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VISEGRÁD ANTHROPOLOGISTS' NETWORK



Launch meeting of V4 Net, 9 October 2017, (from left): Michael Stewart (University College London) ■ Agnieszka Halemba (University of Warszawa) ■ Elena Soler (Charles University Prague) ■ László Kürti (University of Miskolc) ■ Bertalan Pusztai (University of Szeged) ■ Marcin Lubaś (Jagiellonian University Kraków) ■ Nicolette Makovicky (University of Oxford) ■ Daniel Sosna (University of West Bohemia, Plzeň) ■ Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale) ■ Bettina Mann (Research Coordinator, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale.) ■ Juraj Buzalka (Comenius University, Bratislava) ■ Tatjana Thelen (University of Vienna) ■ Margit Feischmidt (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) ■ Frances Pine (Goldsmiths, University of London). (Photo: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2017)

Introduction to the V4 Network

Chris Hann

The Visegrád Anthropologists’ Network (V4 Net) was launched on 9 October 2017. Stefan Schwendtner, freshly appointed as this Institute’s Press and Public Relations Officer, issued the following press release:

Since 2004 the Visegrád states have enjoyed all the benefits of EU membership, yet they have been reluctant to share the burden of the “migrant crisis” that erupted in 2015. It is not just political solidarity with the EU that is judged to be lacking: Western politicians and journalists bemoan rampant xenophobia in East-Central Europe, when humanitarian sympathy with refugees is called for. Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński are depicted as demagogues, manipulating the media and amending constitutions in order to undermine the independence of the judiciary. A generation after the collapse of socialism, democracy itself seems to be threatened.

“Such hasty judgements and stereotypes must be questioned,” says Prof. Chris Hann. “I am especially interested in tracing grassroots social changes taking place within the Visegrád region. Various sectors of labour migration to the West have been well documented, from agriculture to hospitality and the care sector, both private and public. We know the root causes of this exodus: even where jobs are available in the homeland, the wages are abysmal, insufficient even to support household reproduction. But we don’t know very much about what is happening to families and neighbourhoods in the villages and towns which these emigrants leave.” At the inaugural meeting, anthropologists from the Visegrád states were joined by Western specialists on the region to discuss the present state of research and the priorities for future investigations.

“Right-wing, populist mobilization in Eastern Europe is currently attracting a great deal of attention, from anthropologists as well as other scholars,” Hann observes. “This is quite right, it’s an important issue, but to grasp it adequately we need to widen the context. There are plenty of topics where more research is urgently needed – for example, into the social impact of EU transfers and of transnational investors like Mercedes-Benz. Remuneration patterns, payment practices and taxation strategies in enterprises owned by native entrepreneurs should also be examined, together with continuities with the shadow economy of the socialist era which are still widespread in some sectors. A lot of work has already been done on social memory

and nostalgia, the manipulation of historical symbols, the branding of exemplary national products, and the staging of new rituals; but here too, in the understanding of subjectivities and emotions, as we move forward in the second postsocialist generation, there is a need for innovative anthropological research.”

With a mix of empirical projects exploring both political economy and changing social relations and notions of personhood, the aim is to create a solid foundation to address larger conceptual questions concerning trust and morals in states that used to be on the periphery of the Soviet empire and now find themselves structurally marginalized by the EU and global capitalism.¹

The programme outlined in this press release has been steadily implemented during the last two years. We have been particularly concerned to assist young researchers at institutions within the region, many of which have struggled under political and financial pressures in recent years. This network is a novel initiative, quite unlike any previous project or focus group in the department. The very name Visegrád is highly evocative for me personally. I visited the castle that commands the Danube bend at Visegrád for the first time in the course of a Summer University in Economics in Budapest in August 1974. This is the region in which I began my career as an anthropologist. Over the decades I have been fortunate in the assistance and collegiality shown to me by countless “local scholars.” I cannot even begin to correct all the asymmetries that derive from my privileged position as a Western researcher. Even so, I hope that those who have justifiably complained in the past about “hierarchies of knowledge” in our discipline will see this network as an effort to promote more balanced exchanges, such that future generations of European anthropologists will be able to interact on a more level playing field.

When I entered anthropology (following undergraduate studies in economics and politics), Hungary and Poland were at the forefront of attempts to reform socialism. At the end of the 1980s, following “roundtable” talks rather than violent revolutions, these same countries were in the vanguard of the “system change” that eventually led to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Thirty years on, however, they stand accused of populism or a full-fledged “illiberalism;” the statesmen of Hungary and Poland are deplored by the liberal establishment of the EU (to which all four Visegrád states acceded in 2004). Much of my own research in recent years has been devoted to explaining this transformation.

¹ My thanks to Stefan Schwendtner for this extensive summary of our goals in this initiative. This outreach to the media was especially important in view of the strong interest that the public in Halle and elsewhere in the former GDR takes in the condition of former socialist neighbours. For more detail on the launch meeting of V4 Net, see: https://www.eth.mpg.de/4607479/news_2017_10_13_01?c=3198137



The States of the Visegrád Cooperation.

As usual, the causes must be sought at multiple levels: from global political economy to particular national and regional histories (see my discussion in the Introduction to this report). While populism has been prominent in the discussions of the network, there has been no attempt to forge a cohesive overall project. Rather, V4 Net exists primarily to support the priorities of its members in the four countries, in particular through a scheme to enable doctoral students based in the region to benefit from Max Planck scholarships and funding for their fieldwork. Altogether 16 students are being supported in this way. In addition, two-year scholarships have been awarded to 7 postdocs, whose work is based at the MPI in Halle. Apart from supporting conferences and workshops, the network facilitates the mobility of individual scholars between all the participating institutes. Senior and junior members alike are encouraged to spend time at the MPI for Social Anthropology, to work on their own projects as well as to provide stimulus and guidance to the research community in Halle. V4 Net is scheduled to run until the summer of 2021, when a concluding conference will be organized at the Max Planck Society’s castle in Bavaria, Schloss Ringberg.

Doctoral Students supported in the framework of V4 Net

Matej Butko (Comenius University, Bratislava): *The Postsocialist Schengen Borderlands: Comparative Perspectives on Local Governance, Economy and Power* (Supervisor: Juraj Buzalka)

Ewa Cichocka (University of Warsaw): *Life Strategies of Second-Generation Immigrants and Intergenerational Transfers in a Multicultural City. The Example of Polish Immigrant Families in Berlin* (Supervisor: Sławomir Łodziński)

Balázs Gosztanyi (Corvinus University, Budapest): *From Waste to Vintage: An Exploration of an Informal Value Chain in the EU* (Supervisor: Zsombor Csata)

Kamila Grzeškowiak (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań): *In the Name of Security. Securitization of Everyday Life in Poland as a Reaction to the Socio-Political Situation in Europe* (Supervisor: Michał Buchowski)

Jana Hrkčová (Central European University, Budapest): *Wedges of Warsaw: On Green Infrastructure and Pollution in a Postsocialist City* (Supervisor: Daniel Monterescu)

Katrin Kremmler (Humboldt University, Berlin): *'Eurasian Magyars': Postcolonial Perspectives on Hungarian Neo-Nationalism* (Supervisors: Regina Römhild and Margit Feischmidt)

Katarzyna Ewa Król (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): *Knowledge Production and Biomedical Cultures within Rare Diseases in Poland* (Supervisor: Małgorzata Rajtar)

Pavel Mašek (University of West Bohemia, Pilsen): *Rusting Away: An Ethnography of Automobiles, Value, Informality, and Daily Morality at a Salvage Yard* (Supervisor: Daniel Sosna)

Jan Ort (Charles University, Prague): *The Policy of 'Controlled Dispersal' of the Roma in the 1960s in former Czechoslovakia. A Case Study of Humenné District* (Supervisor: Helena Sadílková)

Sandra Ort-Mertlová (Comenius University, Bratislava) *The Roma Community of Eastern Slovakia from the Perspective of Dependence, Dominance and Reciprocity* (Supervisor: Juraj Podoba)

Barbora Stehlíková (Charles University, Prague): *E-Waste between Morality and Ethics: Waste Practices in the Czech Republic* (Supervisor: Daniel Sosna)

Barbara Tołłoczko-Suchańska (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): *Social Life of Foreign Things: Changes within Relations of People and Objects since the 1970s in Poland* (Supervisor: Anna Wieczorkiewicz)

Martin Tremčinský (Charles University, Prague): *Technologies of Exchange: Comparison of Currency Design and Its Political Impact* (Supervisor: Jakub Grygar)

Roman Urbanowicz (University of Warsaw / University of Helsinki): *Uncertain Prospects behind the Edge of Europe: Projected Futures of Polish Youth in North-Western Belarus* (Initial supervisor at Warsaw: Agnieszka Halemba; present supervisor, following transfer to Helsinki: Sarah Green)

Márk Vangel (University of Szeged / University of Pécs): *Working Abroad at Home: Unequal Development from the Perspectives of Mercedes-Benz Workers in a Rapidly Changing Hungarian Town* (Supervisors: Bertalan Pusztai and Ágnes Hesz)

Tereza Virtová (Charles University, Prague): *Work, Create, Innovate! Inquiring into the Start-up Scene in the Czech Republic* (Supervisor: Tereza Stöckelová)

Postdoctoral Scholarships have been awarded to:

Emma P. Greeson: *Polski Design: Nostalgia, Nationhood, and Everyday Objects in Global Capitalism*

Joanna Mroczkowska: *Social Memory in Rural and Small-Town Poland: Anthropological Perspectives on Food and Postsocialism*

Nikolaos Olma: *Crossing the San: Bridges, Cable Ferries, and Everyday Cross-River Mobility in Southeastern Poland*

Gergő Pulay: *Value, Livelihood, and Dependency in Poor Neighbourhoods of Hungary and Romania*

Michal Šipoš: *Ethnography of Loss and Change: War Refugees in Visegrád Countries*

Kristóf Szombati: *Illiberal Statecraft in Hungary*

Johana Wyss: *Memory and Commemoration in Czech Silesia*

**CONFERENCE: Visegrád Belongings:
Freedoms, Responsibilities and Everyday Dilemmas**

Convener: Chris Hann

Venue: Halle, 7–8 June 2018

This conference cast a broad net to attract leading figures from all four Visegrád states, together with younger scholars from the region and a sprinkling of experts from elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America. Our call for papers invoked Karl Polanyi and ran as follows:

The first conference of V4 Net will tackle very broad themes pertaining to “belonging”: from face-to-face communities and regional identifications to loyalties to larger imaginary constructions such as the nation. Beyond the nation-state, does the V4 itself generate sentiments of belonging, and if so, how are these effects achieved? How can anthropologists illuminate current tensions between national belonging and larger entities such as the EU, or a Christian European civilization? In addition to all these forms of collective belonging, other forms may also be explored: to one’s family or larger kin groups, to workplaces, secular associations, religious congregations etc. In all cases, acts of categorization and processes of boundary construction result in exclusions, with implications for social relations and their imagination. The juxtaposition of “freedom” and “responsibility” is inspired by Karl Polanyi (see the final chapter of *The Great Transformation*, 1944). The mature Polanyi argued that freedom cannot be attained in conditions of bourgeois liberalism, where market exchange is the dominant form of economic integration, but only through socialist democracy based on the recognition of society and responsible action towards others. Today, when economic pressures force families apart and politicians manipulate sentiments of national belonging to disguise increasing social inequality and to monopolise power, Polanyi’s social philosophy seems utterly utopian. In his home region and elsewhere, the notion of responsibility may itself be acquiring darker aspects (e.g. in racialized notions of kinship). But is this to paint the picture too black? Can we detect other forms of belonging in the contemporary V4 that might contain the seeds of a new emancipatory “double movement” in Polanyi’s sense?

It would be misleading to claim that the conference provided definitive answers to any of these questions. However, we certainly learned a lot from each other in the course of two full days of debate. The “business meeting” was devoted primarily to

discussions of the scholarly priorities and possible locations of further meetings; but we also found time to note the difficult situation of our Canadian colleague David Scheffel, whose treatment in a long-running legal process in Slovakia appeared to be well below what one would expect from a member of the European Union.²



Participants in the conference “Visegrád Belongings.” (Photo: MPI for Social Anthropology, 2018)

Follow-up BASEES Panel

Some of the central themes of this first conference were taken up a year later at a meeting of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (Cambridge, 12–14 April 2019). At a panel convened by Chris Hann and political economist Gábor Scheiring (currently a Marie Curie Fellow at Bocconi University, formerly a Member of Parliament in Hungary) entitled “Digging Its Own Grave? Postsocialist Liberalism and the Countermovement in the Visegrád States,” the papers of the conveners were supplemented with presentations by two other members of V4Net. Juraj Buzalka and Anna Malewska-Szałygin spoke about the legacies of older streams of peasant political imaginaries in Slovakia and Poland respectively. The panel generated good discussion and the feeling that we should follow up with a publication. The conveners are therefore currently working on an interdisciplinary Special Issue for the journal *Europe-Asia Studies*, under the title “Neoliberal Capitalism and Visegrád Countermovements.” Revised versions of the Cambridge papers will be supplemented with a further four papers commissioned by Gábor Scheiring and myself, all illuminating contemporary political phenomena in the Visegrád states. A final paper (by Felix Ringel) explores closely related constellations in the former German Democratic Republic.

² For more detail about this conference see https://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/en/media/conference_visegrad_belongings_18

In the current reporting period V4 Net has supported three significant meetings outside Halle:

WORKSHOP: Thrift in Anthropology: Between Thriftiness and Wasting (jointly sponsored with the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the University of West Bohemia):

Convener: Daniel Sosna

Venue: Pilsen, Czech Republic, 18–19 October 2018

Daniel Sosna provided the following summary of the meeting:



Stephen Gudeman pictured in front of the Museum of Western Bohemia, Pilsen, during the V4 Net Workshop “Thrift in Anthropology,” September 2018. (Photo: Chris Hann)

A small group of primarily anthropologists gathered in Pilsen to discuss the concept of thrift and explore its potential for understanding human economy. An incentive for this workshop was to explore inconsistencies and contradictions of thrift as well as its relations. We included both junior and senior scholars from different academic environments to bring their varied perspectives and stimulate the discussion. The format was based on nine longer presentations that left enough space for subsequent comments and questions. The core papers represented primarily ethnographic case studies from Europe, although there were also presentations focusing on a discursive level of thrift and North American and Asian examples. The workshop uncovered several different dimensions of thinking about thrift. It can be traced across different scales, refer to different temporalities, mobilize calculative reason, morality, and emotions. Thrift has a specific relationship to value that can operate in various regimes and their mutual tensions may produce contradictions.

I can only add that for myself and Stephen Gudeman (with whom I shared eventful (delightfully slow) train journeys from Halle to Pilsen and back) this was indeed an exceptionally pleasant and stimulating meeting. Further information is available at the webpage.³

The papers of this meeting are currently being revised for publication in a volume edited by the convener in collaboration with Catherine Alexander.



Mercedes-Benz Factory, Kecskemét. (Photo: Márk Vangel)

The doctoral project of Márk Vangel is a cooperation between the Universities of Szeged (Bertalan Pusztai) and Pécs (Ágnes Hesz), with additional support provided by the V4 Net of the Max Planck Institute. Vangel’s research focuses on assembly-floor workers’ perceptions of “working abroad, at home.” The influence of this plant on the regional labour market extends to Chris Hann’s field sites in Tázlár and Kiskunhalas, more than 50 kms away (see Introduction, pp. 8–9; see also Hann 2017b^{Art}, 2017b^{Misc}). Specializing in top-of-the-range vehicles that few Hungarians can afford, this is one of several very large German investments in the automotive sector, on which the Hungarian economy has become very dependent in recent years. However, even before the impact of the Corona pandemic in Spring 2020, plans to expand the site were suspended due to market uncertainties.

³ https://www.eth.mpg.de/4976871/V4_Thrift_in_Anthropology_2018_WS_Pilsen.pdf

CONFERENCE: Social and Cultural Consequences of Voluntary and Forced Migration in Europe

Conveners: Michał Buchowski and Kamila Grześkowiak

Venue: Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, 1–2 April 2019



Frances Pine (London) at the final round of discussion. (Photo: Kamila Grześkowiak)

This conference was sponsored by the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Adam Mickiewicz University. The organizers have provided the following report:

The conference addressed a highly pertinent issue of the contemporary world, important also for Central and Eastern European societies. No wonder that it attracted well over forty applications, out of which less than half could be accommodated in the conference programme. While Poles and Hungarians were the most numerous contingents, other participants came from Georgia, Russia, Finland, Germany, Czechia, Slovakia, the UK and Israel. Topics included the effects of migration on family structure and kin relations (e.g. impact on children's education), linguistic practices of migrants (and of asylum seekers and their translation problems in courtrooms), the integration of highly skilled professionals on the one hand and unskilled Roma on the other, representations of "the West" as a motivation for migration, and the impulses behind volunteers' assistance to migrants, despite the anti-migrant rhetoric of governments. Anthropological perspectives generated insight at the level of the household, e.g. in decisions