

On the Possibilities of Philosophy in the Seventies*

– Review –

Krisztina SZŐCS

PhD Student, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj

Keywords: Marxism, Materialist dialectics, Hungarian Philosophy, Budapest School, Socialismus, academic philosophy, ideological perspective, coded language, manipulation, censorship, opportunism

E-mail: krisztinaszocs@yahoo.com

*

The reader of this first volume has in his/her hands the outcome of the cooperation between the L'Harmattan Publishing house and the German–Hungarian Philosophical Society, a series entitled *Ad marginem – Philosophical Writers in between (East) Berlin and Novosibirsk*. The objective of this book was to combat the belief that “writing philosophy is possible only in Western Europe and/or in North America”.¹ Aiming to open up some of the themes of Central- and Eastern European Philosophy, the series brings back past alternative thoughts and orientations hidden due to changing political and social circumstances, files from the history of this regions’ philosophy known only to “insiders”.

The German–Hungarian Philosophical Society’s conference volume introduces us to the philosophical reality and possibilities of a world succumbed to a totalitarian regime. To quote Sándor Ferencz, this should correct the false, simplified image of present day philosophical thinking which considers that in the decades previous the change of regime academic philosophy served meekly the purposes of the “Marxist-Leninist Department”, while non-academic philosophy represented a kind of “de-Marxified progress”.² The authors of the volume look back on the sixties and the seventies in an attempt to recover some of the main philosophical preoccupations of the era, especially of the seventies, greatly influenced by the dominant ideas of the age as well as by its political climate.

The *Appendix* and the twenty-three articles spanning from 6 to 30 pages deal with an array of problems such as the Lukács-debate, the Altrichter circle’s singular extra-academic activity, the Ruzsa Schools’ Frege inspired logics, and Georg Klaus’ cybernetic experiments. Some studies in the volume, analyzing the social effects of the Soviet socialist-communist political order which suppressed any kind of traditional “bourgeois” philosophy, also discuss the role and the works of György Lukács and his disciples. The former had an important role in elaborating a Marxist philosophy different both from the dogmatic Soviet Marxism, and from the western Marx-renaissance. The

* *A hetvenes évek filozófiai lehetőségei és valósága* (The Possibilities and the Realities of Philosophy in the Seventies) ed. Gábor Boros (Budapest: L'Harmattan – Német-Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, 2010), 324 pp. ISBN 978-963-236-240-3

¹ Ibid., 7.

² Sándor Ferencz, “„Én nem az ő eretnekük vagyok” – Vidrányi Katalinról”, in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 176.

papers investigate the influence of Lukács's works on the Hungarian and Eastern-German philosophy, the political questions related to his career, as well as his aesthetic and philosophical works.

The second part of the collection of studies turns from the historical syntheses towards more particular subjects such as Katalin Vidrányi's anthropological patristics, or Tamás Nyíri's thought inspired by Karl Rahner's theology. We can also find an analysis on Gyula Munkácsy's Kantian-Husserlian method, as well as on the followers and later works of Béla Hamvas, and Béla Suki's existentialist thought.

Due to the variety of themes and perspectives touched on by this volume, the reviewer cannot seek to cover all of them in great detail. Instead, underlying aspects and common features of all the articles have been evaluated such as: the contradictions of the seventies filled with identity issues, self-criticism, manipulations, opportunisms, and political turmoil that reveal also the philosophical possibilities of that era, as well as the more or less successful tools of expression.

The first study, by Endre Kiss, deals with the controversial philosophical turn of the seventies. The social and cultural changes triggered by the events of 1968 made possible a philosophical repositioning. The radically changed forms of life shifted the former Marxist philosophy towards a reconsidered conception, dubbed by Kiss Endre as the "*post-Stalinist renewal of Marxism*".¹

While this new productive and authentic Marxism established in the West, in East "the need for transformation in philosophy had to face the primitive inventory of social existence",² the societies based on the principles of authority halted any kind of rebellion, philosophers were expected to live within the frame of a well-established set of rules and expectations. The ideas which did not fall in with authoritarian thinking were of course eradicated in these times, hindering almost entirely the Eastern-European reading of neo-Marxist thought. Kiss believes that the Hungarian reception of neo-Marxism was entirely bound to Lukács's work as the "his significant works can be considered both neo-Marxist and Stalinist Marxist".³ He sees Lukács's contribution to neo-Marxism in the elaboration of the "*manipulation*" concept. By drawing a parallel between the Stalinist forms of manipulation and the bourgeois democracy of capitalism, Lukács analyzed and evaluated both systems. We quote: "It is an ideological task to restore the forgotten but only real meaning to the falsely used ways of expression, as well as to radically change the slogans that govern the practice. Yet this process imposes increased requirements on spiritual productivity and the cathartic receptiveness authoring the real changes compared to the usual ideological transformations of a bourgeois society".⁴

In this sense, the need for change in Lukács carries the possibility of getting rid of manipulation as such. Kiss believes that Lukács's manipulation-critique can be easily used even nowadays for the dissection of manipulative systems and techniques. The obtrusive and constant manipulation of the seventies resulted in the disabling of the free

¹ Endre Kiss, "A filozófia szerepe a marxizmusban. A hetvenes évek filozófiai fordulatáról" (The Role of Philosophy in Marxism. On the Philosophical Turn of the 1970s), in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 15.

² Kiss, *A filozófia szerepe a marxizmusban*, 15.

³ Kiss, *A filozófia szerepe a marxizmusban*, 16.

⁴ György Lukács, *A társadalmi lét ontológiája* (The Ontology of Social Existence) Vol. II., (Budapest: Magvető, 1976), 780.

market of political ideas, as well as in the harsh limitations brought to the life-worlds, and the schematization of thought. Only Marxism in its strict sense was tolerated, so the mainstream Hungarian and East-European philosophy was the historical and dialectical materialism.

We must not forget that Marxist thought enjoyed a much wider diversity: “interesting books were written the subjects and language of which could not be altogether identified with the brochure-like language of conventional books”¹ – says Erzsébet Rózsa in her study entitled *Coded Language as a Hungarian Specificity in the Philosophy of the 1970s*. In her essay this period is portrayed through the biographies of the historian of philosophy József Szigeti, as well as of marxologists Adam Schaff and Karel Kosik. In the Hungarian context one should mention György Márkus’ Marxist anthropology or Ágnes Heller’s books, *The Renaissance Man* and *The everyday life*, Ferenc Fehér’s Dostoyevsky monograph, and last but not least Mihály Vajda’s analysis of Fascism. Rózsa coins these works borrowing from Lukács, “the renaissance of Marxism”.

The *Budapest School* philosophers such as György Márkus, Ágnes Heller, Mihály Vajda, Ferenc Fehér, Marysa Márkus counted as Marxists in true Marxian terms, but contrary to Lukács they rejected the official Marxist doctrinarian philosophy and criticized the principals of dialectic materialism. Their school of thought produced a multitude of philosophical orientations, and because they took on a particular method to approach philosophical matters it also gave them an authentic voice amidst the mainstream. Take for instance György Márkus’ translation of and introduction to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which managed – according to János Kelemen’s *The Possibilities of Reviewing Bourgeois Philosophy in the Seventies* – “to make one of the greatest works of the ‘bourgeois’ philosophy available in Hungary, but also stated the readiness of some Hungarian philosophers to assimilate and discuss autonomously the biggest achievements of the age.”² Kelemen thinks that this translation may have served to teach the upcoming generation of the sixties to deal with the maze of ideas and to develop their own registers of interpretation and critical thought. While Márkus was concerned most of the time with the philological aspects of Marxology, the philosophy of Ágnes Heller was based on the fundamental value of freedom which is above theoretical systems. Rózsa believes that this period of Ágnes Heller thought was filled with philosophical bravery, analytic skill, systematic thinking and hermeneutical reasoning.³ Vajda’s article on fascism reveals a sensitivity to trace social, political and mental deformities, with this critique of systems also revealing the problematic nature of the Enlightenment’s inheritance. Ferenc Fehér in his Dostoyevsky monograph emphasizes the torn existence of modern individualism. Therefore these writings were not crucially marked by dialectical materialism. Rózsa, analyzing the works of the above mentioned authors, underlines: “these philosophical writings radically differ from the

¹ Erzsébet Rózsa, “A virágnyelv mint hungaricum a hetvenes évek filozófiájában” (Coded Language as a Hungarian Specificity in the Philosophy of the 1970s), in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 78.

² János Kelemen, “A „polgári filozófia” bírálatának lehetőségei a hetvenes években” (The Possibilities to Criticize ‘Bourgeois’ Philosophy in the 1970s), in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 99.

³ Rózsa, “A virágnyelv mint hungaricum...”, 79.

brochure literature of the age, but also from Lukács's latest works. This holds true even if most of these were still created within the Marxist narrative."¹

On analyzing the work of the *Budapest School* we could justly speculate on how the philosophical inheritance of an un-authoritarian, non-ideological philosophical discourse of the seventies, focusing strictly on professional matters, would have looked like. What possibilities people had in a world where external determinants had such a fatal power over the inner drives of the individual, that these became insignificant; in an environment ruled by tacit rules and appearances, which if broken brought about punishment?

If a philosophical achievement was not Marxist enough, or if it was labelled anti-Marxist, retaliation were to follow, the work becoming forbidden as an enemy of the system. The aim of the system was to control the social and spiritual life completely, so that nothing would go unnoticed. The academy was rooted in Marxism-Leninism, the dialectical and historical materialism, scientific socialism and political economy were compulsory teachings in universities hindering the investigation of classical philosophers, the history of philosophy and of any non-Marxist philosophy. Philosophy under the influence of Marxism-Leninism was forced to reduce its conceptual apparatus to the interpretation of the concepts of an authority fuelled ideology, finally downsized to the teaching of dialectical and historical materialism. These radical limitations of philosophy questioned the existence of authentic philosophical works and culture.

József Simon in his *Literature and Philosophy. The Philosophy of (Early) Enlightenment in the Hungarian Literary History (1940–1990)* argues with Lukács on the question regarding the existence of Hungarian philosophy. The latter claimed, it is impossible to find a Hungarian philosopher acclaimed in the world-philosophy, who played more than a secondary role: "It is in the nature of Hungarian culture not to have its own philosophy. There is great Hungarian literature – especially lyrical poetry – at the same level of other European nations' literature. [...] But there has been no Hungarian thinker who – outside Hungary – could be classed at least secondary."² Lukács accounted for his skepticism by his belief that Hungarian culture was underdeveloped and weak: "If we study these relations concretely, than the weakness, dependency, backwardness of the Hungarian culture of thought will be evident: there is no Hungarian philosophy"³. Simon sees this level of skepticism coming from both Lukács and his school "as *a priori* discrediting the possibilities of Hungarian philosophy"⁴. If one would agree with Lukács as Simon says, than it would have no sense to philosophically analyze over and over again the texts of Lukács. This argument seems to support Hans-Martin Gerlach's thought: "Philosophy is the conscious processing of the human condition, going mentally beyond the mental transcendence of the human situation, in order to set the finalized and palpable form of this situation as a

¹ Rózsa, "A virágnyelv mint hungaricum...", 79.

² György Lukács, "Az MKP és a magyar kultúra" (The Hungarian Communist Party and the Hungarian Culture), in György Lukács, *Magyar irodalom – magyar kultúra* (Hungarian Literature – Hungarian Culture), (Budapest, 1970), 469–471.

³ György Lukács, "A magyar irodalomtörténet revíziója" (The Revision of Hungarian Literary History), in Lukács, *Magyar irodalom...*, 506.

⁴ József Simon, "Irodalom vagy filozófia. A (korai) felvilágosodás filozófiája a magyar irodalomtörténet-írásban (1950–1990)" [Literature of Philosophy. The Philosophy of the (Early) Enlightenment in Hungarian Literary History (1950–1990)], in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 221.

goal to be reached”.¹ The vision of transcending one’s situation, topping the doctrinaire, imposed way of thinking, or any attempt to escape the system of conventions carries in itself a philosophical possibility. Could we honestly claim that there were no such attempts in the restricted world of the seventies in Eastern Europe?

What were the possibilities of Hungarian philosophy, provided it remained faithful to the communist party, in the decades ruled by Marxist ideas, what means could it apply to evade the discredit resulting from censorship and the lack of free expression which affected both research and publishing? The authors of the seventies had no other choice than to resort to linguistic and professional scams to fool the censorship. Most philosophers avoided repercussions by discussing strictly professional problems or by retreating from the philosophy of history to the philosophy of language. Vera Békés thinks that this situation coincided with the general tendency to transform philosophy into a strict science. The new orientation to break with the German idealism of the nineteenth century had already begun in 1968. Besides this focus on more strictly professional themes, the philosophy of the seventies can be characterized by the retreat into the history of philosophy.

Mihály Szívós in his study, *The Connection between the Philosophical Works of Attila József and György Lukács and the Relationship between Their Reception in the Seventies* portrays the history of philosophy already as a field of studies “where one could activate without significantly less ideological limitations. The practice of censorship in philosophy was essentially meant to avoid the use of philosophy in relation to social and political issues, apart from fields such as the criticism of religion.”² Szívós shows that the alternative evasion besides the history of philosophy was literature and aesthetics. Those who for some reason would not get involved in politics were also making their way towards literature and aesthetics as there “one could, using a kind of coded language, at times even speak up about current issues. In this way any significant life work that joined philosophy and literature offered occasion and framework for publishing some reflections cautiously approaching current concerns.”³ Erzsébet Rózsa calls this coded language “flower-language”, denoting the meta-linguistic communication going on in the sixties and seventies that enabled philosophers to convey hidden messages without directly or clearly speaking up. Rózsa points out that though Hungary belonged to the Eastern Block, the so called “Kadarism” did not foster the kind of “savage communism” known in the GDR. She says that this “‘Kadarism’ was different from the system of Honecker. By its language games, subtle cultural policy and welfare measures mobilized something important in the large strata of Hungarian society, an element that had been present in the historically inherited mentality of the Hungarian people, waiting to be mobilized”.⁴ By reading between the lines, looking deeply into ideas, matching apparently independent concepts launched an unstoppable series of interpretations in the meta-dimension.

The philosopher generation of the eighties drifted away from the problems of the seventies and avoided Marxism by moving towards entirely independent vistas. Vera

¹ Hans-Martin Gerlach, “Marxista és/vagy „késő polgári” filozófia?” (Marxist and/or “Late Bourgeois” Philosophy?), in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 95.

² Mihály Szívós, “József Attila és Lukács György gondolkodói életművének kapcsolatáról és a hetvenes évekbeli recepciójuk közötti összefüggésekről”, in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 229.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rózsa, “*A virágnyelv mint hungaricum...*”, 79.

Békés writing about this generation mentions György Bence's and János Kis' ecological writings. The two turned towards strictly professional issues by writing on environmental philosophy; this choice of theme made easier for them to avoid the ideological perspective in their thought. Békés sees their achievement in the fact that even though they did not totally ignore the Marxist way, they contributed to the more accurate formulation of the "big" questions. Békés believes that "these were the last years when one could elaborate a critical theory based on genuine Marxist ideas sincerely, without the ulterior motive of opportunism. Moreover, this was a short interval when one needed some intellectual bravery to apply such thoughts consistently".¹ Her summary suggests that the philosophies of the seventies and eighties have spawned in many directions and acquired new and important ways of expression with some success. In many situations the reading of philosophical texts implied the activation of "backstage" knowledge to reveal the core philosophical statements in one text. To see the content of these statements we should deal with each writing apart. Gábor Gángó says that in Poland Lukács's oeuvre was read and interpreted, his Stalinism being ignored, on the basis of ideas transmitted by French leftists, first of all on the basis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's book on Lukács.

Gángó's study entitled *Marxism, Culture, Communication. The Lukács–Brzozowski Priority-Debate and Its Outcome* gives an insight on the Central-Eastern European intellectual dilemmas by comparing the views of Lukács and the Polish critic, Stanisław Brzozowski. Gángó, claiming the priority of Brzozowski over Lukács and analyzing the debate of Hungarian and Polish views, considers that the forerunner of the unique Central-European perspective in philosophy, different from Soviet or Western views was undoubtedly Brzozowski. The central European concept of strengthened socialism, "the double experience and programme of Marxism as cultural philosophy and cultural philosophy as a political alternative"² definitely separated the Central-European Marxism from Western European or Soviet views. Gángó draws attention to the difficulties of trying to grasp the specificity of Central-Eastern-Europeanness; according to him to interpret and understand the eclecticism of these philosophies confronts the international scientific community with a hard task. He explains this difficulty by the fact that "the contemporary Central-Eastern European historians of philosophy, who question the philosophical tradition of their own national past based on the questions of their own age, are the products of this tradition, and only according to this can they position themselves as researchers".³ Thus we are rooted in a national philosophical tradition but we also bear all the characteristics of the Central-Eastern European region. We question the past from the present, the past that determines us as well as our actions and perspectives. The contemporary philosopher therefore can observe the past only through the prism of tradition and current issues. This perspective results in Central-Eastern European thinking determined by national tradition. The writings of authors such as Brzozowski, Korczak, Witkiewicz, Vincenz, Gombrowicz, Miłosz, or Lem this philosophy. Brzozowski playing with the idea of setting oneself outside the boundaries of history or tradition, points out that thus the mind would fill up

¹ Vera Békés, "Egy kézirat a „márures és mégüres pillanat senkiföldjén”", in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...* 119.

² Gábor Gángó, "Marxizmus, kultúra, kommunikáció. A Lukács–Brzozowski prioritás-vita és tanulságai", in *A hetvenes évek filozófiai...*, 252.

³ Ibid., 241.

with ideas which would make it “able to consider, to know, to perceive something that which is not a consistent part of any consciousness, something that is not an element of any human cognition.”¹ There is something terrible and sublime in Brzozowski’s thought, to think the unthinkable, which is a paradox itself. Gángó considers Brzozowski’s Central European philosophy unique in formulating a “philosophy of action”. Later the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka applied the idea of “action” in his philosophy as the question of one’s own life directed on itself. Brzozowski defined the essence of “action” in the philosophical reflection of awareness. The “philosophy of action” means that we continually reflect on our consciousness, the human action gaining its authenticity only if it “regards its own consciousness and all that contributed to the shaping of reality with philosophical reflection.”²

The philosophical journey through the seventies with its interpretations and analysis, took on a hard task; the nine studies that I have selected for discussion show the *Zeitgeist* of a philosophy born in the age of economic stagnation and the Prague Spring suppressed by tanks.

Though we are prone sometimes to pigeonhole the literature of historic materialism, the present volume serves greatly to advocate the variety of philosophies booming in the seventies. The names, societies, “philosophical schools” in this review showcase that even in an era full of retaliations a philosophical spirituality was extant opening the way to the creation of authentic philosophical works.

¹ Ibid., 244.

² Ibid., 242.