

HASÍTOTT FA, BY JÓZSEF BÖRÖCZ (BUDAPEST, LIBRI, 2017)

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József Böröcz, acknowledged scholar of world-systems analysis, was born in Budapest in 1956. He studied literature, linguistic and cultural theory, as well as Polish at Kossuth Lajos University of Sciences in Debrecen between 1976 and 1982. After a year of working as a freelance translator from English, he left for the USA where he embarked on a Ph.D. which he finished in 1992 (Johns Hopkins University). He joined Rutgers University in 1995, where he is currently a professor of sociology. In 2004, he earned his Dr.Sc. degree in sociology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Hasított fa (Split firewood)² is a collection of his publications either published in, or translated to Hungarian. The volume is made up of three parts, organized along three major themes: global dependency relations, the semi-periphery, and Europe and its coloniality. Its core claim is that there is a system of dependencies that connects economic actors. This does not necessarily mean a zero-sum game, but – to put it plainly –, if there is a gain, there also tends to be a loss. An important contribution of the volume is how it re-defines global actors, with the emphasis on relations, and it is precisely these descriptions that reveal the novelty of the analysis.

Regarding the European Union, Böröcz's approach makes it possible to go beyond culturalism (that is, overemphasizing the symbolic and the cultural).

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2 The title refers to the lines of Attila József's poem "Consciousness":

"Just like split firewood stacked together,
the universe embraces all,
so that each object holds the other
confined by pressures mutual,
all things ordained, reciprocal.
Only unbeing can branch and feather,
only becoming blooms at all;
what is must break, or fade, or wither."(translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth)

Western European states followed and then extended their interests when establishing political and economic affiliations with Eastern Europe: the internal logic of the EU is based on facilitating specific flows of capital: on returning the economic capital to the core, and the valorization of cheap Eastern European labour.

State socialism (and the system change) can also be considered in terms of such dependency relations, or actually a multitude of them: internal (both political and economic) dependency from the center (Moscow), and fiscal dependency on economic core countries. Following the logic of Böröcz, these two dependencies are related to each other and an analytical framework is needed for their mapping and description.

Both for the world economy and for Europe, socialism was first and foremost an alternative to capitalism – a new system of property relations and market-state relations. Similarly to the rejection of culturalism as the foundational principle of the EU, instead of referring to socialism as an emancipatory project based on an egalitarian ideology and taking its successes as the result of the application of such ideology, Böröcz studies state socialism from an external perspective; namely, by examining how the former communist countries relate to capitalist countries and, on a broader level, to global political and economic relations. Böröcz shows how the opposition of socialism (as an emancipatory ideology based on collectivism) to capitalism (an emancipatory ideology based on individualism) represents a false dichotomy. Instead of primarily ideological regimes, geopolitical interests shape the relation of dependencies.

Through revealing how relations shape actors, these actors are then described as *doing* certain things instead of being plainly *constituted* through the expression of certain truths or values (as if a political entity were a passive reflection of culture; so-called “shared European values” in this case). Following this perspective, the question becomes how certain rearrangements of a given scale (for example, the Eastern European system change) are connected to larger-scale global transformations. Following the logic of Böröcz, such an analysis has to take external dependencies into account (see the first part of the book), instead of focusing solely on the structures (relations, processes) within a given society – because these are influenced by external dependencies (see the second and third part of the book).

One way of moving beyond the conventional East-West dichotomy would be to see how the relations of external dependency extend further than either Western Europe or the Soviet Union. Another way to supersede this dichotomy is to see how neoliberal ideology in general relates to the post-state-socialist countries, and how the annexation of these countries gave both an economic boost and moral-political legitimacy to the neoliberal world order. Böröcz proposes that

instead of “system change” it is more accurate to talk of a sort of “dependency change” – after the demise of the Soviet Union semi-periphery countries became dependent on economic core countries. “System change” implies a modernist teleology in which “progress” takes a straightforward direction, leading towards the Western model of representational democracy and market capitalism. A change of dependencies is more of a technical term: instead of inferring who stands on which side of history (either good or bad), it is a means of inquiring to whom a country gives up its sovereignty, or what alliances have to be made. Instead of the idealized “Enlightened West” there remains something much more sobering – an economic core extending its reach and, last but not least, a corrupt and empirically negated theory of the legitimization of an unfair share of resources that favors a relatively small part of the continent. The concepts of “Western Europe” or “European values” are thus examples of how cultural patterns, *topoi* or certain figurations are invoked to legitimize such uneven relations, the extraction of resources, or unequal exchange. With the figure of the synecdoche (Chapter 16) applied to Europe (the part representing the whole, the EU standing in for the whole of Europe) Böröcz describes how this “Europe” might self-reference as an inherently cultural project, and it is precisely this discourse (reflecting symbolic values) that enables the extraction of material value. Through the privileging of “European values” the interest of economic core countries may be portrayed as universally human. Some informal economic relations (for example, Hungarian shopping tourism in Austria) are not even provided with a narrative form – or such narrative forms are not part of the popular cultural imaginary – as these would not fit into popular conceptions about “poor neighbors;” this is too far outside the hegemonic framework.

A similar example described by Böröcz is how colonial rule is legitimized through describing colonial populations as inherently primitive, childish, and even feminine (p.338), similarly to the stereotype about women being inherently caring and nurturing. Such a perspective is prevalent and deeply entrenched, and is also based on ideas about inherent qualitative differences.

This volume reveals connections between the economic and the symbolic-discursive, yet it never provides a clear definition of the overall framework and its concepts (each essay uses different concepts). No overall methodology is described. Böröcz describes linguistic phenomena or semantic shifts, yet arrives at much broader, much more complex social phenomena with multiple registers. One example is how “social closure” (groups monopolizing resources) at the time of the transition from feudalism from capitalism is demonstrated to work based on two different assumptions about the history of social change: either the return of “human capital” is based on abilities and merit, or the process involves a much more complex legal-social process – both involve a

complex set of interactions. Böröcz provides an example from Marx and Engels (“Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 1848) – namely, how the bourgeoisie “has put an end to feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations... It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” – to describe a complete regime of social and personal interactions.

It is worth making a comparison here with Frantz Fanon’s (1967) description of the experience of a black man who returns from France. Fanon’s description is first expressed in “genetic terms” (“his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation”), and then the gait is described, “forces are set in motion.” A simple greeting is described as a complex set of changes and interactions: Frenchness bows the body instead of a broad sweep of the arm, words are spoken with a dialect carried through the “habitually raucous” contrast of the voice following a slight bow. This description of the French-creole subject is a whole embodied framework that describes and maps subjectivity, where discourse is only one element. Such a description of coloniality and its effects is about being human (human subjectivity, experience) thus it presumes new ontologies of the human subject beyond the hegemonic Western modality. The coloniality of being is a similar concept, raising the challenge of connecting genetic, existential, and historical dimensions. This is the legacy of colonization, but also a separate entity itself because it is present in social norms, desires, and as a collective identity.

The basic Marxist concept of the superstructure is present in the above-mentioned scholarship, but culture is a set of effects of subjectification, not just ideology. Böröcz describes ideological structures which have effects (both cognitive and corporeal), but there is no clear mapping of these. Social phenomena are sometimes described as detailed, complex entanglements containing layers of social interaction and their effects, yet there is only treatment of discourse and language, as if language principally structured culture and its subjectification effects, but this privileging of language is not explicitly acknowledged. One example involves Joschka Fischer, who “has a cognitive pose” when invoking “Europe” as a panacea for all the ailments of the world. Fischer is a political actor making a public statement. But based on this text, how could we know about his cognition, or anyone else’s? The description reveals what effect his reference to Europe achieves in the context of a given political situation, not what his personal desires and beliefs could be.

Böröcz describes how *topoi* (for example, a “Europe” already imbued with meaning) are instrumentalized, but they often emerge from top-down processes. One fact which Böröcz does not address directly is that within EU culture is located a site for both managing and producing difference;

there is a complex legal-institutional network dedicated to this task. Whether given meanings remain and spread and how this is connected to political and economic interests is also a much more complex process, but in this volume only the macro perspective is explored. Seemingly, the subjects located below some collective entity (Hungarians, Austrians, and so on) are only passive replicators of discourse and they do not have much agency beyond that, but this is not stated explicitly, although such a conception of subjecthood corresponds to the determinism of world-systems theory and its focus on the macro level. World-systems theory describes how constraints on any possible action are manifold – see, for example, Chapter 6 about global redistribution (Redistributing Global Inequality: A Thought Experiment). Redistributing “oligarchic wealth” and thus balancing the structure of global inequality might even make sense from a purely fiscal perspective – rich countries would not suffer substantial losses; poor countries would be way better off. If this is the course of action to be taken, the question is how the passive subjects of the volume would enact such a change, and who the subjects really are.

