

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY IN THE PUBLIC MIND: HISTORICAL CHANGES IN HISTORICAL BELIEFS

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In Europe, and mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, whose history has been so troubled, historical ideas, references and attitudes have a very special function in public thinking. This is the case in our country, on every level and in every sphere of culture. History is the strongest discipline in the humanities and social studies; the diachronic approach still holds strong, a historical choice of subject matter is very frequent in literature, art and the mass media. It is quite unusual that in our modern democracy historical issues carry much weight in political debates, even as actual causes for political conflicts. All this has definitely contributed to historical thinking, or 'naive history' – as a paraphrase of 'naive psychology' – becoming an important area of recurring research projects in Hungary.

My readers are probably familiar with Nietzsche's brilliant essay on the use and uselessness of history. It is a true reflection of the fact that historical orientation has long roots in Europe, although it has taken various forms, functions and contents over the years. At the time of turbulent historical changes, historical thoughts and evaluations also undergo dramatic changes in their role and contents. What I am saying holds true even if we know and we feel that our thinking about society, nations and their history carries knowledge, premises and prejudices even that go back to the distant past.

My colleagues and I have been conducting repeated surveys in the field for over twenty years, using extensive samples and intensive case studies. Selecting from among the data available, let me touch upon the findings of three surveys. The first dates back to 1971, the second to 1981; the third project was launched in 1990 following the usual rhythm of ten years. The focus of attention has not been the turn of the century only, but the whole process of 20th century modern history, into which the evaluation of the turn of the century is embedded.

1. Even if party propaganda, history teaching and historical sciences gave a one-sided view of 20th century Hungarian developments for a very long time, national and family experiences were not forgotten, as they always modified the picture of the past and were available also for empirical social sciences.

Our first extensive cognitive investigations were carried out in 1971. That it was not simply an isolated initiative, is best proved by a parallel survey of public knowledge, that collected harder data to point out the limits of the Hungarian people's information and learning, both in its elements and in its totality. The research also showed the less striking differences of knowledge between secondary school graduates and the less educated. We, however, concentrated our attention on the more subjective world of often completely ungrounded historical theories and second-hand experience, on the softer data of attitudes reflecting and producing prejudices. Our starting point was the paradoxical, but conclusively proven fact that people may have opinions, notions and attitudes bridging the gaps of their factual knowledge, stereotypes replacing information, or even excluding it even if they lack very basic knowledge.

Our investigations in 1971 and later, went back to the turn of the century only. This choice had several explanations. One of the reasons was that the adult population of the country was questioned about historical periods of which they had living memories in the family or personal experience, periods that could be contrasted with the theses of official history codified by textbooks. This early research project had the term "genealogy" in its title, which might be somewhat misleading, as the focus of attention was not the history of individual families, nor was it people's personal opinion about their own fate. What we were trying to find out was the relationship between personal and social history. And this is another reason for limiting the time perspective of the project, as we intended to study the evaluation of periods that define contemporary conditions, that can be and should be seen in totality with the present of which they represent the precedents. We were interested in the past as the road leading to the present. This road had so many ups and downs, twists and turns that it is not easy to cram into the inevitably simplifying subjective perspective of the world.

The 1971 survey was the first and for quite a few years the only investigation of how the Trianon Peace Treaty was assessed in Hungary.

As part of the peace treaties after World War I, the Trianon Peace Treaty gave Hungary its independence from Austria by disannexing two thirds of its historical territories and large numbers of ethnic Hungarians from the motherland. State and economic frameworks of many centuries were thus broken. This political change contributed to Hungary's political extremes and the drive that those territories should be obtained again. This was the main reason for the country siding with Germany and Italy before and during World War II, which in turn resulted in further losses. After the war the borders were reaffirmed, tensions concerning ethnic minorities in neighbouring states were concealed by the slogan of "proletarian internationalism" for many years.

Trianon is the keystone of eras, is a symbol, reason for new eras, and is also a taboo already for Harkai Schiller and others, for the first wave of opinion research in 1945/48, for the historians of the 1950s and 1960s. It was considered seriously only in the 1980s, thanks to the many efforts of scholars and writers. Members of a national representative sample were asked to judge the effects of this historical turning point on three generations of their families. Over 70% said that their families had been very bitter about Trianon. It is not so much the emotional content but rather the open admission of this fact that strikes one. In a country where nationalism and revisionism had been regarded as literally a charge of murder, a statement like that was not just open negation of official claims, but recalled the fresh memories of threats and dangers. We even suspected that there had been a fault in the method of our investigation, that perhaps the answer offered in the questionnaire suggested a comfortable "yes", or in other words, the reply was not carefully considered.

That the finding is not simply due to a methodological error is proved by three different arguments. One is the reaction to a series of answers in the same project. Over 50% of the national representative sample rejected the fact that their families did not approve of the reannexation of Transylvania and Upper Hungary. In this formulation of the problem, interviewees were expected to say "no" in order to express the same idea. In this case it is obviously not a question of giving a comfortable answer, as the strikingly consistent finding is the result of an intellectual challenge. It was in the groups of intellectuals and peasants that Trianon caused greater than average resentment, whereas office workers and skilled workers were less aggrieved. In general, however, intellectuals are not usually more conforming than office workers, and the differences between answers by peasants and skilled workers are due to their dissimilar social and political traditions.

The third argument is to be found in research findings concerning the interpretation of the Hungarian nation. An investigation using a national representative sample in 1973 and a layered random sample in 1975 reflected a strange contradiction of the interpretation and criteria of the notion of the Hungarian nation. Over 45% of the national representative sample said that Hungarians living in neighbouring countries belonged to the nation, although only 21% said that national minorities living in Hungary belonged to a nation other than Hungarian, and only 24% thought that those Hungarians who had decided to emigrate to the west also formed part of the nation.

What we see here is logically quite incoherent, which is an expression of sympathy with Hungarians disannexed through Trianon.

It is a feeling of national belonging that tries to defy the historically developed situation. People living in rural areas and the older generations said

more frequently that Hungarians in neighbouring countries belonged to the nation. These are not undifferentiated general tendencies however: the 1975 investigation based on layered random samples revealed a polarization of adult workers and university students, the former claiming the above view least frequently, whereas the latter saying it much more often.

Another 1981 research project, to be quoted later again, found that primary and secondary school students coming from upper-middle class social and family background and having the best school results were much more sensitive to this interpretation of the nation than their peers from different backgrounds, less prestigious schools and with less outstanding school results.

All this has a number of important lessons. Firstly, in the stifled and choking atmosphere of East-Central Europe, the youngest generations are still sensitive to national issues, to emotional and theoretical conflicts effecting the future of countries and peoples. Secondly, in spite of the negative political atmosphere, the situation was not so stifling as to prevent asking questions, getting answers, measuring and forecasting clearly outlined social trends in this very delicate matter of nations.

Let us return to the starting question of the research undertaken 20 years ago on how the history of the 20th century was viewed from the double perspective of the family and the society. From the large number of data, two strongly interlinked tendencies seem to stand out. On the one hand, there is a strong consistency in judging a period, its characteristics, figures, general social situation and the family. Despite all the richness of points of view of the assessment, the general character of the picture defines the image of each period. On the other hand, the evaluation and judgement of eras are interrelated, they are the outcome of comparisons, they hide a strict hierarchy, in fact there is a social development interpretation in them.

2. People have simplified, overgeneralized, coordinated views of the turn of the century, as well as of other clearly defined ages and periods. The stereotypes concerning consecutive periods present characteristic perceptions of development.

Let us take the first trend. How was the consistent assessment of, say, the peace years lasting up to the beginning of the World War (or to use the term applied by Iván T. Berend, the long *fin de siècle* of the 19th century) manifested in public thinking?

One reflection is the harmonization and adjustment of the contents of the many different assessments. We asked our interviewees to characterize the period between 1900 and 1914 in a number of ways.

Those asked had to evaluate the life of society, the character and role of Franz Joseph, the monarch symbolizing the era and their own family's

situation on scales placed between characteristics (so-called Osgood semantic differentials). It is natural that the contents of judgements vary with the subjects and the points of view.

There are different answer scales for the questions of how peaceful (or anxiety-ridden) the time was, how educated the monarch was (or how responsible), and how much respect the family enjoyed at the given time (or how much wealth it had). All the replies, however, carry a certain negativity. If the evaluation is extracted, or compressed into a single grade of evaluation, the findings for all three questions will be surprisingly similar. (On a scale of five, the average evaluation of society is 2.26, that of the monarch is 2.98 and the family's is 3.03.)

This unifying tendency of evaluations is especially well reflected by the replies expressing the acceptance or refusal of certain social and historical claims. By way of example, let me quote that the whole sample tended to accept that "between 1900 and 1914, Hungary was an industrially underdeveloped country" (4.51) and tended to reject the claim that "between 1900 and 1914, industry in Hungary developed at a fast rate" (2.60). The example may, perhaps, show how great and strong a role the consistence of evaluations play in providing missing information, or even in defying factual information. The industrial development of the country could be a question of perspectives, but it is a positive fact at the turn of the century that the rate of industrial development was remarkably fast. Similar examples can be quoted from other areas as well, from the assessment of the national issue among other things. It was mostly accepted that "between 1900 and 1914, our country suffered from Austrian oppression" (4.32), whereas it was mostly rejected that "between 1900 and 1914, Hungarians played the role they deserved among the nationalities living along the Danube" (2.84).

In addition to related contents, another aspect of the consistence of evaluations is the concurrence of judgements, their correlation in a statistical sense. The persons and groups that saw the period concerned more positively in one respect, did so also in another; and those who had more reservations in a certain aspect, tended to express it concerning a different issue as well. Among the hard social and demographic variables, the role of age proved to be very significant: older interviewees had a more favourable opinion of the turn of the century than did those in their thirties, or in even younger age-groups. Social and occupational factors are not to be overlooked either, as skilled workers proved to be more critical of the given period of the past. In a few areas, intellectuals are also more critical than those with less education, for example, in their view of the monarch. Among the softer variables of attitudes, the role of a declared interest in politics was quite clear

in 1971. In that monolithical period, a declaration of being interested in politics meant a political commitment to the regime. And the interest in politics occurred together with a more critical assessment of the turn of the century. What is truly surprising is that it was more so from the point of the family than from that of social history. To put it in another way, those who emphasized their political commitment saw their own families in a darker light, even if as regards its long past years, than others. A very different approach, using different methodological devices as well, could be used to check the validity of the finding. We have elaborated and applied for the purpose the so-called scale of situational perception, which reflects whether a person is equal or subordinated to representatives of various levels of the social hierarchy. For example it is asked whether he/she is in a position to frequent a company where there are general managers; or whether he/she could get married to someone from a shoemakers' family. This reversed Bogardus scale has resulted in several findings: on the one hand, it has pointed to a strong social hierarchy not only in the past, but also in the Hungary of the 1970s; on the other hand, it has hinted at a favourable change for large groups of people from the situation of the fathers and grandfathers to that of the present generation of adults in the 1970s. It is a notable difference from what has been seen before that in this instance, a declaration of political interests goes together with a proud image of the past, rather than with recollections of misery and poverty. The politically committed project their better social position in the present also to former generations of their families.

3. The common man, the 'naive historian' sees modern history as the road leading to the present, thus strangely, he evaluated the precedents according to their relationship to the result or the outcome. Each period assumes its meaning in the general image of development.

According to all indications, the present state (if the survey was carried out in the 1970s, then obviously the state of the 1970s), and the way it is experienced and evaluated is closely related to the perception of the past.

It is a well-known old cliché that the perception of the past is influenced by the contemporary approach, perspective and attitudes to life, which has been known from the history of historical research and has been supposed also about public thinking. The main contribution of the 1971 project was that it revealed the various groups' image and evaluation of distinct periods in 20th century Hungarian history, as it used national stratified sampling.

Roughly speaking, the general trend was that the time following 1957, the so-called Kádár era, was put into the first place, to be followed by two marked periods following 1945, the personal cult of Rákosi in 1948-53, and then the years between 1945 and 1948, the period of political coalition, in which the strong influence of the occupying Soviet Union was already quite significant.

It does not follow the chronological order that the fourth period in the evaluation is the turn of the century, the years between 1900 and 1914, and the pre-war rule of Horthy between 1919 and 1939 is last in the order of preferences. On the basis of the average of sample, the present was preferred to all else, and its historic counterpoint was said to be the Horthy era. The agreement of replies is strongest in respect of these two periods, and the statistical scattering is most considerable as regards the periods after World War II, especially concerning 1948–53. The preference of the coalition period or the Rákosi period as compared to one another varied very much with social groups. The oldest members of the sample thought that the turn of the century had been a better period than any after World War II. It is not necessary to explain in detail that averages hide very different opinions, so much so that in about 15% of the sample, which is not a negligible minority, the order outlined above is completely different. Nevertheless, in the replies the peak of 20th century Hungarian history is the period following 1957 (scoring 4.47 on a five-point scale), and the real turning point before it is 1945. The difference between social groups is in the degree of their preference for the years following 1945 to the years preceding it.

Apparently, these 1971 results seem a bit absurd today. We cannot deny them, however. What we have to do now is to explain them. The elements of the explanation cannot be other than a list of external and internal forces, a relative satisfaction and in part, some self-deceiving hope. Let us take the latter factor first. It was Lerner, the well-known American social psychologist who introduced the interpreting principle of "the belief in a good world", whereby in naive thinking (and especially in the group of those who are inclined to look at the world in this way) virtue is rewarded, moreover it is also supposed that whatever is rewarded must be virtuous. The ideological brainwashing that human efforts result in progress, and that human society is getting more and more developed, irrespective of facts, or at least, strongly selecting and choosing from facts, is similar to what Lerner has found. Following the Rákosi era and the retaliation after 1956, at the time when neighbouring Czechoslovakia was silenced in 1968, people were filled with relative satisfaction at the calm, the modest material prosperity and the growing freedom of the 1960s and 70s in Hungary. In comparison with the direct precedents and with the social and political pressures in neighbouring countries, Hungary could be seen as an island of peace, or as a joke of the time claimed "the merriest barracks in the socialist camp". Research on the national consciousness in the 1970s repeatedly showed that people were unrealistically optimistic about the country's situation, and its modest economic successes were seen as even more important than the national consciousness. Proud national evaluation and a

self-satisfied assessment of the country were coupled with a corrupted economic mentality and the ideological acknowledgement of a balance of international power. This is how the strange fact can be explained that in 1973 and 1975 most people placed Hungary among the leading world powers in respect of its economic development, and that they seemed to be quite appreciative of the social democratism of the whole Soviet block. It may, of course, be suspected that it was not their true opinion, but that they acted and spoke in line with expectations. It cannot be denied that fears, the need for being socially accepted and respected must have contributed to those favourable opinions, but the question is to what extent and in what ways, as the elaborate points of view, the consistence of unconnected ideas, the systematic differences found between social groups and types cannot be explained simply by fear and differing interpretations of social expectations.

As it has been suggested earlier, our survey in 1971 was trying to tackle this problem consciously, placing in the focus of our attention the variable relationship and interaction between claims concerning family history and the more ideological socio-historical judgements. The periods mentioned so far were characterised also from the point of the individual's family. The hierarchy of periods was basically the same as seen before. The years following 1957 were seen as extremely favourable from the individuals' perspective, and all others were thought to be considerably less positive, especially the age before World War II. The turn of the century was neutral on average, and the Horthy era was considered more negative. In comparison with the social description of periods, differences between the extremes of the scales were smaller, or in other words, the line of development was less steep. The difference is slight, but still the years of the coalition between 1945 and 1948 were preferred to the time between 1948 and 1953.

Peasants' views differed from those voiced by skilled workers, proving to be crucially important. Though not so strongly, differences between social groups were noticeable also in the assessment of social historical periods.

(In this respect, intellectuals are exceptional, as they say that the Rákosi era meant a rise for most of their families, but from the point of social history they are more critical than any other group.) The fact that they were asked about their families and not about the relations of society in general, made interviewees consider a number of individual factors when thinking about their families, and thus weakened even further the force of supposed expectations. Consequently, the percentage of those whose evaluations were not in harmony with the hierarchy accepted by most was even larger: in this indirect order of preferences 21% put the turn of the century and a further 19% the Horthy era in the first or second place. Because of our objectives, we gave members of the

sample the possibility of consciously reflecting on the divergence of official points of view and personal experiences in the family. We asked them what they would rather believe when there was such discrepancy. 19% said definitely that they believed what the textbooks had to say, and 27% accepted totally what their families had told them. Those who preferred textbooks claimed that the line of historical evaluation was turned sharper in 1945, whereas those who preferred their families' views said the line was more horizontal, which suggests that their choice of source expressing a certain attitude had its correlation in formulating judgments on history.

4. In a longer period of social stability, despite all changes in the sample and the methods, the unbroken line of development with the place of the 1900s is virtually unchanged.

Ten years later, in 1981, another extensive survey was carried out concerning views of the history of the 20th century. This time the investigation was conducted among students, using a special stratified sample which enabled us to measure the effects of the various factors. It was found that the family background had a strong impact on primary school children's knowledge of history.

Children from intellectual backgrounds enjoyed privileges, although it is also true that the performance of weak students from families of intellectuals proved to be the worst of all. Later on, following a strict selection process of entrance examinations, the knowledge of students from skilled workers' families was better than of their peers coming from families of intellectuals, if their school results were identical. Knowledge goes together with an important psychological feature of evaluative judgements, namely with cognitive complexity. Cognitive complexity as against cognitive simplicity is characterized by rich points of consideration, by their independence, by complex assessments, by a tolerance of, and even need for, contradictions.

We required and analysed the evaluation of objects belonging to more than one cognitive sphere, finding that the judgement of historical periods is a more or less independent field; the individual is characterized by a complexity of historical judgments, even if not independently but as an addition to how complex the individual's thinking of nations, various social categories and personalities with different historical roles is. (Of the sample of about 500 we chose the two extreme types of simple and complex thinkers and tried to identify their characteristics in handling information. Let me mention briefly that one area of the many different tests was the reception of essays and the drawing of conclusions from them. One of the essays was about the precedents and outcomes of the Trianon Peace Treaty. By adopting the national perspective, simple thinkers were, on the

whole, inclined to accept historical developments, whereas complex thinkers understood and applied the different perspectives, tended to see more clearly the discrepancies of principles and methods, of conflicting interests and of intentions and their outcomes. The backbone of the survey, however, was not this, but the field of historical judgements.

This time our method of research was that we pinpointed five dates in history, seemingly at random, but in fact, they were indicators of longer periods, and we asked our interviewees to judge them from 9 perspectives by using scales. The first year was 1900, followed by 1925 and 1950, then 1975 representing the recent past, almost the present, and finally the year 2000 to represent prospects for the future. The average judgements were getting more and more positive, the years were placed on a nearly straight line going upwards without any breaks. The image of development is even more simple, more mechanical than it was in the case of the national stratified sample ten years earlier, when the first two stretches of the century were at least changed in possession of more experience and more expectations, and when interviewees were not quite certain which of the two eras after 1945 they should prefer. A decade later, among students hardly ever do we find any qualifying factor at all. Judgements made on scales hide maximum two factors, but in the cases of 1975 and 2000 they only have one factor. Students from backgrounds of intellectuals are less critical of the age of the turn of the century than their peers, and this specific feature of this group is especially marked when excellent students from families of intellectuals and families of skilled workers are compared. Within a generally negative image, it was again the secondary school students from intellectuals' families who picked out the few positive features of 1925. These and some other slight colouring effects did not influence the monotony of the picture very much.

5. A radical social switch, however, redraws the historical line of development very dramatically, changing the evaluation of the recent past, as well as the future.

Keeping up with the usual rhythm of ten years, the next stage of the series of research projects is due in 1991. And indeed, at the time of the political changeover in 1990, we started follow-up and repeated examinations, which we are planning to continue on an extensive sample of students next year, in 1992.

Understandably, one of our first questions is what has become of the illusion of supposedly unbroken line of development, that we recorded ten years ago. Last year we asked the students to judge the situation of Hungary from eight points of view, at five different times in our history.

Among the considerations there were the rate of economic progress, the standard of living, the general atmosphere, the freedom of speech, efficiency

in foreign politics, the level of peoples's culture and education. The judgements made by the students questioned ran parallelly concerning the five dates. The evaluation of the 20th century takes the shape of a U. There is a steady decline from 1900, through 1925 to 1950, and a slow rise is starting from 1975 leading to the prospect of 2000. The difference between this U-curve and the steep rising line recorded ten years ago is striking. In the former project the only deviation was that the outstandingly good evaluation of 1975 was hard to outdo on the scales of judgements concerning the year 2000. It is to be noted that the political changes in Hungary have rewritten not only the past but also the prospects for the future. It is a strange fact that a less optimistic picture of the future is matched to the darker past.

The above observations have been complemented with a few others. Inquiring about various dates, we tried to find out how definitely smaller and larger powers have "left their stamps" on our continent.

The three special dates were 1900, 1950 and 2000. Europe in 1900 was introduced as being dominated by Germany, although England was seen to have been nearly as dominant too. France was said to be the third and Italy the fourth in this order. On a scale of five, Italy together with the United States scored less than 3.00, and so did Hungary and Romania, the two countries that were also asked about. Viewing the past from the perspective of the present, 1950 is seen as dominated by the Soviet Union, to be followed by Germany, then the United States and less definitely by England and France. It is believed that by the year 2000 the dominance of Germany will have been restored on the continent, the United States will maintain its present influence, the role of England will continue to decline and reach the level of France, and finally the significance of Russia will be less than 3.00 on the scale.

Studying these quasi-time-series, the sample appear to think that the role of our country and that of Romania, a country seen with a lot of reservations, is gradually growing, although they do not acquire any real significance in the course of this century (i.e. they never score over 3.00). There we have the formula of development again, though at a slower rate.

6. The outstanding evaluation of the turn of the century will be maintained in the longer run, being a kind of historical and cognitive foothold for returning to Europe, to the European development.

What can be expected in another year, in 1991? And why does the historical change have this effect? With these questions we are leaving the domain of strict facts and are embarking on guesswork. I think that the present, its experiences, and people's attitudes to them will continue to shape the image of the past, and the lack of knowledge will continue to be bridged by stereotypical generalisations and attitudes organizing beliefs. In the eyes of young genera-

tions, the present does not suggest the illusion of unbroken development. What they see is that there is some slow recovery after having broken out of recent bondages, still with stiff limbs and fuzzy ideas. They think that after the walls were pulled down, the situation did not instantly become clear and unambiguous; survival is not easy, future prospects and distances are dizzying. The past, after a century of miseries and roundabouts, can at least offer a philosophical and emotional foothold. Every one of us sees something else in the Hungary of the turn of the century, in its form of state and its social processes, but everybody and every programme manages to find its own sources, its own roots, as well as its lost opportunities there. Therefore, I am convinced that the prestige of the turn of the century, which is greater than that of any other period over the past 100 years, will not fade. The only question that remains to be seen is whether we can recognize that the historical kaleidoscope included not only lost possibilities that need to be revived, but also possibilities that have been realised though ought to have been avoided.

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