

Hungary and Transition: Opportunities and Challenges

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My contribution to today's discussion will be to represent the attitudes of the 'person on the street,' the average Hungarian citizen. Hungary is undergoing a period of unprecedented political and economic reform. The pace of change seems continually to accelerate: more radical proposals eclipsing measures debated only months earlier, new associations being founded weekly to address the growing complexity of Hungary's political scene. Not since the brief period of coalition politics between 1945 and 1948 have Hungarians witnessed so potentially radical a shift in politics and economy; not since the heady days of 1956 have events seemed to be propelled so swiftly along new paths. The weight of historical precedent is heavy: twice in this century alone, in 1919 and in 1947, Hungarians have seen their attempts to achieve a smooth transition to democracy and social justice thwarted. Accordingly, the one certainty in the midst of so much excitement and confusion is the widespread feeling of uncertainty, ambivalence and trepidation. No one knows what the future holds. Yet as one friend observed, 'uncertainty is about as close to hope as we get in Central Europe.' In a recent survey, 46% of Hungarians surveyed confessed to being entirely uninterested in politics, another 24% characterized themselves as cautious and reluctant to debate current issues, and only 29% considered themselves active participants in political life (Magyar Nemzet, 1989.II.6, p. 4). If one groups respondents according to the level of education attained, then among university graduates 65% professed an interest in politics, while among those with less than an eighth grade education, only 8% were interested in political affairs. These numbers highlight the pervasive alienation from politics felt among many Hungarians, a phenomenon which is especially prevalent among non-intellectuals, as the numbers indicate. In the village, people would express their disinterest in all things political by claiming to be members of the Stomach Party. Although primarily a statement about the importance of one's material well-being, which includes the ability to provide for one's family, such a comment also conveys the common attitude that people wish to be left in peace, undisturbed by state agencies or party officials. Forty years of Marxist-Leninist party politics, in which all forms of local initiative and popular participation have either been

prohibited or crassly manipulated, have clearly left their mark. Moreover, political practice prior to the Second World War could hardly be characterized as democratic. Despite a tradition of active party politics, open parliamentary bickering and biting editorials, backroom compromise frequently resolved public disputes, leaving most of the population unheeded and unrepresented. Hence, the general attitude among industrial and agricultural workers that politics is the exclusive domain of the upper classes stems from a long history of elite politics, be it among aristocrats, Communist party bosses, or even dissident intellectuals and leading figures from alternative proto-parties.

Nonetheless, when asked in a recent survey whether they followed the parliamentary debates broadcast on tv in December and January, 78% of Budapest residents and 82% of rural residents answered positively (Magyar Nemzet, 1989.11.7., p. 4). Though long excluded from the political process, most Hungarians now appear to be curious spectators. These apparently contradictory survey results in fact capture an important tension which underlies the ambivalence, alienation and uncertainty of Hungarian citizens toward politics. Passivity is a stance wholly in keeping with alienation, and moreover, a safe bet, for whenever Hungarians have taken to the street, to the factory, or to the town hall to rectify years of social injustice, they have been harshly punished for it. This was just as true in 1919, when innocent people were slaughtered by Communists and Radical Rightists alike, as in 1956, when so many thousands lost their lives. The lessons of history seem to be less compelling for the young: in all surveys, younger respondents appear more impatient and anxious for changes to be swift and uncompromising. Young people also differ from their elders in evaluating the Soviet Union's response to a multi-party system in Hungary: while young people tend in larger numbers to expect the approval of the Soviets toward a multi-party system, middle-aged respondents expect the Soviets to disapprove.

The reluctance and hesitation of workers to engage in political activity is shown in the fact that there are only a few sporadic and isolated incidents of public projects initiated in factories or rural communities. Those activities which have taken shape share none of the explicitly political goals common to the flourishing political culture of intellectuals in Budapest. Although organizations such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum may boast rural membership, their ranks are filled primarily by those considered intellectuals in local terms: veterinarians or elementary school teachers, for example. The few clubs and public committees which have been

initiated by urban workers and villagers are almost exclusively economic in focus. This demonstrates the strong priority non-intellectuals place on economic issues, a point to which I shall return in a moment. Rural inhabitants are generally considered to be more conservative than those who live in the city, a view which is at least in part an artifact of elitist prejudices against the country bumpkin. Yet this evaluation of villagers is apparently confirmed by recent survey data which shows that while three-fourths of Budapest residents are in favor of a multi-party system, only a simple majority of those living in the countryside support this change (Magyar Nemzet, 1989.II.7, p. 4). This reluctance to embrace radical changes rests equally on matters of principle and pragmatic experience. As concerns principles, many people are apprehensive about a return to capitalism, and what changes that may bring in their lives. I will elaborate on this point shortly. As regards pragmatic experience, rural inhabitants are keenly aware of the ability of local elites to forestall and circumvent political and economic change. Long witnesses to the power of ensconced privilege, villagers are dismally aware of the intransigence of local authorities, even in the face of directives from central organs of the party and government. In Hungary, this phenomenon, referred to as the "small king syndrome," is widespread, and there is no indication that alternative parties will breed a new race of public officials to replace the old. As the saying goes, "Even saints line their own pockets first." Thus, rural inhabitants have no assurances that the current changes occurring in Budapest will constitute a serious change in local affairs, much less in economic policies and opportunities, which they consider of far greater importance than politics per se. Some observers had argued that a renewed sense of political citizenship would arise with the introduction of a personal income tax last year. However, this does not seem to have taken place. When surveyed, 77% of Hungarians said they do not believe that by paying income tax their say in how state monies are spent has increased whatsoever.

The firm conviction held by most Hungarians that the political process is superfluous, or certainly external to their own lives, is matched with an equally firm conviction that economics do matter. The average Hungarian citizen is far more concerned with the economic crisis than with the fine-points of constitutional law, party privilege, or human rights. As articulated recently by a woman who is employed as a clerical worker in Budapest, 'no one gives a damn about the constitution! They're always trying to divert our attention with all sorts of rubbish. But milk is 16 Ft. a liter; last year it was only 8. That's what I'm interested in! The only ones who care about the constitution are the ones who earn 50,M Ft. a month and who travel abroad for

their weekend jaunts!" During the parliamentary debates broadcast on tv, most viewers were interested in discussions of economic policy, and particularly concerned about the immediate impact of budgetary decisions on his/her standard of living. More than half the population is convinced that the economic problems plaguing the country are of long lasting impact (HVG, 1988.VII.23., p. 50); 77% of survey respondents consider the standard of living to have deteriorated even over the last year (HVG, 1988. IX.17., p. 51). The fears associated with a drop in the standard of living are clearly greatest among those in poorer paying jobs, and on a fixed pension. Hungarian officials have just recently conceded for the first time that poverty is a serious problem in socialism, affecting from one-fourth to one-third of the population. In a survey conducted in 1987, the elderly and poorly educated respondents appeared especially vulnerable to shifts in the standard of living: 26% of unskilled workers and 44% of those with less than an eighth grade education claimed they were unable to support themselves financially. Among those over the age of 70, 50% ranked themselves in this category. A joke being told in Budapest these days asks, Why do rats have four legs? To outrun the pensioner to the garbage can.

A cartoon published in mid-February in a national newspaper showed several men sitting in an office. The caption read: "I've enjoyed enough of the advantages of socialism, I would finally like to enjoy some of the disadvantages of capitalism." This sentiment may reflect the attitude of some Hungarians, but it is not an opinion that is shared by the industrial or agricultural worker. To convey the average citizen's perspective, I would rephrase the caption to say: 'I've not had enough of the advantages of socialism, and I only want to enjoy the advantages of capitalism.' Unlike so many of the elite, workers are not enamored of capitalism. This is not necessarily because they believe that socialism is superior to capitalism in any simple sense. Most people agree wholeheartedly with the goals of full employment, universal social benefits such as health care, old-age pensions, provisions for sick-leave, maternity leave, and day-care. These aims are explicitly identified in their minds with socialism. As a working economic program, however, most workers consider socialism to be misconceived and faulty in its everyday application. In fact, there's a joke which goes, Who invented socialism? Workers or scientists? Workers, of course, because scientists would have tried it on rats first. Yet workers also find themselves in agreement with Marxist-Leninist propaganda when it comes to the distinguished position accorded physical labor, since the predominant conception of work

among urban and rural workers is that of a process of material production and physical exertion. During the early Stalinist period, the emphasis on stark physical effort, the human correlate to forced industrialization, made sense to most people. And to this very day, you will hear people dismiss the technicalities of monetarism or bank reform as secondary to hard physical labor, which is the true and final solution to any economic problem.

This materialist ideology of the Hungarian work force, and their suspicion of socialist planning has been reinforced by decades of half-hearted economic reform. Ever since the introduction of the reforms in 1968, managers and planners would speak of heightened efficiency, even though the practical consequences of reform legislation rarely met these new standards. With each recurring wave of reform adjustments, measures designed to improve the functioning of the economy fell farther and farther away from the ideology of sweat and brute force shared by so many Hungarians, and also, incidentally, did little to remedy the problems of socialist stagnation. Meanwhile, villagers were successfully rebuilding socialist agriculture, and strengthening the economy at large, by contributing long hours of hard labor in their private agricultural activities. Here was solid proof of the transformative quality of diligence and physical exertion. Yet the end product of the reform phase of socialist history, in the eyes of villagers and urban workers, has been the enrichment of managers, higher-level bureaucrats, and the new stratum of full-time entrepreneurs. The growing gap between those who work and those who become wealthy, a gap which underscores the opposition between honorable and disreputable activities, is conveyed in the oft' heard expression, "those who work don't have time to make money" or "you can't become wealthy with honorable labor."

Now the measures being proposed to solve economic problems are resulting in unemployment, income tax, and inflation, all of which are seen to take a disproportionate toll on physical workers. Even before a full-scale return to capitalism, it appears, workers are having to bear the brunt of the disadvantages of capitalism, yet with none, or fewer and fewer of the ostensible advantages of socialism. Workers understandably, then, have deep misgivings about the reintroduction of capitalist mechanisms into the Hungarian economy, despite the fact that many agree that radical restructuring is necessary. Having lost any faith in socialist technocrats and long disillusioned about socialist practice, they are worried that plans put forward by the current elites will give birth to a form of capitalism in which they will truly be left out in the

cold. Retain and improve social services, they say, but don't raise prices, and don't eliminate my job. Do what is necessary to restructure the economy, but not at my expense!

Such, then, is the challenge facing Hungarians today. To find a path toward a more democratic and equitable society, while confronting economic problems, the resolution of which seem to exacerbate social inequality and feed potentially anti-democratic forces. Many, including some intellectuals, worry about the specter of reform dictatorship, fearing that the process of political democratization could be undermined by the need to solve pressing economic problems. Austerity measure, whether foisted on the country by the IMF or by Hungarian economists, would never be popular. Other voices consider alternatives such as innovative means of property reform, for example, to allow a wide variety of economic enterprises to flourish, to strengthen the economy through diversity, to democratize decision-making as well as to improve efficiency and profitability. A mixed economy, then, appears an apt correlate to the burgeoning diversity of views and interests in the political realm. The opportunities are great, the risks even greater, the uncertainty above all paramount.