

Lívía Páldi
**Back to the
Future: Report
from Hungary**

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e-flux journal #23 — march 2011 Lívía Páldi
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At present, the descriptive term “Left-liberal” has been dislocated from its complex meaning rooted in a profound European historical tradition and imbued with highly negative connotations. In Hungary, the term now functions as a synonym for those believed to have benefitted under the former Socialist-Liberal coalition of the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) and SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats / Hungarian Liberal Party) parties.

On January 8, an editorial in *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) – a newspaper intimately connected to the present Fidesz Party government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – accused a number of prominent philosophers of having taken, “in a morally and legally questionable way,” 1.85 million Euros in grant money under the Socialist-Liberal coalition government in 2004–2005. The allegation focused on a group of academics that included philosopher Ágnes Heller (professor emerita at the New School for Social Research), Mihály Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and others, in order to question the legitimacy of properly distributed research funding. The philosophers were also accused of being “by self-definition and according to public consensus ‘liberals,’ who have not settled for staying in the ivory tower and who wish to share their views and thoughts with a wider public beyond the academic arena.”¹

The editorial highlighted six projects (all in the fields of aesthetics and philosophy) out of a total of 35 funded projects, describing them as “not even on familiar terms” with the initial purpose of the grants, which were allocated from the National Office for Research and Technology (now the National Innovation Office) in order to enhance research in social sciences. The accused intellectuals, many of whom served as unpaid project leaders, have mostly been referred to as “the Hellers” (after Ágnes Heller) or “the liberal clique.” Though they clearly share liberal principles, their individual scientific and political approaches differ in many ways.

Two days after the editorial appeared, the government’s Accountability and Anti-Corruption Commissioner launched an extensive investigation into the “suspicious” projects, and the case was soon handed over to the police, who investigated probable malpractice and the fraudulent misuse of funds. Under the pretext of alleged financial crime, the scandal-mongering media campaign soon expanded to become a full-fledged political battle.

The right-wing press not only insulted the integrity of the intellectuals in question, but also made openly propagandistic accusations, denying readers of an accurate report on the situation by providing an arbitrary selection of documentation and by eliminating almost all

voices critical of the investigation. The press also incorporated practical issues – such as the lack of funding for both scientific research and the current application system, the lack of proper evaluation of scientific work, or the much-needed structural reforms within academic institutions – into their criticism in a way that encouraged division among academic professionals. With a few notable exceptions, most academics either remained silent or quietly expressed support for their colleagues.

Those who criticized the campaign against the philosophers, both in Hungary and abroad, pointed at the personal nature of the attacks and the political motivations behind the libels.² Many drew attention to the resurgence of nationalism and classical conservatism, as well as the increasing threats to the principles of liberal democracy, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press.³

A prime example indicating the absurdity of the accusations made by the right-wing press against the philosophers is a photograph, taken from index.hu and reproduced by *Magyar Nemzet*, showing Ágnes Heller and Jürgen Habermas engaged in conversation during a 2009 conference, which was reprinted with the title “Heller and Habermas attacking the [Hungarian]

government together.”⁴

The media campaign against the philosophers was not a positive contribution to the start of Hungary’s EU presidency. The campaign, as well as its anti-Semitic undertones, generated an international outcry, compounding earlier criticisms of – amongst other subjects – the media law and the planned overhaul of the Hungarian constitution. The right-wing media adopted a combative stance towards all international criticism and described it as either an insult to the nation or merely a “fuss.” As a result, some of the philosophers targeted in the campaign were even accused of displaying attitudes that were “unpatriotic” and “cosmopolitan” – a frequently-used coded term to denote Jewishness.

The “philosophers’ case” was preceded by the similarly controversial attempt to restructure the Institute of Philosophy at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an effort that had distinct political overtones. The top-down appointment of the new director, and directives to “rejuvenate” the staff in order to “enhance” scientific work allowed the staff to be “pre-qualified” according to undisclosed criteria. Out of a total of 23 staff members, the process found 13 to be inadequate, some of whom had been

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Agnes Heller and Jurgen Habermas. Photograph taken from the website index.hu. Photo: Francis Kalmandy

working at the Institute since 1978. The escalation of the restructuring effort led to a number of court cases and endangered the future existence and intellectual autonomy of the Institute, which includes the Georg Lukács Archives.⁵

Since last year, public foundations established under the previous government have been placed under scrutiny and are to be consolidated under the auspices of “financial efficiency.” This is highly problematic as the plan consists of merging institutions whose research topics and methodological and historical approaches differ significantly. Among the institutions under threat is the Institute of the History of the 1956 Revolution, whose aim to produce a genuine account of the events in Hungary in and around 1956 plays a crucial role in Hungary’s historical memory.⁶ Furthermore, the professional committees that award the prestigious Kossuth and Széchenyi prizes have been dissolved, with political functionaries replacing prominent former jurors.

Clearly, what is at stake here is the practice of non-ideological, pluralistic thinking, and the autonomy and democratic existence of academic and artistic work. Nothing illustrates this better than the next wave of “re-examinations” that followed those of the “philosophers’ case.” Under the pretext of uncovering the “frittering away” of taxpayers’ money, the government’s Accountability and Anti-Corruption Commissioner began investigating what are referred to as “1% Projects” – an allowance within design and construction budgets for public art projects realized as public-private partnerships.⁷

Also part of the wave of re-examinations was the suspension of the Contemporary Art and Applied Art Grant of the Hungarian University program. Modeled on French and German practices, the program has “since its founding, been almost the only source of funding available to artists in order to realize public art projects, and which has reconfigured the relationship between art and architecture,” according to József Mélyi, art critic and the president of AICA-Hungary. Mélyi also emphasized that the (aesthetic) rhetoric applied to halt the grant application process also “unconsciously conjured up the anti-abstraction campaigns of the 1950s in Eastern Europe, and the *Entartete Kunst* exhibitions of the 1930s, where reference was almost always made to the working people and their collective tax contributions.”⁸

One can find the reasoning behind the current investigations in earlier Fidesz programs, such as their 2007 handbook, *Strong Hungary*, and in particular, Orbán’s September 2009 program speech held in Kötöcs. Among the

initiatives is the drive to create a new cultural equilibrium by means of a *tabula rasa*, a “central power sphere” that would dissolve the dual power structure and the debate over values in favor of creating a (new) “fine, noble, and refined elite” within a new right-wing culture.⁹

The contemporary marginalization of pluralistic and critical thinking and dissenting voices from the public sphere calls to mind not the realization of a vision of “twenty-first century Hungarian culture that occupies a significant place in world culture,” but rather, the cultural policy strategies of the decades preceding post-communist transition.¹⁰

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The article was based on reports published before February 19, 2011. Since then, two of the accused project leaders, Sándor Radnóti and János Weiss, have been acquitted. More recently, a new French organization called Chercheurs sans Frontières – Free Science has provided financial and legal assistance to researchers who may be physically or morally threatened, expressing solidarity with the incriminated Hungarian philosophers. See www.csf-free-science.org.

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Lívía Páldi, born in Budapest, has been chief curator at the Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest since 2007. She has organized numerous exhibitions, including “Other Voices, Other Rooms – Attempt(s) at Reconstruction. 50 Years of the Balázs Béla Studio,” Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest (2009); “Robert Capa,” Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (2009); “The Producers,” Ernst Museum–Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest (2008); “Mircea Cantor: Future Gifts,” Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest (2008); “Deimantas Narkevičius: History Continued,” Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest (2007); “IREVOLUTION?” (with Ulrike Kremeier), Collegium Hungaricum, Berlin (2006); and “Dreamlands Burn,” Nordic Art Show 2006 (with Edit Molnár), Múcsarnok /Kunsthalle Budapest (2006). She is currently working on the English edition of a Balázs Béla Studio reader. Páldi has edited several exhibition catalogues, and was a contributing editor of East Art Map. She participated in the Curatorial Training Programme at De Appel in Amsterdam and is currently a doctoral candidate in the Institute for Art Theory and Media Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She is currently a curatorial agent of DOCUMENTA (13).

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1
Beside *Magyar Nemzet*, other the government-tied newspapers and news channels (MTV, Hír TV, and Echo TV) were involved in the campaign. If not stated otherwise, all quotes are from the editorials of *Hungarian Nation* starting January 8, 2011. About the grant results see <http://www.nih.gov.hu/palyazatok-eredmenyek/archivum/archivum-080519>.

2
Both Heller and Radnóti publicly expressed strong condemnation of the politics and decision-making practices of Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz Party.

3
Beside an appeal signed by the President of the German Society for Philosophy, Julian Nida-Rümelin, and honorary member Jürgen Habermas, there have been press releases (Hannah Arendt-Zentrum der Universität Oldenburg) and protest letters (e.g.: The New School for Social Research in New York) in defense of the accused philosophers; see <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/auf-ruf-von-habermas-und-nida-ruemelin-schuetzt-die-philosophen-1.1050449>, <http://www.politikaetc.info/2011/01/ataque-filosofos-hungaros.html>, <http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/02/apa-open-letter-on-the-situation-of-philosophers-in-hungary.html?cid=6a00d8341ef41d53ef0147e2b3b18e970b>, and http://www.boell.de/downloads/TXT_2011-01-27_Pressemitteilung_Ungarn.pdf. Laszlo Tengelyi, Professor of philosophy at Wuppertal University, reflected on both affairs. His open letter was forwarded to some German papers (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) and scientific societies; see <http://pusztaranger.wordpress.com/2011/01/22/1370/>.

4
Magyar Nemzet, January 26, 2011. The photograph was taken at the University of Pécs by Ferenc Kálmándy in 2009.

5
György Vári, see <http://www.manco.hu/index.php?gcPage=/public/hirek/hir.php&id=22600>.

6
See <http://www.rev.hu/porta/pagere/porta/rev/>.

7
Magyar Nemzet, Saturday, February 5, 2011.

8
József Mélyi, see <http://www.es.hu/2011-02-09-a-kozter-elszamoltatasa>.

9
Viktor Orbán, “To Preserve the Hungarian Quality of Being,” speech given at the sixth “Civic

Picnic” at Kötcsé (Hungary) in September, 2009. For a short, edited version, see http://www.nagyitas.hu/commo n/main.php?cikk_id=568&pgid=cikk.

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See http://static.fidesz.hu/download/_17/Szakpolitikai_fuzet_ek_2_BELIV__2009_02_17.pdf.