

ESSAYS

THE CIVIL SOCIETY EFFECT REVISITED

On the Politics of Liberal
Philanthropy Today*

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Abstract: In this essay, I reconsider the politics of contemporary philanthropy by navigating between two dominant ideological perspectives on civil society: depoliticization and demonization. I do so with reference to the recent tribulations of three famous magnate-philanthropists, Osman Kavala, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and George Soros. By revisiting my concept of the “civil society effect” – the romanticizing of civil society as a domain free from instrumental political motivations – I aim to shed light on the broader political terrain of contemporary capitalism, in which private capital is too easily understood as a neutral medium for political transformations. At the same time, I focus on the histories and genealogies that the depoliticization of civil society silences, especially the imperial legacies that opponents of liberal philosophy – new authoritarians such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán – frequently invoke with pugnacity.

Keywords: Civil society, Islam, liberalism, philanthropy, new authoritarianism

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To begin with, a few points of orientation.

October 2017. In another episode in the ongoing restructuring of Turkish state and society, Osman Kavala, one of the country's most prominent philanthropists, is arrested as a suspected enemy of the state. He remains incarcerated at the time of my writing.

December 2017. Roskomnadzor, the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, bans the website of Open Russia, a media platform sponsored by exiled Russian philanthropist Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

December 2018. Central European University decides to transfer the bulk of its programs from Budapest to Vienna after a prolonged legal struggle with the Hungarian government. CEU is one of the flagship initiatives of its founder, George Soros.

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With these three controversies, we have the makings of a juicy political drama. On one side: States characterized by a heady brew of authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, and neoliberalism, associated with strongman leaders – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, and Viktor Orbán. On the other: A trio of magnates who champion their philanthropic projects in the universalist idiom of liberalism. The object of contention: Civil society and its relationship to state power. Are figures such as Kavala, Soros, and Khodorkovsky the benevolent stewards of liberal freedoms in inclement climes and times, as their enthusiasts profess? Conversely, are they cynical aspirants to hardnosed power, whose claims to act within the sphere of “civil society” mask their true political objectives, as Erdoğan, Putin, and Orbán attest? And beyond such dichotomous interpretations, what contradictions in the contemporary arrangement of states and capital might the tribulations of these titans of finance and industry illuminate?

In this brief contribution, I hope to shed light on the politics of liberal philanthropy today by revisiting a concept that I coined in another context: the “civil society effect.”¹ While conducting ethnographic research among Muslim civil society organizations in Turkey in the mid-2000s, I was astounded by the rhetorical consistency I encountered among NGO representatives. Despite sharp theological, demographic, and ideological differences among various foundations, all of the employees and volunteers whom I interviewed vigorously insisted that they were *not* engaged in political advocacy or activity, that they were simply “civil society actors” (*sivil toplum aktörleri*). Gradual-

¹ Jeremy F. Walton, “Confessional Pluralism and the Civil Society Effect: Liberal Mediations of Islam and Secularism in Contemporary Turkey,” *American Ethnologist* 40 (2013), no. 1, pp. 182–200. Jeremy F. Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

ly, I came to comprehend this rhetorical commitment to civil society as a practice of political legitimation in its own right. As I wrote at the time, “The civil society effect entails both a utopia of civil society, understood as a domain naturally suited to social authenticity and autonomy, and a dystopia of the state, understood as a locus of coercion and heteronomy.”² By asserting their commitment to civil society, the representatives of Turkish Muslim NGOs simultaneously endeavored to vouchsafe the “authenticity” of their initiatives and mounted a critique of state power in relation to matters of religion.

My research in Turkey highlighted the paradoxical character of politics conducted in the name of civil society. To the extent that civil society activists “are involved in politics without aspiring to govern,”³ their political vision aligns with liberal valorizations of “the frugality of government.”⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that civil society actors often reject the label of politics *tout court* – as Carl Schmitt famously argued, liberalism’s distinctive style of conducting politics is resolutely *depoliticizing*.⁵ My concept of the civil society effect attempts to capture the paradoxical, depoliticizing logic of political interventions on the part of civil society organizations, which seek to authenticate their arguments through the claim that civil society, unlike the state, is not mired in the muck of “politics.”⁶

While nabobs such as Kavala, Khodorkovsky, and Soros operate on a global scale vaster than that of most of the organizations that I researched,⁷ they also seek benediction at the altar of civil society. The mission statement on Soros’ Open Society Foundations website is characteristic: “We [...] work to build vibrant and inclusive societies [...] by supporting a diverse array of independent voices and independent organizations

² Walton, *Muslim Civil Society*, p. 18.

³ Michel Feher, “The Governed in Politics,” in Michel Feher (ed.) *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 12–30, here 12.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 29.

⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G. Schwab (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985). See also Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), p. 46.

⁶ Timothy Mitchell’s concept of the “state effect” was a direct inspiration for my coinage. Mitchell’s formulation is as follows: “What is it about modern society, as a particular form of social and economic order, that has made possible the apparent autonomy of the state as a freestanding entity? Why is this kind of apparatus [...] the distinctive political arrangement of the modern age?” Timothy Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect,” in George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 76–97, here 85.

⁷ One notable exception to this is the Gülen Movement, a loosely-knit network of NGOs, private schools, and businesses affiliated with the exiled Turkish Muslim theologian Fethullah Gülen (see Walton, *Muslim Civil Society*). Gülen and his enthusiasts were blamed for the coup attempt of 2016 in Turkey, and his movement is outlawed and demonized in Turkey today.

around the world – the *civil society* that provides a creative and dynamic link between the governing and the governed.”⁸ In such classically liberal formulations, today’s billionaire philanthropists comprehend civil society as a necessary check on potential abuses of governance, rather than a form of governance itself.⁹ It is striking, then, that criticism of philanthropist-tycoons frequently rejects the claim that civil society is a domain “untainted” by politics. Erdoğan, for instance, has inveighed against Osman Kavala with the following words: “Some say he is civil society; he is a nice person, a good citizen [...] When you look, the same person is behind the Taksim events. You see them in the allocation of considerable funds to certain places. All the connections are revealed one by one.”¹⁰ For Erdoğan, as for Putin and Orbán, “civil society” is a version of the emperor’s new clothes. From the perspective of those that govern, the civil society effect fails: it cannot conceal what they perceive to be naked ambitions that represent imminent threats to the sovereignty of the regime.

From the vantage point of the hegemonic liberal consensus in Western Europe and North America, none of this is particularly difficult to understand: Kavala, Khodorkovsky and Soros are beleaguered heroes, latter-day Davids fighting cynical, paranoid goliaths. Civil society is always desirable, and states, especially those tarnished as “authoritarian,” tend toward the grotesque. The unspoken assumption accompanying this consensus is that, unlike states, money – capital – is at least potentially a *benign, neutral* medium for political change. (Think of the role of private funds in the American electoral system, as well as the cordial, depoliticizing public treatment of American billionaire do-gooders such as Warren Buffett and Bill Gates.) Of course, in their blowhard

⁸ Open Society Foundations, “Who We Are,” 2019 (online at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/who-we-are> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]). Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia toes a similar line – “*Open Russia* in its current form aims to connect and unite Russian citizens who seek a state governed by the rule of law, with a strong civil society, regular free and fair elections, and the promotion of European democratic values” – while the website dedicated to freeing Osman Kavala consistently refers to his “civil society activities” (*sivil toplum faaliyetleri*). See Open Russia, “Biography,” 2019 (online at <https://www.khodorkovsky.com/biography/open-russia/> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]) and Osman Kavala’ya Özgürlük, “Osman Kavala Kimdir?” 2019 (online at <http://www.osmankavala.org/tr/biyografi> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]).

⁹ See Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Carlotta Gall, “Erdoğan Champions Khashoggi While Trampling Journalists and Dissidents in Turkey,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2018 (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/world/europe/erdogan-khashoggi-turkey.html> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]). Erdoğan’s reference to the “Taksim events” refers to the Gezi Park protests of summer 2013, which united a plethora of disparate groups in criticism of the government’s neoliberal authoritarian urban policies. One of the key accusations against Kavala is that he funded and spearheaded the demonstrations. For a background on the Gezi Protests, see Jeremy F. Walton, “‘Everyday I’m *Çapul*!’: Global Flows and Local Frictions of Gezi,” in Isabel David and Kumru F. Toktamis (eds.), *Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 45–57.

dyspepsia, Erdoğan, Putin, Orbán and their brethren do not mount a critique of civil society in these terms. Nor are they champions of progressive anti-capitalism – they, too, have benefited incalculably from the manna of neoliberalism. However, to the extent that they draw attention to the inherently political character of private capital, their paranoid perspective demands attention, particularly in relation to the political histories that this perspective registers.

As numerous scholars have argued, “civil society” has frequently fueled collective aspirations and contentions in the post-socialist nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe. Joseph Grim Feinberg neatly captures the historical backdrop to contemporary debates in the region: “In the totalizing system of power that reigned in Eastern Europe before 1989, this state/civil society opposition became radicalized, with the state coming to represent all that was evil and debased, and civil society taking on all that was good and pure.”¹¹ A utopian image of civil society – the civil society effect – was the handmaiden for an unprecedented redistribution of capital, principally through the privatization of state industries, in the immediate post-socialist context.¹² Turkey navigated a different ideological course over most of the 20th century, but the forms of privatization that have accompanied Turkish neoliberalism since the 1980s bear striking affinities to post-socialist transformations.¹³ In Turkey, too, a handful of well-positioned individuals and families earned fortunes that strained credulity. These new plutocrats came to understand themselves as private actors whose interests aligned with civil society, rather than the state, especially in the wake of the “passive revolution”¹⁴ of the Islamist political movement, which eventually resulted in Erdoğan’s coronation as postmodern sultan.

Postmodern sultan: allow me to pause on this phrase. Branding Erdoğan as a rebooted sultan has been a favorite trope in the Western media, but Erdoğan himself has not shied away from the image. Only several months ago, he hosted a so-called “Sultan’s audience” (*Padişah oturuşu*) to commemorate the anniversary of the Seljuk victory over the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071.¹⁵ To the north, Putin has

¹¹ Joseph Grim Feinberg, “The Civic and the Proletarian,” *Socialism and Democracy*, 27 (2013), no. 3, pp. 1–31, here 4.

¹² It is worth noting that Soros’s fortune does not stem from the post-socialist period – he earned the bulk of his wealth as a financier specializing in hedge funds in the United Kingdom and United States. Khodorkovsky, on the other hand, was a direct beneficiary of post-Soviet privatization, principally on the basis of his erstwhile gas and oil company, Yukos.

¹³ Ziya Öniş, “Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neoliberalism in Critical Perspective,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40 (2004), no. 4, pp. 113–134.

¹⁴ Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Tele1, “Erdoğan’ın ‘Padişah oturuşu’ sosyal medyanın gündeminde,” August 28, 2019 (online at <https://tele1.com.tr/erdoganin-oturusu-sosyal-medyanin-gundeminde-padisah-oturusu-79872/> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]).

been equally enthusiastic in donning the mantle of the bygone czars,¹⁶ while along the Danube, Orbán has genuflected to the memory of 15th century Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus, among other forebears.¹⁷ Beyond the recent era of neoliberal privatizations and new authoritarianisms, a deeper historical legacy unites the nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Anatolia, one that touches on the politics of civil society today: the imperial legacy. In comparison with centuries of Ottoman, Romanov and Habsburg rule, the various 20th and 21st century regimes that have held sway in the broad region between the Baltic and the Balkans, the Urals and the Alps, seem fleeting. Deeply-rooted imperial legacies are double-edged. On one hand, nostalgia for the ostensible tolerance of the empires in contrast to the homogenizing imperatives of nation-states resonates with the ideals of liberal democracy and civil society today.¹⁸ On the other hand, the empires offer strong precedents for the preening, personalized forms of rule that inspire the new authoritarian populists. It would be naive to divorce the contemporary politics of civil society from these deeply-embedded, deeply felt histories. Contrary to the universalist, depoliticizing claims of liberal ideologues, civil society as both a concept and a political space has multiple, fractured genealogies, especially in post-imperial contexts.¹⁹

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By way of a conclusion, a few caveats, words of caution, and considerations. My aim in this essay has not been to belittle the projects and initiatives of philanthropists such as Kavala, Khodorkovsky, and Soros, many of which I personally admire. Nor would I want to provide a fig leaf for the coercive, frequently violent powers of states, governments, and strongmen that seek to stifle criticism voiced from the platform of “civil society.” Kavala’s ongoing incarceration in Turkey, in particular, is deeply troubling.²⁰

¹⁶ Thomas Grove, “Czar Vladimir? Putin Acolytes Want to Bring Back the Monarchy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 December 2018 (online at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/czar-vladimir-putin-acolytes-want-to-bring-back-the-monarchy-11544732680> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]).

¹⁷ Hungarian Spectrum, “Will Victor Orbán One Day Become King Matthias?” July 14, 2019 (online at <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/07/14/will-viktor-orban-one-day-become-king-matthias/> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]).

¹⁸ Jeremy F. Walton, “Introduction: Textured Historicity and the Ambivalence of Imperial Legacies,” in *Ambivalent Legacies: Political Cultures of Memory and Amnesia in Former Habsburg and Ottoman Lands*, a special issue of *History and Anthropology* 30 (2019) no. 4, pp. 353–365.

¹⁹ For an account of (post-)Habsburg genealogies of “civil society,” see Chris Hann, “After Ideocracy and Civil Society: Gellner, Polanyi and the New Peripheralization of Central Europe,” *Thesis Eleven* 128 (2015), pp. 41–55.

²⁰ For background on Kavala’s imprisonment and trial, see Hugh Williamson, “In Court with Osman Kavala: Turkey’s Credibility on Trial,” *Open Democracy*, June 26, 2019 (online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/in-court-with-osman-kavala-turkeys-credibility-on-trial/> [accessed Nov. 10, 2019]).

Such admiration and concern, however, should not blind us to the political arguments and interventions that the liberal romanticizing of civil society simultaneously anoints and obscures.

Capital is key here. Our era is strongly seeped in the common-sense hegemony of liberalism, which resolutely obfuscates the political power of both capital and civil society. This is what I call the civil society effect. To respond to it, we must recall that consent, and consensus, can be as repressive as coercion – as Gramsci so famously argued.²¹ Resisting the liberal consensus does not imply an endorsement of the coercive power of the new authoritarianisms, or a naive denial of “civil society” as a whole. On the contrary, a more nuanced understanding of civil society as a massive, protean domain of activity that spans a broad spectrum of (more and less) political positions enjoins skepticism toward depoliticizing, dehistoricizing claims about civil society, especially when made by the obscenely wealthy. Though it may be tempting to think otherwise in an era such as ours, politics, whether on the part of civil society actors or others, cannot be reduced to bipolar confrontations between illiberal authoritarianism and liberal freedoms. Nor should sympathy for the plights of champions of civil society cause us to think otherwise.

²¹ Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).