

## FROM *HÁZI* TO HYPER MARKET: DISCOURSES ON TIME, MONEY, AND FOOD IN HUNGARY

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“We do not live to eat, we eat to live”

(Vladimir Voinovich, *Moscow 2042*)

“We work to live, not live to work”

(Pete, a friend from Debrecen)

In the early 1990s one could still find what Voinovich called Communist Food Establishments, all across Eastern Europe. In Hungary these *önkiszolgáló* (self-service communal eating halls) or *menza* (cafeterias) with long lines of office workers and manual laborers lined up to be served boiled potatoes and some evil looking stew which jokingly would be characterized as “vegetarian pork.” Like Orwell’s Parsons, my fellows would joke, “It looks like meat, it tastes like meat, but I don’t think there is any meat in here. Double-plus good!” The experience of eating mass-produced, but cheap food at cafeterias helped people develop an ironic language criticizing socialism and an almost sacred reverence for homemade meals. As a friend Lajos told me he never eats at cafeterias:

You never know what you are going to get. At home you know what is in the meal: you put it in. You cook it. If it tastes bad it’s your own fault. If it tastes good you can feel proud that you’ve made a good healthy meal for yourself.

In Hungary the word “*Házi*” means anything homemade. In *A Worker in a Worker’s State*, Miklos Haraszi describes the significance of *házi*. Making something for your-self is to defy the State, which claimed to provide everything needed in life—it means being a moonlighter in a State proclaimed a worker’s paradise. *Házi* symbolized above all freedom. The freedom of *házi* comes from the freedom from State control, a sense of accomplishment, having agency, and being independent from, i.e. not being dependent

upon, the State. With the transformation of the political economy in Hungary have come more and more exotic ethnic restaurants, shopping malls with imported foods, fast food establishments, and improved diets. The significance of *házi* has waned in the face of a new consumer culture in terms of meeting the basic needs of citizens brought up in an economy of shortage. Yet the significance of *házi* has increased in the sense of something harder and harder to find, since more and more people flock to various shopping centers and super markets to buy imported produce, goods, and services. *Házi* meant a kind of moonlighting under socialism, not for financial gain as much as for generating self worth, while moonlighting continues, it is at odds with the object of labor, consumption of fetishized commodities available from retail chains or “hypermarkets.”

*Házi* is considered and was considered better because the products of one’s labor are made for the individual’s satisfaction; they are not made for sale; therefore they are not produced for money. They are something made at home, but are not so much required, but desired. The most common *házi* items are food and drink. This concept however is different than the peasant mentality of doing work on the farm or around the house because there is no alternative, food is grown, and household repairs are done because one must do the work for survival. *Házi* is an alternative to that which is provided by the state, corporations, or similarly organized institutions that are necessary for survival and are bought with money. *Házi* is different than what poor people do for survival growing vegetables in the garden and raising pigs and the like because the family can not afford to buy things at the market or in stores—this is a kind of low level subsistence agriculture. Nor is this the same as growing fruits and vegetables and making handicrafts for sale at the

market for extra profits. *Házi* means making food for example, because one loves one's friends, family, or neighbors. A person engaged in *házimunka* does so with them and for them. *Házi* is not about productivity, profit, or any other economic gain it is about love and freedom. *Házi*, however, has a political meaning; it is about cheating the state because the state cheats the individual. Anything that is produced at home runs counter to the modernist projects of communism or capitalism, because the State is not involved. The communist state claimed to provide everything needed in life and therefore *házi* was an insult to the state. Similarly in capitalism everything is in theory available on the market for consumption, and because capitalism is said to be more efficient, with better, cheaper, high quality goods and services, to do it yourself seems stupid and a waste of time. But *házi* is about dignity, creativity, self reliance, individuality, and self worth; it symbolizes the power to choose, to plan, to accomplish, to be a human being not a robot-worker, backward peasant, or mindless consumer—negative sentiments attached to all things un-*házi*. *Házi* thus is a moral concept, a cultural concept which flies in the face of rational actor models, valorization of communist work ethics, and advertising in capitalist commodity fetishism.

*Házi* food, grown in the garden, raised in the yard, harvested, tended to, slaughtered, cooked, and served with special care and attention by family members is praised as a kind of end in itself. It is functional only in that it brings people together in solidarity, enhances dignity, and produces individuality. It is not a way of organizing economic life like in the peasant cultures of the past, although it comes from a peasant mentality; it is an institution in opposition to the modernist state. The fact that many people make jam out of fruit, bacon out of their pigs, and pickled salads out of their vegetables to reduce their shopping budgets does not diminish the cultural meaning of *házi* foods. Beyond a feeling of freedom and cheating the state, some forms of *házimunka* were forbidden under communism such as slaughtering pigs, people recognize individuals and individualism—my Uncle Joe made that, or Auntie Anna baked that. What is given is not commodifiable because it comes out of love. But also one sacrifices time to "do it yourself." It is more than a hobby, although it may be fun. It is more than calculated status-enhancing gift

giving, although some might see it that way. It is a feeling of being human in a seemingly inhuman world of progressive modernist propaganda and work place discipline which tells a person that their only worth is in what they produce for the state and how much they earned for their hard work, time, and energy. While *házi* foods often were converted into subsistence, this is only in the context of socialism's economy of shortage when people had difficulties procuring food. Where *házi* has been given new meaning is in people's shortage of time and energy under capitalist consumerism. But the meanings of *házi* having to do with individualism, dignity, and solidarity are under attack by the new generation's celebration and enthusiasm for commodity fetishism found in advertising and hypermarkets—a utopian ideology of capitalism.

What has time and money have to do with food? Why was *házi* so important? Why have people stopped growing, cooking, and eating their own food and instead flock to hypermarkets and fast food restaurants? There is a new generation of young people brought up on the notion that store-bought is better due to the proliferation of advertising, the new emphasis of the power of money and commodity fetishism. The new mentality around food and shopping is part of a new ideal of freedom. Freedom before was in *Házi*, doing it for yourself, being able to survive as long as one could produce everything needed in life not relying on the state, institutions and organizations, but on real people "known to you" as friends, relatives, neighbors. The change from doing it yourself to buying it from others involves a new sense of self. This new self-image has changed from independence to reliance on money and consumerist services. I want to use questions about food as a point of entry into questions of power and powerlessness, political economy and culture. Similarly one can not understand food and people's relationship to food without looking at work, pay, taxes, shopping practices, ideas about diets, self image, gender and sexuality. In order to understand the present mentality we must first look at the socialist past, which people place in stark contrast to the present. People surely fetishized all things *házi*, but this is not the same as commodity fetishism.

### Discourses of Time, Money, and Food under Socialism: An Economy of Shortage

Q: What is one hundred meters long and eats cabbage?

A: The line in front of a meat market.

--A socialist-era Eastern European joke.

Jokes provide valuable insights into the realities and frustrations of daily life and the jokes told under socialism often played upon the difficulties of trying to procure food. More importantly, these are joking laments that have to do with dignity, morals, logic, justice, equality or fairness, and how absurdity has replaced natural or normal ways of living and acting in the world. These jokes are about deficiencies. Because of the cold war and the mutual separation between the Capitalist world and the Socialist world goods could only be obtained from other socialist countries, a circumstance that severely restricted the amount and availability of food and other commodities. Soviet policy made Hungary and the other occupied countries [like East Germany] pay the cost of their occupation, which meant high taxes and sharing limited resources with the USSR. The post war period immediately lowered the standard of living, due to devastation as well as war debt payments, and many city dwellers turned to various forms of subsistence farming to stretch their food supplies. Pork delicacies, which are a symbol of wealth and prosperity, a sign of the good life for most central Europeans, normally integral to holidays and the feasts that accompany them became scarce. The Communists after 1956 had to provide the population with pork not just on week ends, Sundays and holidays, but for every meal—as a sign of how much better things had become since post-Stalinist changes. Similarly white bread freshly baked at local bakeries symbolized wealth and prosperity and was made available at low prices so that every family could obtain ironically a middle-class symbol of health and happiness under socialism. Pork and white bread are perhaps symbols of social worth they are also unhealthy yet abundant and cheap in Hungary. However even though there were times when pork was abundant, often political conflicts would cause pork shortages as well, as the peasant-farmer strikes would sometimes involve slaughtering pigs to prevent acquisition by the state. Any way you look at it, even when there was pork, something else was surely defective or deficient. I heard many jokes [1993-1997 Hungary] about how people can no longer afford

meat; pork usually comes four times a year through the *disnatures* [pig slaughter] where blood sausages, smoked bacon, and other favorites are prepared. However these homemade pork products were considered like all other things “*házi*” better—homemade is the best, and store bought the worst.

Another endless source of jokes is the Soviet era queuing. Obtaining the materials necessary to conduct daily life was consistently difficult, with some serious improvement after 1989, however while queues were reduced significantly. Today people argue that one can't get enough money to buy what there is, before anywhere people sensed goods were available, a line would form and people would wait for hours for a chance to buy. In the 1990s the shops were more abundant than under socialism, but you still had to wait. For example, there was only one chicken shop in the town of Bérétyóújfalu [1995-1997]. They sold only chicken, and every Monday they were closed, which meant that you had to buy more chickens Saturday morning or wait till Tuesday. Some products were simply in short supply, one day you wake to discover that there is no cheese for two or three days, every shop is sold out. In the past, even more than in the mid to late nineties, workers would smuggle home food or agricultural products in their bags where people would cope with shortages through a barter or gift giving system. Although shortages have disappeared in Hungary and a new mentality or consumer culture has developed from 1997-2003 people still talk endlessly about where and for how much one can obtain goods and services, but what seems missing is the tales of heroic shopping that were so common under socialism and are still quite frequent in post-socialist Belarus.

### Socialist Shopping: Tales of the Heroic Mother

An old lady enters a food store in Budapest and asks for a dozen eggs. The vendor tells her: “You're in the wrong store, granny. Here we haven't got any meat. It's next door that they haven't got any eggs.”

--A joke told by a young female student.

In response to the economy of shortage, rapid inflation, growing unemployment, and the reduction in real income arose a genre of story

telling which I and Nancy Ries, in *Russian Talk*, characterize as “tales of heroic shopping”—a set of consumerist tales about braving markets and finding deals. While there is an equally masculinist set of tales about finding deals on cars, television sets, VCRs, computers, and other pieces of high priced hardware. Here I will develop my description of feminine discourses about shopping first focusing on survival rather than luxury goods, stretching the household budgets to new heights, and morality induced sacrifices for the good of the children. People developed a genre of shopping tales, male and female, and used certain devices, such as dramatic tone, long pauses for suspense, and lists of impossible situations or obstacles, to produce narratives of ordeal and questing. These stories focused on a hard to obtain, or important item, which was badly, needed such as medicine, toys for children, birthday presents, or items in short supply, butter, meat, tea, or cheese. These stories follow V.J. Propp's model of the folktale. They begin with the hero's (or Heroine's) realization that there is a need or lack. In Jack and the Bean stock this is when Jack's mother points out that the cupboards are bare. The hero then departs from home with a mission to find food [or some other crucial item]. The hero's journey represents the axis of the narration, during the course of which he must overcome a number of difficulties, and survive a succession of trials or ordeals, usually with the help of some supernatural powers [even if the supernatural takes the form of “luck”]. The tale ends with the hero's return home with the goods or in the case of Jack something far better than the original quest object.

The female version of this tale, set in the present or recent past, represents a Hungarian version of what Ries calls the “Babushka story”—the Grandma story. While this discourse was highly important under socialism in Hungary and in the 1990s, it is also still popular in post socialist Belarus—with its continuing economy of shortage. Ries argues that the Babushka's ordeal is familiar to all: the long lines, the cold, the faith it takes to wait in line, not knowing if supplies will run out just as you reach the front of the line; the constant intrusions of “more important,” more aggressive or more sneaky persons at the front of the line, the bureaucratic wait for a ration card, or work-place discount card, and a valuable reward at the end—sugar for the family. One Russian author, Vladimir Sorokin, wrote an epic poem of this

quest story called *The Queue*. His story while not technically a “Babushka story,” is an epic tale, which parallels this everyday story, with exaggerations, strange twists, and a surprise conclusion. His story begins with a long line and a question, “What are all these people waiting for?” The moral of the story is that you join a line first and then ask what it's for. Whatever's on sale, it's bound to come in handy, and who knows when you'll get the chance to buy it again? Hours, even days in queues must be taken for granted; they are part of normal life. Indeed, the queue might be seen as a perfect symbol for life in a society governed by an ideology without present tense for a society-in-waiting, kept in permanent state of slavery to the future. No matter that the man in the queue has as his goal, not some lofty ideal, but a pair of foreign shoes or some rare type of sausage. Like communism or utopia, the thing on “Sale” isn't bought as much as given, not chosen; shared, not individual—the citizen asks not “What shall I buy today?” but “What are they giving us today?” Striving towards their future somewhere at the end of the line, the members of the queue are stuck in the endless present, stuck in the pleasant ignorance of time or horrified as other more important activities slip past them. Queuing was not an obstruction to normal life, but the very basis of it and waiting in line became interminable.

What both Sorokin's story and the “Babushka story” have in common are the obstacles or ordeals traversed by our hero, in the past long lines, in the present high prices and lack of funds. In both the inability to find certain items at all is the major obstacle, but now under post socialism there is the problem of finding an item only to learn that one can't afford to buy it. This requires even more searching, forever looking for a deal, a lower price, a seller who can be haggled down to a reasonable price. In the past shopping was a passive activity, you simply found a line and got in looking forward to getting something—anything—because there was literally nothing in the stories. In the 1990s there was a lot more in the stories and although shortages still occurred, they would only last a few days. Now the problem is not finding a particular item as much as finding it at a low enough price to actually be able to buy it.

In Hungary [1993-2003] one must work for money more than ever before. In the past the government gave away food, clothing, housing, and other benefits through the patron-clientelism

and paternalism of the workplace regime. Now these social programs and workplace benefits have disappeared—there are a few exceptions. The money that a worker or pensioner gets has not increased at the same rate benefits have been lost, prices have gone up, and inflation has devalued currency, this amount of money for the average person is small—just enough to buy food, pay rent, utilities, taxes, etc. I argue that time and money have been seized by the regime as a way to make people feel powerless, but also to naturalize that powerlessness in time and money, not human agency. Because stores were generally open only in the mornings and afternoons many could not earn money and spend money; they need to rely on someone to do the shopping for them while they are at work. Food stalls sell their produce in the morning between 6am-1pm. These stalls sell the best quality food at the lowest prices. If one works a normal job, 7am - 4pm, this means they cannot go to market and buy the best quality foods. They must go before work, or after work. But usually this time is spent waiting for buses, trains, and stuck in traffic. Supermarkets, which are open later, don't really sell fruits and vegetables in quantity or quality and the prices are higher. This means one family or household member, usually a woman, wife, or grandmother, must spend their day in search of food—the cheapest, best quality goods sold during normal working time, 7am-4pm. It is possible to buy food at a non-stop [a convenience store open from 6am-12pm]; this food is of the worst quality and the highest prices. This forces one person to devote their time to finding good quality food to spend another family member's money on—that person must spend their time pursuing money making activities, but not accumulation or consumption. This forms a division of labor, usually highly gendered.

### **Dignity, Shopping and Poverty**

Tales of heroic shopping mitigated some of these feelings of humiliation by valorizing personal sacrifice and humility and highlighting the overcoming of innumerable obstacles. The telling of the tale restores the dignity of the mother or wife more than actually acquiring anything, focusing on heroism, endurance, cunning, and good luck. Here the mother or grandmother becomes the symbolic embodiment of the value of female dedication and sacrifice. Her ability to acquire goods in an economy of shortage proves her intelligence, cunning, endurance, and desire to self-sacrifice

for her family. These stories highlight how women, especially older women, should be appreciated, and not be taken-for-granted, and spared the double-burden. These tales played on the cultural constructed notion of women's natural abilities to manage the domestic sphere, and fetishize the magical abilities of women to endure suffering, to be faithful, self-sacrificing, and the ability to produce desired objects magically from impossibly meager materials or from a desolate environment. Intertwined between magical appropriation and descriptions of endurance, are laments of how hard it was for others, citing tragedies. While shopping in the past was an adventure of trying to find something to buy, now one can window shop, looking at all the fancy, high priced goods, displayed in the windows, but the people with money don't have time to window shop those without money can't buy.

In post-socialist Hungary [1993-1997] there was a dual problem of ability to pay as a shortage and when and where one could make that small amount of money go for enough. Often not enough of some particular good was available in the stores and food stalls of the open market, unlike now, where people have cars and can haul week's worth of groceries to a large freezer or fridge. In 1990s Hungary, most people had to carry their food in bags across town to their flat or house because everything one needed was not available in one place—like the 24 hour food warehouse, Metro, Tesco, etc. A hypermarket in 21st century Hungary combines 20 different socialist/post socialist stores under one roof, one can find for example, fruits, vegetables, meat, cereals, milk, hardware, cloths, imported goods, flowers, candies, etc.—all conveniently located in one place. In post socialist Hungary, all these products were located, without much variation in quality, all over the city or town. One had to travel on foot or wait for the buses to find what you wanted and prices varied greatly from shop to shop. One shop might carry one item at a low price, but the other thing one needs sells cheaper across town. At the second shop, other items will be more expensive, but one item will be low priced.

This situation required a daily shopping routine, because even if one finds what one is looking for at a low price, one has nowhere to store food in a socialist-era flat. The socialist-era flat was heated from a central located heating plant building. There was no way to control the heat. Year round the room temperature was

between 70-90 degrees Fahrenheit, spoiling fruits and vegetables. Refrigerators are too small to store provisions for the week, so someone had to make more rounds to the market and stores. One was usually tired out by carrying all the groceries in their shopping bags, backpacks etc. back and forth across town from one's flat to various shopping centers, stores, and open air markets. Commuting also took time. The person who is a wage earner might have to travel one to two hours or more everyday just to get to the wage-labor work place. This precludes hunting for food when shops close up when people get off work. Some people will try to leave work to go shopping, but people like school teachers or factory workers had to add to already long working days the 2-3 hours required to get something "good" to eat. I emphasize good because in Hungary you can find non-stop stores that sell lunch meat, cheese, bread, canned vegetables, etc. but this is of poor quality and expensive.

Another series of jokes are told about surrogate products, my favorite of which is surrogate coffee jokes. This a joke I heard while talking to high-school teachers in their break room in 1996:

--"Would you like a Coffee?"

--"Why yes, thank you"

--"Would you like instant coffee or microwaved coffee?"

--"Ah...no thank you I'll just have the presso coffee"

--"With saccharine and powdered milk?"

After joking like this for a while someone invariably would pick up one of the Hajdu-Téj powdered milk packets and point out that the milk was powdered right there in town, which is the best thing "because you see we know its fresh, not like those other, 'imported' powdered milk brands." Similarly the sugar was made from sugar beets, a substitute source for sweeteners. The joke about powdered milk was particularly ironic because the town and the surrounding area was the largest milk producing area in the country, yet people were "forced" to use powdered milk in their coffee, instead of fresh whole milk. These jokes highlight the problems with consumerism in post socialist Hungary because despite the improved availability, quantity, and choice what one gets isn't really worth it—everything is artificial,

inhuman, undignified—the opposite of *házi*. Everyone knows that *házi* is *igázi*—the real thing. But commodities are sold now in hypermarkets under the slogan—"the real thing" (Coca Cola) or Symphonia cigarettes' "*tiszta házai*" ("pure homegrown"). People joke that Hungary was a moonlighters' paradise not a workers' paradise and now ironically say Hungary is a consumer paradise or a fools' paradise—artificial, short of real choices, real freedoms, and real *házi*.

Hungary has perhaps in theory moved from a "moonlighters' paradise" to a "consumer paradise." Yet like the concept of a "workers' paradise" consumption is open to only those with access, the power to tap into the redistributive power of the State. With a shift from patron-client connections to money people have to seek work to get money to buy food. Under the current tax regime approximately 50% of one's official income is taken by the State's tax office. 30-48% of one's gross income is taken in the form of personal income tax, but another 12% is taken on every necessity, food, medicine, cloths, etc, while 25% is taken in value added taxes on luxury goods including such necessities for sociability such as alcohol, cigarettes, and mobile phones. When asked what people spend their money on the number one answer is food, yet upon further reflection and persistent questioning most conclude that they spend more money on taxes than anything else. Food is primary matter, we cannot live without food and water, sleep and warmth—these are called basic needs and the meaning of life, in part is simple, we live to eat and eat to live. Yet most cannot eat without buying produce at a supermarket and thus paying 50% of our income to the State in taxes. While one informant characterized Hungary as a "consumer paradise" many other people have told me that before "capitalism" Hungary had an economy of shortage—too much money and nothing to buy—now there is an economy of abundance—"you can buy anything you want if you have money."

### **Commodity Fetishism, Consumerism, and Shopping**

In the 1990s people would talk to me for hours about their dreams of shopping in the West where people could buy anything the wanted. This discourse has largely disappeared in 21st century Hungary, but has not disappeared in Belarus where people cross the border to shop in Poland. Voinovich describes such a dream-

shopping trip in his satirical novel *Moscow 2042*:

I went over to one of the counters. Uncertain at first, then getting into the swing of it, I began gathering groceries: two liter bottles of the Swedish vodka Absolut, a good length of Cracow kielbasa, a long roll. A few pieces of trout, a package of shrimp, a bunch of bananas, and jars of pâté, caviar, evaporated milk, green peas, asparagus, [etc.] Some items I shoved into my pockets, others I held under my arms, and the rest, a pile higher than my head, I carried in my arms. Things started falling, and my pile was becoming smaller and smaller (Voinovich 1980:170).

The dream of abundance and ability to pay was fantasized again and again in dream like discursive-imaginary trips to Austria where, my friends argued the people there in the West could buy anything at any time. The dream collapses into despair as the items slip through the shopper's fingers, evaporating before them as they dream of more and more abundance and realize that they can't buy, they can't hold onto these items which are placed before them. People pointed out how in Austria "you get a shopping cart to carry all your stuff in," but lamented how in Hungary "you get a hand basket, because you can't afford to buy more than a hand basket's worth of groceries from a store." This discourse has evaporated too. From 1997-2003 the discourse involves getting money to buy, Hungary is a consumer paradise, but a tax nightmare—the state appropriates one's income thus shattering the dream of unrestricted consumption.

When I ask friends, colleagues, students, and well to use the old anthropological term—informants what they think about food they usually respond that it's a question of too much or too little, too much food or too little, good quality or bad quality, high priced or low priced. Although young women, such as students at Debrecen University, seem most concerned with eating too much, students are generally poor and very busy; they must eat like anyone else, yet they have very little time and thus spend their break time eating fast-food or going without. This is a general problem for young men and women who are students, but also people in general don't have time to stop and eat a proper meal; they are too busy working two or more part time or full time jobs to eat

properly. They must work overtime to earn enough money to pay high tax rates, usually working an official job with a registered income and a hidden "under-the-table" job to make up for the loss of about 50% of their income to the tax offices. Similarly students are affected by the tax regime through its effects on educational institutions' quota system. The universities, for example require students to take anywhere from eight to twelve classes a semester, sometimes more. This means a lot of time spent in-class listening to lectures. The students have little time to spend on reading, writing, research or debate and discussion, but also on shopping, preparing and eating quality foods. Many students choose to go out drinking with their friends sometimes substituting beer for dinner. But why such a high number of required courses and required electives, and why such an emphasis on lectures and exams? The answer seems to be linked to the administration's pay scales and remuneration system. Teachers are paid not by salary but rather are paid by the amount of classes taught, by the number of hours spent in-class. Every university instructor I have met works some kind of side job, extra hours, private lessons, or working for a private firm. The educational system then generates more easy to teach, easy to evaluate, authoritarian styled lectures so that teachers can make a living, sometimes avoiding taxes, sometimes generating large enough incomes so that after taxes, enough remains. Students for their part receive a "free education" they are effected by the quota system inherited from the past, but which costs them more time than money. Time is taken up by the State, time for thought and reflection, conversation and debate, time which could be spent on politics, civil society, and the arts. Students often complained that teachers didn't really read and respond to their term papers so why try, why care? Sadly teachers told me they have no time to do a proper job they are too busy with too many classes to teach. On average a university instructor teaches 36 or more hours a week, not including preparation, exams, office hours, research, curriculum development, conferences, publishing, etc. All required to do quality scholarly work. Too much work means that workers, teachers, students, don't have time to eat properly.

### **The New Faith: Commodity Fetishism and Power**

Marx used the term commodity fetishism to denote the belief that particular

objects have mystical powers, supernatural powers, magical powers. He argued that the religion of Capitalism was commodity fetishism including hiding the whole production process and mental work of turning labor into profit, buying into salvation, money into more money. If Hungary is imagined as a consumer's paradise then it's organizing principle is commodity fetishism. When you buy a commodity you not only get its use value, but rather it's symbolic meaning. Symbols do not have fixed and definite meanings they are context dependent, yet they have somewhat shared somewhat contested meanings. Signs and symbols can be used to evoke shared histories, morals, cautionary tales, and have the power to persuade listeners to change their behaviors. Similarly advertising and the mental life of shoppers rely on commodity fetishism—the belief that when one buys a product they are getting a magical power, which is not actually inherent in the object, but is associated and evoked by the object. For example, a mobile phone has certain use-values, it can be useful at certain times and places to call a friend for help, to arrange a rendezvous or similar meeting—it also might have a built in calculator, calendar, address book, digital camera, etc. But a mobile phone has a symbolic meaning; it is a status symbol. It has the power to help the possessor in less physical, more social-cultural ways.

Similarly, food and drink have the magical power to satisfy and please guests, improve one's health and quality of life, prevent aging, etc. But diet foods are of course even more powerful in the discourses of advertisers; they are healthier and make you sexier, more desirable. Advertising in general plays on the idea that a product will bring magical powers to the consumer. Usually this involves sex and romance, however might include improved intelligence, better family life, extended life, good times, improved nutrition, etc. But foods bought at supermarkets are sold with the promise of saving time and money. One saves time by not growing it, processing the food, preserving it, and looking through the market stalls. One saves time because preparation time is reduced as the cook can take the food from the wrapper into the microwave and then onto the dinner table. Most of all the audience is promised, ease, fun, and "coolness"—being a better human being. In Berger's excellent short essay *Ways of Seeing*, he analyzes advertising, commodity fetishism, and political power

arguing that capitalism has the illusion of democracy, free choice, and genuine happiness. I quote: "the pursuit of individual happiness has been acknowledged as a universal right. Yet the existing social conditions make the individual feel powerless. He lives in the contradiction between what he is and what he would like to be. Either he then becomes fully conscious of the contradiction and its causes, and so joins the political struggle for full democracy, which entails, amongst other things, the overthrow of capitalism; or else he lives, continually subject to an envy which, compounded with his sense of powerlessness, dissolves into recurrent day-dreams." *Házi* meant personal power against the state under socialism. Now commodity fetishism means sacrificing time and energy to buy food with an opposite symbolic worth to *házi* foods.

While the social conditions in Hungary are "improving" (usually meaning becoming more capitalist and consumerist), there is often a contradiction between improvements in the availability of goods and services and debilitating economic circumstances of multiple-incomes, high taxes, and decreased purchasing power. When time is taken up with working, daydreaming, and shopping, people have little time and left for political action, critical thought, and sharing perspectives. When people are bombarded with contradictory ideas and images of who they are and who they would like to be, they reward and punish themselves for the contradictions—binge eating, starvation diets, self-abuse, alcoholism, drug use, over eating, etc—rather than seeking alternatives. While men and women I spoke to in the field are aware of these contradictions; between ideals and realities, theory and practice, representative democracy and freedom, capitalism and consumer choice, working to live and living to work; they feel they are caught in a trap and feel powerless to change the situation. They realize that commodity fetishism is an illusion, a lie, propaganda promulgated by a State that encourages consumption because buying means taxes and taxes mean profits. But commodity fetishism brings hope, hope in salvation from being uncool, escape from the realities of over-work, relief from frustration and meaningless daily routine, glamour and envy, sacrifice and duty. Buying something makes one feel good. It is like a drug, it is addictive, it serves as a kind of medicine, it brings relief, but it also isn't a cure, it relieves symptoms, it conjures up psychic energies, it keeps one going, but like dependency



one needs it more and more and when one can't get it one crashes. People reward themselves with a little treat, a magic fix: fast food, chocolate, a few beers, and a cigarette. At the end of the month, many people run out of money and go without the little treats and well-cooked meals.

Hungarians have embraced a new ideal of the magic fix, quick easily digested fast foods. At lunchtime the local Mc Donald's restaurant is packed with businessmen, mothers and their children, eating quick food in a clean environment with plastic toys inside Happy Meal boxes. There are weekly specials and prizes to be won for frequent customers with "Smart Cards." Mc Donald's offers discount prices on mobile phones, digital cameras, and CD walkmans. All of this opportunity to eat quickly and win prizes, in a clean modern environment brings people away from home cooking, healthy, fresh fruits, and vegetables. More and more people use consumer services like restaurants for lunch, dinner, and ceremonies like weddings, graduations, and rites of passage. People have developed a split consciousness about knowing that homemade is better and that time and money calculations involving working multiple jobs, paying high taxes, and taking time to shop means eating out. Pizza delivery places have sprung up quickly to serve the eating needs of students, single mothers, and the over worked. Not only has Mc Donald's colonized the eating habits of people living in Hungary, but there are a plethora of Hungarian fast food establishments, serving hot dogs, hamburgers, gyros, pizza, and sandwiches. In Debrecen there is a 24-hour diner, Route 66: American style, where one can come and eat anytime day or night —absolutely unheard of before 1995. While people lament these developments, they flock to fast-food establishments because they have no choice, they must eat after all and work like never before.

Within the context of fast food and loss of homemade dinners people have rewritten their ideal notions of family and gender. The new ideal again seems similar to the American ideal of the 1950s. Ideally, a man should go out and hunt and gather money, which he brings home for his wife and family. The wife, free from working at the office, factory, or cooperative farm, goes shopping at her leisure, driving the family car to the hypermarket selecting the finest choice meats, cereals, cheeses, breads, wines, and other delicacies in a clean efficient environment where her car carries the bags home

for her. Everything is wrapped in plastic, standardized so as to prevent cheating, controlled so that one can see price by quantity and that the food is fresh—by examining the sell by date. The hypermarkets are ideally always stocked to the ceiling with the latest foods with interesting exotic names like Mexican pizza, Chinese noodle soup, and Count Chocula cereal. With frozen foods comes the need for larger refrigerators, larger cars, bigger parking garages, plastic debit cards, shoppers gold cards, and other tokens of consumerist status symbols. With this diets suffer as symbols of wealth increase in a zero-sum game of keeping up with the escalation of consumption as social status. As people feel they need and want more, faster and faster, more efficient and plastic covered they need money and more money. This leads to more working hours, more hidden income to avoid taxes, less time for vacations, time to reflect on life, time spent with children, less time for quality time with their partners, less cooking, more shopping in hypermarkets—a loss of time and money, and an increase in artificial flavors and preservatives. The political economy and culture has radically changed from a do-it-yourself ethos to one of seemingly unrestricted consumption.

### Conclusion

What I have tried to show is a transition from an emphasis on *házi* to an emphasis on hypermarket in the discourse of Hungarians in the last 20 years around the issues of food acquisition and its symbolic meaning and cultural significance. I emphasized jokes as a way of highlighting and evoking images of a socialist past which meant insufficient qualities and qualities of available food for consumption. Although in the socialist period money was significant it was less significant than the ability to find food, grow, food, or steal food. With the end of socialism money has a new meaning and a new fetishized power: many say money can buy anything. With an emphasis on money comes a tax system that extracts lots of money from individual citizens and visiting workers. As the popular dictum states "time is money" an therefore a state which is seizing money in the form of taxes also seizes the time of its citizens and with this, energy and labor power is also seized; thus the citizen is working more for the state than for his/her self, family or community. With so much time in the past spent trying to find food and other necessities, less time was available to devote to other uses. Long lines immobilized bodies in non-productive activities.

But if these lines are bureaucratic in nature then what is to stop one from eating in line—bring a bag lunch from home. The problem today however is that people have less time for shopping, because they are working too long hours with double incomes required by families to keep up.

This seems more and more normal to Americans with double incomes the norm. With the Americanization of Hungary this seems natural, but the difference in Hungary is that not two incomes are required, but four since half of one's official salary goes to the state in the form of taxes. This leads to two significant problems for Hungarians: the need for faster foods and hidden incomes. This leads to more stress, more corruption, poor diets, less time for healthy physical activities, a greater emphasis on *házi*, but a more nostalgic one. The young generation brought up on images culled from the TV see all things *házi* as backward, simple, old fashioned, a waste of time, and too difficult—why bother? They dream of making loads of money and thus living free. Freedom means less doing it for yourself, organic, healthy living, in harmony with the natural environment, but rather a sexy, glamorous life style of the rich and famous—dining out, racing down the highway eating fast-food and talking on the ubiquitous mobile phone—a plastic world of credit with differed costs—worry about the effects later. It's a new mentality of having next year's model, today, at half the price. But what will the price be for hypermarkets, hyperinflation, hyperbolic ads, for some hypertrophy, for others perhaps hypersensitivity to body image and a rejection of consumption—when you have an economy of abundance not eating becomes a sign of distinction and prestige—even envy. Hyper-(markets) means both something better and something worse simultaneously. Hypermarkets are better and yet worse than the traditional *piac* (market) and better than the socialist ABC stores. Hyper markets are beyond measure, better than anything dreamt of before, a shopper's utopia—fresh fruits, exotic foods, quality control, centrally located with plenty of parking. But hyper also means excessive—too much plastic, too much control, too many security guards and surveillance cameras, too many preservatives, too many bright colors and advertising slogans. A move from *házi* to hyper, socialism to capitalism, time to money, nostalgia to sci-fi is like a move from Orwell to a Brave New World—globalization, standardization, and the

belief in limitless consumption. It is not a better world; it is not more freedom. It is simply a gilded cage for a stuffed pig.

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