

**“I DO NOT CHANGE MY PRINCIPLES”
– SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY
IN HUNGARY THROUGH ZSUZSA FERGE'S LIFE
(BUDAPEST, NORAN LIBRO, 2016)**

BOGLÁRKA HERKE¹

Zsuzsa Ferge is one of the most well-known and well respected of all Hungarian sociologists and researchers. She is also a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an honorary doctor of the University of Edinburgh. She has received many honours and awards, including the national Széchenyi prize and the Nagy Imre award, as well as other professional ones such as the Polányi Károly award and the Báthory Zoltán honours. She is an outstanding representative of Hungarian social policy and also a co-founder of the first Hungarian university department of social policy.

In the book “Nem cserélek elveket” (“*I Do Not Change My Principles*”) readers will get detailed insight into both her professional and private life from childhood to the present. The book is not an autobiographical work: Katalin Weiler, one of her former students and now her friend, is the editor. Weiler asked Ferge to participate in the interviews that the book is based on. The book was completed in 2011, but was published only in 2016. The original interviews were recorded between 2005 and 2009, and new material was added in 2015.

In the first part of the book, the focus is on Ferge's private life, while in the second part the reader gets to know more about her path towards sociology and social policy. However, the book is not a simple biography; it also paints a picture of Hungarian history through her life. Ferge starts telling her family's story from the period before the war. She describes her family in detail, including her grandparents and parents, and the environment of that time.

She came from a Jewish family, which gave her a strong identity. Both her father and mother learned foreign languages at university and gatherings of intellectuals were very common at their home. After the First World War, life

¹ Boglárka Herke is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Sociology, Corvinus University of Budapest; e-mail: boglarka.herke@gmail.com

slowly changed as growing anti-Semitism infected all spheres of life. During the Second World War, she lost her father, and the family had to survive hard times in hiding. In a chapter about this time during the war, Ferge describes her relationship with her mother and the period that her family spent in Szeged before the war ended.

In the third chapter, the interviews are about Ferge's sister and brother. Acquaintances of the family helped the three children to travel to Paris after the war. They were able to stay for a longer time in France, where Ferge and her sister got a place in a foster home for girls near to Paris, while their brother also obtained good accommodation in another town. This chapter describes the time that Ferge spent in France, which strengthened her bond with her sister, Márta, and offers heartfelt insight into the illness of the older sibling, which strongly defined the researcher's life. Ferge's relationship with her brother was also good, but not as close as with Márta, due to the fact that they lived separately following the time of their arrival to France. They all returned to Hungary later, but Zsuzsa and Károly followed different paths.

Reading further, we learn about Ferge's life as a young university student, who started to learn economics at the end of the 1940s. She highlights two important stories from this period: a disciplinary procedure she was involved in, and how she met her future husband, Sándor. The Rajk show-trial had an effect on university life, as well as politics. Ferge describes how every Hungarian university had their own show trial, involving a disciplinary procedure. At the University of Karl Marx (predecessor of the Corvinus University of Budapest) she was selected for this as her intellectual background and other minor "renitent" activities had drawn attention to her. As the result of this trial the university expelled her, but eventually she finished her studies. However, after the trial an old acquaintance offered her a job at the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, so she started to work there while completing university. How she met her future husband is described: she had to resign from her post in the Alliance of Young Workers (DISZ), and Sándor Ferge was her successor. In this chapter, Ferge also talks about married life and the couple's friends, who are very important components of her story, as is her family. At some points it is hard to follow the details about the many friends and acquaintances that she mentions during her storytelling, but on the other hand this indicates that how exciting and active this period was for her – something which is actually true of her whole life.

When the reader arrives at the second part of the book, Ferge's tendency to be actively engaged is also noticeable in the description of her professional life. Many well-known Hungarian and foreign sociologists are described, and the author provides insight into sociology in the socialist era. In that period, being a statistician was a challenge – statisticians had to be very careful with

interpreting the data. Ferge started to work with household statistics, but she noticed that – despite the political agenda – huge inequalities existed. On her recommendation, the office of statistics started to measure income, which was the basis of her future stratification research. Perceived inequalities became Ferge's main topic of interest, and she was very motivated to reveal why the real level of inequality was different to that which the political ideology claimed it to be. Her research into stratification started with a professional trip to Poland where she met Pohoski Michal. With the help of the Polish sociologist, Ferge conducted the first Hungarian stratification research in 1963. Her famous model was based on her own creation: “*munkajelleg-csoport*”, which can be translated as “work characteristic group”. This method approaches stratification using a classification of types of work. As Ferge illustrates, after much thinking she finally understood that the nature of an individual's work is so valuable in explaining individual positions in a stratified system because it concentrates many other dimensions. The three determining factors in the structure were power, knowledge and ownership. As she relates, power could not be analyzed due to the dictatorship of that time, so the model was only partly accomplished (Ferge considered power to be the structure of formal managerial relationships). Regarding this examination of stratification, Ferge remarks that although the new model did not actually differ significantly from earlier occupational group-based approaches, the “work characteristic group” approach suggested that the implicit content of group formation had changed. Ferge also took part in the data collection phase of this examination and came face-to-face with poverty first hand. As she recalls, it was hard for her to not intervene and try to directly help people in need. She found relief only years afterwards, when she became more familiar with the science of social policy and social work.

Ferge played a crucial role in the accomplishment of the first Hungarian work-life balance survey and also in the international work-life balance survey of Sándor Szalai. It was thanks to this work that she participated in the World Congress of Sociology in 1966. As Ferge explains, attending the congress was the first step she took towards becoming engaged in social policy. Furthermore, within this chapter the reader can learn more about research into poverty lead by István Kemény in 1968, and about how Ferge had to leave her former workplace and this research project. Inequalities and poverty became the focal topics of her professional interest, although she and her husband also exerted much personal effort to address the issue. Ferge states how she always found it important to draw attention to inequalities which exist. For this reason, she restated her opinion about the issue as many times as she could. After this period, she started to work for the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where she was able to

return to researching stratification and schools; more exactly, to investigating how schools reproduce social inequalities.

Ferge started to make inquiries into social policy at the World Congress. She met many important sociologists there who were engaged in researching poverty such as Peter Townsend and Herbert Gans. After the congress, she consciously started learning about social policy. However, it is clear from the narrative that it was never enough for her to simply describe what characterizes society; it has also been important for her to define what should be changed. Thus implicitly, she always approached the field of social policy. Moreover, for this reason she could never engage in a totally value-free sociology, which sometimes created professional conflicts – although in social policy, she could deploy her learning well. In one chapter, Ferge talks about how she learned more about social policy in Essex, where she spent three months substituting Townsend at a university. At this point in the book, the reader gets more insight into the conception of social policy that was created in 1985, and Ferge's role in this process. The researcher shares her opinion about the relationship of political power to social sciences (mainly regarding social policy) through describing how the government supports research. At this point, Ferge talks about recent social policy, and how politics determined the work of the Institute of Sociology before the regime change.

The last major chapter of the book covers the most significant milestones in Ferge's life regarding social policy. She enthusiastically talks about how the authors of the national conception of social policy founded the first university department of social policy. Neither the powers of the time nor the Hungarian Sociological Association supported the new department, but it was nonetheless created in a state of semi-legality in 1985 (students officially learned sociology, and the real subjects were given pseudonyms in students' index books). Later (in 1990) the department was awarded legal status at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) with Ferge as the department head. The situation was even worse in the field of social work; the creation of a dedicated university department for this topic was not permitted as the university did not find this field of science prestigious enough. However, through the work of former students from the semi-legal course the first collegiate department of social work was founded in 1989 in Szekszárd. The reader receives an inside view of how the department of social policy worked under Ferge's leadership – who led it from the time of regime change to her retirement – and what type of difficulties she and the other experts and instructors faced. Furthermore, Ferge defines the real challenges regarding the teaching of social work, and the situation of social workers.

Ferge retired in 2001, but she did not leave off her professional work. At the end of Chapter 6 she describes her engagement in an elaborate project about

child poverty which meant a lot to her. On the one hand, this project was a great success as the government requested that the research be undertaken, meaning that they had acknowledged the relevance of social policy. On the other hand, the project was a failure in some regards, as it had to be ended virtually overnight.

In the final two chapters we get information from the additional interviews which were recorded in 2015. In this section, Ferge explains her opinions about the present political environment and about the situation of social policy. She talks about how her life changed after 2010. She mentions the civil association in which she is currently engaged, and apropos of this, states that whereas she never wanted to be active in politics, being only a civil participant is not an option in Hungary. Throughout the whole book, we see how Ferge was somehow always politically active. During the most significant times of historical change, she was always a member of civil associations.

In summary, the reader of this book will receive heartfelt insight into Ferge's exciting but difficult life. The description of her professional life under the socialist regime also supplies details about the work of sociologists during that era. Her struggle with “value-free” sociology familiarizes the reader with the differences in the diverse fields of social sciences. However, I do not only recommend this biography to social scientists. Ferge's storytelling is very exciting and her life has not been a typical one – her description of her personal experiences with the Second World War, the socialist regime and the regime change illuminate chapters of Hungarian history for everyone.

