

The Great Migration Malaise of 2015: Fear, Frustration, and the Feelgood Factor

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My contribution to this conference will be divided into three sections. I shall first talk a little about the village of Tázlár, which lies about 120 kms south-east of Budapest and somewhat nearer to the Serbian border. The opinions I heard during a short stay in the village in August-September 2015 are not so different from those I heard elsewhere in Hungary, or from “voices on the street” in other countries I have visited in recent months, namely Poland, Britain and Germany. I shall focus on Hungary in my second section and Germany in the third. My concluding remarks will address the deeper ambiguities – not to say hypocrisies – of the malaise affecting Europe in the year of 2015, for which no solution is in sight.

Tázlár: a not-quite-homogenous village on the Danube-Tisza interfluve

As a graduate student in social anthropology (and not yet very fluent in Hungarian) I began field research in the village of Tázlár in 1976. I have continued to visit and write about this community ever since (Hann 1980, 2015a). By coincidence, my regular late summer visit in August-September 2015 coincided with dramatic scenes at the Hungarian-Serbian border and at the Keleti station in Budapest (Hann 2015b). The topic dominated the media throughout Europe and I found it interesting to compare foreign coverage with what I could read and hear inside Hungary. In the village (population nowadays around 1750) and in the nearby town of

Kiskunhalas (population around 30,000), the great majority was highly critical of the stream of *migránsok* (this was the term generally used, rather than *menekültek*, refugees). The proximity of the frontier somehow brought the matter close to home. No migrants were visible in the village or the town, but everyone knew that several hundred were temporarily accommodated in a disused barracks just outside Kiskunhalas. It was asserted that taxis carrying the foreigners northwards to Budapest regularly used the minor roads of the Danube-Tisza interfluvium in order to avoid police controls on the major highways, passing through villages such as Tázlár at the dead of night.

I conducted no systematic surveys. Voting patterns in Tázlár resemble preferences throughout rural Hungary. For the first time ever, there was a finely-balanced race in the mayoral contest of September 2014, narrowly won by the candidate of FIDESZ, the governing party. But it was generally agreed that the political sympathies of the defeated incumbent (who had always stood as an independent and been in office since 1994) were identical to those of his challenger. In private conversations, a few villagers took a more generous line towards the refugees, suggesting that they deserved help rather than the scornful rejection which appeared to be driving the government's response. In some cases this might have been because they knew I live in Germany and suspected that I might sympathize with western criticisms of Viktor Orbán's nationalist rhetoric and fence construction. Negative Western reporting is a constant cause for complaint in much of the Hungarian media. It seemed to me that unorthodox opinions on the *migránsok* were more likely to be voiced by persons who belonged to a sociological minority of some sort, e.g. the Lutheran religious minority, or the dwindling minority of villagers who had formerly sympathized with the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.

Of course, all human beings belong to minorities of one sort or another. The Danube-Tisza interfluvium was repopulated after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Turks in the eighteenth

century through well-orchestrated settlement schemes (arguably better planned than those of 2015), notably involving ethnic German and Slovak communities. The sandy soils of Tázlár are generally unfavorable for subsistence-oriented peasant farming. For centuries they remained uninhabited, used by other settlements as summer pasture. By the late nineteenth century, however, following the abolition of serfdom, population pressures became acute in many areas of rural Hungary. In the absence of industrial investments, the solution for hundreds of thousands was to take a ship to the Americas (as noted this morning by Tibor Frank). In the decades preceding the First World War, one alternative to such international migration was to colonise the internal frontier of the Great Hungarian Plain. Even ecologically infertile regions of the interfluvium were now sold by banks as small parcels of private property. Most of the contemporary population of Tázlár can trace their descent to the migrants who built their scattered farmsteads (*tanyák*) a century ago. Many had *sváb* or *tóth* family names and German and Slovak were still spoken here in the first half of the twentieth century. Only in a final massive wave of Magyarization during the Second World War did almost all of these families adopt Hungarian-sounding surnames (though this was not always enough to save them from deportation and death in Siberia following the victory of the Red Army).

In the socialist decades, when the nuclear centre grew dramatically and hundreds of isolated *tanyák* were abandoned, Tázlár became a modern Hungarian village. After the *rendszer váltás*, there was a modest revival of interest in ethnic minorities in neighboring settlements (Kiskőrös cultivated links with Slovakia and Soltvadkert with both eastern and western Germany), but Tázlár is an exclusively Hungarian settlement. Children do of course learn when still very young that the Magyars are themselves migrants who arrived gloriously in their present homeland in the Carpathian Basin little more than 1000 years ago. But they are not socialized to pay any mind to later migration histories or to the non-Hungarian origins

of a high proportion of local inhabitants. Even the few Roma households of the village communicate only in Hungarian. Kiskunhalas has a much larger Roma population, which the Hungarian majority of the town was prone to invoke when discussing the *migránsok*: “if there is still so much to be done in terms of integrating these co-citizens, how can we be expected to accept Muslim foreigners?”

Hungary: a postsocialist *grande nation* defending European civilization

This conference has gathered many experts on migration research in general, and on Hungary in particular. I bring no such qualifications. All I wish to do in this section is hazard some connections between the policies of the present government in Budapest and the country’s transformation in little more than two decades from constituting a relatively prosperous and tolerant variant of state socialism to being a relatively impoverished and intolerant variant of market capitalism. There seems to be no doubt that Viktor Orbán’s approval ratings have risen in the opinion polls as a result of his handling of this year’s big issue. He may be a pariah in the liberal West, but his aggressive posturing on behalf of Christian Europe goes down well at home. This phenomenon surely has deeper causes in the collapse of the socialist economic synthesis which enabled villages such as Tázlár to transform their collective infrastructure, and their inhabitants to narrow the gap between them and urban elites, and to adopt new living standards and internalise expectations of further improvement that were shattered in the 1990s. The dissolution of collective farms and the privatization of their assets, including the land itself, brought wealth to a few but for the majority it meant uncertainty and, if not impoverishment, then a stagnation and vegetation that contrasted with the forward-looking trajectories of socialist days. The disillusionment is strongest in the rural sector because, relatively speaking, this sector was the biggest winner in the Hungarian variant of socialism (Swain 1985); so the fall from grace is greater. But inequalities have widened within the

urban as well as within the rural population. They have also widened between regions (with eastern districts losing out most completely). The ensuing tensions, in a country which historically had pretensions to being an imperial power in the region, create fertile terrain for politicians adept at playing the nationalist card. The anti-*migráns* rhetoric of 2015 is a continuation of the trends which have seen minorities within stigmatized (i.e. Roma and Jews) and Brussels pilloried for every action or statement not in keeping with the actions and statements of the true guardians of European values by the Danube.

Hungary does not stand alone in this regard. It was the most visible scapegoat for the obscenities of summer 2015, but it is well known that public opinion in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland is roughly congruent with opinion in Hungary. This is not surprising. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided that Syrian refugees would be welcome in Germany, but then very soon afterwards began to insist on quotas to distribute the influx throughout the European Union, you do not have to be a strident nationalist to feel that your country is being treated in a high-handed manner. The then Polish government flouted the opinion polls in agreeing to implement the quotas urged by Germany, but the new authorities in Warsaw are adamant that Viktor Orbán's line is entirely correct. In Prague and Bratislava, too, at least on these matters, Orbán commands a wide measure of respect, even admiration. These facts have led many western commentators to complain about Eastern Europeans who do not understand what it means to belong to a solidary community such as the European Union. If Hungarian farmers benefit from the subsidies distributed by Brussels agricultural policies (so the argument goes), then they must also be ready to share the costs of accommodating refugees. Eastern Europeans might have been multi-cultural empires in the distant past, but they morphed into selfish nation-states under socialism and are now accused of a "compassion deficit".

Criticisms of this kind are constantly echoed *within* the countries of the Visegrád Group by elites in the capital who deplore the growing xenophobia of the masses all around them. I am troubled by these conflicts because I have friends in both camps! It is true that some villagers in Tázlár write the most shameful things about *migránsok* in the social media. They have never encountered a *migráns* in their lives and I know them to be decent people, caring parents and helpful neighbours, not crypto-Fascists. Of course, Hannah Arendt might not be convinced. But those who rush to condemn Eastern Europeans as backward and reactionary should bear at least two points in mind. First, during and even after the decades of socialism, most East Europeans (even those in the larger cities; in fact everywhere outside the capital) had little opportunity to encounter foreigners. This ignorance is no excuse for outrageous posturing, but it is well established that fear and negative stereotypes are seldom broken down until there is more concrete interaction with the groups in question. The second factor is that in recent decades, especially since EU accession opened up western labour markets, millions of Eastern European families have one or members working abroad (most often young people, most often in Britain). This tears families apart, affects marriage strategies, family planning, and much more besides. Against this background, is it surprising that the sight of millions of non-EU citizens being given assisted passage to enter the region's most prosperous country gives rise to anger and resentment? It is rather hard to learn German or English in Hungary to a level at which one could enter a prestigious segment of those foreign labour markets. Most migrants, including qualified graduates, therefore end up in hotels and catering, or in some form of care provisioning. Perhaps some of these migrant Hungarians will, following their experiences abroad, become more sympathetic to the region's new *migránsok* than their parents. But for many, those who stay and those who leave, the dearth of opportunities within Hungary itself is the proof that the EU has failed. People therefore ask: "if there is still so much to be done in terms of integrating our country and region into Europe, how can we be expected to accept Muslim foreigners?"

Germany: Europe's hegemonic power needs both labour and moral glow

Western reproaches toward the east can also be noticed within Germany, where the most visible protests against the influx of *Flüchtlinge* have taken place in Saxony (notably Dresden). The same structural factors apply here as in the Visegrád Group: little exposure to migrant workers in the socialist era, and unfavorable economic indicators today. Yet one also finds throughout Germany (including the West) a widening cleavage between elites (“the political classes”) and masses. Accommodation designated for asylum seekers has been burned down in many western locations, not just in the east. In Germany as in France and Britain, populist anti-European parties are profiting from the conjuncture.

A quarter of a century after unification, unemployment rates in the former DDR are still significantly higher than those in the West. Here, too, the same basic question is posed: “if there is still so much to do in terms of integrating co-citizens, how can we be expected to accept Muslim foreigners?” The politicians’ assurances that no immigrant poses a threat to a native German’s job ring hollow in Eastern German cities where competition with the local working classes in the lower segments of the labour market seems blatantly obvious. Yet the German economy as a whole, which has performed so well since the labour market reforms of Gerhard Schröder more than a decade ago, needs labour. The newcomers are also needed by an ageing society to pay for its pensions. While Angela Merkel justifies her policies as a “humanitarian imperative”, it is safe to assume that this most cautious and calculating of politicians is at the same time well aware not only of the political dividends of her course (the novel support from Social Democrats and Greens greatly exceeds the loss of support in her own party to populists on the right) but also of the strong support from capitalist business lobbies.

There is nonetheless a strong emotional dimension to the political developments of recent months. I call this the feelgood factor. It has much to do with negotiations in the first seven months of this year with Greece over the future of that country within the Euro, and even within the European Union. By July it became clear that Greece would have to accept the terms laid down by Mrs. Merkel and her Finance Minister, but this German victory left a sour taste. Europe's economic hegemon had, if not a bad conscience, at any rate a dented image. The *Flüchtlingskrise* provided an ideal opportunity to restore morale. The price for setting aside (at least temporarily) the North-South tensions occasioned by the Euro crisis was a revival of the familiar East-West binaries of the Cold War era, but this price is evidently considered to be well worth paying. As the weeks go by and Mrs. Merkel acknowledges the huge difficulties in providing decent accommodation and processing the asylum applications of over a million new arrivals, let alone integrating them in the longer term, there is still a glow of pride in large sections of German society that their Chancellor is internationally praised for her principled ethical stance, and spoken of as a possible candidate for the Nobel peace prize.

Conclusion: economic imperatives, humanitarian imperatives and hypocrisy

It is tempting to detect an undercurrent of hypocrisy in the stance of leading politicians, whose appeals to human rights and humanitarian altruism may disguise more mundane, even quite sordid motivations. Mrs. Merkel is inscrutable in this respect. But the social scientists who write about these matters must also be careful. At my own Institute in Halle there have been various initiatives to provide assistance to the many refugees now living in our city (700 are accommodated in a large hotel in the city centre which has come down in the world since its construction as a luxury hotel in DDR days). It has also been proposed that we apply some perspectives and methods of socio-cultural anthropology in working with the newcomers, e.g.

in collecting life-history narratives. Some of these narratives may well provide support for Mrs. Merkel's metanarrative of "humanitarian imperative". But if our researchers take the trouble, as honest social scientists, to sample the population in the hotel, it seems likely that they will find a preponderance of young men whose life-histories may be full of frustrations, but who lack any direct experience of violence or suffering. Their arduous and often risky journeys have been financed by their families and the expectations of them are high: the migrants should enter the labour market as rapidly as possible and begin sending money home. In short, they meet the common sense definition of an "economic migrant" (recall that Viktor Orbán is fond of stating that his policies are based on plain common sense).

Yet I have noticed in a number of international conferences as well as at my own institute that it is politically incorrect nowadays to make any distinction between those fleeing oppression and those migrating in the hope of improving their lives (and the lives of family members, who may or may not join them in due course). It is obvious that the categories and sub-categories are fluid. All of the victims and losers of unequal global forces deserve the sympathy of rich Europeans. And even Hungarians and Poles are undeniably prosperous compared with many, perhaps most, of those on the migration trail to the EU in 2015. But cosmopolitan liberal elites need to understand the realities of relative deprivation in their own backyard. They need also to recognize that the complete abolition of border controls (the logical recommendation of those who despair of drawing any distinction between economic migrants and those with an immediately compelling case for humanitarian support) is good for business, because it drives down the price of labour and boosts the rate of profit; but it is hardly compatible with social democracy and the kinds of solidary community that European states – both in the West and in the East – have created over generations to domesticate international capital.

References

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