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Final Report

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Project: “From People’s Democracy to Socialist Democracy? The Afterlives of Left-Wing Republicanism in Hungary and Yugoslavia, 1945–1968”

When I applied to the Visegrad Scholarship at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives (OSA), my project was still in an all-too-sketchy state. As someone who has only worked on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, any topic dealing with the post-Second World War period in Central and Southeastern Europe seemed a world apart. However, after my time at OSA, I was able to conceptualize much stronger continuities between the ‘long nineteenth century’ and the ‘short twentieth’. Thanks to the Visegrad Scholarship, I could spend eight uninterrupted weeks of deep archival research in the OSA collections, staking out the perimeter of a much larger project within which I hope to work for years to come.

I arrived at OSA with a relatively simple hypothesis: *Postwar theories of popular and, later, socialist democracy which had been developed in Hungary and Yugoslavia were still indebted to interwar leftist attempts to articulate theories of popular sovereignty as a defense against authoritarian regimes.* At one level of analysis, this is an obvious conclusion. With generational overlaps between the periods, and the survival of key political thinkers and theorists during the war, ideas of popular sovereignty and democracy could remain continuous. But, of course, the historical context and dynamics had changed in a much more radical fashion than was the case in autumn 1918 or spring 1919. From summer 1945, attempts at building completely new forms of state in Hungary and Yugoslavia were almost completely discontinuous with the previous regimes. As a point of contrast, the presence of the Red Army in Hungary led to the overrepresentation of Soviet interests in the country; in Yugoslavia, the self-liberation of the country allowed for much more room for maneuver. But the growing dominance of Stalinism—which had been refracted into local forms in each country—could make it seem that there was no room for debate on matters of democracy or popular sovereignty. At least, this was the received image from Cold War literature, often written from other deeply ideological perspectives.

One point I made in my initial application and again at my final presentation is that I work only as an intellectual historian. In so doing, I must take ideas seriously. I *differentiate* ideas from one another, *interpret* them in context, and provide a *genealogical explanation* of how they arose. That perspective comes with added risk: at certain moments, my work may appear to *rehabilitate* or to *normalize* certain modes of thought. While I cannot claim to work ‘purely’ or ‘objectively’ outside of any subjective frame—my interests took me *here* and not somewhere else—I nevertheless work to provide scholarly and not politicized interpretations of political thought.

As I pointed out in my project proposal, nearly all of the work on the political situation in the immediate postwar period—or more specifically on postwar debates on democracy—in Hungary and Yugoslavia have either a synthetic view or are national and non-comparative. Older literature from the Cold War period suffers from additional burdens. Secondary literature on the creation of postwar state socialist systems (here, Hungary and Yugoslavia) are either written from the perspective of apologia or from the anticommunist ‘totalitarianism’ paradigm. The former perspective often collapsed incompatible intellectual phenomena to provide a ‘progressive’ intellectual trajectory, of which a local party-state regime was the apex, realization, and completion. The latter ‘totalitarian’ perspective went a long way to perceive structurally common modes of oppression and closing of societies. But it was not self-reflective enough to realize that structural oppression and societal closing are also features of nominally liberal or conservative capitalist regimes, and at least common to *all* authoritarian systems. Among all of these modes of writing, there is a tendency to flatten historical phenomena, and each of them are open to the danger of nationalist revanchism. This has been borne out clearly by the vast majority of post-1989 scholarship on political thought in state socialism emerging from former state socialist countries themselves in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. Likewise, most international scholarship from North America and Western Europe has attempted (I claim impotently) to recast Cold War ‘Sovietological’ perspectives, with the result of confusing normative political liberalism or conservatism with non-ideological objectivity in scholarship. So, by trying to build an analytic and comparative project which is neither an apologia nor a moral condemnation, my attempt was not merely to offer a new perspective on old data but to try and gather new data in a new light. It is in this way that I wanted to take the *theory* rather than the *practice* of ‘people’s democracy’ and ‘socialist democracy’ seriously.

Given the lack of literature on theories of popular sovereignty in the postwar period, much of my research was spent reconstructing certain debates. To this end, the collections at OSA were indispensable. From Background Reports to Press Surveys, from radio monitoring

to biographical files, the materials on Hungary and Yugoslavia held in the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (HU OSA 300) were indispensable. Within that collection, I worked with the following materials to get a sense of debates over the key concept ‘democracy’ during the postwar period until 1968:

300-5-40: 8/4, 8/7, 8/8, 9/1, 9/2, 15/1, 15/2, 17/3

300-5-43: 1/1–5, 2/1–5, 3/1–6, 4/1–2

300-7-1: 9/3–6, 12/5–7, 13/1–3

300-7-5: 15/1–5, 16/1–4

300-7-8: 5/9

300-10-2: 325/7–8, 382/4–7, 383/1–5, 384/1–5

300-10-3: 39/3–5, 40/1–4, 57/6

300-10-4: 24/5, 26/7, 26/24, 28/4, 29/13, 30/2, 30/22, 31/2–6, 38/26–27

300-40-1: 301/3–5, 488/1–5, 489/1–5, 1378/1–6, 1379/1–5, 1527/3–6, 1528/1–5, 1531/4–5

300-40-8: 100/4

300-40-10: 1/1–5, 2/1–5, 3/1–5, 4/1–6, 5/1–5, 6/1–5, 7/1–5

300-40-11: 1/1–5, 2/1–6, 3/1–5, 4/1–5, 5/1–4, 6/1–5, 7/1–4

These collections were a combination of subject files, background reports, press reports, and biographical files. Further background reports have been digitized, and I viewed these individually online through the OSA Catalogue. The collections of subject files are mostly composed of newspaper clippings which are gathered around a certain term or concept. There are also translations of some articles into English (through the internal RFE/RL press reviews or as one-off commissions), or even full pamphlets. From the RFE/RL Research Institute’s perspective the concept ‘democracy’ was not a key organizing concept. So I approached my question from different, ‘nearby’ subject headings: ‘philosophy’, ‘intellectual life,’ ‘cultural policy’, ‘literature’, ‘revisionism’, ‘liberalization’, and so on.

For the press reviews, I looked chronologically. My project runs from 1945 to 1968. RFE/RL materials are scarce from before its founding in 1950, so likewise the press reviews only begin from the first years of the 1950s. Press material from beforehand would need to be collected from national libraries or online databases, for example. But these were helpful for the Hungarian case in particular. The Hungarian Unit produced reviews in Hungarian and, around the events of 1956 and onward, in English as well. These translations are so useful to

reconstruct debates on certain issues in the press, or even to use in the future as pedagogical material in international classrooms where English is the seminar's *lingua franca*. Still, interestingly, the materials translated into English were not the same as all of the materials which were deemed important by the Hungarian Unit; some reviewed materials remained in Hungarian only, so it was necessary to view both collections. There were no similar press reviews for Yugoslavia since it was not an RFE/RL target country. Rather, any press clippings remained as literal clippings and were organized along with the subject files.

Biographical files were helpful in following the careers and trajectories of certain prominent individuals. I typically focused on philosophers, intellectuals, and prominent party officials (whether reformists or otherwise) insofar as I could categorize them as such. Not all individuals had associated biographical files. Overall, there was typically a gender bias: not many women had developed biographical files even if they were comparatively much more prominent than some men; a case in point is the all-too-thin file for Vida Tomšič.

The collection of intellectual debates collected and reconstructed by Mária Heller and her colleagues at the ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University) Institute of Sociology/Faculty of Social Sciences between 1982 and 1989 were particularly interesting and helpful. Heller and her team worked backward into the late 1950s, and so the collections for intellectual debates in the 1960s in Hungary are excellent. The debates are organized on index cards, grouped around an analytical category given by the researchers.

On the index cards, the author, title of article, and journal/magazine/newspaper are written. In some cases, even the amount of columns which the articles took up are given (perhaps to quantify the prominence or importance given by the editors to pieces?). A key debate I came across was the debate on 'democratic traditions' which took place on the pages of *Élet és irodalom (Life and Literature)*, Hungary's main highbrow political-cultural weekly after 1956. The debate was initiated by the writer and editor Lajos Mesterházi in December 1967; it was followed by responses by Pál E. Fehér, Erzsébet Vezér, György Dalos, and others, through early 1968. It focused precisely on the question of whether Hungarians could claim any sort of national democratic traditions. Mesterházi and the others engaged in the debate on the status of the turn-of-the-century Hungarian progressives around *Nyugat*, *Huszadik Század*, the Social Scientific Society and Galileo Circle in Budapest, as well as the Hungarian social democrats and, from autumn 1918, the communists. In different measure, all authors saw them as part of the same tradition. The leading role of the party was not openly critiqued, but the demand for the rehabilitation of non-communist progressives was clearly a demand for the recognition of a *wider* left-wing stream of thought which Hungarians could claim as a

democratic tradition. For my research, this self-reflective debate was fantastic material, and demonstrated that there was a contemporaneous recognition of precisely the topic which I wanted to investigate.

Alongside this debate, I looked at the following materials from the Mária Heller Research Documentation (HU OSA 335):

335-0-1: 1/57, 1/140, 1/141, 2/216, 3/29, 3/132, 3/152, 3/181

The personal fond of András Hegedüs was the final collection which I looked into (HU OSA 361). This consisted of Hegedüs's published and unpublished manuscripts, notes, correspondence, and personal items. The collections are terribly rich, and I only scratched the surface. Within his papers, however, I did find an interesting, fragmented manuscript (seemingly from the mid-1960s) where Hegedüs outlines his views on parliamentary democracy. This fit very well as a primary source into my research. As an intellectual historian, even unpublished material is deeply useful. One cannot claim that manuscripts are the final views of any thinker on a given subject. But it does allow one to see just how a thinker was reflecting on a topic at a given moment in time. For Hegedüs, the mid-1960s were a deeply productive and interesting time. He had been rehabilitated after his deplorable actions during the 1956 Revolution as the country's Stalinist prime minister. Upon returning from a few years' exile in the Soviet Union, Hegedüs returned to public life not as a politician, but rather as a scholar. He played a large role in rehabilitating sociology and saw it as a tool for the constant renewal and internal criticism of state socialist society. Above all, Hegedüs was concerned with the bureaucratization of the state socialist system, and so used sociology as a critical tool to both describe the development of bureaucratic tendencies within the social system and suggest ways out. Here, the fragment on parliamentary democracy plays an understated but crucial role in his intellectual universe. Bureaucracy exists within centrally planned economies as well as in capitalist ones: bureaucracy is the consequence of authoritarian economic structures. In order to undo authoritarian structures in the economy (and so in society, in politics), Hegedüs suggests a model of 'social control' to be exerted over firms. Management wouldn't be 'elected' as in Yugoslavia, but rather given the role as an expert. Firms in turn would be included in some sort of social control mechanism, which would allow for feedback loops to extend beyond the firm and into society, with production and investment decisions (for example) being made not only in board rooms, but in living rooms, and on the street. Hegedüs saw this as the path toward democratization in society; it also meant that parliamentary democracy could not be the

solution. To do so would put Hungary (or any other state socialist country) back toward the path of competing elite interests with the working majority still excluded from decision-making. Parties were an illusion of choice to Hegedüs. But the solution was not in the one-party state; rather, a “no-party state,” toward the final Marxian goal of the dissolution of the state as such. Although the fragment is brief, it carries in it a powerful theoretical perspective and says a great deal about the large shift that occurred in Hegedüs’s thinking after he returned to Hungary in the early 1960s. I had time to look at the following materials in Hegedüs’s collection:

361-0-3: 1/2, 1/5, 15/1, 19/1, 20/11

361-0-7: 1/2

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My stay at OSA was fruitful beyond measure. I will be able to use the materials that I collected here for many different research projects in the coming years. Overall, I received an excellent map of all of the different debates and conceptual shifts which occurred with and around the concept ‘democracy’ from the late 1940s to 1968. While I am not yet able to confirm or dispel my hypothesis, I think it is clear that there was a retained concern for ‘democracy’ even in the seemingly frozen years of Stalinism in Hungary and Yugoslavia. The materials I collected at OSA with funding from the Visegrad Scholarship allowed me to set the foundations for fruitful future research. Combined with inter-library and cross-archival research in Budapest, Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, for example, a very complex picture of left-wing debates on democracy become more and more apparent. In unpacking and delineating the pathways of this grand debate, its interlocutors, and all of its different facets, my hope is that I can contribute to a continuous and rich history of democratic thought in Central and Southeastern Europe. Democratic thought is in itself part of the democratic tradition, even in times when there seems to be no democratic practice at all.

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