

Gongming LI

How Kornai "Lets the sunshine in" "By Force of Thought"

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[...]

However, the real "Kornai fever" will occur most probably after *By Force of Thought*.

I believe that János Kornai's *By Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey* (published by Shanghai People's Publishing House in May 2013, translated by Jia An and Han Zhang) has a profound impact of historical reflection and moral criticism that goes far beyond the field of economics: it transcends the present and points at future.

In his foreword to the memoirs' Chinese edition, Jinglian Wu named it "the most important book by Kornai". It is worth considering whether an intellectual autobiography written for the public is of bigger significance than Kornai's main works like *The Economics of Shortage* or *The Socialist System*, which earned him a reputation that can compete with that of Friedrich Hayek's. Wu provided an explanation quoting renowned Japanese economist Aoki Masahiko, who, in his endorsement to the traditional character version of *By Force of Thought*, suggested that the book "may also be read as a treatise on the ethics and psychology of scientific creation by a leading social science scholar of our time". It tells us how a social scientist should strive for the truth, and the welfare of the people. (p. 2)

According to some opinions, for Chinese readers, *By Force of Thought* is a mirror reflecting clearly our society, our era, and even us. Kornai himself expressed it explicitly: "I am convinced that my experiences are familiar to many Chinese intellectuals; from my experiences, situation and choices, they will be able to see their own experiences, situations and choices." He even provided an example: "In Hungary and China, people are forced to practice self-criticism against their own will because of humiliation or even serious physical violence. But no matter how 'self-criticism' as a concept has been tarnished, we still need to conduct self-examination." (Preface to the Chinese version) Therefore, one of the central topics of the memoirs is this process, designated as "the ethics and psychology of scientific creation" by Masahiko. The question is how to adhere to intellectual morals and dignity in one's academic research career. (or how to "Let the sunshine in", as Kornai expressed in the Preface of the Chinese version)

The book's subtitle "Irregular Memoirs" indicates that it is unique in its own genre. The author explained that "irregular" in this case refers to a number of relatively independent mini essays inserted discussing his thoughts concerning different social and political issues and events. In

addition, "the book is essentially an intellectual memoir" of the author's political, public and professional life, and the related social relationships. Beside the "irregularity" of the content, the "irregular" sources of the content are also worthy of our attention and research. The author wrote in the Preface: "Studying the documents of Hungary's former secret service proved to be very exciting. Recent Hungarian laws make it possible for citizens to access the material relating to them. It was depressing and at times appalling experience to read informers' reports, records of police investigations made in preparation for political trials, and the notes of state security and intelligence officers. I describe in this volume many of the political police and secret service documents pertaining to me." (p. 5)

This has brought us back to the already discussed problem of contemporary academic research using historical sources as "ideological weapons", which, of course, offers more significant political and moral reflection than "internal references" of organisations and other historical sources. The footnote of page 115 reads: "One such conversation took place at Fekete's flat. It has recently emerged from police records that the flat had been bugged by that time. [...] The police assigned to tap and interpret our conversation were unable to properly follow our discussion of how much moral strength we would have to resist persecution. Reading this report – full of dotted passages and question marks – today, forty-six years later, I have mixed feelings. I would really like to laugh off the coarseness and ignorance of the police and the crazy misunderstandings that the report brims with, if only – even after so many years – I was not still appalled by the tyrannical control over free thought, the contemptible intrusion into personal conversations." (p.115)

It induced even more mixed feelings when the secret files revealed that (approximately ten) people with whom he maintained close friendship for seventeen years reported about his whereabouts and thoughts. Among the documents, there was a copy of a letter written by an American professor, a long list of friends with whom he had phone conversations, report about his academic trips and lectures abroad... This involves two issues: first, according to the Hungarian law, citizens have the right to know about the content of these files, to know who betrayed them. (p.168) On the other hand, whether such information should be made public is still controversial. Facing this moral and emotional dilemma, Kornai made a brave and prudent choice.

Throughout the entire life, Kornai has been facing serious moral dilemmas of choice and conscience. His awakening and recovering from sincere faith and work fanaticism began with the awareness of lies and violence. After the political awakening, the most important was how to find the psychological balance between political conscience and academic research. The period before the awakening was also profoundly analysed: how the defence mechanisms of cognitive dissonance theory blindfolded him. This could be of great significance to our understanding of cognitive and ideological transformation of intellectuals. Throughout the entire book, the topic of major concern is the dilemmas and conflicts pertaining law, morals, friendship, human fallibilities etc. between politics and science. After the incident of October 1956, he made the following decision: "I decided I would determine my political actions in a way that would avoid my being tortured. [...] I feared being tortured. But I feared at least as much that if they tortured me, I would not withstand it – I would betray not only myself but others. I wanted to protect myself from the shame of that when I decided to avoid doing illegal acts. One reason was bitter, sober recognition of my own limitations." (p.115)

But he was aware of the fact that there was no clear dividing line between legal and illegal. For example, what he conceived as fundraising to provide solicitude was likely to have been perceived as conspiracy and violation of the law. (p.121) About how to answer questions when interrogated, he said: "But the real difficulty was not the battle of intelligence and information between the interrogator and the interrogated. The real dilemma was a moral one. [...] I set myself a more modest standard of observing elementary requirements of human decency and tried to keep to it as far as I could." (p.117)

Moreover, although he was trying not to be two-faced (showing one face at home in Hungary and a different one in the West) “That was not an easy task because the free atmosphere of the West was a constant encouragement to speak out more plainly than one would at home in the oppressive atmosphere of threat, denunciations, informers’ reports, censorship, and accusations. I set myself that rule in self-defence [...] But apart from the defensive reason, I had moral qualms about inconsistent behaviour.” (p.174) His reminiscence about “friends” is poignant: “In our time, the word was not used so lightly; it had weight. Life under a dictatorship would have been unbearable without friends (p.122)

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Edited by Zijing ZHOU

Translated by Shenshen Hu