

Gáspár Miklós Tamás (Hungary):

AUSTRIAN CONSERVATIVES AND HUNGARIAN LIBERALS

I am extremely honored to give this speech especially because I am the most ignorant person in this room about Polanyi's spiritual heritage. I do not want to pretend that I am an expert in this field. I have read Polanyi's works. But the organizers of this conference invited me because they suspected that I might have some ideas about the historical background of this mildly strange Austro-Hungarian philosophy of which Polanyi is more or less a part. The people I have in mind include Polanyi himself, the young Lukács, and Mannheim, and Aurel Kolnai who, although his work is in print (his essays were published by Bernard Williams and David Wiggins in 1976), is unjustly forgotten.

My thesis, whatever it is worth, is that these people, as indicated by the title of this little talk, are Austrian Conservatives and Hungarian Liberals. More specifically, my thesis is that each philosopher was both an Austrian Conservative and a Hungarian Liberal. Let me explain what I mean by this. But first let me tell you very briefly that by conservatism I do not mean simple traditionalism. Not everybody who wishes to re-create a former state of affairs is a conservative. Conservatism is a very specific defence of a very specific tradition, mainly the tradition of modernity. Modern conservatism was, after all, born as a reaction to the French Revolution and it was reborn as a reaction to the socialist revolution. It helped defend modern development against dreams of a distant past, which Jacobines and socialists wanted to re-create (and will go on wanting to re-create, because these sorts of people, believing in classical democracy, do exist and are quite victorious this day in Russia).

By the word "liberal" I mean just classical liberals, not American social democrats calling themselves liberals (for all sorts of minor reasons).

So, why were these people in the Eastern half of Europe and, in our case, in the Eastern half of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, liberals, i.e., performers, social engineers, planners of change, people critical of their own tradition? And why were they in an Austrian context, and in a Western context, conservative? The answer can be found in a very important feature of all societies that we do not call Western. These societies have, apart from other things, one very important common feature, which I endeavoured to disentangle in some of my writings, and which is insufficiently regarded and extremely important. All these societies were characterized by the ascendancy of foreign elites, not only colonial societies but also most East European societies. I do not have time to defend this claim, but I believe it is true, that East European societies were ruled by elites foreign to these societies in a number of ways: sometimes ethnically (not always), sometimes culturally, sometimes both.

These elites, in the 18th and 19th centuries in multinational empires like Austria-Hungary and Russia, were the agents of modernization. Modernization in Eastern Europe always meant an emulation of Western models and cultural change, an adaptation to Western ideas of a modern society, a free society of constitutional order. These ideas of liberal reform, were doubly foreign: first, because they were the emulation of a foreign ideal and, second, because they were maintained, propagated and sometimes forced upon the society by elites regarded as foreign. These people, ranging from German bureaucrats in Russia to the Jewish bourgeois in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, were defenders of a Western ideal. Therefore in a Western context they were of course considered conservative. But because they lived in non-Western society, they were considered innovators, revolutionaries, radicals, liberals. They were ambiguous. This is an ambiguity which my own generation knows well.

I think it is very interesting to look at the Austro-Hungarian philosophers who formed themselves within the context of this ambiguity. Always, when they addressed their words to native audiences, they were more optimistic and dogmatically rationalist than when they addressed Western audiences. It is very instructive to contrast Michael Polanyi's, or Aurel Kolnai's, or Karl Mannheim's writings in Hungarian to their writings in German or English. There is a difference in attitude that I have just described. Not only the style, the method, and the rhetoric were different, but sometimes all the connotations were different. In the 1920s and 1930s, Aurel Kolnai wrote in Austria a series of articles for the *Osterreichischer Volkswirth* about **Christianity and Conservatism**, about the meaning of conservatism. These articles contained a great deal of conservative propaganda, very close to the ideals of Karl Kraus. At the same time he wrote articles for the left radical *Szabadunk* in Budapest. Of course, "conservative" regimes in Eastern Europe were not the great conservatism they considered themselves to be, but only Eastern, colonial, East European, authoritarian, whatever.

This example is the most sharply obvious, but the same story could be told about Mannheim and the young Lukács. The young Lukács was a fashionable cult figure on the fringes of German academic culture before the First World War, a conservative fringe, extremely right wing. I think of Paul Ernst and the young Thomas Mann, who were so much in love with Lukács' writings. At the same time, he published his Hungarian essays in *Nyugat*, in *Huszadik Szabad*, the organs of the radical, democratic, not even liberal, left. My contention, and this will be my last, which is identical with my first, is that this ambiguity is not something rooted in Georg von Lukacs' personality, but in the situation of what (I do not but) V.S. Naipul calls the condition of a colonial intellectual.