

KOSSUTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY HUNGARIAN PROGRESSIVES

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The progressives were those who preferred universal secret suffrage to restricted and open voting, modern sociology to old-fashioned hair-splitting over public law issues, secularism to the extensive political economic social and cultural influence of the Churches. Kossuth was a key figure for them. Kossuth's program integrated all the liberal and national aims close to their hearts.

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Progressives – the Original Interpretation

Scholarship calls for clearly defined concepts, and I am afraid that the term “Progressive” in the title of my paper does not meet this requirement. First of all, I have to make clear to our American colleagues that our use of the term “Progressive” in Hungary has little to do with the American understanding of the “Progressive Era” – especially the years of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. What the American and Hungarian Progressives did, however, have in common was that they tried to address some of the most fundamental and topical social, economic and political problems of their respective societies during the first decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, we must always be aware that unlike the American Progressives, who lent their name to an entire era, Hungarian Progressives controlled state power only for a few critical months following the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in the aftermath of World War I.

This observation, however, constitutes only the first step towards clarifying my own interpretation of the concept “Progressive.” Had I been asked to give this presentation twenty or twenty-five years ago, I do not think that I would have had any reservations. Without any hesitation I would have described what I at that time considered to be a very clear and unquestionable definition of progressive politics and the progressives in early twentieth-century Hungary.¹ I would have argued that the platforms of the three major groups that entered into a coalition in

the Hungarian National Council at the end of October 1918 represented the progressive tendencies in early twentieth-century Hungarian politics. The social democrats, the so-called “bourgeois radicals,” and the “progressive wing” of the “independents,” Mihály Károlyi’s party, questioned the legitimacy of the establishment and initiated proposals that could have led to a fundamentally new economic, political and social order in Hungary. Universal political suffrage, land reform, coming to the terms with the demands of the national minorities (the “Achilles-heel” of Hungarian democracy) appeared on their agendas. Consequently my interpretation was quite simple: the issues that later appeared in the program of October 1918 revolution were the components of the progressive platform. In the broader sense of the word, and very much under the spell of Zoltán Horváth’s outstanding study,² this interpretation of the progressive camp included all those intellectuals who were more interested in pinpointing and critically analyzing the “antiquated” social, political institutions of the country than in the pseudo-patriotic anti-Habsburg rhetoric. Progressives were those who – to use emblematic names – preferred Ady to Ferenc Herczegh, the review “Huszadik Század” to “Magyar Figyelő” and especially to “Magyar Kultúra,” “Nyugat” to “Budapesti Szemle,” “Világ” to “Budapesti Hírlap,” Mihály Károlyi to István Tisza and even more to Béla Bangha or Mihály Réz, universal secret suffrage to restricted and open voting, modern sociology to old-fashioned hairsplitting over public law issues, as well as secularism to the extensive political, economic, social and cultural influence of the Churches, especially the Catholic Church. It was the 1905–6 political crisis and its aftermath that substantially contributed to the polarization of these conflicting views.

The Progressives Revisited

A number of factors, however, have made me rethink my previous approach. The experiences of living in a multiparty democracy, seeing a great number of my colleagues in senior political positions, and listening to their reports on decision making procedures led me to the conclusion that it is much more difficult to divide actors of political life into “progressive” and “reactionary” camps than I had originally believed. Much more difficult, but not impossible. Even if the emotions generated by the creative artist appeal to his heart, a historian has to understand and put into context Ady’s passionate criticism of István Tisza. The historian has to recognize that Tisza had serious arguments against universal suffrage. The agrarian experts of the Tisza-establishment were just as much aware of the problems of land ownership as Oscar Jászi and his friends, even if their policy proposals were fundamentally different. When speaking about secularization, one has to be aware of the indispensable social and cultural services rendered by the Churches; and a

great deal of evidence shows that democratization does not directly and immediately resolve national conflicts, nor does it necessarily weaken the centrifugal political aspirations of national minorities. I started to wonder whether or not one can reasonably exclude members of the political, economic, cultural establishment from the ranks of the initiators and proponents of progress, once one becomes more aware of the responsibilities coupled with power.³ However, in spite of all these considerations, less spontaneously but most consciously, I will retain my earlier definition of the progressives as a group. My motivation, however, is by now less supported by the particulars of their political, social, economic program and more by the ethical standards they set and followed. As György Litván so aptly summarized in reference to the lifework of Oscar Jászi:

Our century has been torn between individualism and collectivism, capitalism and socialism, democracy and dictatorship, reform and revolution, reason and violence, modernization and tradition, nationalism and internationalism. While the century lurched between extremes, Jászi was able to formulate a balanced view of all these issues from a position of ethical politics, weighing both sides of the problems and often rejecting all the usual solutions... Jászi seemed again and again to be a loser, only to be subsequently – and often tragically – proved right.⁴

The main components of this ethical politics might be summed up as follows:

1. Political ideologies are not simply a means for acquiring political power.
2. The values of human dignity are not to be subordinated to political considerations; and politics is to be accepted as a field of open competition with clearly defined rules.
3. Consequently ideological and political convictions are not to be transformed into life and death struggles, into unbridgeable cleavages. The aim is to defeat and not to destroy the political rival.

The Progressives' Image of Kossuth

Here I will at last bring Kossuth into the picture and come to the major part of this short presentation. A key point of reference for the dominant group of the progressives was – both before and after 1918 – Lajos Kossuth. This was not an easy choice for them because Kossuth was also at the center of the political rhetoric of the nationalist and conservative establishment. Nevertheless, most Progressives saw the conservative and nationalist appropriation of Kossuth as a distorted and manipulative image of the revolutionary leader. In order to examine the shaping of this “progressive Kossuth cult,” let me now invite you to an intel-

lectual tour of the ideas of three key personalities belonging to the Hungarian Progressives. I am going to speak about the respective ideas of one of the wealthiest Hungarian aristocrats, a man who became the president of the first and short-lived Hungarian republic in 1918. Furthermore, I will also explore the views of the son of a doctor in a small town on the Romanian–Hungarian border, a man who became a prestigious expert on the ethnic-national complexity of the Danubian basin. In addition I will also refer to the political thought of the son of a poor lower middle class Jewish family from the north of Hungary, a man whose most fragile body hid one of the most charismatic and active minds in early twentieth-century Hungarian intellectual life and whose inexhaustible energy focused on the theory and practice of socialism. Mihály Károlyi and Oscar Jászi lived long lives and died in 1955 and 1957 respectively; while Ervin Szabó’s funeral in early October 1918 constituted a prelude to the October 1918 Hungarian democratic revolution. Different as their backgrounds might have been, they all challenged the establishment of their times, and they were all representatives of what we defined as ethical politics. This is, of course, only a small segment of the Progressives’ group but the constraints of time compel such a small selection here. To refer only to the most obvious omissions, I will not speak here about Ady, Ignóty, Bartók, or Szende.

Ervin Szabó and the Social Democrats

Our tour begins almost exactly one hundred years ago, in September 1902, when Ervin Szabó, one of our protagonists, “commemorated” Kossuth’s 100th birthday with the following words: “...Lajos Kossuth can not be listed among the celebrities of the Hungarian proletariat, who cherish Sándor Petőfi and Mihály Táncsics.”⁵ This view was also reflected in the respective resolution of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary. Nevertheless, this view was almost unanimously rejected by Hungarian public opinion. Endre Ady observed in *Nagyváradi Napló*: “...how painful it is that the Hungarian socialists, whose arguments are accepted by an increasing number of people, and whom we have also not once defended, could make such a great mistake. The Hungarian socialists should recognize that a hundred articles in the bourgeois press did not do their cause as much harm as this single resolution without any commentary.”⁶ Szabó’s closest friend, Oscar Jászi was also unable to convince him that he and his socialist comrades should not underestimate the significance and impact of the national principle. As a common friend of the two young men, who were both under thirty, Lajos Leopold argued in a private letter:

The name Kossuth still has a huge latifundium in the Hungarian heart, in the quiet dreams of Hungarian cotters. No doubt, this latifundium is still extensively cultivated, exploited, robbed ... and so only grows prickly and thistle. What about bringing modern machinery and rich harvest to this latifundium?... Kossuth was a man of his capitalistic, doctrinarian, liberal age, from this point of view not our man, however, also a republican, in his later years anti-militaristic and infused our people with a vague, subconscious hatred against power.⁷

Jászi and Károlyi on Kossuth

Leopold's approach in a much more sophisticated form became the platform that would make Kossuth a central figure in the historical and political argumentations of Jászi and Károlyi, in the social-political thought of what Zoltán Horváth defined as the second reform generation in Hungary. Not many personalities in modern Hungary have been able to weld successfully national and democratic aims into ethical politics in thought and occasional action as well. In combining "free thought" with "Hungarian thought"⁸ Kossuth was their prime example. His moral integrity has not been questioned even if many of his views, decisions, and actions had been subjected to criticism. For most members of this second reform generation (with the significant exception of more orthodox socialists) Kossuth's program was the democratic alternative to the Hungarian establishment in the Dual Monarchy. Two heroes of our intellectual tour, Jászi and Károlyi, presented Kossuth as their political and human model even after the First World War. In striking contrast to what they described (quite unfairly) as antiquated nationalist mainstream historiography, they paid tribute to Kossuth as a successor to György Dózsa (the leader of the peasant revolt of 1514), Ferenc Rákóczi (the aristocratic leader of the early eighteenth-century anti-Habsburg uprising) and Ignác Martinovics (the head of a late eighteenth-century anti-Habsburg conspiracy, whom a number of sources have described as a paid Habsburg agent). They were:

...sublime but tragic shadows amidst the tortures and oppressions, which the people of Hungary continuously suffered from the feudal oligarchy and from Habsburg absolutism ... The next to the last successor of these broken heroes, Louis Kossuth, synthesized ... all the tendencies of the first three on a higher level of historical evolution, exactly as the last martyr of the same struggle, Michael Károlyi, continued the secular struggle of all the four and succumbed with them under the blow of class absolutism and foreign enemies.⁹

On another occasion Jászi developed this argument the following way:

It is only the American way that can save us ... Dismemberment of the feudal estates, free trade... autonomy for all national minorities, separation of the state from the churches, economic confederation with the neighboring states, a free and liberal education... in a single word: a republic for the people and by the people... That was the real legacy of Louis Kossuth, which Michael Károlyi tried to continue. But as Kossuth failed in 1848, Károlyi failed in 1918, it is the tragic destiny of our people that his best men can not carry on their unselfish and bright ideas...¹⁰

Jászi and Károlyi frequently compared the October 1918 revolution to 1848: “Mihály Károlyi took seriously the message of Kossuth and divided his latifundia among his peasants...”¹¹ Paying tribute to Kossuth’s personality and moral integrity was far from constituting an unconditional acceptance of all his views and policy proposals. In a most interesting 1933 article,¹² on the occasion of the publication of the Kossuth – László Teleki correspondence in 1850, Jászi described with great empathy Kossuth’s vision of Hungary’s possible dismemberment into six parts in case a “liberated” Hungary, separated from Austria grants provincial autonomies to her national minorities. The champion of the emancipation of the national minorities in pre-World War I Hungary appreciated Kossuth’s feeling of responsibility for the preservation of Hungary’s territorial integrity and his awareness of the utmost significance of the nationality problem in Hungarian politics. In the Teleki–Kossuth controversy, however, he feels much closer to Teleki, who believed that Kossuth’s plan of a confederation of Hungary, Romania and Serbia was hardly possible without an internal federation with the nationalities of Hungary. From Jászi’s point of view, who together with Mihály Károlyi in Hungary during the period between the two world wars was frequently blamed for their “naive” foreign policy of 1918–1919, the federation with Hungary’s nationalities was a key issue. Namely, according to this unjustified accusation, such naivete paved the way to Trianon. But he could point out that as early as 1850 Kossuth had indicated,

... ever since Hungary’s nationality problem had become acute, she had been threatened with dismemberment along the lines not dissimilar from those laid down in the Trianon settlement, unless her statesmen pursued a wise and judicious policy of conciliation and fair play toward the subject nationalities.¹³

In his Memoirs Mihály Károlyi also refers to Kossuth as his predecessor, praising him for realizing in his exile that

... his crucial error had been in antagonizing the non-Magyar races. Living outside his country, his vision was clarified by distance, and he drew up the plan for a Danubian confederation, directed against the Habsburgs. This scheme would have made Hungary the center of a group of democratic states lying along the Danube, thus giving her the role of pioneer amongst homologous and equal neighbors. His followers did not wish to remember this Kossuth of later years; and it was characteristic that as long as he appealed to national conceit, he was considered the greatest Hungarian, but as soon as he launched a scheme of greater value his popularity diminished. For it implied that Hungary would recognize as equals the alien races within her borders, as she could never succeed without their co-operation. Even today [1954] the only solution to the Central European problem is based on this concept of his, and no estimate of Kossuth's statesmanship would be complete which overlooked it.

My aim was to revive Kossuth's plan in a modernized form, and a Slavophile policy was the stepping-stone to this. The events of the past ten years have proved without doubt that Europe's fate would have been very different had a powerful Federal State of 88 millions been able to stand up to Hitler in 1938.¹⁴

Sancho Panza Combined with Don Quixote

The parallel also applied to the personal fates of Jászi and Kossuth. Jászi wrote in a letter to the editor of the Times on January 8, 1926:

Unfortunately I was unsuccessful in all my efforts and the League of Nations determined to save the compromised and financially broken Horthy regime... Since that time I abandoned all kinds of political activity seeing that the Hungarian cause became a *res judicata* and the situation became somewhat analogous to that when Louis Kossuth ceased to struggle against the Habsburgs after the Compromise of 1867... I felt it to be unfair to do anything which could impede the work of financial reconstruction even in the case that it reinforced the power of the absolutist regime.¹⁵

Jászi and his very few surviving Progressive friends remained loyal to their Kossuth cult throughout their lives. Kossuth is again the point of reference when on March 15, 1948 Jászi (who had spent three weeks in his beloved Danubia the previous year) complains:

... unfortunately Kossuth's name which is still our greatest capital in America, has been expropriated both by rightist and leftist extrem-

ists ... although the big estates had been dismembered, the spirit permeating the whole (political life) is not the spirit of Petőfi, Kossuth and József Eötvös but the totalitarian atmosphere of the East.¹⁶

Let me conclude this short survey of the Kossuth image of some early twentieth-century Hungarian progressives with three hypothetical conclusions as to why Kossuth was such a key figure for the political thought and action of my protagonists. One reason was that Kossuth's program integrated the liberal and national aims that lay close to their hearts for implementation by an ethical politics. The other element might have been that Kossuth's example proved: failure in the short run doesn't necessarily mean the failure of a strategic aim, or that moral integrity is more important than non-ethical political gambling that can produce only fragile short lived successes. The third is that for them Kossuth represented a statesmanship that Jászi once described as "led by the sense of reality of Sancho Panza and animated by the non-compromising idealism of Don Quichote,"¹⁷ which is a remarkable example of their own self-image.

Notes

1. Attila Pók, "A magyarországi polgári radikális ideológia kialakulásáról" [On the Formation of Bourgeois Radical Ideology in Hungary]. *Világosság* (1975/6).
2. Zoltán Horváth, *Magyar századforduló* [Hungarian Turn of the Century] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1961).
3. Cf. Gábor Vermes, *István Tisza, the Liberal Vision and Conservative Statecraft of a Hungarian Nationalist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Chapter VII of this outstanding biography gives a very balanced account of the complexity of progressive politics in early twentieth-century Hungary.
4. György Litván, "Introduction," in Oscar Jászi, *Homage to Danubia* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), XI.
5. Quoted by György Litván in his essay "Szabó Ervin, a történétíró" [Ervin Szabó, the Historian] in *Szabó Ervin történeti írásai* [Ervin Szabó's Historical Writings], ed. György Litván (Budapest: Gondolat, 1979), 9.
6. In György Litván, 9.
7. In György Litván, 9–10.
8. Cf. György Litván, "*Magyar gondolat – szabad gondolat*" [Hungarian Thought – Free Thought] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1978).
9. Untitled manuscript in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library, Columbia University in New York.
10. Untitled manuscript of a presentation delivered by Oscar Jászi in the Hungarian Civic Club in New York on January 24, 1926 in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York.
11. Oscar Jászi, "Falsified Kossuth." A Speech Undelivered at the unveiling of the Kossuth Monument in New York, March 15, 1928. Manuscript in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York. Published in Hungarian: "Kossuth Lajos meggyalázása."

[The shaming of Lajos Kossuth] in *Jászi Oszkár publicisztikája* [Oscar Jászi's Journalism], eds. György Litván and János F. Varga, (Budapest: Magvető, 1982), 415–420.

12. Oscar Jászi, "Kossuth and the Treaty of Trianon," *Foreign Affairs* 12 (October 1933): 86–97.
13. *Ibid.*, 97.
14. Michael Károlyi, *Faith Without Illusions* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957), 41–42.
15. Copy of the letter of January 8, 1926 in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York.
16. Manuscript in Hungarian, prepared for a commemoration of March 15, 1948 in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York.
17. Manuscript of a speech introducing Michael Károlyi at Oberlin College on January 17, 1930 in the Jászi Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York.