

Review

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By Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey by János Kornai.

Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007. 461pp.,

£25.95, ISBN 978 0 262 11302 1

János Kornai is a distinguished Hungarian economist whose work had momentous political implications. He is best known for demolishing the economic credentials and claims of 'actually existing' (state) socialist systems well before they collapsed under their own weight and their wrongheaded economic policies. He demonstrated that the profound economic flaws of these systems and the deprivations they inflicted on the people who lived under them were systemic; it was not just a matter of fallible and corruptible human beings trying to implement a splendid theory (as some still believe) that caused the difficulties.

The volume here reviewed, while summarizing his major economic contributions, reveals the evolution of his political attitudes and beliefs. 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. His disillusionment, as is often the case, had two major stages. First came rejection of the brutal methods used for attaining the distant and unrealizable goals, then disillusionment with the ideology which provided the theoretical foundation for the brutal methods supposedly serving the glorious goals. An important part in his estrangement was played by his instinctive aversion to the mendaciousness which the regime institutionalised and required from its supporters. Particularly instructive is his recognition of the emotional aspects of political attitude formation. Emotional predispositions helped to elevate the official ideology to the plane of infallibility.

Belonging to the political community was another major attraction, more psychological and quasi-religious than intellectual: 'The main impetus ... came from faith and belief. I had complete trust in Marxist-Leninist ideology ... convinced that every word of it was true' (p. 44). Subsequently he came to recognise both the gulf between theory and practice as well as the contributions the theory made to the unsavoury practices. Unlike many former Western admirers of these ideologies he made no attempt to salvage old political-emotional investments and did not continue to insist that Marxism was a key to human liberation and an infallible, scientific guide to building a better society. He rejected Marxism not so much because it was responsible for 'the whole beastly business ... but because [it] does not explain what is going on around me' (p. 82).

This memoir chronicles a life rich in accomplishments while acquainting the reader with momentous historical events. It also helps create an understanding of why idealists like its author were attracted to, and subsequently rejected, the political system imposed on Eastern Europe after the Second World War.

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