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# The Prince and the Savant: Political Change and Social Knowledge in Late Modern Hungary

## *Introduction to the Thematic Issue*

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A society that has two elites loses its capability of orientation.

LÁSZLÓ KÖVÉR, President of the Hungarian Parliament, October 2012

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The literature of dictatorships: when you can only write someone else's thoughts, not your own.

SÁNDOR WEÖRES

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The set of essays included in the present issue originate from a team of historians and sociologists at a workshop held at the Central European University a year ago.<sup>1</sup> The inspiration to come together and discuss the relationship

<sup>1</sup> The participants of the workshop in Budapest at CEU, 6–7 September 2016, were as follows: Anders Blomquist, Béla Bodó, Steven Jobbit, György Kövér, György Lengyel, György Péteri, Vera Szabari, Zsuzsanna Varga and Eric Weaver. Thanks to all of them for their active involvement in our discussions. József Litkei and János M. Rainer have been our project's "corresponding" members. Thanks also to Mónika Nagy of the CEU for her generous assistance toward the organization of our workshop as well as with the editorial work for this thematic issue. The project underlying this theme issue has been generously supported by the Faculty of Humanities of the Norwegian University of Science & Technology, Trondheim, Norway.

between political change and social (scientific) knowledge has its origins in our own times.

Politicians with little understanding and affinity for the democratic rules and norms of the political game often come into conflict with representatives of their country's artistic and scholarly-scientific communities and/or its fourth estate. The present president of the USA, for example, has been routinely lashing out ever since his inauguration against what he calls "the fake news media" (which means critical investigating journalism that irritates and displeases him because he feels under his own skin their critical edge). Most recently, in connection with the conflict over the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, VA, he has embarked also on the ambitious enterprise of rewriting American history—putting all the weight of the President's office behind an assessment where the confederate general figures shoulder to shoulder with Thomas A. Jefferson and George Washington (after all, he said, the two latter were also slave owners ...) (Shear and Haberman 2017).

What seems to stand in the way of the surge of populist, nationalist, and authoritarian tendencies in America and Europe today is the sustained strong positions of liberal-democratic values and views in society and its public discourses. As Mária Schmidt, Viktor Orbán's chief ideologue in matters pertinent to history and politics of memory, emphasized as early as in 2000, "Even though we are one nation, within it there are two cultures and two orders of value." (Schmidt 2006: 71) Viktor Orbán, preparing to reach out for power, in his so-called *Kötcse* speech of 2009 claimed that the whole pre-2010 era of post-socialism should be seen as an era of the dualistic field of force (*duális erőtér*), characterized by the thorough antagonism between the values promoted by the FIDESZ-led unified right (*a polgári szövetség*) and the values represented by the "neoliberal" pole of socialists and liberals (entirely alien, in his opinion, to all "true Magyars"). This antagonistic dualism of the political field, in Orbán's rendering, also disoriented the cultural and academic elites and resulted in crisis and stagnation—which is why, Orbán argued, the Hungarian electorate was calling for not merely a change of government but for the replacement of the dualistic field of force with a central field of force (*centrális erőtér*) from where the liberal pole is squeezed out as it has proved to be thoroughly bankrupt. This central field of force will have to be asserted in the norms and criteria according to which the cultural (academic, artistic, and media) elite will be selected. Thus, the antagonistic tension and confusion in the prevalent values of society, characterizing the era of *duális erőtér*, will yield to a long-term stability and harmony between government and culture (including, of course, scholarship), both focusing on "true national issues." As Orbán himself put it: "today it is realistically conceivable that in the coming fifteen-twenty years, Hungarian

politics should be determined not by the dualistic field of force bringing with it never conclusive and divisive value debates, which quite unnecessarily generate social problems. Instead, a great governing party comes in place, a central field of force, which will be able to articulate the national issues and to stand for these policies as a natural course of things to be taken for granted without the constantly ongoing wrangling" (Péteri 2014).

This speech contained within it the bad breath of interwar authoritarianism—this is how the illiberal politician speaks wishing not merely to put an end to competitive, democratic politics wherein various democratically legitimate interests and tendencies rooted in a late modern, highly complex society try to assert themselves, but also to homogenize artistic expression, social thought, and political opinion under the unquestioned hegemony of his own "great governing party" and its conservative-rightist, Christian-National values.

Indeed, we have hardly left behind the cold war era and several countries in the region of East Central Europe seem to be plunging, yet again, into an authoritarian mold in which the autonomy of scholarly endeavor is systematically challenged and undermined. High levels of political ambition and interventionism are sustained in the name of collective (national) interests.

For Eastern Europe's new-old Christian-Nationalist right, just as it used to be for the Communists after they took power in the late 1940s, history appears to be all too important to be left for historians. Thus, high seated politicians take the trouble to lecture to and take to task recognized scholars—similarly to Polish president Andrzej Duda's "offensive" against Jan Gross (Harper 2016). In Hungary, a majority-controlled parliament imposed a new constitution re-writing the country's contemporary history according to the taste of the new rulers (as is done by the Preamble of Viktor Orbán's Basic Law of January 1, 2012); established institutions of scholarship are doomed to wither away by severe fiscal cuts and, at the same time, lavish funding goes into new research infrastructures entirely under the control of those wielding political power (see, for example, the series of recently established research institutions co-ordinated directly by the prime minister's office, led by Mr. Orbán's right-hand man, János Lázár, listed in János Rainer's essay in this issue).

Side by side with history, arts appear to have been a prioritized domain to be conquered by the new rulers: the Hungarian Academy of Arts (a private association turned into a state institution and lavishly funded by the Orbán regime to assert its power over various fields of arts) has even established a Committee of Professorial Nominations, which means that having concentrated all public funds and a great deal of public infrastructure to be devoted to artistic activities in the hands of their Academy, Orbán's government enabled them also to

control professorial appointments relevant for art education at public institutions of higher education. Economics has also been (and will be) among the prime targets of the lust for streamlining exhibited by the Christian-Nationalist revolutions of the Viktor Orbáns and Jarosław Kaczyńskis of the region. The Budapest Corvinus University, formerly one of the region's largest and most significant institutions of higher education and research in economics, is now under the rectorship of the leader of Mr. Orbán's think tank, the Századvég Foundation. He is said to have been instructed by the Prime Minister to apply for the position, while other candidates were given to understand that they should abstain. At the same time, the architect of Viktor Orbán's "economic miracle" (a miracle that seems never to materialize), the National Bank president György Matolcsy, has been using all his influence and large chunks of the annual spending of his Pallas Athenae foundations (operating on the basis of generous endowments put up by the National Bank itself) to assert his own "unorthodox economics." A minor yet revealing and strikingly bizarre episode of these efforts is that one of these foundations, the *Pallas Athéné Domus Animae* (presided over by Mr. Matolcsy himself), bought 2,500 copies of Matolcsy's own book for approximately HUF 15 million (~57,000 USD).

In people with some knowledge and understanding of twentieth-century history, all this evokes the sensation of *déjà vu*, and in this case it is not merely an anomaly of memory. *We have indeed already been there.* As this thematic issue confines itself to Hungary, let's review shortly how Hungary and its intellectual life have been faring through the "age of extremes"—a series of radical political (often systemic) changes in the long twentieth century.

World War I was concluded by two revolutions in 1918–1919 and the rightist Christian-Nationalist counterrevolution yielding eventually a quarter of a century authoritarian rule under admiral Miklós Horthy, a regime that serves as the model to follow for Mr. Orbán and his vassals. The counterrevolution and white terror, the persecution and harassment of not only communists but also liberals and social-democrats, the institutionalized discrimination against Jews in higher education and in the professions starting with the so-called Numerus Clausus Legislation of 1920 brought with it that interwar Hungary lost many of her talents in the humanities and social sciences as well. Thomas Balogh, Oscar Jászi, Nicholas Kaldor, Arthur Koestler, Aurél Kolnai, György Lukács, Karl Mannheim, Karl and Michael Polányi, and many others left the country, an emigration that was followed by new waves of exodus between 1945–1948 and in the course of the revolution and counterrevolution of 1956 and afterwards. Nineteen eighty-nine has caused a number of émigré scholars (or scholars from émigré families) to retie their connections with Hungary and in some cases even to return. But due to the increasingly antagonistic divisions

in Hungarian politics, especially since 2006 and after, and to the introduction of Viktor Orbán's totalizing regime of "National Cooperation" since 2010, we witness a new exodus, particularly of young talent, toward the universities and research institutions of the West.

Now as well as in the past, the country's authoritarian rulers have seldom been alarmed by these waves of emigration. On the contrary, they seem to have encouraged it yielding them positions to reward their own clients with and, in general, a population easier to manage. Those who stayed at home and managed to remain within their scholarly fields had to face the often times heavy adjustment pressure on behalf of authoritarian and/or dictatorial regimes with little respect for institutional autonomies.

The members of our team share the view that no proper understanding of the interrelationship between political change and social (scientific) knowledge is possible without the empirical study of concrete academic fields, within concrete historical contexts.

Béla Bodó's essay follows the windings and turns of the politics of memory after 1989 that looks back at the red terror in the Council Republic of 1919, and the white terror after 1 August 1919. His discussion provides an analysis of relevant public representations (mourning memorials, statues, commemorative plaques) as well as the unveiling ceremonies and regular rituals around them. Studies of memory politics tend to bring the state and major political agents (government, major parties, leading politicians, etc.) into the center of attention. Bodó, however, deliberately focuses upon memory practices related to these events because this enables him to turn the attention to smaller political, cultural, and civic organizations articulating the anxieties and frustrations of lower class youth. As Bodó claims, "For these small groups, the memories about the Red and White Terrors serve both a political and a social and cultural function: they are meant to separate subgroups and subcultures from the rest of society and reinforce their internal unity."

The contribution of János Rainer demonstrates that the interests of memory politics constitute one of the most significant motive forces informing and propelling political interventionism in an academic field like contemporary history. But his main concern is with the intellectual structuration (and political fragmentation) of the field and he sets out to see whether the multiplicity of epistemic-methodological (and political) subcultures that established themselves after 1989 will characterize the profession in the longer run or whether the political power has already been (or in the future will be) able to tilt the balance enabling pluralism and force developments toward a *Gleichschaltung* under the aegis of the rightist Christian-National course of Viktor Orbán's (or someone else's) government. Having shown how memory-political

interests have brought with them not only fragmentation of the field but also a debilitating overcrowding of its agenda with issues dictated by politicians eager to reassess the country's contemporary history, Rainer emphasizes that historians should focus on the internal intellectual dynamics of their field and, as much as possible, keep memory politics out of their work: "Guarantees such as the freedom of cognition, of research, and of discourse—if they indeed exist—are sufficient; historians do not need a politics of memory."

József Litkei offers the readers a subtle analysis of a hitherto rather neglected episode of the "Sovietization" of history writing in Hungary: the first (1950) "Erik Molnár debate" (the much better known second "Molnár debate" was triggered by Molnár's 1960 essay on Hungarian national consciousness). While it has already been shown by others that the actual forms, organizations, institutions in which "Sovietization" took place in academia of the various countries of Eastern and East Central Europe were culturally-historically contingent (David-Fox and Péteri 2000), Litkei is among the first with regard to humanities and social sciences to document the same for the content: the relative openness of outcomes, the relatively high significance of strategically placed individuals with regard to prevailing intellectual patterns, the "master narrative" (the conceptual frame and dominant approach) over national history.

Zsuzsanna Varga takes us to another story of paradoxes—that of agrarian economics and agrarian policies in the era immediately following the revolution of 1956. She shows the protective umbrella held over agrarian economists by a network of powerful patrons in policymaking positions over food production. The patronage by this liberally oriented "Agrarian Lobby," as it came to be called in the latter half of the 1960s, did not merely enable the economists to work relatively freely, to question a number of Stalinist axioms of agroeconomic thought, but even to set up their own organization to collect empirical data. Just as importantly, the agrarian reform-communist network itself benefitted greatly from the work of the economists in their strenuous efforts to persuade major party forums and the party-state bureaucracies reigning over the sector.

If one of the main "lessons" of Litkei's work is that Sovietization did not result in any easily predictable or uniform intellectual pattern in social thought (in his case: history), Varga's case study delivers a strong warning against taking things for granted in another respect: even a repressive regime (like Kádár's in the years of counterrevolutionary terror), granted the appropriate constellation of personal and institutional trajectories, might trigger emancipatory tendencies in some restricted scholarly fields which in turn could possibly yield results in terms of new knowledge and new arguments paving the way for socially and economically progressive policy change and reforms.

Paradoxes are not far away from my own contribution either. In a comparative discussion, two cases are considered: (1) the revitalization of economic research in the New Course era (the years immediately following Stalin's death, 1953–56), and (2) the purge of critical social theory and sociology in the wake of the Brezhnevian Thermidor (1968–1975). In both cases, the change taking place in the prevalent scholarly ethos appeared to be towards that of the professionally oriented scholar concerned exclusively with empirical facts and striving after scientific truth, i.e., the field seemed to have emancipated itself, at least to some extent, from political-ideological tutelage. In both cases, an empiricist or positivist research program seemed to have advanced into a "paradigmatic" position in the scholarly field, squeezing out the strong political and ideological orientation which were often so hard to resist in the state-socialist political, cultural, and academic order. These seemingly identical trajectories notwithstanding, the two cases had precious little in common. The New Course era brought emancipation for economics under the control of ideological and agit-prop interests; while in sociology after 1968, even though it was justified in terms freeing professional sociology from undue political-ideological influence, what happened was a purge of (Marxist) social theory of the kind cultivated by the Budapest School (Ágnes Heller and György Márkus being its most outstanding representatives) and critical sociology as practiced by András Hegedűs and Mária Márkus.

If Hungary's history is really outstanding in any respect, it must be that it is fragmented by frequent systemic and a series of other significant political changes. Since World War I, the country underwent systemic changes in October 1918, March 1919, August 1919, 1944–45, 1948, 1989, 2010. Within each period of longer standing (always illiberal, authoritarian, or dictatorial) regimes, there were several significant political changes—if we only take the period after 1948, we should no doubt include 1953, 1956, 1963–66, 1968, 1974–75, 1978, 1982, 1985, 1988–89. Scholars in their 60s today have experienced in their life and work three different political systems and about eight or ten significant "course changes." With but a very short existence of a relatively liberal order (1989–2010), academic life in Hungary can be seen as a laboratory for the study of social and historical research under repressive-interventionist regimes.

We have by now learned that autonomies (thus, the autonomy of science) cannot and should not be taken for granted. György Lukács maintained about the Weimar Republic that it was "a democracy without democrats" (Lukács 1946). Whether Lukács had a well-founded claim to priority with regard to this particular insight is far beyond the purview of this essay. What is important here for us is its validity not only for democracy but also for academic autonomy. For autonomies, just like democracies, live a very precarious life—their

existence, survival and demise are dependent not so much on institutions and organizations created to protect them as on whether or not all concerned (politicians as well as scientists and, in general, citizens) respect, act, and live in accordance with the values and principles of intellectual and cultural autonomies and the democratic political order.

If we have managed to show at least some of the complexities characteristic of the history of the power-knowledge nexus under authoritarian regimes, we feel we have done what can be accomplished within the framework of a thematic issue. No doubt much more work needs to be done on the interwar, communist, and post-1989 era as well. But we hardly need to know more to be able to respect and agree with István Bibó's commentary from 1947 about cultural and academic autonomies:

In connection with this question, quite a few people mention the universities and the Academy which more or less defend their historical autonomy. These [institutions] are exposed to assaults on grounds that their autonomies are merely crystallization points of certain personal and social power relations. However, this only means that the Academy or the universities provide too narrow frameworks. The recognition of that justifies not the destruction of autonomy but, on the contrary, the organization of it on an even larger scale. It confirms that the whole intellectual life, the whole cultural production and the consumption of mass culture necessitates the establishment of some apparatus of autonomy ... The contours, again, of some kind of a scientific or cultural "state power" are taking shape, which, just like the judiciary, will have to gain by struggle its independence, its autonomy, and its constitutionally guaranteed separation from the concentration of power.

BIBÓ 1982: 557–558

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