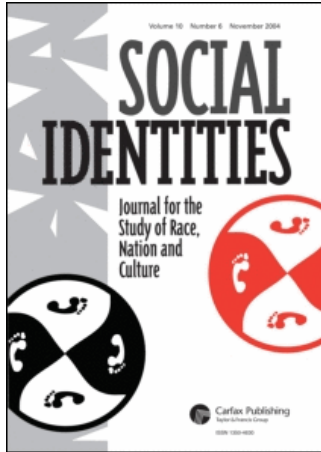


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### Hungarian Horoscopes as a Genre of Postsocialist Transformation

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# Hungarian Horoscopes as a Genre of Postsocialist Transformation

Krisztina Fehérváry

*In the mid-1990s in Hungary, astrology publications and horoscopes—along with porn and evangelical literature—were among the Western cultural forms once restricted or banned by the socialist state that were enjoying enormous popular interest. Rather than examine astrology as a religious belief or superstitious practice, I approach it as a particular genre of self-transformation, often regarded as harmless and entertaining but nonetheless having efficacious potential. Drawing on numerous examples from print publications, interviews with professional practitioners and informal discussions, this article makes two observations: first, that readers of horoscopes looked to the divinatory capacity of horoscopes to assist them in making decisions and navigating the uncertain context of the 1990s; second, that as a genre able to shape and constrain subjectivity, horoscopes were instrumental in affecting transformations of normative character, moral codes and worldview from a localist, state-socialist cosmology to one more in accord with the demands (and enticements) of a global, neoliberal capitalist order.*

In the mid-1990s in Hungary, a half-decade after the fall of socialism, astrology publications and horoscopes—along with porn and evangelical literature—were among the Western cultural forms once restricted or banned by the socialist state that were enjoying enormous popular interest. During my fieldwork, I was drawn to horoscopes in their Hungarian form not just for their novelty, but for their intriguing content. Horoscopes were often blends of advice clearly targeting a Hungarian audience and attuned to the specific concerns of an urban population experiencing the upheavals of the early postsocialist period, but at the same time, exhorting readers to act (or defer action) with vocabulary and characteristics we commonly associate with market-capitalism. The following horoscope was the first to startle me with its tone, to pique my curiosity about the local specificities of a genre I myself enjoyed reading. It appeared on the back page of the local paper of the provincial Hungarian

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steel town where I carried out my research, alongside the weather forecast, the police blotter and the political cartoon.

Today is a good day for working on long-range plans and goals, but you should put aside projects related to the short-term. Avoid making quick decisions, or leave decision making to someone else. Today is ideal for gardening, working with the earth, caring for grapevines. Those who begin to renovate or rearrange their home today will be happy with the results for a long time. We also note that Mercury begins its road in the sign of Gemini. This means that for the next few weeks, Gemini, Virgo and Aquarius individuals will be more active, particularly in business; they should try to capitalize on their talents in the money world. For example, if they want to buy or sell real estate, then they should browse the classified ads and be more bold than usual.<sup>1</sup> (*Dunaiújvárosi Hírlap*, 13 June 1996)

Working the earth and caring for grapevines? These were not activities likely to appear in your local American paper. Advice about home renovation was of particular interest to me, as I was researching the significance of transformations to domestic space after the fall of state socialism. But the use of the terms ‘real estate’ (*ingatlan*) and ‘capitalize’ (*kamatozni*) struck me with their unfamiliarity in the Hungarian context. A ‘real estate’ market, *per se*, was only gradually emerging after 40 years of dormancy, and here it was being used to refer to what could only have been one’s own home or summer cottage. ‘Capitalize’, moreover, was being used to describe one’s own talents. Such a rhetoric of individualism, much less market adjectives for personal characteristics, had long been frowned upon—particularly in this ‘new socialist town’ among its primarily working-class inhabitants. How, then, to understand this transformation of homes and weekend get-aways into alienable property? More importantly, what to make of this explicit commodification of the self?

\* \* \* \* \*

After the fall of state socialism in Hungary, horoscopes like this entered into the fabric of daily life, an inescapable feature in the media and encountered regularly in informal conversation. They appeared in condensed form as in the example given above, but also in the more familiar form in which each sign of the Zodiac receives its own augury. One might expect an anthropological study to approach astrology as a form of religious belief or superstitious practice. Indeed, the augury dimension of horoscopes provides suggestive material for alternative cosmologies to the modernism of state-socialism,<sup>2</sup> and questions of belief and superstition are prevalent in Hungarian attitudes towards astrology. However, rather than examine astrology in terms of belief structures, my approach is to think of horoscopes as one instance of a popular culture genre of self-transformation, albeit a particularly powerful one—alongside pop-psychology advice columns, self-help literature and home-decorating magazines. Drawing on scholarship utilizing Bakhtin’s characterization of genre as ‘an

aggregate of the means for seeing and conceptualizing reality' (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985, p. 137),<sup>3</sup> I show how, in the tumultuous 1990s in Hungary, horoscopes came to mediate the ways readers made daily decisions, took action, and understood themselves and their world within a radically changing context. In the following, I argue that horoscopes were particularly efficacious in two distinct ways. First, in their capacity as a form of divination, horoscopes were often used as tools for negotiating the uncertainties and demands of the postsocialist world. Second, in their capacity as a popular culture genre able to shape and constrain subjectivity, horoscopes are particularly effective in fulfilling demands for transformation of self and worldview. Thus I will be focusing on questions of agency and pace in the modernities of both state-socialism and capitalism as they have existed in Hungary, and in particular, the relationship between the individuating cosmology of horoscopes and the individuation, accommodation, and bourgeois ethics of postsocialist capitalism. In the process, I suggest that long-standing values for character and philosophies for living are appropriated and transformed. While my analysis is specific to the Hungarian context in the immediate postsocialist period, this deployment of genre theory should help us to understand not only the phenomenon of the 'horoscope' but other popular culture forms of self-evaluation in contexts elsewhere (including our own). As the reference to grapevines in the aforementioned horoscope suggests, the popularity of astrology in Hungary in the 1990s was not a straightforward importation of a western-style, popular cultural form.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the form developed a highly localized character, and, as we shall see, responded to the concerns, desires, and even the assumed character, of its public.

With the lifting of restrictions on the press, by the mid-1990s, books and magazines on so-called New Age topics had proliferated: UFOlogy, para-psychology, astrology and Tarot, natural health and holistic healing, acupuncture, iris reading, *feng shui* and the martial arts.<sup>5</sup> Horoscopes appeared in the places one might expect, such as women's magazines and tabloids, but they also appeared in news magazines targeting a more sophisticated audience, such as *Reform*, a publication similar to *Time*.<sup>6</sup> As in the West, horoscopes continue to be resolutely absent from the major, 'serious', dailies, such as *Népszabadság*, *Magyar Nemzet*, and the like. News stands everywhere carry publications providing daily horoscopes for the month or year, and advertise toll numbers for those interested in a more complete elucidation of their Zodiac sign. Television shows and radio broadcasts on astrology offer callers advice from a 'real', that is 'professional', astrologist.

Astrology was not completely banned in Hungary during the state-socialist era, as horoscopes occasionally appeared in regional newspapers or in almanacs. Hungarians were also aware of the popularity of the phenomenon in the West, and many had seen horoscope pages in western magazines or newspapers. Nonetheless, astrology ran counter to the modernist, scientific and rational ideology of state-socialism, and received the same censure as folk superstitions. More importantly, astrology's ostensible divinatory powers were anathema to Communist historical teleology, in which the Party as vanguard laid claim to the knowledge necessary to plan and thus

‘create’ the future for the collective. As we shall see below, the socialist state was largely successful in ‘modernizing’ the population; it extended to the masses what was once an identity of a Hungarian elite, an identity constructed in opposition to charges of backwardness variously aligned with East-West distinctions (see Gal, 1991). Thus, most Hungarians claiming middle-class status understand rational, logical thought to be an index of the modern, and distance themselves from associations with anything from folk superstitions to behaviour attributed to irrational ‘culture’. Witchcraft, peasant divination through bean-sorting, and to some extent ‘gypsy’ fortune-telling are thus scoffed at as stupid or *primitív* (backwards) superstition. For many of this social stratum, astrology occupies a different place. On the one hand, it is understood as a form of knowledge that had been available decades earlier in the West. On the other, its popular media form allows people to regard it as a kind of harmless game or entertainment common in the western media. Thus it occupies a contrary position, both part of a modern, western world, and yet classified as part of the compromised realm of illegitimate (as opposed to institutionalized, religious) ‘beliefs’.

The result is that, when asked, most people insisted they did not *believe* in astrology, particularly as a divinatory power, even if they were familiar with their own sign and its characteristics and admitted to reading the horoscope daily. This combination of scepticism and interest, often caught in the phrase, ‘Well, there seems to be something to it . . . (*Hát, talán van bene valami . . .*), was made possible by the popular media form in which it was consumed, allowing people to regard it as a kind of amusement, not to be taken too seriously. Standard remarks of this type included: ‘Oh I read them, but what they predict for me never comes true’, or ‘They are too vague, and could apply to anything’. The following came from a middle-aged radiologist at the local hospital: ‘There is something to them, though I don’t pay attention to what they predict. I’m a Scorpio, and the characterization very much fits me’ (*Fejér Megyei Hírlap*, 1996).<sup>7</sup>

Even the most devout adherents explained that astrology is not a religion and pointed to its logic. Men in particular framed astrology as a rational system. A junior high school boy interviewed in the regional paper admitted he believed, based on the empirical evidence that much of what was predicted for him came true. He was quick to add: ‘But that doesn’t mean I’m a nut, more that I’m curious’ (*Fejér Megyei Hírlap*, 1996). One man, a member of the local government and a prominent business person of the town, informed me in our first interview not only of the nobility of his family line, but that he was a Leo. He pointed to astrology’s grounding in astronomy and physics, explaining: ‘Our bodies are 75% water, so it stands to reason that we would be affected by planetary movements just as the tide is affected by the moon’.

The conscious positioning Hungarians take towards horoscopes, whether of interested scepticism, of agnosticism, or of secular belief, is revealing in and of itself. But the content of horoscopes allows for a wide range of interpretations, and their appearance in publications from the sombre to the frivolous allows people to take up a variety of orientations towards them—only one of which might be termed ‘belief’.

Many people I spoke with were attuned to the production of horoscopes, and assigned far more credibility to a chart drawn up for a specific person by a professional than to the popular blurbs printed in the daily paper—which they rightly suspected were often written by local journalists. Many also differentiated the augury power of astrology, which was considered the most suspect, from its ability to characterize types of people, which was often what was most compelling. Furthermore, people could use horoscopes in multiple ways: as a pick-up line in a nightclub, or as a cosmology providing structure for unpredictable times and meaning for inexplicable suffering; as a definition of self to adopt or reject, or as a heuristic device for evaluating the behaviour of others. A conscious belief in the predictive powers of the horoscope or the cosmology behind it undoubtably plays a role in how it affects people's lives, but belief as such is unnecessary for the structure of the genre to have the potential to affect consciousness, identity and action through regular exposure.

I turn now to two dimensions of horoscopes which seem particularly relevant for the postsocialist mid-1990s. First, horoscopes as a mode of 'planning', as a structure accounting for past events and giving the future some predictability; and second, the Zodiac as a tool for the transformation of self.

### **Horoscopes and Postsocialist Planning**

Horoscopes in the Hungarian media are generally made up of traditional divination combined with self-development or healing discourse, aspects which are usually kept separate in the US (Feher, 1992).<sup>8</sup> A typical horoscope will describe what might be in store for a person of a specific sign that day in the realms of Work, of Money, and of Love, and then offer suggestions for how to act or respond to these circumstances. These suggestions are correlated to descriptions (sometimes in great detail) of the position of the planets that day, positions that someone with an astrologer's knowledge can 'read' to determine the auspiciousness of certain activities as well as to gage human emotional or physical strengths and weaknesses for that day. While horoscopes might seem to obtain their authority from explicit correlations between planetary movements and individual human action (and provide secondary 'rationalization' for belief), this power comes from their generic use of authoritative discourse (see Briggs & Bauman, 1992). They appeal to a cosmology that resonates with the Judeo-Christian traditions of the region and defies the modernist cosmology of state-socialism; they assume that natural forces beyond human control play a role in an individual's destiny. I'll return to this theme in a moment.

In the rapidly changing world of the 1990s, it is perhaps not surprising that the guidance offered by horoscopes found such a wide audience. During the last decades of the socialist period, life had not been without significant change, but the Party's commitment to the power of planning provided most people with guarantees of basic securities, illusory or not, against the contingencies of the environment or the economy. Furthermore, the state-sponsored press was charged with portraying an

*optimistic* predictability in which standards of living were to increase steadily. The mid-1990s, in contrast, was characterized by a preoccupation with a ‘lost’ security (*biztonság*) created by open markets, privatization and the end of employment guarantees (West, 2002). These anxieties were exacerbated by the transformation of the staid socialist press into a capitalist press driven by the bottom line (and, thus, alarmist sensationalism). Vast numbers of people were thrust into situations where they were ill-prepared to make decisions but felt they had to act quickly. Was it a good time to invest compensation coupons in stocks or in a friend’s business? To switch jobs? Or to sell an apartment?

In an astrology show on evening television, a conservatively dressed male astrologist from a credentialed ‘institute’ gave advice to callers. The callers, most of whom identified as working class by their professions, persisted in asking about their economic prospects and workplace futures—despite the astrologist’s attempts to divert their questions towards their relationships and personal development. His recommendation was: ‘Pay attention to your personal relationships in these times, rather than to problems of existence. Those will take care of themselves’ (BPTV Channel 13, March 1997). The performance of scepticism in callers’ voices was mixed with a palpable desperation to know something about what the future might hold, and how to act on it.

As they were written for a Hungarian public, horoscopes spoke to typical concerns and offered culturally-specific suggestions. The following example from the national women’s magazine reflects the 28% interest rates at the time, while legitimating more familiar forms of financing:

MONEY: If you are in financial straits, don’t think only of a bank loan, but also of the help of relatives or friends. It’s more or less interest free, and . . . warms the heart. (*Nők Lapja*, March 1996, p. 66)

Horoscopes also provided advice for action which tended towards conservative moderation as in the following for Aquarians:

This week don’t jump into anything, no matter how convincing the arguments with which they tempt you; instead, make calculations. Put off signing the contract, if you so decide, until March 2. (*Nők Lapja*, February 1997)

Occasionally, horoscopes would mark certain days as auspicious for bold action with financial consequences, as in this one from a monthly horoscope magazine:

Today is a great day to begin a business enterprise (and also for) your home renovation . . . you will easily find the right furniture and wall paper. (*Horoszkóp Havilap*, August 1997)

Horoscopes also offered structuring guidance with the more mundane decision-making of everyday life. An elegant, middle-aged cosmetician named Klara used the morning horoscope to set the tone for her day, and would discuss with her mother

what sorts of behaviour they could expect of their family or of themselves, based on the augury for their signs. 'When I'm going to be in a bad mood or short-tempered', she said, 'I know it in advance and can prepare for it'. She claimed that one of her clients consulted the horoscopes before getting her legs waxed. Klara insisted this made sense according to the logic of horoscopes which align a person's particular orientation to the constantly changing influence of the planets, an influence which was in the end, physical.

An editorial in the major women's magazine linked the search for guidance from astrology to the exponential increase in consumer choices stemming from the 'freedoms' of modern life postsocialism:

In a world with so much choice, from choice in beliefs to choice in kinds of yogurt, we are all looking for answers . . . we would like to make the future predictable, to have some certainty . . . We would like someone to tell us, THIS yogurt is the one!  
(*Nők Lapja*, June 1997)

There is certainly validity to such a reading of postsocialist anxieties about consumption and a desire for predictability, although it runs the risk of playing into a discourse prevalent in the postsocialist 1990s (emanating largely from western groups), which claimed that the authoritarian socialist state had created populations of people who had forgotten how to 'think' for themselves and were now drawn to alternative voices of authority. But such a sheeplike vision of the postsocialism masses is difficult to reconcile with the vast amount of information on how Hungarians manipulated the first and second economies to their advantage.

Another way of understanding this search for guidance was revealed to me during a conversation with a local radio journalist in Dunaújváros. She had created a Tarot advice show as a lark—having only a rudimentary knowledge of the 'art', as she called it—and was astounded when she realized that her listeners were taking it seriously and making real decisions based on her advice: selling a house, buying an apartment, or ending a romance. 'They want me to tell them what to do', she said, 'they are unsure, and have no one to turn to . . . and they can't ask their friends or family personal questions'. She assumed that they did not call the radio psychologist with their problems because their neighbours would recognize their voices. With the Tarot, if anyone recognized them they could shrug it off as a joke. 'They call the studio the minute they hear my voice', she complained, 'and demand that I talk to them. They think that it is my duty to solve their problems, and they send flowers and presents'.

The radio journalist's comments suggest that the attraction for such impersonal forms of guidance are related to a widespread predilection to keep one's personal struggles to oneself—not to share one's sense of indecision or vulnerability, even with family members. While much is made of the Hungarian culture of complaint, and jokes abound which essentialize Hungarian pessimism, pride, and forceful opinions, ethnographic studies have elaborated widespread norms for the presentation of self, particularly among rural and town populations. These studies develop nuanced depictions of what might motivate certain character traits at specific times, through



analyses of discourses of identity or morality and corresponding practices (Hofer, 1991; Gal, 1991; Stewart, 1993; Bell, 1984; Hollos & Maday, 1983). Martha Lampland has written of a 'rivalry of diligence' that characterized villagers in Sarosd during the 1980s, one in which their identities were constructed through constant, directed activity, particularly on their own property, as well as values of autonomy, stability and orderliness (1991, p. 460).

In my own fieldwork among Dunaújváros's middle-class professionals, the most striking evidence for commonly-valued character traits came in the form of maternal anxieties about whether or not children displayed such traits. Self-confidence and decisiveness, being goal-orientated and somewhat demanding were characteristics thought important to survive and flourish in the contemporary world.<sup>9</sup> One young woman fretted so much over her six-year-old son's lack of focused interest and self-confidence, she planned to enrol him in a psychological counsellor's self-help course. Another woman proudly displayed photographs of her two daughters, commenting that the older one was just like her, strong and decisive, someone who set goals for herself and accomplished them. The younger one 'had a good heart', she said, 'but ...' and she trailed off with a sigh that was meant to convey fondness but also exasperation at the girl's sentimental weakness.

For adults, fulfilling normative demands to appear decisive and directed requires a relatively predictable future with strong continuities to the past. In the absence of such predictability, horoscopes offered one way to maintain a sense of self and perform qualities of confident decisiveness. The anonymity afforded by horoscopes made them particularly compatible with people's desire to hide their need for guidance in order to maintain their all-important presentation of certainty. As we shall see, however, the texts of horoscopes served less to reinforce such norms as to transform them, and, in the process, became a vehicle for transforming subjectivity.

### Zodiac Signs and Transforming Selves

There is little in the social science literature on horoscopes, but a notable exception is Theodor Adorno's analysis of the astrology column in the *Los Angeles Times* in the early 1950s. Adorno argued that horoscopes played a role in maintaining the *status quo* by advising readers to acquiesce to their class position, since socioeconomic status was governed by planetary rather than social forces (Adorno, 1974).<sup>10</sup> Even though I found no clear correlation in Hungarian horoscopes between content and the class status of the newspapers' audiences, their general tone espoused a philosophy of patience and accommodation to circumstances instead of active struggle or critique. Taking a cue from Adorno, I suggest the cultural significance of horoscopes to be tied to the harsh realities of neoliberal capitalism in 1990s Hungary, as Hungarians were compelled to transform themselves to negotiate the demands of the new order. The popular form of the horoscope may have the power to work subtle shifts on implicit and common sense ideals and understandings of 'typical' Hungarian character.<sup>11</sup> In the following, I elaborate two arguments for how this

might work. They centre on the relationship between the set of characteristics ascribed to each sign of the Zodiac on the one hand, and on the assumed characteristics of the reading public on the other. In both cases, suggestions to counter assumed behaviour or to encourage new modes of being often selectively drew upon older values partially transformed or reinterpreted through new (to Hungary) pop-psychology or personal development ideologies.

Astrology's infiltration of Hungarian popular culture is most marked in the use of signs of the Zodiac to characterize people. People often provided their 'sign' in personal ads, and casual conversation often included a reference to the Zodiac in describing (or evaluating) their own or someone else's character. This was particularly true for younger generations. A young woman in Budapest confided in me about her love life through Zodiac signs, relating a number of dates she'd had with an Aries, for whom she was ill-suited, compared with her latest love, a Scorpio, who she was certain was 'the one'. As mentioned above, the Zodiac was also the aspect of astrology people found the most convincing, often claiming to 'recognize' themselves or others in the characterizations they read.

It is probably unnecessary to give examples of typical characterizations of Zodiac signs, as few readers can claim to have avoided exposure to them. However, certain qualities of the horoscope, looked at as a genre, are worth noting. First, the characterizations of different signs are not limited to explicit descriptions set apart from the daily horoscope, but are woven into the daily augury. Thus, for example, engaging in a power struggle is not appropriate for Cancer, but caretaking is.

Second, the structure of horoscopes works to differentiate the audience and specify what they read, creating the impression that the advice given is tailored to them. Most people scan the horoscopes, looking for the sign encompassing their own birthdate and read that one first, and then perhaps the horoscope of a romantic partner, child, or boss, ignoring the rest. The reader is thus predisposed to identify with the discourse of his or her own sign, and correspondingly identify significant persons in their life with that of their sign. Regular readers quickly pick up on characteristics common to the signs they are interested in. (Leos are outgoing, Tauruses are bull-headed, and so forth.) With this identification, horoscopes incorporate the reader into an astrological universe, where they 'belong' to a group of people with similar character traits making up one-twelfth the population and yet remain the unique product of the exact time and location of their birth.

Third, the character traits of each Zodiac sign are presented as immutable and enduring. Thus, horoscopes have the capacity to 'reveal' potential characteristics or dispositions that have, ostensibly, always been there, even if a person was unaware of having such a disposition. Given the pressures in the post-Socialist 1990s for people to redefine themselves and construct new identities—or perhaps more accurately, to find ways to adjust to new circumstances without feeling they had abandoned their core values and identifications—Zodiac signs offered attractive new subject positions in a manner which did not conflict with existing ones. For example, Klara, the cosmetician mentioned earlier, was explicit about how she felt astrology had inspired

her to attempt things she would never have dared try before simply because she'd read that morning: 'Whatever you touch today will work out'.

Hungarian versions of Zodiac signs in the 1990s often included explicit references to the qualities expected of one in a post-Communist world. The following example from an upscale fashion magazine adjusts the typical character traits for Cancer—good with money but tending towards the soft-hearted—to the perceived demands of a capitalist system. It reads: 'Be more decisive than usual, a self-confident performance is half the battle', and then,

Although generosity is unfashionable these days, if it's a question of charitable goals, don't be selfish; if you can help even one person, reach into your pocket. On the other hand, you must be hard as nails in reclaiming loans you have given to friends. In business, there is no friendship! (*Viola*, May 1996)

Here, an ethical system fostered during the state-socialist period is targeted for reform. Under the socialist welfare state, 'charity' was rendered an obsolete concept as the category of a 'deserving poor' disappeared (though poverty did not); poverty activists in the 1980s were considered political dissidents. With the return of the market and the dramatic visibility of widely diverging economic fortunes, charity returned as a legitimating salve for the middle-class conscience. Likewise, within the framework of shortages and the second economy of the socialist era, the blurring of distinctions between instrumental transactions and sentimental relationships was understood as taking place within the realm of an ethical, trusting 'private' sphere (Sampson, 1985/86). Bonds of friendship and family ties were defined in part by their willingness to offer economic assistance. But in this horoscope from 1996, the reader is instructed to reassert divisions between instrumental and sentimental relationships, to reconfigure and separate private and public spheres, as a moral imperative.

Similar presentations of ideal capitalist subjectivities can be found in the convention of the 'key words for the day' feature in monthly horoscope magazines. These words are calibrated to the characteristics of each sign. For example, for Aquarius, one finds words such as *spirited* and *sharp-witted* over-represented, while Cancer features words like *empathy* and *responsibility*. Many words are common to all the signs. Some evoke the longstanding positive character traits mentioned above: *conviction*, *steadfastness*, *productivity*, *planning* and *goal-directedness*. Others clearly evoke the new terms of the market economy, such as: *risk*, *credit*, *team-work*, *change*, *flexibility*, and *entrepreneurship*. And then there are words which warn of reacting in certain ways to unpredictable conditions, such as *delusion*, *rashness*, and *over-exertion*. These are countered with words suggesting better courses of action or mental states: *precaution*, *doubt*, *balance*, *strategy*, *wisdom*. Finally, in all the lists are words which would almost never be used in stereotypes of 'Hungarian' character: *optimism* and *hopefulness*. Also missing entirely are older terms describing the moral qualities of a respectable citizen, such as *modesty*, *respect*, *honour*, or *trustworthiness*.

In this way, horoscopes have the potential to redefine core values and modes of being in a manner similar to other popular media genres. Psychology advice columns

or the plethora of self-help books maintain that self-knowledge is a necessary step for becoming transformed into a more attractive or wealthy person. The typical horoscope operates by suggesting courses of action within conditions given by planetary movements, suggestions that are aligned with Hungarian cultural expectations and are often gendered. This structure sets up an opposition, sometimes explicit, between the positively-valued action suggested by the astrologer, and the negatively-valued behaviour it is *assumed* the reader would have exhibited without this intervention. For example, the following horoscope directed at men contains explicit assumptions about the behaviour of a Taurus, and indirectly of a Hungarian male, in relationships:

On what grounds do you order others about, tell them what they can and can't do? In the interests of peaceful co-existence, try to govern yourself even if it isn't going well these days. Be careful in driving, because an accident could befall you. Pull yourself together, and pay attention to what you are doing. If your loved ones or bosses upset you, don't sulk. (*Reform*, August 1999, p. 55)

Another is directed at a general audience, though it invokes ideals of composure and appearance associated with women:

Be more guarded; the whole world doesn't need to know what you are feeling, what you are thinking. Don't show your irritations, don't act too quickly. In any case, make sure your appearance is always perfect. (*Horoszkóp Havilap*, 1996, p. 21)

As in these examples, most horoscopes assume that the typical Hungarian reader is harried, stressed and overworked—someone who will act or react in haste—and thus will allow emotions of panic, anger, perceived slight or despair to govern their behaviour. The horoscopes further assume that life is characterized by '*kapkodás*', or grasping at things and situations in a spasmodic, panicked manner. And indeed, in the mid-1990s the word *kapkodás* came up as often in conversations as it did in horoscopes, as people complained about the pace of their lives and the pressures they experienced to act quickly—either to strike while the iron was hot, or simply to avoid being 'left behind' during what was understood to be a transitory but critically important period of regime change.

Horoscopes' themes of restraint and patience advocated a more harmonious relationship between human action and the passage of time. These qualities were advocated not simply for strategic reasons, but for one's health and well-being—as in the following entries from a monthly horoscope publication (*Horoszkóp Havilap*, August 1996). For Cancer:

SUNDAY: Be diplomatic, a situation is truly worrisome, but if you fall into panic, you will lose the trust of others. Maintain your sanguinity.

TUESDAY: Try to rest a bit more. Your nerves can't stand the tension infinitely, and your emotions become unstable if you push yourself too hard.

THURSDAY: Completely unexpectedly, criticism rains down on you. A bigotted person will begin to accuse you of all sorts of things. As much as possible, try to accommodate them.

FRIDAY: The position of the stars makes you and others emotional and sensitive. In your business and personal dealings, try to deal with them confidently, and without sundry personal remarks.

SATURDAY: Today can be truly successful, if you dictate an appropriate pace for yourself and for others.

Horoscopes overridingly insisted on a mode of being characterized by continuous flow, of an appropriate pace, and the conviction that there is a right time for everything. They presented attempts to exert one's will over a more natural course of events as futile or self-destructive, only exacerbating a prevailing sense of rupture and dissonance. But their tone was largely optimistic, as they promised eventual prosperity or satisfaction to those who were patient, who showed restraint in adjusting their actions and behaviour to accommodate planetary activity, who adopted a pace in harmony with 'natural' rhythms (in other words, outside of the pace of the scientific, rational modernity so discredited by state socialism). The eventual rewards for 'going with the flow' were most consistently featured in the horoscopes published in a New Age magazine called *Elixer*, which contained a smattering of various holistic and alternative topics from Chinese herbs to UFOs. For example: 'All your efforts will bear fruit sooner or later. Everything which has up until now meant worry and tiredness, will finally bring joy'.

## Conclusion

Horoscopes' portrayal of daily life as full of nerve-racking hassles had much continuity with how life in the 1980s, the final decade of socialism, was often characterized. Similarly, the modes of being and character traits positively portrayed in horoscopes culled selectively from traits long held to be desirable. However, through the genre of the horoscope, these traits had been adjusted to correspond to new demands. Of these, the perceived demand for self-transformation often posed the greatest problem for people who valued solidity of character. The horoscope—like other pop-psychological forms—could resolve this contradiction by 'revealing' selves that had been there all along.

The parallels were striking between the discourse of horoscopes and those proclaiming the unnaturalness of state-socialism in 1990s Hungary. The notion was widespread that state-socialism had been doomed to failure in large part for its hubris: its modernist project of attempting to exert total control over the future through central planning, of proclaiming mankind master over nature, and of attempting to eradicate beliefs in any power above the scientific principles of Marxism Leninism. In contrast, people could find in astrology an alternative system of planning for the future, one which acknowledged and worked with forces beyond

human control. I have suggested here that in the process, horoscopes—like so many other pop-cultural and New Age forms—also effected subtle transformations of subjectivity and reinforced cosmologies emergent in the 1990s neoliberal order, including demands for the commodification of the self. By advocating submission to the power of planetary movements based on one's fated position in an astrological cosmology, horoscopes preached accommodation to the existential uncertainties of the market system, a system they inadvertently naturalized. Moreover, horoscopes situated responsibility for success (or failure) in this system squarely with an individual's capacity to perform in harmony with it.

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### Notes

- [1] All translations are my own.
- [2] For extensive discussions on the cosmologies of suffering in the region, see the forthcoming volume edited by Imre Lázár and Agita Luse.
- [3] In particular, Hanks (1987) and Briggs and Bauman (1992). Goodman (1998, pp. 205–206) gives an elegant summary of scholarship building on these articles in the process of introducing her own genre analysis of the role of 'new songs' in Algeria's Berber Cultural Movement to the construction of postcolonial subjectivities.
- [4] The widespread popularity of the genre has been attributed to the fact that it was once suppressed (and therefore must be true), as well as to its association with western lifestyles. Other explanations for the popularity of 'alternative,' holistic or paranormal phenomena cite the need to fill a spiritual vacuum created by the atheist state, or its subsequent fall (Kapitza, 1991; Pruzhinin, 1995). [For refutations of the 'spiritual vacuum' thesis, see Buchowski (2001) who argues that Communism as an ideology developed a religious, ritualized character; and Yurchak (2005), who discusses the persistence of the belief in science as a flawless instrument, in service of Truth. See Barchunova (forthcoming 2007), for discussion of how this sacralization of science, and the positioning of scientists as spiritual guides, led to dissident movements of scientists themselves searching for alternatives to official ideology for the meaning of life.] Such explanations of 'spiritual vacuum' also fail to account for how and

why some practices took hold in the former Soviet bloc states, while others did not. Why did astrology, for example, which had no roots in Hungarian peasant culture (Dömötör, 1981), enjoy such interest, while witchcraft lore experienced no equivalent revival? Or why is it that Tarot, another form of divination that became popular in the 1990s, rarely referred to Romani fortune-telling traditions which had persisted throughout the socialist period? My argument here is that the appeal of such forms with 'eastern' origins but arriving via the 'West' comes, in part, from how they provide a cosmology that dovetails with criticisms of the centralized state and its Modernist project, criticisms which not coincidentally naturalize a capitalist order.

It is possible that astrology would have been equally popular in Hungary during the socialist period if it had been given such widespread publicity, but the content of horoscopes would surely have differed significantly. I am averse to such speculation, however, since the character of state socialism would have also differed significantly if astrology had been widely tolerated.

- [5] In 1995, the best-selling magazines of this category were *UFO Magazin* with a circulation of 35,000 copies, and *Természetgyógyász Magazin* (Natural Health) at 50,000 copies. Source: Magyar Statisztikai Zsebkönyv, 1996. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, Budapest.
- [6] As in the US, astrological columns are most prevalent in publications targeted at women; this says something about the status of astrology, but it is difficult to generalize about gender differences in audience, as the two biggest women's weeklies claim huge male readerships (*Kiskegyed* claimed 600,000 male readers, of a total population of 10 million. 18 June 1996 (5): 25).
- [7] When I asked my roommate in Dunaújváros, a divorced woman of 30, what she thought of horoscopes, she replied off-handedly that she often looked them over but didn't really believe in them. Then, to my surprise, she went to a shelf and pulled out a book on her own sign, Taurus, which included horoscopes for each day of the year. 'If I read them', she said, 'I forget about them within an hour. But if what is predicted comes true, it makes me happy'. In evaluating these examples, we might take a hint from a *Cosmo*-like Hungarian women's magazine, which listed 'I don't believe in horoscopes' as one of biggest lies women use to mollify themselves (along with 'I never eat sweets' and 'Sex isn't that important') (*Kiskegyed*, 1997, (6)41, p. 12).
- [8] Feher (1992) notes that among American astrologists there is a split between professional astrologers who focus on forecasting, and New Age astrologers, for whom astrology is used as a healing art or psychological tool. In Hungary, some form of forecasting, if only through marking auspicious conditions, seemed critical for the empowering potential of the horoscope.
- [9] These characteristics, I should note, often contradicted those valued in a child when in public, such as politeness and respect. For example, when one young boy refused to offer a respectful greeting, his mother apologized for him and complained about the manners of today's youth; but I knew from the time I spent with them that he was the apple of her and her husband's eye, praised endlessly for his mathematic exploits and confidence, and almost never expected to conform to public norms of politeness for children.

The American cultural predilection, particularly among middle-class women, for expressing vulnerability or weakness to forge solidarity had few corollaries among even a self-identified middle class in Dunaújváros, Hungary. It was far more acceptable to express emotional sensitivity or hurt through anger or withdrawal than by revealing it. Another legitimate form of expression of emotional distress, again especially for women, seemed to be psychosomatic, driving a discourse about nerves and tensions—and more recently, stress (see also Lampland, 1995, for discourse of 'nerves' in the village during the 1980s).

- [10] More recently, Evans conducted a systematic analysis of American astrology columns which partially confirmed Adorno's suspicion that horoscopes in magazines for working class women differ from those for middle-class women (Evans, 1996).
- [11] This genre is similar to but far more complicated than various other popular media constructions such as the 'Color Me Beautiful' tests, which categorize women into a 'season' based on their colouring, or tests to judge one's financial 'type' or leadership capabilities—versions of which were bountiful in Hungarian women's publications.

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