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Janos Mazsu. *The Social History of the Hungarian Intelligentsia, 1825-1914.* Boulder and New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xxiv + 291 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-362-7.

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The Persistence of Aristocracy

For those who are perennially impatient with the pace of social evolution, Hungarian history must be a source of frustration and irritation. While countries to the west were completing the process of bourgeoisification and pressing on to democratization, Hungary was still struggling to rid itself of aristocratic control. To be sure, the Reform Generation of the *Vormaerz*, inspired by Count Istvan Szechenyi, did, along with the Magyarization of the bourgeoisie, envision the bourgeoisification of the nobility. But, according to the late Peter Hanak, things changed after the country's defeat in the 1848-49 War of Independence against Austria.[1] Without explicitly repudiating pre-1848 liberalism, members of the aristocracy, particularly those at the highest levels of society, became increasingly critical of the materialistic and cosmopolitan direction taken by post-1849 liberal evolution. As a result, they exchanged the ideal of bourgeoisification for what Hanak called "the retrograde utopia of *de*-bourgeoisification."[2]

To make matters worse, at least from Hanak's point of view, members of the bourgeoisie often adopted the nobility's system of values and, insofar as possible, its way of life. Thus by the time the guns of August sounded, Hungarian society had fallen further behind societies in the West. Nor did the postwar establishment of Admiral Miklos Horthy's counter-revolutionary government do anything to encourage those in the camp of modernization and social change, especially after they read historian Gyula Szekfu's *Three Generations*, a critical assault on modern (i.e. left) liberalism.[3] Much, of course, has changed since that time, but the author of the meticulously-researched book under review, a Hanak protege and professor of history at Lajos Kossuth University in Debrecen, suggests that some of the–presumably anti-democratic–effects of Hungary's retarded social development still linger.

Greater understanding of Hungary's social backwardness could be purchased, Mazsu concluded, by undertaking a detailed study–based primarily upon secondary school registers and statistical sources–of the Hungarian intelligentsia (*ertelmiseg*), from the *Vormarz* to the outbreak of war in 1914. By "intelligentsia" he does not mean merely, or even primarily, a class defined "by its predilection for socio-political ideologies, alienation from existing reality, and commitment to radical change."[4] Indeed, he examines all of those, including civil servants and white collar workers, who earned their livelihood with their wits and not with the sweat of their brow. For him, the crucial consideration is whether or not they had completed at least four years of formal education at the secondary school level–a high school diploma being the intellectual equivalent of a "patent of nobility" (p. 7).

As early as 1785, Mazsu reports, approximately 40 percent of the roughly twenty thousand members of the intelligentsia were of non-noble origin. And thanks to an ever expanding bureaucracy and a growing industrial economy, that percentage increased by leaps and bounds after 1848-49. By the turn of the century, not more than 10 percent came from the so-called "historic classes." Not surprisingly, the newly emerging intelligentsia resided primarily in urban areas; by 1910, almost one fourth of all intellectuals had settled in Budapest. By far the majority had entered the ranks of the intelligentsia from the urban bourgeoisie, and by virtue of their educational credentials. Included among them were increasing numbers of non-Magyars–primarily Jews, Germans and (some) Slovaks–who elected to assimilate and thus to identify themselves with Magyar national aspirations.

Clearly the social makeup of the intelligentsia changed dramatically between 1825 and 1914. "Why was it [then]," Mazsu inquires, "that, while there was a significant shift in the intelligentsia's social composition and origins towards bourgeois strata, this shift did not show up in commensurate proportions in its lifestyle, system

of values, its political attitudes" (p. 223)? Why, in other words, did the intelligentsia continue to ape the nobility? And why did it "continue to act as bulwark for the existing structures of class power, hegemony and personal relations" (p. 225)? Drawing upon the work of Hanak and the democratic philosopher Istvan Bibo,[5] Mazsu concludes that the "antidemocratic and national content" (p. 225) of the system erected by the *Ausgleich* instilled in members of the intelligentsia a "gentry consciousness" (p. 225). Particularly important to the creation of that (allegedly) false consciousness were "the ideological content of secondary and higher education; ... titles and ranks, manners of approaching people, the familiar versus the formal form of address, style of clothing, behavior, the complicated symbolism pertaining to every aspect of life ... In addition to all this there were the public and cultural institutions, the network of clubs, casinos and other social organizations and associations which filled the socialization requirements of the intelligentsia" (pp. 225-26).

The persistence of aristocratic values and attitudes is all the more remarkable, according to Mazsu, when one bears in mind that the financial fortunes of a high percentage of the intelligentsia declined precipitously during the last decades of Dualism. As a result, many "intellectuals" had to forego former pleasures. Worse, they found it necessary to marry later in life, raise fewer children, and send their wives into the workplace. When even these measures did not suffice to keep them solvent, they incurred debts, took to moonlighting, and succumbed to the temptations of corruption. Only under the most extreme economic pressure did some begin to question the legitimacy of the existing social order. "It cannot be considered a coincidence," Mazsu notes, "that the bourgeois radicals, the Society of the Social Scientists and the circle around the [reformist] journal *Huszadik Szazad* [*Twentieth Century*], came mainly from the ranks of the professionals" (p. 184n).

Just how Mazsu's case study of "The Bishop's Palace," a Debrecen apartment building, fits into the book is hard to say, particularly when he himself observes that most members of the intelligentsia chose residences that differed from the one he has described at some length. This, though, is a minor cavil. A more important objection to this solid contribution to Hungarian social history is that it is based upon an unexamined assumption, namely that anything standing in the way of bourgeoisification and democratization is to be deplored. If it is undoubtedly true that the world of aristocracy was doomed, it does not necessarily follow that the democratic world possesses an unquestioned advantage. Tocqueville, who regarded the advance of social equality as providential, was well aware of what losses its achievement would likely entail.

Aristocracies often [de Tocqueville conceded] commit very tyrannical and inhuman actions, but they rarely entertain groveling thoughts; and they show a kind of haughty contempt of little pleasures, even whilst they indulge in them. The effect is greatly to raise the general pitch of society. In aristocratic ages, vast ideas are commonly entertained of the dignity, the power, and the greatness of man. These opinions exert their influence on those who cultivate the sciences, as well as on the rest of the community. They facilitate the natural impulse of the mind to the highest regions of thought; and they naturally prepare it to conceive a sublime, almost a divine, love of truth.[6]

It would be asserting too much to say that those words apply, without significant qualification, to aristocratic Hungary. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the generation of intellectuals that came of age around 1900 contained some of the finest minds in Europe–one has only to think of scientific geniuses such as John von Neumann, Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner, and Edward Teller. True, many of them stood in opposition to official Hungary, but that does not alter the fact that, as Michael Polanyi often had occasion to remark, they were the products of a society that allowed the best in them to emerge. Perhaps, after all, there is less reason to regret the slow pace of Hungary's social evolution than Mazsu is willing to admit.

Notes:

[1]. See Peter Hanak, "The Bourgeoisification of the Hungarian Nobility–Reality and Utopia in the 19th Century," *Etudes historiques hongroises* 1985, pp. 403-20. Bourgeoisification is the English form of *polgarosodas*, used in modern Hungarian historiography to denote the assumption of bourgeois attributes or attitudes towards civil society.

[2]. Ibid., p. 420.

[3]. Gyula Szekfu, *Harom Nemzedek: Egy hanyatlo kor tortenete* (Budapest: Elet, 1920); fifth, revised edition: *Harom Nemzedek, es ami utana kovetkezik* (Budapest: Kiralyi magyar egyetemi nyomda, 1938; reprinted by Budapest: AKV-Maecenas, 1989).

[4]. See my article, "intelligentsia," in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Modern East Europe, 1815-1989.*

[5]. See especially Bibo's "Ertelmiseg es szakszeruseg" in *Valogatott tanulmanyok, 1945-1949* (Budapest: Magveto Konyvkiado, 1986), pp. 505-22.

[6]. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Richard D. Heffner (New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 166.

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