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**GLOBAL FORCE, CONNECTIONS, OR VISION?:  
THE THREE MEANINGS OF EUROPE IN POSTSOCIALISM**

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Zsuzsa Gille

Department of Sociology,  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

European Union Center  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Champaign, IL  
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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Zsuzsa Gille is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her field of study includes Environmental Sociology, Sociology of Knowledge, Globalization, Cultural Studies, and Eastern Europe.

## **ABSTRACT**

How can one provide a nuanced, empirically grounded, analysis of the diverse experiences and views of globalization is the question I set out to answer in this paper. This paper, therefore, explores the meanings of the European Union for various actors and social groups in Hungary. I argue that from the perspective of Eastern European candidate countries, the EU is a key agent of globalization, and, as such is an appropriate proxy for studying globalization in postsocialism.

## I. Introduction

On the eve of the Hungarian referendum on joining the European Union, held April 12, 2003, a curious poster was banned and confiscated, and its producers arrested. It shows three arms extended for hand shaking: the top one bearing a swastika, the middle one a red star, and the third one the EU logo (yellow stars on blue). The first two hands are shaken, the third one is still awaiting the welcome. The caption says: "it is OK to say no." For EU opponents, each of these hands symbolize a malicious international alliance. While this was clearly a minority opinion in the referendum campaign, it brings into sharp relief the relationship between a fascist and a communist past on the one hand, and, on the other, Hungary's insertion into the Western economic and political circuits--the aim of both EU enlargement and globalization. How can one provide a nuanced, empirically grounded, analysis of the diverse experiences and views of globalization is the question I set out to answer in this paper.

I will explore the meanings of the European Union for various actors and social groups in Hungary. I argue that from the perspective of Eastern European candidate countries, the EU is a key agent of globalization, and, as such is an appropriate proxy for studying globalization in postsocialism. Without being able to give a full definition of globalization, in this paper it will be understood as encompassing, economically, what McMichael (1996) calls the globalization project, an international neo-liberal agenda aimed not at having various regions catch up with the North/West--the meta-objective of the development project--but simply at inserting regions or cities into global free-trade networks as competitive suppliers for a particular niche of the world market.<sup>1</sup> Politically, globalization, is a project of transferring rights and obligations previously held by nation states to supranational agents, while socially and culturally it entails the intensification of transnational social relations at the expense of relations among nation-states (Gille and O'Riain, 2002; Mato 1997).

In order to make sense of the unevenness and the diverse, if not contradictory, experiences of the triplet processes of the collapse of state socialism, entering the EU and globalization in postsocialist Eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> I will apply a framework called 'global ethnography' in order to provide an analytically coherent and empirically grounded understanding of these linkages.

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<sup>1</sup> There is more to this distinction than I can give justice to in this paper. Please refer to the original article.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term Eastern Europe to refer to the former socialist countries (excluding Russia) instead of the preferred term of the region's intellectuals, Central Europe, first because I want to emphasize the importance of their shared postwar history and, second, because the term Central Europe has been often used in an Orientalist fashion, creating hierarchies, often bordering on chauvinism, within the region (Todorova, 1997).

Global ethnography is a theoretical and methodological framework developed by sociologists (I am one of them) committed to exploring globalization and transnational social relations from below, that is, from the perspective of people whose everyday lives have been touched by processes associated with globalization.

In *Global Ethnography*, my colleagues and I argued that people in different parts of the world and differently positioned in their respective societies experience globalization in radically different ways (Burawoy et al, 2000). We grouped these experiences into what we called the three “slices” of globalization: global forces, global connections and global imaginations. In the first instance, people experience globalization as an external force impinging on the locality and changing their lives in ways over which they don’t have any control, restricting their choices to defensive reactions and/or adapting. These changes in general are rather negative, such as factories closing or cutting welfare as a result of pressures by supranational agencies committed to a neo-liberal economic agenda.

People in different positions, however, may find that globalization and transnationalization or the deterritorialization of the nation state also offer opportunities. For them, such as migrants finding employment in countries that are better off or political activists with transnational contacts with movements abroad, globalization opens up a space in which they can build connections to improve their lives and better represent their interests. They actively participate in building these links which, in turn, sustain them economically, socially, culturally and which allow them to maneuver around the global forces that otherwise may be more constraining than enabling.

Finally, there are social groups that are not only able to take some control over the processes of globalization that affect their lives, but that actively engage in defining, contesting and redefining discourses of globalization. They wage their battles much less with a localist and defensive agenda, and rather enter political struggles with alternative views of what globalization should mean and how it should be shaped in their favor. Here the emphasis is on the material power of global imaginations.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how we can employ this tripartite lens to study Europe and Europeanization in the context of recent transformations in postsocialist countries. I will show that there is much to gain both empirically and theoretically by applying such a framework to the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. In analyzing Europe and the European Union as global forces, global field and global vision, I will primarily draw upon research I have been conducting in Hungary since 1995. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing and evaluating the patterns of these three faces of Europeanization.

## **II. Europeanization as a global force**

From the perspective of some Western Europeans and EU officials, it may seem nonsensical to argue that the EU is a juggernaut-like global force that enters the region uninvited threatening collective disenfranchisement and impoverishment. If anything,

they would say, the EU has been chased by the candidate countries and not the other way around. They are the ones who, the moment after the communist parties were defeated, applied for membership. They are the ones who want to be like Western Europe. Members of the Union have not asked them to join them, have little to benefit from admitting these poor relatives and if they ever admit them, that will surely follow from their charitable commitments to advancing the cause of freedom and democracy and not from economic self-interest. So goes the defense of the Europeanization project.

From the perspective of some Eastern Europeans, however, it is difficult to separate what in their much-changed lives is the result of the collapse of state socialism, of globalization, or of Europeanization. Did the milk they used to buy for a quarter of a century disappear from the stores because the dairy plant that produced it was privatized under a new name, because it went bankrupt in the economic crisis following 1989, because it was bought up by a French multinational that ceased production and brought in its products instead (sold at much higher prices) or because it did not meet certain EU standards of quality, volume or health regulations? They wouldn't know, nor would the distinction, if it was possible, make any difference to them. Wherever the change originates, the average customer has equally little control over what's on the grocery store shelves and how much things cost.

One may also argue that the European Union acts as an external force to the extent that, just like the IMF or the World Bank, or any other supranational agency, it prescribes a wide range of actions for national governments, whether in the areas of finance, industrial policy, or welfare. The EU is no more of a "voluntary" club than are the IMF or the World Bank: in order to get economic assistance, in order to survive, really, countries must abide by certain rules, which come with their own set of sanctions: the denial or reduction of financial support and the postponement of the entry date (Bohle, 2002).

EU officials may interject that joining the EU is a deliberative process in which the conditions of accession are negotiated rather than imposed. While that may have been the case with previous applicants, the Eastern Enlargement seems to be a more limited, unilateral process. "This is not a matter of traditional negotiations to find a compromise between different interests, but rather of accession negotiations to enable one of the parties to attain a predetermined objective with the aid and under the supervision of the other," noted the French Parliament (Grabbe 1998, quoted in Bohle 2002).

In fact, EU membership extends the areas in which supranational organizations usually "advise" national governments—it prescribes a rather tight framework of political institutions even before formal accession. While it may seem that democratization is an internal process--it certainly has been theorized as such in the scholarly literature (Burawoy 2001)--and therefore, the choice and the process of joining the European Union are initiated and legitimized from below, it would be difficult to argue that the "legal harmonization" that must precede ascension is a home-grown transformation. With Besseney-Williams (2001) I'd argue that in Hungary, for example, democratic institutions and legislation have not so much been deliberated upon and built, as much as

imported and adopted wholesale resulting in a double democratic deficit—double because national democracy did not even have a chance to realize.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, one may argue that the institution of the European Union, and especially certain changes in it recently, aren't immune to the larger economic and political changes associated with globalization either. Pieterse (1999) is right to argue that the EU is not so much riding the car of globalization as much as being driven by it, or to stretch the metaphor, run over by it. What he calls the vision of a "competitive Europe," mostly held by neoliberally motivated economists, adds up to nothing less than the global restructuring of Europe with a scaled back welfare state and ever-expanding space for free trade.

In sum, the externality, the absence of possibilities for exercising control over the accession process, and the unidirectionality of the flows of information, orders, and aid are a clear indication that the European Union acts as yet another global force for postsocialist publics.<sup>4</sup> This view is commonly held by Hungarian farmers and those who have already suffered from the Western European overtake of the Hungarian food market, especially for dairy products. For them, the maximum production quotas imposed by the EU don't differ much from the minimum quotas demanded by central planning and the COMECON. There is also a common fear that the EU will regulate the food industry, especially meat production, to such an extent that Hungarians won't be able to afford observing the higher standards and will go out of business. Some argue that even communists didn't interfere with agricultural production processes to the extent the EU does.

For people who experience entry in the EU as a global force, such as pensioners, farmers, workers who have lost their jobs or are afraid of losing them, Europe is primarily a supranational power, a colonizer, and not that different from the Soviet Union or the COMECON. They are bothered by the arrogance and unilateral imposition of rules and conditions, and they resent being lectured and talked down to.

### **III. The building of the European Union**

There is more to this relationship, however. Despite the wholesale adoption of legal structures and institutional frameworks, the EU is still a work in progress, and as such, it is also a field of connections and actions. In the process of the accession and the harmonization, there arise new agents with interests that are neither exclusively national

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<sup>3</sup> Bohle (2001) makes the analogical argument for the economic transformations in postsocialist countries.

<sup>4</sup> It has also been argued that horizontal relations between the countries of the region have been once again replaced by vertical relations through the EU, this further diminishes the leverage candidate countries may have (Baldwin, 1994, quoted in Bohle 2002).

or local, nor exclusively regional or international. A whole new stratum of actors emerge, whose existence is conditional upon the progress of the Enlargement, who benefit from increased contacts with the EU, and who at the same time exercise some collective control over the details of the accession process. For such social groups, the accession has opened up opportunities and has carved out a brand new social space, not necessarily outside of the national boundaries but certainly linked to the nation in a very contradictory fashion.

The creation of such a space is not contradictory to the interests of the European Union. In fact, the EU has called forth institutions to foster an understanding of its goals and a distinctive but shared European identity (Shore 2000). There have been a whole series of grants distributed to various organizations (governmental and non-governmental) and research and educational institutions, as well as newly established agencies whose sole *raison d'être* is the Enlargement. The EU has also prided itself on establishing forums that would make its bureaucracy more transparent and has financially supported many projects aimed at increasing input and participation from below. (The European Commission, for example, has for the last six years now, invited and paid the trips of environmental NGOs to so-called dialogue meetings to negotiate the environmental criteria of the accession.). On the one hand, the many professionals, policy-makers, bureaucrats, educators, activists are, clearly, the products of the Enlargement. On the other, however, the connections they establish among themselves and with their counterparts outside the region become the very fabric through which Europe is lived and experienced.

Last year I had the opportunity to observe a forum of environmental NGOs from various Eastern European countries preparing for their annual meeting with the European Commission. The purpose of these meetings is to integrate NGO knowledge and input into the harmonization and accession process. Most participants were skeptical of whether the EC would actually listen to them or that their suggestion would actually have any impact on the conditions of the enlargement, nevertheless, all were interested in building connections with the European Union. Let's not forget that having access to a supranational agency allows these organizations to put pressure on their own national governments and achieve things that would otherwise be out of their reach. The practice of going above the heads of the national governments to put pressure on them has been noted as a key novel feature of global social movements (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) and of a new deterritorialized form of citizenship (Sassen, 2001).

People who have been able to take advantage of new 'European' connections, primarily see the EU as a field of action, and possibilities, established by laws, democratic principles and not in the least, rich resources. This is the meaning the Hungarian government conveyed most forcefully during the referendum campaign. Government officials repeatedly argued that the only losers would be those who are unwilling or unable to change, putting the blame for any potential failure squarely on the shoulders of the victims of Europeanization. It is indeed true that taking advantage of connections requires a certain know-how, a certain experience, really, a certain social and



cultural capital. Presently, it is primarily professionals and activists that have been able to capitalize on these linkages.

#### **IV. Europe as a contested global vision**

No institutional blueprint can be realized were it not for the mobilizing force of the ideas it rests on. You know the European Union is no exception when you find even a market research institution lamenting a lacking European consumer attitude.

Our contention is that the absence of a widespread sense of European identity is not merely a disappointment for europhiles and eurofederalists and the technocratic zealots of Maastricht; it actively corrupts the evolution of an ingredient essential to Europe's long-term competitiveness (Henley Centre 1996, quoted in Shore 2000).

What one should feel this sense of belonging to, of course, looks different from Eastern Europe, but if one may take Vaclav Havel as somehow expressive of a certain identity-anxiety in the region, it is instructive to note that the pressure to define just what Europeanness shall mean is no smaller. Havel addressed the European Parliament with these words in March 1994:

If this great administrative work, which should obviously simplify life for all Europeans, is to hold together and stand the tests of time, then it must be visibly bonded by more than a set of rules and regulations. It must embody, far more clearly than it has so far, a particular relationship to the world, to human life and ultimately to the world order. [Havel 1994.]

He consequently called for “a charter of its own that would clearly define the ideas on which it is founded, its meaning and the values it intends to embody.” If there is not yet a sense of awareness that the Europe postsocialist countries so badly want to join no longer exists—the all-white, all-middle-class, and progressive Europe committed to a regulated capitalism—there is certainly an increasing anxiety that Eastern Europe will not qualify as a first-class citizen of the Union. It is therefore crucial for the candidate countries to receive some kind of a guarantee that they will be judged European enough to deserve all the perks of being EU members. Their need for a well-defined European cultural agenda is therefore quite different but no less consequential. The selectiveness, if not the arbitrariness, of the Enlargement process has already compelled a veritable rivalry among East-Europeans—both among and within the individual countries—for demonstrating one's worthiness. For the time being, this results in the reinforcement instead of in the challenging of the traditional, classic, and mono-cultural repertoire of Europeanness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A wonderful example of this process is provided by Böröcz's analysis of an open letter written by leading Hungarian intellectuals in 2001 to Lionel Jospin, then-president of France, to thank him for granting asylum to Roma refugees from Hungary, as befits the

These ideas, values, culture, religions, and identities that are associated with a unified Europe are of course well-known to all: modernity, progress, civilization, high culture, democracy, etc. (Herzfeld, 2002; Pieterse, 1991; Wilson, Kevin and Jan van der Dussen, 1999). That the Europe based on these is a fiction (Pieterse, 1991), and that Europe as a historical project is parasitic upon practices that are contradictory to these ideals, most notably imperialism and fascism, (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Fanon 1966; Gilroy, 1993; Gosnell, 2002; Hall, 1991a, 1991b; Pieterse 1999) deducts little if anything from their power.

Clearly, it has not been lost on people in need of defending their interest, that the magic words 'Europe' and 'EU' open previously closed doors and "empty" pockets. Increasingly, an updated, "Europeanized" political rhetoric is not only an added advantage, but an indispensable entry ticket to public discourse and decision-making forums. The idea nevertheless has its roots in concrete practices. The many projects of the European Union aiming at establishing a European identity, a sense of belonging to a unified Europe, exhibitions, books, curricula, "European days," and so many other cultural events instill in citizens if not the desired European consciousness then, surely, the recognition that claiming some entitlement to representing Europe, will get the needed attention of the media and of politicians, just like in the past claiming an entitlement to representing the interests of socialism did. As one of the leaders of the Regional Environmental Center in Hungary put it somewhat resentfully, each of their projects had to be framed in terms of its connections with or implications for the country's entry into the EU whether the connections were there or not (Pernecky 1999).

To cite an example from my research, organizations specializing in biodiversity and wilderness protection have been making the powerful argument that Hungary, unlike the much more urbanized Western half of the continent still has pockets of wilderness and is endowed with unique ecosystems home to a wide range of species. Therefore, they say, the conditions of joining the EU should include the retention of the relatively strict conservation laws of Hungary, rather than adopting the laxer EU regulations (Scandinavian activists have been arguing in a similar vein as well). In a way, these activists are appealing to the ecological conscience of the European Union, and as such, claim themselves some authority and moral capital.

I would hypothesize, however, that the proliferation of Europeanized political rhetoric is not merely instrumental or epiphenomenal. That is, while it is a useful tool in claims making, the rhetoric eventually turns discursive, producing new truth regimes, new practices and ultimately transforming Europe itself. It maybe somewhat early to draw such conclusions but the practices this use of Europe as a global vision gives rise to certainly deserves more scholarly attention and would make for an exciting research agenda.

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"honorable traditions of the French nation," ignoring centuries of French colonialism (2002).

For example, in my own case study of a Hungarian village that invited a French multinational corporation to build a toxic waste incinerator, a lot of what may have seemed as an exclusively environmental siting controversy centered upon the environmental and economic nature of the district composed by the surrounding villages. Pro-incinerator forces claimed that the facility would not only bring resources to rebuild the run-down infrastructure of the villages but by bringing high technology and international connections, it would insert the district into the bloodstream of Europe. Greens and opposing villages however saw the EU and its French representative as interested in only turning them into wastelands at a huge profit enriching only the West. They decided to pursue the case not only at the local and national level but also at the continental, global level: they established connections with Western Greens and Europeanized their rhetoric. For the pro-incinerator party, Europe was a missionary, civilizing force, for the greens it was primarily a criminal, colonizing one. Furthermore, both sides had rather different visions of what European should mean in the local context. Those against the incinerator wanted to build the localities' future on traditional economic activities, primarily farming. Pro-incinerator actors, however, saw no future in those areas and claimed that the only salvation lies in foreign high-tech capital infusion.

In such cases, we see the EU or its members as coming in defining the parameters of regional development or environmental policy--acting as a global force. At the same time, we see the birth of a stratum of professionals and activists who use the newly established connections with the EU, including organizations within member countries, to influence the process but also to build a survival strategy. Thirdly, we also see the contestation of imposed meanings of Europeanness and of the place in question. Activists, residents and local decisionmakers ride the EU-wave to forge new connections, access new resources and therefore create new places.

## **V. Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me analyze the relationship among these three slices of Europeanization and draw out the political implications.

Considerable, if not yet systematized, effort has been made to assess who the winners and losers are of the postsocialist transition and, to the extent that the distinction can be made, of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU (Lengyel and Blaskó 2002). I would somewhat unabashedly argue that the three-partite framework of global ethnography provide us with a more nuanced sociological picture than that provided by the winner/loser paradigm. First of all, the winner/loser paradigm operates with a one-dimensional view of human beings, usually reducible to species of the *homo economicus*. Studies informed by the loser/winner dichotomy can excellently assess economic life trajectories through the quantitative analysis of employment, earnings, and property ownership data, among others, however, it fails to account for experiences in the political, cultural, and social areas of life--to start with a list of crude categories. How could one convey the subtleties of political gain or loss in status, for example, through this binarism? Both political gain and loss in status will depend on one's place of

residence, gender, ethnicity, age, level of education, and a host of other even-harder-to-quantify factors.

Even if we remain within the economic focus, however, the winner/loser paradigm will have a hard time integrating experiences that have to do with a change in opportunities, a transformation of space of maneuver. Lynne Haney (2000) provides such a study of Hungarian mothers, newly deprived of their welfare entitlements, arguing that it is not merely the reduction in welfare payments that hit these women hard, but, equally importantly for their individual experience, the fact that the criteria of entitlement changed from mother to needy and the abolition of non-monetary assistance, which, in the past, allowed women to tailor the assistance they needed (missing fathers, abusive husbands, lack of childcare, etc.) to their individual needs. It is this radical reduction in the space of maneuver that women find disempowering, yet it is exactly this kind of experience that is hard to capture with a winner/loser paradigm. Furthermore, a woman may not receive less monetary welfare benefit now than prior to the welfare reforms, but the fact that she has to ask for it, the fact that she has to go through means testing, and the fact that her needs are translated into a mere financial need make for institutionalized stigmatization.

The villages in my case study, to provide another example, may also look just as poor as before 1989, yet they now have political and economic opportunities that have been opened up partially by the collapse of the party state, partially by globalization and partially by the prospect of the entry in the EU.

The Hungarian activist-intellectual may still be living in the same small factory-produced apartment, but s/he now has the ability to be in touch with, talk to and learn from, intellectuals and activists outside the country because of collaboration among universities endorsed and funded by the EU.

My point is not to relativize the quite general loss in economic terms, but to demonstrate that if we are to give a from-below and *emic* account of people's experiences and perceptions of recent changes in postsocialist countries, the forces/connections/imaginings framework does a better job than the winner/loser paradigm.

This tool kit also allows us to see patterns, conjunctions, contradictions in people's experiences, and thus to draw conclusions at the macrosocial level. The key general question is what collective experience, and thus collective action may result from an "uneven distribution" of experiencing Europeanization as forces, connections or imaginings? What happens when a village or region only sees the force-aspect of the EU and cannot find a way to latch onto the EU project with its own agendas and build its own connections? What happens when the only social group capable of turning the enlargement process into an opportunity are professionals—a likely scenario given that the free-flow of labor between postsocialist countries and Western Europe are not expected for a number of years even after the Enlargement? Is it politically risky if the European Union is consequently exclusively associated with elites and elitism (the latter

being the result of the EU cultural politics)? Can the liberal parties in the region afford any further alienation from the Europeanization project?

In this paper, I showed that differently positioned people experience globalization differently. Consequently, the meanings and symbols mobilized by or imputed to globalization will vary not just with the cultural repertoire available to various actors but also with whether the experience under study is more of globalization as a force, connections or imaginations. In Eastern Europe, the EU acts as a primary agent of globalization, justifying my use of this tripartite global ethnographic framework to analyze why people resort to conflicting uses of Europe as a symbol. Finally, I argued that by scrutinizing the patterns of these different uses we can provide an *emic* picture of changing social inequalities. It is only from such a from-below perspective that we can claim to speak for people, rather than merely speak on their behalf.

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