



RESEARCH PAPER

Proletariat bottles up Bourgeoisie: Applying Social Exchange Theory in László's *Sátántangó*

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ABSTRACT

The article explores László Krasznahorkai's novel *Sátántangó* through the lens of George Homans's Social Exchange Theory to delineate how humans somehow possess both proletarian and bourgeois instincts by trial and error. Man simultaneously, embodies good and evil, and can hide one and unmask the other for his/her own benefits according to situation. Through the application of Homans's theory, the analysis of the characters reveals how some common individuals can easily morph themselves into the figure of the capitalist. Specifically Irimiás, Schmidt and Futaki prove through their intentions that any ordinary person, who presents to be very good and honest, can turn out to be a cheater and manipulator only to maximize his/her own benefits. The research unearths that man schleps both proletariat and bourgeoisie alongside, proving these are not two different camps of society, rather it is nature which is coexistent in human beings.

KEYWORDS Proletariat, Bourgeoisie, Self-Interest, Social Exchange, Manipulation, Human Instinct

Introduction

Sátántangó is the foremost novel by the Hungarian dexterous writer László Krasznahorkai, winner of the 2025 Nobel Prize in Literature. He inscribes arduous, complex and long sentences in his works felicitously. He has proven himself as one of the great literary figures of this century, his writing explores postmodern threads such as the apocalyptic and the dystopian, terror and decay and the failed attempts of communism. *Sátántangó* was written in Hungarian language in 1985 by László Krasznahorkai; then translated into English by George Szirtes in 2012. This is the story of a Hungarian village where the communist regime is taking its last breaths, the village is on the brink of destruction and a few characters give it one last shove and throw it into the dark well of decay. What is the defrauding of a community? Simple exploiting human herd – those who have not had access to the equivalent circumstances that exploiters already enjoy. On the surface of this winsome, spherical ball, exploitation has become an eternal garland for those who have been denied opportunities intentionally or unintentionally. In our natural ambience, everyone is given circumstances to divulge either a devilish or an angelic face. A philosophical and debatable question arises here: are there two different fizzogs of mankind – one angelic (proletariat) and the other diabolical (bourgeoisie) – or is there only one, a mixture of both? Through George Homans's Social Exchange Theory, we will weigh up this doubt by analysing some of the main characters of *Sátántangó*, in which it proves how a person morphs himself from a proletarian into a capitalist. Homans's theory explained, humans are self-interested, seeking to maximize their mileage and minimize

their efforts and loss. This theory will be applied for the first time to this apocalyptic, stagnant story of a Hungarian village that is decaying due to the false attempt of communism. A few characters in Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó* exploit commoners psychologically and physically by grasping the opportunities, which has been awarded them by the conditions of the time. To them, demeanour changing circumstances were supportive. These individuals were certainly not wealthy offspring of the Hungarian village, but local residents; however, once given a chance, they evolved from unglamorous paid labourers into "noble" capitalists, adopting behaviours that would be viewed negatively even in a capitalist era. We will also discern this: are those who propagate radically communism or social equality truly capable of lifting others out of misery and suffering? Or is it a simple subterfuge and a lie that pushes people toward even worse situations? In the story, it clears that Irimiás acts as a charismatic figure, falsely promising the villagers a "communal Eden" free from their current deterioration and misery, when he gets the chance. This commoner transforms into a cunning manipulator and exploiter, which shows the process by which a communist propagandist can morph into a capitalist.

Literature Review

László Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó* limns a world in decay, featuring an infertile community on a collective farm where the ashes of socialism are sinking into the ground. This critique narrates a very important discussion about the book that clarifies what is left, must be discussed. In his work, "Dancing with the Devil: László Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó*", Thomas Kahn explores how the arrival of Petrina and Irimiás brings celebration and dark humour at same time to the villagers. He jots that László's Möbius strip structure draws two parallel lines: one representing prosperity and the other exhibiting destruction. Kahn views the story of *Sátántangó* in a diabolical shade, which he sees as a cause of further deterioration. He traces the transition from solitude to a collective identity through the death of Esti and the arrival of Irimiás and his shadow, Petrina. Kahn highlights the "drunken dance" as the twisting spice of Krasznahorkai's narrative structure. For Thomas Kahn, the dance emblemizes two different shades: one is the exacerbation of celebration and hopefulness, and the second is the chaotic scene of a funeral and despair. Kahn describes the manipulative motives of Irimiás as the ones by the devil, he likes the writing style of Krasznahorkai, with such textual ambiguities, his text can never be clearly understood, and we are lost in this mess.

Krause Frantzen builds upon the perception of *Sátántangó* by Kahn, and the ideas of how the present requirements change to other requirements. Ironically, he gives a name to his piece as "Destroying Necessity with Necessity". This implies that as the villagers work to shunt back the misery, they are pushed back to Irimiás's machinations, a way of travelling between one necessary scenario and another, which leads to another apocalyptic trap. Frantzen recounts how the villagers attempt to overcome fear, decay, and terror, only engulf them in further deterioration; their dreams of betterment are swallowed by lethal ember and finally buried by Irimiás. In light of *Sátántangó*, he raises a perplexing stance: how can a drive toward prosperity and improvement lead instead to further destruction, delving deeper into mud and decay?

Alexander Irimia comprehends *Sátántangó* from two different perspectives, examining both Krasznahorkai's prose and Béla Tarr's cinematic adaptation. In her essay, she positions time as the main character and thematic core of the work. She unfolds how Béla Tarr's 7h30 long length film enunciate Krasznahorkai's use of language perfectly. Irimia focuses on the division of time, stating in her essay:

"The film takes on the novel's structure. Both are divided into two parts, with six chapters for each part. The numbering of the chapters (called "dances") is meaningfully unconventional, going from I to VI in the first half and, in reverse, from VI to I in the second half. This arrangement hints at the sequence of steps in classic tango – six steps forward, six steps backward. At the end of such a sequence, the dancers progressively return to the point of their departure, cancelling their own movement" (Irimia, 2019, p.215).

Continuing on the opinion of Thomas Kahn, Irimia also says that Mobius strip building of Krasznahorkai demonstrates that time is not merely a straight line running forward, but a Mobius loop with no edge, i.e. there is no way out.

Henry Baime depicts Hungary's post-communist dystopian condition through the lens of László Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó*. According to him, the condition of the collective farm in the novel does not merely paint an apocalyptic picture of a Hungarian village, but also shows how communist ideology collapsed. The villagers are not just facing decay and terror; they are encountering the calamitous implications of the Cold War. Henry illustrates the story's bleakness and dread through Béla Tarr's film. He admires *Sátántangó*'s plot and use of language, and his views on the plot are as follows:

"The plot of *Sátántangó* is interesting and the plotless scenes are impressive to watch, but it isn't until they get put together that either attains any of their meaning. If it wasn't for the hours we have to ponder the film's sparse but stunning photography without any new narrative information being introduced, the film wouldn't have nearly the same impact. *Sátántangó* presents a gloomy view of humanity, wallowing in the despair of a ruined country, but it is in those moments of reflection that we get to piece together its narrative and messages to find something profound" (Baime, 2020).

Henry Baime's critical reading is more progressive than that of our other scholars. He puts the story of *Sátántangó* into the context of post-Cold War period and this is an interesting perspective which is also quite close to my personal position.

Upon a close examination of these masterworks, all of which are quite well-researched and use the critical theory to cover the main themes of the story, I still managed to sense a lack, which has debauched me into writing the article. In *Sátántangó*, the horror of the post-communism is noticeably seen, the corrupted human civilization, this corruption does not simply set free the economic pressure; it also leaves the self-developed morality of humanity uncovered. I will also discuss the ways in which the key players of the novel reveal themselves at the very beginning, and how formerly manipulated employees acquire devilish capitalistic qualities within a short period of time. This reading will give a dialectical reading under the interdisciplinary approach of the Social Exchange Theory and the novel itself. The inculcation of a self-serving attitude is not only reserved to some of the characters in the narrative, it may as well be applied to other docile people in the event they were afforded the same opportunity. Such an attitude is a variation in the analysis of other published reviews.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Exchange Theory that became the benchmark of my analysis was initially developed by the American sociologist George Homans in his article in the year 1958, titled, "Social Behaviour as Exchange". He subsequently expounded these concepts accurately in his book "Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms". The theory of Homans helps establish the basic model of a hypothetical system, which serves as the explanatory focal points by

which to perceive the ideological as well as behavioural element of the characters in *Sátántangó* by Laszlo Krasznahorkai. The focus of this theory is elementary human behaviour, which states that social behaviour consists of an exchange of intangible commodities, and individuals are motivated to maximize benefits and minimize expenditures. It is the landscape of post-communist corruption and decline that was followed by the sadness and fear that is greatly captured in *Sátántangó*. Homans explains in his theory how individuals attempt to maximize their own profit and minimize their losses and effort, which constitutes the cost. In the novel, Krasznahorkai limns how this instincts drive for personal benefit, while creating a self-made utopian ideal, ultimately leads characters into deeper fear and decay. Homans's Social Exchange Theory also supports this idea. It describes how selfishness is internalized by a person through experience, cultivating a self-interested mindset that confines them to their own domain and makes them see only their own benefit. Thus, it could be argued that anyone can become a capitalist for their own benefit if provided with the same conditions as capitalists already has. To me, capitalism—with all its unequal and coercive control over production—seems as natural to humanity as toileting is.

Material and Methods

In my article, I have attempted to clear up through qualitative research methods that humans possess both proletarian and bourgeois characteristics, displaying these characteristics when behaviour is appropriate, by looking at characters such as Schmidt, Futaki, or Irimiás as metaphors. Using a few quotes from Homans's theory as a reference, an attempt has been made to understand why, when and how humans ultimately value just their personal gain ?

Results and Discussion

For personal profit: Exploitative shift of Futaki and Schmidt

Goodness always bottles up evil, loyalty hides disloyalty, love hides hate, and friendship hides enmity, nothing is as it overtly seems, true reality is infiltrated in all living and non-living things randomly, and can surface arbitrarily in any environment, in any form. In *Sátántangó*, we see how several characters hide malevolent motives behind a facade of virtue. In the novel's first chapter, for instance, we savvy about Mr. Schmidt. Though as poor as the other villagers, he secretly conspire to steal their collective money and to flee. Mrs. Schmidt frames her husband's parlous economic situation this way, "he was hungry and had only a single pair of ragged trousers plus a faded, overcoat with empty pockets to stand up in" (Laszlo, 2012, p.12). Being in a desperate situation means thinking only of your own benefit and conspiring to escape, even if you leave behind hunger and suffering for others. This aligns with the core principle of George Homans's theory, which he explained with the following example

"The more hungry the pigeon, the less corn or other food it has gotten in the recent past, the more often it will peck. By the same token, if the behavior is often reinforced —if the pigeon is given much more corn every time it pecks— the rate of emission will fall off as the pigeon gets satiated" (Homans, 1958, p.598).

The example provided by Homans demonstrates a very easy point, it is simple to assume that humans are fundamentally rational and self-interested and then the behaviour of an individual will change radically depending on whether one is in a state of scarcity or a state of abundance. The exploited man can transmute into an exploiter due to the two primary dynamics; thirst of need and power. The man exploited is hungry, lacking

resources, status and power. The rewards withheld to him (higher wages, better working conditions, respect) are extremely valuable according to the proposal put by Homans. This profound desire creates a powerful motivation to engage in behaviours that might secure those rewards. Mr. Schmidt's cunning intentions were for his own betterment, a goal for which the other villagers had to pay the price. This is a classic case of the "exploitation of labour power": the exploiter and a capitalist dreams of luxury by making others his workers, both emotionally and financially. On the other hand, when Futaki learns that Mr. Schmidt intrigues to flee from the village with the stolen money, he exclaims, "My money!" This is the moment in the novel where another hideous face is exposed. Subsequently, Futaki and the Schmidts speak, and through their sordid conversation, agree to flee together from the wretched village. Their plan mirrors that of the Russian oligarchs of the 1990s, who took advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like Futaki and Schmidt, these oligarchs seized the opportunity presented by a fallen communist regime.

Whatever the saintliness of an individual is, or the manner in which he or she was born to the spirit of pious morality, he or she still has both an angelic and a demonic side – that duality, which is, perhaps, the very nature of man. This is core point of the research: the ultimate expected behaviour of human being is that man is going to act in order to maximize his interests. To my perspective, the story of *Sátántangó* refutes Karl Marx's idea; "Unlimited exploitation of cheap labour-power is the sole foundation of their power to compete" (Marx, 1887, p.312). It is not just the struggle between the proletariats and the bourgeoisies, or exploiter and the exploited. Instead, this relationship demonstrates a universal norm of human society no one can be a pure proletariat doomed to remain constantly exploited. In *Sátántangó*, common workers become exploiters by adapting capitalist traits. People adopt the capitalist system when its logic aligns with their inherent self-interest. Even labour power itself becomes an instrument of exploitation when placed in conditions that replicate those favourable to a capitalist. The proletarian system conceals a latent bourgeois system within itself, one that exposes its true nature when given the opportunity, as demonstrated by the characters of Futaki, the Schmidts, Kraner, and Irimiás in *Sátántangó*. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx divides society into the opposing fractions of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, wherein one class is defined by exploitation and the other by enduring it, and Karl Marx propped up exploiters.

"Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx, 2002, p.14).

But the central aim of this research is to apply Homans's Social Exchange Theory to *Sátántangó* in order to examine how a single individual can simultaneously embody both proletarian and bourgeois traits. There are not two or more distinct factions of social man, but only one, which inherently carries both demonic and angelic qualities. In the story, Futaki plans to steal the money himself. However, upon learning that Schmidt has already stolen it and is preparing to flee for a better future, Futaki demands his share. The price he pays for this profit is his complicit silence. "Futaki inquired, mentally calculating the sums. "Let's split it three ways," Schmidt answered reluctantly: "But keep your mouth shut" (Laszlo, 2012, p.13). This demonstrates that when a human is given an opportunity for personal betterment, the exploited can morph into the exploiter in due time. Their conspiracy reveals their underlying ethics and morality: a selfish person will seize power and resources whenever will be possible. Futaki, gets rid of his mask and behaves for only personal interests. His calculations make him a fledgling capitalist who is only interested in making money out of the ordinary peasants. Naturally, Futaki and Schmidt did not have land or factories, they were simple proletariat. However, they disclosed the untold bourgeois traits concealed in their proletariat life. Such duality is in the nature of people,

who are both evil and good by their nature; it is only our experiences that help to nurture one of them.

From visionary to victimizer: Irimiás's masked intentions

In *Sátántangó*, we meet a number of characters, some of which have an opportunity to transform into capitalists and exploiters, many of them do not. It is the tale of the inhabitants in Hungarian village, here are a few of whom are paupers, trying to rob others. The novel by Krasznahorkai represents a picture of an apocalyptic image of a corrupted, post-communist Hungarian village, a location where the masses are systematically deceived by fraudsters such as Irimiás. He serves as the pessimistic projection of human nature in form of personification, that the working class is not necessarily good that can easily acquire exploiting characteristics where a chance comes. This is how the proletariat becomes a bourgeoisie, a yesterday's proletariats become today's oppressors. Notably, if we read this story, we do not see a single character who is an inborn capitalist, a landlord or the owner of business, even Irimiás is a common local too. Yet, within their apparent simplicity, they engage in deeds that expose concealed capitalist characters that result in the miserable community that they live in. Utilizing the death of Esti, Irimiás lets the people know that: "Now let's not waste any more time, since we understand that Esti's death was a punishment and warning to us, and that her sacrifice serves, ladies and gentlemen, as a pointer to a better, fairer future" (Laszlo, 2012, p.142). His manipulative speech is convincing the people that unless they make the thought of their own interests a priority, they too will end up like Esti. Irimiás in his speech puts the blame on their deteriorating daily situations systematically. He realizes that he can take advantage of the tragedy surrounding the death of Esti and make his cunning words and empty promises an instrument. In exchange, he steals the savings of the people to his advantage. This is what it means by defrauding a community. In this manipulation, Irimiás inserts known value of the reward he promises him in exchange since he makes it seem a scarcity, conditional on their compliance- their figurative pecking. This makes him more than a spy, a highly respected leader or prophet.

His rewards do not stop there: the black thirst of power, the performance of his task as an informant to the authorities, and possibly, the fervent gratification of masterminding a huge fraud. The very process of his manipulative behaviour is perpetuated at a certain rate in the sense that such special, non-financial incentives give him significant personal gratification. George Homans's theory illustrates: "Mankind has always assumed that a person stabilizes his behavior, at least in the short run, at the point where he is doing the best he can for himself under the circumstances" (Homans, 1958, p.601). Focus on human gain is the condition that makes human behaviour predetermined. He claims that human beings are profit maximizers who learn by the mistakes they have made. In *Sátántangó*, Irimiás takes advantage of the historical occasion, when Hungarian communism was at its knees. That created a painful void in the society whereby opportunists came up to commence their own businesses. This was the time during which the elements of the labour class started developing a capitalist ethos themselves. As it can be seen, when the socialist economy was thrown into a trap of the massive foreign debt, these opportunists seized the opportunity to take advantage of the hopelessness of desperate people, establishing small businesses just to push benefits their way. Irimiás followed this trend in society and, although he was following his personal dream of a better life, he left the already falling community in even more pain and even more sorrow. He employs all devil tricks in his diabolical words to persuade people, since he is their sole available messiah and they do not have an option. This is comparable to the bargaining power of the capitalist to the labour in a high unemployment society where a worker is afraid of losing a job and

therefore does not feel like quitting. The reason is that it is a half-loan, but it is a half-loan. This thinking is playing to Irimiás psychologically, and he informs the people: "Your helplessness is culpable, your cowardice culpable, culpable, ladies and gentlemen! Because – and mark this well! – it is not only other people one can ruin, but oneself" (Laszlo, 2012, p.140). Of course, he positions himself as a benefactor. This proves that it is not just Irimiás who bears a devilish nature but that we are all demons and awaiting the appropriate time to attack. When necessity strikes, the opportunity will be seized, as Futaki, Schmidt, and Irimiás do in *Sátántangó*. Simultaneously, the novel depicts a community, disenchanted by the failed practice of communism, that readily welcomes a new form of exploitation. Irimiás transforms the disempowered proletariat into eager participants in their own fleecing, revealing how old systems of control can seamlessly morph into manipulative, pseudo capitalist schemes built on false hope and collective greed. As noted earlier, "Capitalism is as natural to humans as toileting is," which indicates that a person from the lower class can become an exploiter if placed in the same environment as the capitalist class. In the story, the villagers desperate scramble for money ultimately proves they have learned nothing from their history – they merely exchange one master for another. Irimiás, a police informant and a low-level character, plays with the people of the village with the false hopes of a community Eden that ends up consuming the people away with their meager means to a greater derailment. The novel reveals that power and wealth lusts are hypocritical intentions that are revealed when chaos and change are on the brink. These conditions give the chances to the worker to become a capitalist. Irimiás fools the villagers with his manipulative rhetoric:

"What I want is to establish a small island for a few people with nothing left to lose, a small island free of exploitation, where people work for, not against each other, where everyone has plenty and peace and security and can go to sleep at night like a proper human being" (Laszlo, 2012, p.143).

It is the trick that not only leads individuals into the more deplorable positions but also serves as a lesson they can never forget in life that no face can be trusted. The emptiness of the goodness that he promises is realized only in the last part of the story when the great schemes of Irimiás crumble like sand. Probably, we do not know the answer, but in my opinion there is none. Human nature is not subject to a linear pattern. Individuals manoeuvre through their circumstances in an accidental and contingent fashion, and are informed by their past and present experiences taking on a critical, though not a determinant role. When the individual is in the position of a proletariat, there is a high possibility that he or she will assume a bourgeois identity whenever he or she gets a chance. The two traits have been incorporated into the nature of humanity.

The futility of the actions of the characters in *Sátántangó* by Laszlo Krasznahorkai is a clear illustration of the deprivation satiations principle in Homans and the main principle of the Social Exchange Theory: that human actions are inherently motivated by the self-interest and the need to achieve some profit. The novel commences in a crumbling communal farm where all are deeply starving in both material and spiritual aspects. This mutual deprivation preconditions a cynical form of exchange economy where the absence of resources determines value, and the distribution of power is altered once even a small amount of resource is presented.

The current research proposal presents two main readings, united to outline my case: the Social Exchange Theory by George Homans, and the *Sátántangó* novel by Laszlo Krasznahorkai. The theory of Homans offers a bright theoretical perspective on studying the human relationship and the novel by Krasznahorkai offers a bleak image of the post-

communist society. Collectively, they form a great viewpoint of looking into the ideological change of the exploited working population and a possible identity of capitalist. This paper has also tried to know how a human being, full of greed of power and money can easily adopt what is considered an evil role when such incentives are not available. Deliberately or not, the wish to gain power and money evokes the same rules of social exchange, establishing a vicious circle that only increases it. Homans further says an individual also minimizes the potential loss by accepting a given burden and hence creating windows of profit. This is the core principle. Irimiás is a prime example. He tries to manipulate people in order to drive them to his self-established community through manipulative speech to make them experience a different state of hopelessness just to benefit and gain power on his side. He is the embodiment of the metamorphosis of a proletarian to a capitalist life. The Schmidt couple and Futaki are no exception, as it was observed above, because their behaviour can be compared to the Russian oligarchs that came out of such a systemic collapse. Applying Homans's theory, I have sought to demonstrate that individuals inherently possess both proletarian and bourgeois characteristics, and that it is a straightforward transition for a proletarian to reveal his bourgeois side for personal gain. When opportunity arises, people will act in ways that maximize their perceived benefit, regardless of the moral or social cost, which they are willing to pay in any form. In the novel, Irimiás seizes the villagers' remaining wealth through false promises, while Schmidt, Kraner, and Futaki similarly conspire to abscond with money acquired through deception.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the transformation from proletariat to bourgeoisie is not just a complex political one but rather a natural one. And when it is natural, why view capitalism solely in a negative and critical light? Why has it been given the impression that the capitalist system has bad effects on society? This is nothing but a sweeping generalisation. If the capitalist system is shaken in one or two locations, does it mean that this entire system is bad and satanic? Many socialist or communist societies have also been destroyed and ruined in the past decades, exemplary. We also see the dark clouds of a destroyed communist society in Sátántangó. Man has internalized his capitalist and power-seeking nature along with himself throughout evolutionary stages. Homans has explained this behaviourism with arguments in his theory. We know that the dream of a selfless and balanced collective is nothing but a fantasy. The internal drive for personal gain is not an agenda created by capitalism, but it is a pre-existing human trait. If the conditions that exist for the present capitalist are given to the contemporary proletariat, he will naturally and politically become the brute capitalist who will maximize his power and profit through exploitation, whether he once considered it devilish. Given the same conditions – the same control over the “corn” – any labourer, no matter how principled, is susceptible to being morphed into a business holder, proving that the exploiter is simply a former exploited person who was finally given a chance now.

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