

The Concept of Politics and "The Political" in Modern Hungarian Political Thought from the 16th to the 20th Century

Research question, relevance of the research and literature review

Notions of politics and the political, even if only implicitly, frames our thinking about political problems, trends, and events. Concepts of politics do not come before judging actual political issues, still, considering how Western (including Hungarian) political thought developed over the course of the past centuries, research into politics often fails to address the political presuppositions of political thought. The research aim of the present project is to uncover this fundamental level of political thinking, and therefore it poses the following research question: what was understood and implied as politics in the practice of Hungarian political thought from the 16th to the 20th century. While groundbreaking works on the subject (Takács 2007, Bene 2007, Szijártó - Szűcs 2012, Fazekas – Miru – Velkey 2013, Szűcs 2017, Schlett 2018, Hörcher – Lorman 2019, Balázs – Molnár 2020) provide a good starting point for our analysis, the specific question of how politics and the political was understood has never been examined before.

Our research question is all the more relevant as contemporary political theory has taken a political turn once more acknowledging that politics has its own rules and political thinking should be understood in its own right as a specific activity not only in the case of primary political action but also when it comes to political science, political theory, intellectual history, and literature. This multifaceted political turn involves various enterprises of scholarship. Michael Freeden has been arguing for a political understanding of political thinking for a long time to be applied well beyond to his well-known area of ideology research (Freeden 2014, 2015). Political realism has been uncovered once again as a challenge to the depoliticizing trends in mainstream liberal political philosophy (Williams 2005, Geuss 2008, Sleat 2018, Szűcs 2017) and with it a longer history of politics as politics has also been recovered (Bew 2018, McQueen 2018). Following and broadening the seminal works of Chantal Mouffe, agonist approach attempts to reinstall conflict as a political value in thinking about politics (Mouffe 2013, Horváth 2018).

Nevertheless, there is a missing link between these two streams of literature, the history of Hungarian political thought on the one hand, and the repoliticization of theory on the other. Our project connects these two aspects to address the question missing from the scholarship: how the concepts of “politics” and “the political” have been understood in the Hungarian political tradition and political thinking? Arguably, the answers to the question of the nature of politics have never been born *ex nihilo*, theoretical reflections and practical answers have always been embedded into the local (national) traditions of political practice and political reflection. Consequently, while these theoretical findings will help us better understand what is happening in the particular context of Hungarian political thought, studying the question of how Hungarian scholars and intellectuals from the late 16th century on reflected on this first question of politics has a direct contemporary relevance as well. We shall be better positioned to understand what is at stake in the theoretical debates about politics and the political, if our own way of thinking is informed by our findings of the bases of political thought in earlier contexts.

Theoretical background

While usually students of political science, history or philosophy address the first question of politics rather in a later phase of their research career, it is also clear that the questions of “What is politics?” or “What is (the) political?” are always present implicitly in all activities and reflections on politics. There were several attempts in the intellectual history of Western civilization which analyzed this question, including the language of reason of state or the discipline of ‘politica’ in the 16th and 17th centuries, or the German study of Staatslehre, but the most sophisticated and inspiring answers were born certainly in the 20th century. While in the German intellectual tradition Carl Schmitt has been regarded as one of the most prominent scholars giving a classically inspired, yet highly original answer to this question, in the British tradition it was Michael Oakeshott who’s simple and highly practice-oriented reflections on the substance of politics gave a different but still imaginative answer to the first question of politics. We suggest to take inspiration from these outstanding writers in compiling an inventory of the most important answers to the question of “what is politics”. Beyond these two intellectual trends, the recent reflections of an Italian political scientist (Stefano Bartolini 2018) will also be useful as a guide in exploring the terrain of the ‘political’. By surveying these classical authors and the new approach to the old problem of the

political turn in political theory it becomes apparent that these classic approaches might be mobilized as conceptual toolkits.

Today, there is no scholarly or public reflection on the concept and boundaries of politics and the political without referring to *Carl Schmitt*. He put forward his highly influential and radical account of politics in the 1920s. The core of his idea (as well as his experience of the dissolving state-centred and state-defined politics) was that politics cannot be understood by tracing it back and reducing it to some other fields of human and social activity such as economy, morality, or law. Politics cannot be conceived as mere application of pre-existing norms or necessities but only taking into account its own specificities. Therefore, Schmitt heavily criticized any attempt that promised the elimination (neutralization) of politics. Neutralization and denying the specificities of politics results, in fact, in the loss of measures of political action as in a war launched in order to end all wars. Schmitt's famous concept of sovereignty as the authority over declaring a purely political (i.e. extra-legal) state (Schmitt 2005) is not merely a concept of constitutional theory but a model of any genuine political action implying the ever-present possibility of disrupting and re-establishing an institutional order. His concept of the political is existential inasmuch as it grasps a criterion of intensity, famously manifesting itself in the distinction between friend and enemy which always implies the "real possibility" of radically negating each other's existence (Schmitt 2007). That is, a conflict is political from the very moment as it might result in intensifying to the point where the two opposing entities consider their physical elimination. From this it follows that Schmitt's political is an expansive account of politics. Politics in Schmitt's sense cannot have boundaries since it is the political that, through identifying the friend and the enemy as well as the intensity of enmity, sets its own limits.

While Schmitt's specifically German account on politics might be best grasped as a boundless and existential phenomenon, the British tradition is existentially less demanding and more practice oriented. Michael Oakeshott's writings should be regarded as one of the most famous recent British accounts of the concept of politics. Oakeshott, in his Inaugural Lecture at the London School of Economics (1951) opened a new discourse in British political theory, by dismissing two concepts of politics. One of them is that which regards it an empirical activity, politics without policy. The opposite concept regards politics as an ideological activity, one based on principles, abstract theoretical contracts, like freedom, equality, racial purity or happiness. Oakeshott is very skeptical about the applicability of either of these schemes of politics. He explains his own alternative with the help of the example of cookery. As cookery books cannot teach the art of cooking, so books on ideology cannot teach us political activity. Politics, or more properly, political activity is rather dependent upon "a traditional manner of behavior". The springs of political activity do not come either "from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behavior". The problem with that tradition is that it is not explicit, its boundaries are vague, and the internal logic not easy to identify. This is why this concept of politics can be called a soft and weak concept, comparing politics to a culture, which you can only learn by being brought up in it. Yet the most famous of Oakeshott's metaphor of political activity is that of a voyage without a final destination: "in political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy, and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behavior in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion."

More recent accounts on the historical trajectory of the concepts of politics and the political rely heavily on both Schmitt and Oakeshott but include further reflections from the political thinking of the 20th century. Stefano Barotolini's most recent work (2018) starts with a historical overview of how horizontal and vertical conceptualizations of politics have altered from the ancient times up to now. He argues that the main contributions of the political theory and political science of the 20th century could be regrouped into six main conceptual families as far as the concept of the politics and the political is concerned: (1) *Politics as activities*: a common sense approach which focuses on activities labelled with the adjective 'political' such as voting, legislative activities, party propaganda, trade union-employer negotiations, etc. (2) *Politics as institutional locus*: various institutions of the political system provide the scene where political actions are performed. An action will be political as far as it is located within one of the institutions of the political system. (3) *Politics as conflict*: here politics is defined as that activity by which different interests within a given unit of rule are reconciled by giving them a share of power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the community. Conflicts may also exist without power being exercised; this is exactly a situation coined non-political. (4) *Politics as a specific means: power and coercion*: the simplest account argues that where there is power there is ipso facto politics. Whatever power relation, wherever it manifests itself, it indicates and identifies a political relationship. (5) *Politics as allocation*: this stream of literature focuses on what politics produces; on its outputs and results, on its effects. As

Laswell's most influential book's title put it: *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How*. Easton argues that politics is about distribution and allocation of values understood in a broad sense. (6) *Politics as aggregation*: these economic theories of politics argue that individuals have preferences and these preferences are mutually incompatible or jointly inconsistent, and that it is impossible that everybody should be simultaneously and completely satisfied. In such a situation politics is about aggregating individual preferences into a collective choice, the political system is a decentralized exchange system that defines the (constitutionally) acceptable solutions of such problems.

As a preliminary inventory, the works of Schmitt, Oakeshott and Bartolini will serve as potential theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the concept of political and the political in the history of Hungarian political thought. But efforts will be made to integrate into the theoretical panorama also some works of the Hungarian research community, including the relevant works of J. Kis, Gy. Bence and István Schlett. Obviously, there is a need for further work on this field as well, to connect mainstream political philosophy with the most promising conclusions of the history of political thought (Hörcher 2015).

Historical case studies

Based on the above theoretical considerations, the research will take different case studies to uncover various implicit or explicit definitions and usages of the term politics and political in the history of Hungarian political thought.

As for the 18th century idea of politics, we will focus first of all on Montesquieu's impact on the *Testament politique de Joseph second* (1791), attributed to Ignác Martinovics, and through this example to focus on the formation of the idea of the political via Montesquieu in Hungarian political thought, concentrating on the period from 1770 to 1840. Founding studies on Montesquieu's influence were published during the first decades of the 20th century (Kont 1902, Eckhardt 1924, Baranyai 1920) and on some recent articles on Montesquieu's Hungarian reception. They are mainly of philological interest, detecting the presence of Montesquieu's ideas in texts written by Hungarian authors (Éva Ring, 2001, Olga Penke – Péter Balázs, 2012). This literary scope however, although thorough and meticulous, is not centred on the formation of Hungarian political thought, so we have to reposition our focus, in order to look for answers about the frame of the discourse. (*Eszter Kovács: The Reception of Montesquieu's Political Theory in Hungarian Political Thought – Recent Additions*).

Beyond the aristocracy and the gentry, cities played also a crucial role in the political life of Hungary, consequently the concept of politics as formulated by urban elites should also be reinterpreted. The cities of the country did not have a well-defined constitutional role up until late in the 19th century, except for the different administrative ranks they acquired, with the free royal cities on the top of the hierarchy. This research will focus on the debates in the 1830s and 1840s about the constitutional status and political loyalty of cities. It will argue, that much of that debate did not tackle the heart of the problem of the constitutional disregard for newly emerging urban centres, and concentrated on the simple issue of the representation of the towns on the Diet. While liberal reformists and traditional municipalists of the Diet took the view of politics mediated by Werbőczy and the ancient constitution, one of the most refined "ideologists" of the merits of urban politics presented self-government as the way to civility and refinement. This author, János Hetényi, in his book (Hetényi 1841) offered a vision of politics, which was a combination of a "neo- or civic republican" position and a discourse of politeness. It will also be tested, if Heinz Schilling's "urban republicanism" is applicable in connection with it. The research will show how these two traditions of looking at politics (the ancient constitutionalism of the gentry versus the urban discourse of politeness) compared to each other, taking into account parallel histories in Central and Western Europe (*Ferenc Hörcher: Collision of concepts of politics in the debate over the „question of towns” in the Hungarian Age of Reform*). Since Hans Baron's essential study and the Cambridge School, the inherently political nature of humanism has been an indisputable fact in research. Most recent results have shown that the humanist tradition preceding Machiavelli had in itself a significant and original political potential (Hankins, 2019). This humanist paradigm, fertilised by both the Christian humanism of Erasmus and the empirical pragmatism represented by Machiavelli, then became the basis for the new political thought that emerged from the end of 16th century, culminating partly in natural law and contract theories and partly in the literature of reason of state. In Hungary, the Ottoman occupation and decline of the medieval kingdom was both a challenge and paralysing impediment for the political elite, who, as elsewhere in Europe, were members of the humanist *res publica litteraria*. This intellectual-political elite existed in its most developed shape in Transylvania during the Báthory era, and its most important representative was chancellor Farkas Kovacsóczy. He was simultaneously influenced by Erasmus,

Machiavelli and Lipsius, and also had important interest in the Venetian and Polish authors of state theory. The project will attempt to trace the Hungarian antecedents of the humanist political paradigm before Kovacsóczy, and to identify the most important representatives and trends in contemporary Hungarian political thought. This will help us to understand the extent to which Hungarian humanists resonated with the fundamental changes in European political thought during the 16th century. (Gábor Petneházi, *Between virtue politics and reason of state. Politics and humanism in 16th century Hungary*)

Since economics issues have always taken a prominent place in politics, it is also worth to uncover the views held by some of the most influential thinkers of Hungarian political economy. Although by the mid-20th century political economy evolved into mere economics, the two disciplines were far from identical: while economics focused on purely economic processes and laws (and, by consequence, regards the state as merely one agent among others), political economy regarded the fields of politics and economy as ontologically interrelated (Milonakis-Fine 2009). By this ontological relationship we mean not some kind of moral duty the state supposedly had to perform (e.g. maximize prices in cases of shortages, raise tariffs to regulate foreign trade etc.), but certain economic institutions or phenomena, that could not have come into being without the state (e.g. taxes, customs barriers or the monetary system itself). Defined as a state-centered economic approach, political economy has a direct connection to politics, consequently analyzing the works of Gergely Berzeviczy, Ágoston Trefort, János Fogarasi and Gyula Kautz, i.e. the main representants of political economic thinking in the 18-19th century Hungary, is a very promising research aim. (Ádám Smrcz: *The Nature of Politics through the Prism of 18-19th-Century Hungarian Political Economy*)

State-centered views of politics have dominated throughout the 19th century, but an incremental separation of political science from legal studies occurred in the second half of it. While political studies have still focused on state-activities and regarded the state as the center stage of political struggles, it became more and more obvious that political studies and legal studies have different subjects. Consequently, almost parallel with the replacement of the historical school of legal studies and thinking by the dogmatic view of public law, the scientific approach to politics became an autonomous field of research in Hungarian Law Faculties (Arczt 2004). This separation of political studies from legal studies has been also nicely reflected in the process how political science got its own Chair at Pázmány Péter University in Budapest (1873). The subsequent holders of this Chair, Dezső Szilágyi, Győző Concha and Pál Szandter all have written textbooks and introductions to the study of politics. It is self-evident that the concept and the conception of politics and the political elaborated in these textbooks are worth for an analysis if we want to understand what was the meaning of the terms ‘politics’ and ‘political’ in the academic context in the last decades of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century (Kálmán Pócza: *The concept of politics in the first Hungarian textbooks of political studies from the late 19th century*)

While a scientific approach presupposes some kind of keeping distance from party politics, scrutinizing the understanding of politics as reflected in the writings and speeches of active politicians might give a sharp contrast to the scientific approach to politics. Consequently, we will focus on one of the most well known and respected politicians of the Dual Monarchy, i.e. István Gorove. Gorove's political thought can be interpreted within the paradigm of liberalism. Besides his speeches, pamphlets and journal articles, his works include *Nyugot. Utazás külföldön* (West. A journey abroad) (Gorove 1844) in which he recollected his 1842–1843 journey to Western Europe, and reflected on the social and political conditions he experienced there. Although largely forgotten outside of circles of professional historians, Gorove was a genuine political thinker. He did not have strong ambitions for leadership, in practical politics he followed Széchenyi, Kossuth, Deák and Tisza, but he had his own point of view on the main political issues of the day, which would make the analysis of his texts – with the aim of reconstructing how he conceived politics and what was his approach to the political – an important contribution to the traditional account of the last third of the history of 19th-century Hungarian political thought (Kálmán Tóth: *The Concept of Politics in the Works of István Gorove*)

It was during Gorove's days in government, that the Nationalities Act of 1868 was accepted by the Parliament. It had a fresh approach to some aspects of its vexed problem, yet contemporary politicians and journalists as well as later historians criticized its normative content heavily. An analysis of the concept of politics, nation and nationalities behind it will certainly turn out to be useful, in the light of the nationalism and nationhood theories of the 20th-21st centuries. It should look at its understanding of the nature of citizenship (in its contemporary sense of the relationship between the state and the subjects), of the success and failure criteria of the explicit assimilatory strategy (again cf. France) and of the implications for Hungary's security, given the ambitions of Hungary's neighbours to integrate co-ethnics into their state – the proposition being that nation and language were co-

terminous (foreshadowing the Little Entente of the interwar period). This last proposition, of course, left deep marks on Central Europe, as the political history of the 20th century amply proves. (*György Schöpflin: The concept of politics, nation and nationalities in the Nationalities Law from 1868*).

The narrative of nations and nationalism determined largely the political discourse of the 19th but even the 20th century. The cult of the nation and its symbolism became pervasive all through Europe, in the wake of the French Revolution. The relationship between this secular, political ‘religion’ and traditional Christianity has always remained complicated: while in France, the introduction of the new cult also involved a violent dechristianization campaign, in other parts of Europe (including Hungary) traditional Christianity became deeply entwined with national sentiment and imagery. Our research project aims also to explore the different aspects of this intricate process from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, which may be described as a politicization of religion, but also as a religionization of politics. Some examples from political rhetoric and rituals are well known (especially from the time of the 1848-49 war of independence and its aftermath, or the interwar period in the twentieth century), but a systematic investigation into their history remains largely absent. (*Tamás Nyirkos: Nation, religion, and politics in Hungary in the 19th and 20th centuries*).

Revolutions and wars have opened up elementary, previously unimaginable political possibilities, and from this perspective, the relevance of the pre-war liberal political common language, understanding and set of problems have decreased significantly. Even if a some historical experiences of radical political thinking and political action were available, especially the French Revolution and the line of French and German theorists drawing from it, the world of politics seemed civilized, tamed at once, the interference in which was seen legitimate only temporarily (the possibility of a Roman type dictatorship remained was known eg. in Hungary, in 1848). This is what changed radically in the first half of the 20th century. The greatest and most well-known interpretation of this phenomenon was that of Carl Schmitt. Hungarian political theory also followed these changes, to which – among other factors - the first and foremost incentive was the popularity of the methods of intellectual history. One of such examples was the high-quality work of Gyula Kornis’s *Államférfi* (or *The Statesman*, which was also published in French). Two significant works by Aurél Kolnai, *The War Against the West* and the *Der Inhalt der Politik* (the latter can be read in English and Hungarian, while the former has recently been published in German) also belong to this line of thought, and deserve more in-depth analysis. Kolnai opposed Schmitt’s views employing the then novel methods of phenomenology. We intend to rethink this intellectual environment along with these writings within the framework of the history of Hungarian political theory. (*Zoltán Balázs, The Concept of the Political in an Approach Combining Intellectual History and Phenomenology*).

Surely, the state-centered view of politics has been challenged in Europe, as well as in Hungary by the emerging social sciences (especially by sociology). A breakthrough and a radical change has been achieved by Carl Schmitt in the interwar period. Carl Schmitt has been present in Hungarian political thought since the early 1920s; that is, he has been read since the publishing of his key political works. The main encounters with Schmitt took place, first, at the occasion of his visits in Budapest in the early 1940s and, second, during the Communist era when he was theoretically annihilated by György Lukács (Cs. Kiss 2004). In this part of the project the following questions will be addressed with respect of the pre- and post-1945 period: 1. How did the Schmittian account of politics contribute to an autonomous approach to politics in pre-war Hungarian political thought? 2. What is the role of Schmitt’s reception in the duality of theoretical depoliticization and ideological politicization during the Communist era? By revisiting theoretical sources, the research aims at uncovering how politics was grasped as a distinct and non-derivable kind of human activity, thereby contributing to recognizing the autonomy of politics but also how eliminating Schmitt after 1945 revealed depoliticization as a self-refuting gesture. The wider significance of the research is that it attempts to use the Schmittian framework not only to interpret the patterns of reception but also to describe the wavering between politicization and depoliticization as a main trend in 20th century Hungarian political thought (*Attila Gyulai: Politicization and depoliticization with Carl Schmitt in Hungary before and after 1945*).

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