Remembering Mónika Vig

Robert J.C. Young

In the spring of 1991, I held a seminar at Wadham College in Oxford on 'Cultural Difference'. At Oxford, I always gave my seminars on topics which were not directly related to any course or exam—that way people came only if they were really interested in the topic. There was no reward other than the experience of the class itself. From my point of view, it meant that you had no idea who the people in the room might be—since the topic was not on any course or syllabus, the students might come from anywhere in the University, and generally did. As time went on you would get to know them, and find out who they were. In this class that spring term, a young woman appeared who came regularly every week and made quite lively contributions. It turned out that she was one of the first Soros scholars from Eastern Europe, who had come to Oxford on a scholarship founded by the banker George Soros, the man who literally broke the Bank of England in 1987. Some of the billions that he made on that occasion, he put into a foundation to fund graduate students from Eastern Europe, starting with Hungary, his own country, to come to Oxford for a year. It was the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the freeing up of the Soviet Union's colonial empire in Europe—the last of the old colonial empires to dismantle itself. The name of this Soros student was Mónika Vig. One morning after class, she came up to me and asked if she could interview me for a Hungarian newspaper.

A few days later, she turned up in my office and started telling me about herself. Three years earlier, she had organised one of the first women's demonstrations against a communist regime in Eastern Europe. This was no eruption of dissidents demanding access to the mode of Western individualism: the protest was against one of the most brutal examples of insensitive Communist central planning in post-war Europe—the scheme to build an environmentally disastrous Nagymaros-Gabcivko dam on the Danube. I would later recall this campaign when writing about the Namada dam campaign in India, also led by women activists, reflecting that both were characteristic of the new kinds of radical grass-roots political movements that emerged in the late twentieth-century. One result of the ensuing publicity about the Hungarian dam protests was that Mónika was subsequently elected to the first national executive of FIDESZ, the Alliance of Young Democrats. When the repressive Communist regime fell in 1989 and was followed by free elections, Mónika could easily have been one of those put forward by FIDESZ to become an MP, as many of her colleagues were. Sensing however, the beginnings of its subsequent opportunistic move to the right, she left the party and returned to her work on the bi-weekly cultural and political newspaper, *Magyar Narancs (Hungarian Orange)*, which she had helped to found in 1989, and which was now gradually distancing itself from FIDESZ. The reference to orange suggested the paper's liberal anarchist sympathies—it invoked not only Péter Bacsó's movie called *Witness* (in which lemon is called the Hungarian orange), but also the anarchic, subversive Polish group of the eighties that was known as the Orange Alternative. The magazine is still

published today in Hungary, in a notably more upmarket format than the rough newsprint of the early issues.

The experience of the interview was quite unusual for me. Rather than general questions about postcolonialism and the like that I was used to, all her questions were about Marxism. At that time, as someone who had become interested in psychoanalysis, Derrida, Deleuze etc. I was very used to being challenged by academic Marxists for deviating from the lines of acceptable orthodoxy, to being denounced for venturing from the prescribed canon of authorised authorities (actually not much has changed in that respect since). Mónika by contrast was someone who had spent all her life in a Marxist state, and had been brought up on official Marxist ideology right through university. She demanded to know from me why I was still taking Marxism seriously. How could people in Oxford, she asked, still take Marxism seriously when anyone could see that it had been such an abject failure in Hungary and elsewhere? Especially people like me who were not even mainstream Marxists such as Gerald Cohen? The prestige of Marxism in Western academia was something that people in Eastern Europe under Communism found very difficult to understand. I tried to explain to her how this could be so, how Marxism could somehow survive the successive disasters of attempts to put it into practice at the level of the state, and why it was still worth taking seriously as a powerful critical tool, even if all too often such critiques never got beyond the walls of the academy. Though passionate in her views, and clearly impatient with doctrinaire Marxism, she listened to me carefully, and we talked together for several hours. She was greatly struck, I remember, by my argument that it was the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 that led many leftist intellectuals in Western Europe to leave the Communist Party, and to cease to identify the regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as properly Marxist at all. It was the Hungarian Uprising that had led to the birth of the New Left in Europe.

A few months later, Mónika wrote to me and sent me a copy of the interview. In the letter, she remarked that she had mentioned in the article that (according to her) I bore an extraordinary likeness to the Hungarian writer Peter Eszterházy – and enclosed a copy of his picture. I studied it rather carefully. When I wrote to thank her, I lamented what a shame it was that I could not read what she had written, since it was in Hungarian, and my Hungarian was virtually non-existent. I never heard from her again after the end of 1991, but did not think too much of it, as that is fairly normal in the way of things with people who live busy lives.

I kept her letter, and the newspaper, however, somewhere deep in my disorganised filing system, and came across it again many years later when I was moving my things from Oxford to New York. Shortly after I arrived, I met David Mandler, who had recently completed a fascinating Ph.D at NYU on the work of the Hungarian Orientalist Arminius Vámbéry (1832-1913). I told Mandler about the interview that I had never been able to read, and asked him if he would translate it for me, to which he readily agreed. A couple of weeks later, he sent it to me, and as soon as I began to look at it, I became fascinated. First, because reading it in 2006 I realised the interview itself was a piece of history, an arrested moment, caught at the cusp of the transformations that had so changed the world in which we lived. And second, because Monika's questioning had been so sharp, so

probing, interested rather than hostile, but always with the authority of her lifetime experience of living through Marxism in practice, that gave her a certain freedom to say things about it that people on the Left in Britain, including myself, would never say.

As I read the interview, I wondered what had happened to her. Thanks to the internet, it did not take me long to find out. Just a few months after she had sent me the interview, she was travelling to speak at a FIDESZ Open University camp in north Hungary and was killed in a car crash, on 5 September 1992. I felt a terrible sense of shock at the waste of such a creative and intelligent radical young political activist, and, in a different way, personally disturbed because I had known nothing of what had happened to her all those years ago.

Mónika Vig is today memorialised by *Magyar Narancs*, the journal she co-founded and whose political and cultural identity she helped to establish, and by an annual prize that is given in her memory. The Vig Prize was established by the liberal party, SZDSZ (Liberal Democrats Alliance) in 2002 and is given annually on International Women's Day to women for extraordinary achievements in the public sphere and for work in improving Hungarian social dynamics. The recipients are chosen by the women MPs of SZDSZ.

I am glad that in publishing David Mandler's translation of her interview with me, we are able to make a small piece of her work and her life available to English readers. I have dedicated the Hungarian page of my website to her memory, and out of respect for the achievements of her remarkable short life.

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