

# Conservative Ideology in the Making

By Iván Zoltán Dénes



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*László Kontler*

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Iván Zoltán Dénes

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“For the people, truly I desire their liberty and freedom as much as anybody whomsoever. But I must tell you their liberty and freedom consists in having the government ... those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own. It is not for having share in government. That is nothing pertaining to them.”

*Charles Stuart, January 30, 1649,  
quoted in Williamson (1957), 143*

“It is indeed the aristocracy whose influence I wish to preserve in the legislation, excluding all whom wise laws have excluded so far as they are not yet competent. ... Indeed, I do wish to keep the masses under guardianship, and, honestly speaking, to bridle them; but also to promote their material well-being by righteous government; to foster their mental improvement, and not to let them waste their time needed for earning a living by taking part in something they do not know, do not want, and are incapable of, namely, in co-governing.”

*Albert Sztáray, January 8, 1842 in Albert Sztáray,  
“Nagymihályi levelek” [Letters from Nagymihály]*



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# Foreword

The fifty years or so preceding the watershed of 1848–49 witnessed the emergence of liberal nationalism in Hungary, along with a transmutation of conservatism which appeared then as a party and an ideological system in the political arena. The specific features of the conservatism, combining the protection of the status quo with some reform measures, its strategic vision, conceptual system, argumentation, assessment criteria, and values require an in depth exploration and analysis. There were and are historians and political journalists who claim that the goals and programs of the liberals and conservatives only differed in tone and timing, and not in content or character. An objective answer is now overdue by more than a century and a half to the question of whether the purpose of the Hungarian conservative response to the liberal challenge was to defend the equilibrium of social classes and nationalities at European, imperial, and national levels, or to safeguard and modernize the system of privileges by birth.

Our sources of information for the political role and value system of the conservatives in the 1840s are their political journalism, the positions they took in the parliamentary debates, and their political and intellectual backgrounds, while the interpretation of the acquired information requires international comparison.

Most of my primary research was accomplished between 1977 and 1984. Based on this material, I wrote two articles in the early 1980s and 1990s, which were published in *The Historical Journal*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, I gained a great deal from the comments of the anonymous reviewers of both essays, and am grateful to the editors, Christopher Andrew and Jonathan Steinberg for their patience. I wrote the first version of this monograph in 1985 and the second in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Upon Isaiah Berlin's

<sup>1</sup> Dénes (1983, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Dénes (1989, 2008).

(b. Riga, 1909, d. Oxford, 1997) encouragement, I initiated international research to explore the nature and contexts of liberal nationalisms so as to provide case studies of a contextual framework of future comparisons. The outcome of that work, *Liberty and the Search for Identity: Liberal Nationalisms and the Legacy of Empires*, lasting for nearly two decades, is not yet a comparative volume but the opening and clearing of the road to comparison.<sup>3</sup>

Upon receiving scholarships from the British Academy in 1981 and 1990, I had the opportunity to talk with several colleagues in the United Kingdom. In 1990–91, as a Fulbright scholar, and in 1993–94, as an IREX fellow, I accumulated further knowledge in the USA. I was particularly inspired by Isaiah Berlin (All Souls College, Oxford, Athenaeum Club, London), Stanley Hoffmann (Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University), John Graville Agard Pocock (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD), John Rawls (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; b. Baltimore, MD, 1921, d. 2002), James J. Sheehan (Stanford University, Stanford, CA), Quentin Skinner (Christ's College, University of Cambridge), Paul Smith (King's College, University of London), and Christopher Smout (St. Salvator's College, University of St. Andrews). The post-graduate seminar for historians at Johns Hopkins University during the fall and winter of 1993 was a life changing experience for me. So much so, that three years later I initiated the foundation in Budapest of the István Bibó Intellectual Workshop ([www.bibomuhely.hu](http://www.bibomuhely.hu)) based on its model, which has been my reference point and intellectual milieu ever since.

For all their helpful comments when I was working on the subject in the 1970s and 1980s, I remain indebted to my university tutor, György Szabad (Budapest), and János Varga (b. Sótó, 1927, d. Budapest, 2008). The writings of István Bibó (Budapest, 1911–1979), Miklós Szabó (Budapest, 1935–2000), and János Kis (Budapest–New York) have been seminal. The encouragement and remarks of András Gergely (Budapest) and Károly Kecskeméti (Antony, France) played salient roles in the awakening process of the 2008 text.

In the first quarter of 2009, I thoroughly revised and supplemented the text of the 2008 monograph for the English version. I was greatly assisted in preparing it by the far-sighted comments of Károly Kecskeméti and Balázs Trencsényi (Central European University, Budapest), David Robert Evans's linguistic corrections, the patient and attentive translation

<sup>3</sup> Dénes (2006).

by Judit Pokoly, the careful language revision by Thomas Szerecz and Breanne Herrera, the conscientious editing work of Linda Kunos and Krisztina Kós, and the cautious and diligent technical organization of the entire process by Erzsébet Nagy. I am deeply indebted to all of them for the energy, care, and time they spared.

Budapest, August 2009

*Iván Zoltán Dénes*



# Introduction

## Modernity and Identity

Is there a vicious circle of binary forms of political discourses in Central and Eastern Europe—modernity vs. tradition, progress vs. nation, freedom vs. community, self-realization vs. belonging to a community, “Western cosmopolitan civilization” vs. “national identity,” adoption of the European model vs. national self-centeredness? Defining and comparing the roots, history, and variants of these oppositions in different geographical regions of Europe is a task and can be a way forward, so long as caution is taken against the usual schematic models of the *original backwardness*, the different romantic nationalistic *Sonderwege* and their various national mythologies of *uniqueness*. These false alternatives were parts of the heritage of enlightened absolutism bequeathed to its “intelligentsia.” As an outcome of autocratic and totalitarian regimes, these dichotomies were revived. Opposed though similarly unproductive, they mark attempts to create identity in each and all of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Are the alternatives like cosmopolitanism and collective identity, catching up and expansion, emulation and isolation, and inorganic and organic development really unavoidable? Underlying all this, that is, the postulates of the West and the East (usually in the singular), cosmopolitan civilization and national specificities, and the progress of Europe and the mission of the nation, was the intellectual and emotional legacy of diverse responses to the modernizing challenges. These included economic revolution, the enlightened absolutisms, the American and French political revolutions, and Napoleonic wars, which permeated the absolutist attempts of the modernizing systems on the semi-peripheries of Europe at that time. These postulates especially imbued the images of self and enemy onto the intelligentsia who actually created their self-identity during these modernizing attempts. The schemes and political idioms of moder-

nity vs. tradition and progress vs. nation were the opposite extremes along a range of attitudes toward modernization and the search for collective identity from Sweden to Russia, Poland to Greece, and from Ireland through Italy to Spain, Portugal, and Latin America. Several thinkers in the different variants of westernization vs. self-isolation (*zapadnik*–Slavophile, cosmopolitan–patriot, Enlightened–Sarmatian) chose civilization and progress over nation, motherland, and tradition. By contrast, the latter patriotic adherents rejected the innovations urged for by the advocates of progress because they feared that the civilizing reforms would lead to the annihilation of the “ancient constitution,” national traditions, and to foreign domination. Their images of the self and the enemy were determined by the dichotomies of constitutionality vs. absolutism, progress vs. backwardness, civilization vs. barbarism, West vs. East, virtue vs. corruption, patriotism vs. imperial loyalty, and autonomous judgement vs. interest dictated prejudice.

However, not all those who chose constitutionality over absolutism were committed to progress, patriotism, or autonomous judgement. By the same token, not all who wished to promote progress were devout advocates of constitutionality, patriotism, or independent opinion in all regards. The concept of progress was often paired with imperial loyalty and an understanding for a type of absolutism which was embraced by several followers of enlightened absolutisms, the French revolution, and Napoleon. Everywhere there were patriots who were quick to realize that in the teeth of the absolutist threat the defense of constitutionality demanded its transformation and the extension of the personal and political rights to the unprivileged. By contrast, there were advocates of progress who concluded that backwardness could only be eliminated by a strong—even absolutist—state. The exponents of constitutionality expressed themselves in terms of the nation, those of progress in terms of good government, and the universalism of natural law was not alien to them, either. They were first of all the forerunners of European liberal nationalisms representing different conceptions, dilemmas, and traditions.<sup>1</sup> The harmonious unity of progress, freedom, and nation lasted until its advocates rose to power and realized that their respective nations were divided by social class, nationality, culture, and religion, and that the extension of political rights did not eliminate these subdivisions. Apparently it was the attitude toward the different nationalities within the state and its relation to the program of the

<sup>1</sup> Walicki (1975, 1982), Jedlicki (1999), Janowski (2004), Dénes (2006), and Trencsényi and Kopeček (2006–2007.).

nation-state—a most delicate question—that determined their views on confederative solutions. Liberal nationalisms had several antagonists, first of all the conservatives who spoke up for order, tradition, and authority.<sup>2</sup>

## Liberalisms and Conservatisms

The efforts of liberal, conservative, national, radical, democratic, and, later, socialist movements outline a web of complex threads—often interpenetrating, rival, or hostile—in various parts of Europe, including Hungary. The diverse liberalisms and nationalisms are arranged on a scale from a harmonious, mutually interdependent relationship to utter hostility (and self-definition in opposition to the other pole), the degree ranging from national to anti-national liberalisms and from liberal to anti-liberal nationalisms.<sup>3</sup> A similarly complex and differentiated picture is outlined by the various liberalisms in relation to democratic movements and rudimentary parties, ranging from anti-democratic to democratic liberalisms, from anti-liberal to liberal democracies and their opponents, the populist democracies.<sup>4</sup> The relation between various liberal and conservative groups, organizations, and parties ranges from the antagonism of the followers and opponents of constitutionality to the programs of modernization—varying in phrasing, content, and aim from general opposition to totalitarian systems to the mutual acceptance of liberal democracy and neo-liberal economic policy and the different evaluation of the collective rights of the minorities.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between conservatisms and nationalisms is also complex, from opposition through interpenetration to new opposition.<sup>6</sup> The attitude toward the emerging socialist movements, just as the attitude of the various socialist trends to the rest of the ideological and political currents, outlines a highly intricate picture from utter rejection to alliance and vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Walicki (1975, 1982), Jedlicki (1999), Janowski (2004), Dénes (2006), Trencsényi and Kopeček (2006–2007), Mishkova (2009), and Trencsényi (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Bibó (1976), esp. 35–52, Tamir (1993), Kis (1997) 129–184, Kymlicka (2000), Freedman (2005), Kymlicka and Banting (2006), Dénes (2006), Trencsényi and Kopeček (2006–2007), Mishkova (2009), and Trencsényi (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Kis (1999, 2003, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Ruggiero (1959), Kecskeméti (1989), Miklós Szabó (1989, 2003), Kis (1997), and Dénes (2006). A thorough modern synthesis of the theme is missing.

<sup>6</sup> Mannheim (1953), Epstein (1966), and Kaltenbrunner (1972).

<sup>7</sup> Miklós Szabó (1989, 1993, 2003). A serious comprehensive synthesis of the different forms of conservatism is lacking.



Several philosophers have removed the time factor from the political opposition of liberals and conservatives and projected it back into antiquity or the Middle Ages. Some have tied it to the dynastic and religious opposition of the Whigs and Tories.<sup>8</sup> Some historians claim that in several European countries this antagonism can to be traced to the French revolution, and to the constitutional vs. absolutist opposition of the parties of the Spanish Cortez in 1812 and the following years.<sup>9</sup> From the 1870s and 1880s to the interwar period, the liberal and conservative parties were primarily differentiated by their efforts to minimize rather than increase the role of the state, by their support of the free market vs. state protectionism, parliamentarianism vs. corporatism, free vs. command economy, or deconstruction vs. preservation of privileges. After World War II, especially after the offensive of the human rights movements and the Chicago School/Thatcher/Reagan neoliberal turn, the distance between the liberals and conservatives diminished. Also, the liberal parties became small parties, with several elements of their role being adopted and reinterpreted by the radical and socialist parties.

In Hungary, the different liberal political organizations were participants in five changes of political systems (1848, 1867, 1918, 1945, 1989/90), initiating and providing platforms for three of them (1848, 1918, 1989/90), and shaping and determining one (1867–1918). They also formed the opposition to six absolutist, authoritarian, totalitarian, and oligarchic systems (1832–1848, 1849–1867, 1919, 1919–1944, 1947–1949, 1977/81–1989). Different conservative groups were in the background or in opposition from 1848 to 1918, while in the period between the two world wars, they constituted the overwhelming majority of ruling parties. During the one-party system, from 1949 to 1989, the liberals and conservatives—like all other political groups—were illegal, a status from which they could later emerge upon the change of the political system. However, the actors, groupings, and value systems were now different from those of yore. In the second half of the 1840s the conservatives first gathered into a party in opposition to the liberals, but as political actors their antagonism was rooted in the 1790s and could be traced from the 1820s.<sup>10</sup> The pro-government, anti-opposition Conservative Party was

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Butterfield (1931) and Smith (1980).

<sup>9</sup> *Anti-Jacobin Review* 50 (June 1816): 553; Miller (1830) 276. Cf. Epstein (1963), 3–22, Kaltenbrunner (1972), 139–329, Crow (1985), 245–57, and Cortázar, Vesga, and González (1994).

<sup>10</sup> Kecskeméti (1989), Varga (1982a, 1993), and Bérenger and Kecskeméti (2005).

founded in 1846—almost at the same time as Robert Peel’s Anti-Corn Law League—while the Opposition Party rallying the Hungarian liberals emerged officially in 1847. The precedent to the Conservative Party was the court party (*Staatspartei*) while that of the liberals—at least formally—was the traditional party of grievances (*Landespartei*).<sup>11</sup>

The emergence of the Opposition Party took a while, since underlying the appearance of continuity with the gravaminalist opposition there was a new set of wholly liberal notions. The majority of the nobility from the 1790s to the political emergence of the liberals was characterized by a conservatism aimed at preserving the status quo. The opposition united by grievances pursued the policy of the preservation of constitutional privileges, while the court party was in unconditional support of the government in the name of loyalty to the sovereign. In the late 1830s and early 1840s an ambitious Hungarian conservative government official, Count Aurél Dessewffy, initiated the organization of a conservative program, group, party, and newspaper. In the 1840s, the supreme Hungarian government body and the conservatives supporting it launched an offensive under the leadership of two Hungarian conservative government politicians, Count György Apponyi and Baron Samu Jósika, to bring about a pro-government majority in the lower house and squeeze out the liberals from the parliament and county assemblies. To this end the Conservative Party was founded on November 12, 1846 with the participation of some conservative politicians—Count Emil Dessewffy, Sándor Liphay, and Count Antal Szécsen—and senior officials of the government agencies and counties in support of the conservative government politicians.

The political and press offensive of the conservatives unfurling in several waves between 1843 and 1847 was far from unsuccessful. In the spring of 1848, however, they were forced to leave the political arena, at which point the majority of them returned on the side of the Habsburg army during the military conflict. In the first decade of neo-absolutism they were pushed into the background, but they played an important role in preparing the *Ausgleich* (Compromise). More important than their actual role was their legend that emerged in the 1870s, gaining strength in the early twentieth century, reviving in the 1920s, and is even very present today. In 1848 the liberals formed a government and the parliamentary parties of 1848–49. Between 1849 and 1860 they were ousted from local and national political life, into which they returned in 1860–61 provision-

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bérenger and Kecskeméti (2005).

ally, and from 1865 gradually, with the restoration of pluralistic aristocratic political forms.

The party led by Ferenc Deák (the 1861 *Felirati Párt*—lit. “the party proposing to submit an *address* to the sovereign”) that concluded the *Ausgleich* with the court, as well as the opposition led by Kálmán Tisza between 1868 and 1875 (called in 1861 *Határozati Párt*, led by László Teleki, lit. “a party in favor of sending a parliamentary resolution to the sovereign”) defined themselves as national liberal. The Liberal Party was created with the fusion of the above two parties in 1875, and its successor, the governing National Labor Party of the 1910s led by István Tisza, also defined itself as a national liberal party. Even the leftist opposition of the governing Liberal Party, that is, the Independence Party and the Party of 1848, identified themselves as national liberal parties until the 1890s and afterwards.

The 1875 parliamentary faction of Baron Pál Sennyey, the former conservative politician of the Reform era, was a conservative initiative urging for the centralization of the public administration. The Moderate Opposition, the Rightist Opposition, and later National Party led by Count Albert Apponyi, were conservative formations.<sup>12</sup> The neo-conservative parties—the Anti-Semitic Party, the Conservative Catholic, later Catholic People’s Party, the Association of Hungarian Landowners, and the Christian Socialist Party—were founded in the 1880s in terms of anti-liberalism, state social policy, interest protection, and restricted economic forms.<sup>13</sup> Liberal democratic party initiatives were the Budapest middle-class party of Vilmos Vázsonyi at the outset of the twentieth century, Oszkár Jászi’s Civic Radical Party, in some interpretations the liberal party of Károly Rassay and Rezső Rupert in the interwar period, the circle of the periodical *Századunk* (Our century), the group of legitimists in the 1930s and 1940s, and the Cobden League.<sup>14</sup> After 1945, the Democratic Citizens’ and the Radical Citizens’ Parties were liberal parties; so was the democratic, human rights opposition to the state party from the 1970s, the Alliance of Free Democrats founded in 1988, and Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) during the change of regime. The great government parties of the 1920s and 1930s were conservative parties. The politics and political language of the late Kádár era state party, which had shifted from a totalitarian towards an oligarchic (and ideologically increasingly empty, pragmatic)

<sup>12</sup> Mérei (1971), 13–321.

<sup>13</sup> Miklós Szabó (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Miklós Szabó (2001).

character, also displayed conservative specificities aimed at preserving the status quo. This was, obviously, not declared openly since it did not exercise its power by divine grace (nor, for that matter, by popular sovereignty) and it was wholly incompatible with its official ideology. Since the political turn of 1989/90 the Hungarian Democratic Forum, and for the past sixteen years the Fidesz Hungarian Civic Party (later Hungarian Civic Union and its ally the Christian Democratic People's Party), have identified themselves as conservative.

### **Images of the Enemy**

During the emergence and domination of the state party, equally banned were both the conservative traditionalist and etatist discourse and the liberal modernization and liberty-centric political language of the liberals. This fate befell all discourses that were not under state control, such as the ethnicist language of the extreme right, the political idioms of the "third way" advocates, the ethno-protectionist plebeian language of the socialist populist movement, the idiom of the civic radicals, and the leftist and extreme leftist socialists. The builders of the totalitarian state eliminated the public spaces, ousted their actors, and stifled all forms of expression that did not belong to the languages they selected and first of all controlled. True, these languages incorporated elements of old discourse types, but in a shattered, incomplete manner, adopting some of their parts, especially various enemy images. It applies in a general but varying measure that nobody had the possibility to elaborate upon what they were going through. It is understandable that the unelaborated experiences—frozen for decades, thawed after the change of regime—and former political languages resurfaced and even today act with an elemental force.

The outlook of the actors of the political change in Central and Eastern Europe—especially in Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland—was determined by the demand for liberal human rights, economic neo-liberalism, national independence, liberal democracy, and joining the West. The euphoric collective experience of 1989/90 was, however, overshadowed by a series of frustrations which were caused by the collapse of industries of the Soviet market, the disruption of middle-class society, the demise of the early welfare state, the loss of acquired rights, and the polarization of society into a few wealthy and many propertyless people. The concept of nation soon elicited ambivalent associations in many, not independently of the fact that the ideological machinery of the emerging political right expropriated the concept of nation and its related sentiments and unelaborated

traumas, degrading all this into political kitsch. On the left, the successor of the former state party soon revived the enlightened absolutist tradition of the modernizing elite, several party exponents looking back upon the Kádár era with nostalgia. More and more people came to believe that they had to choose between two schemes of the past, two authoritarian systems, Horthy's and Kádár's, as the only possible alternatives.

One of its reasons was that the experiences and humiliations of previous generations remained unspoken and unelaborated often at an individual and almost always at the community level. This, in turn, greatly hindered the emergence of the external and internal conditions of the formation of democratic communities in Hungary, and during two decades the former single pupil of the West of the region was relegated to the sluggard's bench displaying sequences of political hysterias. This situation is in no small degree attributable to the *damnosa hereditas* concealed by the consolidated surface. The inheritance of the autocratic system frozen up and undigested by the one-party state was thawed after the peaceful regime change, the constitutional revolution and its discrete components began to be reactivated, including the enemy images of earlier discourses, without a positive system of references. "Liberal" and "conservative" had become state-party stigmas in line with fascist, reactionary, rightist, and bourgeois. In reaction to that, at first conservative then liberal, intellectual fashions and renaissances unfolded in the nineteen eighties. The attempts by liberal and conservative advocates to find predecessors did not favor an objective approach to any kind of liberalism and conservatism.

Liberalisms and conservatisms have been swept away by intellectual and media fashion trends worded in terms of various political languages. For those who speak and write in the one-time conservative and ethno-protectionist idiom, the organic value-oriented development controlled by the paternalist state and the health of the national organism was and is threatened by *internal and external foes*—formulated in the dichotomy of ethnic Hungarian vs. non-Hungarian. For those who speak and write in the former Marxist idiom, the realization of the classless society and progress leading to it was and is hindered by feudal vestiges and reaction (personified by anti-modernity, the nation). Communist indoctrination also placed the political actors along the dichotomies of progress vs. reactionary position and working people vs. ruling class. Social and political classification also implied serious moral qualification: the representatives of the working class were right by definition, while the members of the ruling class embodied the moral evil. Under the revolutionary mythology, those who were making efforts for the working class regarded the ruthless applica-

tion of revolutionary violence not as a necessary evil but as something desirable and unavoidable. What the conservative, ethno-protectionist, Marxist socialist, and communist political discourses had in common was their preoccupation with their respective enemy images. What one learns from them first of all is their view of the antithesis of progress and nation; they concentrated on what and who was threatening the desirable future and its bearers. The conservatives and ethno-protectionists saw liberalism and the liberals as their main foes. The Marxist socialist enemy image was dominated by feudal reaction (implying both liberalism and conservatism). The communist representation of the foe centered on reaction (feudal and bourgeois reaction encompassing everyone, liberals and conservatives included, except the speaker designating the enemy and his fellow thinkers). The conservatives' vision of the liberal foe ranged from liberal nationalists and anti-nationalist liberals to radicals identified with anti-national liberals, socialists, communists, and Jews. The ethno-protectionists reinterpreted this enemy image in such a way that anti-liberalism and anti-Semitism could be paired with antipathy towards all non-Hungarian ethnic communities. The feudal reaction concept of Marxist socialists covered the clergy and the nobility as conservative reactionary forces, while in communists' enemy representation this image was extended so much that all belonging here received the stigma of fascist, reactionary, and conservative, and were consequently excommunicated. These enemy images were revived and are actively present today together with the different schemes of racial, ethnic, and class enemies. What aggravates the situation is that the traumatized earlier generations have unwittingly passed on their accursed legacy to their descendants, and these feed the political hysterias capitalized by the voracious powers that be.

The first step toward objectivity is establishing distance from the different kinds of enemy images and their political idioms. This effort can be promoted by the understanding and contextualizing of the sources and the literature, instead of their expropriating elaboration. This is a pressing need because, although several pioneering works have appeared on different variants of the Hungarian liberalisms and conservatisms, there are no serious unbiased syntheses.<sup>15</sup> This work is urgent because the political poles of the constitutional revolution and the ensuing period have up till now been described in terms of different conspiracy theories.

<sup>15</sup> Varga (1971, 1980a, 1980–1981, 1982a, 1983, 1993), Kecskeméti (1989, 2008), Miklós Szabó (1989, 2001, 2003, 2006). See also, Zsuzsa L. Nagy (1977, 1980, 2002), Bérenger and Kecskeméti (2005), and Evans (2006).



# Conservatism

## Its Definition and Types

In colloquial usage, the connotations of the term “conservative” and its collocate, “radical,” imply an opposition, an antithesis. The most frequent concepts associated with conservatism, suggesting social and political equilibrium and identifying it with the aristocratic social order, are authority, tradition, traditional values, order, history, social and political hierarchy, aristocracy, status quo, custom, and organic social development. By contrast, the somewhat constructed series of concepts associated with radicalism include “the people,” the search for a utopia of social justice (achieved possibly even through violence), and the goal and challenge of radical renewal. Radicalism lays stress on the universalism of natural law, equal civil rights, and collective self-government contra order by divine grace and feudal social organization, which spiritualizes the military and ecclesiastical functions and regulates personal rule based on merit and dignity. The conservative preserving attitude is tied to traditional frames, historical forms, and the hierarchically conceived frameworks of the aristocratic societal organization. This is further developed into the “nation” in terms of relativity as well as a sense of reality, whereas the demand for radical transformation is linked with universal validity and the ideal state of society.

The conservatism vs. radicalism antithesis is not merely used conversationally, it is a historical outcome of the specificities of the dual self-definition of the conservatives’ and radicals’ rationales reproduced ever since the French Revolution. Conservatives have always accused their adversaries of overt or covert radicalism, the subversion of the social order, the destruction of a social organization ensuring the balance of quality elements, the promotion of an attitude determined by sheer quantities, and the greed for power of a selfish and unrestricted minority. The radicals have also been quick to condemn those of a different opinion from theirs as bene-



ficiaries of the *ancien régime*, and as reactionaries by tagging them conservative. The self-perception of conservatives and radicals was determined by the diabolic nature of the image they created of each other, a conspiracy psychosis comparable to an exorcism of a secularized theology.

The self-definitive schemes that evolved and became fixed were precipitations of real historical experiences: the conservatives saw their adversaries in the place of the Jacobins of the French revolution, and the radicals recognized the advocates of the *ancien régime* in the conservatives. The sterile figures of the *professional revolutionary* and the *obdurate reactionary*—to use István Bibó's labels—imply the separation and polarization of two narrow, rather mythic concepts of the human being in which past and future, tradition and norm, custom and reason, continuity and creativity, are contrasted irreconcilably. This dichotomous thinking evaluates the opposite elements on the basis of whether the indictment is presented by the prophets of the system of privileges based on birth or by those of revolutionary messianism.<sup>1</sup> The colloquial connotations and their emotive charges are fixations of the polarization of these self-identifications.

Modern European conservatism emerged in response to the challenges of various enlightenments and to the eighteenth-century American and French revolutions, its contents being the legitimation of the personal power of monarchic rule, the order by divine grace, and the system of privileges by birth as the valid system of norms questioned by these challenges. Beside and beyond radicalism, it was more and more strongly confronted by liberalism, an ideological and political trend which advocated the society of free owners in which nobody and nothing could have absolute power. Liberalism, representing the different associations of individuals with independent judgement and independent existence (disposal over property), and the value system of personal freedom, mainly wished to emancipate the society of property owners from the absolutist power of the state and to prevent the state from ruling over society.

To achieve this, liberals wished to sever society from the state, the private person from the citizen, and to build up the institutional checks and balances of the protection of individuals against the teeth of state intervention, to separate the executive, legislative, and judiciary powers from each other, and to create a system of personal rights for individuals. The initial

<sup>1</sup> See, Bibó (1991a), 421–521, esp. 447–468, (1986–1990), 3: 5–123, Talmon (1960a, 1960b, 1991), Brinton (1965), Arendt (1979), 21–178, 215–281, (1993), and Furet (1994, 1999, 2000, 2006). Cf. Ferrero (1941, 1961, 1968, 1972) and Berlin (2000, 2002, 2003, 2006).

attempts of the aristocracy to curb absolute monarchic power were joined by the middle strata's efforts to abolish state absolutism and transform the society based on privileges by birth, to change the aristocratic social establishment, and decrease the weight of the aristocracy. Liberalism, however, regarded the have-nots as peripherals, who could not become citizens with full rights unless they became property owners and individuals independent from any kind of paternalism. This meant that they relegated the greater part of society beyond their horizon and provided ample ground for conservative and socialist criticism alike.<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of Great Britain (where state absolutism was curbed since 1688, and autocracy ceased), conservatism often became the opponent of constitutional government and an ally to absolute power in the first half of the nineteenth century. In France, the absolutist state had other roots than the institution of royalty as well, drawing on some traditions of the republic, then the imperial government and the newer imperial traditions incorporating general suffrage. From among these traditions, French conservatism chose that of the king's absolute power: their classic authors, Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, expounded and justified the traditional ideas of an establishment by divine sanction. Since Germany was not a unified state before 1871, the hyper-aristocratic social organization was coupled with a system of provincial sovereigns and regional principalities, hence the thinkers of traditional German conservatism—Justus Möser, Adam Müller—were committed to the territorial principalities. This tradition was broken by Otto von Bismarck, who ushered in the German attempts at unification, opting for *Realpolitik* after 1848.<sup>3</sup>

In the United Kingdom, conservatism represented a cautious variant of the liberal traditions of the aristocratic political life displaying the ever-increasing influence of the middle class, even though a group of young Tory aristocrats led by Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Derby sent out feelers towards the radical movements. Whig and Tory politics were differenti-

<sup>2</sup> See, Constant (1997), 235–260, Ruggiero (1959), 1–90, 347–443, Laski (1936), 237–264, Hayek (1976), 11–21, 103–117, 397–411, Berlin (1990), 334–443, Ryan (1979), 153–193, 253–269, Miklós Szabó (1989), 47–74, 93–108, (1995), 8–22, (2001), Arblaster (1984), Ludassy (1984), 151–202, and Gray (1996).

<sup>3</sup> See, Bibó, (1991b), (1993), 9–125, (1997), 19–166, (1986–1990), 1:295–635, esp. 365–482, Allmayer-Beck (1959), Kaltenbrunner (1972), 139–329, Greiffenhagen (1977), Stegmann, Wendt, and Witt (1983), 1–198, Ludassy (1984), 7–150; (2004), 79–112, Miklós Szabó (1989), 7–46, 93–108, (1995), 50–54, (2003), 11–99, Nisbet (1996), Kontler (1997, 2000), and *Tanulmányok a konzervativizmus történetéből* [Studies in the history of conservatism] (2002).

ated not by a rejection of radicalism but by the degree of its utilization or neutralization, and this differentiation was hard to discern at times. In Europe, British foreign policy was aimed to sustain the equilibrium of the Holy Alliance, to push back the French rival, and contain the eastern expansion of Russia. Benjamin Disraeli's political pamphlets of 1835/36 were determined by social mobility comprehended on the pattern of ennobling, while the inviolability of the aristocratic social organization was self-evident even in the writings of Thomas Carlyle, James Fitzjames Stephen, and Lord Salisbury some thirty to fifty years later, as well. This holds despite the fact that the two reform acts of enfranchisement (especially the second) extended the boundaries of the body politic and thereby forestalled the explosive transformation of the political structure.<sup>4</sup>

At one end of the scale of nineteenth-century conservatisms was the British conservatism of a liberal function, the opposite end being taken by the openly autocratic conservatism of the Russian Empire (preserving and modernizing Byzantine and Mongolian traditions as well). The contemporaneous European—French, German, Italian, Spanish, Austrian and Hungarian—conservatisms were ranged in between these two poles. All were determined by the challenge of liberalism and the influence of the absolutist state.

The theoretical core of (primarily the German) conservative thinking was described by Karl Mannheim as the refutation of the conceptual and methodological specificities of the liberal thought based on natural law—actually as the synonym of political romanticism. He propounded his ideas in a now classic study (obviously generalizing and projecting back to his early twentieth-century experiences). In his view, the conservatives discarded the tenets of the natural state, the social contract, popular sovereignty, and inalienable human rights. In place of reason, they put history, life, and the nation. Compared to the static and rational conception of reality, they advocated the dynamic and irrational character of reality. Against the liberal demand for the universal validity of equality, they put subjectivity and a prearranged order, individual differences, and the organic nature of society, which implies the preclusion of deliberate and violent changes. Against the natural law concept of the universality of liberty, entailing uniformization, the conservatives were partly right in

<sup>4</sup> See, Disraeli (1913), 111–232, 327–365, Carlyle (1872), 339–392, Stephen (1967), Smith (1972), Vincent (1979), Hanham (1969). For their interpretation, see, Kitson Clark (1962), Smith (1967), Cowling (1967), Himmelfarb (1967), Smout (1969, 1986), Blake (1970), Vincent (1972), Dickinson (1977), Gash (1979), and Colley (1992).

proposing that the assertion of individual differences was the guarantee of individual freedom. Their solution, however, relegated freedom to the private sphere, removed from the universal plane in their theory. At the level of social publicity, every individual was entitled to the liberty implied by his social position. The external measure of internal liberties was social position, and hence everyone's place in the unquestionable hierarchy determined one's possibilities. This reasoning led to the thesis of the qualitative inequality between individuals and to the justification of the sole validity of a social establishment based on the system of privileges.<sup>5</sup>

Several thinkers maintain that the principles of English conservatism (a main point of reference for conservatives)—traditionalism, organicism, and political skepticism—derived from the recognition of the moral imperfection of human nature from which it follows that there are and there can be no absolute solutions in the human realm. By self-definition, the conservatives pursue a politics that respects the past but does not shackle the present, and it does not aim at absolute solutions, being realistic in judging possibilities and human nature, adjusting flexibly to reality, that is, being reformist.<sup>6</sup>

Conservative thought was determined by methodological collectivism, an organic view of society, epistemological empiricism, and skepticism (almost agnosticism), and first of all anthropological pessimism.

"Conservatism" as a political term, associated with the diverse connotations of order and authority or realism and retrogression, had a dual orientation at its emergence alluding to the antitheses of conservatism vs. radicalism and absolutism vs. liberalism. "Innovative" conservatism was tied to England, while on the Continent "reformist conservatism" was more part of the rhetoric than political strategy. Yet, unlike the conservatism vs. radicalism and the absolutism vs. liberalism antitheses, the conservative viewpoints—of a society structured and organized by the state, the inevitable imperfection of human nature determined by original sin, a holistic methodological starting point, and epistemological skepticism—were not merely sterile conceptual contents but could be, and should be, referred to the different political situations and concrete attempts at social organization.

<sup>5</sup> See, Mannheim (1953), 74–164, esp. 94–119. For its interpretation, see Kettler, Meja, and Stehr (1984), 71–85.

<sup>6</sup> See, Oakeshott (1975, 1983, 2001), Gilmour (1977), Quinton (1995), Scruton (1995), and Nisbet (1996).

### Hungarian Conservatives: Context and Dilemmas

In the European spectrum, Hungarian conservatism displays divergent traits (or at least specific features) from the rest. It emerged in a country in which the liberal challenge was very strong, while the absolutist state—though its absolute power was delimited by an institutional system of the estates—represented foreign suppression. At the same time, more than half of this country's population was not Hungarian by nationality. International diplomacy reckoned with the Kingdom of Hungary until the end of the eighteenth century. From 1804, when the Austrian Empire was founded, it was not more than a province—a crown land—of the Habsburg Empire. From the inside, the picture was different. The area of the Kingdom of Hungary constituted a land of special legal standing within the empire. The state—a feudal constitutional monarchy—disposed over several elements of fictitious and real independence—interpreted often differently on this side of the river Leitha and beyond. The most important of these elements were the country's own legislature, judiciary, and public administration. Despite this, the sovereign of the country had its seat outside the country—in Vienna—the country had no army of its own, all substantial issues were determined in Vienna, and its authority was not even formally devolved upon a part of the hereditary territories of the Hungarian crown.

Act 10 of 1790 makes the position of the country clear by political law: the head of state of the country was identical with the sovereign of the Habsburg Empire, that is, there was personal union between the two states. Studying the actual decision making mechanisms, however, one finds that the decision makers practically always subordinated the Hungarian causes to the interests of the empire. For the senior officials of the empire the Hungarian Kingdom was one of the crown lands, which was, however, harder to handle because its diet of estates (*Stände*), *Prelati et Barones*, and the nobility of the counties had the right to vote for taxes and recruitment. In the western part of the empire, it was the extension of the licenses of the degenerate and ineffective provincial diets (*Landtag*) that became the starting point of constitutionality.<sup>7</sup> The western half of the

<sup>7</sup> Most notable plans to transform the political structure of the Hereditary Lands: Andrian-Werburg (1843, 1843–1847). Earlier plans and interpretations of the situation: Redlich (1920–1926), 1/bk. 1: 59–88, esp. 77, 1/bk. 2:20–22), Kann (1964), 1:65–68, 2:97–100, (1980), 290–299, 367–405, Jászi (1982), 79–80, 101–158, 336–357, 551–561, and Evans (1991, 2006). On the precedents: Benda (1978), Balázs (1987), and Poór (1988, 2003).

empire was namely governed autocratically, whereas in Hungary the *ancient* constitution precluded absolutism in theory and designated the whole *Constitutio*, the aristocratic privileges, and the ambivalent attitude toward the empire manifested in the *Pragmatica Sanctio* and Act 10:1790. This relationship was interpreted in Vienna and Pozsony differently. Of course, the feudal constitutionality was present amidst the prevailing conditions of absolutism, but there was constant tension between the two, all the more as the aristocratic constitutionality only affected the privileged strata, the decisive majority of the population—the working and tax-paying masses, the *misera plebs contribuens*—being shut out from it.

Since the king of Hungary was not a national king, the typical attitude of conservative parties idealizing the national dynasties had no credit within the given political structure. Hence, loyalty to the dynasty could not be identified with loyalty to the nation; quite contrarily, the pro-court or aulic tradition meant commitment to the empire and its implied non-national character. Nor was it self-evident to identify the cause of the majority religion—Roman Catholicism—with the cause of the nation and the cause of the dynasty, whereas in England—where the Anglican religion and the dynasty of Orange-Hannover could be matched—one could defend the cause of the nation by defending the religion. It was notably the Habsburg-led Counter-Reformation that ensured the emergence of the Catholic faith as a state religion through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with quite some political force. The hostility of the Hungarian estates towards the Habsburgs was traditionally linked up with Protestantism.

It was hard to be a devout advocate of the national past, the traditions, and constitutionality—beyond sheer verbalism—because it also meant the claim to an independent or at least self-ruled Hungary. An independent Hungary, in turn, could not be conserved but had to be created as *de facto* there was no independent statehood. Faced with the explosive phenomena of capitalization (seen primarily in the perishing of small existences, or pauperization), the “social protective,” paternalistic disposition had two outlets: the feudalist protection of peasantry (rejecting bourgeois modernization) or the representation of collective and individual self-determination pointing beyond the liberal position. In this way the paternalist elements of the conservative critique of modernization only became predominant within Hungarian conservatism in the last third of the nineteenth century. Although the protection of constitutionality and society were recurrent formulae of the system of roles and values of Hungarian conservatives, their weight, credibility, and persuasive force are highly questionable.