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Marketing Selves

Constructing Civil Society and Selfhood in Post-socialist Hungary

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Abstract ■ This article examines civil society initiatives in Hungary which urge individuals to re-make themselves as entrepreneurs and unfettered free-agents. These projects cast the subjects of formerly state socialist regimes as prone to pessimism, dissimulation, and manipulation, and contrast them to a valorized 'Western' Self. Treating these implicit classificatory schema as a species of Occidentalism, I discuss how the Western Self has been understood as self-authoring, in contrast to its determined Others. Among these Others were the subjects of state socialism, figured as the products of a totalizing system. I discuss the origins of this figuration, and draw upon Bourdieu's work to situate the ambivalent responses that greet civil society projects. I suggest that in the name of bridging differences between erstwhile Cold War adversaries, civil society projects reinscribe the transition away from state socialism as rupture rather than as continuity; and are part of a larger project of re-imagining Selves and Others in the post-Cold War period.

Keywords ■ civil society ■ Cold War ■ dissimulation ■ East/West ■ Hungary ■ Occidentalism ■ Self/Other ■ totalitarianism

Introduction

The transformation of civil society from conceptual curio of philosophers and political theorists to omnipresent catch phrase has occurred in a little over a decade, and has much to do with the collapse of European state socialism and the end of the Cold War. Revived initially by dissident intellectuals in Poland and Hungary, the concept served as a touchstone for opposition to regimes of state power which were viewed as having colonized society (Arató, 1981). This usage emphasized the structural conditions for the autonomy and liberty of subject citizens: the institutionalization of democracy and 'rule of law' would presumably place limits on the encroachments of state power. In this vision the project of transition away from state socialism was a matter of recapitulating (either as belated development or as the continuation of an interrupted project) the historical disaggregation of power held to have occurred in Western Europe

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and to have provided the conditions for individual sovereignty and self-constitution.

Since these first stirrings civil society has gained global currency, and is today used to advance – among other things – challenges to authoritarian rule, demands for local autonomy, empowerment at the grassroots, and neo-liberal agendas. While this plurality of meanings and objectives might be viewed as following unremarkably from the conceptual richness and semantic elasticity of the term – that is, as an instance of different projects drawing selectively and strategically on the civil society concept's heterogeneous lineages – I suspect more can and should be made of this somewhat striking variation. More specifically, although it has become commonplace to question the utility of the concept on the grounds that it obscures more than it elucidates, I want to suggest that the confusion around civil society might be productive in its own right. I'll develop this idea in relation to civil society initiatives in Hungary.

Although the flow of civil society techniques, dispositions and outlooks into the countries of the former Soviet Bloc is obviously linked to the collapse of state socialism, it is also part of a larger global phenomenon. With the advent of global neo-liberalism, bilateral aid is increasingly being channeled through NGOs (Edwards and Hulme, 1996), and is being dispersed in tandem with projects of institutional reform that take culture and the activities and dispositions of individual subjects as their object. Here we can think of two different types of initiatives, each of which represents a different strand of the current heterogeneous civil society revival. On one hand, we find civil society projects which promote the expression and recognition of minority, indigenous, or local cultures, and which are usually linked with the leftward leaning, social movements strand of the current revival (cf. Doane; and Medeiros, this issue). On the other hand, we see a trend to treat civil society as the core of a uniquely Euro-American cultural patrimony, whose successful transplant is deemed to be critical, yet not equally likely for all regions (Hall, 1998). Two commonalities unite these differently nuanced visions. First, each is highly congruent with the diminution of state responsibilities which stands at the heart of neo-liberal agendas. Additionally, each appears to be implicated in the revival and politicization of an older, highly essentialized notion of culture, as content rather than process.

In Hungary these two disparate strands of the civil society revival intertwine in interesting ways. Initiatives undertaken in the name of civil society often aim *both* to liberate entrepreneurial energies and patterns of grassroots association that were allegedly suppressed under nearly 50 years of state socialism, *and* to reorient the behavioral and conceptual repertoires in which the negative legacy of state socialism presumably persists. Put differently, they often put forth a message which simultaneously emphasizes the need for self-expression and self-actualization, *and* the need for conversion, or radical self-reform. This paradoxical message commands a certain authority, yet also violates a good deal of common sense.

In what follows I will discuss some of the ways in which this contradictory message comes to be articulated, together with the distinctly ambivalent responses that greet it. In so doing I will suggest that the conjuncture of persuasion and skepticism is an important effect of civil society projects in East Central Europe, and can be usefully explored with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. While a detailed review of Bourdieu's work is well beyond the scope of this article, a highly synoptic discussion will provide context for my analysis and an overview of my argument.

The poor logic of civil society

In his model of social reproduction, Bourdieu identifies different forms of capital, among them economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Capital can be converted from one form to another, and in its totality has a tendency 'to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form . . . [and] to persist in its being' (Bourdieu, 1986: 241). Although social inequalities are patterned according to the differential accumulation of capital, they tend to be misrecognized, or regarded as natural. The benefits that accrue to holders of cultural capital in particular are commonly thought to do so spontaneously, as if flowing from possessors' *natural* attributes:

[Cultural capital] manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition . . . [and is predisposed] to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition. (Bourdieu, 1986: 245)

Generally speaking conversions among different forms of capital produce and reinforce the *habitus*, often glossed by Bourdieu as durable dispositions, or socially constituted cognitive capacities (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986).

The misrecognition of capital's circulation and accumulation is enhanced by the operation of 'poor logic', which Bourdieu posits as an axiomatic feature of everyday perception. Poor logic

. . . is able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole, only because . . . [poor logic] presupposes a sacrifice of rigor for the sake of simplicity and generality. . . . (Bourdieu, 1990: 86)

Poor logic uses analogy and homology to generate resemblances and associations which 'are interchangeable in practice', and united by a 'fuzzy coherence [which] cannot withstand the test of logical criticism' (Bourdieu, 1990: 87).¹ Particular resemblances and associations generated by poor logic, however illogical according to *formal logic*, become conventionalized in historically specific contexts, that is, in relation to particular instantiations of power (Bourdieu, 1990: 97).

Despite criticisms that this model comprises a tautological construct which cannot capture processes of social contestation and change, I will

argue that the model *is* useful – albeit indirectly – for understanding the transitional circumstances of East Central Europe. With the destabilization of established power relations in the region, we stand to catch a glimpse of economies of practice in the re-making. Bourdieu's figuration of misperceptions about capital is suggestive of how civil society projects are insinuated in the emergence of new economies of practice. If as a general proposition capital is 'a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible' (Bourdieu, 1986: 241–2), it nonetheless circulates and reproduces in ways which create a *perception* of endless possibility.

Roulette . . . gives a fairly accurate image of this imaginary universe of perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation . . . *in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one*, every soldier has a marshal's baton in his knapsack, and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, *so that at each moment anyone can become anything*. (Bourdieu, 1986: 241, emphasis added)

As we'll see, in the name of building liberal democracy civil society promoters likewise insist that 'at each moment anyone can become anything'. In so doing they present two contradictory visions of limitless individual choice and agency. On one hand, this vision of infinite possibility is represented as *following from* a rupture between the present (post-socialist) moment and the previous (socialist) one; yet on the other hand, such individual optimism is also presented as being the *condition* for severing a tainted socialist past from a promising liberal future. In sum, the new, normatively vaunted free subject is represented at once as *both* cause and effect.

These propositions belong to liberal capitalism's own repertoire of conventionalized misrecognition, particularly as articulated during the Cold War. In this way the civil society vision can be regarded as 'poor logic' in Bourdieu's sense, that is, at least until it is translated into the post-socialist context, where its fuzziness is all too apparent. Despite the interest and attention commanded by the invitation to re-make oneself as a self-actualizing agent, such messages also attract skepticism vis-à-vis common sense understandings about what is possible and proper. If the promotion of civil society is implicated in the emergence of a new *habitus*, its contours might best be sought in the simultaneous yet disjunctive effects of persuasion and incoherence these initiatives are producing.

Marketing civil society in Hungary

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Szeged, Hungary over a two-year period in the mid-1990s, and during numerous shorter visits to the country beginning in 1989. Szeged lies in the country's southeast, within 20 miles of the Romanian and Serbian borders. With a population of approximately

175,000, it is the fourth largest city in Hungary. Historically Szeged has been the economic and cultural center of the southern Great Plain, and today has a diversified economy based on light industry, agriculture and services. Home to numerous educational institutions, an opera and theater, the town has long prided itself on a certain provincial gentility. As in much of the country, privatization has spawned new entrepreneurial opportunities and has hastened processes of accumulation and differentiation. Additionally, since the mid-1990s the town has increasingly been regarded by domestic and international capital as an attractive base from which to spread east and south.

In Szeged, as in the rest of Hungary, many different types of initiatives are advanced and sheltered under the rubric of 'civil society'. This is, in part, a matter of semantics: the term for civil society in Hungarian (*polgári társadalom*) is much like the German *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in its range of connotations. The adjective for 'civil' (*polgári*) conveys both the sense of *citoyen* and *bourgeois*, and thus simultaneously nods in the direction of the political and the economic. As in the German, the term in Hungarian can signal an emphasis on guarantees of associational activity and political participation, and on liberal economics.² This semantic breadth was reflected in the wide array of initiatives in Szeged identified with civil society. Accordingly, in my first efforts to learn about the activities that were occurring in the name of civil society I cast a wide net, canvassing people involved in non-profit ventures (typically with foreign funding), profit-oriented management consultancies, and grassroots citizen groups concerned with the quality of local life and government. In all, I examined seven initiatives which identified themselves with civil society.

The leading figures across this seemingly diverse spectrum of initiatives turned out to be comprised of a small cadre of individuals, with the majority playing leadership roles in at least two or more of the local projects identified with civil society. This fluidity of personnel was matched by a marked fungibility of resources: outside funding earmarked for retraining projects and the support of grassroots citizens' initiatives was often channeled by way of the private ventures of local entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs attracted both outside funding and their private clientele on the basis of claims to be experts in the teaching of 'civic' techniques. Moreover, the leading figures in these initiatives traced their own involvements to prior participation in civic training projects, or to educational or business experience in Western Europe or the United States.

A few features of this picture suggested that mastery of the language, outlooks and practices promoted in the name of civil society could be usefully viewed as an important new form of cultural capital.³ Once mastered, such techniques and dispositions seemed to enhance – at least for a lucky few – access to other resources, especially (though not exclusively) those flowing from international sources. By the mid- to late-1990s it appeared as if the flow of substantial amounts of foreign aid was being mediated by a

small number of individuals who had been among the first recipients of cultural and educational support in the years immediately preceding and following 1989. Although it seemed to me that auspicious *timing* was the most important factor in constituting this small cadre as privileged financial and cultural intermediaries – a matter of getting in on the bottom, as it were – their own personal narratives and professional self-presentations emphasized their mastery of ‘civic’ techniques, outlooks, and dispositions in explaining their success.⁴ To summarize: it appeared as if certain actors were able to reap disproportionate benefits from civil society techniques and dispositions on account of the early timing of their primitive accumulation. Yet their ability to maximize returns on these assets depended on disseminating the message that their successes were subject to transmission, imitation, and reproduction.

Viewed as a potential form of cultural capital, civil society techniques and dispositions are still nascent and unstable, because their reproduction is not yet stabilized and automatic. According to Bourdieu, part of the specificity of cultural capital relates to the fact that its convertibility to economic capital is not readily apparent; rather, the benefits that accrue to its possessors are thought to do so naturally (Bourdieu, 1984). In Szeged, however, claimants to this new, potential form of cultural capital seemed to be actively involved in maximizing returns on their civil society assets, and in covering the paths whereby civil society expertise could translate into material gain. In some cases a single individual’s participation in more than one venture was common knowledge, but in others it was distinctly shadowed, and disclosed only in gossip. In one instance this was clearly a matter of keeping under wraps the fact that private business agendas were being advanced through civic fora; in another the discretion seemed motivated by the desire to maintain eligibility for funding earmarked for non-profit purposes.

If civil society promoters seemed to be actively interested in sheltering from public view the precise channels through which their expertise could be converted into profit, so too was their message often notably opaque on the precise means by which a ‘civic’ world view and style of comportment could translate into material success and general well-being. Let’s take the example of a weekend seminar offered to ‘new entrepreneurs’ at a privately owned consulting firm in Szeged which also received funding from the European Union to sponsor retraining programs. Participants had paid a hefty sum to attend a workshop led by an American entrepreneur who had set up his own consulting business in Budapest. The American had a perfectly choreographed routine: standing in front of his audience of approximately 50 people, microphone in hand, he preached the gospel of how to be a ‘winner’. His full-time translator, also with microphone, was in perfect sync:

Don’t sell a bad product, because it’s too complicated. It’s a bad way to do business because you fool yourself as well as the customer. As winners we want

to get away from complication; we want only simplicity and truth. This will give you a large income and also make you sleep better at night.

Winners are likable. This means extroversion: we like people who like others. We don't just pretend; we *genuinely* like people because it is too complicated to pretend. We like other people because we *decide* to like them.

The fact that efforts to transmit the civic virtues of transparency, honesty and generalized trust can eventuate in such familiar banalities follows – in part – from the sociology of the large institutions from which they issue, and from their exploitability by entrepreneurs. At a distant remove from their international points of origin, and perhaps by virtue of the fact that civil society projects seem to channel funding much more efficiently than they do any coherent program and detailed vision of implementation (Wedel, 2000), their assimilation of (or reduction to) self-help programs is hardly surprising. At the same time, however, such familiar and commodified techniques gain a different resonance when translated into the post-socialist context, and circulated under the banner of civil society.

In addition to making overt prescriptions, these discourses also both grow out of and become vehicles for communicating implicit classificatory schema. These implicit features are genealogically related to Cold War-era discursive regimes which defined oppositions between a totalitarian socialist Other and the democratic Self. A mapping of some of these genealogical ties will permit a better understanding of the meanings and effects of civil society discourses and projects in the post-socialist context.

The Totalitarian Other

With varying emphases Western commentators have often read subjects of state socialist regimes as prone to dissimulating behavior, as conducting themselves ritualistically as opposed to spontaneously, and as favoring masks over 'sincerity' and 'real' expression. In a 1974 essay political scientist Ken Jowitt claimed that dissimulating practices and orientations were typical adaptive responses to a regime that sought to penetrate and politicize all areas of life. Based on 'fear and avoidance', dissimulation is '“deceptive manipulation”, the conscious adoption of false appearances' (Jowitt, 1974: 1184). Jowitt views dissimulation as,

... the posture, response, and strategy that integrates [public and private arenas]. In such a society, one often finds a highly calculative and selective recognition of regime authority. This stance takes the form, not so much of political opposition, as of a strong anti-political privatism in which family and personal interests are emphasized at the expense of regime and societal interests. (Jowitt, 1974: 1184)

Similarly, Jowitt posited in a 1992 volume:

As I argued eighteen years ago, dissimulation becomes the effective (and ethically as well as politically debilitating) bond between the domineering official and societal supplicant during the entire period of Leninist rule. For four decades, dissimulation became the central feature of the population's (misre)presentation of its public or, better, visible self. Dissimulation reflected the fear and avoidance responses of a subordinate population. . . . (Jowitt, 1992: 288)

In their well-received 1992 ethnography of Hungarian steel workers, Burawoy and Lukács present a much more sympathetic reading of 'dissimulation' as tactical resistance (as opposed to Jowitt's symptomatic pathology). The authors adopt the phrase 'painting socialism' to convey how socialist workers experienced the ideological exhortations they were routinely subjected to as transparently artificial – as efforts to 'paint' reality in ways that bore scant resemblance to lived experience. According to the authors the overtness of these official representations bred in state socialism's subjects a capacity to distinguish between 'ideology' and 'reality' which eludes the subjects of capitalist regimes:

Within state socialism . . . people live in two worlds: an ideological world and a lived world. But they are both real. What is clear is the contrast between these worlds. State socialism engenders a heightened consciousness of the discrepancy between ideology and reality, between proclamation and experience, between the affirmation of justice, democracy, and efficiency and the ubiquity of injustice, dictatorship, and inefficiency. (Burawoy and Lukács, 1992: 82–3)

Hence, even as dissimulation is recast in a heroic light, it remains a defining mark of difference between subjects of socialist and capitalist regimes.

The conceptual template of radical difference was echoed in the formulations of the civil society promoters I interacted with. This typically involved a diagnosis of the ills of post-socialist society, and the claim that individuals and organizational patterns required drastic change in order to overcome a debilitating legacy. Among the most common contrasts put forth in the name of civil society were those between altruism and selfishness; positive and negative attitudes; transparency over deception; and even attentiveness to interpersonal etiquette and personal hygiene as opposed to their neglect.

This dichotomized rendering of a socialist self requiring reform on one hand, and the valorized subject of a new order on the other, was somewhat at odds with the vernacular common sense of the people to whom it was addressed. Everyday understandings seemed to discern a common Europeaness where the civil society vision posited essential difference. By the same token, the civil society vision of a necessary rupture between past and future stood in pointed contrast to everyday understandings of the temporal and spatial contiguity of 'Central' and 'Western' Europe. If civil society discourses suggested that individuals needed to apply themselves to programs of self-improvement to cross a great divide, common sense proposed that arrival was just around the corner. Despite uncertainty about

which portal would lead to the promised land, there was little doubt about its imminent accessibility. Ironically, the very notion that the gap to be bridged was slight – a matter of acquiring a foreign language, getting the right job break or sending a child abroad – also informed a widespread interest in and receptivity to these various ‘civil’ initiatives.

Is it possible that the same common sense which predisposes actors to attend to civil society messages in the first place might itself be undergoing a shift in response to civil society initiatives? Are hopes and desires, and everyday theorizations of how social change occurs, being rearticulated in light of a new and authoritative vision which is imprinted with the implicit classificatory schema of civil society discourses? While a definitive answer to these questions is beyond the scope of my ethnographic research, I do want to suggest that certain features of the civil society project might work in this direction. Specifically, I suggest the possibility that ‘transition’ itself is being reinscribed as rupture rather than continuity, and that folk notions of causality and agency might be undergoing modification in the process.

From Totalitarian Other to market winner

The classificatory regimes which provide the rationale and define the urgency for civil society’s export to the countries of the former socialist bloc might be usefully viewed as a species of Occidentalism. James Carrier has neatly described Occidentalism as the implicit self-imaginings by which the West understands itself in dialectical contrast to its Others (Carrier, 1992). Cold War-era discourses diagnosed the otherness of the subjects of state socialist regimes in terms of their alleged inclination to selfishness, calculation, and dissimulation. While this figuration of the Other gains explicit definition in relation to the ‘system’ of ‘Leninist Rule’, it also comprises a caricatured representation of responses to tensions endemic to liberalism and market culture. These tensions concern the possibility of harmonizing the particular and the universal; reconciling self-interest with a greater good; and the relation between underlying motives and outward appearances. In the figure of the Totalitarian Other, the tensions themselves are resituated; more specifically, their vexing persistence in the ‘West’ fades from view. A backward glance will remind us just how persistent, intractable, and culturally salient these tensions have been in the ‘West’.

The emergence of the idea of civil society in the Scottish Enlightenment was coincident with the disruptions of market expansion, which rendered newly problematic relations between ‘the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interests, individual passions and public concerns’ (Seligman, 1992: 5). According to Adam Seligman, the concept’s original promise of resolution rested on assumptions that no longer obtain in the modern world: 18th-century concepts of moral affections, natural sympathy and the mutuality of individual

recognition provided an inner-worldly basis for the legitimation of private interests. Moreover, insofar as the concept of civil society is identified with North American political traditions, it owes a substantial debt to ascetic Protestantism, by way of 'a new vision of the individual as a moral and autonomous agent . . . linked to . . . [the] introjection of grace within the orders of the world' (Seligman, 1992: 71). For Seligman, today's civil society revival is a dead end, precisely because there is nothing to stand in the place of grace; that is, nothing to avert the problem of authorizing oneself as a moral agent.

At a later moment the Scottish thinkers' understanding of the arena of exchange (and with it civil society) as an ethical arena predicated on mutual recognition gave way to a heightened concern about the problematic space between outward appearances and underlying motives: can an apparent coincidence of interest be trusted, or does seeming mutuality mask darker motives? This increasingly acute anxiety is nicely personified in that quintessential figure of the 19th-century American imagination, Melville's *Confidence Man*: the con-man who could win a stranger's trust by 'sincere' avowals of his own sterling character, only to take advantage of his trusting new acquaintance. The danger represented by this figure's duplicity and hypocrisy was related to the early American elevation of *sincerity* to the status of core civic virtue. Underlying this danger is an inherent instability in the opposition between 'reality' and 'appearance', or 'being' and 'seeming'. In the words of one present-day Melville scholar:

In a society where self-authoring is as common as self-parenting – people choose their parts then write their lines – there is no longer any source of reliable authorization or legitimation . . . [a]ll evidence about, emanating from, other people is *potentially* suspect, synthetic, improvised. . . . Just who and how much is to be trusted? There are no self-authenticating signs; but signs are all we have. (Tanner, 1989: xxviii–xxix)

With the collapse of state socialism, and the privatization and welfare state contraction which have followed in its wake, the tensions presented here might reasonably be expected to intensify. Yet today's civil society programs often locate such tensions in the past rather than in the present, and dismiss them by prescriptive fiat. Quoting again from the civil society entrepreneur I cited above:

Winners always work for something bigger than themselves. We all know someone who works only for himself. Only thinking about yourself is bad business; if someone really cares about himself, he cares about others, because this has a good impact on your own income and well being.

Not only are self-interest and the common good posited to be potentially convergent rather than conflictual, their potential synthesis is situated in the domain of individual agency and choice ('we like people because we *decide* to like them'). To reject this recipe for self-actualization is to align oneself with the negativity of the socialist past, and to miss the train to a

shining future, as it were. Skepticism about the techniques being promoted in the name of civil society becomes evidence of the problem that needs to be fixed, a symptom of the malaise that requires a cure. In the context of the imperative to remake oneself as a 'winner', failure to realign oneself accordingly makes one a willful loser. Additionally, the entrepreneur's narrative presents adoption of the techniques he is promoting *as both the mark and the means* of an individual's achievement of the moral and material bounties associated with the move away from state socialism. Much as was the case for Weber's Puritans, to act 'as if' is the best means of coping with uncertainty as to whether or not one is among the elect. As in 17th-century New England, in the new markets of Central Europe confidence substitutes for certainty. The hutzpah that was dissimulation now becomes grace.

Another ethnographic vignette will highlight the ways in which this prescription to conduct oneself as a self-actualizing agent can be problematic. I first met Ildikó in New York in 1994 when she was visiting the US as a participant in a two-year pilot program based in Budapest, whose goal was to train an initial cadre of Hungarian experts in the ways of NGOs. The program had been conceived by two Americans, who then received funding from an American foundation. The two had proposed that indigenous NGOs (defined in this vision to include everything from hobby clubs to new social movements) could play a pivotal role in the building of a vibrant new civil society in the wake of socialism's collapse. Twelve trainees had been competitively selected, and the vision was that after two years of intensive training and activity in Hungary and abroad, the two American program organizers could depart, having seeded the terrain of civil society with twelve experts to continue their work.

Ildikó was serious, ambitious, and initially very enthusiastic. With time, however, she became disillusioned. In her opinion all that the two program organizers had to teach her had been imparted early on, and in Ildikó's estimation it fell far short of what she would need to know to do her future work effectively. Yet when she expressed her sense of unpreparedness and her desire to acquire more technical expertise, her mentors simply told her not to worry, to 'just give it a shot'. This was very offensive to her; as if she were being instructed to pretend to an expertise, to stake a claim to power that she did not in fact possess. Additionally, with time the dissatisfaction of the trainees was compounded by suspicion that the whole program had been dreamt up as a two-year boondoggle for the organizers.

This example suggests that civil society projects provide a discursive interface which is articulating exchanges between indigenous subjects of the 'transitions' and powerful foreign interests and actors, and is performing a gate-keeping function. These initiatives also promote new styles *which simultaneously prescribe their own means of naturalization*; put more bluntly, they promise to be auto-actualizing. Taking the two examples I've given the message is something to the effect of 'Don't scheme! Don't pretend! Don't worry, just be!' or 'The best way to guarantee your self-interest is to pretend

you have none'. Yet this can come across as an invitation to traffic in fictitious cultural capital. Hence, whereas Ildikó understood success in the field of NGOs to depend on mastery of a constituted and recognized body of knowledge, her American counterparts seemed to suggest that it was rather their own techniques of spontaneity and improvisation which needed to be imitated.

The imperative to conduct oneself as a self-actualizing agent, or to abandon concerns about what guarantees one's expertise is, in a sense, the imperative to regard oneself as an uncaused cause.⁵ Yet there is something intrinsically paradoxical about making *prescriptive* propositions about causality: whereas prescription falls within the domain of the normative 'ought', causality is situated in the realm of the descriptive 'is'. On what grounds does one jettison existing rules of causality that are understood to obtain quite independently of individual choice or agency? How *does* one constitute oneself as self-constituting?⁶ Since its inception in the 18th century, the concept of civil society has addressed itself to this same problem, and has been crucially implicated in the figuration of Occidental subjects as self-constituting agents. Moreover, this figuration has gained definition and coherence in contrast to the Occident's determined Others, among them the Totalitarian Other.

The origins and Totalitarianism

As a trope of Occidentalism, civil society has helped to tell the story of how Western individuals have come into being as sovereign and self-constituting. In very general terms, this is the familiar story of the fragmentation of absolute power, a process which comes to be institutionalized in conjunction with the differentiation of state, economy, and society, and with the emergence of distinct public and private spheres, and new organizations of the self. In this origin myth,⁷ historically determined processes precipitate entities notably freed of the determining influences which have called them into being. Thus, it is an origin myth which erases any fixed point of origin: a genealogy of autogenesis, autochthony, self-creation.⁸

The genealogy of the Occidental self as uncaused cause is necessarily elusive, and has hitherto been legible largely in relation to its Others, most recently the Totalitarian Other. The circumstances of the Cold War urged the classification of Soviet regimes as radically Other. Transposed in a particular fashion, elements of the civil society story *qua* Occidental origin myth would accomplish this, in the modeling of 'totalitarian' social formations. This becomes more clear if we note differences between modernization theory of the post-war period and the concurrently emergent model of totalitarianism. If modernization theory was quite adept at 'othering' its objects, it did so in essentially *evolutionary* terms, leaving open the possibility of 'underdeveloped' societies eventually converging with

those of the modernized, industrialized West. Totalitarian societies on the other hand were held to be radically Other, having different laws of physics as it were. According to Stark and Nee:

In its classic expression, the totalitarian model portrayed the Leninist party as bent on establishing total control over Soviet society through mass terror and party-dominated hierarchies, destroying the boundaries between state and society and eliminating any autonomous social institutions and processes. (Stark and Nee, 1989: 3)

If modernization theory maintained the unity of the myth of autogenesis, preserving both of its moments (determination and self-constitution) through an emphasis on the gradual, dialectical processes by which social formations resolve into self-constituting entities and individuals, the totalitarian model sunders the myth's two moments. Put somewhat differently, whereas modernization theory subsumes the logical contradiction or moment of rupture, the totalitarian model hypostatizes the two moments, reifying them as two distinctly constituted and antithetical social formations. In much the same way that an earlier anthropology distinguished 'cold' societies (locked into ritualized structures of repetition, kin ordered, or characterized by a unity of base and superstructure, depending on authorial orientation), likewise the exercise of power in totalitarian regimes was held to be all determining. Following from this, the dispositions and orientations of subjects of these regimes were seen to be directly conditioned behaviors, adaptive reflexes, and hence both reflective and reinforcing of the system's totalizing logic. The model (like its supposed referent) made objects of these subjects, viewing them as capable only of behavior and not action, much as anthropology's simpletons were denied the power to 'make their own history' (cf. Wolf, 1982).

It might appear somewhat strange then that the totalitarian model also spawned such a highly moralizing discourse not only about the 'system', but about its subjects as well. Viewed as thoroughly conditioned, we might expect that such subject/objects would be spared moral evaluation. Perhaps this blurring of the evaluative and the descriptive should not be seen so much as contravening the logic of the classificatory regimes I've been discussing, but rather as being among their more significant effects. I've suggested ways in which current invitations to realize oneself as an uncaused cause demand a blurring of common sense boundaries between the 'is' and the 'ought'. Yet they also root their authority in classificatory schema which code the descriptive 'is' and prescriptive 'ought' as separate and distinct in relation to two antithetically imagined regimes. The determined Other can be described; the originless Self has only a free future, which also constitutes his authority to prescribe. The Other is describable by virtue of his determined status, which also defines his lack of legitimate authority to prescribe.⁹ Prescription by the Totalitarian Other lacks legitimate authority precisely because it is *pre*-scripted: not only does the

Totalitarian Other perform according to the script of his self-interest; the fact that he does so is scripted by the 'system'. He is a performer rather than an actor, a cipher and not an agent.

At the same time that the civil society projects I've described root their moral authority in the fixity of the opposition between determined objects and self-constituting subjects, their prescriptions collapse the distinction: the ability to be an authentic, self-actualizing agent becomes a matter of choice. Civil society promoters often make the repudiation of common sense notions of determination a matter of moral urgency. This presents a paradox to common sense: on one hand the need for transformation is defined with reference to subjects' allegedly determined status; they are Other by virtue of being objects rather than free subjects. And yet their transcendence of Otherness is presented as a matter of willfully denying the power of determinations. Like Dorothy in Oz, the subjects of formerly state socialist regimes are now told that they have had the power to return 'home' all along.

Will the contours of a new *habitus* be discernible in the form of a disorientation and uncertainty with respect to what was once taken for granted? Is it possible that the logical implausibility of doctrines of personal agency and self-determination could produce effects different from the ones they insist on? This would be something like the reverse of the Protestant paradox studied by Weber. Weber of course applied himself to mapping the means by which the Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination could yield, in the words of historian Thomas Haskell, 'the heightened sense of personal agency and obligation to grasp opportunity and construct the future that characterized the capitalist entrepreneur' (Haskell, 1996: 471). Weber's analysis demonstrated that the *logical* implications of pre-destination were overshadowed by the *psychological* implications, which pointed in the opposite direction:

The logical impossibility of ascertaining one's own state of grace with certainty made self-surveillance all the more important and supplied believers with an unparalleled psychological incentive to become self-conscious, self-monitoring agents, who conceived of their lives as careers extending from past to present to future and who constantly adjusted their conduct so as to bring about the closest possible fit between present intentions and future consequences. . . . (Haskell, 1996: 473)

It is tempting to wonder if civil society's prescriptive emphasis on personal agency, freedom from determination, and the obligation to actively construct one's personal future could reorient (and diminish) agents' sense of their ability to control the future. Similarly, the suggestion that agents ought to regard themselves as 'uncaused causes' might reorient a sense of time. Just as every new moment is severed from the determinations of the previous one, so might the future be severed from the present. (In this connection we can recall Ildikó's anxiety about projecting herself into the future with too much certainty, and her mentor's advice to 'just give it a shot'.)

While disorientation and uncertainty are often assumed to follow 'naturally' from the fact of these regime changes, civil society projects might unwittingly contribute to the production of disorientation and uncertainty. Civil society initiatives not only provide institutional and discursive interfaces in encounters between 'East' and 'West'; in so doing they are also critically implicated in the production of the very oppositions which give coherence to 'transition' as rupture, and hence to the need for mediation. In short, civil society initiatives are involved in producing the conditions of their own necessity.

New Others for a 'new world order'?

With the collapse of state socialism, former subjects of these regimes now seem to be regarded as something of an internal Other: needing tutelage in the ways of civil society, yet having a potential that needs only be cultivated. Strikingly, whereas the civil Self was once identifiable by its freedom from determinations and the absence of origins, since 1989 we seem to be witnessing a newly emphatic concern with cultural origins in identifying the civil Self. The sociologist John Hall has recently argued that the possibility of self-fashioning is a defining attribute of civil society, and yet that civil society remains foreign to the 'ideological repertoires' of most 'non-Western civilizations':

Positively put, a civil society is one in which individuals have the chance of at least trying to create their own selves. . . . Further, there is likely to be an elective affinity between civil society and fashion: for all the pretensions to which the latter can be prone, it remains the area in which many can experiment with and try on new conceptions of their selves. (Hall, 1998: 33)

Non-Western civilizations do not have the ideal [of civil society] at the centre of their ideological repertoires, and anyway face social problems likely to rule out of court softer social and political life. Civil society is unlikely to spread outside parts of Central Europe and Latin America. (Hall, 1998: 41)

Just when Central Europeans are being told that what was once dissimulation – deceptive and manipulative self-invention – is now legitimate self-actualization, a new group of Others is being defined according to a 'civilizationally' determined inability to self-invent, legitimately or otherwise. Yesterday's dissimulation is now recuperated as the irritating but healthy pretense of fashion, and redeemed in relation to civilizations whose 'cultural repertoires' will not permit change. In the era of neo-liberalism, the potential to achieve civil society appears to be a kind of means-testing for entitlements in the New World Order.

Notes

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- 1 For example 'man : woman :: sun : moon' which can in turn yield 'hot : cold :: male : female :: day : night :: etc.' (Bourdieu, 1990: 88).
- 2 See Széleányi (1988: 50–4) for an extended discussion of the nuances of the Hungarian term over time.
- 3 Beyond being convertible into other forms of capital, the following attributes of cultural capital are relevant in this connection. First, cultural capital is best measured in relation to the *amount of time required for its acquisition* (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). Correlatively, cultural capital *cannot be transferred instantaneously* ('unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility' [Bourdieu, 1986: 245]). Finally, the bearer of cultural capital displays a distance (both objective and subjective) from necessity; cultural capital manifests itself as '*practice without practical function*' (Bourdieu, 1984: 54).
- 4 A fuller consideration of the ways in which civil society assets might be operating as cultural capital would necessarily involve more comprehensive research into the backgrounds of beneficiaries, especially in relation to their holdings of various types of assets under socialism and in the pre-socialist period (see Széleányi and Széleányi, 1995).
- 5 The term is Thomas Haskell's (1996).
- 6 The historian Thomas Haskell's reflections on the problem of the uncaused cause are highly suggestive for thinking about the consequences flowing from different styles of causal attribution:

Tacit imputations of causation enable us to make the distinctions we depend on every day between innocence and complicity, originality and imitation, spontaneity and deliberateness, exploitation and just compensation, accident and design. Perceptions of causal relations permeate everything we think, say, or do, and it could not be otherwise for the rules of causal attribution are, after all, the rules of change itself; of being and nonbeing, of how things come into, and go out of, existence. All our judgments, moral and factual alike, depend on deciding what is a cause, what is an effect. . . . How we distinguish one link in a chain or network of cause-and-effect connections . . . holds immense practical significance for the interpretation of human affairs. Indeed, in this regard the rules of the attributive game, by allocating causation between the self and the circumstances that impinge on it, quite literally constitute personhood. (Haskell, 1996: 443–4)

- 7 I'm indebted to Hefner's (1998) suggestion that civil society debates be read in relation to a mythic charter of Occidental origins, though my emphases here are rather different from his.
- 8 This myth finds some of its most cogent and authoritative statements in social scientific discourse; reciprocally it is also central to the coherence of the latter, meaning that its traces pervade the knowledge produced by these disciplines. Indeed, this is so much so that the two are hardly separable; many of the organizing polarities of social science – *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* (Tönnies); *mechanic/organic* (Durkheim); *hot/cold* (Lévi-Strauss) – might be seen as

transformations of the two moments of the myth, that is, determination and self-constitution.

- 9 In his reflections on 'the hermeneutic stakes' of contemporary civil society debates, Keith Tester makes a similar point:

To talk of civil society has conventionally meant to distinguish the milieu of free humanity from the milieu of reification produced either by nature or the state. Both of these sites of external authority were the 'Other' of civil society. In these terms, *to be human was to be defining rather than defined*. (Tester, 1992: 11, emphasis added)

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