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DOMINANT HUNGARIAN THEORIES IN A CHANGING ERA
Transylvania, 1910-1922

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Transylvania's inter-ethnic and social relations were determined by several interwoven processes. Generally, it was an era of strengthening national movements and the transition to a capitalist economy had intensive effects in Transylvania. There was a peculiar fusion of *ethnicity*, *society* and *politics* unlike in earlier times.¹ Relations of Transylvania's nationalities (Romanian, Hungarian, Saxons) were historically characterized by 1) nationalities living side by side and nation-building and 2) by the nation building elites, which were regional groups with partly different strategies than their nations states. There are three – partly overlapping – problems to focus on. Firstly, the question of Transylvania: if it is part of Romania or Hungary or is it independent. Secondly, the administrative and ecopolitical status within a given nation-state. Thirdly, the relationship between the ethnic groups and the handling of ethnic problems.

This paper focuses on *nation-building* and *nation builders'* and *regional perspectives*. Nation-building approaches the question from the top, its aim is the construction and reinforcement of the idea of the nation-state, while regionalism relies on the experiences and aspirations (i.e. national culture, economic strength) of grass-root political movements within a given region.² In Transylvania, nation-building and regionalism are inseparable even if there are differences in their methods and approach as there could be various, even contradictory identities if we take a deeper look at the nation which seems united from the top.³

Looking at the local/regional political and social relations is one way of overcoming the more traditional Hungarian discrimination and decline oriented historiography. Community-building historiography approach focuses on societal organization (communal institutions, development and operation of networks) and on the phylogeny of ethnic groups (i.e.: how the elite is produced).⁴

Since the turn of the century, the arguments related to nation, state and the Transylvanian region focused on property rights, voting right reforms and on the unanswered question of nation-building. Actors of the Transylvanian nation-builders with their program tried to develop and refurbish the relations between regional society and land management. In the Székely Land there are examples of institutions (Székely Társaság, Székely Társaságok Szövetsége) which tried to propose and advocate for regional and nation-wide policies, examples for local cultural movements and periodicals which pushed for autonomous policies (*Erdélyi Szemle*, *A Szemle*, *Új Erdély*, *Kalotaszeg*).

¹ GYÁNI, Gábor: A nemzeti történetírás válaszüton. *Limes*, 2012. Year 25., No. 4, Vol. I. Pg. 5.

² KÁNTOR, Zoltán: Kisebbségi nemzetépítés. *REGIO*, 2000. Year 11., No. 3, Pg. 220-225.; ÉGER György–LANGER, Josef: *Határ, régió, etnikumok Közép-Európában*. Osiris–MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet, Budapest 2001, Pg. 19-23.

³ EGRY, Gábor: *Etnicitás, identitás, politika. Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Romániában és Csehszlovákiában 1918-1944*. 2015. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó [Furthermore: EGRY, *Etnicitás*, 2015]

⁴ BÍRÓ, Sándor: *Többségben és kisebbségben*. Foreword by Nándor Bárdi. Pro-Print, Csíkszereda, 2002, Pg. 9.

Examples for land policies and settlement movements (István Bethlen, Ignác Darányi) and the foundation of the Erdélyi Szövetség in 1913 by István Tisza. Even if the various - and at times competing - Hungarian political groups offered different answers (for example in the question of suffrage), all were organized around the identity politics of the thousand year old state and the Hungarian nation-state's history and had the same goal: to protect the Hungarian dominance in Transylvania. They started a social movement, wanted to participate locally and regionally, they repackaged the Transylvania-question into a self-defense strategy, and attack the ruling party's administration and its representatives from the outside and from the bottom. The various proposals contained mutually reinforcing economic, social policies (developments of banking, industry and commerce, land politics and prevention of migration) and purely national policies. In the latter policies regarding non-Hungarian minorities need to be noted. Such was the proposal of the culture zone, which hit the Hungarian minority in Romania between the two World Wars like a boomerang, the emigration of Romanians or the goal of monolingualism. They were for strong governmental intervention even if it meant the state lessening the financial burden of the Hungarian urban population and leaving out the Romanian and German population from such programs. There were no shortage in the "diverse" tools used for influencing local social and political relations, which were only strengthened by other West-European examples (forcing Germans out of Alsace-Lorraine, Germanisation of the Polish peasantry, etc.).

During the debate the Transylvanian Hungarian leaders did not give up any power for the benefit of the nationalities. At the same time, they were highly critical of the centralized Hungarian Kingdom, which – they said – weakened Hungarian's cultural and economical development in Transylvania. They were considering strategies of lessening the conflict between Hungarians-Hungarians, Transylvania-Budapest, the governing party and the opposition, which would maintain the system of the Austrian-Hungarian compromise and would also maintain Hungarian supremacy in Transylvania. They had different alternatives. They wanted a certain level of independence for their region, bigger autonomy from Budapest without questioning the doctrine of the unified nation.⁵ One of the main figures was István Bethlen, who were against any kind of democratization of Hungarian nationality politics before 1918. His organizational skills and influence were proven – among other things - by convincing independence favoring politicians, (Apáthy, Kenéz, Zágoni, Paál, etc.) who were for universal suffrage, to stand by him, while – even if within certain limits – could cooperate with Tisza as well. The progressive political elements (social questions, suffrage, etc.) did not disappear completely, but their positions lessened probably due to the political radicalism of the World War and to the Romanian military attack in 1916.

⁵ K. LENGYEL, Zsolt: *A kompromisszum keresése. Tanulmányok a 20. századi transzilvanizmus korai történetéhez.* Csíkszereda, Pro-Print Könyvkiadó, 2007. 5-6.

The story of the collapse of 1918 and the Transylvanian empire change cannot be told without taking into consideration 1916. The 1916 Romanian-Hungarian War was a turning point not only because it had long term effects on the Hungarian political class and on everyday life, but because it turned Transylvania into a battle-ground, and remained so until the end of the War. Governmental function could not, or only in a very limited capacity, operate in the counties along the Romanian border, economy collapsed and Romanian-Hungarian political relations reached a breaking point, further radicalizing programs against nationalities in the name of protecting Hungarian supremacy.

World War I has changed everything, because the shrinking of the so called historical nation questioned almost all the elements of the national identity discourse: from its historical calling through the nation's ability to establish a state to the Hungarian people's ability to welcome others (the latter was mostly characterized by Hungary). There was a shift in the institutional and cultural background in identity politics, which led to its change.⁶

Following the empire change, an adjustment was necessary and besides the need for *continuity* (defending the economical, cultural and political positions) new elements became more important: the need for *adaptation* to face the challenge of *termination* within a new Romanian cultural majority (and also the need to express *otherness*); *self-organizing* of a minority society (institutionalization); political-cultural *integration*, which contained hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews and working class people.

Continuity became an integral part of Hungarian Romanian political thought. One of the demands of the Transylvanian Hungarians was to be recognized as a nation-building nationality (equality). The minority's elite's reasoning was that with the ratification of the Treaty of Trianon the Romanian Hungarian people - so those who speak Hungarian, are of Hungarian nationality, have an advanced Hungarian identity and part of the 1000 year old Hungarian political heritage— were forced out of Hungary as a result of political reasons. The collapse after the war *terminated* the earlier conditions in several areas of life. If we are dealing with the question on an individual level, the separation of families (tens of thousands of repatriates to Hungary) crimes against personal property (requisition of fixed and movable assets, etc.). The Romanian land reform was especially unfavorable towards the aristocracy, the common lands, assets of foundations, and towards civil organizations and the churches. There were similarly radical and for the Hungarians negative changes with the expansion of the Romanian state educational system.

⁶ EGRY, *Etnicitás*, 2015. 109.

The questions of *self-organization* and *otherness* are manifold. Hungarians had to adapt to their new position as a minority and needed to form answers to the questions of modernity, answers which are legitimate within their own community and within the new nation-state. The new situation naturally brought the threat of vulnerability and of the increased importance and demand for solidarity and democratic values. Unlike in the radicalizing Hungary, in the Transylvanian Hungarian community there was no need for scapegoats after 1919. In the name of a unified nation, the need for the integration of the Jewish and of the working class was appraised (rejecting the ideas of *numerus clausus* and antisemitism). The minority position meant an increased focus on diversity which could be described within the Bucharest – Budapest – international dimensions (United Nations, cooperation with other national minorities).

One of the biggest debate within the Hungarian-Hungarian relations was when governmental circles (with the leadership of István Bethlen) appointed the Transylvanian politicians they felt they could rely on. This conflict is remembered as the passivist- activist conflict in the Hungarian minority historiography, with the former not willing to politically organize for a long time (demonstration against the annexation of Transylvania to Romania). *Regionalism* is another landmark which affected minority-majority relations. Romania's decentralization was one of the central elements of the Hungarian political agenda in which the historical Transylvania and its inner region, Székely Land is an autonomous administrative area. There were two concepts. One is Romania's federalization which keeps in mind Transylvania's unique ethnic relations and which is similar to the Jászi-type system of cantons. The other is national institutional building, the ethnic autonomy plan, which prefers the development of a community with its own ethno-culture. This concept of minority, which recognizes collective rights, was similar to the goals of the regional Romanian elite before 1918 (e.g. providing autonomous religious education, widespread guarantee of language rights in education, administration and the courts, etc.). The struggle for decentralization was interlaced with the democratic question of the Romanian political system. Since the turn of the century and into the 1920s, universal suffrage was part of the political agenda – demanded by both the supporters of independence and by the progressives. Even though the new Romanian state provided universal suffrage, but put many obstacles in the way (electoral corruption, withdrawal of citizenship, etc.). At that point progressives and conservatives demanded together the proper democratic parliamentary representation of the Hungarian ethnic minority and the provision of the rights for free political organizing and advocacy (the right to strike, etc.).

In the Hungarian minority historiography the first significant generation is called *seceded Hungarians*. Károly Kós, Árpád Paál, György Bernády, György Bethlen, Gábor Pál, Elemér, Jakabffy, Artúr Balogh and their contemporaries partly belonged to the political and intellectual elite of regionalism who remained home before 1918 and partly to the Erdélyi Szövetség which provided regionalism's framework. The first generation was socialized in Hungary before World War I, and became a minority from a majority under the new circumstances.⁷ „*History creates situations of destiny and humans create various forms of behavior on the different levels of consciousness in these situations.*”⁸ These nation-building activists with different world-views created the first Hungarian organization together, the Magyar Szövetség (Hungarian Association) in January 1921 and later on their parties along the fractures of the Hungarian political community. First the Erdélyi Néppárt (Transylvanian People's Party) then its counterpart, the Magyar Nemzeti Párt (Hungarian National Party). Magyar Szövetség was for national unity, Erdélyi Néppárt was for progression and Romania's federalization, while Magyar Nemzeti Párt was fighting for ethnic autonomy. The two groups had their public forums, *Keleti Újság/Napkelet* with its revolutionary past and the more conservative *Ellenzék/Pásztrortűz* daily papers. These newspapers, even sometimes as each other's competition, represented *otherness* and *continuity* as well as *self-organization* and *integration*.

Member of parliament Tibor Zima stated the following question in July, 1922: „*this generation will not be able to emancipate itself from the conditioning it has thanks to the earth-shattering events. This conditioning has determined its views about its class status, choice of political parties, thinking and its whole intellect. Will this generation be able to, for example, stand behind a clear democratic platform, which will be necessary due to Hungarians minority position in Romania?*”⁹ Árpád Antal's answer to the question was that a system of state must be found which is suitable for Transylvanian (regional) and other ethnic groups living there, which basically means a federalist Romania. Paál stated the idea – which was the same as the Néppárt's program – the following way: „*we, Transylvania ethnic minorities realize that regionalism ensures the best way to create and maintain the most organic relationship between our motherland and the state. The creation of a regionalist constitution in Transylvania and in other annexed territories is the key to solve the problem of this ethnically diverse region, the most diverse one in the country. This is not separation but the integration of the peculiar details into a country-wide system.*”¹⁰

⁷ BÁRDI, Nándor: *Otthon és haza. Tanulmányok a romániai magyar kisebbség történetéről*. 2013. Pro-Print, Csíkszereda, Magyar Kisebbség Könyvtára. 481.

⁸ BENKŐ, Samu: *A helyzettudat változásai*. 1977. Bucharest, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 8. [Furthermore: BENKŐ, 1977]

⁹ Congress of the Erdélyi Néppárt and the Hungarian representatives. *Keleti Újság*, 1922. 5. year. 154. 13 July. Pg. 2.

¹⁰ Árpád Paál: *The historical calling of Magyar Néppárt*. *Keleti Újság*, 1922. 5. year, 268. 26 November. 1-2.

Even though the different knowledge, aptitude, and moral norms individually affect the direction of career paths', the common historical past determines the possibilities for action. It is not about predestination or resignation but that this is the context one had to deal with and about the goal of an intellectual to change the "*objective situation*". It is this willingness to initiate change which creates new concepts, developments in science, in art and changes political behavior. Societies of East-Central Europe were rather characterized by rigidity than dynamic movements. Above all these changes came about due of conflicts among the great-powers, but they forced *changes in status awareness* on individual and communal levels. Besides the fear from destruction there were also examples one could follow which gave the chance for the increasing and differentiating intellectuals of Transylvania and to members of the elite. According to Samu Benkő, this intellectual consciousness also means that it measures itself against universal standards. It measures individual goals, communal commitment, achievements and successes against the ideas of Europe's intellectual life.¹¹

In the time of state-power change, while in Hungary everything was viewed negatively which had anything to do with wilsonism, human rights, democracy, collective political rights, assimilation, development, etc., In Transylvania these, even if they had slightly different meanings, were important values within the political discourse. The collapse of Hungary changed the status of the Hungarians which lead to the re-evaluation of such political and social notions as state-power, democracy, autonomy, independence, culture, traditions, solidarity, etc. The Hungarian leadership faced new alternatives, which was also looking for emancipation from weighing pressure and centralization. Even if intellectual life was in discomfort and creative work had to deal with many obstacles, the moral norms of the minority position required the harmonization of individual and common interests, the recognition and identification of the people's interest, and as a result of such recognition, it also required growing solidarity.

¹¹ BENKŐ, 1977. 8-9