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### **A Revolution in Suspended Animation**

The 1956 Revolution lingers on in Hungarian public consciousness in a state of suspended animation. Its memory has fallen prey to politics, but as far as the majority of the population is concerned it is dead. What have survived the past fifty years are the 19<sup>th</sup>-century concepts of nation and democracy, which under the surface of euphoria characterized the supporters of the revolution in October 1956, and are now weighing on the young Hungarian democracy as an enormous burden. In order to preserve the dignity of the revolution, Hungarian society refused to recognize either its anachronistic nature or its post-modern, anti-totalitarian features throughout the successive periods: during the revolution, in the period following its crushing, and after the democratic transition in 1989.

### **The Exclusionist Concept of Hungarianness**

One of the most important demands of the revolution was national independence. Since on the surface of politics this independence was postulated as specifically Hungarian, it is necessary to clarify who counted as Hungarians in contemporary public opinion. There are no surveys available, but the contemporary slogan that epitomized the touchstone for Hungarianness is well known: “If you are Hungarian, you will support us!”

Not only during the brief duration of the revolution, but essentially throughout the years that have passed since, no political reflection has been offered on this slogan, seemingly quite straightforward at the time but rather intolerant on closer inspection, which nevertheless worked so well on the majority of the nation at an emotional level.<sup>1</sup> The idea that communists, secret police members, or even criminals – or anyone who took a different, or even hostile, view of the revolution for that matter – could be denied of their Hungarian identity is of course a complete nonsense. Still, back then the idea that people should be excluded from the nation on grounds of their political sympathies or moral views seemed quite natural. It appears as if only victims could qualify to be Hungarians.

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<sup>1</sup> Even today's generations fail to find fault with this slogan, analogous to the old school of left-wingers (and perhaps even the new school, too) who go along with such crazy notion, as “this fight will be the last one”.

It is not true that the word “Hungarian” in this slogan only signified a wish to achieve national independence from the Soviet Union. The supporters of the one-party state looked on the Soviet military intervention as a justifiable means to achieve independence based on justice (they would have used the word “progress”), just as the protagonists of the 1956 revolution would have welcomed an American military action in support of their cause. As for some of the Kossuth Square protesters, they feel that the country’s independence is now being threatened by the European Union, and even by the Jews for that matter.

One third, or possibly even one half, of the Hungarian public still think it natural that people claiming to be “nationals”, and by implication assuming others to be “non-nationals”, can be regarded as democrats. (Approximately that many people voted for “national” parties in the recent past.) They find nothing wrong with the idea that a political party (in this particular case, a right-wing one) should identify itself with the patria, which “can never be in opposition”! Such rhetoric as “The left has turned against its nation for the second time!” can work on these people (as if the same could not be said of the right wing, from Gömbös to Szálasi), along with statements like “Our opponents are aliens to the nation”. The virulent receptivity to this type of rhetoric, which formed an integral part of the public speech in 1956, has lived on, which in itself is enough to have consequences that can seriously divide the nation. In 1956, such a division already existed in an embryonic form behind the scenes, and if there had been more time, that division – considering the number of armed civilians – would have surpassed anything we see in Hungary today.

The national unity that characterized 1956 was momentary. Such unity has a tendency to flip over into a civil war. An extremely pale echo of this possibility can be detected in the events that took place on the streets of Budapest in connection with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **The Anachronistic Direct Democracy**

Democracy was the other most important demand of the revolution. Although during the revolution the successive governments gradually succumbed to popular pressure to adopt a multi-party form, the revolutionary organs of political decision-making

were not pluralistic bodies but platforms of grassroots democracy such as workers' councils and national councils. They were formed very early on, spontaneously and with tempestuous speed, in total harmony with the elementary and deep sympathies of the majority of the population.

The 19th-century ideal of direct democracy already became a reality during the Russian revolutions in the form of the councils (soviets), but the totalitarian aspirations of the communist parties soon perverted the idea, thus proving that without the constitutional guarantees for human rights and the separation of powers, the direct execution of power based on the "intelligent assemblies of the working people" would soon fall prey to dictatorships because of their chaotic method of government.

1956 saw the formation of workers' councils and national councils not just at the local level (factory, company and institutional), but also at county level or even regional level. The intention of forming a single national council for the whole country was also announced. *Besides the archaic concept of nation, it was the similarly archaic concept of democracy that gave the revolution its distinctly 19<sup>th</sup>-century character.*

The nationwide network of workers' councils and national councils was a crucial feature of the revolution.<sup>2</sup> No one knows what implications it could have had, had the revolution been victorious. However, the instinctive hostility, with which members of the councils reacted to the rapid formation of various political parties, firmly believing that workers' councils were more adequate to the situation than the newly reformed parties, could offer us some insight. Nevertheless, the formation of the parties would have been a more natural development, and would have been much more in line with both the Hungarian and the European traditions.

Therefore, during the brief history of the revolution, two power structures took shape, which were politically diametrically opposed, with each declaring itself to be

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<sup>2</sup> The essentially Marxist concept, which developed into a left-wing canon with the help of people like Hannah Arendt and Bill Lomax, was based on this fact. According to this concept, 1956 was a workers' revolution and it eventually would have led to a kind of government by workers' councils. In the light of the events taking place in front of the Parliament in 2006, it is hardly a coincidence that Gábor Zakar, who has gradually turned into a right-wing supporter and an anti-Semite, came out in support of the councils, when he summed up the lesson of October 1956 in his pamphlets entitled "The Steel Circle of National Resistance" in 1957.

democratic: the councils, which were based on the idea of corporatism, rather than on political representation, and which basically exerted on society a homogenizing effect to plaster over the political divisions; and the political parties clearly championing political pluralism. This duality in itself would have been enough to lead us to believe that the nation had in fact been deeply divided already at the time of the revolution, only this could not become apparent in the short time available.

The two irreconcilable and potentially divisive predilections, one for direct democracy and the other for a multi-party system, could not have just disappeared by themselves, especially when all natural political expressions became suppressed under the years of dictatorship that followed; the unaddressed conflicts were merely shelved until such times, when society becomes free. This moment came in 1989. Following that, the tendencies, which did not have time to take root back then, slowly but inevitably gained strength in public opinion. The distorted form in which they eventually manifested themselves was the result of the long period of hibernation.

The idea of grassroots democracy and workers' council was originally linked to the left wing. The political chaos, which was manifested at around the fiftieth anniversary of 1956 in front of the Parliament and on the streets of the cities, bore all the signs of the movements of grassroots democracy – now adopted by the extreme right. This is where the exclusionist concept of the nation links up with the anachronistic/populist concept of democracy. Orbán's political activism to weaken the Parliament, and his encouragement of the "civic circles" to work to that effect, now threatens with the prospect of another Weimar republic followed by the "Gleichschaltung" of Hungarian democracy.

The link between the 1956 political ideal of "Hungarianness" and the patriotic jingoism of today's right-wing elements, or between the workers' councils of 1956 and the "constitutional assemblies" spontaneously formed on Kossuth Square, is clearly not a direct one. Nevertheless, deep down in the national psyche there is a certain socio-psychological state, at the same time atavistic and romantic, which makes today's generations very receptive to nationalistic slogans and ideas suggesting "direct" solutions to political problems. This psychological state is not exclusive to any particular class or political direction, although it is peculiar to a certain kind of

uncultivated personality. Given the right “zeitgeist”, this receptivity can become a political force. Since after 1989 the right wing rediscovered its political heritage from before 1945, and the left wing was unable to do the same, the streets fell into the hands of the grassroots democrats of the right wing, with their “national jingoism” and Árpád flags (the flag of the Hungarian Nazi party). And out of this murky scene looms the social milieu of Baross Square and Corvin Alley (two locations of heavy fighting during 1956).

### **The Tradition of Looking the Other Way**

As opposed to “nationalism” and grassroots democracy, which are 19<sup>th</sup>-century traditions, the third aspect of the revolution, *the tradition of looking the other way*, is a distinctly 20-century phenomenon, which still lives on today. The majority of Hungarian society looked the other way when they saw people being lynched during the revolution, much the same way they looked aside, and are still looking aside, in connection with the extermination of half a million Hungarian Jews during World War Two. When János Mesz, unmistakable for his wooden leg, opened fire on the people leaving the Communists’ party headquarters with a white flag in their hands, he gave the signal for murdering the State Security conscripts who had already surrendered themselves. Also, a number of ruthless criminals, who brutally beat up and hang people on the street – regardless of what the victims may or may not have done –, are now described as revolutionaries in various documents, on plaques and in commentaries. Those armed men and unarmed civilians, who looked on either indifferently or supportively as somebody carved out the heart of an envoy, were at the level of the spectators of the blood sports in the amphitheaters of heathen Rome – a situation crying out for St. Augustine.

Their names, especially if they had been sentenced to death by Kádár’s hanging judges in the subsequent show trials of the one-party state, are now cited in the company of the names of those decent people who had been executed either for playing a leading role in the revolution or for fighting with arms. Although the trials, which were conducted in the wave of retaliation following the revolution, were disgraceful, as the defendants were essentially denied accesses to proper legal defense, morally it is still wrong to confuse revolutionaries with criminals. Any former lumpenproletariats or convicted murders could become a revolutionary, but

those who engage in lynching during the revolution can never be called revolutionaries.

But seeing the names of murderers and revolutionaries side by side on memorial plaques is not the only occasion when a certain section of Hungarian society, right and left-wing alike, choose to look the other way. The majority of the right-wing supporters also look the other way, when prominent 1956 revolutionaries and their FIDESZ instigators howl with the pack of grassroots democrats from Kossuth Square, showering abuses on the prominent figures of Hungarian democracy they dislike for some reason. They have posted the names of public figures whom they suspected to be of Jewish origin; they put the label of communist on social democrats or people who had the courage to confront their communist past.

But the most telling sign is how a certain section of Hungarian society – both on the right and on the left – is willing to welcome with open arms its own spies: a considerable part of the leftists and liberals forgive their artists who informed on them, and the conservatives do likewise with their bishops.

### **The First Anti-totalitarian Revolution**

Many people can be caught up in the spirit of the age incidentally, but the wretched lumpenproletariats and the child soldiers fall victim to it inevitably. It is enough to think of the fate of children who are armed and turned into monsters by their cynical exploiters. As far as the spirit of the age was concerned, the Pest kids and the victims of the Hungarian revolutions were lucky in 1956. The deep resentment of the nation sparked off the revolution. Its authentic message was as follows: nobody, not even the most ignorant person can be redeemed against his or her wishes. In this sense, save the Berlin uprising of 1953 and the Poznan unrest of 1956, *the Budapest uprising in 1956 was the first post-modern, anti-totalitarian revolution in history*. And since history does not end, it will not be the last one, either. But since it was interwoven with the hundred-year-old ideas of national and social redemption, it was also the last romantic, 19<sup>th</sup>-century revolution. It was Janus-faced.

This revolution was no longer about class struggle. The people who actually rose in revolt were not the ones who continued to live in poverty; rather, they were the ones whose circumstances had changed: the left-wing reformists in the intelligentsia and the workers of growing mobility whose star was in the ascendant, and the small business owners and their employees whose circumstances had changed for the worse.

Back then, the Pest kids and the fighting proletariats were consumed by the passions of anti-totalitarianism, and in the process also got a taste of democracy and freedom. And since they had nothing to lose, they were not just brandishing their weapons, but also had the courage to use them – alongside with a few workers, even less intellectuals and still less middle-class members, who did have something to lose. Their brave acts should be gratefully acknowledged. But we should not look the other way: kids and lumpenproletariats are not necessarily democrats. The second-generation, unemployed Arabs setting fire to cars in Paris, the armed child soldiers of the hate-driven Palestine intifada and the middle-class rogues causing bodily harm to the police in front of the Hungarian Television headquarters are no heroes of the democratic cause.

### **Hungary's Faltering Democracy**

Democracy is a political system based on the recognition that society is inherently divided by conflicting interests. In order to prevent an endless series of catastrophes, formal political rules are established on the basis of the abstract principles of equality and freedom. They are themselves a demonstration of the fact that the conflicts of interests are inherent. Such a conflict exists even between the two fundamental principles of democracy: equality and freedom. Equality before the law necessarily implies the curtailment of freedom, while freedom means that everyone, even the greatest villain, should have certain rights. But in case of legal equality it is the most aggressive elements and the most numerous groups that are the first among equals. The significance of this contradiction will only increase in the future evolution of democracies, rather than decrease.

The political abyss that characterizes our 16-year old democracy has in fact been present deep down all along. The various compromises following the end of the war of independence led by Prince Rákóczi guaranteed a peaceful transition, but not without a cost: they exerted a fateful effect on the nation's political culture. Society became conditioned to believe that it was best if its fundamental conflicts remained buried. For that reason, Hungarian society never learned to manage its conflicts democratically.

Ever since the *kuruc – labanc* conflict (a conflict between the anti and the pro-Habsburg factions in Hungarian society) it has been customary to question the other side's true Hungarianness, whenever the resentment on one side took excessive proportions. The objective was to eradicate the opposition, rather than to convert it to one's own side by argument. Another characteristic feature has been for one generation to see a paternal benefactor in certain persons whom the previous generation had regarded as murderers. (From Francis Joseph to János Kádár.) Before 1918 the majority of the population looked the other way in order to justify domination over the national minorities; after 1918 they did the same in order to avoid taking the blame for Hungary's dismemberment after the Trianon Peace Treaty. In 1944 the majority of the Hungarian public failed to see the moral problem behind the Hungarian state's forcing some of its citizens to wear the yellow Star of David (not knowing about the existence of the gas chamber could not be an excuse in this case – it would have been sufficient to show outrage over the discriminatory anti-Jewish laws.) In 1956 the same majority thought it justifiable to chant anachronistic slogans in the interest of national good. And in 2006, although in a less explicit and less dangerous manner, the ignorance surrounding the national identity of Hungarian citizens once again raised its ugly head, accompanied by the archaic ideal of direct democracy and, the most appalling of all, the desire to look the other way.

Perhaps this time we shall be lucky: under the present favorable constellation in foreign politics, there might be enough time for Hungarian society to go through the learning curve and to acquire the skills of how to live peacefully with the fundamentally irreconcilable interests within society through the tiresome and continuous practices of democratic confrontations. Today the hushed-up negative



aspects of 1956 have come back to haunt us, together with all the unresolved issues in Hungarian history, because finally we live in a democracy.