

# Economy and ethics in the cosmic process<sup>★</sup>

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When T.H. Huxley lectured on evolution and ethics in 1893, his critique of the amoral laws of the ‘cosmic process’ left his audience puzzled. While Huxley paid little attention to political and economic institutions, this article draws attention to the historical materialism of that era and its twentieth-century legacies. Empirically, it analyses the rise and fall of a Hungarian state farm with reference to the comparative literature on twentieth-century socialist societies. Theoretically, socialism is considered as the combination of a materialist philosophy of history with an axial ethical impulse. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Eurasian socialist order in the 1990s, we can see why Huxley was right to deplore the ‘fanatical individualism’ of his age. His humanism resembles that of the early Karl Marx and he stands closer to Émile Durkheim than to contemporary currents in the anthropology of ethics.

## Introduction: Two Victorian Londoners

A pillar of the London scientific establishment for much of his life, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) was known to the wider public primarily for his role as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ in the dissemination of the theory of natural selection from 1860 onwards. Whereas Darwin shunned the spotlight, Huxley was a public intellectual of a kind we hardly know today. He was a prolific writer of anatomical papers, but he also served on numerous royal commissions and cared passionately about raising educational standards. In his view, it was the responsibility of the state, of the political community, to enable those born at the bottom of the social hierarchy to move upwards, as he himself had. Huxley became a popular figure outside the Royal Society and elite London dining clubs.<sup>1</sup> This was reflected in the crowds at his funeral and the subscription campaign to commemorate his achievements. The Memorial Committee raised funds from the great and good to finance the statue that stands in the Natural History Museum. A second, more modest appeal was organized to fund a memorial plaque at Huxley’s birthplace in Ealing. ‘Among those who replied to the appeal for funds was a dock labourer. He was,

<sup>★</sup>Huxley Lecture: British Museum, 18 December 2019.

he wrote, “living from hand to mouth and often hardly able to make both ends meet”. But he sent a postal order for a shilling’ (Clark 1968: 124). No doubt this donor was one of the countless ordinary Londoners captivated by Huxley’s public lectures.

In 1893, Huxley delivered the second Romanes Lecture in Oxford with the title ‘Evolution and ethics’. By this time, he had given up both popular lectures and the writing of scientific papers to immerse himself in the works of Spinoza and Pascal. The lecture was acclaimed as a tour de force and published shortly afterwards, augmented with a lengthy Prolegomena that seemed to some contemporaries (including his wife and his friend Herbert Spencer) to qualify and even contradict the gist of the lecture itself. The key issues were summarized by Huxley’s son in his *Life and letters*:

[W]hile morality is necessarily a part of the order of nature, still the ethical principle is opposed to the self-regarding principle on which cosmic evolution has taken place. Society is a part of nature, but would be dissolved by a return to the natural state of simple warfare among individuals. It follows that ethical systems based on the principles of cosmic evolution are not logically sound (L. Huxley 1900: vol. 2, 352).

True Victorian that he was, Huxley could never abandon his belief in progress. But, more than thirty years after his celebrated exchanges with Bishop Wilberforce in the wake of the publication of *On the origin of species*, he returned to Oxford to challenge the reach of selectionist theory. He did so by distinguishing ‘the cosmic process’ – his shorthand for the planet in the universe, the evolution of which is indeed regulated by the new master theory – from social and ethical progress. Much of the lecture is devoted to the Stoics and early Buddhists, ascetic pioneers of a new ethics in what has become known as the Axial Age of Eurasian history (Bellah & Joas 2012). Their ideals are applauded, yet they are criticized for their ‘flight from the battle-field’ (T.H. Huxley 2009 [1893/4]: 86). Humans are capable of more, concludes Huxley: ‘Let us understand, once and for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it’ (2009 [1893/4]: 83).

The problems with this argumentation are legion. Human evolution is split into two phases: at some point, during or prior to the first millennium BCE, our species alone has transcended the cosmic process. Since Huxley formulated this proposition, the development of genetics has transformed our understanding of the unit of selection. Darwinian thought has also been stretched to theories of group selection that enable us to explain altruism, co-operation, and ‘culture’ in general. Would Huxley have been impressed by the sociobiology of E.O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins? We can speculate that he would have been very interested in the efforts of contemporary social scientists, cognitive anthropologists prominent among them, to take up the challenge of accounting for religion and morality in terms of evolutionary theory.

In this article, I pursue some themes of Huxley’s 1893 lecture that have been overlooked to date. He helped his Oxford audience to glimpse the material and political implications of his argument by offering them an analogy between evolutionism and laissez-faire economic ideology. At the climax of his lecture, he dismissed utilitarianism, in Britain the dominant philosophy of his age, as ‘the fanatical individualism of our time’ (2009 [1893/4]: 82). Spencer may have felt personally accused. He responded to the lecture by deploring his friend’s relapse into ‘the old theological notions, which put Man and Nature in antithesis’ (quoted in Clark 1968: 118). Huxley’s thoroughly anthropocentric position was to insist that human civilization had long reached the point where ‘survival of the best’ was what counted, not ‘survival of the fittest’. He died

just two years later, without elaborating on how exactly to recognize 'the best'. We know from his biographers that he spent much of his retirement tending his garden in Sussex, where the laws of nature could be combated by human horticultural intervention.

My second Victorian Londoner, Karl Marx (1818-83), was seven years older than Huxley. His privileged family circumstances and university education were altogether different from Huxley's autodidactic career as ship's doctor and anatomist. Marx was not well known as a public lecturer in his London exile (though it is possible that he attended some of those given by Huxley). When he died, this adoptive Londoner received no lengthy obituary in *The Times*. There was no popular subscription to erect a worthy memorial. Only a handful of mourners turned up in Highgate cemetery to pay their last respects.<sup>2</sup> His closest friend and revolutionary comrade Friedrich Engels eulogized as follows:

On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think ... Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case (1968 [1883]: 429).

Marx, like Huxley, was committed to progress. He too was greatly impressed by *The origin*, to the point that he wrote to the reclusive biologist in the hope of building an intellectual bridge (presumably in the spirit identified in Engels's graveside speech).<sup>3</sup> Darwin's bulldog, however, was dismissive of socialist ideas, which he equated with rigid egalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> He resembled Spencer in this respect. Whether or not he ever registered the existence of Marx and Engels, he would surely have been astonished by the afterlife of their ideas in the twentieth century. Changes in the scope of anthropology and the shift away from evolution towards more presentist theories and methods would also be a surprise. Fieldworking anthropologists have had a good deal to say about socialist societies, both their innovative institutions and their ethical foundations. I shall concentrate on the latter, though not from the point of view of the 'new anthropology of ethics' that is a feature of the discipline's neoliberal present. I am more interested in exploring the ethical tensions of socialist societies in their own terms, in both institutional and historical contexts.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section, I introduce some of the most influential anglophone explorations of rural transformation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. I highlight Yulian Konstantinov's concept of *sovkhoism* to capture ethical tensions at the heart of these revolutionary social formations. In the third section I present a case study of the Kiskunhalas State Farm in southern Hungary. After returning to the comparative literature to probe the ethical dimension more deeply with respect to theft and resistance to socialist managerial power under socialism, I analyse the demise of the Hungarian state farm and how the institution is recalled a generation later. The conclusion abstracts from the field studies to locate these concrete realizations of socialism in world history. The world has moved on, and our discipline with it, but the Durkheimian challenge of establishing institutional frameworks for a progressive moral order remains. In a brief coda, I return to Huxley to argue that the philosophy of history implicit in his celebrated 1893 lecture can be complemented by the materialist

political economy of Marx and Engels, and that Huxley's basic humanism resembles that of Marx's early philosophical writings.

### **Hierarchies of estates and the private-in-the-collective**

For more than a century, the primary hallmark of social anthropology has been the ethnographic method. In the sub-field of economic anthropology, it is conventional to assume that economic action is embedded in a range of social institutions as well as in normative orders. Little attention is paid to history, let alone evolutionary interplay between institutions and ethics.<sup>5</sup> The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (hereafter M-L-M) socialist worlds of the twentieth century provide excellent terrain in which to revisit this interplay. These societies did not generate a large literature in our discipline, partly because foreigners' access was highly restricted (and in many regions remained difficult even after the great collapse of 1989-93). The available studies are heavily biased to the countryside. This is to be expected given the economic backwardness of most M-L-M countries, not to mention prevailing assumptions (both within them and outside them) concerning the appropriate subject matter for anthropological (ethnological) research.

Comparative analysis was pioneered by Caroline Humphrey, who adapted Max Gluckman's analyses of traditional African land tenure (Gluckman 1965) to depict the collective farm in Buryatia (southern Siberia) as a complex hierarchy in which rights over people were more significant than rights over things (Humphrey 1983). Humphrey showed that the political economy of central planning depended on actors' negotiation of 'manipulable resources' rather than market signals. An economic ideology nominally derived from Marx but liable to periodic correction established the formal principles of farm management. The de facto working of the system was very different. Some of the resources that managers manipulated were not merely illegitimate but illegal.<sup>6</sup> They were nonetheless crucial in enabling managers both to meet plan targets and to secure the goodwill and co-operation of the workforce. Humphrey showed that flexible implementation of the planned economy allowed for continuity with Buryat gifting practices. Shamanism lingered as a counterculture to rational Soviet narratives of development. Overall, in spite of individualizing and secularizing trends associated with modern education and social mobility away from the land, Humphrey concluded on the basis of her fieldwork in the 1960s and 1970s that the Buryats had managed to integrate novel socialist institutions into their traditional worldview.

Long-term continuities and the interaction between the socialist enterprise and the 'private sector' of its constituent families and workers have also been investigated for Sami reindeer herders of the Kola Peninsula, northern Russia. Already familiar with socialist institutions from his native Bulgaria, Yulian Konstantinov (2015) eschews comparisons with colonial Africa. Like Humphrey, his prime goal is to grasp how the institutions actually functioned, de facto. His key concept is *sovkhovism*, which he theorizes as a distinctively Soviet way to combine collective social interests with the private interests of households and individuals. The outcome is a dynamic 'private-in-the-collective socioeconomic order' (Konstantinov 2015: 181; see also Konstantinov 2020), in which the assets of a socialist organization underwrite personal/private interests, usually in non-transparent, informal ways. Property objects (in this case reindeer), defined ideologically as *personal* in order to distinguish them from capitalist *private* property, gradually come to resemble the latter. The role of the collective morphs into one of guaranteeing existential security and 'servicing private interests

in an ambiance of mutual accommodation' (Konstantinov 2020: 20, emphasis in original).

*Sovkhoz* is the Russian term for a state farm. Soviet law and ideology distinguished between a collective farm (*kolkhoz*), which was owned by its members, and a *sovkhoz*, which, like most urban enterprises, was owned by the state. According to property dogmas, the latter was a higher form of property on the road to communism. This distinction was upheld in all M-L-M regimes. Long-term convergence between collective and state farms 'on the ground' meant that both types of workforce came to resemble urban factory workers in their working rhythms and pension entitlements. There was, however, considerable regional and national variation, for example in the allocation to workers on both kinds of farm of a household or private plot, and in the extent to which this land could be used for the production of commodities. Both forms of socialist property allowed for the persistence of multiple forms of personal property (also referred to officially as *individual* property, but commonly in everyday speech as *private* property). For both Konstantinov and Humphrey, the property system is the key institution in which to investigate tensions between material performance and ideology or ethics.

On the Kola Peninsula, the socioeconomic order of *sovkhoism* took shape in the years following the Second World War. Despite vicissitudes in the 1960s and again after the collapse of socialism, the basic formula that combines private herd ownership with a large centralized institution has survived down to the present day. Herders value the security of these arrangements because without them they would be exposed to all kinds of risks. The symbiosis of collective and private allows reindeer herders to enjoy 'cultured' lives in an urban settlement while periodically tending their animals on the tundra. The property compromises benefit the society as a whole. According to Konstantinov, collectivization, though imposed in seemingly draconian ways, exemplified not totalitarian ideological monologue but the agency of the grassroots, through dialogical interaction with power holders. Reindeer herders illustrate *sovkhoism* with 'laboratory-like clarity' (Konstantinov 2020: 17) because of the ease with which private gains at the expense of the collective could be concealed on the remote tundra.

The concept of *sovkhoism* can be extended beyond stockbreeding to all forms of agriculture and indeed virtually any job in the socialist division of labour, in countryside or town alike, where personal and collective interests intersect. In a recent application of the concept at the German-Polish border, *sovkhoism* is not confined to the ownership of land or animals or to work but 'comprises the range of expectations publicly raised by farm hands vis-à-vis the management, most prominently entitlement to obtaining a home for oneself and one's family' (Habeck 2020: 136). In Hungarian agriculture in the last decades of socialism, the private plot was commonly eliminated. Instead, collective farm members were allocated resources in kind. The function was the same, namely to facilitate the production and sale of commodities by the household for the benefit of its members (Swain 1985). In the mature Hungarian variant of *sovkhoism*, I found that villagers had little interest in the property rights that had been infringed by collectivization a generation earlier. What mattered to most of them was the security of their incomes and the satisfaction of consumption aspirations (Hann 1992). In this extended sense, *sovkhoism* was a kind of social contract, the details of which varied greatly between countries and regions, and also fluctuated through time. The common factor was that, in addition to eliminating existential risk, regimes buttressed consent

by modifying an ostensibly rigorous collectivist ideology to open up spaces in which individuals could pursue goals of freedom, ethical as well as economic. *Sovkhoism* thus combines an ethical universalism assuring security to all, a principle that Huxley (2009 [1893/4]) located in Axial Age Eurasian philosophies, with a highly pragmatic approach to implementation that was particularly suited to the underdeveloped conditions of the M-L-M countries.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to the USSR, several Eastern European states within the bloc were more open to anthropological researchers in the last decades of socialist rule and after the collapse. Katherine Verdery's (2003) study of the decollectivization process in an ethnically Romanian village in Transylvania builds on fieldwork dating back to the early 1970s. She too drew on Max Gluckman in stressing the 'fungibility' of land, as socialist farm managers deployed their extensive personal networks to accomplish their goals. Wherever rights over persons matter more than rights over things, boundaries become fuzzy. While socialism therefore differed from a Western property system based on ownership, Verdery insists (contrary to [neo]liberal critics) that it be recognized as a distinctive system of property. Since the socialist property system was embedded in different forms of value, decollectivization was necessarily much more than a technical fix through introducing capitalist institutions. In the case of Romania, the difficulties were accentuated by chronic underfunding of the agricultural sector, repressive politics in the last decade of socialism, and the chaotic and corrupt processes of transformation in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Similar conclusions emerged from the socialist-era work of David Kideckel (1993) in another region of Transylvania. While the old class distinctions had been removed with collectivization, Kideckel found that they had been replaced by new inequalities and contempt for excessive bureaucracy. Atomized households combined industrial factory employment with production for the collective farm, much of it on a sharecropping basis. While worker-peasants were similarly numerous in many other countries, the Romanian state was uniquely unsuccessful in generating productive synergies.

Whereas Romania demonstrates that the 'private-in-the-collective' social order was by no means successfully implemented everywhere, Hungary (Bell 1984; Hann 1980; Lampland 1995) and Bulgaria (Creed 1998) moved furthest to realize the potential of *sovkhoism* as an economic symbiosis of the household and socialist enterprises. Yet the evaluations of both the villagers themselves and their ethnographers often emphasize negative, ethically unpalatable aspects of the institutional mix. Martha Lampland (1995), working in western Hungary in the early 1980s, paints a vivid picture of how a 'second economy' and a 'second society' contradicted socialist ideological representations. Market-orientated reforms had encouraged the villagers to see human nature as 'naturally' governed by utilitarian individualism: that is, the maximization of selfish (personal, or at best familial) objectives. The legitimization of János Kádár's regime over almost three decades depended on constantly enlarging the scope for private accumulation. The ambivalence of relations between village households and the socialist state is also emphasized by Gerald Creed (1998) in his Bulgarian study. Through what he calls 'conflicting complementarities', villagers succeeded in moulding socialist institutions to serve their own worker-peasant accumulation strategies. Echoing the tone of Lampland, Creed then highlights the long-term flaws in these complementarities: '[W]hile the integrations and adjustments achieved by informal routes were adaptive locally and empowered villagers, they were also detrimental to the system as a whole. As state institutions and labor were rendered less significant vis-à-vis

expanding informal activity, the practical and ideological foundations of state socialism were further weakened' (1998: 217-18).

Collective and state farms were organized in very similar ways across all of the Soviet Union (and also in China for much of the 1950s). There was, however, a basic difference between the Soviet cases examined by Humphrey and Konstantinov, in which stockbreeding is central, and the Eastern European cases in which agriculture is the main focus of rural production. In the Soviet cases, Stalinist collectivization amounted to the replacement of one set of collectivist principles, originally based on kinship (clan ownership), by another, based on the *kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz*. In contrast, by the middle of the twentieth century in most regions of Hungary and Romania, the private ownership of land was entrenched (though the persistence of semi-feudal pockets dominated by large estates continued to hinder modernization). Even in Hungary, where industry was more advanced than it was in neighbouring Balkan states, the 'surplus' population in the countryside was vast. When socialism was imposed in the wake of the Second World War, the level of the forces of production was still low. This was the rationale for imposing collectivization throughout M-L-M worlds: to accelerate industrialization, while simultaneously realizing economies of scale and raising productivity in agriculture. But in Eastern Europe, the collective institutions, even when they embraced the private-in-the-collective path, immediately ran up against deeply rooted ideologies of private peasant (smallholder) ownership. In comparative investigations of *sovkhoism*, the analysis of economic performance, varying across countries and branches of production, must be complemented with analysis of beliefs and practices at the local level.

### The rise of a state farm in southern Hungary

I shall return to the comparative literature below, but I turn now to my case study. Whereas western Hungary (Transdanubia) is characterized by rolling hills, east of the Danube the Great Plain is unremittingly flat. The Danube-Tisza interfluvium is the driest and hottest region in the country. Soils are generally too poor for high yields in arable farming. Even very sandy soils, however, are suitable for vineyards and orchards. After the country's traditional wine-producing regions in the hills were ravaged by the *filoxera* disease in the late nineteenth century, wine production in the zone between the country's two major rivers expanded considerably. This part of Hungary had been occupied by the Ottoman Turks for a century and half. Feudal social relations were re-established in the eighteenth century, but the medieval network of village settlements could not be fully restored. The rural economy was characterized by extensive animal breeding on uninhabited tracts known as *puszta*. With population expansion in the nineteenth century, the abolition of serfdom led to the parcellization of this land. Colonists in the penumbra of market towns such as Kiskunhalas (Fig. 1) built new lives on isolated homesteads. Most settlers struggled, however, especially where sand produced dune-like effects in the landscape. In the decades immediately preceding socialism, the existential problems of a highly differentiated rural society were nowhere greater than in this zone of scattered settlement.

Socialist policies focused initially on the consolidation of hamlets and villages through investments in infrastructure. Yet the new power holders could not afford to eliminate the small vineyards and orchards that were dotted across the landscape. Agricultural collectivization therefore followed a different course from the general Stalinist model. Village households were at first *allowed*, and in the later decades





**Figure 1.** Location of Kiskunhalas within the modern Hungarian state. Map by Jutta Turner, © Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Reproduced with permission.

of socialism increasingly *encouraged*, to produce goods for sale on the market in traditional ways. This commoditization, aided and abetted by socialist institutions, exemplified the flexibility of Hungary's 'market socialist' path after 1968. By the time I began doctoral fieldwork in Tázlár in 1976, farmers were abandoning their isolated farms to move into the new centre, where they had access to electricity and piped water. Most villagers belonged to an institution known as the 'specialist co-operative', which allowed them considerable scope to continue small-scale farming (Hann 1980). This type of co-operative was an extreme variant of the 'private-in-the-collective' social order I discussed in the previous section. Alongside wine and some dairy production, raising hogs was the branch of production that boomed in the 1970s. The labour-intensive contributions of household members were supplemented by supplies of cheap fodder from the co-operative, which also provided transportation and marketing services.

The 1970s and 1980s are commonly characterized as the decades of 'goulash socialism' in Hungary. Economic decentralization, an opening to market principles, and the stimulation of petty commodity production led to new forms of social differentiation in both town and countryside. This raised pressing moral questions, inside and outside the ranks of Communist Party members. These intensified when market socialism gave way to more authentic forms of market-based economy after 1990. The 1990s, when virtually all collective and state-owned enterprises were privatized, are remembered as the era of 'wild capitalism' (*vad kapitalizmus*). Many of the richest pickings went to former members of the Communist Party. Western capital was welcomed by governments of varying political hues, but on the ground there was condemnation of the ways in which foreign firms were allowed to cherry-pick, in industrial and agricultural sectors alike. This plundering and chaos, both ethical and



economic, continued for two decades, until the country reached an economic nadir following the global financial crisis of 2007-8. The governments led by Viktor Orbán since 2010 have brought a certain stability, such that it is common to hear citizens make comparisons between their current one-party regime and the one they experienced before 1990. Critics of Orbán allege populist manipulation of the public sphere and cronyism in economic management that exceeds anything witnessed under the earlier one-party regimes of M-L-M socialism (Magyar 2016). I have argued elsewhere, from the perspective of Polanyian economic anthropology, that after two decades of chaotic 'disembedding', the era of unbridled market domination has been partially corrected such that under Orbán the economy has been 're-embedded' in society (Hann 2019a; 2019b).

While continuing to visit a dwindling number of friends in the village of Tázlár, in recent years I have started new projects in Kiskunhalas (population around 30,000 and declining steadily), some 15 km away. No significant industrialization took place in this town before the 1960s, when a number of Budapest enterprises were required to establish subsidiaries in Halas. (It is common to abbreviate the town's name.) Success was limited and the numbers employed in industry began to fall again in the 1980s, before the collapse of the socialist order. This decline accelerated dramatically in the era of wild capitalism and virtually all the large socialist enterprises of Halas had closed down by 1995. The Kiskunhalas State Farm, which represented the opposite end of the property spectrum from the specialist co-operative in Tázlár, was no exception. Even when industrial employment was at its peak, with over 2,000 workers and managers, cultivating a surface of nearly 10,000 hectares, the state farm was by far the town's most important employer.

The foundations of this farm were laid in the early years of the People's Republic. Parts of the vast *puszta* surrounding Halas, especially where the soil quality was low, were not redistributed in the post-war land reform, but nationalized. The farms established in 1949 lacked machinery, the workers were mostly rural proletarians lacking know-how, and outcomes were predictably poor. Gradually, however, thanks to investments by the early socialist state, significant progress was made. Several small fragmented units were merged and the state farm assumed its enduring contours in 1961. In addition to arable farming, dairy produce, poultry, and a hog complex, the farm invested in orchards and vineyards. It also built laboratories that co-operated with Budapest enterprises in the pharmaceutical sector. Finally, it invested heavily in wineries and large-scale vineyards which could be managed with the very latest mechanized technologies (Fig. 2). The production of alcoholic beverages was orientated largely to the Soviet Union (though by the mid-1970s, significant quantities were finding their way to the West as well).<sup>9</sup> Following the economic reforms of 1968, the scattered units of the farm had to implement separate accounting systems. All continued to be managed from the farm's headquarters in the centre of town. Meals were distributed from a central canteen. Facilities included a large restaurant and premises for cultural exhibitions and concerts.

In short, the state farm was a 'total social institution' for its members.<sup>10</sup> More than half of the workforce was made up of manual workers, most of them unskilled. This stratum included a large Roma contingent, mostly illiterate. These Roma were expected to attend adult education classes, where they had financial incentives to better their grades. At the other end of the social hierarchy, by the 1980s the state farm could boast plenty of university graduates among its managers, working in scientific laboratories



**Figure 2.** The state farm pioneered modern vineyard technology (1972), © Thorma János Múzeum, Kiskunhalas. Reproduced with permission.

as well as modern offices. Most of them joined the Communist Party, which was a precondition for high office. A lot of time was spent at meetings. New socialist rituals were invented, for example to greet visiting delegations from Cuba or the Crimea (a partner region in the USRR). State farm workers were expected to march through the city streets to mark Mayday (Fig. 3). At the same time, many traditional rituals persisted, such as the ball to mark New Year. The main rituals of the life-cycle, from naming ceremonies to weddings, name-day parties, retirements, and even funerals, were given new socialist forms within the farm. Religious alternatives were not banned, but the higher you were promoted, the more strongly they were discouraged. As throughout the Soviet world, the workforce was organized in brigades, which were obliged to participate in elaborately audited socialist competition.

The Kiskunhalas State Farm appeared to be flourishing when a veteran manager called Lajos Borbás prepared his unpublished history in the early 1980s. This work is replete with impressive statistics. One learns, for example, that between 1957 and 1973 over 3 million cubic metres of soil were levelled annually by bulldozers (Borbás n.d.: 43). The physical environment of the *puszt*a was radically altered as infertile land was rendered productive, but the changes experienced by the human population were just as great. As throughout the country, the victims of a long history of underdevelopment were lifted out of poverty and illiteracy. They now enjoyed basic amenities in their homes, learned mechanized production techniques, and appreciated new worlds of mass consumption and socialist popular culture. All this was consistent with the regime's materialist ideology: the economic foundations of the farm locally and of the Hungarian People's Republic nationally were advancing steadily. In the early 1980s, the farm's pharmaceutical sideline was particularly successful. There were also high hopes



**Figure 3.** State farm workers lead the Mayday march in Kiskunhalas, 1970, © Thorma János Múzeum, Kiskunhalas. Reproduced with permission.

for major investments in wine and spirits, notably a ‘sherry unit’ built to cater for the Soviet market.

Throughout these years, the Kiskunhalas State Farm Farm respected the principles of *sovkhhoism* as theorized by Yulian Konstantinov. Jobs and social security entitlements were secure. If not allocated a house owned by the farm, workers could expect assistance in constructing one for themselves. They also benefited from generous recreational and cultural opportunities. At the same time, especially after the market-orientated reforms of 1968, material incentives and ‘small group initiatives’ were stepped up. Managerial bonuses (*premiszálás*) were increased, irrespective of whether or not the plan was fulfilled. The principles of norm-setting were ratified in the ‘collective contract’ that managers concluded with union representatives, but all workers had a right to an allotment, and here there was much flexibility. Some households raised hogs in their backyards in co-operation with the enterprise, resembling the schemes I documented for villagers in Tázlár in the 1970s. Others contracted to undertake vineyard work on a sharecropping basis. All this private income functioned not only to augment household income but also to increase managerial bonuses. Overall, in the last decade of goulash socialism, the principle of the private-in-the-collective became ever more deeply institutionalized as managers sought to improve the economic indicators of their enterprise while continuing to meet the expectations and aspirations of its workforce. In the following section, I return to the comparative frame to probe further into concomitant ethical aspects.

### **Socialism as a moral project: theft and antagonism**

While economic organization is never devoid of moral dimensions, the lofty ideals of ideological discourses gave this dimension a distinctive weight and visibility in M-L-M



**Figure 4.** Top cadres address a meeting of state farm workers in 1973, © Thorma János Múzeum, Kiskunhalas. Reproduced with permission.

societies. This followed from the most basic differences between economies integrated by markets and price signals and those regulated by central planning. Socialist ethics were ubiquitously displayed in posters and in banners produced for special occasions. The slogan in Figure 4 dates from 1973 when the leaders of the Kiskunhalas State Farm addressed a meeting at one of its satellite bases. A literal translation would be 'Always to live in the communist way, without expediency/opportunism, with a hot heart. That is the real task of the party'. The word *megalkuvás* is often translated in political contexts as opportunism. State farm workers are apparently being exhorted to put communist ideals before their short-term self-interests.<sup>11</sup> One obvious interpretation would be to see this banner as confirmation that corruption and theft were in fact rife, and that villagers had a poor work ethic during their official working hours, applying their labour effectively only when working on their own plots. If expediency dominated in everyday life, it had to be publicly condemned on ritual occasions; when the ritual was over, everyday life would continue as before, in the spirit of a cynical utilitarian individualism.

But the ethical landscape is more complex than this. For all their cultural distinctiveness, Caroline Humphrey reported that the Buryats signed up to 'general Soviet values' (1983: 434). They endorsed the Marxist notion of a labour theory of value and recognized an obligation to produce a surplus for the benefit of society. This did not mean that the official tenets of an evolving Marxist-Leninist ideology constituted a hegemonic reality. The de facto solutions diverged considerably. Yet Humphrey makes clear that the discrepancies did not warrant the application of Rudolf Bahro's concept of 'subalternity', let alone generalized diagnoses of irresponsibility. Rather, she diagnosed a tension between the Soviet emphasis on an ethic of hard work and a division of labour that was manifestly not conducive to 'moral stability' on the part of the individual. It did



not occur to Buryat *kolkhozniki* to apply the concept of theft that they recognized within the private sphere to informal appropriations of property objects that were nominally collective. What counted was whether the individual's status gave him (more rarely, her) the right to make the appropriation in question.

Yulian Konstantinov picks up on the theme of theft in his explorations of *sovkhoism* on the Kola Peninsula. Whereas for Humphrey, on the basis of research carried out much earlier in a very different region of the USSR, farm members seem to muddle through in silence, Konstantinov found that Sami herders commented reflexively on what they were doing when pursuing their own goals at the expense of those of the collective. In their eyes, their appropriations were legitimate. But it would be an error to cast them as resistance to an ideological lie. There was no such antagonism. Konstantinov concludes: 'If we replace . . . "institutionalised theft" with morally mildly flawed "redistribution from below" with an emphasis placed on the intensely social arrangements that assist the process, we may be nearer the reality of personally lived authoritarian socialism' (2015: 17). Notions such as 'theft' and 'lie' feature prominently in the repertoire of intellectual dissidents but for the mass of the population of M-L-M societies, though 'morally mildly flawed,' their social orders had a firm ethical grounding to the extent that they removed risk from people's lives.<sup>12</sup>

In these cases, then, moral norms must be investigated at two distinct levels. There will always be imperfections in the local implementation of the private-in-the-collective, but there is also a general assent to collective ideals: producing goods for the benefit of society in Buryatiya, and guarantees of social security on the Kola Peninsula. The Eastern European country that most closely resembles these Soviet cases is Bulgaria. The villagers studied by Gerald Creed repeatedly supported the successor to the Communist Party in the democratic elections of the 1990s. They opposed decollectivization and regretted that the progress they had made under socialism was being undermined by forces beyond their control. The character of theft was transformed in these years. Under socialism, it had been a lubricant of the mechanisms that integrated household production with state planning, functioning to make total production greater than it would otherwise have been in *both* sectors. It was not condemned morally so long as it did not generate significant inequality. But that is precisely what happened in the 1990s. The villagers who had successfully 'domesticated' socialism had greater trouble coming to terms with capitalism. One commented wryly: 'We don't have theft in Bulgaria; it's called privatization' (Creed 1998: 260).

Many variations on this theme have been documented in other socialist and former socialist states. Otto Habeck's (2020) initial hypothesis in his East German-Polish comparative study was shaped by Konstantinov's reindeer research. Habeck expected *sovkhoism* to flourish where farm workers' activities took place in locations remote from headquarters, and where high levels of skill were involved. But he was told again and again on both sides of the political border that 'illicit activities took place right under the eyes of the managers, and that managers themselves were involved in the give-and-take' (2020: 136). Details of this 'give-and-take' reflected local specificities, including differences in contemporary political economy that had historical antecedents (a long history of large-scale estate farming on the German side, contrasted with a deep-seated aversion to any form of collective ownership in Poland).

The trope of theft in the spirit of Proudhon recurs throughout Katherine Verdery's (2003) Romanian study, where it is linked to more antagonistic social relations. Socialist

collectivization is characterized as 'the grand theft', but theft continues when farm managers turn out to be the principal beneficiaries of unruly decollectivization. In between, when villagers themselves 'took' from the collective sector under socialism, they were (as Verdery represents their views) in effect claiming their entitlements. Though classified as theft by managers, it was through these appropriations that farm workers constituted themselves as 'proper human beings' (Verdery 2003: 69). This appears to resemble Konstantinov's depiction of *sovkhoism* as a worldview. Yet Verdery's account of moral personhood differs from his diagnosis of 'morally mildly flawed' generalized redistribution. Romanian collective farm managers constantly appropriated resources informally, sometimes as part of a larger socialist gift economy that benefited all, but also to aggrandize their personal property. Verdery is unclear as to when managerial elites 'connived' in generalized practices of entitlement in a moral community, and when their informal activities set them apart from others in the community: from the underdogs, from 'people who resisted the oppressions and sacrifices socialism imposed on them' (2003: 69).

The argument about resistance is difficult to reconcile with Max Gluckman's model for grasping a non-commodity system of property. Verdery is aware of the danger of exoticizing Romanian farm workers by equating them with Melanesian or African horticulturalists. On the other hand, she is determined not to naturalize Western ownership and free markets as a standard by which to measure collective farm performance.<sup>13</sup> Her interpretations of the moral dimension and stratification of collective farm life are grounded in the voices of her interview partners in the 1990s, when the system had collapsed. David Kideckel (1993) provides support from the era when socialist institutions were still in place. He goes so far as to compare the Olt Land of Transylvania under socialism to 'amoral familism' in the Italian south in an earlier generation (Banfield 1958; cited by Kideckel 1993: 136). Ceaușescu's repressive accumulation state generated a climate of pervasive mistrust and 'forced hypocrisy'. In these conditions, bargaining with farm managers did not lead to complicit solidarities but to a radical anomie in which everyone was stimulated to break the law. Petty theft from the collective was endemic, and 'would have been far greater had it not been for the fact that people were certain they would be turned in by their neighbors if they were found out' (Kideckel 1993: 123, n. 5).

If Romania represented the extreme of economic and ethical dysfunctionality, the same issues of morality and social antagonism take a different guise where *sovkhoism* was more efficient: that is, Hungarian goulash socialism. Theft is a leitmotiv in Martha Lampland's rich study from Transdanubia. In the pre-socialist era, the community she studied had been dominated by quasi-feudal manors. There was a saying: 'If you don't steal from the manor, then you're stealing from your family' (Lampland 1995: 86). By the time of Lampland's fieldwork in the 1980s, this had morphed into: '[I]f you don't steal from the state, then you're stealing from your family' (1995: 262). The vocabulary is interesting because Lampland was investigating a *collective* farm, rather than a *state* farm such as the one I have been discussing in Kiskunhalas. Rather than perceiving their farm's assets to be their common property, collective farm workers saw them as belonging to the state. What mattered was the binary that separated collective property from that allocated for personal and household use. Hungarian collectivization was highly successful in providing rural inhabitants with security and possibilities for material accumulation that greatly exceeded anything they had known in their pre-socialist history. The sociality of the socialist brigade is also recalled warmly by many



Figure 5. After-work brigade sociality at the state farm (1966), © Thorma János Múzeum, Kiskunhalas. Reproduced with permission.

(see Fig. 5). Yet it seems that all this was insufficient to endear them to socialism. In particular, those who had embarked on an embourgeoisement path before their private property rights were infringed usually remained bitterly anti-communist. In the 1970s and 1980s, these sections of the community were by and large included in new forms of socialist embourgeoisement. They were not pursuing dogged resistance. Yet there was a widespread feeling that goulash socialism was both inefficient economically and flawed morally. The two dimensions were intimately related: the more space the regime allowed for petty commodity production to boost production overall and legitimate goulash socialism, the greater the moral peril and the loss of ideological coherence. Lampland's villagers showed no sign of adopting the values proclaimed in socialist ideology. Common property was there for the taking whenever it was expedient: 'It was simply against human nature, they said, to elevate abstract social goals over personal utility' (1995: 259).

Lampland (1995) describes a 'sweetcorn episode' to illustrate the defects of *sovkhhoism*. Five white-collar managers profited considerably from harvesting maize on their household plots, whereby all the mechanized tasks were undertaken by the collective and the managers invested their own labour only when it came to the harvest.<sup>14</sup> One of the five brazenly had his corn picked by the manual workers of one of the brigades for which he was responsible. Lampland presents this as evidence of a 'them and us' cleavage, resembling that implied by Verdery. Balanced market socialism institutionalized in some form of *sovkhhoism* is a fragile constellation that can easily lose its credibility.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of economic functionality, if farm managers are perceived to be benefiting unfairly by abusing socialist principles, the integrity of the entire system is undermined. According to Lampland, the reforms glossed



as 'market socialism' after 1968 had the perverse effect of demonstrating the moral superiority of the 'second society' and of work that was undertaken privately, for selfish goals. Economic success overall (measured in terms of a vastly improved standard of living) did not reconcile villagers to socialism, but instead highlighted the hypocrisy of its ideological rhetoric. Lampland argues persuasively that pervasive 'absolutely utilitarian individualism' (1995: 270) emerged from an initial infiltration of economic calculation into socialist planning, which then inadvertently 'honed the culture of capitalism' (1995: 357).

These analyses by the finest Western ethnographers of Eastern European communities suggest contradictions between ethical and economic dimensions of socialism and cast doubt on Yulian Konstantinov's holistic concept of *sovkhoism*. But the Kiskunhalas State Farm, as interlocutors in Halas have described it to me in recent years, bears out his model rather than theirs. This farm was surely not free of the individualist utilitarianism emphasized by Lampland, or of what Verdery calls 'managerial shenanigans' (2003: 66). But I have not come across evidence of a binary in which the workforce condemned the leadership, let alone socialism tout court. The act of the section head in Lampland's 'sweetcorn episode' was clearly an abuse: this individual might have thought he was behaving in a culturally and ethically appropriate way, but his community disagreed. I was told of a similar case in Halas in the mid-1980s, but it ended with the section head being sanctioned for his transgression. As Hungarian collective farms grew larger in the early 1970s, everyday pilfering appears to have waned. Intensified mechanization, the payment of higher wages, and better working conditions all contributed to its decline, especially among the young. Moreover, while *sovkhoism* continued in the symbiosis of household production with that of the socialist enterprise, cronyism seemed to another US ethnographer to be giving way to 'more universalistic criteria' as appointments came to be determined by formal educational qualifications (Bell 1984: 182-3).<sup>16</sup>

Former state farm workers in Halas recall that the late chairman who struggled to cope with financial deficits in the late 1980s was himself, like most other managers, the child of poor peasants. Everyone knew that his university degree was not quite genuine, because it had been awarded on a fast track for mature comrades who needed the diploma to cement their personal credentials. Other former leaders still alive and locally resident are similarly respected. From a retired senior agronomist and former party secretary, I learned that the ideal of 'non-expediency' was elusive. Work norms were constantly negotiated in practice: between central planners and enterprise leaders, and also within brigades as they went about their daily activities. But there was no pervasive consciousness of exploitation by elites and certainly no popular resistance.

For all the anger and despair of Romanian villagers, and in spite of the conviction of many of their Hungarian counterparts that the socialist conception of humanity was hopelessly unrealistic, even the US ethnographers report persisting loyalties to the ideals of the regimes that had disappeared by the time their monographs were published (Creed 1998: chap. 6; Kideckel 1993: 186, 218; Lampland 1995: 351).<sup>17</sup> They found little or no support for measures to break up the collective farms and privatize their land (usually in the form of restitution to pre-socialist private owners). Though they had complained vociferously just a few years earlier, the moral blemishes of goulash socialism did not lead Hungarian villagers to endorse either the economics or the morality of wild capitalism.

### The demise of the Kiskunhalas State Farm

The decline of the Kiskunhalas State Farm pre-dated the wave of regime changes that transformed Eastern Europe thirty years ago. The material base turned out to be weaker than any managers or workers had suspected. Ironically, the decisive impulse came from the Soviet Union, which had contributed so much to the theory and practice of this institution from the beginning. From the mid-1980s, in the framework of his *perestroika* policies, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated a rigorous anti-alcohol campaign. Large-scale imports of wine from Hungary were no longer desired. In the increasingly decentralized planning system, no Hungarian politician was able to negotiate alternative markets. (Export to the West was still constrained by the protectionism of the European Economic Community.) The outcome was a disaster for Hungarian producers. The Kiskunhalas State Farm was in the middle of a complex financial reconstruction when the political system unexpectedly collapsed. It was initially included on a list of farms that were *not* to be broken up, on the grounds that this would be detrimental to the national economic interest. But free market liberals as well as the revived Smallholders Party and other nationalists pushed strongly for full decollectivization and the restitution of property rights to original owners. The first postsocialist government implemented a complex plan that offered 'compensation' rather than full restitution. The outcome, in Kiskunhalas as throughout the country, was a period of enormous uncertainty in which production fell dramatically. Most assets, including land, ended up in the hands of a few former farm managers who bought up the compensation coupons of their former workers and had the social capital to obtain the additional credits they needed to become private owners (see Lampland 2002; Swain 2013). For example, the hog unit outside Halas was acquired by Béla (a pseudonym), trained as an agrarian economist, who had long specialized in marketing and built up personal networks throughout the country. This branch has remained successful and Béla has recently handed over managerial responsibility to his son.

Other major investments of the state farm, especially in the wine sector, turned out to be liabilities rather than assets. Wineries became ruins in the course of a single season. The new vineyard owners were powerless to prevent the ecology of shifting sands from reasserting its domination of the terrain. Take Imre, who was born in 1946 into a family of poor peasants and inherited their communist convictions. After graduating from the agricultural university in Budapest, he worked at the state farm for his entire career, rising almost to the top of the hierarchy. Imre receives a good pension and nowadays enjoys cultivating a few grapes (planted in the 1980s by the state farm) as a hobby, for personal consumption and gifting. In the 1990s, he headed a consortium of ex-managers that attempted to revive the export of champagne, sherry, and a sweet desert wine to what was now the Russian Federation. When this business failed, he kept himself busy by helping his son with his fishing tackle business. Imre still owns the beautiful cellar he acquired in the course of privatization, but the tourist business he had hoped to launch there never materialized. The winery and vineyards at this location near the Serbian border have long been abandoned (Fig. 6).

Figure 7 shows a winery complex that has changed owners several times. The aluminium cladding around the vats has been plundered and there is no realistic prospect that wine will ever be produced again on these premises. The nearby hamlet, some 20 km from the centre of Halas, was a very poor *puszta* of scattered farms when the state farm was founded in 1949. The houses that remain are nowadays inhabited by a new rural proletariat (cf. Buchowski 1997). Imre views these developments with



**Figure 6.** Imre, formerly a state farm manager and the owner of this ruined winery (2019). Photo by the author.



**Figure 7.** The ruined winery complex at Tajó *puszta* (2019). Photo by the author.





**Figure 8.** Museum tractors on display in Kiskunhalas during the annual wine festival (2019). Photo by the author.

wistful resignation. He remains convinced that the country would be in a much better place today if it had managed to avoid the excesses of ‘wild capitalism’ in the 1990s. This view is widespread among both lifelong anti-communists and ‘winners’ of the transition such as Béla, who took over the farm’s hog unit mentioned above.

All successor enterprises must play by the rules of capitalist agribusiness, within a framework determined by the European Union in Brussels. Most new farms are on paper a great deal more efficient than the former state farm, mainly because they employ only a small fraction of the labour. When the total social institution was dissolved, most of its employees were made redundant. Few members of the Roma minority found new jobs in the next two decades. The annual wine festival, initiated by state farm workers in 1979, continues as a highlight of the town’s ritual calendar on the second weekend of September (Fig. 8). Many labour migrants return to enjoy the special sociality of this occasion. The traditional procession through the town centre of old state farm tractors decorated with symbols of the fresh harvest evokes nostalgia among ex-employees. However, Roma, who in the past participated in this festival, nowadays have an entirely separate celebration on the outskirts of town. This is explained by some officials as a concession to multiculturalism, but most residents agree that the real motivation was to avoid inter-ethnic skirmishes at the main festival in the centre. The demise of the total social institution has scattered ethnically Hungarian families throughout the European Union (which Hungary joined in 2004) but it has confined the Roma to their ethnic collectivity and contributed to growing incivility (Hann 2020).

### **Conclusion: Socialism in world history**

It is time to draw the various threads and scales of this article together. Huxley paid no attention to economy in his Romanes Lecture of 1893. The dichotomy he drew

between evolution and ethics was rejected by his most influential contemporaries. Nowadays the issues are broached in new ways by biological and cognitive researchers, while social and economic anthropologists abjure from evolutionary debates. In this article, I have nevertheless found it instructive to engage with Huxley's insistence on the relative autonomy of ethics from the 'cosmic process', at least since the Stoics and Buddhists of the Axial Age. Picking up on his analogy with laissez-faire economics, I have drawn attention to the rise and fall of M-L-M social orders. I am by no means the first to suggest that Marxism can be situated in the tradition of earlier salvation religions (Schumpeter 1942). Ernest Gellner (1994) liked to highlight the hubris of a faith that promised paradise here on this earth; but the ethnographic evidence allows us to assess some implementations of socialist ideals more positively. The M-L-M social orders were attempts to apply universalist principles in ways that sometimes managed to deliver goods with reasonable efficiency while respecting local traditions, guaranteeing security, and reconciling individual agency with a collective frame that set limits on social inequality.

The idealist exhortations of Huxley's later years were followed up by materialist scholars in the twentieth century. Prehistorian Gordon Childe (1936) echoed the early Marx in arguing that 'man makes himself'. Childe's Marxist analysis of the urban revolution of the Bronze Age was taken forward by Jack Goody (1976), a non-Marxist materialist. Neither looked in any detail at religion. Childe and Goody contented themselves with positing links between more efficient plough agriculture, larger surpluses, and the growth of more differentiated urban societies. These materialist causal chains can be extended to include the ethical systems consolidated in the Iron Age (subsuming the Axial Age). Questions of political-economic organization and questions of ethics were brought together as new normative precepts formed the basis for large political communities based on collective responsibility. Many societies all over the world have advanced down this path since the Axial Age. Only philosophers of Western liberalism have claimed that private vices are conducive to public virtues. Huxley was suspicious of where this hypocrisy had led his own society; his Romanes Lecture, my leitmotiv in this article, is his ultimate protest.

I have speculated at various points in this article about how the great agnostic would view contemporary trends in the discipline of anthropology. If sociocultural anthropologists have by and large turned away from evolutionary concerns, within this anthropology a 'new anthropology of ethics' has turned its back on much of what passed for social science theory in the last century. Alongside Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim (1995 [1912]) is also excoriated for the way he approaches society as a moral order. Today's anthropologists of ethics (Greek-origin *ethics* increasingly overshadows Latin-origin *morality*, though the terms are often used interchangeably) prefer to explore the freedom of individuals to craft their personhood. Presentist documentation of cultural variation is then brought into conversation with Western traditions of moral philosophy. Huxley might classify this as an academic variant of 'flight from the battlefield'. What matters for him is not the freedom of individuals to cultivate ethical personhood within a cultural idiom, but the progress of society. Though he never encountered the work of Durkheim, the Victorian Londoner would have sympathized with the sociologist's attempt to theorize a modern secular moral order by recovering its pre-axial elementary religious forms. Were he to give his Romanes Lecture today, in homage to the Durkheimian tradition I think Huxley would opt for morality rather than ethics in his title.

Be that as it may, and despite his distaste for communist levelling, Huxley would recognize M-L-M socialisms as elaborate attempts to institutionalize an encompassing, secular, anti-utilitarian moral order for the sake of human progress. Their history in the twentieth century remains controversial. There is something heroic, arguably messianic and transcendental, in challenging the iron laws of capitalist economic development by trying to create an alternative, more perfect social order on this earth. The M-L-M countries confounded the original evolutionism of mainstream socialist thinking, because their revolutions took place in countries which were underdeveloped, and yet experienced bourgeois revolutions. Rural collectivization was an attempt to reap the benefits of modernity without experiencing capitalist class divisions: a path that would avoid private property and the tyranny of the market.

The implementation of these moral principles on the ground was never going to be straightforward. Despite some significant accomplishments, notably in the flexible forms of *sovkhoism* developed in Bulgaria and Hungary, this heroic path ultimately ended in failure. The extent to which this was contingent on the geopolitical circumstances of the 1980s, or derived from deeper economic contradictions of 'market socialism', can be debated. The latter path seems to have increased moral perils faster than it was able to increase economic efficiency. Perhaps the failure was the inevitable consequence of the fact that the revolution did not take place where it should have, in more advanced economic conditions. In any case, the moralist Huxley would question by what criteria flawed 'redistribution from below', accompanied by fluctuating levels of ideological exhortation, should be judged as morally inferior to the conceit that identifies the common good with the pursuit of selfishness. In the postsocialist era, huge numbers of Eastern European citizens look back with positive feelings – nostalgia, even pride – on what was accomplished in those four decades. Their memories are shaped by what they have experienced since, in three decades of wild capitalism and new forms of embeddedness under a corrupt one-party system. But even in the Romanian case, catastrophic economic performance did not lead to negative evaluations of socialist morality, stripped to its essentials of collective security, welfare, and a high degree of equality. Ideological emphasis on collectivist ideals was compatible with the efflorescence of rapacious individualism, which in some circumstances it accentuated. Yet the concept of *sovkhoism* is based on deeper principles of justice that contradict today's wild capitalism, just as Huxley rejected Victorian *laissez-faire*.

### **Coda: Huxley and Marx**

Engels's characterization of Marx as the Darwin of human history has intuitive appeal, but it is riddled with misunderstandings. Darwin was admired not just by Marx himself but also by countless twentieth-century socialists, confident that history was on their side. But Darwinian selection, as Huxley pointed out with increasing pathos in his last years, is not a moral tale of progress. The survival of the fittest does not mean the survival of the best. When Engels emphasizes laws of development, he misconstrues the great biologist. Like Spencer, Engels thought that human society was governed by laws. From this positivist perspective (rooted in the social sciences from their inception), if human ethical impulses matter at all, this can only be within the impersonal, quasi-logical mechanisms that are pushing humanity forward.

Huxley's late reflections on ethics and evolution show us something different. Had he read Engels's exposition of historical materialism, he might have been willing to concede that the ascetic moralities on which he focused in his lecture could only

have emerged when certain material conditions had been met. No Axial Age without the prior material transformations of the Bronze Age! Yet Huxley would surely have dismissed the teleology of Engels as firmly as he rejected the market individualism of the utilitarians. His notion of ethical freedom was quite different from Spencer's preference for *laissez-faire* and a minimal state. Huxley was politically at the interventionist end of the liberal spectrum of his day, which laid the foundations for the labour movement and the welfare state in the next century. In contrast to the positivists Spencer and Engels, his open-ended version of the motto 'man makes himself' invites comparison with Marx, who derived his own thoroughly anthropomorphic vision from Hegel and Feuerbach. For all the obvious differences, I see convergences between two great bourgeois humanists, each sincerely concerned to better the lot of others. Both believed in progress, like the overwhelming majority of European intellectuals of their age. But both harbored doubts and would have no truck with deterministic mechanisms. The revolutionary Marx would be as appalled as the liberal-reformist Huxley by most of what passed for 'socialist morality' in the course of the twentieth century. They would be equally dismayed by the resurgence in the twenty-first century of what Huxley (2009 [1893/4]: 115) termed 'reasoned savagery': neoliberal economic ideologies and the coarse populist politics that neoliberalism spawns.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Huxley cultivated contact with the masses through the medium of 'the people's lecture', confiding to a bourgeois friend: 'I am sick of the dilettante middle classes, and mean to try what I can do with these hard-handed fellows who live among facts' (letter to Frederick Dyster, 1855, quoted in Clark 1968: 44).

<sup>2</sup> The zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester was the only respected scientist and 'establishment' figure to attend Marx's funeral.

<sup>3</sup> The interest was not reciprocated by Darwin.

<sup>4</sup> 'The societies of Bees and Ants exhibit socialism *in excelsis*' (T.H. Huxley, letter to Mr W. Platt Ball, October 1890, quoted in L. Huxley 1900: vol. 2, 268).

<sup>5</sup> The major exception is the school known as the new institutionalism, which has had a considerable impact on economic anthropology in recent decades (see Acheson 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Humphrey gives several vernacular terms for the 'multifarious tricks' (1983: 224) that were necessary to counter the rigidities of the planned economy.

<sup>7</sup> The variation is well documented only for the countryside. No comparable body of work exists for cities and factory workplaces. However, the tensions inherent in socialist property relations and the informal economy are illuminated by Firlit & Chłopecki (1992), Ledeneva (1998), and Sampson (1984). The



continuation of informality and its expansion in new constellations after the demise of socialism are explored in Harboe Knudsen & Frederiksen (2015) and Henig & Makovsky (2017).

<sup>8</sup> In the one chapter of her book that focuses on state farms, Verdery shows that in the Romanian case these enjoyed greater stability in the 1990s. Their leaders therefore had a smoother path towards becoming successful private farmers (in the guise of 'supertenants').

<sup>9</sup> See Borbás (n.d.: 72). In 1974, the Kiskunhalas State Farm exported 20,000 hectolitres of wine to Great Britain (Benedek 1975).

<sup>10</sup> This characterization applies with only minor variations throughout the Eurasian socialist world. Unlike the farms studied by other Western anthropologists (discussed above), the Kiskunhalas State Farm was not an isolated, bounded unit. More than half of its employees lived in the market town, where they were free to associate outside their brigade or wider occupational community. In contrast to the *kolkhozniki* visited by Humphrey in the mid-1960s, Hungarians were not restricted in their movement.

The designation of the socialist workplace as a 'total social institution' (very different from the type of institution analysed by Erving Goffman) originates with sociologist Simon Clarke (Humphrey 1995: 7). Apart from Humphrey herself, it is taken up by Konstantinov (2020: 11, 19). While anthropologists revere the Maussian notion of the 'total social fact', Konstantinov invites his readers to reflect on why they find it hard to deal with political systems conventionally labelled 'totalitarian' – even when these are viewed positively, even affectionately, by most of their members.

<sup>11</sup> This slogan is attributed to Igor Newerly, a veteran Polish communist writer. Newerly's credentials were questionable, since he had resigned from the Polish Communist Party in 1966 in protest against the Gomułka regime's repression of intellectuals. This detail was perhaps unknown to the comrades in Kiskunhalas in 1973.

<sup>12</sup> In the words of Konstantinov: '[T]he success of communication is ensured by the transmission of shared ethical values "from below" and responded to in various ways "from above". The shared ethical preference for *security* as the ultimate value stands in some contrast to *democracy* and *freedom*' (2015: 64, original emphasis). The archetypal intellectual dissident who deplored 'living within a lie' under socialism is Václav Havel (see Havel 1985).

<sup>13</sup> She is explicitly critical of institutionalists in other disciplines who display such ethnocentricity. Thelen (2011) concludes that Verdery nonetheless fails to avoid this trap, a 'dead end' for the comparative anthropologist.

<sup>14</sup> Whereas Lampland views this as an irregular occurrence, this was a standard instance of the symbiosis of socialist farm and household petty commodity production (which in some forms resulted in the elimination of the 'household plot' as a physical entity – see Swain 1985: 76-7). Lampland does not state whether any payment was made for the provision of collective services in this case. Even if charges were levied, household production supported by the collective farm could be lucrative in comparison with regular wage labour employment. The more remarkable detail in this case is surely that senior farm managers performed unskilled manual work to boost their household incomes.

<sup>15</sup> It had long been argued that the *nomenklatura* officials of the Marxist-Leninist regimes could forge a new form of class power through their control of redistribution in the planned economy (Konrád & Szelényi 1979). Goulash socialism enabled the very same persons to profit from market mechanisms.

<sup>16</sup> This implies a contraction in certain elements of *sovkhhoism*, since the material scope for 'redistribution from below' was increasingly curtailed. In Hungary, however, the principle of the private-in-the-collective persisted in a form that was not even 'mildly flawed' from the local ethical point of view: while collective securities were still guaranteed, households and individuals were increasingly free to choose whether or not to work harder, and thereby expand their possibilities as consumers. (Whether this consumerist model of *sovkhhoism* was viable as a long-term form of integration across all economic sectors is another matter.)

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Verdery's account also includes rich documentation of villagers' dissatisfaction with decollectivization. She prefaces this with the remark that complaining is 'an important Romanian cultural form' (2003: 192). Her analysis of the extreme alienation of socialist agrarian institutions in Romania would be undermined if her interlocutors in the 1990s had remembered them positively. Nevertheless, efforts to sustain a local Association as a successor to the collective farm (2003: chap. 6) suggest that, for many of the villagers she studied, *sovkhhoist* values and practices of the *ancien régime* were resilient in this case as well.

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## Économie et éthique dans le processus cosmique

### Résumé

Lorsque T.H. Huxley donne une conférence sur l'évolution et l'éthique en 1893, sa critique des lois amORALES du « processus cosmique » laisse son auditoire perplexe. Alors que Huxley accordait peu d'attention aux institutions politiques et économiques, cet article attire l'attention sur le matérialisme historique de cette époque et ses héritages du XXe siècle. Il analyse de façon empirique l'essor et la chute d'une ferme d'État hongroise en se référant à la littérature comparative sur les sociétés socialistes du XXe siècle. En théorie, le socialisme est considéré comme la combinaison d'une philosophie matérialiste de l'histoire et d'un élan éthique axial. Après l'effondrement de l'ordre socialiste eurasiatique dans les années 1990, il apparaît clair que Huxley avait raison de déplorer l'« individualisme fanatique » de son époque. Son humanisme ressemble à celui du jeune Karl Marx et il est plus proche d'Émile Durkheim que des courants contemporains de l'anthropologie de l'éthique.

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