



Thomas von Ahn

On the aims of discourse

A response to György Schöpflin

In November 2006, Eurozine published an article by Thomas von Ahn analyzing the causes of the violent demonstrations in Hungary the previous month. Among other things, von Ahn argued that Hungarian opposition (Fidesz) leader Viktor Orban was operating a populist strategy that sought to undercut parliamentary procedures. György Schöpflin, MEP for Hungary (Fidesz–EPP), responded that von Ahn was uncritically reproducing the spin–doctoring of the Hungarian Left. Now, Thomas von Ahn defends his original position and asks what a constructive discourse about Hungary's recent past would look like.

György Schöpflin and I are two unequal opponents in a debate that long ago passed its expiry date. While I can claim to be representing an independent position, it is clear from Schöpflin's response that he is acting on two levels: on one hand, he dresses up his text in the garb of learned expertise, on the other, he is a public figure who represents the system of norms of a political party. Hence, our texts are the products of very different aims. Mine is the result of a hermeneutic process of understanding that seeks reasons for the unrest last autumn, which, by Hungarian standards, was unusual. Schöpflin's text, on the other hand, contains no argument that does not ultimately serve the purposes of his party. The aim of his response is to keep alive the discussion about last autumn's events without adding to an understanding of the facts. It makes no contribution to the urgently necessary debate about the deeper reasons for what happened. Therefore, I am reluctant to continue our debate. In what follows, I will restrict myself to pointing out, on the basis of a few examples, the contradictions in which Schöpflin, as a result of his ambivalent position, gets caught up.

Right at the start, Schöpflin, in a sweeping gesture, denies any kind of objectivity to four fifths of the entire Hungarian media. Not only does he claim that this section of the media represents the Left, but also, that it is controlled directly by the government and the Socialist Party. According to Schöpflin, what this media segment writes is not the result of independent opinion; rather, he claims, it acts as a "transmission belt, doing the government's bidding". As if to prove this, Schöpflin cites a short passage from the prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's "lying speech", in which Gyurcsány says that:

[...] these issues [i.e. the party's political projects discussed during the conference, the details of which Gyurcsány admitted not being completely clear about] have to be carried forward, making sure that there is cooperation, mutual benevolence, securing the support of the coalition partner, preparing the leaders and columnists of the most influential papers, so they

are aware of what they can expect. Including them in the process.

At most, one can infer from Gyürcsány's words his party's interest in a professional media campaign, as is usual in all media democracies. Schöpflin, on the other hand, uses the quote to prove not only that a deep divide runs through the Hungarian media, but also that in the period between the "lying speech" and its leak, the media was unfairly influenced. However, these words do not impart as much: György Schöpflin is claiming, without factual proof, that the media was manipulated by the government. His aim is obvious: since the references I use are supposedly the result of State influence, they are neither objective nor quotable. I don't contest that the Hungarian media mirrors the political division that I point out as well. However Schöpflin goes far further when he sweepingly declares numerous media organs to be unqualified to speak, on the basis of proof that is only apparently tangible.

Political crisis in Hungary

This article is a response to György Schöpflin's article, "Democracy, populism, and the political crisis in Hungary", itself a response to Thomas Von Ahn's article, "Democracy or the street? Fragile stability in Hungary".

Another example: in his attempt to identify reasons for the current crisis, Schöpflin makes a crude distinction between the institutional and social foundations of democracy. In Hungary, the institutional structure of the political system meets the criteria for a functioning democracy: regular free elections and a multi-party system guarantee a democratically legitimate parliament and a democratically legitimate government. Additionally, a separation of powers guarantees internal control of the government. This also means that, during a term of office, the prime minister can be dismissed by a majority (via a vote of no confidence). If the prime minister commands a majority, then he or she cannot be dismissed — as is generally the case in Western democracies. Hence, it is inconceivable why Schöpflin picks on precisely this fact to infer that the prime minister is exempted from his social responsibility, and consequently that Hungary's political system is "semi-democratic".

On the other hand, György Schöpflin rightly notes the absence of an internalized understanding of democracy in Hungarian society, one that is not politicized through and through, but that transcends party politics and is pluralistic. However, this is not a problem of the institutional structure of a society, but the way that it is handled! In this context, to portray the street as a legitimate political institution evidences a more than ambiguous handling, especially given that last autumn Fidesz and its leaders reduced their parliamentary presence to a minimum. However, if a democracy is to function above and beyond its institutional structure, it is essential that its members are able to stick to the rules of the democratic game — also in the event of a legitimate (and for a strong opposition party, understandable) attempt to force a government from office. If a party supports its strategies with forces that lie outside the democratic consensus, then it must be prepared for the criticism that it employs anti-parliamentary means.

György Schöpflin justifies the actions of his party by claiming that it placed itself at the fore of the demonstrations in order to protect Hungarian democracy, the government, and Fidesz itself from "genuine" extremism. Thus, he recasts the anti-parliamentary behaviour of his party as that of a political saviour. If that were the case, however, why did Fidesz not distance

itself in the clearest possible terms from the anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, and fascist statements of "its" demonstrators on Parliament Square, in Internet forums, and elsewhere? Facing the dilemma between its power interests and its ethical responsibility to stick to the rules of the game, Fidesz opted for the former. The rules of the game, however, involve that one distances oneself from statements that — since they exclude a part of society — at their core pursue undemocratic aims. If such distancing does not occur, a central criterion of populist politics is met.

Of course, the Socialists also allow themselves to be led to a great extent from interests as opposed to insights. The strategy that helped Gyurcsány to victory should be condemned on a moral level, even if it remained within constitutional bounds. Nevertheless, it is no surprise that Schöpflin's response omits those passages in my text in which I talk about Gyurcsány. Still, my hypothesis that his speech, while keeping him in the driving seat in the short term, in the long term could lead to his political downfall, is currently being borne out. This is confirmed by the latest survey results, which see Fidesz further ahead than at any time in since summer 1998. Therefore, it remains an irony of the whole situation that Gyurcsány would probably no longer be prime minister had Hungary been able to develop a political culture since 1989 in which two opposing camps did not battle it out for exclusive legitimacy.

A final example: the dichotomous distinction between "instrumentalized" and "non-instrumentalized" history, which György Schöpflin accuses me of making, is his own invention. I make a distinction between various politically motivated historical narratives about events in the Hungarian past and argue that these stand in the way of a social consensus about this past. Such a consensus, which necessarily cannot be objective, would be an essential component of a society that was reconciled to itself. Schöpflin appears less interested in this thesis than in making wild accusations that I am disseminating prejudices under the mantle of objectivity.

One thing remains to be pointed out: that it is with argumentative strategies such as these that opinion-formers in the Hungarian political discourse mutually attempt to deny the other's legitimacy. They aim to ideologize the social divide, not to bridge it. In so far as György Schöpflin participates in this game, he also runs into the "trap" in which, as he writes, both the Hungarian Left as well as the Right find themselves in — and which, in his opinion, I fail to see. However, it is necessary to overcome this division, since it is the reason more than any other for the political crisis in Hungary. This has been confirmed in recent months, during which, while the street has decreased more and more in political importance, the unyielding attitude of the two large parties has continued to determine the political climate.

Published 2007-06-12
 Original in German
 Translation by Simon Garnett
 © Thomas von Ahn
 © Eurozine