

EDITORIAL

Toward the Critical Reappraisal of Civil Society

Anyone who has spent time in East-Central Europe during the last thirty years is likely to have heard of the marvels of a mysterious entity known as “civil society.” As Marek Mikuš puts it in his study of organizations claiming the mantle of civil society in Serbia,

Western and Eastern European intellectuals interpreted the rise of dissident publics and movements in socialist Eastern Europe in the 1980s as a rebirth of “civil society,” which would be subsequently celebrated as the crucial factor in the overthrow of communist regimes. [...] They posited civil society as inherently good, the sphere of freedom, autonomy and civic self-government, and the socialist state as bad, always scheming to repress civil society and advance its totalitarian designs.¹

This was a story told about communism, but it became a story about “post-communism” as well, because if nascent civil society overthrew the states that labelled themselves communist, then the task of building post-communist democracy seemed to depend on cultivating a robust civil society ready to defend against the danger that dictatorship might ever return. In the states that had emerged from Communist Party rule, political discussion became dominated on the one hand by lamentations over the perpetual weakness of civil society in the region, and on the other hand by repeated celebrations of the power of civil society whenever it seemed to rise up against newly entrenched state elites. And because the notion of defeated communism came to stand in for a wide range of other things that new social movements – as well as new and old elites – hoped to replace, the ideal of a crusading civil society became a leading feature of the political imagination throughout the world.

The idea of civil society as a victor over communism and a prime defender of post-communist democracy poses a challenge to those who critically approach the phenomenon

¹ Marek Mikuš, *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), p. 11.

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known as post-communism. The idea of civil society has been crucial to the narrative that makes it possible to conceptualize the world, and especially Central and Eastern Europe, as “post-communist” at all: the idea of civil society fighting against the state has translated struggles between subjects of capitalist society into terms reminiscent of the struggle against communism – struggles of a relatively undifferentiated “society” desiring freedom from an ever-dangerous state. Any attempt to turn the critique of post-communism into a critique of actually existing capitalism must directly or indirectly confront a discursive system that has focused so much attention on the critique of formerly existing Communist rule.

The idea of civil society, with its democratic and emancipatory appeal, first appeared as an alternative to other potential approaches to emancipation, and it continues to shape understanding of what counts as emancipation and what does not. As Veronika Stoyanova puts it in a selection reprinted in this volume of *Contradictions*, in appeals to civil society,

Conveniently ignored were the power relations underpinning civil society and the exclusions resulting from these. The new civil society organisations further pushed out other forms of political agency, such as social movements and collective mass mobilisations.²

It pushed them out, or in some cases subsumed and reinterpreted them under the civil society aegis – which selectively included some mobilizations at the expense of others. At the same time, civil society always promoted or tacitly approved of certain forms of state politics, even when it was engaged in struggles against the state, and the ideal of an extra-political civil society would serve as a tool for enforcing as well as undermining political legitimacy. Meanwhile, this exclusivity in the mobilization of civil society has repeatedly provoked responses that reject the politics of civil society. But opposition to civil society discourse has not necessarily generated new, more inclusive and emancipatory subjects. More often responses have appeared as a sort of inverted reflection of civil society, maintaining the exclusionary elements of civil society while developing “uncivil” politics that redirect these exclusionary impulses in new directions. The task of formulating an emancipatory alternative to civil society or, as some might argue, of reconceptualizing the post-1989 understanding of civil society and employing it for more critical ends, has barely begun. The contributions to this volume of *Contradictions* should help shift debate in this direction.

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² Veronika Stoyanova, “The Concept of Civil Society During Bulgaria’s Post-1989 ‘Transition’: Its Road to Hegemony and Its Utopian Surplus,” in this issue of *Contradictions*, p. 127.

We start this volume of *Contradictions* with several articles that address the narrowing of the political and social realms that accompanied the rise of the idea of civil society. Veronika [Stoyanova](#), in the text quoted from above, traces this process in Bulgaria, where civil society entered political discussion in the late 1980s and gained prominence especially under the new regime established after 1989. Jeremy [Walton](#), in his essay on “the civil society effect,” takes us closer to the present, proposing an approach to civil society that avoids the simplistic idealization of the concept and of its magnate-philanthropist promoters like George Soros, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Osman Kavala, while also avoiding the one-sided demonization of civil society carried out by authoritarian rulers like Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Joseph Grim [Feinberg](#), in the Czech- and Slovak-language part of the volume, continues on this theme with a theory that links civil society to the structure of capitalist economic relations and links the rise of civil society discourse to the virtual disappearance of the proletariat from the post-1989 public sphere. Further texts in the Czech/Slovak section take us back further into the history of the notion of civil society: First, a selection of writings by Zdeněk [Mlynář](#) and Miroslav [Kusý](#) illustrates the very different understanding of civil society that was articulated by Czechoslovak intellectuals in the 1960s, an approach far more critical, and arguably more nuanced, than the one generally adopted by civil society advocates today. Then, in a new entry in our ongoing “conceptual dictionary,” Joseph Grim [Feinberg](#) offers a genealogy of the normative “post-communist” notion of civil society, showing the changes that the concept underwent as it ceased to serve as a framework for criticizing structures internal to civil society and became understood affirmatively as a site unproblematic in itself, whose purpose was to criticize what was external to it.

Other texts in this volume address the question of civil society more indirectly, revealing how the notion of civil society is bound up in a variety of other critical concepts. Monika [Woźniak](#), in her comparative study of the thought of Soviet Marxist Evald Ilyenkov and Polish Marxist-turned-Hegelian Marek Siemek, draws attention to Siemek’s apology for capitalist civil society. Unlike many advocates of civil society, who take the term’s validity and desirability for granted, Siemek presents civil society as a historically contingent sphere that makes possible a specific and carefully circumscribed form of egalitarian socialization. In Ilyenkov’s vision of all-human emancipation, by contrast, the possibility of human emancipation appears only in a society that has moved beyond market capitalism and, implicitly, beyond the form of civil society that accompanies it. James Mark [Shields](#), in a piece translated into Czech, likewise looks beyond the merely *partial* emancipation that is possible within one or another sphere (such as religion or politics) that has been separated off from society as a whole. While interpreting traditions of “engaged” or “political” Buddhism that offer far-reaching conceptions of freedom, Shields also turns to the young Marx and his call for the transformation of civil society as the basis for integral human emancipation.

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Some of our texts touch on aspects of civil society discourse from a historical perspective. In the Czech-Slovak section of the journal, Ondřej [Holub](#) looks at the conservative conception of civil society worked out by Croatian-Austrian legal theorist René Marcic, which Holub compares with the Marxist-humanist approach of Austrian Communist intellectual Ernst Fischer. He shows how civil society (or what can be understood retrospectively as “civil society”) became a battleground for the enactment of competing visions of postwar Austria. In an interview conducted by Greg [Evans](#), Noam [Chomsky](#) offers another comparative perspective, in this case between dissidents living under right-wing dictatorships in Latin America and the dissidents of Central and Eastern Europe, who enjoyed the support of the West and generally ignored the plight of Latin American dissidents while in some cases actively supporting the governments that repressed them. This raises the question of what it means to be a dissident, and whether it is appropriate to use the term “dissident” for someone who selectively chooses which oppressive regimes to support and which to oppose. If we consider the commonly made claim that the dissidents of East-Central Europe became pioneers of civil society, then the dissidents’ patchy record in opposing repression might also complicate received ideas about the connection between the growth of civil society and the promotion of democracy.

In several other texts, we move from the notion of civil society to related questions like the meaning of “citizenship” and the challenge of achieving global emancipation not limited to the citizenry of one or another nation. Nishat [Awan](#)’s review of Amy Brandzel’s *Against Citizenship* takes on the question of citizenship directly, engaging with Brandzel’s argument that the very notion of citizenship enforces exclusion and hurts struggles for inclusivity. Awan counters by asking whether a new, “planetary” notion of citizenship might still maintain the emancipatory promise of citizenship while including everyone on the planet – at a time when all people together face the threat of global environmental destruction. We also publish a Czech translation of a chapter from Engin [Isin](#)’s book *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship*, in which Isin recounts the history of the notion of citizenship as a history of defining and excluding non-citizens from ever-newly-circumscribed political realms.

The theme of exclusion, as well as the aspiration to universality that the notion of citizenship often evokes, is also raised by Tatar Bolshevik Mirsaid [Sultan-Galiev](#), whose 1923–25 polemic with the Westernizing orientation of his comrades continues to sound with urgency as the problems of nationalism and internationalism return to the top of the global left’s agenda. We print this historically significant document for the first time ever in English translation. But after Sultan-Galiev’s call for the left to look east of Europe, we turn back to Central Europe and discuss the political thought of the Czech philosopher, sociologist, and foundational political figure T. G. Masaryk. In an interview with Masaryk scholar Jan [Svoboda](#), Joseph Grim [Feinberg](#) asks about Masaryk’s attempt to reconcile national, social, and all-human emancipation. The problem of nationalism is also addressed by Stanislav [Holubec](#) in his Czech-language review of Jakub S. Beneš’s

Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918, and by Martin Šaffek and Jan Májiček in their critical Czech-language review of Luboš Blaha's book *Antiglobalista*, in which the author attempts to provide theoretical justification for a nationalist, nativist leftism for Central Europe. Šaffek and Májiček counter with a call for a humanistic, Marxist internationalism.

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In addition to our thematic discussions surrounding civil society, citizenship, and the problem of human emancipation, we publish several articles on our perennial theme of critical social thought in Eastern and Central Europe. Russell Rockwell compares the notions of freedom and necessity in the thought of Herbert Marcuse and Czech Marxist philosopher Karel Kosík. Jiří Holba presents the thought of Egon Bondy, another Czech Marxist philosopher, who drew inspiration from Buddhist intellectual traditions. (Holba's article thus complements our translation of James Mark Shields, who writes extensively on the connections between Marxism and Buddhism but was unfamiliar with Bondy's thought. Bondy is also the object of a Czech-language review by Vojtěch Ondráček.) And Nikolay Karkov, in an article about the process of publishing works of autonomist Marxism in Bulgaria, discusses the challenge – but also the important intellectual potential – of introducing this critical tradition into Eastern European political debates. In addition, a review by Miroslav Tomek of Ilya Budraitskis's book *Dissidenty sredi dissidentov* (Dissidents among dissidents), discusses the history of left dissent in the Soviet Union.

Other texts in this volume present critical views on the history of Communist Party rule in Eastern and Central Europe. In a Czech-language interview conducted by Tereza Reichelová, Vadim Damier offers a new interpretation of the revolutions in the Russian Empire that led to the formation of the Soviet Union and – Damier argues – to the eventual suppression of the revolution's radical potential. (See also a Slovak-language review of Damier's book on this topic by Juraj Benko.) In both English and Czech we also publish a critical analysis of the conservatism of Soviet-type society in the post-1968-era, written by Lubomír Sochor and introduced by Ivan Landa.

We are also fortunate to publish a talk given in Prague in 2018 by Jacques Rancière, introduced and translated into Czech by Josef Fulka. Rancière's reflections on the political significance of fiction present an important continuation of ongoing discussions of aesthetics and society that have appeared in our journal's pages. (On aesthetics and politics, see also Roman Kanda's Czech-language review of a recent book on Marxism and formalism.)

Some of this volume's reviews have been mentioned above. Of those not yet mentioned, we should draw attention above all to Jakub Ort's, Miroslava Mišičková's, and Diana Young's discussions of left feminism – a topic that will reappear as the central theme of *Contradictions* 2020.

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We also take this opportunity to reflect on the work of several important contributors to critical social theory who have passed away since the last volume of *Contradictions* was released. These include Colin Barker, a prominent Marxist sociologist and historian; Immanuel Wallerstein, the leading proponent of World Systems Theory; and Agnes Heller. Heller in particular, as one of György Lukács's best-known students, one of Hungary's best-known philosophers, and one of the world's leading advocates of unorthodox Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s, has provided *Contradictions* with an important point of reference. Even as her philosophical and political positions shifted after 1989, she continued to raise challenging questions for all those trying not only to understand the world, but also to change it.

Joseph Grim Feinberg