

# LEFT TURN, RIGHT TURN – ARTISTIC AND POLITICAL RADICALISM OF LATE SOCIALISM IN HUNGARY

The Orfeo and the Inconnu Groups\*

*Kristóf Nagy and Márton Szarvas*

*Everyone will be as radical as circumstances make them.*

Inconnu

## Abstract

*This paper compares and contrasts two of the few radical political artistic groups of late socialism in Hungary. Through an analysis of the Orfeo and Inconnu groups we highlight their patterns of politicization and de-politicization to show that the critique of existing socialism was not free floating but was embedded in social structures. By going against the current of individualizing and moralizing artistic biographies, we give a historical materialist account of the two groups. Firstly, the paper shows how the anti-systemic mobilization of the two groups was conditioned by changes in Hungary's world-economic integration and*

\* Funding: Kristóf Nagy was a recipient in 2021 of the Hungarian Ministry of Human Capacities' Ernő Kállai fellowship for art historians and art critics.

*the subsequent restructuration of its field of cultural production. Secondly, it analyzes the tension between two groups' critique of the oppressive nature of state-socialism and their politics of everyday life, by paying special attention to their uneven gender-relations. The analysis places the political ideas of the two groups not only in the changing landscape of late-socialist dissent, but we link them to class positions and social biographies. The article also highlights how radical, left-leaning criticisms of the state-socialist regime were co-opted into the competing liberal and nationalist cultural-political-economic complexes of the post-socialist order, and how the ways of incorporation were the products of individual but socially situated biographies of the intellectual actors. By combining class analysis and comparative historical research with a sociology of culture and intellectuals, this article draws attention to the role of determinate and contingent historical processes in the formation of anti-systemic mobilizations in late-socialist Hungary.*

**Keywords**

*sociology of intellectuals, sociology of culture, cultural politics and policy, social movements, post-socialism, left history, politics of dissent, art, 1968, transition*

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

After 1990, the art history of late socialism in Hungary was written from a perspective imagining a clear division of official artists loyal to the socialist state and following petty-bourgeois, or worse, propagandistic aesthetics, versus the oppositional ones, who were autonomous and critical towards censorship and political control and did not tolerate the restriction of their creative genius. The latter, mainly neo-avant-garde artists, still dominate the imagination of what art was like before 1989. Apartment galleries, constant fear from surveillance, banned exhibitions, and the idea that the autonomy of the individual could only flourish, be lived and experienced in the most private spaces are the main tropes when one starts to speak about the relationship between the state, art, and ideology. Although that kind of transitology is fading away, this narrative still dominates the field, as oppositional art is more attractive on international art markets and more suitable for the making of the post-socialist state embracing anti-communist phrases. In this paper, through the cases of two artist groups, Orfeo

<sup>1</sup> We cannot begin to express our thanks to the members of the Inconnu and Orfeo groups for providing us their moral support, priceless recollections, and archive materials for this research. We are also grateful to András Beck, Jean-Louis Fabiani, Balázs Trencsényi, and Violetta Zentai for supervising our research on the two groups, and to Ágnes Gagyí, Vlad Naumescu, and the staff of the Artpool Art Research Center for supporting our projects from the beginning of our research in various ways, just as for Katalin Székely, Virág Lódi, Krisztián Kristóf, and the staff of the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives for carrying us through the excitements and difficulties of turning our research into an exhibition. Last, but not least, thanks should also go to Alexandra Kowalski for pushing us to develop our exhibition into this article and aiding the process with extensive comments and criticism.

and Inconnu, we attempt to paint a more dynamic picture of the relationship between dissent, state-managed cultural production, and the market. For this reason, we not only analyze the trajectories of leftist and subaltern criticism under socialism but also shed light on the reasons behind their lack of integration into post-socialist canons.

Besides the fact that both artists' groups had a conflictual relationship with the state socialist regimes, they were founded in different decades and came from different social and geographical spaces. Orfeo, the more privileged one, was established in 1969 by the sculptor, István Malgot, in the wake of the global '68 movements. He recruited its members from among his fellow students, who often came from middle-class cadre families at the Hungarian College of Fine Arts, where they even enjoyed the support of the college's Young Communist League secretary. Even before founding the group, Malgot was involved in the "Maoist trial" of 1968, in which young revolutionary intellectuals were charged with conspiring against the socialist state. Despite the courtroom process, those in Orfeo continued to compare and confront "existing socialism" with left-wing ideas. They criticized state socialism as the rule of the "red barons" (the influential party and company leaders) and lamented the devastation of revolutionary ideas and practices. They imagined the process of artistic production as a wedge that could produce cracks in the body of petty-bourgeois social relations. Their anti-systemic critique led to a state-orchestrated press scandal against them, whereupon they were banned from socialist public spaces. In the following years, the group slowly disbanded, and most of its members started integrating into the liberal elite in formation of the post-socialist transition.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast with Orfeo, the Inconnu group emerged neither from an artistic higher education nor from the city of Budapest – it is rather a rare example of working-class, post-peasant discontent turning into an agency among dissidents. The group was established in 1978 in Szolnok, and its founders did not have any experience with professional cultural production, but they were leaning towards the experimental artistic forms of the period. This provocative aesthetics located in the countryside resulted in state retaliation and in the group's politicization. As a result, during the mid-1980s they moved to Budapest and formed a new alliance with dissident intellectuals. They left their experimental aesthetics and underground art circles behind and started articulating political issues with a new directness that was manifested in stickers, stencils, posters, and leaflets. Their populist critique of the regime carved out some recognition for them within the Hungarian dissident intelligentsia; however, with their subaltern

<sup>2</sup> Orsolya Ring, "A Színháztörténet Harmadik Útja És a Hatalom," *Múltunk* (2008), no. 3, pp. 233–257; Orsolya Ring, "Törd a Kerítést s a Falakat Át... Az Orfeo Zenekar Két Éve (1971–1972)," in Ádám Ignác (ed.), *Műfajok, Stílusok, Szubkultúrák: Tanulmányok a Magyar Populáris Zenéről* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, 2015), pp. 139–147. Réka ÁgnesTóth "Cselekvési alternatívák: az Orfeo együttes bábelőadásairól," in *színháztortenet.hu* (online at [színháztortenet.hu](http://színháztortenet.hu/study/-/record/STD16111?from=színháztortenet-forum) [accessed May 25, 2021]).

pedigree and socialization they remained marginalized within the highly qualified intellectual circles. The group's harshly anti-elitist stance led to a break in the years of the post-socialist transition when their former dissident-allies got into power. As a result, during the 2000s some of the members remodeled their anti-communist agenda into a critique of the new liberal elite.

### Theoretical Landmarks and Methodology

Our goal in this paper is to inquire about the social and political roots of anti-systemic mobilization in the field of cultural production during late socialism. While there is an extensive body of literature that studies the critical knowledge production in socialist states, we shed light not only on the production but also on the implementation and practice of critical social thought. By examining political and social trajectories of the main actors of both groups, we outline an explanation of the changing content and form of social-aesthetics criticism in late and post-socialism.

For this purpose, we utilize research that has attempted to deconstruct the self-legitimizing narratives of the dissident intelligentsia and the dichotomy of state and opposition.<sup>3</sup> We argue that the utilization, in contemporary research, of dichotomies that were created before the transition, tends to reproduce cold war categories.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, in the field of art history, less attention was paid to the continuities of the socialist and post-socialist period after the transition, but many endeavors argue for a horizontal understanding of influences within the field of progressive art.<sup>5</sup> Those analyses try to tackle the understanding of Eastern European art as an epigone of Western avant-gardes. Only recently did the oppositional-versus-official divide start to be reconsidered through a methodological reintegration of oppositional artists into the local socialist fields or art worlds.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gil Eyal, "Anti-Politics and the Spirit of Capitalism: Dissidents, Monetarists, and the Czech Transition to Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), no. 1, pp. 49–92.

<sup>4</sup> Balázs Trencsényi, Maciej Janowski, Monika Baár, Maria Falina, and Michal Kopeček (eds.), *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Robert Gildea, James Mark, and Anette Warring (eds.), *Europe's 1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Adela Hîncu, "Managing Culture, Locating Consent: The Sociology of Mass Culture in Socialist Romania, 1960s–1970s," *Revista Română de Sociologie* 28 (2017), no. 1–2, pp. 3–14; Vladimir Tismaneanu and Bogdan C. Iacob (eds.), *The End and the Beginning: The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2012); Judit Bodnár, *Fin de Milleniare Budapest: Metamorphoses of Urban Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Kacper Pobłocki, "Whither Anthropology without Nation-State? Interdisciplinarity, World Anthropologies and Commoditization of Knowledge," *Critique of Anthropology* 29 (2009), no. 2, pp. 225–252.

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009); Sirje Helme (ed.), *Different Modernisms, Different Avant-Gardes: Problems in Central and Eastern European art after World War II* (Tallinn: Kadrioru Kunstimuuseum, 2009); IRWIN, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

In our analysis, we also integrate class analysis with the understanding of dissent under socialism. Class is often a missing point in these analyses not only because socialist regimes often defined themselves as a classless society, but also because the socialist regime's opponents aimed to leave behind class analysis as a Marxist residue.<sup>7</sup> To intertwine class positions with cultural patterns, we utilize the recently rediscovered professional-managerial class (PMC) concept of Barbara and John Ehrenreich. Through an analysis of the politically mobilized US intellectuals of the 1960s, they argued that during the 1970s this group reintegrated into the state apparatuses with the hope of reforming them from within. Moreover, they highlighted a fundamental rupture and conflict between the politicized PMC, which expresses itself in Marxist terminologies, and the working classes who – despite their greater exploitation and subjection – rarely articulate their discontent in a structured way,<sup>8</sup> instead utilizing their lived experiences that Antonio Gramsci called *common sense*.<sup>9</sup>

Our analysis not only resembles Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the French student protests of 1968 as a middle-class revolt,<sup>10</sup> but also helps to understand the histories of the two groups analyzed in this article. While Orfeo, expressing an elaborated Marxist critique, was formed by second-generation cadres dissatisfied with the Hungarian market reforms of 1968, Inconnu emerged from a post-peasant, working-class background and never articulated its discontent in either a Marxist or in any other ideologically coherent way. Therefore, the history of Orfeo shows the *longue durée* integration of dissent into the state apparatus during 1968, while the history of Inconnu illustrates the way the emerging new elite was incapable of integrating the dissent of the socially mobile elements of popular classes.

To place these two groups in the field of cultural production, and to understand the relation between culture and wider social struggles, we turn to Pierre Bourdieu. According to him, the field of cultural production is a sum of conflicts and negotiations which constitute a dynamic structure, in which the struggles for material goods and prestige are mediated through symbolic struggles. The field is contained within the field of pow-

<sup>6</sup> Jan Mervart, *Kultura v karanténě. Umělecké svazy a jejich konsolidace za rané normalizace* (Prague: NLN, 2015); Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, "Introduction: Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism," *Third Text* 32 (2018), no. 4, pp. 371–378.

<sup>7</sup> Iván Szelényi, "The Intelligentsia in the Class Structure of State Socialist Societies," in Theda Skocpol and Michael Burroway (eds.), *Marxist Inquiries Studies of Labor, Class and States*, supplement to *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (1988), pp. 287–326; Márk Áron Éber, *Megkülönböztetett különbségek* (Budapest: ELTE, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America* 11 (1977), no. 2, pp. 7–32; Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The New Left and the Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America* 11 (1977), no. 3, pp. 7–24.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 43–44.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

er but, nevertheless, has relative autonomy in relation to it: “[It] occupies a *dominated position* in this field, which is itself situated at the dominant pole of the field of class relations.”<sup>11</sup> The actors within this field use ideological tools to change their dominated position, or to protect their dominant one. Consequently, looking at the institutional system of socialist cultural production contributes to the understanding of the social and political context in which actors with anti-systemic criticism were maneuvering.

The last pieces of our theoretical framework are Ágnes Gagyi’s concepts of *democratic anti-populism* and *anti-democratic populism*, developed to understand the political polarization during the years of the transitions.<sup>12</sup> Through these concepts, she shows how factions of the post-socialist elites followed distinct and competing strategies. The term *democratic anti-populism* shows how liberal elites allied themselves with international capital and disqualified popular demands as nationalist, utilizing the ideology of democratization and with the promise of political, economic, and moral catching up to the West. By contrast, *anti-democratic populism* was the strategy of right-wing elites to veil class-conflicts by speaking in the name of the nation and by expressing social discontent symbolically, while strengthening domestic capital. While these strategies were competing in the political field, both advocated for world-system integration, though in different ways. In the post-socialist transformation, individual political trajectories developed in this context and are still mobilized by these two streams of thought: while *democratic anti-populism* offered the urban middle-class an expression of their belief in progress, the plebeian attitudes were embraced by *anti-democratic populism* and offered a way to criticize the very real effects of the transition on the everyday life of the subaltern classes as another, collective trauma of the nation.

While the use of comparative research designs is relatively widespread both in the social sciences and in historiography,<sup>13</sup> in the analysis of dissent under socialism it is a rarely used toolkit. Following Swanson, we believe that “thinking without comparison is unthinkable,”<sup>14</sup> there are specific benefits in employing comparison in the field of contemporary historical sociology. The use of a comparative framework enables

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” *Poetics* 12 (1983), no. 4–5, pp. 311–356.

<sup>12</sup> Ágnes Gagyi, “‘Coloniality of Power’ in East Central Europe: External Penetration as Internal Force in Post-Socialist Hungarian Politics,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22 (2016), no. 2, pp. 349–372.

<sup>13</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); William H. Sewell, Jr., “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology,” in Terence McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 245–280.

<sup>14</sup> Guy Swanson, “Frameworks for Comparative Research: Structural Anthropology and Theory of Action,” in Ivan Vallier (ed.), *Comparative Methods in Sociology: Essays on Trends and Applications* (Berkeley: Institute for International Studies, 1971), pp. 141–202, here 145.

us to go behind the inner moral stakes of the two groups and to shed light on the social structures that fueled these groups' radicalism. In addition, looking at these two trajectories in comparison allows us to avoid the most common pitfall in research of any kind of social dissent, namely the idealization of anti-establishment outrage. This research design does not eliminate the uniqueness of the two artist groups but helps to see them as they were formed by "determinate and contingent historical processes."<sup>15</sup>

In researching formerly repressed, dissident social actors – as these two groups were – one faces two crucial historiographic pitfalls. The first is the reproduction of narratives of their former oppressors who for decades monopolized the infrastructure of knowledge production. The second potential pitfall is that the research will aim to provide retroactive justice.<sup>16</sup> Both groups became relative outcasts even after the post-socialist transition, thus their position in the post-socialist historiography is not fixed. In the case of Inconnu, this was because its founders shifted towards the far right, while Orfeo, due to its revolutionary Marxist ideology, did not fit well with the emerging liberal common sense of the post-socialist times. Consequently, this research on the historical maneuvering of the Inconnu and Orfeo groups in the state-socialist fields of culture relies on primary sources: namely, on archival research and interviews. While both forms of primary sources offer rich historical data to analyze, neither of them is unproblematic.

Since neither of the two groups is canonized by Hungarian art historiography, archival sources contain both typical archival materials and artworks. Consequently, artworks are important sources of this research, and we tackle them primarily as historical artifacts, comparable to other historical sources. Regarding the archival sources, we rely primarily on private archives, since neither of the groups is well represented in public archives. Private archives are never unbiased collections: since they were compiled only by some group members, they have their own focus and their perspective partially represents their collector's perspective.

This research could utilize two types of public archives, even if both have their weaknesses. The works of the Inconnu groups are well represented in the collection of the *Artpool Art Research Center*, but since it is an art archive, it brings together only those documents that made sense from the archive's art-centered perspective, and the group's more directly politicized activities are often left out. Documents such as commune diaries, scripts of plays, photos of everyday life, and the art works of Orfeo were given to us by former members, and in the course of the research process they were admitted to the collection of the *Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives*. Another, even more problematic archive is the *Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security*, which contains state security reports on both groups. It is a different form of epistemology,

<sup>15</sup> William Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> István Rév, *Retroactive Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).



which needs to be interpreted and re-interpreted when one organizes knowledge for the sake of the analysis of a certain phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> While the state security archives sometimes provided important and detailed information on some activities of the two groups, they are especially important sources when it comes to understanding the historical functioning and interactions of state apparatuses, even if state security was just one part of the complex machineries of the state.



Figure 1. Interior of the exhibition titled “Left Turn, Right Turn – Artistic and Political Radicalism of Late Socialism in Hungary. The Orfeo and the Inconnu Groups” in the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archive. Left: Inconnu “Culture without Police,” sticker, 1986; Right: Anna Komjáthy “Freedom for Angela Davis” poster, 1971. Photo credit: Andrea Bényi / Blinken OSA.

The other central method of this research is the interview, which raises problems related to individual memory and social history. While we conducted dozens of in-

<sup>17</sup> Cucu Alina-Sandra, “Producing Knowledge in Productive Spaces: Ethnography and Planning in Early Socialist Romania,” *Economy & Society* 43 (2014), no. 2, pp. 211–232; Florin Poenaru, “The Knowledge of the Securitate: Secret Agents as Anthropologists,” *Studia UBB Sociologia* 62 (2017), no. 1, pp. 105–125; Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania’s Secret Police* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014).



interviews<sup>18</sup> with former actors, these can never be used as clear and first-hand traces of historical processes.<sup>19</sup> Interviews are rather distorted from a personal perspective, overemphasize the role of individuals and understate historical dependencies and opportunity structures. Personal interviews are also highly gendered: male actors spoke more about political confrontations, while the everyday, subordinated practices of social reproduction were mentioned in the often traumatic and overridden memories of female actors.

In our methodology, we combine interviews and state security reports to balance the subjectivity of the former with the state-ruled objectivity of the latter. The *Left Turn, Right Turn – Artistic and Political Radicalism of Late Socialism in Hungary* exhibition, curated as a comparison between the two groups and held in the autumn of 2019 at the *Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives*, provided an unconventional form of data gathering. This exhibition and its follow-up events recalled several previously undiscussed memories, revealed previously unknown personal archives, and facilitated people approaching us with their own historical sources.

### Hungary and Cultural Production under Late Socialism

With the exhaustion of the Stalinist plans for extensive development and the inability of the Soviet Union to supply cheap enough raw materials in its sphere of interest, the downturn of the Hungarian economy was felt as early as the mid-1960s. In 1966, a group of reform-socialist economists published a program of economic reforms called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). The reforms were policies in various fields of governance, aiming for a utilitarian adaptation to the changing world economic conditions.<sup>20</sup> With emulations of an interior market and forcing the industries to contest for state subventions through profitability indicators, the reforms forced state companies to be interested in profit maximization.<sup>21</sup> However, these changes did not, for a while, directly

<sup>18</sup> Márton Szarvas conducted interviews with twenty-two former members and allies of Orfeo, while Kristóf Nagy conducted eight interviews with former Inconnu members and allies.

<sup>19</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist," in *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), pp. 156–164; Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," in Paul de Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (eds.), *Identity: A Reader* (London: SAGE, 2000), pp. 299–305; Jérôme Truc, "Narrative Identity against Biographical Illusion: The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricœur," *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 2 (2011), no. 1, pp. 150–167.

<sup>20</sup> Ágnes Gagyí, "A Moment of Political Critique by Reform Economists in Late Socialist Hungary: 'Change and Reform' and the Financial Research Institute in Context," *Intersections* 1 (2015), no. 2, pp. 59–79; Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Melinda Kalmár, "An Attempt at Optimization: The Reform Model in Culture, 1965–1973," in János M. Rainer and György Péteri (eds.), *Muddling Through in the Long 1960s: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary* (Trondheim: Program on East European Culture and Society, 2005), pp. 53–82.

affect the field of cultural production and instead resulted in the re-integration of the productive sectors into the global circuits of capital and in monetary re-integration.

The NEM was ambivalent: it led to destabilization, yet it made development more dynamic. Ideological buffers were introduced, with which the harmful effects of the reform were reduced.<sup>22</sup> Although it was still consensual that ideological work was essential in sustaining the socialist state, the reforms eventually exerted a profound effect on cultural production. With the reforms, the basis of the legitimization of the state became mainly economic, that is, as long as the material needs of the population were satisfied there was no need for harsh political control. Consequently, incentives and censorship became more driven by an economic logic and instead of the domination of the ideological landscape the regime strived only for hegemonic rule.<sup>23</sup> A system was elaborated in which a tax on economically sustainable art pieces (Western European and American movies, pop songs)<sup>24</sup> supported less profitable but ideologically beneficial pieces. Moreover, profit was spent on an impoverished community center system and its renovation. Culture was still perceived as a *system constitutive standard*, thus cultural reforms fluctuated between economic reform and political orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of traditional art institutions, both the Inconnu and the Orfeo groups were primarily active in houses of culture,<sup>26</sup> which were community centers whose space was dedicated for rehearsals, exhibitions, and shows of amateur cultural groups, for leisure time activities of socialist citizens, for educational programs, and for celebrations of national holidays. From the 1960s onwards,<sup>27</sup> the heads of these institutions were given greater freedom regarding their programs. After the introduction of the NEM, the previous understanding of civic cultivation, the professional activity of organizing programs in the houses of culture, started to shift from a top-down conceptualization of public enlightenment<sup>28</sup> to a horizontal organization of civic activities.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kalmár, "An Attempt at Optimization," p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> György Aczél, "Művelődéspolitikánk a marxizmus hegemoniájáért," *Társadalmi Szemle* (25) 1970, no. 11, pp. 9–24.

<sup>24</sup> Bence Tordai, "A Kádár-Rendszer Tömegkultúra-Recepciója," Tamás Kisantal and Anna Menyhért (eds.), *Művészet és hatalom: A Kádár-korszak művészete* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2005), pp. 141–155.

<sup>25</sup> Kalmár, "An Attempt at Optimization," p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Sándor Striker, "Voluntary Education as Public Communication," József Katus and János Tóth (eds.), *On Voluntary Organizations in Hungary and the Netherlands* (Budapest: OKK, 1986); Mary N. Taylor, *Movement of the People: Hungarian Folk Dance, Populism, and Citizenship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

Due to this reform, the role of amateur artistic groups was strengthened as the institutional system not only aimed at educating the masses but also at providing space for the self-organization of cultural practices. This was even more important because socialist infrastructures of cultural production were not open to people lacking professional degrees in the arts. The popular television talent show organized by the Institute of Civic Cultivation (*Népművelési Intézet*) – called *Show Us What You Can Do* – already gave the opportunity for amateur performers to reach a country-wide public.<sup>30</sup> The performing groups were semi-professional and were mainly constituted by university students and intellectuals from smaller towns and villages.<sup>31</sup> Amateurism was no longer considered to be a cultural activity that merely represented and performed the culture of the dominated social groups. In the amateur movement, educated, young people were expressing their worldview in a semi-professional way. As István Nánay, a member of the amateur movement recalls, people saw it as an opportunity to freely express their political opinion.<sup>32</sup> In fact, when political attacks started against Orfeo, Iván Vitányi, the head of the Institute of Civic Cultivation, the central organization for houses of culture, supported the group in the battle against these political attacks, referring to their young age, inexperience, and their potential to become the next generation of socialist artists if the socialist state would be capable of handling them with pedagogical sensitivity. In his letter to the institution of cultural governance, his aim was to protect the integrity of the amateur movement by protecting one of its most effective parts.<sup>33</sup>

The Orfeo and the Inconnu groups seized these opportunities to gain access to the public without getting involved in professional cultural production. In the case of Orfeo, this was also supported by their willingness to create popular art. Members of Orfeo were trained in institutions of artistic higher education, and consciously linked themselves to the amateur movements by starting to work in forms of art in which they had no experience, such as puppet theater and theater. With time and the involvement

<sup>28</sup> Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland, and Hungary* (London: Routledge, 1990); Tamás Deme and Pál Beke, *A szabadművelődéstől a közösségi művelődésig* (Budapest: Széphalom, 2003), pp. 50–51.

<sup>29</sup> *Országos Népművelési Konferencia 1970 – Előkészítő Tanulmányok 1* (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1970), p. 148. On the effects of these measures on alternative and oppositional cultural groups, see the analysis of Zsolt K. Horváth on the Spions punk band. Zsolt K. Horváth, “A gyűlölet múzeuma,” *Korall* 39 (2010), April, pp. 5–30.

<sup>30</sup> István Nánay, “A Tetszhalál Állapotában,” *Beszélő* 2 (1991), no. 27, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Mária Andrassy, “Tájékoztató a Népművelési Intézetben folyó munkásművelődési kutatásokról,” *Munkásművelődés* 5 (1976), pp. 425–450.

<sup>32</sup> Nánay, “A Tetszhalál,” p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Iván Vitányi, *Az Orfeo ügyéről: Az ifjúsági amatőr művészeti mozgalom vitás jelenségeiről* [Letter]. M-KS 288, 36 (Budapest: National Archives of Hungary, 1972).

of more professional artists from the field of theater and music, their studios started to depart from the amateur scene. Similarly, with Inconnu's political involvement, their avant-garde art moved towards more applied forms, and they started producing stickers and using popular motifs supporting the green and human rights politics of the liberal opposition of the socialist state.<sup>34</sup> In comparison to Orfeo, for Inconnu this was a necessity, since its members had not participated in artistic higher education and they thus did not have access to the infrastructure of professional cultural production.



Figure 2. Performance of the Orfeo band in the House of Culture of Kőbánya, Budapest, 1972. (Courtesy of Anna Komjáthy).

While at the outset both groups received support from local cultural organizers and institutions, due to their radicalizing political programs both were quickly expelled from these spaces. In the case of Orfeo, it was a defamatory article about them

<sup>34</sup> Kristóf Nagy, "Ecological Crisis and Political Art in the 1980s Hungary," *OSA Archives* Sept. 25, 2019 (online at [osaarchivum.org/blog/ecological-crisis-and-political-art-in-the-1980s-hungary](http://osaarchivum.org/blog/ecological-crisis-and-political-art-in-the-1980s-hungary) [accessed Feb. 8, 2021]).

by Gábor Szántó that started a smear campaign<sup>35</sup> that precipitated their break with the official institutions; for Inconnu it was the work they made and stored in the local cultural center of their hometown, Szolnok, that led to the banning of the group from all cultural institutions in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County. However, personal connections and arrangements could override bans from these institutions: István Tóth from the House of Culture of Szolnok County provided space for Inconnu, and Éva Benkő, the head of the House of Culture of Kőbánya, protected Orfeo when a press campaign started against them in 1972. However, after she became the head of the Institute of Civic Cultivation, she was the one who labeled the pieces of Inconnu distasteful and ideologically inappropriate. This led to the banning and destroying of their artworks. These acts shed light on the way the authorities perceived the two groups: Orfeo was considered to be politically relevant but too subversive, while Inconnu's avant-garde approach went against socialist tastes. Secondly, it also illustrates the fluctuating nature of political censorship. While during the NEM critical artistic and intellectual practices were given less sanction, following the depletion of the reform experiment they strengthened again. That fluctuation could also be observed during the 1980s. While at the beginning of the decade banning such events was an everyday practice, in the late 1980s aesthetic barriers vanished and political prohibitions became rarer.

The 1980s brought radical changes not only in the field of the political economy of culture, but also in the fields of aesthetics and ideological regimes. In the early 1980s, the idea of culture as a commodity was gaining traction, and even officially under-recognized artists were inspired by the idea of commodifying their artworks.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, this shift towards commodification of culture was not wholly invented and spread by the state as a top-down process to hide austerity measures, but it has a history from below, especially from the cohort of artists that hoped that the market would recognize them more than the state-socialist cultural infrastructure did. This process was also strengthened by the socialist state itself: the socialist regime of Hungary, which had become more and more indebted by the 1980s, became more open towards any external actor taking over cultural duties and bringing foreign capital into the country.

Consequently, in the mid-1980s, two new, international actors of contemporary art appeared in Hungary: the Ludwig and the Soros Foundations. The Ludwig Foundation strived primarily to expand its international artistic network and recognition, while the

<sup>35</sup> Gábor Szántó, "Orfeo az álvilágban," *Magyar Ifjúság* 16 (1972), no. 41, pp. 5–7; Gábor Szántó, "Még egyszer az Orfeo együttesről," *Magyar Ifjúság* 16 (1972), no. 46, pp. 5–6. For the analysis of reports and the press campaign see: Orsolya Ring, "A Színháztársaság Harmadik útja és a Hatalom," *Múltunk* 20 (2008), no. 3, pp. 233–257.

<sup>36</sup> Kristóf Nagy, "Rabinec Studio: The Commodification of Art in Late Socialist Hungary, 1982–1983," in Octavian Esanu (ed.), *Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization: A Transregional Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 139–152.

Soros Foundation had the socio-political objective<sup>37</sup> of using its capital and influence to foster dissident tendencies that in the field of culture led to a new, but still selective, canon. In 1982, the state-owned Generalart company was established to foster the commerce of contemporary artworks. In the same year, artists' working communities were introduced as new legal entities. This tendency of commodification was not, however, unopposed, especially by those who benefited from the state-run infrastructure.

This marketization was recognized and highly criticized even by the artists of the Inconnu. The economic liberalization of the cultural economy was far from their aesthetic and political radicalism. In the 1980s, Hungarian artists previously labeled as dissidents could show their works around Europe in state-sponsored and organized shows; and apolitical artists who were synchronous with the international trends conquered the exhibition venues. The Inconnu group shifted in a political direction during the exact period when many of the cultural producers profited from the more inclusive liberalization of the cultural scene. This led to their marginalization within the underground pole of the field of cultural production; but living in the countryside, organizing performances through informal networks of the Budapest-centered underground was also a challenge. The use of postal services in the form of *mail art* could give them only the fiction of being embedded internationally, when they criticized Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, a Western neo-avant-garde artist, from an anti-colonial perspective. This marginalized status in the world of art was even ironically reflected in their name ("Inconnu," meaning "unknown" in French), which was also pointed at by the secret services that pursued their operation on the group under the code name of "Amateurs."

### Politics in Relation to the Field and Ideologies in General

The late-1960s in Hungary marked an upsurge of the Marxist criticism of the socialist state.<sup>38</sup> The reconsideration of Marxist thinking was happening on two fronts: the social sciences and philosophy. The social sciences questioned the very basis of existing socialism through empirical research and revealed the existing inequalities within

<sup>37</sup> Kristóf Nagy, "From Fringe Interest to Hegemony: The Emergence of the Soros Network in Eastern Europe," in Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (eds.), *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 53–63; Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Gábor Kovács, "Revolution, Lifestyle, Power and Culture," in János M. Rainer and György Péteri (eds.), *Muddling through the 1960's: Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary* (Trondheim: Program on East European Culture and Society, 2005), pp. 27–52; Máté Szabó, "A Szocializmus Kritikája a Magyar Ellenzék Irányzatainak Gondolkodásában (1968–1988)," *Politikatudományi Szemle* (2008), no. 1, pp. 7–36; Dániel Vázsonyi, "Neomarxista Ellenzékiek Társadalomfilozófiai Nézetei a „hosszú Hatvanas Években” (1963–1974)," *Eszmélet* 26 (2014), no. 103, pp. 32–56; Eszter Balázs, György Földes, and Péter Konok (eds.), *A Modernről a Posztmodernig: 1968* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2009), p. 226.



society,<sup>39</sup> though because of the large volume of data it needed to produce in order to prove its stratification theories, critical sociology was highly dependent on state subsidies. Although most of these actors were banned from publication, their research at the Hungarian Academy of Science could go on somewhat uninterrupted. Many young, critical intellectuals found their place in these research projects. In the field of philosophy, because of the authority of György Lukács, practitioners of the discipline mainly questioned the moral and not the material premises of socialism, and they received more allowances from the state.<sup>40</sup> Accepting that from the production of the absolute surplus-value a shift took place towards the production of the relative surplus-value (that is, to a certain extent existing socialism moved towards the realization of real socialism), Ágnes Heller claimed that the recognition of *radical needs* could be the key to the creation of a new revolutionary class.<sup>41</sup>

In 1967, from the circle of Katalin Imre<sup>42</sup> and from the camps of the Young Communist League, a Maoist group emerged, who based their ideas on the anti-bureaucratic ideologies of Mao Tse Tung and Enver Hoxha while maintaining a good relationship with Greek dissidents.<sup>43</sup> It was a group of young intellectuals who were organizing against the “petty-bourgeois Hungarian state.”<sup>44</sup> They participated in demonstrations in front of the US embassy against the Vietnam war, which was in line with the official foreign policies of the Hungarian state; the state, however, did not tolerate the students’ self-organizing. These students were accused of “organizing to endanger the state order.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, they were circulating a leaflet among Hungarian communist intellectuals like

<sup>39</sup> Éber, *Megkülönböztetett*, p. 94.

<sup>40</sup> Vázsonyi, “Neomarxista,” p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> John Grumley, “A Utopian Dialectic of Needs? Heller’s Theory of Radical Needs,” *Thesis Eleven* (1999), no. 59, pp. 53–72.

<sup>42</sup> Katalin Imre (1923–1989) was a radical left-wing actress, writer, and editor. She edited the *Tűz-Tánc* (Fire dance) and the *Tiszta szigorúság* (Unsoiled rigor) anthologies in 1958 and 1963 that were well known and liked by the members of Orfeo as radical socialist statements against the post-1956 regime. Since she was against the post ’56 social consensus and criticized the regime of János Kádár as the triumph of right-wing reaction, she was kicked out of the party in 1967 and was put under constant surveillance. As a mother figure to the young radical leftists, she enjoyed not only the right to engage in full-on criticism but also, as Miklós Haraszti said to Márton Szarvas, the right to manipulate the private life of these young leftists by deciding who could be in a relationship with whom. See also András Simor, “Figyelő-Dosszié,” *Ezredvég* 9 (1999), no. 7, pp. 57–63.

<sup>43</sup> On socialist de-colonialism see: Zoltán Ginelli, “The Clash of Colonialisms: Hungarian Communist and Anti-Communist Decolonialism in the Third World,” *Critical Geographies Blog* Dec. 23, 2019 (online at [kritikaifoldrajz.hu/2019/12/23/the-clash-of-colonialisms-hungarian-communist-and-anti-communist-decolonialism-in-the-third-world](http://kritikaifoldrajz.hu/2019/12/23/the-clash-of-colonialisms-hungarian-communist-and-anti-communist-decolonialism-in-the-third-world) [accessed Feb. 8, 2021]).

<sup>44</sup> Tamás Fodor and Miklós Haraszti in discussion with Márton Szarvas, Oct. 6, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> György Dalos, *Hosszú menetelés - rövid tanfolyam* (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), p.7.



György Lukács that said that they would like to overthrow the reactionary bourgeois state and introduce a Maoist form of communism under the name of the Hungarian Revolutionary Communists.<sup>46</sup> They were apprehended by the secret services and István Malgot, one of the founders of Orfeo, received a suspended sentence. Only the first accused, György Pór, was sent to prison. After the failure of the Maoist conspiracy, István Malgot decided that open political confrontation is not possible in the given context and that culture can thus be used to change the ideas of the people on existing socialism. However, Orfeo members still shared and read the criticism of the socialist state elaborated by the Lukács school.

Among the youth, political songs and participation in concerts became important. Following the South American and Italian political song tradition emerging in the sixties that mixed folk aesthetics and socialist content, they were trying to create a socialist popular song genre that was based on Eastern-European peasant culture. This was also supported by János Maróthy, a founder of the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Science who was engaged with research into popular and workers' songs.<sup>47</sup> The musical bands Gerilla and Monszun grew out of a group that was organized around a young communist girl, Júlia Bársony. They regularly played at demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the Greek Civil War.<sup>48</sup> These political bands were called *pol-beat* (the name of the genre was coined by Miklós Haraszti<sup>49</sup>) and played a similar style as the political folk-rock of Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Peter, Paul and Mary. The band of Orfeo emerged from this scene, travelling to music festivals in the socialist countries and enjoying the support of the officials.

In contrast with the theoretically elaborated ideas of Orfeo, the Inconnu group's ideological agenda was more diverse, inconsistent, and unsteady. Their ideologies did not come from a single intellectual heritage; rather, they were intellectual bricolages in which, at first sight, contradictory approaches could cohabit. In their samizdat magazine, *Unknown Underground Line*, they simultaneously published in 1982 a Hungarian translation of Terry Smith's Leninist essay, entitled "Without Revolutionary Theory...", which poses the question "How do we begin to develop a revolutionary theory for cul-

<sup>46</sup> Szilárd István Pap, "In the Hot Summer of '68, We Were the Tempest in the Hungarian Teapot' - The Hungarian Maoist 'Plotters,'" *Lefteast* Aug. 31, 2018 (online at [criticacat.ro/lefteast/hungarian-maoist-plotters/](http://criticacat.ro/lefteast/hungarian-maoist-plotters/) [accessed Feb. 7, 2021]).

<sup>47</sup> Ádám Ignác, *Milliók zenéje* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Clifford, Juliane Fürst, Robert Gildea, James Mark, Piotr Oseka, and Chris Reynolds, "Spaces," in Gildea et. al. (eds.), *Europe's 1968*, pp. 175–176.

<sup>49</sup> Although Miklós Haraszti (1945– ) is better known for his contribution to the samizdat movement and the liberal criticism of socialism in the late 1960s, he was an influential figure in new left circles. His book *Költők, dalok, forradalmak* (Poets, songs, revolutions), published in 1969 and containing South American and other songs of the workers' movement, had a huge impact on Tamás Fodor's and the Orfeo theater group's work.

tural action?” and a piece by Hermann Nitsch in which Nitsch theorized his ritualistic and existentialist theater.<sup>50</sup> These two profoundly different theoretical currents in the case of Inconnu could co-exist because both served a certain theorization and meaning-making of their own subaltern position. At the same time, the members of the group – never participating in any kind of higher educational framework – were not accustomed to and did not feel pressured to elaborate a more coherent theoretical framework.

While the references to Hermann Nitsch were not without precedent in Hungary because some of his writings were translated into Hungarian in 1980, the group’s relation to Marxist ideas requires some consideration. In the early writings of Inconnu, there was a large proportion of Marxist and Leninist ideas. In some cases, these ideas were used in an ironic way, such as when they were quoting the philosopher István Hermann, who was not only a pupil of Lukács but also the head of the Evening University of Marxism-Leninism, on the oppressive nature of erudition. But more often, the group’s Marxist, anti-elitist phrases functioned as meaning-making in the members’ actual life situations. Statements such as “Political art cannot rely on the class of intellectuals since their relationship with the prevailing dominant power is intimately close and cooperative”<sup>51</sup> resonated well with the position of the unqualified artists who were trying to get into the closed circles of the underground art scene in Budapest. The group’s mixture of existentialist and revolutionary Leninist statements made them hard to comprehend not only for the art scene but also for the secret services, who tried to label them as anarchists<sup>52</sup> whose revolutionary theory was incompatible with the theoretical pillars of state-socialism.

Beginning in 1983-1984, another leftist current, the idea of workers’ councils, would shape the group’s profile. With their move to Budapest, members of Inconnu got in touch with several key figures of dissident circles, among them another ideologically radical figure, György Krassó, who became their closest ally and ideological mentor. In contrast to the members of Inconnu, Krassó came from a Budapest-based middle-class background, but during the 1980s he was one of the few figures among the dissidents who did not shift towards liberal ideas. His engagement with the ideas of workers’ councils arose not purely from theory but also from his participation in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. For Krassó, workers’ councils and the central role of the working class were the critical heritages of 1956, and these ideas perfectly matched with the Inconnu group’s periodically articulating a working-class identity and with their marginal position within dissident circles. Moreover, the re-actualization of the revolutionary temperature of 1956 also functioned as a justification of the group’s extreme actions.

<sup>50</sup> *Unknown Underground Line. Actionalist Journal* (1982), no. 2, pp. 11–17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> ÁBTL 2.7.1. NOIJ Szolnok - 5 / Jan. 19, 1982.

Inconnu's connection with Krassó did not end with his emigration to London in 1985, but the course of the ideological streams in and around the groups changed profoundly with his exit from the scene.



Figure 3. INCONNU, *Red Soldiers*, 1984.  
Artpool Art Research Center – Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.  
Photo credit: Dániel Végel / Blinken OSA.

The legacy of 1956 was also re-actualized from a liberal and nationalist point of view in the late-1980s, and the Inconnu group's own works were touched by both.<sup>53</sup> Their "The Fighting City" exhibition in 1987 was primarily embedded in the liberal dissidents' strategy of gaining international recognition for local dissent.<sup>54</sup> The show, which commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution, was sponsored by international celebrities of the intellectual scene, such as Timothy Garton Ash, Danilo

<sup>53</sup> For the wider context of the commemorations of 1956 that took place in 1986, see: Gábor Danyi, "Phantom Voices from the Past: Memory of the 1956 Revolution and Hungarian Audiences of Radio Free Europe," *Hungarian Historical Review* (2016), no. 4, pp. 790–813.

<sup>54</sup> The only academic publication on the Inconnu Group in English is in the context of this show, see Juliane Debeusscher, "Information Crossings: On the Case of Inconnu's 'The Fighting City,'" *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 31 (2012), pp. 71–83.

Kiś, György Konrád, and Susan Sontag, and was advertised in the international press, for instance in *The New York Review of Books*.<sup>55</sup> Despite these notable supporters, the police confiscated its materials a couple of hours before the opening of the show, to which the group reacted specifically in the framework of free speech discourse: they put the police confiscation warrants on the empty walls and published a press release on state-censorship in the international press. Other works from the period, such as the sticker of the Mona Lisa wearing a police uniform with the caption “police-free culture!” fit into the same paradigm that focused on the freedom of speech and culture.

While in 1987 the Inconnu group was, with the help of dissident intellectuals, turning towards an international audience with an avant-garde-ish visuality, only two years later, in 1989, they re-actualized the memory of 1956 through national symbols and in conflict with the dominant dissident circles. During that year, the group carved 301 wooden headstones and placed them in Parcel 301, where the executed revolutionaries of 1956 were buried. Their monument, mobilizing national-popular aesthetics, not only contrasted with the aesthetically refined commemoration, designed by the architect László Rajk in the same year, but also generated deep conflicts with the dominant grouping of dissident intellectuals. Therefore, despite their in-depth cooperation, the Inconnu group remained marginalized in the dissident circles of the 1980s and started defining itself as the *opposition of the opposition*.<sup>56</sup>

### Politics of Everyday Life

The two groups stand in stark contrast not only in their relation to the ideological currents of the late socialist period but also in their moral stances and everyday forms of ethics. While in the case of the Orfeo group, an ascetic morality and an idolizing of labor and working-class dispositions were dominant, in the case of the Inconnu group, asceticism was not a choice but rather an inevitable outcome of their class position and their confrontation with the state-apparatuses. Orfeo mimicked and glorified a class to which just some of its members belonged, and they aimed to connect to interwar communist cultural movements in which asceticism was likewise aestheticized by middle-class actors.<sup>57</sup> In the case of Inconnu, in which most of the members came from a working-class, post-peasant background, there was no idealization of manual labor. Rather they captured the alienated working-class life based on personal experiences, such as working in a sugar factory.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Péter Bokros, Tamás Molnár, Róbert Pálincás, Sándor Szilágyi, and Jenő Nagy, “Announcement,” *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 4, 1986 (online at [nybooks.com/articles/archives/1986/12/04/announcement/](http://nybooks.com/articles/archives/1986/12/04/announcement/) [accessed Feb. 7, 2021]).

<sup>56</sup> NOIJ - INCONNU III/III - 256/5 Dec. 30, 1988.

<sup>57</sup> Dávid Szolláth, *A Kommunista aszketizmus esztétikája* (Budapest: Balassi, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> “Munkások – élősoborok,” *Unknown Underground Line. Actionalist Journal* (1982), no. 2, pp. 16–27.

Both groups' moral attitudes were related to contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. Just like the political beat (*pol-beat*) movement of the late-1960s, the Orfeo group also valued hard and constant work, not only on art but also on the self. At the first commune of Orfeo, they created an exercise. It was compulsory to run from the train to the house, and they even organized small competitions. As Péter Fábry says, not just their skills but their bodies developed. This idealization of work considered the body, the art they produced, and every other segment of life as a totality, which contributed to the development of each other as they were practiced not just in parallel, but together in everyday life. As Orfeo co-existed and co-developed with the *pol-beat* movement, Inconnu allied with the punk movement of the 1980s, especially after Róbert Pálinkás Szűcs joined the group in the mid-1980s.<sup>59</sup> The group produced numerous punk-inspired stickers, named its samizdat publisher "Punknown Editor," and even experimented with forming a punk band. Their and the punk scene's attitudes resembled each other in their primarily spontaneous, non-theoretical, ritualistic forms of resistance,<sup>60</sup> manifesting themselves in the group's experiments with gayness, sexuality, and animal cruelty.

While the Inconnu group's resistance often took more subcultural and casual forms, the Orfeo group was more systematic. Many of them also participated in the work of the Young Communist League and believed that the existing institutions could be taken over. They idealized work, since they considered it as a preparation for the bigger task: to rule the country. They criticized each other's work for its ideological aspects: they self-censored the play *Vurstli* for being too ideological and didactic, but in other cases, such as that of Mihály Kiss, the divergence from the ideological stream was also punished. As penitence for his habitus, which was branded as petty-bourgeois, Kiss was sent into exile in Algyő to work as an oil miner. After his half year among the workers, during which he lived in a segregated Roma community, he was accepted by the Orfeo community again.

Despite Inconnu's self-definition as amateurs and despite their critique of the hierarchical social and cultural structures, the group was not free from hierarchies that were not only informal but manifested themselves in the distinction of members as *ideologists* and *technicians*. In this division of labor, technicians played a key role in the technical realization of the performances but were not authorized to shape its content.<sup>61</sup> Despite the group's internal and uneven division of theory and practice, as they shifted towards politics they had to reflect on the differences regarding their education and that of the dissident intellectuals who primarily came from university departments, research institutes, and publishing houses. In this environment, Inconnu could stand out and carve out its own place by being provocative. As a member recalled,

<sup>59</sup> Péter György, *Néma hagyomány* (Budapest: Magvető, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>60</sup> Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through rituals: youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 2000); Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1981).

<sup>61</sup> Mihály Csécséi, in discussion with Kristóf Nagy, Mar. 31, 2016.

“we arrived for an exhibition with mouths taped with red duct tape, while for a house party of [dissident intellectual] Ferenc Kőszeg we arrived with bound hands. We were animals in the democratic opposition, no one understood us.”<sup>62</sup>

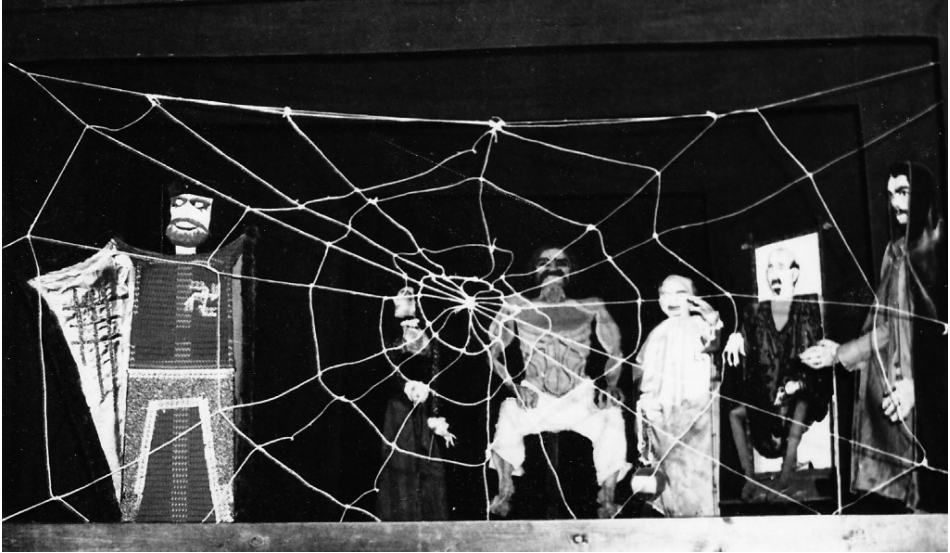


Figure 4. Still from the play of Orfeo titled “1514,” ca. 1972.  
Courtesy of Anna Komjáthy.

While in its ideas, Inconnu was far from advocating Orfeo’s ascetic technologies of the self, in their everyday life both groups shared the reality of being in a vulnerable situation. In the case of Inconnu, this exposure was not a solely chosen one. With their forced exit from the cultural infrastructure and from formal state employment, and with their expulsion from the city of Szolnok, they had to live a highly precarious life underpinned by their bohemian self-definition, differing from the Orfeo group’s voluntary asceticism that also had roots in their social situation. While, for Orfeo, commune-building was primarily an ideological decision reinforced by the poor housing conditions of some of their members, Inconnu’s co-housing was involuntary and dependent on the goodwill of the dissident intellectual László Rajk. Spaces of cultural production and private life were merged in both cases, but while Orfeo could do it in a spacious house built for this purpose, Inconnu had to suspend the operation of their underground apartment-gallery because the small flat was not suitable for the parallel

<sup>62</sup> Róbert Pálinkás Szűcs in discussion with Kristóf Nagy, April 7, 2016.



use for housing and large-scale political gathering.<sup>63</sup> But just as Orfeo's commune was not purely the result of an ideological engagement, the vulnerability of Inconnu was not purely the result of external constraints but also of a self-chosen martyrdom. Self-damnation was present already in their early performances, but then it took physical forms such as cutting, stinging, and burning themselves, and after the first retaliations by the state this turned into a political statement: they started framing their court hearing as a show trial and made statements such as: "Practice the forbidden! Collide head on! Mount an offensive!" While they were directly impacted by the repressive state apparatuses, the group's self-subsistence became profoundly dependent on the liberalizing and expanding second economy that simultaneously both bypassed state-control and introduced more precarious working conditions.<sup>64</sup>

While in dissident circles Inconnu played a subordinate role, within the group its only female member did the same. As one of the male members recalled about the gendered division of labor, "very often from the entire Inconnu group it was only Magdi that worked. At the same time, the three stupid [guys] were just trying to become popular. We made the revolution while Magdi sustained us."<sup>65</sup> This recollection demonstrates how the reproductive labor of Magdolna Serfőző, the group's only female member, was made invisible as she was often omitted from the list of its members. This was made even more dramatic because Serfőző was not only maintaining the male members' livelihood, but she also executed a large proportion of the visual works of the group, since she was one of the two members of the group that had good drawing skills. Gender roles and sexuality were similarly hidden in the case of the Orfeo group, while they were also central elements of the group's communal experiment. Just as the socialist state considered gender equality important on an ideological level and yet perceived female subjects to be homogeneous in its egalitarian policies,<sup>66</sup> the commune also made

<sup>63</sup> Péter Apor, reflecting on the work of the authors of the so-called "Lukács Kindergarten," claims that authentic life and community as an alternative to existing socialism is rooted in the economic critique of relations of production during socialism, such as that developed by Ágnes Heller, György Márkus, János Kis, and György Bence. That is, if there was no difference in terms of the appropriation of surplus and exploitation between capitalist and socialist relations of production, the possibility of critique and alternative building can happen in the production of authentic, self-identical community building. In those terms the liberal critique of the 1980's, which was centered on civil society as the root of civic self-governance and democracy, was already rooted in the Marxist lifestyle reforms of the 1960's. Péter Apor, "Autentikus közösség és autonóm személyiség," *Aetas* 28 (2013), no. 4, pp. 22–39.

<sup>64</sup> For the theorization and discussion of the second economy, see Chris Hann, *Tázlár: A Village in Hungary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Iván Szelényi, *Socialist Entrepreneurs: Embourgeoisement in Rural Hungary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); András Vigvári and Tamás Gerőcs: "The Concept of 'Peasant Embourgeoisement' in the Perspective of Different Historical Conjunctures," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Sociologia* 62 (2017), no. 1, pp. 85–104.

<sup>65</sup> János Gulyás, *Ismeretlenek*, 2005, 180 minutes (film).

<sup>66</sup> Tamás Fodor and Ilona Németh in discussion with Márton Szarvas, July 6, 2015.



no distinctions. Couples constantly changed, but there were more influential personalities for whom sexual freedom was more lucrative. In the interviews Márton Szarvas conducted, the men often spoke about an active sexual life as a normal part of the life of young people and they framed this as an integral part of the youth experience. For example, one interviewee, when he was asked how he got into Orfeo, claimed that it was “through a girl [and] then [I] had sex with all the ‘pretty ones’ and then I left.”<sup>67</sup> It was a significantly different experience in the case of women, who reported very traumatic experiences. Some who had had sexual intercourse with István Malgot claimed that it was compulsory, as they felt that they could be expelled from the commune if they did not do it, but at the same time, since he was an informal leader of the group, they said it was hard to resist his aura. In 2009, a film was made by former members about Orfeo and the focus of the documentary unconsciously shifted to these traumatic experiences. One of the interviewees said that it was shocking for the men to find out how differently life in the commune was experienced by the women, and it was the first and only time that the women had managed to reveal how sexually exploitative life was for the female members of the commune.

### Social Trajectories in History

Over the course of the past 40 to 50 years, members of both of the groups have gone through several radical ideological transformations. In this section, we argue that these changes were not arbitrary but rather contingent upon large social formations. For this reason, we have placed the individual biographies in the context of social history. By doing this, we do not purely aim to discharge former radicals who left or distorted their anti-systemic stances, rather, with Bourdieu, we believe that the “historicising of forms of thought offers the only real chance, however small, of escaping from history.”<sup>68</sup>

In the case of Inconnu, the shift towards post-socialist *anti-democratic populism* was more dominant, while in the case of Orfeo the shift was towards *democratic anti-populism*, but in both cases the ideological transition had already started in the 1980s. This resonates with the highly symbolic division between the urbanite and the folkish blocs, two intellectual blocs that have a long tradition in Hungarian intellectual history. This distinction signifies epistemological positions rooted in social trajectories and embedded in competing elite blocs.<sup>69</sup> The term urban intellectual usually marks a disposition based on a bourgeois social trajectory that prefers Western European culture and wants to catch up with the culture and economic development of these countries. In contrast, the folk-oriented bloc, formed primarily by first-generation in-

<sup>67</sup> Anonymous member of Orfeo in discussion with Márton Szarvas, Mar. 17, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 263–264.

<sup>69</sup> Vigvári and Gerőcs, “The Concept.”

tellectuals often coming from rural areas, legitimizes itself as being representative of the people and peasant culture.<sup>70</sup>

According to the recollections of Tamás Fodor, Orfeo broke up exactly along this ideological fault line; Inconnu, however, wasn't touched by this fault line because they were subaltern subjects and not intellectuals, neither first generation folkish nor embedded urban ones.<sup>71</sup> While in the beginning Inconnu produced harshly anti-elitist statements (such as: "Break with the art-society, the hotbed of the national bourgeoisie!") and reflected on the social origins of its radicalism, their trajectory was also characterized by repeated and failed attempts at class mobility. For example, Péter Bokros's failure to get admitted to the College of Fine Arts just reinforced the group's attacks on institutionalized forms of cultural production and led to a subsequent application made with the goal of causing a scandal. This radicalism against institutionalized culture brought the group closer to the Budapest-centered underground art scene. However, during the 1980s this underground scene was in the process of leaving political radicalism behind as they were now beginning to appear in the liberalizing institutional culture. Thus, Inconnu's confrontational politics went against the grain of the underground scene's transformation.

With the failure of Inconnu's integration into the underground pole of the cultural field, they started forging a new alliance with the dissident intelligentsia for whom Inconnu not only demonstrated the oppressive nature of the regime but also brought visual and printing skills. Already in 1983, Inconnu contributed to the printing of the samizdat magazine *Beszélő*,<sup>72</sup> and in 1984 they published in their samizdat magazine *Inconnu Press* a love letter to György Konrád, expressing how Konrád serves as a moral exemplar for them. Nevertheless, this cooperation was endangered by the profoundly different class positions of the two groups. It is telling that Inconnu wrote this letter to Konrád while not knowing him personally because, in the years of the group's integration with the dissidents, Konrád was living in Berlin and New York on scholarships. While dissident intellectuals shared some of their material, social, and cultural capital with Inconnu in the form of housing, international press coverage, and art publications, this did not eliminate various prevailing class-based dispositions that caused tension between them. This class conflict was intensified by an aesthetic conflict, because dissidents, typically trained in the conservative art theory of Lukács, did not acknowledge

<sup>70</sup> Tamás Hofer, "The 'Hungarian Soul' and the 'Historic Layers of National Heritage': Conceptualizations of Hungarian Folk Culture," in Ivo Banac and Katherine Verdery (eds.), *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995), pp. 65–82.

<sup>71</sup> István Tóth, in discussion with Kristóf Nagy, July 24, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Ferenc Kőszeg, "Inconnu-krónika," *Beszélő* (1984), no. 9, pp. 119–121 (online at [beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/inconnu-kronika](http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/inconnu-kronika) [accessed Feb. 9, 2021]).

Inconnu's art, but only their political activism.<sup>73</sup> These conflicts were exacerbated at the end of the 1980s when dissidents had achieved wider acceptance, and by 1988 Inconnu defined itself in opposition to the political opposition. As they put it:

The 'celebs' of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and of the *Beszélő*-circle received scholarships to go abroad and all kinds of other support through their social networks, while we were considered fags who print the newspaper, who suffer, who slog, who are beaten by the police, who have dirt-cheap everyday problems and who struggle to make a living.<sup>74</sup>

This was not the only case in Hungary of the 1980s in which the nameless and the recognized dissident figures were in conflict.<sup>75</sup> The discord between Inconnu and the recognized figures of the dissident scene culminated in the clash over the commemoration of the heroes of the 1956 revolution, discussed above.

The informal leader of Orfeo, István Malgot, who also came from the countryside, more successfully achieved social and spatial mobility. Being disenchanted from direct political action after the unveiling of the Maoist conspiracy, he became involved in Orfeo, claiming that culture is a necessary tool for ideological education and for revealing the contradictions of socialism. After the breakup of Orfeo, caused partially by his attacks on members whose behavior he labeled as reactionary, Malgot continued his work with the puppet theater and established a Roma theater funded by the Soros Foundation just before the transition.

Compared to Malgot, the urbanite Tamás Fodor's journey shows a more traditional intellectual trajectory that then became politicized in the wake of the global events of '68. His father was a party secretary, and Fodor then encountered new left ideas and the works of the young Marx through the first defendant in the Maoist trial, György Pór, who introduced him to Malgot, and he started to work with members of Orfeo. Their first theater piece expressed solidarity with the Western student movements and criticized the conservatism of the Hungarian socialist state by using quotations from Lenin. After the breakup of Orfeo, he remained the leader of the renamed theater group and directed their productions, such as *Woyzeck*, in 1977. He shifted from leftist critique towards a liberal attitude targeting authoritarian politics. By the 1980s, the theatre

<sup>73</sup> Sándor Radnóti, in discussion with Kristóf Nagy, April 11, 2016. In contrast to the situation in Hungary, there was not such a large gap between the political opposition and neo-avant-garde circles in other Eastern European countries. See, for example, Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> NOIJ - INCONNU III/III - 256/5, Dec. 30, 1988.

<sup>75</sup> Gábor Danyi, "Harisnya, ablakkeret és szabad gondolat," *Múltunk* (2019), no. 4, pp. 92–127. See also János Gulyás' documentary, *Szamizdatos évek*, 1997, 93 minutes.

group became involved in liberal dissident circles, sometimes even hosting the Inconnu group in their commune and printing samizdat in the attic of the building. After the transition, Fodor was the first who became a member of parliament, representing the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, claiming that “now I have left-liberal sympathies. [...] I kept the love of freedom as part of liberal thinking. My leftism is only about solidarity with the oppressed.”<sup>76</sup>



Figure 5. INCONNU, Nailed Hungary, 1984.  
Artpool Art Research Center – Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.  
Photo credit: Dániel Végel / Blinken OSA.

Malgot, in comparison, did not return to politics immediately after 1989, instead focusing on his sculptures. He became re-engaged with politics in 2002 when Fidesz, after it lost the elections that year, established a network of civic circles, which were framed as a democratization of the party but in fact served to mobilize their voters.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> After the coalition between the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats was realized in 1994, voters of this bloc in Hungarian public political discourses are usually referred as left-liberals, which not only indicates party preferences but also an urban middle-class habitus.

<sup>77</sup> Gábor Halmai, “Dispossessed by the Spectre of Socialism: Nationalist Mobilization in Transitional Hungary,” in Don Kalb and Gábor Halmai (eds.), *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class*:

While his former comrades narrate his life as a constant fluctuation between different worldviews, according to him “my plebeian attitude could not stand the promise of democracy without its realization and was looking for initiatives which really empower people.”<sup>78</sup> In fact, after realizing that the civic circles were not a means of achieving direct democracy, he resigned in an open letter addressed to Viktor Orbán. Nevertheless, his oeuvre was shown in 2015 as a part of the Fidesz-regime’s building of cultural hegemony.<sup>79</sup> In this exhibition, his conservative turn was explained by his shifting interest towards mythology, while his former socialist ideas made humanity his focal point. This folkish-socialist trajectory is not unique among Hungarian intellectuals experiencing sudden social mobility. In the post-socialist context, these actors and ideas were primarily co-opted by the political right, while in the post-WWII context actors with similar trajectories were incorporated by the socialist project.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the buzz around anti-communist artistic dissent after 1989, Inconnu could not return to the art field, primarily because they were embedded in neither the local nor the national art scene. Consequently, the group broke up and, in the 1990s, former members tried to establish the middle-class life that they did not have the possibility of pursuing during the 1980s. The group was rebooted by Tamás Molnár and Péter Bokros for the same 2002 election that re-politicized Malgot, and Molnár got involved in the civic circles as well. The re-founded Inconnu focused on its critique of the alliance of liberal elites with international capital. They re-actualized their anti-communist art as ‘anti-liberal’ and compared the former rule of the USSR to the new order of global capitalism. Their art also reflected a certain continuity, as they reformulated 1980s stickers against Soviet nuclear weapons into graphics against expanding the Paks Nuclear Power Plant with US investment; and their 1980s mousetrap-performance, originally highlighting the interlaced nature of national ideas with repressive state apparatuses, turned into a graphic warning against Hungary’s EU accession. The benefits of this re-politicization were as unevenly distributed within the group as they were in the 1980s. Tamás Molnár became the vice-chairman of the newly founded far-right Jobbik in 2003, and in recent years he has been building anti-communist public installations with the intellectual and financial support of the Fidesz regime. At the same time, the similarly re-politicized Péter Bokros was not able to make himself into a profession-

*Working Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 113–141; Béla Greskovits, “Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement,” *East European Politics* 36 (2020), no. 2. pp. 247–266.

<sup>78</sup> Eszter Götz, *Teremtett Lények: Malgot István Szobrai* [Created creatures: sculptures of István Malgot] (Budapest: Kláris, 2013).

<sup>79</sup> Zsuzsa László, “Malgot István közösségi kísérletei Maótól Vonáig egy nem-értelmiségi művészet felé,” *Tranzitblog.hu*, Jan. 22, 2016 (online at [tranzitblog.hu/malgot-istvan-kozossegi-kiserletei-maotol-vonai-egy-nem-ertelmisegi-muveszet-fele](http://tranzitblog.hu/malgot-istvan-kozossegi-kiserletei-maotol-vonai-egy-nem-ertelmisegi-muveszet-fele) [accessed Feb. 7, 2016]).

<sup>80</sup> Iván Vitányi, *Öt meg öt az tizenhárom* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1993).

al political entrepreneur, and in 2017 he passed away living precariously as a public worker. Similarly to Orfeo members, Inconnu members narrate their biography as a coherent life history. As Tamás Molnár commented on their exhibition on his Facebook page: “The members of Inconnu never turned left or right on the Road to Damascus.”

The patterns are the same in both groups. People with either socialist or bourgeois middle-class backgrounds were more likely to join the post-socialist liberal factions (termed *anti-democratic populism* by Gagyí) during the time of transition. People from the plebeian lower-classes mostly rejected and experienced rejection from the emerging, *democratic anti-populist* liberal elite that pushed them towards post-socialist nationalism. In both groups, one can find examples of both trajectories, but more typical in the case of Orfeo was the *democratic anti-populist* way, while in the case of Inconnu it was the *anti-democratic populist* way.

## Conclusions

While previous research often analyzed dissident trajectories from an individualizing and moralizing perspective, in this paper we argued that social trajectories of dissent under socialism and its post-socialist afterlives should be understood by situating individual biographies in social structures. Based on a comparison of the origins, context, and content of artistic radicalism between two politically engaged artist groups, Orfeo and Inconnu, we shed light on how institutional structures and social trajectory shaped the emergence and implementation of dissident ideologies in different historical contexts. We highlighted that differences in individual and collective trajectories in the post-socialist period come not from individual moral qualities but rather from the interplay of ideological context, social trajectories, shifting cultural policies, and the political economy of culture.

While in the case of Orfeo the group’s politicization went partly against the norms of the autonomous art scene, for a while it seemed to be reconcilable with state interests. However, the group’s radicalism mainly manifested itself in a departure from the mainstream lifestyle of the time and tried to turn the individualized form of cultural production into a collective one. As their target audience was the working class, they experimented with realist aesthetics, and their revolt did not include aesthetic radicalism. Their art was supported by the state, but their radicalism regarding politics and ways of living led to their expulsion from their comfortable position. As they had a more secure urban middle-class background, their radicalism did not affect their material position and living standards significantly. Moreover, their social and cultural capital was transposable when the liberal opposition started emerging in the early 1980s.

In contrast, Inconnu was an outsider artists’ group, first striving for recognition in the neo-avant-garde scene. While these aesthetic forms started to be integrated into the global art market already in the early 1980s, Inconnu did not have the social and cultural capital to be able to profit from that process. Retaliation by the state distanced them from the mainstreaming neo-avant-garde art scene and pushed them towards

a liberal dissident intelligentsia. Their habitus and working-class-focused re-actualization of the 1956 revolution left them secluded politically and socially from the mainly urban middle-class elite that was under formation at the time. Their attempt to support liberal dissent with visual materials and applied art undermined their artistic legitimacy in the self-proclaimed autonomous field of cultural production. This lack of integration, rooted in their spatial and social seclusion, later pushed many of the actors towards the antidemocratic populist faction of the transition.

When in 2019, thirty years after the transition, we led an acknowledged liberal intellectual through our comparative exhibition, his reaction was that “we have to acknowledge our [liberal] responsibility for the current political situation in Hungary and for creating such a close-knit network when appointing each other to state positions.” While we argued in this article that there is some truth in this form of social self-reflection, a radical break in intellectual trajectories is not necessarily only the result of the ideological package Gagyí calls democratic anti-populism but, as the members of *Inconnu* pointed out, “Everyone will be as radical as circumstances make them.” The circumstances were the context of the marketization periods of the 1960s and 1980s, coupled with the dominant ideologies of the time, providing different forms of articulation of dissent and anti-systemic ideas. Social trajectory matters, since a middle-class background makes it more likely that one would profit from the social and cultural capital accumulated in social movements. Intellectuals are the ones who by their position are capable of universalizing their distinct position and narrating it as the history of the whole society, in other words, producing ontology from epistemology. However, this capability of universalization is not a pre-given part of every intellectual position, but is highly dependent on the alliances they make during periods of social change.