

--- 1st week of February ---
Seventh Edition



EXPLOR2ING

CENTURY

Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary

SOCIAL AND CIVIL MOVEMENTS

Sziasztok,

We are Tom, Enora and Perrine, three students in Sciences Po Rennes and currently trainees at Cargonomia, a social cooperative in Budapest.

We are currently facing an ecological crisis raising, among others issues, political, social and economical questions. The current system is calling for indefinite growth whereas the planet has boundaries and limited resources. So, when we asked ourselves about sustainable solutions and alternatives, degrowth caught our attention. Then we would like to learn from people who theorize about degrowth, put it into practice, but also from those who engage in ways that degrowth is likely to support.

This series of weekly papers are aimed to discover different fields of degrowth by interviewing people more or less related to it. Today, for the seventh edition of *EXPLOR2ING : Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary*, we are talking about social movements in Central and Eastern Europe, with Agnes GAGYI, sociologist, specialist of social movements and co-coordinator of the Solidarity Economy Center of Budapest.



AGNES GAGYI - PRESENTATION

How would you present yourself?

I am a sociologist and I have been working on different projects in Eastern Europe. Now, I am one of the coordinators of the Solidarity Economy Center in Budapest*.

What were your motivations to work as a researcher and to get involved in the Solidarity Economy Center in Budapest?

When I was 19, in the early 2000, I joined the Romanian and Hungarian alterglobalisation movement. This movement in Eastern Europe was in a very contradictory and conflictual relation with the international one. Its relation to the global movement was very hierarchical, it didn't allow East Europeans to understand their context and to take this understanding into the global conversation. Since I wanted to understand why, I wrote my PhD on this.

Ever since, I was part of a new generation of left political thinking in Eastern Europe. We were trying to figure out our own understanding of socialism, what it means in a global perspective and communicate it to a global debate dominated by western frameworks.

I was part of a research group in Hungary called *Working Group for Public Sociology "Helyzet"**. We were trying to analyse the long-term transformation of Hungarian society after socialism and the current relations formed by Hungary's world-economic integration.

We analysed current class transformations asking what would enable left organising in terms of not just wishful thinking, or symbolic campaigns but real connections to material conditions. One of our observations was the large volume of solidarity economic practices in Eastern Europe that basically functions as a bottom-up subsidy to capital. People are helping each other to be able to pay their debts to the bank, they can help each other to cover up wage gaps or help with building housing etc. I found it relevant to deal with this.



One of my other motivations came from my work between 2017 and 2020 with the *Transnational Institute**, which is a global movement think tank. This was a period where post-occupy movements started to do more concrete material organising, producing lots of new very technical and concrete solidarity economic innovations. I was participating in this and learning from this.

We are going to discuss social movements in Central and Eastern Europe so could you give us a definition of "social movement"?

I don't think it's up to me to give a definition. This is a huge long-standing debate. What we call social movements in Eastern Europe, Latin American comrades wouldn't call it the same. They would say that whatever is below ten of thousands of people aren't a social movement. While in our countries, if you have some groups with a handful of people with some shared frameworks, people already call it a movement. Indeed, this area where people express their grievances, in a way that can be read as political is very narrow.

In general, people think that social movements are political or politically framed mobilizations that are outside of institutional politics. But whenever you start to look at it more closely, you see that it is more complicated than that.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN POST-SOVIET CEE COUNTRIES

Part of your work is about the post-socialist period for the central and Eastern Europe countries. To what extent these countries were integrated or not, in the worldwide economy, and what were the consequences for the population?

They were always integrated but the form of the integration changed. A main structural problem of socialism was that they tried to do Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI). For that they needed to import technology from the west and they had to pay for it with hard currency. To do this they could only sell raw materials like oil or lower technology level products.

By the end of the 1980's, this produced a generic debt problem in all the Import Substitution Industrialisation countries, not only in the socialist ones. After the regime change, countries like Hungary were integrated into the global neoliberal economy from a subordinated position. They became cheap labor sources but also markets for western products. Their finances were taken over by western banks. So basically, the social history of the last 30 years is very much the history of this subordinated neoliberal integration.

"Countries like Hungary were integrated very strongly into the global neoliberal economy from a subordinated position."

Did forced integration lead to protest movements?

Yes. But the thing is that at the level of the educated middle class, which is really important to translate any kind of protest into the language of political institutions, they were quite happy with the transition. Many of them, or the dominant part of them, were integrated in relatively good ways. You could become some upper level state manager, private company manager or promoter of European western integration and democracy within this detrimental process.

So because of this, and also because of the strong suppression of left critics due to the delegitimation of left politics after the socialist period, you couldn't really hear criticisms on the level of public and political debate. But there were all kinds of protests.

In many places, workers who were kicked out of factories were protesting. In Romania for example new independent unions organized strikes, road blockages, clashes with the police... These struggles didn't get the middle class alliance that would have allowed them to get into the press in any sympathetic way.

Then, there was a new wave of mobilizations by the second part of the 2000's, both on the left and the right. And what we see now is the institutionalization of both left and right sides of them. Nowadays, the populist wave is also integrated into parliamentary politics.

Currently what are the main global social mobilizations and demands?

If you look narrowly at the left ones or these progressive green-left feminist ones here, they are pretty much like elsewhere. Their claims are about climate, reproductive rights, and trying to do something about labor rights.

Are there differences with Western countries?

In my opinion, there are not enough differences with western countries. Indeed, the mobilised educated middle class learns a lot from the west. They take western frameworks for guaranteed even if it doesn't apply to the local reality. More work should be done on the local reality and demands should be adjusted to that, in my opinion.

"There are not enough differences with western countries. They take western frameworks for guaranteed even if it doesn't apply to the local reality."

In your article *The reinvention of "civil society" : transnation conceptions of development in East-Central Europe you mobilise the notion of "civil society". What does this notion refer to?**

This text was about what is called "civil society". Eastern Europe's notion of it is a relevant reference point in the international discourse of "civil society" and we can learn from it.

In late socialism, anti-socialist dissidence mobilized this notion a lot. When socialism, at the end, collapsed, some have been tempted to explain it by the existence of "civil societies". It was the idea that civil society has won over dictatorships

Then, in the early 1990's, everybody realised that there weren't such things as civil societies that would have won. The discourse about the notion of civil society changed in the 1990's. It was no longer seen as the cause of the end of socialism. On the contrary, it was stated that the absence of civil societies in Eastern Europe was, in fact, due to socialism itself.

Soon, these normative debates about civil society gave place to more practical projects around topics like democracy or transparency, driven by western fundings.

So in that article you mentioned, we tried to describe the history of civil society as a political construct.

*"Far from being a transparent term for self-organisation [...] the notion of **civil society** is burdened with complex **transnational historical baggage**. Its emergence and use as a paradigmatic concept for denoting civic activism and selforganisation happened within a specific historical process – the so-called democratic transitions – in which local institutions, organisations and movements were expected to serve the **reintegration of the region into global markets**."*
Funding, power and community development, chapter 4
"The reinvention of 'civil society': transnational conceptions of development in East-Central Europe",
A.Gagyí, M.Ivancheva, 2019

SUBSTANCE OF SOCIAL MOBILISATION

You made a review of Daniel Ozarow's work*. Daniel Ozarow is relying on the theory of the J curve and relative deprivation to explain changes of social movement behaviours. Do you agree with this analysis? Should we always expect negative long-term consequences to civil and social movements?

We could say so. But one of the relevant points from that book, regarding East European dynamics, is the existence, in the global economy, of relatively dominated economies that are vulnerable. Whenever there is a crisis, it would rather Argentina or Eastern European currencies that collapse and not the American dollar.

You can expect to have bigger problems in these countries that would affect workers and the middle class.

Then, the other main point is that the dynamics of politicization between workers and middle-class positions aren't stable. That's what happened after the 2000 crisis in Argentina.

First we observed a progressive alliance between workers and the middle class, but it broke down during the Kirchner regimes whose redistribution didn't reach the middle class. The middle class started to ally with Macri's neo-liberal program, which, in the end, wasn't so good for them. That's how it created new elements for a potential left cross-class coalition. These dynamics into interclass coalitions are similar in East European politics.

My main conclusion from this would be that declarations of intents to help workers from middle-class progressive movements shouldn't be taken structurally at face value. It's something that happens regularly when the middle class gets politicized and feels they need other allies, not only the elite. If you look at East European history, these phases of alliances are typically followed by the next phase when the middle class gets into opposition and gets allied to the elite again, repressing the rest of the population.

So my conclusion is that it is the reality built by these concrete material coalitions that primarily counts, and not so much the momentary political, theoretical and ideological declarations of intent.

"The dynamics of politicization between workers and the middle class aren't stable".

You showed that there was a strong wave of cooperative organisations witnessed in CEE after some crisis. Are we supposed to wait for an economic crisis to expect social movements and the spread of alternative economic solutions?

In general I don't think there is a need to wait. But if you look at historical dynamics, in times of crisis there are more mobilizations and more space for them to reach something because the hegemonic construct of the elite cracks.

Studies on social movements and revolutions speak a lot about this “classic need” of a crisis. But it doesn't mean that there is no need to build basic structures when there is no crisis. At the level of cooperative movements, we observed historically that they flourish after a crisis. Then when the economy rebounds again, it sucks up the base of cooperatives and the movement gets more narrow. Despite it's getting more narrow, continuities are important to be ready for another time of crisis.

LIFE AND SURVIVAL OF SOCIAL MOBILISATIONS

Sidney Tarrow theorized the notion of political opportunity theory* as the measure of openness of a political system to mobilisation regarding four factors. Are mobilisations or social movements likely to change things in Hungary within Orban's government?

There were different debates about the political opportunities structure model since it was born. One of it was that there weren't only these 4 factors. Another critique was about the definition of “political opportunities” only considering party politics. This perception skips the whole sphere of labor organizing that happens at workplaces and not parties. It also skips cooperatives organizing or grassroots structures that do not interact with party politics.

Bringing this to the current Hungarian situation, the current opposition consensus is that you cannot do anything as long as Fidesz has two-thirds of the Parliament. So the main important thing is to build an oppositional coalition to have an oppositional government. This way everything would be better.

This is not where I would start the analysis from. I would start questioning the material conditions of local normal people within global capitalism. Because currently they are subordinated to both global capital and to Hungarian capital.

Orban's regime is managing this system in a beneficial way for western manufacturers, local capitalists, and western and eastern financial investors while Hungarian people are working for cheap in these places.

And we can ask: how much is this really going to change with the opposition government composed of liberal centre-right people and their allies? Hungarian households already suffered from the liberal system in the 2000's.

So I don't necessarily see positive aspects of bringing back this in a liberal opposition government. It's not a super big hope.

Progressive movements are arguing that under an opposition government, political repression would be less strong and they will have more maneuver space. I think this is probably true in terms of freedom of speech, but in terms of reaching changes in economic relations, it is limited. Fidesz is making sure all the main economic assets and decisions will remain in its hands even if there is an oppositional government. Furthermore we are looking ahead to a big crisis that will come after the pandemic. In front of this crisis and economic decision power remaining in Fidesz hands, the oppositional government might not be able to handle it. They could be blame for it and Fidesz could come back even stronger.

Thinking of political opportunities for progressive initiatives, I think it would be a bigger opportunity if Fidesz has to bear the crisis. It would crack the economic coalitions that keep it on top. But that would of course come on top of destabilization that would cause great social pains in itself

DEGROWTH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN SOCIETIES

What do you think about degrowth?

Well, I completely agree with the main idea. The reason why I started to work with the framework of solidarity economy and not with degrowth is because within the solidarity economic framework the solutions that were discussed were much more concrete and technical.

I was interested in what could be done immediately. In daily work, the solidarity economy framework was just more useful for me, but these two frameworks (degrowth and solidarity economy) are completely compatible in the abstract sense.

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According to you, how socialist and post-socialist legacies in Central and Eastern Europe impact the receptivity of degrowth concepts and strategies?

Well, we can draw that this relationship is not so good. Consumption in Central and Eastern countries compared to western consumer societies was limited during socialism. The whole post-socialist idea is that now finally we will be able to consume on a Western level. So if you tell people to reduce consumption because of the planet, this sounds less acceptable as long as they are still feeling the relative deprivation.

On the other hand, some researchers argue that we also have to look at existing practices in Eastern Europe that are closer to the idea of degrowth. We usually don't see them because they don't look like western practices. One example is the community supported food networks, which exist in Eastern Europe in a socially organic way. But since in western countries, these things are done by NGOs which are institutionally visible and communicate very explicitly about themselves, it looks as if it would exist in Western countries and wouldn't in Eastern Europe. So you can look at either side of the coin.

"We have to look at existing practices in Eastern Europe that are closer to the idea of degrowth. We usually don't see them because they don't look like western practices."

What is the perception of degrowth notions such as commons and communities in Central and Eastern countries?

My experience is that at the level of slogans it has a very low acceptance because people had enough of sharing property and being pressed in cooperatives during socialism. So, if you put out that flag not many people are going to join. But in the practical work that we do, when it becomes practical and responds to real situations, it becomes quite easy to accept.

If some degrowth related notions aren't so accepted, under what kind of flags people could join or be interested in?

Well, in general my idea would be that it's not the flag that brings together. It's rather existing frameworks of real movement structures, that are actually good for the members. And by building out an infrastructure that actually can act as background. That is what keeps people together. And the name is basically secondary to that.

For instance there is a Croatian finance cooperative that started after 2008 as an alternative to existing banking practices. Normal people, cooperatives, local government could enter it. The idea was that they can put their money together and lend to each other without extracting too much money from each other. And they became popular very fast, it became the biggest cooperative in Croatia in 5 years.

You participated in the Rákóczi Collective project and faced limitations. Could we implement this type of alternatives projects in Central and Eastern Europe?

Rákóczi Collective was an initiative for housing cooperative. Now that initiative developed into one house, that is a real housing cooperative in Zugló (XIV district), and the building of Gólya Cooperative in Budapest too.

They are in what we established as an alternative real estate developer, that can buy and maintain real estate for housing and community purposes. This unit is part of a network called MOBA. It was set up by different housing cooperative initiatives in the region, after they realized that they had the same limits, such as financing, compared to Western housing cooperatives.

In Western cases, if you want to start a housing cooperative, you would go to a cooperative bank to have a cooperative loan. But in Eastern Europe you can't get a loan as a group and it won't be cheaper. The local government or government subsidies don't recognise this form either.

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MOBA started to work on how to get what you call "patient capital". It's an amount of money from the financialized global economy that is willing to go into a social purpose-long term investment. So for instance the European Central Bank has this kind of funds but they are looking for partners who would have like 300 000 homes, not small initiatives. These Central and Eastern European initiatives aren't big enough for that. That's why you need some intermediate organisation that can manage it and our hope is that MOBA can be built into that.

Other limitations relate to regulation. The situation would be better with a more favourable cooperative law. Under the present context, we don't expect to change it on the national level, but we collaborate with the local governments.

So indeed there are limitations like everywhere. If you want to build something that goes against the current system you are going to meet these limitations. But this doesn't mean that you can't work on technical solutions that can take you one or two steps further.

According to you, is the degrowth movement more likely to succeed in an institutionalised way or a non-institutionalised one?

To those people who think that first you need to take power before anything happens, I always respond that when you take the government, you are not taking power. You just occupy a management seat in an institution that is ruled by real power relations. Because of that, you definitely need a base in the real social structure, otherwise what else is going to help you to do anything in the so-called position of power ?

To those who think that you always have to avoid the institutions, I usually say that you can't always do it. It has to be institutionalized sooner or later, otherwise you cannot scale it up.

"I do think that degrowth framework would be relevant, but in the real unfolding of the events, I just don't see the degrowth movement being present enough."

So I do think that degrowth framework would be relevant, but in the real unfolding of the events, I just don't see the degrowth movement being present enough. It doesn't penetrate enough the rest of the movements.

Do you think that if it gets more integrated, it could be coopted by top-down reforms? ?

Basically, everything that was produced by the post-occupied movements as progressive political ideas was already coopted by top-down reforms.

For example, we saw some of Biden's proposals coming from progressive movements, such as redistribution-based social reforms. But those programs were significantly cut down, while most of the budget was allocated to the military.

This is generic. If you don't have the power to carry out, you can only aid the mainstream allies' campaign. Political wins can be used to help building social power but that window is much more narrow than what movements tend to believe.

What would you like the world to look like in 50 years?

We are not even sure that in 50 years from now people will be alive.

If you have to imagine, do you have an optimistic or pessimistic view of the future?

It's not about personal feelings, or about optimism. These things go by objective, causes and facts. Regarding the way we are now, in 50 years, things will be catastrophic and there are no signs that would point in other direction.

I think what people can do at this moment it's really not about feelings related to desires, optimism or pessimism. It's about seeing what there is, growing up to it, and decide accordingly on the next step. People like me are organizing things because we still want to create infrastructures of mutual help that can be helpful in times of crisis. I think realistically that's it. I don't expect that in 50 years grassroots initiatives like ours are going to define the course of history.

REVIEW OF INTERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The exchange with Agnes GAGYI made possible to question social movements and degrowth in Central and Eastern Europe in theory and in practice. Here are some concluding remarks and analysis on this week's topic.

Expectations :

- We were curious about the main characteristics of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe. To what extent are these movements linked to the socialist period or not? How do they differ today, for example, from movements in Western countries or Latin America?
- We wanted to discover the links between social movements and the economic context and changes in Central and Eastern Europe
- Could a massive social movement be at the origin of the implementation and generalisation of the degrowth model?
- We wondered about the influence of social movements on government and public policies, especially in Hungary.

Remarks :

- Global learnings regarding social movements in Central and Eastern Europe -

- Social movements' definitions are diversified in sociology and differ from one country to another.
- The middle class has a pivotal role in the politicization of social struggles. Alliances between workers and the middle class are complex, unstable, often to the detriment of the workers.
- If Central and East European countries have undergone "economic colonisation" with the integration into the neoliberal economy, the same is true for sociological works. There is a challenge for Central and Eastern European countries to emancipate from western and socialist thoughts and thinkings.

- Following on from what we learned from the interview with Edina Vadovics, there are existing initiatives and sustainable lifestyles in Eastern and Central European countries. The challenge is to remove the negative perception surrounding them (linked to poverty, far from the western model...)
- Relative deprivation is one explanation among others for the initiation of a social movement;

- Agnes Gagy's opinion and what we want to highlight -

- From her point of view we should not wait a crisis or resign ourselves to not acting, although there are recurrent patterns.
- According to Agnes Gagy, notions become a social reality if they are integrated in a real struggle (e.g. if you are defending a river as a common good, then the notion of the common good is created as a social reality within the struggle. That's not the case for degrowth).
- Central and Eastern European movements are under constant pressure and are invisibilised by western practices. This prevents them from finding appropriate solutions, or even understanding their own contexts and histories.
- According to Agnes Gagy, bottom-up actions and initiatives won't save us but they can improve the current situation.

New questions / challenges :

- Does the generalisation of social movements necessarily lead to cooptation? Would it be the same with the degrowth movement?
- To what extent can degrowth, a Western European notion, be brought to other parts of the world, such as historically dominated countries? And what are the limits according to the specificities of these countries?
- What are the links between the actual opposition of Orbán's government and social movements, such as feminist or ecologist ones ?

APPENDIX

Resources :

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Working Group for Public Sociology "HELYZET", helyzt.wordpress, <https://helyzet.wordpress.com/english/>

Transnational Institute, <https://www.tni.org/en>

Relative deprivation :

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- LONGLEY Robert, "All about Relative Deprivation and Deprivation theory", *ThoughtCo*, 03/08/2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/relative-deprivation-theory-4177591>

Theory of J curve :

- T.JOST John, "J curve hypothesis - sociology and political science", *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/J-curve-hypothesis>

Political Opportunity structure of Sydney Tarrow :

Tarrow's factors : "The degree of openness or closure of political institutions; the stability or instability of political alignments; the presence or absence of influential allies supporting the movement; the existence of conflicts and divisions among elites", Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 85-89

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