

Hungary

Kristóf Szombati interviewed Iván Szelényi

Interview date: 6 March 2019

Szombati: My name is Kristóf Szombati and I am 38 years old. I defended my PhD two years ago at CEU (Central European University in Budapest) in which I used an anthropological and sociological approach to investigate the birth of Antigypsyism [or Antiziganism]¹ as a political movement in Hungary. Previously, I was active in Hungarian politics, in the LMP party [Hungary's Green party], which is now represented in Parliament and of which I am a founding member. As an elected party official, I was responsible for the party's Roma integration policy and for ensuring that the party would be accepted as a member of the European Green Party. I have since retired from politics, and currently hold a two-year postdoc position at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle.

Sitting opposite me is perhaps Hungary's most famous sociologist, winner of the Széchenyi Prize and member of the MTA (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Iván Szelényi. It is not the first time that I have spoken with Iván; I believe the last time I was with you was when I personally brought you a copy of the book which I recently published based on my [PhD] dissertation. Iván had been so kind as to write the foreword for it. Most people know, Iván, that you wrote, together with György Konrád, an extremely critical analysis of the socialist regime, 'The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power'. Its publication led to your arrest, and later your expulsion from Hungary. I believe it is important to mention that during his years in exile, Iván published a series of important works on urban sociology, the structural deficiencies of capitalist and socialist societies, and patterns of social exclusion in post-socialist Europe. Most recently - and I hope we will get to talk about this - you have written about nationhood, rent-seeking and illiberal capitalism. As a result of these publications Iván has held important positions at several prestigious universities. I would like to mention here the City University of New York, where you were, as I understand, Director of the Center for Social Research and Executive Officer of the Sociology Program, as well as the University of California, Los Angeles. Then came Yale, where you also chaired the Department of Sociology and Political Sciences. After 1989 your Hungarian citizenship was reinstated. In 1990, you became a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and in 1995 you were promoted to full membership. In 2000 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences elected you as a member. You are an editor of a series of regional and national publications, including *Theory and Society* and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. You are currently living in

¹ Antigypsyism is the specific racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as 'gypsies' in the public imagination. Source: <https://www.antigypsyism.eu>

Budapest, and we are conducting this interview in your private office. One objective of this interview is to outline the relationship between Europe's past and present, and how our knowledge about the past can give us a sense of direction for the present and the future. First, I would like to ask you to go back to the beginnings of your life story. You were born in 1938, the year of the Anschluss (annexation of Austria). Recently I read Péter Nádas's magnum opus *Világló részletek*, in which he describes his experiences during the war in incredible detail. Do you have any memories from this time?

Iván: I have some, of course. As with all older people, my short-term memory is catastrophically worsening by the day. That means I simply cannot remember new names, but my long-term memory is quite good. The years of the siege especially tend to be linked to traumatic experiences. I, however, did not experience this time as traumatic. It was interesting. Much has remained in my memory. Let's say from December to February, or even a bit longer, the visible presence of the Russian soldiers was an interesting situation. I can still remember a great deal; I even have memories of the Horthy era. I was a small boy. We lived in Pasarét (a suburb of Budapest) on Kapy Street. I can almost tell you which shop belonged to whom, and who lived there. I have many memories of things like that.

Szombati: Please tell me. I am curious to hear about one of your vivid memories, even about how you lived or an exciting incident.

Szelényi: Yes, as I said, we lived on Kapy Street and had a strange house that my grandfather had bought. We moved there around 1927. I was born there and lived there, longer than necessary because, when I married in 1960, we had nowhere to live and had to move in with my family. So, an exciting incident: it was two or three days after Christmas. I was looking out of the window and saw that the first Russian soldier was nearing our house. He was approaching very stealthily because he was afraid that the Germans were there. There were no more Germans there, they had withdrawn quickly and left the area to the Russians. So this is one of the first pictures of the war that I have. I was the first in the family to see a Russian soldier. I remember that before the Russians arrived, my mother and my grandmother - my grandmother was not so young, about 55 - greased their faces to make themselves ugly. They had been scared by reports that the Russians were coming and would rape all the women. As I remember, there was not the slightest problem with the Russians at the beginning. My grandmother lived in the four rooms on the first and second floors. We lived in the basement. We were immediately ousted from there by the Russians because they thought that it would be safest there if the house was bombed. They set up a headquarters there, and, as far as I know, even Marshall Malinovskij was there for two days. But I am not sure if this memory is quite correct.

Another interesting incident [*laughs*] in connection with the Russians: once a Russian soldier came to our apartment, picked me up and took me with him. My mother was very frightened. What were they doing with me? After a while she dared to go into the kitchen where I was being fed with Russian '*pirogi*'. Somewhere in Russia the soldier had a little blond son; that was why he liked me and gave me '*pirogi*' that they had just

prepared. In fact personally I cannot name any really bad experiences with them. I heard that they shot the father of one of my classmates because he did not want to give them his watch, and other such incidents. But I never experienced anything like that myself. Those are my memories of the siege [of Budapest by Soviet and Romanian forces for 50 days between 24 December 1944 – 13 February 1945]. By the way, I was told that the fighting Russian troops were much better than those that occupied us later because discipline among the fighting troops was very strict. Apparently, it was the occupying troops who raped and plundered. Once they took our curtains when my mother had thought that it was all over and done with. That is my worst direct memory in this context.

I could tell you a lot more; indeed I could fill a book with memories of these critical weeks. I have another basically negative, and very strange, memory. In our neighbourhood there lived a still quite good-looking Austrian widow who had taken in a Polish refugee. We never really saw him. He was able to hide successfully, then the Russians came. The Pole thought they would liberate him. He began to speak Russian with them. He said he was glad that they were liberating him. Thereupon they shot him because they thought, if he speaks Russian, he must be a spy. There was no time to find out, so they thought it would be easiest to shoot him. That was the first dead person that I saw in my life because there, at the beginning of January, his body lay for several days, and I could see it from my room. That was a strange story.

Szombati: In your last answer you spoke about your family. Will you say a few words about them?

Szelényi: I can say a lot about them. I should really write a family history, because I can trace the family history back to the sixteenth century and could tell you various amusing stories. The founder of the family was hanged, I believe, in Kassa [today: Košice, Slovakia], because he was a thief and bigamist. But let's not go there [*laughs*]. My father was a distinguished biologist. His field was the protection of insects and plants. His speciality was a particular type of wasp. They are such small creatures that one can barely see them with the naked eye, but they are important for the balance of the ecosystem. He died in 1982. In his memory, I set up a trust, which awards the Szelényi Prize awards every year. There is a senior and a junior prize for the protection of plants. This year's award ceremony was held recently. So that was my father. Politically, one can actually place him on the far right. But he was a very good person. That is why I say of him that he was a Nazi with the soul of a dove. His antisemitism was very interesting. He spoke badly of Jews, and would remark if someone was a Jew or not. He propagated a lot of brainless biological nonsense about 'races', even though he knew that these do not actually exist. At the same time, he never had a personal problem with such people. During my whole childhood, most of my best friends were, by chance, Jews. He always welcomed them in a most friendly manner, and never let them feel that they were Jews. He was a principled anti-Semite. So it was not by chance that he was still a member of the Arrow Cross party in 1945 [Hungarian fascist organization that controlled the Hungarian government from October 1944 to April 1945 during World War]. It is also not by chance that, in 1945, when he was summoned for certification, he was held at the police station for one or

two hours, but his colleagues (who were asked to certify whether he was a fascist or not) were of the opinion that ‘Uncle Guszti’ was a good guy.

That was all. But, as I said, I heard a lot of crazy things from him in my childhood. It is interesting how a person who never harmed anyone could become a committed warm-hearted Nazi. It is difficult to understand. I can only explain it in the context of the Treaty of Trianon [one of the one of the 1920 Paris peace treaties that ended the First World War]. My father was born in a Zipser [German-speaking] family in Késmárk [Kežmarok, current day Slovakia]. The loss of this town [which became part of Czechoslovakia] was a lifelong personal trauma for him. Because of this he became involved in the [radical nationalist, and anti-Semitic] Turul movement². He was the main priest there. I do not believe that he ever harmed anyone, but he got involved in some foolishness. They sacrificed horses. Of course, they did not actually kill any, but they pretended to. So that [having been involved in the Turul association] was one reason [for his anti-Semitism]. The other was probably my grandfather, my father’s father. His name was Ödön Szelényi.

He was a very gifted scientist, known primarily for his pedagogical works, and he also studied philosophy, theology, literature and all sorts of other things. He was a very conservative person in some respects, but liberal in others. He was an ‘MDF type’ [‘Hungarian Democratic Forum’, a conservative political party founded after the collapse of state socialism]. He leaned towards liberalism in questions of human rights. At the same time, he was a dreadfully strict father, and my father was a bad student and always feared his father. So on one hand the rebellion against enlightened national conservatism was responsible for his shift to the far right; and on the other hand, the Trianon trauma was the reason why he chose this political movement which made such a big deal out of Trianon.

Szombati: And so in the Stalinist era, under Rákosi’s rule...

Szelényi: We had no worries at all! Once we were told that we would be forcibly resettled [to the countryside]. I remember that we had to pack everything up. We waited outside on Kapy Street for a truck to move us. We waited until midnight, then the police came and told us that we could go home. I suspect that my father was too good a specialist in his field and that they did not harm him for that reason. By the way, he never renounced his right-wing beliefs in 1945, but at the same time he became prodigiously Christian. As already mentioned, he had been against [Christian] religion, as was to be expected of a convinced *Pfeilkreuzler* [fascist]. He got involved in the ancient Hungarian religious cult [*laughs*]. That was not unusual for someone on the far-right. In 1945 he underwent a kind of spiritual rebirth and quickly converted to

² The Turul is a mythological bird that acts as the master symbol of national strength and rebirth in the imaginary of 20th and 21st century Hungarian (ultra)nationalism).

In this passage the word ‘Turul’ most probably refers to a society/association named after the Turul that the Participant’s father took part in. The association was highly anti-Semitic and supported antisemitic policies . Source: The Organisation of the Turul Association in Hungary and Debrecen (1919–1945), accessed in January 2020(https://dea.lib.unideb.hu/dea/bitstream/handle/2437/90265/tezis_angol.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y)

Christianity. Being an awakened Christian was important in the rest of his life, right up to his death.

My mother was an uneducated woman, by the way. My father always thought that her father – Szilárd Csapó – was a Romani. I can believe it - my mother had very dark skin. I had an older brother, his picture is in the guest room. I will show it to you after the interview. Had he been with me to Csenyété³ [a Roma village where Szelényi conducted research in the 1990s], no one would have thought that he was not a Romani. This subject has always fascinated me. May I tell you an anecdote?

Szombati: Of course.

Szelényi: It happened much later. In 2000 I directed an international research project [focusing on Eastern European Roma] and visited Gypsy settlements in Romania and Bulgaria. I went to the town of Sliven, where there is a vast Gypsy settlement on one side of the railway station. Almost 40,000 people live there. I was accompanied by a wonderful Bulgarian anthropologist. She asked a Roma teacher who often visited the settlement to accompany us. We spent the whole day there. Afterwards this friendly woman invited us to her apartment. We had a drink, and I invited both ladies out to dinner. During the meal the Roma teacher said to me, 'Iván, you got on so well with the Roma people. I have taken many people there, researchers who either talk down to the Roma, or act as if they were Roma themselves so as to pass more easily. You found the right middle ground. I told her that I had lost my wife recently. She was about 45, and divorced. I was 60. We knew that much about each other. I said, 'Maybe that is because my grandfather was a gypsy.' Then she said, 'Really? If you show me your birth certificate that confirms this, I will be your wife.' I came back to Budapest and looked for my birth certificate straight away, but could not find it. So I did not return to Sliven, but became a professor at Yale. Otherwise, I would still be teaching Bulgarian students English in Sliven to this day.

Szombati: [laughs] A very good story. Let us go back in time a bit. This event in 1956 [the Hungarian Revolution]. Was it formative for you? Did significant things happen, or did it pass you by?

Szelényi: I have to say things about this that most people don't want to hear. I had just started attending university, and was following what was happening with great interest. The unrest started particularly at the art college. In September, there had already been serious student agitation. I had a girlfriend at the university then, and said to her, 'This will turn into a revolution, the only question is when.' The matter did not disturb me. I had already realized, as an observer, that a big movement was developing. On 23 October there was this big demonstration to which I also intended to go. At that time, I was already going out with my future wife, and wanted to go there with her to see what would happen. But without any particular political motivation, simply to watch. My future father-in-law said, 'Don't go, there will be trouble.' He was right. [laughs] I said: 'Alright, I am not that interested, we won't go.' So we went to the Bem Cinema. On the way to

³ Name of a village in Notheastern Hungary, which is known among social scientists as the ideal type of a 'Gypsified village', i.e. a village non-Roma and Roma of higher status have left, leaving poor Roma behind.

the cinema I saw the crowds crossing the Margaret Bridge. It was very interesting because the demonstrators had been told that it was forbidden to shout slogans on the bridge, because the bridge would collapse. I don't know if that is true; anyway, the crowd marched in deathly silence. Anyway, the point is that I saw a bad film at the cinema, and missed out on the revolution.

Szombati: Were you apolitical? What did you think about politics?

Szelényi: That is a genetic thing. I am not apolitical. Politics have interested me a lot since my childhood, but rather as an 'issue'. I don't know how it started. Maybe it was because of the radio. I hated going to school [laughs]. Ironically, I became a teacher and continued going to school for fifty years [laughs]. Anyway, I knew how to rub the thermometer to simulate a fever. So every morning I would show my mother that I had a fever and could not go to school. I switched on the radio to Voice of America and listened to it all day. For me there was interesting information to be heard. In this way I also learned what the Hungarian newspapers were writing, for example, about the 'Rajk trial'. It was obvious to me that it [the charge against communist minister László Rajk] was rubbish because I knew all the details from Voice of America. So there were two statements. One was how Rajk was such a Titoist traitor. The other was what Voice of America reported about who he was. In this way politics became somehow an objective, matter of fact thing for me. I listened to an enormous amount of political discussion, I still follow politics closely, but actually without any feelings.

In 1956 my future wife lived up in the Buda Castle, and I lived on Kapy Street. There was no public transport, so I used to cycle up to the Castle every day. There were experiences in connection with 1956 that did not affect me particularly. I remember that there was a demonstration on Kálmán Széll Square where they were shouting: 'Mindszenty must lead the government!' All I thought was: 'My goodness, that is what this demonstration is about, that Mindszenty should become Prime Minister?' [Cardinal József Mindszenty was the highest Catholic official in Hungary, who after the war became a prominent opponent of communism in Hungary, as a result of which he was tortured and given a life sentence in a 1949 show trial that generated worldwide condemnation.]⁴. That really shocked me.

Szombati: What was your problem with Mindszenty? What did you think of him?

Szelényi: That a cardinal should become Prime Minister of the country – I just could not tolerate the idea. At the age of eighteen I was already too secular to stomach that. I also heard that unfortunate speech he made on the radio in which he said something like: 'I will first inform myself and then comment.' He sounded more like someone who has to decide on the fate of the country than a pastor of the Christian Church.

Szombati: Did you not think about leaving the country, like many of your fellow students?

⁴ József Mindszenty was the Prince Primate, Archbishop of Esztergom, cardinal, and leader of the Catholic Church in Hungary between 1945 and 1973. He opposed communism. As a result, he was tortured and given a life sentence in a 1949 show trial that generated worldwide condemnation. After eight years in prison, he was freed in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and granted political asylum by the United States embassy in Budapest, where he lived for the next fifteen years.

Szelényi: Yes, but not at that time. When we finished our A-Levels [final school exams], half my class decided to emigrate. Today we would say that they were all economic migrants. I don't know if any of them had anything to do with the revolution. People left simply because the borders were open and they thought they would do better in the West⁵. And that was the case for most of them. My best friend at the time was the little brother of the historian György Litván, Ferkó [Ferenc] Litván. I remember distinctly Ferkó saying to me at the end of October: 'Iván, shouldn't we go to Vienna? There are more and more anti-Semitic voices here. Perhaps it would be better to go West.' Then came the 4th of November [when at least 1,000 Soviet tanks entered Budapest to crush the national uprising, which started 12 days earlier. Thousands are killed or wounded]. That was actually something that moved me, when I heard the thunder of the canons. I was angry with the Russians for intervening the way they did. So Ferkó decided that he really would move to the West, and he told us we should go with him. I was interested, but actually only because I was interested in trying to go to an Austrian university. This School of Economics was a terrible place, and there could only be a better university, so I thought seriously about it. But then my future father-in-law said: 'That is rubbish, don't do it.' He was right. It would have been stupid for two eighteen-year-olds to set out into the world. In the end, everything turned out better for me this way. And besides, I had many experiences that I would otherwise not have had.

Szombati: Did you approve of socialism in principle? I mean, after 1956?

Szelényi: Well, I didn't really approve. At that time, I also had conflicts. I was bull-headed and decided that I would not join the 'KISZ' (Hungarian Young Communists' League), which had just been formed. One of the founding members was Jankó [János] Avar, who later became a journalist and Washington correspondent with *Népszabadság* [a Hungarian newspaper and Communist Party organ until 1989]. Before 23 October we got on quite well with Jankó. We almost became friends. That changed after the 4th of November, because I could not understand why so many people had to be killed, why there had to be shootings. He did not like that. And also, I did not join the 'KISZ', which meant that I was one of the very few at the university who did not join it. We sometimes had to report for a physical examination for the military, and one time an officer asked me whether I was a member. I said no, and he asked why not. 'Because it is a young communist league, and I am not a communist.', I said. He answered: 'Oh, don't worry, it is only communist in name.' I answered: 'But it is a part of the name, so I will not become a member.'

So when I left the university my fellow students wrote a very witty [laughs] résumé about me. I think Jankó Avar played a very important role in this because it was so witty that only he could have written it. I was an excellent student. In my cohort (consisting of 200 or 300 students) I was among the top five students. Nevertheless, they wrote a résumé in which they suggested that I should not get a job because I was not a member of the KISZ. At that time, we had two friends with whom we played bridge. In 1960 bridge was a relic of bourgeois society, so they held that against me.

⁵ Explanation about openness of Hungarian borders for final publication?

And then there were these witty things in the résumé. It simply must have been Jankó. He said: 'Szelényi is from the last century, a skeleton left over from the last century.' So because of this no one wanted to offer me any type of position.

Szombati: And how did you get into sociology?

Szelényi: I simply got roped into it. I got into the KSH [Hungarian Central Statistical Office], the devil knows how. There was a department for foreign trade and statistics there. No economist wanted to work there. And everyone studying foreign trade hoped to be sent abroad as a practitioner. But there was a very ambitious young head of department who wanted to build up something from scratch. He had a younger colleague who said: 'I'll find a good cadre for you. I'll go to the boss and ask her who has not been recommended for a post this year, because this person would be the right one for you.' That is how they found me. They couldn't officially hire me with my résumé, so I became a temporary worker. I earned 800 Forints a month, which even at that time was a miserable allowance. I also hated statistics. I worked hard in the library, and was given responsibility for monitoring foreign newspapers. As a result, 800 foreign newspapers passed through my hands, and I had to look through them all. There were many sociological journals. They began to interest me, and I started to publish. When the Sociological Institute was founded in 1963, I was already a sociologist because I had published on the subject. That is how I became a sociologist. I had a half-time position at first. Many years later, I was hired to work full-time.

Szombati: May I ask you in this context what the experience was that led you to writing the book? I am talking about *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* which you wrote together with [György] Konrád and that resulted in a major turn in your life. What led you to write the book, and what problem did the State have with the content of the book?

Szelényi: Yes. The first thought that led me to write the book had to do with an ongoing conversation I had been having Pista [István] Bibó [a Hungarian political scientist and sociologist who became a role model for dissident intellectuals in the late communist era]⁶. When Pista was granted amnesty and freed from prison in 1963, they also employed him in the KSH library, where he was responsible for purchasing books. As a result, he spent the whole day downstairs in the department for foreign journals and saw which books were new and interesting. We became friends and talked a lot. Once he said to me, 'You know, this regime's biggest lie is that it is a dictatorship of the proletariat. If anything, it is a dictatorship of the intelligentsia.' Bibó, the populist, said that. I didn't understand a word of it, but this sentence has remained in my head to this day.

With Konrád we were starting to work with the town planners at that time, and it involved interacting with a lot of wonderful people; for example, with Pali [Pál] Granasztói, father of the historian Granasztó, a good writer and fine intellectual, who

⁶ István Bibó was a lawyer, civil servant, politician and one of the leading social and political thinkers of his era. During the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 he acted as the Minister of State for the National Government. This led to his arrest on 23 May 1957. He received a life sentence on 2 August 1958 but was released in the 1963 general amnesty.

would not contemplate becoming a communist. But was an excellent planner. Our interactions with him made us realize that there was an analogy between the logic of planning and the logic of state socialism. I am thinking particularly of Kádár's reform socialism. So that was one reason [for our writing the book]. The other source of motivation derived from our research on housing. We researched new residential developments and discovered that the best newly built apartments - which were not good at all, but were still preferable over the rest - were almost never given to workers. Workers continued to live in the countryside and commuted to the city. So instead of workers, it was engineers and accountants who got these apartments. It struck us that this dictatorship of the proletariat was privileging the technocratic intelligentsia. There was something not right about this proletarian dictatorship, Pista was quite right about that.

There was another important event that spurred our thinking. I had a very good friend who also emigrated, Karcsi [Károly] Szendi. His grandfather had been the mayor of Budapest under Horthy's [right-wing] regime. Karcsi's father never joined the party, practiced daily confession and stated openly how strongly religious he was. One day he called me to ask my advice. He told me that he had been elected to a committee at the Academy that was tasked with devising a foreign trade plan. I suspect that [Tibor] Liska [an economist promoting market economics]⁷ was involved because Karcsi's father wanted to know what I thought about eliminating state regulation and letting the market decide what we sell, buy and at what price. I said, 'I know the argument, and it has merits.' He replied, 'That is not possible, there must be some kind of order. We can't just leave everything to the "blind market", can we?' This showed that his teleological planning mind played a major role in aligning his thoughts with Kádárism. As a small boy he had played with Horthy's grandchildren [laughs]. That was his background. He never compromised with communism. Yet he absolutely understood what we said about the relationship between the intelligentsia and power. [...]

We took note of who got to go to the Kútvölgyi Hospital, the best hospital at that time in Budapest, and who didn't. Of who could go to the dollar shops and buy what others couldn't. So you could see that the intelligentsia was privileged and that Kádár's regime was progressively incorporating its technocratic faction into the power structure. So that was the motive to write the book. After 1963 it was possible to write and talk about almost everything in the Kádárist regime. There were two exceptions: the alliance with the Soviet Union and the nature of the Party. And our book questioned exactly the nature of the Party by asserting that it was not the dictatorship of the proletariat. We intended to provoke and were looking for words that would annoy the powerholders. We had written this article (with Konrád), 'The Social Conflicts of Delayed Urbanisation'. That was our first big scandal. We thought this article must make a statement, have an influence. We wanted to provoke them, and it worked. They were very annoyed.

⁷ Reference to Tibor Liska, an unorthodox economist who was one of the pioneers of the reform of the planned economy in the 1960s.

Szombati: This mindset is very interesting. I am trying to understand - because I already know you a little - why your relationship to politics is so ambivalent. On the one hand, you say that you had a matter-of-fact, objective relationship to politics - I am referring to your own experience of 1956 - and now, on the other hand, this provocation. How is this compatible?

Szelényi: I am an intellectual. I want to be heard. If I whisper, they won't hear me, and apart from that I feel obliged to call things by their name. I want to find the most fitting wording. It would have been better to stick to Foucault's idea of "Power- Knowledge", that is what it's about. The two cannot be separated, which is why Foucault invented this term. The term 'class' led us to class theory, which only caused problems. The motive for the book was not political - many misunderstood it as a reform proposal. I still hear people say, 'That was such a good idea. If only the dominant class had been formed by intellectuals [laughs], all would have turned out well.' People still come up today to say this. So, no, it was not a reform plan. We did not want to improve socialism. At least I did not want to reform it. What I wanted to do was describe it as precisely as possible. And from this point of view, post-Stalinist state socialism' had a really important attribute. Namely, that it tried to incorporate the intelligentsia into the exercise of power and the intelligentsia was prone to responding positively to this.

Szombati: That strikes me. I never thought that the book could be read that way. That is indeed a complete misunderstanding [laughs]. It was completely clear to me that the book is critical of the regime, that it actually attacks the ideological foundation of the regime. That is why they expelled you from the country.

Szelényi: Yes.

Szombati: So you went to America where you've spent most of your years of exile. I would like to know how this, your life and work in America, shaped your consciousness. In what did you become, so to speak, *Americanised*? And what did you reject? In short, what influenced you there?

Szelényi: You see, I had long been a fan of the USA, since primary school, when I used to listen to Voice of America. That is how I knew that America is the best country in the world [laughs]. For me there was no doubt about it.

From 1964 – 1965, I was on a Ford scholarship in America. At that time there were twenty Hungarian Ford scholarships. They already existed for Poland and Yugoslavia, and were available for Hungary as of 1964. At that time, I was in America for one year and I enjoyed it tremendously. It was an exciting place. I met many wonderful people. My encounters from that time became very important to me during the course of my life, after I had to leave Hungary. I was out of work, and these contacts were instrumental in helping me achieve what I went on to achieve in the US. There was recently a conference at CEU [the Central European University] on the Ford scholarships, not only in Hungary but also in Poland and Romania. They asked me if I could speak there about my experiences. The title I gave to my presentation was 'The Strength of Weak Ties'. You know the expression?

Szombati: It originated with [American sociologist Mark] Granovetter.

Szelényi: Exactly. In January 1965 I had very 'weak ties'. I went for a beer with a young assistant teacher at Madison, Wisconsin. He later became the faculty chair. When I contacted him in 1981 it turned out that he remembered me. And that is how I became a professor at Madison, Wisconsin. It is even more interesting how I became a professor in Australia. By the time I became a professor in the US I had already published a lot in English, including the intelligentsia book which received a very good review in the *New York Review of Books*. But when I left Hungary in 1965, I had only published three or four articles in English. At that time, they were advertising a post at Flinders University in southern Australia. They wanted to find a new chair. So I sent my three articles and my résumé, but all in Hungarian. Shortly after that they called me for an interview in which they asked me difficult questions for two or three hours, and half an hour later the vice dean offered me the post. It was almost unthinkable to appoint someone who has only published three articles as a founding chair. So a bit later I mustered the courage to ask a friend of mine, a professor of American Studies who had been on my recruitment committee: 'Why did you appoint me then?' It could not have been that I got the position only on the strength of these three articles. He replied, 'That occurred to us too, so we decided to get some advice. The vice dean told me "You got your PhD in the USA. You must know at least some sociologists".' This professor of American Studies, who later became a friend, did in fact know a sociologist, Martin Lipset. Now, when I was in Berkeley, Lipset was still teaching there, among other things a course on Latin American student movements. It did not interest me, but I attended his course nevertheless. Martin said, 'Wouldn't you like to write an article on the Eastern European student movement?' I had written a serial study and told him, 'There is no such thing.' Apart from that I had no contact whatsoever with Martin. So, ten years later this professor called Martin and asked, 'Have you ever heard this name, Szelényi?' Martin replied, 'Of course, he was my student.' On the strength of that I was appointed to the post. I was expelled from Hungary. I was the Hungarian Solzhenitsyn [The famous Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union and Communism, and similar to Szelényi stripped of his citizenship and deported from the Soviet Union]. A heterosexual anti-communist, and a student of Martin Lipset. Of course they appointed me. And, as I said, the articles were good.

The important thing is that Granovetter's theory of competition applies to large markets where free competition reigns. In the case of free market competition, and in large markets, 'weak ties' acquire real importance. In the USA I made use of these weak ties all the time, whether as a professor or dean. Let's say I called someone to ask what he thinks about someone else. If the reaction was, "Oh, who is that?" then I did not pursue the matter further. But if he knew something about the person in question, that was very important information. Now, Granovetter's argument was that strong relationships matter in small communities. But in big markets, like the labour market, 'weak ties' are more important. Stiglitz is right, we suffer from a lack of information. We can only compensate for this by trying to build connections. But if the ties are too strong, we cannot be certain that that can trust them as credible sources of information. They stink. This applies to the world market as well as to the academic market. It also

applies to the American market, but not at all to the Hungarian market. Here, only strong ties matter.

Szombati: Do you notice any change here, in Hungary?

Szelényi: No, I believe they have always been very strong and will remain so. The fact that someone is someone else's son-in-law is very important when it comes to winning grants.

Szombati: In the context of your return to Hungary, I do not take it at all for granted that we are sitting here in Budapest and continuing our conversation. You have returned from a very different world, and I am interested to know what experiences and hopes you have brought with you and what happened to these hopes over time.

Szelényi: First, I must say that I was very happy in America, and that people there held me in great esteem. They never made me feel that I was not an American. Only my accent showed that I was not an American. Nevertheless, the evaluations my students give me sometimes make me blush [laughs]. In Yale I was awarded the William Graham Sumner Professor. Now, William Graham Sumner is considered to be the first American sociologist. To give an unknown outsider the highest chair in sociology shows something. The US is a country of immigrants. Only Donald Trump does not understand that.

Why did I come home? One reason is that I can live more comfortably and more securely on my American pension in Hungary. There are about fifteen cities in America, for example New York, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles, where I could live, but I would not have the same living standard as here in Budapest. I love Lipótváros [the neighbourhood where Szelényi lives]. It is excellent for an old person; I can walk everywhere, to the post office, to the bank. There are very good restaurants and cafés, there is everything here.

I also enjoy cultural events sometimes. I believe the strength of Hungarian culture is its music. There are also many theatres. These things enhance one's life. My days are pleasant. It is not New York, of course, I cannot claim that.

Szombati: The so-called change of regime was an important historical moment. Do you have any personal connection to them? Did you actively take part in this process? Did you identify yourself with any one political side? Did you try to integrate yourself in the intellectual field? Did you have conflicts?

Szelényi: I can only repeat that politics are, for me, an object, a subject matter, so I do not have any political affiliation. I try to converse with people on all sides of the political spectrum because I am interested in what they say. For me each one of these conversations is an interview, it feels like doing fieldwork. Many people have visited this apartment. Many from an identical spectrum, like Laci [László] Rajk, Gyuri [György] Konrád or Ágnes Heller, for example⁸. But I also invited Mari [Mária] Schmidt, who was

⁸ All three are renown representatives of political liberalism in Hungary, Agnes Heller is also known outside Hungary.

once my student and we talked about interesting things⁹. I also invited Tamás Kolosi [a leading sociologist in Hungary]¹⁰, an expert in social stratification., because I did not want there to be just the two of us, and I thought it would be more interesting. And suddenly Tamás, who was always rather arrogant, asked Mari: 'Tell me, Mari, isn't LMP [the green party] financed by Fidesz?'. Mari answered: 'And what is the problem with that?' Just that answer alone made that 5000-Forint-dinner worthwhile. [laughs]

Szombati: Oh, don't get me started on that subject.

Szelényi: I learned something very interesting.

Szombati: The significance of that sentence is enough to justify a separate interview or study. I do not know if one can take it literally, whether it was a strategy or a method to avoid having to answer further. It could have been many things.

Szelényi: Maybe you are right.

Szombati: Or it was simply the truth.

Szelényi: Of course, we can see what LMP is doing, but I don't want to judge because I also understand Fidesz very well. It is clever to bring an opposition party into the regime's fold [laughs]. They may say ugly things about me, but when key questions come up, they do what I want. Of course, I would not send a rival candidate who can win votes for the opposition into the fray.

Szombati: I see Fidesz's hegemony differently. I do not see it in terms of 'bricks' [secret agents]. But perhaps we can return to that later. I would like to talk again about the change of regime. You wrote a book with Larry [Lawrence] King [an American sociologist] about the 'new class' in which you sharply criticise liberal elites. With this in mind let me ask you: do you think the political elite which was in power in the 1990s mismanaged the process of regime change?

Szelényi: In order to answer that, I would need to know how one could have done it better and should do it today. In this context I think of Foucault, who once took part in a demonstration to protest against the prison system. He was standing in front of a prison when a reporter asked him, 'But Professor Foucault, how would you do it then?' Foucault answered, 'If I answered, I would be legitimising another system of repression. I refuse to engage in the production of a reform discourse, which is in essence nothing more than a more sophisticated form of repression.' He wrote something similar in relation to his homosexuality in the History of Sexuality. He argues that the discourse which entices homosexuals to come out of the closet is insidious in that it implicitly prescribes certain forms of behavior. 'If you behave like that, then it is OK'. Foucault's response is to say 'I will not engage in a reform discourse. They should leave me alone. I want to live the way I want to live.' I would not like to claim that I have never said anything in my life that implies ideas about reform. I have done so on the subject of housing, for instance. But, basically, I am not a reform intellectual. Gázi [Gáspár] Tamás said so precisely that a tribal society has emerged in Hungary. In this

⁹ A renown representative of the Hungarian conservative nationalist right. Today, she plays a key role in the Fidesz government's memory politics.

¹⁰ One of Hungary's leading sociologists, an expert in social stratification.

context, I am, of course, classified as a Liberal, because of the friends I have. At the same time, I have never tried to follow the SZDSZ [Hungarian liberal party from 1988 to 2013] ideology, neither do I like it when friends of mine sit together and talk about who should become Prime Minister, or which party should cooperate with which other.

Szombati: Your function is that of a critic.

Szelényi: I am interested in the *Sein*, not the *Sollen* [German: in what is, not in what should be]. It is not my job to talk about the *Sollen*. It is very complicated to understand how the system works. Please leave me out of discussions about how it should work. Pali [Pál] Juhász, an SZDSZ representative and still my friend today, once asked me, 'Why don't you vote for a party? Why don't you join SZDSZ?' I answered, 'I don't particularly like any of them, that is why I don't join.' He replied, 'You are a coward.' Maybe there is some truth in that.

Szombati: How is it possible to maintain the role of an independent intellectual nowadays? I am asking because for me and for many of my friends it is a struggle to find a job in which one has time for one's own projects. You know there is this neoliberal trend at universities that basically forces young academics to devote 80 percent of their time to other things than one's own projects, and outside the university it is very difficult to find a job which is compatible with this role. I see, particularly in Eastern Europe, that people leave the academic field because it does not allow them to make ends meet and devote time to critical thinking. What do you think?

Szelényi: There is a lot of truth in that. Luckily this does not apply to me. I receive an American pension. I also receive an academic honorarium that Mr Palkovics [present Minister for Technology and Innovation in Orbán's cabinet], however, would like to take away from me [laughs]. So one has a critical function [as an intellectual] but there are political implications.

Let us consider as an example the migration madness that is taking place in Hungary. As a social scientist I can say that György Soros is absolutely right - Europe needs one million immigrants per year. Soros has never said they should all come in over the green border [illegally crossing the border]. He had no concrete idea as to how it should work. But Europe is getting older, fewer children are being born. OK, so now they [the Hungarian government] are trying to encourage Hungarians to make a lot of children [laughs] – we will see if that works. But these children will only become workers in twenty-five years, they are only an expense right now. At this moment Hungary needs about 50,000 immigrants per year in order to be able to pay retirement pensions. By the way, immigrants come anyway, and not always selected in the best way. The Eastern European labour market is more or less saturated. All of those who come here want to go further west and not stay in Hungary. Why should a Romanian come to Hungary when he can go to Norway or Australia? It is inevitable that society will become more multicultural.

Why should I expect a Muslim to become Christian? He has a great, important culture that can boast of successes in the arts and sciences. And I'm not even talking about India or China. Where was Judeo-Christian culture when Chinese culture was already so magnificent?

Europe has to become more multicultural, that is a fact, not a political statement. It is estimated that, of the 500 million people in the EU, there will only be 300 million at the turn of the century, and the continent will grow much older. That is an unsustainable situation. OK, robots will be utilised eventually, maybe that will help a bit, but it is obvious that there must be discussion on subjects such as this one. Or take the conflict around the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or with respect to Central European University. Gyuri [György] Grüner [external advisor to Minister László Palkovics who is the key player behind the government's effort to fundamentally change the way the Academy of Science operates]¹¹ has said one should not write scientific papers but patents. He was my colleague, an extraordinary physicist, at UCL, but he has no idea how a university functions. The Californian university system, which he is a part of, draws 0.6 percent of its budget from patents. So what exactly is Gyuri thinking? How would he like to reshape funding in order to obtain more patents instead of scientific papers? We know where innovation comes from. It often develops for centuries through important theories and knowledge that are apparently totally useless.

Szombati: Iván, in this context you wrote an article a few years ago about the crisis of sociology as a vocation. From what position can we formulate this criticism if there is a problem with sociology's very foundations? In the article there is a graph that shows how the number of applicants to sociology programmes is dropping year by year. The most intelligent, best qualified, or most ambitious, are not applying. There is a serious crisis in our profession.

Szelényi: Correct.

Szombati: This touches on our ability to formulate critique.

Szelényi: That is right. I have an American passport and an American pension. It does not affect me existentially. But for your generation, it is certainly a problem. That is why it is important to tell the truth about the Academy of Sciences or CEU. It is very interesting to hear that the government wants to place I don't know how many Hungarian universities among the best 200 in the world. I have had my part in building universities for more than 40 years, so I know what a university is. At Yale, for example, I failed. When I went there the [sociology] department ranked number 25 in America. My goal was to take it to the top 10. At present it is number 20. So it is not so easy. To place Corvinus University, which is number 1000 today, among the top 200, that is very difficult. CEU has some programs that are in the top 100, and several others are among the top 200, so it is a tremendous loss for a country to lose such a university [reference to the push of CEU out of Hungary]¹², one that could achieve what existing universities will only achieve with difficulty today.

I would like to relate one more anecdote here. My last post was in Abu Dhabi, where we founded an American university. New York University decided that it wanted to go

¹¹ A reference to the ongoing debate around the role and tasks of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS). Károly Grüner is an external advisor to Minister László Palkovics who is the key player behind the government's effort to fundamentally change the way the HAS operates.

¹² In 2019, the Central European University, founded by the billionaire philanthropist George Soros and previously the top-ranked institution in the country, was forced into exile by Mr Orbán's nationalist regime, after almost 30 years in the Hungarian capital.

global and create campuses all around the world. The first was founded in Abu Dhabi because Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed has a lot of money and wanted to have a good university. The conditions for it at that time were interesting. There was already a United Arab Emirates state university which he supported with an enormous amount of money. He brought the provost of the University of California there and told him, 'All the money is yours, make an Ann Arbor, Michigan out of this university.' It was a total failure. To raise the status of an old university is extremely difficult because there is very great resistance. That is why the prince had the idea of founding a new university that has a chance of becoming a leading university. One method in the existing state university was, 'OK, let's get rid of half the faculty.' What happened then? They got rid of the oldest, often the best faculty, so that they could keep their own friends. That is why CEU is so successful, because it is a new university. I could criticise the CEU also, many things could have been done better.

Szombati: I would like to direct our conversation in a new direction. When you look at the world today with your 80 years of experience, what is the greatest challenge now and in the next 20 years?

Szelényi: I have no idea what will happen in 50 years. We don't even know what will happen tomorrow. We don't know what will happen at the European elections. We think we know [laughs], but we could be lucky, and be proven wrong. It is hard enough to say what is, and very much harder to say what will be. That is not our area of expertise. My predictions were always wrong and I tried to defend myself by claiming that my prognosis was about a distinctive possibility within a particular society. So let's not speculate about the future.

But if I look at the world today, I believe that the greatest problem is globalization and the conflict between nation states. Globalization has existed since capitalism first emerged. If people don't want to read Karl Marx or Adam Smith, who wrote 200 years ago why a world market is necessary and why capitalism necessitates a world market, they should at least read Karl Polányi, who basically wrote the same thing. It is clear that globalization has entered a new phase and that it unquestionably has its own problems. Opponents of globalization are right in one thing, that capital flows very easily worldwide. The continued existence of a prosperous society in places like Scandinavia, for example, faces difficulties because, if the taxes are too high, capital escapes to where there is no, or lower taxation. In the USA, this even happens within the country. I lived in New Haven, where Yale is located. There is enormous deindustrialization there. It used to be a large industrial area, but everything moved south and left unemployed black people behind who had been enticed to move there from the South. The jobs simply disappeared. So globalization also has negative effects, because, as I said, capital moves freely, and this has harmed labour greatly. The trade union movement suffers from globalization. At the same time, we have seen in Hungary that the big multinational firms think twice about packing up and going elsewhere if the unions demand a 18% wage increase.

Szombati: That was in one factory.

Szelényi: That is correct. I only mean to say that capital cannot move from one country to another without there being any costs involved.

Szombati: Seen from this perspective, do you consider the illiberal Hungarian regime's effort to reinforce national sovereignty to be a rational strategy? Is it realistic to tie capital to the nation state again?

Szelényi: No, it is not. Capital is global. That is a fact. The illiberal economic policy which favours sovereignty is offering global capital huge subsidies to create jobs.

Szombati: Yes, but the regime is also doing everything to strengthen the national bourgeoisie.

Szelényi: Sorry?

Szombati: There is an effort to strengthen the national bourgeoisie, isn't there?

Szelényi: Yes, there is certainly some sort of movement from within to strengthen it, that is right. But I don't think there is a tendency for the national bourgeoisie to replace multinational globalised capital. There is, rather, a new distribution [of resources] within the national bourgeoisie. It is very important for the illiberal regime to create an order which incorporates sufficiently large social strata, including capital-holders. But not only capital-holders, but also intellectuals who have a financial interest in the perpetuation of the illiberal system. That is why I do not like it when illiberal regimes are portrayed as tyrannical and dictatorial. The situation is much more complicated, as in order to legitimise themselves, these regimes have created and maintained clientelist networks. And capital is very important in this regard. This includes big capital, people such as Lőrinc Mészáros [a businessman with ties to the regime], for example, and also small businesses, such as the owners of the tobacco kiosks [who benefited from a state-mandated redistribution of tobacco selling licences]. Clientelism is also what the land reform was about. This created large estates - but even the largest were not so large, a few hundred hectares - and their owners became the regime's clients because they received land previously held by the state for a few Fillér [former small unit of the Forint] . So that is very important. We wrote a study about this with István György Tóth that appeared in the last issue of the *Társadalmi R riport*. In the top ten to twenty percent of society there is a stratum that gets on quite well within the illiberal regime. How they vote, I cannot say. These are people with a very high income. We know that they even receive social welfare payments. Particularly interesting is this child support aid. One must be at least three years in regular employment in order to be eligible for this grant. In this way they have cleverly excluded Roma women from those who are eligible.

Szombati: Not only Roma, but Roma as well.

Szelényi: Not only the Roma, but the poor in general. We also see that the earnings of the bottom ten percent are stagnating or even getting smaller. The earnings of the top ten percent have shot up in recent years. From this perspective, the opposition is quite mistaken when they say, 'Well, only those stupid and uneducated villagers vote for Fidesz.' Fidesz certainly did not get forty-eight percent of the votes only from them. There are certainly more than a few who have a financial interest in upholding the

regime. I can imagine that they talk badly of Orbán and Fidesz among friends. In the polling booth, I wouldn't be surprised if they put their cross next to where they think the money is coming from.

Consider the cars. How many Lexus, BMW and Mercedes are being driven in the streets of Budapest? Try to get a table in a good restaurant on a Friday or Saturday evening. Almost impossible. I always book at lunchtime, but even then it is difficult to get a table.

Szombati: How unique is the Hungarian system? You had written an article in which you tried to somehow compare Putin's regime with the Hungarian one. With the Chinese one as well, but I understood that you were trying, rather, to analyse it utilising the Putin model. Is there such a thing as a Hungarian model, or is it part of a larger trend?

Szelényi: I don't think that there is a Hungarian model. It is clear that the post-Communist world is shifting in the direction that perhaps Putin first embarked upon. The essence of it is the strengthening of the central executive branch. As a sociologist trying to understand what is going on, I have to say that this isn't something stupid because there is a functioning executive branch, which means that reforms cannot be stopped so easily. Agency is not a bad thing in politics. It is clear that decision-making is slower when the executive is weak compared to the legislative or judicial branch. I can only use Churchill's words here. The system of checks and balances is of course problematic and bad, but it is still the best possible system because we don't want the executive power to have unlimited capacity to act, because what would happen if the executive power wanted to do something stupid? Let us assume that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences were to be closed or the CEU were to be expelled from Hungary, then we would be glad to have an independent court. We would be glad to have a constitution like the one in the USA [laughs] that guarantees the rule of law over a long period of time and makes it impossible to change the constitution every week within twenty-four hours if necessary.

That is why I do not like it when people say that Orbán's political system is not a constitutional state. They do everything legally. If it happens to be illegal, they make a new law to make what they have done legal. The problem is not that there is no law and that they don't adhere to it. They adhere to the letter of the law, but they can change it because there is, basically, no independent legislative body. The legislative body only puts a seal on what the executive power wants to do, and also the independence of the judiciary is becoming noticeably weaker. It still exists, but it is becoming much weaker. What I mean is, the executive power is becoming stronger in all post-communist countries. That means that the power of the person at the head of the executive branch is being strengthened.

Szombati: Is that a reaction to a crisis? Or a way to prevent a crisis?

Szelényi: I must admit that I have not studied it enough to have any clear thoughts about it. What is clear empirically is that where you have illiberal regimes you also have so-called leader democracies. That means that one person stands out whose power is especially great. From Erdogan to Putin, Xi and Orbán, certain individuals basically

possess great power. This is probably because the other two branches (legislative and judicial) are weak or non-existent. One could say that there is a fourth branch of power, namely the media, which can also limit the leader's power.

Let us leave this setting, and go to the USA. There, it is perfectly clear. It is not by chance that Trump praises Putin so profusely. He says clearly why he regards Putin so highly: because Putin manages to keep his country under his control. Trump would like to do that. His problem is that there are relatively independent powers that continuously interfere with his ambitions. Let us imagine that the plan to erect a wall on the Mexican border seems ridiculous to those who understand the issue. I do not understand it, but tend to believe these environmentalists and other people, also the immigration experts. There is of course the House of Representatives, where the Democrats have the majority, which can prevent him from carrying out his plan. So Trump plays the illiberal card. He will show the House that it cannot prevent him because he will declare a state of emergency. OK, but then sixteen federal states would file lawsuits against Washington because this plan would be a breach of the constitution, and there are many courts that would agree. Of course, it will go eventually to the Supreme Court, where he has appointed a series of judges who agree with his ideological views. It is possible that they will judge it to be constitutionally permissible, that these eight billion dollars will not be used for the pursuit of drug trafficking or spent on the military, but for the building of the wall. What I am trying to say is that Trump's project is exactly like that of Putin or Orbán, but that he faces a series of obstacles. This also happens when it comes to personnel. He believes he is a strong leader, but as soon as he nominates someone, and this someone starts misbehaving – OK, he simply gets rid of him – then the big problem is that he has to go to the Senate in order to be able to nominate a new Secretary of State or Defence. At the moment the Republicans have a majority of three in the Senate, but there are a few independent thinkers among the Republican senators who would prevent it if he suggested a very stupid person. This means that he has to try to persuade fifty-one Republican senators, so that his plans are not thwarted by four dissenting senators. This is not a problem that Orbán and Putin, for example, are faced with.

Szombati: Yes, but there is a difference between the USA and Europe. You do not mention that there is an institution called the EU, which many analysts and Orbán's opponents expected to restrain Orbán somehow, and to at least prevent certain things. So it is very interesting that we have had various answers over the last eight years to questions about the relationship between a rogue member state and the EU. And also about what weapons the Commission has at its disposal and how the political game is played in this context. What have we learned from this?

Szelényi: Yes, when we were talking about the negative influence of globalization, I mentioned the free movement of capital. This is connected in some way with this other problem, namely, the question of politics. Politics has remained essentially national, that is, confined largely to nation-states. This nation-based politics is not really capable of handling global capital. Now, the EU's big problem is that it is almost inoperable as a democratic institution. A unanimous vote is necessary for every important decision, and there is always one country that exercises its power of veto. If the EU wanted to

act strongly against Hungary, Poland would certainly veto it, and probably not only Poland. Possibly Austria and Italy too. This is a platitude, but the EU suffers from an enormous democratic deficit. It has no functioning parliament that can make democratic decisions. I think that is the main problem. The defence of national sovereignties hinders its functional capability significantly, and almost paralyses it. One of the congenital defects of the Eurozone was that it lacked an integrated political system. Many good and even right-wing economists warned that this would be a problem, for example Milton Friedman, who predicted that the Euro will never function satisfactorily. It would function if there was a United States of Europe. Even in the USA it took a long time before its central bank could function effectively. As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a big financial crisis and private capital had to rescue the USA out of the crisis because there was no central bank that had the authority to do this. The Federal Reserve, the American central bank, only started to function effectively in the 1930s. So it took a very long time, 150 years, until the USA had a functional system that guaranteed financial stability. That does not exist in Europe. It would exist if we had a federation of European states, but European politics is moving in the opposite direction at the moment.

Szombati: Are you a federalist by conviction? Do you think that is a desirable direction?

Szelényi: Everyone must decide for himself what he thinks is desirable. I dare not answer that question. I can say that, in order to have a stable, integrated currency, we would need deeper cooperation among European states. But for now the design of budgets is a question of national sovereignty. And so is the question as to whether to allow refugees into our country or not. I would say, under these circumstances, that the system has a planning error. In certain matters they want to go further than they are able to go. The conceptual design of the EU is not harmonious enough.

Szombati: And how do you see the way out of this stalemate? Not from a normative standpoint, but from an analytical one.

Szelényi: We see that the EU is a common market. It appears to be functional. But the EU faces all sorts of great difficulties when it seeks to move in other matters. These difficulties primarily have to do with the effort to maintain nation-states and uphold their sovereignty. For the EU to become a functioning entity like the US, national sovereignties would have to be weakened to the same extent as the federal states in the USA. There, they only have minimal sovereignty. That is the diagnosis. But nation-states are strong and receive strong support from what I would call - here I would like to find a term that they themselves would accept - radical nationalist movements. They have been able to formulate a very strong ideology with which to defend the independence of nation-states, and thus hinder the effective functioning of the EU as a community. Once we wrote an article about this with Péter Mihályi: 'The counterrevolution of the nation-states.'

Until now we have only talked about the negative side of globalization, but globalization also has many extremely very positive implications. The most important argument in favour of globalization is that the biggest problems that we are faced with are *global*

problems. Here I must highlight two problems: one is the environment, other is demography. There is no solution to these problems on the level of the nation-state. That is again the madness of Trump's illiberalism. Trump is trying to lead a national American counter-revolution against globalization. He backs out of the environmental treaty, and thus further accelerates the destruction of the environment. This problem can only be solved globally, but at this level there is no real political organization. The UN, for example, is basically just an administrative office. In comparison with the UN, the EU is a functioning community [laughs]. When the UN comes up with an agreement about refugees that cautiously tries to confront the demographic explosion, countries walk away from signing it, one after the other. This includes Hungary, but also Austria. That is what I call the counter-revolution of the nation-states. An enormous demographic revolution has taken place in our time. I have said that the population of the EU will drop from 500 million to 300 million if the present immigration rate remains as it is.

The system is simply not tenable. In the meantime, the population of Africa is increasing from one billion to four billion. India's population is exploding. China's is no longer, but in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Middle East and Africa – in these places it is exploding. Is that supposed to be stopped by building a wall? Let's think about hydraulics. How is a dam supposed to hold back the rising water level? Eventually, it will break. We have to stop the level from rising. We have to stop the melting of the glaciers in the northern and southern polar regions, because otherwise the Netherlands and New York will not be able to protect themselves, not to mention Venice.

Szombati: Yes, but the paradox here is that the *demoi* - I am deliberately using the plural of the Greek word for the people - are supposed to believe that the European elites are acting in favor of the common good when they try to deal with, say, the global ecological crisis, the demographic problem and the problems of the EU. But I think that the democratic deficit that you have mentioned involves a lot of scepticism towards the elites. Particularly on the periphery. So what are the interests of the elite? Do you understand what I mean? There is this feeling of being left to one's own devices.

It is not by chance that I have been studying rural areas. I think that this is most obvious there, and not only in the Hungarian provinces. There is a cultural and political turnaround due to this feeling of being left to one's own devices, and this is connected to the movement of capital, from the rural areas to the cities. The crisis in Greece was for me highly symbolic in this regard - it revealed some aspects of the projects of the elite.

Szelényi: Yes.

Szombati: What do you think about this? About this problem of class?

Szelényi: Yes, we haven't talked about that yet. The loss of credibility of the political elites is an important and noticeable tendency. Surprisingly though, not in Hungary. Support for Orbán is unchanged. Putin is wavering a bit. The chairman of China's communist party (Xi Jinping) has problems occasionally. The press calls him daddy, and he likes that. At the same time, there are strikes in many places, while Muslims

are becoming discontented, due to his internment of millions of them. That is causing instability. Erdogan's position is also not as stable as it seems. Netanyahu may lose the next election. So there is clearly a loss of credibility in politics, and this is particularly acute in Europe. The Christian Democrats and Social Democrats are basically finished. The establishment in particular is finished. There is also this tendency in the USA. The important thing which favoured Trump at the last presidential election was that he understood nothing about politics [laughs]. People thought, he is a businessman, he will sort things out. He will go to Kim Jong Un and negotiate a deal, because he authored *The Art of the Deal*, and he knows how it is done. That was an essential factor during the election. We must not forget that he lost the election to Hillary Clinton by three million votes. Hillary's defeat came about because she was too much like a 'Clinton Democrat'. The people were tired of that. Bernie Sanders was successful because he came from outside the establishment and is not even a member of the Democratic party. 'Outsiders' are successful in America. For now, the two big parties are capable of integrating them. Not like in Italy, where the Christian and Social Democrats are disintegrating, and Germany where the Social Democrats have fallen almost to the level of the AfD. They don't seem to be able to renew themselves. It is hard to see how it will be possible to rekindle trust in people. I have just emphasised the necessity of globalization and of certain of its advantages. But people often see neo-colonialism behind globalization. Xi Jinping's great project is to extend the railway network. China's intrusion into Africa is being received with little enthusiasm because it is suspected that China, for the first time in its history, has imperialistic ambitions. That is stunning, as one can emphatically say that China has never had any imperialistic ambitions in the whole course of its history, including the Maoist era.

The ambitions were a lot humbler than those in the Soviet Union. At the beginning of Maoism there were international ambitions that Mao quickly put a stop to when the conflict with the Russians began. For a time, he was an observing member of COMECON, then he resigned and retired. That is typical. China was traditionally a country that kept to itself - they built a wall behind which they withdrew. It is really the first time now that they are breaking out into the world, and in the case of Xi Jinping they are doing this with enormous aggression in regard to the economy and military. So it is hard to say what should be done to re-establish credibility. Not only the natural sciences but also sociological research could play a part here. And at this point the questions of environment and demography are very important. Both are things about which we need to think honestly, scientifically and very carefully. The elite tend to deny their existence. That is why I say that the danger in radical nationalism lies in the fact that as an ideology it has great appeal. Unfortunately, it looks as if direct democracy is not the answer to elites' loss of credibility. In this regard Brexit is very important. People may vote on it, but they may be making an idiotic choice. I read a lot about this subject, and it is often said that it is still better to negotiate things carefully in Parliament than to rely on a referendum. Direct democracy is a dangerous thing.

Szombati: I understand what you are saying. Do you think that we can hope here in Europe to somehow integrate these radical movements into political institutions, like you mentioned in the case of the two big parties in the US? Does European history

perhaps play a part? Particularly in the context of the upcoming European elections, one might ask this question. What is the significance of these elections and can one hope for the mollification of radicalism?

Szelényi: What we seem to be seeing at the moment while researching public opinion is unfortunately the weakening of catch-all parties and of social democracy, and the strengthening of radical nationalists. There is still controversy about how strong they can become, also about if and how these radical nationalists can work together. It is clear that Orbán has to negotiate with Le Pen und Salvini. But Le Pen is the big dog who gets many votes and who has for decades been an authentic radical nationalist. Le Pen has always been illiberal, not only since 2014. Her dad has taught it to her since her childhood. It is not clear to what extent these radical nationalists can engage with each other. After all, it is difficult to see them creating some kind of Nationalist International. Salvini says something like 'You must take in the refugees from Italy', while Orbán answers: 'No refugees are coming here.'

Szombati: But this idea of a 'Christian Europe', couldn't it be a common project or a common ideological denominator?

Szelényi: Yes, there is a sort of common basis, and of course the hostility towards migration and the conservation of ethno-national cultural homogeneity is a common ideology. The question is how the European People's Party can deal with this. There are strong tensions inside the European People's Party. There are members who say, 'If Orbán is not expelled, we will leave the party' [laughs]. But some say the opposite: 'We will leave if he is expelled'. Christian Democracy is in a major crisis. Overall it is very difficult to make a prediction about which way things will go.

Szombati: So what do you think are the stakes of this election? Is it an election like any other, or is it actually different?

Szelényi: Looking at the polling, it is inconceivable that the radical nationalists will take over the EU Parliament. So this is by no means a historic election. The European People's Party will be the largest force, and its candidate will lead the EU, at least formally. The sole question is how successful the radicals will be. But irrespective of that, the EU will be weakened. We don't know what will happen with England.

Szombati: That's true. One last question, a very personal one, but with reference to the EU. Are you personally disappointed in the EU?

Szelényi: I wouldn't say that. I never had any concrete expectations of the EU and of what it will do. We have been saying for 20 years that there is a democracy deficit. Political scientists who know about these things tell me that. When the EU was born, we knew that there would be problems. Unfortunately, we see the incapacity of the EU to solve them. To that extent, I was not wrong. I am sorry to have to say something that many people will not like. One great moment for Europe and the EU was September 2015, when Angela Merkel said that Germany would take in the refugees. That was the victory of the European idea. Once I was asked if I sing along when the European anthem is played. I do not, but I spent last New Year's eve, as I often do, in Vienna. When they played the Ninth Symphony, I almost burst into tears. The text

begins with the request to stop the language of hate and to talk about something else. About how we are a human community. Poor Beethoven - if he could now see what has become of it.

Szombati: Perfect closing words, despite the things that have happened after the 'triumph' of 2015.

Szelényi: She could have managed it better. But Beethoven would have been elated. Yes, this is the European idea. Not that Judeo-Christian nonsense, but this is the essence of Christian Europe.

Szombati: And what would Beethoven have said about the wall that our Prime Minister has built?

Szelényi: Well, radical nationalists see walls and fences as the defenses of an ethnographically and culturally homogeneous community.

Szombati: True. Thank you for this conversation, Iván.

Szelényi: Thank you. It was a pleasure.