

The Barren Country

“... Our poor country is a vast mange-festered pasture.

Our lambs are devoured by wolves.

The sandy fields where our melons grow are drenched in blood.

There are no bright stars to guide us...”

István Kormos: Pásztorok (Shepherds) – On Dezsô Korniss’ painting

At a certain point in historical time, just as we were celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, the myth of the revolution suffered irreparable damage as a result of unforeseeable constellations and coincidences that have come to dominate the valid present. The events that took place at various locations in Budapest on October 23 first, and then again on November 4, 2006, largely invalidated the myth of the revolution. The original aim of the jubilee year – in János Rainer M.’s illuminating phrase – was to present a 19th-century tableau¹: to reiterate the revolution’s emblematic events stripped of meaning, when in fact the consensus about the pantheon of the revolution’s heroes, and about the direction of the revolution – a consensus that after 1989 really existed only in the emotionally overwhelming moment of Imre Nagy’s reburial – continuously evaporated. In addition, the people who planned the program of ritual repetition started out from another false premise:

¹ According to this interpretation, 1956 really was a belated 19th-century revolution. Back in 1956, the participants themselves tried to make this connection clear by bringing back the symbolisms of the 1848 revolution and repeating some of its acts. This tableau, which took shape simultaneously with the revolution, already showed heroism, idealism and purity.” János Rainer M.: 1956 a Magyar és egyetemes történetben (1956 in Hungarian and Universal History). Manuscript. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to János Rainer M. for making his manuscript available to me.

they assumed that the cultural practice of the idea and the political tradition of *national history* was a valid one. In fact, these assumptions were largely without foundation. Even if the participants at the time experienced 1956 as the possible restoration of the nation's unity, a view maintained by both the defenders and the suppressors of this complex historical remembrance, the reality of the experience only lasted for moments. To express it in a different rhetoric: if the revolution actually meant access to the personal reality of *our homeland*, to *self-understanding by action*, then the experience of national unity was obviously inseparable from the feeling of finding one's home, a feeling unknown for long decades, ever since 1938.

In contrast to this, the consensual vocabulary necessary for collective memorial rites is not available. The usage in public speech and in public writing of the words 'country', 'nation', and 'society' seems to create just as many divisions as the authors of the various texts attempt to bridge. As for me, I take offence to the expression 'the national side' every time I hear it. We seem to have here a political group, which can eject from the body of the nation everyone, who disagrees with their position, merely with the help of a clever wordplay. It is, of course, also true that for some of the leftwing liberals the exclusive usage of the categories 'country' and 'society' is self-evident, even when the texts concerned no longer analyze discourses in social sciences, but reflect and create feelings.

Therefore, the strange surrealism of the memorial year followed from the fact that the personal experience of forming a political unity, the usefulness of the categorization of national history, and this sudden flash of light, was no longer available in 2006, not even as an assumption. It became obvious that the revolution as the heritage of the nation's unity was in fact rather unpleasant, because how could we commemorate with dignity something that left no mark on the present. And since the political class

was unable to recognize the potentials hidden in mythical repetition, i.e. it was unable to suspend the absolute power of the present, or take *seriously* the parallel action, or post-modern panorama, which represented national unity, it was condemned to insignificance at the best. But the actual outcome was much worse. In the situation that emerged after the Öszöd speech, the rivalry between history and stories began, analogous to what Reinhart Koselleck described as “the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous”.² The program of ritual repetition, which was deemed so boring only yesterday, suddenly disappeared, while in the most vulnerable days of the jubilee year publicity was given to groups, which were interested not in the arbitrary images of the historical tableau, but in forming a tableau vivant themselves, which, through the direct feedback of the media, acquired depressing significance for the political discourse. (There were moments that seemed to have been taken out of Borowski’s Battle of Grunwald or Wajda’s movie Landscape after Battle: the pictures of dispersing groups, pseudo-actions believed to be historical acts in the actual present, and the parody of forming a historical tableau vivant were almost unmanageable for the elite dominating the traditional machineries of representation.) It turned out that the “stage of history” and the images of live broadcasting were inseparable: the image of the Russian tank “jump-started” by protesters on Madách Square, which was originally meant to be used as a stage prop for the reenactment of historical events, accurately captured the tragicomic paraphrase of the tableau vivant. The fighting groups, the media hackers and the FIDESZ mass demonstration, which turned October 23 into an actual political promotion opportunity, practically cut the commemoration’s way to the present. The appearance of two victims of the purges after 1956, Iván Darvas and Domokos Kosáry, on Kossuth Square cleared of the

² Reinhart Koselleck: *Elmúlt jövő. A történelmi idők szemantikája* (Past Future. The Semantics of Historical Time). Atlantisz, Budapest, 2003. P. 387.

protesters by the police and also at the inauguration of the 1956 memorial statue on Heroes' Square, suddenly made that vacuum visible, which had come to envelop the memorial rite of the revolution. Obviously, the responsibility of those groups, who had absolutely no concern for 1956, was different. Those young people, who marched from Deák Square under the red-stripe banners of the Árpád House to have a good brawl, were obviously not interested at all in the rites of commemoration. But the colossal irresponsibility of FIDESZ was clear: *on this occasion a political party stepped out of the tableau vivant of a political community's mythical representation in order to spoil the chances of others to relive history.* Although the extent, to which this stepping out of the order of representation damaged the authenticity of the FIDESZ's rhetoric, is still not entirely clear, it can no longer be taken seriously. In other words, the party taking its cue from Orbán not only turned his back on the Prime Minister, but also ignored *all* the shades of meaning of the revolution, and this is an act of irresponsibility, which will cost dearly – for all of us. However, it was on November 4 that the act of making the revolution's memory invisible by the reality of the commemoration became truly critical. The sight of the FIDESZ party elite marching behind a huge banner that featured a quote from the Gospel according to John – “the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32): a sly innuendo about “Arbeit macht frei” – was embarrassing and discomfiting even for the rightwing political analysts. If the visual icon of October 23 was the “re-activated” Russian T-34, then the previously described image played the same role for November 4. Nothing can be further from the spirit of October 1956 than the things that help interpreting this image. If the revolution was naïve and sudden, human and communal, then the 2006 ‘paraphrase’ was characterized by cold and calculated political finesse, the semantics of depressing double entendre. The end result was that the moral and political crisis,

which had been there ever since the Öszöd speech, and which the FIDESZ had exploited to the maximum, received a new horizon through the squandering of the revolution's tradition and memory – in reference to Péter Kende's excellent book. Therefore, the political right has openly and irreparably betrayed the memory of the revolution, while the left stood by this in silence and in a state of apathetic torpor, thus proving once again that the contemporary realities outside the narrow parochial modernism afforded by the continuous present of the Kádár period have to this day remained invisible for them. The FIDESZ quite simply made a mockery of the cultural heritage of Hungarian history, while the HSP (Hungarian Socialist Party) has not yet acquired the vision that is necessary for capturing the fantasy of the people. By the winter of 2006, therefore, contemporary Hungarian society (the country, our homeland) had arrived at the present – without its elite (whose tasks it actually would have been to represent, and therefore to create, the country's political community) doing anything at all about the piled up layers of history, which should have been confessed, rather than destroyed. Because the state, or the canon, of the knowledge related to past histories is the one that records those frameworks of understanding, which in each other's rhetoric mark out the operational techniques of the loyalty market. In the world of the techniques that have undermined the canons of the post-nation-state age, of the global knowledge, of the media spaces, of the universal virtual worlds, and of the cultural identities rapidly emerging and disappearing, the role and the significance of the forms of national culture, heritage and remembrance are rising in synchrony with the growing clarity of the fact that the abstract norms of liberal capitalism and the dreams of mankind past the end of history have proven to be nothing more than illusions. The more apparent it becomes that globalization, with its intricate and delicate interconnections, is unavoidable – from the cultural symbols of

everyday life to the areas defined by political anthropology – the less meaningful the formula of *cuius regio eius religio* becomes. As the habitat of static nation states is being eaten away by the swiftly flying time, the interest in locality and in the locations of remembrance is growing. The compression of space and time, the reality of the always-on society, the dimension of concurrent interactivity that conquers more and more areas, the growing significance of speed, the fight to save and uncover the meaning of the past histories frozen into heritages – all these familiar phenomena all over Europe – seem to point to the growing prestige of local cultural traditions and customs, which cannot be identified from the viewpoint of the norms and forms of globalization.

But none of us can seriously believe that the casual montages comprised of local cultural norms, along with the easily decaying protean identities, the cultural spaces of consumption and the feigned naivety of intellectual pastimes that are manifested in the type of projects such as “Let’s invent Hungary” and “I love Budapest”, can serve as substitutes for the modern democratic genealogy, which could have been the basis of contemporary political community. We are of course talking about the memory and heritage of 1956.

Just as this heritage became the subject of public ridicule in the eyes of the newer generations, just as it fell prey to the right wing and victim to the left, so did a new epoch began, in which the ways of being loyal to the political community constituted the crucial problem. The functioning of the *democratic* political communities is inconceivable without facing up to the past, without *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. And just as the implementation of the long and arduous process of escaping the Nazi and Communist past became for Germans the key element in forming a democratic political community, or the foundation of modernity in the post-modern present, so it

would be for us, Hungarians. Therefore, when the political elite of the republic proved incapable of creating the memorial communities dominating the modern discursive spaces of the 1956 revolution, then it practically barred society's way from recognizing the validity of such canonized loyalties, which could eventually make it apparent that this is our homeland. It will lead to no good, if the constant references to the national history conceal nothing more than an empty rhetoric exploited for actual political gains by the political right, and if one's familiarity with the nation's history forms no part of *democratic self-knowledge*. It is no use decorating the cars with the Hungarian flag, if it merely means that the owner has *rightwing* political sympathies; it is no use wearing the cockade, if it only signifies that person's party political loyalties; if the red-and-white-striped flags of the House of Árpád can be flown at the FIDESZ conference and at its mass rallies, then all of these things demonstrate the right wing's extremely shortsighted politics of exploiting certain elements of the past, rather than people's identification with certain symbols from the political community's history. In this way, therefore, the conceptual arsenal of today's Hungary does not constitute the foundations of a political community, nor does it have anything to do with the practice of cultural heritage. We are getting further and further away from our possible goal: from the stage where the first-person plural has a rational meaning at the community level. This is despite the fact that, in my opinion, the existence and the postulation of political communities is more important in the age of globalization, than it had been ever before. Loyalty to the constitution and to the homeland is a matter for the emotions, just as much as it is a matter for the intellect. In this way we could soon discover that what the poet said about the nation being the common inspiration – is invalid. In other words, the cultural knowledge and practices necessary for the formation of the loyalties and joint experiences of people living in

isolated, virtual enclaves and homogenous sub-cultures that exist parallel in the same physical space and time are no longer valid. The debates and direct political actions surrounding Oszkár Jászi and István Tisza, Pál Teleki, Endre Ságvári and Imre Nagy faithfully demonstrate the depth and extent of these enclaves.

If patriotism is nothing more than a turn of phrase in linguistic history, one that is known to us only from our history class and has no valid meaning anymore, than we are heading for a sea of troubles in the following years. If this country can rehabilitate, without serious consequences, such high-ranking army officers, who considered as acceptable the violent death of people like Miklós Radnóti, Antal Szerb and half-a-million more in a state of undeniable patriotism, and regarded it as part of government policy, than it will, indeed, be difficult to love this country. Strangely enough, in this politically complicated and depressing autumn it was the weather that brought us some comfort. I was able to read the touching and educational passages from the discourses of self-understanding about the intellectual struggle to regain the right to patriotism in the late afternoons of October and November with my window open: in the works of Jürgen Habermas, Jürgen Kocka, Günther Grass and W.G: Sebald. These German authors knew that their country would become their homeland, and their society would evolve into an interactive political community, only if the shadows of Nazism could *never* again return as arguments in the debates of about the present. This country will become our homeland, when the flags of the Árpád House, which were used by the Hungarian Fascists, will not be flown in our public spaces, when the paraphrases of the mottoes of concentration camps will not be displayed at our national celebrations, when the hideous crimes carried out by the thugs of the Arrow Cross Party will be denounced as shameful by everyone. When May 8 will be brought back as a national holiday: in other words, when the starting point in national

self-understanding will be the feeling of solidarity with the political community that full-heartedly celebrates victory over Nazism. The dullness and the insensitivity that the left wing displays towards the democratic genealogies is a serious problem, because the admission to contemporary European cultural space of a society that lacks the ideal of modernism it is inconceivable. The West, the *other* Hungary, the habitable homeland would be unthinkable without the left wing. The problem is that, save a few exceptions, the elite of the HSP has probably never heard of the leftwing traditions it is supposed to represent.

The left wing, the present government, and the prime minister in person, should make a number of serious gestures in order to resolve the current political and moral crisis – there is no doubt about that. But the responsibility for making a mockery out of the notion of national history lies with the right wing: I am afraid that to some extent the recognition of the two responsibilities and the drawing of the political consequences are interdependent issues.