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THE END OF “THE END OF HISTORY” – ONE TALE, TWO CONTINENTS

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Abstract: This paper’s objective is to give an account of the ongoing transition from liberal democracy to a new form of governance, defined by the Hungarian Prime-Minister, Viktor Orbán, as the “illiberal state.” The author examines the transformation of the political culture in two countries, which at first sight do not have much in common: Sierra Leone and Hungary. In order to better understand the nature, causes and possible consequences of this shift, she re-examines the path leading from the democratic transformation of the 1990s to the present-day changes. She concludes that the move towards illiberal democracy is not a sudden, irrational deviation from what preceded it but rather the direct consequence of the way democratization was conceived and implemented in the countries in question. From a local angle, the illiberal turn points at a double rupture: that of the contract between national governments and local civil societies. From a global perspective, it probably reflects a tectonic reorganisation of international power relations.

Keywords: *Sierra Leone, Hungary, Political Culture, Neoliberalism, Civil Society, Illiberal Democracy*

Introduction

As a Hungarian anthropologist studying civil society in West Africa I work in a Hungary-based small private NGO. Between 2008 and 2012 I conducted 24 months of fieldwork in Sierra Leone, aimed at mapping the Sierra Leonean civil sector, with a special focus on disability-related organizations. For two years I frequented international NGOs and local civil society organisations as well as disabled squatter communities to better understand Sierra Leone’s democratisation process. My personal biography is important here because it explains the double prism through which I have been observing the simultaneous changes

in the Hungarian and the Sierra Leonean society over the past 8 years. What I – in the beginning – saw as an entertaining but highly random resemblance has gradually appeared to me as a double mirror. Changes in one country look clearer and are magnified by the reflection of similar changes occurring in the other. This is more than an optical illusion: the partly overlapping post-cold-war developments of Sierra Leone and Hungary probably follow a larger pattern, that of countries on the edge of global capitalism finding their way in the troubled waters of a quickly changing world system.

According to Wallerstein (2004) a world system is less a geographical than a symbolic and economic hierarchical constellation in which countries and regions on the periphery and semi-periphery are organised around a centre which exercises a centrifugal force on them both in political and economic sense. No matter how far West Africa is from Eastern Europe, Sierra Leone and Hungary have long been embedded in the same world system,¹ the centre of which can be found somewhere on the Euro-Atlantic axis. They can be considered as peripheral in that they both are receivers of capital and technology produced elsewhere. Sierra Leone is clearly classified as a developing country, while Hungary became officially part of the developed world only a few years ago, when it entered the European Union.² Thus, if it is possible – as Melegh (2006) demonstrates – to imagine Hungary as situated at the lower end of the “East-West slope,” Sierra Leone would occupy an unequivocally low position on the South-North slope.³

Both Sierra Leone and Hungary experienced a radical form of peripherality through colonialism and then decolonisation although in different eras and in different forms. The former nominally gained independence from the British rule in 1961, the second departed from the Soviet rule in 1989 (after being successively liberated from the Germans at the end of the Second World War, and from the Hapsburgs at the end of the First). They both traversed the cold-war-era with a one-party state, which disintegrated slowly and almost imperceptibly in the Hungary, and exploded in a terrible civil war in the Sierra Leone. Despite the similarities, the two cases clearly

- 1 For example, a constellation of states organised around the same centre.
- 2 Entering the EU meant for Hungary also to be obliged to reserve a part of its yearly budget for development purposes in the developing world.
- 3 The slope is not only about economy or effective power but also about imagination, reflecting to both of these. See Gagyí 2009.

show limited comparability. Still, in the late 1990s they both found themselves engaged on the same path: determined to embrace with equal enthusiasm free market capitalism and multi-party democracy. The ongoing shift from liberal democracy towards a form of illiberal-authoritarianism under a formally democratic regime is also happening simultaneously in the two countries.

One Mind in Two Bodies – Or, How Illiberal Democracy Came to the People

Sometime in early 2015 I made a video call to my friends in Sierra Leone. They work for a local NGO, just as I do in Hungary. We were discussing politics. I was asking them about the chances of their president running for a third term during the next elections, a move that would have required constitutional amendment. Instead of responding, my friends jokingly looked up at the ceiling, turning their heads in all directions, as if searching for something, certainly for imaginary cameras. We all burst out in laughter. That was a moment of perfect understanding without words. I knew the joke. In civil society circles in Hungary we mimic in the same way the possibility of our conversations being taped. Joking references to hidden micros and bugs are more than innocent kidding. They express the recognition that state power, after many years of conspicuous flirting with “civil society,” now treats the latter openly with suspicion. In Eastern Europe and in West Africa alike we witness a sharp return to a somewhat authoritarian form of rule, hostile to the values many civil society organisations promote: freedom, pluralism and substantial democracy.

Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, had announced the advent of this new system some months earlier,⁴ giving it a name by calling it the “illiberal state.” The concept is strangely reminiscent of Fared Zakaria’s (1997)⁵ illiberal democracy, a notion that in the

4 In the villages of Bálványosfürdő and Tusnádfürdő a political summer university has been organised since 1989, reflecting on Romanian-Hungarian relations and the political-economic situation of the region. In 2014 Viktor Orbán chose this platform to announce the advent of illiberalism. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXP-6nIG8ls>

5 Zakaria explained the concept in the following manner: “Democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights of freedom” (Zakaria 1997: 22).

original context was not meant at all to be an attractive selling point. Zakaria coined the term to depict regimes in which formal democratic institutions coexist with effective lack of liberty. It is relatively easy to imagine statesmen finding it practical to turn to such a type of rule, but who would boast it? Certainly a politician who would realise before others that in his country liberalism stopped making people dream. In reality, though, the governance style Orbán talked about is not fully an enemy of liberalism, or rather, it is illiberal only in as much as it treats freedom and plurality with a natural disgust, while it actively supports, as well as profits from, a truly neoliberal economic policy, concealed under a nationalist, independentist, anti-foreigner and anti-Western discourse.

This makes the startling resemblances between Hungary and Sierra Leone all the more understandable. All things kept in their own proportion, Koroma, Sierra Leone's ruling president, ever since he started his second term has shifted in the same direction. Unlike his Hungarian counterpart, he has not declared that he wishes to radically move away from where he came from. He just did it.

Civil society organisations in Sierra Leone have been placed under an ever-increasing control. Foreign NGOs and their expatriates face toughening conditions: increasing taxes, more expensive authorisation procedures, working- and living permits. But more important they are put under a moral pressure: they are ostracised in newspapers, ritually humiliated in public meetings and made to struggle with bureaucracy for the simplest things, such as custom clearance.

These is not just anecdotic evidence of a broken relation between the state and civil society. They are disparate, but fully connected signs of a new style of governance, not dissimilar from what Orbán is aiming at. In Sierra Leone, as well as in Hungary, illiberal democracy was being built on the foundations of this idealised but in reality highly scanty democratization process.

Change of the Regime and How We Got There: Hungary and Sierra Leone During the Cold War

Although, in a very loose sense, Sierra Leone and Hungary might equally be considered postcolonial societies, the colonisation they knew does not really bring them closer together. Hungary, after having been tied to Western empires as a client state for centuries, was occupied again in 1948, this time by the Soviet Union. Sierra Leone was liberated from the British colonial rule in 1961, starting a promising but sadly short career as an independent, democratic and progressive country. However, the colonial status implied a peripheral position for both countries, a position in which the acute awareness of underdevelopment and a constant longing for catching up with the Euro-Atlantic West defined their place in the global world order (and this, despite Hungary's being locked in place within the Soviet bloc). Peripherality is understood here first of all as the relative lack of capital and technology and a constant dependence on the centre to provide these. In a symbolic sense it means that collective self-identity is defined in relation to the desired but distant modernity of the centre.

There are other similarities. Despite the differences in their history, by the 1980s both countries were under a one-party system, with a problematic and conflict-ridden state-society relation, an unsustainable economic structure, setback by a huge and increasing pile of debt which made them dependent on IMF loans. Heavy indebtedness, trade imbalance combined with externally imposed austerity made these countries explode not only economically but also politically. In Hungary the socialist regime collapsed in 1989, Sierra Leone entered a brutal civil war in 1991 that lasted 11 years.

The end of the cold war marked the onset of a new area for Sierra Leone and Hungary alike. Both countries experienced the dissolution of the Soviet bloc as a shrinking of available options and finances, making their dependence on the Euro-Atlantic centre absolute. Their submission was all the more unconditional in that by the end of the 1980s both states were recognised failures: in Sierra Leone the state was incapable to deal with the ongoing rebel war, in Hungary the socialist system capitulated without a revolution.

By the mid-1990s Sierra Leone was a devastated country practically without a state (Reno 1995, 1996), immersed in chaos, one of the poorest countries in the world, if not the poorest. Hungary had consumed the transition to market economy, its borders were open, its living standards were growing and for a short moment it looked that finally it had found its place where it always should have belonged: in the (Western) “European House.”⁶ Showing very different pictures, still from this point on, the two countries followed the same developmental path: that of previously autocratic, underdeveloped states embracing liberal democracy as a “thin idea of ‘government by the people’”:

“One largely measured by the presence or absence of national elections ... exported to the non-Western world, often coercively, by the USA and its allies: freedom, went the mantra, inheres above all in the right to choose... It was accompanied by the equally insistent imposition of free market capitalism, although capital has often flourished sans democratic governance” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:29).

From the Patrimonial to the Neo-Patrimonial State in West Africa

In 1961 Sierra Leone started its independent statehood with good perspectives. It had a good educational system and a well-educated Krio elite (Cohen 1981), abundant natural resources and a reasonably well functioning agriculture, producing, beyond self-subsistence, for export. However, its economy was vulnerable: offering only agricultural produce and raw materials on the world market in exchange of highly processed goods – a combination leading to permanent trade imbalance. The oil crisis of 1973 hit the Sierra Leonean economy hard. From the mid-1970s on, the growth rate slowed down and inflation grew (Zack-Williams 1990). The economic decline continued in the 1980s, marked by falling per capita incomes and high inflation.

External resources came to counterbalance these negative trends in the form of business investment, aid and loan. From 1970 to 1980 external debt increased from 59 million USD to 433 million (Bah 2011). The major creditor was the International Monetary Fund. As early as 1966

6 The metaphor of the “European House” was used after the regime change to support Hungary’s candidacy for the membership of the European Union, symbolically picturing its entry to the European Community as an act of “returning home.”

the Fund proposed a “stabilization program” (Bhatia et al. 1969). The measures it promoted – the reduction of the operating subsidies to railways, road transport, and local authorities, the rationalisation of expenditures on education and health services, the devaluation of the local currency, the reduction of the agricultural producer prices, combined with the restrictions of new loans and the limiting of the imports – seemed to have an immediate positive effect on the budgetary deficit. However, the positive results were largely counterbalanced by worrisome new trends: “There was a fall in producer prices and in most cases farmers were not paid for their produce. This acted as a disincentive to farmers to produce more crops” (idem, p. 513). Agricultural production collapsed.

In the long run the stabilisation program failed. From the 1970s Sierra Leone joined the group of countries subjected to the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the IMF, which – from the 1970s – used the same “shock therapy” (Klein 2007) for all developing countries. It everywhere produced similar deleterious effects. In Sub-Saharan Africa it made countries respond to deteriorating terms of commerce (partly resulting from falling commodity prices but also from sustained protectionism on behalf of industrialised countries) by introducing a strict neoliberal agenda. In Sierra Leone all forms of agricultural subsidies were stopped from 1978 on (resulting in a sharp decrease of production and the loss of food security); the bulk of state expenditure was cut (resulting in an increase of unemployment and a decline in the provision of “quality food, health, clean water, and other basic needs” (Hekpo 1992), the domestic currency was devaluated (resulting in staggering inflation) and all existing resources were rechannelled to debt service (resulting in dramatic impoverishment and effective starvation). The neoliberal package did not bring the expected results even by its own terms. Sierra Leone registered negative growth rates between 1978 and 1987. By the end of the 1980s it was a failed state, a collapsed economy and an impoverished society relying almost exclusively on foreign aid (ibid).

The end of basic existential security, growing inequalities and deteriorating life conditions resulted in a dangerous political instability. The political power responded to the economic decline and to the popular discontent it generated by the gradual transformation of a multiparty democracy into an autocratic regime. Siaka Stevens,

Prime Minister of Sierra Leone from 1967 on introduced the one party system in 1971, became President and only ceded power in 1985 to his own chosen successor.

Siaka Stevens secured his power by appropriating and redistributing the country's resources to his loyal supporters, who – in turn – relied on a chain of supporters depending on them. Strong patron-client relations constitute the essence of the patrimonial regime, a form of governance taking its roots well in precolonial times (Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010). Although such a rule produces exploitation and arbitrariness, it assures some amount of accountability, as the big men have to take their clients into consideration in order to retain them. But maintaining a chain of clients is costly and potentially dangerous, as a client might – if sufficiently empowered by his own clients – want to take over the place of the ruler. Foreigners can be controlled more easily and politically they represent no threat. Siaka Stevens found out soon how to bypass local clients by rather relying on foreign businessmen. In the 1980s his most important commercial ally, an Afro-Lebanese businessman, got to monopolise 100% of the country's exportation (Peters 2010).

Paradoxically, the IMF's structural adjustment policy prescribed to Siaka Stevens (and later to his successor, General Momoh) to do what they were already doing: privatising public resources by attracting foreign capital (Reno 1996, 2009). By the time the civil war reached its peak, the Sierra Leonean state had already sold out its mines, its tax collection, its port, the national lottery and by the same logic even its national security, hiring foreign private security companies to fight against the rebels.

This was patrimonialism with a new touch. The classical patrimonial ruler found “wealth in people,” as he lived in a universe in which “people, especially men, had to ‘build themselves up’ – to constitute their person, position, and rank – orchestrating ties of alliance and opposition” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:53). In contrast, when political support is externalised, the satisfaction of the internal constituency becomes unimportant and political accountability diminishes. This process was described by Bayart as the “historical trajectory” of the dominant social groups of Africa towards increasing “extraversion” (Bayart 1993). For Bayart, the modern African state

is characterised on the one hand by extraversion, on the other hand by the "reciprocal assimilation" of the political and economic elite "leading to the unification of elites and the creation of a dominant class" (Bayart 1993:163), a consequence of the concentration of wealth and power in less and less hands at the top.

While the schools and hospitals ceased to function, and the roads further deteriorated, cutting even more the hinterland from the capital, IMF officials stressed the need of more privatisation. "Despite the adverse effects of previous lending behaviour, creditors, fearing loan default if the state collapsed into complete anarchy, bailed out the government by restructuring loans on the condition of adherence to reform, including reduction of state spending. This resulted in ... [the] regime laying off approximately one-third of the remaining civil service, thereby further alienating the fragile patronage networks that remained" (Reno 1998:127).

In the face of the chaos in which this policy pushed the country, the international community drastically changed its approach in 1995, abandoning the direct and indirect support of the country's corrupt leaders by purely economic means for more diplomatic methods. In 1996 the UN – under the pressure of the British and US governments – played a critical role in imposing national elections on a country in a state of war. The elections ended with the victory of a former UN official, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. With Kabbah's presidency a new area started: that of a national government under the direct supervision of an international organisation and its numerous bureaus and agencies.⁷ The impressive institutional system of the UN – later joined by an arsenal of bilateral and transnational donors and Western NGOs – has launched an unprecedented wave of modernisation, with democratic transformation in its focus.

Meanwhile in Hungary – On the East-West Slope

Hungary also dragged on the heritage of its past into its period of Soviet occupation. In the Habsburg area its place in the international

⁷ UNIPSIL is part of a bigger family, that of UNCT (Country Team), which comprises various UN agencies, funds and programmes, like UNDP, UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, FAO, UNHCR and UNIOSIL, as well as IOM, OHCHR, the Field Security Coordination Officer and the World Bank (Daco-sl.org).

market was that of an agricultural exporter and an importer of luxury goods (Éber 2014:17). Under the socialist regime heavy industrialisation took off, but its production was hardly competitive on Western markets; it found an outlet uniquely within the COMECON. For highly processed goods and technology Hungary still turned to the West (mainly to Germany). Consequently, its previous place in the international division of labour did not change: it was still a semi-peripheral country, struggling with economic underdevelopment, lacking capital and technology, forced to import processed goods from the centre, in exchange for raw materials and agricultural products. This forced division of labour resulted in commodity dependence and a lack of added value in the production chain.

After the 1973 oil crisis, increasing energy prices made industrial production ever more expensive. The foreign exchange crisis and the falling commodity prices worsened the imbalance of payment, which the country compensated with foreign loans. As a result, Hungary – contrary to other socialist countries – had accumulated an enormous stock of debt by 1989, the year of the regime change.

In 1982, after intense internal debates, Hungary officially joined the IMF, and borrowed from it at the same time. This step might be surprising on behalf of a socialist country, but Hungary's opening towards market economy had started much earlier, with the reforms of 1968, and it was carried on gradually in the coming decades, in different stages. Each stage of reform was preceded by a short period, in which the proponents of public expenditures found themselves temporarily in a majority, contributing to an increase in the foreign trade disequilibrium, which in turn pushed the country to take on more debts. This situation led to the implosion of the system and to the economic regime change starting after 1985 with the “spontaneous privatisation“ of the big socialist companies (Szalai 2016). Privatisation was carried out by the managers, who often succeeded in acquiring the property for themselves or for new owners close to them.

Privatisation profoundly transformed the ownership structure but did not fundamentally change the players. The technocracy of the late Kádár area kept its leading position even after the first democratic election in 1990, sharing the power with the liberal intelligentsia

previously in opposition as well as with the ex-managers (now owners) of the big companies. This new elite represented the interests and the position of the Western centre. This centrality of political and economic power is embodied in Sierra Leone by the "international community," while in the context of Eastern Europe, Szalai introduced the notion of the "superstructure,"⁸ comprising more or less the same (or the same types of) transnational financial-economic institutions (Szalai 2016:125). The regime changing elite in Hungary firmly opposed the idea that Hungary should profit from the transition to ask for debt relief. Consequently, Hungary – just like Sierra Leone – had to start rebuild a new economic structure while paying at the same time for the debts of the previous regime. The only way to do that was by imposing on the country a series of austerity measures of neoliberal inspiration.

Not only did Hungary not ask for the relief from or rescheduling of its debts, it still took a new 200 million USD worth loan under the structural adjustment program, partly in order to assure its continuous debt service (Morva 2001). Ostensibly, the structural adjustment program aimed "at establishing a competitive market economy in Hungary, restoring a reasonable and sustainable growth rate, improving the country's external creditworthiness, and reducing the inflation rate" (World Bank 1990). The program comprised different policy reforms, including the further transformation of the property structure, the dismantling of protective taxes on imports, the liberalisation of the financial system and "a comprehensive reform of social programs (including housing, social security, pension and family allowances)" (ibid). "Comprehensive reform" basically meant a sharp cut in subsidies, while at the same time the state reduced the taxes on enterprises.

Large-scale privatisation and the importation of foreign capital contributed to the production of a new type of elite, composed of the leaders of multinational companies. While Hungary, as a peripheral economy, has always been vulnerable to the international economic environment, after 1989 the influx of foreign capital became the single most important factor in its economic (and political) development. The

8 According to Szalai the main actors of this superstructure in the early 2000s were the big transnational financial and commercial organizations, the large multinational banks, the leaders of multinational companies, the international credit rating and auditing companies, the global media, and last but not least the political and military elite of the USA.

redistribution of income from large sections of the population towards a minority and the syphoning of resources out of the public sector for the benefit of the economic elite resulted in a stronger connection between the political and economic power and created a new social structure based on quickly deepening inequalities.⁹ That was a shock to the population, which had always imagined the closing up with the West to be a process of economic improvement, not believing for a second that the achievements of the socialist welfare state could be in danger.

During socialism the official ideology held that “humans were the supreme value.” This slogan obviously did not meet the everyday experience of the people but still, in the late Kádár era, masses for the first time attained the ranks of petty bourgeoisie as a result of free education, free health care, cheap access to culture and public housing (Pogátsa 2016:10). One immediate consequence of the transition was the erosion of the socialist welfare system.

From 1988 to 1993 the unemployment rate increased from close to 0 to 13 per cent. The real victims of the regime change were the Roma. As they already during socialism belonged to the poorest section of the population, their post-cold-war itinerary is a good indicator of the brutality with which neoliberalism was introduced in the country. In the 1970s the employment rate of Roma men was equal with non Roma, although they occupied mostly physical jobs not requiring qualification. These were the first jobs to be suppressed when de-industrialisation started and the large agricultural cooperatives were dismantled or privatised. In 1993 already around 40% of Roma men were unemployed.

Unemployment was not the only calamity that struck the poor. At the same time Hungarians met another form of social exclusion not known before, that of homelessness. Emblematically, the first NGO dealing with homelessness was formed in 1988 (Udvarhelyi 2014). This was how the Hungarian version of the “Wealth in People” ended, with the formation of a growing surplus population made redundant in all possible ways. The inflation of human capital was also reflected by the slowing down of upward social mobility. “Mobility between the

9 The GINI index jumped from the modest value of 21 in 1987 to 25 by 1989 and 28 by 1993 (Trading Economics).

generations remained on the same level between the beginning of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s; it started to decrease in 1992, mostly amongst men (Bukodi 2002:198).

Just like in Sierra Leone, the growing extraversion and reciprocal assimilation of the elites resulted in the concentration of political and economic power, while masses simultaneously fell back from relative well-being into poverty. Just like in Sierra Leone, these had been autonomous processes in Hungary starting well before the regime change, but turning wholeheartedly towards the Western „superstructure” in a new unipolar world, where no other alternative was available to counterbalance the only existing set of ideas, quickened and exacerbated this transformation.

The Existing Liberal Democracy

Naomi Klein (2007) believes that neoliberal reforms have the best chances to be implemented in places disorganised by real or fabricated crises and major cataclysms. Before the advent of liberal democracy, the crisis (although of a different magnitude) was of such evidence both in Sierra Leone and in Hungary that it was natural for the transnational elite to see these countries as white sheets on which the new system could be easily built. This idea received strong support from the national elite, which almost unanimously lined up behind the enterprise of transformation. This meant one more step toward extroversion – with a new element. The centre’s influence became total, while dependence extended from the economic to the ideological sphere.

From now on, the name of the game was democratisation. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc the proponents of liberal democracy had no challengers anywhere. But the big breakthrough had taken place much before, during the early 1980s when the logic of international development turned upside down. Previously it had been presumed that economic development was necessary for democratization. Developers in the 1980s saw the world in a different light. To them democratization was necessary for economic development. Thus, priorities imperceptibly changed, democracy now was part of a bigger package. It has a certain symbolic significance that it was the same Ronald Reagan who with Thatcher made neoliberalism the ruling

doctrine of Western capitalism, who announced the “Democracy Program” – a program aiming at democratic change in Eastern Europe and the developing world. The type of democracy he propagated was necessarily a particular type: the “thin,” neo-liberal type, a type the Comaroffs called “Kentucky Fried democracy”:

Democracy has become to homo politicus what shopping has long been to homo economicus: a sacred, cosmic fusion of free will and righteous human satisfaction. They are so to speak, two sides of the same coin, two regimes of consumption underpinned by the same mode of ideological and material production. Democracy has increasingly been reduced, in practice, from the substantive to the procedural ... purged of any ideological density, it has come to connote little more than the periodic exercise of preference, the satisfying of desire, the physics of pure interest. ... understood thus, democracy is a small idea, one that is more likely to bring with it Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonalds’s than an amelioration of the human condition (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 112).

In Sierra Leone democratization had started even before the official peace, with the multiparty election in 1996, organised with the moral, financial and political support of the UN. After the collapse of the socialist regime, Hungary’s first democratic elections took place in 1990. The transition from a socialist to a capitalist system took place following the recommendations of the IMF and the World Bank. In 1999 Hungary joined NATO and in 2004, by joining the European Union, it definitely arrived in the free, democratic part of the world. Thus, in the first decade of the twenty-first century both Hungary and Sierra Leone experienced a rapid transition from an autocratic to a democratic rule under the tutelage of Western-based international institutions, which fixed policy objectives for governments and provided the roadmaps for their implementation. The two pillars of democratization were free, multiparty elections on the one hand, and a strong civil society, on the other.

The Age of Project Society in Africa

When I first set foot in Sierra Leone in 2008, only 6 years after the official ending of the civil war, the country was under a de facto

international guardianship led by UNAMSIL, the UN peacebuilding mission in Sierra Leone, whose task was to guide the country on the path of democratic transformation. The UN mission was not alone in the gigantic task of transforming war-torn Sierra Leone into a liberal democracy; the UN presence included 22 different UN agencies, including UNDP, FAO, ILO, IMF and the World Bank. Western governments from Western and Northern Europe, North America and Japan, as well as the European Union, delegated their development agencies in the country to give a hand in the enterprise. Finally, Western-based international NGOs opened their offices in large numbers contributing to the efforts of the major transnational donors. This group of international actors representing first and foremost Western interests was called the "international community"; their presence was conspicuous, manifest in the fact that huge jeeps covered with acronyms were running everywhere on the dirt roads.

To this proliferation of international organisations corresponded a booming of local civil society organisations. Ordinary people I talked to often identified themselves as civil society activists for whatever cause. Kids in remote villages were dreaming of careers in the voluntary sector: they did not want to become football players but rather chairmen of associations. I discovered a local or international voluntary organisation at every corner. I soon came to the conclusion that most probably I had arrived to the country with the highest number of NGO-type organisations per inhabitant. I did not manage to obtain any reliable statistics to defend my claim (as the registration of civil society organisations was uncertain) but at one point a public servant gave me the number of 3,000 registered organisations. While this number is uncertain, Sierra Leone was without doubt the flagship country of the UN (Châtaigner 2005), which used it as an experimental field to put in practice its new post-conflict recovery strategy, based on a massive international presence aiming at quick democratization. This new post-war interventionism was labelled "the liberal peace" (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009; Cubitt 2013; Duffield 2001).

"The approach involves the use of certain mechanisms and tools deployed within troubled locales by an epistemic community of 'peacebuilding experts.' The peace is 'done' through a predefined process involving security sector reform (SSR), the pursuit of constitutional democracy, the promotion of human rights, liberal

development of the economy, civil peacebuilding, and the rule of law” (Cubitt 2013: 2).

In Sierra Leone project society (Sampson 2005) became a “total social fact” (Mauss 1954) permeating all aspects of life. This was not the first time the country met with the NGO world. Its early encounter with the aid industry put it in contact with donors, short-term projects and NGOs taking the place of public service providers, but the projects of the 1980s were different from those of the early twenty-first century. In 2008 the Sierra Leonean population was not only asked to receive aid in exchange for austerity but to actively (and happily) embrace the new (liberal) value system. Old illiterate ladies in the countryside wore T shirts with captions like “small arms control,” “rule of law,” and “public sector reform.” A special state bureau, the so-called Secretariat of Attitudinal Change was in charge of educating the people through visual messages and radio programs. Sierra Leoneans were being patiently taught what to think and how to feel in this new world. The whole country became a laboratory in which a huge project of political and societal transformation was meticulously implemented.

Discovering Civil Society in Hungary

In Hungary the world of NGOs did not emerge in such a spectacular way but here, too, soon after the regime change the non-profit sector went through a period of unprecedented growth. From 1990 to 2007 the number of civil society organisations grew fivefold (Kákai 2009). The increase was particularly rapid between 1990 and 2000. “Civil society” – as the NGO world was called now – was expected to become a key player in the most important social fields: health, education and social work. At the same time it became specialised in defending the key values of the liberal state: democracy, rule of law, plurality, integration of minorities and the further development of civil society, to name but a few. In other words, the newly born NGO-type civil society was expected to take an important share of the state’s tasks under the government’s direct control, while at the same time it was pictured as embodying the popular control over the government. There were at least four false presumptions in this system of expectations: (1) that NGOs in all circumstances can provide better services to needy beneficiaries than the state; (2) that the channelling of resources to

NGOs would result in less corruption and more efficiency; (3) that NGOs are by nature independent from political influence, and (4) that NGOs represent (civil) society, consequently they automatically behold a vision from the bottom.

Not only were these presumptions not necessarily compatible with each other, ultimately they also proved to be false. The NGOisation of social services allowed the state to progressively abandon painful social problems or to tackle them through short-term projects allocated in an arbitrary manner to civil society organisations, which never were sure if they could continue their work after the project's ending. This outsourcing of the welfare function of the state contributed to the downscaling of public services, making these extremely volatile and unreliable. De Zeeuw's words proved to be right: indeed "projects do not create institutions" (de Zeeuw 2005). Not only is it vain to expect that "good practices" locally implemented on a small scale would be taken up and spread broadly by the government with the guarantee to maintain them, the proliferation of projects also helped generate an effective smoke screen hiding the dysfunctioning of the public sector.

The so-called "Roma integration" problem is just one example. The consecutive governments from 1990 have spent enormous amounts of money to fill the gap in the socio-economic situation between the Roma minority and mainstream society. In sharp contrast with the previous era, voluntarily colour-blind welfare policies were substituted by targeted Roma programs, positive discrimination and NGOs expected to take care of the integration of the Roma through training, labour and other thematic projects, always limited in time and scope. The Roma themselves created civil society organisations but instead of political neutrality these organisations were often captured by party politics.

More than twenty years after the regime change the social exclusion of the Roma is a bigger problem than ever. The life expectancy of Roma people is 10 years less than that of the overall population. Almost 80% of them have only basic education (maximum 8 classes), only 27% have some kind of income generating activity, while among the non-Roma the same ratio is 60% (Bernát 2014). In segregated villages and in ghetto-like urban neighbourhoods the third generation of unemployed Roma is growing up. Although for almost three decades

the liberal strategy of Roma inclusion has remained remarkably unsuccessful, it is only recently that this strategy has modestly been put into question even in liberal circles. The doubts developed into a full-fledged scandal when one Roma politician, who is also the leader of an important Roma civil society organisation, was reported to have been possibly involved in the mismanagement of circa 5 million Euro European Structural Funds dedicated to the labour integration of the poorest Roma.¹⁰ That was a hard symbolic blow to ideas about the increased accountability of civil society and the inherent economic efficiency of projects over state action.

The Betrayed Promise of Democratisation in Sierra Leone: Producing Expulsions

Symbolically, in Sierra Leone the liberal peace started with the first multi-party election after the one party system, in 1996. The new democratic era was almost in every aspect the antithesis of the old authoritarian regime – except for its economic policy. The international community exercising guardianship over the fragile state did not profoundly revise the principles of the structural adjustments. The economic basis of the post-conflict state building was still free market capitalism, involving what it takes: the liberalisation of external trade, the attraction of foreign investment with overfriendly tax regulations and a strict control of public spending.

The results were paradoxical. The country knew a quick overtake after the war years¹¹, although starting from an extremely low basis: in 2002, the year of the official end of the war, Sierra Leone occupied the last position in the world's HDI ranking (Human Development Index 2002).¹² Per capita GDP grew steadily and nominal inequality diminished but the macro indicators meant little change in the actual way of living of the poorest. In 2007 a government report still found that food insecurity had grown compared to previous years, 60% of the population had no access to safe water, and 50% had no access to medical services (Cubitt 2013: 103). Measured poverty remained at

10 http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160308_ennyit_fizettethetnek_vissza_az_orzagos_roma_onkormanyzattal

11 <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/sierra-leone/gdp-per-capita>

12 In 2002 Sierra Leone ranked 173rd, Hungary 35th, in 2015 Sierra Leone 181st, Hungary 44th, making their distance from each other spectacularly stable.

around 70%. Foreign investments and export-oriented production did not produce more security or more jobs. The dependency on external revenue flows remained unchanged. These are some of the reasons why Cubitt concludes that macro-economic restructuring was mostly beneficial for what she calls "the external constituency," assuring, if anything, safe debt service (ibid. 112).

Despite the insistence of Western donors on the rule of law and good governance, another area in which the peace-building program had only mitigated success was state corruption. Although analysts celebrated the country's progress in terms of anti-corruption (African Economic Outlook 2011),¹³ locally people had quite a different perception. My arrival in the country in 2008 coincided with an interesting incident: airport authorities intercepted a whole cargo of drugs¹⁴, which apparently landed in Lungi airport with the knowledge and collaboration of highly placed government officials. The case came to light because of the excessive zeal of an airport employee who too quickly called the police. People of the street commented laughingly on the events, with a tone of "business as usual." Indeed, in the coming years there was hardly any year without one or two major scandals. Even the 50th Independence Anniversary Committee¹⁵ had to be reorganised just before the celebrations because the officials could not account for the huge amount of money they received for managing the program. Another cargo of drugs was found by chance in the port of Freetown, apparently deviated from the government's UNICEF funded Free Health Care program.

These were the big scandals. But not all corruption cases become manifest, some are presented as economic success stories. It is rare that the illicit exchange of money between foreign investors and the political elite for fast-tracking dubious businesses comes as clearly to light as happened with the Vice-President who was caught in flagrante in a murky timber business by a journalist disguised as a foreign businessman.¹⁶ Even in this case, the exposure had no real consequences. As a rule, the government, no matter what price

13 In 2011 the Mo Ibrahim Index record found "that Sierra Leone is one of five crisis-affected countries making significant progress towards democratic governance."

14 <http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/3204.cfm>

15 <http://news.sl/drwebsite/exec/view.cgi?archive=7&num=17345&printer=1>

16 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDisMlwlSgk>

ordinary Sierra Leoneans have to pay for the economic growth, welcomes foreign investments.

One of the ways the population pays for FDI is by losing their traditional right to land use. Buying up or leasing large chunks of agricultural land by multinationals contributes to making an ever-growing population landless, jobless and homeless. Land grab, i.e., the “large scale land acquisition by foreign governments or multinationals usually in poorer countries and forced conversion from land used by small holders to large-scale commercial use” (Sassen 2014:193), has been a controversy for quite some time in other parts of Africa. Sierra Leone entered this business relatively late, but all the more enthusiastically. According to estimates, by 2012 more than 40% of its cultivated land was affected by land grabbing (ibid). The situation was considered worrying enough for the Oakland Institute to include Sierra Leone in its first series of seven country reports denouncing predatory land acquisition practices in Africa (Oakland_Institute 2012).

Because in Sierra Leone communal land cannot be sold, companies lease the land, usually for the maximum time allowed by a 1927 Protectorate Ordinance, i.e., for 50 years, with the possible extension of another 21 years. “Early 2011, close to 500,000 ha of farmland had been leased or were under negotiation for lease.” Land deals are characterised by a complete lack of transparency. Leases are negotiated “directly with chiefs and landowners, and often the signatories do not have copies nor are they aware of the terms of the leases or even the land area covered. As a result, there is little critical or accurate media coverage of the land deals, Sierra Leoneans don’t know how much of their farmland has already been leased to foreign investors, and there is no serious public debate on the subject” (Oakland_Institute 2012: 1).

Another form of invisible corruption is tax avoidance. In 2014, Christian Aid published a report on income inequality and the role of tax dodging in maintaining it in 8 African countries, including Sierra Leone. The report notes:

“In Sierra Leone, as of 2011, only one of the major mining firms was paying corporate income tax and this was because their agreement included a turnover tax of 0.5%. None of the top five were reporting profits despite the rapid growth of mineral exports. Dan Watch,

a Danish center for investigative journalism, also reports that the top five mines in Sierra Leone are part of company structures with excessive use of tax havens and four of the five companies reviewed are owned through intermediaries based in tax havens such as Bermuda and British Virgin Islands.” (Kumar 2014:32)

The kind of investments Sierra Leone attracted in the post-war era did almost nothing to improve the capacity of the state to increase the population’s welfare. What is more, it did not really contribute to develop local processing capacities either, leaving Sierra Leone at the lower end of the production chain, increasing rather than decreasing its dependence on global movements of capital. This vulnerability was clearly revealed when by the end of the Ebola outbreak multinationals that previously had enjoyed huge fiscal advantages, declared bankruptcy and closed their gates one after the other, leaving a huge gap behind them (Pinto 2016).

Sierra Leone has never been a rich country, although in the 1960s it was doing considerably better than in later times (Bhatia et al. 1969). The majority of the population always had to be regarded as poor, but yesterday being poor had a different social meaning than today. With market liberalisation the insecurity of the poor has increased considerably. Their problem before was that they were kept in dependency, tied in oppressive patron-client networks. Their new problem is that they are considered more and more as untied elements by the powerful, as a negligible surplus population. In this respect, despite obvious continuities, there is an important transformation going on in the political culture. The poor no longer bring any benefit to the big men, they do not even have their place in the patrimonial chains (except occasionally at elections times).

The result is a formidable squandering of human capital and a conspicuous disdain towards poor lives. Nowhere can the everyday translation of this rule be better traced than in public institutions: in badly equipped government hospitals, where suffering bodies of adults and children are stocked without real treatment; in schools, where badly paid teachers do not even show up and where children are asked to pay a “fine” for their absence; in prisons, where human beings are not only treated like animals, but are literally told that they do not deserve any better. Apparently, not only rulers turned away

from their constituency; nurses, teachers, police officers have equally internalised the idea that certain lives are superfluous.

People are forced into a situation of permanent insecurity and vulnerability. Because they are superfluous, they can be displaced with no costs to the elite. From the countryside they are pushed towards the edges of the cities, where their life spaces are often threatened again by “deslummification” projects, evictions or simple land conflicts. This is a global process by which the poor and those who are threatened to become poor – the small and middle bourgeoisie – increasingly lose control of their living space. Saskia Sassens (2014) calls this phenomenon “Expulsion” or “Foreclosure,” identifying it as the most recent form of oppression.

Expulsions in Hungary

Foreclosure is also happening in Hungary, although not for the same reasons and not in the same way. In Hungary (contrary to Sierra Leone) poverty is not only palpably but also measurably growing, affecting first of all the low skilled, families with children, and those living in poor regions (Havasi, Éltető, 2006). This has been a steady trend since the regime change. As a result of income redistribution from the bottom to the top, one and a half million jobs were terminated. By the end of the 1990s huge sections of the population were falling into poverty. By 2004 constant austerity measures practically stopped economic growth (Szalai 2016:126). In the 2000s, due to a worsening trade balance indebtedness accelerated, by 2006 it reached a critical level.

The 2008 global crises hit an extremely weakened national economy, thrusting the middle class dangerously close to the poor. The so-called “credit in foreign currency” so popular during the previous decade took its victims first of all from this stratum. Together with northern countries so different as the United States or Latvia, Hungary belongs to those places where complex financial products proposed indiscriminately to the population produced a huge stock of private toxic debts, causing a massive wave of evictions when people became unable to pay back their loans. Although the Orbán government gave a helping hand to debtors (to the great distress of banks) the emergency plan did more to save the relatively wealthier

than the poorest. As a result, almost a million Hungarians lost their homes between 2007 and 2012 (Sassen 2014). In the same period homelessness became legally criminalised.

The national-conservative government of Fidesz, in power with a 2/3 majority since 2010, introduced some forms of protectionism and openly turned against multinationals and foreign owned banks. But no amount of discourse changed the fact that even in this new era Hungary retained its unfavourable position in the production chain as a provider of low skilled work and low technology for the assembly plants of multinationals. "Transnational companies practically got a free hand to write themselves the most flexible labour law in Europe. Tax allowances given to them and the monetary policy using drastic internal devaluation of real wages and gradual weakening of real exchange rate aimed equally at improving the internal financing capacity and regional competitiveness of the country." (Éber et al. 2014: 35). At the same time the Fidesz government nationalised companies in the service providing sector and privatised agricultural land, using both strategies to redistribute capital towards the top, in the interest of an emerging national capitalist class composed uniquely of its supporters. This economic policy was successful in drawing the economic elite under the control of the political class, but it had detrimental effects to the majority of the population. As a result, Hungary (still) has one of the lowest levels of real wages in the EU (after Bulgaria and Romania) (Oblath 2015) and in 2012 had the absolute highest proportion in the EU of people not able "to afford a meal with meat, fish, chicken or a vegetarian equivalent every second day" (Eurostat 2015), a standard indicator to measure deprivation. In 2012 Tárki reported that 47% of Hungarians live in households affected by some form of poverty (Tárki 2013). In 2015 the national Statistical Office announced that it would stop releasing data on poverty, because the term is too "elusive" (Hungarian Free Press 2015)¹⁷. In its own way, the Ministry of Human Resources is also fighting poverty: it published a list of words NOT to be used in official documents and talks. Poverty is one of those.

¹⁷ <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2015/06/25/poverty-in-hungary-skyrockets-government-to-stop-publishing-statistics/>

The Advent of Illiberalism – A Sharp Turn?

The kinds of liberal democracy that “the international community” and the “superstructure” helped build in Sierra Leone and Hungary did not even in its blueprint contain the welfare of the majority. This was not a concern either of the national elites executing the regime changes. Rising inequalities were considered as a normal consequence of free market capitalism to which democracy building was linked. However ineffective this “thin” democracy was in creating a fair society, for a long time it was relatively successful in safeguarding – at least nominally – the value system of liberalism: scoring high citizenship rights, personal liberty and respect of plurality. In the first two decades of democracy building an array of democratic institutions was created to protect these values. In Sierra Leone, a series of commissions were established: Human Rights Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Youth Commission, Disability Commission, etc. In Hungary, the new legal system comprised the Minority law and the Equal Chances Law, with the Equal Treatment Authority and the Constitutional Court to oversee the respect of citizenship rights. Until 2011 four Ombudsmen worked under Parliament: the Ombudsman for Citizenship Rights, the Data Protection Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Minority Rights and the Ombudsman for Future Generations.¹⁸ If in practice the liberty of opinion, speech, media and assembly were not always effectively protected, no mainstream politician would have ever thought of publicly challenging these values.

How Illiberalism Came to Hungary

The situation of democracy has perceptibly deteriorated since the Fidesz government overtook power with a two third majority in 2010. This strong warranty and the acute public awareness of the severe economic-political crisis in which the previous “liberal left” governments had led the country gave it practically unlimited power to reshape the governance system in a way to weaken existing democratic institutions. The two third majority allowed the political elite to enforce any new law they wished, including a change of the constitution, which from this point on became the guarantor of conservative values,

18 The Fidesz government abolished these functions in 2011, creating one new function, that of the Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights.

defining Hungary as a Christian country, narrowing the concept of the family to a married couple with their children and denying the right of the homeless to live in the street. In 2011 even the country's name was changed: the "Republic" was abolished. In the same period pressure on the opposition media was growing.

Despite these warning signs, for most people it was a genuine surprise when Orbán in August 2014 announced the beginning of the "illiberal state." Many wondered how this would look like. The government did not fail to give exact indications in a short time. In September the special police arrived in front of the office of a local NGO¹⁹ and took away its female director in a police car. The accusation was officially fraud, but unofficially the expression of "Norwegian criminal" had already been circulating in the media for a couple of weeks. A Norwegian criminal is somebody working in an NGO implementing projects with the funds allocated by the Norwegian government. Such organisations were accused of carrying out political propaganda against the government. The real accusation therefore was not simply fiscal, but more importantly moral. NGO workers at that point were openly presented and denounced in the media as agents of foreign powers.

Illiberal democracy thus came to Hungary with a consumed divorce between "civil society" and the state, a strong foundation on which liberal democracies were built. With this symbolic act,²⁰ the Orbán regime pointed at the not so hidden but rarely acknowledged connection between the intensive NGOization of civil society ongoing from the 1990s and the free market cum political liberalism introduced in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries in the same epoch. During the heyday of liberal democracy growing mutual interdependency between the state, the "superstructure" and civil society gradually drew the latter into the system of "transnational governmentality" (Obadare and Willems 2014:187). The break with the NGO world therefore simultaneously signified a distance taking from "the external constituency" exercising control over political priorities. The punishment of the NGO sector was part of a self-declared nationalist-

19 <http://vs.hu/kozelet/osszes/egesz-napos-razzia-utan-elvittek-a-rendorok-az-okotars-igazgatojat-0908>

20 The police action remained indeed symbolic, with no legal consequences for the NGO.

liberation war waged against the superstructure and its value system, considered henceforth as anti-national.

How Illiberalism Came to Sierra Leone

The transformation did not happen in such a dramatic way in Sierra Leone, but it went in the same direction. In reality the state-civil society relations had never been based on total mutual trust. More space for civil society organisations almost immediately came with more regulation. The Government of Sierra Leone enacted its Revised NGO Policy Regulation in 2009 establishing the registration process for NGOs. It created SLANGO (Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisations), which is as much an umbrella body as an instrument of government control over NGOs. Since 2014 the new revision of the NGO policy has again been on the agenda. The draft policy “includes several additional restrictive provisions, including imposing a 30% cap on NGO’s administrative expenses and a 20% cap on non-Sierra Leonean staff” (The International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law 2016). The relations between the state and civil society were probably gradually degrading, but 2014 was, in many respects, a turning point.

I first realised this during a short visit to Sierra Leone in February that year. I found my friends much less willing to discuss politics with me than before. My visit coincided with a training given by civil society groups to other civil society members and members of the media on the 1965 Public Order Act. The act had apparently never been withdrawn, but until this moment nobody wished to make use of it. The law makes libel a crime, turning it virtually impossible to publicly attack politicians in power for any reason. The workshop thus conveyed a strong message from the government that it would no longer tolerate criticism from the media or civil society. The strangest thing was that civil society apparently collaborated willingly in spreading the message. Intimidation worked.

That same year I noticed that human rights, democracy and good governance were not as loudly celebrated as the years before, but on the surface little had changed. UNAMSIL had left the country in the Spring, but UNDP, the UN’s development agency, was still there to initiate, finance and orient government policies, distributing resources

through calls for proposals. Several NGOs had already left, but many stayed, enough at least to maintain a special housing market for expatriates and fill the beaches of the Peninsula, where capital city of Freetown is situated, every weekend. Nevertheless, strange things – little compatible with the liberal peace conception of democracy – were perceptibly happening. The media was completely muzzled. The only remaining newspapers with critical voices were those of the diaspora, living far from Sierra Leone. Critical NGO activists were either silenced or bought by the government or again oriented towards lucrative private businesses. The president campaigned for a change of the constitution in such a way that it would allow him to be elected for the third time. The “external constituency” was clearly less considered than before. President Koroma recently had refused to sign a bill legalising abortion promoted by different human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, although it had been passed unanimously in Parliament. While youth protests, workers protest and disturbances in local communities had always been reprimanded, manifestations of state and police oppression became more open.²¹ When the state of emergency was introduced in 2015, during the Ebola outbreak, most people immediately associated this with the civil war period when ordinary citizens suffered from state violence as much as from uncontrollable rebel forces.

From the Frying Pan into the Fire – More of the Same, with Different Methods?

Viktor Orbán’s new model is clearly “unorthodox” in the context of what preceded it. It might not please the opposition, but he has his reasons and does not hide them. By his own logic, he turns his back to a trend that has locked the country in a failed development path, making it almost the last in the class within the European Union, a position reflected by all development indicators. In the eyes of his supporters, he is the lonely hero who has stood up against the harmful extraversion characterising his predecessors. His posters say so clearly: “We send the message to Brussels, so that they understand it, too.”²² He can also claim to have had the country liberated from the

21 (Human Rights Watch 2014a; Human Rights Watch 2014b; Human Rights Watch 2014c; Fox 25 2016).

22 “We send the message to Brussels ...” was one of the slogans used during the anti-immigration campaign preceding the October 2016 referendum, implying that the

tyranny of what Erzsébet Szalai calls the „techno-bourgeoisie” (Szalai 2016: 128), i.e., a new economic elite seeking political power in order to strengthen its position. He is a visionary who dares to dream big: he promises to catch up with the living standard of neighbouring Austria in the coming 25 years.²³ What if he is right?

Well, only time will answer this question, but there are a certain number of signs that make this prediction very unlikely. Despite the bold statements, it is not clear that Hungary has liberated itself from dependence. For development purposes it still almost exclusively relies on European money and in the economy there is no major shift from the place that has been ours for long: Orbán’s vision is based on a rather conservative politics of industrialisation, executed with foreign capital which uses the cheap Hungarian labour for its own profit. This policy does not only lock the country in an inferior position on the world market, it directs the workforce into lower paid jobs, not demanding high qualification. Accordingly, the state renounces to boost social mobility with quality education, trapping even the next generations into a place from which there is no escape, in which they can only choose between unemployment or labour poverty – with migration as a third option. Not surprisingly the state spends less and less on education, had decreased the obligatory school age from 18 to 16 and is actively downgrading the school system. If liberal democracy neglected the development of human capital, the illiberal one does the same more methodically and with more determination.

It is true that Hungary is gradually decreasing its stock of public debts (Eurostat 2016)²⁴ and it refused to accept a new package from the IMF, but at the same time it concluded a deal in the energy sector that ties the Hungarian economy to Russia for years²⁵. It seems that the price to pay for independence from the centre is ... new dependence from new would-be centres. If dependence from the Western (democratic) centre has proven to be too costly for Hungary, there is no certainty that turning towards Eastern (non-democratic) allies will leave more

European Union, with its suggestions to handle the crisis, is attempting to oppress Hungarian national sovereignty.

23 http://index.hu/gazdasag/bankesbiztositas/2016/02/23/matolcsy_utolerjuk_ausztriat/

24 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=teina225&plugin=1>

25 http://www.portfolio.hu/users/elofizetes_info.php?t=cikk&i=232321

margin to manoeuvre in the future, although the new friends, Russia and Turkey, will probably pay less attention to state corruption (not that the EU membership would have stopped it). The present government has only exacerbated this tendency (Freedom House 2016)²⁶, instead of mitigating it.

More importantly there is no sign that new priorities will change the tendency of impoverishment that already affects almost half the population. If nothing changes in living standards of the poor and the lower middle class that make up the majority, they will probably experience more fear, insecurity, state harassment, social conflicts and much less liberty, because more authoritarianism will be needed to enforce more resource deprivation. In other words, because liberal democracy did not work, it does not follow that its opposite will do any better!

Sierra Leoneans might soon come to the same conclusion because the direct experience of less freedom and more oppression is not coupled to an increase in the living standards. After the Ebola outbreak Sierra Leone's economic outlook is dire. Last year it experienced negative growth and nothing indicates that there is any recipe for the take-off other than the familiar one: austerity. The real reform, the radical change in both countries, would be to start investing in human capital instead of ostensibly despising it. But their leaders do not seem to be bold or visionary enough to take this step. One might understand them as well: dictatorships are less costly (and probably less complicated) than real development states.

Illiberalism – Who is to Blame?

In Hungary the “illiberal turn” has been received by a profound indignation of the opposition, implying that it is an aberration, a sharp deviation from what preceded it (Nagy 2014). In Sierra Leone, the more subtle and less loud shift towards authoritarian rule is either not theorised or it is considered as the return to a traditional model of African politics: the politics of the belly (Bayart 1993), or business as usual: corruption as state policy (Reno 1995). Disagreeing with these views, I contend that illiberal democracy is neither simply the

26 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/hungary>

negation of liberal democracy, nor is it coded in the African, or for that matter in the East-European political culture. Rather it is the direct consequence of how democracy building took place in West Africa and in Eastern Europe.²⁷

The opposition in Hungary accuses Orbán of emptying democratic institutions. The opposition in Sierra Leone accuses Koroma of the same. My feeling, however, is that the changing relation between the state and society has not been the work of individual politicians, it is rather a sign that the triple contract between the international community, civil society and the state has been broken because of the low performance of liberal democracy. Hungary and Sierra Leone are not unique examples. In 2013 Acemoglu could still state in an interview²⁸ that Hungary is unique in Europe in using democratically obtained power to dismantle democracy, but today the refugee crisis has forged the Visegrád countries together and the experience of a Czech national of the “golden cage of Central Europe” is not that different from the Hungarian experience, despite important differences in the political and economic performance between the two countries (Fiala 2016).

Beyond Europe the climate has palpably changed for civil society in a lot of places. This might be a sign heralding illiberalism. According to *The Economist* in 2014 such disparate countries as Egypt, Azerbaijan, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Sudan and Venezuela passed laws and initiated legal procedures restricting the operation of NGOs²⁹. In 2014 India’s Intelligence Bureau published a report in which it “unmasked” foreign NGOs trying to undermine India’s project for development. In 2015 Russia’s parliament passed a law banning “undesirable” international organisations.

Even within the centre the state-civil society relation is deteriorating. In the UK, one of the biggest charities, Oxfam, was publicly reprimanded for putting its nose into politics by talking about poverty not in Africa

27 For Eastern Europe a few analyses emphasise the role of „the regime changers” in the subsequent anti-democratic turn. These voices though are in a minority. See for example Szelényi 2014; Fordulat 2014.

28 <http://alapblog.hu/miert-buknak-el-nemzetek/>

29 <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21616969-more-and-more-autocrats-are-stifling-criticism-barring-non-governmental-organisations>

but in England.³⁰ At a public event, a British MP warned charities to “stick to their knitting” (Clarke 2015:9). Within the European Union the extreme right is strengthened, in the USA Donald Trump embodies a similar politically non-correct anti-establishment and anti-liberal credo, as does the Fidesz in Hungary (it is not by chance that Orbán supports Trump). Brexit voters and Trump voters act in the same way: they punish the establishment for the omissions of liberalism.

From this angle the present illiberal turn looks rather like a sign of a larger, probably global transformation. Not only liberal democracy is shaking, but the whole foundation on which it was built. If the state and the NGOs could talk the same language for such a long time, it was because this language was the only one available. In the 1990s, the model of liberal democracy was the only credible model and there was no other option. In 2008 it was still possible to believe that it would be enough to eliminate Bin Laden and the only notable enemy of the unique model would disappear. The Arab Spring was still far away and the world appeared to be relatively constant, just like Europe’s and the USA’s position in it. In 2016 the world we live in looks infinitely more insecure and uncertain. From a unipolar order it is shifting again towards a bipolar or multipolar structure. It is in this world order that small peripheral and semi-peripheral countries like Sierra Leone and Hungary have to find their place. Asian and South American economic influence is increasing in Sierra Leone while Hungary is trying to find new alliances in Moscow, Ankara, Teheran and Baku.

There is something reassuring in this idea. At the same time, there is something worrying. If the great transformation in unimportant small countries is a function of a global structural rearrangement, the illiberal turn looks like a fatality. Then the questions of agency and political responsibility can be evacuated. After all Huntington foresaw the possibility of a similar reversal a long time ago (Huntington 1991:18). He even gave a recipe for transitions away from democracy. It is enough that some of these factors coexist: (1) the weakness of democratic values among key elite groups; (2) severe economic setbacks; (3) social polarisation; (4), the determined exclusion of lower groups from political power; (5–6) external factors, such as terrorism and foreign intervention; and (7) reverse snowballing, i.e., examples given by other states. It is easy to see that according to this

30 John Clarke, personal communication.

list the road in Sierra Leone and Hungary has been well paved for an antidemocratic reversal.

But there is a certain circularity in Huntington's model: democracies are fading away when there is a deficit of democracy in and around affected countries. Huntington never questions the nature of democracy to be maintained. For him its American version is the universal standard compared to which all deviation is a tar. But what if the original model is defective? What if the West African and Hungarian examples teach us more about the nature and possible destiny of democracies than its idealised American model?

Hungary and Sierra Leone followed very different paths in their respective histories but in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries these paths met more than once. Some time ago modernisation theories assumed that Africa models Europe's remote past and Europe is (or should be) Africa's future. The Comaroffs proposed a radical critique of these theories, offering an alternative according to which (if we are not careful) Africa might be Europe's future. I believe the parallel stories of Sierra Leone and Hungary can show that Africa's past and present can and indeed does meet up with Europe's past and present from time to time, but they are certainly not each other's future. Their double example shows that democracy accepting structural violence, as a necessary condition of development, is anti-democratic by nature; that an antidemocratic penchant amongst the elites is fuelling cleptocracy and because cleptocracy needs oppression to maintain itself, it is necessarily producing an antidemocratic structure. This parallel story also reveals that extraversion, i.e. the complete abandonment of internal accountability for a socially insensible external support is able to maintain for long an antidemocratic system but ultimately it cannot save it from implosion. It reveals that the disappearance of the dividing line between the political and the economic elite is dangerous because it produces a centralisation of power and of resources. It also proves that promises of material improvement without investment in human capital has always been, still is and will be a lure.

Political trends, then, cease to appear as fatalities: they are always the results of choices between existing options. Ultimately, the tale of two continents points at the fact that saving liberal democracies from

illiberalism might be more difficult than it seems. At least the goodwill of democratic oppositions would not suffice. Saving them might demand reconsider the meaning of democracy and allow liberalism to be touched by critical thinking.

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