MAGICIANS OF MONEY

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When describing the operation of the economy during the socialist regime, researchers have frequently consulted the centrally controlled, censored press (mainly the daily newspapers) as adequate resources to statistics, questionnaires, archived documents (Bauer 1980, Soós 1986). It was a necessity to collect and analyze material in the press, since access was limited to the resources used in democratic states, (it was not allowed to consult the documents on activities of the decision makers). Those who criticized this approach at informal forums (such as coffee- and thee-clubs at workplaces, cafés or restaurants), argued that the press could only be used with extremely strong reservations due to the limitations, expectations and requirements (as various forms of censorship and self-censorship).

Yet, the socialist regime collapsed and the conditions of democracy rule; those who are interested in the methods of field research continue questioning: Where do the boundaries lie between the established and accepted sources of sociology, political science, and comprehensive economics (Wim Swann) and the output of investigative journalism? Are e.g. expensive case studies interchangeable with investigative newspaper reports, or interviews in depth with interview portraits? When addressing this problem, one should only examine good quality work. Péter Szakonyi’s book published by Kossuth Kiadó, is an example of high quality. It contains 10 interviews, so-called portraits, with Hungarian entrepreneurs (sole or determining owners-managers of medium-sized or multinational companies of Hungarian majority ownership). The famous journalist of Magyar Hírlap [Hungarian News, a daily paper] questioned his interviewees based on detailed background information (knowing the significant stages of the career-path of the interviewee and his/her enterprise). In most of the cases, he gained the sympathy of respondents or has relied on the earlier confidence gained.
HARD SOCIOLOGICAL FACTS

The majority of the entrepreneurs operate in the traditional sectors of the economy – industry, trade –. Péter Zwack operates in the beverages sector, Imre Somody in the drug sector, Gábor Bojár in the information technology sector, Éva Keresztury in the wine sector, János Kurucz and Ferenc Pogány re-started and run a successful enterprise in the tourism sector. Kieselbach Tamás runs a gallery; launched his enterprise in one of the traditional sectors previously solely dominated by state companies.

After the collapse of socialism, in the new era, new enterprises were launched introducing, producing and trading in new products and services. The following entrepreneurs started a business in the new sectors of the economy: György Jaksity runs a brokerage, István Tamás a funds management holding, and Károly Gerendai as producer organizes the events of the Pepsi Sziget [Pepsi Island]. To a certain extent, László Kapolyi’s ‘state-trade’ can be listed here as well. The former minister for industry launched his company to ‘barter’ the Russian state debt.

When selecting the interviewees, the author paid special attention to include representatives of the young, middle-aged and older generation. He even attempted to include a female representative, despite the fact that the societal group concerned is largely dominated by male actors. We have already learned from sociological research done on a larger sample (Kolosi-Sági 1997, Szalai 2001), that the entrepreneurs are higher educated than the average population. Therefore the interviewees were holders of high educational degrees. With one exception, they graduated at colleges, or universities and most of them are fluent at least in one foreign language, some of them have been awarded a doctoral degree. Despite the considerable variation in gender, age and occupation, the 10 entrepreneurs concerned do not provide a representative sample of the social group of the new medium- and large-size entrepreneurs. The exclusion of representatives of the large group of ‘hidden’ entrepreneurs who avoid publicity is a necessity; they refused to participate in this endeavor of the author. We can also notice the lack of the representatives of entrepreneurs who had managerial positions at large state companies, co-operatives and state farms during the transition period of the regime and became majority owners of privately held companies as a result of the privatization process.

At the same time, the interviewed entrepreneurs did not avoid being employed by the state sector during the socialist regime. With the sole exception of Péter Zwack who returned in the 1980s from the West, they were all employed by state companies and institutes. While working for the state sector, they cultivated their currently existing contacts and developed their expertise: Imre Somody worked at Chinonin and Éva Keresztury worked at Konsumex Foreign Trade Company as a middle-level manager. János Kurucz who launched Vista, previously worked as a journalist with a specialization on foreign affairs, Tamás Kieselbach was an associate at the Nemzeti Galéria [National Gallery], hence he used his previously accumulated expertise and social framework after the change of the regime. László Kapolyi, who was one of the ministers for industry of the socialist regime, turned his former connections in Russia into successful business contacts in the new era.
There have been some other important sources of knowledge and connections, namely those of the legal and illegal private economies in the 1980s: Gábor Bojár launched the predecessor of Graphisoft in 1982; and Károly Gerendai organized and produced tours for rock music ensembles.

**TEXTUAL CONTEXT**

The author formulates his questions accurately; the interviewees respond deliberately. One can hardly find any characteristics of live discussions, scarcely ever any typical expression of the specific business slang. The characteristics of live discussion are only preserved in the dynamics of the argumentations, repetitions, in jumping from one subject matter to another one. The major difference between these interview-portraits and the scientific interviews in depth can be seized mainly not in the difference in structure and text edition, but rather in laying the accent on the various elements, on life situations. There is no difference regarding the degree of honesty (if such could be defined at all); but there is diversity in choosing the aim of these discussions. The author does not intend to furnish the reader with a sociological description, but aims to influence them:

“My intention was to introduce managers and entrepreneurs to the public, who have already proved themselves during the last decade. They have already achieved unquestionable success in the business world, in their sector; thus their biography and their conclusions might be interesting for the reader.” (5)

In general, Hungarian entrepreneurs and mainly the small entrepreneurs minimize their contacts with the political organizations, parties; they do not take part in politics. Even the minority, who does have some connections to politics, avoids publicity and accepting any public position; they only act as advisors, with an aim to influence the decision-makers. The above-described behavioral pattern is, however, not followed by the majority of the interviewees concerned. Péter Zwack is a former consul and a member of Parliament, Imre Somody is a member of the advisory committee to the prime minister, László Kapolyi is the leader of the Social Democratic Party, which is not represented in Parliament.

The others, without any function, are also eager to take part in politics. Moreover, some of them took even offence at being neglected by politicians: “the state, for unknown reason, was not interested in our expertise and at that time we took it very badly.” (183) “It is very interesting, but nobody has ever approached me by saying - Gyuri, you are an expert on capital markets, we are not, what would you think of introducing this new tax, or adjusting the concerning laws.” (74) They are engaged in economic policy, even without any explicit invitation. Hence, there are many relevant ideas and critical remarks on politicians to be found in this book.

Yet, they are willing to deliver a message to the politicians, they are even more eager to improve the image of Hungarian entrepreneurs, the new capitalists, in the public eye. “Being in business is a disesteemed profession in Hungary. In contrary to the trading nations, we have no tradition of honoring and valuing business” (13). These entrepreneurs experience the daily operation of the internal business world and
are aware of the stories damaging their image. "These harmful phenomena are necessities in transitional periods. The situation shall never be ideal, but I strongly believe that those, who do not belong here, will fall out sooner or later." (130)

Some of the important roots of considerations and prejudices are to be found in the side-effects of privatization. Some among them acted as advisors to privatization, yet the source of their well-being is not linked with privatization, but with their business success: the fascinating growth and quick response of their companies to the changing market demands. Therefore, according to Szakonyi and his interviewees, these samples of the self-made men can influence public opinion favorably. One can read several stories about how risky can be to start a business, which is a long learning process that comprises several failures. By the now successful entrepreneurs eventually hit the bottom previously and were close to collapse: "...we made basic economic mistakes. For example we did not request offers in writing from vendors and did not conclude written agreements, but made only verbal arrangements. Thus when invoicing took place, we were shocked. Not to mention that we forgot to take into consideration inflation then being approximately 30 percent; when the cost increased from 26 million HUF in 1993 to 120 million in 1994, we did not increase the price of tickets, not even with a penny, representing approximately 85-90 percent of our revenue." (41)

Success in business depended on several occasional factors, yet there were recurring success factors among them as well. The importance of the long-term strategy is often emphasized: "Contrary to the trend, we did not base our business on being an import hardware trader of limited scale – as it was followed by many. I have realized that this could only be a short-term solution and I wanted to base my business on long-term prospective." (17) The importance of good quality and the quality being an implicit strategy of the business are often mentioned: "We do not want to produce more wine, but wine with better quality." (118)

Success in business was determined to significant extent by the behavior, values and the attitude of the given entrepreneur. The interviewees are all family oriented and traditional people; they bring up their children with devotion and attention. Their income is much above the average, however capital resources are being used modestly laying special emphasis on consuming only good quality products. A significant part of their income is donated to the poor, helping those in the periphery.

The self-image strengthened by the author-interviewer seems to be fair, yet not balanced. On many areas no information is shared or such information is included indirectly. No information is disclosed about the internal connections and their importance in obtaining orders and credits. "My father, who was also engaged in foreign trade, visited several banks in order to secure financing for his export activities, and finally one of them agreed to it." (108) Therefore, by reading the interviews, one would not be able to understand the significant role of corruption in the Hungarian economy.
THE LIMITATION OF USAGE

By listing the shortcomings with regard to the avoided or partially described elements in connection with the entrepreneurs, we did not want to make an impression that the products of investigating journalism, interview portraits among them, could not be valuable and reasonable sources of societal research. Yet, the freedom of the press (without questioning its extent) does not exempt us from careful consideration of the surrounding circumstances of such interviews. After the change of the regime, when examining the text, we do not need to think of the censor any more, but of the hidden thoughts of the announcers and intermediaries who attempt to use publicity for influencing public opinion and the politicians.

REFERENCES
