Contextual Plurality: A Shoddy Dictatorship

Introduction to the Hungarian Women's Narratives

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Uncertainties

In the last two years' issues of Replika, in a column called "Replika Monologue" launched in March 1997, narratives could be read based on interviews made in the latter half of the '90s. Altogether eight monologues have been published, four by men and four by women. They are almost unanimously liked by Hungarian readers who are, needless to say, nearly all intellectuals, given the character of the periodical. This selection contains the four women's monologues in close translation.[1]

Are these narratives really so good? I hope to answer the question in the affirmative. When I started to mould interviews into monologues two years ago, and planned to put them into later thematic volumes, I felt like the sculptor who had some idea of what he wanted but could not foresee the final shape of the work. Even today, after editing eight monologues, I can only guess how many monologues it will take to say that they suffice for coherent volumes. Being, however, the sculptor of thoughts rather than of material by profession, I find it an exciting challenge to answer the question put at the head of this paragraph, taking my sociological practice and intuition also as the subject of investigation.

At first glance, it is hard to bring the narratives to a common denominator, unless we are satisfied with the general statement that each exposes the life of a Hungarian woman. The first is the monologue of a middle-rank positioned person in a small city who was born during the war, and was laid off in the '90s, a short time before her retirement was due. The second is narrated by someone born in 1956 as daughter of a revolutionary executed in 1958. The third is the life-story of a drug addict born in the '60s. The fourth is the monologue of a health-sociologist shortly before her death of ovary cancer in 1996, at the age of 40. The first three cover the entire life-courses, the fourth only the years of illness, leaving the preceding 38 years under a veil. Thus, in three cases the reader may try to interpret causal relations within the life-courses, whereas in the fourth this possibility is precluded.

Apart from these differences, it may also induce uncertainty that the monologues do not always expose unambiguously what actually happened in certain situations. The speakers do not always remember accurately, and at times they contradict themselves; they may also speak vaguely or try to blur some issues. Since inaccurate and incoherent presentation of certain topics often characterise someone's speech, these strategies of narration cannot be

1 They were published in the issues of June 1997 *(Cancer and Cure),* December 1997 *(Drug Monologue),* September 1998 *(The Daughter of the Revolution),* and December 1998 *(In the Palm of God).*

omitted from a monologue. In other words: the published narratives are subjective constructions of reality. The question may rightly be raised: what arguments can nevertheless be adduced for publishing them?

Prior to giving an answer, it is advisable to differentiate between two speech situations. In the first case, the texts are published separately in consecutive Replika issues to the Hungarian readers, while in the second they are made available next to each other for an international readership. A native reader interprets the publications within the current social context of the texts. The editors know that, since while editing the quarterly, they take the expectations of their own social surroundings into account. It is obviously not accidental that a social science periodical addresses itself at a given place and time to, say, cancer, unemployment, religious faith, the victim of a permanently reinterpreted revolution or the inner world of a drug user. These themes are present in public discourses, thus the publications reflecting upon them are necessarily positioned in the social space. When these monologues are published separately, every three months, taking up a mere 10 pages of a 200-page long issue, their chance to provide context for each other is small. Even more so when the time between the publications may stretch to 6 or 9 months since the interim issues carry the mentioned monologues of men.[2]

The readers of this selection are in a different position. Since they find the monologues side by side and, presumably, they do not know the hidden connotations of public debates in Hungary, they cannot help contextualizing the texts in a different way. While reading, they will certainly ask what connects them. They may also try to find relevant readings for themselves on the basis of their own taste, professional disposition, paradigmatic affiliations, or regional embeddedness. The editor of this thematic section does hope that the readers will find such readings, since the texts provide a rich source for different interpretations. As I am trying to explicate below, these readings may promote a more subtle understanding of both the Hungarian society and some methodological specificities of the social sciences in this part of the world.

Readings

If I try to give an axiomatically concise answer to the question why the Hungarian readers (and hopefully the non-Hungarians) like the narratives, I am led to conclude that their success is due to their *contextual plurality*. To put it simply: these texts are such that nearly everyone may find in them something interesting, thought-provoking, without the messages being formulated in a didactic scientific way. They are texts with enigmatic, associative free valencies open in various directions, yet they always obey certain logics. The sharp existential situations in these narratives are relevant not only for scholarly but also for a naively unreflected mind.

An overview of the possible readings of the monologues from the simpler towards the more complex might begin with the *acontextual readings*. These typically do not place the lives into a complex web of connotations but read them in their peculiar uniqueness. For

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2 The topics of those are: the account of a Hungarian emigrant of 1956 about the sexual revolution of the West and its consequences, based on his own experiences; the history of subtle business strategies of a young man between legality and illegality in Hungary before and after 1989; the abhorrent details in the life-path, in the forties and the fifties, of the world famous science philosopher Imre Lakatos prior to his emigration from Hungary; and details of the career of an emigrated Hungarian psychiatrist in Switzerland and his exile from there.

such interpretations, the monologues are simply fascinating and dramatic. They offer a glimpse at life situations which satisfy the readers' curiosity and enable them – causing at times cathartic feelings – to identify (or, sometimes, counteridentify) emotionally with certain elements in the speaker's fate. To grasp the narratives, one needs no preliminary reflected knowledge in this case: the interpretation is based on actual or potential similarities (or differences) in the reader's life-story.

A possible form of acontextual reading is the *aleatoric reading*, by which I mean that someone reads a text like a found object, rambling in it aimlessly, tasting the words as they are. In some way, this reading resembles hyptertextual browsing, with the not insignificant difference that – for the lack of links – there is no chance of direct switching from one text to another. For the aleatoric reading, any section of a text is meaningful, understandable, interpretable in its segmented form, without the need for a more complex contextualization. The appeal of these texts come from the fact that texts like these could be (as have been) sensationalised by the mass media, throwing into deep relief the horrors of the stories coming out of ordinary everydayness and embroidered to exotic dimensions. That is to say, another form of acontextual interpretation is the *journalistic reading*.

Of course, those who know certain implications of the topics will glean far more from the monologues, as they can further refine their existing reflected knowledge. The arguments below will hopefully contribute to a rich contextualization of the texts, although I refrain from discussing the comparative readings of various sociological sub-disciplines. Hence, for instance, I cannot embark on a discussion of what an agrarian, labour or health sociologist might make out of these narratives, since this would easily derail this introduction. I am going, however, to indicate possibilities of reading from the points of view of different disciplines. Profiting from the freedom ensured by the objectivity of partial subjectivity, I restrict myself to interpretations that occurred to me while editing the texts.

As I have introduced the term of "acontextual readings" it is legitimate to differentiate them from *contextual readings*. The latter are characterised by a frame of interpretations determined by expectations of reflected horizons of knowledge. Of these, first to be mentioned is perhaps the *social historical reading*, for obviously the life-stories interpreted as complementing each other help the readers to have some knowledge about the history of a small East-Central European country. The sequence of the narratives supports this reading. Of course, this mosaic-picture is but a section that can primarily be interpreted by those who are familiar with the topic. But we have no right to underrate a colleague who begins reading these monologues for their novelty and does not know as yet how they will put it into the context of their special field.

If someone has no idea of Hungarian social history, by reading the monologues s/he can gain some impression of how people experienced the totalitarianism during the post-war Stalinist dictatorship ("the fifties" – as the people and historians call this period –), how they tried to create the small islands of happiness despite their miseries (see *In the Palm of God*). Similarly, the outsider may be moved by the passages of the *Drug Monologue* and the *Daughter of the Revolution* which vividly evoke the everyday life, humiliations, sexual misery and helplessness of young people under state care during the "goulash-communism" of the Kadar era. And the monologue of a health-sociologist facing both death and the dysfunctions of the Hungarian health system in the '90s (*Cancer and Cure*), and the story of a woman laid off after the collapse of communism (*In the Palm of God*) may have a thought-provoking appeal to anyone without any special preliminary studies.

Specialists know that the fall of communism and the transition to market economy resulted in an unemployment rate of over 10% in Hungary. But it is perhaps less well known how the transformations in politics, economy, technologies, and modernisation are

experienced by the individuals. What may be seen as one of the virtues of the monologue entitled *In the Palm of God* is avoiding simplistic stereotypes and successfully suggesting, among other things, that although dismissal caused grave psychic and somatic symptoms, finally the justice of the jobless could triumph in a legal procedure. These stories afford a glimpse of an East-Central European country in transition.

And who would imagine – including Hungarian intellectuals with a first-hand experience of the '56 revolution – what hells of official stigmatisation a citizen was put through if she happened to be born in November 1956, at a historical moment when the Soviet troops squashed the revolution, and if her father was executed in 1958 for his role in the revolution (*The Daughter of the Revolution*)? Who would think that stigmatisation was also an everyday practice in educational institutions, too? It will hopefully be informative even for the specialists of this region how traumatic life was for a person brought up under state care – not only because the controlling power restricted and regulated her living space, attainable knowledge, and contacts within the closed institution, but also because – by institutionalising sexual abuse – subordinated the physical existence and the emerging sexual libido of the cared-for to a set of relations in a perverse system (*Drug Monologue*). To put it differently: the "soft dictatorship" enabled punitive perversion to invade the lives of people victimised by stigmatisation.

With the above examples I wished to suggest that the mosaics of the historical readings assemble into various key moments of Hungarian social history in the second half of the 20th century. The historical reading, however, has several variations, subcases – as could possibly be made out from the above references – which may complement one another from various angles. It is obvious to interpret these narratives as contributions to understanding macrohistorical events, seeking answers to questions such as "what led to the revolution of '56?" or "why did communism collapse at the end of the '80s?" But questions raised upon a reversed cognitive logic – when the reader wishes to deduce the explanation of the micro-phenomenon from the macrohistorical events and inquires, say, how "goulash-communism" permeated the everyday lives of the actors of history – are also conceivable.

The narratives, however, are also open to another kind of historical reading. They can be informative when seen as providing examples for a social history of *traumas*. This interpretation has cross references to both the *micro and the macro aspects*. Two of the texts, the *Daughter of the Revolution* and *In the Palm of God* cry for this kind of interpretation, but a more profound reading of the other two monologues is also possible in this way, provided that one accepts that illness (and, first of all, *cancer*) may also be conceived of as the somatically incorporated indirect consequence of social traumas. There is also the possibility that others read these texts as stories of typical and locally characteristic *social problems* implied by the individual lives, trying to contextualise in this way the questions of drug abuse, illness, or more broadly speaking, somatic and mental hygiene, suicide, unemployment or new religiosity. Of course, everyone is free to read the monologues – they being open in this direction as well – as *oral histories*, liberating themselves – even deliberately – from considering any macrohistorical factor whatsoever.

Another major group of contextual readings includes what may be called *structural readings*. Instead of highlighting the historical changes, they try to shed light on identical social elements in permanence. Of course I know a mind in search for structural homologies disdains limitations and may easily draw parallels between, say, a symphony and the structure of a Bororo settlement. Nothing could be more alien to me than trying to put a curb on the Levi-Straussian soaring of unbridled structuralist imagination (and I do hope that these narratives will stimulate such associations), but – given the limitations of my competence and the printed space – I do not intend to deal with these possibilities of

interpretation in detail, going only as far as referring to some aspects of the structural readings that have relevance to the *Hungarian social structure*.

The monologues make several elements of intergroup relations palpable. Let us start reviewing them with a still influential factor whose roots go back several centuries, yet is often overlooked by social scientists: the identification of life-style groups by their *religious dispositions*. Its importance is aptly illustrated by *In the Palm of God*, whose speaker internalised the Protestant ethic tied both to tradition and the process of modernisation during childhood socialisation but did not exercise her religion for decades. This ethos is, however, so powerful that bursting cathartically to the surface from the depths of the personal and social subconscious in the early '90s, it could become the guideline of her way of life and normative behaviour in an almost sectarian extreme form even after such a long period of latency. And, still remaining with this monologue, this text suggests most tangibly another structural feature determining Hungarian society from the end of the last century to our day: the *Budapest vs. countryside* antithesis. (Let me mention but a single fact: Hungary is the only country in Europe with more than 20% of its ten million inhabitants living in the capital.)

Another basic structural antinomy can be illustrated by examples in all four texts. It characterised both the "hard" (the fifties) and the "soft" (from the sixties) periods of communism, and although it is comparatively difficult to define it, it nearly always occupied a central position in diverse subjective constructions of reality. This basic *opposition* is *between "we" and "they"* (or "these"), that is, between the suppressed people of the street excluded from power and the members of the undefinable "communist nomenclature." There is hardly a page in the monologues where this dimension is absent, so it is senseless to refer to the loci specifically. Nevertheless, I cannot help making but a single reference to an example that was most upsetting to me. In the *Daughter of the Revolution* the speaker makes it explicit at several points that – similarly to her father executed after the revolution – she has always been "on the other side," she has been "the foe of communism." By itself, this may not be too surprising, since because of his father, she had had to spend half of her life under police (or other institutional) surveillance, for the power machine of the Kádár regime seemed not to ignore completely the possibility of "counter-revolutionariness" being reproduced by blood. Yet, in spite of all that, in the '80s the speaker thought that a policeman was the most appropriate to ask confidentially what had actually happened in '56. I don't think one could make up a finer story to illustrate the helplessness and exposure of citizens in the "happiest barracks."

An attentive reading of the monologues enables one to reconstruct the institutional conditions of the "we vs. they" constructions of reality, too. A case in point might be the above-mentioned relationship in which legitimate power and knowledge are represented directly by the police. The *Drug Monologue* and the *Daughter of the Revolution* abound in emblematic references in this regard. It is evident to interpret the boss vs. subordinate, boarding school master vs. inmate, teacher vs. student relationships along this dimension, too. But let me also refer to a less obvious interpretation of the "we vs. they" dichotomy implied by *Cancer and Cure*. According to it, in the doctor-patient relationship the doctor is structurally homologous to the policeman, the communist party secretary, or the boarding school master, since he can also manipulate knowledge, distort or veil information, and his structurally conditioned power can be defined by the possession of this knowledge. Needless to say, there is a far from negligible difference: the physician has power directly over life and death, hence his might is greater than that of even the policeman, for the latter (at least in the "softer" phase of the dictatorship) was only entitled to restrict life and freedom but not to annihilate it.

The texts have yet another structural dimension which is perhaps more important than all the rest because all monologues can be interpreted in these terms. This is the relationship of man and woman, for all the crucial relationships mentioned so far can be seen as manifestations of *female subordination*. Such is the relationship of father and daughter in a traditional Protestant community, of (male) host and (female) tenant, teacher and teenage-school girl, who is also a sex object for the teacher, as well as the (male) gynaecologist and the patient at his mercy (I leave the rest for the reader).

I have claimed that the opposition of "we vs. they" can be encountered on nearly every page. So can the relations revealing female subordination. Yet there is an essential difference. While the former aspect is manifestly present in the narrators' subjective constructions of reality, the latter is only *explicitly* outlined in a critical context in one monologue (*Cancer and Cure*), again in a very dramatic way. When, however, one reads the texts with this aspect in mind, the many indications of female subordination appear far more marked and in a wider variety of connotations than the "we vs. they" opposition. It can thus be said that all narratives are about a world in which the institutions of male domination penetrate into nearly all relations of society. This prevalent element manifests itself so routinely and self-evidently that it remains nearly perfectly unnoticed by the suppressed, as revealed by their subjective constructions of reality. In other words: the suppressed women themselves accept as valid the definition of reality imposed on them by those in the positions of power. And whenever they rebel, they explain this move not by their discrimination as women but by other psychic or social factors. Nor do they realise any connection between the failure of their attempts at breaking out or clash, and their gender. Just to mention another upsetting example: the narrator of *In the Palm of God* fits so obediently into the given system of power relations that she internalises not only her illnesses but also her husband's betrayal as female disgrace.

Let me finally emphasise a structural specificity which has distinguished significance in the literature devoted to "Soviet-type" societies, not accidentally either. This factor is the focus on informal networks and various *"soft structural" relations*. The medical attendant who can be called at home, the drug addict turned out from the psychiatric unit "forever" but readmitted soon thanks to personal contacts, the orphan the director of the boarding school wished to marry off (only to mention but a few moments) all illustrate the penetrability and absurd uncertainty of the borders between the official and unofficial, the formal and informal, the private and public.

Hungarian social science has contributed much to the analysis of such relations and institutional dysfunctions. The concepts of "second economy" or "second society" now prevalent in sociology are due to these endeavours. Similarly, such world-famous paradigmatic categories as "shortage economy" or "soft budget constraint" characterising the planned economies of Eastern Europe have also grown out of a need to grasp such phenomena. As far as the Hungarian "goulash-communism" is concerned I prefer using the term *shoddy dictatorship* for I hope it can show that no matter how dictatorial the socio-political system may be, the lack of transparent and rational institutional network offers ample room for those "fishing in troubled waters," that is, for those hankering after their own good in everyday life. This conceptual pattern hopefully reveals both the absurdity and the historical profundity of basic social relations under communism. Furthermore, by introducing this attributive construction I also intend to make allusions to the Austrian–German terms *Schlamp* and *Schlamperei*, which denote the slushy joviality and irrational informality of Austria–Hungary before WWI (and may also help us understand today's Austrian society!). (These German terms are used in Hungarian, too, cf. *slampos* or, even, *slamperáj*.)

Thus, this (very sketchily outlined) dimension of the social structural reading cannot be ignored if we wish to know why communism collapsed and disappeared so easily and without serious traumas in Hungary (and, we may add, in Czechoslovakia and Poland). It collapsed, because when the first gust of wind destroyed the ramshackle edifice of communism in these shoddy dictatorships the second (third, fourth) societies and economies had already been installed for decades, thus reconstruction did not have to start from scratch.

Finally, let me briefly mention another three, probably important contextual readings. (Just as the list of these readings is incomplete, so is their sequence arbitrary.) It is likely that reading the monologues, readers will identify with the fates of the speakers, and thus – similarly to the editor – will find certain circumstances, situations, and relations the narrators have to face unjust and injurious to human dignity. In other words: the texts offer themselves to a *social critical reading*. (It should be noted that this reading is not far from the formerly mentioned aleatoric and journalistic readings, with the difference that here the subject is judged from the vantage point of an ideology and/or paradigm, and not from that of a private fate or life situation.) Disregarding here all possible sub- and crosstypes, I deem three possible critical readings especially desirable: one *system-critical reading* aiming to expose the injustices of communist (and totalitarian) societies, one in terms of *feminist criticism* which tries to deconstruct the institutions of male domination, and finally, a *Foucaultian criticism* which focuses its value-committed critical interpretation on the hidden components of the linguistic-discursive and bodily-somatic dimensions of suppression.

The next possibility is a *psychological reading*. One cannot overlook the fact that all four narratives are replete with elements that can be interpreted in terms of clinical psychology designed for the comprehension of, say, parent-child relationship, anxiety, compulsive behaviour, or personality structure. And it may also appear obvious that what the phenomenological sociology of knowledge calls "construction of reality" may easily be interpreted in a psychological reading as "desire construction" or "projection." Moreover, the narrative reconstruction of the past in an interview situation and the projection of the elicited passions to the interviewer may be conceived as psychotherapeutic tools. The more so because the interviews that served the basis of the monologues were originally made by a psychologist for explorative, interpretative, and clinical purposes (the only exception is *In the Palm of God*).

I can also imagine putting the monologues into the context of a *fictional-metaphorical reading*. That is to say, the texts may be stripped of the constraints of their spatial-temporal, and even sexual and social embeddedness and perceived as fiction or literary works with their features liable to generalisation and metaphor construction. (I am aware that this reading could at least be divided into three. But I hope to be pardoned for this rough-and-ready use in an introduction.) In doing so, the reasons for the speaker's second conversion in the monologue *In the Palm of God* are not (or not primarily) explained with social structural or social psychological factors (maybe it is not necessary to explain it causally), but – accepting her own interpretation – one may concede that her conversion was the manifestation of divine grace. Whereas, ignoring the genesis of the metaphoric interpretation, one can also read her monologue as that of a universally valid objectivation of a fighting, constantly restarting, believing person.

Editing

In proposing such a variety of readings made possible by what I call contextual plurality, I think I have offered my position on the set of desirable interpretative and methodological commitments as well. At the same time, very little has been said concerning the editing

work. One of these rare moments was when – right in the first sentence of this introduction – I wrote that the texts were converted from interviews into first person singular monologues. Now, I may add that three of the interviews were made by the psychologist *Mária Hoyer*, while the fourth was made by the sociologist *Mária Monika Váradi*.[3]

All interviews were at least twice or three times (sometimes five or six times) longer than the monologues. Therefore, much had to be omitted. Shortening, however, did not only mean condensation of redundant wording, stylisation of text, contraction of passages or shifting of accents, but also entailed the omission of complex thematic units, references, implications. One of the main aims of the editing work was to remove the interviews from their clinical psychological or sociological contexts and situate them into the column of a social science periodical, while – and that was perhaps the most difficult thing – the monologues had to satisfy the principle of contextual plurality, too. This work was further complicated by human right considerations as well as cautious-conspirative restrictions, for the editor had to make allowances for the interviewees, interviewers, persons affected by and mentioned in the interviews and the relatives all at the same time.

For example, although all female speakers consented to the narratives being published under their own names, in two cases (*Daughter of the Revolution, Cancer and Cure*) I followed the recommendations of the psychologist who made the original interviews that in protection of their human rights and interests, I blur their identities. For this reason, I changed the names, dates and venues, and I added minor details – for disinformation – that did not actually happen to them. Of course, I took care that these changes appear to be psychologically authentic and sociologically typical. There were also enough difficulties to be solved with the other two texts, in which the respondents appears under their own names. *In the Palm of God* was by far the longest interview (about five times longer than the monologue), so this required the greatest intervention by the editor (explicating the dilemmas of this job would deserve a study of its own). The problem with *Cancer and Cure* was that after the death of the respondent, her husband began co-editing, by not consenting to the publication of the monologue unless the passages showing some medical professors and hospitals in an unfavourable light were omitted (he, of course, had his own reasons).

Apparently, there was an intricate set of viewpoints and principles to be satisfied during editing, while the goal to produce interesting and authentic monologues that meet the requirements of contextual plurality was the main guideline throughout. In view of all that, perhaps the metaphor with the sculptor at the beginning of this introduction is not a sign of self-conceit. When preparing the narratives, I had to filter the raw material through myself and process it into its final shape. During this reconstruction, I had to strike optimal compromises posed by the complex requirement, while I had to preserve my moral integrity and professional competence.

It is not up to me to decide how successful this work has been. What I can safely state is that converting the interviews into monologues has been most challenging, and I would not gladly resign from this job before compiling a few thematic volumes from the monologues in the forthcoming years. I also have some idea why this editing work is so enjoyable. To put it succinctly: it allows me to instinctively give vent to my creative, intellectual's and sociologist's libidos, which, stimulating one another, may authentically evoke in me the illusion that I can see, and make seen, the world in its unusual complexity or, if you like, in its contextual plurality.

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3 The interviews for the male narratives published in Hungarian but not included in this volume were partly taken from sociological investigations and partly made by myself for the express purpose of publishing them.

With these libidinous drives and illusions a sociologist may be considered a paradigmatic specimen of social scientists brought up in communist East-Central Europe. What's more, I can even hold myself lucky that being born in the fifties, I am one of those who are old enough to have met their writer-sociographer grandfathers personally and got to know their value-committed professional and political devotion; but who are not old enough – unlike several members of the "great generation" of East-European intellectuals born in the forties – to have their lives derail into impasses by cynicism and the self-destructive drives of paranoid vigilance; and also, who are young enough to learn the new songs of the new times coming with the fresh winds in the nineties. With these illusions, let me pass the torch to the narrators in the hope that reading their monologues, you will experience the same cathartic moments as I have while editing them. If so, then I haven't worked in vain.