



Unbalanced exposure: existentialism, Marxism, and philosophical culture in state socialist Hungary

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Accepted: 10 June 2022 / Published online: 14 September 2022
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Abstract

Existentialism and existentialist thinkers enjoyed sustained interest in Hungary under communist rule. From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, this branch of “bourgeois philosophy” never ceased to generate renewed attention. However, this reception was not subsumed into the ideological orthodoxy, nor was it simply destined to fuel Marxist–Leninist criticism. Whereas Georg Lukács’s polemics with existentialism in the 1940s set the agenda to embrace a highly critical reception, it was precisely Sartre’s influence in the 1960s that had opened the door for a more open-minded Marxist reading of existentialist thinkers in Hungary. This paper seeks to reconstruct the intellectual motifs and contexts that underlie this uncommon development. In focusing predominantly on the period of the 1960–1980s, I am particularly interested in exploring Lukács’s role in the changing attitude towards existentialism in Hungary; the controversies between various Marxist approaches dealing with existentialist thinkers and the ways which the influence of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus in literary circles influenced the tenor of their philosophical reception. Through this exploration, I will seek to provide a deep insight into one of the richest intellectual landscapes of the philosophical culture in state socialist Hungary.

Keywords Existentialism · Marxism · Socialist Hungary · Georg Lukács · Jean-Paul Sartre · Philosophical culture

It certainly did not escape the attention of the educated public, and least of all the watchful eyes of the ideological gatekeepers, that the book *Trends in Contemporary Bourgeois Philosophy*, published in 1964 and written by György Márkus and Zádor Tordai, initiated a nondogmatic and somewhat unruffled Marxist-critical approach to Western philosophy in Hungary (Márkus and Tordai 1964). In this volume, the Romanian-born Hungarian philosopher Tordai, after a lengthy critical analysis of the different varieties of existentialist philosophy, devoted some insightful remarks to the

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reception of existentialism in the “People’s Democracies” in general. Tordai detected two waves of the impact of existentialism in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. The first one came right after the Second World War, in the wake of liberation; the second, more momentous wave gained currency during the 1950s as a consequence of several vital intellectual factors. In Tordai’s view, the leading motives of the postwar cultural situation explained the foregrounding of existential questions in literature and the humanities, especially because the Marxist thinking of the time paid little attention to the problem of the “human individual”. However, the decisive rousing factor in this situation was precisely the emergence of the “harmful and erroneous political practice” of the 1950s “which forgot about people as individuals and only appealed to the general aspects of history” (Márkus and Tordai 1964, pp. 133–134). As a result, a certain section of the leftist intelligentsia experienced a kind of internal disillusionment and a drifting away from Marxism, which manifested itself in a turn towards existentialism. Nevertheless, Tordai also argued that these developments did not reveal the true nature of socialist reality, as evidenced by the advancement of these societies in politics and culture in the 1960s which was reinforced by the elimination of the practice of the cult of personality. As a consequence, the influence of existentialist ideas in the communist countries was destined to disappear as a regressive tendency.

Apart from the implicit autobiographical reference in these lines—because it was precisely for the publication of a literary study stigmatized by the party authorities as “existentialist” that Tordai lost his university job in Romania¹—these remarks provide an opportunity to embark on contextualizing the reception of existentialism in state socialist Hungary. For this case, and the mindset behind it, offer not only an insight into the self-interpretation of Marxist philosophy of the period, but also a prospect to confront it with the ideological trends and cultural transfers that were actually taking place at the time in the Hungarian philosophical scene. The complexity of this cultural context demonstrates itself in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it is a rather symbolic peculiarity that the critical presentation of the existentialism in Tordai’s account painstakingly avoided making any reference to Georg Lukács, the first internationally renowned Marxist thinker to engage in a debate with this trend after 1945. Lukács, in this period, was completely sidelined for political reasons in Hungary, yet his influence was very much present in the critical approach of the volume.² On the other hand, it is also striking that, in light of what we know today about the reception of existentialism, Tordai was not capable of adequately forecasting the cultural and ideological developments that were about to unfold in Hungarian philosophical life. To be sure, just as the liberating effects of de-Stalinization created a more sweeping ideological and cultural agenda, the influence of existentialism, along

¹In this study, Tordai interpreted the Hungarian nineteenth-century writer Madách’s *The Tragedy of Man* from a philosophical and critical perspective and related it to the situation of contemporary socialist society. In doing so he highlighted the vital importance of taking into account the individual roles and situations in the building of socialism (Tordai 1957). Following various severe Marxist public criticisms, the editorial board of the publishing journal *Korunk* distanced itself from the paper, and Tordai was removed from his assistant professor in philosophy position at the Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

²Because of his political role in the 1956 uprising, Lukács was forced into intellectual exile in Hungary. He was labeled an “anti-Marxist” thinker, and his writings were not published in Hungarian. This situation changed only in 1967 when the Communist regime decided to open up to Lukács. His party membership was reinstated, and from that time, he reemerged as a leading, albeit critical, Marxist intellectual.

with its bolder or harsher Marxist rebuke, did not show signs of regression, but of exponential progress from the 1960s onward.

In this paper, I will argue that the blended presence of the two kinds of intellectual blindness manifested in Tordai's interpretation, one politically self-imposed, the other arising from the plasticity of the cultural situation, one struggling with the past, the other futilely scanning the future, was strongly representative of the general milieu of Marxist philosophical culture in Hungary in the mid-1960s and 1970s. This was especially the case when it came to confronting "bourgeois philosophy" with Marxist ideological or a scholarly arsenal in hand. I will draw upon this cultural disposition of impaired vision in order to expose and assess the most emblematic philosophical attitudes to various existentialist positions and their ideological background in this era. What makes all this particularly significant is that existentialism was undoubtedly one of the most discussed and critically acclaimed Western philosophical movements during the period of state socialist rule in Hungary.

Lukács's legacy

The almost complete absence of positive references to Lukács's post-1945 confrontation with existentialism up to the 1960s in Hungary was fueled clearly by political reasons. However, keeping this achievement low profile meant that Hungarian philosophy deprived itself of one of its most important, if not the only, international affiliations at the time. For in Lukács's case, the confrontation with existentialist ideas had shown not only nominal or ideological traits but was formed through a direct philosophical engagement marked by personal motives. Lukács engaged in a debate on the meaning of humanism with Karl Jaspers, a friend from his youth, in the first postwar international intellectual meeting in Geneva in 1946.³ Subsequently, he corresponded with Merleau-Ponty about his work, and in the winter of 1949, during his stay in Paris, he launched a vivid debate in the French press with Sartre on the meaning and role of philosophy that escalated into a personal dispute.⁴ In addition to these individual polemics, Lukács was intensively engaged in the critical study of existentialist philosophy during this period, as a result of which he published his *The Crisis of Bourgeois Philosophy* in Hungarian in 1947 (Lukács 1947), then again in 1948, with a shortened edition entitled *Existentialisme ou marxisme?* in French in the same year (Lukács 1948). In these works, mostly Heidegger, Sartre, and de Beauvoir were the main targets of his philosophically grounded Marxist critique. No less important, on the other side, is Sartre's somewhat favorable interpretation of Lukács's early concept of "reification" in one of his 1950s articles (Sartre 1964), and his highly polemical approach to his views on existentialism in his essay "The Problems of Method", first published in 1957 (Sartre 1963), later incorporated as the introductory chapter in his *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The same importance can be attributed to Merleau-Ponty's extensive and for the most part laudatory interpretation of Lukács's

³On the Lukács–Jaspers debate, see Starobinski (1989), pp. 193–205.

⁴On these issues, and especially on the postwar reception of Lukács in France, see Bouffard and Feron (2021).

early Marxist thinking in his *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955, in which he also embraced Lukács's work in the tradition of "Western Marxism" (Merleau-Ponty 1973). Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 1960s, Hungarian readers could learn virtually nothing about these significant and internationally recognized philosophical developments due to Lukács's intellectual marginalization.

In fact, in his own interpretation, Lukács made very few concessions to existentialist philosophy. In his view, although the postwar liberated social and cultural situation in Europe could to some extent objectively justify the emergence of existentialism as an opportune mode of thinking, this intellectual trend failed utterly in its understanding of the main constraints and concerns of modern human and democratic development and especially of the merits of Marxism in this regard. In this respect, he pushed the judgment in an absolute direction: in his views, any intellectual current not promoting at least a moderate socialist perspective constituted implicitly a step on the road to the possible restoration of fascism. Accordingly, and apart perhaps from Merleau-Ponty, Lukács considered that the promotion of individualism in all kinds of existentialism was a symptom of a deep intellectual crisis whose cardinal sin was to weaken, mislead or demoralize European intelligentsia and the youth otherwise susceptible to true democratic change in postwar Europe.

Lukács's predominantly philosophical approach helped to foster an instant analytic and polemic attitude towards the reception of existentialist ideas marked by the notions of "crisis", "bourgeois individualism", "irrationalism", and "nihilism". This jargon formed, for a long time, the conceptual and argumentative framework of Marxist interpretations of existentialism in Hungary and abroad. This conceptual universe, reinforced primarily by ideological binders, was put into a larger historical and philosophical perspective by Lukács in his 1954 work *The Destruction of Reason* (Lukács 1980). In this framework, existentialism was portrayed as a profoundly irrationalist philosophical current that not only heralded and fueled, but also continued to promote the values of the bourgeois ideological crisis that ultimately facilitated the rise to power of Hitler's fascism. For Lukács, the thinking of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and to some extent Camus too, was the hallmark of this orientation. Although Lukács was somewhat more permissive with Sartre's ideas in this period, and even envisaged the possibility of establishing a direct contact with the French philosopher,⁵ in his late and posthumously published work *The Ontology of Social Being*, existentialism was regarded yet again with a highly critical lens. The novelty of this approach consisted in the fact that Lukács tried to develop his critique of existentialism against the backdrop of neopositivism, and especially Wittgenstein's thinking, and phenomenology. It was in this framework that he advanced his main objection that existentialism operated with an impoverished and abstract system of categories of human reality compared to the concrete richness of Marxist analysis. Also, although Lukács urged to "follow Sartre's turn to Marxism with the greatest appreciation" (Lukács 1973, p. 395), he couldn't refrain from condemning him for premising an ontological ap-

⁵Lukács and Sartre met in person at the 1955 World Peace Conference in Helsinki. Shortly after, Lukács's former disciple István Mészáros, who was living in England at the time, tried to mediate and establish a working relationship between the two philosophers. However, probably due to Sartre's preoccupations and Lukács's political isolation, this rapprochement did not take place. See Mészáros's account of this case, (Mészáros 2012).

proach based on an “idealist and irrationalist” anthropological underpinning (Lukács 1973, p. 396).

However, if Lukács’s philosophical considerations did not have a more lasting effect on the reception of existentialism in Hungary, it was not only because his political isolation condemned him to a too long period of anechoic silence, it was also because the confrontation with existentialist positions was already moving along different trajectories. The literary and philosophical profusion of this trend, and its gradual alignment with certain left-wing ideals, presented Hungarian Marxist philosophy with a challenge that could only be met from divergent, if not directly opposing, sides and means.

Ideological opening and philosophical diplopia

In the spring of 1961, the authoritative literary weekly *Élet és irodalom* [Life and Literature] published an unusually long analytical article on an unusually tuned topic entitled “Existentialist Phenomena in Contemporary Hungarian Literature” (Köpeczi 1961). The author of the article was Béla Köpeczi, a literary scholar, who would for a long time be one of the prominent party delegates in academic life overseeing the reception of existentialism in Hungary. In order to examine some recent developments in Hungarian literature within this framework, in his article, Köpeczi attracted attention by providing a detailed account of Sartre’s contemporary position along with the main tenets of existential philosophy. It must be noted that under the given circumstances, Köpeczi acted with some caution. For not only did he positively mention Sartre’s recent embrace of Marxism, explicitly referring to his freshly published *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, but he also stressed that the existentialist literary phenomena he detected did not constitute a deliberate platform at all, but rather had to be considered as “atmospheric” intellectual symptoms. That said, Köpeczi’s critique was aimed at some of the most talented figures of the younger generation of Hungarian writers,⁶ condemning them for promoting a vision of the “isolated individuum” and “anguished human experience” that was far from being compatible with a progressive Marxist worldview. However, the overall tone of the article was at once authoritative and permissive. Köpeczi stressed the need for further debate and examination, and emphasized that Marxist philosophy certainly had a distinct part to play in this.

Despite its disciplined ideological character, Köpeczi’s study seemed to open as many doors as it closed. While his criticism obliquely promoted some of the finest works of Hungarian literature, he also urged a critical confrontation between Marxism and existentialism. In so doing, he left far behind such orthodox views as those endorsed by the renowned Soviet philosopher T. Ojzerman, who, being on a lecture tour in Hungary at the time, argued publicly that “existentialism is nothing but the newest and most fashionable form of irrationalism, which has not raised a single new principle, a single new idea” and it is therefore nothing else “but the rotting of bourgeois consciousness” (Ojzerman 1962). By contrast, Köpeczi’s somewhat enlightened criticism set a different tone that certainly did not go unheeded in his day.

⁶These writers were Géza Ottlik, Magda Szabó, István Csurka, Tamás Huszty, Gyula Hernádi, Sándor Weöres, and Ferenc Juhász.

If anything, the fact that he held the post of head of the Central Publishing Directorate under direct Party control must have given particular weight to his words. His approach was indicative of a henceforth typical situation in which even if an ideological barricade had to be erected in the name of Marxism against a bourgeois trend, it was nevertheless a fresh and stimulating experience to be able to take a closer look at those thinking on the other side of the barricade.

The cultural encounter with the both thought-provoking and proscribed existentialist views soon gave way to the spread of a kind of progressive confrontational philosophical reception in Hungary. This was particularly true in the case of Sartre, whose inclinations towards Marxism and the socialist camp could hardly go unnoticed. Thus, for example, Miklós Almási, a former disciple of Lukács, in a detailed critical analysis of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, simultaneously condemned Sartre for his “subjective idealism” and “denial of history”, while also approvingly noting that Sartre “is attempting to circumscribe a real problem: he is seeking the dialectic of individual autonomy and social determination” (Almási 1961). This acknowledgment that existentialism was dealing with “real problems” was already a note of appreciation. In this way, Almási was making the same point as the Polish philosopher and reformist vocal party intellectual Adam Schaff, who, in his book *Marxism and Existentialism* published exactly at the same time in Poland, argued that the progressive cultivation of Marxism required the recognition of the “real problems” of the bourgeois philosophical systems under criticism (Schaff 1961).⁷ In this vein, the recognition of some of Sartre’s merits became an established trope even in Marxist–Leninist criticism. Thus, when addressing the question of personality in Marxism and existentialism, the young philosopher-sociologist Tibor Huszár went so far as to label Sartre as arguably “one of the most restless, vibrant minds of our time”, whose life’s path is characterized by “relentless honesty and ceaseless renewal” (Huszár 1962). Without a doubt, these types of formulations were still meant to establish a critical Marxist engagement with existentialism. However, they were delivered under the influence of a delicate blend of cultural liberalization of the 1960s, marked by the effects of de-Stalinization, and ideological commitment in the hope of creating a new type of socialist culture.

A report of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1968 stated that “the credibility and social impact of Marxist philosophy have been greatly enhanced by the quality of the criticisms and debates that have replaced declarative statements based on authoritative precepts with analytical criticism of the opponent’s views grounded on facts and scientific arguments” (Report 1968). To a large extent, the growing impact followed from the results achieved in the critical examination of existentialism. By this time, however, the critical study of existentialist ideas and thinkers was not limited to domestic Marxist interpretations but also had some textual resources and international overtones. The translation of the first large-scale selection of texts of existentialist thinkers was published in 1965 in Hungary. This compilation, which saw many editions and remained a major reference until the 1980s, was edited and introduced by Béla Köpeczi and included short essays and fragments from Kierkegaard,

⁷ A short extract from this work on the relationship between Marxism and bourgeois theories was published in the Hungarian journal *Valóság* in 1962 (Schaff 1962).

Jaspers, Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre (Köpeczi 1965). In the same period, university textbooks that contained writings from existentialist thinkers were also released (Simonovits 1963). From the cluster of international protagonists, the most outstanding were the Hungarian translations of Roger Garaudy's fierce polemic with Sartre (Garaudy 1963), Piama Gajdenko's somewhat erudite interpretation of Heidegger (Gajdenko 1966), and Sidney Finkelstein's alluring *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (Finkelstein 1968). The translations of Karel Kosík's *The Dialectic of the Concrete* (Kosík 1967) and Adam Schaff's *Marxism and the Individual* (Schaff 1968) generated attention not only because these works sought to radically reshape the Marxist understanding of human reality, but also because they grew organically out of the authors own Eastern-European Marxist views and their clash with existentialism. The release of these last two works is particularly indicative since it shows that the growing interest in existentialism intersected, certainly not fortuitously, with the theoretical debates that had been raging since the early 1960s around the problems of Marxist anthropology and socialist alienation in the countries of the Eastern Bloc.⁸ In these debates, the emphasis on the elucidation of the Marxist conception of the individual and the personality has both nurtured and inspired the attention paid to the existentialist problematic of human praxis.

Among the domestic critical works, Tordai Zádor's authoritative monograph on Sartre's existentialism, published in 1967 under the title *Existence and Reality*, is particularly noteworthy in terms of both scope and quality (Tordai 1967). It is probably fair to say that there were not many philosophical enterprises of this caliber in East-Central Europe devoted to this topic. Tordai's approach was both marked by the fact that his account was intended to be an in-depth philosophical analysis, and not merely a Marxist critical review, and that he subjected Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* to an exceptionally meticulous consideration from this point of view. A further peculiarity of his approach was that he used the development of Sartre's thinking as a kind of deconstructive lens in the evaluative positioning of existentialist philosophy, pointing out that "in the debate with Sartre we have an ally whose support we should not renounce. It is Sartre himself. For Sartre's development, his move away from existentialism, his aspiration to embrace Marxism, is in fact a refutation of existentialism in life, in reality" (Tordai 1967, p. 12). As for the critical part, for most of his work, Tordai undertook to show, point by point, that the failure to take into account the realm of concrete social relations and their ontological underpinnings has set Sartre's early thought on a trajectory that did not allow him to solve his own problems with sufficient sophistication. The failure of existentialism, in this view, resided in its inability to reach the level of interindividual relations by way other than excessive speculation and self-imposed arbitrariness. Tordai argued that despite his incisive approach devoted to the nature of shame, love or bad faith, the methodological shortcomings made it impossible for Sartre to arrive at a genuine understanding of the system of grounding societal interconnections in human experience and its social environment.

By contrast, in his staggeringly detailed critical dialog with Sartre, Tordai also sought cautiously to afford a positive and accurate meaning to Marxist concepts such

⁸On these debates in Hungary, see László (1966), Hanák (1976).

as “social existence”, “alienation”, “individual freedom based on class freedom”, and “class responsibility”, which to a large extent bear the marks of his own insightfulness and elaboration. In the last sections of his work, Tordai tried to show that the decomposition of existentialism in the postwar period was precisely the result of embracing such social and political insights in Sartre’s thought that both transcended the individualist framework of his thinking and pinpointed the superiority of Marxism. Sartre’s “turn” began with embarking on a path towards materialism and culminated in his radical reelaboration of the idea of materialist dialectics. However, Tordai devoted only a short chapter to the analysis of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which merely illustrated but did not really prove his thesis that, even in this work, Sartre remained a prisoner of the essential premises of his own bourgeois outlook. Last but not least, Tordai’s monograph included about a hundred translated pages of Sartre’s early existentialist masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* thus further contributing to the improvement of the textual resources and interpretative competency of Hungarian philosophical culture.

At the same time, it is rather surprising that Tordai’s work received hardly any noticeable critical attention in Hungary. Neither the authoritative philosophy journals nor the leading cultural periodicals, which were usually at the forefront of reviewing pathbreaking philosophical works, devoted any critical appraisal to this work. The reason for this silence may not only be the fact that its author signed a political statement issued by a small group of Hungarian philosophers condemning the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia at the international Korčula Summer School in 1968,⁹ it is also possible that this lack of critical response reflected a kind of cultural saturation with a certain type of discourse on existentialism as well as the professional and ideological limits that shaped its reception.

Literary inclinations and ideological anxiety

When Béla Köpeczi revisited the question of the literary aspects of existentialism and its corrosive effects on Hungarian literature in a lengthy article published in 1964 in the theoretical monthly of the Party, he defined “anxiety and fear” as the most general literary expression of existentialism (Köpeczi 1964). However, no one could expect that these sentiments would be soon echoed by the ideological cadres of the party too. In this case, however, it was precisely an anxiety about the popularity of existentialist ideas in literature, theater, and film that attracted the spotlight. From that point on, the trope of the intoxicating impact of existentialism on the views of the educated public and especially on the youth in socialist Hungary became a long-lasting ideological concern.

Indeed, this kind of anxiety was originated by the ideological discourses that, by often blaming the boomerang effects of a too soon, too permissive reform-communist cultural policy, deemed the influence of existentialism excessive and dangerous in socialism. Thus, the orthodox Marxist historian of philosophy Pál Sándor, reflecting on the “social basis and class roots” of existentialism, observed that existentialism had

⁹On this protest, see Békés (2018).

grown beyond being a philosophical system or even a philosophical school, and its scope had extended to literature, the arts, even theology, to become a whole intellectual current, a general attitude, and a way of life (Sándor 1963). Similarly, the philosopher and Party Academy professor Ádám Wirth pointed out that one of the main forms of bourgeois “ideological infiltration” from the West was the promotion of the ideas of existentialism. However, in his views, the influence of existentialism was not so much transmitted through philosophical theories but primarily through “fiction, film, art criticism, and publicist literature” (Wirth 1964). In fact, if these anxious and condemnatory statements sought to contribute to the upsurge of philosophical debates about existentialism, it was precisely because these influences were already much more pronounced in the field of literature.

In fact, by the time the first fragmentary philosophical selections from existentialist authors had appeared in print, the publication of foreign existentialist literature had already long been blossoming in Hungary. By the mid-1960s, most of Sartre’s important novels and many of his plays were published, and the latter were also performed in leading theatres. In the same way, Simone de Beauvoir’s books such as the *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Mandarins*, *The Prime of Life*, and *Force of Circumstance* had already been translated into Hungarian in the 1960s, and by the end of the decade the *Second Sex* had also been published. This line of interest was spectacularly complemented by the attention devoted to the literary works of Albert Camus, with the translation of *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *Caligula*, and the collection of short stories *Exile and the Kingdom* published in 1969. In addition, numerous literary anthologies, in both large and small format, with translations of existentialist literary texts added further to the repertoire. If we add to this that a selection of Sartre’s smaller literary texts published originally in his *Situations* was released in a book format under the title *What is literature?* in 1969 (Sartre 1969), then we can conclude that a rather systematic and compact literary reception took place during this period in Hungary.

It must also be noted that apart from Köpeczi’s ideological supervisory writings, this literary production was accompanied by a simultaneously benign and virulent critical reception. A good example of this trend is the achievements of the literary historian Vilma Mészáros, whose highly elaborative and evaluative writings on existentialist literature focused firmly on the literary and aesthetic qualities of these works, rather than on their ideologically dubious elements. For example, in her comprehensive work on the contemporary French novel, she favorably highlighted the historical, ethical, and left-wing sensibilities of Sartre and de Beauvoir (Mészáros 1966), while in her 1973 monograph on Camus, she underlined the French writer’s commitment to a realist literary agenda (Mészáros 1973). In a more general but no less noteworthy way, it can be observed that while Sartre’s literary works received a mixed reception in Hungary, having been often stigmatized in light of the allegedly individualist, nihilistic, and third-way inclinations of his philosophical writings, Camus’ literary works have been treated more open-handedly. In assessing Camus’s novels, *The Stranger* and *The Fall*, even Köpeczi argued, after having categorized the author as a “nihilist”, that the value of these works lay in their “subjective honesty and penetrating search” and that these texts “makes us think, shakes us up, and makes us confront the problems of ourselves and our world” (Köpeczi 1962). In the same way,

the blurb of the Hungarian translation of Camus' anthology labeled him almost poetically as “the great writer of the Africans”, from whom “the modern man’s sense of life, era, inner loneliness, exile and the longing for a happy country either expressed in French or in Hungarian, still uttered in ‘an African language’” (Camus 1969).

In this fairly permissive cultural milieu, it is perhaps not surprising that many in the party’s ideological apparatuses feared for the preservation of the accomplishments of socialist society and culture from the corrosive effects of existentialism. From this perspective, what mattered to them was not so much where existentialism came from and what it stood for, but rather who were likely to embrace existentialist ideas and on what susceptible social groups it could possibly exercise its harmful influence. A good example of this is the proclamation of the Council of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest which, in one of its meetings in 1971, expressed its concern in the following words:

Given that the university reflects to a large extent the changes that have taken place in our country and encompasses a large part of the possible impressions, the significant influence of existentialism, among other things, cannot be ignored. The key words of existentialist literature: freedom, fate, responsibility, rupture with the past, elimination of alienation, etc., are capable, by means of incorrect or even inaccurate explanations, of causing confusion in young university students who are still not fully familiar with Marxist-Leninist ideas (Eötvös 1970).

In a situation like this, the task naturally fell to ideological and, even more so, philosophical interventions to try to dispel and prevent the intellectual confusion in question. Even if the help of the Soviet ideologs was of great value in this task, it could not take the burden off the shoulders of their Hungarian counterparts. That is, besides the translation of works such as Chalin’s *The Philosophy of Pessimism* (Csali 1963) or A. Bogomolov–J. Melvil’s critical work on bourgeois philosophy (Bogomolov and Melvil 1972) that condemned existentialism from a Marxist-Leninist ideological position, domestic research had to also invest in this field. A prominent example of such an undertaking is László Farkas’s book *Existentialism, Structuralism, Marxization*, which showed signs of a certain kind of insightfulness despite its unbending dogmatic ideological character (Farkas 1972). It is worth noting that this work also appeared in translation in Czechoslovakia a few years later (Farkas 1977).

From a formal point of view, two distinct features stand out in Farkas’s text. First, it exposed the problematic of existentialism against the backdrop of Husserlian phenomenology and Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, and secondly, in this context, the author sought to demonstrate that any attempt by existentialism, and especially in Sartre, to come close to Marxism could only result in a distorted and falsified form of leftist thinking. In this characterization, Farkas was generous in attaching the labels of “subjective” and “objective idealism” to existentialist ideas and left no doubt about his view that genuine socialist Marxism was, above all, to be protected against these kinds of so-called “permissive” tendencies. However, this was not what the main ideological message of his work was all about. The latter manifested in Farkas’s attempt to demonstrate that the most progressive Marxist philosophical current in Hungary at the time, the Budapest School, originally grouped around Lukács, was in fact a

homegrown version of “Marxizing” revisionism with an existentialist overtone. This clearly marked the ideological intentions of the author, as although the members of the Budapest School, under the auspices of Lukács’s late agenda proclaiming the renaissance of Marxism, were interested in developing an anthropologically based “ontology of praxis”, the association of their views with an existentialist position was by no means justified. Even if Ágnes Heller invoked certain existentialist topics in her early ethics of personality (Heller 1970), the same way Mihály Vajda did in his highly controversial article “Marxism, Existentialism, Phenomenology: A Dialogue” published in *Telos* (Vajda 1971),¹⁰ their alternative Marxism seems to have developed in a different direction from, for example, the Sartrean enterprise. From this point of view, Farkas’s approach ultimately and simply achieved an orchestrated intellectual prelude to the political witch-hunt and administrative measures that were about to be launched against the members of the Budapest School. By party decree, which condemned them for their anti-Marxist stance, the latter lost their academic posts in 1973 and were soon forced to leave Hungary.¹¹

Heidegger calling: from existentialism to phenomenology

In light of the influx of output from a diverse and dynamic French existentialism, the German version of existential philosophy received less attention in Hungary until the late 1970s. However, Jaspers’ and Heidegger’s views were still integrated into the critical accounts and selective publications of existentialist texts. In his 1964 summary, Tordai had already emphasized the ontological and religious overtones of German existentialism and their constitutive role in problematizing the human condition (Márkus and Tordai 1964). Yet these views usually provoked a more vociferous rejection, accompanied by a less vocal critical comprehension, than those of their French counterparts. A good example of this was the publication of a terminologically highly dubious selection of fragments and extracts with which one of the leading Hungarian philosophical journals tried to illustrate the main ideas of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1969). Although Jaspers’s philosophy had already been covered in a monograph format by a Hungarian author in 1966, this was done in more of a popular ideological style than in a thoughtful philosophical way (Vámos 1966). This double standard can surely be explained by the fact that German existential philosophy essentially never put forward any attractive relationship with the problems of Marxism, nor has it featured such spectacular literary achievements as those of Sartre, de Beauvoir, or Camus. At the same time, it is also clear that Heidegger’s involvement in Nazi politics was deemed an alarming and stigmatizing feature. In this respect,

¹⁰This text of Vajda, confronting the positions of Marxism, Husserlian phenomenology, and Heideggerian existentialism in a stunning dialogical form, could only be published in Hungarian after 1989. Enzo Paci, the renowned Italian phenomenologist, had characterized this text as follows: “Mihály Vajda’s ‘Confrontation’ [Szembesítés] is a great example of the intervention of Lukács’s Hungarian school and of the unbiased attitude that appears in this text as the ‘renaissance’ of Marxism [...] in contrast to the various orthodox positions” (Paci 1972).

¹¹On the achievements of the Budapest School, their history, and their significance, see Rundell and Pickell (2018), Dorahy (2019).

the legacy of the devastating anti-fascist Lukácsian critique had a strong impact on domestic philosophical life, which was unhurried to leave behind the verdict that Heidegger's philosophy, both early and late, was representative of an "extreme, irrationalist, fascist-type ideology" (Fogarasi 1957).

However, it should also be added that the 1970s and early 1980s by no means brought about a decline in the reception of French existentialism in Hungary. The publication of a compilation of Sartre's philosophical writings, including "The Questions of Method", sparked a renewed interest (Sartre 1976), and by the end of the decade the first small-scale, virtually ideology-free monograph on his philosophical work had made its way into the public domain (M. Fehér 1980). At the same time, other trends in existentialism also gained attention. Owing to the improving state-church relationship, the idea of Christian personalism was less and less considered forbidden intellectual fruit, and in addition to Maritain and Teilhard de Chardin, the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel also seemed worthy of closer examination (Dékány 1982). The increasingly widening thresholds of ideological tolerance in the late 1970s to early 1980s are illustrated by the fact that the interest in Spanish existentialism, and in particular in Ortega y Gasset, could benefit not only from volumes of various translations (Ortega y Gasset 1983a,b), but also from the publication of interpretative monographs almost entirely devoid of Marxist criticism (Csejtei 1980, 1986). To be sure, the intellectual strategy in which it was possible to reduce ideologically driven considerations in favor of foregrounding an intrinsic philosophical approach became from the late 1970s onwards at least accessible, if not predominant, in interpretations of Western philosophy. This was true even if, for a time, philosophical analyses had to be wrapped up or framed in Marxist jargon. This was the attitude that also increasingly shaped the rising interest in the German version of existential philosophy, and in Heidegger's thinking in particular in this period.

Among the authors dealing with contemporary bourgeois philosophy in the 1970s, Béla Suki's name appeared more and more frequently in the cluster of those who critically engaged with existentialist thinking. What is special about his case is not only that he worked as a history teacher in a rural secondary school, but also that he seems to be one of the few, if not the only, Eastern-European intellectuals of Roma origin to have earned an academic degree in philosophy. Suki had already made his mark in the late 1960s by editing, introducing, and annotating the Hungarian edition of a selection of Søren Kierkegaard's writings (Kierkegaard 1969). The publication of this volume, and the full translation of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* a few years later (Kierkegaard 1978), made a fundamental contribution to the exploration of the historical landscape of existentialism and to the discussion of this line of thought in its confrontation not only with Marxist but also with dialectical philosophy. Nevertheless, from the 1970s Suki started to turn toward the philosophy of Heidegger, seeking to nuance the assessment of his thinking by highlighting its properly historical character and its relationship to Marx (Suki 1974). During this period, he also led a research group at the University of Szeged for the systematic study of existentialist philosophy (Csejtei 2010). Subsequently, his research results culminated in the first Hungarian-authored monograph devoted to Heidegger's thinking, entitled *Martin Heidegger: The Basic Questions of his Philosophy* (Suki 1976).

Suki's approach both validated and expanded the Marxist interpretive framework inherited from earlier periods with respect to Heidegger's philosophy. While embrac-

ing the ideological position, inherited from earlier, that Heidegger's thought could only be interpreted as a "crisis phenomenon" of Western bourgeois society, and especially of interwar Germany, he also tried to get close enough to his philosophy to implement an analytical reading. At the same time, his approach oscillated between a historical contextualization, moving primarily on the horizon of the ideas of Kierkegaard, Kant, Marx, Husserl, and Lukács, and a conceptual approach focusing especially on *Being and Time* within its proper terrain of problematization. All of this was bound together by Suki's distinctive essayistic style, which was receptive to Heidegger's particular philosophical universe and was able to illuminate it with simple examples. The central and apparently Lukács-inspired argument of the work sought to demonstrate that Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of being, along with his radical antimetaphysical attitude, was in fact a failed attempt to find an answer to the problem of modern alienation. Beyond this, the work also contained eclectic and conceptually poorly developed features. The characterization of the late Heidegger's thought as a "mysticism of being" was meant to reinforce the author's assuredly dubious position according to which Heideggerian philosophy as a whole is simply a "subjective idealist ontology" in which "existentialist thought remains dominant and, ultimately, even the ontological attitude is subordinated to it" (Suki 1976, p. 282).

The fact that less than a decade later another monograph on Heidegger was released, which completely redesigned the realm of interpretative codes used until then, is a good indication of the shifts and fluctuations of Hungarian philosophical life of the time. The author István M. Fehér, a young historian of philosophy from ELTE University, was already known for his writings on Sartre and for his meticulous reconstruction of the inner dilemmas of his philosophy in the light of its historical and social circumstances (M. Fehér 1980, 1981). His book on Heidegger marked a new stage in his career, one that over time would launch him towards international recognition (M. Fehér 1984). M. Fehér's most spectacular analytical innovation was to call into question—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—the applicability of the distinctions between "subjective–objective", "irrational–rational", and "metaphysical–realist" in Heidegger's thought. Furthermore, he was seeking to achieve this by showing that the destruction of these entrenched patterns of thought had precisely been carried out by Heidegger himself since his early philosophical writings. By this maneuver, M. Fehér both freed himself from relying on a stagnant Marxist conceptual framework and opened up Heidegger's philosophy to an immanent, if not hermeneutically nuanced interpretation. A further important feature of this work was that, in addition to outlining the development of Heidegger's career and providing a philologically and conceptually sophisticated analysis of the problematic of *Being and Time*, it did not neglect to give a well-tailored account of the German philosopher's later thought. This consisted precisely in doing away with the image of Heidegger as a "mystical" thinker and provided instead an outline of his views on the history of Being, technology, and language. Last but not least, the book spared no effort in confronting the question of Heidegger's involvement in the Nazi movement. In achieving all this, M. Fehér eventually succeeded in removing Heidegger's philosophy from the narrow scope of the existentialist paradigm and resituated it in its own right as a matter of philosophical "thinking".

Another asset of M. Fehér's approach was that it brought Heidegger's philosophy closer to the context of the historical relations that it had cultivated at the outset with Dilthey's philosophy and with Husserlian phenomenology. As a result, the topic of "existence" was presented in such a way that it was no longer depicted as a primarily social or ideological issue, let alone a phenomenon of "bourgeois crisis", but rather as a response to various 20th-century compelling epistemological and ontological problems. The phenomenological reference proved particularly important in this context, above all, because Husserl's thinking, under the prevailing circumstances, was a relatively well-covered but abandoned field in Hungarian philosophy. Two monographs from Lukács's disciple Mihály Vajda in the late 1960s (Vajda 1969, 1968), as well as a volume of selected texts edited by him (Husserl 1973), made many of the fundamental texts and topics of classical Husserlian phenomenology accessible to the Hungarian readers attracted to hard philosophical problems.¹² The portrayal of the young Heidegger's philosophy as hermeneutic phenomenology by M. Fehér, thus, had the advantage of revitalizing this context of reference as well as providing historical and conceptual grounds for limiting the scope of a Marxist interpretative framework in this regard. The complete Hungarian translation of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* in 1984 (Gadamer 1984) further reinforced the tendency to perceive in phenomenology, and in particular in its hermeneutical extension, a philosophical tradition and practice that could actually compete with Marxism without rivaling it ideologically. At the same time, this interpretative orientation began to form a context that brought Hungarian philosophy closer to the standards of the Western-European philosophy of the period. This can be considered a major achievement, even if this same interpretative tendency has for a long time canonized the view that only the Heideggerian hermeneutical surpassing of the Husserlian position can give full credit to phenomenological thinking, which without it represents only an idealistic and outdated way of theorizing.

This approach of Heidegger fundamentally reshaped the way in which existentialism, and beyond it the question of human condition in general, could be brought into philosophical discussions. In the summer of 1988, the philosophical journal *Világosság* [Light] went as far as stating in one of its editorial notes that "without the reception of Heidegger, the philosophical life and intellectual culture of a country will become provincial" (Világosság 1988). However, it is important to add that while the study of bourgeois philosophy and many of the social sciences already enjoyed widespread freedom in many areas during the 1980s, the philosophical position of Marxism was still officially and institutionally monopolized. From this point of view, it is not at all surprising that M. Fehér's interpretation of Heidegger was constructed not through a direct critique of Marxist philosophical tropes, but by means of a systematic elimination of references to Marx and the conceptual framework of Marxism. The latter had been replaced by references to the relevant contemporary Western philosophical literature and the latest volumes of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*. It is clear, and M. Fehér was far from alone in employing this methodology, that this strategy was adopted precisely to achieve philosophical professionalism and to avoid

¹²It is worth noting that, according to Vajda, it was Ágnes Heller, in her 1957–58 seminar on the ethics of existentialism held at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, who had urged him to study Husserlian phenomenology, for which he later also received Lukács's approval (Vajda 1999).

conforming to ideological standards. At the same time, this type of academic philosophizing was complemented by others that, when taken together, anticipated culturally the motifs that led to political regime change a few years later. In the mid-1980s, Mihály Vajda, who was otherwise politically sidelined at the time, had already begun translating *Being and Time* with his young disciples. In a paper published in the wake of this translation, devoted to the alluring topic of the absence of the concept of *physis* in *Being and Time* (Vajda 1988), Vajda made it clear that, beyond the scope of professional philosophical-philological treatment, the engagement with Heidegger's thinking could also contribute to the elaboration of a novel and radically post-Marxist way of philosophizing.

It is certainly a noteworthy aspect of the period, which created a certain legacy in the Hungarian philosophical discourse, that Heidegger's philosophy emerged as a champion of "postmodern" thinking. By the time the Hungarian translation of *Being and Time* was published in 1989, these various tendencies had all made their mark. In the autumn of the same year, as a result of Hungarian and West-German cooperation, many great figures of European phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition came to Budapest to celebrate the centenary of Heidegger's birth in a symposium as a sign of radically changing times.¹³ Just like the shifting fever of existentialism in the 1960s, this period witnessed a sweeping Heideggerian renaissance that, mediated by the political regime change, led Hungarian philosophy into a new era.

The spread of interest in existentialism, which happened to coincide with the historical period of state socialist rule, became one of the defining trends in Hungarian philosophy of the 20th century as a result of several parallel and interdependent processes. In conclusion, three of these are worth highlighting. First, the kind of intellectual curiosity and challenge that has been repeatedly embodied in the problematization of the "human condition" kept existentialist questions constantly on the agenda throughout the state socialist period. This interest was maintained by both the academics and the wider public. Secondly, problematizing human existence and praxis was constantly complemented by the search for corresponding Marxist responses, whether these were subjected to more or less rigorous ideological scrutiny or carried out in the form of a constructive confrontation with Marxism. Thirdly, the growing and more consciously professionalized approach in philosophical work, marked by the attention paid to the "texts" and the prominence of philological issues, produced transformative effects that made direct ideological intervention less and less a viable option in assessing existentialism. The increasingly permissive reading of Sartre, or the conversion in Heidegger's perception from a virtually fascist-state philosopher to postmodern thinker, illustrates the interplay of the peculiarities of this shifting paradigm. Thus, the reception of existentialism in Hungary ultimately reveals the fluctuations of a philosophical culture in which the motives of adherence and resistance to the ideological directives embraced a blended approach generated by the ever-changing attitudes of ideological conviction, intellectual curiosity, cultural adaptation, and academic nonconformity.

Funding Open access funding provided by Eötvös Loránd University. The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

¹³ Among others, H.-G. Gadamer, O. Pöggeler, W. Biemel, K. Held, F.-W. von Herrmann, and J. Grondin came to Budapest for this conference, organized by Prof. István M. Fehér (M. Fehér 1991).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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