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The Lessons of a Reprise

The cult of round anniversaries belongs to the realms of numerology: there can be no rational argument favoring the 50th anniversary over the 49th or the 51st. Nevertheless, the power of numerology is real, which is confirmed by the anguish that grips people on their 30th birthday, instead of the 29th or 31st. Similarly, round historical anniversaries can make us pose to think. All the more so, since we are usually making preparations for them.

I was certainly making preparations for this anniversary. I reviewed a new, important historical drama, *Kazamaták* (Dungeons) by András Papp and János Térey, along with its stage production in Péter Gothár's direction. I wrote about the monuments completed for the anniversary, with special regard to the work erected on Parades' Square, now renamed as 56ers' Square. I reviewed all the nearly two dozens Hungarian films made between 1957 and 2004, which touched on the topic of revolution.* I also went to see the most recent films on 1956, but they were so pathetic that I excused myself from reviewing them.

I see no need to tire the participants of this conference by recapitulating my thoughts on all these subjects, especially since the 'unfortunate events' of 2006 – the familiar euphemism has actually reappeared in public speech – have swept the creations of cultural memory from the forefront of public interest, supplanting them with the issues relating to the culture of commemoration. We have shifted focus to questions probing the relative merits of protesters' besieging defenseless policemen, of policemen's kicking protestors on the ground, and – this has found such favor with the speakers of the left/liberal audience that they could never resist to bringing it up – of protesters' marking the territory around the Parliament with their urine.

* "A sokaság drámája. Megjegyzések Papp András és Térey János színművéhez kitekintéssel és visszatekintéssel" (The Drama of the Multitude. Notes on András Papp and János Térey's Drama with an Outlook and a Lookback), *Holmi*, XVIII. (2006) 3, pp. 394-406.

"A Magyar Bastille" (The Hungarian Bastille), *Színház*, XXXIX. (2006) 10. Pp. 3-7.

"Kis emlékmű-esztétika" (A Little Monument Aesthetic), *Beszélő*, (2006) 10. Pp. 52-58.

"Határesetek. 56-os filmek" (Borderline Cases. Movies on 1956), *Filmvilág*, (2006) 10. 4-9.

As is well known, the protests and riots in September and October 2006 were sparked off by a leaked tape recording of a speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, in which he had admitted lying. However, as many commentators have rightly pointed out, it was not the Prime Minister's own deceived voters who gave voice to their disappointment. Rather, it was the camp of his political opponents, who felt that their passionate mistrust of Gyurcsány had received clear justification and who, incidentally, also discovered a ray of hope that the discredited Prime Minister could be made to resign. This mixture of passion and hope was then projected on the memory of the 1956 revolution – obviously reinforced by the magical power of round anniversaries. It was this mixture that fired up the most radical elements within the opposition to draw up plans for violent action and mutiny in imitation of 1956. As in 1848, when the protestors symbolically seized the press, and then also in 1956, when the radio became the actual mass media to be occupied, so in 2006 it was the television's turn. Just as the crowd in 1956 directed its destructive fury at Stalin's statue – in an act of *damnatio memoriae* –, so the protesters in 2006 turned against the Soviet War Memorial on Szabadság Square. And just as the release of prisoners was an important demand both in 1848 and in 1956 (and incidentally also in 1789), the people taken into custody from among the occupiers of the Television and the street fighters of the following days were promptly elevated to the status of political prisoner, whose release had to be procured.

The absurdity of the existence of a substantive analogy, along with the event's overall character as a violent farce, must be clear to anyone. This, however, cannot change the fact that there have been hundreds who actively acted it out, and thousands who identified with it. Similar analogies are well known in history: “the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the disguise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire,” Marx wrote it in one of his famous writings, the title of which itself pointed to another analogy: “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.”

Further dramaturgical elements were added to the overall retro feeling: in keeping with the folklore of rebellions, one of the two leaders had already been working on his image as a proto-fascist guerilla, while the other cast himself in the role of a fugitive hiding out in the woods and the marches (“Though in caves pursued he lie,/ even there he fears attack”, Ferenc Kölcsey: *Himnusz*, translated by William N. Loew). The Goy Motorcyclists, a modern-day version of a knightly brotherhood, also put in a few appearances, and the myths of Hungarian ancestral history were coming alive on

Parliament Square against a backdrop of placards and other paraphernalia á'la Speaker's Corner. The dress code of modern Western-European urban warriors, and occasionally also of Palestine street fighters, was very much in evidence, along with behavior patterns witnessed in the successful orange revolutions staged in some of the successor state of the former Soviet Union, colorfully complemented by the tribal hullabaloo of the football hooligans. Those who, like myself, spent most of the fateful days with eyes riveted to the television screen, could occasionally catch a glimpse of some half-naked or almost naked "Christ-figures", who assumed various devotional postures – with their arms extended or knee bent, and their eyes dazed in a religious rapture, they were putting themselves up as sacrificial offerings to violence, and apparently taking all the sins of the world upon themselves.

The above listed behaviors cry out for a socio-anthropological study: perhaps such projects have already been under way, and I am looking forward to reading them. But just as I would be disappointed to see the resulting scholarly analyses become fig leaves designed to cover political declarations, I would likewise be appalled if, in the name of scholarly objectivity, researchers were to overlook the fact that these phenomena had been originating from our society, our lives and our culture.

It is in this regard that I would like to project the experiences of 2006 back on the events of 1956. There is no denying that the 50th anniversary of 1956 was not about the community of nations paying homage, nor about unveiling monuments (and with regard to the central event, the Prime Minister sank to his knees, following Willy Brandt's famous precedent in Warsaw): *in 2006 the revolution's memory was conjured up by a real-life imitation of 1956.*

Many would find this turn of events very upsetting, an act of sacrilege even. But we can look at it in a more positive light. Unlike formal remembrances, real events can produce cathartic results with the power to make us rethink the past. The acts of tearing up cobblestone streets to build barricades have done more to bring back the reality of 1956 than any formal ceremony could have ever done, and they also force us to make comparisons. To the majority among the reasonable, rational-minded society, this comparison will make it absolutely clear that fighting a dictatorship and an oppressive foreign power is not quite the same thing as rising up against a democratically elected government, regardless of the feelings one towards it. On the other hand, the same comparison can help de-mythologizing 1956, leading to an enlightened criticism of its cult and the schematic and fragmented memories. We

cannot seriously believe that the actors of revolutionary violence fifty years ago had a social or socio-psychological status that was markedly different from the one that the troublemakers of today have. Desperadoes and social outcasts were just as likely to be found among the crowd then, as they are today, along with brave and adventure-seeking youth or common criminals. We can understand the way in which a crowd can spontaneously gather and gain momentum without much organization or preparation. Our understanding of this will once again underline the difference: it will make us see clearly how under one set of circumstances people can turn into revolutionaries, and how under a different set of circumstances the same people can become ill-advised, brutal and mythomaniac loudmouths. Or better still, we can learn to understand how certain events in 1956 could lead to acts of either heroic resistance or lynching, and how people could simultaneously belong to both groups. The recent events have taught us a lesson about the uncertainties of any historical narrative, as they have shown us how fickle and mutable any event can be, not only an event of the past but also of the present: the same group of people can be presented either as freedom fighters or as football hooligans, or even as undercover provocateurs paid by the government. The same sequence of events could be interpreted either as police brutality to disperse a (largely) peaceful protest march, or as legitimate police action to bring a (largely) violent crowd under control. We have also learnt to appreciate the power of the images, whose incredible informative power could even alter the content of information, or at least could shift the emphasis.

The only reason why we are now in the position to discuss the lessons drawn from the 2006 reprise of the 1956 revolution is that the uprising never took off, and it never in fact assumed an individual character. The imitative and copycat features far outweighed everything else – as a direct consequence of the general lack of direction, but also in demonstration of the superficial nature of the analogy. Although the looting crowd managed to take over the television headquarters, it had no message to broadcast. The political aims of the violent protesters either never went beyond empty generalities or degenerated into fanciful demands. And it is also for the same reason that we can now have faith in the prospects of a reality check in politics.