

A brief look at the Hungarian student movement “*That Was the First Student Assembly in Many Years..*”

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The end of last year and the beginning of the current one were marked by a wave of student protests which most participants and observers characterized as unprecedented in the recent history of Hungary. Thousands of students took part in student assemblies, spontaneously took the streets¹, and attempted direct actions such as reading their demands on national radio. All this took place three years into the rule of Fidesz, the party that holds a parliamentary super majority, under the authoritarian guidance of prime minister Viktor Orbán. While alarmist international coverage of the erosion of the rule of law was producing its own distortions (which is not to say that most of it was not correct in identifying the significant assault by the Fidesz regime on liberal political arrangements), students started organizing. What follows are fragments from a conversation with Csaba Jelinek, Budapest based activist and organizer, who takes us through the history of the student movement, as participant but also as someone who had the opportunity to observe the unfolding of the movement through the activist networks of Budapest.

Why would it matter to look from Madrid to the details of a movement seemingly so distant (not only in geographical terms)? The history and inherent contradictions of the Hungarian student movement can be taken as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of internationalism, on how our international solidarities can be fortified by local insight and local differences can be negotiated within them. Reflecting upon it stems from a commitment to the fact that internationalism, as an indispensable dimension of our militancy, must constantly integrate in practice the understanding of the way in which strategy can articulate itself locally. The belief in the need to construct a revolutionary movement, against the violence of vanguardist expropriation of the instruments of collective struggle, must be joined by an organizational practice which reflects upon inequality in all its manifestations. The manifestations of inequality include geographical disparities and appear alongside cultural differences. Thus, in looking at the Hungarian student movement we can ask important questions, such as: how can anarchist practice articulate itself in contexts where anarchism is almost completely absent as a contemporary or historical referent? How can anarchist political practice connect to seemingly spontaneous movements? How do organizational models travel and how are we to judge the contradictions which certain forms of horizontalism produce inside popular movements? Looking at the Hungarian student movement and trying to position ourselves with regard to it can be seen as a way of following a commitment emphasized by Eduardo Colombo in a recently opened dialogue²: it is to try to insert ourselves at the junction of the critical elaboration of ideas and contemporary protest movements. This means subverting the violence of representation also by understanding how our emancipatory projects can be translated into local strategy.

Action alone is not synonymous to change, and often times that which appears spontaneous is actually the result of invisible efforts of sustained militancy. These efforts

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPIGJgN3s6c>

2 <http://estudioslibertarios.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/entrevista-eduardo-colombo-2013/>

become visible in the Hungarian student movement as well, once we look behind the euphoria which envelops events. What also becomes visible is what a great challenge it is to prevent the incorporation of a movement into habitual political functioning. Although not a project which fights explicitly under the name of anarchism, we hope reflecting on the Hungarian student movement can be done with respect towards the search for finding ways to convert everyday political practice along the lines of radical democracy. This is the struggle of many of the student militants; we hope their efforts to broaden the horizon of the possible will become increasingly self-conscious with regard to the goals of autonomy, solidarity and direct action. Let us not forget that some of the students on the street were as young as 15. The project of generalizing a revolutionary imagination is, we believe, better served by a commitment to patient understanding, analysis of local challenges and by potential solidarity than by isolated experimentation in the “laboratory of the theory of practice.” Equally, we hope that the contradictions and still unfolding history of the Hungarian student movement can contribute to broadening the local revolutionary imagination.

I would like to start by asking you to describe the origins and the current situation of the student movement..

Starting with the history of it.. Formally, the student network (Hallgatói Hálózat - Haha) was formed in 2011, in May, so almost 2 years ago..This was one year after the election of the Orbán government. It was at the point at which they first leaked some information about what higher education will look like. It was the moment when they started formulating some kind of policies regarding higher education, and the first leaked information was through an article that revealed that they wanted to split Corvinus University into parts and abolish the way it functioned. This was what triggered the first reactions.

*A very important point in this story is that there is TEK³ - Társadalomelméleti Kollégium, the College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory, which is, let's say..the leftist college in Budapest and is formally attached to Corvinus University. Another important aspect is that Corvinus University has the most student organizations in Budapest..So of course there was a lot of discussion about this article and how to save the university..at that point it was quite local. There were discussions in which some members of TEK took part. It looked like all the other organizations wanted to take this moderate step, to start the discussion with people from the Ministry. And opposed to this stood the people from the College, who, on the one hand, wanted to see the proposed changes as part of the broader context, as part of the way the Orbán government or regime works. Secondly, they wanted to take some more radical steps, like the occupation of the university. **The result was that the College people withdrew from the general discussion among student organizations and they started to***

3 TEK is an independent college the origins of which are in the 1980s, when it was established as an autonomous college, the object of which was to critically reflect upon the education received by the students of Corvinus University. Still affiliated with Corvinus University, it is nowadays open to students from other universities as well, and its' activity is centered around creating an educational environment for challenging mainstream social sciences as well as some of the educational practices of higher education. Many of the nowadays Budapest based activists have links with the college or can trace some of their political socialization to the environment of the college.

mobilize their personal networks or activist friends..

Which were the other student organizations?

*The most important was the Rajk college, the liberal college, which is the first college that was formed and the most important one, one of the biggest. Well.. they had a liberal view, **seeing this as only a dysfunction of the political system**, therefore thinking we should just talk to the minister..I don't know..organize a lecture in which we educate the masses. The TEK people said:"Look, it's connected to the austerity measures, to the crisis, the political system which they tried to build after the first attempt to narrow down the functions of the constitutional court, it is about the way they try to impose neoliberal economic policies." **So there was a split between colleges and HaHa was formed.***

*The first action they planned was to stay overnight at the university. This was meant to be formal, not an occupation..Have a night full of events, discussions with the general assembly.. It was meant to be a protest, not really an occupation, but still something to mobilize people. The next day the rector said that they won't let it happen and then HaHa made a demonstration, and after that we had a general assembly somewhere else. **That was the first time we were depicted in the media and 200 or 300 people came. That was the first student assembly in many years.** Because of other union demonstrations at the same time it got this high..It was quite spectacular that students started to mobilize at the same time these oppositional movements started on the left..let's say the liberal left.*

*So that was the first important event..And then came the summer when nothing happened. **And then during autumn meetings and discussions started again, discussions about how to make a participatory democratic system. It was clear from the first second that HaHA will be something based on the participatory democratic principle.** The meetings went on during autumn, at a time when the demonstrations of the trade unions were also taking place. That was the point at which Milla (One Million for the Freedom of the Press) was formed, and we, as the Student Network, took part at these demos as the voice of the students. But at that time there were only 20, 30 people who were really active in HaHa.*

The next important point is January 2012 when we made the first..let's say almost direct action ..using this human microphone technique from Occupy. During autumn and winter the complete first draft of the higher education reform was introduced. So of course, as expected, huge cuts were announced, the redistribution and the decrease of state funded places, decrease of the autonomy of the universities, many worrying tendencies. It is in this context that we went to this educational fair..We wanted to reflect on these with a happening which was held at the opening ceremony of the biggest educational fair in Budapest. This is an event which usually attracts tens of thousands of students. So we went to the ceremonial opening of the event,

approximately 30 activists, and we made this performance, basically chanting a text or something really short, summarizing what the problems are with the new higher education reform..So we made that and it went viral on the internet. We had 100,000 views in a couple of days.. After that we organized the first university occupation. That was the first huge demo of Haha, in February. We had 2-3000 participants at the demo, and after the demo, when it formally ended, we tried to channel the people into one of the universities, the faculty of law at ELTE. We occupied an auditorium there. **We had the first student assembly, with 4-500 participants.** It was really popular, a great experience for all those who took part..It got a lot of media coverage. It was in a way an important symbolic action.

At the time a big problem was that this was occurring during the last day of applying for the next academic year, so really at the last minute. And of course our demands were ambitious..to stop the higher education reform immediately. And of course they triggered no response from the side of the ministry..So we tried to organize some other assemblies, to occupy another auditorium a few weeks later..**But it attracted less and less people.**

At the same time another important event occurred, this was a scandal related to the president, Pál Schmitt, who was accused of plagiarism. It was quite obvious that he had plagiarized his doctoral thesis a few decades ago.

During the winter a lot of people came into HaHa, non-college people. That was the time when other youngsters joined the group. **They were..You know, these little radical, almost punk members..So not these ideology driven, older college guys, but the fresh power.**..Based on this newly formed network, Haha made a sit in at the rector's office. This was at the university where the plagiarism happened, 20 years ago, and we demanded the withdrawal of the doctoral diploma of Pál Schmitt and his resignation. The university made an investigation and they announced that there were problems with the doctoral thesis but it is the responsibility of the ministry to withdraw the diploma. Anyway, it went on for a few days and then Schmitt resigned. It looked like quite a successful story from the side of Haha..in the media it looked like we were the ones who made him resign..which of course is not true, but it was important to make our 'brand'. **And then the summer came and that was a period when a little tension started to emerge between the old ones and the new ones. The older ones wanted these slower steps..**

The older and the new ones based on..

Based on age and institutional affiliation. The old ones, the members of the college..The new ones came mainly from the social science department of ELTE, they were younger, they didn't really have an activist background, they were not these ideologically really clear guys.. but they were much more enthusiastic than the old ones..So a little tension about what to do and how to do it emerged..How to, you know..make a clear strategy. The idea back then, I think a year ago, at the time of the first birthday of HaHa, was that we should focus on strengthening our organization, that we should go to other cities and build up a real structure on the basis of which we can stage bigger, more coordinated actions. But the summer

again really killed what was going on..people went on holiday, nothing was really happening politically..So then came the autumn of 2012 and almost all the old guys, old members, including me, we said that we are at a stage at which we cannot do this everyday activism, and we are a little bit tired, and we would like to step back and let the new ones do what they want..

And they really started what they wanted. They saw this film called *Blockade*⁴, made by the Zagreb university movement..or the Croatian one. And they became extremely enthusiastic about that and what they saw. They wanted to make the same..they started to mobilize and make their own structures, they started not as HaHa, **but as a working group called “Strike!” (Sztrájk), they wanted to make a nation wide higher education strike, opposing the higher education reform.** In this context, the government announced the next wave of reforms...even more cuts, less state funded places, a more direct decrease of the autonomy of the universities.

So in this context they made a quite radical draft which really pissed off many students..regardless of their political views. That was the point at which the half-formed Strike group had its momentum. It was quite interesting..They organized a meeting for themselves, on the 5th of December, and exactly on that day the new wave of reforms was announced. **The whole event took a turn and they started to speak about immediate action, immediate reaction, they were really quick.** They announced they would make a general assembly at ELTE, they made a facebook event and it turned out as something really popular..Hundreds of people joined the event, they were able to have a general assembly. They drafted six demands, quite concrete demands. These included: stopping the higher education reform, restoring the autonomy of the universities, stopping the cuts in financial support, and making a real reform. The basis of these demands was that indeed there is a problem with the higher education system, but they want to solve it somehow differently, including all the students and professors. So they made their demands and at the general assembly the initial plan of the core of the group was to make an occupation, not to go out and start the strike movement. **But what happened at the general assembly was that all the newcomers wanted something more radical, a university occupation was not radical enough for them. They wanted to go to the streets..**There was a vote, they voted to occupy a nearby bridge and stop the traffic. And they did it. A lot of people joined, after that there was a spontaneous march. An important thing was that the police reacted in a non-violent way, they let it flow. They realized there is no point for them to start beating the students, so they let the students march on the streets. And so it happened..and it got huge media coverage and made Haha look even more serious politically.

This was at the beginning of December..This opened a series of marches. There were some quite interesting events, for example at the Parliament, when students wanted to storm the Parliament⁵..they went into a closed area..Or in front of the radio when they almost went into the radio offices and tried to have

4 <http://www.ouatmedia.com/content/blokada>

5 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkPXovV17Z0>

the staff read their demands. **It attracted a lot of demonstrators..thousands of students marched on the streets..Which most had never seen before.** And then came the holiday season and after that they made this occupation in February, I guess.

Yes, February. **The occupation lasted for 45 days**, so it was quite long. They had a lot of assemblies, new students joined. But they got tired as time passed, after which the university said they will let them in any time they want, and they will have this auditorium which they occupied..they will let them use it any time they wanted. They accepted this offer and they went out of the university and now there are negotiations going on. I think one of the most important things was the connection with the official student union. First they worked together, but later it seemed that the student union will negotiate with the government and the government won't negotiate with the student network..Slowly the SU just gave up the initial demands. At the moment, as far as I know, there is no discussion between the SU and HaHa. A huge effect on their relation was influenced by this scandal around the local student union of ELTE, about a list leaked in the media..And that's the local student union which was the birthplace of Jobbik. A list was leaked in which they made really racist and antisemitic comments about each student, by name. After this the local student union was dissolved and a new election was organized..I mean it's happening right now, the campaign period. That's the history, in a nutshell.

The big question now is in which direction to go, after having this strong name and sort of a political influence..This question is asked in a political context which matters a lot..The main idea is that we will have elections in a year. After the first three years of the Orbán government, in which there was a huge political vacuum on the oppositional side, now the landscape is starting to polarize. On the one hand the government, on the other side the opposition. **The strategy of the government is quite the same as that of many members of the opposition: it is to make the political landscape, the ideological landscape dichotomous..**on the one hand Fidesz and on the other side this left liberal something..So on this oppositional side you have the former socialist party, which is, I would say, almost killed politically, they still have 10-15 % but they will never be bigger. And you have this new party, which was formed by the former prime minister, who was prime minister before Orbán, **Gordon Bajnai. He is this technocrat neoliberal guy, depicted as an expert. He centers his policy around topics of democracy, constitutionalism...**You also have smaller parties like the 4th Republic or LMP, which basically split because of these attempts to polarize the political landscape...their program is to make a radical break with the old political elite which consists of Bajnai and the Socialist Party and Fidesz, and to make this third pole. But this is also extremely difficult, because of the new electoral law, and the new voting system which is this Anglo-Saxon type of electoral system in which you are on a track towards a two-party system.

Now Haha is caught up in these huge questions..Where to stand in relation to the opposition..there is consensus that they won't join the socialist party. But there are questions about 'big politics'. This alignment triggered many questions and fights. For example, when 80 people occupied the headquarters of

*Fidesz, a dozen of Haha activists took part. But there were also members of Bajnai's party and people from LMP. **After this event the right wing media started to depict this whole group of activists as Bajnai's people and the guard of Bajnai..And of course it's really problematic for Haha which ever since its formation emphasized that they won't take part in party politics because they want to do this everyday kind of politics, politics on a participatory basis. So now the big question is what to do with this polarizing ideological landscape. Whether it's essential to have a clear ideology or just focus on the methods of participatory democracy and assemblies..and all this base democratic practice. Whether to focus on education and to criticize the whole system through this entry point or to deal with the system itself..or the Orbán regime.***

How do you see the learning process of the movement? There are all the discussions about participatory democracy, direct action, and I was wondering to what degree this had a spontaneous component or there is a deliberate anarchist component in it..

*It's strange because in Hungary we don't have an anarchist subculture or an anarchist referent. **So basically these are anarchist methods but we have never referred to them as anarchist methods because there is no referent in the Hungarian context for this.** I don't know..It's a two sided process, because on the one hand there is huge success in the fact that some of these methods (i.e. the methods of 'base' democracy) become mainstream. There is an interesting traveling of these methods into the public sphere. Basically the positive side is that many students, especially the young ones, started to feel how good it can be if they can have their voice heard. But on the other hand it clearly has its limitations. I mean..It's a really strong point in the Haha consensus..maybe that's the one consensual point which HaHa still has..that we need these methods. But it is raised more and more often that Haha should also have a clearer strategy..and it is hard to make a strategy with these methods..for a movement which is not only Budapest based, which includes maybe the more conservative students..So I don't know..Maybe one more interesting point is what we recognized a year ago..**The old college affiliated founders of Haha always wanted to make the ideology really clear and to start with theory and then apply it in practice..And then a year ago we realized, after the first occupation, this symbolic occupation which lasted just for an evening, we realized it is much more important to convince the people with actions, motions, participation than with pure ideology..It is more important to make events in which they can participate than to write articles and make a really strict, I don't know..ideological carta of Haha. That was an important experience for many of us..which became natural for the younger ones.** I don't know how ideology will come into the picture, because now in this polarized political space these guys are forced into the Bajnai camp. But it's not clear how to, or if there is any point in making this ideological separation, from the point of view of Haha...Because of course, from the point of view of the leftist story it would have significance..but from a HaHa point of view it is not clear whether this should happen or not or how to*

make it.

Many thanks for Csaba's patient walkthrough. Solidarity from Madrid for those carrying out locally our international struggles. ¡La lucha sigue!