

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS OF DISCONTENT: PARADOXES OF 1956

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In the paper we seek to trace and better understand the surprising sociological components of the '56 revolution. The paradox lying in the heart of the revolutionary events concerns the fact that the social groups most closely involved in the political mobilization included the formerly faithful communist, later "revisionist" intellectuals, the university students and the industrial working class. They had previously been considered as the primary social basis and legitimation force of the communist political regime. Still, they were to become the main motor of initiating the disobedience almost before 23rd of October and, in addition, "did the revolution" thereafter. What could be the reason of their discontent causing the first "revolutionary" shock to a political regime which regularly defined and declared itself to embody the social(ist) revolution? The explanation is based on a sociological consideration (the mobility trap) combined with a psychological reasoning (the sense of guilt, the bitter feeling of being deceived, and the unfulfilled expectations) and the whole argument will be placed into the specific historical context specified either by Hungary's road from '53 to '56, and the global developments of the communist world in the course of 1956.

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Barrington Moore Jr., in his seminal and pioneering book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, argues that his contribution "is an attempt to discover the range of historical conditions under which either or both of these rural groups [the landed upper classes and the peasantry] have become important forces behind the emergence of Western parliamentary versions of democracy, and the dictatorships of the right and the left, that is, fascist and communist regimes."¹ Unlike Moore, I am now going to try to shed some light on the question of which social groups and for what reasons became important forces behind the revolt against Stalinism in a single small country.

It is almost impossible to discuss the social history of 1956 adequately without a clear picture of the social groups that not only supported or sympathized with the

revolutionary movements but were committed to them and made up the revolutionary bodies. Without relying on impressionistic images available as revolutionary legends or the post-revolutionary propaganda of the Kádár regime, one is left only with the data produced and provided by the subsequent processes of judicial retaliation. The lists of those interned, imprisoned, or sentenced to death after the revolutionary events provide some knowledge of who was actively involved in them. The main problem, however, is that such empirical evidence was constructed some time later, during the reprisal process. Findings taken from judicial proceedings become the basis for identifying and defining what counts as revolutionary behavior, what can be placed in the revolutionary category (or the counter-revolutionary category as the Kádárite persecutors labeled it). This ignores what their immediate inducements to such behavior were. So the bias in the accessible data, coupled with the absence of some 200,000 people who fled westward in late 1956 and early 1957, distorts any picture of the social basis on which the revolution rested. Historians frequently remark that a “fairly wide circle of participants in the incidents was not brought to trial”.² And this is strengthened by data revealing the behavior of the authorities involved in the reprisal. According to an instruction of December 4, 1957, issued by the deputy Minister of Interior, more exact definition of the social origins both of the persons under arrest and those being suspected is needed to match the correct “class politics”. The erroneous data provided on them demonstrates that

in many cases the ‘politicals’ and the ordinary criminals are recruited primarily not from the ‘class alien’, the depraved proletariat and the hooligan elements. [...] It occurs that the previously convicted hooligan elements, class alien persons are assessed as manual laborers on the basis of their nominal occupation, recent work-place or origin.

Therefore, to get a “more exact” definition of who could be considered worker at all, “It is not allowed to register the ones being convicted twice, not even the class alien persons, displaced by the proletarian dictatorship from their [original social] position and doomed to become manual laborers etc. as workers or peasants.” So “both the original and the recent occupation has to be taken as a basis” in determining the class position of the persons concerned.³

Some further invaluable data about the incentives behind revolutionary action can be gathered from oral history, although the difficulties of applying them are no less considerable. Recollections many years or decades later seem to provide decisive evidence about events whose “true story” cannot be learned from official written sources, which are silent on the subject. Oral history sheds light on facts that are personal, unrepeatable and accidental, but the historical evidence it provides is not flawless either. For the record of oral history is an intellectual or rather discursive construct that has more to do with the present than the past.⁴

On examining earlier a collection of oral history interviews with '56 émigrés, I found that the “framework-story” type of account was shaped primarily by certain time, narrative strategies. Less was revealed about the experienced events of historical value because the account was a subsequent story with a teleological basis.⁵

The first point to be addressed is the social composition of the revolutionaries. It is possible to identify three liberally defined macro-social groups that distinguished themselves in inciting and managing the revolutionary processes: the left-wing, communist-oriented intellectuals (mainly of revisionist writers and scholars); the university students, and the industrial working classes. However, they cannot be considered exclusively. There is no denying of the possibility that a big role as potential revolutionaries was played by several members of the peasantry or other strata. The landowning peasantry clearly had a strong influence over local events in the villages. According to one case study, the first public demonstration in the settlement surveyed, on October 26, mobilized a high proportion of such people – nearly a quarter of the local population – while everybody else stood out at their gates to see what was happening. Altogether a tenth of the male residents of the village, 78 persons out of 797, could be said to have taken an active part in the revolution.

Villagers personally concerned in local events (some of whom even held leading positions in revolutionary organizations) came partly from the young workers under thirty-five years of age (mainly descendants of landholding peasants), and partly from the highest-status smallholders, who belonged to an older generation. With minor exceptions, the workers included were commuters in close touch with the town, so that they could mediate between the revolutionized urban centers and their home villages.⁶

Other case studies relating to far less industrialized villages have also revealed feverish activity by first-generation workers of peasant origin.⁷ This had a lot to do with their upward mobility – they, unlike pre-war traditional peasants, had managed to rise socially by becoming unskilled industrial workers.⁸ In the inter-war period, however, the main channel accessible for the landowning peasantry to rise was either the accumulation of land property or becoming a master artisan, merchant and/or clerical worker.⁹

For the peasantry, traditionally and instinctively, would distance itself from modern collective social protest. The “rational peasant”, as Samuel L. Popkin calls him in his analysis, regularly refuses to act for any common or group interest, preferring individual methods of resistance. Individual peasants frequently leave the task of concerted protest to others.¹⁰

Among the main social forces contributing to the '56 Revolution were the creative intellectuals (poets, novelists and journalists). They had been espousing and popularizing revisionist political ideas as early as 1953, and paradoxically, the

ones who had worked hardest to represent and spread the official culture of the communist regime would become the most volatile fomenters of the uprising.

Another crucial social group behind the political mobilization in October 1956 consisted of university students. Their revolt also takes some explaining, for the restrictive admission criteria for university places in the years leading up to 1956 and the ideological rigor imposed upon students in their studies meant that the children of poor peasant and worker families came to form a very large group among the students: 67 per cent in 1954/5 at the Budapest University of Economics.¹¹ Furthermore, a scaled-down *szakérttségi* (specialized school-leaving certificate) had been established to make it easier for children of socially disadvantaged families to gain university places. As a result, children from such groups accounted for as many as 21 per cent of all students in 1952–1953, although this had eased to 13 per cent by October 1956.¹² The reason for the drop in the ratio may be accounted for by the cessation of those kinds of courses in 1955.¹³

Ultimately, the urban industrial proletariat also played a dominant role in the revolutionary events. This question deserves attention because official communist ideology claimed to be an embodiment of true dictatorship of the proletariat; the working class was to be the social basis and main beneficiary of communist rule. Upward social mobility was indeed assured by the regime for many members of that class, but the average working-class standard of living was little different from that of other sections of society, though it was higher than that of agricultural villagers.¹⁴

Meanwhile the social meaning of the expression “industrial working class” had undergone some changes since the inter-war period. The great increase in their numbers and the structural alterations within the class that occurred in the 1950s created quite a new class formation, consisting of many elements representative of the peasant, the lower middle, the middle or even the upper classes. (This social mixture was reflected by the official wording cited before in connection with the official demand of how to categorize the persecuted persons.) Just to mention one aspect: almost 400,000 rural people – one-sixth of the 1949 rural population – streamed into urban industry between 1949 and 1953.¹⁵

Also in flux at that time were the structure of material interests and the contours of the prestige hierarchy. Young skilled workers with privileged positions on and off the shop floor were approaching middle management in their status, as the traditional wage gap between them perceptibly decreased. This and the concomitant drastic deterioration in the status of non-manual employees in industry finally led to concerted action between them during the revolution under the aegis of the workers’ councils. Their convergence, however, was to some extent counterbalanced by an increasing homogenization within the working class itself either in terms of the wages or the diverse prestige of the various branches of industry.¹⁶

The last problem is how to explain sociologically and psychologically the discontent manifest in the 1956 revolution. The first factor to emphasize is the immense physical and social turnover and mobility in previous years. This had had a deep and lasting impact on the stratification and mental outlook of Hungarian society and had caused almost universal uncertainty and insecurity about personal and group identity. Such enhanced status insecurity was felt equally by those who moved up and down the social ladder. No social group was able any more to see itself as a stable entity, equipped with a specific identity coinciding with a cherished image.¹⁷ Such generally shared social experience is thought to be one of the fundamental sociological roots of revolutionary potential, which will be identified here under the notion of a *mobility trap*. This term seeks to express a paradox: Stalinist power was digging its own grave when it facilitated the social mobility that was supposed to hasten the industrialization and restructuring of the social body that would lend social legitimacy to its repressive authority. The special importance ascribed to obtaining social approval in that form followed from the inability of the communist rulers to employ the institutional forms of political legitimacy found in a liberal democracy. This inability had much to do with the "program ideologies" embodied in Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine and elsewhere, in which political aims and interests were justified by radical transformation of the inherited social and political conditions.¹⁸

The question remaining is why the social forces just mentioned should have been the ones to revolt. The hitherto faithful, revisionist communist intellectuals are commonly thought to have been moved by disappointment and disillusionment with the communist utopias. This argument looks plausible, although it needs stating more precisely. The heightened political awareness and responsibility for public issues typically felt by Hungarian intellectuals, writers and creative artists, especially from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, continued to apply when they started to show disloyalty to the regime. Furthermore, the communist elite laid surprising emphasis on gaining outside support from eminent intellectuals, who had stood apart from the regime, but without showing hostility towards it. The role assigned to these intellectuals, under circumstances in which public opinion did not exist, was to represent and even proxy the absent social consent to communist rule. This role in turn increased the self-esteem of these intellectuals and made them particularly suited to articulating subversive ideas leveled at the political system they had been serving.¹⁹

The question of why the university students were stirred up so easily has to be placed in a wider context of an emerging youth sub-culture, which could be observed throughout post-war Europe and in America. This revolt against the adult world usually took the form either of lifestyle reform (a change in mass-consumption habits), or of political action. The first striking manifestation of the latter happened in the autumn of 1956 in Hungary. It was followed a decade later by the

youth upheavals in Paris and on American university campuses.²⁰ The reason why political action came to the fore in Hungary as early as 1956 could possibly be the total lack of personal and public freedom, so that the youth rebellion under such circumstances became channeled into the political movement.

For the working class, the decisive motive seems to have been the anxiety and frustration felt by the lower segment of urban industrial workers, whose poverty was not offset by opportunities for upward mobility. Some analysts even dared to suggest that Durkheimian anomie was behind the prominent part young unskilled laborers played in the armed fighting groups. The social status and mentality of these ‘Pest kids’ seem to be influenced or even determined mainly by social immobility or downward mobility, low levels of schooling, deviance, marginality, lack of a normal family background, general frustration, a conflict-oriented world view, etc.²¹ But one has to add, skilled, as well as young unskilled manual workers were also involved in the armed rebel groups, a fact lessening the feasibility of the aforementioned argument.²²

Workers, who created and filled in the structures of the workers’ councils, cooperated closely with the technicians and engineers above them in the factory hierarchy. On the whole, they were also assisted in their self-organization in the workers’ councils by the communist party and its close ally, the trade-union movement; see, for instance, the order of October 26, and the subsequent orders under the Kádárite leadership of November 16 and 22, after the Soviet occupation. This in itself, and not least, the precise way the workers’ councils operated in the last months of 1956, contradicts in part the theory put forward first by Hannah Arendt. She contended, the workers’ councils “have always emerged during the revolution itself, [as] they sprang from the people as spontaneous organs of action and of order”. This proves that

nothing indeed contradicts more sharply the old adage of the anarchistic and lawless ‘natural’ inclinations of a people left without the constraint of its government than the emergence of the councils that, wherever they appeared, and *most pronouncedly during the Hungarian Revolution*, were concerned with the reorganization of the political and economic life of the country and *the establishment of a new order*.²³ (My italics)

This highly special meaning attributed to the notion, workers’ council was also accepted later on by some historians. Bill Lomax, to mention the most important of them firmly stated that the workers’ councils were established with the specific aim of setting up a new social and political order.²⁴ Also ripe for revision is the equally mythical notion that these organizations represented the will and political credo of the skilled workers – the labor aristocracy of the day, consciously continuing and developing the spiritual legacy of social democracy. Taking seriously

into account the available data on the social composition of the armed rebel groups and the workers' councils, the argument that they expressed an organizational split between two divergent levels of workers seems not to be well founded. It is contradicted by the evidence that many, maybe the most active participants in the workers' councils were recruited from the younger generation, under 30 years of age and very often of poor peasant and agricultural-worker background.²⁵ Their aspirations to the upward mobility enjoyed by the urban proletariat seems to have been decisive, indeed to have given them the main impetus to identify themselves with the cause of the revolution.

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This brief overview of the social forces behind the events of 1956 and the probable motives that moved the participants in their revolutionary behavior demonstrates that there is unlikely to have been a single "text" of the Hungarian revolution, any simple, uniform interpretation of the causes behind the explosion in 1956. And that may also account for the many, even contradictory interpretations of the '56 revolution preserved and maintained to this day.

Notes

- ¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), xi.
- ² Péter Bán, "A Pécsi Megyei Bíróság büntetőperes iratainak néhány társadalomtörténeti tanulsága" [Social-history lessons of criminal trial documents of Pécs County Court], in *'56 vidéken* ['56 in the Provinces] ed. Imre Kapiller (Zalaegerszeg: Zala Megyei Levéltár, 1992), 24.
- ³ Történeti Hivatal, Az érvényes miniszteri, miniszterhelyettesi parancsok, utasítások, közös utasítások gyűjteménye 1957. 6-21/1957.
- ⁴ The classic work is, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), esp. 150–166; See also Gábor Gyáni, "Remembering and oral history", *Budapest Review of Books*, 8: 3–4 (1998), 101–107.
- ⁵ Gábor Gyáni, "56-os menekültek emlékező stratégiái" [Remembering strategies of '56 refugees] in: Kanyó, Tamás, ed., *Emigráció és identitás. 56-os magyar menekültek Svájcban* [Emigration and Identity. '56 Hungarian Refugees in Switzerland] ed. Tamás Kanyó (Budapest: L'Harmattan/MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2002), 135–149.
- ⁶ Árpád Tyekvicska, "Helyi forradalom. Önszerveződés Nógrád községben 1956-ban" [Local revolution. Self-organization in Nógrád village in 1956] in Imre Kapiller, *op. cit.*, 37, 41, 47 and 49.
- ⁷ Gyula Belényi, "Párhuzamos falurajzok: Kistelek és Mórahalom 1956-ben" [Parallel village pictures: Kistelek and Mórahalom in 1956] in Imre Kapiller, *op. cit.*, 14–15.
- ⁸ Tibor Valuch, "Changes in the structure and lifestyle of the Hungarian society in the second half of the XXth century" in Gábor Gyáni, György Kövér and Tibor Valuch, *Social History of*

- Hungary from the Reform Era to the End of the Twentieth Century*. Tr. Mario Fenyó (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, distr. New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 580.
- ⁹ Gábor Gyáni, "Social history of Hungary in the Horthy Era" in: *Ibid.*, 416.
- ¹⁰ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*. (Los Angeles and London: Berkeley, 1979).
- ¹¹ Vilmos Zsidi, "A hallgatóság és a tanári kar átalakítása a közgazdaság-tudományi egyetemen 1945–1956" [Transformation of students and faculty at the University of Economics, 1945–56] in Tibor Valuch, ed., *Hatalom és társadalom a XX. századi magyar történelemben* [Power and Society in 20th-century Hungarian History] (Budapest: Osiris/1956-os Intézet, 1995), 615.
- ¹² Mária M. Kovács and Antal Örkény, *Káderek* [Cadres] (Budapest: ELTE Szociológiai és Szociálpolitikai Intézet és Továbbképző Központ, 1991), 17. (Szociológiai füzetek series 52.)
- ¹³ György Majtényi, *A tudomány lajtorjája. "Társadalmi mobilitás" és "új értelmiség" Magyarországon a II. világháború után* [Ladder of the Science. "Social Mobility" and "New Intellectuals" in Hungary after WWII] (Budapest: Gondolat – Magyar Országos Levéltár, 2005), 109.
- ¹⁴ Gyula Belényi, "A munkáscsaládok reáljövedelme és szociális ellátottsága (1949–1968)" [Real earnings and social provision of worker families, 1949–68], *Történelmi Szemle*, XLV, 3-4 (2003): 305–331.
- ¹⁵ *Idem.*, "Az extenzív iparosítás politikája és a fizikai dolgozók foglalkozási átrétegződése (1948–1953)" [The policy of extensive industrialization and occupational restructuring of manual workers, 1948–53] in Tibor Valuch, *op. cit.*, 623.
- ¹⁶ Sándor Horváth, "Munkás, paraszt, értelmiség munkaverseny lázában ég" [Worker, peasant and intellectual in a fever over work contests] in Levente Püski and Tibor Valuch, eds., *Mérlegen a XX. századi magyar történelem – értelmezések és értékelések* [20th-century Hungarian History in the Balance – Interpretations and Assessments] (Debrecen: 1956-os Intézet/DE TI Új- és Legújabbkori Magyar Történelmi Tanszéke, 2002), 351.
- ¹⁷ Case study findings in terms both of members of the "new" intellectuals or the "new" workers underline the universal instability of such a status identity. György Majtényi, *op. cit.*, 169–171; Sándor Horváth, *A kapu és a határ: mindennapi Sztálinváros* [The Gate and the Border: Everyday Sztálinváros] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 2004), especially 52–53.
- ¹⁸ On the notion of programme ideologies (and their counterpart, status ideologies), see Miklós Szabó, "Programideológiák és állapotideológiák. Az ideológia szerepe és típusai a polgári korszakban" [Programme ideologies and status ideologies. Role and types of ideology in the bourgeois period] in *Idem.*, *Politikai kultúra Magyarországon 1896–1986* [Political Culture in Hungary, 1896–1986] (Budapest: Medvetánc, 1989), especially 98.
- ¹⁹ Evidences supporting the thesis can be found in, Éva Standeisky, *Gúzsba kötve. A kulturális elit és a hatalom* [Hamstrangled. The Cultural Elite and the Power] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára, 2005).
- ²⁰ See John R. Gillis, *Youth in History. Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770–Present*. (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 185–211. On Hungarian aspects, see Sándor Horváth, "Hooligans, spivs and gangs. Youth subcultures in the 1960s" in János M. Rainer and György Péteri, eds., *Muddling Through in the Long 1960s. Ideas and Everyday Life in High Politics and the Lower Classes of Communist Hungary*. (Budapest: Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution/Trondheim: Program on East European Cultures and Societies, 2005), especially 200–203.
- ²¹ Gyula Kozák, "Szent csöcselék" [Holy layabouts] in *Évkönyv 1999 VII. Magyarország a jelenkorban* (Yearbook 1999 VII. Hungary in the Contemporary Period] eds., Éva Standeisky – János M. Rainer (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1999), especially 264–269.

- ²² Cf. Eszter Zsófia Tóth, "A társadalmi részvétel egyes kérdései 1956-ban" [Some questions of social participation in 1956] in Levente Püski and Tibor Valuch, *op. cit.* 379–380. One has to add, that research findings of László Eörsi are to give the most solid ground for any social history generalizations in this area. See, László Eörsi, *Ferencváros 1956. A kerület fegyveres csoportjai* [Ferencváros 1956. Armed Groups of the District] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1997); *Idem.*, *Corvinisták, 1956. A VIII. kerület fegyveres csoportjai* [Corvinists, 1956. Armed Groups of the VIIIth District] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2001); *Idem.*, *Széna térek 1956* [From the Széna Square 1956] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, 2004).
- ²³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 271 and see also 274.
- ²⁴ Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (London: Allison & Busby, 1976), especially chapter V. A far more realistic, less dogmatic approach is, László Varga, "'Utóvédharc'. Munkástanácsok 1956" [Rear-Guard Fighting. Workers' councils 1956] in *Idem.*, *Az elhagyott tömeg. Tanulmányok 1950–1956-ról* [The Abandoned Crowd. Studies on 1950–1956] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi – Budapest Főváros Levéltára, 1994), 199–237.
- ²⁵ Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *op. cit.*; *Idem.*, "A Csepel Vas- és Fémművek munkástanácsainak története (1956–1957)" [History of the workers' councils of the Csepel Iron and Metal Works, 1956–1957], *Múltunk*, 1999/4. 163–198; Attila Szakolczai, "A győri vagongyár munkástanácsa a győri forradalom élén" [The workers' council of the Győr Rolling-Stock Works in front of the revolution in Győr] in Levente Püski, Lajos Timár and Tibor Valuch, eds., *Politika, gazdaság és társadalom a XX. századi magyar történelemben II.* [Politics, Economy and Society in the History of XXth Century Hungary II] (Debrecen: KLTE TI Új- és Legújabbkori Magyar Történelmi Tanszéke, 2000), 129; Sándor Horváth, "A Központi Munkástanács története" [History of the Central Workers' Council], *Első Század*, 1998/1. 113–209.