

Post Truth Society:

A political anthropology of trickster logic

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This is a not exactly desperate, but quite exasperated, thus in many ways and several senses quite literally hope-less undertaking in coming at terms with the character of the times in which we live. It is thus an effort at understanding the contemporary, or the nature of modernity – just as all my past books were, in their own ways.

This is neither the result of a free choice, nor a personal obsession. Having been born and grown up behind the Iron Curtain and just after the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 I could not help but be preoccupied, as far back as I can remember, with the reasons why the life of my grandparents and parents, and their entire generations, were devastated by the world wars and totalitarian regimes, especially the Communist system in which I was growing up, and which was the only one of these disasters of which I had personal experience. At one level, the answer was simple: Communism was brought into Hungary by the Russian army, the uprising of 1956 supported by the entire country was again crushed by the Russians, so once they would live, the regime would collapse. This was simple enough, and in a way became true after 1989, yet I knew, already sometimes by the 1970s, that this was not the full story. So, what is it?

Well, as I have already said, the storyline of this book is hope-less, and one of its senses is that even now I cannot give a simple answer to such questions, though I tried very hard in my previous books, and will try so now as well. I can only convey, and quite vaguely, four experiences that underline the thrust of this book. The first was 1989 and the collapse of Communism, my concrete experience being the rather murky premonition I could not help having that somehow something was not right in all this. Communism collapsed, it was just great, there was no reason to feel sorry for any part of that regime, to be sure; but something was not right in the manner in which it collapsed. As we tried to formulate our unease with Agnes in a series of publications, it was as if the regime collapsed after it had already done sufficient damage. Thus, instead of just dismissing the entire Communist experience as a blatant historical error, which of course it was, and worse, and forget about it, moving forward, we kept wondering among others why this absurd and murderous regime was the Benjamin of so many intellectuals for such a long time. We kept asking this question, but nobody was interested in it, even considered it as the height of indiscretion, so after a time we stopped persisting. But did not forget about it.

The second experience was even vaguer, and I cannot now remember any single event or concrete reason for it, but by 2005 I gained the feeling that the new world coming into being in the new millennia on the back of an ever-increasing globalisation, Europeanisation and neoliberal managerialism, taking over universities and gaining increasing inroads even in Ireland had astonishing affinities with my ‘old world’, and so was bound to become a ‘brave new world’. Such perception was first given expression in a talk entitled ‘The Social Logic of Communism’ I gave on 24 January 2008 in my own Department at UCC – a ‘social logic’ which I now call ‘trickster logic’.

The third experience can be traced to Summer 2011 when with Agnes we did the Camino di Santiago, followed by three long-distance pilgrimage walking trips in the ensuing three years. Walking right through some modern societies, instead of using cars or planes for travel made us evident the radical destruction of nature, culture and traditions that modernity represents, leading us to formulate in our 2018 book *Walking into the Void* first the idea that we are living in a Trickster Land.

The fourth, of course, was COVID and the immediate certainty that not so much the pandemic itself but the responses to it amount to an intensification of modern permanent liminality towards a new, full scale totalitarian-like regime.

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Were one merely to seek information, one should inquire of the one
who hates, but if one wishes to know what truly is, one better ask
the one who loves
Hermann Broch, *The Spell* (1935)

This attempt at understanding modernity has two main parts, corresponding to the two main aspects of such a task. One is to offer a characterisation of the contemporary modern world in which we are living, including its various areas; while the other to search for approaches and thinkers who are most helpful in this undertaking.

Concerning the former, taking up and moving further what I discussed in my previous books, this book pursues five interconnected ways to capture the heart of modernity. To start with and in contrast to ideas like post-modernity or late modernity which imply come kind of leaving beyond modernity for good it suggests, in the footsteps of Marc Augé’s *surmodernité* and Ortega y Gasset’s hyper-democracy that we rather live in a hyper-modern world, where

all the excesses of modernity as still present, and even in an exaggerated form. Second, it also argues that the specific dynamics animating hyper-modernity can be expressed through the term ‘permanent liminality’, or as a situation where temporary, transitory emergency or out-of-ordinary crisis situations have become lasting, almost permanent. As the term liminality was developed to characterise ritual conditions that were temporary but formative, talking about ‘permanent liminality’ strictly speaking does not make sense; however, the argument is exactly that the entire modern world is increasingly developing into such an absurd state. Absurdity was long ago identified by major figures of European culture as a standard feature of modernity (see among others Kafka, Camus, Beckett and Ionesco), and the term ‘permanent liminality’ helps to give a theoretical, political anthropological backing to such intuitions. The term ‘Absurdistan’ was introduced in the 1980s by Vaclav Havel for an imaginary Soviet Republic; this book is based on the perception that, strange or indeed ‘absurd’ as this may sound, in our days, and since quite some years, the entire modern global world everywhere is taking up the features of such an Absurdistan.

One might be forced to live in Absurdistan, but one cannot feel at home there; cannot participate in what is absurd. Such homelessness again since a long time has been identified with life under the modern condition, a situation which rendered everyone a sleepwalker while seemingly awake; an outsider to the life in which nominally one participates. Political anthropology also developed a term for the eternal outsider, this is the trickster; and thus another way to characterise the permanent liminality of Absurdistan is to call it a Trickster Land. In fact, the working title of this book project, and for a long time, was ‘Welcome to Trickster Land!’. However, for a series of reasons this was changed to the actual title, as the totally absurd expression ‘Post Truth Society’ is increasingly coming into vogue and offers a handy way to capture the message of this book. Apart from this being another characterisation of the absurd, the trickster all around the world, in folktales and mythologies, is closely associated with lying, while the main feature of the ‘classical’, Soviet Absurdistan was again the omnipresence of lies and lying. Lying has infinite varieties, the book certainly cannot capture all its modern versions – all the more so as in our world many forms of delivering ‘truth’ also became forms of systematic misleading (which verbatim implies a modern form of leadership) and lying.

Talking about our contemporary reality as being ‘beyond truth’ is not a minor matter. It implies that over three decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when it was conjectured that all lying and oppressive totalitarian regimes became obsolete, and that it is not truth but rather history itself that ended, as part of a particularly strange, even perverse Hegelian master-serf dialectic it is the logic of the thoroughly defeated Soviet regimes that came to dominate the West. Proponent of ‘Post Truth Society’ certainly did not intend it in this way, but this is the clear implication I was led to investigate here.

The second basic question is how to do so; what approaches and methods can one use.

The idea or conjecture that contemporary neoliberal globalisation and europeanisation, as if alongside a Möbius strip, transmogrified itself into a kind of sovietisation is certainly unintelligible by standard, mainstream disciplinary approaches, including positivism, neo-Kantianism, progressive evolutionism, or social constructivism, but standard critical approaches, using any combination of Marxism and Freudianism are similarly useless. This, however, does not mean that we have to start everything from scratch. Over the past decades, even centuries a number of approaches were developed in various areas of thinking and the social sciences outside the dominant, mainstream vs. critique dividing lines that increasingly reveal themselves as being particularly useful in such a paradoxical task. This starts with Max Weber’s comparative historical sociology, which took inspiration most of all from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, and is therefore closely compatible with the genealogical

approach as developed by Foucault. A number of important historically oriented social thinkers can be added to this approach, mostly starting as followers of Weber, outside the limits of the academically instituted discipline of sociology, like Eric Voegelin, Norbert Elias, Franz Borkenau, or Reinhart Koselleck, to name but a few.

The second main approach is Political Anthropology, as it is being developed around the journal *International Political Anthropology* and marked by a series of flagship publications (Horvath and Thomassen 2008, Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015, Wydra and Thomassen 2018, Horvath and Szakolczai 2018b, Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019, and Horvath 2021). The central idea is that terms developed inside anthropology, especially by maverick figures who became partially or completely marginalised even inside anthropology are uniquely helpful for coming to terms with the features of the modern world, for which standard approaches recycle the same progressive self-understanding of modernity. Such thinkers and ideas prominently include Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner (liminality), Paul Radin (trickster), Gregory Bateson (schismogenesis), Marcel Mauss (gift-giving), Lucien Lévy Bruhl and Colin Turnbull (participation), René Girard (imitation), and Alfred Gell (technology as magic).

Still inside Political Anthropology but in a different way the book makes use of basic figures in ancient philosophical anthropology, especially Plato, following the perception that there are surprisingly close affinities between Nietzschean genealogies, the main ideas of maverick political anthropologists, and the thinking of Plato.

Even further, fundamental for this book, just as for the books published together with Agnes Horvath over the past few years (Horvath and Szakolczai 2018a, 2020) is the perception that findings in archaeology are extremely important for any effort at understanding the modern world, as they contain a series of discoveries that help to overcome the standard mainstream progressive-evolutionist vision of history.

Still further, this book would not have been possible without the realisation that such understanding is helped by novels that reveal the increasingly theatrical character of the modern world, while positivistic sociology and analytical philosophy take such features as inevitable aspects of reality (for details, see Szakolczai 2015a, 2016, 2017a).

However, apart from these approaches, this book will introduce as ‘Guides in Trickster Land’ a series of further writer-scholars or scholar-writers: writers, whether travel writers or novelists, who nevertheless also engage, inside and sometimes even outside their novels in scholarly, historical, sociological, anthropological or philosophical reflections and analysis; or scholars whose works extends to and incorporates, even centrally, literature. Such combination of a more objective, scholarly and a more subjective, novelistic perspective is vital for understanding our modern Post Truth Society as a Trickster Land and offers a precious complement to the increasing use of the ‘trickster’ in social and political analysis.

Thus, the first part of this book discusses, chapter by chapter, a series of figures as guides. Still, two questions might be posed concerning this, especially given current conventions in intellectual life: why does one need guides in order to write a book? Would it not be more evident just to expose, in a systematic manner, one’s own ideas? And, furthermore, why exactly these figures are selected as guides? The trickster is a concept in anthropology, this book belongs to social theory, yet the figures selected are neither anthropologists, nor social theorists, strictly speaking.

Concerning the first question, the answer has two parts. This question addresses a very fundamental issue of method indeed, and I happen to share the idea that building one’s *own* theory as a watertight theoretical system, the height of human thinking in the tradition of German ‘idealistic’ thinking, in the footsteps of Kant and Hegel is a mistaken idea that leads nowhere, except being entrapped into own’s own theoretical schemas and mode of

ratiocination. This idea is shared, among others, by Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault, Elias, Voegelin, thinkers about whom I wrote extensively in the past, and that can be traced, through Dilthey and Schleiermacher, among others, back to Plato and the reason why Plato wrote dialogues and not systematic treatises. This is not a minor issue, as in his Seventh Letter Plato states that the proof that Dionysus, the tyrant of Sicily failed to understand his teachings is that Dionysus claimed to have written a book of philosophy. The point of the hermeneutical tradition is that one is always standing in the midst of various traditions and modes of thinking, which one can – and should – take up and move further, but the idea that knowledge can be enclosed into a hermetically closed complete system is simply preposterous. Thus, instead of introducing of ‘my own’ theoretical framework about the modern world, I lead off the argument in the first part through presenting the work of some figures who could be considered as guides to it.

Here, I pay quite a strong, and again ‘methodological’, attention to not simply selecting a few terms or passages that fit into with ‘my’ preconceived theoretical framework or argument, but actually trying to understand the arguments of these guides on their own, reconstructing their internal logic. It is only in this sense that they can become real guides; otherwise they would just be fitted inside a ready-made and probably highly ideological springboard. The approach of this book thus follows a two-step process: first, reconstructing *their* arguments; and second, bringing them together with arguments I took from others, proceeding with the analysis of part two. These procedures are not hermetically separated; ‘my’ preferences – based on previous studies of various thinkers, a series of further personal and scholarly experiences and so on – certainly have an impact on how I read the works of the guides; but the book contains, and absolutely *must* pursue, a genuine effort to understand them on their own terms.

This is not due to a general, moralising kind of argument of ‘respecting’ them, but because it is only in this way that a serious work of thinking and writing can be done. Whoever is trying to build one’s ‘own’ theories remains forever entrapped in one’s own previous thoughts, moving in sterile circles, and actually even worse, entrapped in the thinking of former teachers, whether positively by following them, or negatively by trying to overcome them, whether ‘dialectically’ or by ‘killing the father’, but will never be able to produce something interesting and important, only stale, scholastic treatments of the worst kind, which can result in a great career in the current academic world, as it will be praised by those who produce similar works and would recognise the like-minded, appreciating the pure IQ-based value of those intellectual – indeed – ‘constructs’. But in order to write and develop thoughts one needs always to find new sources of inspiration, to read new books; one needs the thoughts of *others* – not anybody, not ‘the’ other (another meaningless intellectual construct), but some *concrete* persons who had interesting and original ideas and experiences to offer as compared to the ones encountered before. Otherwise, one would always return to the same figures, often the ones studied by one’s professors who did the same before, at the price of egregious boredom and the endless cultivation of truisms, commonplaces or logical constructs, perpetuating scholastic academism.

Turning to the second question related to Part One – why these guides? Even here the answer has two parts. First, because while this book builds on my previous books and the thinkers discussed there, the writing of this book – again – required further, fresh guides. But why exactly these seven figures? Well, this is a by no means an exhaustive and necessary list. One could have selected other guides, but among others this was prohibited by considerations of length. The figures who were included in the book were gathered over a span of several years, and the book gained a shape once this gathering reached a degree of coherence and in a way completeness. The order of their presentation in a certain sense is arbitrary, though due

to their special importance and also due to their being novelists, starting and ending with Broch and Camus suggested itself as an almost ‘natural’ way.

Finally, the second part of the book deals with the main regions of trickster land. It starts with art and thinking, where Trickster always and everywhere had a head start, continuing with the economy, as the economy is a trickster logic creation through and through, then with politics, where trickster takeover through the economy was the most thorough. The last and by far largest chapter is devoted to society, or the comprehensive realm of our lives, which now is increasingly under the threat of parasitic trickster penetration and takeover, destroying the last vestiges of meaningful life, gaining further, unprecedented strength through Covid measures, targeting especially education and sociability, distancing us from each other and enclosing us into our cosy, individually tailored prisons, cob-web-like but made of material harder than steel, ever more safely.

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We make an idol of truth itself; for truth outside charity is not
God, but His image and idol
Pascal, *Pensées* 581 (Brunschvicg)

The worship of truth apart from charity – self-identification
with science unaccompanied by self-identification with the
Ground of all being – results in the kind of situation which now
confronts us. Every idol, however exalted, turns out, in the long
run, to be a Moloch, hungry for human sacrifice.
Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun* (1952)

The message of this book can be illustrated through a story from *A Time of Gifts* by Patrick Leigh Fermor. He spent the first night of his year-long walking trip across Europe to Constantinople in a Dutch inn, after having fallen asleep during dinner. Next morning the innkeeper accepted pay for the dinner, but not for the room. This was only the first example, he says, of the extraordinary kindness and hospitality he encountered all around Europe.

In our days, the story would be unimaginable, though now the area is inside the Union, where the last war ended 75 years ago, while Fermor walked in 1933-7, just at the end of an unprecedented economic crisis, and only 15 years after the Great War, citizen of an enemy country of most regions he visited.

You say: this only shows how we have all become more enlightened, rational, taking better care of our real interests. At any rate, Milton Friedman, main master of ceremony of neo-liberalism taught long ago that ‘There Is No Such Thing As A Free Lunch’. But *I* say: this only shows how deeply our minds and world have become poisoned by trickster logic. We certainly no longer live in a time of gifts. We are entrapped in Trickster Land.