

Turning a blind eye to the obvious

Budapest, fall 2009. István Rév opens the door to the Open Society Archives for a discussion about bloodshed as a poor gauge of a revolution, about honesty and decency as rare commodities, about populism and utopianism.

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The Royal Hungarian Post Office Savings Bank, built in 1901 by architect Ödön Lechner, at Hold utca (Moon Street) in Budapest, is a symphony of color and form, of whim and imagination, of a rustic playfulness. Unlike so many other Jugendstil buildings in this city, where exaggeration and far too shapely replicas are always close at hand, this palatial bank, with its many entrances along an extremely long facade, is neither frightening nor particularly overwhelming. For the goal was also to attract customers, those with small savings; to be – inviting.

In the fall of 2009, the entire section of the street is transformed into a construction site. The visitor, on his way to a meeting, experiences a strange combination of admiration and wonder. In 1873, Budapest had been recast as the capital of an empire that already had one. If Budapest had missed out on the pomp and splendor of the Baroque period, the rounded buildings with surrounding gardens in which the aristocracy loved to make appearances in Vienna, and instead became a city comprised of various integrated districts with a bourgeois if not to say industrial character – this was the thesis of historian Péter Hanák in a late work in which he compared the two twin cities with each other¹ – the Hungarians, in the years around 1900, needed to make everything so much more voluminous, much more ornate and florid, in accordance with the instinct that the parvenus permit themselves: to spew when they can't pick and choose.

Why am I here? And which trip is it now? I set my sights on a side street, right in the heart of the former financial center of the metropolis. The pompous Hungarian National Bank building, recently restored. But the tempo on the sidewalks is cautious. For some years now, Hungary has been driven by crises – a social and an economic crisis, but also a crisis of confidence. Did it never learn from all the defeats? “My country has lost all its wars”, Ferenc said to me when I visited him here in the summer of 1982 – Ferenc, who had been a child of war in my grandmother's family after the World War I, in the same southern Swedish town, Hässleholm, where Ger-

Post Office Savings Bank and Goldberger House, on the Pest side of the Danube River.



many's war dictator Erich Ludendorff sat and wrote his memoirs. “And that's what makes me so optimistic. Because if we lose the next war too, we will be free.”

The Cold War. Communism's war against its class enemies – real or imagined.

We sat in a French restaurant on Rajk László utca, near Margaret Bridge, when he uttered those words. Ferenc ordered everything for us in French; he had held a professorship in that language. He and Rajk, one of the first victims of the Stalinist show trials in postwar Eastern Europe, had been students together. The street is called something else today; rehabilitations made the Kádár period has been examined with new eyes. György Konrád, the writer, former dissident and president of both the Berlin Academy and International PEN, constantly in a foreign land, had Ferenc as a teacher in his youth.

I am following a trail – and immediately go astray. In 1982, I also met János Kornai, the economist. It was a sweltering August afternoon, we sat at an espresso bar on the river. His book on socialism qua economics of shortage had recently been published. Now I read in his autobiography about his own path, to and from Communism. Both Kornai, born Kornhauser, and Ferenc were of Jewish descent. A teenage János was helped by a letter of protection issued by the Swedish Embassy during Raoul Wallenberg's time here, and he was then hidden in a monastery.² Because of his language skills, Ferenc was needed as an interpreter and liaison officer when the Germans and Hungarians and Romanians fought on the Eastern Front, on Ukrainian territory. Despite his Jewishness.

Puzzling. So might one think in retrospect.

The building, erected exactly a hundred years ago, in 1909 is located on Arany János utca, just around the corner, between the palatial bank and the cathedral. The family name was Goldberger, Jews from Switzerland; came to Hungary and founded a textile company; here there were offices, administration and management. Most of the Goldbergers were deported during World War II, the company was nationalized by the Communists, who turned the building into a department store for the *nomenklatura*, the members of which could acquire cheap cigarettes and Scotch whiskey with dollars on the premises. István Rév's office is furnished with a writing-desk, bookshelves, and chairs, all look like originals. Some of the pieces have wooden roll fronts that are true to the period. One of the wall decorations was also hanging in his office when I last visited him, in 2001. It is a copy of a portrait that he bought at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Another copy happens to be in my own study. It is a collective portrait of a number of people who founded and ran *Past & Present* – considered by many to be the foremost historical journal in the world for many years after the war. Several of these people were

Three foundational phases – and three revolutions – in less than a century. How does one survive?



Marxists. It is odd to behold such a picture in Budapest, twenty years after the real-political collapse of Marxism.

István Rév, director of the Open Society Archives, a center for the collection of documentation connected to the era of Communism and the Cold War, as well as documentation connected to human rights violations, does not duck.

“You see, I started my carrier as an economic historian, and this journal, founded in the 1950s, had a particular focus on economic and social history. Some of the founding editors did indeed have a Marxist background. They nevertheless managed to become serious historians, perhaps in spite of their ideological bias. In this country, the case was the reverse: even good historians were less successful as scholars because ideological requirements prevented them from producing first-rate results. And this has become a reminder to me, that it is possible be intellectually honest and ideologically mistaken at the same time.”

Intellectual honesty as a scarce commodity, regardless of the ideological systems? This is a reflection that I make as I write down notes from our conversation.

One of the people in that picture is Eric Hobsbawm. What was important with Hobsbawm, István Rév argues, was that he was able to approach historical currents even at the price of disappointing his ideological peers. That does not mean that Rév idolized him. But Hobsbawm’s early book, *Primitive Rebels*, taught him a lot, he says, in its reassessment of unorganized popular movements, in societies that had not developed political consciousness or formal organizations in a modern sense – as struggles for institutionalized power.

“I remember that we had a heated discussion on the Spanish Civil War and on the role of the Soviet Union in the postwar development of the welfare state in the West at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam a long time after *die Wende*, it must have been 2005 – where beside such authorities on 20th century Europe as Tony Judt, Robert O. Paxton, and Hobsbawm himself, Marcus Wolf, the former Stasi-boss, was also present!”

So many European projects! And Comecon was one of them.

István Rév, born 1951, is professor of history and political science at the Central European University and academic director of the Open Society Archives, Budapest. His book *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism* (2005) was widely acclaimed as a scholarly effort to disfigure the image of an era that still haunts the collective memory in the newborn societies. Here reading Stephen Kotkin’s and Jan T. Gross’s book, *Uncivil Society*.

Rév’s own background is to a great extent that of a dissident in a police state. He was one of founding members of the “Danube Circle”, an early environmental movement with political goals that was awarded by the Right Livelihood Award, “the Alternative Nobel Prize” in 1985, and he was one of those who co-founded *The Budapest Review of Books*, a quarterly that was also published in English, as long as sufficient funds were available – it became a forum for young intellectuals who needed to orient themselves in society when the old powers had disappeared, as well as an information channel for outsiders who wanted to know how people were thinking in the new political culture. In the old days, the opposition had been forced to be circuitous and had used the classical ruse of speaking in allegories.

I tell István Rév about the meetings with Hungarian historians in the early 1980s when a reassessment of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called the “prison of peoples” (*Völkerkerker*), was underway. The imperial epoch did in fact permit significant economic growth in the various corners of the empire, and there was, at least towards the end, after 1867, a relative tolerance of dissidents.

Rév believes that such analogies could serve different purposes:

“For historians such as Iván Berend and György Ránki, two leading reformers, the Stalinist system with its direct Soviet rule in the satellite countries, reduced Hungary to colonial status. They argued that the monarchy on the other hand provided large protected markets for Hungarian agrarian products and a customs barrier for its industry. This gave the Hungarian economy space to develop after

”What do the populists want? Retroactive bloodshed?”

Austro-Hungarian Monarchy came into being in 1867.

“In fact their argument tended to justify further Comecon integration that would supply the respective economies with a similar protected market as had been operating before World War I, when the monarchy ceased to exist. In other words – they argued – it would be profitable for a country like Hungary to commit itself to the Comecon. And they went on to suggest that we thereby would be able to reform the Comecon towards a more balanced relationship between the parties concerned. They hoped to turn the Comecon into a real competitor to the European Common Market.”

This interpretation of history thus contained a hidden agenda. It was also influenced at the time, Rév reasons, by Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of the long history of global economy, the interdependence of (changing) centers and peripheries.

Now, one may raise the question whether the events of 1989 should be interpreted as national liberations, where each country and people followed their own path, or as a concerted action, a more or less simultaneous change of regimes. In either case the question of primacy tends to arise. Who was the prime mover? The Pope, the Poles, Gorbachev?

Hungarians would protest anyway, István Rév comments. They would point instead to 1956 as a starting point for the dissolution of the whole empire.

“When it comes to 1989, many people of today contend that this was not a real revolution, or that it in one way or another was stolen. In the first place, Communism had not had a democratic legitimacy; but neither had the self-appointed people – before the first democratic elections – that succeeded the Communists. The agreements to replace the old system were reached before any democratic structures were established. Compromises with *l’ancien régime* were made over the heads of the people. This is what secured the peaceful, negotiated nature of the transition. 1989, in opposition to the French Revolution in 1789, offered the model of non-violent revolution. When learning about history at school, children are taught that revolutions usually follow the French model; this is what makes it so difficult to recognize that 1989 was in fact a revolution, a new model of regime change.

“The transition was peaceful, even in Romania. This has disappointed some, to the extent that when none of the high hopes of 1989 has been fulfilled, it became possible to argue that what had taken place in 1989 was not a proper revolution. Today we have to pay a very high price for the compromise with the old regime. There was no lustration, no terror à la Robespierre, no vetting of the Communist elite. Former Communists were allowed to remain in politics. And old, reformed parties have returned to leading positions: in Hungary, in Romania, even in the ‘GDR’. They use their positions to enrich themselves and gain economic advantage. It is difficult to understand for the disillusioned, unemployed people in the midst of financial and economic crisis that this was the price we had to pay for avoiding bloodshed.

“So people of the former Communist countries are very receptive to populist voices!”

This István Rév says with an eye towards the upcoming general election this spring in Hungary. He and everyone else I talk to are expecting a takeover by rightist populists, where there are strong elements of xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

Yet he also is careful to emphasize that 1989 differs completely not only from 1789 but also from 1968.

“Had the Communist regimes collapsed in ‘68, it would have been very difficult to reach compromises at the roundtables. Then, utopian ideas were in the air, people were ready for one more adventure. Twenty years later there was no utopian fervor. The dissidents wanted to bring Central Europe back to Europe and to take over old, existing structures that seemed to work so well in the Western part of the world. The slogan of the movement was: ‘No experimentation.’ The goal was to adopt structures from the Western world.

“And now the populists say: Those structures that we imported simply do not work. So in light of today’s crises, we have to ask ourselves if it was a mistake not to experiment. Sarkozy, the French president, – who is no stranger to populism – has called for a renewal of the capitalist order. Populists in East and Central Europe translate such words as a quest for a new system, to reopen the process of transi-

tion and instead of importing ideas and institutions from the West, we should invent something autochthonous that goes beyond the capitalist market and liberal parliamentary democracy.”

There is much talk of missed opportunities nowadays.

“It would have been very dangerous to experiment, and to my mind it certainly was advantageous that we did not have hunger for utopianism. And we thought – probably rightly so – that it was a bad idea to lustrate after the long experience of the horrors of the Communist regimes.

“1956 taught us a very important lesson. Based on the experience with the revolution and its defeat in 1956, we feared a Soviet intervention in 1989, a threat both to the opposition and to the Hungarian Communists who believed they would lose power in the event of a revolt that they could not handle.

“In June of 1989, 200,000 people gathered when Imre Nagy, head of the popular regime of ‘56, was reburied. The security police, aware of what happened in ‘56, thought that the crowd might storm the building of the Hungarian Radio, as it did back in 1956. But when at the end of the day the secret police realized that their worst fears had not come true, they thought and even reported that nothing exceptional had taken place. But in fact what happened was that in the grave were placed the remains of Communism. It was over! It was obvious to all, except to those who thought they were still in power, as they still controlled the radio and the television, unable to understand that a regime could be changed in a hitherto different way, without violence. They waited for the revolution to come. It came, succeeded but without violence.

“And today the populists say that it did not come, as in 1956. There were no executions. ‘The Communists are still around.’ And: ‘We let them ruin the country.’”

What is it that the populists want to see? Retroactive bloodshed? Is the criterion of a revolution that one has gone to the radio building in Budapest, as in 1956, and let oneself be massacred? Rév asks rhetorically. Now people sat down – almost everywhere – at a round table and reasoned with one another.³

Are we then in a Weimar Republic situation? Is there a general belief in a much stronger state power, to supplant the existing democratic bodies?

István Rév:

“Well, I won’t be surprised at all if a majority of the electorate vote for a state power with more authoritarian features. The populists have an anti-corruption agenda. They moralize political life. And they have Church support. They would perhaps introduce a quasi-presidential system, with a lesser role for the parliament, strengthen law and order, and bring the media under the control of the state. They will try to finish the revolution in a way that is unfaithful to the spirit of the extraordinary changes that took place in 1989.”

Note. This interview was conducted on Oct. 15, 2009.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest*, Princeton 1998.
- ² Kornai touches on these events in his autobiography *By Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006.
- ³ See further Timothy Garton Ash, “Velvet Revolution: The Prospects”, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LVI:19. – Garton Ash here, in accordance with Rév, contends that the “velvet revolutions” in Eastern Europe differ fundamentally from the French Revolution and its followers in their non-violent, non-utopian and non-class character and thus can be seen as “pre-French”.



What if the liberation had come in 1968. No round-table discussion, then.