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Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral Dissertation Theses

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The Evolution of the Hungarian Liberal Concept of Nation

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I.

As a development of my MA thesis, which, applying the typology of state-nation and cultural nation, analysed the liberal Reform Era concept of the nation, I originally intended to write about the interaction between the political and the cultural dimension of the nation. During my research, however, I realized that the political aspect of the nation covers far more than could be described based either on the corporate nation concept of Werbőczy, the theoretical model of the French state-nation, or the norm of the civic equality. Consequently, I modified the direction of my inquiry towards the rich traditions behind the political concept of the nation. As a lesson of my thorough investigations I have to object the theory that the liberal Reform Era opposition took the demand on such civic liberties as self-government and, in order to maintain these liberties, on the idea of reconciliation of interests, from the natural law concept of the Enlightenment or from the idea of the rule of law founded on a written constitution. I am convinced that their claim derived from the political legacy of the Hungarian estates, which had had lively connections with the Western intellectual elite already in the 17th century. To put it another way – and to avoid the mere appearance of holding anti-enlightenment views – I believe that the Hungarian Enlightenment had an autochthonous branch rooted in early modern Hungarian political thinking. This started to grow under the influence of Josephinism and the fertilising impact of Western Enlightenment, only to prepare the development of the oppositional Reform Era liberalism. Naturally, I do not suppose continuity between the Hungarian estates, which had fully been established in 1608, and the Reform Era political thinking. I am only looking for early modern antecedents, preconditions and models in order to trace their dynamic transition after 1790. To be more accurate, I state that the demand on collective self-government points beyond aristocratic privileges, and the idea of the reconciliation of interests had already emerged in the 17th century. No matter whether it was a lively or a rediscovered tradition, this legacy played an important role in the development of liberalism and the liberal concept of nation.

II.

Writings on the origins of Hungarian liberalism tend to present their subject in the framework of the grand-scale narrative of the Enlightenment. Deriving from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, only such timely civilian political norms have been investigated by almost all scholars as equality before the law, separation of the branches, the doctrine of popular sovereignty or the responsible government. As a result, most researchers are at pains either to demonstrate or to refute the continuity between Enlightenment and liberalism. Estates

traditions are taken into consideration only as part of the argumentation against the “extraneous” absolutism, or in favour of the preservation of the counties’ self-government and the mobilization of the nobility. This approach has doubtlessly contributed to the birth of large-scale historical reconstructions, but it keeps distracting the attention from an essential aspect of modern European political philosophy as well as from an internal debate of Hungarian liberal thinking. It was of key importance for the external and internal representatives of the Enlightenment and the liberalism— and also witnessed their unbridgeable differences in their attitudes – the way of reacting to the institutional and ideological traditions inherited from the time of the estates, and, relying on these traditions, the way of interpreting the modern relation of the state and the society.

As my dissertation studies the texts of Hungarian liberalism from that particular angle, I had to break with the approaches which focus on the norms of Enlightenment, the French concept of the nation, or the development of the rule of the law. To outline the framework of my textual analysis I relied upon those pieces of Hungarian scholarship, which show a positive attitude towards the European and Hungarian estates, and lay great stress upon the rich legacy of the Hungarian self-government, which functioned in the frameworks of the estates system. I also used recently published – and in Hungary not yet exploited – foreign conceptions, which not only vary, but essentially transform our views on the “homogeneous” West. These emphasise the factors of social self-organisation, while, in other cases, they harshly criticise state centralization. With the help of similar works written by Hungarian and foreign scholars, I attempted to devote due attention not only to the development in France, the unified and rationally organised state, the Enlightenment and the rule of the law, but to the forming of estates traditions too. Focusing of its dynamism, its particular complicatedness and its European context, I endeavoured to grasp the intricate process of the formation of the modern European political culture, and, as its part, the Hungarian liberalism, thanks to the interaction between absolutism and the estates system, the state and the society, and the government and self-government.

III.

The date 1790 in the sub-title is a symbolic landmark in the history of Hungarian Enlightenment. Although its ideas gained ground only later, it was exactly this year when their Hungarian propagators stepped forward with a uniform political programme. 1844, the other date appearing in the title, also seemed an appropriate choice as it was the year when Kossuth was forced to leave his editorial position at the *Pesti Hírlap*. This event marks the

conclusion of the crystallisation process of the oppositional liberal ideology. From this time on, the attention of Hungarian liberal politicians were absorbed in the inner debate of liberalism, the dialogue of the centralists and the oppositionists, and, in parallel, settling antagonisms and organising a party from the liberal movement.

This chronological framework, however, was treated flexibly in the dissertation since I rather strived to shed light upon the long-term ideological tendencies, the institutional and ideological traditions and the wider context. I did not attempt to include every source into my investigation from the period between 1790 and 1844, and I crossed both the chronological and the geographical limits indicated in the title. I approached to the topic from a bird's eye view. In order to outline the European context, I made excursions into 17–18th century Anglo-Saxon, French, Dutch and German political culture. To map the intellectual scope of the Hungarian speaking public, it was indispensable to interrogate the sources of the early modern Hungarian political thinking. As a result, I delineated those features of the intellectual elite which went beyond Werbőczy's exclusive aristocratic concept of the community. Having reached my narrower topic, I attempted to grasp the further development of the early modern estate legacy, concentrating on the most important nodes. Finally, I tried to answer the question how the liberal Reform Era conception of the political nation unfolded from the older and newer traditions of the estates.

In accordance with my method, the primary criterion during the selection of the sources was their potential for influencing public opinion. From the products of early modern political thinking I made use of the relatively widely known pamphlets and sermons, which circulated either in manuscripts or in printed form, and the pasquins and "kuruc" poems, which were disseminated orally as well. From the ages of the Enlightenment and the Romanticism I scrutinised the most popular political programmes and the most illustrious articles of the first Hungarian journals (*Magyar Museum*, *Mindenes Gyűjtemény*, *Uránia*, *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*).

In case of the Reform Era, I involved in my textual analysis well-known political pamphlets and addresses by the 1832–36 diet's liberal speakers, as well as treatises and editorials published in *Athenaeum* and *Pesti Hírlap*. Again, I would like to emphasise that my objective was not to reinterpret all sources of the Reform Era, but to trace the long-term transformation of the Hungarian political thinking.

IV.

As for the European context of the problem, my point of departure was the conviction that the Enlightenment and its early modern antecedents cannot be restricted to discourses on natural law and the development of the modern concept of the state. In fact, 17–19th century political thinking was a remarkably multi-coloured phenomenon and was divided into several political trends. Therefore, the “Western” doctrines of the natural law, liberty, the rule of law and the common good were not parts of a unified world view that could have been implemented in any society without any change. On the contrary, they were deeply rooted in the political and cultural traditions of the Western civilization, and had different understanding in each society, moreover, in each political group.

Amongst the supporters of the French, Prussian and the Habsburg state administration, the success of the norms of natural law was restricted to the relation of the state and the individual. The advocates of the enlightened absolutism – or, to put in another way, legal despotism – would have removed the self-organising intermediary bodies of the society from those factors which were to serve liberty and the common good. According to this concept, it is the powerful state that controls the life of the society. It organises the education and the health care with meticulously detailed regulations, keeps a precise record of its citizens, centralises the administration, and promotes the prosperity, increase and welfare of its subjects. Although it was only short-lived in France, proved to be a failure in the Habsburg Monarchy, and had to adapt to the challenges of modern times in Prussia, the intellectual legacy of the enlightened absolutism lived on in the French demand of the “one and indivisible sovereignty” and the state-centred programme of the “bureaucratic liberalism” in Vienna and Berlin.

In those countries where there were no developed national absolutism or it did not play a significant historical role, such in England, the Netherlands or the United States, the state-centred interpretation of the natural law was ipso facto unpopular. The political antagonists of the Prussian and the Habsburg state, including Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Constant, Möser and the South German liberals, also treated the centralised state with suspicion. In their circles such ideas were in fashion as the ancient constitution, the arguments based on the good old laws and customs, the ideal of the civic-humanist patriotism, and the traditions of corporations, parliaments, courts, regional and local self-governments. For them, liberty, the common good and the rule of the law were attached to the demand for social self-organization, while the threat of tyranny became embodied by the expansion of the state. According to the first approach, therefore, it is the *state* that serves the common good,

protects liberty and fulfils the process of civilisation by eliminating the old institutions, while in the other concept these functions are provided by the *society*, which organises itself in the frameworks of the old institutions.

Although in a local form, both of the great European traditions were present in Hungary. The state-centred concept had already been being shaped from the end of the 17th century by the circles of the court, but it took its final form only in the last third of the 18th century. Focusing on the central role of the society, the other approach was represented by the educated nobility, who pursued the so-called “gravaminal policy”. I have to highlight here that from the 17th century on “gravaminal policy” was not exclusively equal with the protection of noble privileges. The “old Hungarian liberty” (or, from the end of the 18th century, the “ancient constitution”) was based on cardinal laws, inaugural diplomas, and unwritten traditions that, apart from the legislative authority of the diet, ensured the privileges of the royal free cities and the free districts as well as the religious governments of the market towns and the villages. Moreover, they acknowledged the particular procedures, the individual legal entity, and, to some extent, the self-governing authority of each local community. In addition, the educated nobility and the ecclesiastical intellectuals who were familiar with public affairs combined the demand for liberty with the timely thoughts borrowed from contemporary Western intellectual life. They aimed to realise the rule of the common good in the whole society, to persuade the nobility to make a sacrifice for liberty, and to ease the burdens weighing on the poor communities. By this time, a numerous texts had already witnessed the thought of collaboration between the different estates and religions in order to make the country flourish. The propagation of the Hungarian liberty, therefore, could express a particular content which went far beyond the noble defence of privileges and the Werbőczyan concept of community, even in the framework of the estate system.

V.

We do not know the exact nature of the relation between 17th century Hungarian political thinking and the Enlightenment, but it is sure that at the end of the 18th century the political elite could make use not only of the ideas of the Western Enlightenment and the Josephinism, but could rely on the early modern legacy of the Hungarian political thinking as well. At first, the educated members of the Hungarian Masonic lodges sympathised with the ambitions of Joseph II, but they disapproved the liquidation of the old institutions right from the beginning. After the death of the emperor they developed an argumentation and a programme which opposed the centralising intentions of the government and supported some cautious

reforms. Péter Ócsai Balogh, the leader of the oppositional nobility, synthesised the Hungarian traditions and the new ideas on a political level. He further elaborated the idea of the old Hungarian liberty and the 17th century Hungarian concept of collective collaboration in the spirit of Enlightenment. He moved the “gravaminal policy” of the estates towards a reconciliation of interest in the whole society. Batsányi, Kazinczy and Kármán attempted to make a connection between the old aristocratic traditions and the demand for renewal on a cultural level. While they defended the constitution and the historical self-interpretation based on the old liberty, they intended to expand the autonomy of the nation in the fields of language and education. Their primary goal was to catch up with the Western nations in the terrain of culture.

In contrast to József Hajnóczy’s contemporary statements, the objectives and plans of the “enlightened estates” did not include the idea of equality before the law. These goals, however, were relatively widely popular, and, what is more important, they were supported by notable people even after the suppression of the Jacobinist movement. From the 1800s to the 1820s most educated members of the landed nobility and the plebeian intellectuals thought that the centralised state – no matter if it was that of the Habsburgs or Napoleon – embodied the threat of tyranny. Reforms, therefore, can only be executed on the level of the old institutions, amongst the circles of the social self-organisation. As clearly expressed by György Fejér on the pages of the *Tudmányos Gyűjtemény*, this relatively loosely linked group held the view that the Hungarian political system had been developed organically as part of the civilisation of Western Christianity, and its survival depends on the success of its institutions’ adaptation to the spirit of the age. Although, in Fejér’s understanding, the ancient constitution needed protection from external influence, the educated nobility had to stand in the head of the reforms: the development of culture, the increase of the standards of education, the collaboration of different social groups, the parliamentary representation of the market towns, the taxation of the nobles and the reduction of the burdens of the serfs were all considered as prerequisites of the survival of the nation.

The oppositional Reform Era liberals reformulated the 17th century traditions of the “gravaminal policy” of the nobility and the moderate reform programme of the “enlightened estates” according to the norms of equality before the law. According to the programme of the liberation of the serfs, the reconciliation of the interest and the protection of the national liberty were to be achieved no more beyond the dividing walls of the estates, but through the demolition of these barriers. In the 1830s Kölcsey, Wesselényi and Deák enforced the universal norm of natural law and equality consequentially, but they did not accept the logic of

the different rational contract-theories and the intellectual legacy of the state-centred Josephinism. They thought that national liberty and a solid middle class can only be achieved on the field of social self-organisation, in the frameworks of the historical institutions. The enforcement of the constitution is ensured by the reinforcement of the diet, the county institutions, and, including the freedom of religion, the essential laws. They supported the idea that the equality before the law can be based on the liberty of the market town communities and the expansion of the local governments. On the pages of the *Athenaeum*, Ferenc Pulszky and Mihály Horváth supported the programme of the liberal reform opposition with historical arguments. They rejected the intellectual legacy of the enlightened absolutism and the post-Josephinist concept of the guardian state. In their view, the reforms could only be realised with the protection and renewal of the old Hungarian political system, in accordance with the specific features of the historical development.

Kossuth, the editor of the *Pesti Hírlap* launched in 1841, together with his comrades took the traditional interpretation of the Hungarian liberty as a starting point, when they gave a final shape to the programme of the oppositional liberalism. The diet, the *comitatus*, the fundamental laws, including the freedom of religion, the customary law that ensured the liberty of the market towns, and, to some extent, the self-government of the settlements – these were the fundamentals upon which they built the programme of modernisation. They applied the universal norm of equality before the law consequentially, but not in the spirit of the rational contract-theories and the state-centred post-Josephinism; they rather combined it with the traditional arguments characteristic of the values of the nobility and the estates. They did not even think of fixing the new legal principles in a written constitution or in detailed regulations since they held the view that these can only reach their goal if they are crafted through public discussions and during practice, as part of the customary law. In addition, they insisted that the future civil political system of Hungary follow the historical institutional structure. They would have built popular representation of the nation on the self-government of the counties and the liberty of the market towns.

It has to be pointed out that the demand for a separate government, which is independent from the government offices of Vienna and responsible to the parliament, had already appeared in an 1842 issue of the *Pesti Hírlap*, before the emergence of the centralists. Ferenc Pulszky reconciled this demand with the preservation of the old self-governments. He rejected the French, the Prussian and the Josephinist concept of the guardian state. Following the English model, he restricted the rights of the government and intended a major role to social self-organizations. Kossuth's arguments echoed Pulszky's writings: he saw the threat of

tyranny in the French type of centralisation, while he considered the Hungarian tradition – similar to that of England – as a guarantee of freedom.

It is clear from the oppositional liberal programme and from the process of the development of this programme that the use of these aristocratic estate traditions to achieve oppositional liberal goals was not only a rhetorical bravado, but it was brought about by the common historical identity and moral conviction of a political group, which represented both the case of the reforms and the liberty of the nation. Kossuth and his comrades were proud of the fact that the state bureaucracy could never overpower the self-governing Hungarian society on the long run. They sincerely believed that an autonomous Hungary can step on the highest grade of Western modernisation in the foreseeable future if the society gains strength through the liberation of the serfs, the existing self-governments expand following the norm of the equality before the law, and popular representation develops gradually together with the responsible government.

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