

Fall 12-31-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Godollei, Ruthann (1995) "Blues for Billy Bibbitt," *Macalester International*: Vol. 2, Article 17.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol2/iss1/17>

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# BLUES FOR BILLY BIBBITT<sup>1</sup>

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Ruthann Godollei

Having been to Prague shortly after their revolution, and having made several more trips through other former communist countries in the past five years, my interest in the region of Central Europe has expanded beyond looking at beautiful old buildings and marvelous art collections. I have formed observations about the framing of the talk around the economics of the transition, and the status of art and society in the wake of the upheavals in the region. Many times during our faculty seminar in Budapest, I heard the phrase “shock therapy” used in the context of a rapid changeover to a free market economy. I had heard this term in previous visits to Central Europe. The term “shock therapy” is now used so frequently, with no apparent reticence, that I have become alarmed at its implications. Why should a discredited medical/psychological practice from the West be used to define the form of this economic transition? What mentality views the transition in these terms? What are the consequences in terms of the human spirit to a social body thus treated? I am raising these issues in hope of interjecting some humane questions into the technocratic rhetoric surrounding the conditions necessary for a “successful” changeover in the region.

Shock therapy in medical practice, by definition, is intended to induce convulsions, with the hope of altering the personality. The 1950s saw the height of this medical practice in the United States. This could be attributed to a modern-era faith in “experts” and “science” to define norms, and to set about achieving them. Whether due to subsequent questioning of the institutional practices of modern medicine itself or the discovery of different methods of dealing with mental illness, the usage of shock treatment in psychological cases has drastically declined

since its initial development. Public outcry over the use of shock treatment included drawing attention to both the brutality of the means and the undesirability of the outcome for the patient. Doctors prepared patients for the treatment by putting them in restraints and putting a block in their mouth to prevent them from severing their own tongues (this device also effectively muffled screams of pain). Comatose behavior is common after treatment.

In researching the origins of the term as applied to economics, the earliest reference I could uncover was from 1975 in regard to OPEC's policies toward the energy market of the West.<sup>2</sup> Melvyn Krauss in his 1987 book *How NATO Weakens the West* uses the phrase to describe a pullout of American funds for defense in *Western Europe*. The term evolves in the economic literature concerning Eastern Europe, from the time of communist attempts at economic reforms. The news summary of an October 3, 1981, BBC broadcast covering a Polish Solidarity congress stated, "The reports noted the issue of supplies of foodstuffs for the population had come up more often than others, with some speakers expressing the opinion that food shortages might lead to what were described as uncontrolled social disturbances; others were of the opinion that what was required to improve the situation was shock therapy, which would make it possible to restore market equilibrium." These unnamed "others" do not seem to be addressing the population's very immediate concerns about food; rather, the market is discussed as an entity with needs.

Jeffrey D. Sachs, an American acting as an economic advisor to Solidarity in Poland, initially advocated a rapid "leap to the market."<sup>3</sup> In his writing, this process becomes equated with shock therapy. Sachs enthusiastically quotes former Bolivian Planning Minister Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, describing how to end his country's hyperinflation, "If you are going to cut off a cat's tail, do it in one strike, not bit by bit."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this sounds humane, but the truism fails to question whether cutting the cat's tail was the only viable alternative, or whether it was a wise, necessary, or just action, and, further, does not account for the natural response of the creature once the operation is completed.

Sachs stresses that after the types of revolutions that took place in the former communist countries, there is a need for rapid, but also *total* changeovers. "Shock therapy," much more emphatically, is offered not only as one hypothetical solution to the economic ills of the region (among many proposals) but as *the* mandatory policy. In addition, he dismisses hybridization or attempts to keep some state control, union control, or worker share as a wrong-headed "third way."

"One apparently easy solution, such as giving the enterprises to the workers, is no solution at all. Not only would this be highly inequitable and therefore politically unpalatable (since industrial workers account for a mere one-third of the labor force), but it would condemn these economies to the inefficiencies of worker control.... As demonstrated in other countries, it would also condemn the workers to excess risk, because both their human capital and their financial capital would be tied up in the same enterprise."<sup>5</sup> It seems that Sachs is concerned about the inequity of giving one-third of the labor force the controlling share of an industry, but not concerned that his mandate for privatization gives that same control to a much smaller percentage of people. In addition, he seems willing to expose these same workers to the risks of having their money drastically devalued with a concomitant skyrocketing of the cost of living, but not the "risks" through which some American alternative businesses manage to navigate quite well (grocery co-ops, co-op housing, some airlines, etc.).

As Peter Murrell states, "There is no precise set of assumptions that forms the vision of each and every advocate of shock therapy. Rather, there are many viewpoints, all sharing many common elements."<sup>6</sup> One such common theme developed in the economic literature written by other proponents of rapid "free" market changes in Eastern Europe is that notions about combining systems, or hybrid solutions (the so-called "evolutionary" models), were first disparaged, then dismissed, then labeled "the major threat to the transition process."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the phrase for this rapid transition economic theory was originally the "big bang," which at least can be said to have some connotations of creation. Instead, "shock therapy" totally supplanted this terminology; by 1992 I could hardly find further reference to the creationist outlook in economic literature about Central

Europe. Out with the bathwater of communist state-owned businesses were to go the babies of Education, the Arts, Health Care, Public Transit, etc.

Shock therapists of yore generally were not concerned about returning a patient to normalcy but tended to use the treatment as an extreme measure for someone who was either unruly or despondent, uncontrollable, not a "good patient." Similarly, the economists I read did not seem to think too hard about what might happen to the society thus electrically lobotomized. "And yet, the situation remains decidedly fragile, even explosive. The positive benefits certainly warm the heart of a trained economist more than the citizens in the countries themselves."<sup>8</sup> A hallmark of the result of shock treatment was passivity, hollowness, a lack of enthusiasm. After this brutal operation was administered, the recipients often were not really productive anymore. Shock treatment was even used as a torture method to break prisoners in the gulag. Shock often left a patient gutted upstairs, ironically needing perpetual care by the therapists. Permeating the advisories of the shock economists I read is the tone of all-knowing doctors prescribing excruciating treatment (that they would never agree to take personally) to patients "for their own good." In debunking this paternalistic model in regard to mental health, critics such as psychologist Alice Miller (*For Their Own Good*) cite the devastating effects of such blatant disregard for the concerns of the patient. One could see it as an economic form of dumping bad medical technology on underdeveloped countries.

I have to imagine that whoever coined this "too cute" term for economic policy was either ludicrously naïve or incredibly cynical. After hearing numerous authorities speak on the subject during our seminar, I have come to the latter conclusion. The term is invoked without irony, as a tool, a necessity, mildly regrettable but assuredly absolutely necessary for an otherwise lost-cause economic body. In addition, the term is applied to each Central European country's economy. Why would individual patients all need the same prescriptive? Large or small, partially capitalized or resisting forces of the market system, the rhetoric echoed that of the *Economist* of November 17, 1990, with its cynically cute admonishment to Eastern European finance ministers: "TINA" (There Is No Alternative).<sup>9</sup> If a society was dragging its feet and now its economy is worse off than before,

the foot-dragging has to be to blame, not the treatment. The “only way,” we heard, was a more rapid and more extensive changeover to the so-called free market.

I returned home from our seminar to find a new Levi’s commercial on television. A young hipster brags, “In Prague, you can trade them [Levi’s] for a car!” Standing only in his shorts, he then piles into a Skoda (The car in this spot is not identified. It is a Skoda, which is a Czech car.) filled with friends and drives off down the street. This is the not-really-humorous product of an economic policy where the cultural products of the West are the new currency. A quintessentially American product, blue jeans, is exported to a market that is so undervalued that a single pair is supposedly worth an automobile. Reminiscent of the colored cloth-and-beads-in-trade-for-Manhattan routine, the Central European natives are portrayed here as gullible and, most important, rip-offable in inequitable trade deals. It is implied that it is an enterprising act, a creative, audacious bit of horse-trading on the part of the American to swap these magic beans for their cow. As good as cash, the *look* of the West may be seen to have its own currency, a cultural currency that invades, dominates, and supplants the local culture. The commercial is not stating that Skodas are cool and worth trading for, rather that a car is an item any American (capitalist) would know is worth more than pants.

Psychologists such as Alice Miller tend to look at art as an indicator of the vitality of the patient. The art in Central Europe may be one of the few sites for healing; recalling one’s humanity in the wake of brutal treatment, I worry that people will not want to support the vital arts as opposed to light escapist entertainment. In his apartment in Budapest, painter István Kőteles is crafting beautiful, transcendent modern versions of angels, citing a Hungarian proverb, “If you associate with angels, you will be like an angel; if you associate with devils, you will be a devil.” A potential gallery dealer recently informed him that his work was “too philosophical” and therefore unmarketable.

I see four major factors now working against the survival of the arts in Central Europe in the wake of economic shock therapy. One, an enormous Western pressure to trivialize and suspect art and cultural workers. Two, economic reality; art as “extra” in the face of survival issues. Contrary to the notion that art thrives in adversity, I believe art gets made *despite* bad condi-

tions. There are minimal necessities needed to make artworks, including time, enough to eat, and some materials. Already working into the night, there are sheer physical limitations on the artists I met to work extra jobs and still find time and energy to create. Three, market pressure to make stuff that sells instead of saying what you think needs to be said. Pseudo-authentic folk arts for tourists currently cram the markets. Four, both the regional audience and many artists do not want to remember the pain of recent events, preferring a "get on with it" approach. Failure to explore the communist legacy as well as to actively critique its replacement through the arts will leave a vacuum of expression that light entertainment or pseudo-Western art fashions will not address. The German artist Joseph Beuys once strung up a motto behind one of his Aktionismus performance art productions. It read, "To change the art you must change the man." An artist deeply committed to humane values, he saw political justice and economic justice as inextricably tied together.

Why should an artist care about economic political terminology? Because I see it as symptomatic of a pervasive type of dehumanization, such talk deeply concerns me. The newly formed altar to Western efficiency, utility, "standards," and competition is the chopping block for some unique wonderful human aspects of Central European culture. There is no argument that the communist regimes did one kind of cultural damage. However, here is a unique opportunity in time to keep some of the individuality these societies fought *for* against totalitarians. Western fix-it men are consulting (at substantial fees) on the grave case of the childlike nations that might want to actually keep some social services, education, mass transit, and art, and not sell every historical monument, but still want to play marbles with the EU. These patients are worse than crazy, they're dangerous! A threat to the general public. What if we *all* did that?!

I was dismayed by the attitude displayed by several of our speakers that the people of their country are lazy, that the inability to thrive monetarily is their own fault. Curiously, this reminds me of the scolding tone of a friend's MZ motorcycle manual, a gem of communist thinking. Its text ran, "It's noone's [*sic*] fault but your own if the machine breaks down; obviously

your mishandling and failure to observe maintenance are the causes of the present difficulties." This manual failed to recognize the possibility of a flaw in the mechanical design in the first place, as do the engineers of shock therapy. Is there perhaps a hangover of this self-blaming type of thinking so richly lampooned in the István Örkény stories of the communist era? I cannot accept the idea that Hungary's people are lazy when everyone I met (except economic advisors) was working at least two jobs. Artists had three. Background essays for our seminar even included an essay in which someone wrote that the reason for the failure of the economy is that Eastern Europeans do not have a Puritan work ethic! I wish to comment that some of those Puritans had slaves to help with the work part of that "ethic," not to mention a continent full of resources that didn't belong to them to exploit. Those factors would tend to help a society over an economic transition fairly nicely. Since the new Central Europe does not have these prospects, it is not surprising that things are not growing in the same manner as they did in the old New World.

The artists I met were not naïve about capitalism (and communism). Several of our speakers expressed an anxious desire for their cultures to fit in with Europe, not to be different from the "West," and particularly never to be seen as "Eastern." Problematically, what does a society that becomes exactly like its Western neighbors—but is substantially poorer—have to offer that system so based on competition with winners and losers? I see art as a site of resistance to the process of complete homogenization. In my opinion, the artistic process of individuation leading to self-esteem allows one to respect others and wish to learn about them. Preservation and investment in the cultural heritage of a society does not have to lead to unhealthy nationalism; rather, it can build pride in an identity that allows for and relates to similar self-respect in other peoples. When I suggest that support of the arts might actually be a priority during the transition, I am accused of vast impracticality.

Perhaps this impracticality is an expression of that renowned Central European aesthetic: absurdism. Certainly doing it for free, out of love or moral imperative, is an absurdist project under both capitalism and communism; perhaps nothing is so different for many of the artists.



In my teaching, I will use what I learned in Budapest to disabuse the notion that the arts in Central Europe are backward or “behind” those of the West. I found many expressions of sophisticated black humor, intensely engaged. In a huge show of contemporary Hungarian sculpture,<sup>10</sup> I heard a piece screaming. Both attracted and repulsed, when I investigated, a mirage appeared on the gallery floor. The sound accompanied an image of drowning; a face was surfacing in panic, open-mouthed in water, repeatedly going under. The image came from a simple innovative use of technology; the artist, “Eike,” had set video monitors face down on top of a glass fish tank. The sides of the tank projected the image onto the floor, where one could not see it until one came close enough. The piece was called *Divers*. That one exhibition alone had examples of techniques ranging from computer art, assemblage, and marble carving to casting, welding, carving, and conceptual works. Content included personal angst, celebratory homosexuality, Buddhist metaphysics, commentary on politics, and vegetarianism, among much more. I found a reference to the work of Beuys in the installation *Totem* by Peter Forgács—tiny wooden sleds buried in piles of lard visible through the glass door of a refrigerator. Beuys used lumps of fat on sleds as an image of life and interdependent survival (drawing on his own life experiences). Forgács juxtaposes Beuys’s imagery with a giant stuffed hog (the source of the fat) staring at both the refrigerator and a television monitor. The videotape is playing purposely in reverse; we (and the hog) see not a slaughter, but a piecing back together. I would argue that, were the tape playing forward, the audience repulsion at carnage would prevent them from entertaining the ideas presented. Instead, we are distanced just sufficiently to question our use of animals as meat and our humanity.

I stumbled across an archive of international alternative art publications called Artpool.<sup>11</sup> Inside there was a marvelous record of cultural struggle from *samizdat* to ‘zines. In the wide range of writing about art, I was able to find records of work by Eastern European groups not immediately visible to the tourist; punks and feminists and people of color, for example. I was treated to Orsolya Drozdik’s droll feminist commentary piece titled “Kulturális Amnésia Avagy A Történelmi Seb” (“Cultural Amnesia or the Historical Wound”). For an installation at the Sydney Biennale in 1992, she set rows of brass cymbals paired

like open clamshells on the floor, facing a plate rack filled with packaged depilatory products running the length of the wall. Maybe you would have to be a woman, barraged with commodity beauty products daily, to get it right away. I laughed out loud when I saw it. Then I thought about a particular market filled with useless beauty items, and women under pressure to fulfill Western ideals of appearance when paying for food is an issue, and I appreciated the piece on another level.

Certainly, to borrow a friend's phrase, the cultural blender there is on high. Artists from other cultures can lend support to the East Europeans for resistance to the complete liquefaction of their individuality. Israel Velásquez, a Cuban painter currently living in Hungary, draws dark visions of dehumanized "experts," the bone men in control of decisions about the lives of others. We found ourselves sharing a common opinion of the tragedy in the loss of the patina of time in all the renovation mania, and the worry that a shiny plastic Western façade will obscure what is good and valuable and unique to the region. It occurs to me that shock therapy could have been applied after the postrevolution euphoria, as a method of *control*. Go ahead and scream; with that rubber plug in your mouth, no one will hear you.

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### Notes

1. Billy Bibbitt is a character in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* who voluntarily agrees to admit himself to treatment in a mental hospital; he later commits suicide.
2. M. Bataillie, "OPEC's Shock-therapie," *Economisch en Sociaal Tijdschrift* (February 1975): 3.
3. Jeffrey Sachs and David Lipton, *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 55.
4. *Ibid.*, 56.
5. Jeffrey Sachs, "Poland and Eastern Europe: What Is to Be Done?" *Foreign Economic Liberalization: Transformation in Socialist Market Economies* (Westview Press, 1991): 240.
6. Peter Murrell, "What Is Shock Therapy?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 9, no. 2 (April-June 1993): 116.
7. Jeffrey Sachs, in *American Economist* 36, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 10, even lists populism and proportional representation as "putting democracy itself at risk" in Poland.
8. Jeffrey Sachs, "Crossing the Valley of Tears in Eastern European Reform," *Challenge* 34, no. 5 (September 1991): 30.
9. "Capitalism with a worried face," *Economist*, 17 November 1990: 590.
10. Mücsarnok, 1995 Hungarian Sculpture Exhibition, Budapest.
11. Contact Artpool, H-1277 Budapest 23, Pf. 52, Hungary.