

Review published in Hungarian, complete translation
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This indeed unusual memoir may be interpreted in several ways; therefore we may all find it intellectually stimulating. Those who like novel-style autobiographies may see it as a career novel that depicts a very unusual career path; one that demonstrates the author's transitions from an autodidact thinker into a Nobel Prize candidate; from an economist, banned from teaching and sometimes expelled to industrial research institutes, to a Professor at Harvard; and from a bookworm, locked behind the Iron Curtain, to a world traveller. One may also read it as a piece from the history of ideas that tells us how the Jewish bourgeois boy became a communist activist; how the Marxist journalist transformed into an anti-Marxist scientist; what made the follower of Imre Nagy to become fastidious with reforms; how the politician became a researcher refraining from politics, and how the latter evolved into a public figure pursuing economic policy: a figure named János Kornai.

The book may also be interpreted as a “school of thinking”, which enables the reader to follow how the scientist's various pieces, ranging from *Overcentralisation of Economic Administration* through *Economics of Shortage* to *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Socialism*, are built on one another. It gives us a chance to examine the real meaning of such world famous concepts as chronic shortage economy, soft budget constraint, and bureaucratic coordination. It is especially worthwhile to face the self-restraint by which the author – from time to time – strictly revises his earlier ideas, reasoning and conclusions.

The Force of Thought

With whatever interpretation we are reading János Kornai's autobiography, we will be captivated by the “force of thought” that the author applies as his strongest weapon throughout his life, which did have a few periods of trial. It is possible, of course, to challenge Kornai's views, or dislike him for one reason or another. But one thing should be clear to everyone: rather than only being blessed with extraordinary intellectual abilities, he is also a person who conducts his life with high standards in every respect, be it science, or any other aspect of life. The most captivating interpretation of the book for me is the one that presents a most personal Kornai: a human being who struggles with his *own* decisions, and who moralizes over his *own* actions.

That is because this book is also a personal confession, rather than only a description of an age or a professional autobiography. And it is not only because on certain pages he reveals – in his usual shy way – a real person, flesh and blood; a person who lives in a family and meets friends; a human being who also has a body and a soul, rather than only a mind; a man who, apart from facing respect, has also suffered offences during his productive life, and who, as he says, is not shameless enough to easily tolerate injustice,

but also because, as another manifestation of a personal tone, he shares with us his moral struggles that have accompanied him throughout his life.

“Moral settlement”, he says with regard to the deviation from the wrong track that he followed in the 1950’s, although he immediately adds that this book is something else than a public judgement of himself. He might have had a different purpose in mind, still he failed to suppress the moral being in himself; the most ruthless type: the one who does not believe in penitence. For a person who says, “sins are irreparable” it is very hard to face his own life. With this in mind, it is not at all surprising that the book is interspersed with moral dilemmas. The most severe struggle Kornai has had to face in his entire life (as also reflected in his book) was caused by the dilemma of a choice between politics and science. If a person starts his career in the Hungary of the 1950’s and remains a Hungarian scientist and a citizen even after becoming a “world citizen”; if he experiences the reforms of the 1960’s and the 1980’s and the change of the political system as a figure of Hungarian public life while also being part of international science, then he should give account of his political activities, or the lack of them.

Final Settlement

Kornai does make a final settlement of everything that he has done. The most painful dilemma of his life was the 1956 revolution, when he, in a “sharp situation”, i.e. upon writing the economic political part of Imre Nagy’s government program, understood that politics is far from him. That is because his analytical mind simply blocks when he has to draw up an action plan while the future is completely unclear. It is a poignant feeling to read his memory about a talk with Alíz Halda, former companion of the late Miklós Gimes, who had been his friend and died a martyr’s death: “You can imagine that I have thought about it a thousand times over these decades; many times forcing myself to face Miklós’s martyrdom.” A reader, free from such dilemmas also because of his/her age, may imagine with horror what ordeals Kornai, who chose to become a scientist, had to go through when repeatedly facing his own choice in the light of what happened to his colleagues and friends who had followed different paths.

In the course of writing, Kornai also made order in his own mind. He carried out a sort of a final settlement. He does not, however, make a secret of his intention to also use the book for shaping our impression on him. Thus, a final settlement with himself is also a reckoning. The reader will be enchanted by the world famous scientist’s efforts to render his thoughts and actions comprehensible and acceptable for his contemporaries and the future generations. This effort is, however, free from compulsions to justify himself. More specifically, he admits his scientific mistakes (even in the case of *Anti-Equilibrium*, written with high ambitions), and his inherent shortcomings (such as his inability to riposte), or his human weaknesses (e.g. his occasional envy of people who live in the spotlight and who are addressed by strangers in the street, unlike himself).

Kornai’s memoir demonstrates the excellent standards characteristic of him: clear concepts, logical way of thinking (since he hates “blurred“ expressions), metaphors that are humorous and clearly convey the message, readable style, subtle irony and self-irony,

as well as strict criticism and self-criticism. Those who have known the author for a long time will only understand that he has been advancing in years only by his more permissive tone applied with debate partners, although the book also clearly demonstrates that certain emotional wounds would never heal. Kornai's most painful wound is the mainly negative or uncomprehending domestic reception of his *The Road to a Free Economy*, written during the change of the socio-economic system of Hungary. (Well, aging has its advantages, too: the author, now turning 78, have lived to see that the ruthless critics of *The Road to a Free Economy* apologized to him with their study published in [the weekly] *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature] a few weeks ago.)

Even if offences prevail forever, the wounds, caused by them, do heal with time. I think, this might have happened to Kornai's several-decade-old wounds suffered from various reform economists; wounds that may heal now that he has talked about them. Now, by recalling Tibor Liska's and László Antal's statements of the time that challenged his scientific attitude, Kornai feels as if a great weight had been taken off his soul. Now, he had a chance to finally say what he has always wanted to say, namely that there are several fair life strategies. "There are behaviour patterns that I despise and condemn morally. However, I consider several attitudes, rather than only one, as morally acceptable", he says. This is one of the many messages of the book that makes us think.