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Revolution, Uprising, Civil War.

The Conceptual Dilemmas of 1956

Historians have, from the start, been divided on the question whether 1956 was a revolution or a national uprising. Shortly after the 1956 events the debate on the issue was already in full swing, publicly as well as privately. In his theoretical work published in 1963, Hannah Arendt came out firmly in favor of ranking 1956 as a revolution. To be able to call it a revolution, one first has to establish the class characteristics of the event, because according to the usage requirements, a revolutionary event is the violent manifestation of the awakening of a given social group's class-consciousness. In Arendt's opinion, 1956 was a workers' revolution. Since it was also a rebellion against the Bolshevik system that had been brought to power by the revolution of the proletariat, the advocates of the revolution theory needed to show the specific social character of 1956 in order to prove that 1956 preserved (was able to preserve) its working-class character despite being directed against the revolution of the proletariat. Arendt solved this problem by linking the working-class character of 1956 to the exceptional role the workers' councils had played in the Hungarian events: he named the workers' self-organization as the revolutionary *differentia specifica* of the event. He enthusiastically registered the "fact" that Hungary's 1956 revolution had offered a glimmer of hope for the prospect of a self-regulating society: "nothing indeed contradicts more sharply the old adage of the anarchic and lawless `natural` inclination 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.¹

Marxist philosophy in the western countries of the 1960s took a favorable view of such a conceptual development of the 1956 revolution: at that time this was mainly linked to the name of the British historian Bill Lomax. Thanks to his syndicalist views, Lomax, who wrote a comprehensive historical monograph on 1956, treated the October events as a victory for the state of the workers' councils. "The greatest achievement of the Hungarian revolution should thus be recognized as the creation of this totally new structure of popular power - of a state of workers' councils directly controlled by the workers... Indeed, their very essence as revolutionary institutions was that they were organs through which the people would directly rule, through which society could exercise its self-mastery. The Hungarian workers, in establishing direct control over their factories through the workers' councils, had thus in one blow both smashed the former state power ruled over by the Communist Party, and reopened the road to that society which had been the original aim of Marxism and socialism – in which hierarchy would give way to equality, in which political institutions would be replaced by social power..."²

Roughly at the same time (two years later, to be precise), the same British leftwing publishing house that had published Lomax's book also brought out a neo-Marxist analysis by János Kiss and György Bence (under the pen name of Marc Rakovski) on Eastern European Marxism and the Communist regimes. However, the co-authors were far from being convinced that 1956 had been a workers' revolution.

¹ Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*. Penguin Books, London, 1990. p. 271. The scope of the present paper will not allow a discussion of the changes in Arendt's theoretical views on the Hungarian revolution.

² Bill Lomax: *Hungary 1956*. Allison&Busby, London, 1976. P. 203. The first Hungarian translation was published in 1986, still as a *samizdat*.

“If we leave aside the remnants of the classes that sought the restoration of capitalism, the dramatic events of 1956 had only two protagonists: the political elite, which was disintegrating into antagonistic factions, and the `people`. The strata of the ruling class below the political elite were absorbed by `the people`.³ Although they failed to define what they meant by the word “people”, this usage undoubtedly revealed the authors’ hesitation to classify 1956 as a revolution.

From the very beginning, another tradition also existed in connection with the conceptual definition of 1956, which viewed the events as a purely, or mainly, national uprising. Even the choice of the exact word had a symbolic significance: instead of calling it a “revolution”, the followers of the latter tradition preferred to use the words “revolt”, “uprising”, or possibly even “freedom fight” in reference to 1956. This already had a prelude during those fatal weeks in 1956. In his famous radio speech on November 3, Cardinal József Mindszenty declared the following: **“everyone in this country must know that the recent fighting was not a revolution but a freedom fight.”** By way of an explanation he added: “The regime was wiped out by the entire Hungarian nation.”⁴

And finally there is something else. The conceptual revision of the terminology in connection with 1956, which was initiated by politicians, actually hastened the fall of the Kádár regime. In a radio interview aired on January 28, 1989, Imre Pozsgay declared that he regarded 1956 not as a counter-revolution, but as “an

³ Marc Rakovski: *Towards an East European Marxism*. Allison&Busby, London, 1978. p. 31.

⁴ László Varga: *A forradalom hangja. Magyarországi rádióadások 1956. Október 23 – November 9* (The Voice of the Revolution. Hungarian Radio Broadcasts October 23 – November 9, 1956). Ed.: János Kenedi. Századvég Kiadó – Nyilvánosság Klub, Budapest. 1989. P. 470.

uprising against an oligarchic state rule that humiliated the nation.”⁵ This is actually in contradiction with the conceptual definition of an uprising, which makes no mention of violent revolutionary acts, but instead talks of “a certain section of armed forces under the protection of international law, which belongs neither to the army nor to the national guards.”⁶ Therefore, the afore-mentioned usage of the word is a complete terminological nonsense.

The idea of 1956 not being a revolution soon found enthusiastic supporters among the writers of historical works, also. The title (and especially the subtitle) of the 1956 émigré Ferenc Váli’s bulky monograph on 1956 confirms the author’s strong belief in this concept.⁷ He summed up his views on the nature of the revolution in a separate chapter. According to this, the resentment that sparked off the events originated from local nationalism fuelled (or merely awakened) by Soviet-Russian nationalism and Marxist-Leninist internationalism; at the same time, people’s desire for freedom became a driving force only in reaction to that. “In the fall of 1956 both Hungarian nationalism and Soviet Russian imperialist nationalism hurtled into the open and met in a head-on collision.”⁸

⁵ Quoted by Ignác Romsics: *Volt egyszer egy rendszerváltás. Prohászka Imre fotóival* (Once Upon a Time There was a Democratic Transition. With Imre Prohászka’s Photographs). Rubicon könyvek, Budapest, 2003, p. 128.

⁶ *Pallas nagy lexikona. Az összes ismeretek encyklopédiája tizenhat kötetben* (The Great Pallas Lexicon. An Encyclopedia of All Knowledge in Sixteen Volumes). Pallas Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság. Budapest, 1896, vol. XIII. p. 113. Aladár Madarász called my attention to the historical clarification of the word’s meaning, for which I am grateful to him.

⁷ Ferenc A. Váli: *Rift and Revolt in Hungary. Nationalism versus Communism*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1961.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 494.

Due to the 1956 narrative that preferred the term ‘uprising’ (or ‘national freedom fight’),⁹ the historiographical tradition of 1956 has to this day been marked by a dualism. This is not a return to György Litván’s historiographical categorization, which recognized not just two traditions in connection with 1956, but four: two “leftwing” and two “rightwing” ones (reform socialist, national democratic, conservative nationalist and extreme right).¹⁰ The distinguishing feature we have chosen is not based on the various assessments of 1956 according to different political value systems (this is Litván’s choice); rather, it focuses on the issue whether historians prefer to describe 1956 in terms of the transhistorical meaning that expresses the modern-age concept of the revolution, or whether they prefer some other alternative.

A Detour into the Historical Development of Concepts

At this point, we should attempt a brief theoretical discussion in connection with the usage and changing meaning of the term ‘revolution’. In his previously mentioned book, Hannah Arendt describes the moment when “we hear the word still, and politically for the last time, in the sense of the old metaphor, which carries its meaning from the skies down to the earth; but here, for the first time, perhaps, the emphasis has entirely shifted from the lawlessness of a rotating, cyclical movement to its irresistibility.” On the fourteenth of July 1789, in Paris, “when Louis XVI heard

⁹ As an extreme manifestation of this, a British historian depicted 1956 as an anti-Semitic *uprising*. David Irwing: *Uprising! One Nation’s Nightmare: Hungary 1956*. Hodder and Stroughton, London, 1981.

¹⁰ György Litván: *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom hagyománya és irodalma* (The Tradition and Literature of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution). MTA Történelemtudományi Intézet, Budapest, 1992. (Előadások a Történettudományi Intézetben 19 – Lectures in the Institute of Historiography 19), p. 7.

from the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt of the fall of the Bastille, the king, we are told, exclaimed, C`est une re`volte, and Liancourt corrected him: No, Sire, c`est une re`volution.` The king, when he declared that the storming of the Bastille was a revolt, asserted his power and the various means at his disposal to deal with conspiracy and defiance of authority. Liancourt replied that what had happened there was irrevocable and beyond the power of a king.”¹¹

Therefore, it was in 1789 that people first used the word ‘revolution’ to describe a force of nature in the context of the historical events, losing once and for all its original meaning, i.e. “a return to the starting point in the course of circular motion according to the Latin usage. *Revolutio* originally meant orbital movement.”¹² Therefore, Koselleck makes the observation that “since 1789 every revolution is headed for the future, and for the unknown future if we may add, the exploration and handling of which is the inescapable task of politics.”¹³ This was how the word ‘revolution’ became (or was condensed into, in Koselleck’s wording) a collective noun, a trans- and meta-historical concept, which made it suitable for categorizing and describing the historical experiences of various unrests. At the same time, it acquired a temporal dimension, which elevated the expression into a *perspective concept of historical philosophy*, which “now came to imply to the irreversibility of the direction of movement.” And last but not least, the modern concept of revolution was filled a definite social content, once “it turned out” that “the *aim* of a political

¹¹ Arendt: op. cit. p. 47-48.

¹² Reinhart Koselleck: A forradalom újkori fogalmának történeti kritériumai (The Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution). In: same author: *Elmúlt idő. A történeti idők szemantikája* (Futures Past: On the semantics of historical times). Atlantisz, Budapest, 2003. p. 78.

¹³ Ibid. p. 85.

revolution is the social emancipation of every man, in other words, the transformation of society's structure...”¹⁴

And while we are on the topic of the “aim of revolutions”, we must not forget to mention the fact that it was Marx's and Lenin's utopian theory of revolutions that first put the bug in people's ear about both the desirability of revolutions and the wisdom of making them permanent. Therefore, the noble task of awakening the revolution's potential social basis (the participants acting as a group) to their authentic social consciousness in order to revolutionize the entire globe fell on the revolutionaries, who are the sole keepers of the “progressive laws” of revolution.¹⁵

The Class Characteristics of 1956

The obvious question is whether the 1956 events can be connected to any particular social class according to the normative concept of revolutions. To answer this question, we need to examine 1956 from the aspect of social history. In the following section we shall focus on the social background of the “revolutionaries” in an attempt to identify the social groups that contributed the greatest number of participants to the revolution.¹⁶

As a rough approximation, the vague outlines of three macro-social groups emerge in this respect: the leftwing creative intellectuals, often referred to as the “revisionists” (including a large number of writers, journalists and social scientists);

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 86, 88.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 92-93. For more on the historical development of the term ‘revolution’, see Tamás Ungvári: Revolution: a textual analysis. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 19. No. 1. (Fall 1990), pp. 1-21.

¹⁶ The line of reasoning of this section is an abbreviated version of one of my earlier writings: Gábor Gyáni: A forradalom társadalomtörténeti paradoxonjai (The Social Historical Paradoxes of the Revolution). *Forrás*, October 2006, pp. 27-39. The readers are referred to this article for bibliographical information.

university students; and finally, the industrial workers, most notably those working for large industrial companies. It would be an over-simplification to single out these three groups as the social basis of the 1956 revolution. Outside the capital and the larger provincial towns, the revolutionary role of certain elements within the peasantry becomes apparent. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the peasantry faced severe persecution in the last few years before 1956. As a result, their understandable hostility against the regime swiftly rose to the surface following the spectacular collapse of Rákosi's oppressive system from one day to the next.¹⁷

On top of that, the opinion-leaders in villages usually came from the *kulaks*, in other words the propertied peasant families, and 1956 was no exception in this regard. This is faithfully demonstrated by a social history analysis carried out in connection with 1956, according to which in a village named Nógrád nearly one quarter of the population took part in the mass demonstration that broke out on October 26, either by standing in their gates so as to follow the events of the protest, or by publicly voicing an opinion and joining the revolutionary organizations. Of the 797 people who inhabited the village, the *kuláks* formed ten per cent (78). We should also add that they were all men.¹⁸

This rural example is rather revealing, as it faithfully demonstrates that the younger members of the local *kulak* families also played a prominent role in the action: they took a leading part in sparking off the revolutionary events, so they were

¹⁷ For more on this recently, see Sándor Szakácsi: Az ötvenes évek agrárpolitikája – különös tekintettel a “kulákkérdésre” (Agrarian Politics in the 1950s – with special regard to the issue of ‘kulák’ - i.e. the wealthy peasants). In: János Estók (ed.): *1956 és a Magyar agrártársadalom* (1956 and the Hungarian Agrarian Society). Magyar Mezőgazdasági Múzeum, Budapest, 2006. pp. 34-66.

¹⁸ Árpád Tyekvicska: Helyi forradalom. Önszerveződés Nógrád községben 1956-ban (A Local Revolution. Self-Organization in the Village of Nógrád in 1956). In: Imre Kapiller (ed.): *'56 vidéken* (1956 in the Provinces). Zala Megyei Levéltár, Zalaegerszeg, 1992. pp. 37, 41 and 49.

especially active in the initial phase. The wind of the revolution reached the village through the mediation of those commuting workers in their thirties, who held factory jobs outside the village. The younger members of *kulak* families continued to play a part in the local revolutionary events at the later stages: together with the elder representatives of the wealthier peasants (quite often their fathers), they held leading positions in local affairs.

With slight qualifications, this rural formula of the 1956 revolution has general applicability. But now we should turn our attention to the social groups whose revolutionary spirit was more pronounced.

For a brief period, those young, leftwing revisionist intellectuals, who had been loyal to the Rákosi regime for a while but then turned against it vehemently, played a crucial part in preparing the stormy event; they left a deep impression on historical memory after 1957.¹⁹ For that reason, their role has been thoroughly discussed. Rather less attention has been paid to the role of the university students, who distinguished themselves already before the outbreak of the revolution through their political mobilizability and radical views. It is hardly a coincidence that the largest social group among those leaving the country in late 1956 and early 1957 was that of university students.

The revolutionary mobilization of university students requires a little more explanation, because the universities' strict admission policies before 1956, along with the intense ideological propaganda incorporated in university training, were not the ideal breeding ground for revolutionary activism. Since the admission policies favored students who came from the lower social classes, university students were

¹⁹ Cf. "It was the Western European émigrés, and most notably the Imre Nagy Institution of Brussels, who represented the reform socialist tradition most forcefully, and even somewhat one-sidedly." Litván: op.cit. p.7.

counted among the more reliable supporters of the “dictatorship of the *proletariate*” and the Communist system.

Finally, let us briefly examine the role that the industrial workers played in the 1956 revolution. The question is especially timely, because prior to 1956 (and after it, also, of course), the Communist regime continuously pointed to the industrial workers as the main social basis of their power. This was not completely without justification, because the workers (or anyone with a working-class background) were indeed the beneficiaries of the regime’s social politics. Even so, the actual circumstances of the workers in general were not really better than the circumstances of any other social group.

The concept of industrial workers as a class went through substantial changes during the first decade after the end of World War Two. The politics of forced industrialization inflated their numbers tremendously, which in turn brought about further changes, both structural and mental. Industrial workers in the 1950s were nothing like their counterparts in the 1920s and 1930s. First of all, they lacked an elite group of skilled and class-conscious workers with the organizational potential in the areas of trade unionism, politics and culture. Their distinguishing mark was social hybridity, as their ranks included a large number of peasants and petit-bourgeois elements, as well as some *déclassé* members of the middle and the upper classes.

As a result of the earlier mentioned, comprehensive transformation, the wages (and social prestige) of young skilled laborers very nearly equaled those technicians and young engineers who were directly responsible for production and who constituted the middle management in the various companies. Later on this turned out to be one of the reasons why these two groups within the hierarchy of company

employees came to forge a close “alliance” during the revolution, as manifested in the composition and the activities of the workers’ councils.

What was the motivating factor of the said social and professional groups behind their decision to turn against the dictatorship’s machinery of oppression? On this occasion, we would like to underline the importance of *social* resentment. The intensive social re-stratification that took place in the last five or ten years before 1956 affected almost every family and very nearly every individual in some way or another.²⁰ In the course of this process, a widespread feeling of uncertainty and transience set in, with many people becoming confused about their identities. The *déclassés* of the 1945 changes experienced this growing feeling of uncertainty just as much as those who replaced them, and who faced the task of becoming the new *intelligentisa*, the new elite or the new working class in this turn-wheel of social mobility from one day to the next. In the Hungary of the mid 1950s, there was not one compact social group whose identity coincided with their image.

It was this general feeling of uncertainty, this strange social experience, that proved the crucial factor in the formation of the revolutionary potential. We have called this phenomenon the *mobility trap*, because we wanted to demonstrate that the rapid industrialization forced by the Stalinist political elite, coupled with the determined efforts to keep society in a perpetual state of mobility, dug its own grave. The ruling elite succeeded in implanting (and sustaining) this all-pervading feeling of uncertainty in everyone’s mind, of which the excessive fluidity of social hierarchy was both the cause and the logical consequence. The reason why this “social politics” eventually proved to be a trap was that the mobilization strategy, which was meant to

²⁰ Readers may find ample evidence on this subject in an important work that reflects the continuous traumatization of 20th-century Hungarian society through the devices of sociology by Ágnes Losonczy: *Sorsba fordult történelem* (History Turned into Fate), Holnap Kiadó, Budapest, 2005, pp. 115-205.

stabilize the system and legitimize the duplicitous seizure and arbitrary exercise of power, backfired. However, in due course of events this was precisely that brewed widespread spiritual and intellectual hostility against the hard dictatorship.

Therefore, the above given answer to the question “How could there have been a revolution in 1956?” does away with the idea of establishing a strong link between the outbreak of the unrest and the split among the ruling elite. As for proponents of the theses that describe 1956 either as a (national) uprising or as a revolutionary act, they invariably make their case by pointing to a split among the ruling elite. In order to prove my point, I would like to mention only two examples.

"The present work has grown out of a study on the internal rift within the Communist Party of Hungary. This rift, so long hidden from the outside world but closely interwoven with the popular opposition against a Soviet-dominated regime, provided material for a continued study of conflicts in the body politic of Communist Hungary, conflicts which eventually led to the Revolution of 1956," Váli claims in the opening passage of his Preface.²¹

The eminent representative of the revolutionary narrative, Péter Kende, has put forward a strikingly similar reasoning. Before else, the author points out that in investigating the causes of the revolution, it is “unnecessary to get bogged down in details about what it was precisely that the Hungarian masses found ‘atrocious’ and ‘unbearable’ before 1956, because the same atrocious conditions also existed in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria at the time, yet they failed to provoke a revolution there.” Then he goes on to make the claim that “the prehistory of *ever* revolution originates among the *elite*, also. When there is no crisis, rift, discord or the likes among the leading elite of society, then one can be certain that even the greatest

²¹ Váli: op.cit. p. ix.

mass disturbance will lead to no more than a few local unrests. By contrast, when the elite is in a crisis, then even a relatively minor disturbance is enough to spark off a revolutionary situation, i.e. it can bring about the collapse of the government.”²²

Therefore, the dilemma about 1956 being a revolution or an uprising does not directly affect the historical argument, which points to the internal crisis of the elite as the major cause of the events. Besides the weakness of the empirical evidence, this latter theory has another shortcoming insofar as it makes no attempt at explaining the social historical roots of the split among the elite. Also, putting too much emphasis on the conflicts among the elite may cause problems with regard to the presentation of 1956 (or historical events similar to it) as a revolution. This is one of the reasons why Marxist historians and theoreticians, who have most consistently defended the ideological content of the revolution, have been warning about the dangers of reductionism coming from the direction of “bourgeois theories about the elite”. If the conflicts among the elite (or the elites) are the only things that are in the background of movements and violent coups portrayed as revolutionary cataclysms, then what possible need we can have for the notion of revolution? Therefore, the concept of revolution becomes “historically and socially denaturalized”, while the theory of conflict among the elite makes assessments that are indifferent to periods, classes and formation possible.”²³

Finally, let us see what motivated the members of the various social groups, which were vastly different from the aspects of social position, culture and interests, in the course of becoming revolutionaries! In the case of the revisionist intellectuals,

²² Péter Kende: Elkerülhetetlen volt-e a forradalom, és mi volt a haszna? (Was the Revolution Unavoidable, and What Benefits Did It Have?), *Világosság*, XXXVII, 1996, vol. 10, p. 4.

²³ Manfred Kossok: Az újkor összehasonlító forradalomtörténete (The Comparative History of Revolutions in the Modern Age) *Világtörténet*, ‘8/2. p. 69.

there is an easy explanation whereby their feelings of being betrayed and their illusions about the utopia of Communism turned them into revolutionaries. On top of that there is a historically given, peculiar intellectual subculture or its tradition in collective memory. The over-politicized intelligentsia's awareness of its mission had lost very little, if at all, of its earlier intensity throughout the years following 1945. It was further fuelled by the fact that the politically committed (and the fellow travelers) among the intelligentsia played a minor role in the oppressive mechanism of the dictatorial system. They were the ones who conveyed the will of the party to the 'masses' on the one hand, and expressed the approval of the masses in the face of the ruling elite on the other. Therefore, they played the part of the mediator – under dictatorial circumstances that completely shut out public opinion in political matters – so as to legitimate the regime. Their modest autonomy and their slightly greater room for maneuver both originated in this fact, which in turn increased their potentials as revolutionaries.

The eminent role that university students played in the revolution sheds light on the Hungarian aspect of a context that in fact went beyond the country's horizon. The rebellion of the young generation was at the same time the manifestation of a generation gap, which had been in the making for some time, and which became especially apparent after the end of World War Two. The young generation's protest movement, which mobilized the arsenal of mass culture in the United States and in Western Europe (clothing, body culture, music and consumption) began acquire definite political content in the late 1960s (the student rebellions in 1968). However, in Hungary this came out in the open already in 1956. How could we explain that?

The sub-culture movement among the younger generations, which flourished in Hungary under the circumstances of a Communist dictatorship, found itself on a

head-on collision course with the dictatorial regime that was bent on brutally suppressing and eradicating all political and individual freedoms. Therefore, the coming of age of the younger generations could not merely mean the introduction of radical changes in clothing and consumer practices. The painfully obvious lack of freedom relatively quickly and inescapably infused the younger generations' search for identity with political elements. This was why the strict socialization practice at schools failed, when it found itself going against the universal process of generational realignment in the postwar world.

And finally, as far as the working class was concerned, it was probably sheer frustration, more than anything, which drove it to the revolutionaries' camp. Besides their dire economic circumstances, their other main grievance may have been the lack of upward social mobility. The particular social composition of street fighters offers numerous evidences in this regard. However, the proposal in recent literature, which links the militancy of young urban workers (often adolescents and young adults) to their social condition of anomie (complete lack of integration),²⁴ appears to be an over-simplification.

On top of that, the workers, who set up the workers' councils that gave them visibility, displayed social historical characteristics that were different from those of the street fighters. This also dispels the myth surrounding the workers' council, which

²⁴ Gyula Kozák: Szent csôcselék (The Sacred Riffraff) In: Éva Standeisky – János Rainer M.: *Évkönyv 1999. VII. Magyarország a jelenkorban.* (Annals 1999. VII. Hungary in the Contemporary World). 1956-os Intézet, Budapest, 1999. pp. 264-269. Here is a quote from the latest criticism of the thesis: "the assumption, whereby the insurgents came from the lowest segment of society, does not necessarily bear scrutiny." Zsuzsa Vajda – László Eörsi: "Szent suhancok" – Az 1956-os felkelés résztvevői (The Sacred Youngsters – The Participants of the 1956 Uprising). *Beszélő*, vol. XI. October 2006, p. 71.

has enjoyed a great run of popularity in recent times.²⁵ What is it exactly that we know about the social forces constituting the workers' councils?

The active members and prominent leaders of the workers' councils came from the ranks of skilled workers, technicians and engineers. We also know that the majority of the active members belonged to the younger generations (around 30 years of age) and were often first-generation workers with a peasant family background. What impelled them to revolutionary actions? Our hypothesis in this regards is as follows: an ascending social group (the skilled workers) demonstrated against the appalling living conditions and authoritarian rule. This resentment was met with, and reinforced by, the similarly serious grievances of technicians and engineers, in other words the middle management. The ill feelings of the latter group originated from the demoralizing consequences of the leveling of the wages and the loss of their independence at work. In this way, the two groups of industrial employees joined forces, vindicating for themselves the right of organizing production and distributing the resulting wealth.

A brief review of the social history of the 1956 revolution seems to suggest that the event's most important characteristic was the plurality and fragmentariness of its social support. Through one or the other of its segments, every major social group was represented in the revolution. The diversity of their active participation and their direct revolutionary "interests" appears to be one of its most important features of

²⁵ In addition to the earlier quoted works by Hannah Arendt and Bill Lomax, also see *Magyar munkástanácsok 1956-ban. Dokumentumok* (The Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956. Documents). A Magyar Füzetek kiadása, Paris, 1986; Bill Lomax: 1956 öröksége (The Heritage of 1956). *Világosság*, XXXIII. 1992, vol. 10. pp. 724-742.

1956, which clearly sets this revolution apart from all known (modern) revolutions, or from the historical narratives about these revolutions, to be precise.²⁶

The above described social basis of 1956 followed from the denounced and rejected Communist dictatorship. It followed from the fact that the Stalinist dictatorship of the 1950s found itself in confrontation with the entire (civil) society in the fateful days of 1956.

Revolution and Anti-Totalitarianism

If we define 1956 as an anti-totalitarian movement, can we still call it a revolution?

What do we mean by describing a movement as anti-totalitarian? Péter Kende afforded considerable scope for the clarification of this question, when he revived and further developed Raymond Aron's theoretical observations on 1956. Kende justified the application of the label of anti-totalitarian movement to 1956 by the failure of earlier attempts to define it. 1956 defied any attempt at conceptual categorization, because "those were right who called it a 'national revolution', and so were those who primarily attributed to it a 'democratic', or in many respects even a 'socialist', conception." By contrast, the concept of 'anti-totalitarian revolution', in Kende's opinion, makes it clear that "the Hungarian October as a political revolution had the main and undeniable accomplishment of eradicating Communist one-party system."²⁷

The terminology he has proposed also accounts for the fact that "the 1956 Hungarian revolution in a way provided an archetype for the democratic transitions after 1989,

²⁶ On the gradual development of the narrative of a revolutionary event (1789), see François Furet: *A forradalomról* (On the Revolution), Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2006. pp. 15-55.

²⁷ Péter Kende: *Eltékozolt forradalom?* (A Revolution Squandered?). Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2006. p. 112.

the anti-totalitarian character of which needs no further proof (!)”²⁸ The concept of ‘anti-totalitarian revolution’ is further supported by the well-known fact that a considerable proportion of former Communists marched together with the anti-totalitarian masses in the revolution (for example, in the workers’ councils and in the revolutionary council of the intelligentsia); in other words, the formula was not ‘people against the Communists’ but *the elite and the people demanding freedom against the supporters of the Soviet system.*”²⁹

The point that the theory of totalitarianism no longer satisfies all the criteria raised in connection with the conceptual definition of the Soviet-type systems may limit the use of the above-mentioned concept.³⁰ Kende still stands by the concept, because 1) a crushed revolution is still a revolution, regardless of what may follow afterwards; 2) we cannot a priori exclude the possibility of the value-free usage of the expression, when we apply it to an event, which leads to the collapse of the given system of government: *“we can talk about a revolution, when the existing political system is replaced by a radically different one.”*³¹

However, Kende fails to address the question whether an event can be called a revolution, if it is “merely” a violent, anti-totalitarian mass movement to oust the existing regime. Actually, from the viewpoint of the conceptual development of revolution this is a key question. The time-honored meaning of the word ‘revolution’ (after 1789) gets lost in the teleological explanation, i.e. in the suggestion that the anti-totalitarianism of 1989 proves the revolutionary character of the anti-totalitarian

²⁸ Ibid. p. 113.

²⁹ Ibid. Original italics.

³⁰ On the limitations of the historiographical usefulness of the theory of totalitarianism, see Sándor Horváth: A mindennapi szocializmus és a jelenkortörténet. Nézőpontok a szocialista korszak kutatásához (Everyday Socialism and Contemporary History. Viewpoints for Researching the Socialist Period). *Századvég*, Új folyam 40, 2006. Vol. 2. Especially 6-13.

³¹ Kende: op.cit. (2006) p. 110.

movement of 1956, which served as the archetype for the former. The problem is that nobody has ever suggested that 1989 was also a revolution (a violent movement).

Quite the contrary!³²

First we should settle whether the concepts of anti-totalitarian movement (regime change) and revolution are compatible. Kende has no problem with this: “A revolution is (merely) a fact, which needs explanation and has consequences: it is not a cornerstone or a postulate. It is not necessarily ‘progressive’, but that does not mean that it cannot be appropriate and unavoidable.”³³ But in this way he robs the term ‘revolution’ of the very meaning, which it acquired in 1789, and in which sense it has been used ever since.³⁴ Arendt sums this up as follows: “Ever since the French Revolution, it has been common to interpret every violent upheaval, be it revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, in terms of a continuation of the movement originally started in 1789, as though the times of quiet and restoration were only the pauses in which the current had underground to gather force to break up to the surface again.”³⁵

According to the ‘ideological’, post-1789 interpretation of the word ‘revolution’, a restoration, i.e. a (violent) return to an earlier stage cannot be called revolutionary: that is clearly an act of counter-revolution. This was the view taken by the political elite of the Horthy period, proudly proclaiming itself a counter-

³² The first democratically elected Hungarian Prime Minister’s cutting retort to critics who called for more radicalism was widely reported: “You ought to have staged a revolution!”

³³ Ibid. p. 109.

³⁴ In this way the term unnoticeably returns to its ordinary meaning, which was described in a mid-19th-century dictionary under the entry ‘revolution’ as follows: “In the stricter sense, an uprising staged by either the entire nation or a multitude in it against either the sovereign ruler or the authority for the purpose of establishing a new system of government or state structure.” Gergely Czuczor – János Fogarasi: *A magyar nyelv szótára* (Hungarian Dictionary), Emich Gusztáv, Pest, 1864. Vol 2. 914. (my italics??)

³⁵ Arendt: op.cit. pp. 50.

revolutionary regime, even though they had no intention to restore every aspect of the pre-1918 conditions. In their case, the self-description merely meant the negation of the fact (the legitimacy) of the revolution (revolutions).

Finally coming round to 1956: if most of the demands that the instigators of the events had in mind merely concerned ‘restoration’ (instead of progressive changes, such as the elimination of the Communist party’s monopoly and its replacement with a multi-party system, the institutional restoration of the established freedoms of bourgeois democracies and the creation of some forms of direct democracy *anew* (the possible archetypes of the workers’ councils included the revolutionary councils of 1944-1945 and the factory and national councils of later times),³⁶ then the propriety of applying the word ‘revolution’, when meant in the modern sense, is at least doubtful.

It is understandable that Kende is attached to the designation of 1956 as a revolution. Everyone apart from the Kádárist thought of 1956 as a revolution: that was perhaps true already at the time, and was definitely true later on, especially when the people who had helped crushing 1956 disparagingly branded it as a counter-revolution. Therefore, loyalty to the revolution resulted in the enduring popularity of the term ‘revolution’, as the opposite of the official designation (counter-revolution). However, the everyday usage is quite another thing, along with the accompanying universe of experiences, and then we have still said nothing of the requirements of scientific notions. This is where our main problem lies, when we try to return to the pre-1789 meaning of the term (i.e. to the original meaning of ‘*revolutio*’) through the adaptation of the expression ‘anti-totalitarian revolution’. There are incalculable risks

³⁶ For more on these historical analogies and genetic interconnections, see Éva Standeisky: *Követett és elvett múlt az 1956-os forradalomban (Imitating and Discarding the Past in the 1956 Revolution)*. *Történelmi Szemle*, XLVIII, 1-2, 2006. pp. 99-100.

in the undertaking, which could perhaps be averted, but we must know that from this point onwards we are on shaky territory as far as the establishment of scientific notions are concerned.

If the word 'revolution' were to be relegated to its earlier, descriptive role, then what justifications could we have in continuing to use it in the semantic space, where it has up till now been in circulation as a trans-historical (and ideological) concept? For what purpose should we keep it, when the expressions – without trans-historical connotations – 'uprising', 'insurgence' or 'civil war' can all give more precise information regarding the nature of the given historical event. The underlying, and undeclared, purpose could be that we keep using the expression in the academic language either for emotional reasons or because in public speech it helped expressing the dramatic nature and the uniformly cathartic effect of the event.

Continued, Completed or Reversed Revolution

It is, of course, possible that "the controversies of the revolutionary situation back then" can provide some justification for using the revolution in its descriptive sense, in the meaning of 'revolutio'. The Kádár regime, which crushed the 1956 revolution with the Soviets' help, labeled 1956 as a counter-revolution, because it saw in it the act of an uprising against the state of the revolution of the *proletariat*; from the rather handy conceptual perspective of the permanent revolution, it appeared to Kádár and his followers that the 1956 events prepared the ground for the restoration of the political and social system *before* the revolution (for example, the capitalist or semi-capitalist system under Horthy's rule), or would have done, if it had been victorious. It was not the actual events, but the "persuasive power" of the theory that

prompted the designation ‘counter-revolution’. The problem it conceals is, of course, hardly a new one: the origin of the idea can be traced back to the late 18th century in a wider European context, and to 1848 in Hungary’s case.

The issue brings us back to the French revolution, the paragon of all modern revolutions. This was the first revolutionary event, in which 1) the participants did not want to restore, or return to, an earlier stage (in contrast with anything that the English thought of their own actions in 1688, and the Americans in 1787) – rather, they wanted a completely new beginning; and 2) the event could not come to an end by *itself*. From the moment it erupted, “the revolution has no declared goal, it has no foreseeable conclusion.” Because “the 1789 revolution already carried in its womb a second one, the revolution of 1792. The latter made two demands: it wanted to straighten out the first one and it also wanted to broaden it, so as to make it more radical and more universal; it also wanted to be more faithful to its promise of liberation than its predecessor had been. In this way, it launched a movement, which is characterized by a never-ending dualism of self-repudiation and self-advancement.”³⁷

This was the point of no return as far as the older meaning of the word ‘revolution’ was concerned; to be more precise, it is bound to create confusion, if someone suddenly starts to use the word ‘revolution’ not as the metaphor of relentless, progressive innovation, but as the synonym of restoration, which is more in line with the traditional meaning of ‘revolutio’. Or is such a return still possible?

Perhaps it is this (conceptual) dilemma that stands behind the occasional rejection of the modern experiences of revolution, as it was the case with the reformist (liberal) Hungarian nobility, in whose eyes “the March event (March 15) was not a

³⁷ Furet: op.cit. pp. 91,93.

revolution but a peaceful adjustment to the demands of the age, *and the lawful recovery of the country's historical freedom.*”³⁸ This sounds strange to all of us, who believe that 1848 was a revolution in the most literal sense of the word; nevertheless, in the eyes of a historian like Deák, 1848 was not the historical archetype of the incomplete, permanent revolution. This was signified already by the original English title, *Lawful Revolution*, which was dropped for the first Hungarian publication in favor of the subtitle.³⁹ Perhaps this is so, because the limitation of the meaning of the word ‘revolution’, which the combination of these two words imply, is hardly reconcilable with the public image of a perfect and full-fledged revolution that Hungarian historical thinking associates with 1848. When in fact all the author meant to say through his choice of the adjective was that 1848 had no intention to be a repetition of 1789 (and it was not), while of course “granting free ownership of land to peasants” and at the same time “opening the way to a spectacular economic and cultural development” and “supplying the Hungarian nation with romantic traditions to last forever.”⁴⁰ Therefore, while they initiated and implemented progressive developments, the reform-minded instigators of the events that later turned violent interpreted 1848 (and their own intentions) more as a ‘*revolutio*’ than as a (French) revolution. This is, however, merely a hypothesis that would require rigorous proof (not that if such a hypothesis could be verified with sources at all). This particular case can faithfully demonstrate the wide gap that separates the direct experience of a historical event and posterity’s conceptual judgment on it, as manifested in memorial celebrations (and adjusted to the requirements of the present).

³⁸ István Deák: *Kossuth és a magyarok 1848-49-ben* (Kossuth and the Hungarians in 1848). Gondolat, Budapest, 1983. P. 116. (My italics)

³⁹ I should point out that the original title was restored for the second edition in 1994.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 123.

If revolutions have a permanent character, as has been suggested, then every single stage in the course of the revolutionary development can be surpassed in due time. The question is whether the inherent permanence of revolutions is desirable at all. For the majority of the people, the radicalization of the 1789 revolution in 1793, along with the historical experiences gained in this respect, serves as a compelling reason for disliking the idea; for modern revolutionaries, it is just the opposite. If the results of the 20th-century revolutionary movements, which consummated 1793, ever run up against the will of the majority wishing to halt the revolution – as it happened in Hungary in October 1956, and then all over Eastern Europe after 1989 – the people carrying the burden of the permanence of the revolution will – even at the price of turning violent – return to the principles of 1789, in other words, they will take the cause of freedom one step “back”, rather than forward. This is quite understandable, in view of the fact that “the 20th-century revolution carried out – or enforced – in the name of the Leninist principles created nothing at all, on which anything could be constructed. (...) By the end of the 20th century, the whole idea about the irreversibility of Communism had turned out to be a catastrophic illusion. (...) The Communist states and societies found themselves in the absurd situation, whereby they have to *restore* at all cost the very things that they thought they had abolished, because their modern history can offer them no other fix points.”⁴¹

Therefore, Hungary’s 1956 freedom fight - and also a national uprising, of course – cannot be described as a revolution in the modern (ideological) sense of the word without further qualification; at best, it was a ‘*revolutio*’. It was more of a restoration, than a further extension of modern revolutions. In this strict conceptual sense, and only in this sense, 1956 was more of a counter-revolution, than a

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 149, 150.

revolution, since it was a return (according to the dynamics of circular motion), rather than a step in the progressive direction, according to the notion of the permanence of revolutions. Naturally, this ‘counter-revolution’ was not that counter-revolution, which Kádár and his followers envisaged in connection with 1956, who were the prisoners of modern revolutionary mythology and therefore saw it as a retrograde historical event. 1956 as a par excellent freedom fight corresponds, therefore, to the revolutionary ideal that Condorcet defended in June 1793 against the Jacobins (the masters of the Bolsheviks) as follows: “We can apply the word ‘revolutionary’ only to those changes, which are in the service of freedom.”⁴²

That section of the 1956 events, which the metaphor of modern revolution has so far blocked out almost completely, becomes immediately visible as a chain of facts linked by the concept of ‘revolutio’. This first of all applies to the so-called ‘civil-war line of events’ in the history of 1956. When Kende was struck by the slightly civil-war character of 1956, it was not because that this aspect was so conspicuous that it was impossible to miss. Rather, it was because 1956, as soon as it has been transferred to the category of ‘revolutio’, becomes a synonym for civil war. “In fact, *almost every revolution that wants to change the system of government is, by necessity, also a (latent or open) civil war*, provided that the system under attack has some social basis,”⁴³ Kende claims. This is regardless of the fact that people associate modern revolutionary events not with a civil war, but with a class struggle. On the contrary: “As for the period before 1700, it is right to point out that, while they never overlapped completely, the terms ‘civil war’ and ‘revolution’ did not exclude each

⁴² Condorcet: A “forradalmi” szó jelentéséről (On the Meaning of the Word ‘Revolutionary’). *Világosság*, XXX. June 1989, p. 429. For the latest commentary and the application of the text to current developments, see Mária Ludassy: A forradalom szó jelentéséről (On the Meaning of the Word Revolution). *Élet és Irodalom*, 2006. Vol. 50, no. 49, December 8, 2006.

⁴³ Kende: op.cit. (2006), p. 115.

other.”⁴⁴ Therefore, Kende’s heightened sensitivity for the civil-war aspects of the 1956 events can be traced to fact that this conceptual apparatus is more in line with the pre-1789 semantics, than with the modern usage. Our interpretation of the situation gets further confirmation by fact that his empirical evidences in this regard are debatable, to say the least.

Kende makes two claims in connection with the point that 1956 also had some vehement opponents in certain sections of society: 1) admittedly, there were some opponents, but they did not come forward publicly, because first they wanted to wait and see how things would go. But they did exist, which was intimated by the large number of people who sided with Kádár after the fall of the revolution; that belated support makes their earlier position more probable in retrospect.⁴⁵ The weakness of this apparently teleological reasoning is that in an extreme situation, such as the one that 1956 created, the evidence of such belated adjustment to the rapidly changing conditions cannot offer fixed points for the reconstruction of human behavior. The author himself has come to this conclusion in a different context.⁴⁶

2) The enemies of 1956, who were mostly keeping a low profile at the time, were recruited from either the core or the hinterland of the Party. From the author’s scattered remarks it is clear, however, that instead of representing civil society as whole, these people typified ‘society’ directly catapulted into positions of power.⁴⁷

But that runs contrary to the hypothesis about 1956 being a civil war.

⁴⁴ Koselleck: op.cit. p. 81.

⁴⁵ Kende: op.cit. (2006), pp. 115-116.

⁴⁶ “In every society there are people who like wait and see how a conflict develops, preferring to join one of either sides – the challenger or the challenged – only after it has claimed victory. This was no different in the history of 1956, either.” Ibid. p. 97.

⁴⁷ On the subject of the revolution’s enemies, he has made it clear that it was not the 800,000-strong party membership that he had in mind; rather, he referred to the party members occupying positions in the one-party state, who “worked for the party branches functioning as authorities in county, regional, municipal other

Closing Remark

The rival positions taken up in this “battle of names”, which have mostly been limited to a choice of terminology and only rarely have produced carefully constructed arguments (Kende is almost the only representative of the latter category) bear no direct effect on the traditions of national and social commemoration of 1956. The debate sparked off by the confusion of concepts is focused neither on the true significance of 1956 nor on its overall assessment: whether it was a positive event or a historical tradition to be denounced; these questions had some vitality only before the moment of Hungary’s democratic transition.⁴⁸ These conceptual dilemmas merit some interest only in academic discourse, and their discussion appears to be urgent only because it is expected to inject new vigor into the “factual history” of the revolution. Instead of providing answers, we have primarily tried to formulate questions that can foment further debate.

administrations and also for the central administration as a whole.” “Those Communist party members who worked in these organizations – in other words the party and state functionaries – constituted a higher echelon among ordinary party members and, therefore, the party leadership could rely on them in various situations (even in emergencies) more readily than on the more or less amorphous mass of ordinary party members.” Ibid. p. 54.

⁴⁸ For a couple of years after the democratic transition, there was some hesitancy (even) among historians about the assessment of 1956. However, the hegemony of the view that rehabilitated the event was not seriously threatened by this; at the most, it was counter-pointed by a few scholarly views which suggested that “the facts and the motivations should first be uncovered, along with the international background of the October events, before initiating a debate and forming a position on the nature of the uprising. At the moment, this is done – mainly for political reasons – precisely the other way around. (... in other words) a great deal of time needs to pass, before it becomes possible to deliver a verdict on the nature of the 1956 events in Hungary in a proper scholarly manner and free of emotions.” István Vida’s comment in Litván: op.cit. pp. 27-28.