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Observations from Hungary and Central Europe

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Kester Eddy  18 hours ago 3 min read

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Thirty Years of CEE Transformation - What's Changed, What Hasn't & What's To Be Done About it?


You've probably never heard of Professor Tsuneo Morita, since he's a Japanese economist, academic and businessman largely focused on links between his home country and Hungary. But you have now.



Photo: Professor Tsuneo Morita, addressing foreign journalists and diplomats at the Bobo Restaurant, Haris Park, in July.

Photo Håvard Austad

However, he's lived in Budapest for 30-plus years, and he's learned a thing or two about

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how the systems work here – or perhaps more often in his experience – struggle to work.

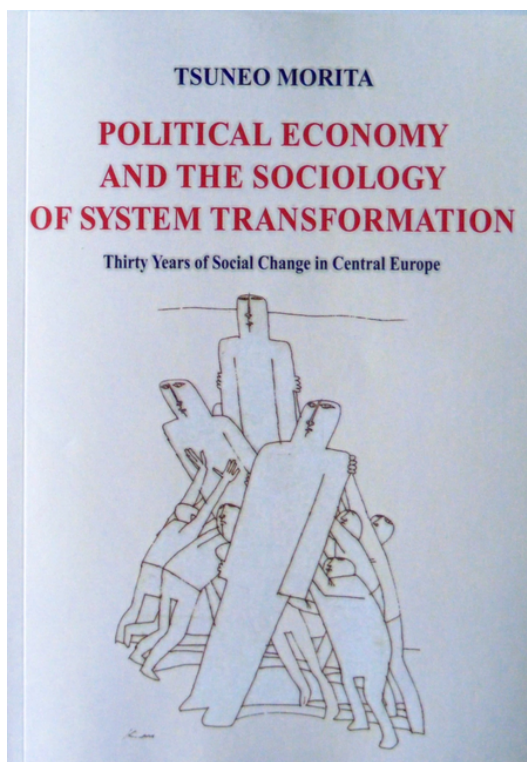
One area of expertise he's gained knowledge of is permitting. Put bluntly, Morita is not a fan of the permitting processes here in Hungary, and he explains his reasons in a recently published book.

You've probably never heard of his book, either, because his publisher doesn't seem to be promoting it much. Moreover the title – *Political Economy and the Sociology of System Transformation* – sounds as if it might be the stuff of nightmares for a final-year student on a first-degree course at the London School of Economics.

In fact, it's a very readable volume, as the tortuous tale of his efforts to obtain a permit to enclose his outdoor terrace in glass to protect it from winter wind and snow well illustrates.

It's a bit long to reproduce here (it's on pages 154 - 157), but the essence is that it took him more than a year, the use of a lawyer to press his case and more than 70 pages of documents exchanged before he could complete what was a relatively minor modification to his home. It is not, as he stresses, in a well visited area of central Budapest – but on a side road at the extremities of the city which is probably never visited by 99.5% of the population in their entire lives. (The latter statistic is my guesstimation.)

Moreover, at no point in this drawn-out process did the permit providers ever come on-site to assess the visual impact of the changes first hand - mainly because they are not required to, so they don't bother. They sit at desks and make judgement from drawings!



Well, it's an entertaining story, but what has this got to do with the Hungary and the greater world, you might ask?

For Morita, it's symbolic of the pervasiveness and longevity of over-restrictive socialist philosophy, "the norm of the limitation of private rights," as he puts it.

Plus, of course, as he also implies, such thinking and bureaucratic practices make progress in any project, unless granted some sort of favoured status, slow, inefficient and expensive.

Not that Morita is some sort of right-wing zealot intent on upholding only the rights of the individual. Far from it: as he argues: "Of course, restrictions on certain

private rights are necessary to maintain the appearance of the city. However, severe restrictions that [effectively] prohibit any form of change to private property is a violation of private rights through the abuse of public power."

It is also an invitation to either (or both) ignoring the law and - though he doesn't note it at

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this point – bribery.

And here, I will stop. I didn't mean this to be a full review of Morita's book, mainly because I've already written one.

It's headlined: *Bland Title Belies Thought-Provoking, if Depressingly Ominous, Contents* and you can read this on the BBJ website here:

<https://bbj.hu/economy/statistics/analysis/bland-title-belies-thought-provoking-if-depressingly-ominous-contents>

I hope this might tempt you to click and read – and think similarly about the book itself.

And just in case you still think it's the stuff of nightmares for a final-year student at the London School of Economics, let me assure you, it is not.

Political Economy and the Sociology of System Transformation; Thirty Years of Social Change in Central Europe, 380 pages, is available from the Balassi Kiado, Budapest, Hollán Ernő u. 33, 1136
balassikiado.hu/2-konyveink



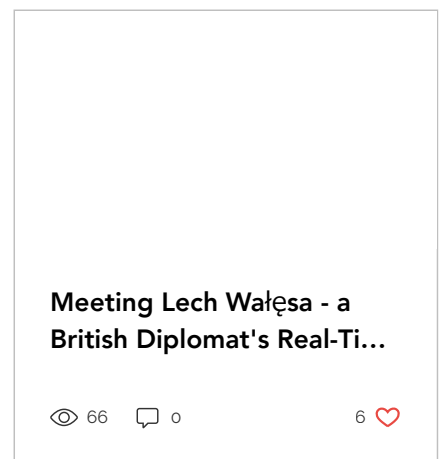
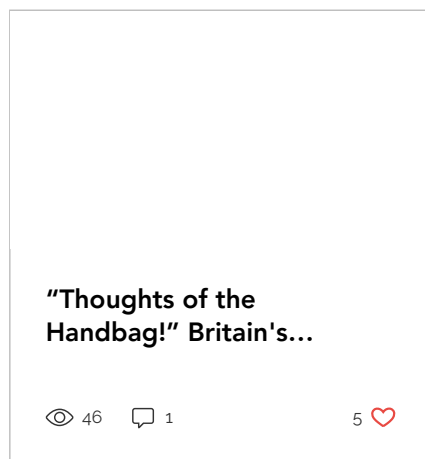
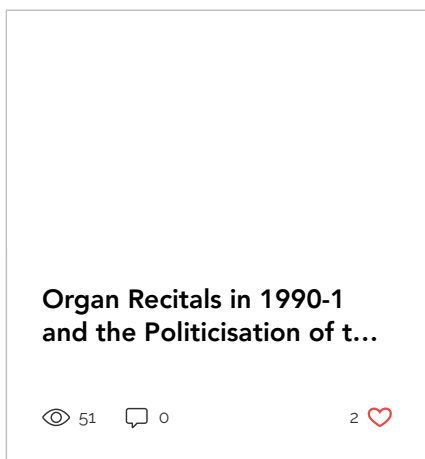
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