

# Blue Jeans in Socialist Hungary

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Draft

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### 1. Introduction

This study is a first discussion of my empirical research<sup>1</sup> results focusing on representations (personal histories and media pieces), regulatory practices, and consumption strategies regarding blue jeans in Hungary between 1960 and the mid-1980s. Blue jeans offers a surprisingly useful juncture for an array of social inquiries regarding past and present issues of domination, agency, community, or the politics of difference, or of remembering. I give an outline in this paper of how ideas and practices associated with wearing, or not wearing blue jeans represented, and in a way, performed the change of relationship between state and society in socialist Hungary in the last three decades or so preceding 1989. I have chosen histories about this particular piece of garment for the following reasons.

Firstly, the spread of jeans wearing in Hungary had obviously been taking place *vis a vis* changing written and unwritten codes regarding what to wear, therefore practices informing decisions of the youth to wear jeans (or not) can be regarded as chiefly important traits of the nature of society's change, and of course particularly that of the youth. Hierarchies of sumptuary rules, and rule conflicts regarding jeans reveal fine tunes of power exercise, or subtle ways to challenge the power, for that matter. As I will show, the convenient abstraction of "state vs. society" in reality is a construct of an often paradoxical network of relations (schematically sometimes resembling to a Moebius stripe) between youngsters, parents, school authorities and everyday practices of cultural governance in schools, cultural institutions, youth clubs, and arts and media pieces about life in contemporary Hungary. I will show that norms that drove "jeans policies" and jeans wearing agencies always unified seemingly distinct considerations of morality, aesthetics and politics that enabled the actors (let them be teen pals in the 1960s or János

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<sup>1</sup> The research is comprised of analyses of (i) archival materials, newspaper articles, books, television reports and movies, (ii) interviews, (iii) studying secondary literature and (iv) about 100 stories I received after I placed ads in two national newspapers and internet bulletin boards asking respondents to send me the story of their first pair of jeans. (The detailed description of the methodology will be in the Appendix.)

Kádár himself<sup>2</sup>) to utilize jeans for their interests. Though wearing jeans can be understood –perhaps all too easily- as an act of resistance or as an example of image-seeking consumer act, my discussion of jeans wearing in socialism reveals a set of histories that highlight previously somewhat neglected aspects of power aspects of everyday life in the eastern bloc.

Secondly, beginning with the youth and (as they grew older) subsequently the middle generations had simply dressed up in jeans *en masse* in the timespan of less than a generation in Hungary, a remarkably salient occurrence in material culture that may deserve inquiry in itself. As everywhere in the world, jeans has been a very particular piece of outfit in Hungary. It was uncompromisingly some-kind-of-western (probably American), a feature in socialist cultural politics bearing obviously more significance than polka-dots on scarfs or the origin of raisins in the grocery. But perhaps more importantly, meanings conveyed by blue jeans and the ways of wearing them, in the west and somewhat later in the east as well, have transformed slightly the very concept of significance associated with clothing as well. Since by the 1980s jeans had been worn in the US by death row inmates as well as Lagerfeld boutique strollers and even the President himself too, jeans has lost most of its immanent, „lexical“ meaning, while on the contrary –through the choice of mode one decided to wear it– wearing jeans has started to move away from being the subject of a binary regulation (in/out; yes/no) towards constituting instead an array a symbolic tools of agency, similarly to auxiliarily verbs in English leanguage, enabling the „wearer-speaker“ to express decidedness or doubt, consent or rebellion, submission or courage, ability to act or helplessness, flux or static status etc. This property of blues jeans turned out to be chiefly important trait for people in the political masquarade of softening authoritarian regime of János Kádár. Jeans was a perfect medium for both to formulate a message without saying anything, and to say something between the lines, the most popular poetic form in public life in the era. As I will show it, jeans manufacturing in cooperation with Levi Strauss Co. in the 1970s was utilized by the officialdom to express political/cultural pragmatism and to highlight quality and progress in the Hungarian economy.

Thirdly, a study of jeans wearing offers a unique perspective to observe consumption, because during the era in question consuming western commodities –in a stunningly paradoxical way–, was a truly informal grassroots activity. Knowledge, attitudes and skills of consumption were largely produced through interpersonal relations, since western advertising simply hadn't reached the country. More on that, the longing for jeans was principally directed by brands (that is, by a logic of uniformity), but authentication of the “raw” jeans (through sometimes crude technologies and essential re-tailoring) resulted a truly individualized piece of outfit that their owners felt something as their second skin (most youngsters had one pair of jeans at best in the period). Informal knowledge determined differences between various brands, between the real and the fake, or the proper way of handling and wearing it. The informal, often vulnerable “parallel-” or “counter-publics” formulated also ideas also about why to wear

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<sup>2</sup> János Kádár was the First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP) between 1956 and 1988.

it, therefore the mostly privately produced and exchanged knowledge about jeans can be regarded as a textbook-like example of how informal public spheres operate when they are controlled by authoritarian measures: They are vulnerable to manipulation and hoax but they perform their central task which is to nurture a sense to differentiate real from fake. And jeans had presented about a perfect case to exercise this task.

Fourthly, not only a long-forgotten unique landscape of longings and desires emerge through an investigation of people's personal stories about their first pair of jeans, but also it highlights –hermeneutically as well as politically profound– aspects of remembering to the communist past.

## **2. The context: The politics of consumption after 1956**

Though they cannot be considered as standard parts of apparel, here we have to address the issue of how to wear medals of honor. Presumably everyone is proud of his/her decoration, but we should wear them only at special occasions, and wearing only the stripe is fully appropriate in certain cases.

Burget – Kovácsvölgyi (1962: 51): *How To Behave?*

The two weeks of the 1956 October revolution had made a remarkable imprint to the subsequent 33 years of socialism in Hungary. However we still know relatively little about certain historical decisions of key importance in October and November 1956<sup>3</sup>, a few general conclusions seem to be plausible for scholars and commentators of the period (Berend - Ránki, 1985; Szabó, 1989; Dessewffy - Hammer, 1995). The political leadership led by Kádár had drawn a conclusion from the fact that even the police and the military joined the revolution as soon as the Communist leadership and the Soviet army stepped down, namely that organized opposition against the communist regime cannot take place again at any means.

The leadership had chosen a a two-tier strategy to achieve this goal. As soon as the Party had a sense of taking control, the police, the intelligence and the newly set up communist paramilitary forces started a course of very heavy retaliations against those be known active in the revolution. Lustration procedures in working places, heavy sentences, carefully communicated in the press and the radio, for taking part in political meetings, forcing ten thosands to report about their colleagues and family to the intelligence, and almost automatically death penalty for those proven using weapons were the most notable items of the retaliation campaign in the late 1950s. This heavy-handed policy had differed from the classic Stalinist measures in a crucial respect. The Party had made a certain withdrawal from people's everyday life. Peasants were stopped being agitated to hand in their land to agricultural cooperatives for a couple of years, the working place party rituals in which people were forced to give their personal consent to party measures were

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<sup>3</sup> For example: Why did the Soviet leadership replace of its military forces with new units after the days of revolution? With whom, where and what did János Kádár talk in late October and early November? What kind of roles the Soviet political leadership and the intelligence played in setting the political agenda of consolidation in Hungary?

also suspended, unlike in the years of Korean war when people had to join „spontaneous“ neighborhood meetings against American imperialism, people were mostly informed about the Cuban missile crisis from the media, bicycle owners were no longer expected to register their vehicle after 1957, or for that matter, as the motto of this section suggests, the privileged political elite was warned in 1962 by the book good manners not to burden the everyday with their state decoration.

The unmasked state violence against active opponents of the regime had become coupled with another vigorously executed series of measures by the late 1950s promising significant increase in people's standard of living. The significant raise of workers' wage just right after the suppression of the revolution can be regarded easily as a short term panic reaction of the leadership. Subsequent development though may highlight a certain direction in government measures aiming to allow more and at the same time, new ways of consumption for people. 1960 was not only a year of the first amnesty for political prisoners, but also when the first large self-service food store was opened in Budapest. The 1960s brought not only the a period when food rationing had disappeared for good, but the introduced paid maternity leave system, housing policies (both building housing projects and allowing people to build their houses), or the permission of small scale agricultural entrepreneurship had all significantly improved the life of millions. The increase of the real wages was paralleled with gradual improvements in the retail industry, Hungarians started to travel abroad in masses (very often with their recently purchased car or motorcycle)<sup>4</sup>, and the monthly *Ifjúsági Magazin (Youth Magazine)*, founded in 1965, contained not only politically loaded stories about democracy in schools, but also chords and lyrics of *Satisfaction* or *Michelle*. A short decade after the 1956 revolution one needed a television set and a sofa for the two major excitements of the year: The football victory (3:1) over Brasil at the world championship in England and the first, very popular Hungarian pop music contest.

The term „negative consensus“ captures quite appropriately the emerging *modus vivendi* in the relationship between state and society in the 1960-70s. At large, it can be regarded as a deal, or a bargain, in which the state offers (modestly growing) material advancements and (modestly) liberalized public life in return for abstaining from touching a few political taboos, such as the one-party system, the alliance with the Soviet Union, the question of Hungarians in the neighboring countries and 1956. And what made the consensus „negative“ is that though it implied self-constraint on both parties, it has never brought trust, which drove both state and society into a culture of pretense and imitation. While people were showing certain eagerness to forget how exactly the Iron Curtain happened to appear on the western border of the country, in return the Iron Curtain started to appear in everyone's mind barring initiative, courage, invention from

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<sup>4</sup> “Between 1958 and 1962 the number of television subscribers increased by twenty times, to 325 thousand. between 1960 and 1970 the number of people who owned cars increased by more than 11 times. At the same time the question of quality of life became a permanent feature in the Politbüro's work. At the Seventh Party Congress in 1959 János Kádár himself described how many orders for washing machines, refrigerators, motorcycles and cars the party had made decisions on. This explosive spread of consumer durables would not have been possible without the doubling of real wages between 1960 and 1975.” (Hammer – Desefffy, 1997).

agencies exercised in everyday life, offering the always-at-hand explanations of learned helplessness. Somewhat poetically it can be argued that the deal was about that the *Angst* caused by painful memories of the oppressed revolution, as well as the fear in the subsequent years, could be exchanged for pleasures of the present order. The communist party's social-political agenda to enforce obedience and to induce forgetting had perfectly dovetailed with temporal aspects in people's emerging consumption habits.

Compliance with state implied rules were predominantly controlled and rewarded (positively or negatively) through the work place or school. Lower or higher level of cooperation with the state were expressed by different promotion and other career opportunities, often representing different levels of wage, of course. Non-compliance with political rules could automatically exclude the person from the circle of the year-end premium recipients, or from receiving state-subsidized loans to purchase a house, a refrigerator, a television, or to obtain a passport or a telephone line (all required a recommendation from the working place). People's dissident attitude could jeopardize their children's chances for a college admission. When in the late 1950s the government introduced not only television but the national lottery as well in Hungary (both somewhat foreseen by Orwell, actually) probably they were not aware that that the latter, that is, controlling people through their expectations regarding the future, would be their most effective tool to exercise power in the future. As we put it somewhere else:

„Queuing is a vote for the future. If we examine lifestyle strategies from the sixties to the eighties we will see that queues are not just a sign of economic realities, but that they can also tell us a great deal about life under Kádárism. While people did not have to stand in lines for a terribly long time (unless they wanted bananas or a visa to Germany), a significant amount of their lives was spent in a symbolic labyrinth of queues. Just a few examples: one generally needed to wait roughly seven years for a telephone, five years for a flat, four years for a car, one could travel to the West once every three years, and could take advantage of a union-paid vacation once every three years. And people in fact 'stood' in other lines that were much more symbolic - for instance, they earned premiums for staying in one work place for a long period of time, and we could mention the intergenerational queues where parents waited for a time when their children could enjoy greater prestige“ (Hammer – Dessewffy, 1997).

Of course, this largely schematic discussion of two decades' important grand social and political transformations could not cover equally chiefly important aspects, such as the Cold War as a global frame for this development, the radically transforming structure of the Hungarian society bringing about unforeseen tensions, or developments in Hungarian cultural politics that commented and influenced vigorously the process outlined in this section. One further aspect has to be mentioned here too that will place blue jeans in the center of the subsequent discussion.

Generational change is perhaps the most important source of surprise in the life of modern societies. Quite understandably, the greater transformation a society performs in a century or so, the more dramatic and perhaps more idiosyncratic changes will occur between its three or four generations. The American baby-boomers' Hungarian contemporaries (and their younger siblings) had either vague child memories of the 1956 performance of Soviet heavy artillery in Budapest, or not at all. For the generations born in the 1950-70s the truly gruesome Stalinist years (1949-1953) were either school book

history, or perhaps a couple of sweet'n'sour (or just sour) family stories. For them, being brought up in the Kádár consolidation, „goulash communism“ was much less as a step in a particular history than a timeless condition, a field that needed new logics of operation to discover about. For these generations staying in a virtual line for five or six years for a nice new Czechoslovak, East German or Soviet car had gradually lost its appeal as a splendid future generating enterprise. Also, compared to previous generations for whom sheer physical survival was the greatest achievement (if they managed to do so) and for whom everyday security was simply a source of pleasure, younger generations had discovered gradually monstrosities of everyday normalcy and also a drive in themselves for something that is unknown and still so much real at the same time: A Levi's 501, for example.

### 3. The Jampec

Jampec (pronounced yam-petz), the Budapest imitation of the U.S. zoot suiter, was under severe attack from Hungary's Communist government. The government flayed the jampec as a sinister penetration of U.S. "barbaric culture" into Hungarian social life.

Managers of state-owned clothing shops displayed mannikins dressed in the jampec style, along with the warning that "everybody who imitates this American fashion madness belongs to the capitalist U.S. in spirit." One shop window (see cut) showed a gorilla next to a jampec and a telegram from the Budapest zoo's monkey house protesting against the insult of comparing a jampec to one of their kind.

Last week the Communist Party organ Szabad Nep called on the government to crack down on jampec-dressed youngsters. Cried Szabad Nep: "They portray the dismal picture of imitating the American gangster's misanthropic spirit, moral decay and spiritual degeneration . . . Can we treat with indifference the fact that our youth are taught to dance sambas to the tune of the Hungarian czardas?"

Time Magazine, 1950 ("Barbaric Culture")

The communist takeover in the late 1940s meant predominantly of the nationalization of nearly everything. The nationalization had not stopped with the appropriation of businesses, factories, shops, cafes, or services. Except for a privileged few, if they happened to have left a car after the WWII destruction, they had to offer it for communal use for the state. Libraries as well as toy stores had to re-profile their selection according to the needs of the progressive working class, a measure that made Freud and Monopoly underground materials for a decade or so. Clubs and voluntary organizations were mostly dissolved or forced under an ideological direction. During the chilliest days of the Cold War, in the 1950s there were virtually no traits of everyday life that was free of political signification, dividing life to friends and enemies. Workers were made of the progressive majority and the social democratic „worker aristocrats“, a white collar worker could choose between the „clubs“ of the progressive intelligentsia and the reactionaries, the youth was mostly innocent and progressive, except for the ones under clerical influence, and the West-aping *jampec*. Clothing was not an exception from this simple way of classification, certain pieces of garments were regarded as the part of the outfit of the internal enemy. One could see black clergy gown or tuxedo mainly in political cartoons

in the communist press depicting usually the Pope and Churchill planning a plot against the peoples' democracies.

The *jampec* was probably the toughest subculture in Hungary's social history.<sup>5</sup> (The word comes from the Yiddish, a term already used in the 1930s for a man dressed-behaving a bit silly.) These young men, mostly of working class origin, having acquired certain survival skills during the WWII as children, were the perhaps the most obvious segment in the society that regarded the communist regime as a temporary bad joke in the 1950s. Similarly to the zoot suiters, and later the mods in the UK, a jampec could be recognized from his shiny leathers shoes with a thick rubber sole (subsequently appropriated by the skindeads), his trousers's legs were tightly tailored, he wore a jacket of checker pattern with a colorful tie, and his further traits included rocker-style hairdo, a particular slang, complete contempt to questions of politics, a longing for jazz music and a generous amount of skill in fist fight<sup>6</sup>. As my words may suggest, a good part of the aura of the jampec is probably sheer myth, partly stemming in the fact that the communist state spotted them as the most trenchant enemies (among the youth) of the peoples' democracy, but which factor contributed heavily to the fact that in the fifties if a young boy decided to enter the wild side, the jampec repertoire was at hand ready-made.

In the next draft I'll include here a short analysis of the jampec in Hungarian cinema in the 1950s (*Dalolva szép az élet, Kiskrajcár*) and in the 1980s (as nostalgia) in Péter Gothár's *Time Stands Still*. I'll also show –based on actual cases– how the charge of jampec was utilized in punitive administrative procedures against secondary school students in the 1950s.

The political treatment of a group in the society with a particular attention to their outfit (especially its charge of west-aping) and its impact on contemporary young people's thinking had turned out to be a novel element in Hungary's social history, setting a pattern for the period when the first pairs of jeans would be appearing a few years later in Hungary.

#### 4. First encounters

„We enter into the clothing store. They show us a great avail of fabric or cloth that makes choice really not easy: which are the cloths or shoes which are nice and useful too? And fashion brings a viewpoint too that we also have to consider.

Our age has brought more freedom in choosing the outfit. The times are over when „the cloth made the men“, when social status or class position determined what has to be worn by people. A basic task of our society is to bring more beauty, quality and value to our life. Everyone in the workers' society has got an opportunity to enjoy fruits of the work. And it is

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<sup>5</sup> Somewhat similar to the Soviet *stiliagi* (mod-like) subculture in the 1950s (Flint, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> It would be of merit to describe and analyze the generation long process through which habitual, I would almost say casual, physical violence characterizing community life have given a way to a much more brutal, I would almost say professional, physical violence in European male youth subcultures.

expressed though the way we dress. (...) We have to oppose the skewed claim that wearing a nice and fashionable dress is a petit bourgeois habit and therefore it is „not appropriate“ to do so. No way! Everyone should dress nicely according to his/her financial opportunities. (...)

We have to highlight a few striking mistakes. Sometimes it occurs that one can see women wearing pants at a theater or in a club. Or when men taking off their suit jacket, exposing their nadrágtartó while dancing. The dressing of the feltűnősködő young people's west-aping, jampec dressing is similarly tasteless.“

Burget - Kovácsvölgyi (1962: 46): *How to behave? (On Dressing)*

As this dressing advice from 1962 may suggest, there had been a considerable move from the class-warfare based sartorial clothing regulating regime of the early 1950s. János Kádár's two-front consolidation fight can be captured with high accuracy in this quote. The authors warn dogmatic communist true believers for their „skewed claims“, and also the reader might have a sense that the west-aping jampec seems to appear in this discussion as a less dangerous (simply „tasteless“) actor. The new sartorial norm in the workers' society had become „wearing a nice and fashionable dress“.

The first pairs of jeans had appeared in Hungary by chance or mistake in the second part of the 1950s. As „my first pair of jeans“ respondents tell me, the first (usually used) pieces were sent to Hungary in charity cloth bales, parcels from American relatives (supporting the family with their used cloths, especially for children), or were brought to Hungary by young people who witnessed the emerging jeans fashion in a western country. The performance of the first pairs of jeans in the late 1950s in families, schools and public spaces were sometimes successful, as the story<sup>7</sup> below suggests, sometimes it was close to disastrous. Teachers, parents and even sometimes peers initially equated jeans with a particular outfit (*cejgnadrág*), a workers' or peasants' working pant made of thick (usually grey or blue) cotton fabric. A respondent said that after bringing jeans from Italy where he saw it as a cool outfit, he was so much ridiculed by his peers that he wore it for outdoor excursions only, until some years later at an excursion someone recognized with clear shock that good heavens, this pal had got jeans.<sup>8</sup> When first appeared jeans even had no common name. Somewhere it was called *kovbojnadrág* (cowboy pant):

After 1956 many people sent things to Hungary as a support. For us, children, it was new and interesting. Biscuits of milk powder taste! Chewing gum (“don't swallow, just chew it”)! Instant cocoa powder! (About for three years I could drink cocoa for breakfast, seriously!) School exercise books with colorful covers! Milk powder! Russian canned milk!! It was all awful good. And the cloths, of course. These things had appeared through different channels. The cowboy pant, for example had come through the Lutheran Church. I attended bible classes at the local church and when they received parcels from their western connections they distributed these things among the people who attended the church.

[The cowboy pant] was an amazing gear! Of course, I could never go to school in that, but apart from that, it could not have been taken off from me – quite understandably, I think. It hasn't included any sense of superiority, or something, it was just an “American (*amcsi*) gear”. (Maybe it wasn't American, I don't know.) At that time the word “American” (*amcsi*) meant absolutely positive.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I mark **this way** texts that come from “my first pair of jeans” stories.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ádám N. (XXXX)

<sup>9</sup> Story from István H. (1945)



In another family jeans had caused excitement for a different reason:

I've got my first jeans when I was in the kindergarten. I assume it wasn't called neither "farmer pant" [*farmernadrág*, the most common name for jeans in Hungarian], nor "blue jeans", in our family it was called the „many-pocketed“ (*sokzsebes*). Everyone in the family, included my parents were amazed by the enormous number of (5) pockets on it, because most pants had 3, all right with clock pocket they had 4 pockets. Jeans had no any kind of status symbol feature, jeans was simply unknown at that time.<sup>10</sup>

As these three stories of early-achievers suggest, jeans was a *terra incognita* in the late fifties, apart from the curious similarity to working cloth, it had no wider significance in outfit discourse, because people seemed to simply abstain from wearing jeans in public places, therefore authorities did not bother with regulating it at all. A few short years later it wasn't the case anymore.

## 5. Regulating jeans: The logic and politics of cultural governance in socialism

A key element in Hungary's cultural politics in the last three decades of socialism was the fact that the Party had always regarded culture as a field that may strengthen or weaken the acceptance of the its rule. The Party has never treated people's habits or way of life as something „given“, out there, irrelevant from the viewpoint of power exercise. When the authorities decided a withdrawal from the regulation of a certain field (for example, the registration of bicycles), in the calculation of the leadership (if there was any) on the income side, the material benefits associated with laxing the regulation were highly exceeded by expected (and often realized) benefits associated with popular reactions acknowledging the Party's pragmatic and enlightened attitude.<sup>11</sup> Since the communist regime had possessed an almost limitless depository of regulated aspects in everyday life, the economy, business, culture and the media, observers in the 1960s-1970s could have a paradoxical feeling that living in communism is similar to a frequent kind of nightmare when one feels she's walking for hours when finally realizes that, in fact, has not moved an inch from the starting position. Miklós Haraszti (1991: 79), an ardent dissident critic of the regime wrote in 1985 about an anonymous writer: „What he's writing today, could not have been published yesterday at any means; maybe it can be published today, but certainly tomorrow.“ This continuous feeling of liberalization could put a shed in many contemporaries' mind to the fact that there were certain things (the items on the „demand“ side of the negative consensus) that the Party controlled as forcefully as ever. Perhaps I do not need to devote too much time to highlight how and why this „relative freedom“ was truly disruptive for the whole society. The culture of goulash communism had nurtured feelings that reading between the lines is a higher art

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<sup>10</sup> Story from János H. (1953)

<sup>11</sup> Something similar can be said about the blunt material concessions the state provided. Chances for available wider choice were growing year by year, but in this external case material constraints turned out to be nearly catastrophic. State socialism has turned out to be a timid giant. It has never had the courage to introduce such measures that subsequent, democratically elected governments had to do in order to stabilize the economy. As a result of this economic policy, Hungary was the most indebted country in the late 1980s in Eastern Europe.

than reading something that needs no place between the lines, nurtured the whole repertoire of self-deceit, it promoted hypocrisy, it disrupted a language appropriate to act with<sup>12</sup>, promoted a sense of arrogant cultural superiority towards other socialist countries, and supported the ethical notion that principles count nothing if there are „higher realities“ (wink here). This cultural-political strategy of the benevolent power rested on a normative structural order, in great part envisioned by György Aczél, Kádár's chief advisor on cultural affairs.

Under Aczél's cultural politics an informal categorization system was developed in the 1960-70s. Books, theater plays, pop band, boys' long hair in schools, mini skirts, punk, sociology, telling jokes about János Kádár, psychotherapy, Coca Cola, body building, avantgarde art, pornography etc. were judged as officially promoted and supported (such as Soviet cinema, Plato, football etc.), or to be definitely banned (James Bond, Polish Solidarity pins, porn, Boney M's<sup>13</sup> Rasputin), or were unwillingly tolerated (such as underground rock, Boney M disco, social research on poverty, or topless beaches). The key for this classification was that it has never had explicit rules, it was sometimes incoherent, it has changed with time and presented large geographical differences. It could easily happen that a banned theater play coming from a country town would be staged a half year later at a small theater in Budapest, or, as „my first jeans“ respondents tell me, there were secondary schools where wearing jeans was allowed already in the late 1960s while others report that in other places that was just the time when it was banned. This highly confusing (therefore very effective) system of promotion, prohibition and toleration was supported by two further interconnected principles. Firstly, in the obviously overregulated polity there were lots of unwritten rules that were never made explicit (for example, one would hardly find a Cultural Ministry memo about accepted length of boys' hair or girls' shirt in school). Secondly, as a consequence of the former, in the operation of any unit of administration the personal traits of the leader of the unit had influenced the nature of operation of the whole organization; with certain pathos we might argue that each leader has created an organization resembling to his or her own face. It was true for janitors, football coaches, company directors, school principals, military chiefs and to János Kádár himself too.

This outlined sketch about the logic of cultural governance in socialism is indispensable to understand the nature and significance of the changing jeans regulating regimes in Hungary. But perhaps more importantly, the true significance of (one time) youngsters longing for blue jeans can be captured only if we highlight a few elements of the politics of cultural governance in socialist Hungary. Living in the 1960-80s meant that people would anticipate that (unless they opt for exit to the west) they would spend their whole life under communist rule. Therefore, since the country was far from being a Pol Pot-like terrorist regime, certain sets of chances or choices appeared in everyone's horizon. Living in the consolidated regime of János Kádár offered people a sense that –however there are silencing moments in life, like driving along a mile-long Soviet military base-, one could coordinate her interests and passions along the available, still restricted but

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<sup>12</sup> Many contemporaries noticed in the period the increasing spread of passive tense in public talk.

<sup>13</sup> A popular German-Caribbean disco band in the 1980s. Hungarian radio played most of their songs except for Rasputin („..Russia's greatest love machine”).

increasing opportunities for a good life. I want to stress here the habitual consequences of the anticipated immortality of communism. When the state allowed people travelling to the West in the 1960s, who would think about that it was available only in every third year, and not about a nice trip to Rome to see Michelangelo's work, to sip real orange juice and to buy a pair of Levi's? When a father brought a cool red corduroy Lee jacket to his daughter which was just perfect to her size and shape, and she was painfully beautiful in that, who wants to talk about why she had to wait for three years for that jacket? When there were more and more youth clubs are open for boys with long hair, wouldn't it be just sheer nitpicking to claim that ideally a youth club has no business whatsoever with the length of its male visitors' hair? When a teen boy notices that as he put on his brand new Turkish copy-cat Wrangler suddenly lots of girls want to dance with him in the disco, would not it be just outrageously hypocritical to expect him meditating about why his jeans was close to equal to her mother's monthly salary? I've chosen these melodramatic imagined examples to highlight major constraints of availability of blue jeans: Price, availability, administrative constraints, lack of opportunity to travel, small variety of size and model, parents' dismissal etc. And as I will show it later in a subsequent section, young people in socialism had very often could successfully challenge these obstacles in their way for a pair of jeans. And what was expected, that usually happened indeed. The dream had come true. Jeans really worked. Metamorphosis completed. Jeans as a second skin enabled the agent to break through conventional barriers. A jeans received from a politically privileged relative will become a source of aesthetic pleasure. An endurance and power to get a pair of Levi's from a dangerous and remote black market is the source of sex appeal. Sitting cool in an armchair in a village disco like a free-floating hippie in a denim suit is the source of privilege. In these stories, I will show privilege will be transformed into aesthetic pleasure, aesthetics into sensual appeal, sex appeal into authority, freedom into exclusivity, lack of freedom into opportunity etc. But all these would have been much less possible if economic-political barriers of the Kádár regime had not restricted young people's longing for jeans. Indeed, these magical transformations associated with the blue jeans were only possible because of those restrictions.

It seems that young people's passion and vision for jeans and political restrictions, quite surprisingly, were mutually reinforcing each other. And when a power is able to channel its clients' – sometimes even seemingly contradictory– whimsical passions and interests into its logic of domination, that's what I call a success. And this conclusion may lead us to another one as well. In my view the story of blue jeans in socialism offers a good case study for the argument that hegemonistic cultural domination had presented its clearest form in some of the consolidated, semi-authoritarian East Central European regimes, such as János Kádár's Hungarian People's Republic.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A critic might claim that if the "jeans master plan" was so smart, how could the communist regime still fall in 1989 at all. First of all, as I will show, the glorious story of blue jeans would come to an end around the mid-1980s, long years before the fall of the regime. I would also never claim anything consciously planned in this process. The Hungarian communist regime was notoriously slow and weak in organizing its polity, often paralyzed by the immanent chaos of any socialist planned economy. Generally, anything meticulously masterplanned in socialist Hungary sounds to me as a funny oxymoron. The systemic analysis (in terms of its competing groups,

## 6. The first conflicts: *Not in my house!*

„...we have to mention letter exchanges that take place against the will and without the knowledge of the parents. Every child is owed to the caring mother with telling her with whom she is exchanging messages and what she's writing in her letters. Parents' experience and wisdom may judge whether this or that boy is a worthy penfriend, and may judge whether the girl is old enough to exchange letters with a boy. Some girls indeed start exchanging letters with boys unknown to the parents at a very early age. This kind of letters may unnecessarily disturb the girl's mental state, may change her mood, and may influence her feelings in a harmful way. In this case it is not only the right but indeed, the duty of the parent to intervene and to read the letter and discuss the issue with the daughter. Most likely the mother wouldn't oppose the letter exchanges if their tone is appropriate, and if the girl truthfully reports about the acquaintancy; and in that case exchanging letters would bring lots of joy to the girl and the boy.“

Burget-Kovácsvölgyi (1962: 46): *How to behave?*

The second part of the 1960s brought a rather spectacular change in youth culture in Hungary. In a couple of years a set of previously unknown phenomena appeared in a single „package“. Following the Beatles mania (through listening to Radio Free Europe's and Radio Luxemburg's jammed airwaves) dozens of „beat groups“ appeared on the scene around 1965, first playing English songs (mostly in a blah-blah language) and eventually coming up with their own repertoire. The music scene could be comparable to the subsequent punk DIY ethos, with the notable difference that in the 1960s boys often fabricated even their electric guitar from the cover of a wooden toilet seat, a wood stick and a couple of piano strings. Boys started to grow their hair a bit longer, girls cut their skirt a bit shorter. Students living in Budapest dormitories took to their home town the records of the new bands, passionate fan groups emerged around the country: A common denominator was still there though: The growing pain about how to get a pair of jeans.

As I will show it in the following section, various authorities reacted differently to the sweeping change in youth culture. Parents were very often in a confused situation. The puzzle to start with was that –as it was reflected in contemporary newspaper's letters to the editor sections– they often simply did not understand the Hungarian lyrics of the new bands tunes sung in a shriek'n'shout kind of manner. Then there were the boys with growing hair, another fallen cultural taboo to be understood quickly. And then, if it had not been not enough, the child would go home and ask for money amounting about the parent's monthly salary for a trouser that looks like a mason's work outfit. Perhaps it is no need to say that many parents could not catch up with the pace of these fast changes. Firstly, because many of them simply did not want to follow these changes at all. Secondly, turning to the jeans more concretely, many of them either shared the power's

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layers of leadership, different power agendas) would be obviously out of focus of this study, but still I'd assume that certain groups even within the leadership were interested in changing the regime's character to a more liberalized format, and to challenge the more traditional dichotomies of good and bad in the regime's working principles, as it could be seen in the case of young people for whom the consumption-conveyed quest for „the real one“ can be understood as a intention to step out of moral and political interpretative framework of the communist regime. And finally, one should not forget that it was not a popular revolution that removed the communist leadership in Hungary...

violent disdain towards the jampec, or just learnt the lesson of the dark 1950s and wanted to protect their child from any unforeseeable cultural-political retaliation against the new rebels of the 1960s. Even more specifically, parents were probably aware of schools authorities' generally negative and restrictive attitude regarding jeans and tried to protect their children from school difficulties that could jeopardize their children's further career opportunities. And most generally the money factor turned out to be the real bottle neck. The society generally was just getting out of a poverty- and shortage-hit long decade, in which saving resources at any means was a key to survival, and for lots of families it was unimaginable to spend 800 Forints<sup>15</sup> for a cloth when a loaf of bread was about 3 Forints.

These concerns were probably to most striking –due to their novelty– in the 1960s but as it is revealed by my respondents' stories, these themes remained the most frequent ones in discussions and debates about jeans wearing in the course of the following decade as well. Very often the conflict was about whether the child can or cannot wear jeans:

My first jeans was a women's jeans that was I could get through acquaintances. A sculptor student of my father got it from that west and it was too small for her but it was just my size. It could be in 1965, so I was 13. They pulled my leg in school for its female cut, but envied me too for it, because most kids haven't got jeans at that time. A couple of years later, in the summer of 1968 took place that case [with the jeans that he told to a young Hungarian writer, Márton Gerlőczy] that was depicted by Márton in his novel with more or less accuracy<sup>16</sup> (...). My uncle –with military record and military sensibility– ordered his son and me to take off our jeans (embroidered with flowers in hippie style), cut them into pieces with scissors, throw it to the garden toilet (of that wooden box) and to take a shit on it after each other. We had to execute this order that I couldn't forgive for my uncle (let him rest in peace) for a long time. The militaristic petit-bourgeois generation, trodden by dictatorships, feeling a sense of danger, tried to humiliate the young rebels. It was a Phyrrean victory though. My uncle appears as Winnetou in the novel, my cousin is Jagger and I'm Gyugyu.<sup>17</sup>

The other story, 15 long year after this garden drama does not lack surprising elements either:

In the Spring of 1983 in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade I wanted to get a Levi's with a red tag, but it was hopelessly expensive (980 Forints) for a family of two engineer parents and three children. In my class in a [Budapest] downtown school about every fourth student had a jeans. Then I decreased my demands, let it be a Trapper<sup>18</sup> (450 Forints), two or three classmates of mine were ridiculed about it by the others, but my father declared that we have no money even for a Trapper. On the Sunday of that week I joined my father to the Easter mass to the church. I was sitting next to him and saw that he was folding a 500 Forints banknote and threw it into the donation box. There were no words for my outrage about it, and I didn't tell it to him.

My first anger lasted only for a couple of days but later I felt morally authorized by that church scene to do a trick in order to get the jeans. In the next week we got a list from the school about the things we had to take to the Summer Pioneers'<sup>19</sup> camp. It was a typed list of things such as the pioneer uniform, a battery lamp, drinking flask etc. In the school there was an office with a typewriter. I asked a permission to use it for typing the planned program of the May Day school

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<sup>15</sup> In the second draft of this paper I will do a short analysis of the change of price of blue jeans.

<sup>16</sup> The novel's title: *Igazolt hiányzás*. Budapest: Ulpius

<sup>17</sup> Story from György M. (1952)

<sup>18</sup> A Hungarian brand, see it in the next section.

<sup>19</sup> The Hungarian Pioneer's Organization was the Party's youth organization for children between 10 and 14.

celebration. I typed the program then I took the Pioneers' camp list that I neatly re-typed with only one modification. I replaced the item "trousers" (*nadrág*) to "jeans" (*farmernadrág*).

My mother knew nothing about my jeans-lust, and I submitted the forged list to her. Two days later she simply gave me the money and I bought my first jeans, seven short years before the regime change.

These two examples may suggest that parents and children were not particularly picky in choosing their weapons in the struggles around jeans. I think it is deeply amusing though that while a key motif in acquiring a jeans was to become „different“, due to its price and non-availability through regular channels, simultaneously very often parents' social network, money and personal sacrifice were utilized to get a pair of jeans from somewhere (often from abroad). Further smaller jeans related conflicts included on what kind of social even a jeans is appropriate for, or never ending conflicts with the mothers who just often could not resist ironing a vertical edge to the middle of the jeans' leg that drove most respondents into the deepest desperation. Another interesting aspect of normative traits of jeans' physical appearance was that while early official criticisms pointed out western ideological infiltration in jeans wearing –following the jampec-bashing logic– jeans had truly horrified older generations for an entirely different thing: because it had a visible writing on it.<sup>20</sup> As we' see it in the next section, the normative discourse on jeans contained elements of aesthetics, moral, social mores and social moralizing, as it is obvious from this story:

Once I was on train with my father. We were sitting at the window at the two opposite side, both of us reading, we didn't talk. Of course my jeans was on me. At the next station two middle age women got on the train and sat next to me and to my father. They're staring at me quite strange but made no comments. It was a non-smoking car and I went out the have a cigarette, but again I said nothing to my father. I just had a couple of puffs when my father came out in a near shock and told me that I must not say a word to him when I go back after my cigarette. When we got off later I asked him what happened. He said after I went out to smoke, the two women started like this: Did you see how this kid looked like? How can one wear such an incredibly awful thing? But not this kid is to blame but his parents, they should be taught a lesson, and like these things... So that's why I wasn't supposed to say a word to my father in the rest of trip to Budapest.

This story about a father captures eloquently the nature of a complicated multitask of mediating conflicts and interests around blue jeans. They tried to come to terms with ideological expectations coming from the school or the media, and simultaneously with their children's longing for difference, and with the negotiated social mores and norms.

## **7. Jeans and the officialdom: From rejection to incorporation**

When jeans started to appear in the early 1960s –not as a surprising charity bale item but a fine fashion product– for the official reaction the obvious analogy of the Coca Cola-doped jampec was at hand. But in a few years, especially because elite's children were overrepresented among the first jeans wearers, a visible shift had taking place. Instead of blunt judgements about the anticiapated nature of the jeans wearer, a differentiated discourse –similarly to the boys' long hair debate– started to emerge. This more balanced

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with *Ádám N.*

treatment of youth culture seemed to appear a chief goal of Party youth policies in the mid-1960s. As I noted above, the Hungarian Television hosted a wildly popular pop music contest presenting (sometimes making) new idols for the youth, the same year Hungarian Radio started a weekly music magazine called „Just for the young!“ (*Csak fiataloknak!*) with the sole task of presenting latest billboard hits from England and Italy. (In making this latter program the explicit goal was to have the young deviated from listening the popular pop show of Radio Free Europe). The Youth Magazine (*Ifjúsági Magazin*) published by the Communist Youth Organization also from 1965, had centerfold posters of The Animals or The Beatles, as well as carefully designed debates about youth problems. In these articles and readers' letters jeans no longer seems to possess any inherently dangerous trait. The stress was much more on who's the person and doing what who's wearing jeans („let's not judge from appearance“), and on what occasions jeans is appropriate. For example, the fashion section contains this photo with a mild pedagogical comment under the picture: *Our photographer took a picture of these two elegantly dressed girls and the boy in jeans at the hall of the National Theater. An evening suit would have been more in style, wouldn't it?*<sup>21</sup>



A NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ ELŐCSARNOKÁBAN KAPTA LENCSEVÉGRE FOTÓSUNK A KÉT ELEGÁNSAN ÖLTÖZÖTT KISLÁNYT A „FARMERES“ RÚVÁL. ALKALMI ÖLTÖNY STÍLSZERŐBB LETT VOLNA. IGAZI!

This was the also the period actually when the most common word for jeans (*farmer*, or *farmernadrág*, i.e. farmer-trousers) was invented. A respondent argues that this word came from the media and his clue was to connect the jeans mania to a progressive

<sup>21</sup> *Ifjúsági Magazin*, 1967 May (3/5). p.58.

American experience. That's why jeans is called *farmer* in Hungarian, therefore the word with its connotation to Steinbeck and the American progressive Left ensured a respectable ideological pedigree for the piece of outfit the youth was longing for. Roughly and generally speaking, the Party-promoted youth media was in the avantgarde in the official public sphere carving out a recognition for blue jeans, especially if one considers that in these years most schools and youth clubs (including the most popular Buda Youth Club) didn't allow jeans wearing at their premises. Also respondents as well as public memories say that boys in jeans (especially with longer hair) were stopped by street policemen to identify themselves quite frequently. It wasn't a very rare case that the policemen took the long-haired boy to a hairdresser and had his long hair cut.

As we see, cultural struggles about youth culture, „beat music“, jeans and long hair were taking place simultaneously in numerous fronts. In this context János Kádár's comment in his address to the 7th KISZ (Organization of Young Communists) Congress in 1967 had made a big difference (Kádár 1968).

There are, for instance, certain Western fashions that have, to a certain degree, spread here as well,....one of these is cynicism, and indifference to questions of public life. In the West this is accompanied with the wearing of wild-west pants, long hair, and neglecting to shave. ...I do not want to talk about wild-west pants, beards, or hairstyles. ...What's important here is that the Party, the Youth League, is not a fashion designer or a hairstyling salon, and does not need to deal with such things.

As suggested in the section on the logic and politics of cultural governance, his words were commented as a sign of pragmatism and open-mindedness in the streets and the media, and simultaneously the growings toleration of jeans at public places could be associated with the message from the leader.

In the next draft I'll include here a short analysis of how fashion industry popularized jeans in the late sixties and early seventies. I also include an analysis of the culturally relevant aspects of establishing two jeans factories in Hungary in the late 1970s and will show, especially in the case of the Levi's firm, how authorities tried to take various symbolic advantages of the fact that „real“ jeans was produced in Hungary.

## 8. Motifs of jeans wearing in respondents stories

In the next draft I'll argue in this section that it would be an over-ambitious goal to search for a well-structured total taxonomy of motifs, longings, values, passions, explanations, constraints and images that frame jeans wearing. Instead, after reading the over 100 testimonies about jeans, I identify the major topical junctures and try to show relationships between various motifs. These topical junctures will be the following: Exclusivity. Belonging to an elite. Community. Jeans as a sign of mutual love. Feeling after getting the jeans. Puritanism. Looking for the „real one“. Doubts and conflicts about authenticity. Jeans as a compass or map. Telling signs on jeans. Individualization of the „raw jeans“. Jeans,



**sensuality and sexuality. Why getting the first jeans turned out to be often a „disillusionary experience“ (Colin Campbell)?**

## **9. The end of the blue jeans craze**

„Some people say nothing’s happening in Hungary. People are happy to be left alone with politics; in their spare time they build their own houses, breed poultry and devote their time for DIY hobbies. The intelligentsia has locked itself to the garden of culture, and left politics for politicians too. The churches collaborate with the state. The old-fashioned reactionaries and western-minded democrats have died out (...) The power sometimes exposes its iron fist but when seeing that nobody’s making trouble, puts it back to its pocket hurriedly. Perhaps the fist smashes on a few leatherpants or drunkard troublemakers but the public in this case applauds and calling for even harsher retaliations. (Beszélő p.11)

These sentences have acquired a certain historical glamour by now. This quote is the first half of opening paragraph from the introductory editorial from the first issue of *Beszélő*, the most influential samizdat publication in Hungary. The editor paints a simple, sensitive and powerful image about social climate prevailing in Hungary at the aftermath of the introduction of martial law in Poland. The author when turns to groups that people loved to hate in the early 1980s in Hungary, mentions the drunkards and the leatherpants. I find it strongly symbolical that the first sentences of this key publication chose to describe a despised group by a sartorial reference, and that this reference is not blue jeans anymore. Mostly, because probably many of those applauding with the power were wearing jeans already. The leather outfit (especially leather trousers) took the „shocker“ role of the jeans by the 1980s worn by punks and heavy metal fans.

As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, this account is the first reading of my research results. A couple of things seem already obvious. The thickly woven threads of various passions and interest in the jeans histories show that any convenient relevant grand theory of consumption would hardly apply. However jeans wearing had become incorporated successfully had not ceased to exist as a field of carving out a space for autonomy. Also, contrary to the easy at-hand connotations of individuality and freedom, jeans wearing often meant exclusivity or privilege. No doubt jeans often turned out to be a passport to different social worlds, still many could read from it where that passport holder was coming from. In my view the jeans story offers not only a perspective to understand (finally!) better the the period of the cold war, but through its particular feature (consumption as an informal grassroots activity) helps understanding better consumption in mainstream capitalism as well.

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