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In the introduction to his *Irregular Memoirs*, János Kornai, system descriptor, system analyst and economist working with a wide range of mathematical tools, gives – with adequate clarity – a precise definition of the subject of the book: “I will tell now how I viewed my work in the process of doing it, and how I view it now, looking backward, when I am writing my memoirs. I have never given a public response to any of the reviews that I got. When I read opinions countering mine, I opened a debate relatively seldom. But now, once and exceptionally, within the framework of my memoirs, I wanted to write »reviews« about my own works. My autobiography basically proceeds chronologically, but it does not strictly follow the chronological order of events in every part. It is not a diary. Every chapter focuses on one theme, be it an event of the time, or my work, or a situation of my life. The titles of the chapters indicate the period described. These periods might [...] be connected with one another, and they might also overlap with one another, if the themes so require.” (Pages 13-14). “My writing is the mixture of a memoir and a series of essays.” (Page 15). By viewing his life story from a distance, the author subjects it to examination and analysis. The events he has experienced only represent one layer of the analysis that is not necessarily the most important one. The reconstruction of motives, impulses and emotional factors primarily serves the purpose of understanding the *system*. The system here implies the *work process* (the term “my work” is used three times in the above quoted sentence), and the system of *pieces* that have emerged as a result of that work. This is the *Kornai System*.

The foreword primarily states this for technical reasons and it simply summarises the motives for the system analysis and the applied methods. With respect to the contents a later part of the text appears to be the most precise. That part of the text you find in the chapter, subtitled *Summarizing intention*, covering his great piece titled *The Socialist System. The Political Economy of Communism*, published in Hungarian in 1993. In this, he writes: “My prior objective was to summarise the results of my own research. Over the decades, I have been dealing with many subjects of research and I have been trying to find responses to newer and newer questions; I almost galloped through the various chapters of economics. These works, that are completely distinct from one another, complemented one another and covered important sub-fields. Apart from these, from time to time I got back to the same issues (such as, for example, phenomena of disequilibrium) with – at least in my view – increasingly sophisticated methods. I may even say that the series of those partial works had a certain path. Now, with this book I attempted to work out an analytical framework that allows for a logical arrangement of the partial conclusions of my previous works that used to be separate from one another.” (Page 339).

This quote, together with the title of the book, fully applies to this irregular memoir. And so is the case with the relevant footnote saying – about the birth of *The Socialist System*.

*The Political Economy of Communism* – that “I did *not only* attempt to summarise my earlier scientific works, *but also the directly perceived experiences.*” One other sentence from the foreword completely applies to this statement that – from the viewpoint of the memoirs – is far from being negligible. “In fact, I wrote even my earlier works, prepared with scientific precision, for the purpose of testimony, or *news items on fading ages*”. This is perhaps the part, where the book becomes similar to a memoir in a traditional sense. The intellectual journey, based on former works and pieces, takes place in the present; the time when it takes the form of a testimony about a past age. *At the time*, these pieces were, of course, created in the process of battling with an age – far from being over - and with its systems and problems.

(*The Socialist System*) When reading it first, the subject of János Kornai’s autobiography appears to be something else than the person himself. It far more appears to describe János Kornai’s battle for life and death with one single (and a half, but let’s talk about it later) issue that has presented a problem for his whole life. It describes the socialist system. The critic himself, helps construct the “enemy”. The chapter titled “How I have become a Communist”, similarly to the following two, discussing the years spent in the editorial office of *Szabad Nép (Free People)* and his disassociation from the communist ideology, behaviour pattern and way of thinking, is the longest part that is – at the same time – the richest in *personal* memories. Unlike in later chapters, the subtitles of these chapters do not contain the author’s earlier books and studies. When we take a closer look, however, we will see that even the piece “*How I became a communist*” is an essay, too. (Well, this is the clearest text that I have ever read about the issue, and this is why it is perplexing.) It discusses the no longer easily understandable question of what brought Kornai and his contemporaries, members of the educated Hungarian middle class born between 1927 and 1929, into the formation called Hungarian Communist Party around the year 1945. The motives are arranged in a strict conceptual and chronological order. The personality type of a person belonging to the *Communist* party is carefully described with the individual types chronologically following one another, constituting models for a particular development or education process. All this is so clear as a table or a chart.

It is impossible to provide an analysis of something without proper distance. The distance, necessary for a clear judgement, is created by the fact that economics section leader János Kornai was removed from the central newspaper of the Communist Party, because he started to see clearly. The ability to see clearly is also the result of a several-year-long learning process during which both the distance and the perspective keep changing. The final point of that process is the first piece, titled *Overcentralisation in Economic Administration*, that, in according to the system of the book, is the result of *work*. At the same time, it is a personal turning point, just as was the transformation into a communist: “I selected the methods of research without hesitation and experimenting. The focus of my research was a thorough questioning of the people involved in economic administration and planning.” (Page 96). Direct experience and the practical applicability of abstract models also create a system. Time: 1956, which is an important date in the history of the socialist system in Hungary. But the story is nearly a decade old. And quite a few things happen also to János Kornai. But the most important thing; *his system*, which is an ultimate approach to the socialist system; the system of the descriptor and

analyst, emerges precisely at that time. From then on, only one thing matters to him; namely what is wrong with the socialist system, how it is possible to understand and describe its fundamental problem, and whether it can be repaired.

*(Sweeping Along –Not Only in Economics)* Movement, progress, change of place and travel are basic motives of the book. It is also possible to describe the *Irregular Memoirs* with various ways of movement. One basic feature of the Kornai system is dynamism; it basically follows one direction, but a higher resolution picture would also display the slight divergences from the trend. The main form of movement is the critical analysis of the problems of the socialist system. In the book, it is described by the story of genesis and summaries of the pieces, ranging from *Overcentralisation*, through *Economics of Shortage* to *The Socialist System*. The path becomes clear and homogenized by subsequent reflections, explanations, as well as occasional corrections and self-criticism. While Kornai explores the partial fields one-by-one and keeps returning to already explored points, also the (socialist) system keeps changing. Of the basic problems of its Hungarian version, its deviation from the classical (Soviet and Stalinist) version and reform will become foci of attention. Just as in the Kornai system, the questions of ‘*what could be*’ and ‘*how long*’ become paralleled with the questions of ‘*what (why and how)*’. The socialist system collapsed precisely by the time the responses get incorporated into the system of the great piece. But this is not the case with the problem: the event will not resolve it, but only places it in a new context; therefore it remains to be understood. A subjective review of Kornai’s set of problems is a very exciting journey in political economics. Apart from the parallel path covered by the object, it also demonstrates the aesthetical values of a drama.

The way Kornai learns, applies and interprets in an autodidactic way the science of economics and its trends is a similar intellectual journey. To readers’ great luck, the author arranges a tutor for this journey, the tutor of his own system. It is the author, who acts as the tutor, who – with only a few exceptions – was, in fact, only allowed to teach beyond Hungary’s borders, but who has always found it important to disseminate his ideas to the widest possible audience. (It would not surprise me, if Kornai, as an expert of mathematical economics, had had a hard time being unable to describe some of his deductions, presented in his *Irregular Memoirs*, in the language of mathematical formulas. But this is a disciplined system and if he speaks in the language typical of an essay, he may not mix it with other languages.)

The easiest way to follow his movement in the geographical and social map of international economics and social sciences would be with a world map and a multi-dimensional network model (if there is anything like that...). But Kornai’s explanation of the connection between the freedom of intellectual and geographical movement as well as the freedom a society’s movement in the language of an essay is also very enlightening. This is something that refers back to the basic problem of the socialist system and to the relationship with freedom or freedoms.

*(Phenomena of Disequilibrium)* The foundations of the Kornai system were one-off decisions “for a lifetime”. According to the book, the author makes a summary of them

in the year 1959 (pages 143,144). Some, or perhaps all of these decisions had been made earlier than that; they were the results of conclusions reached after a long period of thinking. 1959 was the year when these decisions evolved into a unified *system*. The following decisions served as a compass showing direction for the future: break-up with the Communist Party, remaining in Hungary, scientific research instead of a political career, break-up with Marxism, and integration into the professional sphere of economics in the West. Perhaps a few more elements could also be worth mentioning here, such as system paradigm as a work method and approach to various phenomena. All these ensure the functionality, the consistency and (I am afraid to say) the equilibrium of the (Kornai)- system. Although the *Irregular Memoirs* is obviously constructed on foundations provided by these decisions, from time to time the author deliberately reveals the points of disequilibrium. Also, the individual decisions and the conclusions derived from them lead to a certain tension from time to time. The internal tensions derived from the fact that Kornai did not give credit even to a theoretical feasibility of the socialist market economy; still, he devoted himself to the problems of ideal planning. His text suggested to me that he got and remained captured and perhaps even fascinated by the aesthetics of any potential mathematical clarity. Also, tensions deriving from external and internal factors often raise the question of whether an own system can be clearly seen. Kornai often deals with the dilemma of what *to express* and what *not to express*, just as his big decisions collide with his basic human values. Finally, purely external factors may also create tension: harassment by the police and at work in the sixties, exclusion from teaching in Hungarian universities in the seventies, or tempting work offers abroad that at the time appeared to imply leaving Hungary for good.

(*Critical-Political Autobiography*) Kornai is likely to have created something complete by merely presenting his own intellectual path and the reconstruction of his own thoughts. He was, however, also interested in how the socialist system itself responds to his analyses. Therefore, he subsequently faced himself with the background information of this “acceptance” that used to be confidential, but have become public by now. It required historical research. He tracked down all documents about himself, written behind his back. He searched through secret documents of the Communist Party, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the Secret Service. He got into the archives of the Information Office, because he wanted to know who considered his American colleague a secret agent and why, and what were its consequences for him. He is characterized by persistence and elegance: in *The Irregular Memoirs* he does not attempt to resolve in his own system the basic questions of the political system of socialism. He sticks with his own system and – as usually – he attempts to describe and explain it with the highest possible precision.

The impact, the story of the pieces after publication, the disintegrating or stimulating *power of thoughts*, and its directions and confines are questions that regularly emerge in the book. Writing this book appears to be the author’s most serious and ultimate motive, as well as a source for his highest emotional tension. The attempt of the Kornai system to reach equilibrium and its system-like character have imposed a certain limit on its impact. The scientist refused to line up among the *practicing* reformers (who submit proposals in various committees and/or give advice to them) both in the sixties and later, while his

ideas had an inspiring effect on those who did. He also refrained from entering into direct conversations with people who had different views and figures of the political opposition. In the meantime his piece titled *Economics of Shortage* completely transformed the usual way of thinking about socialism, thus, it has made a crack in the wall of the socialist system. János Kornai, the globally most recognised representative of the Hungarian social sciences was not compelled to face this dilemma within the framework of this book. He has done enough, he could have said. Not even the reserved and optimistic personal tone of the book would have required that. Regardless, rather than only facing it, he also pointed out the moral and human aspects of the issue, his personal dilemmas, and with regard to his decisions, he did not hesitate to ask himself: *Have I done enough?* A lot of adjectives would fit the professional literature on the Kádár era, and of them, the term ‘critical’ is one of the most applicable ones. There are only very few authors who also take moral aspects into account when preparing analyses and who, on top of that, start this kind of analyses with themselves. The *Irregular Memoirs* is one of such analyses.

*(Other Works Await Me)* This is the last sentence of the book. But what those will be? I have not found any explicit explanation for that, still, I had the impression that it is one of the things that are at stake with regard to this book. It is a question into whose answering the author, who keeps a sensitive eye on the world and is excited about the reception of his book, would like to also involve the reader. Above, I attempted to characterize the Kornai system with an amount of problems that requires *one and a half* lives. Is transition, our transition from the socialist system into the capitalist one, whose description according to the principles of system paradigm was started by János Kornai right in 1989, a (independent or temporary) *system*? Is it suitable for a large description? Are large system descriptions and large theoretical models at all possible now, after modernity, in this transitory period? Or is what we are witnessing now only a network of problems? He might ask this question differently, but, based on the last sentence of his book, János Kornai will surely have responses.