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Waldemar Bulira, *Teoria krytyczna szkoły budapeszteńskiej. Od totalitaryzmu do postmodernizmu* [The Critical Theory of the Budapest School. From Totalitarianism to Postmodernism], (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2018) pp. 568.

Waldemar Bulira's book is the first Polish monograph on the philosophical and political identity of the Budapest School: the group of students and associates of the most eminent 20th-century Hungarian thinker, György Lukács. Bulira relates the school first of all to Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, Györg Márkus and Mihály Vajda, though also takes into consideration numerous other Hungarian philosophers of the turn of the century, with whom the group was more or less close connected. Despite the fact the term *Budapest School* has been well established for a long time and no-one, including those mentioned above, would disagree as to their affiliation, Bulira's book is actually also the first worldwide monograph devoted to the accomplishments of the so-called school, if we disregard analyses of the their thought characteristics presented in individual articles.

Bulira describes his monograph modestly as a contribution to the research of the history of science and sociology of knowledge. In fact, his study turns out to be extremely important not only from the historical and sociological, but also the philosophical and political perspective. In the *Introduction* to his book Bulira convincingly presents the significance of the Budapest School within the history of contemporary philosophy and points out the reasons as to why it would be a misunderstanding to regard it as a just local phenomenon. What determines that significance in his opinion is already the philosophical calibre of György Lukács, the prototype of Naphta from *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, as Bulira writes, 'the diligent student and sometimes even relatively close friend of such thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, Emil Lask, and first and foremost Max Weber.' (61) As a teacher and also a critically assessed mentor of the representatives of the Budapest School in the sixties, who influenced essentially the directions in the development of twentieth century Marxism, this at least since publishing his *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, Lukács determined likewise essentially the directions of their own philosophical quests. Insofar as the 'heglizing' interpretation of Marxism delivered by him in that book found its continuation in the 'critical theory,' developed by the Frankfurter School, the common denominator of the accomplishments of Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, Györg Márkus and Mihály Vajda turns out to be, according to the monograph's author, their own critical theory of society and their own criticism against the current condition of the modern world.

The main question, one which organizes the structure of the monograph, concerns the very existence of the Budapest School and, subsequently, the legitimacy of regarding the work of Lukács' students within any given period of their philosophical activity as its shared possessions. A positive answer to the question as to the existence of the school

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seems obvious only in regard to the first of those periods, which took place in Hungary and consisted in criticism against the official Marxist ideology imposed on the countries of so-called real socialism by the Soviet Union. What settles the originality of Bulira's book, is his repetition of that question in regard to the subsequent periods of the alleged existence of the Budapest School, which began with the 1977 emigration of most of its representatives.

The question, whether the further philosophical activity of Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, Györg Márkus and Mihály Vajda may be considered still shared possessions of the school or rather works of independent authors, fully aware of their (intellectual, theoretical) independence, Bulira breaks down into four detailed questions, which he attempts to answer in the four relevant chapters of his book. The first three of them discuss the three theoretical topics, on which the School representatives' reflexion focused, to some extent harmoniously, within chronological order: totalitarianism, post-Marxism and postmodernism. After researching both the similarities and differences in their approaches to these topics, Bulira dedicates the fourth chapter to the practical aspect of the critical theory of the Budapest School. He analyses here the numerous political interventions which had for their subject the negative – in the opinion of the Budapest School – tendencies and phenomena of the (post)modern world, among others biopolitics, relativism or fundamentalism. Equally regarding these 'interventions' Bulira puts the question central to him: whether it is possible to find a common denominator for them. He asks, too, whether the criticism of the Budapest School was nothing but negative, or if it contained – at least at some stage – constructive elements?

The monograph's main thesis is that despite the theoretical discrepancies between some group members as well as their own numerous reservations and objections, the personal philosophies of the Budapest School share something more than just an attachment to the critical tradition. The author claims, that 'the character of this theory (meaning both the selection of the issues and the manner of their analysis) was to a large extent a result of the privileged epistemic position of the school's members, available to intellectuals in exile.' (538) Bulira describes very convincingly in his book, how that position influenced their – also common – attitude to the other currents of Marxist critical theory, especially to the so called New Left. In his monograph he relates this term to the wide spectre of radical currents within the scope of the 20th-century Left in its broad sense and outlines, that it was as a whole nothing but a phenomenon of the Western world. The subject of his insightful reconstruction becomes, in this context, primarily criticism of the representatives of the Budapest School contra the Greens and the antinuclear movement in West Germany.

As Bulira points out, among the members of the school, first of all Fehér and Heller in their joint book of 1986 *Doomsday or Deterrence? On Antinuclear Issue* criticised sharply the readiness of German antinuclear movements to make far-reaching political concessions to the Soviet Union. They criticized as well the attempts of those movements to legitimize this readiness by their declared determination to avoid nuclear catastrophe. According

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to the argumentation of the Budapest School, as reconstructed in the monograph, such an allegedly 'comprehensive' political attitude of the German radical Left turns out to be in fact nothing but the readiness to restrict the political freedom of Western societies by exposing them to Soviet political influence. In the essay *Eastern Europe under the Shadow of a New Rapallo*, Bulira writes, Feher and Heller interpreted that attitude and the irrational anti-Americanism inextricable from it, as 'on the one hand, an expression of the revival of German nationalism and, on the other hand, an effective tool in the hands of the Soviet authorities.' (428)

At the same time, as Bulira points out, both the critical theory of modern society and the political interventions of the representatives of the Budapest School was to become a subject of radical criticism from the New Left. What the Western leftist radicals perceived as the betrayal by them of the 'workers' affair' was merely that the School members focused their analysis of totalitarianism on not so much its fascist or Nazi version, but rather its Soviet model. The monograph herein presented delivers an outstanding reconstruction of the author's so-called 'critical theory of totalitarianism' developed by the Budapest School and sheds clear light on the originality of their analyses of the Soviet system. Bulira discusses the definition of that system given by Feher and Heller in their joint book of the same name, as a 'dictatorship over needs,' and states that according to its theory, 'the totalitarian nature of the Soviet system is embodied primarily by the politicization of society, which is possible due to the process of the top down defining its citizens' needs.' (538)

Bulira's monograph makes use of very rich source material. It contains not only the numerous works of the Budapest School from the researched period, but also a broad secondary literature, which consists of detailed studies into topics of theoretical as well as practical interest for them. Such a source basis enables the author to both exhaustively present the philosophical ideas of the representatives of the Budapest School and to throw clear light upon their theoretical, historical and political context. What lies behind Bulira's ability is not only his delivery of a thorough comparative analysis of these ideas, and ability to convince one of their contemporary significance, but also his own research experience in this area. He has been for many years both an interpreter and translator of the works of the representatives of the Budapest School. In addition, due to his direct philosophical contact with Ágnes Heller, Bulira himself turns out to be an animator of some of her political interventions, which he records in the form of deepened interviews.

As a monograph of the critical theory of the Budapest School, Bulira's book contributes to understanding the meaning of the political experience shared in the second half of the 20th century by other countries of the East-Central Europe. Of particular interest from the point of view of the Polish reader are the elements of the comparative analysis of these experiences regarding the Budapest School of Critical Theory and the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas. Interestingly, the author focuses in his comparison mainly on their similarities and differences in fulfilling the criteria; allowing him to speak in both cases about their formation as scientific 'schools.' Nonetheless, the important

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questions put by him about the directions of critical reflection taken by Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, Györg Márkus and Mihály Vajda on the experience of a totalitarianism of Soviet provenience certainly deserve reappraisal with regard to the ways of giving up Marxism and the critical review of that experience taken by Leszek Kołakowski, Bronisław Baczko, Jerzy Szacki and Andrzej Walicki. Bulira's monograph constitutes an excellent starting point for such a comparative analysis, one allowing the pointing out, on the one hand, of the limits of the intellectual answer to this experience and, on the other hand, the characteristics and significance of its critical review typical for the Warsaw historians, but perhaps equally for representatives of other East-European post-Marxist schools as well.

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