

Lee Congdon, *Seeing Red: Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001).

No other non-Hungarian historian deserves more credit for introducing the Hungarian *fin-de-siècle* and its legacy to North American academia than Lee Congdon, professor of history at James Madison University. His latest book, *Seeing Red: Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism* offers a complex portraiture of Hungarian exile intellectuals and the communist experience, deepening the work he had already done in earlier studies. In two previous books, Congdon turned to Hungarian social thinkers in exile in the interwar years and traced their intellectual roots back to the progressive Hungarian counterculture of the turn of the century. By the early 1980s, a reinvigorated Hungarian historical scholarship transformed the image of this period and mapped out the formal and informal institutions of its progressive counterculture, ranging from avant-garde literary journals, theatre and art groups to debating societies and open universities. Congdon drew on this work but also greatly contributed to it with his sensitive and measured approach to intellectual history.

In *The Young Lukács* (1983) he depicted the intellectual journey of the enigmatic young philosopher from his early “religious atheist” aesthetics and philosophy through his Bolshevik turn in 1918 to his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*. Taking his cue from the deeply autobiographical and self-reflective Lukács, Congdon framed the biography around his seminal personal relationships. Drawing on his semi-fictional portraits in the roman-à-clefs by the contemporary Hungarian writers Balázs, Sinkó, and Lesznai as well as *The Magic Mountain* of Thomas Mann, he connected each of Lukács’s seemingly sudden philosophical and political turns to not only life-changing personal experiences but also to the various intellectual strands of the Hungarian turn of the century.

While Lukács, much in vogue in Western academia during the neo-Marxist 1960s and 1970s, needed no introduction, in his next monograph, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria, 1919-1933* (1991) Congdon set his sights on lesser lights of the “Hungarian Galaxy” of émigré intellectuals. The writer Béla Balázs, the artist Lajos Kassák and the philosopher Aurél Kolnai, hardly household names in the Anglo-Saxon world, were paired up with such luminaries as Lukács, the Bauhaus-artist László Moholy-Nagy and the sociologist Karl Mannheim. They represented, respectively, the communist, the avant-gardist, and the liberal tradition, three tangents of the pre-war Hungarian intellectual community from which they all emerged. Despite the sharp differences in their politics and ideology, all Hungarian exiles shared an initial alienation from the mainstream society and official culture of their native Hungary, only exacerbated by their isolation in exile. Yet, as

Congdon went on to show, this alienation also made for a powerful source of ideas and continued to drive their search, albeit along different paths, to regain a lost community.

Through generous social and intellectual tableaux of pre-1919 Hungary, 1920s Vienna, and Weimar Germany, and careful textual analyses of the works produced in exile, Congdon provided a composite portrait of an entire generation. In the process, he unearthed the pre-history of what became a, if not the central, narrative of the intellectual condition in the twentieth century. The case of Hungarian émigré intellectuals who had come of age in the progressive intellectual movements of pre-war Hungary but became influential social thinkers in exile supported the notion of exile as a metaphor for the intellectual condition. Congdon was also among the first to point to the eminent role of Hungarians in Weimar. Adding a corrective to Peter Gay's thesis on Weimar culture as one made by outsiders, Congdon went further to state that "it was only a slight exaggeration to say that exiled Hungarians *created* Weimar."¹

Published exactly ten years later, *Seeing Red*, the sequel, picks up where *Exile and Social Thought* left off, at the moment when Hitler ascended to power, forcing the Hungarian émigrés into yet another exile. It casts its net both wider and deeper, not only following them to London, Paris, Moscow and the United States but also including a chapter on a second generation of exiles, who left Hungary in the aftermath of the 1956 revolution.

An ambitious undertaking in its scope and time frame, *Seeing Red* sets out to be "an interpretive study of two generations of Hungarian émigré intellectuals"(ix). It brings back most of the principals of *Exile and Social Thought*, catching them at various points on the circuitous road of exile. Lukács and other members of his erstwhile Sunday Society such as Mannheim, Balázs, and Michael Polanyi as well as Aurél Kolnai and Moholy-Nagy, are joined by a number of slightly younger writers and artists, most notably Arthur Koestler who emerges as one of the central characters of the book. Congdon's inclusion of an ever-increasing number of members of the Hungarian intellectual Diaspora, from politicians to scientists, writers and filmmakers, at times makes the immigrant scene seem teaming with Hungarians. It brings to mind Laura Fermi's tongue-in-cheek remark in her study on America's *Illustrious Immigrants*: "They [Hungarians] themselves explain that they seem more numerous because they have the gift of ubiquity – and some do seem to be in more than one place at the same time – which multiplies the effect of their presence."²

In the next three chapters we follow them on their political and intellectual journey through the 1930s, the war years and well into the Cold War. Compressed into just over a hundred pages, the sheer number of personalities, and the twists and turns of their personal and political lives often leave the reader overwhelmed. And Congdon's decision to advance the narrative through a series of snapshots and frequent time shifts – intended, perhaps, to create a film-

like flow – does not alleviate this problem; given the time span of over five decades, a more straightforward narrative may have been a better choice. (As well, the lack of a clear line separating this volume from *Exile and Social Thought* may be responsible for the considerable overlaps and long passages lifted, *verbatim*, from the pages of the first volume.) Yet, it is rich and compelling material, based on extensive use of primary and secondary sources previously only accessible in Hungarian as well as numerous interviews with the last surviving witnesses.

Two of the Hungarian exiles figured prominently among the ranks of the anticommunist Left and the leadership of the Congress for Cultural Freedom; and the chapter that relates the politico-cultural battles of the Cold War through the alliance of Arthur Koestler and Michael Polanyi, adds important insights to this history. It is book-ended by summaries of Hungary's political developments, the gradual communist takeover between 1945 and 1948 and the 1956 revolution, providing both a much-needed context to the mind frame of the Cold War warriors and a transition to the last chapter.

Its inclusive title – “The New Émigrés” – and Congdon's claim notwithstanding, this chapter provides only the outline for an interpretive study of the second (post-1956) generation of Hungarian émigré intellectuals. In contrast to the exhaustive sample of the first generation, the line-up of social thinkers at the centre of the last chapter numbers only three: the Marxist philosopher István Mészáros, the historian of science Imre Lakatos, and the political historian Tibor Szamuely. Having arrived in England some time after 1956 (between 1957 and 1964), they all made significant contributions in their respective fields. And, despite the small sample, they could very well be representative of their generation of Hungarian exiles in England. Yet this is a point that remains to be made, as the context of émigré politics, provided in the previous chapters, is a missing dimension in this one.

Congdon has a novelist's touch for storytelling and this chapter is no exception; even a sketch of the pre-exile life of the Lukács-favourite István Mészáros, the Machiavellian Imre Lakatos, and the Gulag-survivor Tibor Szamuely leaves a lasting impression of unforgettable characters and life stories. Yet the account of their background and early influences remains just that, a sketch, and even the added description of the Byzantine ideological intrigues of 1950s Hungarian higher academic and Party echelons cannot do justice to the complex set of values they carried to their exile.

Here we come to the book's true focus: the intellectuals' relationship to communism and the Soviet experiment. Emerging from a labyrinth of meandering life stories and random or fated encounters, the premise at the core of this inquiry is that, for most of the agnostic twentieth century, communism represented the central challenge to intellectuals, its allure made irresistible by its ability to fill a spiritual void. And despite its broad framework and wealth of

material, this is a study that is passionately interested in answering one question only: how the intellectuals at its center fared in their quest of finding faith, be that religious or secular.

In this spiritual reading of the communist experience, Congdon joins a long line of conservatives from Burke to Whittaker Chambers, sidestepping other critics of communism who also make the connection with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, but draw the line at a spiritual approach. (The monumental study of François Furet, the doyen of French historians and himself an ex-communist, *Le passé d'une illusion: essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (1995) is a recent example.)

Much of Congdon's thesis hinges on the testimony of *The God that Failed*, the volume that came to define an entire cohort of disenchanted fellow-travelers, including Arthur Koestler; and Congdon is right to point out the deeply confessional tone of the memoirs of the six former communist/fellow-traveler writers and their emphatic references to the spiritual heritage of the West. Yet we should also remember the very specific aims underwriting this volume: to recast the political and cultural alignments of pre-WWII Europe in a Cold War mould and to re-affirm the authors' place in the Western cultural elite (not to mention to erase the memory of their gross political missteps in the not-so-distant past). Even then, these former faithful Communists or sympathizers, revisiting the time of their recruitment in the late 1920s, listed communism's capacity to fill the spiritual void as just one among its many attractions; it satisfied equally pressing moral and political needs by offering viable answers to racial and class injustices, as well as the rising threat of Fascism. And that it was not just faith but also community they confessed longing for, is an aspect Congdon himself had identified succinctly in *Exile and Social Thought*.

It is no accident that some of the most important figures of the Hungarian intellectual community in exile (and central to *Exile and Social Thought*) are rendered marginal in this study if, like Jászi or Mannheim, they showed immunity to both religion and communism. In the roadmap that Congdon draws of this quest for faith, consecutive stations correspond to degrees of intellectual integrity; thus French fellow-travelers whose "flirtation" with communism (which, "at the deepest level, was the result of their search for a faith that would lend meaning to their lives,") remained unreflected, end up faring much below "the most thoughtful of Hungarian émigré intellectuals" whose "anticommunism was no more satisfying than communism as a cause for which to live and die." For the latter, the overcoming of the temptations of these false creeds "cleared the way for new and more profound spiritual and moral searches"(151).

In this context, the inclusion of representatives of a second generation of Hungarian social thinkers in exile feels even more as an afterthought. As Congdon himself observes, none of them moved beyond political anti-communism, or, as in the case of the Lukács-disciple Mészáros, even communism. Yet

Congdon only hints at the complex (and in this last case, truly Oedipal) ties between the two generations. These, along with the differences in their respective defining experience vis-à-vis communism might offer a clue to their very different stand on it. While the first generation encountered communism in its brief Hungarian incarnation as the utopian episode of the 1919 Republic of Councils, the second generation had come of age during the feverish post-war years of a new, democratic Hungary, followed by the Soviet-controlled communist takeover. And despite the anti-democratic nature of the new communist regime, they deeply identified with the large-scale social and cultural revolution it brought about, not to mention that they owed it their own ascendance to the political and academic elite. This may be the reason why all three representatives of the second generation remained committed to the idea of a democratic socialism.

In this book, as before, Lee Congdon displays a mastery of his subject, including the most arcane details of Hungarian political and intellectual history in the twentieth century. His insistence, however, that intellectuals worthy of that name are driven solely by the desire to find faith is curious, given the degree to which it limits the freedom of the intellectual historian to draw his own conclusions. It feels artificially drafted onto this multi-generational and multi-dimensional study whose rich biographical and intellectual details and loose ends alike provide much food for thought and will hopefully generate further debate.

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¹ Lee Congdon, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria 1919-1933* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), xi.

² Laura Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 111.

Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002).

Revolution in the Air is a first-rate contribution to the recent history of radicalism in the United States. Max Elbaum tells the story of the “new communist movement” and its role in the organized revolutionary left’s climax and near-complete disintegration over the past thirty years. After its birth in the 1960s, the new communist movement reached its greatest density (numerical *and* intellectual, sad to say) in the 1970s, entered into profound crisis in the 1980s, and