



Visions of the future: technology and imagination in Hungarian civil society.

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The question of 'new' methods in the anthropology of science and technology is perhaps better phrased as the need to improve our understanding of experiences—as both participants and observers—of these fields of enquiry. This paper is based on ethnographic research on the role of computers in Hungarian civil society at the Hungarian Telecottage Association (HTA), a movement seeking to promote locally-oriented technological development with the aim of empowering and improving the lives of local people. The members of this movement are geographically dispersed, each representing a telecottage in their own village community. They are united organizationally through a mixture of face-to-face and internet-based interaction.

The particular ethnographic case examined in this paper deals with how the geographical spaces between the members of the HTA are constructed in part through the processes of imagining and conjuring up spaces and relationships between spaces. It focuses on a dispute about control of the organization's website, and examines the different relationships between the geographic dispersal of the movement and the ways it is imagined specifically through the technology. The idea of moral technology is introduced, showing how, what are often referred to in a simplistic and generalized way as the discourses of technology, can be concretely understood in the case of Hungarian civil society.

Studying the role of the imagination in this process highlights how differently imagined ideas about what technology can 'do', what it is 'for' and how it should be 'innovated' lead to structural changes within the HTA, with lasting effects. These ideas are not based on a unified belief in technology but rather on precisely the opposite. Thus, in this paper I argue that it is only through the changes in the organization's power structures that ensue from debates about differently imagined technological properties that these ideas are in the end made commensurate.

From 2002-2003, I spent fifteen months doing an ethnographic study while working as a volunteer in Hungary at the Budapest central office of a large NGO, the *Hungarian Telecottage Association* (HTA). A telecottage is a community technology centre² that is

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² Community technology centres have played an increasingly important role in development projects, particularly in rural areas. They usually provide access to technology such as computers and the internet, but often (and in this case this is very much true) they also provide equipment such as photocopiers, scanners, printers, cameras and video cameras, fax machines and so on. Although academic research on this

owned and operated by local community organizations in rural areas. The first of these was set up in 1994 in a small village in central Hungary, in response to a widely perceived need to solve problems of digital inequality between Hungary and the European Union. The final run-up to accession gave a political flavour to the work of those at the HTA, despite the fact that it was, almost everywhere, presented as being part of a de-politicized civil society concerned with a wide variety of social issues regarding community, nation and Hungary's 'rightful place' in Europe. There was a great deal of discussion in civil society regarding these issues, which was imbued with implicit understandings about aspects of modernity and of both the capitalist present and the socialist past. The pace and dynamism of the social changes taking place gave a huge sense of creativity to the work being done.

In the years following the founding of the first telecottage in 1994, their number grew rapidly. The HTA, a nationwide association, was formed in 1995. It now boasts over five hundred members spread equably across the country. Members are usually found in small rural communities of less than five thousand inhabitants, of which there are a great number in Hungary, although a few members can also be found in larger towns and cities. It is the proud claim of the HTA that they are working to preserve a kind of rural community that is very prevalent in Hungary, and trying to give them 'back' a life and vitality that is often represented by organizations such as the HTA as having been lost during the socialist period, and preparing them for the 'new' society which is currently being built. The ideological basis of the telecottage movement proposes that despite being linked into a national network by their membership of the association, these local centres are able to operate fairly and democratically, and there is no central authority. Thus the strong degree of local embeddedness of each centre in its community ensures that the interests, needs and wishes of the local community are always at the top of the agenda. Rather than deciding centrally what is needed, the HTA sees its role as an enabler, trying to give people the kinds of equipment and the training necessary to make use of this equipment, as well as the networking abilities to develop themselves and their own communities as they see fit. Friends and colleagues at the HTA told me that computers and their use are not even the movement's real goal, however technically oriented it might otherwise seem. In fact, the HTA's official policy dictates that access to these tools and the network, is only the beginning of an empowering and, in every case, locally oriented civil mission for self-betterment and the equalization of opportunity.

In this paper I will explore how the HTA was imagined through a complex series of assumptions regarding socio-technical activity and the structural forms of civil society made up of civil organizations. I suggest that a domain of political action, a space in which it is possible to articulate certain specific political goals relating to democracy and the transition to EU membership is created by this process of imagining. Despite the fact that technology is viewed as a tool with which to achieve social goals, I shall use ethnography to introduce the moral and social aspects through which Hungary is imagined as a certain kind of space by those at the HTA, and how this relies heavily on the simultaneous and inextricable mixing of both social and technological activities and

issue is quite sparse, for an analysis of some of the issues involved see Liff and Stewart (2001 and 2003). For some case studies see also Clark (2003) and Pinkett and O' Bryant (2003).

imaginings. In order to understand properly what is happening at the HTA, therefore, the ethnographic challenge is to ensure that research is particularly sensitive to this mixing of what might be termed as the ‘real’ activities of my colleagues, and also the way they imagined what they were doing.

Over-reaction

One crucial element of the HTA is its website. The website is the main way that announcements regarding funding opportunities and relevant world or domestic news are made to the individual telecottages and other civil society organizations by the central office. It is the main channel through which the leadership can efficiently communicate within the entire HTA. It is also the main source of internal, HTA-related news and information exchange between the individual telecottages. The website forum provides a crucial space in which key issues are debated. Thus, this website was a very significant source of information in my research. During my ethnographic work in the central office, I followed the debates regarding the HTA’s strategy and its long-term goals on the forums, observed what kind of news was deemed important for collection and distribution, and followed participation, or lack of it, in the on-line votes, which were constantly run on a variety of different issues. I also read the leadership’s CVs, traced news and interest stories back through the archives to see how they developed, and explored the links to other sites and domains.

Ethnographically speaking, I viewed the website as an important source of information for my research. However, as the following story will show, I initially greatly underestimated its importance to those with whom I was working. They saw the internet as a technology—the network and its communicative possibilities—as an important means to a specific social end; the ‘proper’ development of democratic political forms in the country. The significance of this will, I hope, become clear.

Shortly before the end of my fieldwork a dramatic accusation was made that one of the HTA’s leaders was greatly abusing his access to and control of the content on the website. Ostensibly, it was entirely normal for a member of the leadership to place things on the website, to remove older information, to edit content as necessary, or to instigate debate across the association over a given issue. However, in this particular case several members of the HTA’s leadership were enraged. They felt that this person, G, was abusing his power to control website content by presenting his own personal activities and interests as if they were those of the organization. He had met with a government minister, and on the website gave news that the association had agreed to take part in a particular project, about which other members of the leadership knew nothing. As they saw things, he was gaining leverage in his own private negotiations with government officials by presenting his interests through the HTA’s website as if they were those of the whole organization. Thus, I was told, that he was threatening the future ability of the HTA to act effectively as a social force by impinging on its ability to act as an effective lobbying force. Initially, it seemed to me that the extreme importance of the website to the organization was highlighted by the strength of the reaction to these apparent transgressions. I surmised that the other leaders were so upset because of the moral nature of the HTA as a *civil* organization, which was constituted as existing for the *social* good

of all, and could not therefore represent anyone's individual interests. Thus they were concerned that this apparent use of the website by someone who was supposed to be pursuing private interests would put the HTA's public reputation at stake and affect its ability to act in the future.

However, what happened next made me realize that there was a lot more going on than I had first thought. A week or so later, G himself became extremely angry, telling me that his name had been removed from all the posts he had made on the website over the past two and a half years. Those members of the leadership with whom he was in dispute, had also taken away his and everybody else's power to make further posts. As I have said, up until this point it had been part of the role of the leadership to maintain the website's content, but this had now been arbitrarily changed without any consultation or agreement on the part of the executive committee. Days later, after long debates, a message appeared on the website apologizing for the fact that, due to a technical mistake, the author's name had disappeared from a 'good number' of articles. This series of events was unprecedented in the history of the organization, and I was fascinated that the website was being employed in this struggle for power. G's opponents on the other hand told me that after this 'accident', they felt the time had come to standardize security across the organization, something that they told me that they had in fact wanted to do for a while.

However, it slowly became apparent to me that the issue here was not about the external public's evaluation of the moral standing of the HTA. At the time, I could not explain why reactions to these events were so strong. I myself found the accusations levelled at G very difficult to believe and had seen nothing to confirm what was being said, despite the fact that I spent a great deal of time with him in the course of my work. He himself angrily told me that it was total rubbish, and that in fact the decision had been made to wipe his name off the website by the rival faction who had browbeaten the webmaster into making this 'mistake' on purpose. In fact it was later quietly made clear to me by several of my colleagues in the office that this had indeed been a deliberate act as a part of a struggle within the executive committee between G and some of the others. According to what I had witnessed, and drawing conclusions from speaking to both those in the central Budapest office and the managers of several telecottages, I became increasingly convinced that G was the subject of false accusations. Moreover, from my research I felt that those in the individual telecottages were far more aware of G's own activities than G's accusers gave them credit for. His close personal relationship with many of the telecottage managers and staff meant that it was, in fact, highly unlikely that he would get away with the kind of duplicitous posting on the site of which he was accused. After some weeks of argument and recrimination G's name reappeared. He has not, however, regained his right to contribute. Instead, he has developed his own website which, after things had calmed down, and after many of those who made the accusations had left the HTA, was closely linked to the HTA's own site.

Ethnographically, I was very interested in some of the assumptions that were being made by both G and his accusers regarding the HTA and the communicative power of the network. It seemed very clear to me from my general experiences there that despite what those members of the leadership who were angry with G might sometimes have imagined or have represented to me, the telecottage managers and staff were not simply linked up through the HTA's website. They also spoke to each other a great deal, used the phone or

direct internet contact through software such as the messenger, attended local area and regional, as well as national meetings, followed the news in general and, of course, spoke directly with my colleagues at the central office when they were unsure about things.

So given this situation, what was everyone so angry about? Despite what his opponents in this row claimed, it was quite clear to me that G's relationship to the telecottages that make up the HTA derives not only from the ability to disseminate certain ideas through the website, but also very much from speeches at conferences, meetings of the leadership and training sessions for new recruits, or from personal relationships with many of telecottage managers and so on. This influence was built, it seems, in both 'virtual' and 'non-virtual' fields, and influence gained in one field clearly derives in part from that held in the other. So what was it, then, that made access to and use of this website into such a highly charged issue? How did it come to be seen as such a crucial source of political influence within the organization?

It seemed to me that even if the accusations against G were true, which they did not appear to be, this would still hardly justify the extent of the anger or the actions taken regarding access to the website. In the effort to try and answer this situation I began to consider how different kinds of fields of action were constituted through the debates and arguments that I have just narrated, and how different notions of space and the network were called into being. I called these spaces 'The Association', 'The Network' and, in wider terms, 'Hungary' itself. As I shall suggest in the next section of this paper, the strength of the idea of development, and the power of technological progress as an idea gave these spaces a very strong moralized undertone, and the activities that went on within them—in this case the use of the website—were often presented in emotive terms relating to ideas about the need for people in Hungary to 'seize' the opportunities that the future was felt to hold, or the 'unlucky' history of the country. In order to understand this idea better I will borrow from the work of Tsing (2000). She describes a gold fever in Indonesia that lasted for years, with millions of dollars being invested, before it turned out there had never been any gold. She argues that by employing romanticized and often moralized ideas about development or underdevelopment, even inadvertently, it is possible and even easy to 'conjure up' different kinds of imagined spaces. While in her case she talks about the jungle and the 'frontier', in this case the space is partly virtual (the website) and partly organizational (the association the website represents). However, in both cases the spaces in question are the subject of emotional, highly moralized and often romanticized notions of the future. Within these spaces political power struggles took place based on these imagined ideas, leading to debates that became angry and overheated. Even when under only slightly closer scrutiny, the actual significance of these spaces to the debate in question was marginal.

The social, the technical and the moral?

In order to develop these ideas I wish to explore in more detail how the technology was viewed by those working at the HTA. Unsurprisingly for an organization so preoccupied with public or community access to the internet and the social issues surrounding it (Kahin & Keller 1995; Wyatt, Henwood, Miller & Senker 2000), the network was presented in a very specific and rather deterministic way. It was a tool which made it

easier to achieve certain social goals: democratization and the building of a free (market) society. For those at the HTA, the transition to this 'free' and 'democratic' political form was seen as a moral, rather than political decision. The things that were to be done with technology were therefore what we might call 'super-political'.

In the wider context of the social and political changes taking place, which I shall discuss in more detail below, one of the main sources of legitimacy for the HTA is derived from its apparent ability to 'use' or 'apply' technology as an apparently simple tool in this deterministic way in order to achieve its social mission. It was far more through this ability that the HTA created its moral legitimacy in terms of the wider society, than through the simply civil characteristics that G's opponents referred to. Certain kinds of technological 'progress' (in fact not necessarily progress per se, see Barry 2001) were made synonymous through this process with the highly visible, yet normalized, and apparently non-political desire to develop the country according to the norms established in the run up to Hungary's final accession to the EU. Indeed, the bridging of the digital divide, expressed as the 'technological emancipation' of the many rural communities that exist in Hungary, the creation of a participatory and responsible citizenship, and the installation of 'robust institutions of democracy' called for in the Copenhagen Criteria laid down by the EU (see also Verdery 1996) was viewed by those with whom I worked as a fundamental part of the development of civil society as a whole. In terms of day to day working practices this perception manifested itself in very different ways between, for example, my immediate colleagues at the HTA's central office, the HTA leadership, or those running the actual centres themselves. People were committed to the general moral mission of progress, but confusion often reigned over how to attain the particular targets, and, as in the case above, disputes over control of technologies became imbued with a highly moralized sense of the right and wrong ways to behave, and the moral responsibilities of controlling different technological means. As I shall suggest, it is perhaps here that we might look for an explanation of the strength of the reaction to G's behaviour.

There is a vast literature describing the processes and motivations through which the transition to democratic political forms are cast in a specifically non-political way (Bourdieu 1999; Ferguson 1990; Hann 1990; Hann 2002; Hann & Dunn 1996; Mandel 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sampson 1996; Sampson 2002; Shapiro 1997). In the final run-up to accession in 2004, those aspects of the transition specifically concerned with the building of a democratic, 'Western-style' Hungary were viewed as taking place through the promotion of a Tocqueville-style, de-politicized and active civil society in the ten applicant EU countries (Bellier & Wilson 2000; Shore 2000). George Soros, one of the most significant figures in the transition to democracy began this ideological shift when he opened the first of his famous foundations in Hungary in 1984, when the country was still under socialist rule. He too felt that, after twenty years, the aim of an 'Open Society'³ had been realized; at least, as he said during his speech marking the twentieth birthday celebrations, in as much as he was now confident that civil society was strong

³ One of Soros's largest organizations was the Open Society Institute, branches of which are to be found in many capital cities across Central and Eastern Europe and large parts of Asia. This organization sought to provide intellectual and organizational assistance to groups and organizations trying to promote the cultural trends necessary to make democracy successful. See <http://www.soros.org> for more information.

enough to resist any potential challenges that might be levelled by the state to free and open society. Vitally, the population were now responsible and educated enough to exercise both their rights, and their responsibilities, properly.

As I have indicated, what came to interest me most during fieldwork was how these political changes were in fact cast in a moral light. Contained within the idea of transition is the notion of moving *towards* the countries of Western Europe. Although many of the social and cultural changes involved in this process have been documented (Burawoy & Verdery 1998; Sampson 1996; Verdery 1996), there is little analysis of the fact that much of this process has taken on a very 'developmental' attitude. Due to the concern with technological progress held by those with whom I was working with at the HTA, this was articulated, as a strong sense of the need to 'catch up', technologically speaking, with the countries of Western Europe. This aspect of freedom and democracy was seen not as a political statement (Rose 1999), but instead as being part of a generally and fundamentally positive move into a certain kind of future. As I have explained, when thus contextualized within the very specific and highly moralized framework of the HTA, the use to which a technology is put is always subject to moral appraisal about whether it is being used in the right or the wrong way. Following Mitchell's (2002) excellent analysis of the ways that socio-technical forms can reveal or conceal moralized discourses of 'good' or 'bad', which in turn are linked to certain kinds of political goals, I suggest that the technological capacity of the HTA was moralized by its overt social mission. If we are aware of how much of the HTA's power is derived only and precisely *through* its strong association of technological forms with sets of social and moral values within the social context of transition/development, we see clearly why perceived misuse can cause a reaction that otherwise might seem way over the top.

Conclusion: moral technology and the network imagination

I argue that in this merging of social and technological change we can see the creation and operation of a 'moral technology'. In order to explore the power of this concept I am particularly interested in developing an ethnographic account of how, following Andrew Barry, different 'spaces' are created, within which political action can take place. Barry (2001: 205) refers to the ways in which political action is always about the articulation of 'geography, history and memory' through specific socio-technical forms. My ethnography is concerned with how this is happening within the HTA. What I particularly wish to draw attention to here is the significant part played by the imagination in the formation of these fields.

In this case the 'socio-technical form' under discussion is the network of telecottages which are stretched across the country. The telecottages, which are locally owned and operated by community organizations, sought to stimulate what was called the 'local information society'. This was, as I was told on countless occasions, essential to the construction and maintenance of a modern and truly 'European' Hungary. The assumption was that Hungary was made up of small communities, which each needed assistance to create a local information society so that it could cater for its own customs, needs and habits. As it was understood, these telecottages, in each case the centre of this local information society, were joined into a nationwide network simultaneously through

both the social form that was the organization—a network of local civil organizations—and the technological form that is the internet—the network metaphor *par excellence*. This could in turn be cast as providing the building blocks of an entirely civil oriented and de-politicized *national* information society from which the whole country could benefit. Local community activity was given space to express itself in a way that could only be called democratic and, it was hoped at least, would through this combined socio-technological network stimulate community participation and interest in national democratic politics.

As I have said, the biggest ethnographic puzzle for me was why, given the total lack of a threat as far as I could see, people became so enraged at G's seemingly innocent actions. What we must understand here is the extent to which the network of telecottages was articulated in imaginative ways by those in the Budapest office according to the moralized goals of the HTA, and according to their own individual understandings of what those goals were or what they should be. In the same way that use of technology was constituted as morally positive when talking about 'empowering communities' or 'modernizing Hungary', so it could only too easily be constituted as negative if it seemed to contradict the HTA's civil mission. When the others became angry with G, it was because he challenged the way they imagined their work and the space in which it was taking place. I felt that the whole notion of local information societies, linked through a network of telecottages into something national, was a rather romanticized notion of the village and the local community, based on socio-technical understandings of how these existed and how they were to be developed in the future. Because of the degree to which these notions were often highly emotional and became extremely moralized, it became only too easy to engage in the kind of 'conjuring' of places described by Tsing (2000), that is, the calling into being of certain social forms—community, modernity, developed nation, civil society—as a part of a set of moralized and social goals, irrespective of the extent that those forms could be found or analysed by the ethnographic observer.

The role of imagination in given political contexts (Barry, Bell & Rose 1995: 488) is crucial to the constitution of a 'national association', which serves 'communities' linked by a technological 'network'. The people with whom I worked were able to imagine a meaningful version of the 'Hungary' that they aimed to build: a Hungary geared on many different scales towards catching up and becoming 'properly' European. This act of imagination leads, of course, to the actual construction of 'real' things in society, be they political organizations, nationwide broadband cable networks, legal entities or any of a huge range of possible socio-technical constructs that have arisen or will arise in the future, in part from the activities of the HTA. I argue that it is this 'real future'—whether or not it was expressed this way—that G was felt to be challenging through the threat he apparently posed to the ways in which things were imagined to be, and that it is this which finally explains the depths of the anger directed against him.

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Tom Wormald completed his fieldwork on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the developing civil society in Hungary at the end of 2003. He spent two years working there as a volunteer for two large NGOs. He chose to examine the role of ICTs as they represent a significant symbol of the 'future' in a country which continues to undergo dramatic and far reaching political, economic and social change, following the collapse of the socialist system in 1989. He is now in Manchester writing up his thesis, due for completion in the summer of 2005. He has also been working as webmaster for the European Association of Social Anthropologists for the past five years.