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East European Politics and Societies 2011 25: 114 originally published online 30 July 2010

DOI: 10.1177/0888325410374090

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The Hungarian Foie Gras Boycott

Struggles for Moral Sovereignty in Postsocialist Europe

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In 2008 an Austrian animal rights organization announced a boycott of Hungarian foie gras, arguing that force-feeding geese and ducks constitutes animal cruelty. The case received a lot of media attention and quickly evolved into a bitter conflict. The article scrutinizes the case as an example of postsocialist conflicts around ethics and morality and the concept of common good. The incident demonstrates not only unexpected obstacles for Hungary to be accepted as civilizationally European but also for Hungarian farmers' ability to act as morally sovereign self-regulating subjects in a neoliberal world.

Keywords: *Hungary; politics of food; animal rights; European Union; morality; neoliberal governmentality*

Introduction: The Common Good in Postsocialist Hungary

While the initial "Wild East" or dog-eat-dog years of the early 1990s seem to be over in Hungary, the profound decline in solidarity that was necessary for the moral justification of the dismantling of full employment and a great chunk of the social safety net has only continued. The principle of "I am my brother's keeper" may not have disappeared entirely but surely has acquired an unusual meaning. A recent cross-national survey showed that Hungarians approve of tax evasion at the highest rate among Europeans. Hungarian sociologists argued that their compatriots consider an otherwise immoral act moral if it is done to protect one's family. The argument that the Communist regime deserved being cheated, which thus rendered dissimulation, lying and tax evasion ethical, has been made repeatedly in the Russian and East European studies literature. As Maya Nadkarni (2000) argues, the "them" of the socialist-era us vs. them binary is still operational. Violetta Zentai (n.d.) describes how certain private vices (mostly involving the use of public resources for private gain) continue to be seen as civic virtue. In a Europe-wide cross-national comparison, Skrabski and Kopp (2008) also find Hungarians among the least trusting people,

with more than two-thirds agreeing with the claim that “people are vile, selfish and want to abuse others.” In fact, agreement with this statement has grown since the beginning of the millennium.

Even as Hungarians trust the state less and less with their taxes, their welfare expectations have increased in the last few years (Csepeli 2009). The attitude that in another context has been called a “desire for socialism without communists”¹ here manifests itself as a preference for the welfare state but rejecting the accompanying ideology that places collective interests above individual ones.

The complexities and seeming contradictions of such attitudes to the common good and the enduring nature of some of its elements suggest a unique case of moral restructuring, one that we may not be able to chalk up entirely to the legacy of state socialism or to some misguided notion of postcommunist nostalgia (Todorova and Gille 2010). In order to disentangle the relationship between liberalization and “Europeanization,” on the one hand, and ethics, on the other, instead of taking a bird’s-eye view based on survey data, I suggest investigating attitudes to the common good based on a case study that will allow us a “thicker” appreciation for similar ethical dilemmas in postsocialism. Rather than measuring responses to hypothetical scenarios or individual attitudes to values in the abstract, I investigate actual ethical decisions, policies and institutions as they manifest themselves in a concrete case of lived morality. With this orientation, I am following what I would call the “practice turn” in studies of ethics and morality (Lakoff and Collier 2004; MacIntyre 1984). In this article I analyze the boycott of Hungarian foie gras (fatted goose or duck liver) declared by an Austrian animal rights group in the summer of 2008. I scrutinize the contrasting ethical claims of the poultry industry and the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FVM), on the one hand, and the animal rights organization Four Paws (FP), on the other. As I will show, transnational social relations play contradictory roles in postsocialist moral restructuring: while there is a transfer of Western European ethical attitudes through corporate social responsibility and the adoption of strict animal rights standards, this process deprives some Hungarian actors not merely of the right to hold distinct moral convictions, but also of the liberal subject’s assumed capacity to act ethically.

Hungarian Foie Gras

While one would normally identify France as the natural home of foie gras, fatted goose liver has also been an important part of Hungarian rituals—especially around November 11th, the day of Szent Márton (Saint Marton)—and has been part of Hungarian cuisine for centuries. Currently Hungary is the second largest producer of duck and goose liver (2,000 tons annually) in the world after France, which produces an annual 16,000 tons. The remaining 2,000 tons (of the global total of 20,000) are produced by Spain and Bulgaria, among others, and China has considerably

increased its output as well. China's foie gras production is slated to grow the fastest, from 100 tons in 2005 to a projected 1,000 tons/yr in a few years.

Foie gras gains its unique and highly coveted taste from the force-feeding of geese (the French term for this is *gavage*) which enlarges, and thus intensifies the flavour of, their livers. Geese as migrating birds naturally increase their food uptake in early fall to prepare for their long flights to warmer climates. It is this ability and propensity of geese (and ducks) that humans have used for five thousand years to produce the delicacy foie gras. Traditionally, Hungarian peasants have fed geese and ducks manually, by shoving a handful of corn meal in the beaks of geese and then squeezing the lump of feed down the oesophagus of the birds. I myself witnessed such a practice in a Transylvanian village as a child.²

Today geese fattened for industrial processing are all fed not manually but mechanically, involving the insertion of a flexible rubber tube for two to three seconds twice a day for a period of two weeks. The tubes are attached to a machine that loads measured batches of feed. Veterinarians I interviewed argue that this is a safer and less uncomfortable method than manual feeding, which occasionally leads to the feed getting into the breathing passages of the birds. Goose hatchlings are bred industrially, then at four weeks of age are bought by farmers who raise them on open range until they reach nine weeks.³ The farms I have visited typically host up to 200-250 birds at any given time. Farmers specializing in fattening take them over from nine weeks of age until their slaughter at 12 weeks, again in industrial processing plants. The slaughtering process meets strict EU regulations for hygiene and the humane treatment of animals: birds are stunned unconscious before their deaths. In some plants, the environment is suffused with blue light to relax the birds even while they are still conscious. The entire process is coordinated by so-called integrators: people experienced in geese raising themselves are in charge of distributing the eggs or birds, administering contracts with the slaughterhouses, but also engaged in assisting farmers with new regulations, getting information out about feed, prices, etc.

In the last two decades, animal rights activists all over the world have criticized *gavage* as inhumane treatment of animals, leading to a ban on foie gras production in fourteen European countries and Israel.⁴ They argue that force-feeding causes pain, gagging and injuries to the birds' oesophaguses and that the enlarged liver is a symptom of disease that causes suffering and untimely death.⁵ The activists also criticize the practice of discarding newborn male ducklings, which cannot be used for fattening. In 1998 the European Union's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Welfare concluded that "force feeding, as currently practiced, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds," and should be phased out (SCAHAW 1998). France, however, as the greatest producer of foie gras, managed to convince its consumers that no torture is involved and even passed legislation in 2006 claiming foie gras as part of the French cultural heritage, which thus deserves protection. Going even further, in February 2008, President Sarkozy said that France would apply to add foie gras to the United Nations's World Heritage List.⁶ Israel decided in 2003 to cease production,

partly because of animal rights concerns, and partly because of concerns about Kosher principles. As Caro (2009) argues in his recent book, former Israeli producers have left for Hungary, which is the biggest exporter of foie gras (the French consume all of their own goose and duck liver and in fact import from Hungary).

The Campaign

In the summer of 2008 Hungarian producers came under fire from an Austrian animal rights group, Vier Pfoten (Four Paws). FP drew up a blacklist of Hungarian meat processors producing fattened poultry products and started a media campaign, especially in West Germany and Austria, where most Hungarian poultry is exported. FP claimed that all the meat—not just the livers—of these birds was low-quality since it came from sickened and tortured animals. As a result, several supermarket chains removed not only Hungarian foie gras but all Hungarian poultry products from their shelves. According to industry representatives the damage has been tremendous, an estimated 4-4.5 billion Forints (about 19 million USD) of lost income resulting from the reduced exports.

In August 2008, a representative of FP sat down to negotiate with the FVM and representatives of the Hungarian poultry industry. The meeting was productive, insofar as it came up with a solution in which the producers and the FVM agreed a) to labelling of fattened poultry products indicating that they result from force-feeding, while asserting that the fattening process is in compliance with Hungarian laws; b) to elaborating and legislating a code on the proper feeding techniques; c) to monitoring of animal welfare in the presence of representatives of animal rights civic organizations; and d) to contributing to a research and development program for changing the fattening technology. In return they requested a) that FP suspend its blacklist for a period to be agreed upon; b) that future blacklists designate products rather than companies; c) that FP cooperate in designing regulation; d) that FP support the research and development program and technological change financially and with expertise; and e) that FP use its influence to contribute to the positive image of firms that have adopted these new technologies. In addition, Hungerit, the biggest foie gras producer in the country, ceased its foie gras production for the duration of these negotiations (September 2008 to January 2009), as a show of good faith.

Despite this agreement, FP never eliminated the blacklist, and instead of implementing the agreement, it asked for (and received) the resignation of the employee who had represented it in the negotiations, a move which almost derailed the communication between poultry interests and FP. FP argued that labelling that marks fattening as in accordance with Hungarian laws misleads consumers because, according to the group, Hungarian food laws prohibit the force-feeding of animals in general but allow it for the manufacturing of fattened poultry products. FVM nevertheless went through with legislating its labelling law, which is now in force.

Preparing for the next round of negotiations, FVM argued that it is contradictory to the interests of Hungary to agree to a unilateral ban, and if such a ban were to happen it would have to be enforced at the EU level, thus applying to all foie gras-producing countries. Even then, a memo warned, the outcome may actually be contradictory to the interests and principles of animal rights activists. China has already invested in the development of force-feeding farms, and in contrast to Hungary, it has no animal welfare laws (Kasza 2008).⁸ It is not the production of foie gras, FVM argued, but rather its trade that needs to be regulated in order to make sure prospective laws are not simply aiming at eliminating Hungarian competition in the European poultry market.

Indeed, as most experts and government representatives argued, it is rather curious that FP does not target France, the biggest producer and consumer of foie gras, but picks a country where farmers have been rather weak in the political process. The main Hungarian competitor of Hungerit is Hunent, which is a supplier of the German Wiesenhof, the world's largest processor of waterfowl. The fact that Pannon Lúd, a foie gras-producing subsidiary of Hunent, was missing from the first version of the blacklist gave rise to suspicions that FP was acting on behalf of this competitor and perhaps even funded by it. FP representatives never explicitly denied this. Indeed, Wiesenhof had attempted to buy Hungerit a few months before FP's blacklist was published. Hungerit is not only a major foie gras producer in Hungary but is also said to own the country's most high-tech poultry processing plant. Wiesenhof is part of a group which is not only the largest poultry processor in Germany but also operates that country's largest supermarket chain, but it has a much smaller share of fattened poultry production in Hungary. If Wiesenhof could cripple a key product line of Hungerit, it would exert significant control over the entire Hungarian poultry market. Hungerit and the Hungarian Poultry Product Committee suspect this unsuccessful buyout attempt to have been behind FP's campaign.

Establishing the Moral Legitimacy of the Anti-Foie Gras Campaign

Political science literature has defined two tests to determine an NGO's legitimacy: a substantive and a procedural test. The former measures how closely the NGO's principles are shared by the community or culture in which it operates, while the latter asks whether it operates in a way that fulfills its substantive principles (Vedder et al. 2007). I find especially the substantive test problematic because it carries a conservative bias, inevitably rendering progressive, for example, anti-racist or pro-gay rights, movements morally illegitimate in certain parts of the world. However this test can be a useful analytical tool when the goal is to understand the rationale that informs an organization's political rhetoric. NGOs always have to take into account how the values they reference in a campaign will be seen by society as

a whole as well as by their peers. That is, it is useful to think of substantive and procedural testing as something NGOs subject themselves to in their considerations about campaign rhetoric. I will demonstrate how the expected low scoring on especially the substantive tests forced FP to Hungarianize its moral discourse and with what effect.

A key aspect of the substantive test in this case is how Hungarians view *gavage*. A new survey research (Élelmiszeripari Gazdaságtan Tanszék 2009) finds that most people do not think force-feeding causes pain and they don't think animals' well-being is more important than the livelihood of people working in the poultry sector or the preservation of Hungarian cultural heritage.⁹ Most respondents (close to half) also said that in the event of an EU ban on foie gras production Hungary should not give in, since this is "a Hungarian internal affair."

Another aspect of the substantive criterion of legitimacy is whether FP's campaign is actually consistent with its goals to help animals. In this regard it is often pointed out that geese used for foie gras production have a much better quality of life than, for example, broiler chickens (Caro 2009). Geese spend most of their lives (from birth to *gavage*) unconstrained in huge barns and open-air ranges, unlike chickens who never see the light of day and spend their short lives (about 35 days) in crowded cages. Goose feed also tends to be more natural, and the death rate in goose raising is much lower (1-2%) than the usual 5-10% in other branches of animal husbandry. Furthermore, the chicken and pork industries affect many times more animals than the foie gras industry. Clearly, say the geese farmers, if FP were concerned with animal welfare it would target these other sectors.

What is more, as indicated above, there would be an unintended consequence to a Europe-wide ban on foie gras production, one that clearly runs against the principles of the animal rights organizations. Namely, without a ban on the sale of fattened geese and duck liver, China would fill the sudden vacuum in foie gras supply, and, unlike Hungary or France, China has no animal protection laws. The effects of existing bans are already felt in China: "Because they're opposing foie gras, their countries stop producing it. But the citizens of their countries still want to eat foie gras, so it can only mean my prospects are improving," a geese farmer is quoted as saying by National Public Radio. The report then sums up the prospects: "And with labor, feed and production costing just a fraction of what they would overseas, he believes China is set to be the world's top foie gras producer in five years" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11032178>, last accessed 9 April 2009). According to this argument it is better to keep foie gras production, or any livestock-based industry, in Europe where animals enjoy an ever-increasing set of legal protections. In sum, using the analytics of the test of substantive legitimacy, FP could not expect its Hungarian campaign to be legitimate.

Another test has to do less with substance and more with procedure, asking whether the NGO in question operates in a way that fulfills its substantive principles.

In Hungarian debates on the foie gras blacklist, I found that even people who otherwise would be sympathetic to the substantive argument about force-feeding's being inhumane found the actual steps and *modus operandi* of FP objectionable. Some people and organizations have criticized FP for a) blacklisting firms (and all of their products), rather than just fattened poultry commodities; b) targeting producers only in Hungary, i.e., a country whose farmer lobby has been very weak; c) taking liberties in "documenting" (see below) and then reporting animal abuse on geese farms to the media; d) its conduct in negotiations with the Ministry and poultry sector representatives, especially its previously mentioned withdrawal from the initial agreement; and e) a lack of transparency in information and funding.

FP argues that it does target French foie gras producers as well, though my search of English-language sources, including reports put out by the organization itself, have revealed no active campaign at the time of writing.¹⁰ A farmers' movement such as the one represented by Jose Bové would have been too formidable an enemy and would have alienated a potential ally in campaigns against industrial animal husbandry. France also presents a harder nut to crack for FP because foie gras is much more integrated into daily diets than anywhere else in the world. The only possible indication of FP's having tried France is that its video documenting the cruelty of force-feeding shows ducks being fed with metal tubes. According to the head of the Hungarian veterinarians' alliance, in Hungary farmers use only rubber tubes, and ducks represent only a small proportion of Hungarian foie gras production. That also means that the video documenting the discarding of male ducklings is unlikely to have been taken in Hungary because both sexes of the goose species raised on Hungarian farms can be used for fattening.

Several TV programs have pointed out these inconsistencies in FP's documentary evidence and criticized the group for not appearing on programs after having promised it would.¹¹ Furthermore, when its videos showed obvious animal abuse it refused to disclose where they were recorded, as, for example, in its more recent campaign against feather plucking. Another animal rights organization, the Hungarian Fehérkereszt (White Cross), also charged that if FP does not disclose where such practices took place it itself aids and abets animal torture and thus is guilty itself.¹²

Therefore, FP's campaign fails to satisfy either the substantive or the procedural criteria of legitimacy. While FP may not be thinking in terms of these exact analytical criteria, we are now in a much better position to understand why it has had to frame its actions in terms of other, and this time, more widely accepted moral arguments. One argument is about foie gras' being a luxury product. FP expects that when one weighs *gavage* against the luxury and gourmet tastes of a narrow rich consumer elite, one is likely to come out against force-feeding. As we will see, Hungarian public opinion tends to connect foie gras production not with elite consumption but with Hungarian traditions. The argument about sinful consumption may however work for individuals already critical of the *nouveau riche*, consumerism, and social inequalities in general.

The second argument is about for-profit animal husbandry. In a similar way to the first moral claim, FP balances animal torture against profits made by foie gras producers. While goose liver is an expensive product and while processors tend to realize a higher profit rate on it than on other poultry products, raising geese is also a much more labor-intensive process than, for example, industrial chicken production. Goose feed is more expensive than factory feed for broiler chickens, and the feeding itself has to be very precise, both in terms of portions and in terms of timing. When geese are fattened they become very fragile and require extreme care in feeding and handling. These extra expenses lead to high prices. At the same time, however, public opinion weighs not the image of profits and dollar signs but that of struggling farmers against the image of geese being force-fed, so this is an unlikely moral claim to win.

The third frame is ideological in content but gains its power from the moral condemnation of the communist past. Markus Miller, director of FP's international campaign against foie gras production, makes the following claim: "The [Hungarian poultry] industry is divided into those who are oriented towards the future and those who are lost in the dark past of communism." But as the previous moral claims about luxury consumption and profit motives suggest, FP also distances itself from capitalism, at least from French and Israeli capital: "Hungarian poultry producers are enslaved by French and Israeli investors, who mislead Hungarian producers and force employees to work for minimum wage so they can increase their profits and abandon them in a destroyed environment and leave them with the shameful fame of animal torture" (FP press release 2008). While this may read like a sympathetic embrace of the workers and farmers, it elides the opinion of many Hungarians that in the present it is a single animal rights organization, FP, that is bent on destroying this "environment" and on stigmatizing Hungarian agriculture. This leaves FP's empathy for the poor without credibility in the eyes of the Hungarian public.

FP's simultaneous identification of pro-foie gras interests with both Israel and communism angers people sensitive to anti-Semitism (evoking the right-wing conviction that communism in Hungary was a Jewish conspiracy). While I heard from several informants the charge that FP reminds them of Nazis—German Nazis had their dances with vegetarianism and with organic agriculture—I suspect a more pragmatic motivation behind FP's allegedly anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the media FP has repeatedly been represented as anti-Hungarian and/or representing the interests of a firm affiliated with a powerful German chain, so FP must have felt compelled to take the wind out of the sails of that argument. Its mentioned failure on the substantive test of NGO legitimacy created a further incentive for FP to appear more pro-Hungarian. While, for example, in a TV interview that aired in Germany FP advised Western consumers to buy German or Polish free-range poultry instead of Hungarian foie gras, in addressing Hungarian audiences, it talked about Hungary's restoring its "fame as the EU's most professional and most successful agricultural member state." FP accesses a familiar patriotic rhetoric when it references

Hungarian farmers, *Hungarian* workers, and *Hungarian* consumers all cheated by the poultry industry.

Ethical or Hungarian?

Hungarianness indeed has become a key trope in the debate. The pro-foie gras side utilizes a different moral frame, which accomplishes two tasks: it provides a positive redefinition of Hungarian foie gras production and discredits FP. The Ministry's and the poultry industry's response has been a rather savvy PR campaign. They have received the help of the Hungarian Chamber of Veterinarians, which tested the effects of force-feeding on geese's physiology and behaviour (2008) and argued that, if done professionally, force-feeding causes neither pain, nor fear, nor irreversible pathological changes in geese.¹³ The PR firm in charge of the campaign also has established a webpage (hungarikum.org) that gives out information about the history and practices of foie gras production and forcefully makes the argument that

[i]n Hungary *gavage* is a several hundred year-long tradition already mentioned in written records from the twelfth century. Fattened goose is a unique Hungarian meal; goose breeding and raising and the distinctive expertise on which these are based has been elaborated over centuries. . . . This kind of expertise and uniqueness is also recognized and regulated by the European Union. (<http://www.hungarikum.org/a-hizottliba-mint-hungarikum.html>, last accessed 22 June 2009)

Hungary has taken its cues in this campaign from France, which, as mentioned, designated foie gras as part of its national cultural heritage and drew up two protections for it: EU designation as "traditional specialty guaranteed" (such as Bordeaux wine) and *label rouge* (for free-range products), which accrues to some foie gras labels. Indeed, in Hungary's case as well, it is the culturalization or ethnicization of foie gras that has proved to be the most influential argument against radical animal rights activists. The foie gras of Orosháza was already designated as a *Hungaricum*, that is, a unique product (typically food or drink), whose special quality, fame or know-how ties it to Hungary.¹⁴ The pro-foie gras campaign also put out videos on the subject peppered with national symbols and folk music (<http://video.google.com/videosearch?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&q=foie%20gras%20hungary&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=vw#>).

In 2009 the foie gras product of Hungerit received the "Excellent Hungarian Product" award. Recipients of this award are entitled not only to the use of the logo of this award in their advertisements and packaging but also to financial and marketing assistance for the award-winning product. The marketing agency operated by the agricultural ministry allocated additional funds for a PR and advertising campaign targeting German and Austrian markets in 2009. They also released a video showing how fattening is actually done (<http://video.google.com/videosearch?hl=en&client=fire>

fox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&q=foie%20gras%20hungary&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=vw#).

The positive redefinition of foie gras therefore consists of the following arguments:

- a) force-feeding is not animal torture but an animal husbandry technique;
- b) this technique has deep roots in Hungarian folklore and culinary traditions;
- c) foie gras is a high-quality agricultural export product that contributes positively to the image of Hungary abroad;
- d) foie gras production keeps the already much-emaciated Hungarian food industry afloat (it is one of a handful of food products in which Hungary has managed to increase its share of the world trade since the collapse of state socialism and EU accession); and
- e) goose fattening is a regulated and monitored activity; its regulation is based on veterinarian expertise and is in compliance with current EU regulations.

The argument has also been made that the Hungarian practice is superior to the French because in France metal pipes are used for force-feeding, in contrast to the more flexible rubber tubes in use in Hungary, based on a Hungarian innovation (Glass 2007). Furthermore, the French mostly use Mulard ducks for foie gras, and only the females of this species can be fattened, so the male hatchlings are killed at birth, while with goose species used in Hungary, both sexes can be utilized (Papp 2008; Bogenfürst 2002).

In addition to the positive moral valuation of Hungarian foie gras, the Ministry and the poultry industry have also presented FP as a corrupt entity. Besides the above-mentioned critiques of the FP campaign, they argue that FP lacks an existential moral ground to make its claims credible. As the head of the Poultry Product Council put it:

Their average age is less than 27 years, they have no work experience, no life experience, they never had to pay their own utility bills, they never had to buy school milk for their kids or a bus pass for their kids. At the same time it seems to me they consider this a big party [*jó buli*]. (<http://www.mtv.hu/videotar/?id=29494>, last accessed 4 April 2009)

And one employee of Hungerit threatened with unemployment due to the cessation of foie gras production in his factory asked: "Is it not human torture that we will be kicked out onto the street?" (http://users.atw.hu/magyarliba/01/dark_shine/azelsoaldozatok.html, last accessed 4 April 2009).

The enemy image of a young and well-to-do urban professional kept resurfacing in the pro-foie gras rhetoric. "Let's defend our Hungarianness and everything that belongs to it. Or shall we allow a handful of ignoramuses *sitting in their leather armchairs* to soil our values and destroy the lives of thousands, while taking no responsibility?!" (http://magyarliba.atw.hu/01/dark_shine/home.html, emphasis mine). In the visual representation of this male character—in a slideshow on the hungarikum.org webpage—we see the added feature of violent anger,

which represents an especially stark contrast with the pastoral pictures of geese in meadows and of elderly farmers with anxious faces gently cuddling goose eggs and hatchlings.

It was also important for the pro-foie gras actors to demonstrate that they love animals and that torturing them is inconsistent with their values. The employees of Hungerit protesting at FP's Budapest office in September 2008 ceremonially handed over a dog to the representative of the animal rights organization to symbolize that, due to lost income caused by the blacklist, Hungerit will no longer be able to support dog shelters.

Conclusion: Struggles for Moral Sovereignty

From the scholarship on postsocialist morality I referred to in my introduction it might appear that the concept of common good, however we may define it, is indeed an oxymoron: the increasing distrust and individualism of Hungarians seem to suggest a certain zero-sum game conviction, namely, that an individual can win only if the other or the community loses. In the foie gras case, however, we see something different. First, this is not an example of rejecting the collective but rather an example of conflicting concepts of who constitutes the collective. Second, the notion of the individual is also up for grabs.

For the pro-foie gras camp, there are two candidates for this collective. On the one hand it appears to be the Hungarian agrarium: the countryside, the farmers, and the workers who depend on foie gras for their livelihood. Following Verdery (1996), who argues that the moral and political capital earned by victims of communism becomes a key resource in postcommunist legislative and political struggles, I would argue that a similarly powerful victimhood narrative has been forged since 1989. This time victimhood develops in relation to powerful foreign actors, such as the EU, the World Bank, NATO, the WTO and the IMF, for all of which the lay term is simply "the West." It is this seemingly omnipotent agent that, in the minds of most Hungarian farmers, has pulled the rug out from under Hungarian agriculture, first by opening up domestic markets to Western food products, then by denying or reducing farmer subsidies allotted by the Common Agricultural Policy that had been dangled as a carrot in front of the otherwise Euro-skeptical rural voters, and finally by using quality, safety and animal rights standards to block Hungarian access to Western food markets. It is not just that most Hungarians consider animal rights a luxury at a time when unemployment and poverty are increasing (especially now during the global economic crisis), and when small farms are rapidly disappearing. More importantly, the accusation of animal torture places farmers in the position of perpetrators and thus damages, if not destroys, the moral shelter of victimhood. When it is a Western animal rights organization that engages in stigmatizing a traditional Hungarian agricultural practice—and its Hungarian counterpart, White Cross, disagrees—there is a profound sense of infringement on the nation's moral sovereignty.

This is why the other candidate for the collective becomes more salient in the rhetoric: the nation. The debate between Hungarian liberals and nationalists about who the victim is or what needs protection—society or the nation—is not an esoteric polemic. It is not just that nation is a more tangible or a more “experience-near” category than that of society but that, as Katherine Verdery (1996) argues, the isomorphism between individual and collective biographies, especially narratives of victimization, renders rhetorical frameworks and ideologies operating with concepts of national identity, ethnic pride, and national sovereignty more resonant with the public. Here one’s loyalty is not towards the state, or state-like actors such as the EU, or their laws and regulations, but to one’s nation.

Indeed, the concept of moral sovereignty evoked by the new Polish government in 2006 in demanding a greater role for Catholicism in EU politics rested on the nation. The official Polish position forcefully pushed for the recognition of European culture’s Christian origins, fearing that without such recognition the government’s ethical stance on various issues, including abortion, would lose its legitimacy in the eyes of an overall more secular and liberal Europe. In that instance moral sovereignty accrued to the nation as a whole, and its invocation expressed an objection to longstanding tendencies to orientalize Eastern Europe.

The question of moral sovereignty in the foie gras case, however, is not simply an issue of whether FP’s ethical values are consistent with Hungarian ones; that is, the experience of infringement of Hungarians’ moral sovereignty does not simply imply that national sovereignty was violated in a moral sense. Moral sovereignty here, rather, accrues to a class of people who presently are still seen as the producers and guards of Hungarian identity and cultural tradition: the farmers.¹⁵ We will understand this better if we inspect the collective in FP’s notion of the common good. FP here is closer to the liberal notion of public, insofar as it references European social norms and the regulation, i.e., the banning, of foie gras production in many European countries. It is however not alone in this framing. People in a middle position, critiquing FP’s particular *modus operandi* but also attracted to a less industrial, more alternative vision of food production, argue that the foie gras industry knew this was coming and should have behaved more proactively to decrease its vulnerability both to animal rights charges and to a possible ban on foie gras production by the EU. They argue that Hungarian meat processors should have decreased their reliance on a handful of Western buyers and diversified their products and their clientele and that they should have looked into changing technology for raising geese earlier. This framing, defining the industry and the farmers not as victims but as capable economic actors, echoes ideas of neoliberal governmentality and its demand for and production of a self-governing, rational actor fully responsible for his/her actions.

The obstacle to goose farmers’ assuming this subject position, however, is double. First, as soon as they present themselves as rationally acting in their self-interest, they confirm FP’s arguments about selfish profit motivation in animal cruelty. Second, the concept of the neoliberal subject presupposes a certain degree of control, choice, and ability to exercise citizenship rights. But at a time when EU policies “strongly

encourage” farmers to leave agriculture, when farmers have no control over whom to sell their products to and at what price, when they are less and less capable of holding onto their land due to land prices ratcheted up by the impending end of the ban on foreign land ownership, when they are forced to implement safety and quality standards originally designed for industrial animal husbandry and food processing (Mincyte 2009, 2010; Dunn 2005), it is highly questionable whether they will be able to leave the only subject position they have available to themselves—that of *Hungarian* victims.

In light of this case, I question whether in postsocialist societies the adoption of Western ethical practices or related EU regulation will indeed lead to self-governing rational subjectivities described in the literature on neoliberal governmentality (Rose 1996; Clarke 2004; Brown 2003). Nancy Fraser’s (2003) concept of segmented governmentality might be a better diagnosis. This identifies a dual society in which a “hypercompetitive, fully networked zone” of self-regulating, “responsibilized” individuals coexists with—and, I would add, depends on—“a marginal sector of excluded-low-achievers” (p. 169). This in turn confirms fears about the development of a second-class EU citizenry in “new Europe.”

Notes

1. Adam Michnik argued that Poles voted for the economic reforms assuming they were voting for socialism without communists, i.e., a non-totalitarian distributionist state (quoted in Vásárhelyi 2005). Hungarian sociologist Mária Vásárhelyi borrowed this formula for Hungarians based on her survey data.

2. A video of such manual feeding can be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videosearch?q=manual%20force%20feeding%20of%20geese&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&hl=en&tab=vw#>.

3. Most of these hatchlings are now of a French species, rather than traditional Hungarian ones.

4. It is important to point out that among these countries, only Israel had significant foie gras production. Pro-foie gras individuals pointed out the analogy to me: “Hungary [that is, a landlocked country] is also a very active pursuer of sustainable and animal-friendly marine fishery standards,” implying that it is easy to claim high ethical standards when one has to make no economic sacrifices to observe those standards him- or herself.

5. The video used in the campaign can be viewed on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7su4qPZKL8>. The protest letter can be signed at <https://www.secureconnect.at/4pfoten/org/protest/0801/index.php>.

6. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List was drawn up in 1972 to protect historical and natural sites, and it traditionally applies only to places or geographical areas and not to cultural artifacts and traditions such as cuisine (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1579826/France-seeks-protection-for-trademark-dishes.html>, last accessed 15 April 2009).

7. China is only now considering its first animal protection law, primarily focusing on the culling of dogs (Ng Tze-wei 2009)

8. This is corroborated by two previous non-representative surveys, one conducted by a popular TV talk show (*Szempont*), the other an ongoing online survey maintained by Hungerit. In the former, the vast majority of people following the show and chatting online argued that people’s livelihood is more important than whether geese feel pain when force-fed, and in the latter as well the vast majority of a very small and unrepresentative sample of people considered FP’s actions as motivated by anti-Hungarian intent. The actual and rather biased wording of the web survey reported 34 votes for the response “Yes, I am outraged

by the damage, the ignorance, the irresponsibility, and the destruction of Hungarian traditions.” The argument “I agree with protecting animals but this is not it” received 8 votes. Only two votes said this strategy was not anti-Hungarian (http://webszavazo.com/includes/poll/vote.php?poll_num=4315, accessed 14 April 2009).

9. In its 2006 report, FP mentions the following countries as targeted in its anti-force-feeding campaign: Hungary, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands (<http://www.vierpfoten.eu/website/output.php?id=1245&language=1>, last accessed 15 April 2009).

10. The group’s representative also did not keep his promise to me for an interview.

11. According to Caro (2009), the *modus operandi* for anti-foie gras activists in North America has been to visit and make video footage of breeding and processing facilities undercover, which could explain FP’s reticence to disclose locations.

12. According to the FVM and the head of the Hungarian Chamber of Veterinarians, the latter did this study on its own initiative and at its own expense.

13. Only a few *Hungaricums* enjoy EU-level legal protection, either as “traditional specialty guaranteed” or as originating in a specific geographical location, which renders its use of that geographical origin in its name or advertising exclusive.

14. This view of peasants and farmers, as the truest representatives of Hungarianness, is a recurring theme both in the Hungarian literary tradition—gaining special salience between the reform era (1820s) and the 1848-49 liberation struggles against the Hapsburg empire—and in the explicit political discourse of the interwar period as advocated by populist politicians (Esbenshade 2006). Ironically, the EU’s recognition of certain food commodities as repositories of local, regional, and occasionally national culture in its “protected designations of origin” (PDO), “protected geographical indications” (PGI), and “Traditional Specialty Guaranteed” (TSG) labels unintendedly reasserts the location of Hungarianness in the agrarium (Gille 2010).

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