

## LONELINESS OF GREGARIOUS SOULS?

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Ágnes Utasi: *Feláldozott kapcsolatok. A magyar szingli.* [Sacrificed Relations. The Hungarian Singles.] Budapest: MTA PTI, 2004.

In the past decade a great amount of publicity was devoted to examining and explaining the phenomenon of postponing long-term partnerships and marriage, and neither public nor academic interest has diminished ever since. According to some this should be an anxious phenomenon, other people condemn it, or try to be rather tolerant; nevertheless, it seems really thought-provoking that many times these opinions develop on the ground of asymmetric information; hence conclusions remain without understanding and contain disguised interconnections.

That is why the research accomplished by Ágnes Utasi in 2001 and 2002 and the resultant book entitled *Sacrificed Relations. The Hungarian Singles* is of great significance; this is the first time that research has been accomplished among stakeholders in Hungary and the book introduces the outcomes while structuring them in the theoretical framework, which provokes not merely academic interest but may serve also as thought-provoking reading for the attentive public.

Utasi's research focuses on singles in their thirties living in bigger towns; via case studies and in-depth interviews. She looks into why one fifth of this age group decides for or ends up in a situation where instead of long-time relationships a lifestyle of short-term or without any kind of partnership is characteristic. The author defines group-specific characteristics as follows: young people in their thirties or forties, good education provided; in comparison with the average they are in better situation on the job market and also make more money. The lack of long-range relationships is also typical; they define themselves as 'independent' and spend their free time in diverse ways. Among 'singles' Utasi creates two basic categories: the first is referred to as 'quasi-singles' where long-range relationship without marriage is provided, and 'singles' where occasional relations are typical.

Before going into the detail of the domestic research, Utasi explains the outcomes of an international survey which sets up typical international tendencies of the matchmaking habits of the 25–35 year-old population (ISSP 2001 quoted by Utasi 2004). Based on this research in the first place Australian, Norwegian, American and Swiss youth seem to postpone formalizing long-range partnerships; this phenomenon is probably in connection with the economic circumstances that are favorable for continuing individual lifestyles. "Partly modernized" values seem to be typical in the ex-socialist countries: the Czech, Russian, Latvian and Hungarian youth wish to get

married at the usual age of their culture, but in case of an unsuccessful marriage they get divorced, which justifies ambivalent socialization of the traditional values. Countries where the ratio of unmarried people is high create the third group: divided into two, Norway and Switzerland belong to one subgroup, while Austria and Brazil to another. In the previous case most probably economic wellbeing has provided pleasant circumstances for living individual lifestyles, while in the latter Catholic values are traditionally strong hence divorce is less tolerated by the society: so young people most probably think and double-think whether they get married. Based on the international comparative study, more than half of the 25–35 year-old Hungarian youth is married, one third is single, 10 percent divorced or separated, 3 percent is widow (*Ibid*). In international comparison the ratio of the 25–35 year-old singles does not seem to be high in Hungary (the country is ranked in the middle of the sequence of the observed countries); on the other hand, the ratio of divorces resulting from relatively early marriages seems to be high.

Searching for the reasons of the single lifestyle on theoretical ground Utasi rejects the opinion that where democracies are based on market economies, the expansion of education creates individual and selfish women. Instead – in harmony with Durkheim's theories – she identifies the seed of changes in the spontaneous responses provoked by institutional individualism. Creating a historical framework for the phenomenon, Utasi points out economic liberalization of women in the first place then emphasizes the effects of secure birth control which reduced inequalities between genders. She points out that parallel with 'disillusionment', according to the reduced religious expectations only loyalty has remained valid from the family-partnership morals, but this is rather psychological and not a normative expectation. As 'dual morality', which expected women to observe sexual norms stricter than that of men, has diminished and more secure birth control facilities emerged, alternatives of marriage (living together, having a child without marriage) have become gradually accepted.

For the sake of understanding the in-depth reasons of the phenomenon, it is fruitful to remember the classical traditions of sociology. According to Durkheim's theories, the more integrated a society is, the greater part of the collective consciousness is common and this way the level of vitality gets higher within the community. A relevant question may sound as follows: in Durkheim's understanding, how vital is the 25–35 year-old Hungarian population? The author points out that due to enlaced norms the age group has ended up in anomy, hence relations break up easily, and changing partners has become a usual behavior. Based on her research, Utasi defines two causes with contradictory effects. On the one hand, an introverted group of individuals has evolved among singles; these people show the least openness towards not only partner relations but also to any kind of social relations. On the other hand, it was proven that people having a partner can attend more free-time opportunities than singles (i.e. research evidence of visiting around and holiday habits) which motivates creating partnerships even though this bond will not become long-lasting. It has become clear from the research that for the sake of understanding examining motivations evolving from lifestyle preferences and analyzing relations of the youth in the broad sense must be taken into consideration.

One of the key outcomes of the research is that among the examined Hungarian youth the number of strong relations reduces (Utasi 2004). We still should not call Hungarian singles as 'selfish', 'egoistic', 'workaholic' or 'superficial': 90 percent of them does want partnership. According to Utasi "... the vast majority would like to have a constant partner and also children in the future." (*Ibid*) She emphasizes that they postpone the decision as far as they can; hence the first part of the career-launch hypothesis by Oppenheimer, i.e. postponing of the decision is empirically proven.

Moving forward according to the author's thinking, the next logical question should be as follows: according to the independent young singles, what are the positive characteristics of their lifestyle? In the first place they say it supports career aspirations; liberty and independence in all meanings ranks second, while diverse sexual experiences are the third. The negative consequences can ultimately be traced back to the weakened social network: being alone in the first place and loneliness the second. It is important that advantages and disadvantages are different for the two genders. Although women show a greater need for partnership, it is the men's quality of life that increases more in case of having a partner, measured on a subjective scale.

On the other hand, Utasi examines what singles miss the most. According to the research, the feeling of 'having an ultimate partner for everyday life' seems to be the most frequent answer, followed by 'the lack of romance and tenderness'; 'to receive and provide warmth', and also 'knowing being needed'. On this list security in material terms ranks less important in comparison with spiritual needs. Although the observed people are in good position on the job market, these responses show that – besides the traditions of classical exchange theories –, softer, socio-psychological theories also should be taken into account.

According to Kalmijn's hypothesis about matchmaking opportunities, three important local "marriage markets" can be distinguished: school, workplace and living surroundings. In Kalmijn's point of view the first one works the most efficiently, especially universities and colleges, because these are the most homogenous in terms of age, cultural capital and job expectations, but the most heterogeneous in terms of gender. Workplace gains importance as women's equality emerges (Davis 1984 quoted by Bukodi 2002), while living surroundings may support matchmaking based on the family's origin (Kalmijn 1998). Based on Utasi's research this hypothesis is not ultimately valid in Hungary. The majority of the respondents got to know his last partner via strong ties, or met him in a society connected to strong ties (i.e. get-togethers for relatives, friends or at marriages). This means that basically culturally homogenous relations were characteristic for more than one third of the sample, where the family of origin played an important role in the mediation. The next third did matchmaking at workplace or at school, while only 10 percent has managed to find a partner in public places for entertainment; still, according to Utasi the probability of getting to know the partner on the Internet is the lowest. The author calls attention to the fact that young people in their thirties with diploma attended university or college via migration, and did not move back to the place of origin afterwards but looked for a job in the bigger city and have settled down there. Since the author takes into account where matchmaking usually happens, in her understanding this means that in the case of people in their thirties who change their place of residence, the

mediation role of the family reduces, and so diminishes the probability of finding the new partner. Hereby we should undertake a short theoretical overview: Qian managed to prove that the role of the educational background gains significance as years go by, while Kalmijn showed that the weight of the occupational status grows the same way and the role of origin diminishes analogously (Qian 1988; Kalmijn 1994; Oppenheimer et al. 1997 quoted by Bukodi 2000). Taking a view on the domestic situation from this perspective we may come to a conclusion that since performance effect increases and the role of origin reduces as people are aging, later on young ones might find partners in other forums like at workplace.

The weak point of this optimistic assumption refers to a crucially important research outcome: it will be exactly the desire to fulfill workplace-related performance expectations that has a negative effect on finding a partner: strong career aspirations, being 'workaholic' or chasing money and wealth have been the most frequent responses when answering questions about why young people find matchmaking difficult. The other typical response was the 'comfort of the independent status'; it seems like after a while young people will have neither time nor aspiration for matchmaking. Here we can trace back an interesting contradiction between theory and empiricism. We have seen that workplace has a crucial potential for matchmaking, and as time goes by work performance gains importance (and as a consequence so does material background, while the role of origin diminishes). Nevertheless, during these years young people will set up and fit into an independent lifestyle which is nice enough to find it difficult to be given up later on, and because of the hectic rhythm of work – which nowadays provokes a positive feedback by the society as a whole – they will have sufficient excuses to neglect investing time and energy in matchmaking. In Utasi's research every second person accused insufficient societal life and the lack of public places suitable for matchmaking as an obstacle in finding a partner, but we might suppose that behind this reasoning the real situation looks different: there is neither a pleasant place nor a favorable society because young people invest so much effort in work which provides a more calculable positive feedback from the outside world, so that it requires all of their energy, even that which could be turned into matchmaking.

At the end, how can we answer the original question: why do Hungarian people at their thirties sacrifice their relations? Based on the research, especially the 25–35 year-old young people at career-launch experience a serious societal pressure for success that can be measured in economic terms – although they admitted that this probably would not make them happy on the long range. In the meantime they invest a lot of time and energy in their career, so at the end they will have neither the resource nor the aspiration to give up their single lifestyle, although we can see that originally it was exactly the "Zeitgeist" coding strong career aspirations and attached advantages that are responsible for their loneliness. On the other hand, this phenomenon or process is not based on a merely conscious decision; moreover, we should not value it as an optimum solution for the young generations – we can see in the research that only 10 percent of them would like to remain single on the long run.

Utasi's outcomes first of all prove that the conceptual-analytical framework offered by the classical traditions of sociology remains plausible to date, but also contains more than one arguments that should be taken also as messages: "Our research has proven that (...) those people seem to be more satisfied and enjoy a more pleasant quality of life on the subjective scale who are surrounded by intimate relations and who undertake a relevant self-control in order to be able to fulfill obligations like unselfishness and solidarity needed in creating and nourishing strong relations in life."

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