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“The DNA of the Hungarian Race Shows that It Is Chosen”

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An Essay on Cultural Identity in Post-socialist Hungary

“While human DNA has two or three spirals within a given length, the DNA of the Hungarian race has nine ... which is identical to the number of rotations of light from the planet Sirius when it reaches the Earth. The cosmic origin of Hungarian intelligence, the Hungarian soul and the Hungarian minds is a result of this fact.” This was written in July 2000 by a undersecretary of the conservative coalition government currently in power in Hungary. While he clearly stated that his theories on modern Hungarian cultural history were formulated as an amateur researcher and private person, they appeared in a magazine with obvious radical right-wing leanings, “Hungarian Democrat,” which has close ties to the government. Although the undersecretary reached a much wider audience when expounding his theories on one of the most popular programs on Kossuth-Radio, a Hungarian broadcaster, no one bothered to complain, at least not in public, and he is still in office.

Many people might assume that protests are useless, as the public’s tolerance for such matters has risen considerably in the last ten

years, and the most important sources of information, the "Royal Television Broadcaster" and the "Royal Radio Broadcaster," as they are popularly known, have been brought into nearly total ideological conformity. Though the few newspapers which have been able to avoid government interference thanks to private ownership or regular financial contributions from private foundations repeatedly attempt to shake things up, they are neither read by those who are affected nor members of the government. Furthermore, the European Union has apparently taken no notice. The lethargy, or more precisely apathy rampant among the system's critics seems to be more widespread than ever. Why has Europe failed to respond? This and similar questions have been asked at conferences held in Hungary for years.

The quote which introduced this essay appeared in the context of a culture war, often referred to as a Kulturkampf, which has flared up a number of times since 1989. Not one of the three governments democratically elected during that period has been able to resolve it.

At first glance, the split between the conservative right wing and the socialist and liberal left wing follows the issue of Hungary's relationship to the rest of Europe and its relationship to Hungary itself. However, as Hungarian conservatism is at present underdeveloped, the new post-communist right wing has turned to the brief golden age of the twenties and thirties as the main source of its ideals, which fosters populist nationalism. This has been equally divisive in the areas of culture, politics and society and has proven to be catastrophic. The struggle to install a Christian Magyarism and a conservative movement striving for an organic Hungarian culture coincides with the war on the Jews (or the groups considered to be Jewish) and their "sympathizers." Today's political left-as was the case in the past-supports western

democracies and cosmopolitan liberalism, in other words, principles which were associated with Jews during the Monarchy. The bitter Hungarian culture war is therefore founded upon rampant anti-Semitism which gains in strength whenever a conservative coalition is in power.

The rest of the background extends back to 1526, the year the Turks invaded Hungary, as since that time, the country was never sovereign except for a brief period. The Turks were followed by the Hapsburgs, somewhat later the Germans and, after the Second World War, the Soviets. An important milestone, and of fundamental significance to the country's history, was the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, according to which Hungary-one of the losers of the First World War-lost two-thirds of its territory to its neighbors. This also meant that one-third of the ethnic Hungarian population became citizens of other countries. Trianon was the cause of a great deal of consternation, and an irrational fear of the "death of the nation" took on immense proportions. The revision of the 1914 borders became the most important issue, politically, culturally and in everyday life, and revanchism was the keynote of Hungarian fascism. The idea developed that the racially pure Hungarian culture was threatened and must be defended. Before and during the Second World War, the historical and thoroughly understandable stance of a victim was joined by that of a perpetrator, which was then suppressed for the four decades following 1945.

The mechanism by which Magyar identity was defined primarily in contrast to hated foreign oppressors, which developed over the course of centuries, continued to function under socialism. Especially in the last decade, the period of the so-called "soft dictatorship," the population's identity formed a euphoric unit, as the democratic opposition, operating in the background, has been

able to achieve a certain amount of progress; widespread resistance has been noticeable despite violent and brutal reprisals. This opposition was often cultural, and art served as an ersatz for political action. Literature, film and visits to museums and the theater-thanks to government subsidies-were affordable for everyone, and there was generally more freedom than in other East Bloc countries. In spite of everything, a relatively active cultural life was able to develop. As a reaction to all-intrusive socialist doctrine in which the particular national characteristics were in danger of submerging, literature, the traditional core of the national identity, and folk art and culture, as the origin of all Hungarian culture, flourished. Political cabaret and the avant-garde experienced a high point, as a result of which socialist realism was left with nothing more than empty rhetoric. Even the church supported the resistance movement by permitting homilies addressing political issues.

The country took on the image of "the happiest barracks in the socialist camp," which also coincided with the nation's identity. In general, the people's view of themselves was identical to how they were seen by outsiders. The state of euphoria was at the same time deceptive, as the oppositional tendencies in the culture, tolerated by the Kádár regime, served as a "political safety valve" whose primary function was to keep the regime in power rather than promoting democracy. However, only after the foundation of the system was whittled away until visibly weakened did the first traces of a civil society appear, and culture played an important role in this development.

The advent of the market economy signaled the end of this development. Just a few months after the political changes, growing nationalism was accompanied by the release of a phantom enemy from its magic lamp which had been imprisoned in the

previous decades. At the same time, the urgently needed assessment of the country's own history was neglected; instead, profit-oriented economic interests and laws of the marketplace affecting art and culture gained in importance, surpassing the importance of aesthetics and educational goals. As it turned out, the market is a craftier enemy of cultural autonomy and identity than the single-party state, since it-in contrast to a dictatorship-is able to simulate art which follows solely an inner need. The speed at which mass-produced art is made the basis of identity determines the extent to which ability for critical self-examination atrophies. Attempts to strengthen the nation's identity and halt the destruction of the foundations of Hungarian art and culture through quotas have failed so far.

The current right-wing, conservative government seems to think that it can exercise a positive influence on Hungary's identity and image by decreeing the implementation of a Christian and nationalistic moral conservatism. As a result, the government's influence on strategically important cultural areas, the state-owned media and the basic institution of cultural financing, the National Cultural Fund, grew. In addition, a commissioner for affairs relating to the millennium was appointed and a well-financed center for promoting the national image was established as part of the chancellor's office. Disguised as a "transparent cultural policy," ultra-modern cultural-marketing methods were employed in PR work, such as direct mailings of propaganda on the millennium in the form a newspaper and a brochure. The fact that the powers that be once again issued definitions of what is genuine and what is inauthentic, what is Hungarian art and what is not, might not have been noticed by some because modern marketing methods are normally associated with stable western democracies. Appeals to the conscience of "true Hungarians" and "true Christians" are

finding a sympathetic audience, often as a result of the long period of suppression. Unpopular opinions are rejected and brushed aside, and critics of the government and its policies are usually denounced with various code words for Jewish: “Liberal Bolsheviks,” “cosmopolitans” and “sham Hungarians” are described as being “out of tune spiritually and intellectually”; in the recent past, even the term “traitors” has been used in radio broadcasts. Attempts to defend themselves against this “state-supported Jew-baiting” result in government accusations of hysteria. A radical right-wing party, MIEP, which has won seats in the Parliament for the first time since 1998, supports these efforts. While MIEP is officially part of the opposition, its members describe it as the opposition to the opposition. According to malicious rumors, this party serves as an ideal mouthpiece for the government, saying the things the government cannot afford to say, as the latter feels obligated to obey EU regulations.

The government’s pro-European goals with regard to external communication, which are also intended to improve its image, are not compatible with the historically reactionary, nationalist aims its pursues through internal communication. The supposedly positive image comprises nostalgic clichés, and the country’s identity is extremely divided. The PR techniques used in internal communication do not represent long-term investments in the cultural identity, as these populist calls to mobilization against a pseudo-community are directed at obtaining a quick profit, i.e. fast and easy success at the polls.

Trianon is not only a common topic in the media, as the general population’s fear is being stirred up; foreign powers are supposedly attempting to assimilate Hungarian culture and therefore rob the Hungarians of their style and way of thinking, and this must be stopped. At the same time, the rhetoric is frighteningly similar to

what was being said and published in the thirties. The concept of pure Hungarian culture has reappeared, and the mechanism of identifying enemies is beginning to take hold. Many of the victims who must "defend themselves" are again becoming perpetrators: Fundamentalism and racism are spreading.

In fact, the process of integration into the EU has so far been guided by the market, and Hungary has been degraded to a great extent to an economic factor. As a logical consequence, integration-despite the best of intentions-is considered to be another "colonization of quotas" dictated from above. For this reason, the intellectual and cultural basis essential to this integration does not exist.

The preservation of political stability in Europe requires that cultural policy become the engine of unification. In order to ensure that culture serves as an aid for self-reflection and the search for identity and no longer instrumentalized to maintain power, the time has come for a dialog with the EU concerning cultural policy. This dialog, be conducted within a unified community with common values, must deal with long-term investments in cultural identities made by a civil society. Only strong identities will be able to deal successfully with questions posed in the course of reflective modernization and to stand firm in the face of tension and differences of opinion. In addition, solely a culture which is extensively independent of politics and the market can make a considerable contribution to integration and a stable society, and guarantee that Europe remains a Europe of nuances.