Haunted by a Revolution?
What Is “Happening” to Us Here and Now?

The problem of historical continuity, or political legitimacy, continued to plague Kádár for the rest of his life. In the government communiqué written in Moscow and broadcast on November 4, 1956 he still did not entirely discard the possibility of taking up some of the demands of the revolution, at the same time unequivocally denying any return to the Stalinist traditions and methods.

By early December 1956, with barely a month passed, it had become clear that the new establishment took a grimmer view of the recent events, branding it as a counter-revolution, while showing no hesitation to revive the brutal oppression of the earlier period. In the next three months the official assessment of the events went through further refinement, or more precisely, through simplification. The resulting view continued to determine the official political line right until the turn of 1988/1989. After that point the problem of continuity only emerged in connection with the relationship to the Rákosi era: how is it possible to honor its “accomplishments” without being identified with its “lawless acts”, most notably the trials of Rajk and Kádár, respectively.

Looking back on the events from today’s perspective, greater importance should be attached to the fact that the revolution, which had once been the expression of the nation’s will and “unity”, failed to become – it could not become – a tradition outside the circle of a small minority (the democratic opposition, a fragment of the formerly active 1956ers): that is to say, a disruption of the tradition dominated right until 1989.

In other words, the memory of the revolution came back to life in the months of the democratic transition, but even that is not so simple, because before we could make such a statement, we should clear up a few points: What do we mean by “revolution”? (Was it really a revolution in the first place?) Can it be identified with its “revived memory” or is it something fundamentally different? If so, is it possible that ever since 1989 we have been commemorating not the 1956 revolution but the Kádár regime that suppressed it?

It was confusing that soon afterwards two fundamentally opposite factors began to dominate at the level of commemorations: on the one hand there was the acclamation of the – at least aspired – national unity epitomized by the revolution, and on the other hand there was the emphasis that the participants of the revolution, not just the active, but also the passive ones, interpreted the events and their own role not necessarily on the same premises.

The common denominator for 1956 was that the overwhelming majority of the population stood united in rejecting the ruling regime, regardless of the fact that at the level of individual motives there may have been serious differences. This was the essence of the "national unity"; this was what the slogan summed up as "If you are Hungarian, you will support us!" Total dictatorship, which was in the focus of rejection, may have concealed different grievances at the individual level, but these all stemmed from the same root, which was complete oppression.

One particular segment of society, the "Stalinists" – a group not as yet clearly defined by historiography – naturally rejected this demand, but the overwhelming majority of the people was, indeed, united in demanding changes – and not simply modifications. When Imre Nagy was ousted in early 1955, the majority of the politically active (thinking) population realized that even within any given Communist regime there were real alternatives, and no matter how much they hated the system, they could all tell the difference between the different versions of the same "Communist" practice from their experience of the Rákosi/Gerô regime on the one hand, and Imre Nagy's government on the other.

After February 1956, when the Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union pulled the carpet from underneath the feet of Rákosi and his gang, more and more people began to think what György Litván actually said straight into the face of the mini-dictator: the once-beloved party leader had lost the confidence of his people and must go! Any delays, for which the Soviet Party leadership bore the brunt of the blame – in other words Rákosi and his gang – became an increasingly heavy burden.

On the contrary, the unwavering insistence on the person of the dictator made it increasingly clear that his ejection from power alone (without structural changes)

would no longer solve the problem: at the Petôfi Circle’s discussion in late June 1956, which turned out to be its last serious debate, Tibor Déry brought up the same problem. However, the changes (or lack of changes) in Hungary did not take place in a vacuum, and Déry’s words were dramatically underlined by the workers’ riots in Poznan.

In other words, when the Soviet leadership finally made up its mind to get rid of Rákosi less than three weeks later, that decision solved nothing at all as it only afforded momentary relief from Hungary’s problems. Personal changes in themselves promised nothing new; they only indicated the authorities’ hesitation, which helped bring matters to a head. Before Rákosi’s ejection – or from a different angle, before Gerô’s appointment – people could still believe in the possibility of the “party’s renewal”, but the events proved just the opposite.

By June 1956, the social groups expressing dissatisfaction in one way or another could no longer be described as a small minority, but the appearance of university students on the scene – they had originally been activated by the authorities in the name of sham democracy – already signaled the emergence of some kind of a nationwide protest. They no longer settled for putting their weight behind the reform communists’ demands (democracy within the party, Imre Nagy’s appointment). Now they wanted to define the criteria of liberal democracy and national sovereignty.

None of the contemporaries could really tell whether this double-edged demand could be reconciled with any kind of Communist system in the name of “de-Stalinization”. This question has still been debated among historians. Rightly or wrongly, the participants still believed that parliamentary democracy and national sovereignty could be reconciled with the social (socialist) achievements of the Communist regime. We no longer have the finely tuned hearing of the contemporary participants to spot this – not even insignificant – difference, which then existed between Communist (and even Stalinist) system and socialism.

All this might mean that the revolution was doomed to failure from the start, because the proposed system, basically a social democratic one, was irreconcilable with the Communist regime. In other words, this socialist character of the revolution was an

anachronism already back then: although not exactly a utopia, it was nevertheless an unrealistic plan.

Imre Nagy's reburial in 1989, or for that matter the democratic transition as a whole, was not about the memories of the revolution: in reality it was about the retaliation that came afterwards, about the burial of the Kádár regime and the creation of a new, democratic legitimacy through negation. After that, the entire revolutionary fervor for sweeping changes ran out of steam: the political transition itself was conducted from above – if not quite from a Rózsadomb villa, but mainly from behind the locked doors of conference rooms.

In some ways, this political transition was very similar to the Compromise of 1867, in the sense that it implemented the earlier goals of the revolution through peaceful means at a later time and without its radicalism. The compromise made by the political class, and also desired by the large majority of society, was reached in order to achieve the democratic changes without violence, without more blood on the Pest streets. Antall's catchphrase ("You should have made a revolution!") was justified in this sense, but from the viewpoint of the final outcome it was false (just as the criticism of the 1867 Compromise was false), because the goals of the revolution were more or less accomplished. What were not accomplished were the ideas that had been unrealistic back then more than thirty years ago.

But from the above it follows that, irrespective of our intentions, what we celebrate on October 23 is not the revolution that has, to this day, not been satisfactorily explained, but the political transition that carried its lasting goals through, no matter how half-baked the result turned out to be. The fundamental contradiction, which is at the root of the permanent conflicts, is basically this: the essentially "leftwing" revolution failed to become – and in its original form could not have become – the tradition of the "left wing", while the "peaceful transition", the culmination of Kádár's reforms, did.

As a consequence, the right wing has adopted the "embezzled" – and essentially "leftwing" – revolution with growing fervor, while the left wing has been looking for its identity in an essentially "rightwing" political turn. What the two camps have in

common is that neither wants to know about the 33 years that passed between these two towering events of twentieth-century history: “Kádárism”.

Strictly speaking, this situation is schizophrenic, which already became clear in 1989, when the Republic was proclaimed – by a former Communist party apparatchik – on the anniversary of the 1956 revolution, in much the same way that the celebration of the Stalinist constitution had supplanted St. Stephen’s Day.

But this failed to make the formula clearer, or the situation less complicated. We could say, or even demand, that “Keep off the memory of the revolution!” (October 23 could even be declared a workday), but in the final analysis what remains at stake is nothing less than our present democracy, which grew out of the revolution’s memory. And we can really not blame its present ills on János Kádár and his regime, as both gave up the ghost in 1989. While it is true that we “did not make a revolution”, the real problem is that, regardless of party political loyalties, we all failed to draw a clear demarcation line between the former dictatorship and our democratic republic stemming from 1956. We simply let it grow into our lives. We have become contiguous with it.

So, it was not the revolution fifty years ago and its commemoration that caused the recent calamities; rather, it was criticism of the democratic transition that was behind the events on October 23, 2006. The right wing clamors for a genuine “people’s democracy” supplemented with all the accomplishments of socialism (even at the expense of parliamentary democracy), while the left wing stands by the consequent implementation of bourgeois liberal democracy and its part-and-parcel, market economy.

According to political analysts, one third of the electors are “stalwart supporters” of the left, and this figure is matched almost precisely on the right. This is evidently the result of visceral politics, where the demonization of the other side plays a crucial part, with both sides labeling each other as communists and fascists, respectively. Quite clearly, the political classes have now reached an impasse: when this deadlock breaks, or alternatively when the voters’ “rebellion” breaks out, it will radically redraw the political map of Hungary, with unforeseeable consequences (for the time

being?), and at the moment this unpredictability is exactly what conserves the situation.