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From Estates to Classes

ABSTRACT

This overview of the epochal transformation of Hungarian society from one of estates to one of classes has been translated from the author's contribution to the probably best synthesis of the country's history produced in interwar Hungary.¹ Even if—fifty years after its writing—several details (especially statistics) would need up-dating, it is such a fine summary of the author's views on social history that it deserves a "renaissance," the more so as the founders of this journal chose Hajnal as their model for "doing history." Concerning the history of the nobility, Hajnal underlines the difference between "western" development, in which the élites (such as the French nobility) acquired expertise to augment and replace their traditional privilege, and the Hungarian story, in which the growth of "professionalism" was badly retarded. The author investigates in detail the fate of landownership: its transformation from "feudal" to modern property, and points out that the over-all reforms—from Maria Theresa's to the revolutionary changes in 1848—did not solve all the problems, neither for the landowning nobles nor for the tenant (jobbágy) peasants. It took decades of Habsburg administration to sort out many, though not all, of residual issues.

Social classes based on the free play of forces and abilities instead of feudal (corporate, *ständisch*) restrictions—this great emancipating enterprise of the nineteenth century brought about the modern world with its marvelous achievements, never before seen in human development. However, the mere release of force may still leave society on a primitive level. True class society may not develop even when stratification is engendered, not by crude force, but by legally regulated competition of economic and political interests. This was the case, for example, in the democracies of Antiquity.

While the origin of modern class society is emancipation, its creative power lies in competent, expert work. Professionalism develops only from the social character of labor, not from unbridled ambition for practical ends. The bases of professionalism were laid in manifold social gradations during medieval and feudal times; these were then mightily unfolded for magnificent purposes during the nineteenth century. The class society of every culture is, therefore, defined by its own feudal prehistory. The project of society is continuous, even if it suffers great transformations. While mankind believes itself to be free in thought and choice, in fact, its historical past is at work.

Hence, to understand the transformation of Hungarian society to modernity we have to start out with its feudal-corporatist stage. Until the end of the *ancien régime*, Hungarian society was unequivocally commanded by the nobility. While the prestige of the French nobility was incomparably higher than that of Hungary, they played, even before the revolution, a far less dominant role in public service (except for the military) or in private economy. For French society was from the outset more complicated; thus the nobility's leadership demanded more care, and professional tasks were gradually released to experts. In Hungarian society, will-power seems to have been sufficient for leadership, and even when nobles turned to professional assistance, the experts remained under their command. In France, stable historical-social traditions in all walks of life were coupled with professionalism; in Hungary, unclear social organization was oriented to accidental needs and, hence, conservative leadership. This also accounts for the mass character of the Hungarian nobility: whoever once managed to rise above the commoners, stubbornly clung to noble privilege, together with his kith and kin. Pre-revolutionary France had 26,000 noble families, comprising some 140,000 members in a population of 25 million; Hungary, with its seven million inhabitants, had 65,000 noble families, i.e., 320,000 souls. In France every 180th person was a noble—in Hungary every twentieth. Only Poland had proportionately more nobles: 1,400,000 out of 14 million. In 1839, Hungary had 136,000 noble households, with some 680,000 members out of a total 12 million inhabitants; thus, the nobility grew faster than the population at large. In Poland, the noble status of all those who rose in civil and military service, or who acquired respectable wealth, was customarily accepted. In Hungary, on the other hand, families might live like nobles for generations without passing through the formal procedure necessary for admission into the nobility. True, in southern Hungary commoners—even craftsmen, tavernkeepers, or stewards—were ennobled en masse when they purchased a plot of auctioned-off treasury property, for only nobles were entitled to full ownership of real estate. While western—particularly French—nobles lost their privilege if they pursued gainful occupation, Hungarian nobles included not only professionals, but craftsmen, teamsters, and even footmen as well. There were actually cases when a nobleman was a hired hand at a peasant's tenant farm. About half of the nobility lived the life of peasants, tilling their small plots; some held servile land and owed servile dues to their landlords. Westerners were bemused by the sight of these "sandalled" nobles, when

they appeared at the last feudal levy in 1809, in peasant garb, riding bareback on their horses.

It seems as if leadership in Hungarian society was never based on expert skills, but pertained as a privilege to those who somehow achieved higher positions in society. West of Hungary, nobles were taxed from the seventeenth century onwards, although differently from peasants. While nobles were taxed in medieval Hungary, in the eighteenth century noble exemption from all taxes became a cardinal tenet. Nobles were exempt from local or seignorial jurisdiction, and even the county court had only limited rights over them. They enjoyed typical privileges of medieval nobilities as lords and guardians of servile populations: for example, no troops could be billeted on their premises, they served only in the noble levy. Hungarian nobles protested against being included in the census around 1800 and have a number placed on their houses. When elsewhere democratic reforms began to transform representative governments, in Hungary the poorer nobility acquired a greater political role, supported by the court, against the oppositional *moyenne* nobility. Up to that time the county assemblies were led by traditionally accepted families, and the votes were "weighed," not counted, just as in England. In 1819 the government ordered the counting of votes and coerced, by hook and crook, money and wine, the poorer nobility to appear at meetings to vote down their enlightened propertied fellows. Alliances, called *kolompária* (company), originally organized to fight tax exemption, were available to the highest bidder on an issue. It was as if the Polish experience of earlier centuries were resurrected in this forced recruitment of noble masses in public life.

However, in this form, the political role of the poorer nobility was only a passing episode. Hungarian nobles differed from their Polish fellows. The *szlactic* never engaged in trades or profession "below his dignity," but lived off his magnate patron and his serfs, reaping the fruits of privilege. The Hungarian "one-plot noble" lived from the labor of his hands, and his privileges had little practical importance; they merely gave him a certain freedom to shape his life. Yet, although the nobles' democracies meant that society was guided by superficial conventions rather than by the traditional circumspect leadership, it also meant that élites did not gain their position by crude, ruthless force. There was no noble *rzeczpospolita* in Russia or Romania. Although Russian nobles were merely a seventieth part of the population, they had no western character, nor did Rumanian boyars. They were ruthless exploiters of these beneath them, servants of the state power above them. Russian and Romania peasants reached the nadir of their fate precisely around 1800, due to economic development, as noble lords began driving their serfs to manufacturing activities away from home and family. To a minor extent Polish lords did the same, making their country manors mandatory markets and their urban houses workshops for servile forced labor.

The economic "inertia" of the Hungarian nobility on the marketplace can thus be seen as a "western" trait. The great landowning magnates lost their position precisely when capitalistic production should have enhanced it. With the exception of a few founders of

mines, foundries or factories, there were no Prussian-English entrepreneurs among them. The latifundia remained rather traditional, "soft" agrarian estates, and even the most agile bailiff was unable to transform servile dues into anything resembling a capitalist enterprise. The social significance of the aristocratic courts ended with the eighteenth century. Although people kept a watchful eye of the magnates' world, the propertied lesser nobility tended to push them out of the county offices.

In early nineteenth-century Hungary about 30,000 noble families enjoyed an annual income above 500 florins and only some 3000 families above 3000 florins, while a Viennese court councillor received 3000 and a college professor 300-400 florins in salary. The better off lesser nobility (*bene possessionati*) constituted an almost formally recognized group within society, especially in regard to eligibility for office. It was traditional that certain families supplied the vice-counts, others the magistrates, again others the jurors or the salaried officials (notary, surgeon, surveyor, etc.). These assignments were not based on property alone, but rather on specific selection processes with the local community, where family tradition was considered a kind of expert training for the given office. The county community was, therefore, not a mere association of noble self-interest under the leadership of the powerful. To the contrary, family prestige gave the officials sufficient standing to defend the county's and its peoples' interests, even against a rich magnate. Special forms of courtesy developed in county documents; specific official rituals reigned at the county court as expressions of unwritten duties, and as regulators of unbridled emotions.

The official and social duties of the *moyenne* nobility demanded the schooling of their sons, at least on the secondary level. After 1800 few men were elected to office without a degree in law, even though this was not formally required. Thus, education had a social and traditional basis in Hungary—unlike Russia where, as late as the eighteenth century, noble boys had to be drafted by force to learn the alphabet. A leading figure among Hungarian nobles was the "justice of the bench" (*táblabíró*, *Tafelrichter*), who, having acquired some legal training and rid himself of the dust of his farm, offered expert counsel in the county's court, in administration or in arbitration procedures. Usually experienced men or former magistrates were given (after 1839, elected to) this post. Complaints usually list their conservatism, not their corruption or incompetence.

Thus there was a certain intellectualization in Hungary—and this was the greatest achievement of the eighteenth century. The new intellectualism did not break through the crevices of traditional society like a wild growth, nor seep in like poisoned gas, nor take the form of corrupt bureaucratism as in Russia. On the contrary, the old prestigious leadership gradually became professional, with the increasing role of the *moyenne* nobility reflecting this process.

Western officialdom (in France, for example) emerged in response to the varied needs of society; it came about not by decree but through historical development within feudal society. Magistracy came to belong to a traditional group of families, honored by certain

noble privileges (*noblesse de robe*). They became the arbiters of matters ranging from the administration of justice through economic questions to cultural issues. All other, more mobile and modern types of civil service and the various professions developed out of this strata of magistrates. Even the free professions developed in the framework of traditional feudal apprenticeship; the schools served mainly for the refinement of the mind. Professionalism had thus, even without riches, a strong social position with recognized privileges and honorable distinctions. Then, by the mid-eighteenth century, professional training left the feudal womb: colleges were founded for it. However, one must bear in mind that the curricula, as well as the social rank and obligation of the professions, were consequences of earlier development.

A 'Justice of Bench' (*Táblabíró*)



As we have seen, Hungary, too, possessed certain social bases for professionalism. However, the wide lower strata of society were relatively formless and generated few structured professional bodies. While many peasant and burgher boys went to school, for a long time only the priesthood (or the clerical-teaching professions) could secure them positions comparable to the nobility. The barely structured social system of Hungary does not seem to have demanded minute professional expertise, but rather legal and rhetorical faculties: debating, persuading, judging and decision-making. Even the chief chancellor of the counties (*főjegyző*) remained long a salaried position, not coveted by the better families, for its main task was to implement expert measures, rather than to enforce political decisions. The spread of legal training reflecting the growing domination of the nobility. Only the legal profession had some kind of feudal precedent through inscription at the bar.

A Hungarian Noble at the End of the Nineteenth Century



Non-noble barristers, engineers, doctors or professors became *honoratiores* by virtue of their diplomas and university training, without any historical basis. There were many complaints against advocates delaying suits and agitating the commoners. And the honoratiores often lamented that neither the nobles nor the commoners accepted them as their fellows.

This, the conflict between the new professionalism and traditional nobility was neither radical nor rebellious, since every noble who wanted to be somebody regarded himself as an intellectual anyway. The best part of eighteenth-century *moyenne* nobility was definitely reform-minded; their parliamentary projects were quite impressive and—only the European reactionary wave stopped their conscientious efforts for social reform. Below the surface, however, just as elsewhere in Europe, deep and rapid transformations were underway.

Letters and numbers were gradually replacing the traditional frame of life. Following the foreign patter, "professional" careers were open to all who held a degree. Thus, young people, nobles and non-nobles alike, rushed to them en masse—so much so that even the enlightened Joseph II contemplated imposing a serious limitation on the higher schooling of commoners. But the most restless segment of society were those lesser nobles who now could achieve a new prestige through education. Bolstered by their ancient nobility as well as their new degrees, they preached liberalism and opposed the conservative magistraten-mentality of their better-off fellows. Avenues leading out of the old feudal-corporate world were quickly opening up: in the 1830s several counties extended the vote to honoratiores and, in 1843, a law granted full rights to civil office to non-nobles—this, however, counted little in county elections.

The "third estate" of early nineteenth-century Hungary consisted of some fivescore royal cities with five to six thousand inhabitants. Furthermore, there were ten times as many market-towns, so that around 1847 urban dwellers amounted to a million and a half, maybe one ninth of the country's total population. Actually, the market-towns were hardly more than huge villages which acquired by contract a limited autonomy from their seigneur.

Burgesses in the strict sense were only a fragment of this urban population. In 1829, Pest had 50,000 inhabitants out of which 22,198 were taxpayers, but there were only 1673 burghers of full urban liberty. Actually, few townspeople cared to acquire burgher status. Fees were high, and the rights thus acquired did not mean much: they were not needed for licenses in trades or commerce and secured no separate court of law for their bearers. Thus, independent urban economic policies did not exist for long.

The right to bear arms may still have given some special standing to the privileged burgesses. Civic shooting associations recalled the burghers' old military duties, and burgher militias were formed during the Napoleonic wars. Also, on certain days a few burgesses still had the monopoly on public wine sale. Otherwise, civic rights meant mainly that the old house- and vineyard-owners were better able to reject newcomers. Although these rights also may have involved claims to urban revenues and municipal offices,

nevertheless, municipal enterprises like taverns, slaughterhouses, and brickstone plants were sold, without qualms, to the highest bidders, even to Jews.

A few generations earlier, major matters were still decided by general meetings of burgesses—but this practice fell into abeyance, and elected burghers or city councils took over urban affairs. Mayors and city captains were still elected annually by the "elected burghers;" councilors and financial officers, on the other hand, held their positions for life. As they were elected by nomination of the council, the urban magistracy functioned in fact by cooption; this was true of the few dozen "elected burghers" as well. Lesser officials were simply appointed by the city council, as were urban deputies to the diet. These deputies usually retained their position for several sessions—as long as they could tolerate the frustrating task. Since all the privileged cities of the kingdom together had only two votes in the lower chamber, most urban deputies attended only as silent onlookers. Thus, while many an urban magistracy presented itself with great circumstance and treated the common townsfolk with disdain, there were no precise ways to define the upper strata of urbanites, the burghers, or the council: they seem to have been a group of successful social climbers who managed to stick to their places by inertia—even though the government kept putting its supervisors on their necks and the country nobility refused to mingle with these "uncouth townsfolk." In fact, country gentlemen retained their disdain for the pettiness of urban administration almost up to the present day.

Professionalism, primarily legal expertise, entered city councils as well. The Pest council of 1822 consisted with one exception of lawyers and former urban administrators (however, in Szeged the majority of councilors remained craftsmen or farmers well in the 1830s). Lesser nobles also joined urban councils, and in some places the traditional ratio again developed between noble and burgher members. In turn, burgher councilors were often ennobled, usually for political services.

In Hungary as elsewhere, new developments in urban life began outside of the old burgher strata. Even craftsmen left the old social framework: in 1829 Pest possessed 2886 master craftsmen and merely 1673 burgesses; in Debrecen there were 1875 masters and 1228 fully privileged burghers. In the eighteenth century every craft hurried to establish its guild, in order to limit the number of independent masters and set prices for their wares. In vain, for these restrictions had already lost their meaning when the guild ceased to be a school of fine crafts and the master an expert craftsman. The counties responded with limitations on price-hikes, and ever more craftsmen worked outside the guilds. Not only was it difficult to get into the old guilds, but many a master saw no reason to pay the high membership fees. The government (after temporarily suspending the guilds under Joseph II) used the institution merely for administrative purposes. After 1813, anyone was permitted to acquire masters' standing and even licensing was entrusted to non-guild craftsmen. Jews were granted the right to form guilds as early as 1805. Nevertheless, Jewish handicrafts developed slowly; in 1839 only 50 of Pest's 7000 Jews were craftsmen.

The eighteenth century saw the sudden expansion of cities all over Europe, as small regulated islands of trades and professions grew into great organizational centers. In the West, successful entrepreneurship was not merely a question of capital, but was built upon long developed, historically rooted organizations of work. The craftsmen's traditional mastery developed to the level of professional knowledge, thus providing a basis for expert enterprise with mass employment. In Hungary, cities grew up as well, but with the overwhelming role of capital and mass labor. Production was heavily dependent on entrepreneurial capital, particularly for raw materials and major contracts (e.g., construction, military supplies). Handicrafts, even if organized in guilds, represented not so much the integration of various skills, but rather a labor pool for average-quality domestic production. In 1838, Hungary possessed some 250,000 craftsmen inside and outside the guilds; in 1847 there were 334,000—that is, one craftsman for every 45 (or, later, every 35) people. For quite a while, Hungarians were employed in factories mainly as laborers, while skilled workers came from abroad. In 1838 453 so-called factories were listed, including papermills, glassworks and foundries; in 1847 their number grew to 528 with altogether 23,400 "regular factory men."

The Hungarian route to rapid commercial development suggests something of a detour around professionalism. Commerce was partly wholesale, partly pedlarism with very few stable, expertly specialized shops. Entire populations—Jews, Greeks, Armenians—were peddlers. In western Europe wholesale trade, like retail trade, grew out of guild commerce by organizing the expert, refined distribution of specific commodities on a large scale. In Hungary, however, no enterprise, no license was needed for wholesale activity. Nevertheless, there were some ineffective attempts at regulation as late as 1812, in response to the great fortunes that were being amassed by foreigners. Joseph II (1780-1790) wanted to "restrict" Jewish commercial activity to pedlarism and wholesale activity; the Pest merchants demanded the same. Thus, in 1822, out of 65 Pest wholesalers, 42 were Jews. Jewish peddlers eventually gained access to weekly fairs, which previously had been restricted to specially licensed burghers and farmers. In 1828 a special committee was formed in defense of "genuine," that is, professional commerce with 114 members—out of 741 registered merchants. Non-members, however, continued to be active in the "genuine" branches of commerce, and the majority of the committee members did not acquire civil rights. All this points to the weakness of the social roots of the new urbanism. Development was most conspicuous in those fields which did not demand profound and widespread organization of skilled labor.

Yet, we should bear in mind that Hungary compares favorably with its eastern neighbors in this regard. Even though Russian towns also grew by leaps and bounds, the great majority of the many hundred thousand inhabitants of Moscow were forcibly transferred serfs constituting a crude labor force in the service of capital and autocracy. However petty and feudal-corporatist Hungarian towns may have been, their administration and judicial

system—and even their historical inertia—gave them, at the dawn of capitalist transformation, a certain foundation; they had, at least, a potential for professionalism—for a new urbanism.

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For the peasantry, the so-called urbarial reforms of Maria Theresa established the principle that the *jobbágy*-tenants' dues could not be higher than the values of landuse and other facilities offered them by the landowners. In 1781 Joseph legally abolished formal serfdom, that is, the peasants' personal bondage to their lords. This should have implied that the relationship between lord and tenant was more impersonal and contractual than anywhere else in Europe under the ancien régime. Moreover, Hungarian tenants' plots were larger than those of their western European fellows. For example, in Hungary every serf held on the average 2/5 "virgates" comprising 7-16 *hold* (4-9 ha) in arable land alone, while in Germany the average was a quarter virgate (*Hufe*). Fields and meadows of Hungarian villages were also wider and more open than those in the western countries.

However, western European peasantry was characterized, not so much by the contractual relationship between tenant and lord, as by the complex integration of peasant activities within the landowning society. The land may have belonged to the lord, but he could do little with it, for it was thoroughly enmeshed in the life and work of the tenant peasant. Most peasant tenancies were, in fact, historically developed family farms. The stronger the hold of tradition, the more deeply and indelibly elaborated were all facets of peasant existence. The contractual farmer is motivated by profit; the *jobbágy*-tenant conquers the land, forms every sod, makes every blade of grass and every tree his home. He is guided, not by end-rationality, but by socialized, deep expertise informed by his bond to soil and village.

Hungarian peasantry was less of a historically developed entity; rural life was less deeply regulated by ancient tradition, the landscape less thoroughly permeated by expert cultivation. Hence, the tenancy was less resistant to the demands of lordship. In the early eighteenth century, when the state began to insist, for taxation purposes, on the survival of tenant plots, the lords, in turn, took advantage of the unclear, "soft" boundaries of tenant land to aggrandize their own claims.

Maria Theresa's reforms defined the size of tenant holdings, according to the quality of the soil. They were still sizable, comprising some forty *hold* (=23 ha) including the use of commons, with additional rights to pannage and herbage. Half-, quarter-, and even eighth-virgate holdings were still viable farms, with commons' rights calculated for family size and farming needs. Peasants with less than 1/8th of a traditional plot counted not as tenants but as *inquilini* (landless peasants) who had to work as hired hands to make a living. There were also true cottars, with no land or house, "living on another's fare." They, too, had a defined place in rural society, with customary claim to employment, limited rights to common pasture, and traditional roles in carting and crafts. Tenants and cottars together constituted the traditional, "urbarial" peasantry.

A Hungarian Peasant



The queen's reforms seem to have ignored a great number of unwritten, customary remnants of centuries-old rural life. One of these, the problem of "residual land" and assarts, the dues for which were not clearly defined, remained moot for many decades. However, there were innumerable other organically grown ties between landowners and those various kinds of peasants who lived in remote hamlets, or who worked land in customary tenancies of diverse types—as sharecroppers, subtenants, laborers or farmhands. These people, marginal to the traditional network of rural society, had been unable to root themselves, their lives and work, in their native environment—and their land fell back into the hands of the landowners. Of course, not all customary relationships vanished: there were still traditional, familial bonds between estate and farmhands. These sometimes developed into a recognized status, like that of traditional *jobbágy*-tenants. Such ties often made it possible for peasants to retain their plots even outside the reform's framework.

On the other hand, the reform did not guarantee the holdings of long-standing tenants, either. Under the guise of "regulation," landowners were allowed to rearrange peasant plots and exchange them for domain land of "equal value." Many an adroit steward took advantage of this, arguing for greater efficiency. Peasant land decreased steadily during the nineteenth century: in 1828 the average tenant holding was only one-third virgate; land in peasant hands totalled some five million hold (=2.875 million ha), while that of the nobles amounted to almost ten million (=5.75 million ha). Around 1800 less than half of the peasantry (i.e. 45%) were land-holding tenants of some kind; some 20% were landless and close to 6% "houseless" cottars. The most characteristic feature of the age was the increasing number of rural laborers and servile farmhands. Of the 1,257,000 rural families in the country, almost half a million were workers on the great estates—their majority living in stable-like primitive huts, working monotonous tasks on far-away lands, and at best dreaming of what seemed to them the colorful society of the villages (if they ever got to visit one).

The level of servile dues was also maximized by Maria Theresa's reforms. Western European peasantries owed as much customary boon-work as the seignorial maintenance of their lord's court demanded, and by early modern times this was usually redeemed for money. If any labor dues remained they did not exceed the typical medieval twelve days a year. The farther east we go, the more strongly does interest override tradition, and the more *robot* work is demanded. In Hungary, the urbarial rules prescribed fifty-two days per annum. This meant that a tenant holding a full plot owed a day's labor weekly, with horse and man; half- and quarter-virgaters owed less, but even the landless cottars gave twelve days of personal service per year. Additionally, there were many minor burdens, including carting and supplying post-horses. These demands actually increased around 1800. Requirements for *robot* work were lower as late as the seventeenth century, but, as they put it in the early nineteenth, "agriculture developed much since..."—thus justifying the demands for more work from the peasantry.

While Maria Theresa had curtailed some of the worst abuses suffered by the peasantry, her reforms, on the other hand, made coerced labor part of a business deal, thus transforming the peasantry's customary service into calculable labor. Subsequently, Joseph II allowed free transfer for the *jobbágy*-tenant—but who would leave an ancient family plot for insecure "freedom?" True, the lords had lost their right to interfere in their tenants' marriages and to determine the futures of their children, nor—in principle—could they arbitrarily order them around for personal service. In reality, however, work cannot be defined so precisely, and thus the borderline between admissible labor and personal service remained blurred. While day-laborers and farmhands were theoretically hired on a free market, without *robot* duties, in fact their dependence on the landowners was virtually unlimited. Thus we can see that real rural poverty originated, not in feudal tradition, but in business-oriented rationality.

The old feudal seigniorial rights and jurisdictions were easily transformed into tools for the landowners' interest against the unstructured, "soft" peasantry. The socially complex but disorganized villages lacked the solidarity to stand united against the lords in matters involving equitable procedure. Nevertheless, Hungarian nobles—though they did not shy back from corporal punishment—still felt restrained by social tradition. In this they contrast with the Prussian junkers, who ruthlessly transformed their *leibeigen* servile tenants into capitalistically exploited laborers and even sold them like slaves (as Polish and Russian lords did as well). Actually, this conservatism on the part of Hungarian landowners, combined with their entrepreneurial inertia, contributed to the sluggishness of the capitalist transformation of the landed estates and their inefficient use of coerced labor. Corporal punishment actually was reintroduced in order to alleviate the monetary burdens of the peasantry. Many a noble sincerely believed that abolition of urbarial ties would return peasants to the uncivilized past and even bring about the loss of their land. Even enlightened noble writers, like Ferenc Kazinczy and Dániel Berzsenyi, leading literati of the early nineteenth century, argued against the notion of "oppression of the peasantry."

In feudal-*ständisch* society, it is not lands and liberty that defines the role of peasants. Western peasants differed from each other not merely in the number of haystacks in their courtyards or of bacons in their pantries: even in the same village, tenants of several historically developed types lived side-by-side, with innumerable traditional names, positions and activities. Each of them had a place and task in the historically grown rural society. Village life was not merely a monotonous struggle for the harvest, but a mosaic of elaborate activities and skills. Even the smallholder's farm was well-equipped, and his life approached civil existence with many professional ties connecting his work to that of others. The peasantry was organically connected to other strata of society and not stuck in its own limited world. Thus, Western observers were appalled by the monotony of Hungarian peasant life—and not only that of the poorest laborers, whose living conditions resembled those in Russia and Romania. While Hungarian peasants were not barred legally from upward social mobility (and many achieved higher positions through clerical and teaching

careers), there was no natural selection for practical trades—crafts and peasantry remained worlds apart.

In the reform movements for rural emancipation during this period we can observe not only principles and great words, but also careful attempts to retain traditional institutions within a new social framework. Between 1790 and the 1830s extensive discussions about rural emancipation took place in parliamentary committees, but only a few minor laws were passed concerning the legal status, the free movement, and the dues of serfs. Basic reforms were still wanting; as in most of post-Napoleonic Europe (until 1848) the practice was to register dues and record cadasters without liquidation serfdom. Thus, Hungary was not conspicuously backward in this respect. From ca. 1830 onwards, it became clear that the existing system had no future, and the diet of 1832-36 took important, though not fundamental, steps towards changing it. During those years the feudal parliament clarified notions of seignorial dependence, re-evaluated peasant plots according to living conditions in the given area, and issued equitable guidelines to regulate such opaque matters as the use of commons and forests. It was actually the post-1849 Bach government that applied these principles for the eventual emancipation and, in spite of their deep distaste for the last feudal diet, accepted the social spirit of these arrangements and their capacity to provide regulation satisfactory to all parties involved. The decades of practical implementation rescued Hungary from severe clashes during the actual liquidation of serfdom. As early as 1836 serfs obtained the right to sell house and land (ancestral plot together with later acquisitions), and to leave their lord if they wanted. Parenthetically, a new, specific type of property relations could have developed along these lines, granting the peasants rights to land, but retaining some kind of veto for the former landlord, based on a prospective buyer's skills and suitability for cultivating the plot in question. However, this possibility was not realized. The same law forbade the amassing of several servile plots and the purchase of peasant land by landowners or communities. "Eternal" redemption of servile dues was also permitted, although serfs were not yet completely emancipated from seignorial ties. Patrimonial jurisdiction was also adjusted to the usual pattern of western feudalism, replacing the lord by county judges and magistrates on the local bench. Although in minor matters the landowners retained juridical and disciplinary powers, their procedures were regulated. Serfs were also granted the right to litigate with a nobleman; earlier this had been the privilege of their lord, who might easily refuse to quarrel with a neighbor or relative "for a lowly peasant's sake." The diet of 1839-40 then proceeded to allow the complete "eternal redemption" of service bonds—but only by mutual agreement, which meant little in practice. In 1843-44 legislation was passed providing for the eligibility of non-nobles to own land and hold public office. Nevertheless, in spite of these reforms, the majority of the population still lived in servitude of one kind or another.

In 1848 seignorial (feudal) dues were generally abolished, and the efficient bureaucracy of the post-revolutionary decade completed this great transition. Subsequently, the land held by peasants was unequivocally theirs, together with lands held in tenure arrangements

similar to the usual "urbarial" ones. All in all, feudal customary rights carried the day against rational property relations just as Stephen Werbőczy, author of the great collection of customary law in 1514, advocated it for the nobility in the sixteenth century. Residual lands, assarts, meadows and the like were divided according to "age-long usage," based on the "usual" degree of peasant labor in these kinds of possessions. The division of commons followed the 1836 principles, but included only "traditional" peasants, tenants and customary cottars. The fate of various types of dependent peasants, share-croppers, and laborers was decided also by customary rights: families could retain, with the usual dues, plots held in their possession since the reforms of Maria Theresa (or for a similarly long period of time); other seignorial lands were merely regarded as rented, and could be recalled by the lord any time. In fact, most of these eventually fell into peasant hands, and finally in 1896 the law granted them property rights to land acquired earlier than 1848. However, for all these residual lands and various other types of property, the peasants had to pay redemption to the landlord amounting, not to the full value of the land, but to twenty-times the annual servile dues. The state paid for redemption of customary plots out of extraordinary taxes, theoretically calculating payments on the same basis, that is, twenty times the annual revenue. However, estimates of the services value were rather low; hence, the payment for a plot, according to the quality of the land, was generally 300-700 florins, hardly more than two-three year's income. Cottars were redeemed for 50 florins—and for the houseless cottars, who had worked for them 12 days a year, the lords received nothing.

True, decisive bureaucratism was necessary in order to liquidate feudal conditions in all their ramifications. The state always took legal precedents into consideration—inquiring, for example, whether a lord's right to keep a tavern, run a mill, claim fishing privileges, and so on, was based on feudal law, royal grant, or acquisition of some other sort. For, if these rights had been purchased, the owner could retain them and his tenants had no recourse. Finally, it became clear that at issue were not merely rights but organic historical-social complexes. The aim was to replace these by quantifiable, calculable conditions which, it was hoped, would be to the advantage of both sides.

The granting hand was generous, yet still the peasantry did not emerge as a winner: only 550,000 former customary tenants became freeholders, and four-fifths of these obtained less than half a virgate. Later some seignorial land came to those who were able purchase and redeem it for money. Houseless cottars received nothing, nor did laborers and field hands. Some 70% of all arable land proved to be seignorial (including state and church estates) and, even if the poor nobles' virtually peasant property is counted in this percentage, the latifundia were enormous—overwhelming—and were now unencumbered "cold" property, entailing no social responsibility.

And the peasants, avoiding the "philanthropic" bureaucrats of the Bach-régime, went to their old masters with their problems. The written and printed instructions of the central government were discarded by the ton in the attics of city halls. When, in the 1860s, the system fell, the new road- and field-signs were immediately torn down. The impersonal

bureaucratic world seemed to be over. For the rest of the century Hungarian politics was dominated by the old better-off class of the nobility. More than half the deputies in the first governing party of Kálmán Tisza (Prime Minister from 1875 to 1890) were former county magistrates, and few non-nobles sat in the Lower House before 1900. Although the first commoner, Sándor Wekerle, became minister in 1889, non-nobles were unusual in Hungarian government before the 1910s.

The county remained its old self. At the turn of the century the countryside was dominated by the landed gentry, a somewhat wider circle than the old noble corporation. Some 4000 landowners held estates of one-to-ten thousand hold (ca. 600-6000 ha). They were followed by the "quarter-magnates," who owned much less but aped the gentry's lifestyle, as did many professionals in the countryside as well. But Hungary produced no stubborn capitalist agrarian entrepreneurs, no equivalent of the English country gentleman or the Prussian Junker. Although agriculture had very good chances after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 (especially with the abolition of custom barriers to Austria, and the agrarians' control of politics), nevertheless the landowners fell into debt—in spite of the fact that their "gentry-world" was truly liberal, prepared to embrace ruthless capitalism and unable to avoid the epidemics and scandals of speculation so typical of the 1870s.

The fault was not in the persons. There was quite a lot of goodwill, experimentation, care and concern. The fault was in the social system itself and the insecure leadership it produced. "Work and intelligence" was the motto, calling for reorganization along the lines of professionalism instead of the disintegrated old order. But professionalism was imagined in a peculiar way—as though it were an open sesame, with high technology waiting to be put on like an overcoat. Landowners mused over lack of capital, wage demands, overprotection, customs policies, and other abstractly formulated problems—but failed to look at the real situation, at their own agricultural society, to contemplate what they could actually do without capital and other powers beyond. Now, it is true that the villagers and field hands did not present much promise for any such agricultural development. They lacked refined skills—for such skills are quickly blunted within the nature-bound life of agriculture. Thus, the gentry despaired and left it to the horsetraders and Jewish grain merchants to organize the market.

In other walks of life, professionalism was equally remote from the soil. Teachers, doctors and engineers disdained to apply their expertise to immediate, local problems, and found it demeaning to live in the country. Their self esteem, in fact, was based not on expertise, but on "qualifications." Their rootlessness thus moved them to seek jobs in civil-service. Ironically, these professionals—by definition liberal-rational in orientation—found their identity in an irrationally defined community: that of "gentlemen." The various professions, moreover, kept to themselves. After graduation the "experts" lost interest in their former teachers and schools. Local civil service was like a moated castle, financial administration a topic *non comme il faut*. The busy activity of the doctor, surveyor or engineer was interesting essentially because they made good money. The crude snobbishness of these

specializations also tore apart the familiarity of small-town life. The better society of university graduates kept strictly apart from the high school absolvents, trained notaries or even less schooled persons beneath them. The more a profession dealt with the common folk, the lower was its value in society.

Navvies at Work



Specialization is, of course, a fact of modern life and has many aspects in western societies. In the West, however, not even the most esoteric specialist keeps apart from his fellow university graduate as did these Hungarian professionals. Although, in the West, too, natural, organic relations between persons are tragically replaced for vocations, the past is nevertheless still at work—no activity becomes profession without the careful study of a multitude of interrelated social problems. Some of the esoteric specializations may seem ridiculously petty in comparison to Hungarian vocations—and yet, there is more life in them. That is why in the West the theoretical and applied, civil and private, aspects of professional life are much more closely connected.

In the West, when the behemoths of economic enterprise absorb the craftsmen's workshops, they have to at least match, with more efficient means, the fine varieties of the old handicrafts and stable social roles of the small businesses. While ever greater numbers of people are forced into wage labor, capital must ever engage new strata of skilled men and women in order to expand its empire. In Hungary, on the other hand, capital is much farther removed from economic life; it floats around like a cloud, descending here and there where quick profit is to be gained by crude calculation. For the crafts have no reliable, upward mobile organizations, and the peasants are unaccustomed to quality work. For example, French manufacturers still utilize spinning and weaving cottage industries, while in Hungary these forms of production vanished by 1860, as soon as the first factories appeared.

Factories were founded with great speed: 114 between 1860-1865; 280 between 1865-1870, and 287 between 1870 and 1875. Although hundreds of enterprises folded after 1870 in the wake of the European crisis, nevertheless, in 1888 Hungarian factories with over twenty employees numbered close to one thousand. The number of factory workers, including women and children, rose from 90,000 in 1888, to 243,000 in 1900, and to 450,000 in 1909. Hungary's industrially active population (including the crafts) was 2.6 million in 1890 and 3.5 million ten years later; and this increase was almost entirely in wage labor. A relatively high number of Hungarian factories were built in minority regions, where the peasantry was even more uprooted than in Magyar counties. In contrast, between 1890 and 1900, 40.3% of the workers in the old French industry, supplying world markets, were still employed in small workshops of less than four persons.

Thus, here in Hungary the working class was not a true social organism, but simply a labor pool. For a long time skilled workers came from abroad; workers' journals appeared in German. Working-class movements focussed on masses, not on quality, while in western Europe they were based on trade unions, replacing the old guild solidarities. In France, the trade unions never fully merged with the socialist political movement, and in England the unions produced the Labor Party, without a strict political ideology. In Germany, however, unions were eventually dominated by Social Democracy. Hungarian workers' associations began, in the 1870s, as guild-like (and slightly anti-Semitic), economic and cultural self-help organizations. Soon, however, they were heavily involved in the suffrage movement, and eventually were dominated by the ideology of class struggle. After the German

anti-Socialist laws were repealed, the party began to organize in Hungary. Its membership grew to 130,000 between 1890 and 1909, with a leadership to a great extent Jewish. At first Hungarian society paid little attention, and became aware of the movement's world-historical importance only when the Social Democrats became the largest party in the German Reichstag. Although outside of parliament, Hungarian Social Democrats were active and vocal: in 1905 there were 620 meetings in Budapest alone; in 1906 588 strikes took place. Restrictive legislation, following foreign examples, did not reduce the level of conflict. Never, under the old régime, had Hungary experienced such tension between social strata.

Due to the lopsided, rootless character of Hungarian professionalism, entire social classes were restricted to activities stifling any human talent—and this is more important in the lives of the workers than their poverty. This self-interested professionalism drew the Jews, previously a foreign element in society, to leadership. When the Hungarian intelligentsia began to move toward practical economic occupations, it was essentially the higher income that attracted them, not vocation or the development of expertise.

Agrarian society cannot be understood by merely adding up statistics. We know, for example, that in 1870 only one third of the land belonged to peasant economies (that is, to farms of less than 30 *hold*, or 17.25 ha), while 38% pertained to latifundia of over one thousand *hold* (=575 ha). Of these latifundia, 231 estates comprised more than ten thousand *hold*, a figure far above the average European agrarian enterprise. However, these depressing statistics are mitigated somewhat by the fact that many large estates were state or church properties and forests. In comparison, one quarter of the land in the German Empire was owned by latifundia of over 500 ha (in Prussia, of course, the figures were much higher), and in England, 5400 great landowners controlled over half the arable land. While we may be horrified by Hungarian statistics (that is, by the fact that, out of 2.4 million estates, 1.3 million were minute plots below 5 *hold*, or 3 ha), we tend to forget that in France—the country of healthy peasant farming—2 of the 5 million estates were, in 1905, smaller than one hectare, comprising merely 2.2% of arable land. Such figures make sense only when examined within the overall context of society. English large estates destroyed the peasantry, but only step by step, while the rural folk became part of the world-conquering manufacturing industry. In France, the sizable properties cannot be counted as real latifundia, for most of their territory is rented out, and the smallholders as well as the relatively few (some 600,000) landless laborers have plenty of regular employment on neighboring farms. This system of rental and secure employment grew up historically; it reflects, not conservatism, but age-old relations within the agrarian economy. Natural resources are expertly husbanded in all their aspects—and this makes it impossible to evaluate agrarian economy merely in terms of profit. In some cases the rental arrangement is almost feudal; the peasant provides specific produce and minor services, which are reciprocated by aid and counsel from the landowner. Customary rights prohibit the expulsion of a peasant tenant from his farm. Similar conditions prevail in northern Italy, with the traditional rental of small plots on large estates supported by horticultural expertise.

As we have seen, peasant labor farther east in Europe was unable in feudal times to develop agricultural expertise and to exploit the land efficiently. Consequently, once off the family farm, the peasantry failed to change to modern conditions as well. Around 1870, there were in Hungary about 2 million propertied households, 1.65 million "annual laborers," 1.37 hired hands; together these represent at least 10 million people out of the total population of 15.5 million. Hence, only 40% of the agrarian population lived on its own land, 60% on that of others. According to other calculations for the late nineteenth century, farm-hands counted some 1.2 million, and the number of day-laborers grew to something like 4.8 million, but this figure probably counts many smallholders as laborers. A 1908 census of adult males registered 3.2 million in agrarian occupations, amounting to some 11 million persons out of a national total of 18 million. Of these, close to a million were landless, a third of whom lived in his own or his family's house. Another 850,000 owned 2-5 *hold* (=1-3 ha). These two groups may be counted as agrarian proletariat amounting to almost 2 million adult males, i.e., more than 6 million persons. Another 850,000 men fell into the category of peasant farmers with 5-20 *hold* (3-11 ha); these were the successors of former full tenants and customary cottars. The larger property holders (up to the level of magnate) amounted to 200,000 males. These are sad figures in themselves—but more significant is the fact that Hungary's agrarian society lacked organic solidarity; it was not made up of interconnected elements, securing work and demanding skill from one another. After emancipation, the peasantry began to encroach upon the latifundia. Some of the wealthier peasants worked fanatically to acquire additional land, toiling and eating with their field-hands. Some of them managed—almost incredibly—to acquire 100 *hold* or more, and it was even said that some farmers became highwaymen at night to obtain money to purchase more land. Nevertheless, even these occasional successes lasted no more than a generation. The economies were not well enough organized to keep their employees; no mixed husbandry, exploiting a variety of natural resources, developed in place of extensive grain monoculture. Thus the peasant farms did not develop into enterprises that could compete with the great landowners, nor did they change into rental farms or make skilled agrarian workers out of poor day laborers. It was not will or work, but historical roots that were lacking. The successful latifundia were based on the cheap labor of *cseléd*-families, settled farmhands who were easily satisfied once their families' survival was more or less secure. For seasonal work, day-laborers (*sommás*) were brought from distant regions. Meanwhile, in the huge villages of the Hungarian Plain, laborers hung around on the squares, waiting for hire, when no additional hands were needed, or when even cheaper labor was imported from Slovak or Rumanian villages. Hatred against the "gentlemen" (in general, all *ownsfolk*, "men in pantallons") grew, and by the 1890s the first agrarian socialist movements arose.

In general, village life was probably duller than in feudal times. Previously, the distribution of fields, discussions about crop rotation, division of commons and their use, reciprocal help in construction and other communal projects regularly challenged the villagers to make

informed, collective decisions. Now, everything was calculated in terms of money. Home industries survived only as folkloric exotica. Although the educational level and standard of living may have risen, what little there was in the way of internal structure, further declined. The true "creative power and spirit of the people" does not lie in some mystical psychology, but in their adjustment to the natural environment in various different ways. Every facet of this adjustment sheds light on the eternal relationship between human existence and nature. The American farmer is no peasant, for his enterprise is monocultural and he secures his needs, food included, in the store. The peasant remains a peasant as long as his workplace is also his home and his labor contains something of the joy of creation.

The question is, of course, whether one can decide by intelligent reasoning which reforms truly serve society. Does one need to consider history for this? Is it not history that gives weight to the imponderable, the minute and the incomprehensible detail in contrast to merely end-oriented rationality? In the final analysis, history may prove that true professionalism lies not in utilitarian calculation but in the social appreciation of human endeavors.

Note

1. *Magyar Művelődéstörténet* [Cultural History of Hungary], ed. S. Domanovszky *et al.* Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, n.d.[1942], vol. 5, p. 165–200. Even though it is a fine summary of Hajnal's concept on social development—in which "expert professionalism" plays a central part, not unconnected to his studies on writing and literacy in the Middle Ages—the synthetising character of the article did not allow the addition of references. To augment the text by these would have amounted to a bibliography of nineteenth-century social history (and several related topics), for which the editors had neither time nor staff.

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29**

**Nobilities in Central and Eastern
Europe:
Kinship, Property and Privilege**

edited by

János M. Bak

**Hajnal István Alapítvány
Budapest**

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LECTORI SALUTEM!

The aim of the editors and publishers of this series of occasional papers is to present recent results of research in social history to the international public. In the spirit of the Hungarian historian of Europe, István Hajnal (1892-1956), we believe that the history of "small nations" may highlight aspects of general development that are less visible in the life of major civilisations.

The volumes in this series will address specific aspects of social development in medieval and modern central Europe. We intend to focus on the region between the German lands and the Byzantine-Russian world, to explore similarities and differences in this area. Instead of arguing the validity of the term, we shall publish studies that may enable our readers to decide to what extent is "central Europe" a historical reality or merely a dream of intellectuals and politicians. That is why we chose a medieval map for our cover: it emphasizes the centuries-old connecting function of the great rivers but contains no ephemeral political boundaries.

It is also our hope to contribute to the understanding of present developments and upheavals in a region about which few critical analyses are available in the English-speaking world. At the same time we should like to foster modern methods and approaches in social history, for so long neglected in our countries.

The present volume appears in close cooperation with the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* Society and contains studies mainly on medieval and early modern nobilities of the region. The papers of two recently deceased Hungarian medievalists as well as articles of a Czech, a Polish and a Bulgarian historian discuss the social history medieval nobilities. Two articles, on Hungarian and Austrian nobles of the ancien régime look at social mobility and estate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The volume closes with an essay by István Hajnal on the end of the noble-corporatist world in nineteenth-century Hungary. With publishing three articles of the generations preceding ours, we wish to bow to those who taught us, without wanting to hide that their questions and answers are not necessarily ours. By printing papers of younger scholars, in turn, we hope to present recent research in the area on topics that are discussed among social historians everywhere.

The volume editor wishes to express his gratitude to those friends and colleagues who assisted in the - often almost uncountable - task of translating and editing the Czech, Magyar and Polish contributions: Catherine Allen, Simon Carne, Tamás Domahidy, Vera Gáthy, Ryszard Grzekik, and Paul Knoll. Needless to say that he alone feels responsible for the remaining shortcomings, which are, probably, many. Maybe, we shall publish once a volume only on the intricacies and pitfalls of translating medieval and medievalist texts.

H & S

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