

CINDERELLAS OF EUROPE: WASTE, FOOD, AND CLEANLINESS IN POSTSOCIALIST POLITICS

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In the periodical of a Hungarian activist group that concentrates on waste issues, a photo cartoon portrays a donkey stumbling towards an "EU" sign. The donkey pulls a trashcan from which piles of Coca-Cola cans and bottles have spilled; the caption reads: "We're heading to Europe. We are taking all we have." This cartoon ridicules the belief that one can become European/Western by accepting and generating Western waste.

While in Hungary the goal of "becoming European" has been generally shared since at least the early eighties, what is involved in achieving that goal has only more recently come to be contested. In this light, the inkblot reading by many observers of the early 1990s in which they try to establish which of the two competing political identities will prevail in postsocialist Eastern Europe: nationalist totalitarianism or cosmopolitan democracy, seems increasingly irrelevant. Restricting the outcomes of the postsocialist transition to a closure towards Europe or an openness to it straitjackets reality.

I find that the picture is far more complicated and that these complexities are increasingly visible now that a decade has passed since 1989. Localities and distinct social groups with newly-found independence from the state and with new struggles for resources, face choices that are far more complicated and that do not map easily onto these mega-scenarios and mega-identities.

Furthermore, what is Europe is increasingly up for grabs. You know that this sense of ambiguity is not just social constructivist babble when you find even *The Economist*, after posing the question "What is Europe?," telling its readers to forget geography, forget culture, and calling Europe a "work in progress." The magazine also documents and ridicules a certain "desire to speak for Europe, even when there is no

merit in speaking for Europe," referring to the lack of political wisdom in the EU's recent admonishments of Austria (*The Economist* 2000:2). Indeed, the ascendance of Haider's party to power might just prove a turning point in the use of Europe as a symbol in postsocialist politics.

If Europe is more a shifting ideal than a clear, pre-defined state to evolve into, what sense does it make to ask questions about whether postsocialist countries are really heading towards a European future--whether as members of the EU or not? We can propose more meaningful and empirically better grounded claims about postsocialist realities if instead we ask what the different uses of Europe as a symbol reveal about these societies and economic and political changes underway.¹ That is my purpose in this paper.

Europe, in the idiom of most East-European intellectuals, has meant an ideal of democracy, freedom, the highest level of civilization—if not an achieved ideal, as Havel (1999[1996]) admits, then surely one that is cut out as a potential for Europe to realize. Indeed, this is the meaning that Europe has most often been associated with in the most varied, even mundane, contexts, to such an extent that disapproved practices or behavior will be branded as un- (or non-) European. Europeanness as a feature has expanded its meaning, from the political and cultural domains (Kundera 1984) to the domain of bodily practices. Increasingly the implicit slogan of liberal intellectuals "I think in a European way, therefore I am a European" is being complemented with the everyday use of this Europeanness as "I eat, drink, dress, behave, treat my body, move, etc. in a European way, therefore I am a European." In this domain of the symbol's prevalence, instead of historical trajectories and shared cultural legacies, the qualities emphasized are primarily *cleanliness* and certain *civilized* bodily practices, including

clothing, behavior in public places (not cutting in line or talking too loud), eating and drinking habits, and fitness.

The enduring and proliferating trope of cultured, civilized and clean Europe notwithstanding, I argue that tiny cracks have already appeared in this use of the symbol of Europe in public discourse. These cracks are more noticeable in some contexts than in others, and here I will focus on one dichotomy with which Europe as a symbol has resonated a great deal, at least in Hungary. This is the clean/dirty dichotomy.

I will analyze the various ways in which Europe has ended up on one or the other side of this pair of oppositions and the kind of political goals these symbolic practices have served. I will use the examples of a local waste incinerator siting controversy and of an import food ban by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. In my conclusion, I will critique arguments that see nothing else in postsocialist politics but symbolic politics, and that reduce these symbolic practices to inconsequential and superficial debates among a handful of intellectuals.

A European wasteland

Beginning in 1978, the Budapest Chemical Works (BCW) dumped about 17,500 tons of tetrachlorobenzene—a highly toxic substance generated in pesticide production—in the vicinity of Garé. Garé is a small agricultural village in Baranya County, a relatively underdeveloped and multiethnic region of southern Hungary. For decades, residents complained that the dump contaminated groundwater and soil, and caused cancers in villagers, excessive numbers of diseases and deaths among domestic animals, and a constant foul odor. As the leaking toxic waste started to threaten the nearby spring and the health and livelihood of an entire region, BCW was ordered to eliminate this dumpsite. The company plans to do this by incinerating the accumulated waste in a facility that would also be built in Garé, the imminent construction of which has, however, sharpened divisions between the surrounding villages. Many fear that the facility would be perilous to their health. The incinerator will be financed with mostly French capital and thus many also worry that it would soon begin to burn toxic wastes imported from abroad. It has been nine years since the controversy began its path through numerous public hearings, demonstrations, petitions, resignations, and lawsuits. The siting

controversy has become Hungary's most covered and most divisive environmental pollution case.²

After 1989, BCW, rather than throwing money out the window by paying for a one-time clean up only, decided to invest in an incinerator that could bring profit after the toxic wastes accumulated in Garé were burned. The announced tender was won by a French company, which formed a joint venture with BCW, called Hungaropec. The village where they proposed this facility, also in Baranya County, successfully resisted the plan. Garé's leaders, however, offered their village as an alternative site. While the great majority of Garéans voted for the incinerator, surrounding villages have been vehemently opposing it.

If Garé and BCW wanted to successfully deploy the global incineration industry in their own survival struggles, they first had to sell the idea of 'cleanup-via-incineration' to authorities and, most importantly, to those villages that now, thanks to democratization, had a say in such investments. Interestingly, the pro-incinerator language applied in the West was much less utilized than a custom-fitted discourse about "Garé's insertion into the bloodstream of Europe." The PR campaign thus drafted a cognitive map that located Hungary and Garé in particular ways *vis-à-vis* Western Europe.

Let us see how this is played out in one of Hungaropec's brochures:

Hungary, like her Eastern neighbors, was characterized by the dumping of the hazardous by-products of industry, that is by "sweeping the problem under the rug" due to the incorrect industrial policy of the past decades, while in Western European countries with a developed industry and with an ever higher concern about the environment the *most widely accepted solution* has become the *utilization* of industrial wastes *by incineration*, which is already applied in numerous densely populated areas of Western-Europe (Switzerland, the Ruhr, the vicinity of Lyon, Strasbourg, etc.) (Hungaropec 1993: 1—italics in original).

In the East/West dichotomy applied in Hungaropec's cognitive map, the "East" becomes synonymous with the past; it is a wasteland that produces so much waste that it threatens us with "suffocating in garbage" (as expressed by one of the impact study authors), but it is not even

credited with having a developed industry. All the East has is an “incorrect industrial policy,” industrial by-products (the two thus tacitly connected in a causal relation) and authorities that designate locations and prescribe the technological parameters of waste treatment. The brochure thus deploys Europe as a symbol in two senses. First of all, it lays out the correctness and progressiveness of the European way of dealing with wastes. Second, it implicitly constructs BCW as a victim at the hands of socialist state authorities when dumping and as a hero when burning the waste it produced, by thus “taking Garé to Europe.” Indeed, in 1993, Hungaropec literally took villagers, environmentalists, and journalists for a visit to reference plants in Western Europe. That is, BCW posits itself as the one representing Europe in a sea of non-European barbarism. As Verdery (1996) points out, autobiographies told as this passage from victim to hero have been the key source of moral and political capital in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. What makes this move especially successful here, though, is that moral capital is coupled with a positive connotation of Europeanness.

Hungary as the cesspool of Europe: the Green perspective

Building moral capital on either side of the case has been a critical strategy. The incinerator is viewed by most Garéans as justified revenge against the neighboring village, Szalánta, to which Garé was subordinated administratively under state socialism. Garéans think that, since administration was in Szalánta’s hands at the time the permit was issued for the dump, and since it was Szalánta that reaped all of its benefits, Szalánta’s residents, more or less collectively, are responsible for the present situation. As a consequence, Garéans believe Szalántans have no moral right to have a say in the decision about the incinerator. Szalánta, however, has been quite successful in presenting itself as the guardian of the district’s physical and moral health. In doing so, it is also able to redefine its leadership in the vicinity, which was shaken first by a 1990 administrative decentralization, and then by Hungaropec’s plan to build the incinerator, which would make Garé the most powerful economic settlement in the district.

In resisting the incinerator, local villages, with the leadership of Szalánta, have mobilized surrounding towns whose existence hangs on urban and thermal water tourism and wine production, and whose reputation can easily be

ruined by the incinerator. They recruited a competing Swiss-Hungarian joint venture and a French incinerator in Dorog into their ranks by positing them as alternatives to the incinerator in Garé.³ In addition, they formed an alliance with Hungarian Greens, who provide the villages with information, contacts, suggestions for action, equipment, and publicity. Furthermore, the anti-incinerator agents were successful in inserting themselves in and benefiting from the international environmental movement, which is a key pillar of what some call the global civil society.⁴

However, it is not only funds, people, and information that cross borders in this green(ing) civil society, but also discourses. The Green alliance draws on the global discourses of environmental colonialism and environmental racism. The charge of environmental racism is raised because of the large concentration of Romani living in the region. The issue is twofold. First of all, a 1995 social-economic impact assessment study ordered by Hungaropec (part of the environmental impact assessment study), argues that the populations of the region’s villages have consistently decreased since 1949, and that they will be ‘Gypsified’ (*elcigányosodnak*), unless there is a boost to their economic development, such as the incinerator of Garé. It is interesting to note, however, what bodies are counted as part of the population in these demographic data. When the study quotes decreasing population figures, it refers to the white (non-Romani) population, and it neglects to mention that there has been immigration into the villages, because these new migrants have primarily been Romani. Obviously, only certain people are “populating” the villages, while others cause their demise.

Second, there is the issue of why this incinerator is planned in this district in the first place. While the impact study views the incinerator as a way to “keep Gypsies out” of the district, the Romani Civil Rights Foundation and the Greens think it is exactly the already large ratio of the Romani population that attracts such investments. It is not only that some bodies are not part of the statistical population, that is, the desired white population, but that polluting, contaminating and poisoning these same bodies--already perceived as filthy by commonly held Hungarian stereotypes--is more acceptable than that of white, pure, and clean bodies.

The charge of ecological colonization is raised in relation to the future place of Hungary in Europe. Greens make a great effort to discredit the

claim of Hungaropec that the European methods and international conventions it follows and the European technologies it adopts are indeed superior, progressive, and morally clean. They argue that, however high the environmental standards it may have for itself, the EU encourages the transfer of waste-to-energy facilities to the eastern half of Europe. They also call attention to the fact that the Basel Convention simply requires that toxic wastes are imported and exported with the mutual agreement of both countries, which, they imply, is not likely to be an obstacle in BCW's case. Europe is thus just another player in the toxic waste export game while keeping itself clean.

What about the Greens' image of the East or the past? Opponents of the incinerator try to expose Hungaropec and BCW not as a break with, but rather as a continuation of, socialism. Greens like to point out that the decision to have a permanent dump in Garé was made under socialism. As one pamphlet said, "a decision made by the State Committee of Planning in 1980 cannot be realized against the will of the region's taxpaying citizens" (Pécsi Zöld Kör n.d.:4). They also see a parallel between the process of decision making about the waste dump and that about the incinerator. "Once already, there was a bad decision made without us, let's not let another bad decision be made again. . . . I hope . . . we can make a decision based on consensus" (Pécsi Zöld Kör n.d.:5).

Democracy and especially local autonomy are the key arguments of the Greens in the debate. What's more, this is the only positive connotation of 'Europe' they acknowledge. This value preference is so strong that it may even take precedence over their environmental principles. Some Greens, for example, would welcome the rival Swiss-Hungarian incinerator in the nearby Kökény because that would be built from local capital, at least partially, and it would incinerate only local (countywide) wastes. One activist stressed to me that the head of the reference plant for this incinerator in Switzerland was much more "open and more democratic" in his dealings with the local population than the leader of Garé and the managements of BCW and Hungaropec.

In sum, the Greens' cognitive map has an opposite gridline: rather than taking us to that paradise-like Europe, Western firms bring Europe to the local backyards, but this Europe is different--it is a regressive and even criminal force. For the opponents of the incinerator, Western European

firms do not export solutions to local problems but export their wastes and *their* local problems--lack of domestic demand for their waste treatment technologies--and thus make these problems global.

According to the Greens then, rather than cleaning up, becoming European or Western, in the idiom of agents like EMC, the French incinerator company, and Hungaropec, means importing waste in the form of Western, high waste-ratio goods and in the form of actual waste to be treated in state-of-the-art Western facilities. Having an ample supply of waste treatment facilities, which usually means incinerators, has indeed been treated as a condition of joining the European Union. As an American banker investing in the export of waste treatment facilities says: "If they [East Europeans] want to become part of the greater European community, I don't see they have much of a choice" (Schwartz, Koehl and Breslau 1994: 41). Hungarians might tacitly agree that they live in a wasteland that is in need of a cleanup, but by accepting Western waste so as to run the incinerator facilities bought from the West for the benefit of Western investors, they really end up as "the cesspool of Europe," as one local doctor put it, and thus reinforce their wasteland image. This Catch-22, endorsing development via waste treatment and joining Europe via waste incineration, is thus exposed by Greens as a false transition consciousness. Note, however, that this seeming closure to the West still holds dear a certain, idealized, meaning of Europeanness, its democratic values, its "environmentalism," and its resistance to any form of racism.

Purifying the body

As part of the post-1989 struggles around political legitimacy, the question of not just who can distribute more goods among Hungarians but also who can save the citizens of the nation from the distribution of 'bads' (such as shoddy products, health hazards, and environmental pollution) gained importance. This is not surprising given that among the events leading to the collapse of state socialism, demands for environmental and public health protection--especially after Chernobyl--acquired a political salience, one that the party-state missed and reacted to too late. As in most of the region's countries where environmental movements were spearheading the resistance (Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Hungary), one of the appeals of such issues was their subtle nationalism. This was not the manifestation of the

pro-nature, post-consumerist, post-industrial environmental consciousness of the West, or at least not primarily. Rather, it was an emergent concern over the health of the nation, a nation that was aging and increasingly sickly, and which was shrinking, both in terms of its population and in terms of its territory. This concern is evident in the case of the Gabčíkovo dam on the border of Hungary and Czechoslovakia,⁵ or in the more recent debate over foreigners buying up Hungarian agricultural land. It is little wonder that marrying the cause of the nation with that of nature culminated in the emergent fascist green agenda of the Hungarian Green Party (MZP).⁶ In sum, bodies in all their aspects--producing, reproducing,⁷ and consuming--acquired a new significance in postsocialist political discourses. The second part of the paper is concerned with consumption, more precisely the consumption of clean and European foods and drinks.

The summer of 1999 was a bad year for the reputation of food and drinks from the European Union: there were three separate food safety scandals. One involved dioxin found in chicken produced in Belgium, another was about a mild poison found in Coca-Cola that was also produced in a Belgian plant, and finally the Hungarian Minister of Food and Agriculture imposed a universal ban on the import of dairy products in July 1999 on quality grounds, which had a significant impact on imports from the EU, and which the EU vehemently protested. These scandals, just like in the case of the incinerator siting, eroded the all-powerful association of Europe with cleanliness and created a favorable discursive environment for decisions that claimed Europe's dirtiness.

Indeed, liberal politicians, who are the most pro-European Union, correctly sensed that in light of the public sentiment that the EU is 'dirty', Hungarians' support for EU membership might drop to a new low. The liberal media's first reactions to the food scandals thus did not give in to this sentiment and tried to salvage at least the moral cleanliness of Western Europe. Journalists in the liberal (oppositional) media kept praising the quick and democratic procedures with which those responsible in the dioxin case were investigated and removed, and contrasted them with the increasingly undemocratic practices of the nationalist/populist ruling party. Europe as the civilized political model was upheld.

Similarly, the liberal opposition immediately criticized the food ban on dairy

products, arguing on rational, factual grounds that the origin of those products in which antibiotics were found was in fact not the European Union, and that therefore it was unfair to impose the ban on the EU as well. The ban was indeed lifted within two days, even though, as experts claimed, it was impossible to complete all the tests on all the goods involved in such a short time. This, however, does not mean that the Minister of Food and Agriculture did not gain anything from the ban.

Prior to the ban, domestic dairy producers had increasingly criticized what they saw as the bowing of the Hungarian government to pressure by the EU to open up Hungarian markets. The representative of the extreme-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIEP) hailed the decision of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to impose the ban, arguing that otherwise there was no way Hungarian producers could compete with the Western European dairy products enjoying a substantial export subsidy by the EU. Furthermore, Western European corporations have bought up many of Hungary's dairy plants to take over the market with their products. From the perspective of these food producers and right-wing, nationalist political actors, Europe or the EU is a cheat, who is forcing Hungary to observe the trade agreements while itself giving preferential treatment to its domestic producers. In their mind, it is only playing fair to impose a ban: the claim of physical dirtiness is just given the moral dirtiness of the EU. The previous food scandals, but especially the dioxin scandal provided just the right kind of discursive environment for making the public accept that despite what East-Europeans generally hold about the superior quality of Western European goods, foods from the EU can be unsafe and of low quality.

While the ban was soon withdrawn, the Minister of Food and Agriculture, who is the head of the Smallholders' Party (a right-wing party governing in coalition with the ruling Fidesz-Hungarian Citizens' Party), and self-nominated representative of Hungary's farmers, managed to achieve his goals. He showed that if it were only up to him, he would, without a second thought, break up all of the restrictive trade agreements between Hungary and the EU if the interests of domestic farmers demanded that. Knowing full well that the ban could not hold up under scientific and diplomatic scrutiny, he directed the criticisms of Hungarian farmers and dairy plants away from his office to the liberal economists, who view the only chance for Hungary's salvation in

increasingly liberalized trade and in Hungary's EU membership.

Conclusion

What sorts of claims are being made in these cases to contest the power of Europe? In both cases, the claims have to do with Europe, its disputed moral and physical cleanliness, and Hungarians' relationship to that Europe. The claim in the food ban case is not so much that Europe dumps shoddy and dirty products in Hungarian, as in the Garé conflict (after all, Europeans themselves fell or could have fallen victim to those contaminations), but that Europe treats Hungarians unfairly and demands undeserved preferential treatment. Hungarians emerge from these two cases as a poor, mistreated figure who is intentionally kept dirty and whose dirtiness is used as further justification for its mistreatment: the figure of Cinderella.

On the surface, the Garé controversy and the two-day food import ban appear as symbolic politics obsessed with purity and pollution—whether physical or moral—and with Europe's ambiguous position in relation to that dichotomy. Does all this mean that Hungarian postsocialist politics is merely symbolic politics, that decisions are made to fit rhetoric loaded with transition symbols rather than being based on “real” interests, as many observers argue? It seems as if political actions are limited to “symbolic gestures” without “directly acting on the behavior of institutions,” (Schöpflin 1995) as lacking real (economic) interests, (Bunce and Csanádi 1992) as irrational (Schöpflin 1995). It seems as if concerns over the body are inherently irrational and fascist. I tried to demonstrate that we need to put these “symptoms” in a different light.

A more historical and sociological analysis reveals that these two cases are indeed struggles for resources that could ensure a viable economic future for a village, a district, or for the country as a whole. In Garé's case, local actors were able not only to put the economic issues on the agenda but were also able to impact various authorities. Today, as a result of years of struggle and legal battles, the chances for the incinerator to be built are close to zero. In the import ban case, pressure by domestic producers forced the government to stand up, even if very briefly, to the EU, to “demonstrate” that Hungary reserves the right to subject EU products to quality scrutiny, that they are not going to just lie down and die, figuratively speaking.

In sum, symbolic politics is neither the end product of local or national decision-making, nor is the use of powerful transition symbols, such as Europe, restricted to intellectuals' debate. Rather, people from all walks of life and in varied political situations have learned to mobilize these symbols for very concrete economic goals. Describing postsocialist politics as mired in the battle of icons, emotions, and symbols is not only to confuse form with content, but even more dangerously, excuses scholars from giving account of the sociological dynamics underlying symbolic politics.

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¹ This approach is inspired by anthropologist Katherine Verdery's ethnography of the transition in Romania (Verdery 1996).

² My treatment here relies on my earlier analysis of this case (Gille 2000).

³ The Swiss-Hungarian joint venture is building an incinerator just a few kilometers away, while the Dorog incinerator is an already functioning facility about 200 kilometers North, much closer to Budapest.

⁴ I am referring to Lipschutz's use of the term (Lipschutz 1996)

⁵ Opponents of the dam argued already in the middle eighties that diverting the main flow of the Danube gives up territory to Czechoslovakia and is a violation of the Helsinki accords predicated on the acceptance of the 1975 status quo of national borders of European countries.

⁶ 1994 polls indicated MZP support as high as 10%. Note that no Hungarian environmental party has yet achieved the 5% of votes necessary to get into Parliament. Among the concerns and demands of MZP were racial purity, increasing male potency and fertility through improving environmental quality, banning the use of harmful salt products allegedly produced by "neo-zionists" around the world to poison others, and forcing AIDS patients entering the country to wear yellow tags.

⁷ On reproductive politics and the representation of women's bodies as producers of the nation in postsocialist abortion debates, see Gal (1994), Kligman and Gal (2000), and Verdery (1996).