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Chapters from Nineteenth
and Twentieth Century
Hungarian Symbolic Politics

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PREFACE

The history of Hungarian symbolic politics is open-ended. It has evolved and it can be tracked, down to the present, and presumably can be tracked in the future. Its essence is continuity of varying intensity, varying emphases and varying power, as with symbolic politics everywhere. The consciousness of identity and the corresponding symbolic expression, however, are far more steady than the forces or priorities of power politics.

The history of symbolic politics is the history of national identity and culture. It deals with how a given group, viewing itself as a community—in this case a nation—declares and expresses its existence, and how it defines itself, what kind of cults it generates.

The history of symbolic politics is different from history in the traditional sense. It constitutes a parallel history. While it does relate to political, economic, or social history in the traditional sense, yet it differs from these altogether; occasionally, symbolic politics becomes a kind of alternative, a history contesting the sphere of power politics of the age; in contrast to the power implications of Realpolitik, it creates spiritual politics, it generates a parallel narrative, it provides an alternative choice of topics. Of course, there may be divergences in what or who becomes the master of the spirits and what and who is the master of vested interests.

Symbolic politics and Realpolitik (i.e. politics of vested interests, power politics, political economy, social politics, etc.) may be quite divergent, but they are never dissociated. The connection involves not just parallel narratives and topics, but rather the fact that symbolic politics constructs a reality of its own, defining the framework of Realpolitik. The existence of this close connection, its changing emphasis and direction do not exclude a difference in nature. On the contrary, it is

precisely this difference in nature that makes it possible to understand and interpret the connections. Symbolic politics constitutes a reality of its own, which does not mean that every reality turns into symbolic politics.

To enable us to study symbolic politics, various factors have to interact. The achievements of historical science are of fundamental importance; the trends since the 1960s and 1970s are extremely significant. The methodologies of traditional historiography have changed. Economic history acquired prominence, largely because historical science was enhanced by new, mainly quantitative methods. The main challenge, however, came from the paradigmatic challenge of the postmodern. However, the all-out attack mounted by the postmodernists was, on the whole, unjustified, as we soon found out that the achievements of traditional historiography cannot be dismissed as nothing but narratives and constructs, because, for one thing, the outstanding practitioners of traditional historiography did not think and write in terms of constructs, but rather of reconstruction.

Nevertheless, the “attack” by the postmodernists resulted in a multitude of intellectual and professional benefits and side effects. History as a discipline became more open, using and fusing approaches by other social sciences far more frequently than before. Cultural history, social history, the history of attitudes (*mentalité* history) articulated themselves.¹ Almost instantly history absorbed or merged with the history of literature, with the perspectives of sociology, of ethnology, of anthropology, among others.² This openness, in turn, occasioned real changes in methodology, the choice of subjects, and the concept of source. The process was already underway even without the postmodern, but it picked up pace and definition because of that challenge.

Quantitative methods lost some of their prominence, whereas the traditional methods of dealing with sources did not disappear; but the range of subjects examined or given greater prominence became far wider. The problem of history as memory, the analysis of the discourse, microhistory were all indications that new questions, new perspectives had been raised and opened up.³ The new perspectives, in turn, created new sources, even when resorting to the methodology of traditional history. The letter written by the prisoner of war became as important as the description of some celebration. The analysis of narratives was

lifted into historical science manifestations which had been neglected until then. Acceptance of the logic of the discourse prompted a reexamination of the complex of concepts. By the 1990s the evolution of historical science had brought about a new state of affairs.

On the other hand, it occurred to some that, if everything is nothing but construct, then so is historical science; therefore we may disregard the need for traditional reconstruction. Theory can be substituted for history, theory itself elicits history.

In my opinion, however, the historian always recounts history. The rules for telling it may change, the concept of history itself may change, but the requirement of telling history itself does not change. Theory affects not the telling, but rather History itself. In this regard, theorizing is a perfectly legitimate intellectual exercise, but we must be clear, that the abstract level of theory is often inappropriate for the telling of history, it is not even designed for it. Of course, the apparatus of concepts and language is based on certain premises and it presupposes theory, but it is not identical with theory. Its value is determined by the extent to which it serves the ends of reconstruction and contributes to the telling of the story. In other words, to what extent does it work? The main criterion of language is not only the logical coherence of construct, but rather the relevance of the description and interpretation to the telling of the story. To simplify: the philosophy of history and historiography continue to be different subjects: both are legitimate endeavors, they enhance each other, but are not interchangeable. Story/history and History are not identical, and they cannot be told the same way. Those who forget this—and they are many—may easily lose sight of both, may think that he or she has told everything, whereas nothing has been told. Unless we find a language that works conceptually for telling a story, it becomes impossible to tell or to interpret. If the story becomes nothing but a theoretical construct, then the story is not told and interpreted, but dogmatized.

The change in historical science was accompanied, in east-central Europe, by challenges in the political arena. The area has undergone enormous transformation since 1989–90. One of the concomitants of this transformation was that forms of knowledge and consciousness that had been repressed now surfaced with elemental force, either in the form of armed conflict deriving from ethnocentric nationalism, or in

the reincarnation of a pagan world view.⁴ The great changes were accompanied by a surge of symbolic politics; almost everywhere the symbolism of the state underwent transformation; the problematic of “good and evil,” historically understood, found a new formulation, often amidst intense debates; statues were removed and new memorials installed; history underwent reinterpretation, often in the form of narratives that had been presumed discarded long ago. The rituals and cults of Communism dissipated, and the rituals and cults of the nation were partly or wholly restored or regenerated. What we refer to as the reassessment of the past was realized in everyday discussions and day-to-day political action.

Symbolic politics appeared in east-central Europe as a theme, as an issue, even at the level of everyday political practice, and the symbolism sometimes functions as identity-maker. The choice of themes was presented not only in the history of ideas, but in day-to-day politics as well. What became a set of legitimate themes in academic circles was accompanied by the methodology of a new historiography. The atmosphere of freedom and the search for identity raised the dead, summoned spirits, made everything we had assumed forgotten once again capable of being expressed. It gave power to tradition and expressed, in symbolic politics, everything it felt was important. History became a means not only to legitimize politics, but to legitimize identity as well.

The change in the situation of scientific history and its appearance in politics coincided with my particular interests. Without being especially aware of the changes in politics, I wrote the first draft of my essay on the Millennium Memorial in 1986–87. I was beyond my dissertation, completed in 1986, which dealt with the representative system in the Hungary during the period of the Monarchy, and this essay was written more in line with traditional history and traditional research. Once the work was completed, my interest and my methodology turned in a direction which could be termed the history of symbolic politics, without my even knowing it, mainly as a result of the changes in scientific history. Only later did my personal interest react to the political process; for instance, in 1992, I wrote for the first time about March 15, which had become once again a national holiday.

As time passed, particularly since 1987, the material which comes together in this volume was in the process of gestation.⁵ I am perfectly

aware that the analysis of the issues could continue, and that the each chapter included here could form the nucleus of a monograph or of a collection of primary sources. (Indeed, I have implemented some projects along these lines already, as in the case of my work on the relations between Francis Joseph and the Hungarians, written in 1988, or about the Millennium of 1896, or in the case of source materials for the centenary of the Revolution of 1848.) My ideas and my work may be considered a cornerstone to which further elements may be added, almost indefinitely. One might add, for instance, the notion of the traitor to the nation, or the analysis of national dishes and drinks,⁶ or the concept of the greatest Hungarian, worth a separate volume, as well as the ever-changing pantheon of the “secular saints of the nation.”

We can compare the symbolic world of national identity to Mendeleev’s periodic table, where the structural spaces are indicated in advance. In this work I have filled in only a few of spaces, but the design makes it possible to fill, with further contributions, other spaces in the grid. Thus my work is not a work of philosophy of history although it does include a good deal of conceptualization. It is bent on telling a history rather than History itself.

As regards the unfilled spaces in the grid, the objective representations of symbolic politics are missing. More exactly, these are mentioned, but only as part of other aspects, even though objects may be a truly important aspect of symbolic politics. Moreover, this aspect would extraordinarily strengthen my conceptual framework, and undergird its most important Hungarian manifestation; I am thinking of the historical analysis of the symbolic political role of the Hungarian royal crown. The object designated as the Holy Crown, or the historical analysis of the sacraments attached to it, cannot be done within the time span of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for the degree of sanctity, the change in content, its place in public consciousness, cannot be understood without its feudal past of several centuries. I felt that my own knowledge was inadequate for this task, nor was I able to identify within the array of historians the one person who could offer a scientifically valid historical analysis, extending over several centuries. Unfortunately, we have to concede that specialization within the profession, in spite of its enormous benefits, would make such an extensive project impossible. And, it is a matter of scholarly ethics that, if the

most important symbolic object is omitted, the less important objects should likewise not be given their due in the text.

I had another consideration in mind in dealing with objects in this volume. The most important objects of symbolic politics, crown, flag, seal, medals, etc., functioned also as state symbols. Thus they are equal to themselves, their symbolic use is not primarily social, but serves the ends of the state. The study of state identity, of state expression is a rather different task, for the basic question to be asked and answered is not so much “what is Hungarian?” but rather “what is the Hungarian state?” The range of subjects to be studied would be quite different, even though there is obviously an evolving relationship between the problem of the nation and the problem of the state.

Thus the subtitle of a book which would include objects, would have to be *Chapters from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Hungarian Symbolic Politics*. The term chapters would refer not only to the parts of the volume that are included, but also to the parts that could be included. The storehouse of symbolic politics, theoretically speaking, is wider than what is discussed here. The time span, on the other hand, indicates that for me the area of research is the symbolic political expression of the Hungarian nation. Of course, I occasionally refer to the background, the elements bequeathed to us by ancient or medieval universalism, but only to establish the necessary context. Moreover, it is clear to me that since the world of symbolic politics is alive and ongoing, that history is broadened and extended by elements from the very recent past (the Hungarian Millennium, the Year of Deák). Yet I tried to avoid the possibility of reading a present-day political interpretation into my analysis; my language becomes increasingly descriptive as we approach the present.

The volume deals with symbolic politics in three major dimensions: personalities, time and space. I know, as mentioned already, that these dimensions are not exhaustive but, in my opinion, they are sufficient to provide an analysis of the history of Hungarian symbolic politics. I feel it is intellectually absolutely necessary—in order to understand the background of these dimensions—to explain what I mean by Hungarian and what I mean by symbolic politics. I have to sketch out the framework of concepts within which this history moves. If this chapter was, indeed, a prerequisite from the standpoint of intellectual honesty, the

international survey that follows was warranted mainly for the sake of drama. Without a look at Europe, albeit from the Hungarian point of view, the horizon would become too narrow and leave the reader without a context and without the means of comparison. On the other hand, the need for dramatic structure does not mean that the chapter has special scientific or scholarly merit. It is simply needed, much as we have to enter into a building by an entrance, even though we know that the door to the concert hall tells us nothing about the quality of the concert. It is not of the same value as the other chapters, in any case, because we know that behind the similarities of structure there is a divergence of backgrounds. This volume would have to be many times its size to accommodate an international survey at the level of the other chapters.

It must be mentioned, furthermore, that the triad of person/time/space is complemented by structural unity. I felt that the presentation of my own analysis is not enough. I felt a need to establish a relationship showing what would happen if symbolic politics became a system of concepts, i.e. what happens when the proselytizing power of the nation-religion begins to function. I felt it would be worthwhile to take a look at the attempt to intellectualize symbolic politics on the one hand and, on the other, to examine the process of historical identification resulting from a nation-religion, and to go beyond the original ethnic group; that would give us the possibility to examine the mechanism of the impact of the nation-religion, inseparable from it.

I analyze the transformation of symbolic politics into a conceptual structure with regard to the views of István Bibó. I could have selected some other personality, for there are quite a few figures in Hungarian intellectual history who could have served the same purpose. Rather than provide such a list, allow me to indicate why I opted for István Bibó, without disclosing the contents of the entire chapter: he created a pure conceptual structure, unlike the writers László Németh or Dezső Szabó (to mention two other possibilities); to many readers Bibó constitutes an intellectual standard (unlike Oszkár Jászi, for example), and he has no ax to grind (unlike, say, Gyula Szekfű). He argues within the historical framework that constitutes the time dimension for our book.

It is Jewry that offered itself as an example of the proselytizing impact of the identity history of the Hungarian nation-religion, and of the changing content of the concept "Hungarian." Theoretically, it

might have been possible to pick the German ethnic minority, but that would have been misleading, for some of the Germans had always counted as a separate nationality, and they still do; but it was the Jews who lacked national consciousness of their own, and became the ideal object for proselytizing by the nation-religion, only to become, later, the victim object of a narrower concept of nation. Moreover, the chapter sheds a new light on one of the major problems of Hungarian and European history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I conclude the volume, by way of postscript, with a topic which completes the glory of the Hungarian nation-religion. Here "The God of the Hungarians" becomes the object of analysis.

This work was elaborated over the past decade and a half or longer. Its content changed, as has its approach and its use of concepts. I owe thanks to many for making this work possible. Rather than a long list of names, all I can say: thanks to all who deserve it.

I am pleased that new areas are becoming the object of study thanks to the broadening of the focus of historical inquiry. Insofar as possible, I mention in the notes the important and relevant international and Hungarian references. It seems to me that the nation as a cultural, emotional, symbolic rallying point will continue to play an important role, in spite of the fact that the political concept of nation is undergoing change everywhere in Europe. Because of this, in my opinion, the symbolic projections pertaining to the nation have gained and will gain in value, because aspects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (national independence, political sovereignty) do not have the same future within the European Union as they did earlier. The concept of the political nation in the traditional sense is being deconstructed, while national identity manifest in cultural and symbolic politics has received a fresh impetus.

Even more important under the circumstances is what has always been essential: that the scientific discourse continue ever more forcefully, with new perceptions, fresh approaches, along new impulses. This book is meant to contribute to that process.

The history of Hungarian symbolic politics is ongoing, as mentioned. I hope to continue along with others a task that will never be complete. I am confident that the problems raised here will help us perceive the relations between theory and history along new lines, as well

as the help us understand the symbiosis of both forms of history, the complex of national identity and symbolic politics in a new context, and the old and potentially new features of the nation-religion. The proportions which, in my opinion, are the essence of everything, are never a given, but the outcome of the interplay of intellectual productions. I am confident that a rational, analytical approach will make it possible to understand how Hungarian national identity has lived, and still lives, mainly as feeling. If we can understand what we feel, then perhaps we can chose the continuation.