



Peter Herrmann

**FREEDOM OF LISTENING AND BEING
LISTENED TO
For Zsuzsa Ferge**

After overcoming the first joy of the honour of the fact of being seen as sufficiently important to contribute, I was perplexed by the task: feeling like the proverbial gnome, standing on the shoulders of a giant, and knowing that the words still may be heard – and this stands at the heart of my relationship, worthwhile to talk about on this occasion: as challenge to myself, as invitation for others to join, and as expression of gratitude towards Zsuzsa.

Rosa Luxemburg once stated – in her work on The Russian Revolution (1918)

Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of 'justice' but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when 'freedom' becomes a special privilege.^{1/2}

It is a statement for which she is widely praised – and praised from very different sides.

These words came to my mind when I thought about what to write. The invitation, written somewhere in Hungary, the evening of the day before I read it, reached me in Shanghai, just before I left the hotel for my morning walk. It was near Fudan University, established in 1905.

¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/index.htm>; 12/04/16

² in another translation it says 'the freedom of dissenters'



3

– And there I was: one could say thinking and being different in life, dissenting in times and places. The part of Shanghai where I found myself is accommodating one of the most traditional universities of the country, next to the 'futurist scenes' of a promenade-styled futurist looking shopping centre



4

³ http://studyinchina.universiablogs.net/files/Fudan_oldGate.jpg; 14/04/16

⁴ <http://www.callisonrtkl.com/projects/hopson-international-plaza-hopson-commercial-real-estate-col/>; 14/04/16

, surrounded by the small shops and 'stands',
where craftspeople repair nearly everything,



and all this next to the high-tech/high-speed
accommodation of 'Oracle', Microsoft, SAP and the
like – the 3Vs in a nutshell of reality:

Volume, Velocity, Variety.

A world of obvious contradictions.

One can say I met Zsuzsa for the first time 'in the
middle of all this': A small town in Ireland, Cork:
though it was the second largest city of that
island nation, and it was not really the old
traditional place as a date like 1905 suggests; nor

⁵ <http://ftrumm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/2014-07-11-21.30.26e.jpg>; 14/04/16; © James F. Trumm. Used by permission

appropriate' and coming to conclusions that allow both, sociogenetic and psychogenetic change. And as such it is a matter of daily life, not of abstract programmes, handed down from 'offices' in order to deal with 'cases'. It is, seen in this light, also the quest for freedom as obligation to dissent: thinking differently and taking up the historical and societal challenges, notwithstanding personal advantage.

I mentioned the 'failed lecture' in Cork: failed by way of the turnout.



12

Taking liberty showed another meaning: the disappointment was obvious, though only for seconds. But it was taken as opportunity to

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engage with the few colleagues: distinction is indeed not a matter of numbers of attendees, of giving papers, Q&As but of the ability to engage in exchange. Then and there, as again and again later, it surprised me how much I learned by being listened to, not as provider of information, but as one dissenter talking to another dissenter, taking the liberty of thinking differently while living in an era that tends to undermine freedom by granting it as privilege to a few. And it is also the freedom of teaching the most difficult to teach: the ability to ask questions and to search for something that is new.

was it the unknown time of the future. It was the simple presence at a university in a small Irish town, those days when we met it was not really effected by the distant roaring of the Celtic tiger, just trying to find its own way and direction



6

Contemplative, a bit oblivious and in this way self-centred and finally also 'without sense for future'. It was on the occasion of a presentation for which I invited her, a disappointing event as there had been only so embarrassingly few people showing up, but then even more enjoyable the next day which we used for exploring the coast, and a bit each other.

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7

– We drove along the coastal area near Kinsale, stopping occasionally for little walks in the beautiful and quiet spot.



8

As we did not talk politics up to then, I was surprised to be asked to tell about the way that

⁷ <http://www.ireland-now.com/ireland-photos/visit-the-historical-town-of-kinsale-kinsale-bay-226-.jpg>, 14/04/16

⁸ © Gerhard Pfannendoerfer; used by permission

brought me 'there' – and the 'there' was about my political point of view. Not knowing each other, but being aware of the subtle issues around the east-west-capitalism-communism, I felt admittedly a bit uncomfortable, though without hesitation giving a frank answer: I talked about growing up in a right-leaning household, having been 'infiltrated' by protestant work-ethics, and also to some extent exposed to the liberal atmosphere of the (traditionally educated) middle-class intellectuals, the edified bourgeois – all this, and the opportunity to get in close contact and friendship with trade-unionists and antifascists, radicalising me, allowing me to emerge as convinced 'moral-intellectual leftist'.

Place and time played such a huge role in our relationship from then on – the awareness and acceptance of our completely different background and experience in time and space which coined us in different ways. There was still a paradox going hand in hand with it: we both had been dissenters from the time and space into which history put each of us, the time and space that we should have accepted as unquestionable. Both of us lived in a time and space, committed to change. – Seen in this light, Rosa Luxemburg's

quest for freedom is not least a historical and societal one, posing the question, if the era we live in, allows us to be dissenters – not granting it as privilege but allowing for it in daily life: and at the same time allowing for it not in terms of the privacy of daily life, but in daily life as socio-political beings.

It is the old and seemingly unsolvable question around individual and society, linked to the apparently eternal questions of the good and the bad, the freedom and oppression – including the seemingly eternal questions of right and wrong, rationality and nature, revenge and forgiveness, order and passion, despair and not withstanding the obstacles: hope. But while writing these lines, I am getting more than ever aware of the fact that it is only irresolvable as long as we think in dichotomies. – Of course, much had been contemplated on this, we see the variety of written thoughts especially in philosophy and sociology, reaching from reflections on dialectics to the characterisation of the insider and outsider (*Elias*), the latter sometimes emerging as stranger (*Simmel*) even to oneself. But latest when we try to put this tension into practice of daily life, we usually return to reproducing the dichotomies. The result: anger, outrage, helpless protest and at most deconstruction and even

destruction. And indeed, it is so justified, so much needed – while actually writing, on the way from Amsterdam to Xamien, I get hold of *Le Monde* (10.4.2016), and see how much this world lost hold of itself, became baseless. Enjoying a real newspaper in my hands, not looking at a screen, I find nearly no joy in what I read:

- *Migrants, euro, 'Brexit' ... Why is Europe fatally wounded*
- *The pope preaches mercy from case to case*
- *Panama Papers – the confessions of David Cameron*
-

And there is an article on prostitution – sex work as it is now called, emphasising that people, many of them migrants, are 'free to sell there body' on an hourly basis, not being slaves, free to use this 'last net' as they fell through the loosening meshes of the crumbling net of solidarity and support; another article then deals with the new employment regulations in France

In actual fact, all this is embarrassing, exasperating. *The Process of Civilisation* seems to be revoked. The title of the book written by

Norbert Elias reads like the title of a utopian novel, or at best as title for a historical novel, capturing some period of history. – Norbert was for a long time very much an outsider and came only late to the deserved recognition. When I met him – being student in Bielefeld, he was at the ZIF (Centre for Interdisciplinary Research) – he was still very much an insider's tip. And although the topics of his work seemed to be so much topics dealing with historical issues, a closer look reveals that he actually looked at challenges of his own time. More importantly he was open to uncover the tensions, marking the historical process of civilisation. He saw this process in the two perspectives: as matter in need of sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations (*Elias, Norbert, 1939: The civilising process. Sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations. Translated by Edmund Jephcott with some notes and corrections by the author. Revised edition, edited by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000*), and thus as matter of relational change.

In a nutshell, this allowed Elias to truly understand the complex issue of development ... – and truly understanding also means that he did not only not dichotomise individual and soci(et)al;

moreover, and importantly his understanding was concrete. Theory matters, of course:

people often speak and think of individuals and societies as if these were two phenomena existing separately – of which, moreover, one is often considered 'real' and the other 'unreal' – instead of two different aspects of the same human being.

(Elias, Norbert, 1968: Postscript to The Civilising Process; op.cit.: 449–83; here: 468)

And reading this, it becomes clear that theory only matters as considering people's real daily life, making 'structuration' (*Giddens*) real, and showing the truth of the statement that 'men make their own history ...' (*Marx*).

Now, I am not writing about Norbert Elias; and I am not discussing paradigms. I am writing about my encounters with Zsuzsa, or to be more correct: about what these encounters meant for me. If I remember correctly, Elias showed only once up in our conversations. And this was

actually during our badly attended event in Cork. Later I have had several opportunities to meet with Zsuzsa – for me too few, but nearly⁹ always in a 'private realm', as meeting of friends if I may say so. And though Elias was not present as scholar, what I said before about him was ever present. It was present, allowing me to learn that, what we usually mean by paradigm, is in fact a matter of personality. Of course, it is easy to teach and to learn the basics of our discipline (or any discipline). But what really matters is personality: somebody who is more than an individual and who is more and other than a person playing a role on the given stages of private life, politics, lecture theatres etc. . This makes academic work being much more than simply applying some '*Rules of Sociological Method*' (Durkheim). True utilisation means appropriating: merging observation, sober analysis, anger as means of 'making things appropriate': and coming to conclusions that allow change. It is also about a permanent *Discourse on the Method* (Descartes) and the permanent *Advancement of Learning* (Bacon).

⁹ Nearly, as one of the encounters in a different framework was on the occasion of my visiting professorship at Elte University, which allowed me to teach her PhD-students, the department at the time headed by Katus Tausz; the other two occasions were a conference organised by EPAN and a workshop organised by Dorottya Szikra.

Earlier I wrote, that place and time played such a huge role in our relationship – the awareness and acceptance of our completely different background and experience in time and space. There was still a paradox going hand in hand with it: in different ways we both had been dissenters from time and space But there is actually a different meaning to it as well.

I remember a little jaunt from Budapest to Lake Balaton



10

– we passed a graveyard, and while strolling across, we talked about Cigany, Gipsies, Sinti,

¹⁰ http://i.dailymail.co.uk/1/pix/2010/01/11/article-1242270-07C421C9000005DC-605_468x301.jpg; 14/04/16

Roma, whichever term may be correct,¹¹ their peculiar concept of time and space. May we say that for them time and space are non-existent? Or is it more appropriate to say that space and time are not relevant? Perhaps this is also not correct and we should say that space and time are ever present? Present then means as immediate and full respect of the given environment, other people as equal, and that entails the challenge: as equally responsible.

That gives then a new meaning to freedom as the freedom of dissenters. Freedom has to be the freedom that is independent of space and time, reflecting general claims of a process of civilisation – a process that allows sociogenetic and psychogenetic development going hand in hand as matter of self-determination: as determination of the space in which people live. Zsuzsa's professional engagement was about this – and here I do not have talk about her work: the expertise in the area of analysing social security, poverty, and the situation of children, of course not as contemplation, not as analysis for the sake of 'pure knowledge' but as matter of freedom in the said sense of appropriation: observation, sober analysis, anger as means of 'making things

¹¹ Actually the question of political correct terms was also part of the conversation.