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## THE LEGACY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY HUNGARIAN CONSERVATISM

The paper discusses the political views of János Asbóth, an outstanding representative of the nineteenth-century Hungarian Conservatism, explained in his various works. Asbóth's Conservatism cannot be characterized by Friedrich A. Hayek's terms as 'fear of change' or 'fondness for authority'; it rather shows similarity to Edmund Burke's attitude. Asbóth clearly considered progress the task of the human race, but he wanted progress to be continuous and organic. He might be regarded as a disillusioned Liberal too, since his Conservatism seemed to be based on the criticism of Liberalism, which he did not think could cope with the challenge of Socialism. On the other hand, he thought that Conservatism was more flexible an ideology, since it started from given circumstances and focused on the needs of the state and its citizens, while Liberals started from principles, which involved certain goals. The paper also discusses Asbóth's criticism of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the relations between political and cultural Conservatism.

*"We can never be sure that the opinion we are  
endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion;  
and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still"*  
(Mill 1963, 142).

Conservatism is a term that can apply to moral, legal, religious, political, and cultural phenomena. My investigation will be limited to the last two of these fields and to the activity of János Asbóth (1845–1911), the author of the manifesto *Hungarian Conservatism* (1875), a two-volume analysis of *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (1887), and numerous other works. I wish to avoid both the preconception that "one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such" and the idea that its two other characteristics are "its fondness for authority and its lack of understanding of economic forces" (Hayek 1978, 400). More to the point, I reject those definitions of Conservatism that are based on the premise that the Conservative attitude towards the other is tied to "its hostility to internationalism and its proneness to a strident nationalism" (Hayek 1978, 405).

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Instead of using the term in the more restricted sense of designating “a political philosophy that attributes incomparably greater value to institutions and practices of society that have evolved historically than it does to the societal models of individual political thinkers” (Gassenmeier and Gurr 2004, 117), I would characterize Conservatism in a broad sense as an ideology based on the “idea of inheritance” (Burke n. d., 216), implying that the history of our predecessors can be read as our own history. To conserve values means that we try to discover the legacy of the past in the present. Asbóth’s early travel book, published in 1866, was dedicated to “a respect for our ancestors” (Asbóth 1866, 1: 330) and Darvady, the hero and narrator of his only novel *A Dreamer of Dreams* (published at the very end of 1877), portrays himself as someone who “is looking for the old in the new” (Asbóth 2002, 125). A Conservative is often inclined to view his own fate as a story that happened before. When Darvady falls in love with a celebrated *prima donna*, he relives the experience of Antony and Tannhäuser, the Shakespearean hero’s love for Cleopatra and the Wagnerian hero’s devotion to Venus, “feeling a magic that contains damnation” (Asbóth 2002, 155).

Conservation implies continuity. In the second book of Asbóth’s novel, both the revolution of 1848 and the oppression that followed its defeat are presented as ruptures. It follows from Burke’s principle of “at once to preserve and to reform” that “time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at” (Burke n. d., 383–387). Accordingly, the Hungarian author approves of the abolition of serfdom but regards it as a shortcoming that “it happened as a radical change and not as an organic evolution” (Asbóth 1892, 16), so that the Hungarian nobility found it difficult to adjust to a suddenly changed milieu. In his judgment, a state of equilibrium is endangered by both stagnation and rupture, and the latter is often the result of the influence of “fanaticism” (Asbóth 1872, 191), a term borrowed from Burke, who condemned both the “fanatics of slavery” and the “fanatics of popular arbitrary power” (Burke n. d., 28). As a Conservative, Asbóth distrusted all fanatics who secularized the ideal of salvation. He argued for “a progress based on internal and organic evolution”. “Great and lasting prosperity can be reached only in a conservative way, by the efforts of several generations”, he remarked (Asbóth 2002, 104).

Undoubtedly, the survival of a Romantic legacy is responsible for the belief that “ideas, especially in the humanities, are comparable to organisms. After a painful birth, they may become powerful and will inevitably decline” (Asbóth 2002, 250). Asbóth’s contempt for what he labeled as inorganic in the culture of the Bavaria of Ludwig I may remind us not only of the opposition between organic Greek and imitative Roman cultures formulated by Friedrich Schlegel and later by Ferenc Kölcsey, in the essay known as *National Traditions*, one of the programmatic statements of Hungarian Romanticism, published in 1826, but also of Burke’s cultural warning against inoculating “any scion alien to the nature of the original plant” (Burke n. d., 234). In his book on Italy, Switzerland, and Bavaria, published one year before the *Ausgleich* of 1867, Asbóth made the following statement: “If a human being, a plant, an art, a craft, a people, a country, or a city does not develop gradually from the inside, relying on its own energy, if greatness is imposed on it (...), a fundamental flaw will be de-

tected by anyone who has seen such development from the inside” (Asbóth 1866, 1: 102).

This kind of Conservatism goes together with a criticism of the existing and a demand for change. “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation”, as Burke argued (Burke n. d., 223). Asbóth’s position clearly echoes that of his predecessor: since “in politics nothing can be conserved by not changing the existing” (Asbóth 1892, 96), no statesman can succeed unless he “can combine the radicalism implicit in the concept of theory with the Conservatism that is a sine qua non of every practice” (Asbóth 1872, 443). For Asbóth progress is “the sacred goal of mankind” (Asbóth 1866, 2: 53), but history is a matter of changing perspectives. Accordingly, “conditions in a country may ask for Liberal arrangements at one and Conservative solutions at another stage” (Asbóth 1875, 2–3). Following the lead of Montesquieu, who in *De l’esprit des lois* insisted that no form of government can suit every country, he admitted that “a republic is the most perfect form of the state in an abstract sense” (Asbóth 1866, 1: 321). He was convinced that “liberty was the sole guarantee of the continuity of progress” (Asbóth 1872, 160), but rejected the idea that freedom was identical to prosperity or welfare. Echoing John Stuart Mill, he believed that “liberty was closely tied to individualism” (Asbóth 1872, 114). As he linked the principle of individual freedom to monotheism, he traced back the tradition of individualism not to Classical Antiquity but to the Judeo-Christian legacy.

Taking it for granted that “the destruction of human life was an unforgivable sin” (Asbóth 1872, 405), he was critical not only of the secularized forms of salvation but also of the teleological interpretation of history: “the theory of some ultimate goal is superfluous. A human being embodies both the goals and the motives of his/her actions” (Asbóth 1872, 109). Although he ridiculed the pettiness of the Swiss “Spiessbürger”, he expressed his envy for a people that “knew slavery from hearsay only” (Asbóth 1866, 2: 55), and considered “the freedom of expressing individual opinion” to be a patriotic duty (Asbóth 1875, IX).

If it is true that in the Hungary of the 1870s “Liberals were known as the spokesmen of legal equality and the development of bourgeois institutions” (Takáts 1993, 545), the question arises why Asbóth called himself a Conservative, since he accepted both of the goals mentioned. The answer lies in the historical context. By the second half of the nineteenth century the earlier opposition between Liberals and Conservatives had been replaced by the triangle of Socialism, Liberalism, and Conservatism. Viewing his own age as “the period of Socialism” (Asbóth 1892, 571), Asbóth anticipated the conclusion reached in the twentieth century that skepticism and tolerance were not the exclusive characteristics of Liberalism. Inspired by Socialist ideas, he maintained that the Liberals “increased the duties of the citizens without granting them work and income (...). Under such circumstances the exploited working class and the impoverished agricultural labourers were forced to turn to the illusions of Communism and Socialism” (Asbóth 1875, 22).

It was under the influence of the Paris Commune that Asbóth reached the conclusion that Hungary needed a Conservative ideology. “Who could deny that in 1825 the conditions in our country demanded a Liberal policy”, he asked. Admitting that the

movement of “Conservatives and Liberals who had more insight and courage than the majority” dominated the first half of the century, he warned that “in the new conditions the task was not to reject Liberalism but to avoid its shortcomings”. Believing that “in the past both Liberals and Conservatives were responsible for errors against liberty”, he drew the following conclusion: “Liberals start from principles, which involve certain goals. Conservatives start from given circumstances and focus on the needs of the state and its citizens” (Asbóth 1875, 9, 138, 13, 95, 94). For him Liberal and Conservative stood for concepts that were vulnerable to historical changes. It followed from the complexity of their interrelations that the 1848 revolution could also be viewed from the perspective of preserving values, since the ruling class endorsed democracy; “it gave up its privileges in order to save the nation” (Asbóth 1866, 1: 223–224). To avoid discontinuity, “the old nobility had to adjust to the new circumstances and become a professional class” (Asbóth 1892, 20).

Is it possible to regard Asbóth as a disillusioned Liberal? Earlier examples would suggest that sometimes a Conservative ideology developed as the outcome of a loss of belief. At the start of his public career Edmund Burke was a Whig, and it is well-known that the Jacobin terror became a cause for disappointment for numerous European intellectuals. Burke’s description of “the despotism of the multitude” (Burke n. d., 337) may have inspired the Hungarian author’s claim that “if you seek liberty (...), you will learn from the example of the first French republic that the most frightening tyranny is the one exercised by the people” (Asbóth 1872, 81). Disillusionment is a keyword not only in Asbóth’s novel but also in his political writings. His thesis that Democratic North-America turned into “a country of humbug” (Asbóth 1872, 219) indicates that his criticism was directed not merely against the fake Liberalism of the Hungary that followed the “Ausgleich” but also against capitalism: “although the landowners often abused their privileges, they had to pay some attention to the welfare of their serfs, while the factory owner can hire another labourer in place of the one that has died of starvation, since the world is full of starving people” (Asbóth 1875, 22). Such a position is incompatible with the consistent support of any political party. “I attacked all parties and always voted for the one that seemed to have more truth under the circumstances”, Asbóth confessed. “No political party ever accepted me”, he added (Asbóth 2002, 115). In his view Conservatism stood for an unqualified respect for intellectual quality.

Scholars often emphasize his debt to the Liberalism of József Eötvös. While he had a great admiration for his predecessor, he insisted that liberty, nationality, and equality, which Eötvös discussed as the ruling ideas of the nineteenth century in his two-volume work *Der Einfluss der herrschenden Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts auf den Staat* (1851–1854) “were in fact not the ideas of the nineteenth but of the eighteenth century” (Asbóth 2002, 253). In the public lecture he gave as an elected member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, on 14 October 1895, he went further by suggesting that the principles of the Enlightenment and the French revolution were never put to practice: “Far from realizing the plan of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century became gradually, step by step disillusioned with and turned against this program, and finally destroyed it by violent, systematic and consistent attacks” (Asbóth 2002, 253).

He reminded his contemporaries that the idea of economic “laissez faire, laissez passer” was formulated by the physiocrats, around 1750, and by the second half of the nineteenth century, it became “hyperconservative” (Asbóth 2002, 261). By choosing that word, he wished to emphasize that an extreme form of Conservatism was inevitably self-destructive, since it undermined continuity.

The legacy of the Enlightenment cannot be preserved in its integrity. This is the presupposition underlying the thesis that Adam Smith “was largely responsible for the intellectual current which defined the main goal in terms of material prosperity. Although he was full of good intentions and noble emotions towards the working class, his theory contained the germ of the ideology which subordinated labourers to the success of the work and degraded them to mere instruments in the hands of capital, instead of giving equal value to all forms of human work”. The description of the transformation of the “citoyen” into a “bourgeois” is clearly influenced by the Socialists’ attack on Liberalism which Asbóth considered to be “a considerable scholarly achievement”. He could not endorse an ideology “that replaced the dominance of the nobility with that of the business class using the slogans of Liberalism”, because this “would inevitably lead to the increasing power of Socialism” (Asbóth 2002, 259-260).

Asbóth’s awareness of Socialism indicates that in his view Conservatism demanded that one pay attention to trendy phenomena. He realized that the world was drifting, willy-nilly, towards materialism, business-like mentality, and what John Stuart Mill called ‘collective mediocrity’ (Mill 1963, 190). Seeing a society in which ‘money determined social standing’ (Asbóth 1892, 202), he discovered the fundamental contradiction in Liberalism that was defined later in the following terms: “‘Liberal’ can mean freedom of the stronger to do down the weaker by following market rules; or it can mean equal effective freedom of all to use and develop their capacities” (Macpherson 1977, 1). Having read the works of the younger Mill, he believed that in one respect his Liberalism was one step backward from the position that stipulated “one person, one vote”. In Asbóth’s interpretation, the rules of the market were incompatible with the individual’s right to self-development, and he both predicted and condemned a society in which the politicians were entrepreneurs and the voters consumers. The Liberalism he saw around himself was based on inequality, which he regarded as evidence that the goals of the 1789 revolution were not respected.

The American Civil War further strengthened his disillusionment. He welcomed the abolition “of the frightening anomaly of slavery”, but in his view after the victory of the North the wealthy succeeded in exploiting the post-bellum state, “using Liberal slogans” (Asbóth 1875, 26). Echoing Burke’s claim that “those, who attempt to level, never equalize” (Burke n. d., 254), he associated post-revolutionary systems with corruption, opportunism, and career building.

He raised four objections to the Hungarian Liberalism of the decades following 1867. The first among these was the legal inequality caused by the gap between the rich and the poor. One of the main theses of the book entitled *Hungarian Conservatism* is that “poor people have no rights in Hungary” (Asbóth 1875, 114). No less important weaknesses are the incomplete emancipation of Jews and sexual discrimina-

tion. The last flaw of the Dual Monarchy is arguably the most complex. It has implications both for foreign policy and for the status of national minorities. The statesman Asbóth admired was Talleyrand. What others dismissed as inconsistency, he called the “enlightened and common-sense patriotism” of “someone who could always recognize the real interests of France” (Asbóth 1892, 281). As an expert on the Balkan region, Asbóth called for a policy that could lead to “good relations between the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy” and the nations that belonged neither to the German or to the Russian Empire (Asbóth 1892, 610). It proves his tolerance that he saw “the most effective ally” of anti-Hungarian movements in “excessive Hungarian patriotism”, and urged his compatriots not to behave “as conquerors and oppressors” (Asbóth 1892, 127, 44). He rejected the idea that his own nation was superior to any of its neighbours, and described Croats as a politically mature nation from which Hungarians “could learn a great deal” (Asbóth 1875, 137). Borrowing the premise from some of his predecessors, he reminded his public that Hungarians were the only national community of the Monarchy that had no representatives outside the boundaries of the state, and insisted that a Hungarian independence from the Habsburgs would mean the creation of “an insignificant state at the mercy of its neighbours” (Asbóth 1892, 28). The prediction made by a German author that a Danube confederacy “as an inorganic community could easily become a victim to Russian domination” was confirmed by his personal experience. During one of the Balkan wars, on 5 July 1876, he recorded that “in the streets of Belgrade some called for the creation of greater Serbia and in two years planned to attack Austria with the help of Russia” (Asbóth 1892, 441, 465). During his stays in different parts of the Habsburg Monarchy he saw that “the spokesmen of the nationalities subordinated *all* matters to their national cause”. This, together with his reading of the Russian press, convinced him that it may prove to be impossible to “stop the disintegration of Hungary”. The fear that “once we have lost the country, (...) people may find liberty in this region or beyond the ocean but they will not find Hungary on the map” (Asbóth 1875, 99, 107, 28) led him to the belief that the survival of the Dual Monarchy was the proper goal for Hungarian Conservatives (Asbóth 1892, 180).

While Asbóth remained adamant that local cultures were to be cherished, he admitted that “national character was never finished”; “it had to follow the changes in circumstances”. He was sure that in the future “the emotional and mental habits of the European nations would become more and more similar” (Asbóth 1872, 15, 22), and took a special interest in the traditions of other continents. Far from being a Eurocentric author, he studied continuity in Mexican culture, insisted that in the Middle Ages Arabs represented real civilization, and risked the hypothesis that “Chinese people will reach our standards, except in fields in which they have been superior to us for thousands of years” (Asbóth 1872, 426, 73). Without exaggeration, it could be pointed out that a fascination with local habits, customs, conventions, and traditions, made this pioneer of comparative anthropology a severe critic of British Liberalism. In the book which he produced as a counterpart to John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, he blamed the English author for his colonial attitude to so-called “uncivilized, barbaric peoples” (Asbóth 1887, 105).



His efforts to bridge the gap between the native and the foreign would raise the question about the relations between political and cultural Conservatism. On this occasion I cannot address this question. Let it suffice to say that the activity of János Asbóth would suggest that the one does not necessarily follow from the other. Although this Hungarian author regarded the Greek language as the basis for teaching the humanities and insisted on the significance of conservation in the arts, he also wrote one of the most innovative Hungarian novels of the nineteenth century, a work that received much more attention in the last fifteen years than during the first hundred years that followed its first edition. Besides, in the essays he published on literature and the visual arts, he attacked didactic allegories and academic genres, proving that a Conservative in politics can have a taste open to the reception of artistic originality.

Today some Hungarians use the term Conservative when describing their own value system. They could learn from the example of this highly cultured writer, who was fully aware of the interrelations of Liberalism and Conservatism, culture and politics.

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