressions of Ambrus, he shrugged and commented, "we knew he had a lot of money, but no one asked him where it came from."
- <sup>12</sup> Then again, our interview took place just days after she and her family had finished spending their savings on renovating their kitchen – trusting their home to store value more effectively than in the ever-devaluating forint.
- <sup>13</sup> Ambrus's extravagant wastefulness, as a rejection of bourgeois values, also evoked the strong Hungarian cultural trope of the gentry. (Thanks to József Litkei for this observation.) At the same time, however, it resonated with the more recent era of late socialism, in which the relative inability to consume or have access to Western goods and standards of living (exemplified in the ability to travel abroad) was a key idiom through which the public articulated their dissatisfaction with the regime. Because there were few options to spend money, most Hungarians instead accumulated their extra income or invested it in a car or country house. Now, given that access to Western consumer goods is theoretically available to all, many Hungarians define success by the ability to invest in experience (i.e. travel), rather than property.
- <sup>14</sup> While productive comparisons might be drawn between the current situation in Hungary and 1930s America, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.
- <sup>15</sup> Indeed, such an insistence on personal autonomy and invulnerability can be read not only as a historical response to state socialism, but also as reflecting the visual logic of capitalist modernity in its longing for crime as pure spectacle:

transgression without loss. The dialectic of the hidden and the visible that determines the act of the criminal – the impulse both to leave a signature and yet to escape detection – here is flattened into the spectator’s demand for a spectacular, “clean expenditure,” in which something is stolen but nothing is lost. (This logic is drawn from Hollier 1989.)

<sup>16</sup> Given the waning of his popularity since his second arrest, Ambrus has recently used his media savvy to attempt to “cash in” on this over-politicization of public discourse. In an effort to make allies, he has turned away from his original endorsement of the center-right government in power (Fidesz) and is currently seeking support from presumably more sympathetic liberals by sending letters to magazines and television shows

<sup>17</sup> Another example occurred days before Ambrus’s second arrest. During a demonstration supporting a fired soccer coach, his fanatic supporters chanted not only his name, but that of the Ambrus as well, as if to extend his apparent moral “legitimacy” to the coach. (*MTI Országos Sajtószolgálat* [MTI State Press Service], October 25, 1999.)

<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps most evident in the arguments voiced by those who opposed the Whisky Robber’s popularity. Their failure to explain, and the very banality or circularity of their reasoning – such as the police authorities’ attempt to discredit Ambrus as a homosexual or the common popular argument that “*a bűn az bűn*” (“crime is crime”) – reveals the difficulty of intervening or breaking apart the heroic construction of the Whisky Robber effectively.