The Discourse Of „Gift“, And The Discourse Of „Control“: Contested Reception Of The Philanthropic Activity Of George Soros In Post-Communist Czechoslovakia In The Early 1990s

Pospisilova, Tereza, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

In the literature on philanthropy we find historical accounts, quantitative studies of trends and factors influencing giving, foundation success stories and books about how to engage in a successful philanthropy; analytical studies of philanthropy are much less frequent. The book Globalization, Philanthropy and Civil Society: Projecting Institutional Logics Abroad edited by Heydemann and Hamack (2009) represents a rare analytical attempt to understand how Western foundations entered the transforming post-communist societies of Eastern Europe (but not only) and how their institutional logic was contested and transformed in the process. The process of post-communist transformation has been addressed by political and social scientists many times (e.g. Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Berend, 2009). Attention has been paid to the influence of Western foundations on local civil society activism (Císař, 2008; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). However, much less attention has been paid to the question how the institutional set up and ideas guiding Western foundations interacted with local agents and their priorities, resulting in their refusal or negotiated acceptance.

Countries of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe underwent parallel transformation of politics, economy and society, including building of civil society after 1989. This meant (theoretically) an open space for Western foundations and their agenda. However, when they entered local environment, they encountered a „contested reception“, and were shaped by local disputes and power contests (Heydemann & Hamack, 2009). The paper is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of how local agency affected the Western philanthropies in post-communist states in the early period of transformation.

The paper is a case study of one of the first private philanthropic endeavors in Czechoslovakia after 1989, the Prague Central European University (CEU) Foundation, established in 1991 by the American philanthropist of Hungarian origin, George Soros, as the organizational basis for setting up an international university (the second campus was established a year later in Budapest). The explicit aim of the foundation was to help Central European countries to complete post-communist transformation and reach democratic and pluralist society by educating a new corps of regional leaders. Soros originally proposed a gift of 25 million USD over 5 years to build the university in Prague. However, due to a lack of local support, the foundation was closed in 1996. The aim of the paper is to show how local political struggles involved the foundation and how the foundation was legitimized by its champions and de-legitimized by its opponents in the process.

The analysis is based on historical accounts (Stepan, 2009; CEU 1999) but primarily on own archival research and on 20 in-depth interviews with people who participated in founding the Prague CEU foundation. The analysis traces the “real” events but at the same time concentrates on the ways the Prague CEU foundation was defined and legitimized in the discourse, represented by major documents on the one hand and by public media on the other. This is a form of critical realism advocated in discourse analysis by Fairclough (2005). The paper uses the five-element model of strategic philanthropy (Frumkin 2006) and adds elements of discourse analysis in order to (1) describe the way the Prague CEU foundation was set up in 1991 (defining the philanthropic activity as a “gift”). The same structure is used to (2) show how the foundation was challenged by its opponents in 1992 (defining the Soros activity as an attempt to seize “control”) and (3) how the foundation responded by changing its strategy in 1993 (by putting a new emphasis on the “efficiency” of the foundation), which later lead to its institutional exit in 1996.

Literature