

## **Voluntary organizations and nonformal adult education in Hungary: Professionalization and the discourse of deficiency.**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores issues of professionalization and the discourse of deficiency in Hungarian voluntary organizations and nonformal adult education. The argument is made that transformational adult education, e.g., Freire and Mezirow would be useful to dispel the myth of individual deficiencies.

### Introduction

Dramatic political and economic change invokes a social response inextricably bound to a society's political, economic, cultural, and social history. Foundations of cultural traditions, the source of a population's identity, are weakened as the state encroaches further into the private lives of its citizens seeking new dimensions to co-opt in order to control. As cultural currency is diminished and traditions atomized, the state must keep pace with new demands on its economic currency as this, above all else, becomes the most highly valued currency in the modern state. The failure of the state to meet these new expectations provokes a "legitimation crisis" (Habermas, 1975) often reflected in citizens' increased "efforts at participation and the plethora of alternative models-especially in cultural spheres" (p. 72).

Hungary provides a dramatic case in point. The demise of the authoritarian state-socialist regime after 40 oppressive years resulted in democratic elections in 1990. Voluntary organizations i.e. the types of alternative models eluded to by Habermas, exploded on to the Hungarian scene. From fewer than 8000 in 1989, Hungary today boasts between 30,000-40,000 registered voluntary organizations (Hegyasi, 1992; Kuti, 1993; Les, 1994; Research Project on Hungarian Nonprofit Organizations, 1991) .

Houben (1990) suggests that these organizations, while essential, are not a sufficient condition for participation in society. He argues that the key to meaningful participation lies in nonformal adult education organized within voluntary organizations. Hungarian adult educator Basel (1992, p. 68) supports this argument by specifically calling upon "nonformal education and voluntary associations [to provide] the various forms of adult education experience, learning, awareness raising and empowerment" necessary for active participation in society.

This paper will highlight two key issues which emerged from data collected to discover, from the Hungarian perspective, the role of and relationship between nonformal adult education and

voluntary organizations in the growth and elaboration of Hungarian civil society after 40 years of state socialism has been removed. They are: 1) the professionalization of voluntary organizations through nonprofit management training; and 2) the "discourse of deficiency" Hungarian adult educators and voluntary organization leaders used to describe program participants and the population at large.

Data for this research was collected in Hungary by conducting in-depth interviews with individuals from over 25 organizations. Extensive field notes and debriefing with interpreters provided insight into the cultural context. The organizations which participated in this study fall into three general categories: voluntary organizations, academic institutions, and government institutions.

### Civil Society

A visual representation of the social model with the most currency today is the triangle model constituted by civil society, the market, and the state. Civil society is often defined in two ways: 1) the types of organizations which comprise it e.g. voluntary associations, independent universities, publishing houses, trade unions " judicial systems, family, and community 2) attitudes and behaviors e.g. self-responsibility, trust, liberal thinking, tolerance,, and interest representation (Ignatieff, 1995; Tandon, 1991; Weiner, 1991). The concept of civil society has classical origins and figures prominently in the works of Locke, Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci. The nature of civil society varies by degree between countries dependent upon the cultural, economic, historical, political, and social traditions held by each.

### Voluntary Organizations and Weber's Theory of Social Organization

As this study focuses on voluntary organizations as part of civil society, Max Weber's theory of social organization provides a useful way to conceptualize how they function in society. "Associations" are a basic category of social organization of which the "rules restrict, or exclude, those outside of it" and whose leaders and executive staff enforce the rules and regulations (# 12, 11-2-4, 1978, p. 33). By virtue of an executive staff, voluntary associations are to some extent authoritarian (# 16.2, 11-1-2, 1978, p. 39). An association is "voluntary" when "the established set of regulations ... claim validity only for those who have entered into membership of the association through personal choice" (# 15,11-4-7, Weber, 1978, p. 37).

To illustrate the point, one can compare the extensive bureaucracy of any large national association e.g. the American Medical Association with the rather informal local garden club. However, both are voluntary associations and as such are subject to administrative constraints and an element of authoritarianism.

## Voluntary Organizations in a Hungarian Context

It is a mistake to assume that the characteristics of voluntary organizations are universally defined, they are not. For example, in Hungary foundations tend to be grant seeking, service providers rather than grantmaking organizations common in the West. However, similar to the West, the range of voluntary organization activities is almost limitless. Their overall purpose tends to be other than profit making and organization leadership frequently solicits contributions from private sources as well as seeks special consideration from the government in the form of favorable tax laws and subsidies. Voluntary organizations are often considered "bastions of democracy" and sites where citizens can learn democracy through participation.

## Professionalization

As early as 1991, George Soros<sup>1</sup> claimed of the many Hungarian organizations he financed that "we must abandon the spirit of volunteerism that characterized the foundations in their heyday and replace it by professionalism" (p. 142). He stands with many others who disregard experiential and prior knowledge in the quest for professionalism. Thematically, professionalism ranked high among the organizations which participated in this study is pervasively addressed in the Hungarian literature (Autonomia Alapítvány, 1993; Biernaczky, 1993; Biernaczky and Rabi, 1992; Civil Society Development Program, 1995; Csako et. al., 1995; Hungarian Folk High School Society, 1995; Mero, 1995/ 6; Nonprofit Information and Training Center Foundation, 1996; Siegel and Yancey, 1992; Utzschneider, 1996).

Professionalization of a certain field rests upon two major characteristics: 1) the identification of a specialized body of knowledge; and 2) the training of practitioners (Cervero, 1988; Courtenay, 1990; Illich, 1978; Van Til, 1988; Wilson, 1993). The introduction of a distinct body of knowledge into the university environment further signals that a particular area of practice is actively seeking legitimation and "professional" status.

The data revealed a significant trend towards professionalization in Hungarian voluntary organizations in the form of language, the emergence of nonprofit management training organizations<sup>2</sup>, and the introduction of such in academic institutions. An obvious example of a "specialized body of knowledge" is the appearance of a code or unique discourse only accessible to an elite group. For example, interview participants facily used Western jargon and acronyms such as "NGOS" (nongovernment organizations), "QUANGOS" (quasi-nongovernment organizations), and "S.W.O.T." (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses<sup>3</sup>. For those not yet fluent in the language of voluntary organizations, i.e. most of the population in Hungary, the emergent language of the field will render the discourse inaccessible to most. Further, at the time of this research, three such academic programs were in the implementation stage.

## A Critique of Professionalization

Foucault argues that specialized organizations, especially academic institutions, invite certain controversial topics which gain public attention into the university setting "to honor it and disarm it." In this way, the bureaucrats not only control the discourse, they legitimize it, sanction it, and professionalize it.

Likewise, Ivan Illich (1978) and John McKnight (1978) sharply critique the professions and the notion of professionalization. The following excerpt is representative of the tone which Illich takes towards the concept of professionals:

"From merchant-craftsman or learned adviser, the professional has mutated into a crusading and commandeering philanthropist... [who] assert[s] secret knowledge...which only they have the right to dispense' (Illich, 1978, p. 19).

Professionals deem some information too sophisticated for laypersons who in turn must subordinate themselves to professionals in order to obtain certain knowledge.

McKnight (1978) delivers an equally harsh critique of professionals especially relevant to this study because he focuses on service providing organizations. He argues that all "professional" help assumes the might and right of the individual professional. The (mis)use of democratic language such as "group-oriented services ... and community-oriented services" fails to disguise the role of the deified professional (1978, p. 83).

What began in Hungary as the spontaneous association of a few people, "like in the fairy tales," is being subjected to professionalization as seen in the growth of Western-style nonprofit management training programs. Kulich admonishes that such programs may be the "new panacea, if not a new shibboleth" for the many challenges facing Hungarian voluntary organizations today (1995, p. 90). With the uncritical adoption of such programs, the particularly Hungarian experience is devalued and substituted with prescribed and decontextualized curriculums. Organizational lessons learned, such as "no more top down for civil organizations" are plowed under "official knowledge" and approved technique.

Issues surrounding professionalization also impact nonformal adult education and are addressed in the next section.

### Life After the Revolution. The Discourse of Deficiency

Hungarian adult educators overwhelmingly refer to their program participants or the public at large in negative terms i.e. as incomplete persons. By all accounts, Hungarians resemble the walking wounded plagued by deformed self-perceptions which impede their ability to navigate the complexities of daily life (Basel, 1993; Bibo, 1995; Fodor & Kovacs, 1991; Frentzel-Zagorska, 1992; Hanak 1992; Harangi, 1992; Reuters, 1996; Toth, 1991; Toma, 1988).<sup>4</sup> Captured in phrases such as "they lost their capacity" and "they don't know how to solve their own problems", the discourse of deficiency was most obvious in a pyramid shaped individual and community development model based on a series of individual and community deficiencies.

The assumption here is that deficiency needs development. Starting at the base and moving upwards, the pyramid was divided into the following categories: "lack of confidence, lack of personal connection, lack of cooperation, lack of knowledge and information, and lack of capital" (Koles, date unknown, p. 8).

From these examples, the focus is clearly on the individual. McKnight's (1978) argument concerning professionals (in this case adult educators), needs and deficiencies is well-taken. He argues that such a focus drives

"the practice of placing the perceived deficiency in the client. While most modernized professionals will agree that individual problems develop in a socio-economic-political context, their common remedial practice isolates the individual from the context" (1978, p. 79).

### Beyond the Deficiency Discourse

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) suggest that the deficiency discourse be turned on its head in favor of an approach which considers assets over deficiencies. People are accepted for who they are not what they lack. For example, if we are speaking of a young gypsy woman in Hungary who has never been to school that "she lacks knowledge" or we can turn it around to ask "Whose knowledge does she lack?" We might continue, "What social/ political/ economic/ structures are in place that impedes her access to the knowledge associated with power?"

These types of questions encourage individuals "to achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality." (Freire editor's notes, 1985, p. 87). Thinking this way favors a transformative adult education such as Freire's "theory of conscientization" and Mezirow's "perspective transformation." Especially useful in the Hungarian context is Freire's theory in consideration of sustaining the democratic consolidation achieved before, during and immediately after the revolution and to stave off bureaucracy (Freire, 1985, p. 85).

Mezirow's theory of "perspective transformation", although criticized for its psychological grounding, is also useful in that it acknowledges the capacity of adults to act upon, rather than be victimized by their environment (Clark, 1993; Collard and Law, 1989).

### Summary

For many of the participants who contributed to this research, now is a very exciting time in Hungary. They do extraordinary work in voluntary organizations, as adult educators, or in some other capacity. There is much to be done and many feel the opportunity to shape the world around them. This paper brings to light some of the issues surrounding the adoption of Western-style management philosophies into new voluntary organizations. It cautions against the pitfalls

of professionalization. Likewise, professionalization in adult education was also addressed. Hungarian adult educators are encouraged to look at those with whom they work in a new way by moving beyond the discourse of deficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> George Soros emigrated as a young Jewish refugee from Hungary to England in 1947; in 1956 he settled in the United States (Soros Foundations, 1994). Today, he is "a billionaire financier", "hedge fund king" and "modern Carnegie" who earned approximately US \$ 1.49 billion in 1993 (Greene, 1994; Jereski, 1993). From earnings on his investments, he "has given or pledged more than US \$ 1 billion to establish one of the largest networks of nonprofit institutions created by anyone since Carnegie" (Greene, 1994, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> In a North American context nonprofit management is defined by a prescribed set of skills and knowledge deemed necessary to successfully operate a voluntary organization, where "successfully operate" refers to increased efficiency and productivity and decreased cost. For example: finance; organizational and program development; fund development; marketing; public relations; and strategic planning (Drucker, 1990; EMs, 1993; Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management, 1995; Siegel and Yancey, 1992; Van Til, 1988; Wilbur, et. al., 1994).

<sup>3</sup> S.W.O.T. is a strategic planning tool included on the nonprofit management training agendas of two training organizations in Hungary.

<sup>4</sup> The suicide rate in Hungary is second to none in the world; levels of alcoholism and cardiac arrest lag not far behind.

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