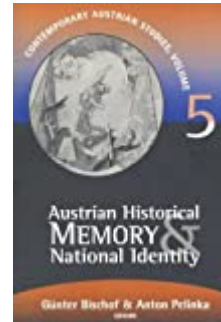


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## National Identity in the Twilight of State Socialism

Until the eighties “nation” and “national identity” were rather exotic and rare topics of research, approached almost exclusively by a small number of experts in the fields of political science and history. This has changed in the meantime. Not only have they gained more prominence in these fields, but they have also attracted increased attention, for example, in sociology. Especially in Europe the publication output seems to have multiplied exponentially since the early nineties.

The reasons for the exploding creativity in this field are obvious: a) In Western Europe the emergence of political structures that at least partly run counter to those of the nation state has accelerated. Many people are concerned about what they could lose and what they could win. b) In the East the Soviet system, which according to its self-understanding was already a political reality beyond the nation, collapsed in 1989. The first response in the respective countries was the re-establishment of traditional nation state structures and the flourishing of nationalistic ideologies. Both developments—not to mention the process of globalization—give reason for analytical as well as empirical reconsideration of the national

phenomenon.

The work of Gyorgy Csepeli is one of the rare examples of this genre from the former communist bloc. And as far as the field of sociology is concerned it is probably the only one as yet. Of course we have already witnessed numerous conferences in the East focusing on this theme, but most of them deal not so much with the *nation* as with ethnic minorities; and if their proceedings were published, then only as edited conference readers that were compromised by sometimes very heterogeneous contributions. Instead of this, in the case of *National Identity in Contemporary Hungary* we have a monograph based on consistent theoretical reflection and solid empirical methodology.

Csepeli has opted for the conventional sociological approach of relating theory and facts, which makes the work comparable to similar projects abroad. Of course, this can also be turned against the author when it comes to evaluating if this research is genuine. Another point of criticism the reader might initially be tempted to raise is the fact that the book is a translation. The Hungarian version was published already in 1992 [1]. Furthermore,

the adjective “contemporary” in the title is not exact, as the two data surveys on which the conclusions are based go back to 1983 and 1989. Considering the fundamental changes Hungarian society has experienced since then, this seems to be ages. It is true that, in an epilogue taking into account data up to 1995, Csepeli tries to show that with respect to “national identity” the changes have not been so severe.

The book is divided into two parts: Part I: Theoretical Assumptions and Part II: Empirical Patterns of National Identification among Hungarian Intellectuals in the Twilight of State Socialism. The latter would actually have been the more appropriate title for the whole book as it is an empirical study of certain aspects of the collective consciousness of intellectuals in the last decade of state socialism in Hungary. Though Part I is definitely significant, it could have been worked into the empirical analysis. Thus the existing cleavage between the two parts would have been avoided. Part I is further divided into three chapters: Nation and History, National Ideology and National Identity. Part II has four chapters: Being Hungarian; Economic, Political and Cultural National Attitudes in the Formation of National Identification; Construction of National History. Chapter IV contains a lengthy conclusion (pp. 217-240) and the Epilogue (pp. 241-267). Attached are Appendix 1 (Prominent Hungarians mentioned in the text), Appendix 2 (Significant historical events), Appendix 3 (Hungary's Boundaries 1914-1945), Notes, Bibliography and Index.

Csepeli defines nation as “a modern form of social organization” (p. 3) and the “appearance of national society as a concomitant of modernization (p. 7).” More elaborately, “The organization of society into nations, the birth of the nationalist ideology... and the national identity of members of society are modern phenomena (p. 35).” As contrasting phenomena he mentions tribes and nationalities. In general he follows those strands of thought that claim modern society isolates the individual. He considers the “nation,” besides “class,” to be one answer to this existential threat. He recognizes three “types of national evolution”: the Nation-State, the Cultural Nation, and the Citizen Nation.

Though this is a common division in Western nation theory, in this book it gets a special flavor through the inclusion of ideas from Hungarian scholars who are particularly concerned with the development in the East. Unlike in Western Europe (Model 1), the emerging bourgeoisie east of the Rhine could not take advantage of consolidated state structures from the feudal age to inte-

grate the segmented traditional societies into Capitalism. “Thus the state could not constitute the starting foundation, it was at best a distant historical memory (p. 14).” Here nation-building “began with the development of the mother tongue (p. 15).” The field of culture was endowed with the mission of nation-building (Model 2). The *Citizen Nation* (Model 3) is reserved by Csepeli for the US. “...the American nation stands as a prime example of a pure civilian [sic!] society (p. 25).”

In the following two chapters Csepeli distinguishes between “National Ideology” and “National Identity.” He defines “national ideology as that historically formed and collectively shared store of information which... makes it possible for the members to imagine, feel and express belonging to a national group (p. 43).” National identity on the other hand is something connected with the life-world. It might, but need not converge with national ideology (p. 103). Though the author does not explicitly mention at this point the “producer” of national ideology, he obviously means the cultural elite (writers, philosophers, journalists etc.) of a society, whereas national identity based in life-world concerns everyone, but differently. Under the premises given, it is logical that “structure and contents of national identity” must be unevenly distributed socially. Csepeli identifies the intelligentsia as the group where national ideology and identity are closest together. In Hungary he estimates the intelligentsia to be 7 to 8 percent of the adult population. But only half (3-4%) are considered to be “full-fledged heirs of the message handed down by the stock of knowledge of the national ideology (p. 124).”

It is at this point the book turns to empirical analysis (Part II). To this point not much has been said about Hungary, if we ignore the occasional references to Hungarian authors in this field. Only from this point on is the promise of the title to reveal something about Hungarian national identity going to be met. And it is only part of the intelligentsia which will be studied: “On the basis of the preceding chapter..., it becomes obvious that the most active bearers of national feeling and consciousness, those who mobilize knowledge, principles, ideas are to be found among the intelligentsia... (p. 132).” The empirical data analyzed derive mainly from two surveys among this group. The first in 1983 is based on a random sample of 600 university graduates. In 1989 similar interviews were conducted also among university graduates (671). Whereas the second group was made up of historians teaching Hungarian history, agronomists, political and economic leaders, the sample in 1983 was created by selection from lists of membership in the Association

of Hungarian Writers, the Association of Motion Picture and Television Artists, and the Association of Journalists. This is important to know because it shows the small and specific groups from which the conclusions will be drawn. Therefore the significance of the results depends entirely on the quality of the theoretical arguments developed previously.

What is the outcome of these two surveys? The results are rich and manifold. Similar or even the same instruments have been used in other countries. This should enable cross-national comparison [2]. Here I will not dwell on this particularly, but try to point to results that a reader who has followed the discourse about nation and nation theory would hardly have expected. The first surprise is that the answers of the respondents do not satisfy the proposition suggested in Part I. The space east of the Rhine is not necessarily the realm of the “cultural nation,” at least not in the Hungary of the pre-reform era. Neither in 1983 nor in 1989 did the respondents give priority to “mother tongue” as the criterion for “being Hungarian.” Instead, most important for them was self-classification (“because I feel” or “all those who claim”). Other than in the concept of “cultural nation,” here the nation is seen as an “open, inclusive group” (p. 136) reminiscent of the concept of “citizen nation.” But the responses were in no way coherent, because kinship and cultural elements were also mentioned to a considerable extent, in 1989 more, in 1983 much less [3]. Also, terms of the traditional national ideology did not elicit much response. “In the light of these results we must find it rather strange that the conservative national parties which came to power as a result of the free elections of 1990 attempted to validate the obsolete national ideology which had prevailed between the two world wars (p. 140).”

Results like this certainly do not fit into the mainstream picture about the post-communist societies. Is the Western perception of a revival of nationalism in the post-communist societies wrong? Csepeli himself gives an interesting interpretation. He identifies the nationalistic rhetoric appearing after 1989 not as the return of “a haunting ghost from the pre-socialist past” but as an unintended consequence of the time of building socialism.

The clue for his argument is that it was the policy of Lenin and Stalin to organize the people of their empire into administrative units “which were socialist in content but national in form (p. 258).” When the Soviet bloc imploded only the national form remained, “all certainties apart from the boundaries disappeared from the region (p. 257).” Not only that, the Yalta Agreement from

World War II and the Helsinki Accord of 1975 had internationally consolidated the “national form” to an extent that, when the socialist content disappeared, the societies could peacefully go on unchallenged from the outside. As far as the nationalistic rhetoric at home is concerned it could only succeed as political but not as cultural nationalism. “We would like to argue that cultural nationalism is in retreat in the post-socialist political landscape (p. 256).” The exception, according to the author, is Yugoslavia where the internal borders lacked the sanctity enjoyed by borders elsewhere in the area (p. 264).

Also something of a surprise are the countries viewed as similar to Hungary by the sections of the intelligentsia surveyed in 1983 and 1989. Austria, the historical companion of Hungary for centuries, is not perceived to be as one would expect. In both samples it is Poland that outscores Austria in many aspects. Of course there are differences in ranks when it comes to breaking down the similarities to Economy, Culture and History. But even then there is only one case where the majority of the respondents (58 percent) mentions Hungary as similar to Austria, namely in 1989 in “art and literature.” Poland is mentioned most frequently when it comes to “history” (83 percent, 1983; 71 percent, 1989), “culture” (53 percent, 1983) and “political traditions.” Though the overall pattern of these answers did not change much between 1983 and 1989, one point must be mentioned: In 1983, 34 percent of the respondents viewed Austria as economically similar to Hungary. In 1989, this decreased to 4 percent (p. 196, p. 172). We know from other sources that the average Hungarian might give Austria a more prominent place than the intelligentsia investigated here [4].

Besides this, the book contains many other results from “selections of living persons of reference” to suggested “alternatives for the resolution of conflicts.” The organization of the data goes from simple cross tabulations to sophisticated cluster analysis. Perhaps interesting for somebody who wants to invest in Hungary is the assessment of a relative majority (49 percent) of the respondents that “work ethic and productivity” is below average (p. 168); only 5 percent considered it “above average.” A contrasting example is “art” (42 percent vs. 4 percent). All in all the reader gets another interesting glimpse behind the former Iron Curtain at a time when state socialism was already in a phase of collapse.

Csepeli was a member of the system and is certainly qualified to comment on it. Like other Hungarian sociologists before him [5], he is preoccupied with the intelligentsia. The high status of this group was once again un-

derlined when the new prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, accepted only university graduates as members of his cabinet. As an insider, the author provides the reader with many fascinating details that foreign experts would hardly be able to discover. For example he mentions *Macko ur utazasai* [The Travels of Mr. Teddy Bear] by Zsigmond Sebok, a childrens' book from the times of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that even then socialized very young people in affections for the space of the nation. The era of communism could not keep this book away from the book shelves of Hungarian children. The national message was carried on from generation to generation.

Where could one challenge the author? The book is certainly interesting to read, even in Part I where it more or less repeats already known positions from theories of nation and ethnicity. Maybe the author could have made the distinction between models and historical reality more visible. Unfortunately, he follows the derogatory understanding which the academic mainstream today imposes on the concept of "cultural nation" and in the same breath assigns it to the countries east of the Rhine. But his empirical data show a much more complicated picture. Also, it would have been worth having a glimpse of the nation-building processes outside the West, particularly in Asia. It is also irritating that the book is not up to date concerning the theoretical discussions in Western Europe, simply because the English translation is ten to fifteen years behind the time the main part of the research was conducted. The author tries to compensate the time gap in his epilogue, but not with respect to the developments in Western Europe.

Taking into consideration the accelerating development of the European Union would unavoidably have led to the question of whether Hungary can survive as a nation. Csepeli believes in a "post-modern national identity" which is "constantly capable of renegotiating those

times, terms, and traditions of the nation through which people turn their uncertain, obscure and passing contemporaneity into the eternity informed by the national sign (p. 266)." This last sentence of the text is another surprise for the reader, because it seems to contradict the basic theoretical assumption of the book that nation and national identity are historical phenomena. Somebody who underwrites this statement must be aware that national identity can be replaced by some other kind of collective identity. Why should the nation—and be it the Hungarian—in whatever version (cultural, political or citizen nation) be the last word of history?

#### Notes:

[1]. Gyorgy Csepeli, *Nemzet által homályosan* (Budapest: Szazadveg Kiado, 1992).

[2]. See Max Haller, *Identitaet und Nationalstolz der Oesterreicher* (Wien: Boehlau, 1996).

[3]. By the way, the author calls the chapter here *Being Hungarian* which reminds of an earlier book edited by Gyula Szekfu, *Mi a magyar?* [What is a Hungarian?] (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Tarsasag, 1939; reprint ed.: Budapest: Helikon, 1992).

[4]. See Gyorgy Eger and Josef Langer, eds., *Border, Nation and Ethnicity in Central Europe* (Klagenfurt: Norea, 1996).

[5]. See Gyorgy Konrad, and Ivan Szelenyi, *Die Intelligenz auf dem Weg zur Klassenmacht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978); English: *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

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