*Commentary*

# Hungarian Contradictions

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It is always a risky venture to comment on an article that focuses on issues that lie outside one's own immediate research—risky because one is not familiar with most of the primary sources and with many of the controversies among the specialists in the field. On the other hand, as the gynecologist is just as much a doctor as an ophthalmologist or a surgeon, and they all aim at curing their patients of disease, historians specializing in various fields also belong to the same guild. A perspective from a certain distance can be especially useful if two historians ask closely related questions about the social, intellectual, and political history of a region they both belong to, but make attempts at the answers using differing materials from different epochs.

Most of Professor Heindl's works deal with the eighteenth and the first two-thirds of the nineteenth centuries; my interest lies more in the last decades of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. During the last few years, she has been dealing with the making of heroes in nineteenth-century Austria; I have been interested in the making of scapegoats in twentieth-century Hungary. These quite different interests, however, are both inquiries into the peculiarities of political culture in our part of the world and the role of this political culture in the fate of the Habsburg Empire.

If we had lived a hundred years earlier, Professor Heindl and I would have been citizens of one state, though we would have held different citizenships. As liberal-minded intellectuals, probably we would have both been quite critical of many aspects of our Dual Monarchy, but a Vienna-based professor would most likely have also been critical of the nationalist bias of her Budapest colleague. Different as our approaches might have been, we would have shared an interest in preserving the political institutional framework of our Dual Monarchy. As professors, we would have been state employees, and established university professors, though they are keen on intellectual freedom, rarely rebel. We would have complained a lot about our respective state administrators, who rarely listen to scholars when they make their decisions and devote more time to political and personal intrigues than to the real problems of our state and societies.

If we had still been active a decade and a half later, then we would have both pondered the role of this state administration in the decline, fall, and destruction of the monarchy. Depending on our political and ideological convictions, we would perhaps have considered the alternative of emigration, but home or abroad—I assume—our choice of research projects would have been—directly or indirectly—related to the investigation of the causes of the disintegration of the monarchy.

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Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after the traumas of World War I and II, the Cold War, and the regional turbulences of the last decade and a half, the same question still applies: Would the survival of the monarchy have saved Europe and the world from all these disasters? How strong were the centrifugal forces of the monarchy versus the centripetal forces?[1] Closely connected is the issue of modernization. To what extent was the political framework of the monarchy an obstacle to or the driving force behind the modernization of its societies, including the professionalization of public administration?

In 1998, George Bárány addressed these and related questions in a forum article in the *Austrian History Yearbook* and elaborated on the contending components of political culture in Austria-Hungary.[2] He referred to the ambiguity of the concept of political culture—in addition to his extremely inspiring article, let me exploit a most recent Polish contribution in the search for a conceptual framework for my comments, that is, a definition of political culture. This Polish political science handbook defines political culture as a "collective, lasting and objectified achievement, located in time and space, available to the experience of the whole community ...[; the] result of the effort of generations, encompassing the material and non-material products of human activity, including value systems and models of behaviour, whose core is politics."[3] Bureaucrats of all types, but especially state administrators, are, I think, major carriers, the "executive personnel" of these traditions.

Professor Heindl both in this article and in great detail in her path-breaking monograph[4] describes the Habsburg rulers' attempts at creating an imperial, nationally neutral state administration. On a general level, I think, there can be hardly any doubt that the ultimate failure of the Habsburg monarchy was largely due to the lack of a "collective, lasting and objectified achievement" that could have been represented by this bureaucracy. The achievements were considered to be more aspects of the traditions of regional and ethnic-national communities—at least from the perspective of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual and political elites—than those of the empire. When, for example, praising their "constitution," Hungarians proudly referred to the 1222 Golden Bull that was born at nearly the same time as the Magna Carta (1215) and various fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century legal acts. These are documents from the time before Hungary's integration into the Habsburg Empire, so, as it was argued, the original constituents of Hungary's political culture go back to the half a millennium of sovereign statehood following the foundation of the state in 1000. This tradition attached the greatest significance to the municipal—county and communal—levels of state administration as a guarantee against the abuses of royal prerogatives—of the central power. All attempts at transforming this municipal bureaucracy into a transmitter of central power were doomed to failure because of the resistance of the local elites. Professor Heindl most appropriately points out that the political doctrine behind the Austrian state law could only be natural law; the historical legitimation of the Austrian state would have been impossible.[5] The Hungarian state

[1]This terminology was first used by Oscar Jászi in *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, 1929).

[2]George Bárány, "Political Culture in the Lands of the Former Habsburg Empire: Authoritarian and Parliamentary Traditions," *Austrian History Yearbook* 24, part 1 (1998): 195–248.

[3]Karol B. Janowski, "Kultura politiczna" [Political culture], in *Wprowadzeniedo nauki o państwie i polityce* [Introduction to the state and political science], ed. Bogumil Szmulik and Marek Zmigrodzki (Lublin, 2002); cited in Janusz Zarnowsaki, "Considerations on the Political Culture of Central Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Specific Features of Epochs and Regions," in *Political Culture in Central Europe*, ed. Magdalena Hulas and Jaroslaw Pánek, vol. 2 (Warsaw, 2005), 12.

[4]Waltraud Heindl, *Gehorsame Rebellen. Bürokratie und Beamte in Österreich 1780–1848* (Vienna, 1991).

[5]Waltraud Heindl, "Bureaucracy, Officials and the State in the Austrian Monarchy: Stages of Change since the Eighteenth Century," *Austrian History Yearbook* 37 (2006): 39.

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doctrine, just as much as the Bohemian one, was exactly the opposite: it was based on the tradition of medieval sovereign statehood.[6]

If we now focus on the seemingly most successful period of Habsburg rule in Hungary, the decades following the 1867 Ausgleich, the main sources of conflict and tension in this respect were myriad and the actors were the *Beamten*: bureaucrats, clerks, and civil servants. As to these conflicts, first of all, we have to refer to the phenomenon of "Doppelgleisigkeit," that is, the fact that the local administration was subordinated both to the central Hungarian government and to the county and communal magistrates. *Mutatis mutandis*, the relationship between the central government and local governments in the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy reflected the relationship between the imperial government and the Hungarian parliament.[7] The Hungarian ministry could only submit the annual budget to the Parliament if the emperor had previously agreed (*Vorsanktionierungsrecht*), and, in a comparable way, the implementation of the financial decisions of the county municipality was not possible without authorization from the Ministry of Interior. Moreover, the communal budgets also had to be approved by the county authorities. These are general regulations but, of course, all these laws were filled with life by the *Beamten*.

In the post-1867 Hungarian central state administration, we find a great number of well-educated intellectuals with broad horizons. These personalities, members of the second generation of the so called "Hungarian centralists,"[8] were patriots and nationalists, yet they were still ready to accept positions in the state administration. Their willingness to do so was motivated by the ideas of such positivist thinkers as Spencer, Bentham, and Buckle, and they believed that the decisive factor of history was the struggle for life among nations. They shared the view that the guarantors of the free development of the smaller peoples of the Carpathian Basin were the Hungarians, whose destiny was to protect the region from the threats of German imperialism and Russian barbarianism. They believed that the sovereign, liberal nation-state—in their interpretation post-1867 Hungary was a sovereign state that had voluntarily entered into a federation with the other Habsburg lands—can efficiently push forward the modernization of the country and society, but only if the local governments are powerless. It is this view that made them very unpopular among radical Hungarian nationalists, many of whom viewed them as representatives of foreign interests. The centralists wanted to curb the influence of the non-Hungarian citizens of Hungary and limit the political impact of the conservative landed nobility. We have only a relatively small amount of research based on primary sources concerning the efficiency of these efforts. They aimed at the expansion of the traditional circle of political decision makers and pushed forward the professionalization of public administration, advocating special training for civil servants, uniform standards, regular qualification, and guaranteed salaries and pensions. For example, in the case of Veszprém County, in 1884, twenty official positions

[6]See, for example, the works of László Péter, especially his book-like chapter in *Die Habsburgemonarchie 1848–1918*, vol. 7, *Verfassung und Parlamentarismus*, part 1, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch (Vienna, 2000), 239–540.

[7]See, for example, the most original work by Béla Sarlós, *Közigazgatás és hatalompolitika a dualizmus rendszerében* [Public administration and power politics in the system of dualism] (Budapest, 1976).

[8]Bárány gives a clear definition of the group of centralists of the 1840s: "This small but important group, which included Baron Joseph Eötvös, his brother-in-law August Trefort, the legal scholar Ladislas Szalay, and others[,] was to challenge more consistently than Széchenyi the political monopoly of the nobility in the counties and in the Diet with the purpose of setting up a government responsible to a truly representative parliament." George Bárány, *Stephen Széchenyi and the Awakening of Hungarian Nationalism, 1791–1841* (Princeton, 1968), 267–68. See also László Deme, "Pre-1848 Hungarian Nationalism Revisited: Ethnic and Authoritarian or Political and Progressive?" *East European Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1992): 141–69; and Iván Zoltán Dénes, "The Value Systems of Liberals and Conservatives in Hungary, 1830–1848," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 4 (1993): 825–50.

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were filled by elections, but only fourteen by 1890. By 1913, 55 percent of all Veszprém county officials were appointed.[9] Still, even if we lack systematic investigations on the transformations in individual counties, the research of Andrew C. Janos, Magdolna Balázs, Vera Bácskai, Gábor Benedek, Gábor Gyáni, András Gerő, Péter Hanák, György Kövér, Béla Sarlós, Éva Somogyi, Károly Vörös, and others clearly confirm the tendency that István Bibó, the public administration expert and political scientist, defined without archival research in the aftermath of World War II: bureaucratization in Hungary took place under Western forms, but with Eastern, feudal content.[10] In practical terms, this meant that, for example, at the elections in the so-called rotten boroughs, the bureaucracy could herd the docile or indifferent Slovak and Romanian voters to the polls to elect the government's candidate without much resistance. This method usually failed in the Magyar constituencies of the Plainland and Transylvania, where the Calvinist gentry and smallholders were stubborn enough to resist.

There was a peculiar contradiction between the quite impressive professionalization of the state administration during the Bach period and the later lack of efficiency in imposing central will on local administration after 1867. The explanation lies, of course, in the 1867 political transformation. Namely, reflecting Hungarian national demands, and also according to professional standards, the number of Hungarians in the Vienna-based central administration of the Dual Monarchy increased. Although the respective statistics are not always reliable—that is, Hungarian citizenship did not necessarily mean Hungarian ethnicity—the estimate is that the proportion of Hungarians in the ministries of joint affairs was 15 percent in the 1890s and around 26 to 30 percent on the eve of World War I.[11] They were to represent Hungarian interests in Vienna, but, in Hungary, they were considered the representatives of imperial interests. Most of them indeed criticized the useless efforts to emphasize Hungary's separation and believed that guarding the international prestige of the monarchy also served Hungarian national interests. That view was never accepted by the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian political elite. The consequence of this situation was that the Hungarian officials of the ministries of joint affairs were treated with contempt by their counterparts in the Hungarian administration. In turn, instead of easing communication and increasing efficiency, the battle lines between Hungarian and imperial interest became even more marked. Neither the monarchy as a whole, nor Hungary, profited from this state of affairs. There were a number of contradictory basic principles in this system that even well-schooled angels would have found difficult to implement in a parallel manner.

First of all, to defend the foreign political interests of the monarchy certainly called for a high level of centralization and a concentration of resources. The other principle was to achieve political stability in terms of balancing the interests of the two parts of the monarchy, and in terms of domestic political stability within the two parliamentary systems in one state. All that, of course, called for decentralization. The third principle was to try to come to terms with the aspirations of the elites of smaller national groups and respect, as far as political stability

[9]Gábor Gyáni, György Kövér, and Tibor Valuch, *Social History of Hungary from the Reform Age until the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2003), 267.

[10]István Bibó, "A magyar közigazgatásról" [On Hungarian public administration] (written in 1947), in Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok. Második kötet, 1945–1949. Magvető* [Selected studies. Second volume] (Budapest, 1986), 477–78.

[11]See, for example, the works by Éva Somogyi, especially *Kormányzati rendszer a dualista Habsburg Monarchiában* [Governmental system in the dual Habsburg monarchy] (Budapest, 1996). Her succinct summary of these problems can be found in Somogyi, "Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia közös kormánya" [The joint government of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy], *História* 5–6 (1994): 26–28; and Somogyi, "A Habsburg Birodalom és a magyar kiegyezés" [The Habsburg Empire and the Hungarian compromise], *História* 4 (2003): 14–19.

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demanded, ancient territorial and church autonomies as well. In addition to that, an efficient administration was also supposed to meet the demands of economic modernization. Professor Heindl writes a great deal about the "Konkurrenzverhältniss" between "Untertanengeist" and "staatsbürgerlicher Sinn." If we define the sources of conflict along this line, we could also add the national, patriotic identity[12]—and most state servants had to try to live with these conflicting loyalties. Hungarian experiences, as reflected by scholarship as much as by contemporary and later arts and literature and collective memory, fully confirm Professor Heindl's point that the traditions of the centralized neoabsolutist regime survived for a very long time and the bureaucracy excelled more at standing up for its own interests than at being an honest broker for these many conflicting interests.

My comments have been limited to one point: The discrepancy between the need and the efforts at establishing efficient administration with professional state servants on the one hand and the political preconditions of stability on the other in the Habsburg monarchy during the long nineteenth century. I fully subscribe to Professor Heindl's concluding point on the *Schlamperei* of this administration. It was not occasional negligence and lack of perfect professionalism, but rather the petrified caste spirit of these civil servants on all levels that contributed to the demise of the monarchy.

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[12]The complexity of post-1867 Hungarian nationalism is well explained by András Gerő in his book *Képzelt történelem* [Imagined history] (Budapest, 2004). He argues that "during the Reform Age (1825–1848) national and liberal values could be well combined, but after 1867 a redefinition of Hungarian nationalism did not come about. The opposition articulated the national interest, the governmental side represented liberalism in a conservative context. Nationalism was built on fiction and lacked political support but successfully imposed its issues on politics. It was, however, not in a position to implement its most important aspiration, i.e. complete Hungarian sovereignty." Ibid., 141.

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