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The Future of Our Past

Hungary's Cultural Struggle with its Communist Legacy

As always, it is not is easy to assess the nature of the times for contemporaries. These are transitory times -- they seem to be haunted by the times they follow rather than determined by the times they precede or prepare. Retrospective rather than anticipatory.

Françoise Thom, Sorbonne's Professor of Contemporary History, uses the image of Chernobyl as the metaphor for our times: communism ends like Chernobyl, leaving radioactive material all around, needing decades or centuries to be destroyed.(1) Hungary's leading sociologist, Rudolf Andorka, refers to R. Dahrendorf's thesis positing that whereas political changes to parliamentary democracy need six months and the improvement in economic well-being of East and Central European countries may need only six years to solidify, the development of a democratic culture might take sixty years.(2) It is common to find consolation for the slowness of the mental and cultural changes in the example of Moses from the Old Testament: fearing that the children of Israel might want to return into the bondage of Egypt if they see hardships and war, God let the people wander in the wilderness for forty years until those born in the wilderness, the generation of bondage, died out.(3) Today, Hungary's "generation of bondage" is still very much alive and involved.

What is all this, pitch dark pessimism or mindless optimism? "Was it Heaven or Hell?" -- we could ask with Mark Twain. Two or three years ago Hungarians would have spoken of the Moses reference with a distancing smile: yes, but we are bound to do better than that. They would have considered Dahrendorf's thesis overly pessimistic. Today people might

accuse Dahrendorf of being too optimistic: mental and cultural changes seem to take several generations indeed, and economic transformation too needs more than six years. Actually, can we state with certainty that the political changes are final and irreversible? Can we realistically hope that the nuclear waste left behind by communism will ever disappear?

Or, and this is the gravest issue, do people really want to wipe out communism and all its legacy? Have mentalities changed to such a degree that people should want to forget about the communist era for good? How do they see their future? What is their attitude toward democracy and a market economy? How do they view themselves?

In this paper I will try to answer these questions by

- (1) first looking at the political and economic changes that have occurred since 1990.
- (2) Then I will examine the mentalities that prevail in a post-communist country like Hungary and are at the bottom much of its difficulties. I am most interested in (i) the survival of the mentality of dependency, (ii) the prevailing atmosphere of envy, (iii) the lack of democratic education, including the fragility of the culture of negotiation and compromise.
- (3) I will try to examine how this cultural climate affects women and feminism;
- (4) and finally, how intellectual creativity can find its outlets in post-communist Hungary.

1. Political and economic changes since 1990

In the early 1990s Hungary became a driving force of the Central European region, the first in several ways. Hungary was, for example, the first country from Central or Eastern

Europe to be admitted into various organizations of European integration such as the Council of Europe. The last Soviet troops left in 1991, making it possible to put Hungary's relations with Russia and Ukraine on a new footing. The country was obviously advancing towards European Union membership. Hungary's good international standing trickled down, we might say, to the ordinary citizen as well, who now does not need a visa to visit any European country, not even to Israel (in which case Hungary was again the first). The world appreciated the security and stability inside the country, as well as the peace which every day had to be won along the 300 km long stretch of South-Eastern border with the former Yugoslavia.

Hungary attracted more than half of all foreign investment going into the entire region. Many of the state-owned enterprises were dismantled, privatization was conducted with full vigor yet gradually. Unemployment, at 12%, felt high, but was still less than in some more developed countries such as France. Hungarian politicians could afford to think long-term, with the future as a priority, for which the hardships of the present might be justly traded. This is the vision which put emphasis on infrastructure, education or telecommunication. Socially, Hungary was praised for its stability: in spite of the hardships, Hungarians pulled through without significant social unrest. Most Hungarians liked the fact that, unlike in some other countries, no "de-communization" (no "lustration," no purging of former communists) occurred. This was so in spite of the fact that the majority of Hungary's parliament was non-communist and that the Government of 1990-94 were all pro-Western professionals.

In the spring of 1994 Hungarians voted the old regime's communist politicians back into power. Of course, Hungary was not the only country in Central and Eastern Europe where the "ghost people," as the New York Times calls the former communists, returned (A.M. Rosenthal, August 9, 1994) ; it followed the example of Lithuania, Estonia and Poland. Only in this respect was Hungary different: the voters replaced the single Central and East European cabinet with no former communists with a Government that had, according to

The Wall Street Journal, more than 200 years of membership in the old Communist Party (Jonathan Sunley, December 15, 1994). And since Hungary excelled among the countries of the region in so many respects, its following the EastüEuropean trend came as a surprise to many observers.

A Gallup poll was released right after the elections in the Hungarian weekly Beszélő, a journal close to the Alliance of Free Democrats, the junior coalition partner to the Socialists in the new government (June 2, 1994, 24). The poll revealed extremely disturbing facts about the attitude of voters toward the market reforms introduced during the previous four years. Clearly, supporters of the winning Socialist Party were most opposed to a free market economy, the predominance of private property, and were the most nostalgic for government redistribution of incomes. These were the voters who brought the Socialist Party to victory: clearly said "no" to much that had happened between 1990 and 1994 in the direction of dismantling communist structures.

"Illusion is reality," a PR-expert says. People, with their nostalgia votes, articulated their preference for illusion rather than reality: they were nostalgic for the 70s and 80s, when foreign loans (originally taken for infrastructural investments but then spent on consumer goods) granted higher living standards than Hungary's real economic output would have allowed. For decades, Hungary under communist leadership was, to use the words of Hungarian born Harvard economist János Kornai, eating up its tomorrow, and thus "discounting its future."⁽⁴⁾ Indeed, it was a short-term vision, its priority lying in the present only. The consequences are bitter indeed: Hungary now has the highest per capita debt in Europe.

In 1994 Hungarians voted for illusion rather than reality in another sense as well: the illusion of being better off than other Central and East Europeans. They wished to go back to those times when living standards were easily kept highest relative to the region.

Traveling into Hungary from the South and the East is, I am often told, like entering a different and better world -- a world somewhat like the one in Zoltán Kodály's comic opera, Háry János, which portrays Hungary through the benevolent mirror of Hungarian folk and fairy tales. In this amusing opera otherwise full of self-criticism, the "Hungarian-Russian" border divides two contrasting worlds of good and bad, of eternal summer and everlasting winter. I often think that Hungarians -- who seem to take their peace, stability and higher living standards for granted -- believe that such a contrast between Hungary and the other countries of the region justifiably exists not only in fairy tales and comic operas. The population's "fairytales" perception of Hungary, maintained by the illusory policies of the 1970s and 80s, was shattered during the unexpected hardships and difficulties of the country's transition, often leaving Hungarians disappointed with the current state of affairs.

2. Mentalities

(i) The Mentality of Dependency

The mentalities of today's Hungarians were largely shaped during the forty odd years of communism. Most probably these mentalities were not born during the communist decades, even if conscious efforts were made to veil off the past. Communism taught a strange relationship to history: generations grew up with the belief that a new era began with the communists. "B.C." (before communism) times were sometimes given a distorted narrative only.

János Kádár, party chief responsible for Hungary's 30 years of goulash communism, learned a bitter lesson from the uprising of 1956: special methods were needed to make Hungarians swallow communism. Thus, a soft version of dictatorship was invented: in return for benefits unparalleled in Central and Eastern Europe, Hungarians became Kádár's accomplices in the common effort to live better. Kádár's political gesture was the significant

wink. "Let us not provoke Moscow's anger: promise me that no more '56's' should occur, and in exchange, I will make you the star country on the block," the wink said. They soon became party to the deal: society was self-containing, excesses were curbed, censorship was self-imposed. Journalists and historians went along with never referring to the "events" of 1956 or the lives of Hungarian minorities in the neighboring "brotherly" countries. Television commentators enthusiastically condemned Israel's "aggression" in 1967. These same reporters spoke about brotherly help to the "Czechoslovak people" in 1968 or the Afghanistani people in 1981.

What did Hungarians receive from Kádár for looking the other way? The soft eiderdown of liberal totalitarianism. Party membership was not forced: only about every sixth persons of the wage-earning population were card-holding members of the Communist Party (altogether 800,000). Travel was liberalized: every third year Hungarians were allowed to travel to the West (unless their passports were refused) and exchange, once every three years, from \$70 in the 70s to \$300 in the 80s. They enjoyed job security without being demanded to work hard or provide quality work; they enjoyed existential security in the form of their evening beer and Sunday Wiener Schnitzel. They could afford certain other luxuries as well: they could work their vegetable gardens over the week-ends, and provided they paid full-price for the cars three or five years in advance, they could in due time own a Polski Fiat or Skoda.

Kádár bought the collaboration of a nation with peanuts. His "pact," however, fostered a set of mentalities: the mentality of dependency and the feeling of envy, both related to the materialistic concerns societies of communist Central and Eastern Europe were relegated to. I would like to make it clear: communism bred societies that were -- and still are -- significantly more materialistic than their Western counterparts. Material possessions are valued in these countries out of proportion and can be used as bargaining chips to a greater extent than in Western democracies.

It is understandable that thoroughly materialistic societies evolved in communist Central and Eastern Europe. People who have to put much of their energy into satisfying their daily physical, etc. needs, cannot be expected to pursue higher self-actualizing goals. Foreign visitors to Eastern and Central Europe will probably agree when I say this: mere existence requires much more constant effort than in Western countries. There are two reasons for this. One, the buying power of an average Hungarian salary is less than one-tenth of the US average: it pays for about fifteen times fewer, say, loaves of bread, gallons of gasoline, square feet of real estate or automobiles, thus leaving very little for "extras." In fact, in Hungary 85-90% of an average income of a family has to be spent on groceries, housing, and utilities. The other reason is harder to grasp, but is related to the underdeveloped nature of infrastructure and services. The practical maintenance of an everyday routine seems to be elevated as the chief goal of life in Eastern Europe, instead of being subordinate to other activities or a "higher" objective. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs may provide an explanation: only after the lower physical needs, as well as the need for love and security, are satisfied can an individual develop and satisfy higher motivations for self-respect and self-actualization.

For a large segment of society, the mentality of dependency does not seem to have weakened in the past few years; rather it seems to have been reinforced -- as well as exploited -- by the economic and political developments of the post-communist times. It is this mentality that shocked foreign investors like GE in Hungary: the lack of self-confidence and the incapability of Hungarian workers "to think for themselves."(5)

Economists have talked about the danger of Latin Americanization in Hungary: when a thin layer is getting very rich, while the rest of society is lagging behind. It has clear economic, political, and cultural ("mentality") reasons.

The phenomenon of Latin Americanization can only be understood when the new economic

elite rising in these countries are inspected under a magnifying glass. Where do they come from? Where did they have the initial capital (late 1980s and early 1990s) in these generally capital-poor economies? Political scientists and sociologists are unambiguous: in Poland, Hungary, and Russia especially, the former communists have been the chief financial beneficiaries of the economic reforms. Anne Applebaum talks of the old Italian model revived: "Corrupt regimes led by former communist parties that rely on a semi-mafia business class composed mostly of former communists." "Links between ex-nomenklatura capitalists and ex-communist politicians remain intact," Applebaum continues, creating a ruling class that holds power in several fields, with little room for real competition in political or economic debates."(6)

Sociologists in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary have traced the careers of several hundred new businessmen, and found ex-nomenklatura in high numbers. The conversion of political power into economic power is typical of the region. Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss talks about the new grande bourgeoisie, ex-nomenklatura oligarchic families of the late 1980s converting their power by diversification and institutionalization. He and his team examined hundreds of diversified oligarchic families, where typically the grandfather would be the once party apparatchik, the son a manager of a joint venture, the daughter an editor for Hungarian television, the son-in-law with a boutique, the nephew studying at Oxford, etc. Hankiss points at other ways of power conversion: when state companies are privatized and reserve wealth is created by the oligarch's own fiat. In all cases, the new grand bourgeoisie of Hungary's market economy has invisible yet powerful communist roots.(7) No wonder, Hungarian communists are half-jokingly said to have retained only capital from Marx's Das Kapital.

The ex-communist oligarchic community seems to constitute the richest layer of Hungary's Latin-Americanizing society. Under such conditions, entering into competition is very difficult for those who fall outside this oligarchic network. Other developments seem also to run counter to market competition. The taking back of the administration in Hungary by ex-

communists through purges and sweeping personnel changes fits into this trend as well. Anne Applebaum writes of the stultifying effect this lack of competition has on politics and economy; it goes counter to the kind of capitalism and political transparency Hungary's progressive forces have opted for. The Copenhagen Document of the CSCE, for example, states that "the representative nature of government must also be reflected in the administration, through equal access of all citizens to political and public office" (Co. 7.5). There are ministries in Hungary where most of those employed between 1990 and 1994 have been dismissed; in many cases the political motivation is clear. Depriving citizens of equal access to administrative office sends negative signals both inside and outside of the country. Externally, it speaks about Hungary's hovering between the cultures of Eastern and Western Europe. Internally it creates an atmosphere of fear not conducive to democracy.

1. Françoise Thom, Les fins du communisme (Paris: Criterion, 1994), p. 41.
2. Andorka Rudolf, "Változások és állandóságok a magyar társadalomban a rendszerváltozás óta," Magyar Szemle III/10, 1013. R. Dahrendorf, Reflection on Revolution in Europe (London, 1990).
3. *Exodus*, 14:17-18; *Numbers*, 14:16, 29-33.
4. Talk given at the Budapest conference of social scientists, in February 1995. Quoted by Hungarian daily, Új Magyarország, February 27, 1995.
5. See Michael Jordan, Budapest Sun, April 27-May 3, 1995.
6. Anne Applebaum, "The Fall and Rise of the Communists -- Guess Who's Running Eastern Europe?," Foreign Affairs, vol. 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994), 7-13. Quotes from p. 11.
7. Elemér Hankiss, "What the Hungarians Saw First," in Spring in Winter. The 1989 Revolutions, ed. Gwyn Prins (Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 13-36. References to pp. 26-28.

Readings

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