

THESIS SUMMARY

to the Ph.D. dissertation of

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The relationship of nation-building and regional identity with ethnic marketing and consumption

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Budapest, 2023

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I. ABOUT THE RESEARCH: BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

The topic of discussion is the interdisciplinary examination of economically driven ethnic branding and ethnic consumption of the Hungarian minority in Szeklerland, as part of a nation-building process. The research inquiry is using the case of the Csíkszentsimon (Sânsimion) based beer manufacturer Csíki Sör to raise questions about the changing ethnic and regional identity of Szeklerland in the context of local and global (local production vs. big business), ethnocultural (Szekler) and national (Hungarian nation-building) impacts, as well as the consumption that is connected to it.

My aim is to understand global and local processes in one framework, to place the micro level – the locally and traditionally accumulated ethnographic knowledge – next to the macro structures, in one single interpretive framework: as a manifestation of a global economic tendency, the emergence and communication of modernization, in the discourses of a local community.

Anthropological inquiry always starts with the observation of a social phenomenon. My interest in this particular topic originated in 2014, when the local brewery opened its doors. A desire for deeper scientific apprehension and understanding was inspired by the events unfolding around the beer, among which the initiative titled *Székelyeknek székely terméket* (*Szekler products for Szekler people*) was especially of importance. The speeches delivered at the event were urging the crowd to stand up in support of the factory as an act of resistance, in the name of national survival of the Szeklers.

The dissertation is about the Szekler nation-building and identity construction process, where after the regime change, the ethno-cultural and emancipatory claims of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, and the regionalist aspirations of autonomist movements were strengthened. Identity politics and the contradictory interests of nation- and state-building became topics of everyday discussion. In this new current, a more spectacular form of marketization of minority symbols emerged. References to the mythology, the history and traditions of the region, as well as the revival of the overall image and symbolism of Szeklerness are having a renaissance ever since the regime change.

There is a strong ambition in the political field: to establish this “torn-out” part of the nation as a strong and independent region. At the same time, we can observe the emergence of a cultural market for the expressions of the Szekler identity, folklore elements being adapted for market penetration, and a canonization of national symbols. This consists of the reproduction or re-discovery of national symbols, and the reinterpretation of various sport events and

activities in a national framework. Furthermore, the ethnic market is regularly present in places like the Csíksomlyó Pilgrimage, the Ezer Székely Leány Napja (Day of the Thousand Szekler Girls), the Hungarian Cultural Days of Cluj etc., all of which possess a prominent nationalist and Szekler character as expressed in their event communication.

What characterizes the ethnic market is that it either utilizes specifically regional (Szekler, Transylvanian), Hungarian (minority related) cultural and material resources (e.g. the commodification of folk traditions and folk art in tourism), or it offers products or services in connection with the symbols and/or narratives of ethnic folklore. This cultural market lays the groundwork for ethnic branding, cultivating the social or profit-oriented frame of ethnic consumption. I view this process as a classification struggle, that is entered by new actors: post-modern entrepreneurs, who think about the already established Szekler ethnic and national heritage in a different register.

In order to understand the current nation-building processes and the topoi that are in circulation regarding Szeklerland and the Szekler people, it is necessary to briefly introduce the history of the region. The history of Szekler nation-building is in fact underlining that the memory of Szekler prerogatives and distinction has stayed present parallelly with the conception of the idea of Hungarian nationalism. There was – and still is – an expression of a double identity and affiliation present in Szeklerland, that is also implying an ambiguous interpretation of nationhood. In the case of Szeklerland and Szeklerness, the concepts and categories of ethnocultural group, ethnic community, minority nation and nationalism are heavily intertwined, while their contents are constantly changing – they are not clearly delineated and closed notions, but rather still developing ones, under constant refinement.

The dissertation is focusing on one aspect of the (re)construction of these categories, it examines this social process as it unfolds in the ethnic market of Szeklerland. The case addressed here is the story of Csíki Sör. The research positions this phenomenon in a threefold field delineated by the positioning of entrepreneurs involved in the ethnic market, the nationalist discursive framing present on the everyday level, and the reflections of consumers.

My main research question is how can a fairytale-character, dressed up in stereotyped traditional costume, convince Netflix-watching audiences to vote on the products of Csíki Sör with their money? What are possible incentives? Can beer-drinking be a patriotic act? If yes, how? How can a brewery and a brand be so important that it brings people to protest? Is the protest motivated by nationalist sentiments or by a fear of losing one's livelihood? Ultimately, what kind of profit is being made by investing into creatively producing the character of the

idealized Szekler, an invented tradition, if it's connected to self-identity and is made available for the masses?

The methodology of the research is characterized by plurality. The formulation of subjective testimonials and personal opinions was made possible through semi-structured guided interviews, accompanied by four focus group interviews under the title of *Ethnic consumption and regional branding in Szeklerland* as well as a survey.

The approach to the topic is twofold:

a. On the one hand, by examining what kind of ideologies of production and consumption are created by Csíki Sör, and how are these positioned in the dominant social discourses, namely the context of Szekler nation-building and the rise of nationalistic sentiments.

b. On the other hand, by investigating how a particular Szekler community perceives the production of identity construction targeted at them. Namely, how the members of the community talk about the representations of their own cultural distinction, and what is the reception and interpretation of these images.

The Csíki Sör brand is also exploiting the undefined, malleable nature of the limits of nation-building, and makes use of the current discursive frame of Szeklerhood. In this sense, through its own means and self-produced contents, it continuously re-constructs the "Szekler" as a unique ethnic category. In its communication it relates to Szeklerland as the truest parts of the Hungarian nation, consequently drawing on the Hungarian national identity, thereby trying to sell its products not just in Szeklerland, but the whole Hungarian language area and ultimately all around the globe.

The case of Csíki Sör shows how marketization can turn local and ethnic identification into economically effective tools – as part of Szekler nation-building –, what kind of ethnocentric reception it gets, and what ethical dilemmas it raises, despite the commercial success. Thus, the research provides an insight into what kind of classificatory and communal representation-creating discourses emerge in the business sector, and how these function in everyday (consumption-related) situations.

Furthermore, the dissertation raises the questions whether the Bourdieusian fields of restricted cultural production and extended cultural production are separable from each other, and what happens when a product simultaneously holds symbolic value and brings profit in market competition. Does (or can) economic investment move from symbolic representation of the minority nation to facilitate a representation that can also be understood as heritagization? In other words: can we talk about heritagization if the tradition of a national character and

symbol-system reaches public awareness, and thus conservation, not through an institutionally musealized form, but through economic investment and mass production?

II. USED METHODS: CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

One of the main arguments of the dissertation is that in the case of Szeklerland, when talking about Hungarianness and Szeklerness, the categories of nation and ethnic group, nationalism and ethnicity often overlap and are difficult to separate. Just like the economic aspects of these notions, the aspects of ethnic consumption and economic nationalism are also entangled. Another basic assumption is that the definition of an ethnic group is in every case produced by a specific historical, economic, cultural and political context, is linked to interactions and is highly situational. What is at stake is a historically and socially produced, processual Szekler ethnic and national category and identity.

The basic concepts describing the phenomenon observed in Szeklerland are nation, nationalism, nation-building, ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic group. In my social scientific interpretation, these basic concepts together with the premises of the social embeddedness of the economy, and the claims about ethnic consumption and ethnic marketing all converge in the postmodern, interdisciplinary Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The rationale for this is that consumer culture theory, like anthropological analyses of consumption, rejects the concept of the rational consumer and focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of consumption.

I do not consider the national minority, the nationalizing state nor the external national homeland as a given. As Brubaker argues, these three fields all comprise differentiated and competing positionalities. In this triadic relational nexus the interaction between fields is continuous. The specificity of this interaction is that the interpretations of each field often become “the object of *representational struggles* among actors in a given field.” (Brubaker 1996. 68, emphasis in original) Examining the variations of minority discourses in Szeklerland, we arrive precisely at this space of representational struggle.

According to what I take to be a valid interpretation, national minorities mostly form separate, parallel societies within the frame of the political nation: societies that have their own language, their own culture, and live in an area that is considered their homeland, where they constitute the majority. Put quite simply, we define national minorities as “ethnocultural groups which think of themselves as nations within a larger state” (Kymlicka 1999. 66.)

As we are talking about Szeklerland, it is essential to bring the concepts of nationalism and national minorities into a common interpretative space. Minority nationalism is characterized

by an understanding of the minority group “in specifically »national« rather than merely »ethnic« terms, a demand for state recognition of their distinct ethnocultural nationality, and the assertion of certain collective, nationality-based cultural or political rights.” (Brubaker 1996. 6.) While ethnicity is often the basis for the construction of national cultures, I argue that “unlike ethnic identity, national identity is always directly linked to the problems of state-building and dialogue between states” (Löfgren 1989. 16.)

I view ethnicity as a permanent social organization of cultural differences. In Károly Kocsis’ definition, the concept of ethnicity refers both to the way in which individuals express their personal identity, as well as to the type of social stratification that results from group formation based on actual or perceived common descent and cultural characteristics. (Kocsis 2002. 319.) My basic category will not be group as ethnicity, but instead “groupness” (Brubaker 2002. 168.) I understand the existence of the nation and ethnic categories, as well as their importance and effectiveness to be in a constant state of development, of “being produced” (Keményfi 2002. 377.) through ideologies, narratives, categories and systems of classification.

The dissertation bases the relationship between culture and economy on the proposition that social structure and socio-cultural values determine economic activity (Polányi 1976, Granovetter 1985, Portes 1998, Putnam 1993, Lengyel–Szántó 2005, Csata 2019, Szabó 2010). Granovetter’s study of the economic network of immigrant minorities in the United States led him to conclude that group membership is a resource in the economic process, providing cultural advantage, solidarity advantage and network advantage (Granovetter 1995, Csata 2015). Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) view ethnic-based “bounded solidarity”, “enforceable trust” and “value introjection” as sources of social capital.

The core concept of the dissertation is social capital, which emerged in the seventies and eighties, and came to the center of attention following the theoretical work of the above-mentioned researchers (Bourdieu, Granovetter). The basic thesis of Robert Putnam, one of the representatives of the paradigm, is that social capital is a fundamental characteristic of social organization, communities and larger groups (including the nation). Social capital is an ability and characteristic of communities in which norms, alliance-formation, mutual trust and solidarity are highly present. To this I connect Bourdieu’s theory of the conversion of different types of capital (Bourdieu 1997).

In my dissertation I bring different scientific concepts into one interpretative framework, and attempt to use the theory of social embeddedness of the economy (Granovetter) as a starting point to explore Bourdieusian concepts (in particular the notions of cultural and social capital) and processes (conversion of forms of capital) extended onto a larger ethnocultural community.

One basis for this is that I understand ethnicity as a possible framework for cultural embeddedness and social capital. Research on the social embeddedness of economic processes suggests that different economic outcomes of different ethnic groups may be determined by their specific values and community norms. The literature on ethnic economics confirms that among economic actors, being from a common ethnic group can provide a cooperative advantage over other market actors.

Looking at ethnic consumption, I emphasize that the subjective sense of belonging to a nation or ethnic group (Turner 1975, Niedermüller 2002, Bindorffer 2001) is the basis of what Feischmidt and Brubaker call the consumption of the nation (Feischmidt–Brubaker 1999). Jon Fox considers consumption understood as a practice of national identity to be an aspect of “everyday nationhood”, and distinguishes between two types of such consumption: the use of national goods (such as the flag, the coat of arms), and the consumption of non-national goods in a nation-related way (such as recipes). The choice between consumer goods endowed with identity value can be understood as symbolic production: the agency of the consumer to shape their own identity (Fox–Miller 2008). Friedman argues that modern consumption is about identity, playing a central role in creating difference, both in shaping one’s own and a group’s self-image and identity (Friedman 1994).

Consumption-supportive ethnic marketing is a marketing communication trend that uses visual and linguistic symbols specific to a particular ethnicity/group.¹ Marie-Christine Pauwels coins the process of ethnic-based branding becoming a mainstream phenomenon, a “commercial gold mine” (in the US), a marketing evolution (Pauwels 2006. 21.) Furthermore, ethnic marketing is also defined in the literature as the commodification of difference and diversity, the marketing of commodification (Rath 2007).

For the analysis of ethnically based branding, I consider the definition provided by Pires and Stanton to be the guiding one. The authors define ethnic marketing as a set of practices and institutions through which a product/service is created, communicated, delivered and redeemed, in a way that provides value to ethnic consumers, clients, partners and groups, and to society as a whole (Pires-Stanton 2005). Further elaboration on the definition clarifies that the content of such production must not only represent the characteristics of the group, but also meet the social needs and wants of its members. In my research I use the terms ethnic and minority marketing. In this context, I interpret these as synonyms as a sign of marketing activity specifically linked

¹ See more in Pollock (1992, 1993), Danowski (1993), Holliday (1993), Sheth–Parvatiyar (1995), Svendsen (1997), Pires–Stanton (2005).

to the Szekler ethnic community, where the product adaptation strategy, the product's characteristics and communication are also linked to the targeted group (Keegan 1998).

I combine the aforementioned concepts and scientific notions in the interdisciplinary Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). CCT is an attempt at a theoretical synthesis that focuses on the dynamic relationships between cultural meanings, consumer behavior and the market (Arnould–Thompson 2005). Essentially, it builds on the concept of cultural studies, and understands culture in a Geertzian way, in that it considers culture to be a constructed set of experiences, meanings and practices. CCT also frames consumption as more than the simple satisfaction of needs, but as a socially and culturally determined act (Mitev–Kántor 2018).

Making profit starts with innovation: the producer does not just create a product, but creates a new form and, above all, seeks a relationship with the consumer. This can be linked to the claim of the economic anthropologist Gudeman that the producer, through the meanings attached to production and/or product, creates a representation that determines the worldview of others (Gudeman 2001). It is this worldview that motivates people to buy and use certain products (Pires–Stanton 2005).

Another reason for including CCT is that CCT research is characterized by methodological plurality. Its representatives emphasize the use of ethnographic methods in market research and stress that an understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of consumption is not attainable through survey research. Product symbolism, ritual practices, the meaning of the product and the brand can only be identified in consumer stories. Hence, qualitative methods are those that enable the examination of the symbolic boundaries that structure individual and communal consumer identities (Holt 2002).

III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATION

The following points summarize the findings of the research as themes.

- a. On the basis of a general description of the ethnic market in Szeklerland – which in itself fills a gap in the existing literature – I concluded that after the 2000s, multiple businesses were established in Szeklerland which build on the region's characteristics and specificities. Discussing the main current initiatives, I found that today there are several enterprises that operate as trademarks (e.g. Székely termék/Szekler product), commercial brands (e.g. Góbé termék), community promotion and distribution schemes (e.g. Átalvető), or even as profit-oriented enterprises that use ethnic features (e.g. Csíki Sör).

- b. In this market context the history, myths, legends and ethnographic knowledge of the region turn into economic resources. The study of these initiatives shows that in the functioning of the Szekler ethnic market economic image-building and ethnic identity building are mutually supportive and intertwined processes.
- c. The regulations of the current trademark systems provide a framework for producer and consumer schemes, but lack systemic coordination and monitoring. Furthermore, in this system, the buzzwords ‘Szeklerland’ and ‘Szekler’ do not only imply traditional methods of production, quality guarantee, local and locally-sourced production, but in many cases, they also imply (or are intended to imply) saleability, commodifiability.

2. Reflections on value formation and the commodification of culture

- a. According to the results of the discussions on the process of value formation, a mythical, fairytale-like image of Szeklerland is still present to this today. The image of the region endowed with idealized and authentic features is made all the more confusing by the fact that it places the characters themselves in this frame. The locals are, in their own words, caught in the intersection of realistic everyday life and the need to conform to this manufactured image.
- b. The actors actively involved in the formation of the image of Szeklerland, who work in the field of preservation of traditions, are critical of the introduction of elements of ethnographic heritage into the market. They see the initiative of making Szeklerland more attractive as a state of imbalance in the process of conversion of regional cultural assets and natural resources into economic capital.

3. *Ethn branding and the Csíki Sör*

- a. Although in the ethnomarketing of the beer producer, the adjective “csíki” (meaning “from the Csík region”) and the derived “csíkiness” is referring to a geographically existing and definable entity, it is not only presented as a concrete tangible entity. It is also a symbolic framework and collective representation composed of historical traditions and ethnic elements, which not only illustrates and displays a tradition, but also constitutes and reinforces it. The stereotypical elements and myths involved in the creation of the image fit into a semiotic system of the culture of origin. Thus, the ethnographic heritage associated with Szeklerland, partly historically developed and partly invented in the present, is an effective means of communication in the business communication of Csíki Sör for addressing a specific target group.

- b. The analysis of the Csíki Sör commercial proved that the few-minute promotional video, as a multimedia representation, uses national symbols with fine tuning and frames beer consumption as a ritual practice defining social and cultural identity. Csíki Sör is a capitalist enterprise that uses upward ethnic discourse in its marketing, pitching its product through regional culture and identity in a context where these have a strong upward (national political and economic) momentum. Csíki Sör situates its own activities within a local and subnational discursive framework – in opposition to the global, and a regional, re-territorializing discursive framework – in opposition to deterritorializing tendencies.

4. Consumer interpretations and receptions

- a. The Csíki Sör Manufactory has outstanding economic performance indicators, of which the local community considers the most important achievements to be job creation and thus changes in the quality of life, an increase in the demand for skills, and the retention of the young generation.
- b. According to the result of the survey, the use of ethnic and cultural symbols, the local character of the product and the aim to support local producers play an important role in the selection of the Igazi/Tiltott Csíki Sör. Those who support the local character of the beer generally have a higher willingness to support local products and local producers. And among those who support Csíki Sör as a Szekler product, the expression of identity and the use of ethnic symbols are generally much more supported.
- c. The research questions on ethnic identity confirm the role attributed to the use of Szekler symbols and the presence of a strong Szekler group consciousness. The results confirm that (in the case of beer) an ethnic dimension is present in making purchasing decisions: ethnicity can be a determining factor in economic life. It seems to be a prominent organizing element, even if not the only one. Belonging to a particular ethnic group also implies a greater willingness to cooperate economically, because of the greater openness among its members to buy from, or transact with each other. Cultural and social capital can facilitate economic activity, hence cultural affiliation can be used as a real resource.
- d. The result of the analysis of consumer receptions and interpretations is that Csíki Sör, as a *par excellence* national product, also functions as a political and economic instrument, in other words, it represents a kind of patriotism. The beer represents an economic and cultural opportunity in the search for economic and mental security, as well as for identity affirmation. In its representation and interpretation, it is a part of

self-determination, a means of locating oneself in the world, in other words, an objectified expression of a cognitive schema: a means of expressing one's own cultural identity and the survival of the minority nation.

5. Commodification and social responsibility

- a. A practical output of the dissertation is a proposition for the regulation of the ethnic market, as the formulation of the social problem is the first step and a potential starting point for developing a solution, that can happen through the organization of a broader discussion on the situation and the creation of a code of ethics. This would allow for the future utilization of my research in Szeklerland, and would also contribute to the application of socio-cultural anthropology in the business world, for which – besides some early stage initiatives (Kántor 2018) – there has not been a good model developed yet in our region.
- b. In the ethnic market of Szeklerland, the image of the “pure source”, the traditional, authentic, local and Szekler national symbol system is a stereotypical quality, which allows the exploitation of cultural and social capital as an economic resource. In this interpretation, the ethnic marketing communication of the Szeklerland based beer producer Csíki Sör, which defines itself as national, is nothing but a modernist response to the functioning (or lack thereof) of economic capital and the experience of being a minority.

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