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**Count István Széchenyi's History Approach in the Context of Political Values
Prevalent in the Reform Era**

Theses of a PhD Dissertation

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1.Objective of the Dissertation, Definition of the Topic

In the past one and a half centuries, interpreters of Count István Széchenyi's idealism and political career have repeatedly drawn readers' attention to the existence of a very strong and plausible ideological background based on history approach considerations and recurring in his manifestations both private and public related to the assessment of the state and transformation of the Hungarian nation, applied consistently and sometimes elevated to "philosophical heights" despite all their eventuality. To a significant extent, it was these systematic comments related to the past, present and future of the nation that prompted the author of the present Dissertation to subject Széchenyi's thoughts on history to a more detailed scrutiny, departing from the previous findings of Széchenyi-historiography related to this phenomenon and already filling whole libraries.

Although Széchenyi never elaborated his own "concept" on history approach in the form of an "original systematized work", earlier research on ideology history had highlighted how deeply his political concepts, pamphlets and programme forming works were imbued with arguments based on this peculiar "interpretation of history". However, the findings of 20th century Széchenyi historiography pointed not only to the emphatic nature of the phenomenon but contributed with significant philological and ideology historical basic research to a more precise understanding of Széchenyi's approach to history. In the first half of the century, Dávid Angyal, then in his footsteps, Béla Iványi-Grünwald shed light on several European intellectual parallels, attitudinal bases and ideological connections with the Count's ideas on history. In the early 1970s, the ideology history reconstruction investigations of András Gergely uncovered the most important basic categories of Széchenyi's approach to history and the role they fill in the Count's ideology system. Nothing attests more to the definitive nature of András Gergely's work than the fact that a significant number of the biographies and Széchenyi interpretations published in the past few decades chose this construction as their starting point.

In spite of the achievements referred to above, a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between the Count's arguments including history approach considerations and the political discourse of the period as well as the connections between the recurring argumentation and the political values of the Reform Era has not been made. The author of the present Dissertation – digressing partly from the philological, structural and reconstructive research approaches – has made an attempt at uncovering the recurring rhetoric elements of

Széchenyi's history approach arguments and their "operation mechanisms" in the context of the political values of the Reform Era.

In the political discourse of the Reform Era, Széchenyi's arguments armed with history approach considerations were not considered unique or exceptional in themselves. The politicians and political writers of the liberal elite, recognizing the necessity and unavoidability of changes, often took the opportunity to refer to historical examples, the experiences of other nations or the general regularities of historic development. The intention of painting a picture of the still malleable and uncertain future, the need to secure public acceptance of the bourgeois transformation went inevitably together with a continuous expansion of ideas incorporated in political arguments aimed at convincing ever-widening strata of society. Traditional and new forums of the public sphere equally confirmed that the challenges faced by Hungarian society towards the middle of the 19th century could be brought into public thinking only by exceptionally strong and varied argumentation, in many cases involving explanations of history approach.

Apart from that, it seems that arguments reflecting history approach considerations played an important role in specific political situations, too, for instance, in the polemics surrounding the different ways of the development of the Hungarian nation and the transformation of society. The reasoning presented in refuting the standpoint of the feudal-conservative nobility or in criticising the Kossuthian concept undoubtedly shows that Széchenyi's arguments – parallel with the aims of convincing and influencing – were greatly infiltrated by an "interpretation of history" elevating the nation's future into a much broader, world history context. Furthermore, the core of the Széchenyi-Kossuth debate and the structure of the Count's criticism, to a certain extent, reflected that Széchenyi's charges against Kossuth were considerably formulated on a standpoint based on history approach considerations, in which the stake of the transformation and development of the Hungarian nation was placed into a universal global history context.

The complexity of the phenomenon inspired me to research Széchenyi's approach to history, its linguistic-rhetorical manifestations and the role they played in forming the political values of the Reform Era in the context of ideological connections and one specific debate. Starting out from a reconstructive investigation of the Count's ideas on history, my analysis focussed on the issues of what function that history approach played in Széchenyi's ideological system, to what extent it presented a closed, consistent "system", as well as how that approach built on peculiar thought panels and conceptual range fit into the progress of political discourse of the Reform Era.

II. Methods applied

In choosing the methodological base applied in my Dissertation, I had to consider that Széchenyi's manifestations including history approach considerations in the textual locations generally appear with different intensity and sometimes even with different function. Due to the complex nature and "fluctuating" occurrence of the phenomenon, successful completion of the task seemed to be feasible only through the amalgamation of different methodological approaches. Considering that research methods in many respects have to comply with the particular features of the research object, in the interest of better access to the theme and a more precise understanding of the Count's ideas on history and the related political argumentations, the author deliberately took the risks of "methodological polyphony".

A reconstructive investigation – partly more comprehensive, partly in different direction from the findings of previous research – seemed to be the most appropriate starting point. In the course of this work – reflecting continuously via historiography comments to the respectable volume of the achievements of previous Széchenyi-research, which often deal with the Count's ideas on history only "referentially" – special analysis was given to the connections of Széchenyi's concept of nation and progress. The connections of these concepts changing with time, according to my pre-supposition, may yield significant indicators as to the role of the Count's history approach as well. Besides, in the structure of the Dissertation – concentrating mainly on texts originating from the early 1840s resulting from the constraints of the work – a dominant role was assigned to the analysis of the history approach aspects of the polemics between Széchenyi and Kossuth. In one of the most significant political confrontations of the Reform Era, connected to the intention of influencing and winning over public opinion, by raising the risks of transformation, a major function was acquired by the linguistic-notional aspects of history approach argumentation. Although there are innumerable social, political and conceptual aspects of the origins and later waves of the Széchenyi-Kossuth debate, the basic concept of *Kelet népe* and the interpretation of Kossuth's response to it, make it doubtless that the different history approaches of the debating parties constitute a dominant element in their arguments.

Apart from that, the exposure of the role of history ideas in the ideological system, beyond the ideological history reconstruction investigations, seemed unimaginable without a certain outlook on the theory and philosophy of history. Although in earlier versions of the Dissertation (built primarily on the findings of ideological history, hermeneutics and concept history literature) I intended to attach a great role to this kind of introduction, in the finishing

stages of my work – besides references from the notes – I had to discard the full introduction of conclusions drawn in the preliminary studies.

Also flowing from the characteristic features of the theme, an analytic exposure of the basic concepts of history approach argumentation recurring in Széchenyi's work presented itself as an important task. Through this, besides the connecting points and basic relationships of the Count's history approach to his ideological system, we can formulate a picture on the part this phenomenon played, too. However, I considered it practical to examine the structure and functioning of the history approach "model" – though an analysis of concrete political situations exposes a lot of exciting issues - not in their immediate political contexts but in a broader one based on the standards and value categories of the Reform Era public thinking. The "functioning" of Széchenyi's history approach argumentation, its rhetoric function lent itself to the easiest analysis reflected in the basic concepts embedded in the political discourse of the period and the conflicts resulting in the intensification of arguments.

Accordingly, I laid special emphasis in the analysis to Széchenyi's approach to the past and the "basic concepts" of his history approach. First, I tried to provide an explanation to what image of the future could be based on the Count's concept of the past, then I analysed how Széchenyi's basic concepts of history, rooted in European intellectual ideals, fitted into the broader connections of the Reform Era political values. Consequently, I focussed my attention on shedding light to the relationships of historical meaning of concepts with several layers of meaning (such as progress, nationality, constitutionalism) frequently used in Széchenyi's manifestations and the political jargon of the Reform Era in my case-study like analyses of ideological and concept history character of the Dissertation. With the progress of the work, it became more and more evident that the investigation of Széchenyi's history concepts, besides its numerous political, ideology and thought history aspects, brought to the surface an array of professional-methodological connections, too. Consequently, painting a clearer, more tinged picture demands a further extension of the research in the future.

III. Accomplishments

One of the most important accomplishments of the Dissertation I consider that, moving beyond the previous statements in literature, I managed to present the genesis and structuralism of Széchenyi's ideals on history set in a significantly wider system of connections. Starting from a broader historiography basis and the investigation spread to a

significantly larger body of text, greatly contributed to being able to give in my Dissertation a more comprehensive view of the characteristics of Széchenyi's approach to history.

My investigations led to the conclusion that the set of values guiding Széchenyi's history ideals were primarily based on his specific interpretation of the past, best reflected in the optimistic image of the nation's future painted in his programme-forming works. Diary entries from his younger years, however, show that the acceptance of the Hungarian nation's youthfulness and hence its transformability had not always featured as a constant element in the Count's world of thought. The author of *Hitel* and *Világ*, while attempting to draw up the nation's future, came to the surprising conclusion in a somewhat "non-historical" way that the Hungarian nation showed the "life characteristics" of not decay but youth and, therefore, could not possess historical traditions of past grandeur worth mentioning.

The Count became convinced during the investigation of the nation's state and characteristics that the Hungarian nation – by adopting the experience of more developed ones – might be able to join the progress of world history. Furthermore, in his view, it was exactly the youthfulness, future potential and "readiness for improvement" in the fields of politics, culture, economics and civilisation that presented a major guarantee for the Hungarian nation to fulfil its role in world history in the dimension of universal mankind. The youthfulness of the nation, therefore, offers such a potential, through which (via self-improvement) Hungary can contribute to the progress of the whole mankind. The ideals of progress and improvement – armed with the argumentation of English Enlightenment and Liberal law and history philosophy – furnished Széchenyi's history ideals with the optimism and dynamism needed to believe in the alterability of laws, representational system and constitutional government.

Following the argumentative role of the America-image popping up in Széchenyi's manifestations – reflected in the political values of the Reform Era – for several decades, proved that the references to the "model country" of Liberal economic and social development were organically connected to other categories of the Count's history approach. In Széchenyi's approach to history, the "youthfulness" of the "New World", its political structure, economic and social development – in contrast to the conservative set of values – could provide a reasonable theoretical starting point not only for the Hungarian bourgeois-national transformation but, refuting the opposition's arguments and discarding the uncritical, mechanical adoption of models, fortified the autonomy of the Count's history ideals and political arguments.

Széchenyi's diaries attest that the recognition of national characteristics and the romantic-organic approach to describing the life of nations analogical to the human life cycle

started to play a dominant role in the Count's thinking following his reading experiences in the late 1810s and his extensive travels in his young age. The organic nation concept deriving from the mentality of European Romanticism was partly suitable for Széchenyi to define the age and future potential of the Hungarian nation by comparing it to other nations at different stages of development. On the other hand, however, the adherence to this concept involved the maintenance of the possibility of the nation's death and the development of a constant sense of danger connected to the development of the nation in the Count's history approach. In the earlier stages, it was not the public manifestations but rather the personal world of his diary that reflected that ever-present dilemma created in his mind by the constant need for progress and the possibility of the malady and death of the nation, in other words, the interaction of the romantic-organic concept of the nation and the idea of progress.

In Széchenyi's view, steady progress and continuous perfection, the involvement in the course of global development are essential conditions for Hungary to be able to fill its historic duty. However, according to the Count's arguments, the age of a nation is in itself the factor that defines the strategy for nation building and its pace of progress through which that historic task can be accomplished without the threat of the nation's death. An inappropriate method of progress because of its pace, direction or leaders – prompting a counter-effect from the *“intricate”* and *“entangled”* factors defining the existence of the Hungarian nation – might lead to a harmful setback of the development process and might also result in the death of the nation. In Széchenyi's history approach, the relationship with the Hapsburg Empire, the national minorities or the threat of social revolution counted as potential “dimensions of danger” that could hinder the fulfilment of that historic calling.

To a great extent, these history approach considerations seem to have permeated the Count's constitution interpretation, too. Széchenyi treated the question of constitutional progress as one of the key issues of universal national improvement. Although, equipped with the ideological background of Enlightenment and Liberalism, he saw the bourgeois transformation of the Hungarian nation in creating the fundamental civil liberties and constitutional guarantees, the issue of constitutionality in Széchenyi's argumentation – flowing to a great extent from his particular history approach considerations – appears in a multi-dimensional system of connections aimed to calculate with all factors of the national-constitutional transformation.

At the start of the 1840s – realizing the opportunity for a more dynamic and radical national transformation – referring to the threat posed by the young age and vulnerability of the nation and fearing its death (disappearance and annihilation), Széchenyi launched an

attack on the “*attitude and tactics*” of the *Pesti Hírlap* jeopardizing his own previous popularity. The charges formulated in *Kelet népe* – re-actualizing the ideals elaborated earlier and giving the arguments meant to convince the public a new direction – highlighted the particular value dimensions of his history approach: “*For humanity to uphold one nation, cherishing her peculiarities as a heirloom ‘n develop in her immaculate character, elevate her powers and virtues, and by so doing, trained in new forms so far unknown, lead her to her final goal, the glorification of mankind [...]*”.

The fundamental statements of *Kelet népe* lead us to conclude not only that the polemics – parallel with their numerous other dimensions – was filled with history approach interferences and references but also prove that his history approach considerations formed such solid base of Széchenyi’s idealism that the Count arranged his arguments around these ideals at the time of the first confrontation with Kossuth. Kossuth’s responses also strengthen that the mental building blocks of two disparate history approaches represented by the two parties keep recurring well-pronounced during the debate. Drawing up the accomplishment of the Dissertation I must emphasize that my conclusions are not aimed at the reinterpretation of the polemics but were intended to establish that the clashing political argumentation of the two parties, both Széchenyi and Kossuth’s history approaches, though in many respects pointing to the same direction, were responsible for the confrontation. An investigation into the history approach aspects of the Széchenyi-Kossuth polemics confirmed primarily that, in the action-reaction series of the conceptual debate, the parties – due to the heterogenic nature of their history approach – used differing arguments in the historical context of the nation’s past and future.

In the course of my work, I believe I managed to strengthen and confirm the presupposition that Széchenyi’s history approach deeply and fundamentally permeated the Count’s idealism, nation approach, interpretation of progress, constitution concept and view of the nation’s future. The conclusions of the case studies, setting the fundamental categories of Széchenyi’s history approach into a broader context, confirmed that Széchenyi’s political argumentation founded on his history approach fitted organically both conceptually and rhetorically into the course of political discourse of the era. This particular approach seems inseparable from the Count’s idealism but is also inseparable from the thinking of his contemporaries and the political values of the Reform Era. This history approach is a dominant and clearly identifiable element of Széchenyi’s thinking and the particular standpoint taking shape in the political argumentation deriving from it represented a characteristic but by no means unique phenomenon in the political discourse of the day.

I trust that my investigations managed to prove that Széchenyi's history approach considerations formed a definitive part of the Count's political argumentation and this deeply felt and consistently applied idealism, as well as the linguistic-notional set drawn from it, represented a characteristic though not unique component of the political discourse organically embedded in the context of the era. An analysis of this particular world of ideals and the political arguments relying on it can be suitable in many respects to add further tinges and colours to the picture already created about Széchenyi's system of ideals and political values.

IV. Further publications of the author related to the theme of the Dissertation:

“let us be [...] if possible in everything: the nation of reason” – István Széchenyi’s history approach and the *Kelet népe* In: Acta Universitatis Debrecensis Ludovico Kossuth Nominatae Series Historica LI. Studies on History VII. KLTE. (Edit.: Péter Takács) Debrecen, 1999. 115-129. p.

Count István Széchenyi and English Constitutionalism. In.: ECONOMICA (Scientific Publications of Szolnok College) 2001. Volume II. 77-85. p.

Introduction of the works “Kelet népe” and “Garat”, philological care and proofreading of the texts on the CD “*Count István Széchenyi’s Complete Works*” Published in: (Accompanying book: Count István Széchenyi’s Complete Works, 33-36. p.) and on CD: “*Count István Széchenyi’s Complete Works*” Logod Bt. Bp., 2001. ISBN 963 00 7859 7

On the land of “past empires” – Széchenyi’s Oriental Travels in 1818-1819 (Part One) In.: Post-Bizantine Publications V. Studia Postbizantina Hungarica 2002. 37-54.p.

“History Approach of Count István Széchenyi in the *Kelet népe* Polemics (Sketches of raising issues for a PhD Dissertation)” In.: 1st Scientific Conference of PhD Students in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County CD ROM. ZMNE Aviation Technology Institute, Szolnok, 2002.

Tamás Fülöp – Ferenc Velkey: Philological care and emendation of *Világ* by Count István Széchenyi. (work in progress) János Neumann Digital Library. (www.neumann-haz.hu) 2002.

The concept of progress in Széchenyi’s system of ideals. In.: DIALÓGUS November, 2003. (Year II. Vol. 1.) 9-20. p.