

COMMUNISM AND AFTER

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The Cynical and the Ironical – Remembering Communism in Hungary –

A Paradox

I wish to begin my presentation with a frequently voiced assertion that sounds like a cliché – namely, communism is a ‘past that inhabits our present’. The paradox underlying this apparent cliché derives from a seemingly irresolvable contradiction: How could the yesterday inhabit our lives today, when it is the past precisely because it is no longer present? Of course it is on the basis of our expectations for the future that we today evoke our memories of the past. As the wheels of memory turn, a bridge thus forms not only between past and present, but one arises also between present and future, and, consequently, between past and future.

Jan Assmann distinguishes between two forms of collective memory. He refers to memory that has solidified in the form of myths, traditions, or historical narratives as *cultural memory*; and to the more malleable form, in which the communities that remember themselves lived through the past events, as *communicative memory*.¹ The memory of communism in Eastern Europe is therefore mostly *communicative*. This has several consequences.

First, a culture does not intrinsically possess communicative memory. To the contrary, it is exactly the evoking of the past, as a social act, that creates the culture of remembrance associated with the event(s) in question. This process is, then, a culture-producing social activity. Secondly, it evokes the primary experiences of the larger part of the remembering community; which is to say, this community remembers past events in which it partici-

¹ Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Beck, 1992. 69–70.

pated. In contrast with cultural memory – in which convention and knowledge validate a memory – in the case of communicative memory a paramount role is accorded the *witness*.² Since however everyone remembers only certain portions or details of the communist era, those that impacted their own lives, the third singular characteristic of communicative remembrance is its *segmented* nature. As written by Reinhart Koselleck: the primary experience is always fragmentary and impossible to convey as a single experience, and every later “process of condensation” is secondary. For this reason, segmented remembering gives rise to mutually competitive narratives.³

A contradiction

The measure of credibility is determined by our own sense of justice as derived from our experiences and by the social and political discourses. The writing of history and the politics of history account for the bulk of the latter. At the time the wheels of communicative memory are turning, we have in our possession no coherent, condensed narrative of communism. Consequently the political sphere may have more room to manoeuvre, becoming something of a writer, a scholar of history itself. In the quasi history that emerges, credibility is determined primarily by political utility.

Our segmented memory further muddles up the criterion of *credibility*. To remember in cultural terms means that we are capable – independent of our own experiences – of judging whether past events are real or unreal, whether one-time decisions were appropriate and fair or inappropriate and unfair, and what’s more, to view such events and decisions from a distance, absent of all moral content. In terms of communicative memory this would mean the following: despite our own dispersed and fragmentary experiences, we would be capable of accepting not only that other people possess fundamentally different experiences but perhaps that our own experiences, when viewed from our present-day perspective, are unpleasant and difficult to bear. In communicative memory, however, our own experiences, including our one-time suffering or joy, necessarily find their way onto one side of the scale; and it is with all this that we measure the experience of others.

The communicative memory of communism is therefore a protected discourse, I mean, protected from abuse, because the witnesses are many; which precludes the possibility of anyone telling any kind of story they well

² Ricoeur, Paul: La marque du passé. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, No. 1, 1998. 14.

³ Koselleck, Reinhart: Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, No. 2, 1999. 213–214.

please. And yet it is unprotected; for it has yet to be fortified all around by social conventions and by historians' narratives. Both the witnesses and the narratives are at the mercy of the whims of the politics of history.

And a dilemma

What does – what can – a witness remember? In his 1968 novel *The Joke*, Milan Kundera wrote, “I see a moving walkway (which represents time) and a man (who represents me) running in the direction opposite to the direction the walkway takes; but the walkway moves faster than I and therefore gradually bears me away from the goal I am running to reach; that goal (odd goal, situated in the *wrong direction!*) is a past of political trials, of auditoria where hands go up, of fear, of penal battalions and Lucie, a past which still has me under its spell, which I am still trying to decipher, unravel, and which still prevents me from living as a man should live, facing forward.”⁴

Kundera struggles between the need to remember and the affirmation of life. According to him, the ruinous and indecipherable, impossible-to-unravel but elusive past hinders us from living our lives “facing forward.”

The answer would appear to be: better then to forget the past. But there are various ways of forgetting, too. Citing Nietzsche and Freud, Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *passive* and *active* forgetting.⁵ Passive forgetting involves suppressing past memories and trauma into the subconscious, a process that carries the risk of these traumas reviving; that which is suppressed returns. Active forgetting is by contrast based on the processing of experiences and trauma: we can forget these memories because we are already ‘beyond’ them.

But is the only way out of this dilemma really through forgetting? Kundera wrote *The Joke* in 1968, in an era that had already left behind the heinous crimes of Stalinism but which had remained a ‘soft’ dictatorship – a dictatorship that had made these crimes taboo, which banned their remembrance. To this day Hungarian society has managed neither to process its experiences of socialist era nor to heal the wounds it suffered in those decades. While the revolution in 1989 did undo earlier taboos, the Hungarian *Vergangheitsbewältigung* was left incomplete in most cases, not least as con-

⁴ Milan Kundera: *The Joke*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. 243. (Translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.)

⁵ Ricoeur, Paul: *Gedächtnis – Vergessen – Geschichte*. In Müller, Klaus E., Rüsen, Jörn (Hg.): *Historische Sinnbildung. Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte*. Hamburg: Darstellungsstrategien, 1997. 433–455.

cerned the nation's experience of World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, and 1956; or rather, the politics of transition petered out with ill-matched, sometimes ignominious gestures aimed at restitution. At the same time, the decommunisation discourse of the political transition straightway divided Hungarian society into perpetrators and victims and offered a ready-made model whereby, with a few exceptions, we were all victims of communism. A wideranging public debate that might have ripened our relationship to our nation's socialist past was not to be. Instead, the cagey atmosphere of that era seemed in one important sense to prevail, as public discourse concerning secret information, for example concerning just who had or hadn't been a „secret agent” during communism, appeared to be firmly in the control of narrow and less than transparent political interest groups.

In 2002, not long after the national elections led to the fall of the center-right government with the victory of a socialist-liberal coalition, it finally became clear that the discourse on decommunization was only part of a ‘now you see it, now you don't’⁶ sort of game – a game in which the newly elected prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, appeared as some sort of socialist James Bond from the 1970s. Hungarian society by and large reacted with indifference when even he admitted (*after* his election) that he had been a ‘secret agent’ during the socialist era.

From all this it seems as if Hungarian society has more or less forgotten socialism, and what's more, by way of passive forgetting. Not so with the politics of memory, which from the start strove to create *lieux de mémoire* for the past.⁷

Nostalgia and the thirst for revenge – ironic and cynical remembering

Politics has numerous tools at its disposal to spur society to remember the past. Political gestures can be made, laws can be passed, educational programs can be initiated, memorials and museums can be built. What follows is a brief analysis of two government-sponsored initiatives at ‘musealization’, which shed light on two different forms of remembering.

⁶ See Kovács, Éva: “Hütchenspiel” – Der ungarische Diskurs über die Restitution der Gerechtigkeit. In Krisztina Mánicke-Gyöngyösi (Hg.): *Öffentliche Konfliktdiskurse um Restitution von Gerechtigkeit, politische Verantwortung und nationale Identität*. In der Reihe “Berliner Schriften zur Politik und Gesellschaft um Sozialismus und Kommunismus” des Peter Lang Verlags, Band 9, Frankfurt am Main-Berlin-Bern-New York-Paris-Wien, 1996. 119–134.

⁷ See Kovács, Éva: “Das uns alle verzehrende historische Fieber” in Ungarn. *Südosteuropa*, No. 7–9, 2002. 388–411.

Museum exhibits concerning the socialist era generally focus on narratives crafted by scholars or by visual artists. Not only do they convey knowledge but they can also awaken emotions in the visitor: they can calm them or incite them, make them cry or make them laugh. A successful museum can be the venue in which the process, the work of memory begins: visitors can evoke their own experiences in connection with what they see.

The Statue Park

In Hungary, the musealization of the socialist era got underway early on, in 1989. Indeed it happened, humorously enough, with the removal of the visible traces of the communist era – namely, with the decommunization of the street.⁸ Concern over spontaneous public initiatives to topple communist statues – initiatives that had a disconcerting air of mob rule to them – led political players to institutionalise the issue. While the majority of public opinion favoured leaving such statues in place, the fear of political violence resulted in the official removal of the statues, or, plainly put, the organised and restrained toppling of statues.

So it was that the idea of having a ‘statue park’ came into being. The park was finally opened in 1993, on the outskirts of Budapest, (as part of a huge – and later abandoned – effort the Hungarian government had undertaken to prepare for a world expo in Budapest in 1998). The choice of venue reflected a desire both to localise or marginalise the past and to marketise it (by rendering it into a quasi outdoor market – a market that, situated as it was within easy access of a major motorway, was aimed essentially at Western tourists).

No sooner does the visitor enter than he or she is greeted by a famous Hungarian poem by Gyula Illyés, “A Sentence on Tyranny,” making it implacably clear (as per one of the poem’s most memorable lines): “You yourself are tyranny.” The razor-thin ‘Scenes Wall’ practically falls upon the visitor: this crude, monumental brick wall serves simultaneously to distance him or her from the recent past (as if we were walking among thousand-year-old ruins or in a cemetery) and inspires terror owing to its vast proportions. And yet it is also ludicrous for the fact that there is *nothing* behind it: this is but a potemkin wall. The statues, having been removed from their original places, also have a double effect: on the one hand they seem much bigger and

⁸ See Kovács, Éva: Zwei Etüde über die Mythen und Ritualen im ungarischen Systemwechsel. *ÖZG*, Wien, No. 2, 1999. 210–237.



more frightening on the ground in the relatively open space of the park; and on the other, they seem comical, locked up together this way.

Notwithstanding that the park also suggests the depths of hell, it is shaped in the form of a flower meant to represent the antithesis of tyranny. Its fundamental motif is a walk along that theme central to the long decades under the government of János Kádár, “the path of socialism.” The paths dictated by the statues and the park’s overall arrangement do not compose a chronological timeline, however. Instead, by presenting the history of the Hungarian workers’ movement and of Stalinism according to topic, the park does its part to reorganise collective knowledge away from a chronological perspective. By completely ignoring the long decades under Kádár, this new narrative resolutely distances the visitor from the nation’s relatively recent past. The recent past is ‘written’ in the Statue Park as a history not present at all among us; the park doesn’t assimilate our own life histories, our collective experiences of socialism. Thus it encourages the psychological distancing, the subconscious suppression, of the Kádár era. At the same time, the thematic arrangement emphasises Hungary’s connection to the international



workers' movement and its later oppression by the Soviet Union, thus offering the visitor a relatively presentable picture of the socialist era – that is, one that posits Hungary as martyr.

To paraphrase the comments of those who dreamed up the idea of the Statue Park, “There is nothing, absolutely nothing, funny about this park.” To this Kundera would surely retort, “[L]aughter ... has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness).”⁹ Nonetheless, the Statue Park as experienced to this day by tens of thousands of visitors annually turned out to be funny: it has become the scene of irony-laden excursions at the end of which we can acquire the ‘last breath’ of communism, or rather, a CD featuring the ‘Best Songs of Communism’.

⁹ Milan Kundera: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996. 86. (Translated from French by Aaron Asher.)



An ironic posture by no means suggests passivity or forgetting. In the words of Richard Rorty, “ironists” – those capable of irony, that is – “face up to the contingency of [their] own most central beliefs and desires.”¹⁰ Indeed, laughter requires a sort of distance: the recognition that what only yesterday was frightening is today a source of humour. Perhaps it was the park’s formal opening in the summer of 1993 that established the fundamental mood of its visitors. Indeed, the ceremony was modelled on a celebrated 1969 movie, “The Witness,” that classic parody of Hungary’s own Stalinist era of the

1950s; indeed, the ceremony was choreographed by none other than Péter Bacsó, the film’s director. The caricaturing of tyranny, ironic remembrance, requires an active process of remembering.

The same goes for the objects that can be brought in the Statue Park’s souvenir shop. As Ina Merkel mentioned, nostalgia is likewise a type of active remembrance, if not quite as contemplative as ironic remembrance.¹¹ The relics of socialism first had to become *trash* in a symbolic sense, so that following their musealization they could become ennobled as cultic objects. Every station can be a step in evoking and processing the past.

In short: the Statue Park emerged from the collision of a medley of (somewhat overlapping) interests that all favoured its establishment. There were of course those who desired a radical shift away from state socialism and thus wanted all the era’s statues toppled outright. And then there were

¹⁰ Rorty, Richard: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹¹ Ina Merkel: Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the Battleground of Consumer Culture. In Strasser, Susan – McGovern, Charles – Judt, Matthias (eds.): *Getting and Spending, European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* Washington, 1998. 281–300.

museologists who wanted to archive and exhibit. The park's planners meanwhile wanted to convey a 'serious' message, the artists behind the opening ceremony aimed for irony, and the park's operators had their eye on profit. Fortunately, all these interests were more or less realised – opening the door to a unique form of remembering the past: ironic remembrance or nostalgia.



The House of Terror

Almost ten years later, in 2002, another institution dedicated to reminding its visitors of the communist era opened its doors in Budapest. This was preceded, in 1998, by the election of a governing coalition led by the centrist-right party, the FIDESZ. Due to this shift political discourse became anticommunist again. By then Hungarian society had by and large completely forgotten the message of the Statue Park (again to quote from Illyés's seminal poem): "[E]veryone is a link in the chain." Calls sounded for the establishment of a 'museum of communism' – and these calls could, at least in theory, rest on the justifiable public need to display the heinous crimes of that era and to establish an honourable memorial to the victims of the red terror.

The 'Hungarian House of Terror', as this museum came to be known, aimed however to convey a more complex message to the general public. By linking the reign of terror carried out under Hungary's brand of national socialism, or fascism, with the subsequent terror experienced under communism, this museum drew an equal sign between the two regimes and, what's more, established a continuity between the two brands of terror. With this it aligned itself with that controversial, revisionist school of historical thought which regards the human devastation wreaked by these two types of dictatorship, and the regimes themselves, as of essentially the same nature. The underlying aim of such revisionism is to question the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and to make communism seem like Nazism, communists seem like Nazis. Moreover, this tendency suggests that the perpetrators and the vic-



tims were the same under both dictatorships. In the case of the House of Terror, this relativist interpretation of the Holocaust is further suggested by the structure and proportions of the venue: the crimes of Hungary's fascist Arrow Cross are depicted in one room only.

Since the history of communism is depicted only in part, the exhibit can hardly be called comprehensive. Not that this was the aim. As the museum director herself has publicly declared, the institution aims to display terror in all its sensational aspects,¹² to invite visitors to a historical 'happening'.

For this, the institution's planners conceived of an exhibit that profoundly calls into question the venue's very nature as a museum. Strikingly few objects are on display, and only some of these are authentic; most are either of ambiguous origin or have been thrown together from disparate parts: props for the 'happening'. The exhibit doesn't so much as provide an accurate history of the building itself, which in 1944 was the headquarters of the Arrow Cross and later, under communism, served the same purpose for the notorious ÁVH, or the State Security Office.

The exhibit was formally opened in front of the building, on the Andrásy avenue, by the then prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The crowd included quite a few supporters of the extreme right wing – in particular, of the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (known by its acronym, MIÉP) – who'd ar-

¹² Pittaway, Mark: The 'House of Terror' and Hungary's Politics of Memory. *Austrian Studies Newsletter*, Vol.15, No.1, Winter, 2003. 16–17.



rived directly from a protest they had staged in front of the Socialist Party headquarters. This served to endow the ceremony with a further shade of meaning: for one thing, the suggestion that the communist terror is still present in our lives today; for another, the notion that the House of Terror is the child of both the political right and the extreme right – in other words, that these two political groups in Hungary can be a cohesive force.

The House of Terror thus creates a historical narrative that paints a picture of Hungarians as the victims of both Nazism and communism. In this narrative the communist terror persists well beyond the actual fall of communism – if not to this very day. And it communicates this message in a rather aggressive manner: the visitor cannot wander about the House of Terror at will; there are only group tours. Part and parcel of the ‘happening’ is a spectacular show that emphasises exceptionally loud sound effects. It is no surprise that many have come to refer to the House of Terror, which in Hungarian is *Terror háza*, with the witty and rhyming appellation *Terror pláza* (Terror Plaza) – a big shopping mall. No information is provided about the documents on display; not least, about their sources of origin. Flyers available in the individual rooms provide terse summaries on the given topic; and while they might be



well-balanced kernels of fact (which they often are not), by more or less taking their rightful place in the canon of texts positing Hungarians as victims, and in associated relativist discourse, the overall picture is one of falsehood. In the words of Peter Sloterdijk, this is the working of a cynical mind.¹³

The exhibit awakens in many visitors a thirst for revenge. Often I've stood in front of the House of Terror in line with others waiting to go in, and among them no few were readying themselves even at the entrance to finally let loose inside and get down to really hating those communists. In the months after the museum opened, even the Office of History, Hungary's version of Germany's Gauck Institute, saw its attendance rise markedly. This suggests that the House of Terror inspired no few common folk among its visitors to feel as if perhaps they, too, had been persecuted by the communists way back when – as if they, too, had files to dig up in the Office of History. Not only did the museum's website afford room for a 'database of victims' but so too for a 'database of perpetrators', allowing anyone to publicly 'denounce' anyone they well please. Both the 'happening' inside the museum

¹³ Sloterdijk, Peter: *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Frankfurt am Main, 1983.

proper, and the institution's website, resemble a TV reality show in that they communicate the message that anyone and everyone can be a heroic sufferer and a scholar of history.

In what way does this cynical politics of remembrance encourage people to evoke memories of the past? Large crowds have visited the Hall of Terror. When, after the Socialists returned to government after a four-year hiatus with the 2002 national elections, and a proposal was made to trim the institution's state funding, the directors organised a 'circle of friends'. This group undertook a media campaign suggesting that, ah yes, here we go again, the socialists were persecuting us. Of course this campaign glossed over the fact that the museum's planned budget – as inherited from the previous government – was nearly three times that of a similar state-funded museum; which is not to mention that the House of Terror took in significant proceeds even from ticket sales. Symbolically, then, this museum continued to remain the ideological property of FIDESZ and of the extreme right.

In short: the cynical politics of remembrance has a very different effect on its audience than does the ironic sort. It makes reflection impossible, precluding any confrontation with the past, hindering humour and laughter. It demands submissive reception and it serves up this reparation in return: here, we can grieve for ourselves and pass sentence on others. We leave the House of Terror not with a sense of relief that might translate into these words: "Ah, how good it is that all that is in the past." No, we leave brimming with anger at the communist 'enemy' and with a perverse sense of satisfaction at having seen, for example, the photo and name of a well-known liberal politician's father on the wall of perpetrators. The House of Terror takes our cloudy historical knowledge of Nazism and communism up a dark alley – it exhibits half truths in spurious surroundings. Twentieth-century Hungarian history transmitted thus is the history of our wounds unhealed to this day. The exhibit produces visitors who leave full of even more frustration and resentment than they came with.

Nonetheless, even if the House of Terror is not exactly a national monument, for a distinct group of people it can still become a *lieu de mémoire*. These people light candles and place flowers by the foot of the building, and hold memorial services here on a day dedicated to the victims of communism. They are an odd mix of young right- and extreme-right wingers and old folks who feel as though they have come out the losers after decades of communism, and it is their collective aim to avoid having to remember as individuals.

Uses and abuses of memory

As we have seen, the Statue Park and the House of Terror have very much in common. Both aim to shape the way people remember the communist era, and both embody existing realms of public will. Moreover, both aim to make themselves marketable, and in doing so each creates a business – whether an outdoor market or a mall – out of memory. However, the differences run deep: while the House of Terror aims to assuage the thirst for revenge, the Statue Park aims for quite the opposite. The latter would shut away the past somewhere far away, the former would conjure it up like an evil spirit as the present. The latter does not transform the objects on exhibit, the former goes at them aggressively and turns them inside-out. More important, the Statue Park serves as a reminder that we were all participants in tyranny, while the House of Terror names 100 perpetrators and exempts the Hungarian people from having to look the past in the eye: everyone is a victim. Ultimately, however, the most essential difference between the two is that while one creates an opportunity for irony and for active remembrance, the other reaches for this cultural memory with cynical means: the liars call the liars liars...

Translated from the Hungarian by Paul Olchvary

Appendix

	Statue Park	House of Terror
Antecedents	Toppling and damaging of statues, 1989–90	Auschwitz exhibit, 1998–99
Direct impetus	Institutionalisation of spontaneous public anger	Shift in the politics of memory: the appearance and institutionalisation of revisionist history
Site	A field on the outskirts of Budapest	A palace built in 1880, in downtown Budapest
Reason for choice of site	Convenient access for Western tourists arriving by car, the marginalisation of communism	Prior uses of the building (headquarters of the fascists in WWII, of state security during a portion of the communist era)
Structural approach	Open-air park	Installation, exhibition

	Statue Park	House of Terror
Objects on exhibit	Contingent but authentic; statues from open-air public spaces that city and municipal governments opted to remove. In terms of aesthetics, recognisability, and function, the overall effect is coherent.	Contingent but only partly authentic. Some objects have been put together from disparate elements, others are copies or of questionable origin.
Exhibit method	<i>in context</i>	<i>in situ</i>
Time period depicted	1919–1956	1944–1991 (2002)
Narrative depicted	A primarily thematic and somewhat chronological lesson in the history of the workers' movement	A primarily chronological and somewhat thematic history of collective suffering
Suggested role of fellow citizens during the depicted time period	“Everyone is a link in the chain” (as per Gyula Illyés’s poem)	Names and photos of perpetrators and of victims are on display
Souvenir shop	A tattooed Stalin (on the cover of an art book) CD, “Best of Communism: Selected Revolutionary Songs” CD: “Best of KISZ: Pol-Beat from the Kádár Era” (KISZ was the acronym for the communist youth movement.) CD: Polyushka (techno version) CD-ROM on the Statue Park	A bookshop with 275 books, most of them historical scholarship but some by extreme right wing authors. Photo albums, travel guides.