
Personal Notes on Story and History

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In the winter of 1956 I had the threatening feeling that I could be destroyed. I was of pre-school age, I was playing in the garden on the outskirts of Budapest, when looking through the fence I noticed that a tank was approaching on the street. A soldier stood on the top with a machine gun, looking around suspiciously. My friends were hiding in small hastily dug 'family bunkers' in their courtyards, as most of the family houses in the neighbourhood had no basement. We didn't even have a bunker, although passing time might have been much more interesting in one, in spite of the wet and stale air. I had a newborn sister, and she occupied the adults' attention. I was paralysed by the glance of the soldier, I couldn't move. - Stand up, don't slouch, and slowly walk over here, said my father, who looked outside on hearing the rumbling noise. I did so, and soon after my father picked me up, and I waved airily after the rolling tank.

In the elementary school I learned the norms of competition and solidarity. I learned my place in the hierarchy (not dumb but lazy), and I got accustomed to a sort of 'split talk'. 'Don't breathe a word about it in the school', this was a frequent phrase in family talks. There are divisions between the private and public everywhere, but probably there were too many themes for us to keep to ourselves in those years. Not only that the 'Christ resurrected' graffiti had been written on the walls by Aunt Petrás; not only that the next-door neighbour had an air-gun that had been smuggled in from 'Czehsko'; and not only the opinion of my father that his boss was a big zero in engineering and had the party to thank for his career. But also that we wore the national cockade on 15 March. The situation was ambivalent: remembering the 1848 revolution was an important part of the ideological arsenal, but the authorities did not like to see too many cockaded youngsters on the streets. So we put the cockade on our shirt—and stayed at home. The public and the private were separated not only by style (one was more ceremonial and empty and the other more intimate). They were separated according to topics as well, and we were not supposed to talk about public issues. We might have had our opinion, but we kept it to ourselves. Or—I suspect—more frequently we didn't form an opinion on important issues because the discrepancy was frustrating and because it was better to stay on the safe side. We got

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accustomed to it and the important things happened in private life anyway: hanging around with friends.

In the autumn of 1968 several rumours were in the air in Hungary concerning the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and allied troops. Reputedly, the Hungarian leadership tried to mediate up until the last moment in order to avoid the occupation. Supposedly, the Hungarian soldiers were forbidden to shoot unless they came under armed attack. Allegedly, when villagers saw the troops heading towards the border, they went into the stores and bought up salt and sugar, remembering that these had been the most precious products during the war. But all these were rumours, neither exact information, nor opinions. The official version that the occupation was friendly assistance to an imperilled fraternal country was not widely believed. Our math teacher—a charismatic person—set aside the curriculum and started to talk about the events. He said that the day before he was passionately arguing with his university student son and probably we were also interested in his opinion. We were interested indeed, plus we could avoid doing school lessons. His major point was that the Hungarian participation in the intervention was regrettable but unavoidable. Without it, our economic reform could have been endangered. (The Hungarian new economic mechanism had been discussed and prepared for years and was eventually introduced in 1968.) Our teacher's conclusion was not far from the official version, but it was a personal opinion and it broke through the bars of the 'split talk'.

In the spirit of the new economic mechanism the curriculum of the Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences was reorganised. The need for real knowledge as opposed to ideology was the core motive. New disciplines—sociology among others—were introduced. We read Max Weber and Karl Polányi, we participated in field research, and the mood was enthusiastic. My very first research experience was fieldwork for András Hegedüs. He happened to be one of the few Hungarian intellectuals who protested against the occupation of Czechoslovakia. He certainly knew what he was doing, as he had been a devoted prime minister in the dark 1950s. In the 1960s, however, he played a new, progressive role in the rebirth of sociology and in the debates about the reform. By the early 1970s he had lost his academic positions and was becoming a lonely dissident. His more recent reputation, however, survived and local leaders in the countryside were very cooperative interviewees when they learned that I had worked with him. Anyway, the clouds of dogmatic counter-reform already gathered in high politics and could be felt everywhere. Everywhere, except for the university—I thought, but I proved to be naïve.

Organisations have their own good and bad traditions. The bad tradition of our university was that scapegoats were produced among graduate students from time to time. Besides a diploma, everyone got a review, based mostly on aspects of political loyalty. Those who got a bad record couldn't hope for a good job. I received a bad review and in spite of high research ambitions I got a job on the periphery of the academic world—I started to work as an assistant archivist.

My colleagues were interesting—quite a few ‘fifty-sixers’ landed there—but the job was boring.

What remained were the frequent meetings with friends. There were lectures and debates in private apartments, discussing the writings of István Bibó, Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, and other analysts, dreamers, and proclaimers of a more humanitarian society. We also read extended reviews of the contributions of Pavel Machonin and Lubomír Brokl to *Československá společnost*¹ (together with other pieces), a few manuscript copies of which in Hungarian were circulating, because we were eager to learn the facts about our societies.

My marginalisation lasted for three years and at the very end of the third year I got an offer to return to the university within the frame of a programme to renew the sociology curriculum. A three-year period is relatively short, but when you are in it, you don’t know how long it will last. So I started to teach at the university with concentrated effort and to organise my own empirical research, when political history seemed to intervene again.

At the end of 1979 a protest wave rose up among Hungarian intellectuals in response to the imprisonment of the Charter 77 activists. One of the declarations protested against the imprisonment of people for their political convictions and asked Kádár to intervene for the release of the prisoners. I agreed and signed the petition. It was not a radical text and more than a hundred of us signed. But the authorities got anxious, they ordered an investigation case by case at workplaces, and some people, mostly journalists, were dismissed.

My hearing was organised in the rector’s office with the participation of the rector and another university leader. It followed the pattern of the good cop–bad cop division of labour. The good cop asked about my motivation (I really disagreed with the arrest of people simply for their views, it reminded me of the 1950s). The bad cop wanted to learn who persuaded me and who brought the declaration into the university circles (I politely refused to answer). They wanted to learn my opinion on other solidarity actions and on the fact that the declarations and lists were presented on Radio Free Europe. They asked if I was ready to dissociate myself from these (I didn’t want to do that, I signed what I did, and anyway, that was the nature of the news—it is read on the radio). - It would have been much easier if it had been read on Radio Moscow, said the good cop sardonically, and after a break he added, just continue to work, young colleague. The bad cop didn’t add anything.

I learned later that the rector, as a young man, had been an assistant to Imre Nagy at the department of agricultural policy. And I learned something else, too. Before the solidarity declaration I had been nominated to receive a minor teachers’ award, and this proved to be a headache for the leadership. It was one thing

¹ Machonin, P. et al. 1969. *Československá společnost*. (Czechoslovak society). Bratislava: Epona.

that they didn't fire me, but getting a reward at that time sounded like a silly provocation. So at the last minute they nominated another young colleague, a party member. For sure, he had extra information about antecedents and circumstances. Suffice it to say that he refused to accept the reward.

I was a kid in 1956 and a teenager in 1968. I experienced the events and gained deep impressions, but history somehow swept over our heads; it didn't trigger my personal decisions.

After 1956, bloody revenge was followed by a long period of soft dictatorship. After 1968, less bloody but wide cadre changes occurred, and then a long period of bald and hard dictatorship followed. The worker councils of 1956 and the 1968 experiment of socialism with a human face failed, it is true. But did the need for a society with a human face fail, as well?

There is little doubt that the civil rights movement and the democratic opposition grew out of the experiences and failures of 1956 and 1968. The transformers (dreamers and pragmatists alike) absorbed these experiences. It is a rare historical moment when failure turns to success, and when dreamers acquire not only symbolic but real political power. It is true, however, that the influence of the dreamers, their consensus with the technicians of power proved to be temporary and disappeared into the stomach of pragmatist times. In the coexistence of dreamers and pragmatists, dreamers are more vulnerable and deserve support. The nature of pragmatist politics has been well described by critical elite studies and not much room for illusion is left. However, that is what we can learn from experience, that one should be careful with social dreams as well. Despite the signs of solidarity, the utopia of society with a human face may be expecting too much from human nature. It deserves the critical mirror of sociological observation as much as pragmatist power elites do.

When things are looking blue, and the outlook is not promising, the Hungarians say 'things stand Czech' (csehül állnak a dolgok). I couldn't trace the etymology of this saying, which most likely goes back to historical times. But half a century after the failing hopes of the Prague Spring, this wording seems to be generally applicable again.