

SOCIOLOGICAL HERITAGE

INTRODUCTION TO OTTILIA SOLT'S ARTICLE

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Ottília Solt was born in 1944 in Budapest. She graduated from the Faculty of Arts of ELTE University in 1967. She studied philosophy, but was interested in tangible reality that could be experienced already at the time. “The social scientist, particularly the so-called empirical one, who draws his or her message from material facts, is probably inherently a rougher creature than the philosopher entertaining subtle letters” – she wrote in *Beszélő* decades later.

Her career is articulated into three well separable periods. In the first one, comprising more or less the 70s, she conducted research in a great variety of topics, yet rather similar in spirit and approach as a full-time social scientist. After graduation she was employed by the Institute of Economic Research operating as an affiliate of the Central Statistical Office, and soon she had an opportunity to conduct empirical research. At that time no sociology was taught at the university, therefore she had to learn the profession while doing research, in practice. She chose her own tutor. When she drew up her research plan for the study of economic managers at her place of work, she invited István Kemény to participate in conducting the project. The jointly pursued research represented the beginning of lasting and intensive co-operation. The short period of Kemény's life when politics did not make anymore and again impossible for him to conduct empirical researches, fell to the late 60s and the early 70s. The overwhelming majority of his significant surveys related to economic managers, workers, the poor and Gypsies was done during that period. Solt participated in almost all of them, just as she was one of the initiators and organizers of those domestic seminars, organized in private apartments, including her own, where Kemény, partly related to the researches in progress, and partly independently of them, held courses on social history, sociology and economic science, placing emphasis on sociological literature and on the critical analysis of the contemporary Hungarian reality, and totally disregarding the taboos and tactical considerations that limited and distorted the contents of university education and of the academic and broader public discourses of the day.

In 1970 Kemény gave a talk at the Academy to a professional audience. In the otherwise extremely subdued and objective presentation he violated one taboo: as against the official ideology he stated that there were poor people in Hungary. The case developed into a scandal provoking the intervention of the Party headquarters: the gradual squeezing out of Kemény from official sociology began.

It was in this intellectual and political power field where Ottília Solt's career as a sociologist began. She discovered and analysed in detail in her writing *A munkaerőhelyzetről [On the Situation of Labour]* those mechanisms of wage regulation, employment policy, and a little more generally of the Kádárist economic system that had led to the reproduction of the stratum of unskilled, low-prestige and highly fluctuating "unnecessary workers" (cotton-wool people as it was called later on) as structural elements already in 1970. Later on she regularly returned to the analysis of the problem when she wrote about poverty and the gypsies, because she was repeatedly confronted with its grave social consequences whenever she did research related to these topics. She regarded it as one of her most important tasks to monitor the subsequent destiny of the tenaciously reproduced society of "unnecessary workers".

In 1972 she was employed by the newly organized sociological group of the Municipal Institute of Pedagogy. Here she started to study child-rearing habits, a special aspect of workers' way of life. At first she conducted her research in the families of highly qualified skilled workers living in the zone of family houses of Csepel, and next of the semi-skilled workers of Angyalföld, another industrial region of Budapest. This is how she had found the closed classical poor colony of Angyalföld, the crowded Tripolisz of flats without amenities, which became an eminent field of her researches in the next years.

Based on the researches of previous years, her paper of comprehensive nature entitled *A 70-es évek budapesti szegényei (The Culture of Poverty in Budapest of the 70s)* was completed in 1976. Earlier the *Budapesti Nevelő* (Budapest Educationist), a periodical of the Municipal Institute of Pedagogy regularly published her writings. She offered this paper also to them but it was published only after major cuts. Therefore, when in 1977, János Kenedi compiled a samizdat publication out of writings rejected or censored by editorial offices she gave him the complete variant of her paper without hesitation. In the same year the customs officers confiscated some books considered as speaking against the system she brought from her visit to the West, and in 1979 she signed the declaration of solidarity with the Czech Chartists. Altogether it was too much: at first there was a disciplinary procedure against her in her workplace, next she was demoted, transferred and finally dismissed from her job.

In the 80s, after having lost her job due to political reasons, she functioned as an opposition politician, playing a role offering measure and programme to the activities of a loose and by far not uniform grouping called democratic opposition. She founded SZETA (Fund Supporting the Poor) with others and kept it alive up to the fall of the system. It was the first organization of the Kádár-period, grown out of spontaneous initiative coming from the bottom, and she edited the samizdat periodical *Beszélő*.

The third phase began in 1988, when the Network of Free Initiatives and the SZDSZ were founded. She became a professional politician, one of the decisive figures of her party and an important actor of the process changing the system, and was an MP from 1990 on for one term. She mostly contributed to discussions on societal and social policy, on human rights and on the democratic rules of the game.

After the two and a half years following the parliamentary term "changing the system" with her participation, the leading motifs of the three periods of her career

emerged again: she returned to empirical sociology to the extent of a survey on the situation of the homeless, she participated in launching the course for social workers at the János Wesley College and in formulating its intellectual image thus creating a new institutional framework for the continuation of the tradition of SZETA, and she expressed her opinion on the condition of public affairs in her writings.

She died in 1997.

The two-volume selection of her writings and parliamentary addresses entitled *Méltóságot mindenkinek [Dignity for All]* gives a comprehensive image of her oeuvre.