

The Land of Storms and the region where the country's heart beats: changing images of peripherality in Hungary

Introduction

Over the past years the intensifying processes of peripheralisation have been studied from political economic (Smith & Timár 2010, Nagy & al. 2012), structural-territorial (Pénzes 2013), hinterland development (*cf.* Timár & Kovács 2009), and discursive (Avraham & First 2006, Eriksson 2008) angles. There is at the same time an emerging body of literature that tries to connect the material with the discursive (Beetz 2008, Lang 2012). This paper makes such an attempt by showing how socio-material and discursive processes are co-constituting centre-periphery relations on the example of Hungary, on the sub-national as well as on the supra-national level. Particular attention is paid to Békés County in southeastern Hungary, often regarded as one of the most peripheral parts of the country. The region's relation and position is considered not least vis-à-vis the (administrative) region of Central Hungary and especially the capital city Budapest.

The particular questions that the paper tries to find answers to are: What kind of notions and images are typically produced of Békés County, by whom and why? How can these affect public notions of the region and thereby its widely defined well-being?

The empirical data used can be divided into two main groups. On the one hand, popular literature and films were chosen that deal with rural areas, mostly in the Great Plains and especially in Békés County. The time range goes back to the past eighty years; as will be explained below, older relevant sources are scarce. Nevertheless, some reflections on the nineteenth century will be provided. The second main group of empirical data are articles in popular but still demanding publications, especially the popular scientific journal of the Hungarian Geographical Society. Here, the time range is much shorter – all sources are from the 2000s – as such publications of course have a much shorter circulation period. As will be shown below, these sources were also deemed relevant as they have considerable influence on the public perceptions of the places here dealt with. The sources are then critically analysed, focusing in particular on the ways they portray so-called peripheral and rural areas. I chose not to adopt a definition of peripherality on my own but relied instead on sources that themselves use the term periphery and closely related concepts such as marginality, and then went on analysing how relatively influential actors have been using these terms and with what effects (*cf.* Meyer & Miggelbrink 2013). Nevertheless, the researcher's bias can never be ruled out: my own background in mostly large cities can only partially be „compensated” by the relatively short time – about six months – spent in my study area. Yet while I participated in conversations with locals this article is not based on primary sources such as interviews or questionnaires. Before moving on to the empirical data, let us briefly review – without any claims of completeness – some earlier theoretical as well as empirical studies within the field.

Peripherality: some conceptual ideas and earlier studies

As a result of the Westphalian order peripherality was mostly seen as a concomitant feature of territoriality and was thus rarely problematised up until the 1960s. This changed in the 1970s, when peripherality was increasingly studied as a phenomenon and a crucial and unavoidable feature of capitalism (Wallerstein 1974, Petras 1976). While still a marxist, Lefebvre (1974)

became a forerunner of changing this by claiming that the periphery's one-sided dependence on the centre is an expression of the socialisation of space (*cf.* Shields 1991). With the cultural and spatial turn since the 1980s, peripherality is increasingly seen as a relational process – captured with the concept of peripheralisation – that is constantly under (re)construction and (re)negotiation. On the example of various geographic scales in Finland Paasi (1995) showed how peripherality is socially constructed, rather than given. Relational thinking means that „peripheries mean different things in different places and for different people” (ibid: 254-255). In her study on a small Portuguese bordertown, de Oliveira (2002: 254) noted that while outsiders may perceive the local inhabitants as being at the periphery, they themselves do not. Relatedly, the relativity of space means that any place on the Earth cannot be peripheral on its own but only in relation to another place; for instance a small town vis-à-vis the capital, a tiny impoverished state vis-à-vis a large and powerful one, and so on. Hence, there are different ways of understanding spaces, places and landscapes, which thus become ambiguous and paradoxical rather than straightforward and homogenous (Forsberg 1996). Additionally, such discourses can of course alter in time (*cf.* Gyuris 2014).

The cultural turn implies that cultural meanings of space are significant, and not just for identity but also for „the construction of the economic meanings of peripheral areas” (Paasi 1995: 255). For Shields (1991: 5), marginal places „carry the image and stigma of their marginality, which becomes indistinguishable from any empirical identity they might have had”. In a study on British local authority estates, Hastings and Dean (2003) noted how the term 'no-go' estate became a convenient way for the media and public alike to label a wide variety of social environments, despite the fact that only a small number of these experienced unrests. Such labelling then exacerbated neighbourhood decline whereby those who could move out, leaving behind the more vulnerable: „labelled as failures, [the latter] people accept and internalize this negative image. Outsiders – professionals, politicians, the media – reflect, reinforce and magnify that image. People expect to be treated badly and their image of themselves and the estate takes a further battering” (Taylor 1998: 821). Similarly, according to Lang (2012: 1751) “(collective) self-images of actors in peripheralized regions are highly relevant and often lead to mental lock-ins setting off downward spirals of decline”. A number of examples from eastern Germany have been recognised: the town of Guben shall have “collectively resigned” (Bürkner 2002); the German-Polish borderland be “peripherised in the heads” (Matthiesen 2002: 3), and Johanngeorgenstadt be a “self-label of a dying or already dead city” (Steinführer & Kabisch 2007: 120). As Lang (2012: 1751) notes, as a consequence of such categories – and arguably their internalisation – “emigration appears as escape or at least as discursively constituted *modus agendi*. If such cognitive developments become dominant, complete regions tend to be paralysed and appear hostile to innovation”. In sum, Beetz (2008: 13) notes that

spatial discourses are not only shaped by locational factors but also by images. Being classified as centre or periphery does not only affect actual developments but also potential development chances. Spatial inequality is thus not just a result of economic and political processes; the difference between centre and periphery mirrors the societal construction of spatial order.

Finally, yet another body of literature has emphasised the potentially positive elements of a marginal position, not just in its function of creating something new and innovative but also in bringing together different centres (and peripheries). Chinese diaspora literature in the United States (Lee 1991), or Kaliningrad's potential bridging role between Russia proper and the EU (Browning & Joenniemi 2004) are just two examples of the many examples of what Lotman (2005) termed semiospheres or Soja (1996) thirdspaces. It is with such a conceptual baggage that we now turn to the empirical material.

Békés County: processes of socio-economic polarisation

Hungary and Békés County offer illustrative examples of “social spatialisation” (Shields 1991). The country’s postal codes, road-network, and dialling codes all reflect the spatial hierarchy: the capital Budapest carries the number one, its surroundings the number two, with the remaining Hungarian regions being allocated subsequent numbers, “clockwise” on the country’s map. (Similarly, personal numbers start with one for men and two for women.) From a modernist and structuralist perspective, then, a powerful narrative can be presented that portrays Békés County as a peripheral area. The region is located in the south-eastern corner of Hungary – itself not an economically vibrant country – bordering Romania, one of the poorest member states of the European Union (EU). As Paasi (1995: 255) noted, “since the territorial system is always changing, the analysis of peripheries cannot ignore the historical context”. The region’s history-in-a-nutshell could then be written as something like the following. The Great Plains including Békés County has always been a backward and peripheral region. Due to its physical features (lowlands) that make it easily accessible, the area has often been invaded by different peoples (e.g. Tatars, Turks etc) whose empires’ borders it often constituted, not least due to the mountainous regions that surround it. Up until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Békés County’s position was actually in the centre of the Kingdom of Hungary – commemorated by a small windmill in Szarvas set up in 1939 (Szabó & Simkó 2002: 45-46) – but it has been a border region ever since. For a brief period, between May 2004 and January 2007, Békés County was even at the external border of the EU and it still is of the Schengen Area. From an absolute understanding of space, then, the study area is in many ways a peripheral one.

In socio-economic terms, the story is a very similar one. Békés County can be described as an area characterised by high rates of poverty, unemployment, out-migration, and an aging population (Lócsei et al. 2013). The inhabitants of the county have the third lowest average income (Kiss 2014) and purchasing power (Orosz 2014) out of Hungary’s twenty meso-level units. At the same time, the share of state-organised public labour – a strongly debated measure to combat unemployment (Bakó et al. 2014) – of the region’s total labour force is among the highest. Békés’s road-network is most likely the poorest of all Hungarian counties, with no motorway even planned to run through its territory. Due to its peripheral location, poor transport infrastructure, and possibly its monotonous landscape, the region’s touristic potential remains limited. Such a negative description unfortunately coincides with socio-economic realities to a large extent, although it is not the whole picture.

A somewhat different picture emerges if we take into account the following factors that are also characteristics of Békés County. Its many rivers make it a popular tourist destination for kayaking and other water sports. While spa-towns can be found all over Hungary, Gyula and Orosháza definitely belong to the more famous ones. Békés County’s soil is among the EU’s most fertile, even if the area’s agricultural industry has seen better days. The region’s share of Hungarikum food products – a prestigious category of premium-quality products from Hungary – is clearly over-proportional (Szabó & Simkó 2002: 46). Over the past years the county seat Békéscsaba has been hosting an annual sausage-festival dedicated to two of these Hungarikums, with the event enjoying increased nation-wide fame and recognition. Relatedly, (national) initiatives have been taken recently to reinvigorate the traditional meat industry of the region, although the successes still remain open to question. At the same time, the railway link connecting the county with Budapest is both frequently trafficked and currently under reconstruction to allow for faster travel. Further, cross-border traffic from neighbouring Arad County in Romania is significant for the region’s commercial and tourism industries, evidenced by the presence of Romanian cars, signs, and people in

Békéscsaba. Relatedly, Arad County's significant ethnic Hungarian population (~9%) and Békés County's Romanian minority (~1.1%) has been offering opportunities for various types of exchange across the border.

Thus while processes of peripheralisation are clearly present in the study area, as Lang (2012: 1751) has pointed out such processes are revisable, as testified by a number of examples even outside the large cities and capitals of Central and Eastern Europe. Historic and spa towns – e.g. Swinoujście (Lundén et al. 2009), Karlovy Vary, Visegrád, Gyula – and formerly heavy industry-dominated places that managed to shift towards modern industries – such as Hoyerswerda (Lang 2012: 1751), or the Hungarian counties of Komárom-Esztergom, Győr-Moson-Sopron, and Fejér – are doing comparatively well. Yet the point of this article is not to find out whether Békés County is a peripheral region or not but to investigate how the dominant images associated with it can contribute to or hamper its widely defined well-being. Hence, it is to the discursive elements that we now turn.

Békés County: discursive aspects of peripheralisation

This chapter is sub-divided into two sections, legitimised mostly by the different genres of the sources used.

Notions of peripherality in literature and film

Images and notions of peripherality are (re)produced in popular culture, and these appear to be changing in time. In the nineteenth century the “countryside” was rather over-idealised in Hungary (Kovách 2012: 32) – as elsewhere in Europe – by for instance national romanticist authors and poets such as Sándor Petőfi or János Arany. Spaces until then conceived as rural and peripheral stepped into the foreground by becoming subjects of over-romanticisation: in a time of increasing urbanisation, longing for the rural did not just represent a search for national authenticity (ibid), but also a desire to (re)visit the “untouched” nature. Under such circumstances issues like poverty – also widely connected with rurality (Leibert 2013) – were barely dealt with, if at all. The 1930s however saw the rise of the movement of “folk authors” (*népi írók*), many of whom had come from impoverished rural environments themselves. The term “folk” was a self-label of this loosely connected group, standing in opposition to the “urban” and “genteel” elites (Péter 1994: 1484). Seen as a radical movement by many, the movement's goal was not just to portray social problems – as they observed them along their journeys across the country and beyond – but also to lift these into public consciousness and to promote solutions (ibid).

One of these sociographic monographs, *Viharsarok* (Féja 1937/1980) – a name translated into Land of Storms in the title of a movie by the same name (Császi 2014) – deals with roughly the same area that today constitutes Békés County. This was not a coincidental choice, as the author explains:

When the editor presented the plan of this book series and asked me which landscape I would cover I immediately pointed to the southern Tisza-region, Transtisza's and Hungary's “land of storms”, where minds and hearts could never reconcile to the existing, to the Hungary that came true. This people were always ready to rise, to start a new life... When a sparkle flew there, Transtisza immediately burst into flames, burning beautifully, as if it was conscious of a better and more human life, rapidly putting up troops against the aristocracy and later against feudal-capitalist powers. (Féja 1980: 11).

In the same year another similar sociographic work was published, *Puszták népe* (Illyés 1937/1969). Although dealing with another geographic area (Tolna County), the observations made are very comparable to Féja's: the local population is described as heavily polarised in all sorts of ways; socially, economically, culturally etc. Defencelessness and impoverishment best describe the fate of the servantry, whose lives were strongly dependent on and regulated by their feudalistic overlords – including the right to hold guns (Illyés 1969: 25) or even dogs (ibid: 7). And yet

the land of Sió-Sárvíz has always shined intensely and ready-to-stick, like the sword pulled out from the scabbard, as many times as the wind of freedom was blowing... whenever blood could be shed freely, whenever the opportunity arose to pour out stifled bitterness and revenge... The people of the puszta [i.e. Hungarian grassland] are excellent soldiers... not regretting their skin. In heroism and contempt of death only the Bosnians can compete among the monarchy's peoples. (Illyés 1969: 25)

According to Illyés, the combat-readiness of the puszta's servants is evidenced by their heroic actions for instance during the revolution of 1848 and World War One (ibid: 24-25). The two books have come out in a number of subsequent editions and remain included in the national curriculum for high schools, although that was not always the case. During the interwar national-conservative regime Féja for instance was sued for “dishonouring the nation” and dismissed from his position as a teacher. His book remained banned during the communist period up until 1957 (Grósz 1995: 28) since it suggested allocating small lands to the peasants as a measure to combat their poverty.

The latter may be a reason why it took some decades until the next more famous sociology was published dealing with the problems of a rural small town, again in Békés County: its title *Az ország peremén* (Varga 1982) translates into “On the country's edge”, which refers to both the area's marginalised inhabitants as well as its physical location. Apart of directing attention to the severe conditions that the community at stake is living with, the author also points out the following:

The appearance of the problems of peripheries in public opinion has an even stronger effect on social consciousness than the reality would suggest. Social consciousness is namely prone to magnify the negative phenomena of the periphery. This ... leads to exasperation and listlessness not just in the periphery, but also elsewhere. The solution is therefore not to keep silent, on the contrary... (Varga 1982: 11)

Hence, Varga is pointing to a possible gap between socio-material realities and perceptions of it. Importantly, he does not make the above point to belittle the problems of peripheralised areas; as the folk writers he too shows a clear commitment to finding solutions (Varga 1982: 11-12). But the citation above does emphasise the important point that images and discourses of peripherality can be very powerful and influential – even on the whole of society. Yet Varga himself makes some doubtful and essentialising claims, such as that “on the periphery everything unfolds in a different way than in the centres; everything substantial and important takes shape differently than it should” (ibid: 9), or that the village he observed suffers of higher internal income inequalities than other Hungarian settlements (ibid). The author further suggests that “unknown and therefore uncontrollable processes and initiatives can bud on the peripheries”, giving “antisocial intentions of certain strata among the urban young” as well as “the growing sect-movements” that he relates primarily to rural areas, as examples (Varga 1982: 11). In reality, the spread of various free churches (a fairer description than sects) that was indeed characteristic for Hungary in the 1980s (and 1990s) was rather more common in urban environments. Yet Varga also recognises – although conditionally – that “value can be created at the periphery, too; such artistic treasure that competes with the already familiar and recognised merits” (ibid). Indeed, at times elements of folk culture – typically originating in

rural places – such as handcraft, folk music and dance etc – have been important identity markers of many societies, and even been more widely associated with the authentic national to gain political (Kovách 2012: 32) but also commercial value.

An even more provoking and arguably also arrogant idea is raised in another volume by two young sociographers (Mátyus & Tausz 1984), namely that the servants – while “liberated” in 1945 – have got accustomed to dependence and for many of them self-dependence is often more dangerous than defencelessness. Nevertheless, this new book series (*Gyorsuló idő*) that Varga’s and the latter work were part of set out to deal with contemporary social problems after some decades of silence.

The years around the regime change in 1989 were a time for (a probably too incautious) optimism regarding the whole of Hungary’s development, which might explain why issues of peripheralised areas stepped into the background. One remarkable and highly-prized exception is the novel *Sátántangó* (Krasznahorkai 1985), adapted into a seven-hour long film in 1994 and published in English in 2012. The story – spread over a couple of days of endless rain – focuses on the dozen remaining inhabitants of an unnamed isolated hamlet, although the movie version is known to have been shot in Békés County (Stöckert & Galuska 2011). It portrays “failures stuck in the middle of nowhere... Their world is rough and ready, lost somewhere between the comic and tragic, in one small insignificant corner of the cosmos. Theirs is the dance of death”, as can be read on the website of the publisher of the English translation (New Directions 2015). The reviews published there describe the story as “an hours-long slog through mud and meaninglessness and superstition”, Krasznahorkai as “a poet of dilapidation”, his work as “a bruising study of expectation and failure”. In sum, a highly-prized work based on strongly negative images of Békés County, although implicitly.

The most influential contemporary writer from and on the southern Great Plains is most likely Krisztián Grecsó. His first book *Pletykaanyu* – recently published for the third time (Grecsó 2013) – is described by a major distributor as “bringing fresh news from depths we rarely receive genuine reports from” (Libri 2015, my emphasis). The author himself is described as a native turned into an “ethnographer”, and “the question is left to the reader whether this makes him a traitor”. In Grecsó’s latest book *Megyek utánad* (2014) the Land of Storms carries with itself the notions of soil-boundedness, immutability, and forgottenness: “in the Land of Storms no miracles are taking place. There, waiting for miracles is a miracle in itself; the mirage that one day for someone it will be better – that there is such a thing as better at all” (Grecsó 2014: 179). Accordingly, the book’s main character begins asking himself whether his misfortunes are a result of his own decisions, or rather of his “land-of-stormsiness” and thus “peripheral existence”. The latter interpretation is supported by the book’s title; “I’m walking after you”, to another place, following someone who always tells him where to go. Despite all the negative images surrounding it (and despite having moved to Budapest himself), the Land of Storms – including all its peripheral features – is also a place loved by Grecsó.

Finally, an already-mentioned movie was presented at last year’s Berlin Film Festival by the title Land of Storms (Császi 2014), accordingly set mostly in Békés County. The film was described as “a potently atmospheric drama of three young gay men wrestling with their sexuality in an unaccommodating environment” (Rooney 2014). One of the local characters “loosens up as barriers are broken down, but the pressure of his religious beliefs, his needy mother (Eniko Borcsok), a sometime girlfriend (Zita Teby) and the homophobic local youths fuels his conflict” (ibid). Whereas Békés County may not be known for its particular openness towards subcultures including LGBT-people, characterising the region by piety and homophobia can be rather misleading as neither religiosity nor support for the far right (though no satisfying measure of homophobia) are typical features of the area.

Popular scientific notions of peripherality and centrality

Images and notions of peripherality and centrality are also (re)produced in popular scientific literature, including by geographers themselves. A good number of examples of this can be found in *A Földgömb*, the popular scientific journal of the Hungarian Geographical Society. While Hungarian borderlands and other areas conceived as peripheral are frequently covered, there is a number of interesting patterns regarding the ways these are described.

Many of the articles analysed are written from the centre's perspective, in the sense that they use dichotomies like us/them or here/there. Thus they implicitly – though most likely unintentionally – target audiences in “centres” such as Budapest and other larger cities. A report on the Dráva-sík (Pálfai 2002) – a micro-region along Hungary's southern borders – that bears the subheading “Faces of a forgotten landscape” starts off with the following: “the attributive in the subheading may perhaps appear as exaggerated, but if *we* start asking around in *our* acquaintanceship *we* will be astonished to learn how little *people* know about this land...” (ibid: 32, my emphases). In contrast, an account of the Bereg (Pristyák 2005) in north-eastern Hungary constantly talks in first person plural of “our values” in the region. As it turns out, the author works at the regional university college. Her local embeddedness might also partly explain why she gives an impression of making attempts at advertising the region to tourists, by for instance starting the article by saying “the Bereg is not only nice in July and August” and by using subheadings like “The magic of the Upper Tisza region” (ibid: 39).

Certain places are also peripheralised by being depicted as forgotten or remote. Similarly to Pálfai's (2002) already-mentioned essay, a contribution on the Tiszazug (Mező 2004) is subtitled as “A forgotten landscape in the heart of the Great Plains”. The next report in the same volume is on Lavenham, “where time stopped” (Pethő 2004: 44) despite the fact that today this English town is a very popular day-trip destination for people from across the country. Of course, the image that “time stopped” in a certain place can also make it appear attractive to some or even to many, at least temporarily. At the same time, few of us are probably drawn to places that are forgotten, at least in the longer run.

Rural and sparsely populated areas are not rarely exoticised and romanticised. A portrayal of Hortobágy (Tamáska 2004) – a landscape of the Great Plains often deemed as iconic in recent (national) historiography – describes it as “a romantic water world, with its timber-wolves, million fishes, shepherds, fishermen, hunters, wranglers, and crabbers, exiled into the works of ethnographers”. Additionally, some regions – often already popular tourist destinations – are ascribed positively sounding slogans, thereby further contributing to their popularity. A contribution to a special issue on the Adriatic coastline is entitled “Portray of a “happy land”” (Nemerkényi 2004), after a designation by Le Corbusier (de Castro Gonçalves 2013: 199). The already mentioned town of Gyula is sometimes referred to as the “pearl of the east” (*ref*). Unlike with many ascriptions of peripheries, in these cases the labels used are put in quotation marks.

The contrast between the ways centrality and peripherality are portrayed is particularly apparent in two successive issues of *Világjáró*, a popular travel magazine. The article on the Southern Great Plains bears the title “Treasures of meandering river valleys” (Szabó & Simkó 2002). The second sentence says: “...this land was not only shaped by man's presence but also by his disappearance; as a result of depopulation under the Turks nature has reoccupied her realm” (ibid: 42). In contrast, the contribution on Budapest and the Central Danube-region is entitled “Where the country's heart beats” (Szabó 2003). According to the introductory paragraph:

If we look at Hungary's map, Budapest appears as a huge heart pumping blood through vessels – along the motorways and railroads – to the entire body of the country... It appears as if the heart of our weather-beaten country – and possibly of the entire world – has always beaten here. (ibid: 40)

The metaphor of a biological body representing a country – in this case Hungary – is interesting, though neither new nor unique. Already Ratzel (1903) made the comparison between a state and a biological organism, with his idea later misinterpreted and abused by territorial revisionist decision-makers and scholars. The metaphor is of course not irredentist in itself; it does however represent and maintain an image of a country or nation as a clearly distinguishable unit with its own life and development. A biological body not least has a heart, brain, and limbs – comparably to a demarcated territory's centres and peripheries (cf. Beetz 2008: 13).

Finally, images of centrality can be maintained long after a place's central functions have diminished. As a report on Sztána, the “central place” (*központos hely*) of Kalotaszeg – a region of Transylvania – informs us, back in the days of steam locomotives all trains had to make a stop at this small and tranquil but picturesque village (Tamáska 2005: 43). When Károly Kós – a famous architect of the time – spotted the area, he described his feelings as: “I'm just standing at the edge of the mountain, and I know, I feel every bit now that I'm standing right in the middle of Kalotaszeg, which has been giving me all the beauties of its wonders as a present...” (ibid). The area became a popular resort for Transylvanian intellectuals up until 1944 and preserved its designation as a “central place” even after fast-trains no longer stopped there, reproduced in Tamáska's article and elsewhere.

Conclusions

The paper has shown that popular culture and popular science can provide fruitful sources to study images and notions of a geographic area, given their wide circulation and large impact on public consciousness. The dominant image of Békés County is that of a peripheral area; it was indeed surprising how frequently the term features even in novels and sociographic works targeting a broad audience. The question then is what this peripherality has meant for those who used the term, what kind of images have been ascribed to it. The rather stably present notion of periphery and the epithet Land of Storms – largely associated with Békés County – in older and recent sources have allowed for such a comparative analysis. This showed that the attributes assigned to those concepts have altered significantly over time: while “land-of-storminess” has mostly referred to toughness, severity, and a revolutionary spirit up until the 1950s, it has since then almost on the contrary been associated with passivity, tardiness, and tepidity. Indeed, Forsberg (1996) and others have reminded us that even the same place or landscape can be read in different ways, and Gyuris (2014) that such discourses can change in time. But what is interesting about these shifting images of the Land of Storms is that they have all the time been attributed to the region's peripherality. This is intriguing since features like a revolutionary spirit are neither necessarily nor solely typical of peripherality. As an example, societal change including uprisings has at least in Hungary often been initiated by intellectuals in the capital or in other centres. Similarly, a “distant” location or even a poor connectedness is a judgement from the viewer's perspective: thus Budapest is more distant and inaccessible for marginalised groups in Békés County than is the latter for car-owners in the capital – let alone the mental distances.

Most of the influential sources, and thus the notions of peripherality produced, are written from the centre's perspective almost irrespectively of the author's origin. This is particularly true for popular scientific works that seem mostly to target audiences in the centres, for instance by offering commercial and/or romanticised images of peripheral areas.

In particular, portraying places as remote and/or forgotten (Pálfai 2002, Mező 2004) most obviously reflects the writer's perspective, and possibly that of the target audience. It is not least illustrative that one of the few contributions written by a resident of the described region (Pristyák 2005) shows no signs of perceiving the area as remote, let alone forgotten. These attributes might of course be exaggerated by the writers in order to make their cases more interesting, but that also contributes to the (re)production of images of peripheral areas as being essentially different from centres. As we saw even among the older/more established literary sources, authors such as Illyés (1937) or to some extent Mátyus and Tausz (1984) can be rather pejorative in their writings about peripheries. All this supports Paasi's (1995: 255) observation that "representations of the peripheries are typically constructed and defined in cores", thereby maintaining the established socio-spatial order.

What can all this imply for the development of a region like Békés County? As Beetz (2008: 13) noted images are highly important for any place's development potentials. Historical and recent associations with the label Land of Storms may not be the most ideal for building a positive image of the region, nor for regional identity. In terms of socio-economic realities, then, growing inequalities within Békés County and out-migration are only little compensated by a much smaller in-migration and the modest cross-border flows (Nagy et al. 2012). There is a real risk that the region remains a socio-economic black-hole on Hungary's – and Europe's – map. Yet as other examples have shown, processes of peripheralisation are revisable (Lang 2012: 1751). Opportunities for cross-border cooperation for instance near Gyula or Arad are not as fully exploited as in the borderland around Oradea (Toca 2012), Satu Mare, or Subotica. The improving railway-connections may bring further benefits. As images of the Land of Storms have been changing in the past, more positive associations with it may emerge in the future that should benefit Békés County – and thereby Hungary as a whole (cf. Varga 1982: 11).

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