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THE MORAL  
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OF ECONOMY:  
WORK, WORKFARE,  
AND FAIRNESS  
IN PROVINCIAL  
HUNGARY

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# The Moral Dimension of Economy: work, workfare, and fairness in provincial Hungary<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The bridging concept of moral economy has been productively deployed in various disciplines but recent inflationary adaptations, in line with the burgeoning anthropology of morality (or ethics), neglect the material economy (the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services). Following a critical literature review, the moral dimension of economic life is illustrated with reference to *work as a value* between the late 19th and early 21st centuries in Hungary. This moral dimension is highly susceptible to politicization, as becomes clear in the passage from “reform socialism” to neoliberal capitalism and ensuing changes in welfare entitlements. The present right-wing government (in power since 2010) has laid great stress on workfare in its economic and social policies. The paper considers the functioning of these schemes in two local settings and shows how discourses of work and fairness are extended into new ethical registers to justify negative attitudes toward immigrants. Investigation of the moral dimension of economy complements the paradigms of classical political economy and the neoclassical synthesis that dominates in modern mainstream economics. While all three have a role to play in economic anthropology, investigation of the moral dimension through ethnographic methods is the hallmark of a specifically anthropological contribution to the more general programme of renewing a holistic social science.

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## Introduction: morality, economy and moral economy

Distinctions between traditional philosophical enquiry and a more rigorous economic science have proliferated in Western scholarship since the 18th century. By addressing them separately in his two best known books, Adam Smith is arguably the chief source of this bifurcation. New disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology occupy middle ground. Specialists in the sub-fields of economic sociology and economic anthropology try to integrate qualitative factors such as *morale* or *Werte* in connecting economy and society. Economic anthropologists appreciate Max Weber primarily for his emphasis on the understanding the motivations of economic actors (Billig 2000). His more theoretical interests in how changes in the value sphere are connected to changes in economy and society do not feature prominently in current work.<sup>3</sup> Although socio-cultural anthropology is witnessing a general resurgence of interest in morality and ethics, unlike the old evolutionist literature contemporary practitioners pay rather little attention to the domain of economy.<sup>4</sup>

In recent decades one conspicuous tool in efforts to bridge the divide has been the concept of “moral economy”. Norbert Götz (2015) has surveyed its multifarious usages since the era in which this coupling first became thinkable, as the pendant of political economy. Prior to the eighteenth century there was no notion of economy as a *thing*, a rather important thing in an emerging commercial society, comprising the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Aristotle’s *oikonomia* had referred to the self-sufficient estate, in opposition to the market. With the onset of industrialization the meaning of economy shifted, though not all at once, and not in all milieus. The ensuing ambiguities are still prevalent today. To *economise* connotes sensible household management, a usage that Aristotle would recognize. But he might be puzzled by the respect accorded in our age to methodological individualism, the approach through which utilitarian philosophers initiated the modern discipline of economics, which largely brackets the dimension of politics (not to mention those of anthropology and sociology, disciplines that Aristotle would have subsumed under politics).

Early uses of moral economy are obscure and of interest primarily to historians of Christian theology (as in “moral economy of the deity”). Götz notes a sermon at the University of Cambridge in 1729. By the end of the eighteenth century the coupling is being applied in secular contexts, with links to benevolence and later to crime statistics (for which it is a synonym). The Chartist James Bronterre O’Brien used it in a way akin to that of E. P. Thompson in his celebrated contributions more than a century later (Thompson 1963, 1971, 1991). The English historian came close to renouncing the concept he made famous. In his last publication on the subject he suggested that “political” or “sociological” would have been more suitable terms than “moral” to denote his intention. Unfortunately, “political” had been claimed already in the 18th century by the emerging theoreticians of the newly dominant market economy.

Thompson argued against crude materialist explanations, notably of “bread riots”. His interest lay in society as a moral entity, which is the premise of the discipline of sociology, above all in its French tradition. Didier Fassin, one of the most productive contributors to recent debates about

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<sup>3</sup> Weber’s most celebrated contribution is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but his key programmatic text concerning the value sphere was written only later, still with a focus on religion (Weber 2009). It was not integrated into the monumental posthumous work *Economy and Society* (1978).

<sup>4</sup> See Fassin 2012, Keane 2016.

moral economy, criticizes Thompson for precisely this (Fassin 2009). He prefers the approach of James Scott (1976), interpreting Scott's emphasis on a "subsistence ethic" as opening up to a fluid approach to *values*, as distinct from Thompson's more sociological stress on "norms and obligations".

In his own review of the recent literature, Fassin includes a long list to illustrate how the concept has been trivialized through its faddish application to almost everything. (Christopher Hamlin's "moral economy of the aquarium", published in the *Journal of the History of Biology* as early as 1986, is a nice example.) However, historian of science Lorraine Daston is excluded from Fassin's dismissive list. Her call in 1995 for more attention to the values and emotions of scientific communities engaged only marginally with socio-political dimensions and not at all with economy in the familiar material sense. Conceding that this use of moral economy might be nothing more than "lexical coincidence", Fassin nonetheless applauds it and contrasts Daston to both Thompson and Scott. He then proposes a middle way between these three authors (even if no simple synthesis is possible). If Daston's insights are added to those of the social historian (Thompson) and the political scientist cum anthropologist (Scott), we shall be in a position to take the moral dimension seriously. Fassin's ensuing definition of moral economy mimics a famous definition of "political economy" by Jean-Baptiste Say: "we will consider moral economy to be the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space" (Fassin 2009: 15).<sup>5</sup> Fassin concedes that this approach to moral economy emphasizes the adjective rather than the noun: by stressing norms, values and emotions the concept loses its "original strictly economic dimension" (*ibid.*: 22). But he considers this to be a price worth paying and concludes that the path is now open for "an ethnography of moral economies in modern societies" and thus in turn for a politically grounded "anthropology of moral economies".

Addressing the concept myself a few years ago, before the recent stock-takings of Fassin and Götz, my basic criticism of Thompson was similar to that leveled by Götz. Thompson's strong emphasis on popular resistance to price-making markets at the onset of industrialization was too specific. It could not even be generalized to other European economies undergoing a comparable transition. In Hungary under socialism it was easy to demonstrate that the moral basis of the rural community included the values of private property and a market in land (Hann 2010). There are in any case problems in generalizing about the values of a community when its population is highly stratified and the political authorities are encouraging class warfare. In short, moral economy is an unsatisfactory, "clumpish" term (to use an adjective applied by Thompson himself [1991: 13] to the concept of culture). My objection to Fassin is simpler: economy is not merely downplayed in his clearing of the conceptual bush: it is so completely bowdlerized as to become meaningless. When he proclaims that "At least, moral economy is moral" (Fassin 2009: 15), we might as well abandon "economy" altogether and refer to a moral system, framework, climate, or "background" (Abend 2014). Since a communitarian bias is the main common denominator of most if not all of the research inspired by Thompson, why not speak simply of a moral *community*?

Thus the status of the concept of moral economy seems at present thoroughly muddled. As Norbert Götz argues, the dominant Thompsonian usage implies not just a specific politics (anti-capitalist) but a specific moment in global economic history. Moral economy is not a concept that

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<sup>5</sup> English translations and page references to Fassin's article are reproduced from the version available in the internet (last accessed on 23 September 2016): URL : [www.cairn.info/revue-Annales-2009-6-page-1237.htm](http://www.cairn.info/revue-Annales-2009-6-page-1237.htm).

has been deployed in the analysis of sharing or pooling among hunter-gatherers, or gift exchange among horticulturalists. It becomes relevant long after the emergence of “commodity economies” (Gregory 1982), at the point when, in highly differentiated societies, a normative consensus concerning basic entitlements is threatened by an expansion of the market principle. Götz is sympathetic to sociologists who would extend the concept beyond this encounter, e.g. by applying it to the inter-generational contracts that underpin developed welfare states. Having criticized the specificities of Thompson’s usage, however, he then undermines his own logical critique by proposing to restrict it in a different way: to civil society in the sense of third-sector initiatives and “humanitarianism”. Fassin himself has moved in this direction in his empirical work, but whereas he continues to engage with politics by “articulating” different scales of analysis between the local and the global, Götz ends up seeking common ground with behavioural economists. He suggests deploying moral economy “as a concept to illuminate such key features of economic allocation as are motivated by ideational, rather than material expectations of personal gain” (2015: 148).

In contrast to the adaptations recommended by Götz and Fassin, I propose discarding the notion of moral economy in favour of the sociological approaches of Weber and Durkheim. These classical sociological contributions engage with moral values in a way that the dominant paradigms in the history of economics do not. For classical political economists (such as Say, but also Adam Smith and Karl Marx), the principal economic actors are groups or classes with opposed interests. For neoclassical economists, they are utility-maximising individuals and profit-maximising firms. Neither of these academic paradigms investigates the nature of morality, though of course each can be harnessed to make moral arguments. Marx’s theory of capital can be used to legitimize workers’ revolt, while the market analysis of the later Adam Smith, or that of the Austrian school in the 20th century, can be invoked to defend the status quo. Welfare economics is the branch of mainstream positive economic science that concerns itself with the distribution of resources. Some economists argue that excessive social inequality is deleterious for the efficient functioning of an advanced economy. But since abandoning the general terrain of philosophy (or “the moral sciences”), economists have left it to sociologists and anthropologists to investigate the moral sentiments of real economic actors and their collectivities empirically, and to moral philosophers to debate their significance. In a world of turbulent markets and intensified concern about the compatibility of capitalism with democratically governed polities and decent human societies, this division of academic labour is unhelpful. It needs to be overcome; but I argue that reifying the moral dimension as (a) “moral economy” is no solution.

Didier Fassin distances himself from any form of reification when he notes that “moral economies are unstable or at least fluid realities traversed by tensions and contradictions, since conflicts of emotions and values oppose as much as they divide social groups, but are also subject to change and negotiations, according to circumstances and configurations” (2009: 21). But is the dimension of economy really as unstable as this implies? One way to conceptualize it is to see it as the *ethical context of embeddedness*. Embeddedness was the key concept of Karl Polanyi, who used it in a holistic sociological way to counter formalist analyses predicated on *homo economicus*. It was later adapted for narrower purposes by economic sociologists (Beckert 2009). But even the “substantivist” followers of Polanyi emphasized institutional contexts and paid relatively little attention to ethics or morality. I prefer to speak of a *moral dimension* in the sense that morality implies a collective and systemic basis in long-term shared values. By contrast ethics, which in the anthropological literature is increasingly deployed as the more general term, emphasizes fluidity

and tends to place individuals rather than cohesive collectivities at the centre of the analysis. It is of course important to avoid the traps of functionalist Durkheimian communitarianism by constantly questioning the extent to which particular “dominant” values are in fact shared throughout the population. The Weberian framework allows for tensions and even contradictions as values are contested and change historically. Nonetheless certain values show resilience and serve as a fundament of societal integration. I shall demonstrate how the persistence through radical changes of the social formation of a crucial value identified with the sphere of the economy integrates the value sphere of provincial Hungarians more generally, and how this is nowadays manipulated by political actors.

My main concern in this paper, then, is to connect “the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments” with changes in the material economy. I do so by focusing on work. This is an activity which is central to the economy everywhere (even if its forms differ greatly and not all persons perform it). I examine work as a value in rural Hungary, drawing both on secondary literature and field research in a village that I have known for 40 years. A key feature of the present economic conjuncture in Hungary is the attempt to address unemployment (the lack of paid work) through workfare. I distinguish two phases in these schemes, in the more recent of which an earlier moral consensus in the community is breaking down. Through a multi-scalar “articulation” approach of the kind advocated by Didier Fassin, I then show how politicians have responded by insidiously shifting the moral ground to identify new scapegoats. Work remains unquestioned as a dominant value but power holders are seeking to bolster their declining moral legitimacy by shifting the focus away from local workfare schemes to an aggressive anti-immigration campaign on a national and European scale.

### **Work in Rural Hungary**

Work, broadly understood as goal-directed activity to secure survival and reproduction, is a universal feature of economy. It can be studied in all human societies, including those which lack a clear concept of economy and which do not distinguish between the time of work and the time of leisure (Spittler 2016). The performance of work involves complex patterns of interaction with artifacts and environments in which many factors extraneous to a narrow calculus based on principles such as “least effort” play a part. Work figures prominently in social imaginings of the economy and is often the prime object of moral sentiments. It was a central topic of investigation for anthropology and adjacent fields on the eve of the fieldwork revolution, especially in the German-speaking world, where scholars sought to explain why the members of “primitive societies” toiled as they did, often communally, sometimes without appearing to distinguish between work and magic (Spittler 2008). In recent generations, however, this vital activity has attracted less attention from economic anthropologists than other aspects of economy, such as consumption, exchange and finance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is a sweeping statement which needs some qualification. The latest edition of James Carrier’s *Handbook of Economic Anthropology* (Carrier 2012) devotes two of its 38 chapters to “Labour” and “Industrial work”. Both contributions (by E. Paul Durrenberger and Jonathan Parry respectively) provide excellent reviews. However, reflecting the way the field has developed, the authors have more to say about themes such as social class, industrial relations, the welfare state and the informal sector than about the immediate *experience* of work, as studied by Gerd Spittler (2016), or about the labour theory of value and alienation as explored in decades of neo-Marxist work, or about *work as a value* in the Weberian sense developed in this paper. Work does not feature prominently in Katherine Browne’s (2009) theorizing of a “moral sphere” or in the other contributions to this recent rich collection devoted to anthropological approaches to the links between morality and economy (Browne and Milgram 2009).

The peasantry of preindustrial Hungary exemplifies the centrality of physical effort in the moral order of the Christian rural community. Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer (1969, 1972) collected rich ethnographic materials from Átány, a Calvinist village on the Great Hungarian Plain, on the eve of socialist collectivization. Dedication to the soil was a measure of the moral person. The goal was not maximum self-exploitation but rather moderation and a proud satisfaction in the proper tilling of the fields according to the rhythm of the seasons and custom.<sup>7</sup> Fél and Hofer quote a peasant called Ferenc Orbán: “It is fine to be in the fields, to work there; one is drawn outside by his desire. This is my favorite work. I was born into it, I grew up in it, I would like to do it as long as I live” (1969: 58). At the same time, the ethnographers noted pronounced inequalities in this rural society. The moral principle of work implied a peasant meritocracy, but this was undermined by another value, that of private property. Many Átány villagers were landless, or lacked sufficient acreage and other resources to qualify as self-sufficient “proper peasants”. Whereas sociological analysts might speak of class differences and exploitation, the villagers themselves (according to their ethnographers, doubtless biased toward the well-to-do) emphasized the commonality of values. The poorly endowed and the landless were more likely to consume alcohol to excess, in which case there was agreement that they were responsible for their own misfortunes.

These rich descriptions by native ethnographers were augmented a generation later by the neo-Marxist account of US anthropologist/sociologist Martha Lampland (1995). Although based primarily on field research carried out in the early 1980s in a Catholic village in Western Hungary, Lampland too digs deep into the past. Whereas Fél and Hofer offer an idealized account of work in “traditional society”, Lampland presents a more dynamic model. She emphasizes how the moral significance of work as “possessing activity” changed from the late nineteenth century onwards with the consolidation of a capitalist economy. In the immediate wake of feudalism, according to Lampland, work did not yet take the form of *labour*. By the inter-war decades, however, “labor property” had become the basis of a capitalist agrarian economy, as well as the yardstick of social value and moral esteem (as documented also by Fél and Hofer). Lampland downplays the importance of landownership (which is surprising in view of the fact that the community of Sárosd was characterized by large manorial estates until the 1940s). The “proper peasants” were an even smaller minority in this settlement complex than they were in Átány. Lampland notes that strict discipline and even physical violence were required to make the manorial servants and day-labourers work with a modicum of efficiency; she does not apply the concept of “moral economy” but it is hard to imagine that the rural proletariat perceived and valued their work in the same way as the more prosperous farmers of the community.

Lampland argues that the process of labour commodification continued in the socialist era, especially after 1957 when the Communist Party sought new ways to bolster its fragile legitimacy. Collectivization severed the value of labour from property. In the new technocratic hierarchies of the collective farm, remuneration was calculated according to time rather than “work-unit”. During the last decades of socialism, thanks to an innovative symbiosis between large-scale socialist units and village households, the Hungarian countryside prospered as never before (cf. Swain 1985, Hann 1980). Different forms of calculation persisted in the household sector, along with the old respect for hard manual work. In the last decades of socialism, however, this work ethic was accompanied by a new concept of leisure time among the young, for whom the consumerist

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Malinowski (1935) on the “practical work” of the good gardener in the Trobriand Islands, who achieved social recognition through effort and skill in much the same way as the proper peasant of Átány.

accumulation of goods was the priority and time meant money. In this way, according to Lampland, by the 1980s the commodification of labour was completed under a nominally Marxist-Leninist regime. Wealth was accumulated, many new houses were built, and a highly stratified peasantry previously excluded from the national society was effectively integrated into it on a much more egalitarian basis than hitherto.

This accomplishment was paradoxical, since it took place under a regime that was ideologically committed to the expansion of collective production, industrial methods of farming, and the supremacy of the urban working class. Collectivization went against the grain of the norms and values of the majority of the rural population. In this sense, the flourishing of the material economy was out of synchrony with the moral dimension: older villagers in particular bemoaned the loss of their private property rights; they criticized both the proliferation of bookkeepers and other white-collar employees in the new collective farms and the excessive staffing and low levels of performance of their manual brigades. But overall, as far as work was concerned, there was considerable harmony between the material efflorescence and the moral dimension thanks to continuity with a dominant value. The “second economy” of late socialist Hungary was full of dubious dealing and moral aspersions, but the great majority of participants, especially in the rural sector, owed their additional rewards to their own hard work, which usually had a practical, physical dimension.

Contrary to analysts who exaggerate the boundary between public and private spheres, Lampland argues that an economistic utilitarianism prevailed in both. She also plays down the differences between socialism and capitalism, arguing that the former is better considered as an “eccentric” form of the latter (1995: 15). The muddying of the moral dimension was reflected in discourses of corruption and in everyday pressures to put the welfare of one’s family before that of the cooperative (in the past the family had been prioritized vis-à-vis the manor in a similar way). To siphon off collective goods and to “slough off” during one’s official working time were tolerated up to a point, but public opinion condemned farm leaders who were considered to take *too much* for themselves. Work, however, remained unchallenged as the foundation of social value, with a bias to its manual forms. There was a basic congruence between the Marxist-Leninist ideological focus on the value of labour and the evolved peasant work ethic. Propaganda campaigns condemned workers who flitted from one job to another (*vándormadarak* – literally “migrant birds”). Those who failed to show a registered workplace at all were classified as *közveszélyes munkakerülők* (literally “publicly dangerous shirkers”). They could expect to receive a 28 day jail sentence to encourage them to mend their ways.

By the time Lampland’s study was published, further far-reaching changes had taken place in the Hungarian countryside. The land was privatized and socialist institutions rapidly dismantled (Swain 2013). I found that most villagers, especially the elderly, approved of the restoration of private ownership, on moral grounds (Hann 1993). They criticized the concessions made to economic rationality in the decollectivization legislation, notably the failure to return land to owners in its original boundaries. Before long, however, villagers began to realize that, without the socialist synthesis, the economic prospects for the rural population as a whole were bleak. Some of those who had previously opposed the socialist institutions for emotional and ideological reasons now admitted (at least privately) that without a collective agent of some sort the household sector would not be able to retain its vitality. The eventual demise of the latter was due to a combination of factors, including the abundance of cheap imported foodstuffs made available by foreign



supermarket chains. The “dumping” of subsidized products from western and southern Europe undermined the basis of the petty commodity production that had brought wealth to the countryside in the late socialist decades. It led many households to give up raising animals and growing vegetables, even for subsistence purposes, since the same items could now be acquired cheaply in the stores. The moral satisfaction which accompanied decollectivization was thus followed by years of great uncertainty and discontent. In the course of the privatization frenzy in the cities, the link between wealth and practical work weakened dramatically. Even in villages, some individuals were able to make huge fortunes through shady dealings while the majority struggled to maintain the income levels to which they had become accustomed in the preceding decades.

The lack of congruence or synchrony between the dimensions of morality and economic performance was a continuation of that noted above for the socialist era, but now in reverse form. Private property was re-established, but respect for hard physical work clashed with the values of a market-dominated society. In contrast to the socialist era, many young people nowadays have little hope of finding jobs in the village or the wider region. The political economy forces them to migrate, and since EU admission in 2004 they are as likely to fetch up in London or Dublin as in Budapest. Those who remain at home have improved access to television and the internet, but the work ethic of the socialist era has been definitively subverted. Many of the well-equipped houses built in the socialist period are now up for sale, at give-away prices that barely cover the costs of their raw materials.

The continued importance of work as a value with sensitive political implications is reflected in the public attention paid to the unemployment rate (a statistic that did not exist under socialism). One way to reduce unemployment (a highly desirable goal for the ruling party in the run-up to an election) is to create new jobs through public expenditure.<sup>8</sup> In line with similar schemes to reform welfare entitlements in the advanced capitalist states, provision for workfare (*közmunka*) was introduced in Hungary in the 1990s. These provisions were first activated on a significant scale in 2009 by the Hungarian Socialist Party as part of a conscious policy (it was called “Road to Work”) to tackle unemployment and decentralize welfare responsibilities. By this time it was already clear that the right-of-centre Fidesz party of Viktor Orbán would win an overwhelming victory at the general election of 2010. The new government was able (with some justification) to present the country’s dire economic situation as the consequence of a bungled transition in which liberals and socialists alike had lost sight of traditional values while shamelessly lining their own pockets. Orbán paid particular attention to work as the supreme value, highlighting its uplifting moral effects in his rhetoric and frequently identifying Gypsies (Roma) as the indolent “other” of the naturally industrious and virtuous Magyar.<sup>9</sup> From 2010 onwards the Fidesz-led government simultaneously expanded workfare programmes and slashed established levels of unemployment benefit, leaving local government officials to pick up the pieces as best they could.

While free market economists tend to deplore workfare for its distorting effects on labour markets, critical social scientists are more likely to view it as a disciplinary intervention on the part of the state to sustain the conditions of neoliberal exploitation (Peck 2001; Wacquant 2012). There

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<sup>8</sup> Other ways to address increasing inequities in the availability and remuneration of work in a neoliberal globalized economy by generating new forms of mutuality and social protection have been examined in Italy by Muehlbach (2012), who emphasizes volunteering and develops the concept of “ethical citizenship”, and in South Africa by Ferguson (2015), who emphasizes cash distribution to the poor by the state.

<sup>9</sup> Similar schemes in neighbouring Slovakia in the same period led to a “moral panic” concerning the lazy, the criminal and other “underserving poor”, especially Roma (Makovicky 2013).

is general agreement among analysts in Hungary that the programmes have had little or no success in meeting their declared goal of retraining workers for the regular labour market. Nonetheless, Orbán's party has adhered to its vision. Following another election victory in 2014, workfare programmes were further expanded. The official rate of unemployment has fallen in these years. Critics allege that the huge numbers nowadays employed in *közmunka* represent a disguised form of unemployment, just as many of those nominally on the books of socialist collectives had constituted a form of hidden unemployment before 1990. They also argue that those who now work abroad should be included in the statistics, which they are not at present. In the next section I look in more detail at recent developments in a region where I have been working since 1976.

### **The Moral Dimension in Tázlár and Kiskunhalas**

The village of Tázlár (resident population nowadays *circa* 1,750) and the market town of Kiskunhalas (*circa* 29,000) are positioned mid-way between Átány and Sárosd, the villages discussed above. Due to the regional ecology and settlement patterns, the zone between the rivers Danube and Tisza was spared the typical forms of collectivization. Rural households were generally able, thanks to a loosely-structured “specialist cooperative”, to continue farming on a household basis (Hann 1980). This meant a different type of symbiosis from that found elsewhere, where the household plot complemented large collective holdings. In Tázlár, most farmers did not work in the socialist sector at all, implying a slower progression to commodification than that outlined for Sárosd by Martha Lampland (1995). For those who wanted a wage-labour job, the specialist cooperative was one possible opportunity, until its collapse after 1990. Many others were available, including numerous factories in nearby towns such as Kiskunhalas.

The main feature of Kiskunhalas relevant to the analysis that follows is its proximity to the state border with Serbia. During the Cold War its barracks housed large numbers of soldiers, Soviet as well as Hungarian. This changed rapidly after 1990. Some of the military sites were adapted for capitalist commercial purposes. The largest factory in the new era was Levis, which expanded rapidly to employ over 500 workers. The town has struggled economically since this firm (which has its European HQ in Brussels) decided to close down its operations at short notice in 2009. There was no resistance.<sup>10</sup> No further significant foreign investments have been forthcoming.

Moralizing discourses about workfare in Tázlár and Kiskunhalas are similar to those documented by Makovicky (2013) in Slovakia and to widespread condemnation of “benefits scroungers” in other European welfare states. It is considered only natural that people should work, rather than receive benefits from the state without working. The very category *közmunkás* evokes immediate suspicion and a pejorative evaluation: why does this person not take up a proper job? But when it comes to the implementation of workfare schemes at the local level, a very different picture emerges. The main activity in Tázlár since 2014 (prior to this year only a handful of individuals were employed to maintain parks and verges) has been market gardening on plots owned by the community. Part of the production is sold commercially, part is consumed collectively within the village through the school kitchen, and part (vegetables that don't look good enough to be sold commercially) is sold at a 30% discount to the workers, or even distributed free to supplement

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<sup>10</sup> Women seamstresses were a major component of the workforce. They recall the work as demanding but satisfying, also in terms of relatively high wages and numerous fringe benefits. For a contemporary report of the closure, see <http://nol.hu/gazdasag/lap-20090325-20090325-31-326020> (accessed on 7.10.2016).

wages. Even those who in principle were critical of public sector interventions tended to approve of these activities when I enquired in 2014. More surprisingly, while there was little sense of solidarity among the *közmunkás*, there seemed to be little if any stigma attached to working in this way. Some at least derived considerable satisfaction from the tasks they were carrying out for the community (Hann 2016; cf. Szőke 2012: 108–109). In short, even though the contracts were always temporary (in order to avoid generating entitlements to unemployment benefit), workfare was accepted throughout the community and even popular with the participants themselves. It was defended by the officials charged with its implementation, notably the mayor, who viewed it as humane and fair.<sup>11</sup>

Workfare participants in Tázlár were diverse in terms of age, gender. For some, this form of work was an alternative to long-distance migration, which they might notionally prefer but could not consider because they lacked the networks or had dependent relatives in the village. In the Danube-Tisza interfluvium, the main alternative to workfare is day-labouring, opportunities for which are readily available at most times of the year, especially in vineyards. Calculated on a daily or hourly basis, this labouring pays better than workfare (which is pegged at a figure below the national minimum wage, yielding a net monthly income of around 170 Euros for most participants). Apart from being seasonal, such private work is tougher and seldom generates the camaraderie that at least some of the workfare participants seem to value in the public scheme. Those who muddle through outside workfare are unlikely to be adding to their pension entitlements; some do not even have basic health insurance.

In August 2014, in addition to vegetable production, the 12 *közmunkás* in Tázlár also maintained the small central park, cut grass in other public places and stabilized dirt roads. By summer 2015, in line with the national trend, their number had risen to 34; one year later it was 47. The new mayor<sup>12</sup> confided that the state was now providing sufficient resources for him to be able to offer *közmunka* to everyone who wanted it (previously the recruitment had been highly selective). It was in the community's financial interests to utilize these funds rather than have to pay out basic social support. Even Gypsies were now included (Roma are a small but expanding presence in Tázlár due to the cheapness of housing here). The scope of workfare activities had expanded accordingly, particularly in the vegetable branch. In Summer 2016 most workers gathered daily at a location on the edge of the village where a new pig-sty had been constructed and was about to receive its first animals. This had been financed through a successful grant application (new machines and vehicles had been acquired in the same way). In future, in addition to marketing surplus vegetables, the village would earn much-needed cash through the sale of surplus pigs.

Local commentaries in 2016 were more variegated than they had been two years before. The new mayor is a teacher at the village primary school. He visits his employees daily but finds it difficult

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<sup>11</sup> Mayors are generally glad to have a significant workforce at their disposal to help counter the consequences of reductions in public funding in recent decades (see Váradi *et al* 2016). These schemes gave village leaders considerable power in the years in which central allocations sufficed to hire only a fraction of the unemployed, since in practice they were the ones who selected the beneficiaries on the basis of lists provided by the local employment agency. As employers, they have considerable discretion in how workers are treated and remunerated. Thelen *et al.* (2011) showed how the "social citizenship" of Roma was compromised by the mayor of another village on the Great Plain who humiliated them in the way in which they received their wages.

<sup>12</sup> A new mayor running on the Fidesz party ticket was elected in the local elections of Autumn 2014. The previous mayor, in office for the preceding 20 years, was an independent – see Hann and Kürti 2015.

to organize a large and diverse group with only two designated foremen.<sup>13</sup> Work begins daily at 6.00 am in the summer, but later in the winter. The new mayor is expected (according to national guidelines) to enforce an 8-hour day and is considered to be more strict than his predecessor. Prior to 2014 employees had to work only 6 hours daily, which allowed them more time for a more lucrative afternoon shift when such informal opportunities were available. Yet the current mayor continues to show considerable flexibility. If a diligent *közmunkás* is invited by a private farmer to work as a day-labourer on a task that is urgent (e.g. harvesting elderberries), he or she is allowed to take a day off from the public scheme. A trusted worker may be allowed to divide the working day between public and private employers (the latter may or may not be legalized through taxation and insurance declarations). This flexibility is important for prosperous landowners as well as for the labourers themselves and might be considered a novel form of public-private collaboration.

The *közmunka* workforce continues to comprise both men and women (the latter a two thirds majority in 2016) of all ages up to 60, most of whom lack any skill or qualification.<sup>14</sup> Berci, a veteran of the schemes since 2010 whose biography I presented in an earlier account (Hann 2016), was apprehensive about the future. He was happy that the new mayor was continuing to grant him considerable personal autonomy, but he ruled out the possibility that he would soon have to participate in a new division of labour at the communal pig-sty. Berci thought that the scheme's expansion had brought in large numbers of villagers who did not work effectively at all, even when clearly specified tasks were given to them. This inclusionary policy was clearly unfair (*igazságtalan*).<sup>15</sup> Such opinions were echoed by other villagers, inside and outside the programme. Due to this atmosphere, the low level of income, and the absence of any training element that would improve their future job prospects, a few villagers declined the mayor's offer of *közmunka*, even when this meant losing any possibility of welfare support. Others do not bother even to register as unemployed. This is in part a legacy of this region's history under socialism, when many households were able to avoid the formal labour market. Such persons can supplement their small farms with day-labouring in peak periods, as they did in the past. Yet there were complaints from some residents that the expansion of the *közmunka* programmes had made it harder for them to recruit casual labour. This was a problem not only for prosperous vineyard owners but more generally, e.g. for pensioners who needed occasional help because they were unable to perform demanding practical work in their house and garden personally. Some spoke negatively about *közmunka* as a new version of collective farming and pointed out that Tázlár had managed to avoid collective pig-sties even in the socialist era.

While economists in the capital might be concerned that the expansion of commodity production through the *közmunka* programmes distorts markets and creates unfair competition for rival, private producers, and sociologists view them as a new form of the incarceration experienced by the workshy in the socialist era, such condemnatory opinions are still outweighed in the village by the sentiment that practical work is intrinsically preferable to welfare dependency. But the work should be meaningful. This became clear to me in the town of Kiskunhalas, 15 kms from Tázlár, where inhabitants contrasted village *közmunka* programmes based on food production with what they

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<sup>13</sup> These persons are paid some 30 Euros extra monthly, but their authority is weak. The previous mayor once refused to re-employ a *közmunkás* he considered to be excessively lazy on the job; but the increased numbers have made it harder to implement this sanction, which could potentially be financially disadvantageous for the village.

<sup>14</sup> In Kiskunhalas substantial numbers of white-collar workers have been employed as *közmunkás* in various public offices. Even in Tázlár two young graduates have held temporary positions in the mayor's office. They were the only local *közmunkás* who had managed to move on to regular jobs when their contracts expired.

<sup>15</sup> The first dictionary equivalent for *igazságtalan* is unjust but Hungarian has no closer term for unfair.

observed daily in their urban setting. Large numbers of *közmunkás* (among whom Roma are conspicuous) are very visible in the streets and parks of Kiskunhalas. The town has never been so well maintained, its residents acknowledge. But it has only a finite number of flower beds, and leaves cannot be swept throughout the year. In short, the visible activities of the workfare programmes strike many observers as rather pointless, and certainly very inefficient. In the town there is also criticism of the fact that unemployed graduates with suitable qualifications are increasingly being hired to carry out jobs previously undertaken by civil servants with permanent employment contracts.

Altogether, in the summer of 2016 I heard significantly more criticism of the *közmunka* programmes than I had heard in the two previous years. The earlier consensus that endorsed the government's lofty moral philosophy of a "work-based society" was being undermined as both villagers and townspeople questioned whether this work was properly organized, whether it was work at all, whether it was undermining established forms of employment, both public and private, and whether it was fair (*igazságos*) in the way that it rewarded deserving and undeserving alike. Given this weakening of support for a central plank of its economic policy, it was therefore convenient for the government to be able to shift attention from the summer of 2015 onwards to a supra-national crisis that offered new possibilities for generating a moral consensus in the Hungarian nation.

### **The Migrant Crisis of 2015–2016**

Few residents of Tázlár and Kiskunhalas have had any encounters with those seeking a route through Hungary on their way to a better future in Western Europe (primarily Germany). Nonetheless the proximity of the state border enhanced the impact of the "migrant crisis" of 2015–16 in this region of East-Central Europe. Local attitudes have been overwhelmingly negative from the eruption of this crisis in August 2015 (Hann 2015). People did not need to encounter migrants physically in order to agree with their political leaders that they were a threat, not deserving of support in European societies where they did not belong. Moreover, some of these European societies had increasing difficulty in maintaining standards of living for their own citizens, above all due to a shortage of suitable *work*. The general stance in Hungary resembles that documented in other Visegrád countries (and also in many countries of Western Europe). Of course there are local nuances, one conspicuous argument in Hungary being the Roma issue: "we have enough difficulties to integrate this minority that has a long historical presence in our society, and which speaks our unusual language; how can we be expected to integrate elements that are by any criteria even more foreign?"<sup>16</sup>

In the national referendum of 2 October 2016, over 98% of those who cast valid votes endorsed the government's message to reject the imposition of EU quotas.<sup>17</sup> Since fewer than 50% of those eligible cast a vote, however, the result had no legal validity. It was certainly a disappointment for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had organized an expensive campaign in an effort to gain

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<sup>16</sup> The otherness of the Roma has been accentuated since the end of socialism, but one strand of continuity concerns their alleged disdain for practical work. Countless jokes are told by Hungarians to reinforce the stereotype of Gypsy indolence, e.g. "Have you heard about the Gypsy who complained that the level of benefit entitlement in Hungary is excessively low, because the *Magyar* population has lost its former work ethic?"

<sup>17</sup> They did so by answering "no" to the following question (considered by most foreign analysts to be highly manipulative and possibly even illegal): "Do you want the European Union to be able to order the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without parliament's consent?"

additional support from centrist and left-wing parties. In Tázlár 99% of voters supported the government's line, but with turnout at just over 55% this was nonetheless far short of the resounding communitarian endorsement sought by the government.

Most villagers I spoke with in the weeks before the referendum were strongly supportive of Orbán's rhetoric concerning the need to defend the frontiers of Europe's Christian civilization.<sup>18</sup> Others, however, preferred to stress more pragmatic arguments for resisting immigration and opposing the *liberalis* policies proclaimed by other EU states. Many families in communities such as Tázlár and Kiskunhalas are fragmented by international migration, which takes place because decent jobs are simply not available at home. The government is perceived to be massaging its unemployment statistics through the workfare programmes. How, people ask, in the light of these circumstances can it be fair that Germany and other wealthy members of the EU should expect a country such as Hungary to accept even a small quota allocation of migrants from outside Europe?

Elements of frustration and resentment loom strongly behind these attitudes (along with nostalgia for a socialist era in which careers were easier to plan and some form of work was always available). Hungarians know from often sensationalized media coverage that not all migrants come from the poorer strata of their home societies: you need resources to make it through the Balkans all the way to Germany. It is theoretically open to residents of Tázlár and Kiskunhalas to apply for passports to enter Germany, but most of them lack the necessary resources: not only money but also the contacts without which they could not hope to survive more than a few days in a foreign country where they would have the disadvantage of *not* being classified as refugees or asylum-seekers. They also lack basic language skills to integrate and find work outside Hungary.<sup>19</sup>

The rising wave of populist nationalism throughout Hungary can be interpreted as a new ethical register (one that poses more ethical challenges for the foreign investigator, who is unlikely to find this register attractive). But what I found striking is that numerous interlocutors in Tázlár and Kiskunhalas continued to mingle arguments about fairness with economic propositions, often with reference to work. In a direct comparison with the recipients of workfare, one old friend asked me why the Hungarian state should pay a much higher sum to cover the costs for the board and lodging of a migrant than it pays out to a village *közmunkás*, earning a monthly income of 170 Euros? It is commonly alleged that the migrants have no intention of ever taking menial jobs, but seek only to benefit from the generosity of the richer nations. I was told of a case in Germany in which migrants had apparently refused to carry out the *közmunka* allocated to them by the Bavarian village in which they had been billeted (with full board), on the grounds that they were being offered only 1 Euro per hour as payment. This is roughly what a *közmunkás* in Tázlár receives per hour of work, but the migrants were demanding to receive the German minimum wage for their efforts – 8.50 Euros per hour, an unimaginable figure in Hungary.

Is it helpful to speak of a *moral economy* in these contexts, either at local, national, or even supra-national levels? I argue that we do better to speak of a *moral dimension*, an ethical context in which deeply-rooted values pertaining to practical work are being manipulated by power holders in

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<sup>18</sup> A few (generally the more educated, often belonging to an ethnic or religious minority) moralized in the opposite direction by pointing out that the Hungarians are themselves an immigrant people in the Carpathian Basin, and that the Great Plain had to be repopulated in the eighteenth century following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks. Others pointed out that hundreds of thousands of Hungarians were welcomed in the West following the failed revolution of 1956.

<sup>19</sup> The primary school in Tázlár was unsuccessful in its efforts to appoint a teacher for English in the school year 2016–2017.

the context of an increasingly dysfunctional real or material economy.<sup>20</sup> This moral dimension of economy is articulated at multiple levels from the individual to the global capitalist system. To understand why Levis, a multinational corporation with a global brand, decided to close down its operations in Kiskunhalas in 2009, and why employers' organizations in Germany have generally been sympathetic to the influx of migrants in 2015–2016, calling for their rapid integration into the labour market, the economic anthropologist can turn to the work of political economists. The anthropologist may also wish to draw upon the methods and techniques of the neoclassicals, e.g. in modelling the labour market and explaining the decisions of individual villagers obliged to choose between low-paid wage labour, workfare and day-labouring. These are scientific paradigms which bracket morality.

And yet the ethnographer is likely to find that moral sentiments are omnipresent on the ground, often giving rise to personal and collective dilemmas. In Kiskunhalas the influx of unwanted migrants fills some of the unused space in the town's abandoned barracks and it creates jobs for warders and policemen. Although the working conditions are hardly attractive, the positions advertised in Summer 2016 offered wages some three times higher than workfare. So locals conceded that a situation of which they disapproved in civilizational or moral terms (in agreement with their Prime Minister), often justifying their stance with economic arguments, might at the same time bring the supreme benefit of jobs to their particular settlement. Their town is not just tidier, it is also more secure than ever before (though police convoys and sirens in the middle of the night are sometimes an irritation). A young man's decision to apply for a job as a Special Forces Policeman can be readily formalised in the framework of the "neoclassical" paradigm. Nationalist values may or may not be decisive in determining his career choice; they are certainly likely to influence the way the policeman performs his work with migrants, if his application succeeds.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have considered the concept of moral economy and its usefulness in understanding work and workfare in contemporary provincial Hungary. From a historical perspective, I have argued that the government's implementation of workfare, far from being an authoritarian punitive measure, is endorsed at local level because it can draw upon both the pre-industrial ethic of the smallholding peasantry and the ethics of socialist industrialization. Both emphasized what Malinowski (1935) called "practical work". This activity is central to the human economy. As a basis of worth or recognition, it is a principle that seems irrefutable. This naturalization is highlighted in Hungary by the increasing inequities of postsocialism. The enduring nature of *work as value* has been exploited by the populist politicians in power since 2010.

When it came to the practical implementation of workfare schemes, I found that opinions changed as the schemes were expanded. Yet in 2016 in Tázlár there was still a broad consensus of support for the flexible way in which successive mayors have implemented the *közmunka* schemes. Beyond the basic valuation of work as such, mayorial sensitivity to the needs of individuals in his community, rich as well as poor, offers insight into moral dimensions of the economy. We might even want to speak of a moral community; but this hardly warrants the identification of a "moral economy". Rather, these values and evolved practices are important elements of context, of which

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<sup>20</sup> On dysfunctionality and corruption under the present Fidesz government, see Magyar 2016. On the wider European and global context condemning Hungary to a new condition of peripherality, see Streeck 2014.

any investigator of the embedded economy of Tázlár needs to take account. A holistic historical analysis must engage both with subjective attitudes to work/labour under very different regimes, and with the condition of the material economy that has created a need for interventions such as workfare (last experienced in Tázlár at the height of the Great Depression).

Even though I end up discarding his clumpish term, my approach is broadly consistent with E. P. Thompson's analysis of a context where he was concerned with the just price rather than the fairness of work or labour. I noted in the introduction that Thompson, looking back on his coinage, suggested that "political economy" might have been a more appropriate term, but for the fact that this was a well-established term with a quite different meaning. Classical political economy is the search for regularities, even laws, in the large-scale evolution of economic systems, a branch of science that was not very attractive to Thompson as a humanist historian. In any case it is helpful to distinguish between political economy as a scientific modelling of economic life and enquiries into how economic action is continuously shaped by subjective convictions of good and bad. The two are of course entangled. Moral propositions put forward to justify economic policies such as workfare have ramifications for the political economy. Moral arguments are regularly advanced to conceal a logic that is rooted in political economy.<sup>21</sup> The larger question here (raised but not resolved by Max Weber) is the nature of the relationship between values and the material economy.<sup>22</sup>

To return finally to the specific arguments of Didier Fassin: my critique is that his version of the articulation of moral economies remains an idealist exercise unless it is extended to connect with articulations in the real, i.e. material economy. The reactions of various nation-states and diverse social groups within them to the current influx of migrants to the European Union cannot be grasped without an analysis of global neoliberal political economy in the sense of that academic paradigm. Didier Fassin leaves us in a world of free-floating moralizing discourses and does not pay enough attention to this real economy.

I distinguish theoretically between the dimension of positive (material, objective) economy and normative enquiries into moral, or ethical subjectivities. Most projects in socio-cultural anthropology (in keeping with the Durkheimian tradition in sociology) will be concerned with both. If our concern is with economic anthropology, the first dimension cannot be excluded. We must attend to the common-sense meaning of economy, i.e. the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services, involving markets, money and material technologies. These are, of course, our modern analytic categories, but they can be applied to any human economy, including those in which people do not themselves recognize "economy", do not distinguish between practical work and ritual (or between the work of men and the work of Gods). This material economy can be studied from the perspective of methodological individualism as a process of the rational maximizing of profits or utility. This is the formalist tradition in economic anthropology. But the

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<sup>21</sup> For example, some Hungarians accuse the German Chancellor of hypocrisy. Under the pretext of humanitarian aid, so this argument goes (I heard it from only one individual in Tázlár but frequently in urban contexts), Angela Merkel's true objective is to admit the additional labour urgently needed by German capital if it is to keep costs low, maintain profit rates, and thereby its political domination over weaker EU members such as Hungary.

<sup>22</sup> In the case of work, Lampland posits the rise of a capitalist economy as the causal variable which explains the new value of work as "labor property". I am persuaded by her arguments but I have no intention of extending them further to revive speculative arguments about the long-term evolution of morals/morality. There may be something so general (even universal to our species) about "practical work" which renders it more impervious to historical change than other values. By contrast, the academic social sciences react more rapidly to the changing economy; but this is not the place to explore causal relations between the present post-Keynesian, neoliberal economic order and post-Durkheimian trends in the social sciences (including the new anthropology of ethics and its prominent concern with "working on the self").



subjectivities (including virtuous and altruistic motivations) of individuals cannot be understood without analyzing the more or less localized communities in which they live. For this task inspiration can be taken from Karl Polanyi and his followers in the substantivist tradition, who investigate the human economy in both its ideational and its material-institutional embeddedness. It is futile to juxtapose moral economy to political economy. They are not just asymmetrical: moral economy as theorized by Didier Fassin is an unfortunate construction best abandoned, because it deflects analysis away from the economy altogether. We should think instead of embedded human economies (Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010) with multiple dimensions: the material has priority but other dimensions will always figure. Understanding what I have termed the moral dimension involves grasping the historicity of dominant values, as seminally theorized by Weber, and their enactment in social relations, as exemplified in the Durkheimian school.

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