The *West* Envisions the West

Images of the Western World in Hungarian Critical Thought between the Two World Wars[1]

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Turning to the example of a particular Hungarian intellectual circle, I examine how Western-oriented thinkers in Eastern Europe formed their views about the pinnacle of civilization between the two world wars. My inquiry centers around the intellectual community of a literary and critical journal called *Nyugat* (West) which exerted a crucial and enduring influence on Hungarian print culture and public debates. The paper reveals that dreaming of and interpreting modernity in its fully developed Western forms fostered the creation of meaning and dignity for a local culture but developed new visions and expressions of life transcending local contexts and possibilities as well.

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Most peoples in Eastern Europe have been nurturing a permanent desire to be integrated into the West throughout their modern history. They have tended to envisage themselves in terms of their proximity or distance from the Western trajectory. Ironically, to conceptualize the West has appeared crucial even for those who sought for the avenues of progress and collective identities exactly through denying the Western model.

For a long time, the concept of the West appeared to be identical with Europe, the embodiment of the highest form of civility. From the outset of the industrial revolution, the concept of the West became bewildered and identified more and more with the whole Atlantic scene. The visions of America as a distant experiment for developing a democratic society under frontier conditions shifted to the perception of the staggering results of the overseas modern progress. From the turn of the century, the interplay of images of the West, Europe and America became more complicated: geographical distinctions started not only to represent distinctive social realities but to embrace diverging and competing political, cultural and moral ideals as well.

In this paper, turning to the example of a particular Hungarian intellectual circle, I examine how Western-oriented thinkers in the region formed their views about the pinnacle of civilization between the two wars. This was the period when critical currents in the Western world itself had already started to challenge the underlying principles of the modern development and its agonizing outcomes. Therefore, East European intellectuals faced the double task of embracing and disputing the Western tradition in their writings and thoughts. My inquiry centers around the intellectual community of a literary and critical journal called *Nyugat* (West) which exerted a crucial and enduring influence on Hungarian print culture and public debates. The attention is concentrated on the 1920s and early 1930s, indicating that with the rise of fascism a new period started in the discussions on the West.

Imagining through Mapping

Anthropologists, historians and cultural theorists have offered revealing studies on Western imaginations about non-Western cultures and societies in the colonial and postcolonial context. These studies emphasize the underlying belief in the irreconcilable and rigidly hierarchical dichotomy between Western and non-Western civilizations, and its moral, political and epistemological implications (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fabian 1983). The perception of others within the Transatlantic arena seems to rely on polyvocal public discourses among which the hierarchy of authority is always fragile. Classifying and essentializing larger social entities are constitutive of the representations in this arena as well, yet the forces of domination and the articulation of divisions appear to be more flexible and negotiable than those which permeated the colonial context.

Conceptualizing others is a persistent drive of human mind for classifying, describing and explaining reality. Accordingly, the other/same dichotomies are often constructed for representing and projecting vaguely phrased tensions and desires. In other cases, ideas and sets of beliefs are displaced in space and time, often in order to prevent imagination from the empirical test (Bauman 1991b). It is also crucial to acknowledge that recognizing differences among people is the basis for formulating, re-enacting and confirming collective identities. Individual and collective entities make sense of themselves through mirroring and measuring their existence in others. Conceptualization of distant others frequently serves as a vehicle for registering and representing distinctions within the fantasizing society, and in general, constructing identities in the intricate web of national and ethnic diversity of the world (Lash and Friedman 1992, Hall 1992, Hobsbawm 1983).

Classifying others is an edifying component of *social imagination,* that is a collective work of a group, society, or discursive community by which they transcend and reframe their ordinary life and concepts of the world. Social imagination emerges as a web of reflections upon idiosyncratic experiences; it is a particular paraphrase of the ultimate anxieties of the active subject of imagination. This imagination expresses sensibilities and motives of the actors but also fuels actions in social life. As Appadurai argues, in modern societies, social imagination is constituted by historically situated play of public and group opinions (Appadurai 1997:48–65) in which intellectual discourses, crossing national and political boundaries, mediate and pollinate each other.

Explaining different others within the Transatlantic scene has become a medium for exchanging critical insights about various instances of the modern experience. Fantasizing about others underwent a qualitative change by the proliferation of the production and consumption of mass culture. New forms of representation elaborated by culture industry opened new possibilities of transmission of ideas, images, and concepts between elite dialogues and vernacular culture. This latter distinction itself appeared as one of the main apprehension of modernity. Print capitalism appeared as a crucial domain and device for forming spiritual communities, boundaries and distinctions between people. Printed words also served to generate imagined linkages between the periphery and the heartland of civility (Anderson 1983).

East and West within Europe was the product of Enlightenment and subsequent philosophical and historical thoughts. Eastern Europe was perceived by the West as an ambiguous place between barbarism and civilization. In the production of this division the active part possessed, mapped and peopled the subject, although in a reciprocal process. East European people used complex cultural strategies of resistance, appropriation, deference, and complicity to engage themselves in this production. The "underdeveloped" identity was sometimes a source of shame, at other times a source of pride, but most often, a volatile mixture of both (Berman 1988:43). As Larry Wolff reveals it, the agenda of philosophy was elaborated within the contours of geography whereas the data of geography were arranged according to the priorities of philosophy (Wolff 1994:361).

By the turn of the century, the type of the Western-oriented thinker emerged throughout

the East European public spheres. Western orientation often indicated if there existed a unified and coherent model to be discovered and understood. In fact, references to the West conveyed a semantic instability and a symbolic richness simultaneously. As a consequence, the orientation was firm but the ultimate concept was necessarily complex, polyform and ambiguous.

The Local Public Sphere and Cultural Landscape

As well-known, in the interwar era, a tormented, post-war Europe faced great uncertainties both in material, political and moral terms. The in-built ethnic and national tensions of the Trianon Treaty, the unsettled competition between the leading powers, the defeat of liberalism, the proliferation of mass politics and the unsolved economic problems, all evoked fears and mutual suspicions. Old and new nations initiated diverging trajectories for accelerating their modernization and constituting or re-establishing their national sovereignty. These societies strived for institutions of the bourgeois nation state. Their social composition, however, remained in a post- or semi-feudal stage; they lacked a strong bourgeoisie or a stable middle-class, key factors to a broader social modernization.

Following World War I, Hungary also became a sovereign country but due to the drastic resolutions of the Peace Treaty of Trianon, it lost a considerable part of its territory and population.[2] Political discourses, sometimes even liberal-progressive voices, suggested that Hungary was punished rather than accommodated to a reasonable agreement.[3] After the failure of the first bourgeois-radical government (1918) and the short-lived Soviet Republic (1919) a conservative regime seized power with authoritarian and centralized state practices. Though a multiparty parliamentary system was allowed to operate, the possibilities of a liberal bourgeois democracy were blocked.[4] With few exceptions, paths for emancipation were narrow or practically closed for most segments of a half-feudal and half-bourgeois societal structure. The regime itself denounced harsh or violent anti-Semitism, yet introduced a social quota for Jewish professionals and intellectuals in higher education and state offices.[5]

Social discourses unfolded in a versatile ideological and political arena. The major intellectual divisions between right and left, conservative and progressive, were not patently identical with the distinction between Eastern or Western orientation. For example, inclinations to the West had been constitutive of certain conservative currents since the 19th century. A new and powerful wave of conservatism was initiated by an influential historian in the 1920s, appealing to a postulated Christian-Germanic cultural community to which Hungary historically belonged.[6] By the end of the 1920s, an enduring ideological cleavage in Hungarian public thinking expressed itself, known as the urban-populist debate. The cleavage this time came into being by the almost neat conjuncture of two important distinctions: Western or anti-Western orientation and urban or rural-centered social ideals. Populists writers and critics approached the issue of social emancipation from idealizing the peasantry, the patriarchal rural life and its uncorrupted social mores.

Historical storms of the early twentieth century restructured the legendary extravaganza of the *fin-de-siècle* intellectual life of Hungary. Outspoken scholars of the progressive and radical liberalism were forced to emigrate for having close political ties to the Soviet Republic.[7] The liberal political forces, constrained mostly to urban centers, were divided by ideological differences and personal rivalries.[8] A great deal of progressive thinking withdrew to the sphere of literature, press, and publishing houses. Several cultural traditions of the pre-war era survived or successfully re-enacted themselves; above all, the fecund and polyphonic literary culture of the country. Major periodicals, dailies and magazines became reorganized following the war. Though the atmosphere of tolerance between different political convictions did not disappear completely, voices of print culture became polarized by the 1920s: the progressive-liberal, the radical-socialist, the Christian conservative and the populist-nationalist intellectual circles, began to settle themselves around particular periodicals and dailies.

It was before World War I that a literary and critical journal achieved a unique position on the Hungarian intellectual scene and preserved it till the end of the 1930s. Its name, the *Nyugat* (West), indicated the decisive intellectual orientation of the literary circle which gathered around it.[9] The authority of the journal was paramount even among its chief enemies. Editors championed aesthetic standards which stood for originality and perfection. They welcomed experiments in any genre and style of modern literature and criticism, and valued the expression of a variety of moral and social ideals which were unified only by currents they unequivocally denied, such as obsolete feudal social ethos, ethnic and racial hatred, extreme populism, and the cult of violence.

Thus, one could find among the authors of the journal writers committed to nineteen-century bourgeois values, advocates of peasant democracy, political radicals as well as religious moralists; writers and poets focusing on the turbulent spirit of the modern mind or delineating the crippling Hungarian society; and also cultivators of pure aesthetic experience. Critical reflexivity towards any kind of inherited historical or cultural traditions and the conviction of a cosmopolitan openness characterized this workshop of intellectual dialogues. The *Nyugat* operated as a distinctive public sphere in itself enhancing a vital dialogue among its major circles.

The leading group of the journal, embracing progressive writers, critics and journalists, was thoroughly involved in other forms of print culture. They regularly contributed to progressive and liberal dailies and submitted writings even to popular magazines. Thus, production of culture to a literate public entailed a social engagement regardless of whether men of letters manifestly argued for or against it. Their passion and dedication to give meaning to their most personal experiences inherently inspired them to meditate on the human condition; to negotiate their place and merits in the literary canon made them interpreters of traditions of textual interpretations. In my view, the *Nyugat* in fact practiced an influential social criticism in the related historical period.

Culture *or* Civilization

Editors of the *Nyugat* were frequently pictured as dwellers of an "ivory-tower" by contemporary observers. The metaphor referred to the journal's elitist editorial policy and inculcated the opinion that the journal promulgated the spirit of escapism and a cult of illusion. It was claimed that the journal shifted of the turn-of-the-century intellectual revolt into style and yearned for the milieu of Paris, London, Berlin and New York instead of facing Hungarian reality. In contrast to these judgments, the intricate flow of ideas around and through the literary journal energized an engaging intellectual experiment. Instead of retreat, it advanced imagination through travelling across texts, images and dialogues, and imagined travels into new realms of experiences.

Critical thinkers of the *Nyugat* cultivated the spirit of cosmopolitanism, as a relentless search for universal values in a tenacious alliance with the Western world. Dreaming of and interpreting modernity in its fully developed Western forms fostered the creation of meaning and dignity for a local culture but developed new visions and expressions of life transcending local contexts and possibilities as well. Notwithstanding, the West was elevated as a subject of robust criticism as well. In the 1920s, many critics and writers around the *Nyugat* felt that the ideals of the Enlightenment had been stretched to its farthest limits. Others proposed that the great historical project of modernity became exhausted and needed new visions of hope. Some shared a concern with Nietzsche and Spengler on the tarnish and mediocratic faces of Western civilization and argued that the epitomes of culture and civilization might be disentangled in time and space.

The discussion of Western modernity unfolded in interwoven discourses on art, literature, history, paradigms of refined thought, and problems of social progress. Instead of mapping the world as an arena of distinctive nation-states, German thought, French taste, English democracy were grasped and discussed as measures of excellence as well as locus of diversity of modern culture. The shifting gaze among the metropolitan scenes of Berlin, Paris and London tried

to capture simultaneously the universals and specificities of the searched-for Western spirit.

Among other crucial themes, the articulation of Western experience produced a rich subtext on the concept of *culture*. The Hungarian progressive thinkers' conceptualization of culture showed a protean picture and reinvigorated several connotations of the term that critical thought had elaborated throughout Europe in the preceding decades. One of the major contemporary concepts appealed to Kant's understanding of (high) culture as the repository of art and science, that is the utmost excellence of human intellectual and aesthetic capacities. This uncompromising concept manifested itself above all in the opinion of Mihaly Babits, one of the chief editors of the *Nyugat* throughout the 1920s.[10] He assumed an unbridgeable distinction between art and reality and pursued the ultimate emancipation of intelligence from the visible, the tangible, and the material. He also proposed that reason manifests itself through disinterested righteousness. By incorporating a broader German tradition, others conceived of culture as the progress of the inner intellectual and moral capacities of people as opposed to civilization, the gradual refinement of manners and social behavior.

Though this distinction was spelled out, critical thinkers of the *Nyugat* took a more positive view on the role of civilization than their German counterparts. In the concept of a bourgeois ethos, Hungarian progressive currents valued a balance between the refinement of manners and the respect of culture. This understanding had reminiscences of Matthew Arnold's notion of culture which embraced all sides of humanity and emphasized perfection through learning (Williams 1983), although having less trust in the state. Writers around the *Nyugat* attempted to reconcile a division characterized by Norbert Elias as the French and English versus the German understanding of culture and civilization (Elias 1978).

The discussions on true properties of culture was propelled by another major current of thought that pondered the social grounds and *commitments* of refined thought. Babits insisted on keeping life and literature apart for the sake of universal aesthetic and moral standards. Along the line of Babits, many critical thinkers denounced that social and political revolutions in the first decades of the century resulted in the encroachment of politics onto culture and introduced the ideals of primitivism. Reservations to developing social commitments were fuelled by a stubborn suspicion towards mass politics and a contempt for mass men of the street, who have no sensitivity, spirituality or dignity. Not surprisingly, Ortega y Gasset, and his fears from the coarseness of the lower classes became regularly cited references. These accounts also reflected anxieties raised by the advent of Bolshevism and Fascism.

The other major direction on the problem of commitment was formed by the pursuit of subtle interfaces between literature and society, allowing various possible relations between intellectuals and their social environment. Followers of this conviction advocated for the intellectuals' responsibility for transforming the general backwardness of the country into a progress; they were to be ardent critics and initiators of cultural elevation, political emancipation and general societal well-being. Representatives of this approach conceived of the social responsibility of literature as a philosophically farsighted and aesthetically superior enterprise.

As inextricably connected to the problem of commitment, the quality of thought and subsequent social impacts also intrigued inter-war progressive thinkers. The *Nyugat* itself composed a mixed intellectual landscape ranging from positivist convictions to philosophical idealism, following the turn-of-the-century tradition. When keeping their eyes on the West, intellectuals around the *Nyugat* became perplexed by the proliferation of extreme versions of these philosophical traditions, in particular by pragmatism and irrationalism. Many Western-minded thinkers of the *Nyugat* concluded that the principle of pragmatic rationality had impoverishing effects on culture and human relations. Some entertained that it counterbalanced obscure mysticism and the pursuit of transcendental rejuvenation whereas others argued that it created an effervescent urge to turn to these pre-rational spheres of minds.

A heated debate in the journal nicely reflected the Hungarian progressive thinkers' pronounced ambiguity towards the philosophical and social outcomes of modernity and complicated their understandings of culture. The debate centered around the message of Julien Benda's well-known book *The Treason of the Intellectuals,* published in 1928. Drawing on French currents, Benda argued that intellectuals lost their interest in truth and moral values; they became spokesmen of irrationalism or pragmatism, and thus, advocates of mindless enthusiasm, violence, and nationalism. Babits firmly endorsed Benda's arguments by suggesting that the death of morality and the denial of truth became intertwined in contemporary thought. He emphasized that the philosophical roots of this decay had already started with pursuit of rationality which became ruthlessly detached from the ideal of truth and engulfed in the principle of usefulness. The power of reason got challenged by primitive and obscure forces originated in sheer bodily experiences. These forces unleashed the spirit of fight, action, and natural viability in social practices. Intellectuals, who were willing to serve social battles, particular prides and particularistic desires, inadvertently confirmed the authority of the most inferior instincts and the will to power. This brought the defeat of Reason by Reason. The only hope to save culture is in the uncompromising stance of intellectuals who stand firmly like "lighthouses".[11] By the same token, by his affirmative using of the metaphors of bridges, routes and water dams signifying the valuable achievements of humanity, Babits expressed the belief that the major danger in fact was irrationality rather than practical rationality. This clear-sighted but passionate text showed that Babits, to save a barren and corrupted culture, was willing to transgress the fine line between excellence and civility, yet by no means that of detachment and commitment.

Another chief figure of the *Nyugat*, Erno Osvat, debated the explanation purported by Benda and Babits. He warned for intellectual traitors who acted exactly upon their insistence on truth and thus advocated for political and philosophical exclusions and extremism. He implicated that intellectuals might have yielded to some particularities of truth by their most sincere search for truth. Osvat emphasized the inherent uncertainty of ultimate truth and proper morality, and illuminated the insufficiency of a critique that condemned some outcomes of the search for truth but encouraged to continue the search on unspecified grounds. One can add that Babits in fact drew on good examples of intellectual detachment (e.g. Catholicism) where not the relentless search for truth but the unquestionable moral framework saved refined thought from corruption or demise.[12]

The most powerful critique against the targeted book came from Ignotus[13], one of the founding fathers of the journal, who defended the concept of social conditioning of all human thought and rejected the idea of detached intellectual existence. Thus, he allowed to reconcile commitment with critical thought, drawing an unequivocal correspondence between positivism and commitment, idealism and critical faculty, respectively. The debate had several repercussions in the following years. In the 1920s, Hungarian progressive thinkers could not but ruminated around the possibilities of social emancipation and the termination of suffering in their home country. Several voices supported the principle of rational-moral criticism even if realizing that political myths and ideologies offered a more convincing relief from social suffering than literature. Consulting with Western experiences and reflections – occasionally Eastern ones as well – on intellectuals' social engagement, progressive thinkers did not receive an unequivocal and convincing moral guidance. In the beginning of 1930s, several critical thinkers around the *Nyugat* acknowledged that European writers had to surrender and to retreat into the garden of beauty and individual soul.[14]

I would argue that it was exactly the encounters with multilayered social and intellectual achievements of the West that motivated Hungarian literary and critical thinkers to understand culture in a broader sense. These encounters inspired the authors of the *Nyugat* to address spheres of human experience other than art and science, such as common-sense wisdom, technical progress, and legal emancipation of which the uncanny connections to culture were

a permanent intellectual anxiety. Pal Ignotus (not identical with Ignotus), a literary critic, contested the pervasive detest of the highly cultivated literary public for commerce and pragmatic spirit of the progressive bourgeoisie. He reminded the audience of the *Nyugat* for the emblematic figure of Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Monsieur Homais, the man of vulgar pragmatism. The Hungarian critic warned that the aristocrats of letter would have been purged and burnt if Homais and his colleagues had not been their contemporaries. Ignotus pinpointed that in the 20th century, aggressive parvenu philistines (Sorel, Barres, Mauras, D'Annunzio) called for mass movements to form anti-bourgeois sentiments and to discredit urban civility. They enacted a "proletarian savonarolism" in Russia and performed "state-promoted melodrama" in Italy. In these circumstances, the literary and intellectual elite must rehabilitate Homais to defend civility. They are to protect the freedom and versatility of human practices, including less sophisticated ones, that give terrain for individual creativity and freedom.[15] By drawing on respected literary examples, Pal Ignotus made a convincing attempt to expand the concept of culture and to offer a more subtle account of the problem of commitment versus universal truth.

For critics around the Nyugat, it was also essential to tackle the issue of boundless or context-driven nature of culture. More closely, the issue of incorporating Hungarian culture into a refined European one dramatized the tension between the universality and particularity of culture and cut across the problem of commitment versus reflection. Many argued that a valuable particularity can be pursued only through joining to the community of universal values. Others proposed that only local traditions can manifest and contribute to the universal assets of culture. It was Ignotus, again, who eminently clarified the position of the progressive intellectuals. He claimed that artists and thinkers could articulate certain sensibilities pertinent to a particular ethnic group or society. By the same token, local sensibilities are by no means barriers to produce culture conceivable and valuable for a broader, universal audience. For example, national cul-

ture and its artefacts may articulate common sensibilities, usually tied by language. But Ignotus referred to ironic cases when most cherished figures and products of national cultures were of minority or foreign origin in recent chapters of history of Europe. This strand of cosmopolitanism embodied a flexibility and complexity of cultural production across ethnic, national and other social lines but allowed the identification of particular cultures along the aspirations and desires of a particular community. It denied the possibility of state-governed political actions to enhance national cultures in a Herderian sense.[16]

Culture *and* Civilization

The overseas world entered this picture with a manifold significance. America as an emerging world power, distinctively different from the earlier colonial empires, profoundly intrigued European peoples' thinking. The arrival of American consumer goods and products of culture industry exerted provoking influence on European societies in the 1920s. Certain artefacts of the American industry, in particular cars and silent movies, penetrated the urban realms of Eastern European societies. The striking American presence reshaped the European intellectual accounts of the New World: it heightened the fascination with its achievements and stirred up intense feelings against cultural and economic colonization (Bigsby 1975).

The circle of the *Nyugat* was also shaken up by the growing presence of America in the 1920s, similarly to the literate public all over of the continent. The two sides of the Atlantic scene were incessantly compared and contrasted to each other in various concrete aspects of life. In general historical terms, American society appeared to the Hungarian observers as a realization of unfulfilled European desires: it was a master of its reality instead of being governed, perplexed, and tormented by it. Critical thinkers of the *Nyugat* endeavored to present the world across the Atlantic in two major directions. Some observers described American progress as the faithful accomplishment of the European civilizing project. Others interpreted the overseas world as an original version of

modernity: they emphasized the exceptionality of American society which challenged the major traditional values of the old continent. The duality of opinions was not at all new on the horizon of European intellectuals. The debate, which had been most known before through the dialogue between John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville and was not only rediscovered but rearticulated in the Hungarian public debates in the 1920s.

It was only a few literary scholar around the *Nyugat* who entertained that America was just another landscape in the Western universe. They indicated that the overseas world exported its fundamental institutions and social ethos from Europe and then brought them to perfection under more favorable historical conditions. Therefore, the two cultures were conceived as variations of the same project. Endorsing this conviction, one critic proposed that the "homo americanus" was not at all the embodiment of a new social ethos. He argued that colonizers of the new world took the Bible, the English system of laws and the knowledge of French encyclopedists and combined them masterfully. Yet the critic admitted that individual freedom and the unleashed human potentials on the American continent were enabled by the paramount lack of aristocratic principles.[17]

A particular path of representing the familiarity of the American scene stressed the idea of continuity of cultural traditions between the two continents. Many critics of the *Nyugat* valued, and occasionally even admired, overseas high-brow literature and theater as part of a universal Transatlantic culture. They acknowledged overseas writers for portraying heroes as having roots in the American soil and being antithetical to the European subject. Yet, Hungarian critics explicated the outstanding quality of literary representations precisely because of their stubborn criticism of American reality. This exegesis of American literature was unwilling to credit American civilization the level of sophistication that it gave to its literary products.

Novels of Sinclair Lewis and Dos Passos, for example, were portrayed as masterfully reflecting dark sides of the American spirit and progress. Due to the semantic diversity and richness of readings, money-centered and hectic urban lives and human relations were presented as truly American, but the dispirited and dreary realm of the Mid-West was also pictured as the dominant reality of America.[18] It was exactly through the venerated American literature, seen superior to its subject, that Hungarian critics started to grasp the complexity and plurality of the overseas world. By cherishing American high literature, literary critics applied distinguished texts as the device to bring the subject closer but keep it at a convenient distance. Literary imagination became dissected and rearticulated in a critical imagination in which the object and subject of literary imagination were given almost equal care.

Related to the discussion of print and written culture, some authors of the journal offered observations on stunning libraries and universities of America.[19] Though the observers were clearly impressed by these institutions, in particular when compared to the atavistic and poor conditions of home libraries and universities, the dominant reception did not acknowledge these institutions as the centers of high culture. They were rendered secondary in the shadow of fine arts and literature though the knowledge accumulated in them clearly served high art and learned wisdom as well. Images of American libraries and universities could not compete with those of cafes and theaters. Tensions between art and science, built into the Kantian notion of culture, nicely articulated themselves in these accounts.

The interpretation of the overseas world that posited a *fundamental disjunction* between the two continents displayed a social universe saliently diverging from the European traditions. Accordingly, American society obtained coherence and progress through the primacy of technical civilization and a matter-of-fact spirit of people. This thesis had two ramifications for the Hungarian observers. One of them indicated the incompatibility and superiority of the European heritage embodied in art and learning. The other one suggested that the values which made up the two distinctive cultures are incommensurable but equally significant components of a universal humanity.

The old thesis of two distinctive Atlantic scenes envisioned how the refinement of the European tradition was endangered by utilitarian and mediocre American thinking. It propagated the need for defending Europe against the depersonalizing, mechanizing and leveling effects of the spirit of American modernity. These concerns replicated Tocqueville's caveat about the inevitable uniformity evaporating throughout the American scene, and they prefigured the Adorno and Horkheimer arguments about the loss of the autonomous human subject, on the other.

The judgments on American way of industrialism were emanated and nourished by an ongoing debate on the impact of technical rationality and spirit of industrial progress. From the turn of the century, voices lamenting on backlashes of modernity in the *Nyugat* got intensified in the allegory of Machine. The image of America as the undisturbed fascination with industrialism horrified those believing in German sense of divided spheres of culture and civilization. In contrast, an enthusiastic modernist vision posited the machine as a vehicle for eliminating the feeling of inauthenticity and idleness, and for evoking self-discipline, viewed as painfully lacking in contemporary European societies.[20]

The conscience of the superiority of classical education and traditional humanism did not obsess all accounts of cultural criticism among the Hungarian progressives. Still sustaining the comforting belief of European superiority, several Hungarian progressive critics and writers played with the pious idea of a potential marriage between the American culture of utilitarianism and the conventional European humanity. The imagined conjunction promised the reconciliation of market and culture, creativity and refinement, freedom and traditions by which Europe was imagined to be reborn.

Mostly those who had personal encounters with the overseas society suggested that American society was built on a different metaphysics than Europe. A writer, who was an enthusiastic observer of America, celebrated the society across the Atlantic as providing liberation from paralyzing "philosophical constraints". Menyhert Lengyel was fascinated by his personal experience that all American people could see a permanent hope for the future, though no one could obtain an ultimate material security. In a diary of his visit to New York, he reported that the crowd on the street was by no means horrifying – in sharp contrast to the message of the European scenes. He emphasized the strong connection between pervasive consumption and social peace pertinent to contemporary America.[21]

Ignotus, the committed devotee of the modern spirit, argued in a sober voice that America "developed a practical socialism" which offered civility and welfare in an unprecedented scale. America made several revolutions of equal value with the French Revolution, such as the separation of the church and the state, the elimination of social casts, the pacification of races, the triumph of popular will, and the emancipation of women. Ignotus proposed that technical culture did initiate something crucial that the refined literary intellect could not: an unrestricted communication among various social microcosms, which resulted in the unavoidable acknowledgement and reputation of others. The Hungarian critic sarcastically invited Spengler to capture a new global culture in progress, a world of commerce and technology without intellectual refinement and arts. His ultimate vision was, however, to reconcile culture and civilization in a future humanized utilitarianism.[22] These ideas rearticulated John Stuart Mill's understanding of the spirit of commerce and industry as one of the greatest instruments not only for civilization of the narrowest, but of improvement and culture in the widest sense.

Finally, the most radical accounts offered a comprehensive criticism on European convictions and imagination on American modernity. In 1933, a debate took place in the journal in which those authors discussed their views on contemporary America whose authentic experience originated from visits or longer stays overseas. A Hungarian expatriate from New York, Arpad Steiner scrutinized how Europe's judgmental gaze promulgated the images of obsession with money, the frailty of moral order, and the lack of cultural sensitivity as American essentials and thus bemasked the "kaleido-

scopic chaos of reality".[23] Ignotus made a brave self-reflexive gesture as to argue that Europe saw America as a barbaric world in order to hide its own weakness. Along this line, Robert Braun, a respected social scientist and an enthusiastic friend of America, pronounced that the image of America mirrored the spiritual chaos that Europe had found itself in different periods of its modern history. These authors appeared to be precursors to critical anthropological thought as to suggest that the critique of American society served to divert the European mind from judging itself.[24]

New Menaces or Hopes?

The figure of the autonomous and *dignified individual* was high on the modernist agenda for most progressive thinkers in Hungary. They lived in a society that never managed to create a wide community of autonomous actors in its history. Most literary critics viewed the problem of individual dignity through lenses of the distinguished figure of the author. A group of them felt morally secure and intellectually elevated by being safely distanced from the mass. But the majority of them, horrified by the shattering images of mass society, wanted to see fellow-citizens walking with their head high and self-esteemed. These critics and writers of the *Nyugat* turned to Western examples to find evidences for the possibilities of a dignified human life, civilized manners and expression of freedom as evaporated social practices.

Pinpointing the liberating impact of the American cultural milieu on people, several Hungarian critics developed powerful arguments to challenge the traditional European concept of the role of the talented individual, that had originated in the Romanticism and perpetuated in high art. This concept put its ultimate faith into the subjectively obtained qualities of human mind and its capacities to enhance culture. It gave minor importance to the position of the human subject in the variety of social alliances which inspired and mediated his or her creativity. As a consequence, the sovereignty of the individual was the privilege of a few. The dilemma of the talented individual and reasonable human subject got radically recast in images of American society which embraced creative and self-confident individuals on a spectacular scale, that had been unknown in Europe before. The dilemma did not simply recuperate the distinction between culture and civilization; it enunciated a major tension within Transatlantic modernity.

The problem of the autonomous individual became intertwined with debates on two latest experiences of modernity, namely the "*new woman*" and the *cinema*. Having been crucially affected by the American encounter, these two particular and interrelated experiences mediated the changing conceptualization of culture and the perception of the West in the intellectual circle of the *Nyugat*.

Progressive men of letters were intrigued by the increasing visibility and the bewildering participation of women in the overseas public sphere.[25] The ideal of a public career as the core of a new female identity was primarily viewed through positive lenses. In contrast, the public takeover of women in the sphere of elite intellectual activities was debated or ridiculed. Most notably, the self-conscious and independent American woman devoting herself to leisure and consumption as new modes of articulating womanhood invited the menace of liberating a new subjectivity from its masculine master. At the same time, the standardized herd of uncontrolled women prefigured the emergence of a mindless mass mentality detached from any morality. Thus, the former caveat scorned the construction of a new female identity whereas the latter one warned for the danger of the loss of it. These opinions revealed themselves in minor remarks (and essays published in journalism outside the *Nyugat*) rather than explicit discussions of the topic.

These images of the emancipated American woman were constructed by thinkers, mostly men, who were surrounded by a strangely mixed late-Victorian yet urban-liberal morality. They pursued the ideals of originality and freedom of lifestyle that elevated them above the ordinary spirit of the bourgeois, in particular the petite bourgeois. Yet, as their audience was constituted primarily by the educated urban bourgeois, the way in which they addressed gendered aspects of life was intricately filtered through a

bourgeois ethos. This ethos appeared to be insecure in its economic and political underpinnings as elsewhere in lately modernizing countries. Therefore, a social respectability was to be established by a perfection of life-style, education and culture. A distinctive life-style was created by a regulated gendered division of activities and social spheres. In addition, the milieu of high art occasionally occurred to be more rigidly biased against women than the one which saturated Hungarian bourgeois society at large. Literary men entertained ardently essentialist beliefs in male and female principles, theoretically equally valuable but suitable for different sorts of activity.

It is not the task of this paper to explicate further that only few literary women contributed regularly to the *Nyugat*. It is instructive to learn how Sophie Torok, a woman making a literary career on her own, while being the wife of Mihaly Babits, elucidated women's position in high art. She questioned how literary history classified literature as romantic, naturalist, realist – and women's, or English, French, German – and women's. She claimed a space for talented women in the same categories of literature that men occupy and to be measured by the same standards. She admitted that contemporary women performed better in popular literature. She warned, however, for seeking any essential property of women's nature when seeking explanation. She rather urged to speculate on the intimate closeness of the children's room and the kitchen for women authors.[26] Sophie Torok's voice got very little support by her male colleagues in the *Nyugat*.

By the same token, issue of private relations of men and women occupied many authors' minds in critical and literary writings. For example, the *Nyugat* initiated a debate on the institution of marriage in which almost all distinguished authors participated. The debate produced a variety of perceptions and opinions written in free-style essays. Most participants expressed the view that marriage is a private matter and its quality depends to a large extent on the quality of people who perform it. The majority of authors supported a liberated and flexible standpoint and discussed men's and women's desires and morality on equal footings.

Few of them, however, addressed that freedom is conditioned by social arrangements and dominant public morals.[27] The lessons of the debate revealed why critics of the *Nyugat* remained notoriously uninterested in issues of emancipation. Therefore, overseas examples of the emancipation of women inspired only a few Hungarian progressive thinkers to offer critical comments on the local conditions.

In contrast to Hungarian literary men's resistance to accommodate to the new currents of gender emancipation, the debate about the values and distinctive properties of the American and the European traditions was often embedded in gendered conceptualizations. Binary oppositions and encounters between the two separate social realms became reinforced by different gendered metaphors, which however did not form a neat system. For example, action, enterprise and progress were circumscribed as masculine values and characteristic to American society. What was threatened to be invaded by them, that is European high art and learned culture were highly ambiguous in terms of gender. These were of course primarily male activities, yet general refinement was frequently pictured as a feminine property. Meanwhile, the feminine sensuousness and irrationality of American mass culture were contrasted with the high aesthetic standards of the old continent, identified above all with its male cultivators. Hungarian progressive thinkers were puzzled, however, when they had to present the inordinate and destroying passions of hatred and the desire for domination, which had been pervasive in European social and political life, as a masculine essence.

The reception of film also became a particular lens through which ideas about the distinctive values of the two cultural scenes of the Atlantic were spelled out. Critics of the *Nyugat* exhibited high esteem for the new, encompassing universal language. At the same time, they gave voice to their fears of the rejuvenation of a plebeian experience and aesthetics which make writers "destroy their fountain pen and drop it to the bottom of the Danube river".[28] Images were seen to obliterate the authority of words. Even the fascination with the democratic accessibility of the new art was accompanied by a

warning about the degeneration of the audience into insanity. Either as a menace or a promise, both camps viewed movies as a source of authenticity amidst the general loss of values.

The competition between literature and film manifested itself in the heightened dichotomy of Europe and America. The major and influential film critic of the *Nyugat*, Ivan Hevesy frequently revealed the division of labor between the two continents: the artistic talent of Europe and the financial and technical potentials of America. Nevertheless, he celebrated a particular invention of the American movie-makers, namely the burlesque, seen as one of the most authentic means for the artistic expression of the perplexities of modernity. The most original figure of the burlesque was considered the genius of twentieth century art at large. In Chaplin the Hungarian critics viewed the brilliant reconciliation of a perennial humanity with advancing modernity, thus uniting the two parts of the Western hemisphere. In addition, the popularity of Chaplin among the movie-going public at large challenged the understanding of the relation between high and popular culture.[29]

Parallel to discovering the potentials of the cinema, Hevesy and others bemoaned its murky impacts as well. They feared that as film had become a thriving business, profit making drives could dry out popular genres and the taste of the audience. Equally importantly, they were anxious about the emergence of the cult of stars and the subsequent cult of appearance. This cult was viewed as not only devaluing the grace of expression but diverting the spirit of modern individualism as well. It was already in the middle of the 1920s that Hevesy and some other critics warned for the crisis of the cinema, including American and European film-making as well, and advocated for the artistic values and social potentials of the Russian movies.[30]

The themes of individuality, women's emancipation and cinema were all connected to the growing domain of *mass culture*. Reactions to mass culture showed vast dissimilarities in the *Nyugat*. On the one hand, it was viewed as being mindless, sensuous, and emotional, and therefore as being feminine and inferior. The admiration of Pilots, Boxers, and black female dancers demonstrated the dethronement of reason and spirit of beauty, as Babits argued.[31] Others indicated that it was the elite which constituted mass culture as a bounded domain of human consciousness. Accordingly, to maintain the decorum, art "needed a sea to form an island". Many thinkers pronounced that the tension between the high and the popular could be rejuvenating.[32] There were also voices that proposed to saturate the industrialized production of mass culture with higher aesthetic standards, and to save Europe from the shallow qualities of American cultural imports.

It is worth listening to Ignotus again, who occurred to be the most reconciliatory thinker in the innermost circle of the *Nyugat*. He appealed to the Minister of Culture, who lamented that Hungarian people preferred Nick Carter and jazz to authentic Hungarian folk culture. Ignotus suggested that basic narratives of Hungarian folk tradition were not more authentic than stories of Nick Carter. He argued that people changed their clothes and music incessantly, and their worldviews always incorporated elements of high culture as well as mass culture. Accordingly, authentic is what people accept as their own, thus the problem bears no relation to the origin of the artefact.[33]

Finally, a radical theorem also gained foothold in cultural debates in the *Nyugat* which harshly denied the intellectual scorn of the masterless men of the street. Ivan Hevesy expressed his fascination with the dazzling surfaces and radiant scenes of modern urban spaces. Having much in common with the avantgarde movement, Hevesy envisioned the street as the center of the new art. He proposed that a new culture was in the making based on a new ethical and economic world. Meeting new aesthetic standards, the new culture was imagined to be understood by people since it emerged from their worldviews. The critic also invoked the role of print culture, most notably the press, to teach people a new morality. He drew on the unlimited expressive and communicative possibilities of the cinema as well.[34] The thesis argued that the locus of a new culture could be in Eastern Europe due its social and aesthetic potentials.

This radical account could be juxtaposed to

Walter Benjamin's ideas and other avant-garde proposals about the revolutionary implication of the waning of the aura of art (Benjamin 1968). These proposals indicated that the decay of high arts conjured up various public and profane illuminations which recaptured the loss of everyday experience. Thus, the tactile and experimental forms of expression were not antagonistic to thought and reason, instead, they conveyed a new vision of collective hope.[35]

Rational Hopes

Transnational imagination in the *Nyugat* pursued to find an intellectual home in a maelstrom in the inter-war period. In their discourses on the West, critical thinkers of the journal also pondered the place of Hungarian society in the Western world and European culture. They undermined or even ridiculed the old depiction of Hungary as a helpless victim of the struggle of large historical forces, or as a stranger on the European scene. They rather tried to convince themselves and their audience that Hungary had been a quasi-Western domain with akin patterns of social consciousness, work ethic, spiritual sensitivity, and cultural emancipation yet of moderate historical success. The ultimate purpose, however, was not to illuminate Hungarian uniqueness, but to impatiently understand paradoxes of modernity and discover new realms of experience.

Hungarian progressive intellectuals were predominantly dreaming forward instead of centering on the particularities of being. But was not the question of becoming part of the problem of being? There was, for sure, by a dialogic relationship between the two spheres of social imagination. Authors of the *Nyugat* favored to envision an unconstrained future which escaped from the prison of the present. This conviction was intertwined with the possibility of appropriating ideals from a universal humanity, instead of confining the human spirit to local particularities. Accordingly, identity was conceived as a specific moment and locus in the circuit of self-reflective thoughts.

From among the marked paradoxes of modernity, the issue of rationality mounted to the top for Hungarian progressive thinkers. Some

with finely tuned ideas, others without being theoretically incisive, believed in the distinction between practical rationality and reason. They unconditionally supported the notion of reasonable yet they had resistance towards the principle of thoroughly rational. Ultimately, they realized that irrational turns were the outcomes of the decline of reasonable thinking rather than the straightforward consequence of practical rationality. It was still ahead that dreadful political forces masterfully combined the principles of irrationality and practical rationality in the heartland of the European continent.

Critical thinkers and writers made candid endeavors to regulate confusion and adversity in their Western experience. They had confidence in their capabilities of seeing and articulating but had doubts in their capabilities in knowing, as many admitted it. Their interpretations of the West left open surfaces to incorporate further interpretations. Their geographically metaphorized concepts powerfully channelled but not restricted imagination. Addressing the failures of civilization and the successes of culture on the European continent whereas contemplating the progress of civilization and the weaknesses of culture in American society, critical thinkers of the *Nyugat* tended to structure a neat dichotomy but simultaneously was accumulated and expressed a wisdom to challenge this dichotomy.

The ideal world was not straightforwardly identified with the actual West in the views of most Hungarian observers. Acknowledging the calamities of modernity, the deadlocks of cultural perfection and moral advance, progressive thinkers ruminated around the West as a state of mind, an intellectual object under permanent construction, which idealized transhistorical and transnational values. The Western imagination fulfilled fundamental hopes through formulating specific ideals, and then impelling the mind to keep forward in imagining. What made the imagination in and through the *Nyugat* intriguing was that it limited itself to the universe of rational hope. In rational hope, fantasy transcended its own conditionality to carefully extend the line between the possible and the impossible.[36]

Notes

1. This article is the outcome of a larger work that investigates images of the West in Hungarian print culture between the two world wars, including critical and literary journals, dailies and popular magazines. The research was supported by Research Support Scheme of Open Society Institute (1995/1996).

2. Hungary lost roughly two thirds of its territory and more than half of its population (20 million/8 million). It retained, however, 55% of the industry, 82% of the heavy industry and 70% of the banks of the pre-Trianon country. See: Janos, A.J. (1982).

3. In this atmosphere, the conscience of victimization tainted the Hungarian perception of its neighbor countries, including the most democratic regime of the region, Czechoslovakia.

4. In 1922 the number of eligible voters decreased from 40% to 30% of the total adult population, due to setting up age and school limitations. Franchise became seriously restricted as compared to the rules enacted in 1918. In the countryside the open ballot was restored, therefore the majority of rural candidates were controlled by the administrative apparatus. In contrast, the cities, especially the capital, became the locus of the liberal opposition's constituencies.

5. In 1920 the Numerus Clausus limited Jewish enrollment at the universities. Yet, from the middle of the decade, it was silently and partially ignored and degrees obtained abroad were accepted. In this way, the percentage of Jews in professionals and intellectuals did not drop dramatically by the end of the 1920s (among lawyers from 57% to 55%, among physicians from 48% to 40% and journalists from 40% to 35%).

6. Gyula Szekfu implanted the ideas of the *Geistesgeschichte* School, founded by Dilthey, in the Hungarian intellectual soil.

7. Among others, Gyorgy Lukacs, Bela Balazs, Karl Mannheim, Karl and Michael Polanyi.

8. One of the liberal parties had seats in the parliament yet of insignificant role. Their efforts to cooperate with other parties failed for unbridgeable ideological gaps.

9. The major conservative literary forum was named *Kelet* (East, 1923–1940). According to legitimate judgments, it also contributed to the renewal of literary scholarship.

10. Though Babits was a paragon of respectability in literary and moral terms, his caveat did not monopolize the dialogues in the journal.

11. Babits, Mihaly 1928: Az irastudok arulasa. *Nyugat* II: 355–376.

12. Osvat, Erno 1928: Az irastudok arulasa. *Nyugat* II: 761–762.

13. Ignotus (Hugo Veigelsberg) was one of the editors of the *Nyugat* right from the start of the journal in 1916.

14. Cs. Szabo, Laszlo 1932: Irodalom es szocialis feladat. *Nyugat* I:59–61.

15. Ignotus, Pal 1929: Monsieur Homais rehabilitalasa. *Nyugat* I: 340–46.

16. Ignotus 1929: Faj es muveszet. *Nyugat* I:715–718.

17. Hirschfeld, Mark 1930: A homo americanus. *Nyugat* II:736–739.

18. Sinko, Ervin 1928: Amerika regenye. John Dos Passos: Nagyvaros. *Nyugat* II: 766–768. Lengyel, Menyhert 1929: Egy nagy amerikai regeny. Sinclair Lewis: Arrowsmith. *Nyugat* I:68–69. Schopflin, Aladar 1930: Sinclair Lewis. *Nyugat* I:555–558.

19. Braun, Robert 1929: Boston es Upton Sinclair. *Nyugat* I:1276–158. Balassa, Jozsef 1828: Az amerikai kultura I. *Nyugat* II: 142–149.

20. Csank, Endre 1930: Uj humanizmus. *Nyugat* II:299–301.

21. Lengyel, Menyhert 1925: Newyorki naplo. *Nyugat* II: 560–564.

22. Ignotus 1927: Amerika s a kultura. *Nyugat* II:18–20.

23. Steiner, Arpad 1933: A mai Amerika. *Nyugat* II:244–247.

24. Braun, Robert 1933: Amerika ma. *Nyugat* I:261–263.

25. See for example: Balassa Jozsef 1928: Az amerikai kultura II. *Nyugat* II:240–248.

26. Torok, Sophie 1932: Nok az irodalomban. *Nyugat* II:267–630.

27. 1926: A hazassag valsaga I. *Nyugat* I:856–875. A hazassag valsaga II. *Nyugat* I:1033–1048.

28. Kosztolanyi, Dezso 1930: Lenni vagy nem lenni. *Nyugat* I: 254–255.

29. Hevesy, Ivan 1928: Az amerikai filmburleszk. *Nyugat* I:816–822. Charlie Chaplin: Az aranylaz. *Nyugat* 1926 I:572–575.

30. Hevesy, Ivan 1927: A filmszezon merlege. *Nyugat* II:150–152.

31. Babits. ibid.: 371. The figure of the black dancer refers to the provoking visit of Josephine Baker whose performance transgressed the concepts of racial, sexual, and cultural distinctions. The visit was discussed at lenght in dailies with the participation of the authors of the *Nyugat*.

32. Halasz, Gabor 1933: Uj iranyok a vilagirodalomban. *Nyugat* II: 525–528.

33. Ignotus 1929: Nick Carter es a jazz. *Nyugat* I:836–839.

34. Hevesy, Ivan 1922: A muveszet reinkarnacioja. *Nyugat* I: 182–190.

35. It should be noted, that this manifesto was offered at the beginning of the examined period. Subsequent writings of Hevesy showed that he did not consider this new culture as embodied in American manufactured mass culture. Yet, the concept was cultivated by several other colleagues and artists till the beginning of the 1930s.

36. Habermas' idea of rational hope is discussed by Ricoeur, Paul (1986:276).

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