

REVIEWS

QUESTION MARKS, AMBIVALENCES, AND UP TO DO IT

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Laki, M. and Szalai, J.: *Vállalkozók vagy polgárok? A nagyvállalkozók gazdasági és társadalmi helyzetének ambivalenciái az ezredforduló Magyarországon.* [Entrepreneurs and Citoyens? Ambivalences of the Economic and Social Position of the Members of the Business Elit in the Hungary of the Turn of the Millennium.] Budapest: Osiris, 2003.

The two authors have embarked on an enterprise truly nice and enviable to sociologists when they decided to explore the ambivalences indicated in the subtitle. The question mark at the end of the title and the introduction of personal tone equally corroborate the reader's expectation to learn exciting things about great entrepreneurs and/or citoyens. In the introductory chapter one may read the main reasons of the dilemmas of the study: what is the discipline that would offer the language for better narrating the social circumstances and consequences of the changes of ownership that took place in the 90s? I do not wish to squeeze the authors into boxes but anyone being little familiar with researches conducted on topics of domestic economy and sociology would know that both authors graduated from Karl Marx University, and Mihály Laki speaks rather the language of economics, whereas Júlia Szalai uses rather the language of sociology. In other words, the reader may hope that they present the multi-actor facts and multi-factor interrelationships of the current process of the domestic bourgeois development and acquisition of ownership through different cross-sections. (For the sake of the reader it should be noted that the survey was completed in 2000.)

The work presents the research itself in a convincingly logical structure. Though it consists of ten chapters, essentially it is composed of three major parts. The first two chapters contain the definition, operationalization and the description of hypotheses. The next six chapters analyze the interviews, and the two closing parts summarize the 'mosaic'-like answers given to the hypotheses. The supplements attached are not secondary either: the psychological analysis based on the interviews is the work of Natasa Kő, and the personal, anonymous data of the persons included in the sample are collated to the basic distributions of a statistical survey of a large sample (TÁRKI 1997). All this serves well to discipline the reader to focus only on those (great) entrepreneurs (and citoyens) who were addressed by the survey and his attention should not be diverted by a crowd of tabloid information constantly cropping up about the well known star rich of the day.

Reading the passages of an imposingly broad survey of the related literature and of the discipline in the chapters describing the building of hypotheses helps fully sympathize with the authors' fear expressed by the term "up to do it" as they call the chapters in the title dealing with definition. Here too they put questions to themselves and to the reader. Surely one may read answers as well, the answers of researchers studying a similar population and problems earlier, that would more or less approximate the researchers either to the definition of the concepts of (great) entrepreneur and citizen, or to the interpretation of historical background information. Mihály Laki and Júlia Szalai have systematically collected (almost) every publication that may be interesting for the topic, and they have chosen with a sure hand and arranged statements that fitted to support their exposition. Demonstrating a wide range of literary background, however, has some risk: inevitably one author or another may make overly emphatic statements in a given period of time, but it is revealed by the survey that its *validity* is limited (for instance a large-scale replacement of owners in the period of /pre/privatization, or the transformation of the political elite). This should be particularly stressed.

They characterize the circle of the interviewees in the following: "We contacted great entrepreneurs in managerial positions of medium and large enterprises in majority or exclusively domestic ownership, and part-owners possessing a decisive share and important managerial jobs." (p. 24 and Footnote 6.)

Thus the definition of an entrepreneur, analyzed in Chapter One, was operationalized by setting out from the characteristic features of the enterprises and then finding the persons to be questioned, who, as it is subsequently revealed, were not unanimously enthusiastic partners of the authors, the 48-element multitude of those who actually answered from among the questioned ones is a group of people 'screened' in a sense, who, for various considerations, were ready to submit to the data-collecting will of the interviewers.

The authors themselves present us the stumbling blocks attributable to the method. Among others there is the case when the interviewee presented a 'possible story', his own narrative of the changes and events that had happened to him simultaneously to the change of the system, or that there had been an extremely large number of changes during the course of privatization and the past 15 years in the ownership composition of companies and enterprises, their market share, profile, and structure had been constantly changing, in other words, the interpretative frame was in constant change together with the reflections of the interviewees, and all this was presented to the researchers in the form of reminiscences, looking back to their successful career.

The second "up to do it", a definition of the top bourgeois, estate or class characteristics of the group interviewed was again a rather difficult task. They were in quest of historical logic asserting itself: whether the actors trying to find a dominant role in the unfolding market corresponded to the requirements of a "westernized" behavior. Were they able to and did they want to be citizens? (The same question can be put today as well, in present tense. /The reviewer's remark./) On page 33 one may find some self-critical paragraphs on how naively the authors have assessed the expected positive results of market freedom. The tough entrepreneur weathering economic competition who has acquired assets has not become automatically a

politically emancipated citizen, who recognized his duties and rights as well included in his citizenship, and his behavior and lifestyle have become even less westernized and cultured.

The question of research quite clearly is, as it is put by the authors, whether the Hungarian society is capable of correcting its track in a “Western way” as a result of the civic achievement of a new business elite born out of economic transformation? (p. 31.)

The broad tableau presenting the difficulties of the interpretation of the concept of ‘citizen’ is a series of informative descriptions and film-like images. It becomes clear to the reader at the end of the chapter how the Hungarian language is struggling – ‘resourcefully’ as it is usually suggested – against the expression of concepts and facts due to political reasons. Discussions and researches have been in progress on modernization, lopsided, relative socialist embourgeoisement, and about elites, but the themes of civilization and urbanization were also brought in, more over the problems of civil society were also involved. Researches have remained in this trap of tradition and the image has not become any clearer to this day. (I would not have brought in the 2002 Election Programme of Fidesz-MPP referred to, because it is nothing else but what its title states and has nothing to do with an academic treatise.)

The authors have drawn the conclusion: “there was no ‘oven-readily’ adaptable empirical concept” (p. 42.) to mark the citizen. Yet the alloy of the antecedents in the literature mentioned above and a definition given by Pál Juhász proved to be utilizable and has allowed for an adequately plastic operationalization. This definition specifies four elements that help grasping the essence of civic development and behavior. The first two elements are: the citizen seeks an *individual solution* of joining the division of labor and his demand for acquiring *acknowledgement* in the community is linked to it, even through his entrepreneurial achievement. The third characteristic feature is *risk-taking* in business and enterprise, the fourth one is the sociological consequence, whether he is able to break away from the *community* that was at his disposal and whether he was able to shape a new one. These features – writes the author quoted – are important for the purpose of creating the medium of economic activity and interest representation, in other words, it is a conscious taking up of a role that is involved. The authors, however, have not only relied on seeking these elements of definition in the topics of interviews. They took up the reference groups, one after the other – small and medium entrepreneurs, managers, cultural intellectual elites of a background of several generations – and they hoped for identifying more exactly the characteristics of the group interviewed on the basis of the knowledge of their features.

I see some contradiction here: the authors regard the historical antecedents (and features that are deductible from them) automatically as tradition, whereas they may rather be patterns at the most if they can be revoked from memory. The ensemble of the elements of behavior that are assumed to be civic consists of the components of the current ‘Western’ modes of behavior and patterns. What today’s people see on the Internet and television, or personally experience during their business trips and visits, or the wealthy live through in their travels abroad and exotic vacations, or the present Western lifestyle and behavior may be deducted from the current social environment.

In order to illustrate how difficult the task is, and to help others learn from it, some facts are worth mentioning even in a review article: interviewing a representative sample was out of the question in this population, because the orienting talks had indicated a rather large “proportion of hiding” (that is refusal to answer). They would not have tolerated the tight structure of a structured questionnaire therefore a structured interview (in depth) could be applied. The President of the National Association of Hungarian Industrialists helped the researchers (p. 51.), he personally recommended people and mediated, but even this assistance was not effective enough, therefore the researchers had to shift to the snowball method, and they could ultimately interview acquaintances of their acquaintances.

Though the topics of the interviews were not given by the researchers, it is discernible from the completed work that the thematic sequence was lent by the structure of the career (interview) itself. The analysis is also built along it: the promotional role of *the family* is stressed in becoming entrepreneurs; another important dimension of the analysis is the *acquisition of knowledge and experience*. Detailed information was collected about the circumstances of the *acquisition of assets* and the *operation of the established enterprise*, and about wrestling with competitors. (The method of Oral History researches, already known here too, was applied in the processing of the interviews.)

Perhaps the most exciting task of this research has been the study of the *family background* of the interviewees, to identify what has been the role of the family and parental tradition, the patterns seen, the expectations and pressures played in the life of the future entrepreneur. The authors masterfully deal with the historical background material; one may learn a great deal from this and the following chapters. The post-war life of the families was dominated by dictatorship from 1949 up to the revolution, and subsequently by the institutions of the softening dictatorship, at times playing tough. This period is deliberately projected by the authors from “below” as the age of continuous solutions one was forced to adopt. They call the period the age of the *perpetuum mobile*, imprinted in historical memory as vilification, existential threat, political harassment, and a continuous pressure for self-defence on families. (p. 62.) Looking at it from another angle, the reviewer adds, this period was one of a contradictory modernization of the Hungarian economy and society divested of political freedom (industrialization, the development of a forcefully collectivized agriculture by state programmes from the late 60s onwards, an aggregation of the plans from their previous breaking down, etc.) Looking at it this way the circle of the interviewees is put in a slightly different light. In fact the oldest person of the respondents was 67 (in 2000) and the youngest one was 32 years old. Five of them were definitely born after 1956, and, if I counted well, at least ten entrepreneurs were just a couple of years old at that time. Almost half of the entrepreneurs were born, or were babies during the period of the dynamic economic development determining the mobility trend of post-war Hungarian society, and the rest were small school children during the previous, rather difficult times. The family histories unambiguously show that the *survival strategies followed* by the ancestors of the great entrepreneurs *in the 50s and 60 were the watershed*, neither the opportunities offered by late socialism, nor the differences of family heritage dated to pre-war times had a similar weight (p. 64.).

Groups of people *striving upwards*, protective ones *remaining on the same level* and of temporarily *declassed* ones can be distinguished. It is mostly the respondents belonging to the first-generation intellectuals, the self-made success people who belong to those constantly striving upwards. Those who consider pressures for adjustment and political opportunism (this usage is not that of the authors) pragmatically, would more easily overcome grievances humiliating the family; they would carry on with their efforts and go ahead. According to the texts quoted the interviewees did not sink too deep into the fine details of family history, they easily slipped over some stories and were narrating anecdotes. (The excerpts from interviews published quote the first paragraphs of a traditional autobiography: I was born in this and this place, at that year, my mother was so-and-so, my father was so-and-so, I attended school at this place, I applied for admission to that institution.) The authors quote data and how the *interviewee* interprets the situation. In footnote 37 one may find the explanation: the interviewer took it naturally if the respondent did not tell what he did not want to, for instance the delicate details of family vicissitudes, their fears, and facts disturbing self-identity. Those excerpts of the interviews are the most tragic details of the chapter on family motivations when people reversing the destiny of families broken by being declassed, narrate their story.

The analysis of interviews is a particularly difficult genre, all the more so because details of family heritage are difficult to separate from the attitudes of a family related to *learning*, therefore the role of learning in progress crops up here and there. The decisive role of learning and school education should be studied from various angles at the same time: what level of school education a person has, what was the quality of the school, what occupation does and how far predestines an outstanding (great) entrepreneurial career, moreover, how far the detours, corrections of school education, new skills, new schools and training influence progress? It is not surprising that they would not have achieved anything without schooling. It was a privilege to be admitted to higher education in the given period. The question was, and this was expounded by the authors, how it was possible and how they could acquire those privileges. In this chapter the authors present the educational career of the entrepreneurs collated to the results of domestic researches in educational sociology. They even mention an important fact: when families moved it could significantly facilitate access to good institutions of secondary education for the interviewees. The circle of (great) entrepreneurs under survey demonstrated a conspicuous deficit in the knowledge of foreign languages. This is discussed at length by the interviewees, they mention its importance somewhat ashamed, and it is revealed by what creative solutions they substitute the lack of their own knowledge of foreign languages by the knowledge of the employees of their enterprise.

The analysis goes into detail of the role of *learning by experience* in Chapter V. From what organizations and jobs do the labor experiences prior to the change of the system originate? (Who, in how many workplaces, in what jobs has made his employment career? Were they subordinates or leaders? Were they party members or not before they became /great/ entrepreneurs in 2000?) They lived and managed here, this is given in advance by the authors in the subtitle. The next subtitle "Networks" is somewhat more as well as less than it could be, but nice little (petty) cases of

‘smartness’ and opportunism from the 80s are narrated by the big shots who attempted crisis management at that time. This sub-chapter is a good dramaturgical preparation for the next one, where the respondents go into detail about the modes of acquiring assets. Naturally they had understood that history offered them an opportunity never to be repeated. It is difficult to sum up all the possible methods in this chapter. It is the authors who help the reader: they have created categories, and condensed the answers into simple statistics. The great entrepreneur of today either could acquire assets by the privatization of his own company, or he participated in it and in addition he also founded an autonomous enterprise, or his career of bright success by 2000 originally began by the foundation of an autonomous small company. Ten people of the respondents already worked in an autonomous enterprise in 1989; therefore only 38 of them were interested in the privatization of a state-owned company. The small statistical tables help the reader, and excerpts from the interviews confirm the statement of the analyst commentators: those people participated in the privatization of companies who were inside those firms, had some position there, and were members of the HSWP. Reading it now in a review article it is not a major novelty. The authors, however, have made selections of the stories narrated so that the reader may not see only a stereotype and trivial datum, but should note that these people had a profession, a duty, a job, and ambition, that they are proud of their achievement, they have always striven to a place where they could show even better what they were able to do. The historically offered opportunity of acquiring assets also offers successful work, and it is not necessarily rough extortion, robbery a jealous and aristocratic outsider likes to hear about. Next there is an analysis richly “supported” by excerpts from interviews about the variegated forms of taking loans and of economic transactions, about the knowledge and skillfulness that have made these entrepreneurs really great.

Here the element that may illustrate the risk-taking of the operationalized civil entrepreneur is not sufficiently stressed in the analysis. The logic of the analysis, insisting on the chronological exposition of career, is transformed into the history of the changes of the market environment after the acquisition of assets is completed: the entrepreneur is lost and the enterprise remains. Perhaps it explains why it is precisely the *foreigners* (vide: foreign-owned companies) who appear as the shapers of the chances of growth and survival of domestic big companies. It is understood that it is the foreigners who are the really serious competitors, they are bigger, stronger and impersonal – and surely they are the reference group of the respondents, but the (great) entrepreneur does not only compete with foreigners but with everyone else whoever is present in the market, in other words, they are confronted to each other as well. The respondents are active in several branches and markets, is it not possible that competition between foreigners and Hungarians depended on the branch? Where does this tribal outlook come from? How do they play with the advantages deriving from the knowledge of the locality? Judging by the text of interviews these topics have offered an opportunity for the great entrepreneurs to assess, interpret and qualify phenomena, to complain, in a word: to take up the analysts’ job. The authors themselves word their doubts in the summary entitled *Cautious Assessment*, closing the chapter.

The two final chapters offer a summary of the large empirical material, addressed to the present: *Entrepreneurial Ethos and Daily Life and Closing Words*. A sincere

statement follows: there is no unambiguous answer to the question put at the beginning of the book, whether the domestic great entrepreneurs of the turn of the millennium are citizens. The work is not yet completed, for here come the four mosaic-like reflections mentioned at the beginning of this review, that refer back to the hypotheses. The careers for sure have demonstrated a series of solutions *differing from the traditional* in their realization, they wanted to be the first, better, or different ones from the rest. The mosaic summing up the *civic features* of the enterprise (as an activity) speaks about entrepreneurial merits. These people regard their creature, the enterprise with creator's (almost parental) responsibility as if it were a living creature. The next square of mosaics is the analysis of the values and the realization of roles that are bequeathed in the great entrepreneurs' families. The authors unfold its mechanisms from confessions on marriage, wives and children. One may learn truly shocking details about the *public spaces* (third mosaic square), that is about the entrepreneurs' fields of manifestation outside the market, what they think of state interference, on the neutrality of competition, on civic courage, how do they do charity work, do they prefer sponsorship or rather donate, etc.? The interpretation of lifestyle, consumption and social relations (the fourth square of mosaics) must have been the most difficult one. The authors and the shy interviewers were unable to break through the hiding attitude of great entrepreneurs. It is explained by the "official" circumstances of the interview situations. I wish to ask cautiously: was it not possible to read from the 'props' of the office room? And what could have been the message of the interviewee's dress, shirt, pen, jacket, haircut, shoes, watch, and glasses? (I must confess I should have been particularly trained for becoming able to decode the meaning of the 'conspicuous' goods, because the great entrepreneurs give signals to each other and not to the social scientist interviewer.) The two authors resisted this temptation.

The separation of the psychological analysis from the main text was a good editorial idea. The psychological analysis underlines the most important statements. Natasa Kő was not in an enviable position, for her analysis is a work based on "brought-in material", she had to rely on the details of career interviews that had some psychological relevance.

Finally: the book is elegant, soft-bound, and the cover was doubled in a refined manner with the inside flap (the jacket would not be damaged). The blurb says that the cover is decorated with a portrait by József Rippl-Rónai, entitled "Lajos and Ödön". Two elegant gentlemen in their fifties – the painter's brothers – look at us. Are they the members of the business elite of a hundred years ago? It is a summer picture; Lajos is seated, wearing a whitish Borsalino hat, white shirt, a waistcoat and dark brownish jacket, supporting himself on his elbow, with a cigar in his hand, wearing a ring on his index finger, he has a trimmed beard and moustache. Ödön is of a somewhat bulkier constitution, wearing a white summer suit with a waistcoat, with a red flower on his lapel, with a bluish scarf-like tie, he wears a gold chain of a watch or pince-nez and even a ring, with a wide-rimmed yellowish brown summer hat on his head. They belong to Kaposvár, and are the sons of the headmaster and teacher. By their (civic) occupation Lajos is an auditor of financial administration, and Ödön is stationmaster at the railways. They are state officials. And the question marks multiply.