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**Science as Vocation**

In the preface of his „irregular memoirs”, János Kornai writes this: „These memoirs are a subjective augmentation of my scholarly work. I have not tried to include what stayed out of *Economics of Shortage* or *The Socialist System* because the material was too personal in nature or because something else prevented me from stating my opinion. This book’s genre allows me to present my personal credo on several ethical, political, and scientific questions. For me, it was not possible to squeeze subjective position statements and personal declarations into scholarly works on well-circumscribed topics<sup>1</sup>.”

Kornai’s scientific works have, in fact, contained also earlier such “general credos”.

In the introduction of *A Passionate Pamphlet in the Cause of Economic Transition* in Hungary, written roughly around 1990, Kornai points out that „those who venture into the field of ‘what should be done’ are bound to step out of the domain of science defined in a strict and narrow sense. (...) Of course, in this book I also resort to methods customarily used in scientific research, namely those of logical reasoning and reference to facts. At the same time, however, my political and moral values, my personal disappointments, hopes and beliefs, are clearly discernible. Instead of hiding this fact, I chose to stress it by making use of the word “passionate” in the original Hungarian title.<sup>2</sup>”

Far the longest personal introduction is, however, given in the more than 10-page-long preface of the 1989 second edition of Kornai’s first book, written in 1956, that bore the title *Overcentralization in Economic Administration*. This preface may be considered as the most important forerunner of the “irregular memoirs”. By revealing again – after 33 years – to the public his first large-scale work, Kornai went back to its most important statements, explained their historical and scientific contexts and confronted them with the professional and life experiences he had gathered in the meantime.

Opportunities for presenting one’s subjective references and credos offered by a hundreds-of-pages-long autobiography obviously greatly differ from those offered by a preface to a scientific work. One of Kornai’s introductory phrases in the preface of *By Force of Thought* is also true, however: “I am somewhat reserved, and discuss my life rarely and sparingly.”<sup>3</sup> Well, as a close colleague who spent with him now precisely a whole decade here in the Collegium Budapest, I can only confirm that. Despite many

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<sup>1</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Kornai, János; *The Road to a Free Economy*, HVG Rt. Budapest, 1990. p.31.

<sup>3</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. xiii.

years of cooperation in a friendly atmosphere, I have learned – with intellectual excitement and, at points, sincere commotion – about most elements and very important phases of his life path only now, reading the book.

But the “independent life” of a subjective recollection will definitely not be alien to Kornai’s scientific life work. While, in addition to the intellectual “Auftakt”, personal emotions and confessions gave weight to the more abstract and somewhat dry explanations in the prefaces and introductions of his earlier scientific works, the preface of *By Force of Thought* is intended to provide readers with a disciplined and structured starting point, usual in specialised scientific literature. As is characteristic of his scientific works, he resolutely defines – also in his memoirs – the field and objectives of his analysis, consequently instructs readers what *not* to expect from the book, and gives a precise description of the book’s structure even going into such details as the logic behind making two kinds of footnotes. “I remain a scholar even when writing my memoirs<sup>4</sup>”, writes Kornai, and this is true. What he offers is an “intellectual autobiography”, rather than a “private one”, or the “description of an age”. After a brief recollection of personal and family circumstances, the book focuses on how Kornai has experienced the last 50 years as a scholar and a thinker.

Such confrontation and reckoning are important components of all memoirs and autobiographies. I have, however, never met a biography writer who started work with such high scholarly ambitions and the diligence of a historian, as did Kornai. In order to picture the context, life circumstances and presumptions prevailing in the course of writing his economic works, which, in fact, accompany, evaluate (and often influence) the respective historical age, (and in order to “also think with his earlier mind” when updating them), he read again these works, their references, their reviews, and the relevant parts of friends’ mails. Sometimes he even started real archive research. He has systematically incorporated secret service reports, employer evaluations and [state] party documents about himself, into his memoirs. In addition to being a historian’s accomplishment, the book also demonstrates the scientific merit of having carefully and systematically designed units of the most important works of his impressive oeuvre by devoting each of them a separate chapter in the chronologically appropriate sections. “Several hundred reviews of my books can now be compared with my self-assessment”<sup>5</sup>. While recollecting the ideologies, the political, moral and scientific positions, as well as “decisions influencing his whole life” he has adopted and made in the course of his life path, Kornai does not only offer an account, prepared with sincerity and – at times – with anxious speculation, but also carefully written, rational and essay-like analyses on important issues of Marxism, the theory of economics, politics, science, the economic reform, critical review as such, and the domestic, as well as the international scientific sphere.

## History

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<sup>4</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. xiii

The 20-page starting chapter on his „family and youth” describes the model prevailing in the entire book: Kornai continuously challenges the oversimplifying explanations of the facts that he presents. A determining childhood experience is the bourgeois wealth of his family, and later, the life threat posed on them by Hitler’s fascism. This, however, did not make him an enemy of Germans. His father, Pál Kornhauser, a Jewish lawyer acting as a legal consultant for several German companies in Hungary, enrolls him into the German Imperial School of Budapest. Kornai thinks it is important to say a few good words about them: “Never in the eight years I spent there did I here a single anti-Semitic remark<sup>6</sup>.” It is heart braking to read his dry report on the Holocaust. His father dies in Auschwitz and his brother in a labour camp in the Don River Band. His mother and his two other siblings survive 1944-45 by hiding. His own survival – in the form of getting out of a death row – was the result of the so-called “Schutzbrief” [a letter of safe conduct] obtained within the framework of Raoul Wallenberg’s well-known lifesaving efforts. He first told this story in 2001, upon inauguration of the Raoul Wallenberg Guesthouse of Collegium Budapest. The major role monastic orders played in saving Jewish people is, however, less obvious. Kornai describes with grateful words how the Budapest Jesuit Order helped him survive.

The next four chapters of the life path relate to a determining phase of our 20<sup>th</sup>-Century history: Kornai tells us “how he became a Communist”, what his activities were in the editorial office of *Szabad Nép* and how he became disillusioned with Communism; more specifically, how he confronted, and in 1953, got into a conflict, with the ideology and the political system he had chosen as a young man. The sincere reckoning and “comprehension”, which is explanatory but free of excuses, give a precise picture – useful for historians – on how much this should be considered a “response to the trauma of 1944”. He provides an illuminating typology regarding the five grades of identification with the Communist Party, seasoned with the recollection of enthusiasm that he felt upon reading Marx’s works, first of all the *Capital*, and George Lukacs’s writings.

I am most intrigued, however, by his description of the “cognitive dissonance” or that particular blindness by which he – in his increasing and later powerfully dominant Communist conviction – disregarded first the robberies and the violence of the Soviet occupying army – that he had, in fact, experienced – and then – in a long-lasting “sleepwalker”-like mental state during his rising career as a journalist at *Szabad Nép* – the increasingly frequent abuses around 1949 and the Rajk trial, together with the subsequent arrests and dismissals. The same applies to the obvious defects of the Communist command economy that he regularly analysed in *Szabad Nép* and that he tried to explain and excuse for a long time. Kornai attempts to give a ruthlessly precise diagnose on how an entire generation could make that tragic mistake; he rejects the recently fashionable stereotypes of merely attributing a cynical desire for power or irrational blindness to those who joined the Communist movement after 1945. There are plenty of us who need these historical confessions to be able to understand our parents’ life paths.

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<sup>6</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 9

In order to understand all this, it is important to tell how the “awakening” came about, how the moral and intellectual foundations of his Communist ideology rapidly collapsed after Imre Nagy’s action in 1953, how debates, targeted at clearing things up, initially led to the first “insubordination”, and later to an open rebellion and the final braking with Marxian political economy. The start of Kornai’s career as a scientific researcher – after having been removed from the editorial office of *Szabad Nép* in 1955 and transferred (to his and our great luck) to the “sphere of scientific research”; the Institute of Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – is, in fact, marked by his dissertation in 1955-56 titled *Overcentralization in Economic Administration*, which is a science historical report – of fundamental importance – on the starting points of Kornai’s oeuvre and the economic analysis of Socialism.

The few years following this point, including 1956 „and after”, which mark a decisive period, were “the most troubled period” in his life. Despite not being a central figure of 1956, Kornai took part in the drafting of Imre Nagy’s government programme and was a founding member of the new paper *Magyar Szabadság*. Thus, also he faced a “threat of imprisonment” during the retaliations. Together with András Nagy, he was dismissed from the Institute of Economics on the party’s command and left with the possibility of continuing research in the marginal Textile Industry Research Institute.

He gives a credible report on the dilemmas thinkers faced also in the heat of the revolution and the doubts rising to unbearable levels by anxiety and fear between 1957 and 1959, a period marked with retaliations, hearings and political-professional ordeals. The autobiography becomes most lyric in this chapter; more specifically, the part in which his personal account, containing passionate confessions mixed with calm analyses, is counter-pointed by historical documents, hearing protocols, secret service documents, recollections by survivors, information obtained by „interviewing” various people.

These turning points inspired him to make new “decisions for a lifetime”. While giving up the idea of emigration, he decided to fully break with Marxism and the Communist Party, exclusively devote his attention to research, rather than to politics (even illegal opposition politics), and to do the former primarily at an international level as “part of the Western profession of economics”.

One may read a few shocking episodes – emblematic to the history of the Kádár era – on how certain friends and colleagues reported on him to the secret service and how he was threatened by a “fabricated trial” because of an American colleague visiting Hungary who was blamed of being a CIA agent. Kornai’s report on the sixties and seventies is, however, dominated by scientific research leading to increasingly spectacular successes, the reception of the emerging works, and the growing number of positions filled in the Hungarian and international scientific spheres. History, with a capital H, comes to a role again in 1989, the moment of the new “turning point”, the collapse of the Socialist system. It is enlightening to read about the old and new dilemmas Kornai was compelled to evaluate by the series of events that took place – in the course of the political change – at a pace nobody expected. After keeping a certain distance from politics for several

decades, Kornai again faced the same dilemma as in 1956: should he stick to his decision?

### Science and Politics

This confrontation, as we have seen, prevails in the entire irregular memoirs and it might be the most important ideological and moral problem, to which Kornai gets back in almost every chapter. In 1955, after the first phase of his political and public activities came to an end by his dismissal from *Szabad Nép*, and he started scientific research, the question first re-emerged in 1956: "...where does the border between politics and science run in my case?<sup>7</sup>" His friends encouraged Kornai, a critical analyst of the Socialist system and an emerging critic of Marxism as a whole, to take up a public role, and they relied heavily on his advice. He nevertheless declined to give a talk in the Petőfi Circle. "As a *listener*, I was drawn as if magnetically by the atmosphere of the meetings. As a potential *lecturer*, I felt that the setting did not really suit me."<sup>8</sup> Although in a dramatic moment of the unfolding revolution he gave up on his earlier decision and prepared a draft for the economic programme by Imre Nagy's government, but he came to this conclusion a few days later: "... I did not have the expertise or information on which to base a program to fit the new political realities<sup>9</sup>". This was when he informed Ferenc Donáth, who had requested him to do this job, on his decision not to take part in the work. He refused in a similar way requests to become a journalist at *Magyar Szabadság*, *Népszabadság* and the radio. As I have already mentioned, not even his withdrawal was enough to prevent the launch of a series of investigations against him in the period of retaliations.

It is clear that Kornai, as a scientist, established – as early as during the 1956 revolution – an attitude towards politics on the bases of the same principles as the ones that he attempted to unambiguously enforce also later. He kept a certain distance from direct political activities, but he did so in quite a different spirit as the one suggested by Max Weber's "value-free science" and notion that "politics should not be pursued in university lecture halls". The scientific issues raised and research results accomplished by Kornai always had a palpable and outspoken political message.

Kornai points out in several parts of his memoirs that he intended to contribute to the change of the socialist system precisely by his critical studies and books. He viewed his critical economics, above all his *Economics of Shortage* published in 1980, as „helping to erode the system<sup>10</sup>” in that it „shocked” [people] „into seeing the socialist system differently<sup>11</sup>.” When analysing the influence of this book in Hungary and the world, he obviously considers its extraordinary impact on Hungarian and Eastern European economists to be his most significant political act.

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<sup>7</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 97

<sup>8</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 97

<sup>9</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 102

<sup>10</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 250

<sup>11</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 251

He gets back to the issue of “science or politics” upon describing the new situation emerging in the wake of the “turning point” in 1989. After a long struggle, he decided not to “make some essential career change,<sup>12</sup>” not to become a politician, nor to join any of the emerging political parties. It is very interesting to read quotations from his letters written to János Kis and Viktor Orbán in 1991 and 1992, respectively, in which he politely declines requests to join efforts to draft economic programmes for the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz).

The only change to his earlier attitude was that in his own way, or by his new essays critically presenting the alternatives of economic policy, he attempted to also influence politicians, rather than only economists and the general public. This was the spirit in which he held a very successful talk for economists in August 1989 that he later developed into a longer essay titled *A Passionate Pamphlet in the Cause of Economic Transition in Hungary* (1989), or the “Kornai bomb”, as Gáspár Miklós Tamás called it. A few years later he stood out for the “stabilization surgery” in a few important series of articles (something that he repeated last year in connection with the new reform package, or just last week in his article on the “real meaning of the change of the system”).

János Kornai’s most important new venture after 1989 related to the sphere of science and scholarship, rather than to politics. He played a decisive role in setting up an Institute for Advanced Study, Collegium Budapest, on the model of such an institute at Princeton. In addition to his position of full professor in the United States, this new international research centre, based in Budapest, has become his most important “professional base”. This is where he has organised several research groups on the economic and political scientific analysis of post-socialist transition over the last 15 years. (The latest such group was titled “*Honesty and Trust in the Light of Post-Socialist Transition*” and operated in 2002 and 2003.)

“At Home in Hungary and in the World” – says the title of one last chapter of the *Memoirs*, in which he systematically compares the higher educational, academic and human environments prevailing in the two countries. It is a rare thing, not only in Hungary but also elsewhere, that two kinds of culture, the local-national and the international one, are so organically integrated in a single life and oeuvre as is the case with János Kornai. With professional self-evaluation, as powerful as a life synthesis, prepared with scholarly ambitions and the personal weight of an irregular autobiography, Kornai primarily turns to his fellow scholars and the general public, which forms an opinion on scholars’ activities in Hungary and abroad, to declare his ambitious personal credo what it means when science is not only a profession but also, and above all, a true vocation.

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<sup>12</sup> Kornai, János; *By Force of Thought*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006. p. 345