

ON THE ANTI-SEMITIC PREJUDICES IN HUNGARY TODAY

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Kovács András: *A kéznél lévő idegen. Antiszemita előítéletek a mai Magyarországon.* [The Alien at Hand. Anti-Semitic Prejudices in Hungary Today.] Budapest: PolgART, 2005.

András Kovács's book, two thirds of which follow the methods of empirical sociology, does reflect on the demand for the interdisciplinary approach of antisemitism in its first part. The broader reading public (everyone beyond empirical sociologists) may find this part the most important one. First of all Kovács convincingly points out that the Shoah "is made a unique historical phenomenon jointly by the number of victims, the definition of the sphere of victims, the aim of persecution, its historical location and methods", and hence taking away any possibility from those who want to make the Holocaust a relative one with reference to other genocides and crimes. Kovács surveys international literature referring to the historical continuity of anti-Semitism, on an excellently selected basis. He summarizes his opinion saying that continuity can be primarily identified in personal prejudice, and in the survival of anti-Semitic language and culture. I wish to challenge this stand to some extent. I am of the view that even if the various types of anti-Semitism may have new social circumstances, as in Hungary the various social systems have piled up, the decades of pre-capitalism, capitalism, and even post-capitalism, with all the consequences of a bourgeois development left half-baked, similarly anti-Semitism characteristic of the individual social systems and of different reasons is also piled up (of religious denominations, anti-capitalism, anti-liberalism, anti-socialism, and the type of anti-Semitism hating certain functions, or envious of them, wishing to acquire them). I would have liked to read also some survey of the data of the history of anti-Semitism in Hungary that could be grasped empirically, for in this sense researches into Hungarian historical sociology could serve as the immediate antecedents of Kovács's book, for the mixed marriages, the schools and the various scenes of social life admitting/excluding Jews could describe this phenomenon by specific social groups, consumable by sociologists and not by the historian of ideas, and here I would refer to the complex work of Viktor Karády.

As Kovács does not believe in the continuity of actual structures but only in that of the elements of anti-Semitic parlance, the issues of the empirical part do not extend over the study of the historical knowledge of the joint past of Jews and non-Jews (the only exception of latter history being the study of historical consciousness related to the Jewish nature of the State Security Police /AVH/), hence we do not learn how far

the fact that the absolute and relative over-representation of Jews in the pre-1945 Hungarian press, industry, the Hungarian left, and liberalism was an important feature of social history (see about this also the work of Viktor Karády) is part of historical public conscience, and how far it is only the usage of the right-wing intellectuals from where the open-minded part of our nation is informed that they “have” to see Jews in the liberals, leftists, journalists, and capitalists. (In this respect the present-day Hungarian anti-Semite is far more governed by ideology than his/her grandfathers had been: the grandfathers could still rely on grasping the religion of the grandparents as fixed by public administration, whereas the anti-Semites of today can only rely on the followers of which occupations and political view should be regarded as Jewish, and if it does not work, which of these should be regarded as assimilated *by Jews...*)

As one may have a feeling of want in the historical part, the summary of the psychological explanations of anti-Jewish attitudes and the grouping of extensive theories facilitating understanding is excellent. These competing theories are utilized by the author fully, and he empirically tests them in a sense, and when, in the empirical part he measures frustration, anomie and prejudice (independently of anti-Semitism) he points out a strong interrelationship between these personality traits and manifest as well as latent anti-Semitism. He devotes a separate chapter to explanations of group phenomena.

The chapter, presenting how traditional anti-modernization, or disillusionment deriving from the crisis of modernization produced political anti-Semitism as a result of diligent piecemeal work of intellectual ideologists, based on mostly German researches into detail, forecasts the most important message of the book, namely, that there is no massive anti-Semitism without the objective crisis of modernity, nor there is political anti-Semitism without a deliberate anti-Semitic elite activity.

Faithful to this thesis Kovács presents the Hungarian anti-Semitic discourse, political anti-Semitism, created by groups of intellectuals after the change of the system in the next chapter. He is rather restricted when speaking about extreme anti-Semitism experienced at the periphery of political life, which was taken out of total isolation by a single institution, namely the Dominican Order. He goes into greater detail when analyzing the discourse of the centre anti-Semitism, related to the noted articles by Hungarian populist writers of the 1990s. It is expressly masterful as he presents how they supported and authenticated his own anti-Semitism *by condemning* the Holocaust. Moving further inwards to the centre, Kovács does not see a manifest anti-Semitism, but discussions of the policy of identity, moreover, he states, that “There was no veiled message behind the arguments of Antall and Jeszenszky.” (The right wing prime minister and minister of foreign affairs in the 1990s) Antall did not distance himself from the above mentioned populist writers until the latter one attacked him as a leader of the state and a party, one may perfectly apply the attribute permissive anti-Semite, introduced by Kovács in his earlier book, which means the toleration of anti-Semitism in the circle of allies. Or, I may accept Kovács’s statement in one case, provided he believed that there was no “anti-Semitic message” because even though there was anti-Semitism in the mind and behavior of the above-mentioned politicians, but it had no “message”, for they did not use the anti-Semitic topic for winning over new strata, just they sort of “gave themselves away”...Regarding the

gravely compromising nature of the epithet anti-Semitic, I understand that the author does not apply the term for the late Prime Minister, presumably in high esteem by almost half of the Hungarian population. I feel, however, the use of the attribute “not anti-Semitic” highly problematic, particularly that in the Aristotelian usage the word *not* indicates a stand diametrically opposed to the attribute following it, and it is out of the question in this case. Despite all quotations from Antall we know that an Act on restitution was passed that is gravely discriminatory of Holocaust victims, and Antall, as Prime Minister of Hungary used the pair of phrases of “your dead” and “our dead”, and Jeszenszky in an 1994 conference commemorating the Holocaust has spoken about “the Hungarian” victims “nearby” the “Jewish” ones. (In the Hungarian language “The Jews are not Hungarians” – is a sentence which defines a strict antisemitic attitude.)

I fully agree and can support the analysis of Kovács saying that the “circles of discourse” constitute a peculiar “chain”: one “speaker” who does not assure his/her accord with the other “speaker” who can be tolerated, but not supported, only accepts the next speaker, who would apply the same procedure for the next speaker. Presumably this phenomenon is a characteristic feature of any discourse, perhaps with the difference of where the chain breaks off. As contrasted to common belief, the aim of conquering German history of the inter-war period is not alien to the present German right wing either. In the historians’ dispute Nolte’s earlier book (1963) on *The Period of Fascism* was enlisted by the action directed by Stürmer, a history adviser of Chancellor Kohl that wished to confiscate the narrative of German history from the successors of Willy Brandt “binding their knee”. Beyond the Oder, however, the chain of discourse circles can break off: when recently Nolte began to quote David Irving, and placing himself at the platform of the German extreme right, Kohl, as well as Merkel unambiguously have isolated themselves from him. The chain is somehow broken off more rarely in Hungary, and sometimes it is not even broken...

The empirical two thirds of the book and dissertation present the anti-Semitic prejudice of the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, and separately an inclination towards the denial of the Holocaust on the basis of several major researches. This empirical part was not made along the *logic of the traditional public opinion polls*, namely it does not follow the logic of putting attitudes in a cross-tabulation together with social variables, and hence drawing conclusions about the various groups. On the contrary, it has certain theoretically well-founded expectations and hypotheses, and the questions examining attitudes as well as the groups studied are shaped so that the former ones may be verified or refuted.

These researches are also longitudinal and hence a certain image may be formed on the changes of anti-Semitism. In 1995 the residents of Budapest are over-represented among the 28 to 35% of anti-Semites. The elderly and less educated are more characterized by one of the manifestations of xenophobia that is anti-Semitism. The lack of sufficient supplies of social resources causes anomie, to which presumably anti-Semitism may also be linked. Anomie and conservatism together point towards extreme anti-Semitism, and religious conservatism, together with anomie made anti-Semitism probable, and it was from among them that the group extending over 1% of the society where anti-Semitism had a political meaning, too. Kovács demonstrates

that the role of anomie, formerly so important, has decreased, because anomie was rationalised in political choices. At that time the anti-Semitic and non-anti-Semitic groups were not separated any more by social integration and frustration, but by an orientation of their world view. Purely political anti-Semitism is much bigger, the carrier of which is primarily a high-status nationalist group. Parallel to it the denial of the Holocaust has also grown, even if not in its nastiest form, but while the proportion of those who could imagine abuses of the memory of the Holocaust extended over one third of the society in 1995, it covered half of it by 2003.

One of the most significant methodological products of Kovács's work is the analysis of latency, showing how big the non-pronounced and even effectively denied anti-Semitism in reality is and what its type is. Kovács actually applies the method of not considering anti-Semitic statements decisive. He only qualifies someone an anti-Semite if he/she identifies with several anti-Semitic statements. He assesses anti-Semitism a complex phenomenon right from the outset: he locates the respondents on a scale measuring prejudiced stereotypes, social and emotional distances, and an aptitude to discrimination. According to historical studies there *should be* a difference in keeping with belonging to a religious denomination, with the distance historically empirically well grasped between the Jews and the other denominations (see e.g. Viktor Karády's researches). One may not read about it in this book, but in another book by Kovács on the anti-Semitism of university students. According to that work the interrelationship is just the opposite of what could be expected: the proportion of non-anti-Semites is significantly lower (26%) among Lutherans, than among Catholics (38%) and Calvinists (43%). One would once gladly read an analysis of whether the Lutherans included in the given sample are related to another feature, such as the social composition of parents, or the type of the institution, or it is just a reverse of the trend, or that the more liberal of the present descendants of the inter-war period Lutherans have become secularized, hence they have defined themselves as members of the group without religious denomination, therefore the "remaining" respondents have inevitably become more anti-Semitic...

The logic of the set of social interrelationships of anti-Semitism, namely the different kinds of anti-Semitism cropping up at different points of the society, agrees with the one presented in an earlier book on the young elite, where it was revealed that the *social background* of parents strongly influenced anti-Semitism. The characteristic letter 'U' of several other researches, notably of the sociology of religions, emerges here, too: the proportion of anti-Semites is higher among the student children of the expressly highly educated parents and of parents of expressly low education and social status. The nature of anti-Semitism is different at the two end-points of the letter 'U': children of rural parents of lower education profess traditionally anti-alien and anti-Judaist prejudices, whereas children of higher-status urban parents profess the anti-Semitism of 'objectively' competitive nature supported by political arguments. (It is characteristic of Kovács's methodological circumspection that he did not set out from the two different kinds of anti-Semitism which he could have done on the basis of theoretical literature and historical experiences, but he has formed five bunches of opinions out of *many* questions, out of the opinion of those, who are averse to the "Shylock-Jew", the Jews sticking together, the communist Jews, the Zionist Jews, and

the religious Jews, and it is the correlation of these bunches that has produced the pair of opposites of the modern and traditional types which could be correlated to the letter 'U' and which also correlates with historical experience.

At the end of the book on university students Kovács has written the following: "Such people are also needed to the persecution of Jews who ...assume to realize their political aims by an anti-Semitic policy. Political forces of this kind, to be taken seriously, have not yet appeared in post-communist Hungary. But if they would emerge it is feared that they could easily find the words suited to their aims." That book was published in 1997. Returning MIÉP (Party of Hungarian Justice and Way) to parliament in 1998, and its great influence among university students in the 2000s brightly supported Kovács's predictions, just as the analysis of the survey conducted by Kovács in 2005 proved anti-Semitism being widely politicized in the population.

There is a single significant issue in the empirical part, which I would gladly challenge. Apparently Kovács has measured the circle of anti-Semites narrower than accepted in common discourse. In fact in common discourse we would qualify someone anti-Semitic even on the basis of partial agreement with a *single* grave statement, just as a judge would send anyone to jail on the basis of a single aforethought manslaughter...With the statement that "the extermination of the Jews also had favorable consequences to the country" 6% fully agrees, 9% agrees, 29% does not agree, and 56% does not at all agree (p.93). This statement is manifest to such an extent, and the word "extermination" has so strong an emotional content, that a relationship with this statement by itself can be interpreted. The size of the two agreeing groups (15%) is significantly bigger than which is defined, otherwise by correct mathematical methods, as "extreme anti-Semites", though an even more extreme opinion cannot be imagined, and because of the presence of "extermination" here even indifference, or the general suspicion towards historical facts cannot explain it away. If, on the other hand, an emotionally not so strong Judeo-phobia is assumed beyond the statement, then the situation is even worse (sorry for this subjective word), for actually it means that it is a favorable thing and could be accepted to be taking part in murder and robbery, meaning that in 1944 many people shared the possessions of Jews, and the "remaining country" benefited from it...A further question is whether in this case one could aggregate the answers of "I do not agree" and "I do not *at all* agree". If they can be aggregated then more than four fifths of the Hungarians would definitely not identify themselves with this extreme form of anti-Semitism. If the two answers cannot be aggregated, saying that such an extreme, emotionally shocking statement should, by all means provoke the most strongly refuting answer of the non-anti-Semite respondent, then we are forced to regard about 44% of the Hungarian society anti-Semite. (A methodological check of this issue is not complicated. If, for instance we put a statement clearly independent of group adversities, such as "it is useful to the country if the robber and murderer is not punished" and see how many percentage of the respondents pay attention to choose the more marked rejection of the alternatives of answers "I do not at all agree" or "I do not agree"...) Until a test like this does prove that a large part of the respondents do not feel motivated to make a distinction between the rejections of two different dimensions, I cannot but think that unless someone takes up the position of full rejection, he/she should not be divested of the title of

anti-Semite. Therefore 44% of Hungarians are at least “suspect”. But the number of those who expressly agree, and in this case the above-mentioned methodological check is not necessary, 38% of the Hungarian population considers the influence of Jews too big in the country, 23% would like to legally limit the accumulation of wealth by the Jews and the foundation of enterprises by them, 19% would limit the proportion of Jews in certain occupations. The weight of these statements covers aversion deeper by scale and may get much more in contact with anti-Semitic acts than, agreeing with the saying that “the Jews are more interested in material things than not”, or with the statement that “all the Jews are the same”, and the plain aggregation of the statements may be misleading. Considering all this, it is naturally clear, that the population studied should be somehow distributed into groups, but in this case I would have more welcomed anti-Semitism of the strength of one, two, three, etc. At any rate, it can be the subject of further research or more precisely of secondary processing to be done by the author or perhaps by one of his students, to explore the socio-economic and psychological causal model of agreeing with the totally extreme statements.

My next remark suggests my wish to further consider the lessons in the direction of political science, and obviously not in that of sociology, joining in to the excellent chapter on political science, closing the dissertation. It is a major achievement of Kovács, that in contrast to the usual platitude confronting the Kádár era as free of anti-Semitism to the situation of the post-1990 times he proves that “Communist politics constantly recreated the ‘Jewish question’ and the related concepts if open anti-Semitism was not tolerated, like for instance in Hungary.” For “in Hungary, too, the organs of the party and government precisely kept a record of the Jewish origin of persons who got within sight, and if they saw any kind of risk in a person’s background, he/she was discriminated against exclusively on the basis of origin. Thus anti-Semitism was not recreated out of nothing after the change of the system.” “The theory of possible anti-Semitism the outlook of which is followed by this analysis, too, sets out from the assumption, that the three factors, such as prejudice, the development of anti-Semitic culture and the appearance of the anti-Semitic political ideology, do not necessarily derive from one another, their simultaneous appearance is a consequence of historical factors outside and independent of them.”

After 1990, in the lack of an essential program of social policy and in order to supplement for it “the preferred terrain of the immediately launched discourses creating identity was history and its dominant participants were the intellectuals, the professionals of discourses of history-policy. These discussions on identity politics were conducted in the language of intellectual groups, and were not primarily about the future but about the past.” At the same time they were not entirely “fictitious” conflicts, one may add, for “the anti-Semitic discourses conducted in the centre expressed intellectual status conflicts directly and almost openly, and that too, presented as crucial political choices, because of the role of the intellectuals described above. Thus part of the intellectual groups, playing an important role in the political discussions at the time of the change of the system utilized the language of the ‘Jewish question’ as well as the rhetoric of ‘national self-defense’ for the political rationalization of their group conflicts. The ‘We’ and the ‘They’ did not mark modernist and anti-modernist cultures, but delineated groups of intellectuals and those

parties and political groupings the very same intellectual groups wanted to shape to their image, or considered their opponents respectively.”

The issue is not (only) whether conservatives and rightists consider the Jews alien, but whether the ‘foreigners’ are considered Jewish, and, further on: whether anyone is regarded foreign, who professes views and has habits different from theirs. For it is the intellectual who has the best chances of fixing ‘labels’ and making the contents of labels accepted by society. The lessons of Kovács’s book go far beyond the specific question, and serve as explanations to the power lines defining the entire Hungarian political culture. And that, too, with a specifically mutual nature: those who see a cosmopolite foreigner, traitor of the nation in a person thinking differently, the latter one would be sooner or later considered as Jewish, or at least would be treated on the basis of historical patterns of action evolved against the Jews, and those who wish to discriminate against the Jews would sooner or later also call and consider them cosmopolites and foreigners.