
The Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä in central Finland is one of the most important institutes at which Hungarian history and culture is studied and taught outside of Hungary, both from the perspectives of teaching and research. Many historians, ethnographers, and literary historians have gotten doctorates at the university pursuing research on Hungary and its culture, and the institute has managed to catch the attention of many young Finnish scholars, who have then taken a more active interest in Hungary. The university, in keeping with tradition, publishes every dissertation as a book and, now, also online. Tuomas Laine-Frigren’s dissertation, which has now been published as the 280th volume in this series (the number is not a typo), offers important new information and insights for scholars of the Kádár era and anyone interested in the history of sciences in Hungary and, more narrowly, the historiography on the social sciences.

Laine-Frigren examines how the science of psychology developed under Kádár, or more precisely, how it was reborn. He considers how the institutional system first began to take shape and the various political and professional/scientific debates amidst which it developed in the period that lasted from the defeat of the 1956 Revolution to the mid-1980s. Laine-Frigren refers to himself as a revisionist historian, by which he means that he considers the state socialist system a meeting and collision point of many competing interests. He adheres to a complex analytical method which includes perspectives from the history of ideas, the history of science, and political history. His discussion is polycentric, by which I mean that he considers, alongside the discipline of psychology in Hungary and its connections to international scholarly life, the significance of formal and informal networks, circles, and individuals, and he also examines the various discourses on this branch of the sciences.

The book is divided into four chapters. In the first, Laine-Frigren offers a historical glance back, providing a portrait of the rich and recognized school of psychology that developed in Hungary, going back as far as the work of Sándor Ferenczi. He also shows how utterly devastating the anti-Jewish laws, the Holocaust, and the destruction of the war were to the discipline, followed, after a brief moment of respite, by the Stalinist dictatorship. He quite rightly
notes that the science of psychology never disappeared entirely in Hungary. A slender thread of continuity always remained, though separation from the world of international (and particularly Western) scholarship unquestionably was a serious hindrance.

In the second chapter, Laine-Frigren examines the ideological milieu in which psychology prospered or struggled. This process clearly was in close parallel with the processes underway in the Soviet Union, where behaviorism (based largely on the ideas of Ivan Pavlov) and the ideas of education theorist Anton Makarenko had become dominant. On the other hand, however, the desire of power to rear and shape society collectively also created opportunities. Indeed, the process which came to its culmination in the 1960s and 1970s had already begun before 1956, if only very embryonically. Researchers managed to secure major financial resources and launch comprehensive programs, since the government had ever greater demand for the advice and counsel of psychologists in its attempts to deal with the various social problems it found itself compelled to confront.

These developments are perhaps most clearly evidenced by the changes which took place in the approach to child and youth psychology and treatment, which Laine-Frigren presents in the third chapter (which is the most thorough and circumspect chapter of the book). He was able to draw on serious preliminary studies, since the circumstances of and problems faced by the younger generations in Hungary after 1956 have become popular subjects of study. Laine-Frigren persuasively argues that the large number of young people who took part in the 1956 Revolution and the various forms of counterculture which emerged in the 1960s deeply worried the political leadership of the country. The various measures which were adopted and organizations which were created in order (allegedly) to protect children dealt with these problems in an array of varying ways. Numerous serious issues came to the surface, including the traumas faced by the generation which was growing up in the postwar decades, overburdened parents, and shifts in family roles. Furthermore, the authorities often criminalized and labeled as deviant the behavior of young people who found themselves in difficult circumstances, and instead of providing care, they strove to isolate them. Laine-Frigren offers analyses of numerous case studies, and he offers examples of the kinds of tragedies which took place in the foster and community homes. He also shoes how, with the passage of time, it became increasingly clear that the state was not able and did not particularly even want to address the causes of juvenile delinquency.
The book includes a similarly excellent chapter on the ways in which social psychology gained ground and became increasingly institutionalized. Laine-Frigren essentially ties the increasing prestige and prominence of the social sciences to the introduction of the process of economic reform. The debates which preceded and followed the introduction of the new economic mechanism helped nudge the processes of decision making away from the ideological and towards the rational. The sciences of economics and agriculture acquired new value and respect, but so did branches of the sciences which focused on the ways in which society functions and responds to shifts, as these branches of inquiry provided important information for decision makers. This shift had a positive influence on assessments of the science of psychology.

Laine-Frigren offers two examples illustrating this, examples one might describe as concealed. Ferenc Pataki began his career as part of the People’s College Movement, and was given a Soviet scholarship, and became involved in the Petőfi Circle. In the 1960s and 1970s, through his personal ties to György Aczél, he played a key role in the management of the institutional and personal background of psychology and, in particular, social psychology. The book contains frequent mention of his name, the titles of his works, and references to the decisions he made, and quite rightly so. Pataki’s career quite clearly illustrates that it was possible to pursue a career within the state socialist system which may well have been founded on political loyalty, but which nonetheless yielded important contributions to the field. Not everyone was so fortunate, of course. For Ferenc Mérei, who had a similarly outstanding mind, the period between 1945 and 1949, i.e. the golden age of the short-lived People’s College movement, was the zenith of his career. Mérei was pushed to the margins of official scholarly life, first because of the anti-Jewish laws, then because of the Stalinist dictatorship, and then because of the role he played in 1956. His life story, however, is clear testimony to the fact that a person of his talents could not be completely banished from scholarly life in Hungary. Because of his remarkable intellectual capabilities and stunning knack for pedagogy and teaching, he was given an opportunity, as a laboratory leader, to form a significant circle of students at the National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (known more familiarly as Lipótmező after its location in a neighborhood in the Buda hills). The effects of his work and the works of this group of students can still be discerned today. Perhaps the only more serious shortcoming of the work lies in the fact that Laine-Frigren was not always entirely aware of the antecedents in the careers of the psychologists on whom he has chosen to focus, and this sometimes leads to odd lacunae.
In the closing chapter, in which Laine-Frigren offers a summary of his findings, he again raises the central questions: to what extent did the development of a discipline depend on the individual wills of the decision makers in the party state and to what extent did it depend on submitting to political pressures and constraints? Were there any real intentions to reform, and was it possible to resist calls to catch up, as it were, with the science of psychology in the West? One of the great strengths of the book, in conclusion, is that Laine-Frigren has very precisely depicted the opportunities for action and the limits of these opportunities.

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