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“WE WANT SOCIALISM, BUT IN A HUNGARIAN WAY”

THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS’ COUNCILS DURING
THE DISINTEGRATION AND REBUILDING OF THE SOCIAL-
IST SYSTEM IN HUNGARY (1956–1957)

Theses of Doctoral (Ph.D.) Dissertation

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CONTEXT AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Even though in the last thirty years hundreds of scholarly contributions have been written on the Revolution of 1956, the revolutionary workers' councils were not given ample scholarly attention. This is due to several factors. On the one hand, after the end of communism in Hungary, they did not form part of the canon of the memory politics of 1956, on the other hand, they did not fit the narrative of the burdened heritage of the ideologically driven history of the workers' movement. The lack of institutionalized labor history with modern methodology and approaches also deterred researchers from exploring the history of workers in the 1950s. Most publications by Western émigrés and historians writing in the 1990s are permeated by Marxism and its one-sided approach, the boundaries of which, in my view, have limited the possibilities of research in this area. Due to this methodological problem and the lack of sources that would have allowed the exploration of the events on the level of factories, most historians have focused on the macro-level of political events, emphasizing the asymmetrical political struggle of the Central Workers' Council of Budapest and the Kádár's government. What is more, the question of the interconnectedness of the workers' legitimacy with the state socialist dictatorship, as well as the alternative visions of Socialism among the members of this particular group was also ignored. The reformist ideas of the principal agents of economic control, aiming to renew the state socialist system during the years of the single party autarchy which brought about a 'catastrophe in politics', and how

these reformist ideas incited action and ignited the sparks of the revolution, were also neglected by previous research.

However, the historiographical trends concerning the Revolution of 1956 in Hungary had a positive turn in the middle of the 2000s, as the interdisciplinary, objective and – following the archival turn – source-based methodologies became more and more dominant and resulted in several useful articles and valuable source publications.

My research aims to join the historiographical trend which aspires to provide new insights to the *contexts of politics, the interrelations of different political doctrines, leadership methods and social practices*, as well as *the multicolored value system of the workers taking part in the revolution*.

Besides the lacuna in historiography, personal reasons motivated me in choosing the topic of my doctoral dissertation. As a university student in Szeged, I made an interview with the only female member of the workers' council of the Shoe Factory of Southern Hungary (*Délmagyarországi Cipőgyár*), and her stories and the questions she raised motivated me to explore the topic further.

METHODOLOGY

❖ *The 'peculiar marriage' of the Sovietized language and the use of political language in 1956.* This problem is rooted in *the dual use of language* during the dictatorship: there was an 'official' language accepted as the norm, and parallel to this, an everyday diction

evolved, having had its organic development, kept alive by the different subcultures of society. As for the workers' councils, I examined the 'filters' between the two linguistic universes, focusing on certain expressions which were transferred from one to the other, and on how their meaning was modified as a result of this movement. The lists of demands and programs written by the members of the workers' councils shed light on the concealed use and existence of the *Sovietized language and way of thinking*, which further complicates the deciphering and contextualization of the real aims of the revolutionaries. The members of the society, even though they acquired the language of dictatorship, did not acquire the ideology completely, and only some elements of it (especially political expression reflecting on equality, democracy and the role of society) were built into the deep structures of their thinking.

❖ *Contextual text analysis.* In analyzing the primary sources, I have taken the intellectual historian, Quentin Skinner's instructions on approaching the use of political language as a guideline. In analyzing historical sources, we must also focus on the complex contexts of how a text is written. It is also important not to take the context we identified as a determinant stipulating contemporary events, but, as Skinner put it, as a 'final framework', which aids us in retracing the recognizable meanings which we could identify as the force of locutions as understood by contemporary society. In pointing at the relations of the conceptual variants between the workers' councils and socialism, I find Skinner's approach, which distinguishes between the

contemporary uses of meaning, understanding, and concepts, useful. A method of historical reconstruction is necessary which *'focuses on the personae using the concept'*, as well as the methods of use, and at the same time considers the target audience of certain texts and concepts. Understanding the motivating forces behind the *'personae using the concept'* is of primary significance, during which we must avoid assigning anything to the actions of historical actors that they could not identify with and which were not yet *'ready'* as historical phenomena.

❖ The differences between political actions in normal and crises periods. Most scholarly contributions dealing with the political processes of 1956 fail to reflect on the nature of politics. The collapse of the system in 1956, the descriptions of the early Kádár era and the process of reconstruction under Kádár are mostly based on the sources of the leading bodies of the Hungarian Working People's Party (MDP) and the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and the documents of political trials and the state security. As opposed to this, I apply an approach, which, related to the deep state theory, distinguishes between the formal and informal circles of power. What is more, we must also bear in mind that the workings of politics differ in times of consolidation and crisis, the latter of which is termed by István Schlett as the *'political state of emergency'*. Following this chain of thought, as for the political situation in 1956, the identification and analysis of different political values, patterns of behavior and

forms of decision-making can help to cast a different light on the political-historical events of 1956.

RESULTS

The main results and conclusions of the dissertation can be summarised as follows:

❖ The workers' councils were not exclusively Hungarian phenomena, rather, they conformed to the alternative current of economic thinking and the mainstream of reform politics within a Socialist framework, opened by the wave of de-Stalinization. In this sense, they should be considered as an integral part of the history of the East-Central European zone (belonging to the Soviet sphere of interests) in the 1950s.

❖ The workers' council, as a key institution of self-management, meant, as a neutral ideology, a perspective for those who, either in a political, or on professional grounds, opposed the mechanical copying of the planned economy of the Soviet Union, and aimed to find an alternative to the system based on central planning.

❖ The workers' councils were the forums and institutions of grassroots democracy which, during a political crisis, could secure the legitim and consensus-based selection of leaders. Furthermore, they

established the institutions of accountability and recallability and created lively relations between the representatives and the represented.

❖ The experiences of the workers' councils in 1956 have proved that, during a political and economic crisis, the workers' participation in running an industrial company can be beneficial, and that they can attend to administrative and technological tasks as well. However, as for the period of consolidation, it is still unanswered, whether they would have been successful in managing a profitable business and in securing social transfers, if they were subjected to the changing cycles of economic conjecture.

❖ As for the mode of operation, more forms and working mechanisms are delineated: the corporative operation was dominant, but there are examples of strongly centralized leading and decision-making processes.

❖ Next to the everyday management of the factories, the workers' councils, working out the "Hungarian way of socialism", put the basic problems of politics on their agenda, namely, they tried to define the criteria of legitimacy, create the ideal order of the division of power and the controllability of executive power. In outlining their democratic political vision for the future, the revolutionary workers' councils did not work on realizing utopias, rather, they turned to the classical concepts, institutions, and toolkit of Hungarian intellectual history and strove to redefine them in a contemporary framework.

❖ Most councils were made up of workers without political knowledge and preconceptions, who did not act upon abstract ideas and well-definable ideologies. Their political utterances were in most cases revolved around the notions of ‘nation, democracy and socialism’ with diverse contents in different contexts. These political perspective concepts concentrated on the traditional moral values and criteria concerning the nature of the social and political system, based on the society’s sense of justice. Due to this, I do not hold the approach viable which mechanically identifies social democracy or other ideological currents with the heterogenous value system represented by the workers’ councils.

❖ The thinking of the councils’ members who had more thorough political knowledge concentrated on the notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘property’. The first manifested itself in outlining of the forms of *political and professional representation*, and the second in conceiving the necessary conditions of the *welfare of workers*. Therefore, they proposed ideas, such as profit sharing, the realization of common property or workers' shares to aid the creation of a society of proprietors.

❖ In responding to the structural crisis of the Soviet model, they did not consider representative democracy as outdated, but rather, as desirable, and to promote welfare through governmental actions, they proposed a decentralized structure. Therefore, they attributed a significant role, with a wide range of legislative and executive functions, to

the self-managing bodies, as well as the bicameral legislative authority.

❖ As the length of the period in which these workers' councils could work is rather limited, we cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question to what extent, through the network of the workers' councils, could the decentralized industrial leadership, integrating the national corporations through professions and the chambers of industries, create a more competitive and successful environment, and succeed in providing a better quality of life for the workers' collectives, as opposed to the rigid and centralized system of the 1950s.

❖ The workers and their industrial corporations embody a part of the Hungarian revolution, which was less opposed to socialism, and whose program and value system can be considered as an undeservingly neglected chapter of the political tradition of the democratic left and Hungarian intellectual history.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

❖ “A Magyar nemzet érdekeit védő szocializm” Az 1956-os munkástanácsok alapértékei és politikai szerepvállalása. [“A current of socialism protecting the interests of the Hungarian nation” The value system and political participation of the workers' councils of 1956]. In: Horváth, Miklós (ed.): *A diktatúra évtizedei. Tanulmányok*,

esszék, előadások. [The decades of dictatorship. Studies, essays, lectures.] Budapest, 2013. 157–169.

❖ A munkástanácsok és a Kádár-kormány hatalmi harcának egyes kérdései (1956–1957) [Some questions of the political struggle between the workers' councils and the Kádár government (1956–1957)] In: Balázs, József et al. (eds.): *Studia Varia. Tanulmánykötet. [Studia Varia. A collection of essays.]* Budapest, 2016. 360–372.

❖ Fából vaskarika? 1956 és a szocializmus. [An essential contradiction? 1956 and socialism.] In: *Kommentár [Commentary]*, 2016/5. 10–18.

❖ Characteristics of the operation of the revolutionary workers' councils of 1956: typical and atypical examples. In: Reka, Kiss – Zsolt, Horváth (eds.): *NEB Yearbook, 2016–2017*. Budapest, 2018. 195–223.

❖ A munkás-önigazgatás gondolata és esélyei történelmi perspektívában – 1956, 1989. [The idea and chances of workers' self-management in a historical perspective – 1956, 1989] In: Gécz, József – Laczkó, Sándor – Sipos, József – Révész, Béla (eds.): *Szeged hosszú tavasza 1989-ben és '56. [The long spring of Szeged in 1989 and 1956.]* Szeged, 2017. 37–43.

❖ “A karhatalom nem más, mint az MSZMP védőhaderege.” A honvédtiszti karhatalom és a forradalmi üzemőrségek fővárosi konfliktusai. [“The police force is nothing but the defending army of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party.” The conflicts of the police force and the revolutionary factory guards in Budapest.] In: Ötvös, István – Trieber, Péter (szerk.): *A dolgozó népet szolgálták? Fegyveres testületek és pártirányításuk a szocializmusban. [Did they serve the working nation? Armed forces and their control by the political party in state socialism.]* NEB Könyvtár, Budapest, 2018. 83–115.

❖ A Szeged Városi Munkástanács 1956-1957. Történet, felelősségre vonás és állambiztonsági utóélet. [The Workers’ Council of Szeged 1956-1957. Story, impeachment and afterlife by state security.] In: *Clio Műhelytanulmányok [Clio Studies]*, 2019/9. p. 1-71.