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Transforming Memories:
Workers' Recollection of the Socialist Regimes in
East Germany and Hungary

Eszter Bartha

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE
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Abstract

This paper analyzes and compares workers' memories of the late socialist regimes in East Germany and Hungary. It presents the results of an oral history project conducted in two factories, Rába MVG in Győr (Hungary) and Carl Zeiss in Jena (Germany) between 2002 and 2003. Both factories were large enterprises of the socialist period and both were considered to be "model" factories. The two enterprises survived systemic change but with considerably reduced personnel. Forty life-history interviews were made in both factories with an equal number of people who were still employed there, and with those who had lost their jobs during re-structuring. The selection of the interviewees had two main criteria: 1) an equal number of men and women; 2) the age of at least 40 so that the interviewees had work experience under the socialist regime. To find interviewees, I used the snowball method and newspaper advertisements.

The partly similar, partly different experiences of transformation influenced the construction of the memories of socialism in the two countries. Although it cannot be said that the socialist system left only negative memories behind in East Germany – in fact, most of the interviewees argued that the school system, health care system and child care institutions were better, and the state gave more support to working mothers than after 1989 – no-one wanted to return to Honecker's GDR. Most of the interviewees said that they were happy that the Wende had come. The memories of the Kádár regime in Hungary showed a more varied picture. Some narrators claimed that they lived better under the old system and they expressed a desire for the return of the Kádár regime. Although most people accepted systemic change to be necessary, they thought that privatization benefited the old elite. The change of regime in Hungary was therefore linked with a new exclusion and dispossession of the people.

Keywords

Postsocialist change, East Germany, Hungary, workers, life-history interviews, narratives of decline, memory of socialism, new exclusion.

*Transforming Memories:
Workers' Recollection of the Socialist Regimes in East Germany and Hungary*

ESZTER BARTHA

Max Weber Post-Doctoral Fellow (2007-2008)
European University Institute, Florence, Italy

Introduction

Not even once was I late for work... so I say that there was very strong discipline there. Whoever worked there honestly did not have to worry about having work tomorrow. Believe it or not, in the division where I worked you had to ask people to take their holiday. There were 23 people working there and at the end of December I had to send them for holiday. We are at the end of the year, and they did not want to take their holiday because they liked their work in the factory so much [...] at that time people were proud of retiring from the same factory where they started working. Today they ask: do you want this job? If you pay me more, bye-bye, I will go there immediately. People don't believe that it was like this, although Ede Horváth¹ travelled many times to the West where dynasties worked in the motor factories, the whole family worked there until retirement from the grandfather to the grandson. Not that in every second week you have a new job.²

I liked my job as an optician very much. I really enjoyed my work, and I could not imagine that I would do something else. After the Wende we worked for a shortened period of time and then the whole division was dissolved. There was a so-called social plan, people in a difficult social situation were supposed to be positively discriminated for but I know three women in our division, all single, with children and no one protected them. It was a very difficult time for everybody. I finished a computer course and I learnt typing. During the training time I had to register regularly at Zeiss, and then, I will never forget, one man on this board told me that if we need an optician who is a good typist, we will certainly think of you. It was as if he had hit me in the face [...] At that time I did piecework. I had to perform well, fulfil the norm and so on... Now I have a different job, I sit in an office, which I have always thought an easy job, but it is a very different type of work, although I enjoy it in a different way than my work in the factory but I must say that when I go home, I feel exhausted to the same extent as when I finished my work in the factory.³

¹ The chief manager of Rába factory between 1963 and 1989. Before this he was the manager of the Industrial Tool Factory, which was united with the Wagon Factory in 1963. The factory regained its original name - Hungarian Railway Carriage and Machine Works – MVG – in 1965.

² Interview with a Hungarian maleskilled worker, foreman (63).

³ Interview with a German female skilled worker (56).

The above quotes reflect the systemic change of 1989-1990 in East-Central Europe from the perspective of the workers, who constituted the largest social group in the socialist regimes, and who were proclaimed to be the ruling class under state socialism. Although the socialist regimes largely based their legitimacy on this social group, relatively little has been done to investigate the social and political behaviour of workers at the time when what can be termed as the legitimacy gap became painfully apparent for the party states, which claimed to exercise power in the name of the working class. In what follows I outline some of the reasons for this negligence, while at the same time I seek to highlight the theoretical and empirical importance of “bringing back” workers into the social and political literature of late socialism.

The rapid collapse of the Eastern European socialist regimes rendered the year 1989 a watershed. Because of the focus on political upheaval, 1989 was often seen as a “year zero” – an unquestionable turning point. This boundary was first challenged by economic history, which showed that the economic decline of the system started well before its political collapse.

This paper offers a different perspective on systemic change by focusing on workers’ life-histories in the two regimes, and in particular, on the question of how living in the new, capitalist system influenced the construction of the memory of socialism and the change of regime. By doing so, the paper seeks to challenge simplified notions about the relationship between the workers and the party state as well as about the ways in which socialist regimes are remembered in post-socialist industrial communities. The relationship between the workers and the regime has been in fact a widely contested issue since the establishment of the Eastern European Communist regimes, and subject of ideological rather than academic debate. Since class theory was central to the self-legitimation of these regimes, and the Communist parties claimed to rule in the name of the working class, the writing of working-class histories under state socialism had to conform to this dominant legitimizing ideology.⁴ The eventual and rapid collapse of the Communist regimes across the region in 1989 discredited the “legitimizing” narratives of official histories; the events of the year disproved notions of a simple equivalence between class position and class consciousness characterized of dominant trends in Marxist thought. Contrary to the expectations of many Eastern and Western European leftists, political programs based on the philosophies of democratic socialism and workers’ self-management received very little support from Eastern Europe’s working classes after they were liberated from the bureaucratic tutelage of their ruling Communist parties.⁵ Nor was the Eastern European political and intellectual

⁴ While labor history in the Eastern European countries was influenced directly by political and ideological requirements, this “traditional” paradigm - what Thomas Welskopp called the “prevented heroic history of the proletariat” – was present in Western historiography as well. According to Welskopp’s argument, in this traditional narrative the complex relationship between class position and class consciousness has been simplified to the triangle “situation – consciousness – behaviour”. For a theoretical critique of the old narrative see: Thomas Welskopp, ‘Von der verhinderten Heldengeschichte des Proletariats zur vergleichenden Sozialgeschichte der Arbeiterschaft – Perspektiven der Arbeitergeschichtsschreibung in den 1990er Jahren.’ *1999 Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, no. 3. (1993), 34-53.

⁵ Michael Burawoy self-critically reflected to these expectations in Michael Burawoy- János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a critical re-evaluation of the chances of leftist alternatives in Hungary see: Tamás Krausz - Péter Márkus (eds.), *Önkormányzás vagy az elitek uralma?* (Budapest: Liberter, 1995).; Tamás Krausz, (ed.) *Rendszerváltás és társadalomkritika* (Budapest: Napvilág, 1998); *Erzsébet Szalai*, *A civil társadalomtól a politikai társadalom felé. Munkástanácsok 1989-93* (Budapest: T-

climate favourable for revisiting working-class histories after the change of regimes: all forms of class theory were regarded as utterly discredited⁶ and the “working class” was often uncritically associated with the state socialist past. This nourished the belief that workers were by definition nostalgic about the past regime. In Germany even the term *Ostalgie* was created to express this feeling.

Sources and method

My research analyzes forty life-history interviews made with workers of the Carl Zeiss factory in Jena (Germany) and the Rába factory in Győr (Hungary). Both factories were large enterprises under socialism and since the regime regarded workers in large-scale industry as its central social basis, its labour policy was mainly targeted at this group. Further criteria were that both factories survived this systemic change, in order to find interviewees, who worked there in both regimes, and that both should have a pre-socialist past. Since socialist towns built on heavy industry were obviously hit harder by re-structuring, I decided to exclude this distorting factor. The province of Thuringia, to which Jena belongs, is one of the most developed parts of East Germany (Jena is also referred to as *Leichtturm*), and Győr-Sopron county located in North-Western Hungary belongs to the most rapidly developing region of the country, characterized by the establishment of new industries (Audi, Philips). The Zeiss and Rába factories survived the changes albeit with significantly reduced personnel. Carl Zeiss Jena employed over 30,000 people in Jena while Rába had around 20,000 employees in Győr (both factories had plants in other towns as well). The personnel of Carl Zeiss Jena were reduced to 3,000 and that of Győr to 4,000 at the time of the interviews (2002-2003). Because many branches of the factories were privatized, it is impossible to tell how many people lost their jobs as a result of re-structuring. Unemployment hit the GDR harder than Hungary: in Jena the unemployment rate exceeded 10% while in Győr it was below 5% at the time of the interviews. In both factories I conducted an equal number of interviews with people who were still employed there, and with those who had lost their jobs during re-structuring. The selection of the interviewees had two main criteria: 1) an equal number of men and women; 2) the age of at least 40 so that the interviewees had work experience in the socialist regime. To find interviewees, I used the snowball method and newspaper advertisements.⁷ Interviewees were asked to tell their life-histories and they were encouraged to compare their experiences of the two – socialist and capitalist – regimes.

The main objective of the research is to analyze and compare workers' experiences and their ideas of both regimes. Memory in this sense is understood as historical and relational; its construction is inevitably influenced by the experiences of

Twins Kiadó, 1994); *id. Baloldal - új kihívások előtt (Budapest: Aula Kiadó, 2003)*; László Thoma, *Alternatívák nélküli társadalom (Budapest: Gondolat, 1995)*.

⁶ While it has become fashionable to dismiss class analysis altogether, there are authors who propose the reinterpretation of the concept of class rather than propagating its general crisis. See Don Kalb, *Expanding Class: Power and Everyday Politics in Industrial Communities, the Netherlands, 1850-1950 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997)*, 3-24; Thomas Welskopp, 'Ein modernes Klassenkonzept für die vergleichende Geschichte industrialisierender und industrieller Gesellschaften' in: Karl-Thomas Lauschke-Thomas Welskopp (eds.), *Mikropolitik im Unternehmen. Arbeitsbeziehungen und Machtstrukturen in industriellen Großbetrieben des 20. Jahrhunderts (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 1994)*, 48-106.

⁷ Since it was agreed with the participants that the interviews would be treated anonymously, the names of the interviewees are not given in the text.

the new, capitalist regime. An even more interesting question is, however, how workers socialized in the past regime think of the new society, and how they evaluate the change of regime in retrospect. The present paper starts from the assumption that memory is constructed in a given social space and is inevitably shaped by ongoing social processes. It thus takes a social rather than psychological approach to the construction of memory: the analysis is concerned with finding common patterns in the individual life-histories and recollections in an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of workers' social experiences of both regimes that make up the substance of their historical memory.⁸

Methodologically, the paper seeks to make use of what Michael Burawoy called the extensive case method.⁹ The first dimension of the extended case method is participant observation. On this, there is a huge literature in ethnography, discussing the covert and overt forms, different levels of immersion, insider and outsider status and the role of informants. In my research both pragmatic and methodological considerations suggested that I be an observer rather than a participant. The second dimension is the establishment of a link between the macro and the micro levels. One way to think of the macro-micro link is to view the micro as an expression of the macro, discovering reification within the factory, commodification within the family, bureaucratization within a school. From the perspective of the extended case method, this link is established, however, not as a reference to an "expressive" totality but to a "structured" one in which the part is shaped by its relation to the whole, in a dialectic relationship. This dimension is particularly important for my research since in order to compare the findings of the two factory studies, it is essential to link the individual case studies to the national and global environments that determined the conditions of systemic change. The third dimension is the extension of the case study in time, a condition that is fulfilled in the research.

The last dimension is the extension of theory: Burawoy argues that by discovering and explaining an anomaly in the field, it is possible to improve grand theories. The analysis of the interviews in both countries in fact challenges both assumptions discussed above: because the urban skilled workers that the regime considered to be its main social support were not nostalgic about the socialist regime and nor were their views on capitalism consistent with orthodox Marxism or "mainstream" liberal expectations. In the light of the East German interviews it can be stated bluntly that workers were not nostalgic about the past regime: in fact, no-one wanted to return to Honecker's GDR, not even those who, after years of unemployment could have held themselves to be the losers of the change of regime. The evaluation of the Kádár regime in Hungary was more ambiguous. It was mainly the people who lived in villages who reported a marked decline in their standard of living and life opportunities. While people observed that there were many positive features of the socialist system (full employment, and social security), it was typically skilled urban workers who argued that material security did not compensate them for limited political freedom. These findings suggest that the memory of the state socialist past should be taken more seriously as a social construction rather than being dismissed with simplistic

8 See Halbwachs's argument, who belonged to the second generation of Durkheimians in the interwar years, that the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

9 The extensive case method is described in Michael Burawoy, 'Introduction: Reaching for the Global', in id., (ed.), *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 1-38.

psychological arguments underlying the idea of Ostalgie such as “time makes memories grow fonder” or “youth is always positively remembered” that were not verified in the research.

The two countries – the GDR and Hungary – were chosen as examples because they offer two different approaches to socialism; one can be labelled as reformist – Hungary; the other as collectivist – East Germany. While both the Kádár and Honecker regimes sought to win over people for the regime through consistent increases in welfare provision, and with the promise that the workers would “catch up” with Western levels of consumption (this policy was promptly called in Hungary the standard of living policy), in the Hungarian case this was increasingly combined with an extension of the private (also called “second”) economy that was expected to provide the economic basis for the increase of the standard of living of the people. Gradual marketization went hand in hand with a “softening” of the dictatorship. This more liberal atmosphere rendered the signs of the social decline of the regime visible in Hungary. In the late Kádár era, mounting economic discontent gradually developed into overt criticism of the Party and the political system.

The GDR, by contrast, was always regarded as a socialist stronghold on the border of the Eastern bloc where the Soviet military presence and ideological control was much stronger than in Hungary. There was also a more marked need to compete with the capitalist West directly. After the end of Ulbricht’s reform and his resignation in 1971, Honecker combined central planning with a significant extension of the welfare state. As the gap between East and West German standards of living continued to grow, repression was used to a greater extent than in Hungary to prevent open criticism, allowing the states to publicly maintain the fiction of the superiority of the socialist system. In contrast to Hungary, where market reforms contributed to the growing individualization of society, the GDR preserved a more collectivist model of socialism, where solidarity – in the light of the interviews – was also strengthened by the relative shortage of consumer goods and services.

The transformation from socialism to capitalism had different national trajectories in the two countries. After the change of regimes, the GDR adopted the welfare system of West Germany that mitigated the social costs of transformation. Hungary, on the contrary, was characterized by the outright dismantling of the socialist welfare system, and adopted an explicitly neo-liberal program of re-structuring. The comparison also aimed to explore how the different experiences of post-socialist change influenced workers’ recollection of the two regimes.

“Narratives of decline”

There are two main aspects of post-socialist change on which the German and Hungarian respondents expressed similarly negative views. The first is the disintegration of the community at the workplace and in the neighbourhood. In life-history interviews, workers reported having participated in an intensive community life in socialist collectives (such as brigades or neighbourhood communities – *Hausgemeinschaft* in the GDR) that they recalled with a sense of loss. The common leisure and sometimes even family programs strengthened social contacts among colleagues, thus reinforcing cohesion and solidarity. Interviewees also reported cases when these supportive social networks helped them (or others) through private hardships:

It was much better with the socialist brigades, we all knew each other. At that time they said that we have to pay attention to others. On paper. But people also wanted to pay attention to others. Because I remember that we went to see the babies of colleagues, we went to the cinema, and what you can imagine, everywhere. To concerts...and the community was at that time more united, we went to bowl, to play football, at that time we always went somewhere. Not because people undertook the tasks on paper. Ridiculous. Because they had a nice time together. And there were very few who wanted to be left out of this company.¹⁰

Similar stories were reported by East German interviewees when brigades gave psychological support to their members:

Earlier there was a totally different feeling of solidarity between colleagues. Today it is more like a fight because people think that they cannot keep their jobs otherwise. It was different in the GDR era [...] We had a colleague who had an alcohol problem and it was precisely in this environment that her socialist brigade helped her to lead a normal life. After the Wende she became a real alcoholic.¹¹

While many interviewees recalled community life with a sense of loss, brigades were not linked with Communist ideology in the eyes of people. As one interviewee formulated it, people had a nice time together and they cared little about the ideology. Other interviewees consciously distanced themselves from the propaganda of the regime, while maintaining that community life was different back then:

In the past the collective was very different, for instance the socialist brigades, it is easy to say now that it was all communist propaganda, but I think, no, today you can't organize anything like that, I am not nostalgic, really not, because those times were also not very good, but it was different, people were related somehow differently, now they don't care about others, it is a different age, a different style, everybody says so, it was not so bad in the past, we were young, we used to go out, it was not bad at all. We went to the pub, to the wine-cellar, drinking, having barbecues, we also went to the library, there were eminent librarian members [laughs] so I was an eminent librarian member, too, I like reading very much, I wrote the diary of the brigade, we had lectures, we planned socialism [laughs], it was not so bad, excursions with the brigade, cinemas, the collective was very different in the past, okay there was a lot of Marxism, but we did not take it seriously, they could not fool us with everything.¹²

The disintegration of the old workplace collective was often directly linked with the second common negative aspect of systemic change, the fear of unemployment. The disintegration of the old collectives was mostly explained through the increasing competition in the new system, the massive lay-offs and the individual's fight to keep his or her job in both the East German and Hungarian interviews. Workers reported that they were under constant pressure because of the lay-offs, and that this tension poisoned the atmosphere in the workplace. It was observed in both countries that society grew more individualistic and relations became increasingly privatized. Many interviewees directly contrasted the old times, when communities at the workplace had been more important to the people, with the experience of the new, capitalist regime:

At that time it was possible to establish better communities in a workplace than today. I can say this as a brigadier. I invited them to this anglers' camp¹³ a couple of times a year. When the first

¹⁰ Interview with a Hungarian female skilled worker (55).

¹¹ Interview with a German female skilled worker (45).

¹² Interview with a Hungarian female worker (49).

¹³ The interview was conducted in the weekend house of the interviewee.

was successful, they were likely to come again. They had an opportunity to get to know each other, and they were also interested in it. Now the same company – okay, not the same because 3-4 have already retired, but there are new people – so, 10 years ago 60-65 came because many brought their families, too – last time it was only 22. One has no time, the other is tired – only one had a really serious excuse, even though he still came in the afternoon. It is no longer fashionable today, perhaps people don't want to go into company because of their individual problems. But this also holds for our block of 80 flats. When we moved in, I visited at least 35 flats on New Years' Eve. But people also came to us, we went from flat to flat together, we had a great time.¹⁴

That old community spirit, that brigade spirit that I represented, too – since I was the brigadier in this group - it was possible to regularly bring together people, I invited them or we went to a restaurant, and we had a good chat. We don't have this today, people don't have time, even though we are not that many, everybody runs home after work, has other business.¹⁵

In the East German interviews workers similarly stressed that there was a higher level of communality among colleagues and their neighbours in the old system than in the new one. Many interviewees argued that the loosening of contacts with fellow-workers and the disintegration of workplace collectives were the direct results of the increasing competition characteristic of the new labour relations. In this context the positive values of the socialist brigades (solidarity and communality) were frequently contrasted with the individualism and egoism of the capitalist system:

This collective spirit that existed at the time of the GDR had a very different background. People helped each other because they had common problems to solve. Today one speaks of team spirit but this team spirit is actually needed to achieve a goal. Not to solve problems but to achieve a goal. In the brigades it was not the goal that was important but collective social work, to have good results as a collective, for instance if someone did not have enough points, the others helped them and together they could achieve a good result. Today the system does not work like that. This is a pity because people had a greater sense of togetherness in order to help each other. Today this help is not wanted. People are required to work together for the same goal but they are expected to work on their own and to achieve the maximum output.¹⁶

The collective was much more united in the time of the GDR. We went on excursions, held common festivals to celebrate Christmas in the workplace and other celebrations that we had at the time, we did many things together, we had many common trips and we had a rest. After work we always had a rest. But it is not the same now as it used to be. The collective is not what it used to be. I have work, I do my work – and the others? Earlier it was not like that. You can try but it no longer works. 'I work here and what I do afterwards – that's my business, that's my private life' – that's what many would tell you now. It hurts a bit, really. People need time to relax – it would be good if we had a little time for each other!¹⁷

Today people are occupied with themselves. In the period of the GDR we had a community. Neighbours helped each other, we had excursions with colleagues from the workplace, there were common activities [...] There was a good climate in our plant, we regularly held brigade evenings, brigade parties. There were very many events organized amongst brigade members, among workmates, in the workshop, in the plant and in the whole factory – regular events. Neighbours met privately, they mutually helped each other with various household jobs, for

¹⁴ Interview with a Hungarian brigadier who represented the Rába factory in the executive committee (62).

¹⁵ Interview with a Hungarian brigadier (53).

¹⁶ Interview with a German male skilled worker (50).

¹⁷ Interview with a German female skilled worker (48).

instance, repairing things or decorating the flat – that was totally normal. It was totally normal that we helped each other. It is not like that today. It has been lost.¹⁸

Interviewees also mentioned how GDR housing communities provided a social network for neighbours. It was observed that the GDR had a more egalitarian housing policy while in the new system the living quarters became socially stratified. People who had jobs were more likely to leave the blocks of flats and move to houses or other quarters. Some narrators thought that there were housing estates where only the unemployed or foreigners lived. According to many interviewees the housing communities were part of a communal life that declined after the fall of the GDR:

In earlier times we had a – it was called a housing community (Hausgemeinschaft) in these houses, we were all young people with mainly one, or two children, we were all around 23-24 when we moved to our first flats, people sat together a lot, there were club nights organized, people had a good time together, it is different now, people don't do it any longer because everybody has his or her own problems and people withdraw from community life. People don't chat with their neighbours on the stairs, they say: 'Good afternoon' to each other if they meet, and they close the door. I think that today people are much more stressed, they have to think about things that were natural in the GDR, everybody or almost everybody was treated equally, everybody had work and a stable income. Very few people had really big problems. I say again, people had work, every family could send the children to nursery or kindergarten – many things that used to be natural but today they are not. Today everybody is uninterested ... people don't care about their neighbours; they might hear that he is unemployed or she is now again at home but it is not their problem. Today people are concerned only about themselves.¹⁹

Solidarity declined both at work and in private life. Take the collective of our building – there were 44 flats in the building, families of similar age, we did a lot together, there were parties, we enjoyed ourselves. After '89 this has disappeared, people did not sit together, everybody stayed in the flats; it was not like it was, more together, people organized children's parties in the buildings, they were nice and they have disappeared, too. There were house parties twice a year but today people don't want to sit together and speak of their things, perhaps they are afraid that they give themselves away and that others take advantage of them. Today people are afraid to share their ideas or problems with their friends, that's why they turn inside.²⁰

While the dissolution of the old collectives was explained through increasing stress, competition and egoism characteristic of the new system, the fear of unemployment also appeared as an "independent" source of tension. Workers would typically use the antonyms "relaxed" and "tense" to describe the difference between the old system and the new one. Many Hungarian interviewees reported that there was little work in the plant and that they lived in constant fear of being put on the scrap heap. In this respect, the workers who were close to retirement age considered themselves to be relatively lucky because they would not have to look for new employment. Female workers under 57, were, however, very anxious about the prospects of their re-employment. They argued that their skills and age put them in a disadvantageous position in the labour market:

What do I do if I get kicked out? Don't worry, you can ask, I thought of it so many times. I don't know. It makes me cry. What prospects do I have? The problem is that there is nothing at all. I only have this profession, this school. I can't even imagine what can I do. The problem is that I

¹⁸ Interview with a German female skilled worker (60).

¹⁹ Interview with a German female skilled worker (48).

²⁰ Interview with a German male skilled worker, former brigadier (51).

will be 49. No, I really can't imagine what will happen to me. I would like to retire (laughs). This age group and this profession - well, really, really very bad. I believe that the government should support this age group, this social class. The truth is that there is a class, which has aged and sickened and worn out, grandmothers . . . whoever I talked to, were all complaining.²¹

Changes? I already told you. For us the fear that we lose our job. For us this is the most important thing, we are always afraid of it. We do not earn here such a big money because we get 54, 000 Ft²² in one shift. But if this remains...yes, I think the most important change is that we are afraid of losing our jobs. This is a very big problem to us, I have ten years to retire, if I could retire at 55, I would say, okay but ten years is a very long time, how do we manage that? In the past we were relaxed, we had a job, now we are afraid, after all we are in the worst position, no? Because nobody really wants to employ this age group, above 50. Nobody. We are afraid that we cannot find a job [later] I would go back to what I have told you so many times. I would like to keep my job. I would like to be healthy and keep my job. This is all I would like.²³

German workers had confidence in their enterprise but the problem of unemployment was an issue that most of the narrators emphasized either because they had already been confronted with it (some of them lost their jobs in 1991 and they considered themselves very lucky to be re-employed by Zeiss) or because unemployment affected their immediate family, relatives or friends. They pointed out the “absurdity” of young people sitting at home and not finding jobs while elderly people could only retire without pension cuts at the age of 65. The chances of re-employment of those who had lost their jobs in the factory varied. There were interviewees who could not find permanent employment and stayed at home or did small jobs for hourly wages (e. g. shop-assistants). Others reported writing many applications and/or informal contacts that helped them find a new job. Many thought that society discriminated against unemployed people who were held to be lazy. It was also reported that unemployed people experienced isolation and they became depressed (some people mentioned divorced spouses and friends who committed suicide because of depression). Even in less extreme cases it was agreed that employment created a new dividing line in society because those who had work could afford things that unemployed people could not (travelling, nice housing, new cars, restaurants, fitness centres, etc.). Workers would, indeed, speak of a two-class society with respect to the employed and unemployed. In general, German interviewees held unemployment and the feeling of insecurity to be the most negative aspects of systemic change.

I lost my job in 1994. At the beginning I hoped that I could stay because I worked in a field – material supply – I thought that the factory would stay. But everything was dissolved. I did a 9 month computer course, I thought that I could stay in the company where I did my training but it went bankrupt. I got an 8 month ABM²⁴. I also tried to look for jobs on my own. I have applied to many places but I am not young anymore and they are looking for young people... no-one wanted to take me. My children are grown-up but all the same, I could not find work. I have always applied to everything that I have found but nix. I did small jobs like telephone service, selling books, keeping fish in an aquarium and selling them, but everything just as side jobs, just to do something. To sit at home useless and do nix, that I did not want. I also sold Tuppenwaren – those plastic things, just to be occupied. When people just sit at home and they don't have tasks, many develop psychological problems... depression... I know some...no money, no work,

²¹ Interview with a Hungarian female skilled worker (49).

²² Ft (Forint): the Hungarian currency.

²³ Interview with a Hungarian female unskilled worker (50).

²⁴ ABM (Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen): governmental initiative in Germany to help the long-term unemployed. Such jobs usually take one year and they are paid from central funds.

they bury themselves in their house...That's why I wanted something else. [later] In the Arbeitsamt²⁵ they only do the administration, but they don't give you a job. The job that I have now, I found for myself.²⁶

I lost my job in 1992. I did training in the catering trade, I was unemployed for a year and then I found a job in a sweet factory. I worked there five years on the production line, it was a really stupid job and then I heard by chance that Zeiss was looking for skilled workers. I applied, and I succeeded – it was the best that could have happened to me. [later] That time, back in 1991, it was easier to talk about unemployment because so many lost their jobs. The circle of friends was bigger... now everything has become more fragmented. Today it is more difficult to be unemployed than it was. In the past people spoke openly about it, today it is an anonymous thing when someone is unemployed. People feel ashamed, and they don't want to show it outside. In the past it was a collective problem, everybody had the same problem. In every family there was someone who worked in Zeiss and lost their job. Today people turn inside, they don't want to show their private problems. Friends have also changed, there are some who survived the big lay-offs and there are others who could not really find a new existence, others left and or no-one knows what happened to them...People don't want to let others see inside. I see it in my husband, he also does not like speaking about his unemployment. He is healthy, he wants to work but he does not know what to do to find a new job. Now he is a house husband – for him it is very unsatisfactory – sometimes... he feels that his hands are tied. He is waiting for a positive answer from somewhere every day. I also notice that when there is an envelope in the post-box – rejection - that it is very depressing.²⁷

I think that today people can achieve much more with flattery than in the GDR. People did not lick the ass of the bosses – sorry for my words - as they do today. They stay longer in the workplace, wait until the boss goes home so as he sees that they are still there. This is ridiculous, and it did not exist before. I'll give you an example. An old friend of mine became a mid-level manager. He invited me to his birthday party. Afterwards, I told him frankly that I would not go next time if he kept on talking only about his work. He has never invited me again.²⁸

There was one important aspect of change that was mentioned in the Hungarian interviews only, the loss of material security. The majority of the Hungarian interviewees reported that they lived worse now than in the past. In order to make ends meet, most of the narrators had to renounce such “luxuries” as going on holidays, eating out in restaurants (even cheap ones) and maintaining a car. People who had teenage children argued that social differences were visible already in school: they mentioned expensive school trips and extra language courses that manager and lawyer parents could afford while they could not. People who lived in single-income households were in a particularly bad financial situation, and claimed to have experienced the most radical decline.

Based on the subjective evaluation of their financial situation, among the Hungarian interviewees three groups can be distinguished. The first - and smallest - group includes the people, who claimed that they could compensate for the decline of real wages with extra work in the informal economy:

I finish the shift at 2, then I go to Györszentiván [a neighbouring village] to help out in the garage. And my sons are working, both of them in Audi, they live at home, that is how we help them so that they can save on the rent and food. So I think we live on the same level as before.²⁹

²⁵ Labor Office in Germany.

²⁶ Interview with a German female skilled worker (53).

²⁷ Interview with a German female skilled worker (47).

²⁸ Interview with a German male engineer, long-term unemployed (47).

²⁹ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (51).

In the later stage of the interview, the narrator, nevertheless, argued that he would have expected an improvement of his financial situation since his children started working and he did not have to support them as much as before. In this respect, he added that “staying on the same level” could in fact be considered as a decline.

Female narrators frequently used family strategies to participate in the informal economy:

After they fired my husband, I did not give him time to be desperate. We had some spare money plus the severance pay, we put everything together and he opened a car repair workshop in our garage. He is working and I do the book-keeping when I get home from work. I am not complaining. It did not get better, it did not get worse. We can keep the same standards we had before.³⁰

From the narrative it is clear that the opening of the garage was motivated by necessity rather than an entrepreneurial spirit. The wife’s involvement in the business shows that it is a family strategy to reduce the costs of labour. It is worth pointing out that in this case it was apparently the wife who convinced the husband to be an “entrepreneur.” While the narrator did not explicitly say how much income they received from the garage, in private she told me that they paid the minimal tax “like all other entrepreneurs.” It is therefore reasonable to assume that it was the (presumably) untaxed income coming from the informal economy that enabled the family to keep the same standards they had before.

The second group includes people who experienced a “significant” decline but lived above the poverty line. There were two common characteristics in the circumstances of these people. They shared a household with spouses, who received wages or a pension, and with three exceptions they had adult children who did not require substantial support. The reduction of household costs could not, nevertheless, compensate for the decline of real wages. Most narrators in this group reported that they found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet despite renouncing such “luxuries” as going on holidays, eating out in restaurants, and attending theatres on a regular basis. While the workers would contrast the reduced selection of consumer goods under socialism with the present abundance of products, they would immediately add that “now there is everything but who can afford it?” It was a general complaint that the costs of living had increased and “we can no longer save”. The narrators agreed that people who live off wages are in a “much worse” position now than in the past.

In the past I could buy much better food. I could spend more money in the supermarket. I could buy everything by contemporary standards. Now I can’t save, I can’t go on holiday, I can’t afford respectable clothing. In the past I had a car. Now I am take the bus. This month I saved on the bus fare because the factory closed for two weeks, so I came on foot to work. I don’t want to be pitied (smiles), no, I lived much better in the old times.³¹

Living is much more difficult now than in the past. Utilities are very expensive. The gas bill, 30,000, just for one month, I don’t know how they are calculated. We are living from wage to wage, and every month I pray to God that nothing unexpected happens. If my husband gets ill, I really don’t know what we would do, how we could pay the bills.³²

³⁰ Interview with a Hungarian female white-collar worker (48).

³¹ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker, shop steward (57).

³² Interview with a Hungarian female skilled worker (50).

The first speaker apparently relates material decline to social degradation. The renunciation of the distinctive features of the middle class is apparently perceived as a decline of status: “I can’t afford respectable clothing”. His walking to the work place in order to save on the bus fare is clearly perceived as an aspect of his social decline: “I don’t want to be pitied”. In the second narrative the declining financial situation is shown by the increasing problem to pay utilities and the lack of opportunity to save. “If my husband gets ill, I really don’t know what we would do, how we could pay the bills”. The problems mentioned by the speaker can be seen as “common” in the sense that all narrators complained about the rising costs of utilities, which they found increasingly difficult to pay and the lack of “spare” capital. They were all doubtful if they could cover “unexpected” costs. It is worth pointing out that all narrators would consider “health” to be the most important wish in their lives.

The narrators in the group, who had young children, were particularly concerned about the reduction of their opportunities. One of the most painful changes for them was the increasing cost of education.

I can tell you a strange thing. I think, it was more free than today. I felt free that I have a flat, a car, a good job, holidays at the Balaton, fishing, it was not a problem to pack the whole family into the car on Friday afternoon and go to Tata, or go camping. We liked it very much. And we cannot do it any more. What kind of freedom is that? That we cannot afford an ordinary holiday? And I am working, I have a normal job, I don’t drink, I never smoked. In the past we went to Tata every second week. I used to fish there. Now I cannot afford it. My daughter goes to secondary school, the books she needs, the dictionaries. We paid 40,000 just for books. And she is only in the first year. And then I sit down to calculate how I will pay for university for my daughter? Because she is a very good student, so I won’t let her not go on. But from this money I am not sure that I can pay her education.³³

This is what I most regret that they [the children] are left out from so many things because we cannot pay for them. Now the opportunities are much better but not for everybody. I cannot pay the English summer school for my children, or the ski tours. And the books, everything is so expensive. In the past there were no such differences, you did not feel smaller amongst the people. The children in my son’s school, well, most parents are managers, bankers, intellectuals. I cannot afford these. My son goes to the summer camp with the money he has worked for. When we go to pick up Balázs, I am always telling my husband, stop behind so that those kids don’t see that he gets in and out of such a wreck of a car.³⁴

Both narratives reflect a particular concern about their limited opportunities to provide a sufficient background for their children. This is all the more pressing in the light of growing inequalities. It is worth stressing that workers explicitly contrasted the difference between the educational opportunities for their children with those of the children of managers and lawyers. The fact that the children in the narratives are “very good” students increases the feeling of guilt of the parents, who cannot give their children the same opportunities as the wealthier parents such as the English summer school. As compared to the socialist period, this is indeed a difference, with which the parents and the children have to learn to live.

³³ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker, (49).

³⁴ Interview with a Hungarian female skilled worker, shop steward (46).

The interviewees, who belong to the third group, effectively live at or below the poverty line.³⁵ All the people in this group lived in single-income households or received disability benefits except for one narrator whose husband, having lost his job in the co-operative of the village, became an alcoholic and lived on disability benefit. One cannot, of course, draw general conclusions from forty life-history interviews; my results, however, underline the importance of the size of the household in the workers' material security. In my research a male pensioner, a divorced "active" man, two widowed "active" women and the above mentioned family, who lived on one income earned by a woman and the disability benefit (which was little more than half of the wife's wage), belonged to the financially most disadvantaged group. It is worth pointing out that two retired women, who were both widows, would also belong to this group had it not been for the additional income of their part-time jobs. In the light of the narratives, these people experienced the most "radical" decline in their standards of living. Suffice is to quote from two narratives, which I have chosen as particularly sad documents of post-socialist change.

You deal with the problem of how you explain these things and I deal with the problem of how I live in the future? In September I retire. I calculate the food won't be cheaper but more expensive, no? This month I get the bill that I have to pay 2460 for the TV. I watch Discovery and Spectrum, these I really like, but I calculate, so far I have paid 1680 and the difference is almost 600. That I can't afford. So I go and change the contract. Now I don't have those channels. But what can I do? I have a car, fifteen years old, but this is the only thing that cheers me up, you know, I like to go down, take a look, caressing, washing, repairing, it happened once that I ate bean soup for a week so that I could repair it. You need something that cheers you up, no? But now I calculate, I don't think I can keep my car.³⁶

I don't like this capitalist system at all. If it continues like this, we will be homeless like so many others. If they don't increase wages, it will be the end of us. If the prices go even higher than now...they increased so much this year, I must tell you that I am frightened. How will we manage on this wage? My husband gets 29,000, I get 50, and the monthly pass, true, the enterprise reimburses 70% but I have to put aside the money... I pay 20,000 on utilities, and if I go to the shop, at least 5,000 Ft is gone... I save a lot on food, I cook always for two days, and I know many tricks... like potatoes, they solve a lot, you can make so many things from potatoes, but now I am really afraid of what is going to happen [...] I would like to have a peaceful life, and now it is really about money, money and money. It is useless to say that money does not matter. If there is no money, we can't eat, we can't pay the bills, we can't make a living, we quarrel...All because of the money, money, money. Am I not right?³⁷

While the majority of the Hungarian workers reported stagnating or decreasing standards of living, most of the German narrators, who had work, in contrast experienced an improvement in their material conditions. Many of them had bad memories of the shortage economy of the GDR and the insufficient provisions (e.g. the long wait for a car). They also said that factories paid very good wages and that they were fortunate to be employed by Zeiss. In general, it was acknowledged that the new system offered greater prospects to young people than did the GDR:

I started work at Zeiss in May 1968 and in October I already got a flat. Five months. At that time many people came to Jena because of the flats. That's a fact, there were many. There were

³⁵ They spent around 65% of their income on utilities and the remaining sum (15,000-20,000) barely covers the costs of "basic" food.

³⁶ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker, (59).

³⁷ Interview with a Hungarian female unskilled worker, former shop steward (54).

factories like Zeiss in Jena, and the large chemical factories in Eisenhüttenstadt – I don't know if the name says something to you – many young people moved there. You can see from here the houses... to the left. I moved afterwards because it was a two-room flat, you could only get a two-room flat if you did not have children. [...] My son is not married and he has a flat. I find this good. He is better off now than we were.³⁸

Freedom to travel ranked high among the positive experiences of the new system. It was mentioned in almost every interview although some people added that while all East Germans were curious about West Germany, West Germans were less interested in visiting the East. With respect to freedom of travel, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees thought that the new system has also brought new opportunities for the older generation, who were retired at the time of the Wende or shortly afterwards:

The redundancy package? For me – we are the winners of the unification, you see – we, old people, we have worked... I don't want to say that...we have not worked ourselves to death, neither in Zeiss, we have done our work, but we could also go on holiday, I was at Balaton, Harkány, Zalakaros³⁹ – I also travelled to the Soviet Union, to the Black Sea and the Caucasus – not everybody could do that but if you had saved money... it was not so bad in the GDR either, we worked, and we are still proud of it, we have always achieved something – but at the end the politics went kaput. I want to say that one cannot blame it on the workers in Zeiss or in Schott or in Bitterfeld. We were more or less misused for an ideal, which practically – I mean I always thought that the day would come when the planned economy would collapse. Fortunately it happened without a war [...] Had I gone to the West 30 or 40 years ago – you see, my brother did – perhaps I would have a bigger, fancier car – here I don't have one. But after the Wende I went to America for a trip, I saw the Grand Canyon, and Las Vegas – that is something that I would not have dreamt of before, this Reisefreiheit that we have right now. I am really happy that I have lived during the unification of Germany – you see, I was born in Germany, not in the GDR.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, unemployed people reported less satisfactory material circumstances. Contrary to the Hungarian workers, they would typically stress, however, the relative worsening of their situation in comparison to people who had work.

When I bought things for my children, I did not pay attention to brands. I bought the ones that I could afford. They wore them and they made friends, with whom they are still friends today. Christian has grown up in this new society, but he is very special, he has never come to me and said Mum, why don't you buy this or that. When I buy something, I have to consider how much money I have, and not the fashion at school. But I think this actually comes from the parents, in many families where both parents work and there is enough money, the children will get everything. I can't buy this because I can't afford it - I know that many don't like it that this is the truth [...] Holiday, clothes – I never buy anything for myself. Or the grandmother comes and asks what we need but otherwise... I don't spend money on myself. Otherwise... I give money to Christian to buy ice-cream but I don't buy any for myself. This is how we live. I have a 10 year old car. It is my luxury. My car is my luxury. When I am really fed up with everything, sitting at home and not finding work, I get into my car and take a drive. This is very important for me.⁴¹

³⁸ Interview with a German male skilled worker (58).

³⁹ Holiday resorts in Hungary.

⁴⁰ Interview with a German male skilled worker (76).

⁴¹ Interview with a German female engineer (56).

In the German case employment was the most important indicator of material wealth: families where both partners worked were considered to be relatively well-off, families where only one partner worked could still have a decent life, while a household which consisted of unemployed people had to cope with everyday financial difficulties.

It makes you feel exhausted to sit at home and not to have work. It sometimes gets on one's nerves when others go to work, and you have to wait at home and you try and you don't get a job because you are too old...it makes you feel psychologically drained [...] No, we are not happy that the Wende has come because we lived better in the GDR. We went on trips, we earned money, and we had no troubles. Today I have real troubles about what will happen tomorrow, how we will manage, which we did not have in the GDR. Should we go to the Arbeitsamt to beg for some support – I know that I exaggerate but for the two of us it was really better in the GDR when we had our jobs, we went to work every day, and we could afford to go on holiday or to go out. Now my sister sometimes takes us out or gives us a lift but otherwise no more holiday [silence].⁴²

People who had work would also address the problem of increasing material inequalities. Narrators argued that the freedom of travel was relevant only to people who could afford it and unemployed people could not. They said that they feel uncomfortable in this situation and they would rather not speak about their trips to unemployed friends. Some workers would, in fact, speak of a two-class society with respect to the employed and the unemployed. Solidarity with the latter was frequently facilitated by personal experience or close contacts to people who were unemployed for a long period of time (partners, family members, relatives, close friends).

One socializes less today at the workplace and with the neighbours than at the time of the GDR. It has got nothing to do with poverty, no, I don't think that this is about poverty. I think that everything became more stressful, you have to think of many things, which were self-evident in the GDR. I repeat that everybody or almost everybody was treated equally. Everybody had a job, a reliable income and today it is not like that. Nobody had really great problems in the past. Everybody had a workplace, every family had a nursery and kindergarten place, and many things were self-evident, which today you have to solve by yourself [...] After all, today everybody is busy with his or her problems. I don't know how to explain this. I mean... I don't know if people still feel sorry for those who have lost their jobs or they have to go. I can't tell, really. And one does not really want to hear when he or she comes home from work that work is the topic again, especially when one has the same problem at home, in the family.⁴³

Ja, this is a topic I can talk about a lot...a transformation, which...I have seen what my wife has been through and many ask her: how come you have been unemployed for three years? That is a long time, one has to be able to find something...ja? But do you know what I say? That out of one hundred unemployed people there are maybe three who don't want to work. Maybe in the first months, or the first weeks you say, fine, I can stay at home, I can get my unemployment benefit, and something will come up in the future, and then first, you have to cope with the problem that there is no work, that you can't find anything, and you hear this statement from every corner! That there is plenty of work in Germany, only you don't want to work. The state gives you money and you have a really good life – and so on. I can tell you that only people who have never been unemployed, who have never been through this, can talk like that. I see how many applications my wife has written – an unbelievable amount. And the hope that someone will be interested in you until you get a letter of refusal [...]Whoever gets a job can consider himself or herself lucky – this is my opinion.⁴⁴

⁴² Interview with a German female skilled worker (57).

⁴³ Interview with a German female skilled worker (48).

⁴⁴ Interview with a German male skilled worker (46).

Employment apparently created a new dividing line in society, which was addressed in many interviews. Narrators argued that unemployed people were excluded from social life, both materially and psychologically. Apart from expressing solidarity with the unemployed many interviewees spoke of the detrimental psychological effects of unemployment. Some speakers used personal experiences to argue that long-term unemployment often led to depression, alcoholism or even suicide.

This must be difficult for them [the unemployed], it is not only a financial problem, people feel they are somehow useless, they feel as if they were not needed. And it is a very bad situation, indeed, when one sees other people go to work, and he or she is not needed. Many can't understand this [...] I think that too little has been done for the unemployed. It can't be that people are confronted with such a lack of perspective. And eventually the unemployed have to make massive cuts on their spending, and even if people find jobs, they are totally underpaid. But many say that I have to take this in order to survive because it is a bit more than unemployment benefit [...] I would never say that these people live at my cost because the same thing could happen to me. It is bad enough that this phenomenon exists, unemployment. I mean that one can be happy to work here because the company is successful but things can change any time, and then one should put himself or herself in the place of these people because he or she can have the same experience [...] Indeed, I find that after the *Wende* egoism has massively increased. Do you understand me? People think too much of themselves and they don't care about the rest. This is my personal opinion.⁴⁵

When someone is unemployed, he or she has little money in the first instance. Because of the lack of financial means, you are automatically excluded from the social activities that others can afford. You can't do things with the others because every entertainment costs money after all. And you don't find contact with your friends and acquaintances and so you feel discriminated against.⁴⁶

While the disintegration of the socialist collectives was a common negative aspect of post-socialist change in the German and Hungarian interviews, the decline in the standard of living ranked high only in the Hungarian narratives. Taking a closer look at the accounts of the German workers, however, a more ambiguous picture emerges. The decline of social solidarity, the reduction of social networks (particularly in the case of the unemployed) and the increasing material inequalities were highlighted in the overwhelming majority of the German interviews, independently of whether the speaker was employed or not. Workers would typically stress that in the old system people were treated equally or almost equally, and there were no basic differences in the material conditions of working people. In the Hungarian case the workers' declining material opportunities was one major source of resentment against the new regime. In what follows, an attempt will be made to discuss in more detail how the workers' experience of post-socialist change impacted on their social and political attitudes and the construction of the memory of the socialist regimes.

“What went wrong” with capitalism?

Although the Hungarian workers reported more negative aspects of post-socialist change than did their German counterparts, these negative experiences have not translated into a radical criticism of the capitalist system per se. The Hungarian narrators apparently associated capitalism with the “West” and thus with material

⁴⁵ Interview with a German female skilled worker (49).

⁴⁶ Interview with a German female quality controller (54).

prosperity and welfare. The contradiction between the experience of “small transformations” and the “expectations of modernity”⁴⁷ was resolved with the argument that “something went wrong” with the implementation of capitalism in Hungary. The narrators apparently understood capitalism as a system to be implemented rather than “naturally” developed. In this respect, the workers would frequently refer to the case of Austria which “introduced” capitalism and joined the ranks of advanced countries. The narrators argued that Hungary “was no worse than Austria” and the Hungarian labour force was as skilled and educated as their Western counterparts. It was therefore only the “circumstances” that prevented the country from achieving a similar level of development.

The question “what went wrong” with capitalism has been addressed at two levels in the narratives: that of the factory and the national economy. With respect to the first level the lack of work in the factory and the continuing lay-offs generated not only a critical reading of “Rába-history” on the shop floor but also a radical “inversion” of the official discourse. From the perspective of the shop floor, it was first and foremost the new management that was to be blamed for economic troubles.

Two types of arguments have been developed. According to the first version, the new managers were incompetent and disinterested in the development of the factory. The workers apparently saw them as members of a “clique”, who are unaccountable. They can, therefore, allow themselves “not to work” but only take home the “millions” they are getting in Rába. The workers were apparently well informed about the salaries of the managers. All of them mentioned that the chief manager earned 16 million Ft a month. The huge wage differentials between the managers and the workers were considered all the more unjust in the light of the growing economic troubles of the factory. The workers did not understand how a “poor factory” could afford to pay such enormous sums of money. Many argued that this contributed to the economic decline of the factory.

The recollection of the “time of Ede Horváth”, the legendary chief manager under socialism⁴⁸, apparently amplified the criticism of the new management. While it was recognised that Ede Horváth used his political contacts to bring work to Rába, the narrators would typically point out that he also found markets in the United States because he “went after” the work. Ede Horváth was also praised for keeping his managers under strict control. The narrators would typically argue that he would have “kicked out” the present managers a long time ago. The “time of order” under the patronage of Ede Horváth was frequently contrasted with the present state of “chaos and disintegration” associated with the new management.

⁴⁷ James Ferguson argues that the myth of modernization - myths related to industrial development, and the expectation of catching up with the material welfare and levels of consumption of the developed capitalist countries – was not only an academic myth but it provided a set of categories and premises that continued to shape people’s experiences and interpretations of their lives well after modernization had become a discredited theory in the academic world (James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Ede Horváth came from a working-class family, and during the Stalinist era, at the time of forced industrialization he distinguished himself as a Stakhanovite. He was appointed the chief manager of the Industrial Tool Factory in Győr in 1953. In 1963 the Wagon Factory was re-united with the Industrial Tool Factory and Ede Horváth became the chief manager of Rába. As a member of the Central Committee, he came under an intensive political attack in 1989. The enterprise council asked him to retire, which he agreed to do on 18 December 1989.

There is little order, little work, everybody knows, it is different than in the past when we had the big orders. Because it is not a solution for them to go and look for work but to kick out the people, even though they'd better kick out the managers 'cause they are more useless than we. The chief manager says, I can't give you work, there is no work. He says it is not his job to find work. Okay, then what is his job? What does he get 16 million a month for? Because that's how much he gets. And he can't save 5,000 extra for us. It is no solution that I don't give you work, I can believe that but then how come that in the past we had work? This is my biggest problem now, that's why I'm telling you. I don't want to go back to Ede Horváth but my opinion is that I grew up in this environment, in this factory, so I want to work in a normal job in a normal environment and I think the people should consider that those leaders did a lot for this environment, this country. Because this town can only be grateful for people like Ede Horváth and Róbert Burger.⁴⁹

The speaker apparently sees no difference between the task of Ede Horváth, which was to a large extent political, and the task of the new management. "It is no solution that I don't give you work, I can believe that but then how come that in the past we had work?". He attributes the failure to find new markets to the incompetence of the managers rather than the low competitiveness of the factory. He explicitly contrasts their perceived disinterest in Rába with Ede Horváth's commitment to Rába and the town of Győr. Local patriotism is another important argument that most of my narrators used. The new managers were uniformly criticised for their lack of local contacts and their disinterestedness in the development of the town, which was another significant difference from the time of Ede Horváth. The workers would typically use the term "Budapest people" to refer to their "non-belonging" to the Rába community. Their unfamiliarity with their environment gave rise to many comical anecdotes.

We hear that one day the chief manager from Budapest makes up his mind and starts speaking English at the meeting. Half of the bosses here can't speak English. They have not got a clue what he is talking about. They are just sitting there and nodding their heads. Now tell me honestly, do we need such a chief manager?⁵⁰

The second type of argument constructs the decline of the factory in terms of a conscious design. Many narrators argued that the "folks from Budapest" intentionally wanted to destroy Rába in order to sell its valuable real estates and take the money out of the factory. The fact that the leadership did indeed offer the central site for sale nourished further speculations. The rumours that the site was to be bought by an Israeli estate agency were developed into full-fledged conspiracy theories in some narratives:

It is Jewish capital that robbed this country, this is the general opinion here. And I agree because it is also my experience. I stress that I am not an anti-Semite, I have no problem with the Jews, but they are starting to convince me. The newspaper wrote that the Wagon factory will build luxurious houses here from Israeli capital, just think of the workers, who spent their lives in this factory, it was our work that built this factory, that is why we got so little pay and now they are selling it to Israeli capital. Engel-group? When the people heard this, the very moment they started to blame the Jews. The workers are betting that he [the chief manager] is a Jew. I really don't know if he is but all the people are saying that here. You hear it from many people in Győr.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (57).

⁵⁰ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (48).

⁵¹ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (51).

Although apart from the speaker only one male pensioner who developed overtly racist arguments, the comments I heard during my visits to the factory suggest that the rumours of Israeli investment did indeed reinforce anti-Semitic sentiments. It is worth pointing out that while the workers were reluctant to renounce normative views on capitalism, many of them were apparently susceptible to anticapitalist rhetoric if the “capitalists” were identified with the Jews.

At the national level Hungarian workers would typically blame the multinational companies for the destruction of Hungarian industry. In this respect, the arguments about “what went wrong” with Rába were “extended” to explain change in the whole country. Most narrators considered the elimination of rivals as a common strategy of multinational companies. The destruction of Rába was therefore read as part of this large-scale strategy intended to destroy Hungarian industry.

To be sure, it was generally recognised that multinational companies had brought “progress” to Hungary. Narrators would, however, immediately point out that the material and technological basis of this progress did not belong to Hungary and therefore made the country very much dependent on “external forces.” The “right” way of progress was apparently conceived within the framework of the nation state:

Until the change of regime we developed on our own. Now the multinationals are developing a lot. But what happens if one day they decide and pack and go? What is left behind? The empty hall? What do we do with it? It does not belong to our country. Until the change of regime whatever progress we made, it was on our own. Since then whatever progress we made, was mostly done by the multinationals. And if they leave, the country will collapse.⁵²

The narrator clearly constructs the concepts of “progress” and “development” with reference to a “national” capitalism. The socialist system is apparently understood first and foremost as a modernising regime. The slower rate of progress in the past is contrasted with the new perspectives. “Now the multinationals are developing a lot”. As the narrator argues, however, this is an “illusory” progress, because it is beyond the control of the national economy. “And if they leave, the country will collapse”. In this respect, the progress “done by the multinationals” is clearly understood to be “extralocal” and therefore unreliable.

While the new perspectives of progress are “illusory” in most of the narratives, all the more “real” are the detrimental effects. The narrators would typically argue that the entry of the “multinationals” into the Hungarian market created “unfair” competition between foreigners and Hungarians. The “national property” was therefore sold to the “foreign” people.

This was the change of regime, that we sold everything. And to whom? Not to Hungarian people. To abroad. And for them the most important thing is to get back as much profit as they can. Because Hungarian people can't buy big companies, not even one of them.⁵³

With respect to the selling of national property, the workers drew an explicit analogy between the case of Rába and that of the national economy. They argued that the “foreign” owners would intentionally destroy the factories to get rid of competition. De-industrialisation was therefore understood as the product of a conscious design.

⁵² Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (57).

⁵³ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (49).

The “foreign” owners not only eliminated potential rivals but also enjoyed extra privileges that the narrators considered particularly unfair. The most important were the tax-exempt agreements. Many workers would make explicit comparisons between Rába and Audi to argue that the latter was in a much better position to invest in technological development than the Rába factory, which had to pay taxes.

I think that this crisis is creeping on in Hungary because we should also make a step forward. We need to invest, to buy new machines and technology and we can't afford it because we are taxed. And the foreign companies are all competitive because they are not taxed. Take Audi, it is easy for Audi to invest if they don't pay taxes to the government. That is where I see the problem that the government holds up its hands and lets everything be sold. And the result is that everything goes bankrupt. So I am not happy that Audi is prospering. Because it will prosper like it did in Szombathely, where Opel bought the plant and after five years, when they should have paid taxes, what did they do? They moved the plant somewhere else. And now they are producing Opels in Poland.⁵⁴

The listed inequalities, the growing dependence and the insecure future apparently hurt national sentiments. It is, nevertheless, worth pointing out that workers' views on multinational companies were “consistently inconsistent”. While it was generally recognized that “multinationals” gave higher wages than the national companies, workers would typically add that the companies would have had to pay considerably more to workers in Western countries. The self-image of “cheap labour” apparently made the workers susceptible to nationalistic rhetoric.

The world economy already said that Hungarian labour was too expensive, they cannot make a business out of us. Regardless that they pay one-seventh of what they would pay in Inglostadt. I am not a nationalist but I think that this Csurka [radical rightist party leader] is certainly right about this. It should not be like the Germans who think Germany is above everything but Hungarian people should have respect in their own country. Yes, they should. Because now they take us for nothing, that is the truth. We don't have any respect.⁵⁵

The perception that development is controlled by unpredictable “external” forces triggered strong statist arguments. Most of the workers blamed the government for making too great concessions for global capital. The workers would typically expect the government to interfere and re-assert control over at least part of the economy.

Because you can take any company, they will destroy them if the state does not interfere although it should, because that is the goal here, to destroy this factory, which was a prospering enterprise in the past, the point is to destroy it, so that there is no competition. I can tell you that I can see through these things [...] Another example are the textile factories, a rival firm bought them and since then there has been no development here. There was Richards, Graboplast, all serious, big firms with international reputations in Győr and all went bankrupt. That's what I don't understand in this change of regime, why they do not interfere, because okay, they should not support bankrupt factories but it should be different if the state and the country see a perspective in a factory [...] because we should consider our own interests and we should not be dependent so much on the West.⁵⁶

While the development of the national economy received a rather negative judgment, the change of regime was even more critically evaluated. One can point out

⁵⁴ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (57).

⁵⁵ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (48).

⁵⁶ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (52).

here a gender specific difference: many skilled workers and foremen (including former members of the Party) would typically argue that the collapse of the Kádár regime was necessary and inevitable, while it was typically women who lived in villages and were often employed as unskilled workers who expressed a desire for a return to the past.

I trust that mammoth companies like the Wagon factory will not be created in the future. So there would be no more such giant enterprises apart from the rail and traffic companies but there would be firms of a human size, which offer material opportunities for our youth, but within manageable limits. There will be competition but young people can make a living. I believe that if one works hard, this can be realized everywhere. I would never want to go back to the system that we had before 1989. No way. Because the conscious life, conscious education and the conscious future is moving in the direction in which we are going right now.⁵⁷

I see a big difference. At that time, in that system, if you had a job where you worked eight hours a day, you still had Saturdays and Sundays. I worked in the local co-operative, I kept pigs and cows. I paid the wedding of my daughter from the money that I earned on the pigs. We worked very hard but we made a decent living, I could save, I could count how much the food cost every day [...] I can tell you that all of these houses were built in the Kádár regime. You don't have to tell this to anybody in the village. Everybody started building their own homes, young people got married and in the next month they took up loans because they had a secure workplace, and they started building. I could save for everything at that time from my own work [...] I hate this system, I really do, where the danger of indebtedness threatens us. I feel, I know, I see this danger. And if there is no change, they don't increase wages, I am 100% sure that we will have to accumulate debts. And then will they take this house, which we have built out of many years' work? Do I deserve this after I have worked all my life?⁵⁸

Regardless of how the Kádár regime was evaluated, the change of regime was felt to be a period in which society was cheated. It was commonly believed that privatization benefited the old elite and that ordinary people received nothing of the "peoples' property". As we have seen, many speakers argued that foreign companies only bought local firms to close them and eliminate business rivals, and they were only interested in acquiring Hungarian markets. People would typically blame the old elite for selling off national property. They were seen not only as egoistic and selfish but also irresponsible and unscrupulous, willing to sacrifice national interests in order to enrich themselves. It can therefore be argued that in the eye of many workers the change of regime was "imposed" on the people from above, and they had little or no opportunity to influence the formation of the new system. I have chosen the following quotations to illustrate how deeply rooted the conviction is that the workers were excluded from the decision making process and that privatization meant a new exclusion and dispossession of the people:

For sure we were not overpaid, because you know at that time they told us that we earn so little because 30% of our wages went to the social fund. But then in 1989 democracy broke out, and this 30% was lost, they are not going to give it to us although after 40 years I think that they could [...] In 1989 I told the party secretary that comrade, I have finished. I see so many swindles here that I have had enough. Why in 1989? Because I did not like anything that was going on at that time, there was so much beating around the bush, lying, blaming others. So I said that I have had enough of this business. If you can't go on in the right way, you should close the shop. And so I have finished. And I have not regretted it for a minute.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Interview with a Hungarian male skilled worker (58).

⁵⁸ Interview with a Hungarian female unskilled worker, former shop steward (54).

⁵⁹ Interview with a former Hungarian foreman, pensioner (75).

They practically stole the factory. When this new chief manager, X, arrived, they transferred the production of buses. But where? To one of the companies where he has interests. When manager Y left the factory, he also took I don't know how many turner's lathes on the pretext that the factory does not need them. This is how things are carrying on. [...] Public money just disappears somehow... for instance in Rába. When they distributed the shares, they did it so that the management got the majority. And the blue-collar workers, who needed money, what did they do? They sold their shares at low prices to the management. This is how it worked. And now they can do whatever they want.⁶⁰

In the past system there existed a social net. It was compulsory to have a workplace. If you had not worked for three months, it was a criminal offence, and they had to find a workplace for you. Or you had to show how you make a living. Now you don't have to show anything. And nevertheless, how many of those, who don't work today, dress and live much better than the workers? And people, who live from wages, can't save and can't make a decent living. [...] My son comes home from school saying that they want to make a board of photos of the students taking their final exam for 100,000 Ft. My heart aches. That the parents of one child can afford everything and the other has nothing. Horrible. I have declined to a level where I never thought that I could get, that I don't eat a proper meal for days so that my son does not see that I can't afford the meals for two. If this is what the change of regime means, I may wish the old regime back. Because there was security there, this is what I think even today.⁶¹

In contrast with the Hungarian narrators, the German interviewees spent much less time on the re-structuring of the factory and the massive lay-offs. The reduction of the personnel was understood as the natural outcome of the loss of markets and the drastic fall in demand. The majority of the workers did not question the validity of the social scheme, which was set up to protect the most vulnerable groups. Some interviewees argued that people used "contacts" to keep their jobs but it was generally recognized that the social and family situation of the employees was taken into account (for example, it was young people in the first instance, who had to go because they could easily find new employment in the Western German regions; when a couple worked by Zeiss, an attempt was made to keep at least one of the partners). In the German interviews there was no reflection on the "decline" of the factory; indeed, the interviewees did not construct the post-socialist history of the factory in terms of a "narrative of decline". Many workers in fact thought that the change brought progress, investment and new technology to the factory. People who lost their jobs would not discuss the later history of Zeiss at all. Many interviewees, however, observed that the industry in the socialist period polluted the environment to a much higher extent than did the new technologies.

The difference between the political climate of the Honecker and the Kádár governments was also reflected in workers' memories of the two regimes. Although it cannot be said that the socialist system left only negative memories behind in East Germany – in fact, most of the interviewees said that the school system, health care system and child care institutions were better, and the state gave more support to working mothers than after 1989 – no-one wanted to return to Honecker's GDR. The most "extreme" story in this respect is that of a worker who was homeless at the time of interviewing, and had been imprisoned for political reasons in the GDR in the 1980s. Even though he said that he would not fight again for a capitalist system, not even his experience of the new society could embellish the memory of the Honecker regime.

⁶⁰ Interview with a Hungarian female skilled worker (56).

⁶¹ Interview with a Hungarian female white-collar worker, shop steward (48).

Neither did the couple who argued that they lived better in the GDR, want the return of the old regime.

There was also a difference in the political definition of the Kádár and Honecker regimes. In the Hungarian case it was a contested issue in the interviews whether or not the Kádár regime was a dictatorship. In contrast, Honecker's GDR was held to be a dictatorship by the majority of the interviewees. It should be, however, noted, that the narrators strongly objected to the equation of the GDR with the Nazi regime:

My instinct tells me that no, I would never compare the GDR with national socialism. I would not put them next to each other. I can only tell you that I would not. I would not make any comparison with it, no way....⁶²

I have not lived under national socialism but I would not compare the two systems... absolutely not.⁶³

The image of a "totalitarian" state was indirectly contested in many narratives. Some interviewees pointed out the actual involvement of people in the state organized activities:

I did not join the Party. My husband was a member of the Party and when this woman came to me and told me that my husband is in the Party, so that I should be in the Party too, I said to her, so go and convince your husband first. Because I knew that he was not in the Party. In this aspect I was a bit...how should I explain? So for instance I always went to celebrate 1 May. Not because anybody forced me to go there. Because today this is what people would say – that they had to go. They even claim that there were lists of attendance. I have never seen such lists. No one asked me why I go or don't go. I was just there.⁶⁴

I would not condemn everybody who worked for the Stasi. These were personal things...you have to condemn them if they volunteered but it was not always the case. Some were just led into it. They may have given information without harming anybody. I was never interested in my own file or the file of anybody else. If someone worked for the Stasi from our collective, I just don't want to know.⁶⁵

Some narrators argued that propaganda was present on both sides to downplay the other regime:

One has to say that the West Germans also don't know much about us. For instance the institutions for child care. We had nice kindergartens, where the children played and learnt many children's songs – and they [relatives, who lived in West Germany] thought that our children learnt only Communist songs!⁶⁶

It is worth noting that many workers, who expressed socialist ideas, argued that in the time of the GDR they had consciously kept a distance from the party-state. While they also maintained this attitude towards the Communist Party after the fall of the regime, they re-evaluated the criticism of the capitalist system which the Party propagated. As some of them explicitly stated, it was only after they had lived in capitalist society that they learnt to believe its socialist criticism.

⁶² Interview with a German female skilled worker (51).

⁶³ Interview with a German male skilled worker (54).

⁶⁴ Interview with a German female white-collar worker (55).

⁶⁵ Interview with a German female skilled worker (52).

⁶⁶ Interview with a German female skilled worker (56).

I could actually live quite well in that system. I had no other orientation. I was born into that system and I did not feel myself imprisoned. For me it was normal that I could only go to Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.... One was happy to go there at that time [...] I was not a member of the Party, no. I could not identify myself with it although I was active socially in many other fields – at school, in the FDJ⁶⁷, and also during my training. I was always engaged in group activities and community organizations – but the Party, no [...] We were not interested in how Honecker lived. I was interested in how I lived. I was not against... But I did not want to join the Party and I stuck to this. I participated in everything that we had in the GDR – brigade book, patronizing schools – because I enjoyed it. But not the Party. That was for me like a red rag to a bull.⁶⁸

I was not a member of the Party, no...I did not have an interest in joining because I did not agree with some things [...] Na ja, they fooled the people a bit, just like today – socialism, all good, capitalism, all bad – it is not true, they can be both good and bad. As for me, I always say that capitalism is good if you have a job. When I have a job and I earn money, I can fly to America or to Spain or anywhere else. But if you have no money, you have problems.⁶⁹

While most of the interviewees said that they were happy that the Wende had come, the experience of the new capitalist regime triggered a re-evaluation of socialist ideology, which seemed to be effectively discredited when it was propagated by the Party. When speaking of the present, many interviewees expressed a desire for a more egalitarian society, the decrease of material inequalities, the reduction of unemployment and the expansion of the welfare state. Indeed, it can be argued that the majority of the interviewees expressed a socialist view of society. While it was recognized that the old system had to be changed, the workers said that they had a different ideal in mind when they went to the demonstrations against the old regime. It was the members of the younger age groups in particular (people between forty and fifty), who expressed this disappointment.

Today's parties don't have the same power as the Party had. In the old times the Party told the economy what to do, I mean that the main decisions were made in the Party and today it is the other way round: now the economy tells the parties what to do! [...] Our politics is too much dependent on economic interests... after all it is big industry that determines what today is called politics [...] You did not go onto the street in order to get this system. We went onto the street in order to build up a new system because people were not satisfied with the old. At the time we did not know that we were united. We thought that the GDR would remain. We wanted to move things within the GDR so that we could do things in a different way... that's why people went onto the street at that time [...] The situation of labour has worsened. That's clear. There is not enough work for everybody, and it won't get better because of modernization and new technologies. There is a lot of outsourcing, which further reduces the workplaces. So the situation won't improve, it will only get worse.⁷⁰

I see not much difference between the SPD and the CDU. I don't expect anything from this country and this democracy. It has been a long time since I had believed that it would go differently, that something would happen. And then at some point you just realize that what they offer to you, all this politics – it is an ugly comedy! It is always the same people who try to profit for themselves. Nothing else. I don't know what more I should expect from them. In the last years of the GDR everybody was very discontented. We all knew that what was before can't go on for long. There was no more perspective [...] at that time there were a lot of illusions, dreams

⁶⁷ FDJ: Freie Deutsche Jugend, the youth organization of the East German Communist party.

⁶⁸ Interview with a German female skilled worker (55).

⁶⁹ Interview with a German male skilled worker (53).

⁷⁰ Interview with a German female skilled worker (49).

that the two systems would somehow merge together but I would not have imagined that our whole system... that it would be so unscrupulously overtaken by the West.⁷¹

Some narrators also mentioned the generational differences in the experience of systemic change:

Personally I am happy that the Wende has come because my life became much better. But I can take the example of my parents, who have not won anything. They have a very low pension and they don't live well. They have worked all their lives. My mother worked and she had four children. And now I have more money than they have put together. This is somehow very sad... I think that for a particular age group... they had Pech⁷²... Young people benefited from the Wende if they had work but a certain age group belongs to the losers.⁷³

Regardless of how they evaluated the Wende, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees held that the situation of labour had worsened since 1990 because of high unemployment rates. Many actually explicitly used the term “exploitation” to refer to the workers' situation.

My brother-in-law is also frequently at work from 8 am till 9 pm... People who have work are exploited. They don't dare to protest because they are afraid of losing their jobs. There are lots of others waiting outside, this is what they say. Whoever has work is often exploited. What we have learnt from Lenin – quatsch⁷⁴, Marx's Kapital – what is capitalism? The exploitation of man by man. This is like that. And capitalism has not changed – it will stay like that.⁷⁵

It can therefore be argued that the negative experiences of post-socialist change (out of which unemployment and the disintegration of the old collectives ranked the highest in the German interviews) nourished socialist ideas of society. Workers were apparently disappointed in their expectation that in the united Germany there would be more social justice, and ordinary people would have more say in the issues that affected their country. While they rejected Honecker's regime, the new political system was likewise criticized for its failure to be a true democracy. As the above examples show, many narrators thought that there was only formal democracy in Germany, and that politics was decided by economics. In many interviews we can observe the image of the “little man”, who is excluded from the decision making process. People also stressed the huge social and material gap which separated professional politicians from average citizens. Interviewees typically argued that the politicians who sat in parliament had lost touch with the reality of ordinary peoples' lives, a comment on planned reforms that reduced welfare benefits.

While the interviewees did not speak directly of the social downgrading of the working class, the criticisms of high unemployment and the argument that the situation of labour worsened do in fact express a real concern about the social and political role of the working class. Many interviewees were sharply critical of the shrinking of the middle class because they considered the working class as part of that middle class. This classification of the working class may well have been one of the most lasting legacies of the socialist middle class, whose disappearance still triggers sharp social criticisms.

⁷¹ Interview with a German female skilled worker (47).

⁷² They were misfortunate.

⁷³ Interview with a German female white-collar worker (44).

⁷⁴ Nonsense.

⁷⁵ Interview with a German female engineer (49).

Nowadays people don't want to be turners or technicians but they want to make a great career... This is, I mean... The situation of the little man got worse and not only because of unemployment but if you look around the small entrepreneurs also have troubles...it was always my conviction that a state can't exist without a middle class. If this trend continues, then the middle class will disappear, and no state can exist without a middle class. Because a state always needs "extended hands", and this is exactly what the middle class provides.⁷⁶

First of all, you should see that the whole state has changed fundamentally – I mean its total organization and its objectives. The GDR was in principle a worker and peasant state. For instance they did a lot to support workers' education. It was easier for working-class children to get to a university than those who came from intellectual families. The whole culture of this country was like that. Today's society is totally different, there is much more support for intellectuals, science, research, they get much higher incomes and better opportunities. And if you see both dimensions – the economic and the social conditions – then there is a change of 180°. And there is an overall change of culture that you can also see in the plants. In the GDR it made no difference if you were a worker, a foreman or a manager – no difference in treatment, you could talk to everybody. What we experience today is that those who have responsible jobs distance themselves from their subordinates.⁷⁷

Inequalities have been increasing, na klar⁷⁸... You can see this in the neighbourhoods. In the time of the GDR people were happy when they moved to a newly built blocks of flats. Nowadays you find mostly migrants and the unemployed living there. Whoever has money moves away, builds his own house... there are whole quarters now where only professors and managers live.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In spite of the differences between their ruling socialist regimes, systemic change produced common experiences in East Germany and Hungary. Unemployment, the disintegration of the old socialist collectives, the loss or reduction of former networks, and the decline of solidarity in the workplace, the neighbourhood and in society seem to be common topics that underlie workers' narratives of the experience of post-socialist change. "Die Wende" was clearly understood as a dividing line in the German interviews. It should be noted, however, that many interviewees explicitly contrasted their original expectation of a more just, socialist oriented state with the new system, which they started to interpret in terms of its once discredited leftist criticism. In the Hungarian case, the year 1989 bore less significance for the majority of the interviewees. Systemic change was in general understood as an elitist project, whose negative consequences the people had to bear. While the German workers, who had work, still considered themselves to be part of the middle class, in the Hungarian case there was a stronger sense of the working class being downgraded (declining standards of living, the declining prestige of the factory).

These negative experiences did not, however, per se generate a leftist criticism of capitalism. In Hungary the contradiction between experience and expectation was resolved with the argument that something went wrong with the implementation of capitalism. The negative experiences of systemic change, which was understood as an

⁷⁶ Interview with a German female quality controller (53).

⁷⁷ Interview with a German skilled worker (55).

⁷⁸ Clear, obvious.

⁷⁹ Interview with a German skilled worker (60).

elitist project, led many narrators to the search for “enemies” and the support of the ideology of the strong state. The socialist criticism of the system was often mixed with nationalist sentiments. By contrast, the German workers harboured far fewer illusions of the capitalist system than did their Hungarian counterparts. They saw the social phenomena that they criticized – in particular, unemployment, increasing privatization of human life, the feeling of insecurity and the growing material polarization of society – as a consequence of capitalism. Indeed, many of them explicitly admitted that the experience of capitalism brought them closer to the old Marxist narrative, which they had refused under socialism. While the workers would not increase the state’s role in the economy, the state’s planned withdrawal from the social sphere (cuts of unemployment and social benefits, the extension of flexible employment) met their uniform and strong disapproval. In the long run, however, they did not expect this trend to be reversed. The situation of labour was negatively evaluated in both countries: the overwhelming majority of the German and Hungarian interviewees thought that the workers were more defenceless in the new system than they had been in the past.

The recollection of the two regimes shows a more controversial picture than can be squeezed into any “grand” narrative. Despite relative political liberalization under Kádár in Hungary, limited political freedom was markedly criticized in my interviews with skilled urban workers - the very core of the working class which the regime believed was central in its support. This experience contributed to the illusion of generalized welfare and the high consumption levels that capitalism could generate for them. Despite the more painful experience of transformation in Hungary, idealized views of capitalism persist, leading to a desire for national capitalisms as opposed to the bleak realities of globalization. In East Germany, the anti-capitalist ideology of the Party that was rather ineffective under the Honecker regime seemed to have a greater appeal after the regime’s collapse. At the same time, the comparison of the memories of the Kádár and Honecker regimes suggests that material security does not compensate people for political freedom. Even though the workers in the GDR had a higher standard of living than in Hungary where economic stagnation forced the government to increase prices from the late 1970s, the Kádár regime received a more positive evaluation not only in Hungary but also in Germany where interviewees recalled it as a “Western” country in socialist times, which can be explained through the experience of greater freedom.