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SPECIAL ISSUE: R. J. MORRIS: AN APPRECIATION

Bob Morris, the exceptional interlocutor

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Abstract
Bob Morris first influenced social historians in Hungary through personal contacts, but these contacts were later strengthened by institutional networks. The post-transition historiography of Eastern Europe found concepts in Morris' work that dovetailed with the rise of interest in researching the history of the public sphere and the understanding of structural changes in society. However, because of the different historical traditions of the region, these concepts could not be easily transposed. Nevertheless, the work of Bob Morris is often cited in research on modern urban forms of associational life. His work on urban history is systematically being introduced to younger generations through one of the principal handbooks for teaching social history at the university level. Most importantly, Bob Morris' approach to research and his enthusiasm for conversation with scholars at all stages of their careers will long be remembered, and his work guides urban historians across the continent.

My first memory of Bob Morris is sitting opposite him at dinner one evening at the Urban History Group's 2007 conference in Exeter. I remember vividly that despite my embarrassment, we talked all the way through dinner. This was not down to me, but to Bob's famously generous spirit, and even though he was talking to me personally, he picked up the thread of a conversation running since the early 1990s in which the Hungarian talking partner changed every once in a while.

It is difficult to say how and when the paths of Bob Morris and Hungarian urban historians first crossed; presumably, however, it was the European Association of Urban History that institutionalized that link. The association – established in 1989 to provide a forum for multidisciplinary research on various aspects of urban history from the Middle Ages to the present – held the third of its bi-annual conferences in Budapest in 1996. Bob Morris was not among the speakers in Budapest, but he was a member of the intellectual community already maintained by the association, and six years later in Edinburgh he was the head of the organizing committee.

It is also known that the roots of the relationship extend even deeper. From the mid-1960s, H.J. Dyos had been building a network of urban historians across Europe, including first Bob Morris and at the beginning of the 1970s, Vera Bácskai from

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Hungary.[1] Following his initiative, from the 1990s onwards, in line with the geopolitical transformations in Europe, British–Hungarian urban historians' relations became more frequent and students more mobile (with the Centre for Urban History in Leicester becoming the first port of call) and they were able to participate in conferences. And so, the long-running conversation with Bob Morris started, initially with his live talks. Bob was a man of conferences: several visiting graduates (many of them now professors) can recall the discussions they had with Bob during conference sessions, breaks between sessions or dinners. But the conversation started also in the spiritual sense of the word, that is, by the transfer of his ideas and knowledge 'brought home' (mostly in the form of thoughts, but materialized in books as well, in an age when internet and PDF downloads were not yet available) by those studying in Britain. All these factors enabled the young generation of Hungarian historians of the 1990s to borrow, implement and test his concepts and ideas in a social environment completely different from the one in which he developed them.

In what follows, I will show which of his concepts and approaches have been the focus of interest to Hungarian historians, and how far these have proved fruitful in explaining the history of nineteenth-century Hungarian urban society. It is noteworthy, though not surprising, that it is primarily Bob's writings from the 1980s and the early 1990s (the period of systematic knowledge transfer from the UK to Hungary) that have become seminal in Hungarian historiography. All the more so, because this period was marked by profound political and social transformations that also affected historians' spirit of enquiry. Even if indirectly, the social restructuring that followed the political turnaround in Eastern Europe made researchers sensitive to topics of social (re)formation and (re)structuring, and to strategies used by various social groups to improve their position at the societal level or in their local communities. Concurrently, the reorganization of the public sphere, which had been extremely limited under the socialist–communist political regime, also sparked interest. Research into the public sphere, civil society, associations and social interchange in both social science and history had greatly increased after 1989. Bob Morris' ideas about the middle class, voluntary associations and their relationship with each other were at the heart of the new fields of interest.

Largely as a result of Bob's work, it was widely accepted in Western European literature that the organization of associations in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cities was an attempt by the emerging urban entrepreneurial and manufacturing (bourgeois) middle class to establish a set of institutions for its comfort, for its cultural entertainment, for the protection of its security and last but not least to exercise symbolic power within the city.

Árpád Tóth (just two years after graduating from the Centre for Urban History, Leicester, in 1996) was the first to investigate whether these characteristics of urban social phenomena could be observed in a markedly different social and political environment in early nineteenth-century Hungary. Here, it is neither the difficulties of comparison nor the results (however interesting these are) that are of importance. Rather, it is the telling way Tóth interprets his research from hindsight, because it reflects the crucial role Morris played in shaping the attitudes of young historians,

[1]For more details on this, see R. Rodger, 'Explorations in European urban history. Perspectives from Leicester', *Moderne Stadtgeschichte*, 2 (2020), 64–85; R. Rodger, 'Bob Morris: an appreciation', *Urban History*, 50 (2023), 199–201.

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and it also reveals Bob's sense of self-reflective humour. When gathering information for this article from people who knew Bob in Hungary, I also contacted Tóth. Reflecting on his attempt to adapt Bob's concepts to early nineteenth-century Hungary, he wrote: 'I remember thinking at the time that what I was doing was a proper adaptation of what I had read in Morris – only Vera Bácskai, my supervisor, had strong reservations about it.' Tóth soon learned the reason why. At a conference, he heard Bob ironically interpreting the international reception of his research on associations: 'Most of the research was initially "we too",' – Tóth recalled what Bob said – 'that is, researchers, wanting to prove that there was prosperous associational life in their country, as well. Later, this was followed by the competition of "we first", meaning that not only everybody wanted to prove that they had associations, but furthermore that these society-shaping institutions appeared even earlier than in Britain.'[2] This anecdote – still remembered 20 years or so later – vividly illustrates the fragile vanity of scholars (familiar to all of us in one way or another) who are even prepared to turn the investigation of a historical occurrence into a competition. However, it also suggests how Bob's achievements and the strength of his argument have been the subject of envy and desire by many.

Hungary – and other Eastern European countries with similar societies of orders organized not just by wealth but also by law and custom well into the middle of the nineteenth century – entered 'the competition' with a disadvantage. The processes observed by Bob Morris in Britain may only be compared at a conceptual level with those experienced here; there is, however, a narrow basis for comparison at the level of social practices. Researchers of urban associational life start from the assumption that the political significance of associations in early nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was of greater importance than their social role.[3] Associations provided the earliest framework for the critique of sovereign power, and then this function grounded their social significance. However, unlike in Western Europe, where associations functioned as 'melting pots' of urban society, in the Eastern part of the continent subscriber democracy ultimately led to the reproduction of historical social inequalities. Associations here were not a means of social integration or cohesion but of differentiation. Distinct social groups did not form common associations; each established their own, and the separation was further reinforced by the linguistic, ethnic and religious divisions that were predominant in Eastern Europe.

The British example, as presented by Bob Morris, is more relevant as a point of comparison in the case of the relationship between associations and the state. Associations in Central-Eastern European countries sought to respond to the specific needs of individuals in the emerging modern societies, albeit some 50 years after Britain did. At first, when social policy was not yet systematically organized, associations provided a framework for social care. Later, however, functions that were

[2]Email correspondence with Árpád Tóth, Feb.–Jun. 2024.

[3]Á. Tóth, '"Nachäffen" oder zivilisatorisches Aufschließen? Die Pesther Vereine des Vormärz und ihr Verhältnis zu westlichen Vorbildern', in F. Solomon, K. Zach and J. Brandt (eds.), *Vorbild Europa und die Modernisierung in Mittel- und Südosteuropa* (Berlin, 2009), 49–70; Á. Tóth, 'Voluntary societies in mid-nineteenth-century Pest: urbanisation and the changing distribution of power', in R. Roth and R. Beachy (eds.), *Who Ran the Cities. City Elites and Urban Power Structures in Europe and North America, 1750–1940* (Aldershot, 2007), 161–77; Zs. Kiss, *Az egyedüli tér. (Társas élet és közélet Zala megyében a neoabszolutizmus korában)* (The only space. (Social life and public life in the county of Zala in the age of neoabsolutism)) (Budapest, 2020); E. Kruppa, *Das Vereinswesen der Prager Vorstadt Smichow 1850–1875* (Oldenburg, 1992).

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previously both organized and performed by associations became increasingly monopolized by the state, and associations during the nineteenth century were relegated to a shrinking area in the shadow of the state, just like in Britain.[4]

Post-transition historiography of Eastern Europe, as presented, found concepts in Morris' work that fitted well with the new interest in research into the history of the public sphere and the understanding of structural changes in society. However, because of the characteristically different historical traditions of the region, the transposability of these concepts was limited. Nevertheless, the work of Bob Morris is often cited, and his concepts are used frequently in research on modern urban forms of associational life. Beyond this, his work on urban history is systematically being introduced to younger generations through one of the principal handbooks for teaching social history at the university level.[5] But most importantly, Bob's approach to research and his enthusiasm for conversation with scholars at all levels of their career will long be remembered, and his work provides a guide for urban historians across East Central Europe.

[4]G. Gyáni, 'Individualizálódás és civil társadalom' (Individualization and civil society), *Történelmi Szemle*, 4 (2010), 485–95; Á. Tóth, 'A társadalmi szerveződés polgári és rendi normái' (Traditional and bourgeois norms of social organization), *FONS*, 5 (1988), 411–79.

[5]L. Timár, 'A brit társadalomtörénet-írás' (British social history-writing), in Zs. Bódy and J.Ö. Kovács (eds.), *Bevezetés a társadalomtörténetbe* (Introduction to social history) (Budapest, 2006), 125–52.

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