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COMMENTS ON BY FORCE OF THOUGHT

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this event. My credentials and qualifications for doing so have nothing to do with economics (although I attended the LSE). Rather I would like to speak as another Hungarian (or more accurately, a Hungarian-American) academic of the same generation and the same ethnic group (if Jews may be so defined) who can relate to the life and political attitudes of Professor Kornai. He and I shared both the life threatening experiences during the Nazi period in Hungary, and the subsequent unpleasant experiences of life under the Stalinist Rakosi regime between 1948-54 as well as the years leading up to the Rev of 1956. We both came to be highly critical of the communist system but the trajectories leading to this rejection were different.

My rejection found a simple expression: I left Hungary after the Revolution of 1956, whereas Prof Kornai stayed (with long sojourns abroad) and succeeded in finding scholarly expression of some of these experiences and critiques. He obviously had a far more complex and long lasting relationship with the system. Although our lives took different turns we responded to these shared experiences, in similar ways, emotionally speaking

Aside from these personal affinities I have a longstanding professional interest in political attitude change (or the evolution of such attitudes) which may qualify me to make these remarks. I have been particularly interested in such attitude change with respect to communist systems and ideologies; I have studied and written about both such political infatuation (in POLITICAL PILGRIMS) and disillusionment with communist systems and ideals both in communist states and in the West. (in POLITICAL WILL AND PERSONAL BELIEF and most recently in THE END OF COMMITMENT.)

A unique aspect of Prof Kornai's life and work has been that while he was, for all intents and purposes, a dissident and critic of the communist regime, he managed to survive professionally, intellectually and (most important) morally as well, and succeeded in dividing his time through much of his life between Cambridge, MA and Budapest, H and many other destinations abroad.

Perhaps the most important claim to fame as a professional economist that he demolished the economic credentials and claims of communist, or state socialist (or "actually existing" socialist systems) well before they collapsed under their own weight, and that of their wrongheaded economic policies (among other things). Most devastatingly and iconoclastically he argued and demonstrated that the profound and persisting economic flaws, of these systems, and the deprivations they imposed on the people who lived under them, the "various disorders such as shortages ... derived from the system..." [31] It was not just fallible and corruptible human beings trying to implement a splendid theory (as some still believe) that caused the difficulties.

Remarkably enough he managed to accomplish all this while living for the most part in Hungary under Kadar and got away with it partly because of the more permissive policies Kadar pursued. To be sure his work was far better known in the West and other parts of the world than in his native Hungary and the Soviet Bloc. What strikes me as a central trait of his personality: moderation, a moderate and judicious disposition probably also played some indirect a part in this intellectual-moral survival, in his accomplishments and the well deserved international recognition.

While a professional economist Prof K. typifies the true intellectual who transcends narrow specialization and engages a broad range of topics and issues of great moral, ethical and human significance. He was not what they call in Hungarian a "szakbarbar" or a barbarian of his specialty. His wide range of interests was already apparent in his childhood and adolescence when he devoured the books of Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, (among others) a hobby that, I suspect, distinguishes him from many economists and other non-literary academics whose early recreational preferences tend to be different.

I would like focus here on his edifying and impressive political evolution, that could have been included in the GOD THAT FAILED, [the famous collection of writings of a few distinguished Western intellectuals, published over half a century ago.) He was initially drawn to the Soviet Union and the ideals it appeared to embody because the Red Army saved his and his family's life (though not his father's) by expelling the German troops and their Hungarian supporters from Hungary and thereby ending a reign of terror and extermination that faced the Jewish population. (At he same time and paradoxically enough, his embrace of the communist system eroded his sense of Jewish identity, at least at the conscious level, as he put it. [27])

I used to feel exactly the same way, and welcomed the Soviet troops as liberators, and perceived them as such for some years to come notwithstanding their orgy of looting and rape in Bp I observed (that included an attempt at my mother and sister, who managed to outrun their pursuer, a few days after liberation). Cognitive dissonance can be managed, up to a point.

His disillusionment, as has often been the case had two major stages, or components. First came the rejection of the methods used for the attainment of the glorious, distant and unrealizable goals the regime supposedly pursued: in particular the brutal terror of which he learned from friends who had been imprisoned. The 2nd stage was disillusionment with the ideology, with the justifications and rationalizations of the brutal methods supposedly serving the glorious goals to be achieved. An important part in his estrangement from the system was played by his instinctive moral aversion to lying and the mendaciousness the regime institutionalized and required from its supporters. It should be noted here that for a number of years, before undertaking the studies that led to his becoming an economist, he was a journalist working for the party newspaper. [Also significant was the influence of Miklos Gimes, a journalist who was later executed wth Imre Nagy.]

Particularly valuable and instructive, in his examination of his attraction to the communist systems and ideology, is his recognition of the emotional aspects of the process. Belonging to a community, the political community of the Party was a major attraction (in addition to the gratitude for liberation to the Soviet Union, noted above). Communist ideas or ideology was not a primary or major stimulant, at

any rate not initially. (29) He wrote about the process of his political attitude formation and maintenance:

"These axioms [underlying commitment P.H.] are not shaped purely by intellect. To an important extent they are created by meta-rational factors: beliefs, prejudices, aspirations, desires and moral judgments. The meta-rational factors act like doorkeepers, deciding which door will be open to an idea or impression and which closed. The doors in me were not operating properly at that time. I excluded all experiences and ideas that would have shaken my belief. The defense mechanisms described in the theory of cognitive dissonance had gone into operation. Information that contradicted my deep convictions was being stifled, so that I could persuade myself of the accuracy of my original view of the world and maintain my own mental peace." [52]

These emotional predispositions helped to elevate the official ideology to the plane of infallibility: "Marxism-Leninism...held the key to understanding the world..." [34] This was more a quasi-religious than intellectual attraction as he makes clear: "The main impetus...came from faith and belief. I had complete trust in Marxist-Leninist ideology...convinced that every word of it was true." [44] Looking back at his youthful infatuation he compared himself to a sleepwalker. [45] Subsequently, over a lengthy period of time he had undergone what he called "a process of emotional and intellectual restructuring that lasted several years" [78] as the moral foundations of his worldview collapsed. He came to recognize both the gulf between theory and practice AS WELL AS certain contributions the theory made to the practices.

It was also distinctive of his political-philosophical evolution that he made no attempt to salvage old commitments and emotional investments often manifest in the clinging of numerous Western intellectuals (erstwhile sympathizers with communist systems) to some version or remnant of Marxism and their youthful ideological-political follies. He did not continue to insist that Marxism was a key to human liberation, an infallible, scientific guide to building a better society or suggest that it was only fallible human beings who misunderstood or misapplied its propositions under adverse historical conditions. He did not fight what he called "desperate rearguard actions." [81] Rather, he noted that "The tenets of M-ism survived as obsolete doctrines, petrified like specimens of long-extinct species of animals." [80] He rejected M-ism not so much because - as another H-an author put it - it was responsible for "the whole beastly business...but because [it] does not explain what is going on around me." [82]

BY FORCE OF THOUGHT is both a chronicle of intellectual accomplishments and liberation, and a record of a decent and productive life balancing the pressures of living, so to speak, between East and West.

Let me say in conclusion that at a time when we are inundated with self-serving memoirs written by dubious celebrities with bloated egos, Prof. Kornai's memoir meets every important requirement of the genre: it chronicles a life rich in genuine accomplishments; acquaints the reader with momentous periods and events of history not likely to be familiar to most of them; helps to understand why people of good will had been attracted to, and subsequently rejected a political system and ideology that appealed to their idealism; finally and most importantly it expose the reader to reflections and insights produced by the confluence of an exceptional intellect and turbulent times.