

“1956 means nothing to me, as I was not even born then ...“

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In my paper I try to find an answer to the question whether the memory of 1956 and its recent commemoration mean anything to the younger generations at all.

The main function of celebrations in general is to build delicate bonds, and a sense of belonging, among members of a group, be that a family, a religious group, a workplace or a local community. National holidays serve the same purpose: they provide a symbolic and normative legitimacy for a nation, while also offering an occasion for sharing an experience and marking out the most important moral and political points of reference for the community; it is also instrumental in strengthening the identity of individuals. In celebrating anniversaries we turn towards the past: by referring to the shared memories, and also by the act of the commemoration itself, we allow these occasions to create continuity between the ancestors and the living members of a nation. The collectively interpreted historical events, symbols and heroes together constitute the community cement for individuals to construct their sense of national identity. But when a national holiday actually divides people, rather than bringing them together, then it weakens the feeling of national identity and isolates the individual from the national community.

We had to wait thirty-three years before we could reclaim 1956 and officially celebrate it as a national holiday in 1989. Nevertheless, instead of bringing clarity to our collective knowledge of 1956, the past fifteen years have only produced more new questions. There are several factors that have contributed to the division: on which side people were before and during the revolution; what they did after the putdown of the revolution; what political views they held then; and what political views they are holding now. But does the generation gap come into the picture in any way? What about the people who only know about the events from books and reports: how do they see 1956? And what do young people think of the way others perceive 1956?

In harmony with the spirit of this “rapid conference”, I concluded a “rapid survey” to present a sociological snapshot of young people’s views on 1956. As regards methodology, I conducted a quasi focus group. The method of focus groups has a serious drawback in that it can say nothing about representativeness: we cannot reconstruct the statistical frequency of the views, nor can we draw a sociological

background or offer an explanation of the attitudes. On the positive side, it is an extremely efficient way to reveal the various types of views, as well as the possible approaches and contrary opinions.

I sent e-mails to members of two groups of university students – actually, my students who all had outstanding academic achievements and intellectual qualities – asking them to give me thirty minutes of their lives and write down their views, in a couple of paragraphs and without making any preparation or research, on the following topics:

Can you say that your life has in any way been affected by what happened in 1956?

Do you see any sense or any message in celebrating 1956 today?

Whom do you regard as the heroes and the bad guys, the winners and the losers, of 1956?

Finally, what do you think is wrong with the memory of 1956 today?

I based the following thoughts on my students' responses.

### **On Latency**

One of the most striking results of the rapid survey was the prevalence of latency. Of the 60 students chosen, only 12 obliged me with an answer. In view of the fact that I had close personal relations with the students polled, and also considering the special character of the student-teacher relationship and the students' interest in social sciences, the high ratio of the students who declined to answer gives a good measure of the prevalence of latency. The majority of the students had no wish to share their views on 1956 with me. The literature distinguishes between factual and communicative latency. In his study on anti-Semitism, András Kovács describes the difference by pointing out that conscious or factual latency is where a respondent has no developed opinions about the issues under examination, and communicative or functional latency is where participants in the communication hide their real opinions. We can only guess which one of the two types is more predominant in our case. Still, judging by the opinions of the students who did provide an answer, the best guess is that the "ignorance" about 1956 is rather widespread among people in their twenties. Many students have mentioned the lack of real discussions about 1956: the memories

of 1956 are hardly ever brought up in their private conversations with their parents, nor is the subject likely to come up in broader family circles or in schools. Young people tend to replicate their parents' attitude towards 1956: the lack of knowledge both in personal micro-history and macro-history (or the repression of this knowledge in the case of their parents) makes it difficult to have any personal knowledge about 1956, which also explains the existence of conscious latency pressure as indicated by the large number of people who declined to give an answer. \*\*\*\*\*

### **On People's Personal View on History**

But what are the views of those, who did not shy away from the topic of 1956? Is there anything about 1956 that touches them personally? According to the predominant view, they have no clear and strong personal experience and connection with anything that happened in 1956. The fact that a clear consensus on the assessment of 1956 is lacking at both the social and the political level plays a crucial part in this, because young people cannot get their bearings in the maze of the conflicting views. Another factor that weighs in heavily is the fact that 1956 happened relatively recently. The personal history of individual people, along with their subjective experiences in connection with 1956, greatly affects their assessment of recent events. At the level of personal micro-history, 1956 gave rise to very different human attitudes and reactions and the confusing and contradicting family recollections, which can often blur the actual events, can make it even more difficult for members of later generations to form a clear view. In one of the interviews, this came out as follows: "In my view, people will only be inspired by a historical event, if they have relatives who give them their own personal account of the circumstances. My grandparents were not closely involved in the events. One set of my grandparents lived in the provinces, and were busy trying to break away from poverty through education; my other grandfather wanted to keep away from politics altogether, trying to stay alive for the children's sake. For this reason, 1956 fills me with neither hatred nor enthusiasm." Elsewhere we can read this: "My former classmates came to my mind, who described how the authorities had taken everything from their grandparents (before 1956) and how they had thrown them into prison. It was very interesting to see that even in the case of today's adolescents, family recollections determine people's political orientation. Obviously, I am no exception." Another

recurring element in family recollections is the dilemma of *leaving* or *staying*. This came up in the interview on several occasions, although today's generation finds it difficult to make anything of these memories. "In 1956 one half of my father's family immigrated to the United States, where they have lived ever since. They had no political motive to leave; they simply wanted to have a better life. My father was six years old in 1956. They lived in Pozsony Street, and he even remembers the explosions and the tanks. He also recalls an intense family debate about whether they should stay or go. My grandfather on my father's side stayed here with the children. Only my grandmother is alive now. She has never had any regrets that they had not tried their luck: she believes that it was to make a living here, too. From the way they talk about the past, it is evident that they take pride in having stayed here." It is also true on a more general level that, when it comes to the assessment and significance of recent history and of the personal recollection of historical events, the public discourse is increasingly characterized by the clash of opinions and the competition of views and judgments. The further back an event took place in history, the easier it is to weave it into the fabric of both the collective narrative and the ideological phraseology, as the personal contexts no longer affect the assessment. In the case of 1956, this mechanism is seen to be at work in the uncertainties and disorientation of young people.

There is an even more important consideration here, namely the fact that 1956 cannot be judged in separation from everything else. It is inseparably linked to the long period of Kádárism that followed it. One of the respondents characterized his personal attitude towards 1956 as follows: „Without 1956, neither the politics of the Kádár era nor the survival strategy of the generation of our grandparents and parents can be understood.“ The family's micro-history of 1956 plays a crucial role in young people's ability to understand and judge all that was happening with their family and parents in the past fifty years; it also comes into play when they try to build their own personal micro and macro-historical identity by positioning themselves.

Paradoxically, the key to the correct assessment of 1956 from the viewpoint of identity construction lies in the three decades that followed the fall of the revolution. While for the majority of Hungarian society, the 1956 revolution forms – in a distorted and suppressed way – the crucial, ceremonial moments of family recollections, the social identities of the parents and grandparents were basically determined by the antithesis of 1956: the period of consolidation in the Kádár era.

Here is how one of the students has put it: „In 1956 the period of classical socialism ended: what came afterwards was the era of welfare dictatorship based on tacit compromises. It followed directly from 1956 that the public life and the private sphere separated for good, as people abandoned the great dreams and plans of the 1940s and sought refuge in the private sphere.“ For most of the families, lower middle-class prosperity and the experience of independence in their private life created a positive identity, which the memories of 1956 at least complicated, if not confused. As for the youngest generations, they came to the realization that if they wanted to identify with the „positive“ life strategy advocated by their parents, they could not escape the trap of cognitive dissonance reduction and could not resolve the serious contradictions between the post-revolutionary building blocks of personal social identity and the purely moral judgment on 1956.

### **On the Heroes and Victims of 1956**

In order to strengthen the sense of belonging among members of the community, and also to elevate society to a higher level of morality, the national holidays interpret the historical events in terms of a fight between good and evil. The 1956 revolution is no exception in this regard. Today's young generations evidently find it difficult to sort the actors of the revolution into moral categories. Heroes and victims, winners and losers get mixed up in hopeless confusion. „In many cases there is an extremely thin line between heroes and sinners; my guess is that there are people on both sides who qualify for either of these categories.“ „I could mention heroes and victims in connection with 1956, but I would not like to talk about winners and criminals! The Hungarian people as a whole is the victim, and the hero, too.“ „Hungary had great losses in human lives, which was only offset by moderate gains insofar as the system became a little less severe. Unfortunately, it also added one more item to the list of historical events that have helped shape our national character: sad and downbeat, with a tendency to harbor grudges. But proud, too, which is also important.“ The unique and tragically disrupted character of 1956, with all the individual and collective traumas that it left in its wake, and with the divergent roles its actors later came to play, together do not make it easy for later generations to deliver an objective and clear verdict on the character of the participants of 1956. This is how the people can become heroes and victims at the same time: the country, János Kádár and his party included, can be seen as both winners and losers, along with those who either

fell in the fighting or were imprisoned after it. As for those who left the country, they are both winners and losers, too, along with those who stayed here, whether they are quiet survivors or disappointed fighters. The pedestals stand unoccupied in the revolution's pantheon.

### **On the Revolution**

But the simultaneous existence of contrary interpretations and the lack of consensus are nowhere near as apparent as at the conceptual level. The young generation is quite united in rejecting the label of „counter-revolution“. They even tend to accept the term „revolution“. But when it comes to defining the meaning of the word, their respective views reveal substantial differences. „Depending on which side you are looking at it from, or how you answer questions such as „Whom the revolution was directed against?“, or „On whose behalf was it fought?“, and „What became of it?“, the answers can vary widely.“ Some would focus on the armed struggle to change the regime, while others would emphasize the aspect of bringing down a dictatorial establishment; still others would underline the desire to effect radical changes in the structure of power and society, while many would mention the idea of a war of independence and the heroism of the street fighters; and then there are still the ones who would consider the attainment of freedom as the most important consideration. However, since the word „revolution“ is effectively missing from the vocabulary of the young generation, the qualification of 1956, along with the memory of it, remains an empty and meaningless notion.

### **Contemporary 1956**

Notwithstanding the contradictions, members of the young generation are far from being indifferent to the memory of 1956. This is caused partly by normative factors and partly by socio-psychological ones. On the one hand, the view – very popular among the respondents, despite the fact that conceptually it is not being properly thought through – that when democracy and the democratic system were made the basis of the new regime in 1989, the roots of this voluntarily assumed common identity reached back to 1956. The political message, whereby it is impossible to engage in politics without the participation and the common will of society, can also

be traced back to 1956. On the other hand, from a socio-psychological viewpoint, all the respondents agree that a national community needs heroes and 1956 was one of those rare moments in Hungarian history, when the radical events and the seismic changes could turn a number of (ordinary) people into heroes. The overwhelming feeling of national pride, which is the emotional cement of every nation, is meant to give a state of satisfaction and mental balance at the collective level for every member of the nation, just as the function of positive self-evaluation is meant to bring spiritual harmony to the individual. For today's Hungarian society, the younger generation included, 1956 is one of the rare occasions, which can offer an internationally convertible source for national pride. However, the national canonization of 1956 is hindered by a few contradictions inherent both in the events then and in their reception later. These contradictions include the individual and collective **feldolgozatlanság**, the multitude of suppressed traumas, the lack of social consensus, the failure to talk out the experience of 1956, and the lack of political socialization, which could integrate the events of 1956 in a system of values acceptable to all members of society.