

CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

by

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If one wants to discuss Hungarian culture one must mention a peculiar linguistic situation. The Hungarian language belongs to the family of the Finno-Ugrian languages, to be more precise, to its Ugrian branch, its closest relations being Mansi or Vogul and Chanti or Ostyak, the languages of small nations living east of the Ural range, in the riparian areas of the Ob and its tributaries, and also in what is now the Sverdlovsk region. This is a distant linguistic kinship, since the Hungarians left the Ural region more than two thousand years ago settling—after a long migration across what is European Russia today—in their present homeland around the year 900 A.D. The natives were mostly Slavs, and one would have expected that the Hungarians would become assimilated as the Bulgarians, a people of Turkic origin, were. The Hungarians, however, not only resisted assimilation but succeeded in establishing a state which in the second half of the Middle Ages played a crucial role in Central and Eastern Europe. I do not wish to list here the vicissitudes of Hungarian history, but only want to explain that owing to its language and the related culture the Hungarians stand for something special in Europe. They were able to maintain some of their peculiarities over the centuries, although adjusting to a culture which at the beginning was foreign to it, that of Western European feudalism and of the Latin Church.

Attachment to the civilization of Western Europe became an essential factor in Hungarian culture albeit the country's economic and social development was unable to keep up with that of the more advanced regions of the continent. In Hungary urban development started late, and the progress of native capitalism was impeded by foreign occupation and by the late feudalism of the Hungarian nobility. This delay powerfully marked Hungarian culture, as did the fight for independence of a country, which was dominated from the sixteenth century through 400 years by the Habsburgs,

and for more than 150 years, at least partly, by the Ottoman Turks as well. Everything that has been progressive in Hungary since the sixteenth century, imposed a militant role on Hungarian culture. Literature often exercised political functions since for reasons which were at the same time internal and external—the ruling classes, with the exception of certain periods, refused to undertake the mission to which they were called. Such conventions marked Hungarian culture and its development until quite recently.

In these conditions, the Marxist concept of culture was not foreign to Hungary. The radical transformation of society demanded a cultural revolution, not in the sense of a *tabula rasa* of the past, but rather in the sense of the democratization of culture and the diffusion of cultural values among the masses, as well as support by the state for research and creative work, all leading up to the development of a culture which accords with the requirements of the new society.

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In my opinion one of the great problems of our time is a culture fit for large numbers; that is the functioning, the substance, and the diffusion of such a culture. After 1945 we devoted ourselves primarily to the development of education, ensuring the needed financial resources to the sons and daughters of peasants and workers and not only in primary and compulsory education which was extended to eight years of study, but also in secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

It can be said that, thanks to our efforts, the level of schooling has risen to a point where today over 90 per cent of those under thirty-five have completed the eight forms of primary school, 40 per cent have completed four years of secondary studies, and 50 per cent three years of secondary studies. Nine per cent of this category have studied at a tertiary institution.

What is even more significant is that education was able to contribute to social mobility, and even today more than 40 per cent of students in tertiary education are the children of manual workers.

In this way, education was able to diffuse a general culture, but also special skills to the masses. Far be it for me to keep silent concerning the problems which arise in the assimilation of culture, and it is precisely this which induces us to advocate reforms in this domain.

Education cannot be the sole source of the culture of the masses, and even in a socialist country such as Hungary one has to face what I would call the development of a culture of the home. Many adults continue their studies,

others use libraries, museums, or houses of culture, others again art schools. At present practically every Hungarian family owns television and radio sets, which have become the principal means of the culture of the masses. We are justified in claiming that the diffusion of culture outside schools, in the domain of useful skills as well as of great cultural values is well organized. It is the cultural products that are part of entertainment which set problems to us. Is it necessary to take over the models of consumer culture, or should one look for some special formula in this domain? I may add that in Hungary all the ways of consumer culture are represented, and we consider that prohibitions are not a sound method, except where militarism, racism, aggressivity, or hard pornography are concerned. At a certain time it was imagined that folk art might be able to resist native or foreign consumer culture, and after the Second World War we witnessed a rebirth of the folk song. Recently there was a certain revival of folk dancing as adapted to the demands of young people. In spite of these attempts we cannot claim to have found the contents and forms which are likely to enforce themselves. This is why we are interested in discussions concerning national cultural identity and the cultural industry.

Another question on which I should like to touch concerns what one might call cultural pluralism. Let me emphasize that it is cultural pluralism and not political pluralism that I am talking about. This pluralism permits the coexistence of several ideological, scientific, or artistic currents in the framework of a socialist society led by a Communist Party. Today we can claim that in Hungary this pluralism exists, since—to speak now only of literature—Catholic or Protestant authors are published as well as writers that called themselves populist for a long time and who, at this moment, are interested mainly in the problems of national identity, or one associated with the *urbánus* movement of old who do not wish to deal directly with political problems, not to mention Marxists who today stand for a kind of commitment which is much less direct than it was thirty years ago. This means that we reject a dogmatic cultural policy, which wanted to impose ideological uniformity, without—incidentally—achieving it even in its hey-day. This does not mean that we accept everything without debate: ideological pluralism demands that confrontation of ideas without which culture cannot be imagined. It is equally true that in those debates we try to efficiently represent Marxist ideas while conceding that the partisans of other ideologies may also be right. As far as art goes there is realism of various sorts but there is also the avant-garde in its old established and new forms. This means that writers and artists have all the necessary means to address themselves to a differentiated audience.

It is obvious that it is not easy to implement a cultural policy in such conditions. This cultural plurality demands an atmosphere of debates where criticism plays a privileged role in order to present ideas and values and point out the characteristics of the different currents while underlining their differences and guiding the public. In the country of György Lukács we are obviously sensitive to the problems of aesthetics, but a revival appears necessary in this domain after recent progress made by literature and the arts. Creative activities are subsidized considerably and this permits the audience to buy books and records cheaply, to pay only a modest part of the real cost of theatre, cinema, and concert tickets. This is an instrument of the democratization of culture, and I think that this is one of the characteristics of socialist cultural policy. It is, of course, difficult to exercise the functions of patronage on account of the rivalry of the schools and the diversity of public opinion. In this respect we have tried to proceed towards decentralization, according a much greater autonomy to the municipal and county councils, as well as to other bodies, such as the trades unions.

Such a cultural policy does not make life idyllic, it adds its part to conflicts, but we think that it can contribute, even through its contradictions, to the birth of new values.

Today it is especially the Hungarian cinema which proves to the public abroad that Hungary tackles the real problems of society and of man, and that it makes efforts to find answers. What can the function of art be, if it is not to contribute to the consciousness of the nation and of mankind?

My last point touches on the question of international cultural cooperation. In this respect we can claim that Hungary is an open country and that the orientation of her culture is universal. Let me show this by mentioning some figures. We have cultural agreements with approximately 80 countries, we are present in more than 600 international organizations in the sciences, education, and culture. Our scholars and scientists in any one year go abroad in the interests of their studies, to a variety of countries, on more than 20,000 occasions. In 1982, 15 per cent of the titles published and 20 per cent of the copies printed were by foreign authors. Every second publication of literary value was the work of a foreign writer. In a single year Hungarian theatres presented 260 foreign plays. Hungarian cinemas screened nearly 200 films, of which 180 were made abroad. In our scientific and cultural relations we seek to intensify cooperation with the socialist countries, our principal collaborators. At the same time we take good care to maintain relations with non-socialist countries as well.

We make every effort to give scope to scientific, artistic, and ideological pluralism, offering opportunities for publication and expression.

We are convinced that versatility enriches our intellectual life and leads in the last resort to the development of a socialist culture with trends which renew themselves as an ongoing situation. We are still anxious concerning the way in which the confrontation of currents comes about.

In order to illustrate this versatility, I shall not quote Hungarian but foreign examples, in order to illustrate more clearly what is involved. In philosophy, based on Hungarian translations, the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Theilhard de Chardin are on the library and bookshop shelves, as well as classical and modern Marxist philosophers, pride of place being given to the works of György Lukács; Keynes, Samuelson, Schumpeter, or Tinbergen are there amongst the economists as well as Maurice Dobb, or contemporary authors; sociologists published in Hungarian translation extend all the way from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss, including scholars of many schools. American and English historians are available as well as works by members of the French Annales school.

French literature has been translated all the way from the *Chanson de Roland* to the *nouveau roman*. Contemporary German writers available in Hungarian translation include Böll, Grass, Lenz, and Enzensberger, published in editions of 20,000 to 30,000 copies. The same is true for English and American writing, from Mallory to Malcolm Bradbury, from Washington Irving to William Styron, again in substantial editions.

Goethe spoke already at the beginning of the nineteenth century of the birth of *Weltliteratur*, of universal literature. I think that today one should speak of a universal culture. Cultural autarky is impossible at the end of the twentieth century which has seen such extraordinary technological progress, and it is also necessary to think of real cooperation which excludes any kind of idea of domination. In effect we do not think that in cultural matters there are only givers on one side and recipients on the other. Every giver must be a recipient at the same time and vice versa.

The smaller ethnic groups have also produced values which are capable of entering the cultural mainstream. Historic discrimination should end, as should another kind of discrimination, of a new sort, which is the consequence of the activities of the international cultural industry. The universalization of culture thus implies a knowledge of all cultures, but evidently first of all a knowledge of all the great values of these cultures. Such a concept demands a new spirit in realization, a universal approach from the aspect of the frontiers of culture, and an axiomatic approach as far as the products for diffusion are concerned. I believe that such a universal approach does not contradict, but on the contrary favours a national cultural identity which is to find itself in the presence of other cultures.