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The 'Cursed Channel': utopian and dystopian imaginations of landscape transformation in twentieth-century Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the utopian and dystopian discourses surrounding the Main Channel of the Danube Valley, often referred to as the 'Cursed Channel', which flows through the eastern floodplain of the Danube southward across the Great Hungarian Plain. Plans for the channel were originally drawn up at the end of the nineteenth century during the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the channel was only completed after the dissolution of the monarchy in the 1920s. The debates concerning the social and ecological aspects of this project were part of the broader political discourse about modernity, traditionalism and conservation in Hungary. The scheme was first publicly termed the Cursed Channel in 1937 by a politician from the region, Lajos Dinnyés, who later served as Hungary's prime minister for a brief period after World War II. By the late 1940s, with the rise of Soviet influence, Hungary was caught up in the sovietization of science and policy, including water management. In the wake of the gradual communist takeover of Hungary, the epithet of the Cursed Channel gained new currency, influencing discourse on local implementations of the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature. Tracing the history of the channel and people's perceptions of it, the paper illuminates the construction of a hydrosocial dystopia, and explores the dialectics of utopian and dystopian imaginations of hydrosocial landscapes. We argue that dystopian and utopian geographical imaginaries connected to the Cursed Channel were influential in the transformations of landscape and hydrosocial governance in twentieth-century Hungary.

Walking along the nature trails across the wetlands conserved in the Kiskunság National Park, one might notice information signs that mention the striking name of the neighbouring channel: 'Átok-csatorna', that is, the 'Cursed Channel'.[1] This name refers to the Main Channel of the Danube Valley (Duna-völgyi főcsatorna, hereafter: DVCS), which was built in the 1910s and 1920s to drain the lower Danube-Tisza Interfluve; it flows through the eastern floodplain of the Danube southward across the Great Hungarian Plain, beginning close to Budapest and joining the Danube in the town of Baja (Fig. 1). Recent decades have witnessed a significant increase in public appreciation of remaining wetlands worldwide.[2] In the area, a growing number of wetlands have come under official protection since the 1970s, and several wetland restorations have been carried out.[3] Despite conservation efforts, however, by the early 1980s there was a severe decline in the level of groundwater in the region, which threatened the sustainability of several lakes

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[1] The Hungarian name itself is ambiguous: the compound 'Átok-csatorna' can mean both that the channel is cursed and — maybe even more so —that the channel itself is the curse. We chose to use the first meaning because it sounds more natural in English.

[2] H. Prince, *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes,* Chicago, 1997; G.V.T. Matthews, *The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: its History and Development*, Gland, 1993.

[3] A. Iványosi-Szabó, Ahogy elkezdődött — a természetvédelem előzményei a Duna–Tisza közén, in: A. Iványosi-Szabó (Ed.), *A Kiskunsági Nemzeti Park Igazgatóság Negyven Éve*, Kecskemét, 2015, 11–16.

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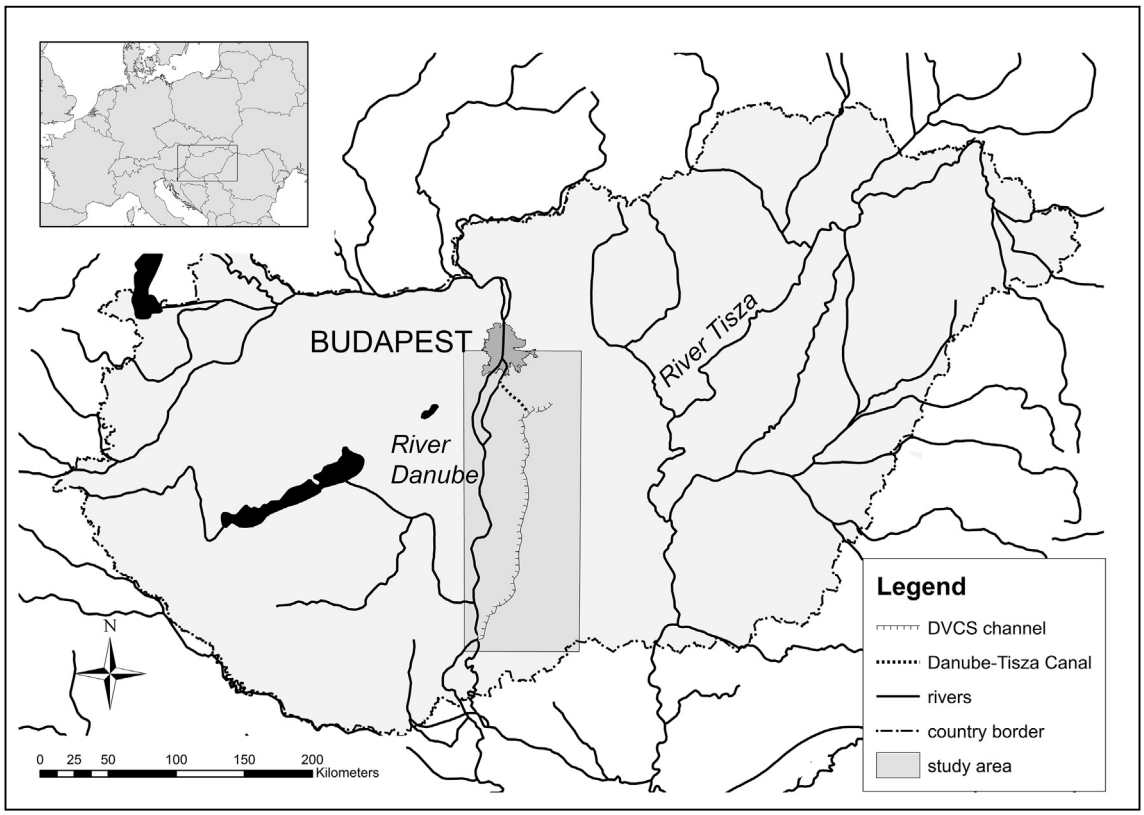

Fig. 1. Location of the study area in Hungary. Source: the authors.

and fens.[4] Today the channel is blamed for destroying the wetlands, which are now perceived as a valuable part of Hungary's natural heritage. For much of the twentieth century, however, transforming nature by draining wetlands and irrigating drier territories was seen as a necessary part of 'progress' in order to increase agricultural productivity.[5] This paper examines the history of the DVCS and its surrounding wetlands, from the first plans for the channel in the Austro-Hungarian period at the end of the nineteenth century, through the completion of the drainage scheme in the interwar years of an independent but much diminished Kingdom of Hungary, to the irrigation projects of the post-1945 communist era (Fig. 2). By focusing on the evolution of the channel's perceptions and the discourses surrounding each stage of its development, the paper aims to contribute to the general understanding of the political ecology of hydrosocial governance in Hungary.

The case of the Cursed Channel suggests that political projects are inevitably environmental projects, and that conversely, environmental projects cannot escape being entangled in politics.[6] Hence, following Erik Swyngedouw, the social and political context behind the contested meanings of nature should be viewed and investigated as the hybrid entanglements of culture and nature, or hydrology and society.[7] As suggested by Rutgerd Boelens and others, hydrosocial territories are understood as 'the contested imaginary and socio-environmental materialization of a spatially bound multi-scalar network in which humans, water flows, ecological relations, hydraulic infrastructure, financial means, legal-administrative arrangements and cultural institutions and practices are interactively defined, aligned and mobilized through epistemological belief systems, political hierarchies and naturalizing discourses'.[8] From our point of view, the 'Cursed Channel' can be analysed as an example of a contested imaginary, and as a vehicle to influence and manipulate discourses about hydrosocial territories. Such an approach is valuable and illuminating, given that polarized rhetoric that reduces options to either a 'blessing or curse' is not uncommon even today in discussions about water management.[9] These sorts of polarized labels expose the utopian/dystopian thinking behind hydromodernization and the control of water in general. Other scholars have already emphasized the role of the geographical imaginary in transformations of hydrosocial

[4] B. Kohán and J. Szalai, Spatial analysis of the shallow groundwater level monitoring network in the Danube-Tisza Ridge using semivariograms, *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 63 (2014) 379–400.

[5] Similarly to colonial Mexico: A. Sluyter, The making of the myth in postcolonial development: material-conceptual landscape transformation in sixteenth-century Veracruz, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (1999) 394.

[6] E. Swyngedouw, *Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain*, Cambridge, 2015, 1–37.

[7] W. Cronon, Introduction: in search of nature, in: W. Cronon (Ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature,* New York, 1996, 23–56; B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, 1993; S. Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*, London, 2002.

[8] R. Boelens, J. Hoogesteger, E. Swyngedouw, J. Vos, and P. Wester, Hydrosocial territories: a political ecology perspective, *Water International* 41 (2016) 1.

[9] J. van Schilfgaarde, Irrigation — a blessing or a curse, *Agricultural Water Management* 25 (1994) 203–219; Dams — blessing or curse?, WWF, http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/water/dams_initiative/ last accessed 30 January 2017; D. Tadesse, The Nile: Is it a curse or blessing?, *Institute for Security Studies Papers* 174 (2008) 1–27.