

ANDRAS BOZOKI

Rolling Transition and the Role of Intellectuals. The Case of Hungary, 1977-1994 (Budapest-Vienna-New York: Central European University Press, 2022), 620 pp.

Transition to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe occurred as a consequence of the way communist regimes dismantled. Not as a momentum, but rather as a continuous overlapping series of phenomena, events around 1989 happened because of the actors, especially the intellectuals, that created them. This is the main thesis of András Bozóki's book published in 2022, *Rolling Transition and the Role of Intellectuals. The Case of Hungary, 1977-1994*. This work fills the gap in a literature that focuses mainly on the democratic transition in Eastern and Central Europe as a unitary space or on the Ruling Elites in a newly capitalist system.¹ More recently, political writings on Hungary discuss the democratic backsliding and the illiberal turns of the regime, including it in a regional framework affected by populism, and Euroscepticism.²

András Bozóki, professor at the Department of Political Science at the Central European University and founding editor of the *Hungarian Political Science Review*, offers in his work a complex and complete analysis of the Hungarian transition to democracy, describing in what manner intellectuals forged multiple strategies for adapting to the then contemporary democratic wave in the former communist bloc, between 1977-1994. Why this period? Because, comparatively to other Central European communist countries, Hungary met the prerequisites of the transition before it actually happened. Consequently, a mild de-communization happened under this domino effect as it depended upon the negotiation process

¹ Lavinia Stan (ed.), *Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Reckoning with the Communist Past* (BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, 2009), 326; Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communism Central Europe* (London: Verso, 2001), 288.

² András Körösesnyei, Gábor Illés, Attila Gyulai, *The Orbán Regime: Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making* (London: Routledge, 2020), 202; András L. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Society* (London: Routledge, 2017), 176; Andrea L. P. Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact, and Electoral Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 222.

and the Roundtable talks mutually accepted by the state apparatus and the opposition.³ Bozóki adopts the Weberian interpretive sociology method by creating types and categories that summarize the essence of change (9). More precisely, intellectuals changed attitudes, hence adopting various strategic positions. Was it dissidence, political activism, negotiation, or emerging multipartyism, they all adapted to the context and were analyzed by the author in a sociological way based on empirical research (10).

To begin with, developed throughout nine chapters, the book offers a chronological perspective fragmented into five periods, that is the dissent (1977-1987), open-network-building (1988), roundtable negotiations (1989), parliamentary politics (1990-1991), and the new pro-democracy initiatives (1991-1994) (11). Although contextual analysis is the path leading strategy, methodological pluralism is mobilized, associating sociological and politico-historical point of view, interviews, biographies, and eventually data analysis. In this way, the qualitative and the quantitative approaches give a panoramic perspective over past events, allowing readers to put into perspective the Hungarian democratic path until nowadays. Precisely, András Bozóki's considerable merit is to deconstruct intellectuals' roles, whether they were mediators, truth-tellers, reformers, activists, elite negotiators, professional politicians, or "founding fathers" (28). Sometimes their individual path crosses regime politics, especially during the dissent era and the late János József Kádár's regime (1956-1988), but this aspect will be treated later as it represents a paramount contribution to the general overview.

The book starts with a theoretical introduction concerning several theories about intellectuals, from Seymour Martin Lipset's classical trans-contextual concept, that describes them as "all those who create, distribute, and apply culture, that is the symbolic world of man" (37), passing through the New Class approach, according to which intellectuals catalyze a cultural capital and acquire the monopoly of interpretation (32).⁴ It eventually arrives at Daniel Bell's theory of *épater la bourgeoisie* intellectual attitude (41) and to Gil Eyal and Larissa Buchholz' network-

³ Lavinia Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 103.

⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 331.

based approach that qualifies intellectual *intervention* depending on their position within the *epistemic community* (46).⁵ The distinction between established intellectuals and movement intellectuals is particularly important within this book, for it explains how intellectuals, as socially active participants, and politics interfere and determine each other:

“In short, it is usually the established intellectuals who raise the problem, but there is a need for external reaction so the issue will be regarded important by susceptible, critical social groups.” (51)

Additionally, the author argues that, after the Hungarian revolution in 1956, within Central Europe similar political strategies have been observed, especially in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary: intellectuals were coopted and integrated into the party, within what seemed to be a moderated system, despite the fact that it was actually a milder form of control (through selective repression and social isolation). Populism was thus the “organic development” (96) of the solidarity movement on a national basis, and it could be identified in Samizdat journals such as *Hírmondó* [Messenger], or *Beszélő* [Speaking] alongside other topics such as moral politics, national minorities, churches and peace activism, environmentalism, cultural criticism – that is, everything that was not aligned with the state-party ideology. However, other states from the communist bloc (*i.e.*, Romania and East Germany) could not follow the same path, given the hermetic regime and the direct repression of all forms of opposition (61). When it comes to the politics of memorialization (chapter III), Samizdat publication contested “Bibó forgetting phenomenon,” in accordance with the distinction between *Goulash Communism* intellectuals and the then created opposition. Demands for democracy and for liberal values emerged with 1956 revendications that continued even after 1989 regime fall. Despite that, the author underlines that, in terms of politics of remembrance, the link between 1956 and 1989 exists only as a theoretical construction, based on a “linguistic, conceptual, and visual framework of remembrance” (138) through which intellectuals canonize

⁵ Daniel Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Gil Eyal, Larissa Buchholz, “From the Sociology of Intellectuals to the Sociology of Interventions,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 117-37.

the history of events. By this means, András Bozóki looks at the bigger picture of the transition and the practices favored by it, showing almost dialectically how social strata and actors interact in moments of political turmoil.

Furthermore, civil society, as a collective identity, spurred the need for dialogue: exchange between the elite and the individuals enhanced the idea of civil disobedience as a duty (181). Perceived as “fidelity to universal human justice,” the antipolitical movement (led by antipolitical intelligentsia) put morality into politics in such a way that only liberal system could have valued freedom, critical thinking, and out-of-party moral conscience. As such, the author states that before 1988, opposition was seen only as opposed to the system; afterwards it became the forum of pluralistic structuration translated into an open network building guided by such liberal values and aspirations. Deficiencies were not absent, as András Bozóki underlines: compared to the Polish case, where *Solidarnosc* was also articulated by a religious feature, Hungary was hit by the passivity of the workers translated into the lack of a cross-class mobilization (195).

Advancing, the fifth chapter starts with a more general discussion on theoretical grounds concerning regime change and elite change, emphasizing three theories of post-communist elite change during the 1980s: Elemér Hankiss’ convergence of power, Jadwiga Staniszkis’ political capitalism as a hybrid form of Westernization, and Erzsébet Szalai’s technocratic continuity (236).⁶ These theoretical paths open the discussion on the mechanisms used by the regime threatened by the emerging opposition, especially under János Kádár and, later on, under Imre Pozsgay. Given the official attitudes, the Hungarian opposition developed mirroring behavior which eventually led to a fragmentation of the new parties into ultra-moderate (Bajcsy-Zsiliszky Friendship Society, Christian Democratic People’s Party), moderate (Hungarian Democratic Forum) and self-limiting radical ones (Alliance of Free Democrats). It is paramount to recall the existence of such different postures in order to better understand how post-communist politics

⁶ Elemér Hankiss, *East European Alternatives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Jadwiga Staniszkis, “Political Capitalism in Poland,” *East European Politics and Societies* 5, no. 1 (1991): 127-41; Erzsébet Szalai, *Gazdaság és hatalom* [Economy and power] (Budapest: Aula, 1990).

transitioned to split interests and contrasting attitudes towards democracy. Therefore, during the Round Table Talks, EKA (Opposition Round Table) converted the rhetoric of model change into regime change politics, because “socialist pluralism” (as defended by the Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party) was not an alternative anymore. Thus, the election of a new Parliament was perceived as an imperative in order to accelerate the transition to democracy. The reburial of Imre Nagy, as part of the transitional justice, symbolized a reformed perception of the past, a new stage in the democratization course, being followed by the debates around the Constitution. In this point of the book, the weaknesses of the Hungarian post-communist society are pointed out by András Bozóki, as the limited results of the constitution-making process become visible: contradictory discussions about the presidency, introduction of the word “socialism” in the new Constitution (as endorsed by the Hungarian socialists), establishment of a Constitutional Court, and most importantly the debate on who should elect the president. This latter issue split the political scene into the opponents to the popular election of the President (including FIDESZ, the social-democrats, and the Alliance of Free Democrats) and those who advocated in favor of this possibility. Although there was a consensus on “Back to Europe” national goal, popular sovereignty, individual freedoms, ideal of moderation, and cleavages in the Hungarian society were soon present, despite the “negotiated revolution” pronated by the elite:

“Left-wing parties were discredited already at the starting point of the new regime, and they also fell victims of their own modernizing-centrist policies; their voters unsurprisingly turned to the extreme right-wing populist forces who offered security and protection” (317).

Within this wide-ranging classification, individual-focused analysis is put forward for the sake of a class-structured perspective. Thus, intellectuals as legislators emerge from past, deterministic events (such as the 1968 revolutionary wave or the emergence of younger parties), opening the way for a more competitive, and sometimes cooperative, interaction between political actors. In this point of the book, the author discusses the new categories of intellectuals created because the political

context forced them to manage the newly liberal regime, and to eventually implement the negotiated reforms: professional politicians, civil servants, CEOs, technocrats, or economists, they had to coagulate into a New Class of “post-communism managerialism” (428). In this matter, liberation from the old regime was a collective experience in need of trans-contextual knowledge provided by the intellectuals, during anti-fascist demonstrations in 1992, or during the decline of the Democratic Charter in 1993. That is to say, the polarization of the political scene started a fight against the emerging *democradúra* and asked for the self-mobilization of the elite in order to back up the democratization process. Indeed, embracing the European liberalization wave needed a form of metapolitics, involving the civil society, and connecting the intellectual elite to the isolated actors or dissident movements.

Finally, the book ends with a more quantitative approach (throughout thirty-nine events precisely inventoried) concerning the rotating agency of intellectuals within the political scene. During the five periods illustrated earlier in the book, the rolling transition operated as a mechanism through which different groups of intellectuals replace each other and transgress fixed roles in order to comply to varying contexts:

“To sum up, in Hungary, as a rule three fourths of the participants were replaced by newcomers in each period of transition, while a fourth of them went through to the next stage. This has been the formula of rolling transition in the Hungarian case.” (525)

To this extent András Bozóki’s work exploits patterns and overlapping categorizations, since transition happens because individual, rational and self-conscious political actors get involved and act according to circulating interests.

However, nowadays Hungary is struggling with a democratic backsliding connected, paradoxically, to those actors that participated in the 1990s to the transition to democracy. Failed democracy, illiberal regime, electoral autocracy, these are the attributes describing the actual political situation.⁷ Starting with the 2010 elections, when Fidesz won

⁷ Michael Bernhard, “Democratic Backsliding in Poland and Hungary,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 3 (2021): 585–607; Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign*

two thirds of the seats in the Parliament, Hungary became an ideal type of a worst-case scenario, framed by a general regress of Western democracy model.⁸ It is thus a good moment to question how a consensus-based transition (exceptional in Central-Eastern Europe) turned out to be problematic for Hungarian society. For this matter, András Bozóki's book offers a paramount contribution to the subject in the way he puts into a conceptual and historical frame intellectuals' contribution to the transitional process, thus allowing the readers to better understand current political phenomena.

TEODORA LOVIN
(University of Bucharest)

Affairs 76, no. 6 (1997); Attila Ágh, "The Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 5–6 (2016): 277–287.

⁸ Attila Ágh, "The Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe;" Pippa Norris, "Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks," *Social Science Research Network*, March 7, 2017.