

a review article

## **With an Ideology of a Different Colour: An American View of Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile**

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Lee Congdon, *Seeing Red. Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001. 223pp. Cloth. ISBN: 0-87580-283-4. US \$40.00.

Lee Congdon has produced two valuable books on the careers and writings of Hungarian intellectuals in emigration between the world wars and after the 1956 Revolution. The first, *Exile and Social Thought. Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria 1919–1933* (Princeton University Press, 1991), appeared at a time when the extraordinary interest in the culture of East Central Europe, that had largely been stimulated by the Cold War, was beginning to wane. Nevertheless, with its extensive documentation on writers and summaries of their works, it helped to fill a gap for the Western reader, particularly in the field of the arts. Now, after more than a decade, it has been followed by a companion study from a different publisher, whose provocative title *Seeing Red* signals that the author's treatment of the material (in chapters entitled "A New Faith," "The Soviet Experiment," "The War Years," "The Cultural Cold War," "The New Emigrés," and "Beyond Anticommunism") and in particular the author's attitude, makes this appear a somewhat different book. For here Congdon's focus on intellectual history takes on a restrictive ideological slant. This has the effect of causing him to neglect the world of competing political and economic institutions — the impact of which had, after all, caused the intellectuals concerned to emigrate in the first place. Instead, Congdon presents it as a place of Manichaeic dichotomy between nihilism and religion.

Thus, the lifework of the distinguished Hungarian intellectuals who are his subjects is reduced, in effect, to a search for a substitute

religion. Setting aside Aristotle's dictum that man is a social animal, the author's point of departure is a prefatory quotation from Edmund Burke proclaiming that man is a "religious animal," and he goes on to quote Nietzsche in support of his decision to make *Seeing Red* "a study of the threat [of] nihilism," on the grounds that "the history of the last century... can only be understood in light of the struggle with that menace" (Preface). Historical evidence for this position is, perhaps not unfortunately, slight. That "Christianity [was] losing its hold" (according to Arthur Koestler, by whom Congdon was clearly influenced) and that "the West" lacked "an alternative faith", had cleared the ground, he thinks, for communism as a serious alternative. This new "faith", "a jealous god", was short-lived, though. For within three decades or less, as the title of a key collection of essays suggests (to which Koestler contributed), it was becoming "The God that Failed". Congdon seems to accept Koestler's misguided pronouncements on history, such as that there was no "light" since the Dark Ages until Kepler (*The Sleepwalkers*) (p. 154), and by Michael Polanyi who, he says, "knew" that Western liberalism had arisen as a reaction against the authority of "the medieval church" and suggests that Luther was a "liberal" (p. 106). It is almost as if these refugees were anxious to exchange the failed absolutism of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for a new absolute.

Rather than nihilism, it is scientific rationality that would certainly be selected by most readers as having displaced religion from its primacy in the West. However, according to Koestler, science had provided a "false reading" resulting in a "determinism" which "paralyzed the people of the West" — which led, according to Michael Polanyi, to an allegedly prevalent "universal scepticism" (p. 99). To this, however, scepticism on the part of the reader is a likely reaction. A new passion generated by the pursuit of truth in the study of nature, and by the simultaneous far-reaching impact of Romanticism, had revealed new dimensions of the psyche, emotions and the imagination, informing virtually all aspects of cultural life not excluding Catholicism and the burgeoning forms of Protestantism. Indeed, as Congdon shows, Christianity was sufficiently alive for John Macmurray to declare that Christianity, "rightly understood, was communism" (p. 39). One feels that some intellectuals were motivated by a sense of personal need, rather than by a desire to engage with the great public issues of their time: the attempts to create political and social institutions to deal with matters of war and peace, economic crisis, and the inevitable constraints upon freedom within a complex society. The thinkers whom Congdon cites most often soon retreated into categories of individual perception. Consciousness of sin played a part in the writings

of Koestler, mindful that he had denounced a lover while in the USSR (*The Invisible Writing*), who agonized over the nature of the "I" as more than a grammatical fiction, and at the end, concluding that "science" was "essentially a religious endeavour" (*Arrow in the Blue*), retreated into parapsychology, telepathy and clairvoyance (p. 156). For his part, Michael Polanyi devised a philosophy of "personalism", and engaged in ever "more profound spiritual and moral searches" (p. 159).

It is always a mistake to identify institutions too closely with their founding ethos — "the Church" with Christianity, the dismal "church" of post-Tsarist authoritarian imperialism (an easy target for critics) with Marx. Thus, it is Marxism, not the non-existent communism of the USSR, that was the intellectual — not "religious" — inspiration and concern of most of Congdon's émigré thinkers. Its attraction was that it embodies an interpretation of history which culminates in a "scientific" critique of capitalism, both of which have profoundly influenced thinking in the social sciences. But it is more. Those who were attracted to it were not concerned with moving pieces around on some grand chessboard of ideas, but with following the injunction that rings through the pages of *The Communist Manifesto* to the effect that the point is not to interpret the world but "to change it".

The striking transformation of the West continues to be achieved not only by blind industrial and market forces, but also by attempts to make the economy responsible to society at large, as expressed through the thought, teachings and actions of a broad spectrum of social reformers ranging from socialists to utopian thinkers, from liberal reformers to conservative improvers. For it is the deed, the touchstone of Goethe's *Faust*, that ultimately validates the idea.

Yet it is the "great" economic historian Karl Polanyi (*Newsweek*, January 6, 2003) who was above all concerned with "that which is done" (in Ranke's words) who is singled out for somewhat patronizing criticism in Congdon's book, because he was critical of what had been done in the name of the liberal market utopia, and because he was not "anti-communist" enough. Polanyi was above all concerned with the failures of the market system sustained by ideology which war alone had rescued from depression, failures moreover which explained the compensating world-wide turn to fascism. He argued for the possibility and indeed necessity of change: citing evidence ranging from the local ("Red Vienna's" success in building workers apartments for rents averaging 5% of income) to nation states' interventionist measures to protect society from the worst effects of the unfettered market system. It is mistaken to say that Karl Polanyi was "pro-communism" because he was aware that critics of the USSR also

sought to discredit socialism and democracy, given current doubts as to the ability of democratic institutions to solve the problems of mass society in the industrial age (pp. 36-7).

For this, Karl Polanyi is criticized — as no one else is in the book — for having “flirted” with ideas, and for his (much quoted) article “The Essence of Fascism” which was deemed “unsatisfactory” and “mistaken” due to “its weaknesses” in viewing fascism as “capitalism in crisis” (p. 39). Further, his wife Ilona Duczynska come in for similar treatment: “enraged”, “exasperated”, “unrepentant”, possessed of “notoriety”, and (A. Kolnai) “an inexorable revolutionary fanatic” for insisting on the need to distinguish between bolshevism and fascism.<sup>1</sup>

More serious is the absence of any sustained discussion of the working class — to whom in particular fascism and communism appealed with solutions to their plight. In the rarefied atmosphere in which ideas rather than people are presented in *Seeing Red* (the title summons up images of red rags waved provocatively at bulls), apart from Karl Polanyi, virtually none of the others mentioned seems to have voluntarily encountered real working-class people. Indeed, Congdon devotes more space to the art of the film — and even 14th century Florence — than to the British working class, a brief reference to Walter Greenwood's significant *Love on the Dole* (1933) serving merely to conclude a discussion of the career of the film producer Alexander Korda. The observation that the impact of the Depression “was felt less in Britain than elsewhere” (p. 20) counts for little beside Karl Polanyi's stark discovery, on first arriving there, that nothing he had read or witnessed on the Continent had prepared him for the degradation of all aspects of working-class existence under the class system. It was a pupil of György Lukács, the post-1956 emigrant intellectual István Mészáros — a close friend of Karl Polanyi and Ilona Duczynska — who in a 1992 interview in England provides a corrective. “I think you have to relate yourself to something; political and social commitment cannot be in thin air or in a vacuum. I am deeply committed to the working class, and this is how I think of the future intellectually” (p. 121).

Here a word may be said for those “other” Hungarian intellectuals, those who chose not to emigrate, particularly in and after 1956, who “sought the renewal of socialism by means of radical democratization” (Mészáros, *La rivolta degli intellettuali in Ungheria*, 1958), the message of a key work, listed in the Bibliography but not mentioned in the text, by Karl Polanyi and Ilona Duczynska, *The Plough and the Pen* (1963). But, then, the émigré intellectuals' journey to anti-communism and beyond also took some of them beyond socialism's concern for the people, beyond

equality even. Thus, though Mészáros was aware of capital's expanding system of domination and of growing inequities between and within countries, during 1960-70 Imre Lakatos and Tibor Szamuely actually expressed disquiet at what they deemed to be the West's excessive concern with equality; for his part, Koestler (in his book *Insight and Outlook*, 1949) came to regard integration "only in a cosmic sense, not on the social level" (pp. 150-51).

One would never guess from Congdon's account that Karl Polanyi's much translated and reprinted 1944 *The Great Transformation* had been twice listed among the 100 most significant books written in the past half century (*Time* 1977, and *The Times Literary Supplement* 1995) for he clearly favours Michael Polanyi's attack on this "prime target" in his hastily composed *Full Employment and Free Trade* (1945), on the (mistaken) grounds that the former was advocating "a planned society" (p. 83). On Michael Polanyi's sweeping observation that Soviet economic failure "proved beyond all reasonable doubt that there existed and could exist no alternative to capitalism," Congdon comments "we know that he was right" (p. 81). Karl Polanyi's pioneering study on "Socialist Accounting" (1922), with its all-important distinction between "economic costs" and "social costs", was years ahead of its time. Yet, ignoring the manipulated tax regimes and price structures of multinational corporations, Congdon flatly states that such a functional theory of society "now seems excessively optimistic with regard to human possibility".<sup>2</sup> During this period, in his articles and letters which, Congdon observes, were "wisely" done, "masterly", Michael Polanyi had one purpose: "He had resolved not to let a single leftist claim go unchallenged", for "detachment [means] enslavement" (p. 74).

Equally ideologically determined are Congdon's references to Michael Polanyi's views on science in response to the extremely influential work by J. D. Bernal — to him, that "brilliantly perverse publication" — for whom the former was "more than a match" in a review (p. 74). He even seems to take seriously Michael Polanyi's fear of "enslavement" that would result were "pure" science to be paralleled by, let alone subordinated to, an "applied" science designed more clearly to serve society (p. 44). Fear of slavery was very much in the air. Congdon observes that "the peoples of the USSR had, Polanyi knew, already been enslaved". But, then, Polanyi saw "slavery" threatening from another direction also, along the lines of *Brave New World*, considering it possible that "slavery to private appetites" would prepare the mind for submission to "public despotism" (p. 75). But it may be observed that the author does not refer to what is fast becoming the case in his own country, where private mass

merchandising techniques are leading to the public despotism of big business with its own domestic and foreign policy agenda.

In conclusion, it must be granted that omissions are few, though Congdon's failure to follow up on his opening statement that "many" (p. 3) of the members of the first generation of exiles were Jews is regrettable in light of his emphasis on their readiness to search for a new religion; absent, too, is any reference to the distinguished Marxist art historian Arnold Hauser. An error that strikes the eye is the description of the neo-Gothic Parliament Buildings in Budapest as "neo-baroque" (p. 110). Given the lofty level of discourse in the material cited, the author's attempts at, or recitations of, breezy colloquialisms ("the diminutive Dollfuss" is reminiscent of Time magazine's "the cigar-chomping, bearded dictator" [Castro], as is "Saint Antal", "it was open season on Hungarians" in Moscow in 1937, the "chutzpah" of Alexander Korda, Ilona Duczynska's having "more political savvy", the "salami tactics [of] Rákosi and his myrmidons") do not come off.

There can be no doubt that Lee Congdon's *Seeing Red* is a valuable book. The bibliography and footnotes are in themselves highly useful to scholars, and the interested general reader will learn much from the summarized material in the on the whole clear and always lively text. The two volumes on the Hungarian exiles are indicative of the outstanding contribution made by Hungarians to world culture, and a reminder that in the age of 'world powers' the small countries of the world continue to make a disproportionate contribution to humanity. In important respects, Congdon has risen to the challenge of his material. In general, it appears that he prefers nihilism — if, indeed, that is what it was — to the particular religion that attracted his subjects, perhaps to any religion. However, his text reflects the fact that in his country the free market utopia continues to be proselytized with all the fervour of a new religion of a different colour.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lee Congdon, *Exile and Social Thought. Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria 1919–1933* (Princeton University Press, 1991), *in passim*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.