

Writing the nation and reframing early modern intellectual history in Hungary

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Abstract The article traces the development of Hungarian intellectual history of the early modern period from the emergence of the national romantic constructions of literary history to the recent turn towards contextualist and conceptual history. One of its main findings is the ideological importance of this period for the formation of the national canon, as it became a central point of reference for the emerging local methodological tradition of intellectual history, even if it was often compartmentalized under other categories. From this perspective, the article puts particular emphasis on ideological constructions seeking to define the nation and depict the emergence of modern national identity. This finding also offers a vantage point for analyzing the interplay between literary history and the socio-culturally focused approaches, which can be considered the main framework for the developments of the last two decades, when these local historiographical traditions entered into an interesting dialogue with the Western European and American schools of intellectual history. Along these lines, while pointing out the discursive continuities with the previous paradigms, which are shaping even the contemporary historiographical production, the article also ponders the ways in which the inherited (post-)romantic constructions can be successfully challenged.

Keywords Intellectual history · Hungary · Early modern period · National romanticism · Positivism · *Geistesgeschichte* · Marxism · Contextualism

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The present article seeks to provide an overview of the development of Hungarian intellectual history of the early modern period. It argues that due to the crucial importance of this period for the formation of the national canon, its analysis was always closely connected to the debates on national identity. Tracing the main “paradigms” from the romantic beginnings through “national classicism,” the dominance of *Geistesgeschichte*, the varieties of Marxist history, and finally the consequences of the linguistic turn, it points out the discursive continuities determining in many ways even the contemporary historiographical production, but also inquires into the possibility of challenging the (post-)romantic constructions.

The literary canonization process between national romanticism and positivism

Our topic is an ideal test case for an overview of Hungarian intellectual history given that in Hungary, throughout the last two centuries, the early modern period has been considered eminently important in view of the emergence of modern national culture. Trying to locate the roots of ‘national literature’, the different historiographical narratives all agreed in contrasting the “Latin” Middle Ages to the vernacular literature of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. This becomes clear when one reads Ferenc Kölcsey’s *National traditions* (1826), one of the formative texts of modern Hungarian literary history (Kölcsey 1988). It was probably the most important romantic statement of cultural nation-building, and succeeded in linking the discussions on “national literature” and “Hungarian character.” In Kölcsey’s reading, national cultures evolved in congruence with a normative past; symbolized by mythical forerunners. In this context he extolled the classical Greek culture, unfolding organically from its archaic stems, assimilating the foreign influences step by step, thus retaining its own integrity.

Measured to these high standards of organic development, Hungarian culture (and arguably all modern European cultures) suffered from serious inadequacies, due to the fact that the public memory almost completely erased the references to a heroic age and there was a conspicuous lack of a national mythology. According to Kölcsey, this *lacuna* did not imply the absence of “ancient glories,” as there was indirect proof of the ancient pedigree of Hungarians, but the historical hurricanes sweeping the country in the past 1,000 years, and also the fateful rejection of the pre-Christian cultural heritage in the Middle Ages, broke the normative continuity. As the ‘modern’ Hungarians were found to be in an uneasy relationship to their glorious past, and manifested a lack of interest towards their ancient virtues, the nation was judged to be in danger of “losing itself.” The writers trying to shape the national discourse had to face the situation that in the Hungarian tradition there were no surviving epic traditions comparable to Homer, or Ossian (‘whose’ songs were paradigmatic for any attempt at recreating the national epic in the first half of the nineteenth century).

In Kölcsey’s opinion, instead of searching for a lost epic in vain, the constitutive figures of the literary tradition, especially the authors of the early modern period, were to be reconsidered, inquiring whether these oeuvres could provide a symbolic canon for the national awakening. Thus, in the last section of the essay, he turns to

Hungarian literature from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, deploring the inorganic dominance of Latin over the vernacular. He contrasts unfavorably the art of the “international” humanist Janus Pannonius, who wrote in Latin, to the vernacular Baroque poets, whom he saw at least partially compatible with the ideal ‘national canon,’ although he criticized their general fascination with Latinity and the Roman culture in general, which for him represented an inauthentic option. At the same time, lacking the stylistic meta-language, this contrast did not evolve into a full-fledge normative counter-position of two periods as “good” or “bad,” as the entire tradition was taken to be extremely problematic, but also the only available building material for a cultural regeneration.

In the post-romantic vision of literary history—emerging in the 1860–70s—ultimately everything was taken to be pre-history which preceded the synthesis of the full-fledged national literature regarded as the synthesis of folk art and high culture (emulating the Hegelian model of *affirmation*, *negation*, and *negation of negation*). Consequently, the early modern context was usually described in terms of the antecedents of the national canon. This did not mean lack of cultural and even political interest in the early modern period, as the cleavage of pro-Habsburg and “independentist” factions (which was related, although did not overlap completely with the clash of Catholics and Protestants) had important repercussions in the mid-nineteenth century and also triggered two competing narratives of Hungarian history. In the canonizing discourse of literary history, however, a rupture was detected between the early modern and contemporary cultural configuration. This is exemplified by the canonic history of Hungarian literature, authored by the most important literary historian of the nineteenth-century, Ferenc Toldy, where the early modern period (labeled as “modern period”) is described as a tripartite age containing a period of upsurge, of “first blossoming,” and of decline (Toldy 1987). While it would be an overstatement to claim that Toldy treated this epoch as a prelude to the description of the national revival literature, the mere spatial allocation (the fourth part covering the last 90 years is more than four times longer than the third covering the period between 1526 and 1772) indicates a certain hierarchy.

The image of the early modern period in the competing paradigms of *Geistesgeschichte* and *Volksgeschichte*

This teleological perspective was, in an important sense, undermined by the paradigm of *Geistesgeschichte*, which reached Hungary in the 1910s. Inspired by the taxonomy of art history, it sought to identify what was Hungarian and universal at the same time, in view of the different periods of cultural history.¹ In a sense, this theoretical framework problematized the implicit hierarchy devised by “national classicism,” although, in practice, it was not entirely devoid of teleological pretensions.

¹ On the reception of *Geistesgeschichte* in Hungarian historiography, see Vardy (1976). From the perspective of the history of philosophical schools see Percz (1998).

A characteristic example for this ambiguity is the book of János Horváth on the origins Hungarian humanism, which was probably the most influential work of literary history in the whole inter-war period (Horváth 1935). In fact, Horváth's position was not fully derived from the precepts of *Geistesgeschichte*—it was rather a “negotiation” with “national classicism,” starting already at the turn of the century, and formulated in a program-article as early as 1908. Most importantly, he repudiated the exclusive concentration on the nineteenth century as the final culmination of development. At the same time, he was far from being a relativist, as he also posited a normative framework, according to which literary history should fit into the teleology of nation-state building. Along these lines, his interpretations were marked by a series of profound ambiguities. Repudiating the “deductivist” literary theories of the previous generation, he concentrated on the socio-cultural connections of literature, but nonetheless subscribed to an “idealist” position, according to which the individual occurrences all fit into the unfolding of the “Absolute Spirit.” This claim can be seen in his assertion that the Renaissance and the Reformation originally formed one sequence, representing the same spiritual craving for “rebirth.” For him, the Renaissance was a European spiritual trend, which was ultimately leading towards the creation of “national cultures.” In this process, the most important points of crystallization were the emergence of vernacularism and the strengthening feeling of national allegiance.

In view of the crucial issue of the formation of the “national culture,” Horváth sought to map the interaction of the local traditions with imported ideas, localizing the foreign paradigms and describing their itinerary of indigenization. In the Hungarian context, this process meant the “division” of literary culture, as the Latin and the vernacular literatures parted company, finally resulting in the dissolution of the Latin branch. From Horváth's perspective, Latinity was not “inorganic” (as in the romantic vision), but there was an ultimate gravitation towards vernacularization. Along these lines, he also documented the gradual assimilation of the humanist canon—shifting from “court humanism” around the exemplary Renaissance ruler King Matthias, to the less concentric “chancellorial” version. Therefore, in Horváth's interpretation, the crucial dynamism is not between “local” and “foreign” ideas, but between two “personalized” principles—that of the “medieval” Saint Stephen and the “Renaissance” Matthias—both representing a synthesis of imported and autochthonous elements.

In contrast, Horváth's friend, the historian Gyula Szekfű, was more deliberate in his instrumentalization of the precepts of *Geistesgeschichte*, though, once again, we cannot speak of a theoretical application, rather a careful selection of certain interpretative devices. In the inter-war period, various attempts were made to launch a Hungarian *Geistesgeschichte* as a new *organon* of the humanities. But this paradigm never reached a total hegemony, and in the most authoritative publications marking its breakthrough, we can find a series of thematic and personal compromises with positivism for example (Hóman 1931). In his most important works,² Szekfű returned to Meinecke's ideas, rather than to some more abstract

² See Szekfű (1989) (First ed.: 1920, Revised ed.: 1934); Hóman and Szekfű (1935–1936); and his collection of studies, Szekfű (1942).

methodological canon. Thus, once again, he considered the emergence of the nation state as the central question, but his tone, after the traumas of 1918–1919 (the democratic and Communist revolutions and the “dismemberment” of historical Hungary), was not so optimistic, stressing that the emergence of nation-statehood in the region caused the collapse of the multi-ethnic Hungarian Empire. Whereas in his early works, Szekfű concentrated on *Staatsräson* as the central concept, later he turned to the looser concept of “political sense,” used as a retrospective (and prospective) legitimization for the dominant position of the Hungarian “state-nation” in the Carpathian Basin.

These ‘imported’ ideas were couched in an intricate net of internal Hungarian “discursive traditions,” in Szekfű’s case, being rooted in the Catholic/pro-Habsburg political subculture. The second part of the nineteenth century was in fact marked by a fight of two canons (rooted in the divergence of Catholic and Protestant denominational traditions and the divergent historical experiences of Western Hungary and Eastern Hungary with Transylvania, and also twisted by the dilemmas posed by the *Ausgleich*). With the dissolution of the Monarchy, the debate around the Dualist structure became obsolete, but the socio-cultural and discursive cleavage survived. The unprecedented events of 1918–1919 undermined the traditional references to the normativity of historical continuity and exposed the need to rephrase the national discourse in terms of the novel situation. Two major discourses of national identity emerged from the crisis. First, a nostalgic exaltation of certain elements of the Monarchy-establishment and the search for a scapegoat to explain the disruption of this historical continuity; second, the “new discourse” of a homogenous ethno-national statehood. This latter had two potential directions, one leading to ethno-radicalism and eventually to the extreme right, the other emerging as part of the populist ideology in the thirties, rather on the left of the political spectrum.

Adjusted to the new historiographical developments, early modern history was also considerably reshaped. Certain categories gained new actuality: for example, in the twenties, the authoritarian regime launched a “Neo-Baroque” project—seeking to establish a new period of spiritual integrity and translucent authority. Obviously, this was in a certain sense congruent with the narrative of *Geistesgeschichte*. It was not completely accidental, then, that, in Szekfű’s historiographical landscape, the “Renaissance Monarchy” posed less vital questions of interpretation. In a way, he seemed to imply that this period had less to do with the political culture of the 1920–1930s than the ensuing historical epochs. In his opinion, the crucial division of identity could be located in the sixteenth century, resulting in the emergence of a “great-Hungarian” (pro-Habsburg) orientation, opposed by a “small-Hungarian” (Protestant-Transylvanian) option. This choice was obviously rooted less in theoretical-methodological considerations than in the internal clash of historiographical narratives. As a matter of fact, it was also possible to bring together *Geistesgeschichte* with a historicist version of Hungarian nationalism; for example in the work of one of Szekfű’s closest followers, the Protestant Tibor Joó, who posited Matthias’ empire as a normative model for a “resurrected” Greater Hungary.

For Szekfű, however, the most important period was doubtlessly the Hungarian Baroque, which he localized in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. The novelty of his perspective was the emphasis on the later part, i.e. after the 1711 compromise

between the Court and the Hungarian Estates. Szekfű contrasted the misery of the seventeenth century to the “silent but steady” development of the eighteenth century, resulting in integration into the Habsburg imperial context, and producing a Catholic spiritual culture. In his reading, this process meant that Hungary finally accepted the geopolitical “realities,” and tried to reach the best arrangement within the framework of the given imperial setting.

Although, in the mid-thirties Szekfű came to challenge Neo-Baroque as a meta-political ideology legitimizing the neo-conservative regime, the framework of this interpretation remained crucial for him throughout his career. At the same time, his synthesis came to be challenged from different directions. On the one hand, a new generation of neo-Latin philologists set out to reconsider the historiographical image of humanism; on the other hand, alongside with the emergence of the populist political discourse, a new version of the post-Independentist, Protestant narrative was formed, preparing a counter-blow against Szekfű’s *labanc* (pro-Catholic, pro-Habsburg) history.

The protagonists of the new philological research were themselves in the ambiguous position of both continuing and repudiating the previous canon. We can see this in an exemplary manner in the writings of Tibor Kardos, one of the most prolific young authors on early modern intellectual history in the late-thirties. In fact, Kardos was also turning back to Meinecke’s reading of Machiavellism as a formative interpretation. Of course, the basic problem with applying Meinecke’s narrative to the Hungarian context was that while the German historian duly placed *Staatsräson* into the Baroque context, in the Hungarian reading it was hard to identify a fully fledged autochthonous state-building project under the aegis of the Baroque *Zeitgeist*, dominated by pro-Habsburg Counter-Reformation. At the same time, King Matthias provided the only available example of something like a “national centralization.” This occurrence naturally pushed Kardos into a direction of *protochronism*, seeking to locate a kind of indigenous Machiavellism *avant la lettre*, in the literary portrait of Matthias by the Polish-Italian humanist Callimachus Experiens (Filippo Buonaccorsi) (Kardos 1931).

As it was not hard to see that this detour was quite controversial, Kardos came to assert that the “Hungarian Renaissance” was, in fact, a more *longue durée* tradition. He claimed that the Hungarians’ “ancient system of selection” overlapped with the humanist idea of “natural nobility,” and there was also a tradition of Hungarian Latinity, being favorably disposed to the Renaissance revalorization of classical antiquity. More importantly, however, he extended the concept “forward” too, creating a link between the Renaissance and the national revival of the nineteenth century. While, for Horváth, the age of humanism ended with the Reformation, in Kardos’ vision, the humanist literary culture was deeply embedded in the educational system. Retaining Szekfű’s theory about the “elongated” Baroque, he came to distinguish between “two Baroques:” a “heroic” (in the seventeenth century) and a “socialized” (eighteenth century) one, but he asserted that, in important ways, they were continuing the humanist culture (Kardos even used the term “Baroque humanism”) (Kardos 1942). It is important to stress that while projecting the concept of humanism backward was a rather problematic endeavor, Kardos’s hypothesis about the continuity of humanist cultural patterns into the

literary and political culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proved fruitful and in many ways converges with the findings of researchers tracing the *longue durée* impact of civic humanist and republican ideology in Europe.

The other challenge to Szekfű's synthesis came from Elemér Mályusz, who was fusing the Protestant-Independentist tradition with *Volksgeschichte*.³ From his perspective, the image of the Renaissance monarchy was left more or less uncontested, as it was described as a period of military glory, strong statehood, and flourishing culture. In contrast, the Baroque, which was also associated with the Counter-Reformation, became the object of conflicting interpretations. Predictably, there were significant divergences between Mályusz and Szekfű. In general, he considered *Geistesgeschichte* an important but one-sided perspective. He defined it as a par excellence "bourgeois science," which expresses the ideas of bourgeois culture and civic nationhood. But he considered it somewhat obsolete: "If, however, our destiny (...) requires us to turn into an ethnic nation, the mission of historiography will obviously also change" (Mályusz 1942, p. 56).

Mályusz also pointed out that some of its main tenets were not necessarily applicable to the Hungarian context, or led to distortions, like the need to formulate clear-cut categorical distinctions between Renaissance and Baroque *Weltanschauungen*, whereas in the seventeenth-century Hungarian context these were in many ways overlapping. In his opinion, the real problem with *Geistesgeschichte* was that in the hands of Szekfű it became a tool of „denominational bias,” serving the Catholic construction of history and envisioning the eighteenth century as a harmonic coexistence between the Habsburg king and the Hungarian nation, under the aegis of late-Baroque spiritual culture. For Mályusz, however, the Baroque of the eighteenth century was already a spiritual fossil. He countered this image with a positive emphasis on the Enlightenment (even though he emphatically rejected the radical Enlightenment of the 1790s, which he described as an intellectual precursor of Bolshevism). The re-evaluation of Enlightenment was an especially interesting move, given his right-wing radicalism in political terms, in sharp contrast to the moderate conservatism of Szekfű.

The fortunes of early modern intellectual history under the aegis of Marxism

After 1945, many elements of this debate became obsolete. The “constitutive question” of historical interpretation changed, the “national teleology” was shaken, and another teleology, that of the progress of socio-economic formations, was declared to be enthroned. Along these lines, the stylistic categories of art history, which were previously used to structure the narrative, came to be subordinated to socio-economic history. This meant also that the new taxonomies were cutting across the canon of *Geistesgeschichte*—which, in turn, was labeled as a sinister attempt at legitimizing the “counter-revolutionary regime.”

³ His most important methodological manifesto was Mályusz (1942), see also the posthumous edition of his lectures: Mályusz (1994). See also Erős (2000). On the European transfer history of *Volksgeschichte*, however, without a Hungarian chapter, see Hettling (2003).

The transformation did not mean, however, the total destruction of the national discourse. In fact, the Hungarian Stalinist use of national symbols was rather ambiguous.⁴ On the one hand, like any Stalinist cultural policy in the region, it was marked by the general tendency to suppress the national canon, as a powerful competitor for the hegemony over souls. Some of the official historians of the regime, such as Erik Molnár, set out to re-evaluate the traditional historical canon in the spirit of the class struggle and, as a result, proposed a new narrative, which would have purged Hungarian historiography of its “nationalist” overtones. In some ways, this meant a return to the turn-of-the-century socialist scholar Ervin Szabó, who sought to destroy the liberal nationalist canon by emphasizing the class conflict. On the other hand, the chief cultural politician, József Révai, who had a strong interest in literary history, tried to bring together Marxist discourse with the populist narrative, thus perpetuating a post-romantic vision of the Hungarian past. Révai sought to forge a symbolic continuity, identifying the projected communist society with the fulfillment of the centuries-long freedom struggle, and describing the communists as the inheritors of the collective charisma of the national Pantheon. (Révai 1948) It is indicative of the plurality of discourses that Molnár was violently criticized by another official historian of the regime, Erzsébet Andics, for downplaying the progressive aspects in the national tradition.

In the context of ideological polarization, early modern intellectual history also came to be reshaped in terms of sharp counter-positions, opposing the “good” Renaissance to the “bad” Counter-Reformation, defining Humanism as “progressive,” but downplaying its elitism. In general, the “official” historical production leaned towards the Protestant-Independentist narrative, albeit dressing it in a Marxist garment. This was true especially in literary history, but also in history proper. At the same time, the anti-Habsburg ideology of the Estates could also be described as an overt instrument of class domination. As a matter of fact, in historiography, the “social register” could overcome the national canon easier, whereas in literature their interplay was much more complicated, as there was no alternative literary pantheon (like the leaders of peasant revolts in history), so the same authors—integrated by the (post-)romantic canon-building—had to be “recycled”.

Even though 1956 meant a profound break in the history of Hungarian Communism, this duality remained important after the Revolution as well, since the regime was undecided as to which direction to support. The exaltation of the national aspects of communism posed a danger of coming perilously close to the ideological reservoir of the supporters of Imre Nagy. On the other hand, the Kádár-regime sought to generate an image of breaking with Stalinist schematism, and, for example, in the conspicuous silence of many writers after the defeated Revolution, the new leadership authorized the publication of works by many cultural figures—alive or dead—who were previously excluded from the literary canon as nationalists. In addition, as the liberalization of the regime took shape from the early-1960s onwards, a whole cohort of trained historians, who were marginalized in the 1950s, could gradually come back. Once again, the plurality

⁴ On the nationalist aspects of Stalinism in Hungary see Mevius (2005).

of discourses was unavoidable, as many of them were trained in the Protestant-Independentist canon, but others were students of Szekfű, that is, in some sense following the Catholic pro-Habsburg narrative.

Consequently, a series of debates erupted concerning the social and national determinants of the “independence movements” in the past, usually resulting in some sort of a stalemate.⁵ The “Kádárist compromise” in historiography and also in literary history was thus not so much a result of political intention, but was encoded in the very ambiguity of the regime towards the “national discourse.” The two potential directions both had some official support, but they also had serious limitations, thus they mutually paralyzed each other’s pretensions to exclusivity. On the longer run, as in other spheres of the regime, this complex interplay of alternative traditions catalyzed a more conscious strategy of integration, rooted in the weak legitimacy of the regime, but gradually becoming its self-avowed source of pride.

The leading literary historian of the 1960–1980s, Tibor Klaniczay was a paradigmatic figure of this ideological negotiation. One can read his theoretical texts from the 1960s as sophisticated attempts at making use of this ideological conjuncture—in order to create an anti-Stalinist, but nonetheless anti-romantic, construction of literary history under the aegis of Marxism (Klaniczay 1964). Consequently, his polemic with the previous canons was formulated in a very intricate language—intended to praise and criticize at the same time. He claimed that the official canon of the 1950s should be taken as the “first phase” of Marxist criticism of bourgeois science, which naturally remained to some extent under the impact of the very tradition it sought to criticize, creating a new literary history by “turning Horváth’s objective idealism downside up,”—i.e. changing some of the value-judgements, but retaining the interpretative framework.

Along these lines, Klaniczay described Révai’s efforts as the *Aufhebung* of the conservative-national canon, putting the accent on the revolutionary aspects in the national-romantic narrative, but failing to problematize the very narrative. He also identified another Marxist tradition, personified by György Lukács, whom he accused of falling into the trap of dogmatism when trying to prove that everything valuable in literature was related to realism. In his opinion, both of these directions were applying a measure of anachronistic normativity to the literary material (either in terms of the teleology towards national independence, or in view of an atemporal standard of realism)—thus effectively blocking the more reflexive and contextual research into the “real problems,” and also imposing a set of rigid norms on the actual literary production. Therefore, according to Klaniczay, a new synthesis was to be elaborated, breaking with the backward-looking normative constructions and elaborating a future-oriented analytical framework. At the same time, Klaniczay did not consider these two directions immediately harmful: as a matter of fact, he envisioned their convergence under the aegis of Marxism as the final dissolution of the populist-urbanist conflict, which divided the “progressive intelligentsia” in the inter-war period.

⁵ Among others see Andics (1964); Pach (1965); Benczédi and Csatári (1967).

The creation of a new historical synthesis required a new canon of periodization: thus, Klaniczay reasserted the relative autonomy of literary history by claiming that in this case the “superstructure” was not immediately determined by the “basis.” This meant a return to the idiom of “styles,” but he tried to delimit his approach from *Geistesgeschichte*, negating its principal thesis according to which a given historical epoch is marked by a dominant *Weltanschauung*. Instead, he emphasized the overlapping of layers: while the influence of the Renaissance could be traced up to the eighteenth century, some elements of the Baroque were already present in the sixteenth. Besides the repudiation of the overtly historicist pretensions of *Geistesgeschichte*, he also sought to subvert the tendencies of ahistoric essentialism, which sought to establish some stylistic markers appearing in different epochs (comparing the “eternal Baroque” of Eugenio D’Ors to the conception of “eternal realism,” culminating in socialist realism). In his opinion, stylistic labels should have been rather “dialectical categories,” denoting a certain kind of relationship to the world, and not all-encompassing frames of the “collective mind.” On the other hand, styles do have a social basis, but they cannot be exclusively localized in social relations either. In stylistic terms, the chief protagonist of Hungarian counter-reformation, Péter Pázmány wrote less “Baroque” texts than the Protestant authors of his time, who produced a flamboyant mannerist prose. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the overlapping styles, like late humanism or early Baroque, did not have direct class-relatedness either, as they were often used by both conflicting sides.

Klaniczay’s theoretical program was inserted into a Marxist terminology, but, in a certain sense, he was problematizing the Marxist perspective itself—which he hoped to legitimize with ample references to the achievements of Soviet early modernist literary history and philology. His construction was not created “*ex nihilo*” but represented a broader *sensus communis*, which gradually became institutionalized and catalyzed a considerable upsurge of early modern studies after the ebb of the 1950s. Of course, not every work of this trend was marked by the same level of theoretical reflexivity. In fact, many works, written in this paradigm, were much more exposed to the traps of Marxist categories, while the other branch of authors, sometimes marked by tacit misgivings concerning the dominant ideology, turned to documenting the “domestication of the universal”—i.e. the Hungarian reception of Western stylistic and intellectual canons.

In literary history, the new trend often entailed a return to some kind of unspoken *Geistesgeschichte*—going back to a more “immanentist” scheme of stylistic periodization, positing a series of “unavoidable” principles, which were supposed to characterize a given period and determine all its manifestations. This perspective could be merged with the more orthodox Marxist historical constructions as well, by being corroborated with the corresponding normative markers. In historiography proper, one can observe somewhat divergent developments. One of the chief results of the “Kádárist compromise” was the upsurge of socio-economic history around Zsigmond Pál Pach—valorizing the structures of everyday culture and the *longue durée* transformation of life-conditions, over the question of “national independence.”

What nevertheless connected the two disciplines is the presence of the paradigm of ‘belatedness’—contrasting the Hungarian ‘story’ to Western developments. When, in the early-1960s, Klaniczay sought to devise the theoretical pre-conditions of a comparative Eastern European literary history, he inserted a very sharp cleavage between the East and the West. In his opinion, in the West, literary culture was the result of the Renaissance, secularization, and humanism, while, in the East, it was catalyzed by the Enlightenment, romanticism, and the emerging national idea. The same cleavage was crucial for the protagonists of social and economic history, such as Iván T. Berend, or György Ránki, as well. As a matter of fact, in social and economic history, this counter-position was even more straightforward, couched in the then fashionable theories of the center-periphery relationship, the “politics of backwardness,” and the Marxist re-conceptualization of agrarian history, concentrating on such issues as the “*zweite Leibeigenschaft*.”

An important aspect of the emerging pluralism of historiography was the activity of a group of scholars in the 1960–1970s who successfully fused political, social, and intellectual history and reshaped the image of the early modern period. All of them in some ways were connected to the Protestant-Independentist canon, but succeeded in moving beyond the narrow denominational and political confines and offered a master narrative, which was conspicuously devoid of direct Marxist references. A key figure of this cohort was Kálmán Benda, who started his academic career in the 1930s and was interested in the form of national identity in the early modern period, while he was also part of the populist anti-fascist youth subculture of the early 1940s. While during the years of Stalinism he was ejected from the academic establishment and had to withdraw to the position of archivist within the Reformed Church, in the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s he managed to publish a series of important text editions (most importantly the materials of the Hungarian Jacobin conspiracy of the 1790s) and later also monographs, to become one of the central figures of Hungarian historiography, covering the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Benda’s construction of history, in a way going back to the democratic populist tradition of the thirties, sought to establish a continuity ranging from the ideology of the early modern “independence movements” (such as the Bocskai uprising in 1604–1606) through the enlightened patriotism and social radicalism of the late eighteenth century to the emancipatory liberal nationalism of the 1830–1840s, which created modern Hungarian political culture. Other important historians and literary historians active in the 1960–1980s, such as the specialist of Transylvania and also dignitary of the Reformed Church, László Makkai, the political and cultural historians Ágnes R. Várkonyi (dealing, among others, with the political and intellectual history of the Rákóczi uprising), and Katalin Péter (studying seventeenth century political and religious thought and mentalities), or the intellectual historian (and also high bureaucrat of the Communist cultural establishment) Béla Köpeczi, while remaining critical of the romantic nationalist historiography, all saw some sort of connection between the early modern anti-Habsburg independence movements and the modern democratic traditions.

The most important problematization of the early modern antecedents of modern national identity was proposed by Jenő Szűcs, whose work emerged from the clash

of the different traditions concerning the historical roots of the “national idea.”⁶ The basic theoretical options of this debate were the following: according to the orthodox Marxist perspective, the national movements could be taken as manifestations of social conflicts, or, by integrating the anti-Habsburg-Independentist tradition, national struggles could be redescribed in view of a *longue durée* continuity, resulting in the “socialist nation.” With time, there were various attempts at reaching a middle way between the two extremes. For instance Klaniczay,—and, implicitly, many important historians—talked of “two nationalisms” in the early modern period: one, “noble nationalism,” connected to the class-interests of the privileged, and another, a weaker alternative tradition, which sought to connect the program of “national centralization” with the bourgeois attempts of breaking through the Estates-framework.

Although Szűcs also envisioned a gap between the privilege-centered mainstream of the national ideology and the (humanist and spiritualist) critical undercurrents, his innovative interpretation of early modern nationalism was nevertheless more flexible, analyzing the constitutive *topoi* of the late medieval national discourse in their complex socio-cultural setting.⁷ Besides, Szűcs also sought to strike a balance between the Marxist version of social constructivism and the traditional narrative of the persistence of national consciousness (which was also resumed by some ‘national communist’ authors) distinguishing categorically the pre-modern and modern forms, but nevertheless allowing for the existence of some sort of “national consciousness” already before the nineteenth century.⁸ In some sense, he was following István Bibó’s insights, who delineated the itinerary of modern nationhood from late-medieval and early modern national units, in relationship to the “democratic principle.”⁹ Nevertheless, the accents were placed elsewhere: for Bibó, the central issue was the formation of “anti-democratic nationalism” as a permanent threat to the European balance, while, for Szűcs, the crucial question was the emergence of the political and symbolic frameworks of national identification.

The key testing grounds for him were the mobilizing power of national allegiance, the relationship of ‘national identity’ to social position, and, finally, the *longue durée* tradition of the national ideology, as a means of social and political legitimization. On the one hand, he identified a certain continuity with the pre-modern conceptions, pointing at the formative role of the corporate paradigm rooted in an ethnogenetic construction, which in Hungary was first formulated in the late-thirteenth century. On the other hand, he pointed out the socio-cultural fragmentariness of the pre-modern societies, and the concomitant multiplicity of the constructions of collective (national and supra-national) identity.

⁶ Szűcs (1974). As a matter of fact, one should place his famous essay on “The Three Historical Regions of Europe” rather into the context of these debates, and not so much into the canon of Central-Europeanist literary myth-making in the traces of Kundera’s “kidnapped Europe.”

⁷ “Nép és nemzet a középkor végén,” in Szűcs (1974), especially pp. 566ff.

⁸ See especially his „A nemzet historikuma és a történetiszemlélet nemzeti látószöge,” in Szűcs (1974), pp. 13–184.

⁹ Bibó (1986–1990); see especially his “Az európai egyensúlyról és békéről,” written in the early 1940s, vol. I. pp. 295–635, especially pp. 316–26.

The decades of the 1970–1980s were marked by the gradual restructuring of the methodological precepts of history-writing, posing a number of new questions. Of course, the transformation was not complete; thus, it resulted in the coexistence of different schools and different ‘temporalities’. The most important factor in view of the historiographical mainstream was the general trend of de-ideologization, which, from the 1970s onwards, produced a ‘positivist consensus’ and a rejection of ‘too strong’ ideological (and even methodological) narratives. Along these lines, Renaissance and Baroque almost completely lost their immediate political connotations, and this could not be changed even in the 1990s, which otherwise was marked by a certain tendency to ‘re-ideologization’.

Continuities and new methodological challenges

In the last two decades, one can list a series of important historical and literary oeuvres which contain some aspects of the early modern history of ideas. Especially in the 1990s many works were published which sought to analyze certain historical problems from the perspective of intellectual history writ large (history of *topoi*, imagology, history of rhetoric, or the new approach of the history of cultural transfer). These works had to face the methodological dilemmas inherent to the common frameworks of interpretation, according to which history of ideas—be it literary or political—was written in the previous decades.¹⁰

One such dilemma was that of *periodization*. As mentioned above, in the history of Hungarian literary thought a series of debates took place in which interpreting a given author involved determining whether he was a Baroque or a mannerist thinker. These „immanent” periods were ultimately rooted in the tradition of *Geistesgeschichte*, which could be easily integrated into the Marxist historical constructions, corroborated by the corresponding normative marker (like ‘progressive’ humanism).

As in the international academic context the paradigm of “early modern” gradually took over the stylistic categories, this triggered a certain change in the local academic production as well. The classical Marxist periodization (linking the beginning of the Modern Age to the English “Bourgeois Revolution”) was gradually abandoned; as a consequence the period ranging from the Renaissance to the French Revolution came to be defined as a prelude to social and political modernity. The transition to modernity in this sense came to be grasped in the various visions of a ‘local’ *Sattelzeit*, located somewhere between 1770 and 1848, while the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became the object of more specialized research.

The next similar dilemma concerned the problem of relating local developments to the trans-national frameworks. Faced with the marginal status of their cultural canon in the broader European context, Eastern European authors often constructed their narrative so that the description of local developments or cultural networks was necessarily parallel to the constitutive figures of the European cultural canon. It remained unclear what could be and what could not be studied with the means of the

¹⁰ For an overview on Hungarian historiography after 1989 see Trencsényi and Apor (2007).

history of reception: in what sense can we speak of the dynamism of a local context, how does the transmission of a cultural tradition take place, what is the mechanism of the reception of a cultural tradition or conceptual framework?

Last, but not least, the narrations dealing with the same period from different perspective—in view of literary, political, cultural, or even religious history—often described the very same problems from rather incompatible perspectives. The result of this was that certain early modern oeuvres, which were marked by eminently political overtones, were studied only from the perspective of literature, and in some other cases historical interpretations ignored the narrative, or discursive, aspects of certain texts they used as sources.

These problems become especially tangible if we look at the considerable transformations in the Western-European mainstream of practicing intellectual history. Hungarian intellectual historians after 1989 could not return to the questions of the pre-Communist decades shaped by *Geistesgeschichte*, which were based on linking certain phenomena in Hungary to the main lines of the ‘Western canon’, as, in the meantime, the very structure of this canon had been also profoundly transformed. In the last decades, several intellectual traditions have been gaining academic attention, those previously not considered to be part of the mainstream (such as Lipsius and neostoicism, the ideologies of ancient constitutionalism, the neo-Machiavellian discourse, or the philosophical history of the Scottish Enlightenment, etc.). It is symptomatic, however, that the only synthetic volume on the history of early modern political thought written after 1989, authored by István Schlett, remained basically in the Hungarian academic context of the 1970s, drawing most of his analytical insights on the work of Jenő Szűcs and avoiding any engagement with the more modern methodological and also thematic developments of Western European intellectual history (Schlett 1996).

In view of the methodological innovation, in the last two decades, there were a number of promising attempts in Hungarian historiography, aiming at a dialogue with recent “Western” methodological precepts and thematic directions. Concerning the methodological canons of early modern intellectual history, there were at least three markedly different directions of reception, those linked to the “Cambridge-school,” the German *Begriffsgeschichte* and *Diskursanalyse*, and to the French thematization of discursivity, connected to a broadly defined cultural history. In literary studies there were also parallel efforts to update the theoretical framework of interpretations with reference to New Historicism and to Reception Aesthetics.

As for the reception of the British developments, according to the recollections by György Bence, references to the Cambridge school were already present in the late 1960s at the seminars of the philosopher and prominent member of the “Lukács-school,” György Márkus.¹¹ It is not by chance that the integration of these methodological references to history-writing involved works dealing with non-Hungarian materials and thus remaining outside the “institutionalized” mainstream. The reception of British intellectual history was greatly facilitated by the work of the historian of philosophy, Mária Ludassy,¹² who was probably the first to apply

¹¹ See Bence (1993).

¹² Some of her more important works: Ludassy (1972, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1992).

the modern Western approaches of intellectual history in Hungary (mainly on French and English materials of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries), and whose irony and erudition was an inspiration for many generations dealing with the history of political ideas. The most prominent Hungarian author directly inspired by the Cambridge school¹³ is László Kontler, who used these methodological precepts to draw the picture of the origins of British conservatism, after which he turned to the German reception of the Scottish Enlightenment and also to problems of inter-cultural translation.¹⁴

Another important track was the project of establishing a Hungarian *Begriffsgeschichte*, by the above-mentioned György Bence and social historian Károly Halmos, who kept alive the program of analyzing political vocabularies throughout the 1990s, without, however, being able to launch a collective project.¹⁵ On the whole, the German input was not so popular among historians, but in the late-1990s became increasingly tangible in political science, and in certain cases it can be found in works which bordered on the history of political ideas, although the historical craft remained rather unimpressed by this development.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the group of young scholars gathered around the political scientist Márton Szabó can be considered as the most active hub of the reception and local application of Koselleckian precepts, and is also increasingly involved in the trans-national network of conceptual historians.

The situation is markedly different in the case of the French input, which had stronger infrastructure and a relatively potent scientific lobby within the ranks of Hungarian historiography in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly due to the general acceptance of the *Annales*-school seen as relatively compatible with historical materialism. Although there were certain attempts to integrate Foucauldian and other perspectives into historiography, this Francophile direction, eminently present in the “*Atelier*” *Centre Franco-Hongrois en Sciences Sociales*, is mostly crystallized around the broadly conceived paradigm of social history, which makes the chances of an autonomous intellectual history rather limited.

All in all, the strongest branch of intellectual history to date remains a mixture of literary history and history of ideas, along the lines of Tibor Klaniczay, with a certain sensitivity to reception aesthetics and theories of comparative literature. The followers of this trend, however, usually remain uninterested in the political context, producing mostly imagological reconstructions, such as the work of Sándor Óze on the early modern understanding of providential national history (Óze 1991).

¹³ Ferenc Horkay Hörcher made a pioneering effort in the popularization of the ‘Cambridge-school,’ with the editing of a selection of texts from Skinner, Dunn, Pocock, and Tuck, followed by an eminently contextualist post-face, intended to explain the origins of contextualism to the Hungarian audience. See Horkay Hörcher (1997).

¹⁴ Kontler (1997a, b, 2007, 2008).

¹⁵ For the intellectual portrait of Bence and the analysis of his impact on Hungarian intellectual history see Takáts (2008).

¹⁶ For basic programs of Hungarian political discourse analysis see Szabó (1997, 1998).

In the 1990s, there have been some attempts, however, which sought to apply the new methodological innovations of *Begriffsgeschichte* or contextualism to the early modern Hungarian context. One of the most methodologically reflective authors along these lines is Sándor Bene, who sought to extend his research of early modern literary history towards a more encompassing framework of the history of political ideas. His *Theatrum Politicum* analyzed the concept of public opinion on seventeenth century Hungarian and Italian materials, in another work he provided a contextual reconstruction of the rise and fall of a Croatian historical narrative in the eighteenth century and gradually he also delineated a broad research agenda for intellectual history.¹⁷ More recently, in a series of programmatic texts—some co-authored with the historian of literature and rhetoric, Gábor Kecskeméti—Bene sought to formulate a new framework for writing the history of early modern Hungarian literature based on a critical engagement with the precepts of modern intellectual history, with special regard to the Cambridge school.¹⁸ Bene and Kecskeméti found the perspective of intellectual history especially useful in defending a broad conception of *litterae* as a possible source material of the early modernist literary historian (including the historical, legal, political, theological etc. textual registers) against the prevalent, more aestheticist understanding of literature. At the same time, they also sought to incorporate the specific concerns of the literary historian to the framework of intellectual history—thus they argued for the extension of Skinner’s analysis of speech acts to the specific field of literary communication, where the “moves” of the actors are also linked to a conscious choice of genres.

In a similar vein, József Takáts has been analyzing early-nineteenth century Hungarian literature in terms of the *longue durée* impact of early modern discourses (Takáts 1998), and a number of other younger scholars, such as Gábor Gángó, applied contextualism to the study of Hungarian political thought.¹⁹ Based on these methodological developments, Takáts also sought to devise a short synthetic history of Hungarian political thought from the eighteenth to the twentieth century focusing on “political languages.” The ambiguous results of the venture indicate the problems of applying the methodological precepts of the Cambridge school in another historiographical context: while the analysis of the transformation of early modern political languages such as ancient constitutionalism into the modern ideologies of liberalism and nationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century is innovative and convincing, Takáts was less successful in mapping the political languages of the twentieth century, where the Cambridge school could hardly offer a point of orientation, and in his later chapters he restricted himself to a more idiographic method (Takáts 2007).

Among the historians of the “guild,” however, the popularity of the methodological tools linked to the Cambridge school or *Begriffsgeschichte* proved to be

¹⁷ Bene (1999, 2000, 2003).

¹⁸ Bene (2001, 2007); Bene and Kecskeméti (2009).

¹⁹ Gábor Gángó, studied the oeuvre of József Eötvös from a contextualist perspective—see Gángó (1999)—and also developed his own reading of the methodology of intellectual history, see Gángó (2002).

rather limited. What emerged instead was a rather innovative combination of political history with the history of representations and communication. A pioneer of this approach in Hungary, Nóra G. Etényi, analyzes the patterns and strategies of presenting the Hungarian anti-Ottoman struggle in the political propaganda of the Holy Roman Empire, contributing to the reconsideration of the role of the pamphlet news in shaping the public sphere in early modern Europe (Etényi, 2003). The study of representations is also central to the work of Péter Szabó, offering a series of studies on the images of authority in early modern court culture (Szabó, 2008).

On the whole, even though they did not attain an institutional dominance, the developments described above succeeded in challenging some of the traditional presumptions of early modern history-writing. First, they stressed different levels of continuities than the previous schools of interpretation. This meant, for example, a novel concentration on generic conventions, mapping for instance the *speculum*-literature, previously left completely out of the focus of interpretation, as these texts were neither part of the national canon of *belles lettres*, nor considered a usable source material for political history proper. In similar terms, the *longue durée* impact of humanism, not so much a normative value system but a set of practices transmitted by the educational system and the rhetorical tradition, was also identified as a fundamental cultural “idiom.” It is less and less possible to interpret texts in terms of the “spirit of an age”—in fact, the art historical terms usually employed for this kind of interpretation became subverted by the art historians themselves. Finally, not unrelated to the “linguistic turn,” there has been a growing interest in mapping “discourses”: analyzing the narrative traditions of “ancient constitutionalism,” “elect nationhood,” the “body metaphor,” or the vocabulary of neostoicism.²⁰

Concomitant with this methodological transformation there was a shift in the symbolic geographical framework, gradually shifting the emphasis from “belatedness” to “otherness”—i.e. placing the national cultures not on a purely temporal continuum, but on a “three dimensional” map. Last, but not least, the very concept of “national history” became relativized, also due to the visible need for a more flexible terminology to differentiate between the history of pre-modern Hungary, which was a *Vielvölkerstaat*, and the history of Hungarians as an ethnic category.

Conclusion

The recent developments indicate that, notwithstanding the relaxation of the ideological implications, writing early modern intellectual history remains closely connected to the national identity-discourse. The best way to tackle this conjuncture is to make our approach self-reflective—pointing out the intricate ideological implications of the representative interpretative traditions. Analyzing the early modern origins of the national identity-discourse as a project of intellectual history thus entails a specific mirroring effect: inserting the story of the emergence of the

²⁰ Such innovative works of the last two decades are Heltai (1994); Hargittay (2001); Imre (1995); Ács (2002, 2006); and Kecskeméti (1998).

national canon into an interpretative framework, which is intimately related to the very conception of the “national” culture. Of course, this circularity poses the danger of becoming merely tautological, resulting in ‘self-reproduction’ (i.e. finding only what fits into the pre-fabricated canon of the unfolding national self), or in a short-circuit of self-deconstruction, pointing out that, in fact, the historian is shaped by his tradition and, therefore, he does not have any means of reaching outside of it.

Modern intellectual history teaches us that only way out of this dilemma might be to problematize and historicize our analytical categories: establishing the complex genealogies which formatted them, but which might have been forgotten or became covered by other layers of the tradition—or even by other traditions.²¹ At the same time, we should be aware of the implications of our methodological choices—considering what kind of answer we might acquire with a certain set of interpretative ‘tools.’ While ‘listening’ to our sources, we have to be able to discern these two dynamics—how the *past talks to us*, and how *we talk to the past*. In this sense, self-reflection is not a retrospective act, performed from the height of the “owl of Minerva” (who allegedly takes flight only after a tradition loses its grasp), but is rather comparable to the experience of the “translator,” who is trying to mediate between two very distant cultures. Unless he is embedded in both of them, he cannot find the right terms for rendering more complex phenomena intelligible. Even so, it might happen that certain things are misunderstood, mistranslated, etc. We are in a position of “incomplete knowledge,” empowered but also limited by the traditions we are operating with. We cannot exist completely outside them (since then we would lose our “voice”), but still, we are trying hard to reach a “higher” observation point, from which we can have a more encompassing view on their mechanisms and limitations.

This is exactly the sense in which the act of self-reflection can become an identity-building project. Identity is eminently perspectival. The romantic project of identity-building, which lies at the very root of most European national canons, sought to find a perspective, believing that the national soul just awaits expression. In turn, drawing on the experience that the cultural canon is not something cognitively given but needs to be disseminated, the various post-romantic projects (such as *Geistesgeschichte*, but even the Eastern European ‘indigenized Marxism’) sought to impose their perspective. Seeking to break with these projects, our task might be to learn to change our perspective, to be able to consciously shift our optics, mapping and re-mapping the traditions in question from inside and outside. This does not necessarily entail some kind of “value relativism”: being able to shift our focus does not mean that we must subscribe to the idea that every point of view is equally normative. It means, however, that, for reconstructing an event, we have to look at it from more than one view-point. We are doubtlessly framed by traditions, but, by imposing some kind of narrative coherence on them (by expressing them), we are also framing “our” traditions. In fact, every act of translation modifies the framework of the tradition: putting it into a perspective means making certain sequences of it reflexive, actualizing one of its many *potential* readings.

²¹ On the underlying normative implications of modern intellectual history see Kelley (2002).

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