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Jozsef Eotvos. *The Dominant Ideas of the Nineteenth Century and Their Impact on the State. Volume I: Diagnosis.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 543 pp. $56.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-360-3.

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Diagnosing the Dominant Ideas

D. Mervyn Jones has done students of the Habsburg Empire, and of European history in general, an immeasurable service with his translation into English of Jozsef Eotvos's classic *The Dominant Ideas of the Nineteenth Century and Their Impact on the State.* This is the first English translation of Eotvos's two volume work, a work previously available in Hungarian and German.[1] Only the first volume, *Diagnosis*, will be reviewed here; Volume II, *Remedy*, was unavailable at the time of this review.

As Eotvos may not be as well known as other Hungarian reformers (for example, Count Istvan Szechenyi, Lajos Kossuth, and Ferenc Deak), a short biographical sketch is necessary before turning to a discussion of *The Dominant Ideas.* Although his father and grandfather were both high-ranking officials in the Habsburg Empire, Baron Jozsef Eotvos (1813-1871) came to identify increasingly with the cause of Hungarian social and political reform. Two trends in nineteenth-century Europe influenced Eotvos above all: romanticism and liberalism.[2] The romantic influence can be seen in his literary production and in his belief about the social significance of literature.[3] The influence of European liberalism is most easily seen in Eotvos's political career and his role in the Hungarian social and political reform movement. Before the 1848 revolutions, Eotvos played a prominent role in both the Hungarian literary revival and in the reform movement. He served as the Minister of Religion and Education in the Hungarian Ministry from April to September 1848, resigning after the conflict between the Hungarian Ministry and Vienna became unavoidable.

While in self-imposed exile in Munich, Eotvos formulated his political thoughts in three treatises, the last two of which were the two volumes of *The Dominant Ideas.* [4] He returned to Hungary in December, 1850 and resumed both his political and literary careers. Allied with the Deak faction, Eotvos played a significant role in the years immediately preceding the *Ausgleich.* In the government established under Prime Minister Gyula Andrassy, he served once again as Minister of Religion and Education. His greatest political achievement was the Elementary Education Act (1 December 1868), which established compulsory education in Hungary and in which the educational autonomy of the churches and nationalities was protected.

Eotvos's political undertakings on problems of education and the nationalities were informed by the political theory he espoused in *The Dominant Ideas.* His analysis centered on two issues which he felt were responsible for the failure of the reform movement: 1) the rights of nationalities and 2) the organization of a modern constitutional state. He sought to develop a theory of the liberal state founded on the principle of constitutionalism which ensured the rights of individuals and nationalities. Eotvos attributed the failure of 1848 to the contradictions between two interpretations of the dominant ideas of the time: liberty, equality, and nationality; that is, there was a conflict between "the form in which the ideas have been propounded...and in the way in which attempts have been made to realize these ideas" (p. 88). The question which Eotvos sought to answer in Volume I of his work was whether the dominant ideas could be realized according to their revolutionary interpretations without precluding the existence of large states (p. 89).

Eotvos began his work by defining what he termed the three "dominant ideas" of the time. Liberty was defined as "the state in which people can use both their own abilities and the natural forces in their environment to achieve objectives of their own choice" (p. 91). Equality,

as applied to the state, was "the equal subjection or equal independence of everyone, the equal entitlement of all to exercise State power" (p. 91). The third principle, nationality, was defined as "the efforts of individual peoples to reach the situation to which all may feel themselves entitled by virtue of their past (historic rights), greatness or other attributes" (p. 91). Since the French Revolution, however, these ideas had been interpreted according to quite different, revolutionary interpretations.

The principal arguments that Eotvos made were, first, that these ideas, in their revolutionary interpretations, were mutually incompatible and second, that these ideas were incompatible with existing states. He began elaborating this argument in Chapter Two by demonstrating how the revolutionary interpretations of liberty and equality were incompatible. In his view, since the French Revolution, liberty had been interpreted as the principle of popular sovereignty–the "supremacy of the people" (p. 92). Liberty had thus become a corollary of the principle of equality, inasmuch as the principle of equality demanded that every individual have an equal share in the governing of the state. The theory of popular sovereignty, however, negated the principle of individual liberty because it granted to the state absolute power over the citizenry. Eotvos argued that the nature of power was to expand, particularly when those who exercised the power were the same who could set limits to it, i.e., the people. The coupling of liberty and popular sovereignty resulted in a situation in which the people's liberty was greater the more the power of the state expanded. As the power of the state expanded, however, the more individual liberty was limited; individual freedom of action decreased as spheres of life were increasingly assigned to the state (p. 93).

Eotvos contrasted the revolutionary interpretations of liberty and equality with their traditional interpretations. For Eotvos, the model was England. In England, liberty, according to its traditional interpretation, meant that no absolute power existed. The institutions of English government–the king, the Parliament, the courts–were all limited in their power. The British Constitution was, therefore, a "free" constitution. The traditional English interpretation of liberty supported, and was supported by, the concept of equality. All British subjects were equal before the law; their equality and their liberty were guaranteed by free institutions (pp. 94ff). "In a word," Eotvos concluded, "in Britain equality means equal liberty" (p. 96).

In Chapter Three, Eotvos next argued that the revolutionary principle of nationality was incompatible with the revolutionary principles of liberty and equality. He argued that nationality had, since the French Revolution, been determined by a common language and by appeals to historic rights. The national ideal was to organize states in accordance with linguistic communities. He argued that all national movements aspired to the same goal: "The basis of every national aspiration is a feeling of superiority; its aim, domination" (p. 110).

Again, Eotvos appealed to the example of England (and also to the United States and Switzerland), where the traditional, pre-revolutionary interpretation of nationality was still dominant. The traditional interpretation of nationality was devoid of linguistic meaning; rather, it signified a territorial loyalty. In this way, nationality had advanced the causes of liberty and equality: "Whichever country or period we consider, we find that the idea of nationality always recedes into the background in proportion as the concepts of liberty and equality advance towards realization; on the other hand national autonomy survives intact nowhere more than in countries where the principle of liberty and equality are not applied" (p. 118). Eotvos concluded, therefore, that the revolutionary, linguistic concept of nationality was incompatible with the concepts of liberty and equality.[5]

Eotvos turned, then, to a discussion of how the dominant ideas, in their revolutionary interpretations, were incompatible with existing states. If these revolutionary objectives were achieved, he argued in Chapters Four and Five, the result could only be the dissolution of existing states. He proceeded to analyze the various proposals which were being put forward to reconcile the dominant ideas with the structure of the state: 1) to build upon the existing order, 2) electoral reform, and 3) transition to a republic. In Chapters Eight through Ten, however, he explained how each of these solutions are found lacking.

Having done that, Eotvos concluded that it was not the dominant ideas themselves which were responsible for the tensions in society, but rather the ways in which these ideas were "commonly" understood and applied (pp. 349ff). The revolutionary interpretations of the dominant ideas–"that all the efforts to realize liberty and equality are in fact directed only to realizing as completely as possible in the State the idea of the supremacy of the people; the efforts launched in the name of the principle of nationality aim solely at obtaining absolute supreme power in the State for a particular nationality"–were therefore incompatible with European civilization, and that the realization of these ideas, interpreted as

such, would necessarily bring about the disintegration of existing states" (p. 350). Despotism would be the only result.

Eotvos foreshadowed Volume II of his work in the conclusion to this volume. He argued that the state must be based on the principle of liberty, rather than equality, nationality, or popular sovereignty: "...we must seek the preventative against this disaster not in the absolute power of a State built on democratic foundations but on the contrary *in the principle of liberty*, on which our social order has been based, but which has been disregarded in the modern organization of the State since the principle of liberty was replaced by that of the people's supremacy" (p. 365). In Volume II, Eotvos presented his proposal for reform of the state structure. Eotvos argued that only by limiting the realm of state power and by expanding the sphere of individual action would liberty be safeguarded.[6]

Eotvos's ideas bear some resemblance to the arguments of other contemporary European writers. That Eotvos and contemporaries such as Karl Marx, Friedrich List, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill (and this list is certainly not exhaustive) influenced each other must be considered. Eotvos primarily framed his arguments with an examination of classical history and the French Revolution. He tended, therefore, to make only passing references to his contemporaries, although he obviously read them. The exception was Francois Guizot, to whose work Eotvos often referred, particularly in relation to his understanding of European history. While Eotvos discussed communism and argued that communism would be the "logical development of the principles on which every present-day State institution is based," he made no specific reference to Marx (p. 313). To List he referred once as evidence that "even the cosmopolitan Germans" conformed to his conclusion that no nation would be content merely with equality of rights, but rather would be satisfied with nothing less than supremacy over those peoples around it (p. 111).

Although Eotvos differed from Tocqueville in his strong critique of nationalism, he was nonetheless strongly influenced by Tocqueville's pre-1848 writings. Eotvos was particularly influenced by Tocqueville's warning about the dangers of the tyranny of the majority and his emphasis on the role of the township and local self-government. Eotvos focused on the dangers of the concept of popular sovereignty in Volume I of *The Dominant Ideas*, and he explicitly endorsed Tocqueville's conclusions about the threat that absolute power posed to individual liberty by including a lengthy quotation from *De la democratie en Amerique* in his conclusion to Volume I (pp. 361-363). Similarly, in Volume II Eotvos, clearly influenced by Tocqueville, proposed a constitutional system in which the autonomous township would replace the county system. Tocqueville and Eotvos did indeed correspond with each other, and Eotvos saw Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* as an endorsement of his own conclusions in *The Dominant Ideas*.[7] Similarly, Jones notes that upon the publication of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in 1859, Eotvos was quite pleased to discover how similar his ideas were to Mill's, and even sent him a copy of *The Dominant Ideas* (p. 39).

Although *The Dominant Ideas* has often been described as a classic treatise on the concept of nationality, it appears that Eotvos regarded it even more as a treatise on the concept of liberty. What will strike most readers, however, is how accurately Eotvos predicted the dangers of nationalism. He concluded that nationalism was indeed the most threatening danger to European civilization, a conclusion which has been borne out by events of the twentieth century. His catastrophic view of the principle of nationality could, however, be considered somewhat overdone. Eotvos argued that all nationalities strive for domination, regardless of whether the nationality in question is the dominant nationality in the state. He argued that those "oppressed" nationalities which claim to strive for equal rights and autonomy would seek domination once equal rights had been achieved (p. 112). Historians of the Slovak national movement, for example, would certainly counter Eotvos and argue that this movement only sought autonomy, not domination.[8]

D. Mervyn Jones is responsible for the translating, editing, annotation, and introductory essay for this first translation of Eotvos's *The Dominant Ideas*. Jones prefaces Eotvos's work with his own introduction. This is largely a biographical introduction to Eotvos's careers as both a writer and a reformer. Jones is, however, at his weakest when discussing the events of 1848 and how they influenced Eotvos in writing *The Dominant Ideas*. His discussion of the events of 1848 is brief and does not provide an adequate framework for the development of Eotvos's ideas. Similarly, he only refers to the content of *The Dominant Ideas* in relation to Eotvos's other works and his practical efforts as a politician. *The Dominant Ideas* is an important work not only for students of the Habsburg Empire, but also for students of European intellectual history and of the history of nationalism. For those readers less acquainted with Eotvos and the history of Hungary, more discussion of the context of 1848