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*Where parallel worlds meet: civil society and civic agency.*
*Politicising polio in Sierra Leone*

Theses of the PhD dissertatition

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Pécs 2015

## Acknowledgement

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who made this research possible by supporting, guiding or instructing me:

- Gábor Vargyas, who spent long hours correcting and commenting my texts and was never too busy or too tired to give advice or to answer my questions. He always knew how to motivate me, with gentle rigor;
- Andreas Dafinger, who was always available and whose sharp observations and reflections consituted a great sourcee of inspiration;
- Gyula Viga, who accorded me his time and whose support meant a lot to me;
- Bea Vidacs, Ágnes Hesz - the opponents of the "home defence" - whose insightful comments I have tried to integrate in the final text;
- Judit Farkas, Eszter Kisbán, Zoltán Nagy, Éva Pócs, teachers of the Department of European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Pécs, skillful to create a relaxed but enriching learnig environment;
- Lajos Boglár, Michael Steward, Jacqueline Knorr, Mats Utas, John Clarke, Mihaly Sarkany, Anita Shroeven, Annamarie Losonczy – senior colleagues, teachers and friends who inspired me;
- Balázs Danka, who helped me with the statistical calculations and Márton Gerő who prepared the network diagram.
- Denis Ramos and Ferdinando Formisano, assisting me with audiovisal documentation.
- Family, friends and workmates, who gave me a gift of patience and empathy

- the Conflict Cluster of the Nordic Africa Institute (Uppsala, Sweden), which received me for two months as a visiting fellow;
- The Department of European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Pécs, of which I attended the doctoral program and where the dissertation will be defended.

I have to say a special thanks to the people I met in Sierra Leone without whom writing the dissertation would not have been possible:

- Members of "local civil society"
- People with disabilities
- Members and leaders of DPOs (disabled people's organisations)
- Executive members and inhabitants of the polio-homes
- The staff of One Family People,
- The musical band "The Walpoleans"
- Expatriates and national workers of INGOs
- Government officials, market women, beggars, traditonal authorities, inhabitants of villages, of urban neighbourhoods, of slums and of squats, i.e. ordinary Sierra Leoneans of all walks of life who accepted to cooperate by letting themselves to be researched. and by that to contribute directly to the research.

**The context of the research and the broader relevance of the research question**

In this research I studied international development presenting a particular case, located in the micro environment constituted by local and international organizations working on issues of disability in Sierra Leone with the intention to better understand the nature of governance produced in everyday interactions in banal situations involving actors of "civil society". In the context of this State-targeted, NGO driven development, "civil society" stands for a web of connections, linking NGOs and other types of Civil Society Organisations to State actors, parastatals, transnational donor or regulating organizations, international expert communities and their "beneficiaries".

In the last decade of the 20th century Sierra Leone went through a particularly destructive civil war. The conflict lasted 10 years and since its end the country has been the site of a colossal "development project" the stake of which is its own reinvention aided by international organisations and INGOs. Such a large-scale, all inclusive societal experimentation proposing to rebuild the nation, reorganize the State, reform the social structure and rethink the culture have posed new challenges to international development which are comparable only to a few other experiences, like that of Cambodia or Liberia.

In the mid-2000s there was a sense of global transformation expressed aptly by the slogan introduced by the country's President calling for "attitudinal change", implicitly blaming the culture of the citizens for the dire state of the country. Official policy papers and reports emanating from intergovernmental organizations tended to describe the situation as a "tabula rasa" in which a new society had to be rebuilt from scrap. This definition of the situation opened a large space for international organisations which were invited to participate in the project of building the "liberal peace" (Duffield 2001; Cubbit 20013). Local civil society was also given an important role in this project, the result of which was the reshaping of local civil society organisations according to the rules of the NGO world, transforming Sierra Leone into an African variant of "project society" (Sampson 1996, 2005).

Through my research I strived to understand the logic and evaluate the dividends of this large-scale transformation from the perspective of the small, but no so hidden community of the polio-disabled. Understanding the internationally led liberal peace-building process as a new kind of governance, I was also looking for patterns of resistance and everyday forms of agency amongst the polio-victims, many of whom live in the street or in occupied houses, surviving on begging or on different small jobs in the troubled zone of urban informality. Because persons with disability in Sierra Leone belong with a great probability to the much larger group of the urban poor, their resistance can be conceived not only as a struggle against identity based discrimination, but also as one challenging the social, economic and symbolic consequences of an oppressive form of social stratification.

This case study shows that the position of the lower classes in the post-cold war liberal social order is defined by their increasing relegation to the domain of informality, situated between legality and illegality, making their claims on territorial belonging fragile. For these reasons, in the early 21st century oppression of the poor – and not only in the Global South – dominantly appears as interlinked social and territorial exclusion,

where citizenship is "differentiated" (Holston 2008) between those who are fully protected and fully mobile and those whose need of protection can only be satisfied by charity, and whose access to places claimed by the rich is increasingly restricted.

My results further suggest that in this social order not only the nature of oppression but also the possible forms of resistance are fixed by globally codified discourses. At the same time, locally negotiated norms, world views and practices, individual and collective strategies represented and performed in interactions are constantly calling into question the seeming homogenizing effect of this order. In banal interactional situations subtle negotiations are taking place, (re-)defining identities, recomposing social relations and reinterpreting important themes like "development" and "citizenship". The research, by describing some of these negotiation processes going on in Sierra Leone's aid driven post conflict reconstruction contributes to a better understanding of the logics and mechanisms of project society and allows apprehending the possibilities of insurgence within its rule.


**Fieldwork and methodology**

I started fieldwork in 2008 with a 2 months pre-field visit, in the heydays of global project society, one year after the guard changing elections in Sierra Leone. I passed there 12 month between 2010 and 2011 and returned for short visits every year until 2014. My first point of observation was from inside the local office of an international NGO, Handicap International. With time I discovered a network of Sierra Leonean civil society organizations, active in the field of human-rights and disability and I consciously shifted the focus of my investigation. A third phase of the field work started when I got regular access to the polio-disabled homes. From this point my time was divided between formal, ceremonial occasions and informal moments spent with members of the homes. This proximity conducted me to various unexpected places, allowing me to discover the Sierra Leonean society with them, through their eyes. From observer I became actor in some of their stories, in which sometimes I got deeply entangled.

My methodology is characterised by a classical social anthropological approach and a symbolic interactionist perspective. I paid attention to rumours, news in the media, call-in programs in the radio and informal discussions to identify topics important for Sierra Leoneans. I was especially attentive to personal interactions, many of which were embedded in intricate stories. I spent long  hours assisting to collective rituals where identities (such as "people with disability", "civil society", "human rights activists", etc.) under construction were put on stage in front of a cooperative audience. I was looking for dominant representations - and the narratives justifying them - in reports, project descriptions, training material, in documents belonging to the grey literature of the NGO world. I made interviews with NGO staff, civil society members and ordinary people living with disability. I followed civil society groups' interventions on the ground and talked to people involved in these on the reception end. I completed the usual qualitative methodology of cultural anthropology with a statistical survey and network analysis.

**Structure of the dissertation**

In the first chapter I set the scene. I introduce the protagonists and describe the double framework in which they live: in places being at the same time informal collective polio homes and formal grass-root organisations.

The second chapter opens a parenthesis. Leaving for a moment the question of disability, I turn towards civil society, in order to explore it first in its connection to NGOs, civil society organizations and the different subcategories of these. DPOs - disabled people's organisations - are part of this world. I also broaden the definition of civil society, searching for collective manifestations of civic agency in traditional and neo-traditional forms of associations. This exercise helps us understand the hybrid origins of present day civil society organizations in Sierra Leone.

In the third chapter I show how the idea of disability was progressively constructed. This process leading to the autonomization of disabled groups was somewhat paradoxical, as in the formation of the collective identity pre-war total institutions played a major role. Foreign charities started the practice of gathering people with disability in one place and it was this patronizing behavior that ensured on the long run the critical mass (Silla 1998), necessary for the emergence of the collective solidarity, the common culture and the educational basis leading to the emergence of self-managed places registered as DPOs.

Chapter 4 speaks about these places and the people populating them. It gives account of personal itineraries of polio victims. Despite the individual differences, these itineraries are crystallized around some common experiences: the advent of the illness, the acceptance of the impairment, the war and participation in the disability community, but also of love, child rearing and family life. Defying all stereotypes, one salient feature characterizing the life histories of the mobility-disabled is their amazing geographical mobility and capacity to cross boundaries of social groups.

In chapter 5 I deal with representations. I show the various discursive forms used to talk about disability. I show how "the proper way" to talk prescribed by international organizations and their local allies becomes a tool of cultural violence, apt to stigmatize those whose marking as Others gets wrapped in developmentalist discourses. I try to reconstruct the official view on the traditional beliefs on disability to confront it with the non-official, rarely admitted, "non-traditional" views of NGO workers and public officers.

In the 6th chapter I show how discrimination functions as a prefabricated thesis which forbids to formulate interrogations. When empirical data proving discrimination are demanded, these turn out to be scarce. The results of my own survey suggest no or very little sign pointing at systematic mistreatment of persons with disability by "society" as such. Rather, disabled people seem to suffer from structural violence maintained and obscured by the very authorities that charge the local culture with discrimination.

The last but one chapter is about politics. I describe how politicians use the squatters, how these exploit their relations with politics and how disabled people do politics with acts and words in their everyday lives. Analysis of the networks in which different disability organizations are embedded and make their political moves show that below the institutional level the politics of the organizations is highly personalized. My charts also reveal that polio homes - instead of constituting a negligible closed local universe - are part of a global web, which individual homes turn ingeniously into a resource.

In the last chapter I examine other strategies of resistance. I point to translation as a mode of survival in a world composed of parallel universes. The polio-disabled of the capital use their double identity to resist threats targeting them. Having mastered two contradictory languages – gang language and civil society language – they alternately use these to defy power. In the discursive field produced in these ambiguous interactions, contestations are disguised as false consensus. This is a powerful strategy, but it is fundamentally double-edged, because of its vulnerability to being easily co-opted.

In the concluding chapter I take stock of my main statements. I take the point of the end of 2014 to look back on the research and to draw my conclusions. In 2014 the world seems to be changing more rapidly than in the preceding four years. It looks inevitable that project society is changing too. The Sierra Leonean disability movement in its present form, as part of project society, is probably also facing important changes. Immobility is not an option. The decline of the old form of project society confronts all civil society groups - including disabled people's organisations - with a triple alternative: either they disappear, or they become puppets of conservative forces, or they assume their role as changers.

## Results

Research amongst the polio-disabled communities of Freetown led me to assess the achievements and the drawbacks of the liberal peacebuilding project. The material show how creative appropriation of the - material as well as symbolic - resources offered by the project society has effectively contributed to increase the (very modest) material wellbeing of polio-disabled people living in self-managed collective homes. However, I also demonstrate the logical limits of this type of agency in a quickly shifting political environment.

The political write-up of civil society under the liberal peace was a chance for organizations of disabled people, which, for the first time in Sierra Leonean history, became a non negligible political factor. Nevertheless, I contend that the success of polio-disabled communities in functioning as effective pressure groups, as well as organic micro-societies assuring shelter, livelihood and a minimal social security for their members hail from their affinity with earlier types of formal and informal voluntary associations, rather than from their adherence to project society.

According to the classical literature dealing with West Africa (Little 1957; Banton 1957 (1969); Nunley 1987) the history of friendly societies is inseparable from the history of urbanization. From this perspective the organizations of polio-disabled people can be best understood as adaptation to the most recent phase of this urbanization, marked by a double process, on the one hand creating spatial egalitarianism, annulling difference between rich and poor neighbourhoods, and capitalist urban development, on the other hand, attempting to reconquer urban spaces from the poor. The tension between these two concomitant tendencies results in a strange contradiction in the lives of the disabled communities, which constantly experience sudden shifts from inclusion to segregation – and backwards. Brutal attempts of eviction come as unexpectedly as the (usually) ensuing official clemency.

International NGOs framing disability as object of universal rights answering universal needs turn a blind eye to this reality. By denying the specific situation of the polio-disabled communities, by calling discrimination what is in reality structural violence (Farmer 1996), they effectively contribute to the depoliticisation of disabled organizations. Fighting against discrimination is easily incorporated in the attitudinal change campaign, blaming culture and bad habits of Sierra Leoneans instead of pointing at the root causes of exploitation, segregation and alienation of the poor.

While members of the polio-communities full heartedly participate in the validation of the anti-discrimination frame, they cannot systematically limit themselves to this role. Far from the public celebrations where disability is put on stage, they have to fight against random police aggression, violent evictions, and brutal attempts of displacement. Their double identity placing them in the blurred zone between the

formal and the informal help them greatly in this struggle. They use shape shifting – changing often their public persona between the two registers - to resist. Appearing at times as members of the official civil society, at other times as an unruly and potentially violent gang, they offer themselves simultaneously as allies for the power and behave as its challengers.

Mastering perfectly both the language of the NGO world and the idiom of the urban underclass, they use this competence to translate back and forth between the power and its subjects. They use the language of citizenship to reframe disability rights in terms of rights to the city. Shape shifting and translation place resistance not outside of the power but within its core. That is why formalized civil society organizations, like the organizations of disabled people, facilitate at the same time deopliticisation and politicisiation.

This mode of resistance has its limits, though. There are multiplying signs pointing at the approaching end of project society. There are several causes underlying this change. First, the shifting power balance between countries of the centre and the periphery weakens the hegemony of Western liberal democracies and the model they propose. Second, the tensions between the promises of project society and the deep inequality it actively legitimizes are probably not sustainable in the long term. In Sierra Leone, while the political culture is still dominated by Western principles, economic domination has been for long more global. Western political domination is already withdrawing, symbolically marked by the withdrawal of the UN peace building mission in early 2014. What project society is leaving behind is a conspicuous lack of functioning institutions and a weak guarantee of civic rights and liberties, progressively fading away with the advent of a palpably more authoritarian style of government. The Ebola outbreak in 2015 can be understood as a new symbolic milestone, marking definitely the end of project society, while at the same time debunking its failings.

Overcrowded, insalubrious disabled squats have been miraculously spared by the epidemic. Polio communities have effectively resisted not only the evictions but also the virus. More than a sign of miracle, this victory probably reveals their internal strength, which identity politics have often camouflaged as weakness. With project society gradually coming to an end, identity politics might reach its limits, too, pushing polio-disabled communities to assume more clearly their political role, creating alliances with other oppressed groups.

**Main scientific contributions**

With this case study I wish to contribute to three scientific fields: cross-cultural disability studies, civil society and regional studies. The ethnography of polio-disabled communities in post-war Sierra Leone fills an important research gap, adding to the relatively small but gradually growing corpus of knowledge about disability in the Global South. Observing the strategies of poor disabled people within and without civil society results in the redefinition of the concept of civil society and in the reevaluation of its political role. Finally, the exploration of the political landscape and the social movements in Freetown contributes to Sierra Leonean studies, shedding light on some aspects of the urbanization process, at the same time helping to assess the achievements and failures of the post-war liberal peace-building.

*Disability*

Agreeing with Davis (Davis 2006) that present-day disability politics has more to gain from its own revision than to lose, I am also convinced that bringing in the perspective of the South might serve as an engine for an intellectually refreshing and politically liberating paradigmatic change. In the present paradigm it is "logically impossible for a qualitative research to find disabled people who are not oppressed" (Shakespeare 2006:201). This paradox weakens the practical stance of the disability movement, making it unable to distinguish between oppression and discrimination. This circular reasoning has particularly devastating effects in the South (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). The idea that people in developing countries mistreat disabled people because of backward thinking is pervasive. It resists observable counterexamples. Benedicte Ingstad - evoking old phantasms about modernity and barbarism - calls this belief the "myth of the hidden disabled" (Ingstad 1999). There is practically no literature problematizing the representation of disabled people in Sierra Leone as powerless and voiceless victims, abandoned by society. Maria Berghs' (Berghs 2013) recent account on the Sierra Leonean war amputees is a refreshing exception, but even this author fails to perceive the many ways in which the victims use their agency to cope with their situations, defending themselves collectively against structural violence and creating "small circles of liberty" in which their identity is momentarily liberated from spoliation. I believe that the critical re-examination of the situation of disabled people in Sierra Leone might contribute to the better understanding of Sierra Leonean society as a whole, as well as to the universal project aiming at the emancipation of people with disabilities in the world.

*Civil society*

The meaning of civil society has gone through an interesting modification in the past 20 years. For a while it was counted as a taken for granted assumption that the number and the multiplication of NGOs was a sign in which one could read the level of democratization of a given society. In a volume edited in 2001 on associational life in Africa (Tostensen, Tvedten et al. 2001) the majority of the articles still searched for manifestations of civic agency in associations belonging to the NGO world. Nonetheless, growing disillusionment obliged the scientific community to question whether CSOs were intrinsically benevolent in nature. Many students of development have called attention to the extraordinary vulnerability of formal organizations to being sucked in existing power structures, to their undemocratic potential; to their cultural violence, sometimes overtly supporting "the global hegemony of the Western worldview" (Rottenburg 2009:vii) and to their role in transforming democracy from a big idea into "the minimalist version of participatory government sold to the South by the North" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:29). This progressive disillusionment was accompanied by a parallel rediscovery and celebration of informality. Emblematically, in a recent book, entitled "Civic Agency in Africa arts of resistance in the 21st century" the authors (Obadare and Willems 2014) ostensibly search for subversive potentials outside of the scope of the officially recognized fraction of civil society. No matter how tempting it would be to follow the chaotic paths of organic resistance emerging spontaneously out of the reach of formalized institutions, my own research among the polio communities of Freetown suggests that it is problematic to oppose the informal civic and the formal civil, in Africa certainly, and probably elsewhere, too. It is more promising to search for agency in the intersection of these two spheres, as the example of the polio survivors -

living on the margin between formal civil society and that of the informal squatter communities -shows.

*West-African studies*

There is an important number of anthropologic texts evaluating critically the Sierra Leonean post-war peace-building project (see amongst others: Kelsall 2009; Ibrahim; and Shepler 2011; see amongst others:Cubitt 2013; Harris 2013). My contribution to this literature is interesting not only because I look at this process from the point of view of those at the bottom, but also because I propose from this perspective an ethnographically detailed description of project society.

**My publications in relation to the topic**

The NGOization of Civil Society in Sierra Leone – a thin dividing line between empowerment and disempowerment", in press, Palgrave Macmillan Publishing House

A föld ára. Fejlesztés, demokrácia és egyenlőtlenség Nyugat-Afrikában (The price of the land.Development, democracy and inequalities in West-Africa), first prize in the category of scientific diviulgation, Valóság, 2014. June; LVII. 6.

A magyarországi antropológia helyzete, gondolatok egy kényszer pályamódosító nézőpontjából (The situation of the Hungarian applied anthropology)

A Másik megnevezése. Interkulturállis találkozás vagy az elnyomás gyakorlatai (Naming the Other, intercultural encounters or practices of oppression) In Kultúrakutatás és narratíva. Szerk. Szász Antónia és Krizsa Fruzsina, L'Harmattan, Makat, Budapest, 2013

A gyarmatosítástól a nemzetközi fejlesztésig: az észak-déli kapcsolatok történetének rövid áttekintése. (East-West, North-South, Development and Underdevelopment : a short history of inequality) Ethnographia, 2011/2, Budapest

 A Bundu asszonyok esete az Amerikai Egyesült Államok elnökével. Az Emberi Jogok számos hasznáról és haszontalanságáról. (The case of the Bundu women with the President of the United States. On the use and misuse of Human Rights), AnBlokk, 5 (2011) Akció/kutatás, pp. 42-56.

 Globalizáció In Globális Nevelés, (Globalisation and global education) Budapest, Artemisszio, 2009,

What is development and what does it do?, presented at the EIDOS conference held in Amsterdam 2008