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Laudatio on Ivan Szelenyi's 70th Birthday

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I would like to make a few very sketchy notes on Ivan's scholarly work. Sketchy because it would take a symposium of several days to do justice to it and also because he has himself written beautiful and much too self-critical reviews of his major works.

I have titled this section "Irony and Testimony" or "How to be an Intellectual as a Sociologist?".

What is striking about Ivan's amazing oeuvre spanning almost 40 fertile years is at first glance its scope and breadth in both topics and methodological styles. Among else, he has written about

- the theory of intellectuals
- poverty and ethnic discrimination in remote Hungarian villages
- the problems of new housing developments (no wonder he ended up in New Haven!)
- the social history of the Bildungsbuergertum
- the class structure of socialist and post-socialist societies
- a Post Weberian plus Post-Bourdeusian general theory of social change on the micro and macrolevel
- symbols in postcommunist culture
- the history and transformation of agrarian production systems
- elites, managers, lawyers, farmers, small self-employed, peddlers and gamblers
- comparative life histories in the transformation of Hungary, Czechnia, Poland, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and China, as well as on
- race and the underclass.

Probably an even more important contribution is Ivan's variety and combination of competencies, working styles and methodologies. Just imagine the following: after a

multitude of survey and census analyses on the composition of the residents of new housing developments in 1960's Hungary, he resolves unexpected findings in his quantitative data by writing in *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (1974) a historical treatise of the role of intellectuals, a systematic theory of Socialist systems as class structures, a critique of current Marxist theories and an empirical analysis of the changing role of technocrats, bureaucrats and humanistic intelligentsia. While "Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power" has a Toquevillean flavor of the learned essay, *Socialist Entrepreneurs* (1998) is the epitome of an academic monograph with formal theory construction on agricultural and family production, of the role of the semi-proletarians in the Socialist economy, topnotch statistical analysis, but also social history and not least extensive ethnographic field work. *Making Capitalism without Capitalists* (2006) can be read as a general theory of social change, an analytical treatise of the class structure of the Socialist societies in transition, a study on the role of managers and as an empirical research monograph based on his and his' collaborators large-scale comparative *Project on Social Stratification in Eastern Europe after 1989*, including both population and elite surveys. Finally *Patterns of Exclusion* (2006) is a study using both historical demography stretching 150 years and ethnographic fieldwork across a number of years about the gypsies and their social place in the small village of Csenjete. Let me add that these and many other studies show also a remarkable coincidence in one and the same person of the solitary individual scholarship, collegial collaboration and the role of project initiator and manager.

In hindsight, we of course can now see how his rebuilding of our department is a kind of a projection of these different modes of sociology: historical and cross-national comparative studies, theory and intellectual history, social criticism and policy analysis, quantitative stratification analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. So far we lower mortals have needed four Centers to live up to his abilities as poly-social scientist, we will need a few more slots to fill his big shoes.

The second observation I would like to make about Ivan's academic work is not only that given his involuntarily disrupted life in four countries and three continents it shows a

truly remarkable continuous rate of productivity. It shows moreover an admirable unity of purpose and objective. Ivan has carried on for almost four decades an overarching macrosociological project which ranks among the very top enterprises of our discipline: what is the trajectory of Socialist societies before and after their demise, persistently insisting on varieties of socialism and likewise of Postsocialist capitalism? In his fabulous piece on *An Outline of The Social History of Socialism or an Autocritique of an Autocritique* (2002) he describes his major works in terms of an Hegelian dialectic: In the *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* he opens up as thesis the historical possibility of a rational socialism through the takeover or sharing of power of the early party bureaucrats with the bearers of cultural capital – both technocratic and humanistic. This did not happen because – as antithesis - the bureaucrats managed the survival of socialism by allowing the rise of semi-proletarian, agrarian producers rather than transferring power over to a professional elite. This third way of independent or semi-independent agricultural entrepreneurs in combination with state run manufacturing, also an important phase in the Chinese story, turned out to be not viable either. In the consequent synthesis, *The Making of Capitalism without Capitalists*, the professional-technocratic- humanistic intelligentsia again played a historical, but probably temporary role. In my mind, Ivan's three major works not least represent the last successful societal analysis as class analysis, i.e. one where not only systems of domination and exploitation, but also the direction of social change can be derived from the relationships between collective actors representing broad social groups. But this is another story.

Finally, “Irony and Testimony” or “How to be An Intellectual as a Sociologist?”. The unity of Ivan's scholarly work also derives from his self-positioning as an intellectual and this theme runs through his work from the beginning pages of *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* to his recent vision of a “neo-classical sociology”: Can there still be a role for the intellectual if she or he is giving up on the utopias or “pure” types of either Socialism or Capitalism? Can there be a critical role for the sociologist if she or he neither wants to be a normative theorist, ideologue or a preacher?

Let me close this section with letting the early and the late Ivan speak for himself:

In the Preface of his earlier work he and Györgi Konrad state “We were not Communists, had never joined the party, and did not even think of ourselves as Marxists. But as professional sociologists we felt called upon to examine the functioning of the Eastern European social system from the point of view of the oppressed. That meant that our critical analysis was bound to have a socialist perspective.” (1979:xiv).

And later, in ch.1: “It is one of the important characteristics of the intellectual life that in this conflict [between the transcendent reference to universal values and the historical embeddedness, what he also calls the generic and genetic concepts of intelligentsia] emerges into consciousness, and the recognition of it brings with it its own catharsis. The intellectual’s schizoid existence stems from the duality of his social existence, his history is a history of crises of conscience... They [the intellectuals] articulate the rules of the social order and the theories which gave them sanction... but at the same time it is intellectuals who criticize the existing scheme of things and demand its supersession. ... Often the schizophrenia inherent in the intellectual’s role is apparent in one and the same individual. The greatest of them incorporate the contradictions between the generic and genetic roles into antinomies of their thought...” (1979:22).

These two sides of the intellectual reappear 30 years later in a somewhat transformed way. Ivan posits the question: “Is critical analysis possible without a critical vantage point, a utopia which is somehow outside the system one tries understand?” He is pleading for “irony” as an alternative mode of a critical stance: showing the immanent possibilities of the direction of a society, (in his books these were the fusion of bureaucratic power with the technocratic and humanistic intelligentsia, the alternative route of the semi-proletarians, and the varieties of post socialist capitalism). “Since the aim of critical analysis is to raise the critical self-consciousness of the actors, irony is an equally valid method” (2002:64).