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Economists write autobiographies, let alone “unusual ones”, very seldom. But this time, it is precisely that the memoir writer has made an extraordinary career that he, after seven-and-a-half decades, attempts to understand and present to a wider audience rather than only to people of his profession. And of course, like other people writing similar books, he would like to rectify his image. János Kornai’s unusual autobiography, titled *By Force of Thought*, has recently been published by Osiris Publishing House.

Memoirs are very seldom written about scientific careers and the intellectual problems behind the accomplishments that are reported in the books. I only know one such autobiography: the one by the French Raymond Aron, who made a memoir of an age out of his career as a political philosopher. But while Aron’s work is about European history, Kornai’s book details the economic problems that he encountered in the course of his scientific activity and which he attempted to resolve by his research results. It is surprising at first, but then, it becomes fascinating how the economic concepts recognized and elaborated (of course very concisely) by Kornai are projected to the respective phases of his life.

János Kornai’s scientific career is fascinating. In the list of literature at the end of his autobiography we can see 20 titles of books and studies as long as books. Also, Kornai has written more than 10 professional studies of “basic importance” that have inspired the entire international scientific community. This is unparalleled in the domestic history of science, but examples for it are scarce also in international science. It makes sense to compare Kornai with the global players of economics also because his major works (and mostly the minor ones, too) have also been published in the major foreign languages, and they have always received responses. Just as it emerges from the story itself, Western circles of economists have quickly “discovered” János Kornai, who started his career as an autodidact, and so have such circles from the East (more details of the latter will follow), and these circles have considered him as one the greatest economists of the world for more than 25 years.

Let’s stop here for a moment and think about the gap between János Kornai’s appreciation in Hungary and abroad. There is a Hungarian scientist with an original way of thinking who carries out his works with tough consequence, great productivity and a huge impact, for whom major European and U.S. universities are competing (he has received the title of honorary professor from 13 universities), who had been Professor at one of the world’s most prestigious economics faculties, that of Harvard University, and who has several times filled the position of chairman of the most important international associations of economics. (...) Of the same person, an infamous former rector of the Budapest University of Economics, László Háty memorably said in 1958: “As long as I am the rector, Kornai may not teach here”. And not only he has kept his word, “but so

have his successors”. It was as late as 1987 when rector of the time of the same university Csaba Csáki extended a job offer for Kornai. The economist gave the following shocking response: “Your initiative only took place after... I had accepted the invitation from Harvard University. I am grateful for your attention, but I should admit that it came too late. You only live once.” (...) “I can say...that any time over the last three decades, I would have been prepared to deploy most of my capacities for the sake of the Budapest University of Economics. Over the entire period of my career I have faced with bitterness and sadness the fact that I had not been invited to become a teacher at the place where young Hungarian economists are trained...This is an irreparable loss for me that cannot be compensated by other teaching and research results.”

By pointing out this contradiction, I do not mean that Kornai has not been appreciated in Hungary. Everyone who knows even a little Hungarian economics literature is aware that Kornai has been the most-often-quoted author for several decades (the book reveals that he had preceded Marx by the end of the 1970’s, who until that time had been the most-often-cited author.) Since the proclamation of the New Hungarian Republic, many of the prime ministers and ministers of finance contacted him to ask his advice.

Regardless, this country does not seem to have understood that no other Hungarian social scientist achieved a fame comparable to him over the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and that he is the only one, who is recorded as a contributor to the history of science with important and original pieces, rather than being only occasionally mentioned as a scientist or viewed as an exotic Eastern European.

(...)

What raised Kornai’s passionate research interest was the essence of the system in which he (together with half of Europe) was compelled to live after the historical change of 1945. First of all, he wanted to understand how that system works in terms of the economy. Further, he sought responses to the questions of what deeper and system-specific factors explain how it works and how to grasp the impact of this system with scientific concepts.

(...)

Looking back, the career proves to be impressive: it started with an apparently modest (but, in fact, courageously original) exploration of the industrial branches, and later led to a synthesis of the socialist system, published in the early 1990’s, which scope and depths had – up until the time – remained unparalleled in the international scientific literature, including works by the biggest scientists, such as Vilfredo Pareto, Joseph Schumpeter, Abram Bergson or P.J.D, Wiles.

(...)

János Kornai’s unusual autobiography gives an insight into the world of scientific creation. His thoughts about the functioning of economics are obviously targeted at his domestic and foreign fellow economists, but what he says is also very instructive for outsiders. But the point is that this book describes the life and the problems of a scientist. Even upon reading the contents, we will notice that most chapters refer to a stage of his

research activity (and half of the subtitles are identical with the title of a Kornai book, each). What is outside of this scope in this biography is also interesting and important and sometimes entertaining, but remains a circumstance only. And the fact that this book is not exhaustingly dry – despite all this – is the result of the author’s ability to describe even the most difficult scientific issue comprehensively, or even with a sense of humour.

(...)

Perhaps needless to say, but the author’s relation to the Hungarian political power is an organic part of his career. One of the most critical phases of this is the period after 1956 when Kornai, as a suspicious follower of Imre Nagy, was closed up in quarantine, and submitted to questionings by the police and judges because of his imprisoned friends. (...) In the 1970’s and 1980’s Kornai was monitored by the secret police, which the book details and which is supported by an incredible amount of recently available evidence. His admission to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was at first vetoed by the highest political leaders of Hungary, but later, with the political indifference resulting from the domestic political thaw in the 1970’s, the gate of the Academy finally opens in front of him. (...) In Russia, China, and recently even in Vietnam, it seems that the works of János Kornai (primarily the *Economics of Shortage*) inspired part of the young economist generation to break up with the officially prevailing attitude towards economics. In communist China now entering the path of reform, Kornai’s books sell by the hundreds of thousand. In this sense, this work has become part of the political history of our age.

After 1989 Kornai consciously transferred from the field of “clear science” to the borderland between science and politics. His work titled *The Road to a Free Economy* dealing with the economic transition has not reached the impact Kornai was hoping, but it has remained a point of reference in debates on transition to capitalism. Kornai’s always-busy computer has been putting out dozens of studies even over the last 15 years. The 77-year-old scientist does not seem to plan to withdraw from work. The last chapter of his book reveals a more optimistic view of the change of the socio-economical system than that of most people in Central-Eastern Europe. (...)