

“What Happened to Jokes?”

The Shifting Landscape of Humor in Hungary

Martha Lampland

Department of Sociology, University of California

Maya Nadkarni

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Swarthmore College

Since 1989, commentators on both sides of the Atlantic have mourned the death of jokes in postsocialist societies. While in fact humor has not gone away, the everyday experience of sharing jokes as an intimate form of political criticism has indeed vanished. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and archival research on the history of Hungarian humor, this article contributes a new perspective to the recent wave of scholarship on Soviet laughter, by examining the “loss of the joke” as both a cultural phenomenon and a critical discourse in postsocialist Hungary. First, we argue that a series of important shifts in the way Hungarians work, socialize, communicate, and engage in politics has led them to be far more circumspect in sharing political humor. Second, we analyze the self-reflexive perception of loss as a form of cultural criticism that indexes broader anxieties about the challenges of interpreting the operations of power under postsocialism. With this shift in political sensibility, we argue, the lament that the joke is “lost” may now offer more effective political commentary than a joke itself.

Keywords: *Hungary; humor; postsocialism; multiparty politics; alienation*

One of the distinct pleasures of doing social science research in Eastern Europe has been the lively culture of joke-telling. Hours spent telling joke after joke, laughing with friends, ridiculing buffoons, mocking ourselves, and commenting on the absurdities of life. After 1989, however, our informants started to complain that there were no more jokes. Hungarians and foreigners alike were puzzled by their disappearance. Easy answers about the demise of authoritarian political structures did not satisfy, particularly in Hungary where the party/state had retreated from policing private affairs in late socialism. Nonetheless, the complaint lingered; a distinct sense of loss was palpable.

In actual fact, jokes did not vanish. Political jokes told in private at the expense of the Communist Party and government officials faded away, but the everyday mischief of pausing in the midst of a conversation to tell a joke is alive and well in Hungary. Television programs such as “Weekly Seven” (*Heti Hetes*)¹ skewer political and economic elites, political cartoonists are thriving, and visual puns and parodies circulate

over email and social media.² Humor has even penetrated the practice of politics itself with the emergence of the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt*), whose humorous political slogans, video clips, and urban graffiti highlight the absurdities of contemporary party politics and its media representations.

Nonetheless, in both everyday talk and public discussion, many Hungarians insist that they have lost a particular capacity for humor since the end of state socialism. As early as 1992, the celebrated novelist Péter Esterházy wondered why the “Budapest joke [*pesti vicc*]” had vanished.³ More than two decades later, long after Soviet-era jokes have become museum curiosities to be preserved in books and Internet archives,⁴ this complaint about the loss of humor persists. “What happened to jokes?” has become a frequent refrain not merely among literary observers⁵ but in cultural and political commentary more generally.⁶ In interviews and casual conversations, our informants have often remarked upon the loss of the joke as well. During a chance encounter with a famous author on the metro in 2012, for example, one of us explained she was studying why jokes disappeared. The author’s immediate response: “When you find out, please tell me!”⁷

So commonplace is the perception that a distinctive aspect to Hungarian culture has been lost that even contemporary humorists must battle with this assumption in their interviews and published work.⁸ What has been lost, they have insisted, is not humor itself but the social activity of telling jokes. “In the past twenty years, not even one person has come up to me on the street to tell me a funny story. It’s entirely certain that nowadays there aren’t any new jokes,” observed the humor editor for Hungary’s *Playboy* in 2013. Instead, new forms of laughter have emerged: “Telling jokes is slowly falling out of everyday communication; instead we share and ‘like’ [on Facebook].”⁹

So why don’t friends gather to tell political jokes anymore? What ended the practice of sharing jokes, and why? And what cultural work do the widespread complaints about the loss of humor perform in today’s postsocialist Hungary? To answer these questions, our analysis examines the “loss of the joke” from two perspectives: the loss of a specific social configuration of joke telling in late socialist Hungary and the contemporary perception of loss as a critical discourse under postsocialism. First, we argue that in contrast to the usual assumptions about the repressive character of socialist dictatorship and the flowering of cultural expression under democracy, it is in fact during the postsocialist period that the free and comfortable exchange of political jokes has become difficult. Our explanation rests on changes in the ways people socialize with each other, an experience substantially influenced by transformations in class position, political allegiance, generational differences, and new forms of media. The intelligentsia of late socialism—white-collar workers, party elites, and intellectuals—are the primary subjects of our analysis. Second, we argue for the cultural productivity of the very complaint that the joke has vanished. That is, rather than participate in contemporary nostalgia for the socialist-era joke, we analyze the self-reflexive perception of loss as a form of political commentary that indexes broader anxieties about the challenges of interpreting life in postsocialist Hungary.

Elsewhere, political humor has been on the rise, not merely as a response to politics, but (as the success of Iceland's Best Party demonstrates) as an increasingly important form of political participation itself.¹⁰ We argue that what has made politics in contemporary Hungary less amenable to humor than elsewhere is this perceived crisis of interpretation, which has inspired competing narratives of conspiracy, victimization, and persecution to replace knowing smiles and shared mockery in Hungary's political repertoire. With this shift in political sensibility, we argue, the lament that the joke is "lost" may now offer more effective political commentary than a joke itself.

Our analysis draws from ethnographic research conducted both before and after the fall of state socialism in Budapest and two villages in Hungary. One author first did fieldwork in the early 1980s, where she observed and participated in the late socialist culture of joking firsthand. The other has been conducting fieldwork on memory and political transformation since the mid-1990s. Since 2011, both authors have conducted follow-up research specifically on Hungarian political humor. This has included archival and media research, as well as interviews with long-term informants. While our argument focuses upon the loss experienced by a generation of intellectuals, and the problems they have faced in mastering their fate under postsocialism, we contextualize our analysis within our long-term ethnographic observations of late socialist and postsocialist Hungary.

This exercise contributes a new perspective to a recent surge of scholarly interest in the politics of socialist humor. Traditionally, the socialist joke has been conceptualized as a populist response to authoritarian repression: an act of everyday subversion that follows Havel's mandate to "live in truth."¹¹ This position reflects a long tradition of humor as a form of political resistance in Central and Eastern Europe, whether the gallows humor that flourished under Nazi occupation¹² or the satirical stance towards political authority epitomized in Hasek's *Good Soldier Svejk*.¹³ Under state socialism, Kundera's analysis of the potential of laughter as a form of "heroic skepticism" similarly emphasized humor's capacity for self-liberation, if not political emancipation.¹⁴ Our analysis, however, argues that to view the Soviet joke as simply resistance to authoritarian rule overlooks not only the socialist state's own attempts to craft and monitor its citizens' laughter,¹⁵ but also the flourishing of similar humorous practices in Western liberal democracies long after the end of Soviet state socialism.¹⁶ Moreover, as scholarship by Klumbyte and Yurchak has demonstrated, under late socialism the Soviet joke materialized a stance towards the state that cannot be simply classified as resistant or supportive.¹⁷ Instead, jokes and the laughter they inspired expressed relations of what Klumbyte terms "political intimacy" between the regime's representatives and its subjects: an affectively charged "zone of comfort" that brought the official and the personal, affirmation and critique, into close dialogue.¹⁸ Our argument draws upon Klumbyte's concept of "political intimacy" and her analysis of how laughter can illuminate relations of power. We extend her insights to ask what not only the presence of humor but its disappearance might reveal about how politics and sociabilities have transformed since the end of communism.

Political Intimacy

[Political leader] is traveling through the countryside and his chauffeur inadvertently runs over a pig. [Political leader] tells the chauffeur to approach the nearest house to apologize, and offer compensation. [Political leader] waits and waits and waits. Finally, the chauffeur leaves the peasant home with his arms full of sausage and other delicacies. When he reaches the car, [political leader] asks him what happened. “I don’t know, I just said, ‘I have [political leader] in the car and I just killed the pig.’”

In the late 1980s, a book was published in Poland with the simple title *Them*.¹⁹ No explanation was needed, in Poland or Hungary; the book was obviously about the Communist Party. A compilation of interviews with high party officials, the collection conveyed in one simple word the view that party members stood outside proper society, representing the antithesis of morality and integrity. Longstanding Communist Party practices had fed these views. Moreover, the party consistently represented itself as a monolithic body, of one mind, fulfilling the tasks set by a Leninist vanguard capable of predicting the path to a new world.²⁰ Hence the Manichean logic of us versus them pervaded the popular imagination across the Soviet bloc. In joke after joke, the socialist Everyman was pitted against the powerful and incompetent party operative, whose unearned privileges made the vaulted claims of the party ring hollow. The simple formula well-known from folklore—a clever servant or peasant outwitting the lord of the manor—was easily appropriated and elaborated upon by evoking the empty slogans and wooden jargon of the Communist Party.²¹

The consistency of themes in political jokes is a sad commentary on the limited political fortunes Hungarian citizens have faced over the last century.²² The conditions conducive to incisive political humor, however, were often the periods of greatest censorship and retribution. In the most repressive era of the 1950s, people were put in jail for telling a joke. By late socialism (1970–1980s), on the other hand, telling political jokes had become a favored pastime among Hungarians. As Yurchak explains, even in the Soviet Union it had become common by this time to share jokes in semi-public venues, such as the corridor of the university. “The Brezhnev period has been referred to as ‘the Golden age of Soviet anecdote’ [joke] . . . and in Russia it is sometimes called the era of anekdoty. Petrovskii even called the Soviet unofficial culture after the late 1950s ‘anekdot-centrist,’ . . . while Fagner and Cohen remarked that anekdoty became ‘perhaps the most significant new art form produced by Soviet culture.’”²³ In Hungary, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, political commentary in the form of jokes was not restricted to university hallways or kitchens. Despite the party/state’s suppression of alternative political commentary, certain venues, such as cabaret performances on the radio, regularly skirted on the edge of outright criticism. Some performers were given greater latitude, permitted to joke about very topical and sensitive issues. Humorists such as Géza Hofi, for example, were renowned for their ability to mock the Communist Party and its policies deftly, and his performances on

radio and record were extremely popular.²⁴ The most cherished venue for telling political jokes was at home, with friends, over a bottle of wine and late into the night.

In a fascinating article on *The Broom*, a satirical weekly published in Lithuania, Neringa Klumbyte develops the notion of political intimacy to analyze the dynamic social relations among readers, journalists, editors, and party censors in the 1970s, a period in which “the discourse of power was never monologic and simply oppressive. It was situational, contextual, and changing” (*ibid.*, 2). Her discussion of the negotiations and compromises surrounding *The Broom*’s publication paints in miniature the processes characterizing politics in every domain of Communist Party rule. While the official proclamations issued by the Communist Party were couched in the language of certainty and historical necessity, the means by which policies were actually crafted involved extensive discussion, debate, and disagreement. The ever-present danger of shifting political contingencies made it extremely difficult to figure out just what could be said publicly at any moment, especially in the pages of a joke magazine. The humor of a moment could be fleeting—“you had to have been there”—but a brief misstep could have long-term punitive consequences.

In other words, telling a joke successfully—evoking laughter and amusement—required that one judge the timing well and the audience effectively, whether that be one’s friends around the kitchen table, or the powers that be in the Ministry of Culture. By emphasizing how much context mattered, Klumbyte also makes a more general point about humor as a sociocultural practice, a performance that teeters on the edge of propriety. Whether one follows Freud in emphasizing the personally liberating action of telling a joke, or one ascribes to the idea that the psychological impact of jokes is caused by surprise and incongruity, in either instance the point is the same: humor is socially powerful. Sharing a joke is a quick means of creating bonds between strangers; it can also be a surefire way to ruin a friendship. As Klumbyte tells us, “Political intimacy is . . . about intersubjectivity, imagined and real, about active, but almost never horizontal relations, loyalties, attachments, trust, and friendship” (*ibid.*, 7). By examining the changing character of social relationships in Hungary, it is possible to explain how late socialism’s shared world of politically motivated ridicule could disappear.

Socialist Leisure Time: “Criticize After Dinner”

What is the horizon of Communism? It is a line connecting two points that is constantly receding.

In the *German Ideology*, Marx painted a picture of the freedoms Communist society would afford the weary proletariat: “in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing

today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.”²⁵ Hungarian society never passed into the final stage of Communism, so thoughtful citizens were left to imagine what it might have been like. They did, however, enjoy a work tempo far less strenuous than was common in capitalist countries. The Communist Party’s commitment to full employment, complemented by maternity leave policies drawing women with young children out of the labor force starting in the late 1960s, resulted in low levels of productivity across the economy. Job performance was secondary to one’s relationship to the Communist Party and personal connections. In factories, fostering a good relationship with the shop steward guaranteed better piece rates; for white-collar workers, kowtowing to superiors was the key to advancement.²⁶ Relatives of influential party officials landed cushy jobs with generous benefits. Incompetence could be rewarded, when well-connected but unqualified people were promoted to a position within the hierarchy to reduce the harm they might inflict on the organization.²⁷ All in all, the Communist Party’s incessant boasts about productive and politically committed workers were belied by everyday experience.

Under these conditions, plenty of time could be whiled away at work by socializing: gossiping, discussing hobbies, catching up on the latest sports news, and of course, telling jokes. Cooperative farm members in the building brigade rested up from busy weekends devoted to working on private contracts in the second economy. Managers could explain poor levels of performance in factories on problems with supply chains, but lax labor discipline was also responsible.²⁸ Office workers spent time during their working hours running errands and shopping; cumbersome bureaucratic affairs were complicated by the fact that one could never assume officials would be around during office hours. It goes without saying that white-collar workers did not take their work home, leaving time to socialize with family and friends.²⁹ It was common to spend time in the neighborhood pub, visit relatives, or have guests drop in unannounced, bottle of wine in hand, primed to spend the evening discussing politics and exchanging the latest jokes. The fact that under late socialism, Hungarians could devote a portion of their day to socializing with friends bears little resemblance to the rich life of a communist polymath Marx imagined in *The German Ideology*, but it stands in stark contrast to the pace of life in postsocialism.

The existential insecurity the capitalist labor market introduced to Hungary forced a change in priorities. Unemployment, banished since 1948, became a common phenomenon. People were forced to take on additional jobs, often working off the books for higher pay.³⁰ Aspiring entrepreneurs worked day and night to make a go of it, while newly active politicians were swamped with the complicated tasks of the transition away from socialism. While it had been common for academics to augment their salaries by translating or tutoring, the pressure to find additional sources of income increased substantially. Artists of every stripe were left to their own devices, as the once reliable sinecure of socialist cultural subsidies was no more. Time once spent in long and heated debates over politics in the “flying university”—a center of dissident activity—evaporated. The intellectual camaraderie fostered in reading groups and samizdat projects became a luxury. For white-collar workers and the

intelligentsia, the leisurely lifestyle possible in late socialism—the chance to drop in on a friend on a whim to reflect, criticize, and laugh—all but disappeared.³¹

This experience of loss—of unfettered time devoted to friendship and camaraderie—is not only a class phenomenon but a generational one. The pleasures of late socialism are difficult to replace, even with the most advanced technological innovations. Younger people may thrive by emailing visual jokes or commenting on politics by posting on Facebook or YouTube, but however one analyzes the social character of a networked world, the quality of intimacy—be it political or not—is qualitatively different. Networked communication is individuated and personalized, Facebook being the obvious case in point.

Moreover, the ease of posting information and creating websites on the Internet opens up myriad possibilities for preaching to the converted and inflaming passions, for propagating falsehoods and spreading innuendo anonymously. The structure of Internet communication suits the diversity of political convictions flourishing in postsocialism. This is a far cry from the character of personal communication in late socialism when phones were scarce. Even if one owned a phone, calls were brief and to the point, to reduce cost. In some households, people assumed phones were tapped, and so they avoided speaking about anything of substance over the phone, or they unplugged the phone when company was present. Of course, it was just as common in the 1970s and 1980s to preach to the converted and inflame passions, propagate falsehoods and spread innuendo “from unknown sources,” but this took place among friends and family gathered at home. Broad brush commentaries about the abuse of power were possible in public venues if timed appropriately. More official interactions, such as negotiations that took place among editors and writers over the boundaries of the permissible in public humor, may have been more guarded, but no less intimate, as Klumbyte makes clear.

Beyond these technological changes, the very stakes of socializing have also transformed. The time spent chatting and joking under socialism was not merely entertainment, but helped to build and maintain the social relationships necessary for professional advancement and material security in a shortage economy. While success under capitalism also depends on social connections, the destabilization of existing social hierarchies and networks has undermined the sense of community and shared struggle that once made “easy socializing” possible. Instead, political jokes and conversations now have the potential to fracture social ties as much as reinforce them, as communities once united by their stance towards the party/state have fragmented along class and political lines.

Alienation of Affection: Worsening Class Inequalities

What's worse than being exploited in capitalism? Not being exploited in capitalism.

Incomes in socialist Hungary had always varied according to one's party membership, social position, and family background. While significant differences in official

wages across various sectors of the economy did not exist, there were serious discrepancies in the benefits enjoyed by particular segments of the population. The consequences of designing policies favoring urban workers over rural, for example, or bureaucrats over unskilled workers is well documented.³² Public transportation in Budapest was highly subsidized and access to housing favored those living in larger settlements where the state funded new construction. On the other hand, the denial of social benefits such as pensions and health insurance for cooperative farm members until the mid-1960s meant the standard of living in the countryside was substantially worse than in Budapest or other regional cities.³³ Intellectuals and artists had access to foreign travel denied to the majority of citizens. Cooperative farm presidents and party officials traveled in chauffeured limousines, and could draw on an entertainment budget that kept them well supplied with good food and drink. Few in Hungary had any illusions about socialism erasing economic inequalities. Nonetheless, the rapidly growing income gap in postsocialism was startling. Laws against evicting people from their apartments fell by the bye, leaving many homeless. Confronting unemployment for the first time in their lives, proud workers were devastated. A great deal has been written about the era of primitive accumulation after 1989, its whys and wherefores.³⁴ Our point here is to suggest the consequences of these changes for the composition of one's social circle. Two countervailing processes are worth noting.

As Michael Burawoy and János Lukács have argued, years of party rhetoric and party/state policies instilled in workers a clear idea of the antagonism of class against class, providing a useful means of analyzing the exploitation of workers by the party/state in clear and unequivocal terms.³⁵ The irony, of course, is that Marx thought this sort of consciousness-raising would occur in capitalism rather than state socialism. The disadvantages workers experienced as a class were easy to describe:

First, the central appropriation of surplus engenders a shortage economy so that the expansion of the forces of production requires worker self-management. Second, the central appropriation of the surplus is managed directly and visibly by organs of the state at the point of production. Workers all over the country define themselves in relation to a common exploiter. Third, because it is visible, the extraction of surplus has to be legitimated, but as we have seen, this only heightens the contrast between what is and what could be.³⁶

Hence Hungarians began working in a capitalist economy armed with a well-honed repertoire of political criticism. Foreign companies moving east to take advantage of lower wages quickly became the brunt of their ire. But so too did politicians who were unable to provide the standard of living Hungarians had enjoyed in late socialism, a lifestyle that they had thought would be a sure thing in a capitalist economy.³⁷

The kind of class consciousness Burawoy and Lukács describe lived easily in late socialism alongside another prominent set of ideas, specifically about personal

responsibility and individual success. Heightened individualism and rampant utilitarianism thrived in late socialism.³⁸ The scramble for wealth and prestige that characterized the 1990s merely strengthened this Horatio Alger narrative. Not surprisingly, the complex and contingent socioeconomic processes accounting for one's fate were neglected by the average citizen, in favor of a moral story about personal aptitude. In his analysis of forms of capital, Bourdieu refers to this practice as euphemization, that is, representing one's success as if it could be explained solely by personal attributes rather than pointing to discrepancies in who has access to various forms of social, economic, and cultural capital.³⁹ A successful entrepreneur who rose above his fellows claimed that he was clever and they were stupid, or unwilling to give up their "socialist" ways, while the impoverished railed against evil folks who took advantage of the poor and the weak. This naturalization or embodiment of difference had reared its ugly head in late socialism, but it gained power with greater disparities in wealth and income, even invading the domain of jokes with the public flaunting of racist and misogynist humor.⁴⁰ Steadfast friendships nurtured in high school classes could not bridge the growing gulf between the wealthy and the down-and-out, turning once happy reunions into awkward encounters. Friends stopped inviting friends to birthday parties or holiday events. As fewer and fewer people of differing social fortunes spent time together, the ability to empathize across class lines withered.

New Political Stakes

A man returns home to find his daughter making love with her boyfriend in the living room. Shocked, he walks into the kitchen, and finds his wife having sex with his neighbor on the kitchen table. He rushes out of the house, and runs directly to the party offices. "I must join the Communist Party right now!" The party officials explained to him that he would have to go through a series of tests and interviews before he could join. "But you don't understand. I must join the party today!" "Why?" they asked. "Well, I got home and found my daughter screwing in the living room, and then found my wife fooling around with the neighbor in the kitchen, and I shouted, 'I am going to bring so much shame on you!'"

In 1961, the first secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, János Kádár, marked the beginning of a new era in Communist Party politics when he declared, "Whoever isn't against us, is with us." The sustained class warfare the Communist Party had waged against reactionary forces and the recalcitrant peasantry throughout the 1950s was abandoned, paving the way for a reconciliation between the regime and its citizens. After the brutal crackdown of the revolution in 1956 and the second and final wave of collectivization in 1959–1961, Hungarians could no longer harbor any illusions that they would be able to escape Soviet control.⁴¹ The Communist Party responded by lifting restrictions preventing the children of class enemies from attending college, paying greater attention to the quality of living standards,

improving access to consumer goods, and taking halting steps toward economic reform. Animus toward the regime did not disappear, but the cruelty of Stalinist oppression seemed a thing of the past. This is the era that figures prominently in nostalgic films and books published after 1989, portraying life as a simple quest for Western goods, sex, and rock and roll.⁴² While these rosy romantic images have more to do with a growing youth culture in the 1960s and fond reminiscences of those times, it was true that the Communist Party increasingly withdrew from policing private life and casual interactions in the workplace. It was not uncommon during the late socialist period for party members, and even party officials, to tell jokes at the expense of the party/state, creating a temporary bond with those who had not joined party organizations.

Being able to laugh at a joke with the party secretary over coffee or a beer was fun, and reinforced the common saying that Hungary was the happiest barrack in the Communist bloc. It did not, however, alter actual power relations day to day. A party operative lost none of his effective control over people's lives when he sidled up to a coworker to relay the newest joke. So too, the generic us-versus-them mentality expressed in jokes also obscured other significant political differences among Hungarian citizens. These differences were not voiced in public, and in many cases, rarely mentioned outside the closed doors of home. Class grievances—"they took everything"—consumed the life of many families, whose property and livelihoods were destroyed with the rise of the Communist party/state. People suffered from the wounds inflicted by politically motivated punishments, be they the well-known trials and imprisonments of the 1950s and the post-1956 brutal crackdown, or the less publicized, but equally devastating, disciplinary actions taken against people who ran afoul of party officials or other influential members of the community. Families drawn to the Communist cause to rectify longstanding social injustices, such as the rural proletariat who rallied behind collectivization in its earliest forms, nursed resentments against reformist cadres who repudiated calls for social justice to promote technocracy, reaping the rewards of upward mobility that poor families had hoped to achieve. Nationalist leanings—from benign forms of pro-Transylvanian cultural platforms to rabid irredentist attitudes—were nurtured within families, handed down as heirlooms from generation to generation. Strong religious beliefs were secretly guarded, though by the 1980s censure for public religiosity had waned significantly. Even the semi-public dissident community in the 1970s and 1980s included people across the political spectrum: some were motivated by conservative religious convictions, while others engaged in political activism traceable to leftist critiques and social science research. In other words, sharing jokes about the party/state floated above, and kept hidden, these deeply held and widely divergent ideological commitments.

With the demise of the one-party state, the stakes changed. Both the "us" and the "them" of the socialist joke collapsed. First, it was no longer necessary to hide one's convictions. Factionalism ran rampant; once good friends found themselves on different sides of the debate, as long-held, intimately private beliefs were expressed

openly. Indeed, varied responses to the economic and social disruptions of transition often produced *new* political convictions that fragmented long-established alliances. Careers were made in party politics, and shifting loyalties in the course of the transition prompted questions about the sincerity of one's interlocutors. Groups sorted themselves into like-minded communities, rallying others to their side. Second, with the demise of the authoritarian party/state, it became increasingly challenging to identify a "them" to joke about—or to agree upon who "they" might even be.⁴³ A dispersed set of actors and forces now determined people's lives, and the workings of power appeared increasingly decentralized and opaque. This problem of locating political and economic agency became another source of social fragmentation, as the shared disdain for communist state authorities shifted into hotly contested attempts to identify those responsible for Hungary's misfortunes: whether competing political parties, the market, the EU, ethnic minorities, or gangsters in the form of corrupt bankers or the mafia.

As a result, jokes now reflected the polarization of political and social life. In 2011, for example, a set of images produced by supporters of the far-right political party Jobbik and widely circulated on Facebook and other social media highlighted the discrepancy between current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's right-wing anti-communist rhetoric and his increasingly authoritarian policies, by pasting his head onto posters featuring Mátyás Rákosi, who ruled Hungary during its Stalinist era. Similarly, in the run-up to the 2014 elections, the humorous Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt*) mocked Fidesz's campaign promises by making extravagant vows to get rid of traffic jams, build a mountain in Szeged, and provide everyone with eternal life—"plus 20 years." Such mockery of the disjunction between ideology and reality was a popular topic of the socialist-era joke as well. Yet the difference is that such jokes no longer target a shared and seemingly immutable enemy in order to challenge the very legitimacy of political authority. Rather than offer systemic critique, they instead represent stakes in ongoing battles for political dominance.

Of course, this is the proper course of democratization: the open discussion of divergent ideological views and opinions. Yet one consequence of this vibrant political debate was that without a shared loathing of the powers that be, the political intimacy generated by sharing jokes about the party/state was lost. Political jokes prompting loud guffaws at one party could deeply offend guests at another. Even socialist jokes themselves fell prey to postsocialist political struggles, as when both the left and right wing battled to claim the legacy of the "Hungarian Orange (*magyar narancs*)," a popular emblem of national humor and resilience under the absurdities of socialist rule.⁴⁴ As a result, cordial relations in everyday interactions now required a more nuanced conversational style. Offending neighbors and colleagues was unpleasant and unnecessary, so new modes of interaction arose. Clues to one's political leanings could be clothed in innocuous offhand remarks, and a topic pursued only if one's interlocutor's response was reassuring. And since political allegiances could

affect one's livelihood and reputation, people were unwilling to take the risk. A new form of secrecy enveloped Hungarian society.

New Political Subjectivities

Cohn was called in to the factory manager's office. "Cohn," he said, "you have been an outstanding employee and a great shop steward. But I see here in your file you haven't joined the Communist Party. Why not?" "Well, comrade, it's like this. My Mother ran a brothel during the war. She did everything! She scrubbed the floors, washed the linens, and prepared the food. But she wasn't a whore!"

Recent scholarship has argued against using the structure of the joke itself—the easy binary between "us" and "them"—to explicate the day-to-day power relations of Soviet rule. Yurchak's analysis of humor under late socialism argues that the rigid, formalized nature of state authoritative discourse enabled Soviet subjects to both recognize and evade grappling with the system's structural contradictions. Instead, people carved out creative, meaningful everyday lives that refused categorization as simple support or opposition.⁴⁵ Klumbyte's notion of political intimacy builds upon Yurchak's argument to demonstrate how both the everyday act of telling jokes and the shared values that they reflected were able to invest asymmetric power relationships with rich meaning and positive affect.⁴⁶ Such blurring of the distinctions between the personal and official, satire and deeply held belief, was what gave a long tradition of cosmopolitan joke-telling its particular significance under late socialism.

Nonetheless, the joke's Manichean logic is worth taking seriously in the Hungarian context. Its critical stance towards the powers-that-be makes visible a fantasy about remaining outside politics that ironically was nurtured by the very experience of normalization. The social contract of late socialist Hungary encouraged its citizens to conduct their personal affairs relatively undisturbed in exchange for a withdrawal from political participation. This enabled the perception of a certain distance from political authority that gave moments of joking intimacy with one's superiors or party officials their transgressive pleasure. Moreover, the dream of attaining a "normal" life experienced elsewhere—whether defined in terms of democratic political rights or access to Western consumer goods—similarly encouraged criticism towards a political system that guaranteed material security but could not keep up with the higher standard of living in the West.⁴⁷ While jokes could thus help pass the time relaxing with friends, they might also be used to directly condemn the regime.

Of course, such distance from political concerns was ultimately illusory, since the willingness to retreat to the private sphere was the very condition of Kádárist citizenship. After the end of communism, however, the experience of the democratic political process has nevertheless invested the memory of this late socialist political

subjectivity with new significance. Today, the irony of the contrast between ideology and reality is less available to systemic humor, because people can no longer blame the hypocrisy of the party/state for such inconsistencies. Instead, the challenges of democratic governance and participation has implicated its citizens in its frustrations and failures. As a result, while many Hungarians continue to believe that democratic values are important, the fantasy of democracy that nourished both active political opposition and the idle fantasy of a better life somewhere else has been disenchanted.⁴⁸ In light of such disappointments, both the lack of humor and the discourses that lament its loss are symptomatic of a more general discourse of postsocialist failure that people may feel too implicated within to joke about.

Crises of Interpretation

Cohn comes back to Hungary after living in Israel, and is curious to see what socialism is like. He runs into his old friend Grün. “Grün, you must tell me. What is socialism like?” “Good.” “No, I want a more extensive description.” “Not so good.”⁴⁹

Many have observed that humor is more difficult during times of social change, when political, economic, and institutional upheavals also overturn the symbolic coordinates of everyday life. As Oushakine notes, even early Soviet authorities and critics fretted about the demise of popular humor as they attempted to craft a specifically Soviet laughter in the early years after the Bolshevik revolution. A 1923 article titled “Why Are We Unable to Laugh” blamed the new Soviet media for failing “to discover its main theme, to discover its main enemy that could preoccupy [its] attention in a significant way.”⁵⁰ Another denounced the harsh conditions of life: “‘War, revolution, hunger, struggle, economic depression, unemployment—the radical demolition of everything (*lomka vsego*) . . . all that was not conducive to eliciting laughter.’”⁵¹

In the early years of transition, Hungarians similarly worried that the struggle for survival amidst the uncertainties of postsocialism had blunted the national capacity for humor. In an essay chronicling the transformations in Budapest, for example, the novelist Péter Esterházy lamented the loss of the joke as a sign that the city’s inhabitants had lost their “historical coordinates” and were reduced to a brute existence that had “not yet learned how to live.”⁵² After all, while socialist jokes were formulaic, knowing how and when to tell a joke was nonetheless a carefully honed skill that displayed the ability to navigate both intimate social relations and official authoritative discourse with finesse. With the end of communism, the breakdown of the social relations and political structure that once enabled jokes to flourish rendered such expertise obsolete. The failure of attempts to keep the socialist-era joke alive by importing new content into old forms only underscored the fear that Hungarians were losing the interpretive capacity that had once made political humor possible.

The Hungarian self-image of the flexible and enterprising subject of late state socialism was replaced by that of the ossified *Homo Sovieticus*, trapped in an outdated, devalued *habitus* and incapable of adapting to the new demands of postsocialism.

This sudden irrelevance of both socialist-era jokes and the ability to tell them resonated with other complaints about the new interpretive challenges produced by the symbolic upheavals of transition. The predictability of the former state bureaucracy—and the knowledge of how to navigate it—vanished, and new rules for professional and social advancement appeared opaque and difficult to decipher. At the same time, the introduction of market capitalism and the sudden attainment of long-held fantasies about access to Western goods left many people feeling equally ill-equipped to interpret public culture with a critical eye. While one of us was conducting fieldwork in the late 1990s, for example, many of our interlocutors deplored their former selves as being childishly gullible to even the most exaggerated claims of Western advertising. Similarly, in public discussion and cultural commentary, moral panics around new postsocialist celebrities and role models reflected concerns about the capacity of a new consumer public to engage with the capitalist media with the same discernment they had once employed to critique the official state culture of late socialism.⁵³

Meanwhile, former dissidents, artists, and intellectuals struggled to find a new role after losing the oppositional identity that had once endowed their activities with broader meaning and political importance.⁵⁴ At stake were not only practical considerations of economic survival and the decline of social prestige, but the loss of a privileged relationship to truth-telling that had enabled the intelligentsia to speak both to and on behalf of a silenced public. As the sociologist Elemér Hankiss argued in 1992, over the years of late state socialism, writers and scholars had developed a rich linguistic and analytic repertoire in order to make sense of a way of life that had now suddenly vanished. “With the collapse of the Communist system, they have lost their object of study, their special expertise, their primary social function.”⁵⁵

For forty years, to become a well-known writer it was enough to be courageous, to reveal a bit more of the absurdities of the system than your colleagues, and to handle skillfully the indirect, allusive, metaphoric language developed for this purpose. . . . Today, writers have to relearn their metier in a world where telling the truth is no longer surrounded by the mystical aura of beauty. This is a serious and tormenting crisis in their lives.⁵⁶

Such loss was also a pervasive theme during ethnographic research one of us conducted in the late 1990s on the Hungarian film industry, in order to analyze postsocialist transformations in cultural production. For example, one director explained in an interview that during late socialism, Hungary’s filmmakers had acted as social critics by cloaking scathing political commentary within historical allegories or

gritty fictionalized documentaries. Now, he said, if Hungarian audiences wanted political analysis, "They could pick up a newspaper—they don't need us anymore."

This new experience of insignificance was of course already long familiar to artists and intellectuals in the capitalist West.⁵⁷ What is crucial in the postsocialist Hungarian context, however, is how these complaints about the loss of social status, economic security, and political relevance were expressed as specifically interpretive challenges as well. Hungary's cultural elites now lacked not only state support and prestige but the critical distance that would enable them to determine worthy topics and means of analysis. "We don't know what to talk about or how to talk about it," another filmmaker explained, arguing that the former themes and cinematic strategies of late socialism no longer seemed adequate to the present day.

Throughout Hungarian society in the early years of transition, uncertainty thus replaced the open secrets and "knowing smiles"⁵⁸ of late socialism, as new interpretive challenges produced anxious subjects struggling to make sense of not only a rapidly changing cultural landscape, but their own place within it. Complaints about the loss of the joke offered an idiom through which to express these broader fears about the ability to navigate the new terrain of postsocialism. That is, if jokes once served as proud emblems of Hungarian inventiveness and resilience under Soviet rule, their absence now reflected new worries about national subjectivity itself.

In the Place of Jokes: Loss and Political Imagination

A young snail and its mother are sitting on a pile of shit. One day the young snail asks, "Mother, what is that beautiful patch of green over there?" "That's a field of grass." "And Mother, what's that deep blue spot over there?" "That, my son, is a lake." "Mother, what's that majestic stone in the distance?" "That's a mountain peak." "Then why are we sitting here?" "Because this is our homeland."

More than two decades after the end of socialism, this perception of the loss of the joke endures. Why does the intelligentsia still remark upon its disappearance, especially as new forms of sociability and laughter have emerged to take its place? One answer might view the persistence of such complaints as evidence of cultural pathology, similar to Oushakine's diagnosis of aphasia in postsocialist Russia.⁵⁹ Another might explain this perception as simple nostalgia for youth and what now often appears to be a less colorful but cozier era in history. Our analysis, in contrast, argues for understanding the "loss of the joke" as a self-reflexive discourse of lack that both indexes and provides critical commentary upon Hungary's larger transformations in political subjectivity. Complaints about the disappearance of the joke thus do not merely mourn an outdated habitus and lost forms of sociality, but they also reflect new configurations of power and political agency that have left many Hungarians searching themselves and others for blame.

In order to understand the cultural productivity of this claim to loss, it is necessary to contextualize it within the narratives of persecution that have replaced the Soviet joke as the dominant mode of political imagination in everyday and public life under postsocialism. These discourses thematize the challenge of interpretation and the loss of shared socialist verities by battling to identify the agents of Hungary's present and past misfortunes, whether former communists, foreign governments and the European Union, the international financial community, Freemasons, or Jewish conspiracies. Such narratives of national oppression by internal or external enemies have become pervasive in contemporary Europe, but it is important to note that in Hungary these accounts span the political spectrum.⁶⁰ A recent poll, for example, revealed that while the targets differ, approximately half of the respondents on both the left and right believe that powerful forces control the country from behind the scenes.⁶¹ Conspiracy theories, moreover, are not an underground or fringe phenomenon, but rather can be found in the media and government rhetoric as well.⁶² Rather than being isolated to the extreme right in Hungary, such suspicion thus represents a shared tool of political culture and public debate—a form of “political common sense”⁶³—in postsocialist Hungary. Indeed, unlike the former socialist intelligentsia’s nostalgia for the joke, the logic of conspiracy spans both class and generations, requiring not only intellectuals, artists, and scholars, but workers, bureaucrats, teachers, and businessmen alike to deal with the onslaught of paranoia that spills out of the television and newspapers. Whether it be everyday gossip with the grocer about “foreigners” or our informants’ diatribes against the current government, the fog of conspiracy hangs everywhere.

As elsewhere, such claims to oppression and conspiracy represent a response to the dispersal and opacity of power in late capitalist modernity, where the links between structural forces and human action are no longer easily identified or understood.⁶⁴ As the Comaroffs argue in their analysis of conspiracy theorizing,

Conspiracy, in short, has come to fill the explanatory void, the epistemic black hole, that is increasingly said to have been left behind by the unsettling of moral communities, by the so-called crisis of representation, by the erosion of received modernist connections between means and ends, subjects and objects, ways and means. All this in the global world that is at once larger and smaller, more and less knowable, more and less inscrutable than ever before.⁶⁵

These observations, however, have a particular resonance at moments of epochal shift such as postsocialism, when the search for explanation and agency has replaced the once easy knowledge of the people and institutions responsible for one’s fate, and where corruption and a lack of trust in political and economic institutions have disenchanted the initial bright hopes of democratic transformation. The specific narratives of conspiracy and persecution that emerge from such attempts to make sense of confusing circumstances are rarely factually accurate. Yet when viewed as modes of theorizing rather than empirical data,⁶⁶ they illuminate ways of imagining the operation of power that stand in striking contrast to the joke: discursive forms that

emphasize urgency rather than stasis, fear and paranoia rather than knowing amusement, and antagonistic social relations rather than political intimacy or solidarity.⁶⁷

Of course, such forms of knowledge are not unique to Hungary's experience of postsocialism. Famous for its pessimism, the nation has a long tradition of complaints of victimization: a history composed of martyred national heroes, defeated battles, and lost territories. This attitude suited the climate of the Cold War as well: "defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics, and policy."⁶⁸ Under state socialism, conspiracy theorizing could thus be found in both political conversations around the kitchen table and in state surveillance that sought to discover hidden connections and threats among its citizens. The residues of this logic are now visible across the former Soviet space (and elsewhere): while the content may differ, the forms and logic of such accounts of occulted power and its sinister agendas are remarkably similar.

Nonetheless, competing narratives of persecution—and the will to explanation they represent—have taken on new importance in postsocialist Hungary, where what has been lost is not only the certainties of the past but also the rosy future promised by transition. The failure of Hungary's expectations to triumphantly lead the region in economic prosperity and European integration has thus produced laments of national shame and ignominy as people attempt to make sense of what went wrong. Indeed, laments about the failure of transition are even more pervasive than the complaint that the joke is lost.⁶⁹ During interviews that one of us conducted about the twentieth anniversary of the end of state socialism in 2009 and 2010, we discovered that without the party/state to blame for their disappointment, informants of varying classes, ages, and political affiliations both targeted themselves for the naïveté of their hopes and sought to identify specific corrupt or venal actors (whether crooks, politicians, cosmopolitan elites, the old communist nomenklatura, right-wing extremists, or foreign agents that range from the IMF to "Zionist cabals") as overwhelmingly responsible for the "failed" transition. What is perhaps most important about these explanations is not their accuracy but the ways they functioned—however temporarily—to restore narrative coherence to complex circumstances and thus interpretive competency to their teller. As Ortmann and Heathershaw argue, conspiracy theories "are by definition simplifying stories" that "attempt to impose order and meaning onto a bewildering world."⁷⁰

The pervasiveness of narratives of conspiracy and persecution in contemporary Hungary raises questions about democracy and political engagement that return us to the intelligentsia's "loss of the joke," and the work that commenting upon such loss might do. As one of many discourses of national disappointment and failure, the complaint that the joke has disappeared may now constitute more effective political commentary than a joke itself. Fenster notes that such laments may be less of a spur to political action than a defense against it; as he warns, conspiracy theories "displace the citizen's desire for clinical significance onto a signifying regime in which interpretation and inerrant conspiracy replace meaningful political engagement."⁷¹ Yet by providing an account for their narrator's very disenfranchisement from the

democratic political process, complaints of loss and persecution may also provide ways for people to salvage their moral integrity as well.

Conclusion

While other practices of humor are alive and well more than two decades after the end of state socialism in Hungary, complaints about the loss of a social milieu for sharing political jokes continue to resonate. We have argued that these complaints reflect the loss of a form of political intimacy that characterized social interactions in late socialism. Reduced time for leisure, the growing gap between rich and poor, and changing political commitments and stakes have made it more difficult for the intelligentsia to share a repertoire of jokes comfortably and easily, in private as well as public. Instead, as part of the course of democratization that no longer hides these commitments from public view, jokes have segregated into camps that reflect the range of political ideologies in Hungary today. Moreover, the disappointments of transition have also produced a shift in the practices of knowledge used to understand the operation of power. In the place of jokes, laments of loss and persecution now give voice to the interpretive challenges Hungarians have faced under postsocialism.

Our analysis of the loss of the joke raises further historical and ethnographic questions about the relationship of humor to politics. If, in fact, the habit of mocking the party/state in private life was so widespread in late socialism, then it is worth asking just how political repression was exercised in late socialism, and with what effects. And if the enduring complaints about the lack of the joke reflect not only the demise of late socialism's political intimacy but the contemporary frustrations of postsocialist politics, what might enable Hungarians not to restore the socialist-era joke, but to relinquish mourning its loss?

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Notes

1. The Hungarian version of the German RTL Television program, “Seven Days, Seven Heads (7 Tage, 7 Köpfe).”

2. “Daily Drawing” (*Napirajz*) is an Internet site posting political cartoons (napirajz.hu), and “Pub News” (*Hircsarda*) resembles the *Onion* in the United States by publishing ostensibly accurate news that in fact has been written specifically to spoof politics and everyday life (<http://hircsarda.blog.hu/>).

3. Péter Esterházy, "Az idő városa [The City of Time]," *Kalligram* 1 (1992), <http://www.kalligram.eu/Kalligram/Archivum/1992/I.-evf.-1992.-junius/Az-ido-varosa> (accessed 1 June 2013).

4. See, e.g., Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008); (author unknown), "Pesti viccek a szocializmus idején" [Budapest jokes in the socialist era], 2000 July-August (2006), <http://ketezer.hu/2006/07/pesti-viccek-a-szocializmus-idejben/> (accessed 1 June 2014); and János Homa, ed., *Ez már a kommunizmus, vagy lesz ennél még rosszabb is? Hal(l)hatatlan politikai viccek az 1948–1988 közötti időkből* [Is this communism yet, or will it get even worse? Immortal (and unable to be heard) political jokes from 1948–1988] (Eger: Északi Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1994), also available at <http://mek.oszk.hu/00500/00540/00540.htm> (accessed 1 June 2014).

5. See, e.g., interviews with Nobel Prize-winner Imre Kertész ("Pest humorá eltűnt" [Pest's humor has vanished], *Stop.hu*, 29 March 2007, <http://www.stop.hu/kultura/pest-humorá-eltunt/114377/> (accessed 1 June 2014)) and György Dalos (Agnes Szabó, "Nem látok néphumort—Dalos György író [I don't see any popular humor—György Dalos, writer]," *Magyar Narancs* 12, no. 3.25 [2010]), as well as Dalos's earlier article, "Is the East European Joke Finished?," *Hungarian Quarterly* 34, no. 130 (1993): 113–23.

6. For examples of this trope in the news media and political blogs, see Zoltán Hegedüs, "Eltűnt a pesti humor" [Budapest humor has disappeared], *Metropol.hu*, 13 October 2008, <http://www.metropol.hu/ithon/cikk/309984> (accessed 1 June 2014); Sandor Zsigmond Papp, "Pizza a spagettifáról" [Pizza from the spaghetti tree], *Népszabadság*, 26 March 2010; and Szathmáry, "A Pesti humor" [Budapest humor], Mandiner blog, 24 October 2006, http://mandiner.blog.hu/2006/10/24/a_pesti_humor (accessed 1 June 2014).

7. Similarly, in a visit to Budapest in December 2014, one of us queried graduate students about the way people tell jokes these days. They confirmed that their generation does not spend long hours telling jokes at parties the way their parents' generation had.

8. See, e.g., Zoltán Trencsényi, "A humor mint hordozórakéta" [Humor is like a rocket launcher], *Népszabadság* 30 December 2014.

9. István Bus, "Hová tünt a pesti vicc?" [Where did the Budapest joke go?], *Metropol.hu*, 2 February 2013, <http://www.metropol.hu/cikk/995363-hova-tunt-a-pesti-vicc> (accessed 1 June 2014).

10. Dominic Boyer, "Simply the Best: Parody and Political Sincerity in Iceland," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (2013): 276–87; Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "American Stiob: Or, What Late Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal About Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 179–221; and Noelle Molé, "Trusted Puppets, Tarnished Politicians: Humor and Cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (2013): 288–99.

11. Václav Havel, "Power of the Powerless," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, ed. and trans. P. Wilson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 125–214. See also Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context* (Chicago: Northwestern, 2009); Anna Krylova, "Saying 'Lenin' and Meaning 'Party': Subversion and Laughter in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society," in *Consuming Russia. Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 243–65; and Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle*.

12. Antonin J. Obrdlik, "'Gallows Humor': A Sociological Phenomenon," *American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 5 (1942): 709–16.

13. Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk: and His Fortunes in the World War*, trans. Cecil Parrott (New York: Penguin, 1995).

14. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999). See also Roger Kimball, "The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera," in *Milan Kundera*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 37, 33–46.

15. Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "'Red Laughter': On Refined Weapons of Soviet Jesters," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (2012): 189–216.

16. Boyer and Yurchak, "American Stiob," 2010.

17. Neringa Klumbyte, "Political Intimacy: Power, Laughter, and Coexistence in Late Soviet Lithuania," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 4 (2011): 658–77; and Alexei Yurchak,

Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

18. Klumbyte, “Political Intimacy,” 663–64, 673.
19. Teresa Toranska, *Them: Stalin’s Polish Puppets* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988).
20. Indeed, the use of the hyphenated term *party-state* in the literature on socialist states in Eastern Europe accurately describes the Communist Party’s self-representation. The workings of government and party offices were always far more complicated and internally divisive than the outward depiction of party unity suggested.
21. Krylova, “Saying ‘Lenin’ and Meaning ‘Party’”; and Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot,” *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 161–88.
22. In fact, political jokes told during the socialist period were part of a broader and longer tradition of urban humor associated with the Jewish community in Hungary and elsewhere in Central Europe, notably their style of exposition and structure. This joke form was decidedly cosmopolitan, associated with living in the big city, whether in Budapest, Vienna, München, or New York. The wide popularity of jokes in everyday conversation and in print, in addition to the shared inheritance of Jewish humor across Central Europe, accounted for the phenomenon of “political joke lineages,” in which a joke appeared over successive generations in slightly altered form to accommodate changes in the political landscape. E.g., the joke about the chauffeur “killing the pig” was told about Hitler, Stalin, Krushchev, and Brezhnev. The joke often cited as a parody of frequently cited jokes—jokes being told by number, because everyone had heard them so many times before—has been told to us in various forms: prisoners in jail or a socialist labor camp, as well as three Jewish men traveling on a train.
23. Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism,” 176.
24. As György Péteri has pointed out, a more comprehensive study of socialist jokes would include an analysis of the ways that cabaret, radio, TV shows, and other media negotiated the boundaries of criticism the party/state would allow or punish over time (Lampland, personal communication).
25. Karl Marx, “The German Ideology” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 159–91.
26. Péter Galasi, ed., *A munkaerőpiac szerkezete és működése Magyarországon* [The structure and operation of the labor market in Hungary] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1982).
27. The role of personal connections for moving up in a career is also well known in capitalism, the difference here being the primary importance of Communist Party connections.
28. Reforms in the early 1980s allowing industrial workers to form small subcontracting firms within an enterprise that would pay a much higher wage than normal hours were a direct response to the lackadaisical efforts of workers during their regular shifts and the pull of the second economy. See David Stark, “Rethinking Internal Labor Markets: New Insights from a Comparative Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 492–504.
29. Hungary was known in the 1980s to have a thriving second economy. Serious time investment in private work, however, was almost entirely restricted to agriculture in village communities, leaving city dwellers with few options to work after hours to make an extra buck. In 1981, 68 percent of the population did not engage in any private sector activity, and 21 percent of those who did so were working in agriculture. Nonagricultural labor, such as selling skilled services like plumbing or accounting, constituted 5 percent, labor contracts were 2.5 percent and renting a mere 1 percent. See Ákos Róna-Tas, *The Great Surprise of the Small Transformation: The Demise of Communism and the Rise of the Private Sector in Hungary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 117. Commenting on the substantial constraints blue-collar workers faced in engaging in the second economy, Iván Szélényi has been quoted as saying, “You can’t build a factory in your bathtub.”
30. The damages the black labor market wrought on the Hungarian economy over the last two decades will soon be clear when many thousands of people will not have sufficient support from their retirement provisions to get by.
31. Hungarian scholars visiting the United States in the 1980s could not understand why American academics had so little free time to socialize, but they soon came to understand the pressures of making a living and advancing one’s career in university employment under capitalism.

32. Iván Szelenyi, "Urban Development and Rural Management in Eastern Europe," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 2 (1981): 169–205.

33. It is important to remember that the new comfort villagers experienced in the 1980s was a direct result of innumerable hours spent working in the second economy. In contrast to the frequently voiced complaint among urbanites that peasants were becoming rich because they were stingy, villagers had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps in the 1970s and 1980s, rectifying longstanding differences in urban and rural lifestyles. See Martha Lampland, *The Object of Labor: Commodification in Socialist Hungary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

34. For early works, see Jadwiga Staniszak, "'Political Capitalism' in Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 5, no. 1 (1991): 127–41; David Stark, "Privatization in Hungary: From Plan to Market or from Plan to Clan?", *East European Politics and Societies* 4, no. 3 (1990): 351–92; Ivan Szelenyi and Eric Kostello, "The Market Transition Debate: Towards a Synthesis," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 4 (1996): 1082–96. For more recent discussions, see Andrew Barnes, "Comparative Theft: Context and Choice in the Hungarian, Czech, and Russian Transformations, 1989–2000," *East European Politics and Societies* 17, no. 3 (2003): 533–65; David L. Brown, Béla Greskovits, and László J. Kulcsár, "Leading Sectors and Leading Regions: Economic Restructuring and Regional Inequality in Hungary since 1990," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31, no. 3 (2007): 522–42; Catalin Augustin Stoica, "From Good Communists to Even Better Capitalists? Entrepreneurial Pathways in Post-socialist Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 236–77.

35. Michael Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

36. *Ibid.*, 134.

37. Joshua Tucker, "Economic Conditions and the Vote for Incumbent Parties in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic from 1990 to 1996," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2001): 309–31.

38. See Lampland, *The Object of Labor*, 1995.

39. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1985), 243, 241–58. For a more extensive discussion of this point, see Martha Lampland, "The Advantages of Being Collectivized: Cooperative Farm Managers in the Postsocialist Economy," in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), 31–56.

40. Mihály Laky essayed similar views about comedy club routines in personal communication. For a discussion of the naturalization of difference during the late socialist period, see Martha Lampland, "The Advantages of Being Collectivized," 72–123.

41. Little attention has been paid to the impact the Soviet withdrawal of troops from Austria in 1955 may have had on political ambitions for independence among Hungarians in 1956. This underreported event should remind us that no matter how intensely the Cold War was being waged in the mid-1950s, international borders and spheres of influence had not been entirely set in stone. After all, the Berlin Wall was only constructed in 1961.

42. Krisztina Fehérváry, "Innocence Lost: Cinematic Representations of 1960s Consumption for 1990s Hungary," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 24, no. 2 (2006): 54–61.

43. From this perspective, the first democratic elections in 1990 also represented the last opportunity for Hungarians to unite across emerging political divisions to mock a common enemy. Humorous campaign posters shouted "Goodbye, comrade!" to the back of the head of a thick-necked Russian communist functionary, announced "National Spring Cleaning" beneath an image of busts of Lenin and other Soviet memorabilia in a garbage bin, or asked the electorate to choose between two photographs: the first, the famous socialist fraternal kiss between Brezhnev and Honecker, the second, an attractive young Hungarian couple necking on a park bench.

44. In 1999, this comic symbol from the film *The Witness* (*A Tanú* [1969]) became the center of a lawsuit when the right-wing Fidesz party, which includes the symbol of the orange in its logo, attempted to prevent an established liberal weekly from continuing to use *Hungarian Orange* as its title.

45. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.
46. Klumbyte, “Political Intimacy”.
47. Krisztina Fehérváry, “American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms and the Search for a ‘Normal’ Life in Post-socialist Hungary,” *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002): 369–400.
48. E.g., a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2009 revealed that more than three-quarters of the Hungarians polled were dissatisfied with democracy (the highest in the region). (“Two Decades after the Wall’s Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations,” The Pew Global Attitudes Project, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/267.pdf> [accessed 1 March 2015].)
49. Unfortunately, this joke works just as well for the postsocialist era as the socialist.
50. Iakov Shafir, “Pochemu my ne umeiem smeiat’sia?” [Why are we unable to laugh?], *Krasnai pechat’* 17 (1922): 6–9, at 6–7, cited in Oushakine, “Red Laughter,” 196.
51. N. Krynetskii, N. “O krasnom smekhe” [On Red Laughter], *Krasnai pechat’* 20 (1923): 7–9, at 8–9, cited in Oushakine, “Red Laughter,” 210.
52. Esterházy, “Az idő városa.”
53. For further discussion of these points, see Maya Nadkarni, “The Master’s Voice: Authenticity, Nostalgia, and the Refusal of Irony in Postsocialist Hungary,” *Social Identities* 13, no. 5 (2007): 611–25.
54. Supported or tolerated cultural producers in Hungary enjoyed not only economic security, but relatively little outright suppression. Instead, artists were expected to exercise self-censorship, and the regime permitted mild criticism in order to prove its own liberality. Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989).
55. Elemér Hankiss, “Grants and Advice? Thank You. But Send Us Also a Durkheim or a Habermas,” *East European Politics and Societies* 6, no. 3 (1992): 359–63, at 362.
56. Ibid., 361.
57. Renata Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5. Indeed, as Jodi Dean argues, the diversity of opinion enabled by the emergence of new media later in the 1990s has only further disarticulated political criticism from cultural and political consequences: a plight that she terms “communicative capitalism.” Jodie Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
58. Alena Ledneva, “Open Secrets and Knowing Smiles,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 4 (2011): 720–36.
59. Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6 (2000): 991–1016.
60. For survey data on the targets of Hungarian conspiracy theory, see Máté Nyuszlay, “Titkos háttérhatalom irányítja az országot [Secret hidden forces are running the country]?” *Népszabadság* 13 August 2013; and Csaba Tóth, “Survey Finds Support for Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories across Hungarian Political Spectrum,” 8 July 2014, <http://budapestbeacon.com/politics/survey-finds-support-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theories-across-hungarian-political-spectrum> (accessed 1 March 2015). Both articles draw from research on conspiracy theory conducted by the Hungarian think tank Political Capital.
61. Nyuszlay, “Titkos háttérhatalom.”
62. For examples of conspiracy theories in political speeches and the media, see Zoltán Kovács, “Viktor Orbán’s speech and Gordon Bajnai’s Rejoinder,” *Budapest Beacon*, 23 October 2013, <http://budapestbeacon.com/politics/viktor-orbans-speech-and-gordon-bajnais-rejoinder/> (accessed 24 October 2013); and Haszanz, “A köztévé bebizonyította, hogy nem a politikusok korruptak, hanem az újságírók” [Public television has demonstrated that it’s not the politicians who are corrupt, but the journalists], 444, 8 December 2014, <http://444.hu/2014/12/08/nem-a-politikusok-korruptak-hanem-az-ujsgirok/> (accessed 1 March 2015).
63. Lilith Mahmud, “In the Name of Transparency: Gender, Terrorism, and Masonic Conspiracies in Italy,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2012): 1177–1208, at 1186.
64. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Transparent Fictions; or, The Conspiracies of a Liberal Imagination: An Afterword,” in *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 296, 287–99.

65. Ibid., 287–88.
66. Jodie Dean, "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 3 (2000).
67. On the logic of conspiracy theory, see e.g. Dean, "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory"; Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space," *The Russian Review* 71 (2012): 551–64; and Kathleen Stewart, "Conspiracy Theory's Worlds," in *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George E. Marcus, 13–19 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Péter Krekó's analysis of antisemitic conspiracy theory includes a discussion of the motivations and nature of Hungarian conspiracy theorizing more generally. Péter Krekó, "The Empire of Conspiracy: The Axiomatic Role of Antisemitism in the Ideology of the Hungarian Extreme Right," *Searchlight Magazine*, 17 April 2013, <http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/archive/the-empire-of-conspiracy-the-axiomatic-role-of-antisemitism-in-the-ideology-of-the-hungarian-extreme-right> (accessed 1 March 2015).
68. George E. Marcus, "Introduction: The Paranoid Style Now," in *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2, 1–11.
69. As early as 2004, e.g., the prominent left-wing scholar Gáspár Miklós Tamás declared that the transition had failed in an opinion piece in the newspaper *Népszabadság* ("A rendszerváltás megbukott [The Transition Failed]," 29 February 2004). (An ensuing debate between Tamás and his colleague János Kis was also published in *Népszabadság* over the following months; for a summary and recent elaboration of his position, see Gáspár Miklós Tamás, "TGM: 25 év, takarodj" [25 years, get out!], *HVG* 26 November 2014, http://hvg.hu/velemeny/20141126_TGM_25_ev_takarodj, accessed 1 December 2014). Disappointment with transition is pervasive among the public as well; according to the 2009 Pew Research Center public survey, 72 percent of the Hungarians polled believed that they were currently worse off economically than they had been under communism, and their dissatisfaction with politics is also the highest in the region. ("Two Decades after the Wall's Fall," The Pew Global Attitudes Project.) For a right-wing conspiratorial explanation that blames the failures of transition upon foreign finance and media, see László Bogár, *A rendszerváltás megbukása* [The failure of transition] (Budapest: Kairosz Kiadó, 2010). Bogár is also a frequent commentator in the media on these issues.
70. Ortmann and Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories," 553 and 556.
71. Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008), 79, cited in Ortmann and Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories," 557.

Martha Lampland is Associate Professor of Sociology and Faculty Director of the Science Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego. An anthropologist, she has conducted field work and archival research in Hungary since the early 1980s. She has previously published on labor, standards, and numbers, and has just finished a book titled *The Value of Labor: The science of commodification* (Hungary, 1920–1956).

Maya Nadkarni is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Swarthmore College. She has conducted field work in Hungary since the mid-1990s, and she has previously published on memory, nostalgia, popular culture, and the fate of the state security archives in postsocialist Hungary. She is currently completing a book titled *Remains of Socialism: Memory and the futures of the past in postsocialist Hungary*.