

RESEARCH REVIEW

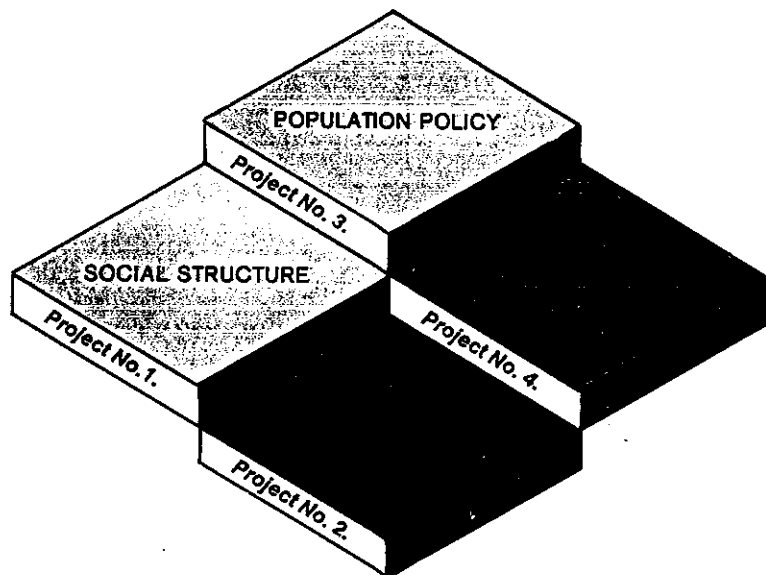
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DAY-TO-DAY CRISIS MANAGEMENT
(public utilities and non-paying consumers in a city)

This study aims at summing up the partial results of a wider research project. Concerned with state ownership, more precisely with the so-called 'welfare council flats', our aim is to seek answers through politico-sociological methods, legal history and empirical sociology on two questions: what has been the (so far untold) role of housing policy in the struggle of various social groups and forces to acquire material goods since 1945, and in which fields are social struggles intensified by the present wide-spread economic and social crisis, revealing the total absence of truly effective social construction.

In this study the reader will find a few results of an empirical survey conducted by interview and question form methods among Budapest families who had been unable to pay electricity, gas, district heating and similar utility bills and/or rent for council flats for longer or shorter periods of time. Thus our analysis is concentrated on a relatively detailed description of the participants of some particular conflicts studied in housing management, the conflicting interests of public utilities and official (council) landlords vs. the municipal rent collecting company, the latter's internal structure and functioning, the motivation of those who have to collect rents and charges, and a differentiated group description of non-paying customers (the latter also being an attempt made at describing various groups of the city poor); in our view this is the only way of understanding in a sociologically complex manner where the lines of conflict really run between the different interest groups and subcultures, and what the social game called „non-paying rents and charges” are really about.

The actual weight carried by the problem examined here is indicated by the fact that of the approx. 800 thousand homes lived in by 2 million Budapest inhabitants, 420 thousand are council flats, and of their tenants about every sixth (approx. 68 thousand families or households) was in some kind of arrears at the beginning of 1989. The number of families in arrears has trebled over the past five years. A significant section of them fail to pay up „only” occasionally for a month at a time, but the proportion of those unable to „catch up with themselves”, accumulating several months of arrears, is gradually increasing. As a consequence, and in the wake of the „naturally” growing irritation of public utility companies and rent collectors, more and more legal proceedings have been initiated (at the moment, nearly seven thousand for failure to pay rent and about eight thousand for not settling utility bills) and many households have had their public utility supply cut off (weekly 150 on the average).

The public is just as much shocked by these obvious signs of spreading pauperism as the politicians and managers affected are. That type of social bankruptcy and collapse of norms is part of the general insolvency of the economy, where a wide range of companies and institutions owed a total of 140 million Ft to the Gas Supply Company in the end of 1988 in Budapest alone (with another 250 million Ft owed to the Company by residents); the Hungarian Electricity Trust could not collect some 1.5 thousand million Ft from industrial firms (and about a tenth of that sum from domestic consumers in the entire country). At present, „bankruptcy proceedings” can be more easily initiated against households that are in arrears of a few thousand Forints each than against state firms that have accumulated debts of measured in tens of millions and openly admitting bankruptcy.

1. Collecting Company: Squeezed In Between Public Utility Companies and Consumers

On the face of it, two opposing interest groups clash within the frames of the ever growing number of non-payers and the ever stringent legal proceedings triggered off by them: consumers vs. suppliers. But the real situation is far more complicated than that; the combined party of „suppliers” is heavily entangled in contrasting interests and conflicts.

The consumers' and suppliers' sides are in contact through a fairly large group of people, the collectors. They represent the Public Utilities demanding their fees and the Landlord wishing to collect the rents. The actual act of paying becomes personal through the collectors.

That type of **personalization** of contact between „Suppliers” and „Consumers” is a customary form, but not a regular one. Companies transfer money via bank accounts and so does a minority of the population. The latter only meet the collectors when the meters are read if — in new system-built housing developments where the meters are outside the flats — at all. The very work, and thus the personal character, of collectors is called into question by a general adoption of paying via bank order or through the post. No representative of the insurance companies, banks or the tax office ever calls on houses: paying rents and settling accounts are functions of adult citizens. Needless to say, meters will have to be read in situ in the future too (if not quite as frequently as now), partly because finding a technical solution for this is not in anyone's interest for the time being, and partly because the chance of exercising some control through the in situ inspection of meters could only be relinquished when there is a deeper mutual trust between consumers and suppliers (and the technical solutions involved.)

The changes in the methods of collecting rents offer a clear example of the problems on hand: in the past, the landlord's janitor was at all times present, thus exercising a direct control over the tenants and collecting rents smoothly on time. When tenement houses were nationalized, that set-up remained basically unchanged for many years, until (for reasons not to be discussed here) the functions of janitors were carved up among several participants, rent collecting having been taken over by an army of collectors — far more impersonal than the good old janitors. Lately, solutions inspired by distrust of the tenants keep cropping up, suggesting that rents be collected, and the actual use of council flats be supervised, by representatives of the state housing management firms, who could more directly act on behalf of the state or the government as the landlord.

The personal character of paying cash not only keeps changing form and method, coming to the fore or receding slightly into the background, but the very person of the cash collector represents different things for the individual households. For many people, a cash collector is merely a „door-to-door cashier”, whose person is utterly unimportant and interchangeable. Others rely on the personality of collector, who is familiar with the neighbourhood, is conversant with the comings and goings of his or her „clientele”, i.e. when they can be found at home, in which part of the month they have got enough money etc., and can come to an accommodation to the clients — at least within reasonable limits. But the collector can only become a 'man of trust' only for those who, even if momentarily, share their problems with him, asking him to come back later or requesting a bit of patience and understanding (since cash or rent can be collected patiently or impatiently, with some elbow room allowed in certain permissive and retaliating procedures of the collecting business).

Rent collecting is a unique profession, for — owing to the unequal relations inherent in it — collectors represent „authority”, even if they happen to be understanding and

flexible, or — nota bene — „appeasable“. Although provided with some real tools of authority (establishing accurate date of payment, when consumers should be at home, payment summons, initiating court proceedings, putting lead seals on meters etc.), collectors are seldom compelled to use them, their function merely consists of collecting due rents and charges, in other words acting as the „beggars of the authority“, with as much decency as possible. Although these features have not much to do with the standard of service, these are the aspects that can be best kept in evidence — and at a lower risk.

The efficiency of collectors depends on the quantities of bills collected and the time spent on the job. Through careful organization, the time needed to collect money can be minimized, but for that schedules must be fully adapted to the consumers' needs. Consequently, a good collector must know his or her district thoroughly and should of course collect there for a long time; moreover, some means of maintaining „discipline“ among the consumers can also come handy. The collector has to be familiar with the time schedules of all the inhabitants in the district, i.e. who can be found in this or that part of the day, or solely on rest days etc.

This means that the advantage offered to a collector of having no set working hours is reduced to a minimum as soon as a collector wants to organize his or her work schedule for maximum efficiency.

But within certain limits, collectors are fairly free to economize with their time and energy, establishing their own order of importance for official and private matters. Thus taking care of small children or sick and elderly relatives at home can be harmonized with rent collecting, along with cooking dinner for the family, tending household farms, attending daytime educational courses, doing outwork for firms and other such similar engagements. In comparison with other jobs of a somewhat similar nature, collecting is a less closely defined and responsible a job than that of a postman, but is definitely more complicated than that of the newspaper delivery man.

As is the case of wages earned by postmen, papermen and in general the employees in different services, collectors are typically given low wages, tipping being reckoned on. The size and structure of tipping, however, cannot be calculated and depends on a host of factors, such as people in heavily tipped professions tending to give tips more regularly than those with fixed incomes who, in turn, would be ashamed of failing to tip the obviously underpaid collectors; furthermore, being among the potential delinquents, low-income consumers are deeply interested in „buying“ the goodwill of rent collectors. As observed on many occasions, consumers who have accumulated the highest arrears tend to give the handsomest tips — to an amount that often borders on corruption.

Nevertheless, even without knowing enough of the details it can be stated that the custom of tipping diminishes the system of financial incentives established by the collection company (which is fairly inefficient anyhow). Offering an extremely low extra income, the system is less and less competitive with tipping. And what makes things worse, the collection company, while turning a blind eye to tipping, partly to eliminate the risk of bribery and partly because collecting has not been acknowledged as a „tipped“ job, does take the fact into consideration by deliberately issuing „advantageous“ and „disadvantageous“ districts to its collectors and trying to draw these up in such a way as to achieve a more or less just arrangement for everybody, lest tension should increase within the ranks to a point where nobody would apply for the job.

Several other internal conflicts and contradictions within collecting as a job are also the result of low wages. Over the past decades, the job has been taken over by women; not only „housewives“ are ready to take such jobs but also university students needing

some extra income or old-age pensioners unable to make ends meet etc. It is not surprising that with such staff it is extremely difficult to produce a high degree of efficiency, especially in the so-called disadvantageous or 'hard' areas. On the other hand, with the standard of living gradually sinking all over the country, the entire system of collecting becomes „soft” on payments; experiencing the same economic hardships in their private lives, the collectors are unable to believe any longer in the justness of rents and charges, the legitimation of charging such charges is at stake and the excuse of „through no fault of one's own” for failing to pay is quite credible for the collectors themselves.

Collectors have a close, although not a day-to-day relationship, with their bosses. They take their packets of bills for the month, collect the money, book the items, send the money to the Company by post, and finally visit the branch office again to render account, after which the entire process begins all over again for the forthcoming month. Apart from the incentives offered by the Company, all that could as well as be a one-man undertaking for every collector, but actually is normal employment subject to the traditional bureaucratic expectations and pressures.

Established in 1948 and unique in its kind anywhere in the world, the Collecting Company is not really interested in collecting arrears, its income being proportional to the number of meters to be read off and the number of flats to be visited. Although yielding no profit, any action taken beyond those basic tasks is none the less a contractual liability. With anybody unable or unwilling to pay, collectors are actually powerless. Application of pressure is limited by regulations of social policy and certain political considerations. Thus it is in the rules of the Company to refrain from cutting off utilities to delinquents before double holidays, the prolonged absence or hospitalization of consumers. At present, the real driving force behind the Company's actions is not so much the profit netted, but rather a peculiar ethos of meeting the requirements and discharging the functions set for the Company, some internal „must” of coming up to the expectations of the bureaucratic machinery, working according to its own rules and establishing its own norms. Consequently, however, the reasons for delinquency may be rational and understandable in certain cases, failing to pay is regarded by the entire system as „intolerable” and is to be solved by the collector or his or her branch office.

Another essential driving force strongly affecting delinquents is the collectors' effort to carry out their work as quickly as possible, this being also in the interest of the Company. More visits would mean more collectors and vice versa and any consumer in arrears would inevitably increase the number of visits and cause complications to the work schedules. Collectors and the Company alike deeply dislike delinquents, their „persuasion” to pay up at last being „dirty work”, involving extra administration. It seems that the „softpedalling” of certain collectors and the periodically „liberal” attitude of the Company towards delinquents are due to lack of capacity and not for humane considerations.

The branch offices themselves, although at the price of much paper work, can adopt the tactics of passing the problem of delinquency to the higher echelons of the Company; this they can do by transferring a properly prepared documentation of the consumers in arrears in their districts to the legal department of the Company, they have met expectations and rid themselves of a burden, at least temporarily. Moreover, the missing sums do not affect adversely their work efficiency indices, since they are in the in-trays of the Legal Department.

The interest of the Legal Department to settle outstanding accounts as quickly as possible coincides with the final objectives of the Company. Provided that the schedules of the court permit it, the Legal Department passes on the documents for them to be

executed. It is characteristic of the lack of co-operation and joint interest that quite a number of documents travel all the way from the execution office of the court to the Legal Department, branch office and the collector responsible for the consumer in question on account of some real or fake deficiency in the data. Such a passing back of the buck of course entails extra work and gives rise to some kind of disciplinary actions.

The overall motivation of the Company to make delinquents pay up is also based on such contradictions. On the one hand, it is one of the primary functions of the Company to collect rents and charges, making full use of its tactical, work organization, administrative, law enforcing etc. means; on the other the economic and other interests of the Company are much more differentiated than that.

Along with some other historical reasons, the basic idea of establishing the Company was to render the collecting of several utility charges more economical in the capital through a single, unified agency, reading off the meters and presenting the bills at a single time in every household, rather than doing all this separately. Thus the Company is interested right up to this very day in engaging as many customers as possible for its fully established system, data stock, data processing network etc. (This is how chimney sweeping charges, rents, home insurance, certain advertising fee etc. have been gradually added to electricity and gas bills.) Thus the internal motivation of the Company associated with collecting rents and charges is basically expansive.

No wonder that „fiddling” with delinquents clearly disturbs the fundamentally expansive attitude of the Company. The public utilities, as customers, do not like the extra expenses involved in collecting arrears, and expect the collecting firm to be more effective and without any additional charges. As a consequence, incentives and motivation remain limited at the company level. It is interesting to see how „business” discussions with the customers are interwoven with expectations appealing to certain traditions, pressures arising from authoritative positions and the mobilization of „Godfathers”, as well as the all-important personal contacts of the managers. As a result, the Company's negotiation positions can be highly varied with different customers and public utility firms: the partners enjoying monopolistic positions in their own fields try to hold each other at bay, and the range includes high-handed and peremptory customers just as much as polite and well-behaved ones. No wonder that profits and motivations vary from one branch of business to the other, although most of the differences tend to be lost in the internal mills of the company structure.

So far, the Company has been presented as an independent economic undertaking of a fundamentally bureaucratic character, since in spite of all changes in the company structure and external dependency (the originally municipal collecting „office” has become an independent firm), from the population's point of view and as regards its functioning in connection with collecting it has remained a „bureau”. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that over the past few years, the Company has dynamically developed an important computer branch, thus having become from an internal accountant of the Municipal Council a computer base for the capital and also a commercial firm on the computer service market; the surplus capacity of the computer system received for the modernization of its collecting function can be „sold” on the market. It is characteristic of the company structure that the collecting branch and the computer centre are independent economic units within the overall framework in contractual relationship with each other; moreover, the „quasi market-oriented” computer branch is nearly as weighty as the collecting business; it is also worth mentioning that the young and highly trained managers have now more and more say in running the Company as a profitable undertaking, the general manager himself being a computer specialist.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the Company's collecting activity covers a significant section of non-domestic consumers, among whom meeting obligations promptly and accurately has been problematic for years and the present-day state of affairs is especially disheartening. Various industrial, agricultural, commercial firms, as well as governmental and political bodies etc. have often disregarded the Company's collectors (having been able to afford that attitude, being authoritative „bureaus" and „offices" themselves), and problems associated with liquidity crop up more often than ever. "Hell is breaking loose" in the economy and the collectors can do very little against delinquent firms and offices (since they cannot be cut off from the mains, only be sued – a highly prolonged process). The dynamism and magnitude of the delinquency of economic bodies and official organizations are just as grave as those of the population.

The players in the game existing under the conditions of monopolies and a bureaucratic market, i.e. public utilities and other customers, the Company itself with its independent branches, the collectors and finally the consumers, are kept in a continuous state of turbulence by a system of a curious cooperation interwoven with traditions, customs, authoritative and administrative pressures, mutual double-crossing, sentiments, ideologies and even rational arguments. As can be seen from the above, the conflicts occur among participants who have unclear interests, roles and functions, the roles themselves being full of inherent conflicts.

With the fast growth of the capital and the influx of large numbers of people around the turn of the century, the market-oriented private undertaking gave way to large public utility firms. It is now inextricable what were the roles of a relatively undeveloped market, an insufficiently differentiated credit system, lack of capital on the venture market, the relatively low buying power of industrial and domestic consumers alike, a shift of power from entrepreneurs towards the bureaucratic institutions, the idea of the modern city, the responsibility for public services in general taken increasingly seriously by the municipal authorities and the technological characteristics of the highly capital-intensive utility networks.

It is clear that having left the pure market sphere of the entrepreneurs, the public utility works started representing interests and functions that were absolutely alien to the profit motive. In order to be able to meet public utility functions, the works took their shares of the taxes levied by the state and the city, and some of their assets (partly company, partly municipal and partly state possessions) have been allotted to them as funding capital. In return, they are expected to supply the community, ensuring the normal functioning of municipal institutions (plants, offices, households).

Also the consumers and city institutions taxed in one form or another expect their share of the city services to be taken for granted. Services and utilities usually spread in cities gradually (private and common wells appear first in the centre, being developed from there towards the outskirts; common wells are replaced by water supply mains first in multistorey houses, then also in the single-storey ones; open sewage ditches are first covered, then converted into an underground sewage disposal system; garbage disposal becomes an organized service; city gas illumination of streets is gradually replaced by electric power; electric supply becomes general in households; domestic gas supply is developed, first for cooking, then for heating; block and district heating systems are established etc.). The very existence of city services and utilities is regarded by city dwellers as a fact of cultural and civilized life, even if it may only be still scanty and limited, dividing the urban areas from the underdeveloped outskirts.

The urban civilization that has taken shape over a long period of history involves simple facts such as garbage no longer being dumped in the street in an „European city”, sewage is not spilled outside one's gate, homes are provided with heating and lighting, the number of the roofless is limited etc. The type of coexistence known as urban civilization has developed many means and methods to prevent and avoid the sight of unpleasant situations (and equally as many for discriminating and hiding them). Since such anomalies would be in strong contrast with the well-established order for civilized life, their very sight is highly „embarrassing” to all.

Arrears in rents and charges are occasional or downright necessary projections of certain characteristic social situations or modes of existence. When searching for the causes, some characteristically different ways of functioning and types of organization are encountered, bespeaking the presence of small groups leading different ways of life even within small-size samples.

These characteristics of these ways of life cannot be established along one or two distinct factors, but should be considered together and simultaneously; thus, the existence and non-existence of households, their manner of organization, stability and instability of family structures, social deviance, trends of consumption, forms of economy, functioning of institutions, characteristics of human relations, standards of living, state of technical development, characteristics of acquiring a home, the quality of homes, the present state of affairs between the past and the future, the aspirations etc. must be taken together.

Needless to say, the delinquents included into our sample are mere representatives or indicators of individual way of life groups of unknown size, and we can take it as certain that the representatives of other groups of „delinquency” would only appear in a larger sample (e.g. the happy-go-lucky types who simply could or would not bother to pay bills regularly, highly skilled technicians extremely clever at offering plausible sounding explanations for missing payments, conscientious refusers, people who can seldom be found at home etc.).

The Rootless

About a half of the households visited belong to the „Rootless” category.

People have been met whose life has (finally?) been derailed or has never been on a track. In spite of the fact that their entire lives are geared towards finding a foothold somewhere in life, they have not been able to achieve any stability so far. They could be called down and outs, wrecks or pariahs, were they more than passive sufferers of their lot but also active participants, shaping their lives by characteristic means in a characteristic medium. It is just to call them the outcasts of society, marginalized people, sub-social elements, unintegrated individuals. But these descriptions rather indicate the social mechanisms that establish social standing and position or more precisely the conflicts, of such people, and are less suitable for clearly defining their situations and everyday forms of living. It would be perhaps misleading to mark them, as a group, as poverty-stricken, paupers or even deviants, because these words denote more and less than the reality of the group tested.

The absence of any stability at all, based on however a meagre financial basis, is one of the characteristics that separate the rootless from the „proletariat”.

Under a certain standard of neediness, even the hope of ever attaining a relative stability is lost and losing one's bearing in life gradually becomes irreversible. Necessity knows no law, as the old saw runs. In „homes” ruled by cold and hunger, concealed

prostitution soon offers itself as a viable alternative to penury, „well-doers” and „chums” of the same social position appear as overnight guests, irrespective of sex and age, and channels open to the „blackest market”. At a certain stage, the very existence of such people cannot be maintained from one day to another without shoplifting, shady transactions, hustling and cheating. Although we do not have to accept that way of life, its presence and function must be understood (branding the majority of the group as mere „criminals” would be a gross overstatement).

It would be a mistake to believe that rootlessness also means a lack of economy in life. But in fact, that economy is realized in peculiar forms, among them — and in view of the frequency of its occurrence it should be given a special emphasis — the so-called „partnership in life” or matrimony.

That phenomenon has many factors, one of them being that in the wake of a divorce or separation, one of the partners almost inevitably lands among the downcasts, having nothing more than the shirt on his back. What usually follows is a series of moves from one workers’ hostel to another, and perhaps to cheap furnished rooms or even to being put-up as a favour. In those spheres of society, „shacking up” with somebody is one of the cheapest solutions and has found wide-spread acceptance. Needless to say, „cheapness” is not the only aspect of the practice.

Rootlessness often goes hand in hand with loneliness, detachment from institutions and institutionalized norms in life, and even from the world of „normal” people striving after their own objectives. That predicament can be resolved by establishing a partnership with somebody.

Also some quite prosaic reasons can be found behind such solutions: underpants need washing, cooked food is also among our basic necessities, and some kind of a shelter where one can „go home” in the evening for a sound sleep is a must for all of us.

The absence of a regular income, the reasons for which will be dealt with later, also impels towards the painful necessity of finding a mate, as soon as possible. The method is not only about making use of „naturally” available services within an existing household or quasi-household to bridging over the moneyless state and/or escaping from an actually very expensive state of having no household at all, but also about the simple fact that a single income, if there is any at all, is usually insufficient to make both ends meet.

Such relationships based on necessity are of course highly instable in themselves, partly due to the miserable circumstances and partly as a consequence of a constant state of human, mental imbalance. Although any subsequent failure of human relations inevitably leads to another crisis, that risk is inherent in the „deal” (it is of course of great weight when a crisis appears and which of the partners is being hit harder in it).

The particulars mentioned so far offer some explanation on the fact why middle-aged mothers with children share their lives with young men in their twenties more often than in other groups, or young mothers seek asylum with relatively well-to-do single men in their fifties etc.

The instability and frequency of such relationships, the frequent changing of partners, determine the quality of the households. Obviously, there can hardly ever be sufficient time to establish some kind of regular and planned economy, based on stable financing. A normal, reasonable allocation of funds is never to be found even if there happens to be one regular wage-earner, or even two. Although this would not mean that money just „flows away” or is „thrown out of the window” in such households, at least not necessarily but any allocation made is done in kind rather than by „finance”.

Similarly to our Group 2 („proletarian with low fixed incomes”), about every other household practices weekly or monthly shopping, even if at a lower level. This means that a (fairly significant) part of the income (pay, wages from odd jobs, pensions) is at once spent on basic food-stuffs (flour, lard, sugar, pastry, salt, coffee etc.). Continuously needed and non-perishable, those foodstuffs are regularly consumed until the next major shopping: thus by purchasing such fundamentals as soon as some money has flowed in serves to ensure the conditions for elementary subsistence. Such traditional hoarding recalls war economy; and not surprisingly since these households are in a constant state of crisis, so to say, and a risk of household collapse demands a specific state of alert. By spending a part of the income on stockpiling without delay, the absolutely basic necessities can be provided for every body in the household until the next income is received, since in case of emergency a few days can be lasted out on flour-cakes, vegetable stock, empty dumplings and similar crude foodstuff.

The money left after major shopping, though according to several responders the entire income, is so little that there is nothing that could be „spread out”. The only difference among households has been observed only in whether rents and utility bills were included or set aside as fixed expenses (this being fairly uncharacteristic of those quarters, since household budgets would collapse from one „payday” to another anyhow), or spending going on as necessary or possible, either leaving enough for rents or utility bills or not.

It is an essential characteristic of this type of household economy, and of the entire way of life, that the existential imbalance and rootlessness causing loneliness go hand in hand with an absence of certain essential human and economic relations (with relatives, work-mates, neighbours etc.) which could offer some useful help in surmounting the actual crisis. In spite of the fact that the households „run out” of money fairly often, and to quite significant extents at that, regular borrowing could not be observed (perhaps because nobody would lend them any money), and private debts rarely run high (because of the distrust caused by the lack of potential coverage). Owing to the „hard” barriers of the surroundings, debts tend to accumulate with the Collecting Company.

In the absence of the appropriate relations to act as a sound background, yet another motivation is apparent for striking up some kind of a cohabitation or concubinage – the sooner, the better.

A further factor, or group of factors, affecting that alert but rootless way of living is not being able to have wage-earning chances in the second economy. As a consequence, total earnings are even lower than those of others, thus blocking the way out of the hopeless mess and life is not centered on work or job. Standing on only one leg is a serious risk in the work sphere, this being only compensatable by standing on more than one leg outside that sphere, if feasible.

A reason for failing to earn any money in the second economy is the insufficiency of informal relations that could help one to get second or third jobs, and also that failure can be lead back to imbalance and lack of integration of the derailed persons (among whom passive figures sticking to a single job throughout their lives can be found just as often as the so-called ‘migrating birds’ changing their jobs every now and then). But a limited ability to work is even more characteristic of them.

As a consequence of their entire careers, living conditions and, last but not least, adverse working conditions, many of the people concerned have serious health problems. Chronic alcoholism can of course be listed here as well, along with : untreated and maltreated organic, mental and nervous diseases. It is a thought-provoking observation that a

serious malady or accident can trigger off some very fast procedures towards losing one's footing; moreover, it seems as if rootless people are hit by accidents and certain types of maladies more often than others.

Finally, it should be made clear that by „rootless“ people is meant not individuals possessing certain qualities or characteristics, nor some state of affairs in which certain people tend to exist sooner or later (although at a certain level of society all these are inherent in the word); for the purposes of this study, the word denotes a clear-cut social group. The rootless people visited by us belonged to a more or less top region of the world of city dwellers having lost their foothold, for after all they lived in flats instead of 'social homes', „health institutions“, chronic wards, prisons, youth hostels with regularly cut-off ties to the outer world, nor did they live in alms-houses, under bridges or in obscure corners bearing no resemblance to a human abode.

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The other group examined beside the rootless city dwellers were the proletarians. Holding low-paid white-collar, physical or auxiliary jobs, having nothing better than council flats allotted to them and leading petty yet organized existences, their incomes, standards of living and modes of living were essentially set by their powerless social standing.

That section of our sample is further divided into three; the denominations given each reflect a specific attitude: „vegetating at the surface“, „manoeuvring at the surface“ and „taking off from the surface“. In relation to them, the rootless people are denoted as „whirling under the surface“. In our case, the „surface“ means the lowest level of membership in society, a state of integration in the world of normally living people. These in the sub-category mentioned first hold their ground well at the „surface“; those in the second have reached the surface or would like to set off upwards from there (if they could); the third sub-category have taken off or are about to take off from the surface regarded as a basic level — it will be later seen how successfully.

The members of the first sub-category could be called „normal, stable and decent poor“, referring to their characteristic position in their present, past and future; in contrast, the members of the second sub-category are regarded as „people wanting to get on“ or „half-successful entrepreneurs“; as regards the third sub-category, the people treated there are „almost successful“ or „falling back into poverty while climbing upwards on the social ladder“.

Paying somewhat less attention to actual delinquency, it can be stated that our sample includes the rootless, the „proletarians on low fixed incomes“, „entrepreneurish proletarian“ and „welfare proletarian, namely the individuals characteristic of these sub-categories.

Proletarian on Low Fixed Incomes

This category includes people whose life is „hard“, but still „stay at the surface“, sometimes only just“ or are regarded as „endangered“ by falling down the social ladder, but mostly living at the „minimum standard“, typical of them is an all-out effort to stay at the surface by struggling, kicking and balancing; some of them are in a wholly impossible situation, where they keep losing ground, whereas others do their best to slow down the process of sinking and desorganization and stabilize a proletarian state at the low fixed income level.

„Thanks” to the very deep roots and highly refined culture or civilization of the decently poor city proletarian way of life, that state can be maintained even under extreme hardships. Offering as much energy for self-protection and reserve mobility in „hard times”, that way of life exerts as great a retarding effect on social advance in „better times”.

This also means that the present state of those people usually is the result of an advance made earlier out of a condition regarded as socially inferior to it (in our case, this being the „rootless”); thus it represents not a stage in social ascent but rather means a fairly stable situation having a past but not much of a future. No great strides forward (in education, job promotion, financial conditions, home standards, ecological conditions) can be reckoned with.

Reflecting a lack of mobility background, the standard of education is characteristically low for this sub-category. Over and above the eight years of primary school (compulsory for everybody), which qualifies individuals for auxiliary and trained workers' jobs, mostly some kind of semi-skilled job is held by them (cook, waiter, storeman, dress-maker, hospital attendant, central heating fitter), chiefly of an auxiliary character. Such jobs are suitable mainly for establishing oneself in some „small trade”, through which one's head can be kept above water. These professions or activities are characteristically followable at home, saving costs and cutting spending. Another point of importance: many of those activities use easy-to-obtain primary materials (left-overs, remnants, odds and ends etc.).

Those responding in our sample were often hindered in utilizing the skills that they could „sell” or „invest” to yield higher profits or to raise their wages because of bad health or run-down condition, the still felt effects of family mishaps, the burden on having an invalid in the family unable to earn his or her keeping, or a badly missed member of the family who had suddenly left the household for some reason. The members of this sub-category were mostly elderly or middle-aged. As a rule, those living on low-pensions in our sample were in this sub-category, along with many lonely people (childless, or having only a single child). Nor were married couples in the sub-category young either; had maximum a single child each, and as a consequence of (invalid) pension benefits, no couple had two full-scale incomes. That too had left its mark on their standards of living.

However, there was a marked difference between them and the rootless: while in the present subcategory, serious maladies and disabilities had definitely been caused by adverse working conditions, for the rootless those causes were found to be mingled with the effects of deviances and pauperism. The proletarians on low fixed incomes could still hold their own (at that stage, if you like), and were not crippled, at least not to the extent of the rootless.

From that point of view, a manageable state of one's life is of the utmost importance: maintaining an organizable framework is a must. The households visited there were based on sound husbandry: none of them were disintegrated, quasi- or semi-households. The frequent coming and going so characteristic of the rootless was unheard of in this sub-category, nor were the ever changing partnerships. Married life is the natural thing, a stable bond on which life can be based and which will have to endure much hardship; should a divorce be obtained, the following stable relationship must be a soundly founded one.

Having mentioned the importance played by „essential loneliness” among the rootless, its opposite should be stressed in this case: tight family bounds have been observed,

along with close ties to workmates and neighbours alike. For maintaining a proletarian existence on low fixed income, perhaps the establishing of such reliable relationships is of pre-eminent importance. None of the households visited in this sub-category could function without a sound background of this character. Such relationships also help people in maintaining sound human, emotional and mental attitudes and fighting off all the risks of becoming disorganized. In an indirect manner, that background helps households to hold on, and provides direct assistance in bridging over sudden lacunae in household budgeting.

The simplest kind of offering help is „feeding” the needy within the family either over the week-ends or on work days, and handing on clothes to workmates or neighbours. Small amounts of financial assistance are often given by relatives, workmates and neighbours (this having been needed either occasionally or regularly by all the families examined). (In some of the households included in the sample, such emergencies occurred quite systematically, with a calculable consistency. Especially where loans come from some member of the family, individual family budgets are extremely hard to separate from that of the larger family).

In the spheres treated here, traditional institutions such as pawn shops have really important functions (before Christmas or a wedding anniversary or a birthday, a piece of jewelry comes in very handy) and certain valuables travel to the pawnbroker. Except in the case of pensioners, Postal Savings Bank loans are regularly requested, though seldom for major investment, merely for meeting actual medium-size deficits (which could not be covered by private loans), or covering the relatively high key money for freshly allotted council flats.

Another special form of institutionalized bridging credits, i.e. social assistance granted by local councils, is most often met in this sub-section. That type of social assistance has been especially devised to aid the stable, solid and industrious poor; in requesting it, the form of low fixed income proletarian existence seems to be highly suitable. In rare cases, council grants are requested also by members of the other two groups, though mostly in vain, partly because their incomes turn out to be too high and partly out of failure to see the process of requesting through because of a sense of shame.

(That type of institutionalized relation to the social services of local councils taking the form of borrowing can also be found among some of the „rootless; here it regularly fails for reasons which include the lack of job, irregular way of living and failing to comply with the requirements. The rootless are mostly „treated” in detoxication stations, police headquarters, prisons and neurological clinics.)

Stability and sound functioning of households can be best maintained by spreading out the incomes. The proletarians included into this group clearly aim at setting aside the money to cover overhead expenses as soon as pay is received, this being an old tradition in those circles. But not even strict husbandry can eliminate the fact that towards the end of the month the reserves must be used up.

Over and above the spreading of resources and requesting quick loans for bridging gaps, a strict and elementary restriction of consumption must be quite often adopted. Some members of this group have said that under a certain level, regarded by them as a minimum, they have nothing to economize on, having run out of all reserves for cutting down. Others have mentioned areas where consumption had to be cut back quite considerably in the recent past. Younger people complained of having had to cut down on „entertainment”, which means that they cannot go out anywhere to enjoy themselves (e.g. a cheap restaurant, or even a cinema or modest bar is now beyond their means — not to mention summer holidays or days out).

One way generally adopted of cutting expenses is to reduce spending on clothing to a minimum, buying second-hand things and cutting food purchases. The claim of „Nothing else has been left for us to cut but food!“ makes people resort to eating the cheapest possible pastries, potatoes, rice, meat substitutes using almost forgotten Second World War methods; milk is replaced by cheap tea, margarine by lard, vegetables by plain potato dishes and so on.

The pressure is felt most strongly in the so-called (luxury) consumer goods such as coffee, tobacco and alcohol where households tend to have already made quite heavy cuts. Although cutting these articles out completely is extremely difficult, quantitative and qualitative reductions have obviously been made already.

Entrepreneur Proletarians

If considering the quality, size and location of homes or flats (these aspects being highly important also as a complex index) this group does not differ from the previously treated one. They live in the traditional working-class districts, in working-class blocks of flats, and their homes are in the bottom or medium-to-bottom range of quality (simple kitchen cum living room to two-room flats with all conveniences). Not even per capita incomes are higher. As regards overall conditions, they should rather be classed into the same category instead of being differentiated.

Assigning these people into a separate sub-category is justified by the essential differences in the methods of earning their income. In short, as against the low fixed income proletarian, these people are effectively engaged in the second market or economy. That fact alone entails many factors that alter their ways of life. As preconditions, some marketable skills are needed, along with some useful personal ties and an ambition to get on in life; as consequences it should be mentioned that they can earn higher incomes, although taking higher risks and that their entire way of life is organized around their work or job; moreover, they tend to pick out jobs that promise financial advantages over others.

However „loose“ and even doubtful it seemed at first sight to differentiate between the two groups on this basis, the clear profile obtained on the group by other means has fully justified it.

This was the only sub-category in which not a single pensioner, invalid or single person could be found – only married couples, where both partners were wage earners in the age bracket of 30 to 45, namely in the most active phase of life, and with not more than two children. Thus those were all consolidated households, or rather families in the strict sense of the word, with really good prospects for getting on, at least in theory. By getting on we mean breaking out of the proletariat, or at least improving on their standing. (The consolidated family structure that fits neatly into the picture not only acts as a sound base for engaging in entrepreneurial activity but also offers insight into the background of these people).

Entrepreneurial activity is made feasible for reasons which include the clearly more highly qualified character of the group, showing up skills that sell well on the market (carpenter, mason, car mechanic, instrument fitter, computer programmer, university graduates working elsewhere than in their original field). It should, however, be added that the wives in this group, while being not less educated than those of the previous group, are less highly skilled (sometimes much less) than their husbands, thus earning considerably less too (casual home-workers, trained operators, clerks, mothers on child care etc.).

In spite of the fact that these families often manage to earn 2.5 to 3 wages, due to the husbands' second jobs and working wives, their positions are still imbalanced; not only because of the risks involved in the second economy, but also owing to the insecure nature of the typically female jobs taken by the wives. (As regards the families included in the sample, it can be surmised that the low qualifications of the wives indicate some insecurity in the husbands, their somewhat immature character and instable status in society.)

Thus the members of the group are typified by these aspects: they can organize their lives, families and households, can take care of themselves, are full of vigour and want to get on in life. This means that they at least want to be better off. The means, accumulated abilities, „capital”, undertakings and experiments of those people are all greater than the similar qualities and endeavours invested in the „small businesses” of the low fixed income proletarians (who mainly aim at acquiring and making use of the discard and leftover materials at their firms).

The „entrepreneurs” included in the sample are by no means capitalist entrepreneurs but venturesome wage earners; what is more, failed ones, as it seems. In order to obtain a realistic picture, the expression „proletarians aiming higher” should be made more accurate. The stress should be laid on the intention of getting on. Although success is minimal, the real achievement lies in the fact that under the given adverse conditions the families have been able to avoid sinking – almost a common rule. To make the difference in relation to the previous sub-category mere comprehensible: while the life of the latter is organized around the task of staying at the surface, the essential aim of the entrepreneur category is to maintain a mediocre but acceptable standard of living, with the hope of improving it sometime in the future. In other words, engaging in the second economy is partly to maintain the level attained and partly achieve some improvement if possible. With these aspects in mind, we can take a look at the successes and failures.

One of the principal aims of proletarian entrepreneurs is to establish their homes, in the wider and narrower senses of the word alike. As if trying to compensate for the dilapidated state of their city surroundings, the families do their best to renovate their homes, painting and decorating, installing gas heating, wooden panelling, wall tiling, buying modern furniture and keeping the home as clean as a chemist's shop. Their households are automated at least at the basic level (this is also true of the low fixed income proletarian group). As a rule, the entrepreneur proletarians have their flats from the local councils (or have exchanged them with a cash supplement for their former and inferior homes), whereas the low fixed income proletarian families mostly inherited their council flats, or received them as completely dilapidated cut-price rented flats.

Postal Saving Bank loans play a major role in the economic strategies of entrepreneur families, the stress being laid on short-term personal loans, as well as on loans for buying furniture, consumer goods and home renovation, even if some part of the loans must be directly or indirectly spent on daily necessities. Raising loans shows a strategy of „fleeing forward”, combined with the firm belief of „we shall manage”.

This deliberate attitude of „living beyond one's means” indicates an inclination towards risk-taking, mostly in a quite trustworthy manner, but parallel to the major investments, parental assistance is not uncommon to stock up the larders and private loans are also regularly asked for.

As regards the combination of assistance rendered in kind, Postal Savings Bank loans and private loans, it should be taken into consideration that the various arrears and debts are interconnected by well-established mechanisms; some kind of a „game” is being often

played with all these, partly out of necessity; another point to be borne in mind is that the basic incomes actually serving to maintain or cover basic consumption are often separated from the extra incomes reserved for investment and home building.

The not quite regular scheduling and magnitudes of incomes within the households make husbandry complicated, if not impossible, as against the customary spreading of incomes so characteristic with low fixed income proletarian families. One of the tendencies observed in the entrepreneurial proletarian families was that of aiming at reserving certain sums for rents and utility bills; as a rule, the wives' basic wages serve as a minimum of financial security in that respect.

Although within wider limits, the methods adopted to consumption is similar to those mentioned among low fixed income proletarian households: refraining from hobbies, cutting down on luxury items of food, buying less clothing, turning down the heaters etc. As far as we were able to observe a characteristic difference in consumption, the so-called „meat limit" seems to run between the two groups of proletarians, in as much as the entrepreneurial group almost always mentioned as an important factor in economizing that they had to introduce qualitative and quantitative cuts in their meat consumption. The significance of that fact may correlate with the former standard of consumption, the requirements of high work efficiency and the symbolical importance of having a fair amount of meat on one's table.

A collapse of family life or even temporary illness can suddenly and fundamentally disrupt the very basis of a household that is in a state of overspending. The affects of the instable second economy are very clearly felt in this group: owing to the failure or indebtedness of co-operatives, small firms and company sub-contracting, the employers in this sphere of economy are wholly at the mercy of circumstances. Such mishaps lead to the heavy indebtedness of such families, although this can be gradually eliminated by limiting consumption and by asking for family loans.

Welfare(?) Proletarians

Merely by way of making things clear, on establishing and delineating the different sub-sections or groups seemingly incompatible aspects were used. The separation adopted can be finally justified (subsequently, if you like) by the differences observed in the ways of life. Tootless proletarians were separated from low fixed income ones as regards their household structures, deviances, degrees of organization and stability even at the first level; the difference between the low fixed income and entrepreneurial was obvious in the latter's participation or engagement in the second economy and their striving after financial benefits, the so-called welfare(?) proletarians can be differentiated from the former groups by different aspects again.

A really simple method for establishing the characteristic qualities of welfare(?) proletarians is to take a look at the families: while those of the present sub-category are basically the same types of proletarians they have been given or allotted council flats in the recent past, thus having received a significant welfare benefit. In our sample, the families occupying council flats of one plus two half rooms, two rooms, three rooms in the so-called 'new developments' (consisting self-contained flats in multi-storey system-built houses with district heating) have been included into this category.

Categorization has thus been made partly in accordance with the way of acquiring a flat, plus the quality and character of it, and partly by the fundamentally proletarian standing in society (the latter's distinctive marks not being stressed here of course).

The point again is that some essential characteristics of the lives for the families examined show significant differences for certain reasons.

The quality standards of flats can provide families with a sufficient frame for establishing themselves in society, and the importance of that circumstance cannot be stressed often enough. The very fact that the flats have been allotted to these families indicates that they must have met all conditions set for such a welfare benefit (and it was not by chance that also the families living in council allotted co-operative flats are included into this category). These families could not afford anything better, but proved to be „worthy” of that allotment.

The obvious contradiction inherent in the expression welfare(?) proletarians indicates the tensions present in their social standing, past and future prospects.

The members of the group have been continuously engaged in some Budapest firm for several years, and had to have a fixed address in the capital for a similar length of time. Moreover, they had to lead „balanced” lives, have an ordinary family structure meeting official expectations, produce a sufficient number of children and a fairly low per capita income from strictly the first economy (to qualify as „ideal” subjects for such an important welfare allotment). At the same time it should be noted that after the families have moved into the flats of relative adequate quality, their regular incomes are hardly if enough to cover the costs of furnishing and maintenance.

The constant tension existing between income and expenditure is another factor that establishes the way of life of these families – as against the entrepreneur proletarians of the group previously treated.

Those in our sample classified as welfare(?) are less highly skilled than the entrepreneurial group. Their „undertakings” mostly tie them to the first economy (overtime, tips), and their job-hunting and/or promotion strategies aim at achieving stability, security and wages as high as possible. Their jobs (driver, driver's-mate, tram or bus driver, newspaper vendor, shop assistant, caretaker etc.) yield far too low incomes in relation to the high overhead expenses of their new flats, but the gaps can be bridged through extra earnings not demanding any special skills.

An important factor in the welfare(?) proletarian condition is a large number of children (this being both a reason and a consequence at the same time). Couples having as many as four or five children can be found in this group, although some families have „only” two children, and a number of divorced women living with their children have also been included. The consequences of having children will be dealt with later on. The only aspect mentioned here is that large families are among the motives for seeking relative stability, and naturally plays an important role in having to struggle with constant tensions between income and expenditure. Married status is the natural thing in this circle: the couples are workers, young and middle-aged alike.

In the background of these married couples there are the relationships of assistance, mostly the parents rendering active help. Almost all families are in need of regular food supplies, and they regularly receive fruit and vegetables from the parental gardens. Besides regular bridging loans must also be requested, as a consequence of which the families are mostly quite heavily indebted to the parents. Should parents run out of money, or be incapable of raising enough money for lending, work mates, colleagues and friends are approached for some money, or even pawnshops must be utilized. Following from the set-up, the situation is characterized by a complicated and multiple system of indebtedness. Bank loans are of course part of it (including the loans received for buying furniture, redecoration etc.), although the refusal to take loans so characteristic of low fixed income proletarians is not unknown among these families either. (No wonder, since they are conscious of the weight of the strict conditions set by the Postal Savings Bank.)

The external sources and the wages earned by the families (for married couples, extra earnings and the wives' wages usually bring in 2.5 incomes, whereas for singles the rate is 1.5) are just sufficient to cover expenses. Typical of the families is a strictly rational and systematic form of budgeting. This type of husbandry of course was directly indirectly important in the families' qualifying for welfare flat allotment. At the same time, spreading the incomes is essential in view of the high overhead expenses and the similarly high costs of supporting large families.

The two spheres of expenditure function as „hard budget limits”. The couples pool their earnings (including the extras) and earmark the necessary amount for overhead and food. Sooner or later, the sums allotted for such necessities tend to eat each other up and the usual financial mishap occurs. Should any money be saved for „Miscellaneous” purposes on payday, it is inevitably and at once spent on clothing – almost always on children's clothing. Budgeting is almost certainly derailed by the outstanding debts to friends and the bank.

As apparent from what has been stated so far, any mishap occurring (e.g. sickness due to overburdening) strongly affects the families even the ones that can rely on family assistance), and heavily overburdened budgets can only be balanced for the time being by fresh tricks.

All welfare(?) proletarian households included in our sample had to resort to cutting consumption. The running expenses in system-built housing cannot be adjusted in any manner. Thus „restructuring” of food consumption, cutting luxury food items like coffee, tobacco, drinks to a significant extent, saying good-bye to „fun” and summer holidays are all characteristic measures, and so are the removing of children from day-nurseries, washing the laundry at home and sewing children's clothing in the family. The entire family consumption is so organized as to ensure proper care for the children.

Beside being fed, the children are properly dressed, given pocket money, can even go to the cinema or ice-cream parlor and some „entertainment” centre, and can afford chewing gum and odd things. In contrast to the adults' pattern of consumption, it is apparent that every effort is centered on the children. With the knowledge of the financial situation of the families, and their daily worries, that attitude is basically an emotional one, being the well-known affection of parents for their children.

Buying the necessary clothing for the children is another heavy burden on families. This is one of the spheres of family budgeting in which children appear as individual consumers. And things are made only worse by fact that children wear their clothes out rather fast, and grow out of them perhaps even faster. The regular and inevitable nature of that necessity makes that budget item very „hard”.

Some elbow room can of course be obtained by adjusting the quality of children's clothing to financial realities. Handing down clothes is an age-old solution of the problem in large families (and even within circles of friends).

The chains of clothing exchange fail to ensure quality, but in hard times the very fact of obtaining something necessary gives a taste of victory. For a limited range of clothes, home-made things, knitting and converting are generally adopted solutions.

What is often not taken into consideration is that the „family-centered attitude” is an important phenomenon in the restricted reproduction of social existence in itself. It can also be regarded as a stage in that process. It occurs when people are shut off from the other spheres of reproducing their social existence such as joint entertainment, friendly circles, culture, education, co-operative undertakings, collective political actions, interest protection etc., and all that remains to them – if anything – is their individual chance

to sell their work capacity and their family, in which their mental and biological essence can be reproduced.

The type of consumption „centered on the children” is the next stage, when not even the family has the necessary resources for reproducing itself in full. It seems that the parents' needs can be cut to below minimum (except for some food, especially for physical workers). The restricted biological reproduction of adults (parents) results in diseases and early break-down.

In times when resources are so painfully scarce, distribution within the family must be made with the knowledge that the simple reproduction of the members' existence will inevitably be impaired. As the case often is, adults forfeit their right to reproduce themselves for the sake of the younger generation. Such decisions lead to „children-centered” consumption. That set-up or arrangement is not solely demanded by the physiological needs of children, because most of them go to school (or day-care centre etc.) where they are expected to appear decently clothed, provided with specified school gear and to donate certain amounts on set objectives. That type of normative system also affects the parents at home, also covering the consumption trends of children in their private lives.

As regards the families we visited, the parents' consumption patterns were not under the burden of such a heavy external and „institutionalized” pressure, since they usually had jobs where the strict expectations mentioned before are not felt very strongly (with two important exceptions: wives working in „white collar” jobs, where dress and appearance is of importance, and physical (rarely white-collar) workers whose colleagues would cold-shoulder anybody unwilling to join them in the pub).

Following from these circumstances, the families whose social standing is at stake for any reason try to hide their mishaps as long as possible, even through the behaviour of the children.

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It has been stated for the entrepreneurial proletarian group that some of them included in our sample were striving for a better life, towards „getting on”, but have failed, at least for the time being. As regards the welfare(?) proletarian group now under discussion it should be even more emphasized that they are the people who have almost made it, who have been given a chance for living better (even if through some „caprice” of social or welfare distribution), who have really started climbing up the social ladder — and who seem to have nonetheless failed. Their prospects, which were real have narrowed down and they can call themselves lucky if they can maintain their present standard. Instead of being real welfare proletarians, they are merely welfare(?) proletarians.

Just like members of the previously treated group, this welfare(?) proletarian group cannot easily resign itself to that turn in their fate either: they use their brains, hustling, working hard, restructuring their consumption, cutting expenses etc. But even so, they typically spend more than they can earn. Accepting the fact that their finances regularly prove to be inadequate would mean to accept the failure of their entire strategy for life. Reducing their spending is very hard indeed, especially if the small tricks of proletarian survival have been lost over the years of social ascent. Shrinking one's life beyond a limit would be almost impossible anyhow, in view of the size of the family and within the walls of the comfortable new flat.

Viewing things from perspectives which are also the organizing elements of the present, it can be stated that while the entrepreneurial and welfare(?) proletarians did have a chance to get on, the low fixed income proletarians have a chance to survive, whereas the rootless have long lost all hopes of a better life.