

Review

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The Budapest Times, March 2007

János Kornai, *By Force of Thought. Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey* (The MIT Press, hardback. Ft8000 at Bestsellers Bookshop)

This is a long book, comprising 400 large-size pages of main text, plus about 50 pages for notes, a glossary, a chronology and bibliographical references. That should not deter potential readers, since the style of writing is simple and free-flowing. Nor should the fact that its Hungarian author is one of the foremost economists in the world, even though, as the saying has it, 'economics is the dismal science'. Some complex economic theories are touched on in this book, but theory does not dominate.

"I have striven for honest introspection," is how János Kornai describes his task. Introspection is certainly there. In this sense, the style, although straightforward, may annoy some readers. The personal pronoun 'I' is all over the place. A random check turned up the use of 'I' twenty-two times on one page of less than forty lines. On the other hand, this is an autobiography of a noted economist, not a celebrated writer of works of literature. "I am not Marcel Proust or Péter Esterházy" are his opening words.

Kornai takes us through his long journey which professionally took off, if that is the right term, when he became a regular contributor to *Szabad Nép*, the daily newspaper of Hungary's ruling Party in the first half of the 1950s. In retrospect, given that Kornai would become one of the main economist-critics of 'actually existing socialism', it is perhaps surprising to learn that at the start of his career his confidence in the Soviet Union was characterised by "blind, unconditional faith" and a belief that "we were infallible".

In his case, as with many others, the attraction of 'communism' was strongly connected to the circumstance that as a Jewish person he saw the arrival of the Red Army in 1945 as indeed a liberation. However, from then on, as he relates, 'Jewishness' was not important, though commitment to the cause was all.

Disillusionment and a desire for change came from meeting political comrades who had been wrongly imprisoned, from the reform processes initiated by Imre Nagy after he first became premier in 1953 and by the effects of the 1956 uprising. The result for Kornai was that subsequently he vowed never again to put himself at the service of power politics, rather at the service of research. It is a decision he has been able to stick to, he says – more or less. As he relates, he has often been called upon for advice and support, particularly in the periods before and after Hungary's transition of 1989-90, and, although never refusing to offer advice if he thought he had some to give, it is clear he has preferred to stay clear of politics, whether in Budapest or in Harvard, where he was offered an important academic post.

In view of this, the comments in Kornai's autobiography which touch, sometimes indirectly, on politics, or rather political-economic ideas, are intriguing and often surprising. That Hungary's "command economy was eliminated in 1968" may seem startling, but he goes on to explain what is meant. 1968 was the year of the introduction of the so-called New Economic Mechanism in Hungary, which saw a move away from total centralisation towards greater freedom for enterprise managers. Similarly, a lengthy footnote acknowledging an intellectual debt to Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, is a surprising find.

Such unexpected elements offer both intrigue and insight to anyone delving into this complex, lengthy but easily digestible work.