

# THE BIG-MAN FROM THE "WHITE HOUSE." Negotiating Power in a Slovak Post-Rural Community<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: This paper deals with the issue of negotiating power and exerting authority in a contemporary post-rural community. It analyzes various strategies of village representatives by which they build their influence and create obligations among the villagers. At the same time it shows how the village inhabitants deal with incurred moral and economical dependence on village representatives. The issue will be addressed through the lens of the dynamics of the rise and fall of the village's main representative. The big-man theory, proposed by Marshall Sahlins, will be used as the explication framework.*

*Keywords: rural anthropology; post-socialism; status; power; Southern Slovakia*

When we visited Pálenica for the first time in January 2008, we were astonished by an enthusiastic welcome. A delegation, consisting of the mayor, four councilmen and the head of the mayor's office, arranged an opulent feast in the mayor's house, which is called, as we found out later, the White House. At this feast, we debated details of our cooperation. More precisely, the mayor defined everything that the councilmen and other village inhabitants could and should do for us. It seemed that he possessed unlimited authority. All the councilmen paid utmost attention to his words and only occasionally added minor details of planned activities. We felt almost trapped by the mayor's charisma. His leadership seemed to be natural, his economic success logical, and

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his general popularity self-evident. At least from an outsider's perspective, he represented an accumulation of all the attributes that someone would need to establish himself at the top of a post-rural community in the post-socialistic countryside.

Since then we have been coming to Pálenica regularly a few times a year. As we proceeded in understanding the local social structures, the reality revealed itself as more colorful and multilayered. Similarly, the story of the village leadership became more dynamic. The question we kept asking was who the mayor of Pálenica actually was.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Context of the Research**

Research of a Central European village has had a long tradition in Czech ethnology (e.g., Chotek 1912, Stránská 1931, Václavík 1930) and also sociology (Galla 1939, Bláha 1937). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century other topics started to “compete” with research of the village (beginning urban studies, problems of interethnic relations). Only several outstanding personalities of the Czech science understood Czech, and/or the Czechoslovak village from a modern ethnological or socio-cultural anthropological perspective (e.g., Kandert 1988, Kadeřábková – Polednová – Vaněčková 1976, Švecová 1975, Salzman – Scheufler 1974). From the 1990s, Czech and Slovak science had definitively divided regarding village qualitative research into the stream of traditional ethnological research tending to a historical perspective, eventually to folklore studies (Slavkovský 2002, Válka 2007, Jančář 2003 etc.), to the stream of purely sociological (rural sociology, e.g., Majerová 2001, 2006) and to the stream of socio-cultural anthropology to which we relate. There are four basic accents that are laid on within the research of the current village: social networks creation (e.g., Kandert 2002, 2004); establishing of collective identities (Grygar 2007), post-socialist transformation (Torsello 2003, Haukanes 2004, Danglová 2006), everydayness in a holistic perspective (Skalník 2004, 2005). All of these accents are connected by an interest in the dynamics of politico-economic changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to the social continuity of rural communities. To keep its continuity and to prevent disintegration, people living in these communities had to repeatedly cope with politico-economic changes (Hann 2007). They again and again had to defend or modify their original shape and function of their own social networks in new politico-economic conditions.

The village Pálenica, in which we carry out our fieldwork, is a small village located in Southern Slovakia. Formerly a rural village that changed into a post-rural village now has about 250 inhabitants. Although some of its inhabitants work in an agriculture enterprise (there are two, one of which belongs to the mayor) and some work in a local industrial enterprise (also belonging to the mayor), almost half of them commute to work to a nearby provincial town. The village's most distinguishable characteristic is its ethnic heterogeneity. Due to post-war political changes, formerly the almost exclusively Hungarian village became a Slovak-Hungarian village, with the contemporary ratio of Slovaks to Hungarians 1:1. Like numerous other small settlements in Slovakia, the village is strongly religious, though not all the villagers attend the local church. All these factors contribute to differentiated socio-economical statuses of the village inhabitants and the plurality of social activities within this community and outside of it.

In this paper we would like to address the constitution and negotiation of power in this local community. By using the example of the rise and fall of the mayor of the village, we would like to show how and by what means he constituted his position in the local community, how and with whom he negotiated it and how his power was manifested in social reality. In the dynamics of this process we will seek moments which contributed to the maintenance or loss of his power.

The term power is generally weakly defined and ambiguous in social science. While in Weberian tradition power and authority are related to the state and institutions, Skalník (1999) distinguishes these two as fundamentally opposed principles. Power is related to the state and its institutions, in contrast to authority, which "is legitimate without the backing of power, and is voluntarily recognized by all people" (Skalník 1999: 162). However we would like to focus on the microperspective to show how the mayor worked himself into his position mostly by his own endeavors. Because of this, we see Marshal Sahlins' (1963) concept of big-man as a useful interpretive framework because it addresses the constitution of power on an individual basis.

The concept of big-man (Sahlins 1963), although originating in Melanesia, was later used in other parts of the world like Africa or the Caribbean to describe the achieved leadership of a man with personal power (Brown 1990). The metaphor of the big-man was even used to interpret the social reality of U.S. senators (Weatherford 1987). The most important "indicative quality of big-man authority (...) is *personal* power. Big men do not come to the office;

they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups” (Sahlins 1963: 289, italics in orig.). The big-man is a person who manages to gain a recognized prestigious position within a society by his own efforts.

But this model does not distinguish between power and authority; instead it treats them as synonyms (Sahlins 1963). In this regard we perceive power as a disposal of means which enable enforcement of one’s will. To describe how the mayor subsequently gained his particular position, we use Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capitals (Bourdieu 1998) as an analytic category. Although we are aware that Bourdieu’s theory is a theory of class reproduction and not a theory of rational choice (Bourdieu 1998), his definition of symbolic capital as a creation of successful usage of other capitals allows us to examine individual negotiations on various levels and with various ties. It is exactly symbolic capital that is “capital with a cognitive base, which rests on cognition and recognition” (Bourdieu 1998: 87) and “responds to socially constituted collective expectations...” (Bourdieu 1998: 102).

Our fieldwork has been conducted primarily by means of team *rapid assessment*. *Rapid assessment*, according to Bernard (2002), means a short-time (usually just several-week long) intensive data collecting, focused on a particular research question, followed by an analysis of the gathered data. Combined with a multiplicity of researchers in the research team, repeated short-time stays in the field allowed us to gather a substantial amount of data in a three-year time span while capturing society dynamics. Moreover, it allowed us to analyze the data in between research trips to specify the research questions for the next stay. In our research, we are working on many different issues, using research techniques typical for ethnography: participant observation, informal interviews, document analysis and the genealogical method. The data used in this paper were gathered primarily by means of narrative interviews with the mayor, participant observations, informal and semi-structured interviews with other village inhabitants, personal correspondence and analyses of municipal annals and other official documents. Therefore the paper conveys the perspective of the mayor confronted with perspectives of other village inhabitants interpreted by using the aforementioned theoretical concepts.

## Prologue: Social Network in a Post-Rural Community

It is necessary to place the mayor's story of power negotiation into the context of social relations in the locality. It is important to know towards whom and with whom these negotiations have been conducted. In other words, although this text is not primarily focused on social networks, social relations and the context in which these negotiations have been conducted play a significant role. As Grygar (2007), using Granovetter's distinction between strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973) shows, *"using ties in social networks, including resources in the disposition of people-ties, might be a legitimate tool of upward mobility (...) it is the very ability to establish and maintain legitimate weak ties which affects the size of maneuvering space for the realization of political ambitions."* (Grygar 2007: 27, translated by M.H.).

One of the primary aspects affecting the social life in the community is the reproduction of social capital within individual families. In the context of the locality it is even possible to talk about extended families or even lineages. The contemporary village consists in two thirds of descendents of several families (which is traceable not only in genealogies, but also manifests itself in just a few repetitive surnames and quasi-kinship ties of godparents-godchildren). With regard to the history of the locality, they are almost always families of Hungarian origin (regardless of whether all of their contemporary members declare themselves as Hungarians or not). Moreover, Hungarian appears to be the primary language of communication on almost all significant levels, including meetings of the village council.

But we must not omit the Slovak inhabitants of the village either. There are several families who immigrated in the 1930s and 1940s and who consider themselves (and are considered) denizens.<sup>2</sup> Their ties with Hungarian families are evident in the institution of godparents-godchildren and many Slovaks also married into Hungarian families. In these cases it is possible to see the adoption of the social and cultural capital of these families, including the Hungarian language as the language of communication in the locality. Individual Slovak families have been immigrating to the locality in the last fifty years, though. It seems that these families stay on the margins of village social structures even though the previous mayor originated from their milieu. He was their mayor for two terms in office; however after his

<sup>2</sup> By denizens we mean people living in the area for several generations.

loss in the last communal elections, he moved away. That is why he cut off most of his connections and literally vanished from the minds of the village inhabitants. Because of this we were unable to reconstruct his position in the village context.

Those families who possess “traditional” (inherited or restituted) economic capital play a dominant role in constituting current norms. As we will show below, direct descendants of former Hungarian “kulaks” play an important role in various decision-making processes. Only five denizen families have this extensive inherited or restituted property at their disposal.<sup>3</sup> Their influence is evident at least in their involvement in local economic ties. Even though virtually nobody engages in agriculture as his primary source of income today (there are two agricultural enterprises in the village), no one wants to renounce his family property. In this context it is important to whom one will rent his land or whom one will ask to plough the small plot of ground adjacent to his house (in addition to farm machinery from aforementioned agricultural enterprises, there are three tractors in the village). It is also possible to see this economic capital manifest itself in the lumber cooperative (*urbárska spoločnosť*) and in the position of an individual in its hierarchy.

Beside this strong denizen stratum it is necessary to count in the gradually evolving new economic elite. No matter whether denizens or immigrants, in addition to real property (especially a house, which is considered more kind of matter-of-course) these families also possess finances with which they try to manifest their status (cars, modern technology, modern house designs, education of children, employment of a whole family etc.). They are often small businessmen who are able to get loose from “traditional” ties and norms because of their economic independence.

On the contrary to this stratum which possess economic capital, there are (again no matter whether denizens or immigrants) “the poor,” which means the usually unemployed, unpropertied persons (often living in local apartment houses), often members of a “pub clique.” This stratum is dependent on job offers in the locality. Even though the village lies only 10 km. from the administrative center of region, local unemployed people are not mobile enough to make use of job offers in the nearby area.

Another level of social ties is represented by owners of cultural capital. These are especially members of the church council and people who are related

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<sup>3</sup> There are some other families with extensive property in the village, but they do not live there.

to them. 97% of the villagers are Roman Catholics.<sup>4</sup> Although Pálenica is not an independent parish, there is a church there in which church services take place two or three times a week. The church is also the visual and symbolic dominant feature of the village. Care of it including its funding is in the hands of the church council. The church council consists above all of members of denizen families and it is the network evolving around the church council that dictates to a great extent the moral rules of the village. The priest stands somehow paradoxically on the outside of these structures, not only because the presbytery is located in a neighboring village, but especially because he refused to accept the local means of communication – the Hungarian language. An aversion to the priest was at least declared the reason why some of the locals attend church services in the nearby town or do not attend church services regularly. But even these people admit the significance of having a church in the village, including the necessity of a church council. Other bearers of cultural capital are individuals only. They either achieved higher education (the teacher, the medical doctor) or they have been successful in their jobs (the bank clerk).

To summarize this somehow schematized description, we would like to formulate a few key factors that have an important impact on the social life in the village. It seems that two of the most important factors are the denizens' status and "traditional" economic capital. The stronger this social and economic capital is, the more probable and the stronger the cultural capital is. These aspects are to some extent substitutable by personal endeavor, but even in the case of putative solitary individuals these aspects play an important role. Nevertheless it is necessary to keep in mind that all the village inhabitants are electors and that the mayor in Slovakia is elected directly. It is thus essential to negotiate not only with people possessing prestige, but also with marginalized groups that lack power.

## **The Story of Mr. Whitehouse – Chapter I: "Economic Pursuit"**

The life story of the mayor, let's call him Mr. Whitehouse (after the name that village inhabitants gave to his estate), can be traced in four dimensions as a story of achieving economic, social, symbolic, and cultural capital. At the beginning there were no signs indicating his later life success. He comes from a family of Hungarian denizens who in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>4</sup> Census 2001. Internal document of the village council.

belonged to the middle class of the rural inhabitants of the village Pálenica. Owing to political and economic changes of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which led to the departure of most of the families with the highest status, his family became more socially respected. But over time members of Mr. Whitehouse's extended family moved away and, at the beginning of the 1990s, only his parents remained there. Although he comes from a family of Hungarian denizens, his social relations in the locality were limited. "He was really a shy boy. He didn't go out much. He wasn't liked much by others."<sup>5</sup> After his wedding (1987), he even moved out of the village for 13 years, an act which weakened even more his social capital related to the community.

Despite the absence of cultural capital, he was not interested in increasing his education. His mother said: „We were happy, that he had finished school. He did not want to stay there. And even though we repeated to him that he had the brains to achieve it, it did not work. He was eager to earn a living as soon as possible. Education meant nothing to him. The girls were a different story...“<sup>6</sup> After he got a certificate as a painter-decorator, he started to work as one. In socialist Czechoslovakia, neither he nor his family possessed significant economic capital. But Mr. Whitehouse longed for economic success. In 1988, with the declaration of the Provision of Services Act,<sup>7</sup> he immediately started his business in the building industry. After 1989, he made use of the opportunity of restitutions and supported his father in the decision to become a private farmer again. He also returned to the village through other economic activities and in 1991 he became chairman of a lumber cooperative (*urbárska spoločnosť*). In 1994, he started a new machine-industry company as one of its shareholders. In 2000 he managed to secure all of the partners' shares in the enterprise and became its sole owner. One year later he used the assets from the bankruptcy of the former Standard Farming Cooperative (JRD) in Pálenica and moved the operations of his business to its buildings. At the same time he founded his own agriculture enterprise. He also confirmed his interest in carrying on business in the village of his birth by systematic pur-

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<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Weeddow, 69 years old, denizen, Hungarian; fieldnotes June 8, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Whitehouse, mother of Mr. Whitehouse, 68 years old, denizen, Hungarian; interview September 26, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Sb. z. ČSSR, ČR/SR 1988 částka 1, 2/1988: Nariadenie vlády Slovenskej socialistickej republiky o predaji tovaru a poskytovaní iných služieb občanmi na základe povolenia národného výboru z 26. novembra 1987. Available at: <http://web.mvcr.cz/archiv2008/sbirka/1988/sb01-88.pdf> [accessed August 10, 2009].



chases of farmland and timberland. Ownership of property then logically led him to the decision to start to live in the village. By this means, he established himself again in the social and economic structures of the village.

## The Story of Mr. Whitehouse – Chapter II: “Making Friends”

At the beginning of the 21st century, Mr. Whitehouse returned to the village of his birth. To some extent he used his social capital, gained in the period when he lived in the town, to establish himself in the village (e.g., his good connections to the police). But we prefer to address his negotiations of his position in the village. When Mr. Whitehouse returned to the village, he had relatively high economic capital at his disposal, which enabled him, when he later became a big-man, to employ potlatch strategies. Nevertheless, economic capital alone seems to be quite a burden in Pálenica. The concept of granting prestige on the basis of buying up former socialist property could not be found among the village inhabitants. On the contrary, there was a persisting practice based on the opinion that to steal from large properties is socially acceptable. Also, the unexpected economic success of Mr. Whitehouse was treated with suspicion of its legality. Therefore, Mr. Whitehouse was forced to cope with continuous pilferage of former Standard Farming Cooperative (JRD) property, now in his possession, and also with obstructions on the part of the municipal authority in gaining permissions for construction of buildings and purchase of land. To reinforce his authority as a businessman, Mr. Whitehouse had to choose between two alternatives: to reinforce his position to make his economic activities more accepted by the village people or to enforce legitimacy of his business plans through judicial and executive power.

Mr. Whitehouse chose the first way, “*to come to an agreement with the people,*” to enter the social networks of the village and to explain the importance of his business for both the village and its inhabitants. While making friendship ties and strengthening neighbor ties, he was very emphatic. “*I am able to come to an agreement with anybody, even with people way below my level... but it is important to get to know them.*”<sup>8</sup> It is possible to say that Mr. Whitehouse was really good in distinguishing various social groups within the locality and he defined himself the way he thought these groups would expect. In the first place, he presented himself as a denizen and Hungarian in response

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<sup>8</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 29, 2008.

to the importance of these concepts in the local culture. He was also a member of the new post-socialist economic elite in the village, which enabled him to align himself with other groups in the village. Even in this position he directed attention to family tradition: “*My family was the first that took the land back from cooperative property and became farmers as my grandfathers were.*”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time he let the people know that he really cared about the village. “*I wanted (...) to continue what I experienced in my childhood. When I was a kid, the village was growing. And then I saw just decline and I didn’t want to look at it.*”<sup>10</sup>

These strategies were used not only with the aim of maintaining his economic situation but also with the aim of strengthening it. The reason is that economic capital is just the initial capital needed to establish a big-man. Melanesian big-man creates his name by “amassing goods, most often pigs, shell monies and vegetable foods, and distributing them in ways which build a name for cavalier generosity, if not for compassion” (Sahlins 1963: 291). Nevertheless, social capital is fundamental, because “[t]he making of the faction (...) is the true making of the Melanesian big-man. It is essential to establish relations of loyalty and obligation on the part of a number of people such that their production can be mobilized for renown building external distribution.” (Sahlins 1963: 291). Mr. Whitehouse used the same strategies which Melanesian big-men use. He gained the loyalty of Pálenica inhabitants “by calculated generosity, by placing others in gratitude and obligation through helping them in some big way” (Sahlins 1963: 292).

To begin with, he tried to enlist villagers for his business, “[to] *persuade them, that if I got [money], they would have [it] too.*”<sup>11</sup> To use them for his own goals, Mr. Whitehouse utilized three ways to make the villagers obligated to him: relationship of employer and employee, relationship of lessor and renter of land, and relationship of buyer and seller of land and estates.

The relationship of lessor and buyer was always formed with denizen families using mutual trust between these families and that of Mr. Whitehouse. A denizen rents or sells the land to someone whom he personally knows and whom he trusts because of having a similar background and relation to the land, rather than to someone else. The sale was usually preferred by families with smaller portions of land that did not have their identity significantly based

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<sup>9</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 28, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 28, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 29, 2008.

on land ownership. Among families that were in the past owners of larger portions of land, the concept of land ownership is still important. Because of it, they are not willing to sell the land and while unable to farm it themselves, they tend to rent it. This does not apply only in the case of loss of trust, whether between families or between individuals. In this case these economic ties cannot form on any condition.

The relationship of lessor and renter also creates a kind of obligation on the part of the lessor, in our case Mr. Whitehouse. He does not want to admit that he could fail in the role of the lessor, so he subordinates other economic strategies to fulfill this role. *"In contrast to Baris,<sup>12</sup> he [Mr. Whitehouse] always pays. Even if he is not making money. I don't know where he gets the money from, but he always somehow pays us [his rent]."*<sup>13</sup>

This strategy on the one hand can be perpetuated by an endeavor to keep the trust and loyalty of persons to whom he is tied by these obligations. On the other hand it might be a way to retain the prestige of a trustworthy and successful businessman.

Considering the relationship of employer and employee, at first Mr. Whitehouse also aimed his attention at denizen families. In this respect he was the one who needed to trust his potential employee. As his business grew, he also started to employ people from other social groups. He addressed especially "the poor," people without economic capital. He interprets this change as a help to the indigent. *"Everyone who needs [a job] can come. I will give him a job."*<sup>14</sup>

It created long-term obligations on both sides. The fact that someone was given employment in a company of Mr. Whitehouse was positively valued as a confirmation of closeness to and trust on the part of Mr. Whitehouse. At the same time it also changed or rather bound means of mutual communication in other contexts. For example one of his employees, who also happens to be the sextoness in the local church, stated: *"He still was not sending money for the church. If it was not him [Mr. Whitehouse], I would have it out with him. But in this case I had to be careful."*<sup>15</sup>

It created a distance between Mr. Whitehouse and the rest of the village. This distance was clearly related to fact that Mr. Whitehouse had not entrusted

<sup>12</sup> Rival agricultural enterprise operating in the village.

<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Salesleddy, 47 years old, denizen, Hungarian, currently living in nearby city; fieldnotes February 17, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; fieldnotes April 28, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Secktonns, 33 years old, denizen, Hungarian; fieldnotes September 27, 2008.

any of the village inhabitants with an executive position in his firm. He chose his colleagues exclusively from outside of the local community.

But it would be unfair to say that Mr. Whitehouse built his social relations primarily in the context of his business, on a business relationship. He had several friends in the village. It is important to add that most of these friends belonged to the cream of the village society; they might be even perceived as prominent persons of prestigious social groups. But also in dealing with them he used two strategies to make them obligated to him. The first was offering them employment in some of his enterprises. *"I was thinking about quitting [my job] many times. And he [Mr. Whitehouse] told me: 'What kind of luck are you looking for there? Work for me. I will give you a job right away.'"*<sup>16</sup> No matter whether these offers were accepted or not, they were perceived as a principal part of building mutual friendship. The second strategy used by Mr. Whitehouse to confirm friendship relations was providing a place for holding private parties on his estate, the White House. Private parties (on the occasion of a marriage, a christening, a confirmation, a funeral, a birthday or a name-day) are perceived in the village context as important social events and their attendance is carefully monitored. The guests are invited on the basis of three relationships: kinship, friendship and prestige-confirming relations. Prestige-confirming relations were in the center of Mr. Whitehouse's interest. He was invited to attend these parties, at least because he was the one who enabled the people to hold these parties. In this way, he was able to strengthen ties with people he regarded as influential. Even though he designated them as friends, he valued their prestigious position in the village more than friendship ties and used them instrumentally to boost his own prestige.

However, there were also people in the village who resisted getting involved in Mr. Whitehouse's social networks. As he comments: *"I was forced to show them... by, you know, some non-traditional, quasi-illegal means, that this is my property and that I won't let them steal from me."*<sup>17</sup> Thus intimidation was one of other strategies to gain the loyalty of the village inhabitants.

Despite all these efforts, there remained some individuals in the village who resisted all of Mr. Whitehouse's attempts to make them obligated to him. These were on the one hand people who did not participate in village social

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<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Banclerc, 50 years old, denizen, Hungarian, friend of Mr. Whitehouse; fieldnotes September 23, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 28, 2008.

life or were even in direct opposition to it. They were recruited from the ranks of the socially marginalized, but some families of Slovak immigrants were also among them. On the other hand there were people who were direct opponents or even rivals of Mr. Whitehouse. Among them was also the previous mayor, who in addition complicated Mr. Whitehouse's endeavor to strengthen and extend his economic interests. As Mr. Whitehouse said: "*The Mayor had the only handicap; he wasn't able to come to an agreement with me. He had a billion reasons not to meet my wishes.*"<sup>18</sup> And that was the one and maybe the initial reason why Mr. Whitehouse did not content himself with economic power but decided to support it with political power. He ran for the office of mayor. He used his social capital, based mainly on his economic capital, and due to it he won the direct election (though by four votes only).

It may look as though we come to a contradiction with the fact that Mr. Whitehouse gained the status of mayor, an official office. Nevertheless, as we might have seen just a while ago, the power of Mr. Whitehouse did not originate in the mayoral status, but the acquisition of the mayoral status was just one of his strategies on his way to gaining power.

### **The Story of Mr. Whitehouse – Chapter III: "In the Light of Success"**

In 2006, the economic, political and to a great extent social capital of the village was concentrated in the hands of Mr. Whitehouse. Since that very moment, he has been using all of this resources to confirm and reconstitute his exceptional position within the village.

But power gained by big-man might not last forever. To keep his status recognized and to be respected accordingly, Melanesian big-man "must be prepared to demonstrate that he possesses the kind of skills that command respect" (Sahlins 1963: 291). Mr. Whitehouse needed to do so also. He has used the economic and social capital and political power which had concentrated in his hands to confirm and reconstitute his exceptional position in the village, his symbolic capital.

As mayor, he does not want to execute the role of a clerk himself but he leaves the agenda of the office in the hands of a highly competent clerk, the head of the office. But the villagers mostly take their mayor for a clerk. Thus

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<sup>18</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 29, 2008.

this decision contradicted the presentations of Mr. Whitehouse as the only one with denizen roots who can do something to enhance the village. For this crucial position he instead hired a person who was in no way bound to the village and didn't aspire to be so. This step was perceived negatively throughout the village, throughout all the social groups. What people did not see was that Mr. Whitehouse resolutely insisted upon being informed. By making all the decisions himself he ensured that he still retained everything under his control. He treated the village councilmen in the same way as he treated the head of the office. He did not accept their suggestions, but gave them tasks. He treated their function as an executive, not a decision-making one.

He did not just retain his aforementioned "quasi-illegal means," initially a specific kind of loyalty insurance, but he even extended them and transformed them into a system of a village security service. He used a system of TV cameras to monitor the movement of people in the village surroundings. *"I know the goings-on in the village. If someone shows up, they [the security service] immediately tell me."*<sup>19</sup>

His policy towards the village inhabitants can be characterized as a policy of sugar and whip. *"There are some people who had some problems [with the law]. There was one man whom I gave a job to, but he didn't appreciate that and soon left [the job]. After some time, he had some troubles with law. I put up bail for him and took him back to work, but it wasn't on the same terms [as his previous job]. You have to teach the people."*<sup>20</sup> But this attitude wasn't reserved for employees only. He treated all social groups the same way – e. g., he could contract small businessmen or deny them a contract.

He demanded that people behave according to his norms – he rejected drunkards, criminals and disloyal people. He also applied these manipulations to the employer-employee relationship, eventually by refusing sub-deliveries from small businessmen.

But as a result of this kind of modern serfdom, the social capital of Mr. Whitehouse weakened. Mr. Whitehouse thus balanced the authoritative-ness and control over the village inhabitants by investing in the village, thus employing aforementioned potlatch strategies. He freely granted his economic capital to ensure the functioning of the village. He sent his employees and his machinery to work in the village (e.g., snowplough in winter, repair of roof of

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<sup>19</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; fieldnotes May 2, 2008

<sup>20</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 4, 2008.

the village cultural center). He also financed social activities of the community (e.g., he donated wild boar meat and wine for village celebrations; his son acted as a DJ on these occasions). While doing this, Mr. Whitehouse was well aware of the financial expensiveness of his mayoralty. *"Everybody thinks that when I have [money], I can give [it for these celebrations]."*<sup>21</sup>

## **The Story of Mr. Whitehouse – Chapter IV: "How to Stay in the Light"**

It is possible to look at all the strategies of Mr. Whitehouse, including the gain of mayoral status as an accumulation of power. He did exactly the same as "what the big-man is doing: amassing a 'fund of power'." (Sahlins 1963: 292). Melanesian big-man had to possess personal qualities like "magical powers, gardening prowess, mastery of oratory style, perhaps bravery in war and feud" (Sahlins 1963: 291). Mr. Whitehouse also had to prove that he possessed values appreciated by the Slovak post-rural community. He was well aware that his prestige could not be based only on economic success, social relations, and political function.

He knew well that it is of the greatest importance to show to the community that he has the know-how valued by them. He had to start visualizing certain aspects of culture to create his style, his own image corresponding with his goals, which at the same time had to be understandable by the village inhabitants. He had to find symbolic manifestations by which he could persuade people about his qualities. In general he used the following strategies:

1. Verbal discourse was used to ensure the positive image of Mr. Whitehouse, based on positive as well as negative propaganda. He told stories in which he portrayed himself using three interlinked images. (1) The first image was of a man who led the village out of economic and moral poverty. It was the story of the decline of the village, of neighbors who did not trust each other and who stole property from each other, of the nonexistence of moral rules, of poverty and crime even among kin. This story was used as a challenge and argument why he had to save the village by becoming mayor. He succeeded in distributing

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<sup>21</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; fieldnotes May 1, 2008.

this story so far that people loyal to him adopted this story and further reproduced it. (2) The second image was of a man predestined for leadership and a successful leader. He told the story of his grandfather, who had been a village mayor before the Second World War. He found pleasure in comparing himself to his grandfather. By doing this, he explicitly listed his own personal qualities, like being enterprising, having moral authority, being wise and being mayor. (3) Last but not least was the image of a founder of a successful dynasty. This story aimed at distributing an idea of promotion of his family, of creating a tradition of fame and prosperity which would be carried further by his oldest son. *“My son, he is just like me. He will carry the family banner.”*<sup>22</sup>

2. Mr. Whitehouse maintained a different image from the other village inhabitants. He consistently presented the image of a successful politician and businessman. He has the biggest house in the village (called the White House by other people) and the best car. He wears either a suit or a hunting outfit. In a village ruled by Catholic morality he portrayed himself as a devout Catholic. And he successfully concealed the fact that apart from his wife he also had mistresses. By doing this, he demonstrated his distance from the other villagers. He manifested that it was he who was able to do such things.

3. His manifested image also consisted of a declaration and defense of Hungarianism in the area of South Slovakia that was becoming more and more Slovakized. By this he conformed to the Hungarians, i.e., denizens.

4. He also posed as a specialist and expert. He pretended to be competent to address anything and everything: from village history, traditions and condition of minorities in the Slovak Republic to the European Union agenda, economy, and management. To prevent questioning his competence, he has openly emphasized that to gain know-how, one does not need to study; it can be gained only by experience.

5. He was an organizer, an active participant, and above all a representative of social events in the village life, both public and private. He was also the leading figure of sightseeing trips to Hungary, which he organized as well. Moreover he innovated some of these events to make them more spectacular (e.g., by fireworks or erecting a maypole) in order to amplify his importance. These innovations were also often financed from his personal sources.

6. He tried to increase the number of village inhabitants loyal to him by, e.g., luring people from the town or other villages and to make his activities

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<sup>22</sup> Mr. Whitehouse, 42 years old, denizen, Hungarian; narrative interview April 29, 2008.



in the village visible. He provided services and investments which were visible to people in the community (renewal of a shop, repair of an office's roof, lighting of a local church, reconstruction of a playground, rebuilding a bus stop, installation of garbage cans, etc.)

7. Mr. Whitehouse also had to cope with his competitors, who possessed cultural capital valued by the villagers and who were not influenced by his economic and social capital. He had already coped with the former mayor. His main opponents became the priest and an enthusiast of local history. Mr. Whitehouse chose to dishonor these men. He defined them as incompetent and started to ignore them. Mr. Whitehouse tried to substitute their knowledge and social functions by attending mass in the town so that he did not need to use the service of the village priest and by using university researchers (which was our role in this story).

These strategies were in principle used with two aims. On the one hand Mr. Whitehouse used them to create or strengthen loyalty, either of a certain social group or of the whole village. On the other hand he used some of these strategies for a systematic creation of distance from the other villagers, to manifest his superiority to them. As we might have seen, it was the determination of Mr. Whitehouse that enabled him to gain power and to reinforce it systematically. Like among Melanesian big-men, "[t]he attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men." (Sahlins 1963: 289).

### **The Story of Mr. Whitehouse – Chapter V: "Big-Man's Fall"**

But as was mentioned earlier, the position of big-man is not unshakable. Big-man is not a political title which grants power to his bearer (at least for his term of office). It is more an "acknowledged standing in personal relations" (Sahlins 1963: 289). Because of its dependence on the strength of the created social network and maintaining personal relations "personal loyalty has to be made and continually reinforced; if there is discontent it may well be severed." (Sahlins 1963: 292). Recently Mr. Whitehouse ceased to fulfill his obligations to his coterie of loyal men. Because of this, he is criticized by the local community. He avoids any confrontation and it seems that he is losing his power.

There was tension in Mr. Whitehouse's social network even when he was at the peak of his power. Though he did not show it in public, he resented one

level of his exceptional position in the social networks of the village: he felt hurt when he was told the unpleasant truth by people who tried to restrain his influence. He was able to act against them from the position of power granted by his office. Needless to say, because of his unpopularity, he felt uncomfortable. But at the time he knew that even these “rebels” depended on him and they would bow down before him. A crucial change was brought about by an economic crisis in the second half of 2008. Mr. Whitehouse lost some of his contracts and changed his business plan. He massively reduced the staff in his firm. Although for a long time he resisted dropping villagers, at the end he was forced to do so. Since then he has been employing only a few village inhabitants. Because of this decline, he also dismissed the village security service.

The fact that people in the village were not economically dependent on Mr. Whitehouse was a real problem for him. Not only did it lessen his social prestige, but it also worsened his possibilities to manipulate the village inhabitants and to keep them within the borders he delineated for them.

The change of business strategy and loss of loyalties on the basis of employment and power relations connected to it did not have to mean resignation to social relations and positions in the social networks. Mr. Whitehouse was still the mayor and could utilize this potential. Nevertheless he himself probably did not see the sense in doing this. The manifestation of power executed through the manipulation of people was fundamental to Mr. Whitehouse. At the moment he was losing it he abandoned everything related to the symbolic capital which he gained as mayor.

He lost interest in acting as mayor in public. He ceased to personally organize local social events. He also neglected his friendship ties with village inhabitants. He even changed his rhetoric: instead of “WE” he started to use “I.”

This strategy logically underlined his fall. Not only did he not offer employment to village inhabitants, but he also did not even fulfill their expectations as an organizer and representative of the local community. The fact that he was forced to engage in manual labor in his firm and that he had to wear dungarees just confirmed that he had lost the status of big-man. “*The harvest is under way and you-know-who [Mr. Whitehouse] has to actively participate in it because, as he sacked Mr. Teemstar, he has to distribute gasoline to tractors and harvesters himself.*”<sup>23</sup> In the local community, he has started to be perceived as a man who failed.

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<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Banclerc, 51 years old, denizen, Hungarian, friend of Mr. Whitehouse; personal correspondence Pálenica – Prague July 25, 2009.

## Epilogue

In the Story of Mr. Whitehouse we tried to show how a Central European businessman living in a post-socialist village uses the same strategies of negotiation and constitution of power as the Melanesian big-man. Partly consciously, partly intuitively, Mr. Whitehouse used strategies that for a time let him have a range of capitals, which constitute symbolic capital, at his disposal. His rise, his quest for power, was long and slow, while his fall was sudden and quick.

But in respect to all of this, it is important to notice one fundamental thing. It is not the mayor's office that turns a man into a big-man. It is just the opposite. Mr. Whitehouse became mayor because he was a big-man. To be able to exert his power openly and in public, he was forced to legitimize it by means of a formal office, which corresponds to the concept of Central European culture. He fulfilled characteristics of big-man somehow unwittingly without the support of such a concept in his own culture. To some extent, it was Mr. Whitehouse's endeavor to gain material wealth that brought this role into existence and thus made a Central European businessman a big-man.

The fall of Mr. Whitehouse is more symbolic than real. From the economic point of view, he is still the biggest farmer in the village and remains a person with the will and courage to run a business. But in many other ways he just turned away from the community. Now he pursues his own way to extend his material wealth. But the people in the community still pay attention to his actions, maybe surprisingly or maybe logically. They still pay attention to the White House, which they named in the days of the power peak of their "leader," their "master," their big-man.

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