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## **INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCIENCE THE LEGACY OF ELEMÉR HANKISS<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

Elemér Hankiss was one of the most influential and brilliant thinkers of the past half century in Hungary and Central Europe. His work overarches disciplines from literary criticism and sociology, to political science, anthropological philosophy and civilizational theory.

Thanks to his numerous essays and media appearances he was highly appreciated and well-respected as a non-partisan public intellectual.

This essay investigates some of the lesser known aspects of his oeuvre, and his contribution to creating a unique advanced study centre in Western Hungary's historic city of Kőszeg.

It also highlights his outstanding ability to oscillate between different disciplines and public activities, while at the same time continuously focusing on the existential questions of human existence.

**KEYWORDS:** oscillation, Prometheus and Apollo, black swans, inquisitive, reinvent and reform, Kőszeg, Institute of Advanced Studies, uncertainty, quantum mechanics

*You see things; and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"*  
—G. B. Shaw

*I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.*  
—John Cage

Elemér Hankiss was a prominent thinker of the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium. His multifarious career in science encompassed numerous fields of the social sciences from literary theory

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and the sociology of values to a theory of civilization developed on anthropological, philosophical and historical foundations. From his family he inherited an affinity for literature, culture, the arts and languages as well as the pursuit of sharing and popularizing knowledge and fostering public good. The attitude of a social reformer, popular educator and “public intellectual” fit harmoniously to the artisanal industry of a researcher immersed in his narrower professional field. He kept expanding the breadth of his work, loosening and repeatedly criss-crossing the boundaries between disciplines, moving from one to another, and returning to his starting points from time to time. In his own words, he had never stopped “oscillating.”

Many could not grasp his elegant movement, intellectual leaps and seemingly sudden shifts. Some abhorred, some adored, and many considered him frivolous. Indeed, these repeated switches were not easy to understand, due partly to the fact that Hankiss was profoundly and fully committed to the actual tasks of each “period” in his oeuvre. Moreover, he often returned to his earlier research themes. Nonetheless, he provided us with a key to this mystery: in his final period he frequently implied that he was always truly interested in the big questions of existence and non-existence, the meaning and meaninglessness of life. This caused him to seek and gather evidence and arguments from literature, the arts, the culture of everyday life, in the social sciences, psychology, theology and philosophy.

### 1. PROMETHEUS *VERSUS* APOLLO

One of his deepest and essential insights was the “dualities” inherent in our lives that he illustrated through contrasting the Promethean and Apollonian worlds. While Prometheus is an embodiment of *technê* and helps humans to get along in this world, avoiding general questions of existence and the hereafter, Apollo is the symbol of creativity and transcendence. One helps us to survive, the other protects us from the horrors of the void, introducing beauty and playfulness into our lives. Hankiss observes that the two perspectives do not exclude one another: rather, they coexist and interact to characterize our lives. At times one of them prevails, then the other suddenly jumps to the fore. In fact, this dialectic determined his own life too: while he founded a workshop, presided over Hungary’s public television and a scientific institute, fostered intellectual movements, from time to time he vanished – suddenly – to read, write, think, learn and argue at top-ranked intellectual centres of the world, to pay tribute at the altar of the Apollonian worldview. This constant back-and-forth journey between the two views or strategies makes his multifarious oeuvre particularly original and benevolently provocative. And it also offers a host of opportunities to join in and continue this oeuvre.

It is the body of questions that emerge in the course of this criss-crossing or constant oscillation that makes Hankiss's achievements and influence so inspiring and exciting. He examines the two worlds and their relationship to one another rather than separately. By constantly making connections between different approaches and disciplines he helped the practitioners of various professions to find new paths, widening their horizons and encouraging them to raise new questions, to shed obsolete or reality-curbing theories and methodologies, to seek contact with each another. He urged them to be "black swans": scholars who can put forth unusual and perplexingly novel ideas. This effort finally – after years of enduring experimentation – led to the birth of a new type of development and research institution, an "institute for advanced study" (generally unknown in Hungary) in the Transdanubian town of Kőszeg (iASK) with an international character, complex approaches and methods, the integration of basic research and socially innovative development projects as well as a constant drive to create novel perspectives and mindsets.

For Hankiss, Vienna, Oxford, Washington and Florence were little "gardens of Eden," but he was well aware that he would probably not find the meaning of his own life in these miniature paradises. He considered their modest Hungarian counterparts to be real intellectual workshops, "perhaps the prime homes of the quest for meaning" (Hankiss 2012, p. 98).

## 2. THE ETERNAL INQUIRER

Elemér Hankiss never stopped asking questions. He rarely criticised anyone directly and preferred to enshrine his critiques in questions. He was truly inquisitive and interested particularly in individual fates, and life struggles. He was able to perceive big battles in the lives of "small people" and encouraged his colleagues to give an account of their lives and achievements in order to show what they stood for. Hankiss was always encouraging us to explore our aims through self-reflection and inquiry.

He was also a master of gentle irony, and maintaining a distance at all times. Maybe this combination of gentleness and unapproachability was what many people found appealing. At the same time, he urged everyone to think and doubt and, paradoxically, to develop an intrinsic demand for action. He kept the distance from himself too. Perhaps that is why he asked so many questions. He kept playing with ideas and avoided to take them seriously for a long time. Irony and paradoxes always suppressed the pathos in his writings. He shunned maxims and closed theoretical systems, constantly thinking about counterpoints and successive steps, continuation. He considered incompleteness to be a key to freedom – to continuity, the quest for the eternal and sustained curiosity. He strove to transmit

André Gide's message: "Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it." (Hankiss 2014a, p. 331)

But who was this man, curious about everything and everyone, thus ever inquisitive, yet retaining his civic reserve?

- *A successful scientist?* – This image could be formed by all those who read his scientific papers in a range of fields from literature, sociology and political science to the theory of civilization and philosophical anthropology. The iASK Hankiss Centre and Archive in Kőszeg currently collects and processes this rich and largely undiscovered oeuvre.
- An unfaithful lover rambling through the Halls of Science? – An initially successful scientist who was driven towards ever new fields by his restless nature and curiosity, did he thus fail to reap the greatest laurels awaiting him in any particular field? His critics cannot see perpetuity in change, the repeated returns and ceaseless doubts, and the deep questions of human existence that are very difficult to answer and a strain for all of us.
- An essayist? – In fact, the essay is an experiment, and thus Hankiss was (also) an essayist in the deepest sense of this word – a twenty-first-century wanderer, a postmodern Montaigne. He wanted to be intelligible for all, and avoided jargon, academic jargon and vague wording. Hankiss "socialized" his field of practice, the humanities and social sciences, allowing people to directly utilize these disciplines.
- A popular educator? – In the period from 1996–2014 Elemér Hankiss actively participated in the international summer universities organized in Kőszeg. The city also hosted English-language Master's courses which were launched in 2005 in cooperation with the Corvinus University of Budapest. Elemér was always present, compiling books of reading materials. From 1960 onwards, for several decades, he also worked for the public radio as an editor, often presenter and program creator, and occasionally as a translator of international literature featured in the programming. Conversing with excellent artists, directors, actors, literary critics and sociologists, again, in the course of seemingly easy-going chats he raises unlikely questions, demonstrating what artists and the arts are capable of in representing latent fates and fateful questions, as well as societal dilemmas.
- A postmodern Don Quixote? – Hankiss really had a restless nature and he repeatedly made attempts to improve public conditions in Hungary. Following the brief episode of acting as the president of Hungary's public television – a hardly "successful" period that provides quite a few lessons yet to be analyzed – he sets out to organize the reform movement "Let Us Reinvent Hungary." This, like the two other reform experiments related to

his name, “Let Us Reinvent Central Europe” and “A New Age of Reform,” immediately bumped into rejection from the new-born “politico-economic elite” and the new-old media. Elemér Hankiss made efforts to point out that in 1989 Hungary had suddenly gained plenty of room to maneuver and the chance to alter its trajectory by directing energies for its own good, in a conscious and well-planned way, to create a happier and more successful society. He was ready to act for this cause and encouraged others to do the same. He stepped outside his ivory tower to surpass the constraints of the conventional behaviour of an intellectual. His envisioned reforms were widely approved and clearly in demand; nevertheless the critical mass of Hungarian society did not think it was time to leave behind their deep-rooted passivity nurtured and matured by dictatorships of the recent past.

The experience of freedom, its forms of realization and general concept, constituted a constant subject for Hankiss. After the fall of the Berlin Wall he kept raising the question: Can we live up to the freedom that opened for us? He was seeking and discovering the hidden messages of the desire for freedom and immortality in the world of objects, the products and advertisements of consumer society too: in toothpaste, the washing machine and the shape of a salt shaker.

The approaching end of life warn even the most playful mind to become sober and solemn. Hankiss began to inquire into freedom, the meaning or meaninglessness of life, the concepts of mortality, death and non-being as well as the role of world religions and civilizations. His writings increasingly focused on God, and dealt primarily with the question to what extent various images of God underpin the conviction that humankind has a role and significance in the universe.

### 3. HANKISS’S INNOVATIONS IN SCIENCE AND PUBLIC LIFE

The diversity and depth of Hankiss’s admirable achievements as a scientist and thinker have only been uncovered in their complexity, in terms of their interrelated aspects, in recent years (Miszlivetz 2008; Takács 2018). Many wrote about the results of his work in literary theory and sociology, and the introduction of structuralism that brought about intellectual renewal, and the popular books that grew out of his research in the field of value sociology and the heuristic concept of the “second society.” He never stopped writing essays on the distortions in Hungarian society’s value system and behaviour culture. A significant part of his stocktaking book, with two editions in 2014, *A befejezetlen ember* (The Incomplete Human) is devoted to the critique of society and power (Hankiss 2014a). It is a brilliant synthesis, social criticism extended over the global and European spaces in a new epoch.

#### 4. FEAR AND CIVILIZATION: THE EXISTENTIALIZATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Although Hankiss continued to pursue his Promethean activities, he did withdraw from his role as a social reformer; from the second half of the 1990s his attention and research interest drew him towards Apollonian spheres. In the grand essay “Fear and the Social Sciences” he points out that sociology cannot tackle the questions of death and existential fear (Hankiss 1997, 2001). Departing from a century-old sociological practice, he also interprets the individual itself – with specific values, aspirations, anxieties and fears – as an independent and major factor of social existence. This opens the way towards the “existentialization” of the social sciences. He saw fear and anxiety not only as corollaries of “other social facts” but one of the essential creative and motivational forces of the human civilization.

Representatives of the “hard” social sciences do not consider existential questions as research areas that can and should be studied. Hankiss, however, not only adopts but literally excels in research that directly benefits social utility, escaping the spell of numbers, data sets and certainty. His intellectual legacy proves that – although they are hard to reconcile – the spirits of Apollo and Prometheus are not mutually exclusive.

#### 5. THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE LURKING MINOTAUR

This 1997 essay – which was also published in English later in the book *Fears and Symbols* (Hankiss 2001) – outlines the foundations of a new theory of civilization. Hankiss strongly draws on other disciplines focusing on humanbeings, primarily on cultural anthropology (Bronislaw Malinowski) and the findings of psychology, social psychology (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and their followers), and last but not least philosophy and the philosophy of science (Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Karl Jaspers, Herbert Marcuse, etc.).

Observing the series of mutually sustaining, entangled crises which increasingly manifest from the beginning of the third millennium, Hankiss draws the conclusion that we have reached a new epoch, the age of uncertainty (Mizslivetz 2009a, 2009b). He elaborates the concept of “axial periods” of radical change developed by Jaspers to conclude that we are now entering a new (the third) axial period when “the economic-social-cultural structure of the world has been in radical transformation, and the interpretation of the universe, life, man’s position, role and existence have also transformed” (Hankiss 2015, 240). Thus he drew close to authors and analyses who/which – although adopting different approaches – had reached the same conclusion in analyzing global transformation. He joined the prominent representatives of political economy based world-systems analysis, ecological systems theory, theories of civilization and

transformative periods in history such as Karl Polanyi, Immanuel Wallerstein, Ervin László, Zygmunt Bauman, Eric Hobsbawm or Yuval Harari. He began to write a new Grand Narrative, which will probably cause a great deal of further creative pondering for the forthcoming generations of intellectuals and research due to its hard-to-categorize nature.

Although Hankiss wrote about a third axial period in global terms, he admittedly focused on Europe or Western civilization and its transformation, crisis and hollowing-out. He published his last article in the 14 December 2014 issue of the *Népszabadság* under the title “Europe and the Minotaur” (Hankiss 2014b). Here he warns us of the threat of self-destruction that derives from this hollowing-out.

## 6. THE QUEST FOR MEANING IN THE QUANTUM UNIVERSE

Elemér Hankiss passionately sought to discover what was hidden beneath the surface of everyday life: is there a deeper layer of human life? (Hankiss 2014a). He really believed that in the new age of uncertainty, as Western civilization is hollowing-out, we need to find new interpretive frameworks for scientific discovery, and put an end to the unfinished and unfruitful “science war” and distance between philosophy (the humanities) and the natural sciences. In his essay “Quantum Mechanics and the Meaning of Life” (Hankiss 2017) he suggested that the latest achievements of quantum physics provide more possibilities for this than ever before. Scholars engaged in the humanities and social sciences should not only understand the theory of relativity and the contentious major currents of quantum research but feel comfortable in areas of culture and science other than their own narrower fields. In the first half of the twentieth century physicists and natural scientists attended to philosophical debates and were aware of the significance of the different strands of thought. This has changed now, and thus we should listen to Einstein’s warning of 1944:

“So many people today – and even professional scientists – seem to me like someone who has seen thousands of trees but has never seen a forest. A knowledge of the historic and philosophical background gives that kind of independence from prejudices of his generation from which most scientists are suffering. This independence created by philosophical insights is – in my opinion – the mark of distinction between a mere artisan or specialist and a real seeker after truth”

Elemér Hankiss was “a real seeker after truth” in Einstein’s sense – gifted with an enviable and exemplary arsenal of knowledge, culture and the special ability to see the forest beyond the trees.

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