

REMINISCENCES OF ZSUZSA FERGE

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In the mid-1990s the EU put up and financed a set of temporary EU Chairs in Social policy in (at least) half a dozen Eastern European countries. I happened to be offered one of them for the spring semester of 1996 at ELTE in Budapest. In the 1980s and 1990s, I worked quite a lot on comparative social and labour market policies and institutions. Zsuzsa was *the* authority on Eastern European policies and institutions. Her book *A society in the making* had been published by Penguin for a mass market. I knew of her because of that, and I referred to her in my *'European Modernity and Beyond'*, which set out to study East and West together and comparatively.

The reception of these EU Chairs differed widely. One colleague told me that it took him two months to get into contact with his supposed hosts. I, on the other hand, was very privileged, as Zsuzsa had prepared everything with her usual effective energy and personal warmth. I got a light, but meaningful, teaching assignment, and my wife and I could rent a house from one of her junior colleagues. She invited us for dinners in her lovely house, and took us on a wonderful, and somewhat adventurous trip to Balaton, the latter due to the fact that her eyes were not quite as good as her driving, which sometimes put us in risky situations. She was a great Central European intellectual, full of energy, curiosity, and of wide-ranging knowledge.

We both had an egalitarian and solidaristic conception of social policy, then under attack from neoliberal perspectives and a target of the heavy economic artillery of the World Bank. In the second half of the 1990s the Bank was campaigning for a private pension system of individual capital accounts, the system which the military dictatorship had instituted in Chile. While I was there the Bank organized a conference in Budapest intended to sell the scheme to Eastern Europe. Not due to any particular concern for people in retirement, but primarily as an instrument to create and expand financial markets. Zsuzsa could not attend due to other obligations, so she asked me to go there as her deputy. We were there to listen to Chilean economists and to the Bank representatives, telling us the benefits of privatization and giving us political tips on how to run down existing public schemes before launching the solution of private finance. I reported in detail to Zsuzsa, and she started to plan a rebuttal.

Zsuzsa and I became friends as well as colleagues, and I invited her to speak at a conference organized by the Swedish research network Centre of Marxist Studies. She hesitated at first, given the bad name of Marxism in many Hungarian circles, but she came to Stockholm and gave a highly applauded lecture on social issues in post-communist Hungary.

My wife Sonia and I have both kept a fond memory of Zsuzsa and of the good time we had in her circle. We were actually talking about that the day before Dorottya's kind invitation arrived.

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