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### **Insider critic of Marxist economics discusses his autobiography**

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To say that János Kornai has led an interesting life would be an understatement.

Born in Hungary in 1928 in a country still suffering from the aftereffects of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he spent his youth in the dangerous position of a Jew under a government that had thrown in its lot with the Nazis.

After World War II, Hungary joined the Communist bloc, and the young Kornai became an ardent supporter of Marxist-Leninism. By 1956, however, on the eve of Hungary's unsuccessful revolution, he had become disillusioned with Marxism and with the idea of a centralized economy.

It was at this crucial moment in history that he defended his economics thesis at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. Later to be published under the title "Overcentralization," the work gained worldwide attention as the first criticism of Marxist economics from within the Communist world.

"Most of the thesis defenses at that time were attended by a handful of people, and afterward you would get a nice job offer. Mine was attended by hundreds of people, the thesis was successful and praised for a few days, but soon afterward I was condemned as a renegade, and instead of getting a nice job offer, I was fired from my workplace."

Kornai, now the Allie S. Freed Professor of Economics Emeritus, has written a new book summing up his eventful and influential career, titled "By Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey" (MIT Press, 2007). On Monday (May 14), Kornai spoke about the book at an event sponsored by the Economics Department, The Center for European Studies, and the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies.

Kornai announced at the outset that he would not attempt to summarize the 560-page book but would rather confine himself to an explanation of its cover page. This apparent exercise in minimalism, however, yielded far more narrative substance than one might have supposed.

The book's main title, "By Force of Thought," conveys a double meaning, Kornai said.

"First, it refers to my own career, that what I achieved was not through political position, nor through money, or the flattery of influential people, but rather any influence I have had was through thought, through the books and papers I have published."

Kornai's thought influenced his career in other ways, which he did not discover until the collapse of the Communist government of Hungary made it possible for him to examine government archives. He learned that an attempt had been made to recruit him as a spy but that he had been rejected as unreliable on the basis of his published writings.

"I was not reliable because of my thought. My thought protected me."

The book's title also expresses Kornai's belief that thoughts can have an influence on the course of history. As an economist whose beliefs have changed radically over his career, Kornai has found that confronting his own thought can be an uncomfortable experience, but he has resolved never to deny the errors he has made in the past.

The book's subtitle, "Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey," has several meanings as well, Kornai said.

For one thing, it refers to the somewhat irregular format of the book, combining personal narrative with short, nontechnical essays on economics, economic reform, socialism, capitalism, and other topics.

It also refers to the irregularity of the author's intellectual and professional life. Unlike most of those in his profession, Kornai never studied economics as an undergraduate. In fact, he never received an undergraduate degree. His first exposure to economics was as an economics reporter for a Budapest newspaper, and he stepped directly from that job to a graduate program.

The debacle over his candidate's thesis (the equivalent of a Ph.D.) has already been mentioned. A further consequence of being the first scholar to criticize the Communist economic system from within was that Kornai was barred from climbing the academic ladder in the usual way and instead held a series of academic positions well outside of the mainstream. The first time he held a full professorship was when he came to Harvard in 1986.

Finally, Kornai explained the meaning of the book's cover illustration, which shows a pair of clay figures known as "Shaman and Youth," produced in Mexico around 1500 B.C. Sitting cross-legged, side by side, the larger figure of the "shaman" on the left and his smaller student on the right seem to be engaged in an intense discussion.

The older man places a fatherly hand on the youth's shoulder while the young man gestures with his fist as though striving to get his point across. Kornai first saw the figures in the art museum of Princeton University and "instantly fell in love with them."

Denied the opportunity of teaching economics to Hungarian students because of his unorthodox ideas, Kornai cherishes his teaching position at Harvard and, since 1992, his appointment as a permanent fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study of Collegium Budapest.

“These little figures symbolize for me the relationship between the teacher and his student or the master and his disciple. For a while I was on the right-hand side, and then I moved over to the left.”