



Krista Harper. *Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activists and Post-Socialist Ecology in Hungary.* Boulder: Eastern European Monographs, 2006. 160 pp. ISBN 978-0-88033-592-8; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-592-8.

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Making Environmentalism in Postsocialist Hungary

Wild Capitalism offers a set of ethnographic essays on environmental activism in Hungary from the 1980s through the 1990s, in which Krista Harper “interrogates how the meanings of ‘environment,’ ‘citizenship,’ and ‘civil society’ have changed as environmentalists reinvented themselves as part of the imagined community of international environmentalism and grassroots globalization” (p. 2). After a brief trip to Budapest in the fall of 1993, Harper conducted her primary fieldwork from 1995 to 1997 (it is not clear whether she was in the field continuously during this period). She interacted with a variety of environmental groups in the capital but focused most of her attention on the student group ELTE Klub, participating in its weekly meetings, demonstrations, and social events. She also attended a range of nation-level meetings, demonstrations, conferences, and training sessions involving other groups. Harper “used several methods to develop a picture of environmental activism as a perspective and a set of practices—collecting activist life histories, conducting interviews, participating in the everyday activities of environmentalist groups, and observing debates and demonstrations. Since [she] was concerned with transformations and continuities in environmental activism over the course of the transition, [she] often used a methodological strategy of tracking an issue or activist through time” (p. 6).

The book comprises five numbered chapters bracketed by an introduction and very brief conclusion. Chapter 1 examines the well-known movement that emerged in the late 1980s to oppose damming of the Danube River for hydropower generation. Harper notes the crucial politicizing role of the movement’s “green dissident” critique of state socialism: “The demonstrations of 1988 were, for thousands of citi-

zens, a turning point in the creation of an alternative civil sphere” (p. 34). But she finds that already by 1995, this heroic “founding epic” was “showing signs of wear,” and many activists were articulating a “new, more inclusive story” (p. 29). In one influential revisionist chronology of Hungarian environmentalism, an ELTE Klub activist highlighted the movement’s diverse roots in the nonviolence/peace movement, the alternative community movement, and various nature protection and environmental organizations (p. 37). Harper’s research confirms this alternative “origin story,” providing a useful corrective to the reductionist focus on the Danube mobilization and revealing some of the tensions and rivalries within the broader environmental movement.

In chapter 2, Harper shows how the Chernobyl disaster sparked environmental consciousness-raising and mobilization, drawing on Ulrich Beck’s (1995) notion of the “anthropological shock” engendered by the “incommensurability of scientific knowledge about environmental risks and the everyday experiences of people living with those risks” (p. 69). She relates informants’ “Chernobyl stories” to show how “dislocating experiences of uncertainty” and of official deception “transformed their personal, professional, and political identities” (pp. 52-53). The mother of a newborn became a grassroots environmental activist; a research biologist moved into NGO work and then journalism. Harper compares these Chernobyl stories to the “litanies of complaint” identified by Nancy Ries (1997) in perestroika-era Russian conversation. The Chernobyl stories “resemble litanies in their invocation of a community of exposure and potential suffering, ... [in] their identification with innocent victims, ... [and] in that they identify knowledge and ignorance as a power relationship” (pp. 61-62). However,

Harper argues that unlike Ries's litanies, these stories served to promote social change rather than passive acquiescence, when "the speaker locate[d] a possible solution to technological and environmental problems in public participation and collective action" (p. 62). Chernobyl undermined the legitimacy of state socialism by subjecting to scrutiny the "twin claims of its technical expertise and its ability to provide for citizens," thereby sparking a "politicization of knowing" and "politicization of caring" (p. 63). Klara, the research biologist, found that "even as a scientific expert with access to technology and information, she was unable to challenge public policies around Chernobyl because of institutional opacity and bureaucratic closure.... [S]he had to act as a citizen so that her interpretation as a scientist could be heard" (p. 66). Parents' Chernobyl stories "highlight the dilemma of being a responsible parent when trust in the state's welfare bureaucracies and scientific expertise falters and the personal havens of the home and the body are shown to be vulnerable to outside threats" (pp. 67-68). This shock propels them out of the home and into the realm of civic activism, causing "them to see environmentalism as a parental or professional responsibility—as a public vocation, rather than a private litany of worries" (p. 68).

Chapter 3 chronicles the emergence of an anticorporate, anticonsumerist strand of environmentalism in the 1990s. Harper notes that while dissidents in the 1980s focused on the need to protect the public sphere from an overbearing state, they failed to recognize the need to protect that sphere from commercialization. This omission was "understandable," she says, "given that the second economy had been a key site of Hungarian opposition to state socialism" and that "Western brand-name products symbolized resistance to state authority" (p. 77). After the collapse of socialism, however, penetration by multinational corporations engendered an intense backlash against global consumer capitalism. Harper chronicles grassroots campaigns against McDonald's restaurants, Nestle-sponsored school contests, and Coca-Cola's controversial offer to "gift-wrap" Budapest's famous Chain Bridge for the holiday season. These campaigns critiqued global corporations' material wastefulness and glorification of consumption, their use of marketing techniques that saturated public space and reminded many of socialist-era propaganda, and, most fundamentally, the loss of local control engendered by their perceived cultural imperialism. These campaigns, Harper argues convincingly, broadened the

scope of "environmental" activism to include notions of decentralization, public space, and public participation, bringing to the fore the crucial tension in late-capitalist societies "between citizenship and consumership" (p. 93).

Chapter 4 builds on this theme to trace the emergence of an "eco-colonialism" narrative critical of Hungary's insertion into global and European markets. In the 1990s, Hungarian activists began to note the uneven distribution of environmental risks between East and West, focusing particularly on four issues: "1) international traffic in toxic waste; 2) the introduction of non-recyclable packaging for consumer goods; 3) the relocation of dangerous processes, especially nuclear technologies; and 4) the transformation of Eastern Europe into a new market for risky products, particularly genetically engineered foods" (p. 102). While the narrative of the socialist East's "backwardness" vis-à-vis the capitalist West was hegemonic during the transition years, Hungarian activists, through their interactions with international NGOs, gained "access to another discourse on progress: the international environmentalist critique of neoliberal globalization" (p. 118).

Finally, chapter 5 provides a very brief application of the environmental justice paradigm to the case of the Roma in Hungary. Harper finds that although the economically and politically marginalized Roma minority has suffered disproportionately from negative environmental impacts of the postsocialist transition (and of the socialist-era ethnic division of labor), "virtually no groups have attempted to connect environmental issues and Roma rights mobilization. Only a handful of Romani activist organizations make reference to environmental issues; and no environmental organizations include the participation of Romani communities as a goal in their mission statements" (p. 127).

Wild Capitalism is well written, readable, and concise (147 pages), making it a useful text for undergraduate courses on environmentalism or postsocialism. However, its scholarly value is diminished by Harper's superficial and at times misconceived engagement with theory. She cites a grab-bag of relevant theorists throughout the book, and while in some cases she integrates her ethnographic evidence meaningfully with these theoretical frameworks (particularly in her use of Beck and Ries in chapter 2), more often the connections are poorly articulated.

The biggest problem in this regard is Harper's use of the term "political ecology," which appears in the title and sporadically throughout the chapters. Harper never defines the term, and she uses it in several different and sometimes inappropriate ways. In its most common scholarly usage—and the one that Harper claims to employ—"political ecology" refers to an interdisciplinary scholarly field that emerged in the 1980s primarily among geographers and anthropologists to critically examine relationships between power, poverty, and environmental degradation in colonial and postcolonial settings (see Roderick P. Neumann, *Making Political Ecology* [2005]). Political ecologists draw on post-Marxist political economy and poststructuralist discourse analysis to explore, for example, social constructions of nature and environmental narratives, the politics of scientific knowledge production, and contested access to natural resources. Harper acknowledges that "political ecology provides a method for studying the political economy of the environment," and claims to be providing an "urban political ecology" of postsocialist Hungary. So far so good—but later she refers to the "ecocolonialism" narrative as "an attempt [apparently by its articulators, i.e., Hungarian activists] to develop a political ecology of post-socialism" (p. 99). In this context, "political ecology" appears to be an activist strategy. Elsewhere, she refers to "Western European and American environmentalists' critique of capitalist political ecology" (p. 114). Here, "political ecology" seemingly refers to an economic system and its environmental impacts.

This fuzziness is not merely semantic: the more fundamental problem is that Harper is not actually "doing" political ecology in this book. She makes reference (drawing on secondary sources) to the political-economic context of the events she discusses, but this context is not the subject of her

analysis. The book's title is doubly misleading, for it is not really about capitalism. It is, rather, an ethnography of environmental activism, which quite successfully examines "how environmentalism takes shape in specific cultural and political contexts" (p. 6). And yet, while she explores the narratives articulated and contested by various environmentalist actors, she does not bring to bear the poststructuralist power/knowledge perspective that is central to political ecology.

What Harper does is to show us how variously positioned actors talked about and practiced environmental activism during the transformative years before and after the collapse of socialism. The book succeeds on these terms, and its greatest strength is its ethnographic richness. Harper provides numerous photographs illustrating environmental protests and street theater, anticonsumerist cartoons, and the like, and she captures some wonderfully telling moments: the dismay of east-central European activists at an anti-European Union demonstration in Amsterdam when their Western counterparts "launched into a round of the Internationale" (p. 146); the excerpt from "a contemporary Dutch textbook on marketing" that celebrates the opening of East European consumer and labor markets with the declaration that "Europe's colonies are now more nearby than ever"; the direct-action prank by anti-waste activists in which 792 non-disposable plates were delivered to McDonald's headquarters; the rebranding of Budapest's "Student Island" summer music festival as "Pepsi Island" (pp. 121, 82, 73). These details make the book an engaging read.

On a technical level, the book is marred by the lack of an index, the large number of typographical errors, and the occasional omission of cited sources from the bibliography.

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