

Fall 12-31-1995

# Nostalgia/Forgetting/Hope

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### Recommended Citation

Blaney, David L. (1995) "Nostalgia/Forgetting/Hope," *Macalester International*: Vol. 2, Article 16.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol2/iss1/16>

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# NOSTALGIA/FORGETTING/HOPE

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David L. Blaney

Perhaps my most serious confrontation with Hungary has come in the reading of Imré Mádach's *The Tragedy of Man*. This dramatic poem turns on an ongoing dialogue between Adam and Lucifer on the meaning of existence. As Adam experiences the expanse of human history — as a Pharaoh; a Roman general; a Crusader; the scientist Kepler; Danton; a London proletarian; and an observer of a rational scientific future and a time near the end of human habitation of the earth, as the sun grows dim — Adam clings to hope in the face of Lucifer's acute observations about human limits and failings. George Szirtes, the translator, reminds us that "the argument *is* the drama." One of our speakers, Enikő Bollobás, described *The Tragedy of Man* (first published in 1861) as a classic of Hungarian literature and as exemplary of the Hungarian national character. The back cover of the Corvina edition (1995) describes it as a work of "lasting interest" with "relevance in an ever-changing world." Whatever its status, I have found Mádach useful in giving a bare organization to this series of reflections.

## I.

What potent words are kin and property,  
Like two great levers that shall move the world,  
They will give birth to every pain and pleasure.  
The two ideas will grow continuously,  
Creating nations and industries,  
Begetting greatness and nobility,  
Devouring, in time, their own progeny.

Imré Mádach, *The Tragedy of Man* (p. 42)

Barely a week beyond the seminar, I found myself in a village outside of Leipzig, in the flat of a third-generation German Marxist. It was a breath of fresh air. In a closed room full of cigarette smoke the air was no more breathable than Prague's, but the discussion seemed fresh. Somehow the old-fashioned Marxism of class analysis, the contradictions of capitalism, and worker internationalism, so recently marginalized by neoliberal triumphalism and late or postmodern skepticism, seemed vibrant, youthful, energetic. He argued that the new fashion in Marxism was precisely old-fashioned Marxism. It all sounded a bit naïve and dangerous (as things youthful often seem) despite the nostalgia I had discovered in myself for simpler Cold War times.

But the nostalgia was real: across East and Central Europe I looked in vain for signs of a vision of a socialist alternative beyond the relics of communist sculpture displayed at a local theme park in Budapest. In the seminar, I found tiresome our speakers' preoccupation with the ill-legacy of communism, the problems of stabilizing liberal capitalist social and political institutions, and the desperation to reassert national pride by rejoining and being recognized as an equal with the "West." At the same time, I found this reaction on my part equally troubling. The temptation was to make our speakers uncomfortable with their own commitments, attempting to dispel what seemed to be taken as given or natural—the nation, the state, capitalism, the "West." But after doing so, could I give our speakers a viable option to some version of Western liberal capitalism? Not clearly so. It is an uncomfortable position: although the end of the Cold War seems to have made everything and anything possible, it has made no particular alternative a compelling option to capitalism.

## II.

We have the common good for compensation.

(p. 173)

This is madness—it's really most disturbing  
To see such spectres of the past in this  
Enlightened age...

(p. 230)

The irony is that even though the Cold War was credited with fossilizing historical possibilities, the last period of oppositional politics in East and Central Europe inspired leftists in the West to attach creative political possibilities to the "rise of civil society." Leftist disenchantment with the state and the market led to a focus on civil society, conceived as a sphere or space of self-organizing association between state and market but not quite of either. The supposedly self-organizing quality of civil society meant that scholars could conceive of civil society as a source of social creativity, participatory experiments, and emancipatory action free from and in conflict with the alienated, hierarchical, rationalized determinations of state and market. Various forms of opposition to the state socialisms of East and Central Europe were seen to parallel the new social movements of West Europe and North America as part of a convergent oppositional politics. Actual connections between movements and organizations on both sides of the Iron Curtain lent credence to this interpretation. This enthusiasm has continued with the end of the Cold War as civil society is now theorized as a cross-national or even global phenomenon that might, because of its autonomous quality, initiate a political project of societal protection from state power and market forces.

However, it seems that the postcommunist project in East and Central Europe appears principally as a means of contracting and moderating these possibilities. Civil society is domesticated as civic society modeled on the experience of the "West." Civic virtues are to be cultivated in a sphere of voluntary social attachments that somehow mediate and transform the clash of self-interests operative in the market. This civic-mindedness is to be exercised intermittently in the formal institutions of political life. Here, civic-mindedness is not meant to indicate radical or transformational politics, but the centrist, secular, stable, and moderately tolerant politics associated with a modern liberal capitalist society.

The appeal of both visions of a civil or civic society rests on the capacity of an autonomous sphere of associational life to create in the citizenry a recognition of common bonds and a common good despite the divisions of interest and power created in contemporary market society. The claim is compelling only if we can think of a civil society of civic-mindedness or a civil soci-

ety of the solidarity of social activism as in reality separable and mostly insulated from the determinations of the market and the state.

Much thinking has been devoted to this issue. It was Hegel who theorized the role of intermediate associations between family and state as a site for the taming of competitive self-interest created in liberal societies. It is important that Hegel did not posit some space for civil society fully autonomous of state and market. On the contrary, civil society and state are mutually determining and interpenetrating; rather than independent of the state, civil society depends on a limited but activist state for its establishment and maintenance. Likewise, the market is a key institution of civil society; civil society is made possible by a regime of rights, including property rights, that legally constitute people as individuals and substantively constitute them as individual agents of exchange and association. Perhaps as a consequence, Hegel himself was convinced that such intermediate associations are necessary but not sufficient to create the social bonds required to hold citizens together in a form of social life where individualism, property, and self-interest are central. Rather, he saw that the kind of social bonds required for the pursuit of collective purposes were forged primarily in times of mobilization for war. Hegel's argument may appear prescient but ultimately unsatisfying to anyone watching the bloody creation of civil societies in the new states of the former Yugoslavia.

Marx is usefully read as a response to the relative optimism of Hegel's reconciliation of liberal individualism and social unity and purpose. For Marx, the possibility of collective purpose that Hegel found in the unity of family, civil society, and state institutions — the State — is merely formal, where substantive divisions and relations of power and domination exist in society. That is, "collective purpose" in a capitalist society is another name for a social project of domination by a narrow stratum of society. It is not hard to observe the rise of that stratum in post-communist Hungary even if measured only by the Mercedes Benzes and Jaguars peppering the streets. Or we might measure it by the character of government policy — whether by shock therapists or gradualists, liberals or socialists—where liberalization means dispossessing average people of a right to job security and eroding their savings and hence consuming capacity.

Thus, along with Marx, we might read the civic-mindedness of a civic society so sought for by our Hungarian colleagues as the politics of a people seeking domestication by capitalism. That such a society may only be discomfited as opposed to being torn apart by class struggle is partial testament to Hegel's observation (or prediction) of the allure of nationalism and the power of war and threat of war to create and reinvigorate nations.

### III.

..., in the old classroom,  
The life there is not all economy,  
Not yet.

(p. 188)

Eternal hope, forgetfulness—if only  
They were not in league with destiny,...

(p. 251)

What appears most troubling about all of this is the narrowness of thinking associated with the idea of postsocialist or post-totalitarian "transition." That is, successful "transition" seems to mean instantiating and stabilizing a particular set of institutions and social practices out of the myriad possibilities that appeared to exist with the collapse of actually existing communism. But is there another game in town? Are we left with Joan Robinson's ditty that the only thing worse than being exploited by a capitalist is *not* being exploited by a capitalist? Or, perhaps better, where has the old-fashioned leftist project gone?

The new fashion centers on other issues: the politics of identity or recognition. Or is it the politics of a lack of a clear and certain identity? Our ideals of civil society, liberal or left, posit the existence of an at once personal and public space for (critical) reflection on our collective social and political practices. Such a social space presumes plurality—divergent viewpoints and disparate actors—yet depends on sustaining relations of mutual regard and respect among the actors, sometimes said to be embodied in the commitment to certain rules of public discourse. That is, a basic sort of egalitarianism is the foundation of civil society. The problem is deciding which social actors count

as worthy of equal regard. If respect for equality and plurality are foundations of civil society, then this space is by necessity normalizing in that it will restrict actors and ways of life inconsistent with these particular ends and means. In Hungary, for instance, they face urgent problems of what to do with former communists, skinheads, and Gypsies — all seemingly uncommitted to the preconditions of a civil society. Other issues, like the role of women and homosexuals, seem less pressing where the official agenda is limited to stabilizing minimally democratic institutions. Thus, civil society always involves privileging certain forms of difference and constructing certain actors and ways of life as “others,” as antisocial, but the process and consequences of such denial of recognition may appear more or less arbitrary depending on where you stand. It is the problem of “standpoint” in the denial of recognition in the face of difference that motivates much of leftist scholarship and action, resulting often in a defense of quite radical claims of difference. But where are we left when radical claims of plurality disable civil society itself and the foundations of our collective reflections on our common social life?

While it is clear, then, that a politics of identity and recognition is constitutive or foundational of any ongoing struggle to stabilize or destabilize contemporary or wannabe civil societies, traditional questions of social justice within a class-divided civil society may come to appear secondary to these seemingly prior issues. How can we confidently speak of social justice where the pressing concern is the basis of societal membership, of the bounds of society itself? It appears that it is precisely the idea of a common social life that is disputed.

However, issues of class and the political economy of capitalism more generally are equally constitutive or foundational of civil society, its antinomies, and the possibilities of a radical political project. What it means to be an actor within (even if also in opposition to) civil society is to possess agency. Agency is the capacity to initiate and at least to some degree to realize projects in the world. It is quite difficult to argue that agency within civil society is unaffected by the operation of market society. In a market, actors must generate wealth on their own — through means of their own capital or labor — in order to support the activities that make up their way of life. We know that

wealth can be used to generate information, create publicity, and lubricate the wheels of government; it is quite plausible to argue that, in practice, the greater one's access to wealth the greater one's agency as a social and political actor. Further, in market society your value as a person is in large part determined by your place in a hierarchy of wealth and income. That is, there is a way in which the rich are more "persons" than those lower in the status hierarchy. There is even some threshold of access to wealth below which human beings individually and in groups cease to be recognized as people altogether, and appear to lose any basis for agency in their society. The frustrations surrounding efforts to recover agency for the poorest or to locate an unambiguous site for an anticapitalist agency within a market society suggest that we cannot ignore the way issues of class are issues of identity, recognition, and agency.

To the extent that we live in a global political economy, the relative economic success of countries or ways of life constitutes a similar status hierarchy. We might think of this situation as creating a hierarchy of cultures of civil societies within a global culture of competitive capitalism — a global civil society perhaps. This valuation of cultures is captured in a rich vocabulary of gradations of economic success and potential: advanced and backward; developed, underdeveloped, and, more optimistically, developing; modern and traditional, where modernization is a strategy for upward mobility. Political economists were clear from the beginning: wealth is a condition of civilization and the contrast between our wealth and their material poverty a verification of our civility and modernity. Again, locating resistance to this culture from a position *within* has been equally frustrating for the Left. Recently, the Left has pinned much hope on the nonmodern as a source of resistance. Or, claims of a sphere of (global) civil society, purified of the determinations of capitalism, has gladdened the heart of leftists who imagine their NGO or academic institution to be occupants of such an insulated social space. However, where the nonmodern is everywhere polluted by the modern, and civil society is market society, we all find ourselves partly immersed, nay constituted, by the very forces we hope to resist. That is, we find our capacity for agency intimately tied to social relations we mean to repudiate. This constitutes the hope of a resistance that does not in part



partake of and reproduce capitalist modernity as a matter of forgetting, of erasing the presence of the powerful forces that shape it and us.

#### IV.

[We] would prefer to take a general view  
(p. 210)

The whole world is a single nation now  
[but]

I fear too big a world will not be loved  
As much as the soil in which our parents lie.  
(p. 207)

The desire to establish a *Hungarian* civil or civic society may seem paradoxical in an age of globalization. The existence of a Hungarian society and identity are premised on the continuity of the familiar political architecture of modernity — people, nation, and state. However, many argue that this political architecture is increasingly challenged by a world of global processes and local resistances, transborder relations and flows, and migrations and mixings. For instance, asserting the sovereignty of the Hungarian people immediately involves the Hungarian state in difficult relations with the states and ethnically Hungarian populations of Romania and Slovakia as well as with minorities inside its own borders. Opening Hungary to the world will create an increasingly diverse population, including opportunity seekers of all sorts (from educated Westerners fleeing recession to Asian entrepreneurs and less-skilled immigrant workers from countries neighboring and afar), as well as involve its citizenry in activities and associations that compete with a narrow Hungarian allegiance. Being free to pursue national wealth within a global division of labor may generate wealth at some level for the nation but, at the same time, it makes the national livelihood dependent on the collective valuation of the nation's products and its culture in a global market. In addition, becoming rich (if they are so fortunate) may incorporate Hungarian consumers into a mode of consumption that increasingly appears to have little that is distinctively Hungarian about it.

And, finally, seeking recognition as an equal within Europe via EU membership entails at the same time some diminution and subordination of national sovereignty and identity to Europe. Thus, establishing civil society appears as an attempt to fit oneself into an increasingly problematic order.

Despite the specter of homogenization ("McWorld," as it is fashionably dubbed), it is forces of globalization and the concomitant fracturing and localization that appear to be a source of the kind of alternative political possibilities that are mostly absent in the notion of postsocialist transition. That is, if the familiar political architecture is indeed being undermined by global processes and problems as well as local resistances and identities, we may require new configurations of political space that recognize global society and link the global and local in ways hitherto unimagined. However, there is no blueprint for ordering a world exhibiting forms of commonality and difference that cannot be captured by the nation-state and the existing blueprints for civil society. Nor are we certain of the agencies required to put such a new world into place. We exist in a time where the old is far from eclipsed but where there are forces afoot that compel us to try to understand and act in the globe in different, and mostly yet to be determined, ways. It is precisely at such times that our need of a sure sense of agency confronts our lack of a clear basis for action; the illusion of a sure agency is salvaged only by refusing doubt and imposing clarity of purpose where none exists.

The aspirations of our Hungarian speakers seem understandable as a response to this world we now inhabit, even if limited given the need for new political thinking. What is much more puzzling to me is why I was there and what my own goals were. Officially the seminar was part of an effort to internationalize the Macalester College faculty. But despite the arguable value of "international" experience, I remain confused about what "internationalization" can possibly mean. That is, the apparent urgency of calls for internationalization does not necessitate immediate clarity on this issue.

The term "international" refers to the space above and between a world of separate nations. We might think that to be internationalized would be in some way to know that space and thereby to be able to order it and operate within it. The aspira-

tion is not only to develop the skill to move in between and across nations, but also to develop the capacity to stand in some way above nations. Internationalists have long imagined an impartial stance, a cosmopolitan view that joins nations by transcending the parochialism and antagonisms associated with the nation-state system. In this sense at least, the project of internationalization appears intimately connected to the political architecture of modernity: the cosmopolitan longing that we might transcend the partiality of our own way of life — our national narrowness — depends paradoxically on a world of distinct nations, peoples, and ways of life. To travel the world is to learn about the other, to expand one's horizon through the other in order to arrive at a general view.

There are dangers in this way of thinking. We know that knowledge of the other does not necessitate treating the other as a subject, recognizing the equality but difference of the other. In fact, certain kinds of knowledge appear to depend precisely on rendering the other as an object. Were East and Central Europe rendered objects of knowledge that I might use to overcome my own partiality and parochialism? Were the speakers merely agents of that process? While I am less than certain about the answers to these questions, I am more certain that the kind of cosmopolitan view I might have achieved by my participation in the seminar should not count as a general or universal view. Rather, the cosmopolitan view appears less as a universal stance and more the particular viewpoint of those afforded the opportunity to move across boundaries and consume in a rich variety of locales. As the representative of a particular social stratum in global capitalism, the cosmopolitan can lay no more claim to the universality of his or her view than can the "isolated" villager. In fact, the opposite might be the case. Our contemporary attention to globalization has revealed a world of hybrid cultures and civilizations, multinations, and polluted peoples. That is, most of the world has already been internationalized and usually by one form of force or another. Thus, we seek in vain for an other that has not already been rendered at least partly us. We hope to engage in a voluntary dialogue of equals with others who have been forcibly interacting or integrated (as subordinates) into our way of life for several centuries. It is only we, at the core of global capitalism, whose own culture is often taken as the model

for a homogenized world, who have the luxury to imagine internationalization as a vocation—the realization of a more universal self. We might more realistically see internationalization as a responsibility we now bear given the success of our previous commercial or military conquests.

While the project of internationalization as coming to know the other seems to be partially destabilized by the very process of globalization that is taken as its justification, we can identify some, even if uncertain, basis for action in the world. Globalization is not merely something we have imposed on others: we have done it to ourselves as well. Centuries of globalization have made us a multination, have distributed peripheral economic activities within the core, have placed the other within ourselves. Thus, we as scholars and teachers not only confront a world of hybrid cultures, we confront the world as hybrids of various sorts. At the same time we confront what is perceived as an external other, we must also acknowledge and confront the other within. And again, to know the other is not enough, for the temptation is to know or suppress the other as an inferior, as marginal—a process given a certain structure and magnified by a global culture of competition. The challenge is to know the other as an equal, and, though the same in certain respects, different in myriad others — to engage in the kind of dialogical process by which the other (external and internal) becomes a source of criticism for self, just as the self may be a source of criticism for the other. It appears to me that this is what we must do as part of an effort to restore a more secure basis for agency in the world.