

Zsolt K. Horváth

The **p**roduction  
of **c**reativity.  
The **p**olitics of  
Ferenc Mérei's  
**p**sychological  
and **e**ducational  
**a**pproach

Zsolt K. Horváth

## The production of creativity. The politics of Ferenc Méri's psychological and educational approach

*"Investigations by Binet, Fontegne, Claparède, Piéron, Wallon and their pupils have shown that what lies behind achievement is not a set of abilities that can be isolated and come into operation in an artificially-created test situation independently of every external and internal condition, as the testers who conceive the mind in terms of elements believe. It is something else. A person is not just a quantitatively definable resource that achieves more or less, better or worse; rather, a person is a carrier of qualities and traits."*

Ferenc Méri: The Psychology of Choosing a Career (1942)

### Creativity and the neo-romantic concept of the genius

Creativity is a word we use all the time. Recently, I saw a sign in a haberdashery shop seeking "youthful, dynamic, creative" sales staff. Typed into a search engine, the first hits are bound to include "psychological" approaches. The reader can probably already hear the words "complex, problem-sensitive productive ability located in the right hemisphere of the brain," and an article in a color magazine illustrated with a model of the human brain beside the faces of Freud, Einstein and Salvador Dalí. Thus the vernacular ideas of creativity propagated by the popular media often go together with the naïve and romantic concept of the genius. In compensation, and to keep the reader's spirits up, there is always an assurance that individuals can develop their own creativity, and it is not *completely* consigned to biological determinism.

The Hungarian magazine *Pszichológia*, edited and written by psychologists, has recently run a special issue on the “creative self” with a somewhat more sophisticated set of approaches. Creative ability comes over as ‘given’, but what is given is a potential that has to be developed. We also read that current ideas of creativity are children of their time. And as for “great people,” creativity always has a collective aspect – two authors working together were more effective than if they worked individually. Somehow, though, creativity is still locked in the prison of “personality,” and in spite of ourselves we see it as something “inside,” a subject that may have an age, but no gender, class status, address, personal or family history, or contacts. It is a solitary subject in a society imagined almost as a vacuum.<sup>1</sup> Of course we could counter this judgement by saying that it is not the job of psychology to take social factors into account (this being the area of sociology and social history), but this is a distinctively contemporary view, and not without harmful political consequences.<sup>2</sup>

In Europe between the two world wars, educational psychology, social psychology and child psychology (Édouard Claparède, Jean Piaget, Henri Wallon, Kurt Lewin and others) argued that intellectual abilities are not self-contained, hereditary, measurable faculties, but qualities that can be developed in childhood, above all in the educational system. It was a movement that was propagated in Hungary by László Nagy and Ferenc Mérei. In the 1960s, however, there was a resurgence of scientific insistence on what was put forward as objective measurement of intelligence. Neither viewpoint is free of the authors’ political and intellectual disposition. While left-wing, sometimes Marxist psychologists, believing in social equality and social justice, put the emphasis on development and the quality of education, conservative and right-wing liberal authors focused on the inherited nature of intelligence, which allegedly obviated the need for any equalizing function in education. The former saw access to knowledge as being unequally distributed in society, and education as having an obligation to correct this, while the latter saw the child’s intelligence as determined and conclude that more talented and intelligent children should be given preference in the school system so that they can provide maximum benefit for the economy and society. Immediately after the Second World War, nearly the entire Western world espoused the left-wing, equalizing education policy, but by the end of the 1960s, there were already signs of the ideological and science-policy turn discussed below.

1 *Pszichológia* [Psychology], no. 3 (2015).

2 On the need to connect individual-focused psychological studies to social reality, see Dóra Máriási and Katalin Vida, *Kritikai pszichológiát! A pszichológia intézményrendszere a kritikai pszichológia perspektívájából* [Let’s do Critical Psychology! The institutions of psychology from the perspective of Critical Psychology], *Imágó Budapest Online*, no. 3 (2015) [http://imagobudapest.hu/images/lapszamok/2015\\_2\\_Egyeni\\_szocialis\\_problema\\_szam/02\\_Mariasi-Dora\\_Vida-Katalin\\_Kritikai\\_pszichologiat.pdf](http://imagobudapest.hu/images/lapszamok/2015_2_Egyeni_szocialis_problema_szam/02_Mariasi-Dora_Vida-Katalin_Kritikai_pszichologiat.pdf), and S. Mark Pancer, *Social Psychology: The Crisis Continues, in Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, eds. Dennis R. Fox and Isaac Prilleltensky, (London: Sage, 1999), 150-165.

### Naturalism and conservatism: the viewpoint of biological imperialism

The starting point perhaps came in 1969, when Arthur Jensen, professor of psychology at Berkeley University, set off a huge controversy by arguing from the point of view of quantifiable, scientifically precise intelligence research that intellectual abilities cannot be equalized through a school system based on the idea of emancipation. This implied that recurring inequalities may be of biological – genetic – origin.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by the Harvard researcher Richard Herrnstein in 1971, who foresaw that “the increase in equality of opportunity will result in a society stratified by IQ, and the old social classes will be replaced by classes according to cognitive abilities.”<sup>4</sup> This line of thinking was taken even further by Edward O. Wilson (who was the source of the model of naturalism that Bruno Latour used in his critique), whose book *Sociobiology* gave a name and a direction to a movement already emerging in scientific circles, and latterly known as “biological determinism.”<sup>5</sup> Disregarding the obviously racist approaches derived from the naïve use of scientific concepts (followed by immediate political protests), it is striking that these researchers had a deeply scientific, specifically biological, view of human nature, and took almost no notice of the half a century of sociological tradition. Specifically, they did not consider how deeply the heterogeneous processes of socialization influence individual opportunities and choices, or how the space of pre-structured choices is narrowed and restricted by the direct milieu (family, housing, peer groups, etc.). It seems that the researchers working under the banner of biological imperialism “forgot” everything that psychologists sensitive to social inequalities had discovered decades earlier. So far, we could account for everything by noting that research scientist in natural sciences received a different kind of professional education and so their approach, while more than problematic, is at least harmless. But when Herrnstein wrote a book with his well-known right-wing political adviser Charles Murray and – as Loïc Wacquant pointed out – asserted in the name of “scientific race theory” that “racial and class inequalities in America reflect individual differences in ‘cognitive abilities’”, then it is difficult to call the cognitive viewpoint politically harmless.<sup>6</sup> (This of course does not imply that this abuse of science is committed by every cognitivist.) If these cognitive abilities can be determined with scientific precision, then it logically follows that the programme of education aimed at equalization, into which the advanced countries have invested enormous sums,

3 Arthur R. Jensen, *How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?* *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1969): 1-123.

4 László Lakatos, *Biológiai imperializmus* [Biological imperialism], in *Modern szociológiai paradigmák*, ed. Dénes Némedi (Budapest: Napvilág, 2008), 170. See Marshall Sahlins, *Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1976.

5 Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, 5-6.

6 Loïc Wacquant, *Prisons of Poverty*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minneapolis Press, 2009, 13.

is entirely worthless.<sup>7</sup> The essentialist scientific view quite easily becomes a politically-motivated, normative social policy.<sup>8</sup> Researchers operating in different paradigms thus drew completely different conclusions from the crisis in education. The neoliberal right wing, citing the authority of science to advocate the maintenance, indeed augmentation, of the privileges of the elite (the “cognitive elite,” as the authors of *The Bell Curve* put it) urged resources to be withdrawn from education, while left-wing sociologists who ascribed inequality to the social environment urged educational reform to prevent the widening of the social gap: impoverishment and the increasing vulnerability of those at the bottom. The neo-conservative-neoliberal upsurge that fed on the crisis of the social democratic welfare state has reshaped the political and economic discourse, pervading it with its own vocabulary, and it is consequently difficult to argue against the concept of “growth” with, say, that of “solidarity.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the saddest thing about this dispute is that it contains almost nothing new.

### Left wing education: the redistribution of knowledge and abilities

Ferenc Mérei (1909–1986) was a highly influential psychologist and educationist. He graduated from the Paris Sorbonne as a student of Henri Wallon, joined the Communist Party, and took part in political work among Hungarian émigrés in Paris<sup>10</sup>. When he returned to Hungary with his degree in 1934, the approaches of the scientific and social science were in a similar situation to the above. Academic psychology in Hungary – from the psychoanalytic school of Sándor Ferenczi and Lipót Szondi’s Laboratory of Pathology and Medicine of the Hungarian Royal State College of Special Teaching to the Institute of Psychology led by Pál Harkai-Schiller within Pázmány Péter University – was dominated by the scien-

7 Richard J. Herrnstein – Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve. Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994). For a criticism, see *The Bell Curve Wars. Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America*, ed. Steven Fraser (New York: Basic Books, 1995); *Intelligence, Genes and Success. Scientists Respond to The Bell Curve*, eds. Bernie Devlin, Stephen E. Fienberg, Daniel P. Resnick and Kathryn Roeder, (New York, Springer, 1997).

8 Johannes Keller, “In genes we trust. The biological component of psychological essentialism and its relationship to mechanisms of motivated social cognition,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88 (2005), 686–702.

9 Doreen Massey, “Neoliberalism has hijacked our vocabulary,” *Guardian*, 11 June 2013.

10 Ferenc Mérei was a member of the Hungarian Communist Party between 1945 and 1950, and thereafter of the Hungarian Workers’ Party, and worked on the scientific reform of education. He was partly responsible for the introduction of the 8-year comprehensive elementary school. In his post in the Psychology Seminar of the Budapest Institute of Educational Science after 1945 and as Director of the National Educational Science Institute after 1948, his duties included the reform of education, including the writing of new textbooks. In spring 1950, he was dismissed from all of his posts, and until the 1956 Revolution, he maintained his family through translation. Charged with seditious organization, he was arrested in 1958 and, in 1959, sentenced to 10 years in prison, but was granted amnesty in 1963.

tific approach. The individual stood at the centre of this view of humanity, and it attempted to address the psychological disorders of the individual, although it is true that Pál Ranschburg and János Schnell had already focused on prevention, and their interest was increasingly turning to children and school.

Mérei’s psychological training had completely different roots: French academic life at that time was deeply pervaded by the sociology of Émile Durkheim, who at the turn of the century had proposed that every human choice is pervaded by many latent social influences, with observable parameters from which laws and types could be formulated. Mérei’s teacher, the psychologist Henri Wallon, had a declaredly Marxist outlook. His left-wing stance was, in Mérei’s words “evident in every statement he made. This meant to me that he approached the subject from a specific social viewpoint. He stated that this or that phenomenon was tied to a specific milieu. I felt that we were on the same wavelength: that psychological phenomena are socially determined.”<sup>11</sup>

This is extremely important, because at the same time, one of Mérei’s mentors in Hungary, Lipót (Leopold) Szondi, was advocating “health background records” to be drawn up before marriage to combat disability and criminal tendencies.<sup>12</sup> Mérei, with his Marxist and later Durkheimist views, but who had attended Szondi’s seminars, took a different line. In his thinking, the social level always preceded the individual, and initially he almost rejected the very concept of given traits and abilities, declaring the child to be a blank slate on which “society writes its message.”<sup>13</sup>

To bring all of these threads together: the argument based exclusively on inborn abilities, which treats cognitive and creative abilities in a deterministic way, has a serious but often unspoken consequence, that it considers education as almost a waste of time, because biological capabilities fully define the career that the individual will follow in society. The left-wing thinking informed by the Enlightenment tradition, however, was placing increasing emphasis on education as the most important component of social mobility, because thousands of experiments proved that abilities are only partly inborn, and can thus be developed, perfected and shaped. By virtue of education, therefore, knowledge and creativity are not predetermined assets but may be redistributed via the education system, thus reducing social inequality.<sup>14</sup>

11 György Győri, Küzdelem a lélektannal és a világgal. Beszélgetés Mérei Ferencsel [Struggle with psychology and the world. Interview with Ferenc Mérei], *Kortárs*, vol. XXI, no. 4 (1977): 630.

12 Lipót Szondi, Beszámoló a M. Kir. Állami Gyógypedagógiai Tanárképző Főiskola Kórtani és Gyógytani Laboratóriumának 1938. évi munkájából [Report on the 1938 work of the Pathology and Medicine Laboratory of the Hungarian Royal State College of Special Teaching], *A Jövő Útjain*, vol. XIV, nos. 1–2 (1939): 3–5.

13 See Győri, op. cit., 630. In his small-group research, he later moved away from pure sociology and recognized the existence of physiological determinants.

14 Émile Durkheim, *Éducation et sociologie* (Paris: Alcan, 1934). *Émile Durkheim, Education and Sociology*, (New York, Free Press, 1956). See also Georges Politzer, *La crise de la psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1947).

### The qualitative measurement of intelligence and the production of creativity

Ferenc Mérei's early career was thus fundamentally shaped by French sociology and educational theory. It is in this spirit that he discussed the world of the child and early development in his writing between 1934 and 1942. In one of his lesser-known earlier papers, he put forward his scientific counter-arguments concerning the "child prodigy" phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> For a child extolled by the family as a "prodigy", the most important task of psychology and education is to provide protection against later disappointments, because the child will usually be unable to live up to what are in any case false expectations. Mérei recommended a much more subtle approach to measuring intelligence, based on multiple criteria: he attacked Alfred Binet's concept of intelligence and outlined an innovation by the neurologist Grigory Rossolimo by which intelligence was regarded as something more than a quantitatively definable stock and could also be examined qualitatively. This approach distinguished among abilities and produced a graph of test results which he called the psychological profile, although the score was less significant than the shape or figure of the curve.

In his research, Mérei discovered four ways of qualitatively determining intelligence. "Two of these concern intelligence as a whole, and define the intelligence constellation partly in terms of breadth, speed or depth and partly in terms of the predominance of understanding, ingenuity or criticism. The third distinction derives from the study of mode of perception, and distinguishes visual, auditory and motor disposition. Finally, by a fourth means of differentiation, we may talk about logical, verbal, numerical or general intelligences in terms of mode of expression."<sup>16</sup> These distinctions only have value, however, if they do not depend on the counsellor's intuition and are based on standardized tests. This perhaps sums up that the vulgarized, fetishized contemporary use of the concept of intelligence is no more than a conjuring trick of social policy in which the exclusive focus on cognitive abilities is an ideological move to increase social inequalities and retain the position of the elite. Of course this is not completely new, because in 1948, when Mérei was the leading figure in Hungarian education, he wrote an extended paper criticizing arguments for education that concentrated on an elite, and raised a flag for the ideal of comprehensive public education.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ferenc Mérei, *A csodagyerek a gyermeklélektan mérlegén [The "child prodigy" in the balance of child psychology]*, *Gyermeknevelés*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Feb–Mar, 1935): 30–32.

<sup>16</sup> Ferenc Mérei, *Az intelligencia minőségi értékelése a pályaválasztási tanácsadásban [The qualitative assessment of intelligence in career choice]*, *Iskola és Egészség*, vol. 5, no. 2 (January, 1938): 127–140, here: 133. For more detail, see Ferenc Mérei, *A pályaválasztás lélektana [The Psychology of Choosing a Career]*, (Budapest: Unitas kiadás, 1942).

<sup>17</sup> See Ferenc Mérei, *Demokrácia az iskolában [Democracy in school]*, *Nevelés és Iskolakutatás*, vol. IV, no. 1–4 (1985): 7–90. This paper was not published in 1948 for political reasons, above all because of its criticism of Soviet education. See also Ferenc Mérei, *A falakon belül: a neveléstudomány feladata [Within the Walls: the Task of Educational Science]*, (Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, 1948); Ferenc Mérei, *Utópia és valóság a magyar nevelésben [Utopia and Crisis in Hungarian Education]*, (Budapest: Szikra, 1949).

From this perspective, it is worth examining Mérei's ideas about creativity. Perhaps not surprisingly, these challenge the propositions of today's psychologists, who – sometimes unthinkingly – concentrate on the individual, the personality and the unfolding of inborn faculties. The difference between the two does not lie in forgetting that the individual is a human who lives in society, with which nobody would argue, but in taking a view of society – as Mérei eloquently puts it – "as an inert framework in whose relations the individual moves as if they were inorganic objects."<sup>18</sup> This is the liberal model of the individual acting independently of the community. Its naivety shows up when viewed in terms of the social sciences: it disregards the constraining concepts of structures, norms, class status, habits, forms of capital, etc.<sup>19</sup>

Mérei thus placed the concept of creativity in the context of educational history, while basically declaring that its conceptual definition and the study of the phenomenon was the task of psychology. His approach outlines a trinity of views. 1) Nineteenth century education placed *general knowledge* above all else: the basics that seemed necessary for finding one's way through life. This was criticized on utilitarian grounds, because "consciousness was furnished with ready knowledge," while children were not taught how to put it into practice in life. 2) Then attention turned to adaptation and the set of faculties that underlie adaptation, and the watchword became *intelligence*. "In intelligence-led mental operations," he wrote, "(...) we apply *acquired* experience and knowledge in a *new* situation."<sup>20</sup> However attractive this may seem, it can still produce closed knowledge, because previous experience will be incompatible, if it is not only applied in a new area, but there is also a new point of view, then and intelligence-based education can easily fail. In addition, it could not explain how scientific discoveries come about, because we cannot grasp a previously undetected phenomenon with existing means, and so it is not enough to *apply*, and interpretation requires new methods and language. 3) Mérei used the word *creativity* to mean constructive activity that moves from convergence to divergence, with thinking in terms of the possible categories, not independent of knowledge and intelligence, but going beyond these. He asserted that psychology takes creativity to be a general human faculty which shows up in many different ways and is certainly not just a characteristic of great figures. He said that just as situations in which we experience anxiety enhance appreciation and understanding of danger, it is in creativity that there appears the potential for action to transform situations, and this is interpreted as constructivism. Just "as we experience the tension of anxiety as a warning sign of danger, *creativity has its own fundamental mode of experience*: constructive curiosity, and the experience that accompanies the resolution of a

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 36.

<sup>19</sup> Lásd Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). In brief, Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" in *Cultural Theory. An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 81–93.

<sup>20</sup> Ferenc Mérei, Foreword to the Hungarian Edition, in this book *p.* originally published in Erika Landau, *A kreativitás pszichológiája [The Psychology of Creativity]*, (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1974), 5–6 (Original emphasis.)

situation: *self-actualization*.<sup>21</sup> Psychoanalysis was at the forefront of analyzing the action-precipitating tensions of anxiety, frustration, aggression and sexuality, but was found wanting in its explanation of tension-reduction mechanisms that create social value. The psychology of the 1970s was moving towards analyzing such defense mechanisms as sublimation and elaboration behind the process of creativity.<sup>22</sup>

In the period of the Cold War as a result of the neoconservative-neoliberal turn, Western academic circles (primarily the USA) again started to prefer the utilitarian approach and upheld the importance of individual performance and reproduction of elites. Mérei, at the same time, did stick with the left-wing view that creativity and the ability to make creative application of knowledge only has value if the privilege of the social elite is turned – by means of public education – into a common asset; this is clearly the task of education. Of course the psychologist is not naïve, and knows that schools do not usually carry out this task. He saw the reason for this as lying in the school system being the repository of social continuity, while creativity is often unorthodox and non-conformist. The creative potential inherent in non-conformist manifestations can be difficult to distinguish from senseless rebellion, although the former definitely calls for confirmation on the part of the teacher, and to recognize it, argued Mérei, there is a need for creativity in teaching. Only creative teachers are capable of educating people to creative thinking and action on a mass scale.

## Summary

Overall, a society can only be said to need a concept of creativity that is broad in scope and released from the exclusive conception of the elite if that society wants to do more than just reproduce itself in exactly the same form, with the same privileges. It has to be open to change and permit and even encourage social mobility.<sup>23</sup> “When we assess the educational perspective of creativity, the crucial link in the chain for socially feasible development is the training of kindergarten and elementary school teachers. (...) It is the task of kindergarten and elementary school teachers to carry over the early sparks of creativity (...) into adolescence, so that they build into the self-actualization efforts of the youth.”<sup>24</sup> The psychology of creativity is not a hazy, neo-romantic theory of genius and is not based on faith in outstanding intelligence as a guarantee of the self-reproduction of the elite. Rather, it takes effect in the detailed everyday work of the

teacher; it is *production*. The Marxist concept of production means more than the repeated creation of material goods, intellectual products and institutions based on the collective action of members of society. It also means that these things are newly brought into existence by each era, and this manifests itself in the interaction of the subsystems of society. That means that production, in addition to a general meaning, has era-specific characteristics. Ideas that emerge around creativity, changing from age to age, mark out the place of education as production, set against the dominant form of production. Looking around the world today, we do not see the situation that Mérei described and wished for. All over the world, education is regarded not as a subsystem to produce creativity, more livable conditions of existence or self-actualization, but as a passive branch struggling for redistribution. Perhaps the time will come when Mérei’s ideas, which seem almost dreamlike today, will *again* become the building blocks of educational realism.

*The writing of this essay has been supported by the author’s János Bolyai Research Grant.*

21 Ibid, 8.

22 On the concept of elaboration, see Ferenc Mérei and Ágnes V. Binét, *Gyerme-klélektan* [Child Psychology], Budapest: Gondolat, 1975, 3rd edition, especially 265–273 and Zsuzsa Gerő, “Gondolatok a Mérei Ferenc által körvonalazott elaboráció fogalomhoz” [Thoughts on the concept of elaboration outlined by Ferenc Mérei], *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, vol. 48–49, no. 1–2. (1992): 18–30.

23 See *Átmenetek iskoláskorig* [Transitions up to School Age], eds. Ilona Szabadi, György Hegedűs and Alice Hermann, Budapest, Magyar Pedagógiai Társaság, 1970.

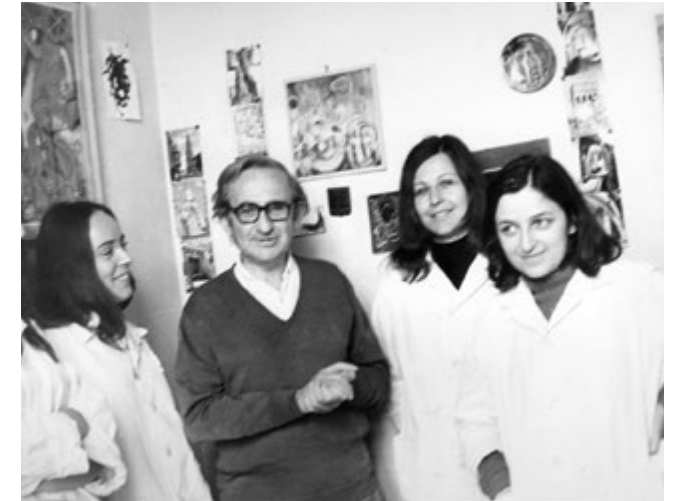
24 Mérei, “Foreword”, 12.



Ferenc Mérei receiving the Kossuth Prize in 1946, in the background Mátyás Rákosi, General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party.



Prison photo of Ferenc Mérei at his arrest in 1958



Ferenc Mérei in his study with his colleagues Ágnes Györi, Emőke Bagdy, and Judit Békés in the Psychological Laboratory of the National Psychiatric Institute ("Lipót"), 1970.

Talk by Ferenc Mérei and Miklós Erdély in the program of the "Creativity Visuality Exhibition," Józsefváros Exhibition Hall, 1976