

THE DESTRUCTION OF REASON (ON THE CURRENT LUKÁCS AFFAIR)¹
A DESTRUIÇÃO DA RAZÃO (SOBRE A SITUAÇÃO ATUAL DE LUKÁCS)

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In the run-up to the official celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the uprising of 1956 in Hungary, anticommunist waves surged. Once again, the Marxist philosopher and theorist of the revolutionary working-class movement Georg Lukács (1885-1971) became a target.

The newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, on 21 October 2016, issued a complaint against the Georg Lukács Foundation on the basis of a law enacted in 2012, regulating the naming of streets and public places, but also of public institutions. The foundation itself supports social and literary research projects and is formally independent of the Georg Lukács Archives. “Any organization is allowed to bear the name of a person who has played a leading role in the establishment, development or maintenance of the despotic political systems of the twentieth century.” The newspaper also quoted the opinion of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which, according to the law, is to take an arbitration function in disputes. Coming to Lukács, it succinctly points out, that his relationship to the party leadership had not been free of conflicts, but without any doubt, he had “participated in the establishment, expansion and maintenance of the communist system”, and following that: “According to the law, a public place cannot be named after him.” This judgment however does not relate to Lukács’ “academic quality”, it is brought up merely on behalf of the “legal situation”.

Communist murderer

One day after the article was published, two politicians of the Neo-fascist Party Jobbik put a red scarf around the eyes of the Georg Lukács statue in

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Budapest's St. Stephan Park. It should symbolize the "red star on the eyes of Hungarian society, politics and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences". During this action, they announced a request to remove the statue. This was accepted at the beginning of this year by the Budapest City Council. Jobbik afterwards stated, that "one more piece of communism living with us had been emasculated." Furthermore: "We are delighted that 27 years after the so-called system change, a communist murderer, who was responsible for the execution of eight people at the time of the Council-Republic as a peoples' commissar, who as a philosopher was the celebrated ideologues of the Rákosi epoch and who had a key role in the cultural policy during the Kádár system, finally is not allowed to have a statue in Budapest." On 28 March this year, the statue was then carried away in the early morning. The place is now empty, it is to be filled with a statue of Hungarian national hero and king St. Stephan.

However, the publicist Zsolt Bayer gave the prelude to the current attacks on Lukács and intellectuals and institutions related to him. The founding member of the governing Fidesz Party and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's good pal, is as the "fist of the party" responsible for the rude tones in government-close media in Hungary. He became internationally known for his racist utterances against Sinti and Roma as well as his insults on EU politicians. In July 2015, Bayer intervened in a discussion on the rehabilitation of the anti-Semitic historian and politician Bálint Hóman, who had been under education minister Miklós Horthy. From 1933 to 1945 he was president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In 1945, Homan, who had participated in various anti-Semitic parliamentary measures, had fled to the German Reich and was finally handed over to the Hungarians after the World War, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment as a war criminal. Referring to the rehabilitation of Hóman, Bayer comes to speak of the "war criminal" Lukács: "Lukács is the icon number one of the Hungarian Left and the liberals associated with a thousand threads with them, he is their unquestionable intellectual authority. His legacy was and is carried by listeners (sic!) of the Budapest school he founded, the 'Lukácsists', from Mihály Vajda to

György Márkus all the way to Ágnes Heller. To question Georg Lukács in any aspect is deadly sin in these circles and involves immediate exclusion.”

Bayer starts with quoting various chronicles on atrocities committed on the Jewish population at the time of the Hungarian Council Republic in 1919, which he described as a “rat revolt” to show “how the Bolsheviks, majority-led by Jews, were dealing with people of their kind.” Subsequently, he asks, “How did these animals deal with non-Jews?” In this context, he recounts a story that has emerged again and again since the 1990s. At the end of the First World War, Lukács as a peoples’ commissar took part or even ordered the execution of seven or eight deserters while defending the Hungarian frontier against Romanian troops. The truthfulness of this anecdote has often been doubted, most recently and in detail by András Lengyel, a Hungarian scholar on the history of literature. There are no witnesses to the execution, nor graves, nor documents that would testify the funerals. The trial in this matter, which took place in 1919 after the failure of the Council Republic, condemned the allegedly executing red armist merely on the basis of the fact, that the executions might have taken place according to the usual practice. What is spicy about this episode is, that Lukács talks about the event in the autobiographical interview volume *Lived thinking* and says that he ordered the execution to restore morality. If the executions were carried out, their purpose was to defend the Hungarian frontier against the Western-backed Romanian troops. So questionable the practice of the execution of deserters is, the soldiers were familiar with it from the Austro-Hungarian Army in the First World War. If the execution had been ordered by Horthy or one of his officers, it would be considered a justifiable measure out of patriotic motives by those, who now claim, Lukács was a mass murderer.

Bayer not only uses this episode to insinuate double standards to Lukács’ defenders, who at the same time condemn the antisemite Hóman, but also deliberately creates a parallel between the Bolsheviks “majority-led by Jews” in 1919 and the defenders of Lukács today: “This is an announcement: enough with the intellectual terror, and with the fact, that ‘Lukácsists’ have been deciding who

is in the pantheon of intellectual life for a good half century and who is not. And quite generally, it's enough with you.”

Institutions in the thread cross

It would not have been necessary for the new announcement to draw the attention of the “Lukácsists” to the fact that Bayer and his alike had enough of them. Since Orbán’s reign in 2010, they are facing a bad media campaign. The Georg Lukács Archive is also affected by this. It is located directly at the shore of the Danube, not far from the large market hall, in the Belgrade quay apartment where Georg Lukács returned from the USSR in 1945 and where he lived until his death in 1971. In his will, the philosopher had left his library filled with rarities to the Philosophical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, his manuscripts to the library of the Academy. For the sake of simplicity, both the library, manuscripts and letters after his death were left where they were, in the apartment where Leo Kofler, Wolfgang Abendroth and Hans Heinz Holz were invited to the meeting, where Rudi Dutschke visited him, where he wrote his late aesthetics and the *Ontology of Social Being*, in which Lukács in 1956, smoking calmly his cigars, received his Hungarian pupils in revolt, in which his wife Gertrud Bortstieber, as Ágnes Heller recalls, served frightful cold plates.

The archive took up his work unofficially after Lukács’ death. His disciples set themselves the task of examining the early writings for points of reference for the 1956 project of a “Renaissance of Marxism”. In 1973 some of them were prosecuted for “anti-Marxist machinations”. They lost their positions and were no longer allowed to publish. In 1977 Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér and György Márkus left the country. But the work in the archive went on. The later material from Lukács’ estate, e.g. from his Moscow period was sighted and prepared. The Hungarian edition of his works took shape, and the West German Luchterhand publishing house and other foreign publishers were supplied with ever new material. In the 1990s it got quiet around Lukács. The archive published the

writings of his students, who had not been able to appear before. The memorial tablet, which reminded people crossing the street, that the marxist philosopher had lived in the house, was twice beaten off the wall. A broken memorial tablet hangs today in the entrance area of the archive. In 2012, some unknown smeared “Killer 1919” under the new table.

The dispute over the archive, which in the meantime was subordinated to the library and then again to the Philosophical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, finally broke open in 2010. Previously, the accusation had been made, the archive tries to establish a second Philosophical Institute. The new director, who was forced by the then president of the academy to the Philosophical Institute, wanted to dismiss fifteen of the twenty-five employees of the Institute of Philosophy on the grounds of “unsuitability”, f.e. Miklós Mesterházi, who had been in the archive since 1978 and is responsible e.g. for a four volume book outlining the history of reception of *History and the Class-Consciousness*, the correspondence between Lukács and Ernst Bloch, as well as the publication of the writings from the era of the revolutionary revolution and the 1920s.

At the beginning of 2011, the controversial Hungarian media law had just been decided, and Ágnes Heller was one of its sharpest critics, *Magyar Nemzet* titled: “Hellers researched away half a billion”. The accusation was: “The liberal philosopher circle, which almost every day puts the conservatives to the pang, has come to approximately half a billion Forint under the Gyurcsány government in a morally and legally questionable way.” Actually the research funds financed the projects of more than hundred researchers from six several institutions. The archive had also received funds.

The premises were then searched by the police. The International Georg Lukács Society in Germany launched a petition for the preservation of the archive, Jürgen Habermas and the then president of the German Society for Philosophy Julian Nida-Rümelin called for the protection of the philosophers in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, also under the reference, that the expression “liberal” in “in Hungary is now carrying again the connotation of the fatherless,

cosmopolitan attitude of Jewish intellectuals.” The accusation of the misappropriation of research funds was later dropped as unfounded, and Heller and others won their actions for defamation in court. But the campaign had worked. And the question of the fate of the archive, from which the last research staff was thrown out in 2012, hung in the air.

Lukács in the Slaughterhouse

It was no surprise, therefore, that on 5 March 2016, the oppositional daily newspaper *Népszabadság*, which had been closed since then, wrote that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was going to dissolve the archive. The only remaining staff, Mária Székely, had been informed about the “relocation plans” the day before by the Academy. An international petition for the preservation of the archive collected more than 12,000 signatures in the shortest time, and the academy was compelled to publish an announcement in which it emphasized that it was only dealing accordingly to Lukács’ testament. The relocation was ultimately subject to the reworking and cataloguing of the estate under “strict professional rules”. The most important goal was to make the material accessible to domestic and international researchers. At a press conference on 20 April, László Lovász, the President of the Academy said that the bad condition of the apartment was decisive for the relocation plans. There was fire danger and there was no air conditioning. In addition, a building for the academy’s disciplines at the Academy was being built in the Vágóhíd útca (in English: Slaughterhouse Street), where as well Lukács’ library was well looked after. At the plenary session of the Hungarian Academy on 2 May, Lovász emphasized again that there was no political background for the steps taken and that he could not speak of a dissolution of the archive. Smugly he added, that in this regard, his name, too, could be put under the petition against the dissolution of the archive. Again he said, it was all about the cataloguing and digitization “neglected for forty years” and, if necessary, the restoration of the manuscripts. He also wanted to

clarify that the academy had no memorial sites, not even for its most outstanding representatives. However, he stated, the Academy would provide organizational and technical support to the Lukács Foundation if it wanted to run such a memorial.

He was not able to convince the intellectuals surrounding the archive. Miklós Mesterházi suspects that “the Academy would gladly get rid of to be associated with Lukács or the Lukács-research.” Although the archive had always belonged to the academy, technology “beyond the typewriter” came from private donations, since the Academy would never wanted to have merely the appearance of supporting the archive. The professional editing, which the president promised, had in some cases already been done long ago, and the announced technical modernization should have taken place long ago. Péter Agárdi, literary historian and curator of the Lukács Foundation, says it is cynical to accuse the archive of “forty years of neglected work”, since the academy neither initiated nor supported the modern revision of the manuscripts in the past: “As a matter of fact, the Academy never knew how to deal with the estate of Lukács or with Lukács himself, who was and remained a Marxist after 1918.” The planned premises in the newly-mentioned building of the Academy were neither sufficient nor suitable for the extensive collection. Moreover, the relocation would destroy the entire cataloguing, which up to this day is still based on the systematization still carried out by Lukács. The relocation and new cataloguing would make the use of the stocks impossible for years. The required modernization, the question of fire protection and also the air-conditioning, all this could be done best in the apartment. Agárdi concludes that the Academy wants to get rid of the estate, and “is trying to reduce Lukács’ importance, meeting the expectations of the official remembrance politics which does not allow the leftist Georg Lukács to be an outstanding personality.”

Anticommunism

In order to prevent the Academy's plans, a new foundation was set up to save the archive in its old place. The leasing contract of the academy regarding the apartment runs until 2025. One possibility would be that the foundation takes over the leasing contract, another option would certainly be the purchase of the apartment, which would be expensive and depends on the district, which owns the apartment, too. But still, the condition for all this would be, that the material remains in place. The foundation would undertake scientific and editorial research and thus save the academy from this "disgrace". For this option many details had to be clarified, but the Academy refused, despite the contrary insurance, the dialogue. There is no communication wanted. Either way, the foundation would require a lot of money for the continued operation. As Chairman of the European Left, Gregor Gysi has already submitted a request for the financial support of the archive to Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission.

Whether the EU is agreeing is highly questionable. Not only does Lukács run against its own ideological convictions, it also would seem to confirm what the conservatives in Hungary always accuse it of, namely, that it is only half-heartedly condemning communism. "The criminalization of the past", says the historian Miklós Mitrovits, does not, however, serve to deal with the past. The ideology of anticommunism is always directed against emancipation; if there were no communists, they would be invented. The fact that most of the attacked philosophers and scholars have for a long time distanced themselves from Marxism and Georg Lukács, in fact, their new self-definition in opposition to Lukács in the 1970s and 1980s made them the first representatives of a new bourgeois-liberal anti-communism in Hungary illustrates this very impressively.

The "Lex Heineken", which is currently under discussion, which is supposed to ban the "symbols of despotic systems" on consumer products, in the case of the beer brand Heineken, the red star, is another bizarre example of

anticommunism. The general dissatisfaction in the country and the non-silent demands for change and social justice, the many small battles against corruption, the cruel conditions at the Serbian border, for gender equality and the reception of refugees and the ever more open search for alternatives, the Hungarian government and the conservatives backing it, can only explain themselves through the fact, that it has not yet adequately elucidated on the crimes of “communism”. The fight against its specter offers the Hungarian government a last chance to posit itself in the spirit of antitotalitarianism as truly democrat and guardian of European civilization.