The Idea of National Legitimacy in Fin-de-Siècle Hungary

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**Introduction**

This paper focuses on the ways in which discourses on legitimacy affected and shaped late nineteenth century nationalism. Many debates on national identity have used legitimacy not only to strengthen their argument, but also as a reflection of the changing nature of national identification. The importance of nationalism notwithstanding, the idea of legitimacy has not benefited from sustained scholarly attention.

In fin-de-siècle Hungary, legitimacy was a debated theme. I focus on fin-de-siècle because, at that particular moment, legitimacy supplanted nationalism with particular ideas about national superiority and inferiority. Such topics are, of course, difficult to address. In order to talk about legitimacy and nationalism in fin-de-siècle Hungary without reiterating the post-Trianon arguments (be they self-congratulatory or derogatory) the argument should be disconnected from historical determinism.

A discussion of legitimacy in fin-de-siècle nationalist discourses should not – as is so often the case - refer to the stereotype that associates Hungarians with “power” and other national groups with “subjugated peoples.” In order to appreciate the fin-de-siècle nationalism (that form of nationalism that, after all, engendered the transition from multi-national empires to national-states), legitimacy must be *rehistoricised*, that is to say re-integrated within its original framework.

**Organisation of the paper**

This paper is organised into three parts. The first part introduces the topic by considering some nineteenth century reflections on the nature of legitimacy (i.e. historical myths, conquest, etc.). At the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of legitimacy encompassed both historical arguments and a medium for national attainment.

The second part portrays some of the ways Hungarians expressed their national legitimacy. I suggest that, by fin-de-siècle, national legitimacy not only transformed the classical historical legitimacy of the aristocracy, but also became one of the most important references for Hungarian nationalism. In this context, national legitimacy both informed and transformed the relationship of Hungarians with other national groups (i.e. conflicting nationalisms).
Finally, the last part of the paper synthesizes some of the arguments. Advocating the idea of legitimacy, Hungarians infused their nationalism with a new theory of society and state. The nation, they urged, was a total community base upon a glorious historical tradition, spiritual and mental characteristics, language, and a homeland. It became thus clear that in the Hungarian Kingdom only the Hungarian nation had legitimate pretensions to individuality and territoriality.

Introducing Legitimacy: Forms and Expressions

National legitimacy is a delicate subject. The search for its origins, meanings and historical implications has always been a pressing preoccupation for both nationalists and scholars of nationalism. In the late nineteenth century, nationalism emerged as a powerfully constructed ideology. Dexterous in devising persuasive forms of identification, nationalism eroded not only the leading ideologies of the nineteenth century - liberalism and conservatism - but also challenged traditional ways – mainly religious - of ensuring subordination, obedience and loyalty.

Nationalists have used narratives of legitimacy to determine how national attributes were distributed, how national identities were shared and, most importantly, what nation meant – socially, psychologically and symbolically. Legitimacy gave nationalism a new dimension. This was not, however, a unidirectional process. Nationalism too played a leading role in the elaboration of narratives of legitimacy. Explaining the nation`s glorious antecedents and asserting its legitimacy became one of the central preoccupations of the nationalist ideologues.

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2 Eric Hobsbawm related the emerging national identification with a major set of mutations within political nationalism. It is worth mentioning them. “The first is the emergence of nationalism and patriotism as an ideology taken over by the political right. The second is the assumption, quite foreign to the liberal phase of national movements, that national self-determination up to and including the formation of independent sovereign states applied not just to some nation which could demonstrate economic, political and cultural viability, but to any and all groups which claimed to be a `nation.` The third was the growing tendency to assume that `national self-determination` could not be satisfied by any form of autonomy less than full state independence. Finally, there was the novel tendency to define a nation by ethnicity and especially in terms of language.” In Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire, 1875-1914 (London: Abacus, 1999), 144.
3 This idea is mostly explored in Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
In the nineteenth century, the idea of historical legitimacy fed into a larger nationalist discourse out of which it was substantially re-constructed. Members of the parliament used popularised versions of legitimacy, delivered by the emerging national historiography, to write legislation, as much as journalists exploited them to produce national stereotypes that shaped public opinion. Although one can never adequately document all facets of how the idea of legitimacy transformed nationalism, one can identify how nationalists incorporated ideas about legitimacy and supremacy in their interpretations of the nation.

In many ways, national legitimacy can be traced to the Enlightenment and the period of National Romanticism. Johann Gottfried Herder, for example, has repeatedly been invoked as the initiator of a new way of conceptualising human groups and their relationship to the state and history. Deeply enmeshed in the conviction that individuals should belong to a group, Romanticism fervently professed that every human community had its own unique shape and pattern. Volkstum (national folklore) and Volkgeist (national spirit), not only enhanced the belief that the history of a nation was unfolding according to a divine plan, but also portrayed the constitutive elements of such a history, as unveiled in the common language, mythologies, popular songs and legends. It was, thus, assumed that each nation deserves a special place and role in the universal scheme of history. One of the consequences of this development was the need to produce myths of origin.

Mythic versions of the national history were invented to rationalise national identities. In the newly established German Empire, ideas of Teutonic supremacy and Pan-Germanism bolstered Germany’s national arrogance and inserted additional vigour into its aggressive imperial programme. In France, considerable authority was given to theories concerning the supposed Celtic or Gallic origins of the French society. In Russia, adherents of pan-Slavism encouraged the expansion of Russian influence in the Balkans as a prerequisite to

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the eventual unification of the entire Slavic Race.\(^8\) Hungarians, as we shall see in the following, cherished the idea of a Turanic origin,\(^9\) whilst the Romanians claimed direct descent from the Roman colonists.\(^10\) In most cases, fragments of historical truth nourished the fantasies of blood and belonging, which in turn demanded an elaborated cartography of nationality.\(^11\)

**Imposing Legitimacy: The Cult of the Origins**

While this paper investigates how legitimacy reflected nationalism, the final goal is to show how Hungarian nationalists debated to obtain supremacy and recognition. In outlining some of the nineteenth-century expressions of historical and national legitimacy, I extract those specific Hungarian discourses that overlapped with the politics of assimilation and Magyarisation: micro-sites where legitimacy was subject to public consideration and where “national character” and the idea of “the superior nation” were explicitly discussed.

In fin-de-siècle Hungary, the idea of legitimacy became a source of nationalist resurrection.\(^12\) It was acclaimed by Hungarians and contested by non-Hungarians. Indeed, much of Hungarian political thought in the late nineteenth century focused on means of protecting national cohesion – all of which involved the existence of coherent politics of Magyarisation and assimilation.

Contrary to what is being argued in much of the scholarship, Magyarisation and assimilation were not just eruptions of chauvinistic nationalism, but were part of a well-elaborated conceptual apparatus. The fin-de-siècle generation thought it was their duty to finalise the process of creating a strong Hungarian nation-state. As István Tisza told a Transylvanian audience, “First of all, our non-Magyar citizens must take into account the fact that they belong to a national state, to a state that is not a conglomerate of peoples of different races, but a state acquired and created by a single nation.”\(^13\) Hungarian ideologues implied that the

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\(^12\) It is important to note that non-Hungarians did not contest the historical (the Millenary Hungarian state), but the national, legitimacy of Hungarians.

(Magyar) nation and the (Hungarian) state should be identical: a unitary Magyar nation needed a unitary Magyar state. In many respects, the construction of Hungarian national legitimacy and of the civilisational role of “the Magyars” greatly illustrates the transformation of Hungarian political discourse, from a tolerant and liberal *Gesellschaft* (that of 1867) to an illiberal and exclusivist *Gemeinschaft* (that of 1900).  

National legitimacy was part of a discursive practice and intellectual framework that percolated into assumptions about the historical, cultural and political domination of the “Magyar nation.” Those fin-de-siècle intellectuals and politicians who embraced the notions of national legitimacy and superiority proposed to transform “Magyar” national identity not necessarily by maintaining the old hierarchical Hungarian social and political stratification, but by augmenting assimilation and Magyarisation. The main assumption here is that assimilation and Magyarisation represented a part of a larger attempt used by the Hungarian ideologues to construct a homogeneous nation-state. Ideas of national legitimacy and superiority remained salient within the proliferating debates on the relationship between the Hungarian nation and the nationalities.

There is no doubt that Magyarisation and assimilation were important in fin-de-siècle Hungary, and indeed many thinkers explicitly identified themselves with one current or the other. Both terms were, however, used in different ways. Assimilation was commonly associated with the process of Jewish emancipation and the liberal ambition of replacing “Natio Hungarica” with a political nation of citizens. It denoted either a specific doctrine associated with the process of creating a nation-state, or, more loosely, a tendency of forced integration into the political definition of nation. The use of Magyarisation varied more widely, including: support for education in the Magyar language; an increased governmental regulation of the social and economic affairs of the non-Hungarians; or a national creed that emphasised the existence of a single version of identity.

National legitimacy needs historical myths. The final purpose of those attempts to insert in the discussions on national identity references to the glorious ancestors was the glorification of the nation through depicting the past as being magnificent and reflecting the present as being in need for imperative improvement. By fin-de-siècle, there was increasing tension in Hungary over whether the “Magyar” nation should look at an idealised Magyar past for its

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model, or if instead it should create a multi-ethnic society. It seemed that the former option proved more seductive. In this context, parallel with the celebration of its millenary existence in 1896, Hungary experienced a particular form of ancestor worship: the theory of Turanic origin.

Péter Hanák remarked that “Fin-de-siècle nationalism used the Millennium to popularise Hungarian state power and in stone, iron and words, to perpetuate the illusion of a Hungarian Empire.”15 Organised to celebrate the existence of the millenary Hungarian state and the conquest of the Carpathian basin by the Magyar tribes, the exhibition evoked the way Hungarians portrayed themselves in relation to the external world (Europe) and its internal ethnic diversity (the nationalities). Grand works of art were commissioned to celebrate the conquest, including the Heroes’ Square monument, with its towering central sculpture of Árpád and the other Magyar chieftains who founded the Hungarian state.16 The Hungarian political elite was attired in uniforms that evoked the clothing of the seventeenth- and eighteenth century Hungarian nobility.17 The conception of the celebration was infused with a variety of forms of legitimacy that were not accidental references, but reflected a state of mind conspicuously present in fin-de-siècle Hungarian political discourse.

The 1896 Millennium Exhibition framed the Hungarians as the only legitimate nation in Hungary. It depicted their ascendancy among European nations and their cultural superiority in the Carpathian basin.18 The ideas of Hungarian national and cultural superiority were reified by the architecture and physical arrangement of the exhibition. “The Nationality Street,” for example, was where each “nationality” of Hungary was represented. As an illustration of the

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18 As Alice Freifeld stated: “To celebrate the past, liberal Hungary had to draw beyond its own genealogy to the conservative pillars of church and aristocracy. The basis of aristocratic privilege is, of course, historic birthright. And in 1890 the aristocrats began planning a great Banderium, a grand historical procession, to mark the thousand-year anniversary of the Hungarian nation.” In Freifeld, “Marketing Industrialism and Dualism in Liberal Hungary, 1842-1896,” Austrian History Yearbook XXIX, part 1 (1998): 84.
“peaceful cohabitation” of the “Magyar nation” with the “non-Magyar races,” the “nationality street” reflected, as one contemporary proudly observed, “the ardent desire of the nation, that the different races inhabiting this country may always live in peace and harmony side by side, united in the love of the common fatherland.”

Another aspect needs highlighting. The ethno-racial rhetoric became substantially articulated by the time of the Millennium Exhibition. Its most outspoken expression was the depiction of Magyars as members of the Turanic race. Zsolt Beöthy (1848-1922), a literary historian, offered the best illustration of the Turanic ideology. Published in 1896, Beöthy’s A Magyar irodalom kis-tükre (The Small Mirror of Hungarian Literature) attempted to grasp the ethnic-spiritual roots of Hungarian culture. Starting with the iconic image of a horseman coming from the Volga River - the symbol of the Asian roots of the Magyar nation – the book explained the nomadic characteristics of the Magyars. The Turanic culture was, according to Beöthy, marked by a strong consciousness of the “common cause” and collective solidarity, the force of contemplation, tranquillity and honesty:

From the mist of ancient time, a figure of a horseman emerges before our eyes, standing quietly on the lowlands of the Volga valley, watching. In his peaked fur-cap, clad in panther-skin, his muscular waist seems to stem from his small horse. With eagle eyes, he looks across the seemingly endless plain whose every point is sharply lighted by the bright disk of the sun. (...) He waits for the future and he feels, he knows that their common cause shall require his strength. His soul is filled with the sense of this strength and with his devotion to his race.

Beöthy thus reconstructed the nomadic Turanic features of the ancient Magyars into a new Hungarian Weltanschauung. The core of Beöthy’s argument is that the combination of “Turanic” racial and cultural particularities was crucial in formatting the Magyar national character:

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20 Lajos Kéky, Beöthy Zsolt (Budapest: Franklin, 1924).
21 The original Hungarian reads as follows: “Az osidok homályából egy lovas ember alakja bontakozik ki szemeink előtt, amint a Volgamelléki pusztán nyugodtan áll és figyel. Hegyes kucsmájában, párduc-kacagányában, izmos dereka mintha oda volna nove apró lovához. Saszemeivel végigtekint a végétlennek tetszo síkon, melynek mindent pontját élesen megvilágítja a nap fényes korongja. (...) Várja a jövendot és érzi, tudja, hogy a közös ügynek az o erejére is szüksége lesz. Lelke ennek az eronek érzetével s a fajtájához való ragaszkodással van tele.” In Beöthy, A magyar irodalom, 15-16. (This and subsequent translations from Beöthy are provided by David Olah. I also wish to thank Balázs Trencsyeni for his help in editing them). A French version of this text can be consulted in Zsolt Beöthy, “La vie intellectuelle en Hongrie,” in Jekelfalussy, L’État Hongrois, 64-65.
The image of this solitary horseman explains not only the way of life of the ancient Magyars, but also the essence and development of the Magyar spirit. The entire spiritual life of the Magyar nation is permeated by the natural and moral influences that prevailed in its ancient living conditions and took root in its soul. 

Although Beöthy attempted to produce an alternative to the national-liberal canon, his description of legitimacy functioned perfectly within the classical discourse on the political nation (nemzeti politikai). In other words, Beöthy argued that the Magyars have constantly been assimilating other races, but because of the strong Turanic racial qualities, they managed to maintain their traditional institutions of liberty and constitutionalism that characterised the “Magyar political nation.” This detail is important for it described a particular way of combining the spiritual characteristics of the Magyar race with the claim that Magyars’ most important feature was their preoccupation with the public sphere. The “Magyar political nation” was thus a unique combination of different races whose assimilation into the Magyar “military and spiritual type” erased the original racial differences. Hungarianness was, concluded Beöthy, forged by both historical and geographical conditions, and by a racial nature, i.e., – based on the racial qualities of the Magyar race:

The Hungarian soil, the sky, the institutions, the history have continuously developed and extended the Magyar spiritual type, even beyond the boundaries of the Magyar race in its narrower sense, amongst all those who have lived for centuries in this history, and on this soil, under this sky, within these institutions. The present Magyar nation has been shaped throughout the course of history; yet it has been shaped by the Magyar race and shaped in its own resemblance.

It should not be inferred from the above remarks that the dissemination of national legitimacy was a unidirectional process. There was already a well-established intellectual tradition of conceptualising legitimacy in terms of historical tradition and memory. The dissemination of national legitimacy was

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22 Again, in Hungarian: “Ennek a magányos lovasnak képe nemcsak az osi magyarság életmódjából, hanem a magyar szellemi mivoltából és fejlődéséből is sokat megmagyaráz. A magyar nemzetnek egész szellemi életében jellemzően nyilatkoznak azok a természeti és erkölcsi befolyások, melyek osi életviszonyaiban érvényesültek és lelkébe gyökeresek.” In Beöthy, A magyar irodalom, 16.

23 The original goes as follows: “A magyar föld, ég, intézmények, történet állandóan fejlesztették és terjesztették a magyar lelki t’pust a szorosabb értelemben vett magyar faj határain túl is, mindazok között, akik századokon át ezen a földön, ez alatt az ég alatt, ezekkel az intézményekkel ezt a történetet éltek. A mai magyar nemzet történetileg alakult; de a magyar faj alakította s a maga képére alakítottatta. Beöthy, A magyar irodalom, 21.
not merely the work of a handful of ideologues who formulated a new nationalist ideology, but also the product of a multitude of sources embedded within the very framework of Hungarian society as a whole.

By the turn-of-the-century, the national legitimacy not only successfully integrated the narratives of historical continuity, but it also became a sign of cultural identity, of one’s belonging to a specific national camp. It was, as Beöthy argued, a way of communicating an acceptance of a particular set of ideas and for a specific social, political and national norm. Contemporaries learned to decode this message. It became part of the fin-de-siècle political language, a familiar and convenient symbol of Hungarian millenary history, the main trope of a political language through which the debates of national identity was debated. Not understanding the language of this environment, precludes one from a thoughtful insight into the mechanism of conflicting nationalisms.

**Conclusions**

If the constitutive force of legitimacy is appreciated, fin-de-siècle theories of nationalism are interpreted as nationalists wanted them to be understood: as theories uniting territory, history and nation into an indestructible totality. Legitimacy demonstrates how decisively national identity has been tied to notions of being culturally and politically “superior.” In this context, national superiority, therefore, can be seen as a culturally specific segment of Hungarian pretensions to monopolise societal authority. National legitimacy was well entrenched in Hungarian political imagery, yet continually in need of reinforcement.

This paper has been concerned with the idea of national legitimacy that emerged as nationalism proliferated in fin-de-siècle Hungary. Throughout, emphasis has been placed upon the flexibility of this category, and upon its potential to provide a theoretical focal point that could draw together discussions of various dimensions of the political and national life of fin-de-siècle Hungary. Hungarian national legitimacy served to embody definite kinds of interrelations between “the ruling nation” (Hungarians) – with its administrative, legal and coercive machinery – on the one hand, and “the nationalities” (Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, etc.) over which the ruling elite held control, on the other. Broadly, it designated those intersected cultural, political and social representations Hungarians used to mark their distinctiveness and prove their civilisational role and hegemony.

Conversely, contesting national legitimacy occurred on general discussions on assimilation, Magyarisation and the idea of the unitary nation-state. As suggested, national superiority in fin-de-siècle Hungary was determined by a combination of natural (the historical rights of the aristocracy and rural gentry) and social privileges (the newly empowered middle class). With the diffusion of
racial thinking, however, it became accepted that some nations were “superior” to others. In this context, the national legitimacy came to incorporate both the inner qualities and the historical achievements of the nation.