

Culture Wars as Property Struggles: The Hungarian Academy of Arts in Post-1989 Hungary

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ABSTRACT | While property is a common analytical category in political economy, it is often omitted from cultural analysis. To bridge this gap, this article examines the Orbán regime's cultural flagship institution, the Magyar Művészeti Akadémia [Hungarian Academy of Arts, HAA] from a property perspective. By putting the 1992–2011 trajectory of the Academy under a spotlight, a rarely examined prehistory of the current Orbán regime comes to the fore.

By deploying historical and social sciences literature alongside archival and interview-based primary research, it is here argued that the property perspective can transcend the “culture wars” explanations of postsocialist cultural polarization by highlighting the material roots of such conflicts. The case of the HAA serves to demonstrate that its cultural clashes were property struggles to obtain properties from the postsocialist state. In this quest, the Academy formed an uneven alliance with the national-protectionist elite bloc. By demonstrating how the HAA was bound to the competition of postsocialist elite blocs, its cyclical politicization can be best understood from the angle of the rapidly transforming property regime in post-1989 Hungary. In conclusion, the article proposes the postsocialist property regime of culture as a framework to analyze cultural and property clashes in tandem.

KEYWORDS | cultural politics, Magyar Művészeti Akadémia [Hungarian Academy of Arts], Orbán regime, postsocialism, property relations

The artists go where the stew is.

—*Unknown artist of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, 1993*¹

During the transition . . . [t]he liberal trend already had the Soros Foundation; the . . . social democrats transferred the assets from the party-state. Only the so-called conservative trend . . . had no resources. I helped create this background.

—*József Zelnik, 1995*²

Today the Magyar Művészeti Akadémia [Hungarian Academy of Arts] (hereafter HAA) is one of Hungary's most significant property holders, and its president preaches from its lavish headquarters, "we don't need to be afraid of the words 'cultural supremacy.'"³ The HAA manages and redistributes a yearly 12 billion forints (ca. \$30 million) derived from the governmental budget, employs hundreds, and possesses magnificent real estate properties in Budapest.

In contrast to its present prosperity, the HAA was for decades characterized by a propertyless status and a constant struggle to acquire properties. It was established in 1992 after the transition and functioned as an NGO until 2011, when the Orbán regime constitutionally enshrined the Academy. This act enabled the HAA to realize its original ambition: possessing and redistributing state properties. By this means it aimed to restructure the postsocialist field of cultural production by enhancing a nation-bounded culture. According to the Academy's statutes, it strives "to protect the most significant values of Hungarian intellectual life and restore its value system."⁴

Compared to the vast literature on property relations in postsocialist industrial and agricultural production,⁵ the cultural products of the post-socialist transformation are primarily analyzed either through ideological concepts such as censorship, restorative justice, and aesthetical reintegration, or through the lens of diffusions and cultural transactions.⁶ To bridge this gap, my article attempts to outline the political economy of culture during the transition in Hungary by focusing on the shifting property relations of state-led cultural production.

By responding to this special issue's invitation to revisit Hungarian history from the angle of property relations, I aim to put the HAA into focus and demonstrate how property regimes shape cultural production, and how property relations are concealed by the concept of "culture wars." It is not only its prominent place in the post-2010 Orbán regime that makes the HAA a relevant case for studying postsocialist property relations. Three

more factors, namely its establishment in the wake of the postsocialist transition, the combination of its propertyless status with its quest for properties, and its deep involvement in the struggles of postsocialist elite blocs qualify the HAA as an apt example of the property regime of postsocialist cultural production.

My property-focused investigation of the HAA's 1992–2011 trajectory relies on archival and oral-history sources. I carried out participant observation at the HAA for my doctoral research. This ethnographic fieldwork made me aware of and opened the path to the previously unresearched, unprocessed, and neglected archives of the HAA. I spent months processing 1,300 documents from the HAA's twelve-linear-meter archival materials, and this article primarily relies on these files. I complemented the archival research with an analysis of secondary sources and two dozen interviews. I conducted these interviews with key players in the HAA's early history and with some of their allies and administrators.

To map the postsocialist genealogy of the current right-wing property regime in cultural production, I focus on three moments in the HAA's history. First, I show how its failure to establish a property-owner organization in the wake of the transition led the Academy to ally with the national-protectionist elite bloc. Second, I analyze the HAA's bottom-up construction of its headquarters in the mid-1990s as a process of property accumulation in which the Academy's external dependencies loosened, but its internal hierarchies tightened. Finally, I inquire how the HAA's boycott of state subsidies from the Westernizer market-liberalist regime after 2002 enhanced the institution's precarization and rightward political radicalization.

By charting the HAA's quest for properties before the rise of the current Orbán regime, I call attention to the decades-long formation of right-wing cultural infrastructures. The joint analysis of culture and property also provides an alternative approach to the postsocialist cultural struggles of Hungary. I argue that such an analysis can lead to better conceptualization of the postsocialist property regime of culture.

Theoretical Foundations: Putting Property Back into Culture

In this article, I join the literature that approaches property as a social relation. Instead of focusing merely on its possession, I pay special attention to its control.⁷ Capturing the cultural aspects of property relations is not

unique among historians and social scientists, who often emphasize the ideological embeddedness of property regimes and conceptualize powerful notions, such as the moral economy, to interpret this relation.⁸ Still, culture is a stepchild of property-regime analysis.

When cultural studies are concerned with property, they focus on private property. Consequently, their analysis revolves around cultural industries and considers the state primarily as a policymaker.⁹ The state-owned and -managed properties come into the picture primarily in the literature on cultural heritage and copyright focus. To bridge this gap, in this article I put property back into cultural analysis. For this purpose, I turn toward the social sciences literature theorizing the relational nature of property and analyzing it from a critical political-economic perspective.

The literature on social history, political economy, and state formation suggests that state and property relations are inseparable.¹⁰ Under capitalism, nation-states guarantee property rights. The state does not merely maintain the legal framework for property relations but is also involved in the property-related processes of production and exploitation.

The postsocialist condition, the context of the HAA's property-related struggles, has often been studied from a property perspective.¹¹ Scholars have emphasized that individual private property did not become the sole form, and the state remained a crucial actor in property relations in post-1989 Eastern Europe.¹² József Böröcz has convincingly argued that in state socialism private property was not eliminated but rather penetrated by the state, describing it with the concept of property vacuum. Writing in 1992, he was expecting an informality-based destatization and an original accumulation on the ruins of state socialism.¹³

But not the heavy state subsidies toward cultural production—also existing in Western Europe—but the lack of its alternatives is the specificity of the Eastern European field. This phenomenon is more than a socialist legacy. Social historians, such as Jürgen Kocka and Iván Szelényi, have emphasized the relative weakness of the property-owner bourgeoisie (*Besitzbürgertum*) in the region that developed in tandem with the prominent role of the cultural bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*).¹⁴ In the absence of a robust property-owner bourgeoisie in Eastern Europe, cultural producers' dependency is articulated primarily in relation to the state apparatus. This socio-historical background explains why the HAA–state nexus and not the barely existing one between the HAA and the bourgeoisie is the focus of this article.

While the cultural producers–state connection is a central aspect of this analysis, the state is not a homogenous entity. This was particularly manifest in the case of postsocialist Hungary, where Westernizer market-liberalizing and national-protectionist elite blocs were competing to control the state and manage the country’s reintegration into the capitalist world economy. The former aimed to lead this integration by enhancing a national bourgeoisie, while the latter sought to do so via foreign direct investment-led development. Thus their seemingly internal confrontation at the scale of the nation-state had its origins in the uneven development of the global world economy.¹⁵ Both elites developed the ideological complement of their strategies, under the flag of “democracy” in the one case and “national interest” in the other. Consequently, these elites were not solely economic interest groups but rather hegemonic blocs looming over economic, political, and cultural actors.¹⁶

In analyzing how the HAA tried to establish a coalition with the national-protectionist elite bloc to gain properties, I am not examining an alliance of equal parties.¹⁷ Rather, I stress that due to their propertyless status, intellectuals of the HAA were exposed to the political-economic elite factions controlling material resources. By putting property relations back into culture and connecting both to state formation, I have outlined a theoretical horizon that can help go beyond the ideological facade of the “culture wars” discourse that is often produced both by and about the HAA.

A Prehistory of Postsocialist Hungary: The Disintegration of the Socialist Property Regime of Culture

The HAA emerged into its postsocialist condition when the previous property regime of culture fell apart. This disintegration opened a path for the establishment of new art academies competing for properties and state recognition. State-socialist cultural production was dominated by the artists’ unions, organized on the Soviet model. These institutions not only amalgamated all the professional cultural producers in a formally democratic organizational structure but also exemplified the state-socialist property vacuum. They functioned as property holders, owning enterprises (such as art-trade companies) and enjoying monopolies (such as over the production of postcards), and for the artists they provided material allowances covering

everything from raw materials to pensions, studios, and holiday trips. Due to late-socialist austerity politics,¹⁸ from the late 1980s artists' unions became the subjects of politically and aesthetically loaded infighting over their decreasing resources, and in the early 1990s most of them broke apart.

The fall of the artists' unions' quasi-democratic model opened a path for a meritocratic reorganization of cultural production. The HAA was the national-protectionist form of this trend—uniting those who were considered by the founders as the cream of elite culture—while Westernizer market-liberalizing actors aimed to reach meritocracy through project-oriented, managerial, and memberless institutions.¹⁹ In the wake of the restitution of presocialist property relations emerged the idea of effecting justice for writers expelled from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) in 1949.²⁰ The idea of founding an Academy of Arts first came up in 1989, in the wake of the market optimism of the period. First Ferenc Glatz, the last state-socialist minister of culture, proposed the establishment of a partially business-based Academy of Arts.²¹ Although this idea was not realized, right after the transition further Academy funding plans emerged.

Two competing art academies were established within a month in 1992: the Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts (SZALA) and the HAA. SZALA secured symbolic recognition and limited but predictable material resources by being associated with the HAS. In contrast, although the name of it suggests a state institution, the HAA could only be established as an NGO, without any stable funding and formal affiliation with the state.

The membership of the two academies followed the demarcation lines of postsocialist elite polarization. The SZALA united artists associated with the Westernizer market-liberalizing faction, while artists close to the national-protectionist faction were concentrated in the HAA. Despite the overlap of a few figures, the division was already clear for the contemporaries. As Imre Makovecz, the first president of the HAA, put it just a few years later: "I happily join the game of dividing things into left-wing and right-wing because I have to face the fact that there are two art academies, one left-wing and one right-wing, and without a doubt, people are unmistakably partitioned between the two."²²

The conflict between the two art academies did not stem from a fundamentally different aesthetic regime but emerged from postsocialist property conditions. Under these, the two academies aligned with two competing elite factions in order to secure properties through them.

The following decades were characterized by their relationship being in limbo, with periods of diplomatic rapprochement and escalating conflicts following each other. Still, until 2011 SZALA remained the more dominant of the two institutions.²³

Postsocialist Accumulation of Property and the Academies of Arts

The HAA's mission statement declared its purpose as "to create a garden of sovereign dignity, which is independent of earthly powers, but not of Hungarianness."²⁴ Despite the emphasis on sovereignty, lacking a predictable material base, the HAA had to navigate among the rapidly changing postsocialist property and power relations.

The first years of the HAA, dating from 1992 to 1994, were dominated by negotiations with state secretaries and influential MPs, the preparation of draft laws, and the struggles to get state subsidies. Its objective was to achieve a state-entitled public-body (*köztestület*) status that would have given it properties, symbolic recognition, and legal instruments to shape cultural production. The Academy's secretary-general summarized the benefits of this path by arguing that it would provide greater legitimacy for politicians and cultural producers. As he put it: "If this [the redistribution of state subsidies of culture] is an activity supervised by artists and art professionals, peace is presumably greater. Internally, there will be a more extensive debate. However, it will not radiate to the state. . . . If not the culture minister must decide whether folk art or literature gets thirty-five or thirty-six million forints, but . . . it is handed over to the authorized body of the Academy of Arts, . . . s/he won't be corrupted, just as the artists won't be corrupted in a political sense."²⁵

He also compared this model with privatization and argued that no transition occurred in culture because property relations were not changed. He believed that such a transformation—realized via the strengthening of the HAA—would mean the destatization and socialization of cultural production.²⁶ "That is why it would be important . . . to implement real socialization by the state in this field, just as privatization did in the economy. . . . In this sense, there was no regime change in artistic life. This would require the operation of an [art] academy that is a public body."²⁷

This idea of establishing a self-governing cultural organization controlling resources and properties of cultural production was widespread

in the cultural circuits of the national-protectionist elite faction. The Magyar Kulturális Kamara [Hungarian Cultural Chamber] advocated a similar corporatist model. It envisaged itself as the holder of all culture-related properties and assets, and suggested supporting cultural production from the ensuing profit. The models of the HAA and the Hungarian Cultural Chamber both aimed to restructure state properties and functions into cultural producer-led organizations, and aimed to adjust to the rising corporatism of the post-1989 societies.²⁸ The similarity of the two programs was more than a coincidence: there was significant overlap among the intellectual factions standing behind the two organizations.

To keep pace with SZALA, operating under the umbrella and in the building of the more than 150-year-old HAS, the HAA quickly developed a formalized operation. It employed a chief administrator right after its formation and rented a pricey office in the center of Budapest.²⁹ Since the HAA neither had any property nor a legal status entitling it to state subsidies, the institution had to rapidly find financial resources to cover its expenses.

These representative forms served to improve the Academy's negotiation position with the government, since its desired public-body status could have been delivered only by the state.³⁰ However, the HAA and the right-wing Magyar Demokrata Fórum [Hungarian Democratic Forum] (hereafter MDF) government ruling until 1994 did not ally to transform the Academy into a public body. The failure of this alliance to be realized was even more unforeseen, since in 1992, at the HAA's constituent assembly, two state secretaries from the MDF government were present, and Prime Minister József Antall congratulated the Academy's foundation in a letter.

Although the HAA aimed to be the vanguard of the national-protectionist elite bloc's cultural hegemony, the Academy could not even unite its allies. There were influential artists affiliated with the national-protectionist bloc, such as the writers Sándor Csoóri and Tibor Cseres, who decided not to join the HAA in order to maintain their positions as universal intellectuals; others, such as Imre Bak, withdrew after recognizing its politicization. In addition, some artists from the countryside could not even distinguish the two academy-founding projects.³¹

The political-economic conflict between the two postsocialist elite blocs also manifested itself in the scale of the two academies' direct confrontation. Key figures of the SZALA saw the HAA as the junior partner of the MDF government; one founder of the SZALA framed the HAA as the

academy of the right-wing cultural administration.³² By the same token, the anger of the HAA members was toward the SZALA, even though it was their own political bloc that hindered their academy's public-body status. In the eyes of the HAA members, the SZALA seemed to be their competitor for the limited properties and the legal statuses validating them. As one of them put it semi-ironically, "The artists go where the stew is," and the HAA founders feared that without the state-backed entitlement they would become insignificant.

Toward the public, the HAA communicated the symbolic aspects of its struggle for public-body status; but in its internal meetings, the material aspects were more emphasized. As one academician formulated it, public-body status would provide a budget for self-maintenance, room rental fees, and coffee costs.³³ During this period, the HAA not only lobbied influential governmental politicians,³⁴ but even hired a lawyer to draft an act codifying its public-body status.³⁵

The HAA was not completely foreclosed from the postsocialist redistribution of properties, just as SZALA never became a flagship institution of the postsocialist Westernizer elite. Although the HAA seemed defeated in the art academies' struggle for state recognition, SZALA also had only a small administration and did not provide annuities for its members. Even though the HAA did not have enough political backing to become a public body, it got a financial allowance from the state apparatus immediately following its establishment. The Academy was also invited to delegate members to state-owned foundations and committees, quickly gaining a hand in redistributing state properties and positions.³⁶

The HAA also took advantages from the process of privatization and the residues of the socialist cultural infrastructure, although symbolically it positioned itself against the culture of socialism. The HAA's founding meetings took place at the building of the Közművelődési Információs Vállalat [Civic Cultural Information Company] and its first brochure was printed by the same enterprise,³⁷ spontaneously privatized by József Zelnik, the cultural *éminence grise* of the national-protectionist elite bloc.³⁸

The Academy's financial operation was grounded on the original accumulation of this elite bloc in the early 1990s.³⁹ In 1992 the Academy received 10 million forints from the state-owned Szerencsejáték Alap [Gambling Fund] through the intervention of József Zelnik, sitting on its board.⁴⁰ Zelnik was not involved solely in establishing the HAA but

defined himself generally as an engine of the original accumulation of the national-protectionist elite faction. As he put it, “During the transition, people belonging to different political philosophies tried to create their financial background. The liberal trend already had the Soros Foundation; the . . . social democrats transferred the assets from the party state. Only the so-called conservative trend . . . had no resources. I helped create this background.”⁴¹ As his words reflect, the Academy’s struggle for properties and subsidies was just a small and subordinated aspect of the broader project of accumulating capital to stabilize the cultural infrastructure of the national-protectionist bloc.

In the early 1990s this elite already was experiencing conflicts in the field of cultural production: the control over state media became a battleground between the two emerging and rival elite factions. In this context the control over popular forms of culture—such as television—was prioritized over opening another frontier in elite cultural production. The partial betrayal of the HAA happened not because governmental figures believed in the autonomy of culture but rather because elite culture seemed to be a minefield that did not promise any short-term political gains.

The flagship initiative of this capital-accumulating and simultaneously hegemony-forging endeavor was the establishment of Duna Television in the same year as the HAA. The objective of this project was to provide a mass medium for the national-protectionist faction, and its material infrastructure was also provided by Zelnik.⁴² He also played a key role in endowing the Művészeti és Szabadművelődési Alapítvány [Arts and Free Culture Foundation], which got a fifty times larger state subsidy than the HAA as well as prestigious real estate such as the Vigadó building, a large concert hall in the capital on the bank of the Danube.⁴³ While the HAA utilized its limited funding to contribute to the hegemonic ambitions of the national-protectionist elite bloc, the Arts and Free Culture Foundation also had the resources to financially support right-wing cultural initiatives such as the HAA with bridge loans and discounted space rental.

In the absence of any transfer of state properties, the HAA remained reliant on subsidies embedded in the clientelism of the national-protectionist elite bloc. This clientelist dependency was exposed by the fact that the HAA received only indirect governmental subsidies, mediated through state-initiated foundations. The donations from the Arts and Free Culture Foundation and the Gambling Fund strengthened the political dependence

of the Academy. Instead of transferring properties, even allied governmental actors encouraged the Academy to apply for such grants.⁴⁴

In this section, I have captured the HAA's attempt to become a public body as an endeavor to decentralize state functions through informal ties in the postsocialist property vacuum. While the postsocialist national-protectionist elite faction did this by boosting its original accumulation, the HAA was integrated into it only peripherally. Thus, the Academy could not become a proprietor even during the liquidation of the socialist property regime.⁴⁵ As a result, the HAA became embedded into the national-protectionist elite bloc via informality-based clientelism. Still, materially it remained essentially dependent on governmental funds. Therefore, a single parliamentary election could entirely change the Academy's conditions, which happened in 1994 with the electoral defeat of the right-wing government, utterly crushing the Academy's dreams of public-body status.

Managing Precarity: Cheapening Artistic Labor to Create Property

With the electoral defeat of its allies, the HAA's condition became more precarious. As I will argue below, this strengthened its decision-makers' understanding of the importance of political alliances and enhanced the Academy's internal hierarchies. Although the national-protectionist elite bloc did not secure the HAA's legal and proprietor status, the Academy's operation was ensured until 1994, thanks to its direct and indirect subsidies. This status quo became unstable in 1996, when the political wing of the Westernizer market-liberalizing elite bloc (embodied by the coalition of the Magyar Szocialista Párt [Hungarian Socialist Party], MSZP, and Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége [Alliance of Free Democrats], SZDSZ) terminated the HAA's yearly state subsidy.

This change in state subsidy did not target the HAA directly but was a systemic part of the gradual neoliberalization of cultural production. The cultural policymaking of the MSZP–SZDSZ government aimed to remake the property regime within the field of culture. According to its Westernizer market-liberalizing principles, it aimed to extend competitive funding for cultural organizations. As a result, the administrators of the HAA realized at the end of 1996 that they no longer had their own separate line in the state budget, introduced in 1994 as one of the last acts of the previous government.

This competitive-subsidy structure confirmed the Academy's understanding of political power as the source of properties. As a result, it encouraged the HAA to accumulate properties in its own hands and to tighten its alliance with the national-protectionist faction. It immediately addressed the minister of culture, but without any success: from that point the HAA had to apply every year to get state subsidies. The members of the HAA understood this change as a politically motivated weakening of their position in the struggle for limited state properties, and they further politicized the conflict with an open letter. They wrote that "politics has attempted to rank the creators and creations of Hungarian art, which is nothing more than a show of force and political discrimination."⁴⁶ Despite this deepening of the conflict, the Westernizer market-liberalizing government between 1994 and 1998 did not terminate the state subsidies of the HAA. Still, the unpredictability of the emerging competitive property regime encouraged the HAA to remake its political alliance with the national-protectionist bloc to strengthen its material position. It was also motivated by the slight decrease in its state allowance (from 14 million to 10 million forints) that, in the high inflationary environment of the mid-1990s, meant in effect a severe cutback.⁴⁷

The loss of political allies after 1994 also motivated the HAA to find new, bottom-up means of securing its material existence and counterbalancing its propertyless status. To this end, from 1995 the Academy became invested in a new project of building its headquarters, which both created its first private property and established new forms of dependency within the organization. The construction was a joint project with the architectural studios of the Academy's president Imre Makovecz and his pupils. For three years, the HAA spent half its income on establishing its headquarters, which was in the basement of an office building dominated by architectural studios.⁴⁸

Makovecz's cheap labor was key to creating the Academy's first property. He designed the building for free. This donation of time and the closeness of his studio chained the HAA to his persona. Cheapening labor was not solely a practical solution to construct a building cost-effectively but was also a virtue in Makovecz's circles. In the 1980s, he designed several houses of culture in the countryside for free, to be built by the local communities' free labor.⁴⁹ This practice utilized and idealized the traditional community-based, mutual-aid-building form of *kaláka* [barn-raising]. *Kaláka*-like forms also appeared in the making of the HAA's headquarters,

for example, when the president urged the Academy's painter members to collectively decorate their banquet hall's ceilings.

Through this construction process, the HAA became a property holder and less dependent on external funding for the first time since its establishment. However, it became more reliant on Makovecz since his studio was just a few meters away from the HAA's place, and his and his pupils' free or cheap labor was one of the primary sources of the Academy's new property. As the HAA could materially rely on its political allies less, self-exploitation became the primary source of its property accumulation. But as a side effect, this also developed internal dependencies.

Politics of Propertylessness: Realigning with the Postsocialist Right

The victory in the election of 1998 of the national-protectionist elite bloc restructured by Fidesz provoked new hopes at the HAA. It could again aspire to forge an alliance with that bloc and achieve its long-desired public-body status. Right after the election, the HAA presented to the government two draft versions of a law securing that status. Both versions would make the Academy into a proprietor: they included annuities for the academicians and the (primarily real-estate) properties held and managed by the institution.⁵⁰

According to the draft law, HAA would have attained a role in distributing state funds for cultural production. In addition, the draft laws offered financial stability for the often-precarious elderly academicians. Therefore, through the partial control of the material and symbolic capital of the state, the HAA would have not only become a property holder but also had the opportunity to shape property relations within the entire field of cultural production.

The transformation of the Academy into a property holder was more than a hope: the HAA's political allies also promised it. As one of my interviewees recalled, negotiations were at an advanced stage, and a prestigious palace in the center of Budapest was even designated as the site for the new HAA headquarters.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the codification of the HAA law failed under the Fidesz government of 1998–2002, just as had happened under the previous MDF-led national-protectionist regime.

HAA members realized that Fidesz had deceived them, but paradoxically they started boycotting state subsidies only after its electoral defeat in 2002. Following the elections, Makovecz stressed that “Fidesz fooled us

for four years.”⁵² Other key figures of the HAA also agreed with this analysis and stressed the Academy’s role in remaking the national-protectionist bloc. As “Fidesz had no cultural politics, and they did idiocy after idiocy . . . [t]he Academy must be upheld because Fidesz does not have a cultural agenda today.”⁵³ The HAA’s disappointment in its allies did not weaken its coalition with the national-protectionist elite bloc since it was already highly invested in it.

The HAA’s deep commitment to the national-protectionist elite bloc provoked its boycott of the new government. Despite this, the decision to boycott state funds was not consensual, and most members—accustomed to cultural producers’ state dependence—were anxious about it. For them, the boycott meant the demolition of the Academy’s hard-earned property. Since the decision was contested, President Makovecz utilized his charisma and above-analyzed position as the creator of the Academy’s only property, its headquarters, to force the decision through. He, “as a justification, referred to the condemnable political role and moral stance of the leaders currently governing the country.”⁵⁴ By ignoring the Academy’s struggle for material resources during the previous decade, he stated, “Existence does not require money, but courage.”⁵⁵

The boycott seemed to be an act of independence, but it paradoxically deepened the HAA’s political and economic dependencies. Since 99 percent of the HAA’s income originated from the state, its boycott led to precarization and necessitated new revenues. It also endorsed the alliance with the national-protectionist elite bloc, even though it had deceived the HAA twice before. The academicians hoped for financial support from its economic wing, and the legislation of their public-body status from the political branch if it came to power.

The HAA became politically radicalized, and even politicized its only property while its allies were in opposition. Already in 2002, it hosted the founding meeting of the Alliance for the Szövetség a Nemzetért Polgári Kör [Alliance for the Nation Civic Circle], which was the flagship organization in Fidesz’s remaking of the national-protectionist elite bloc through the Civic Circles movement.⁵⁶ As the HAA’s operation was not sustainable without state subsidies, it hoped the national-protectionist elite bloc would come to power as soon as possible. However, it took eight years. As a culmination of this process of politicization, in 2009, Makovecz delivered a speech in the name of the Academy at an anti-government protest.

With the boycott of state subsidies, the HAA aimed to liberate itself from political exposure. However, with its precarization, the Academy became entirely reliant on the expected rise of its allied elite faction. After the first four years of this self-austerity, in 2006, György Fekete, one of its decision-makers and future president, already said that if Fidesz loses the elections, the HAA would be able to operate only in a samizdat manner, due to the lack of material resources.⁵⁷

The Academy employed three mechanisms to manage this precarization. It cheapened its administrative labor and solicited donations from its wealthy members and the capitalists of the national-protectionist bloc. Due to the lack of state funds, the HAA curtailed the number of its employees, and even the salaries of the remaining ones were often delayed. One of them summarized the situation: “I must serve the Academy, that’s why they pay me, but they can’t generate this payment, so I generate it.”⁵⁸ It also approached the flagship enterprises of the postsocialist national-capitalist class, such as MOL (oil and gas), OTP (bank), and Videoton (manufacturing holding company), albeit with little success.⁵⁹ Consequently, the donations from its internal capitalists—consisting primarily of architects who owned their own studios—became the primary income of the HAA.

Despite the new revenues, the HAA became heavily indebted by 2008. With the failure of its philanthropy-based and self-funded operation model, political alliances were the only remaining solution to sustain the Academy. In 2009, in the depths of the crisis when the Academy could barely pay its bills, its president outlined a straightforward plan “to elaborate the HAA’s financial conditions and present it to Viktor Orbán (I take on the task). Achieving state maintenance”—as he put it in his notes.⁶⁰

From 2002 to 2010, the HAA tried to become independent of the state and to establish a property regime in which the academicians and the national capitalist class sustained the organization. Its ambition was to guarantee the Academy’s autonomy from the state. But this led to exploiting the employees’ cheap labor and a new dependency on the national-protectionist elite bloc. Fidesz’s overwhelming success in the elections of 2010 and subsequent regime building stabilized and upscaled the Academy’s operation. The post-2010 administration transferred to the Academy real estate but not assets to cover the institution’s operating costs independently from the state. Thus today the HAA’s lavish endowment comes from the central budget, making it entirely dependent on the regime.

Conclusions: Toward a Postsocialist Property Regime of Culture

This article has demonstrated the advantages of using the concept of property regimes in analyzing cultural clashes by focusing on postsocialist Hungary. The notion of property regimes can be advantageous beyond its classical political-economic application, since it illuminates the often-hidden material conditions of cultural production. As a result, the concept of property regimes offers an alternative to voluntaristic and individualizing methodologies of cultural analysis and a path to consider the material constraints of cultural production.

The archival material debunks the culturalist self-historicization of the HAA and demonstrates its quest for property-owner and -distributor status in the postsocialist property vacuum. I show how the state's prominent position in cultural production pushed the Academy to forge alliances with the postsocialist national-protectionist bloc. Consequently, its competition with SZALA mirrored the rivalry of the national-protectionist and the Westernizer market-liberalizing elite factions. Because of the state's central position, the Academy's attempts to gain properties appeared in cyclical efforts to achieve state recognition.

Through the case of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, I investigate a postsocialist property regime of culture. I define the central features of this property regime by approaching property as a social relation. The first is that state allowance, rather than individual private property, is its dominant property form. As a result, actors in the postsocialist property regime of culture were striving for state subsidies and the right to redistribute them. The second defining feature of this property regime is cultural producers' subordinated integration into the rival postsocialist elite factions dominating state apparatuses and controlling material resources. Consequently, cultural producers' alliances with the postsocialist elite factions do not speak to their moral standards but their material vulnerability. A third feature of this materially coerced integration is that two parallel cultural canons emerged, but their property-related origins were masked, and aesthetical differences were emphasized.

The analysis of the three phases of the HAA's history demonstrates that besides the postsocialist political and economic transformation, the property perspective is also powerful in understanding cultural conflicts in postsocialism. By highlighting how the struggle for the limited and

predominantly state-managed property shaped the cultural history of Hungary, we can go beyond the “culture wars” framework by providing a historical and materialist perspective.

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NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author. In the Hungarian sentence, *pacal* is the central word. *Pacal* means tripe, typically prepared as a stew in Hungary. “Vita az akadémiai törvényről” [Debate on the Academy Act], audio recording, May 20, 1993, Nemzeti Művészeti és Kulturális Kapcsolatok Alapítványa [Foundation for National Artistic and Cultural Relations], Budapest (hereafter NMKKA).

2. Pál Péter Bóday, “Rózsák háborúja? Beszélgetés Zelnik Józseffel, a Magyar Kulturális Szövetség elnökével” [War of the roses? Conversation with József Zelnik, president of the Hungarian Cultural Association], *Magyar Hírlap*, December 2, 1995.

3. Tamás Pataki, “Nem kell félnünk a ‘kultúrfölény’ szótól” [We don’t need to be afraid of the word “cultural supremacy”], *Magyar Demokrata*, April 25, 2023, <https://demokrata.hu/kultura/nem-kell-felnunk-a-kulturfoleny-szotol-671464/>.

4. “A Magyar Művészeti Akadémia alapszabálya” [Statutes of the HAA], January 31, 1992, NMKKA.

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6. Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009); Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion, 2012).

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13. József Böröcz, "Dual Dependency and Property Vacuum," *Theory and Society* 21, no. 1 (1992): 77–104.

14. Iván Szelenyi, "The Rise and the Fall of the Second Bildungsbürgertum," in *Cores, Peripheries, and Globalization: Essays in Honor of Ivan T. Berend*, ed. Peter Hanns Reill and Balázs A. Szelenyi (Budapest: CEU Press, 2011), 165–81; Jürgen Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German Sonderweg," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 40–50.

15. Andrew C. Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Postcommunism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 411.

16. Regarding the reintegration of Hungary into the capitalist world economy, and the conceptualization of the Westernizer market-liberalizing and national-protectionist elite blocs, I follow the analysis of the "Helyzet" Working Group for Public Sociology. For its elaboration, see Ágnes Gagyi, "'Coloniality of Power' in East Central Europe: External Penetration as Internal Force in Post-Socialist Hungarian Politics," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22, no. 2 (2016): 349–72; Márk Áron Éber, Ágnes Gagyi, Tamás Gerócs, Csaba Jelinek, and András Pinkasz (Pintér), "1989: Szempontok a rendszerváltás globális politikai gazdaságtanához" [1989: considerations for the global political economy of regime change], *Fordulat* 21 (2014): 10–63.

17. György Konrád and Iván Szelenyi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Beverly J. Silver and Eric Slater, "The Social Origins of World Hegemonies," in *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*, ed. Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly J. Silver, *Contradictions of Modernity* 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 151–216.

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21. Magda Ferch: "'Tisztelet, hála és szégyenkező önvád': A Széchenyi Irodalmi és Művészeti Akadémia huszonöt éve" ["Respect, gratitude, and shamefaced self-accusation": twenty-five years of the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts], in *Huszonöt év: A Széchenyi Irodalmi és Művészeti Akadémia története* [Twenty-five years: the history of the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts], ed. Magda Ferch (Budapest: Széchenyi Irodalmi és Művészeti Akadémia, 2017), 36–37.
22. "Molnár Tamás előadása: Baloldal—jobboldal a művészetben" [Lecture of Tamás Molnár: left and right in the arts] (transcript), November 30, 1995, NMKKA. Makovecz, the HAA's founding president, was born in 1935 and became well known in the 1970s. After his conflicts in the socialist architectural studios, he got involved in underground art circles. He was active as a parallel-institution founder: he ran a private architectural master's school and organized an alternative builder's camp. During the late socialist period, his design work was at the peripheries, but after 1989 he became a frontman of the postsocialist Right, designing its landmark buildings, such as the campus of the reestablished Catholic university. He had numerous church commissions despite his serious involvement in the spiritual teachings of Anthroposophy. Makovecz died in 2011, just a few months after the constitutional enshrinement of the HAA.
23. When in 2011 the Orbán regime enshrined the HAA in the constitution, the president of the SZIMA demonstratively resigned. Still, the institution continued to exist under the umbrella of the HAS. However, its financial resources have since been a fraction of the HAA's.
24. Géza Páskándi "Művészet és akadémia, vagy akadémiai eszme" [Art and academy, or academic idea], in *Az első tíz év: A Magyar Művészeti Akadémia Emlékkönyve 1992–2002* [The first ten years: memorial book of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, 1992–2002], ed. Flórián Kováts and Franciska Nagy (Budapest: Magyar Művészeti Akadémia, 2002), 6–7.
25. Flórián Kováts, *Mértékadó közösség* [Authoritative community] (Budapest: Írók Alapítványa–Széphalom Könyvműhely, 2011).
26. Bob Jessop, "Globalization and the National State," in *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 185–220.
27. Kováts, *Mértékadó közösség*, 54.
28. David Ost, "Illusory Corporatism in Eastern Europe: Neoliberal Tripartism and Post-communist Class Identities," *Politics & Society* 28, no. 4. (2000): 503–30.
29. *A kultúra napszámosa—dr. Kováts Flórián* [The day-laborer of culture: Dr. Flórián Kováts], directed by Gábor Zajti (Érd: Zajti Film, 2013).

30. Ferenc Kulin, interview by the author, Budapest, June 9, 2020.
31. Gábor Erhardt, “Interjú Dévényi Sándorral” [Interview with Sándor Dévényi], *Országépítő* 29, no. 4 (2018): 7–17.
32. Ferch, “Tisztelet, hála és szégyenkező önvád,” 85.
33. “Vita az akadémiai törvényről.”
34. “Vita az akadémiai törvényről.”
35. “Törvényelőkészítő szerződés” [Contract for law preparation], May 6, 1993, NMKKA.
36. György Fekete, letter to Imre Makovecz, June 15, 1992, NMKKA; Imre Makovecz, letter to István Bakos, June 18, 1992, NMKKA.
37. Imre Makovecz, letter to the Gambling Fund, July 9, 1992, NMKKA.
38. Zelnik fostered the folk revival starting in the 1970s, and in the early 1990s he guided the establishment of the national-protectionist faction’s Duna television channel.
39. On the postsocialist original accumulation, see also Miklós Sebők, *Paradigmák fogságában: Elitek és ideológiák a magyar pénzügyi kapitalizmusban* [Captured by paradigms: elites and ideologies in Hungarian finance capitalism] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2019); Gábor Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Tamás Geröcs, *Magyarország függő fejlődése: Függőség és felzárkózás globális történelmi perspektívában* [The dependent development of Hungary: dependence and catching-up in a global historical perspective] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2021).
40. József Zelnik, *Prométheusz udvartartása* [The court of Prometheus] (Budapest: Ökotáj, 2017).
41. Bóday, “Rózsák háborúja?,” 12.
42. HAA, “Keddi kaleidoszkóp—Kodolányi Gyula író, költővel Kulin Ferenc beszélget” [Tuesday kaleidoscope: Ferenc Kulin in conversation with writer and poet Gyula Kodolányi], March 7, 2017, video, 43:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRZfPdpf2Ns>.
43. “Lapító alapítók” [Hiding founders], *Köztársaság*, April 23, 1993, 15–16.
44. György Fekete, letter to Imre Makovecz, July 21, 1993, NMKKA.
45. Böröcz, “Dual Dependency.”
46. MMA évzáró tanácskozás [HAA year-end meeting], March 31, 2006, 14, NMKKA.
47. Kováts, *Mértékadó közösség*, 44.
48. Kováts, *Mértékadó közösség*, 45.
49. Márton Beke, “Makovecz Imre: A közösség drámája” [Imre Makovecz: The drama of community], *Magyar Művészet* 4, no. 1 (2016): 81–89; Pál Beke, *Méltóságkereső* [In search of dignity] (Budapest: EPL, 2001).
50. “Törvénytervezet a Magyar Művészeti Akadémiáról—A változat” [Bill on the HAA—A version], May 21, 2001, NMKKA; “Törvénytervezet a Magyar Művészeti Akadémiáról—B változat” [Bill on the HAA—B version], May 21, 2001, NMKKA.
51. Lőrinc Csernyus (architect, HAA member) in discussion with the author, September 2021.
52. “Jegyzőkönyv az MMA közgyűléséről” [Summary of the minutes of the HAA’s general assembly], March 1, 2003, NMKKA.
53. “Fekete György hozzászólása a Vitairat az MMA jövőjéről című eseményhez” [György Fekete’s address in a debate about the future of the HAA], April 17, 2003, NMKKA.
54. “Részletes jegyzőkönyv az MMA közgyűléséről” [Detailed minutes of the HAA’s general assembly], March 1, 2003, NMKKA.

55. Imre Makovecz, letter to Gábor Mezei, February 2003, NMKKA.
56. Béla Greskovits, “Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 2. (2020): 247–66; Ágnes Gagyi, Márton Szarvas, and András Vigvári, “Civic Organization beyond the ‘Open Society’ Battle: Cases from Hungary,” *Czech Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 2. (2020): 158–77.
57. MMA évzáró tanácskozás, 14.
58. Kováts, *Mértékadó közösség*, 49.
59. Imre Makovecz, “Szponzorkereső levelek” [Letters requesting sponsorship], June 2022, NMKKA.
60. Imre Makovecz, “Javaslat az MMA közeli jövőjére” [Proposal for the near future of HAA], December 2009, NMKKA.