

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1848 REVOLUTION

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
USA

Zsigmond Kemény, the Transylvanian-born author, in his 1850 pamphlet, *After the Revolution*, questioned the Romantic concept of national character, and characterized tradition as ambivalent: both a sine qua non of culture and a system of dated conventions. Kemény drew on Bentham's utilitarianism, considering the right to property to be the basis of society. Liberalism and nationalism were in conflict during the Revolution, and the fate of the Revolution showed that extremes may lead to failure.

Keywords: Communism, Post-Communism, identity of community, national character, discontinuity, populism, nationalism, liberalism, utilitarianism, tradition, tyranny of the majority, tragic interpretation of history, Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, Habsburg Empire

1. Continuity and Disruption

Historic events usually provoke a wide range of interpretations. Instead of trying to give an overview of the reception of the 1848 revolution, I shall limit myself to the analysis of an early assessment. *After the Revolution*, a long pamphlet by the Transylvanian-born writer Zsigmond Kemény and published in 1850, was often described during the decades of Communism as controversial. Those who saw the expression of reactionary views in the work spoke of an unjust evaluation of Kossuth's revolutionary activity. This interpretation will not hold up under scrutiny; the real reason for the attack was Kemény's critique of Communism. My intention is to re-examine the pamphlet from a Postcommunist perspective and decide to what extent it can be read as a condemnation of the revolution. The assumption underlying my arguments is that the conflicting interpretations of 1848 constitute a characteristic example of treating history as a vital criterion for defining what it is to be Hungarian. Employed in a search for self-identity, history was often twisted to supply a burden of proof. How the debate was conducted reveals how insecure Hungarians are about their inheritance.

As in most of Kemény's nonfictional works, the present is approached from the angle of the past. While the first person singular is used in the last section of the text, a distance towards the events marks the introduction. The impersonality of the tone is especially striking in the summary of the author's assessment of the fate of Hungary: "During the revolution he could not believe that victory could lead to the creation of an independent Hungarian state. Nor could he take it for granted that Europe would allow such a victory" (252).¹

From the very outset, the fate of the Hungarian community is examined against an international background. With a focus on the identity of this community, the Romantic concept of national character is considered and made questionable on the basis of the idea that even the continuity of the individual is far from self-evident. "Timon of Athens was transformed overnight from a gentle and hospitable citizen of the world into an eccentric misanthrope" (190). Possibly inspired by Plutarch's life of Anthony, the play known as *The Life of Timon of Athens*, and Montaigne's essay *De l'inconstance de nos actions*, Kemény developed the argument that the coherence of national identity was as questionable as that of the human personality. In his view, continuity is often broken by the unexpected in both cases. What the example of Timon suggests is that discontinuity can often be described in terms of a change in attitude towards others. The fate of the Hungarian nation is determined by its relationships "to the other nationalities living in the country" (194). Such is the starting thesis formulated in *After the Revolution*.

2. Centralization and the Hungarian Counties

Widely accepted judgements are often questioned in Kemény's works. A few pages after the passage about Timon, expressing strong reservations about the validity of the Romantic concept of national character, there is a reference to the definition of Hungarian identity given by the poet Petőfi. The wide horizon of the plainland is taken as a symbol of liberty, and a hypothesis is formulated that closely resembles the main thesis of the political message Petőfi sent to the people of his native Cumania, in the summer of 1848: "The territory between the rivers Danube and Tisza represents the heart of Hungary and the core of the Hungarian people. If something fails to succeed in this region, it will never succeed in the rest of the country" (197).

The populism so characteristic of Petőfi's poetry made no impact on Kemény. His emphasis on the significance of the countryside was meant to suggest the incompatibility of centralization with Hungarian traditions. That is why the idea that France could serve as an example for Hungarians was rejected: "In France the counties are subordinate to Paris not only because of the intellectual superiority of

this city but also because from the Pyrenees to the Rhine all the arteries of the country are directed towards this centre” (195). The model contrasted to this French tradition is reminiscent of the ideal of self-reliance popularized by Emerson, whose work is as deeply rooted in Calvinism as that of the Hungarian author: “The judge of the county court had to rely on his own judgment. Instruction rarely came from Vienna or Pest. In any event, he was reluctant to listen to warnings coming from above” (197–198).

Local conditions are hardly known in centres, whether actual or hypothetical. The argument that the counties “have saved Hungary from absolutism” (250) is closer to Kossuth’s ideas than to those of the centralists. Yet it would be misleading to regard this as the whole truth. The other side of the coin is that “the county system tolerated the corruption that dominated political decisions” (250).

Tradition is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a *sine qua non* of culture, on the other, it is a system of dated conventions. Kossuth’s assumption that the counties could play a role similar to that of the Swiss cantons is dismissed. At the same time, it is a cause for serious concern that “the advocates of centralization thought themselves infallible” (252).

3. Communism

The main lesson people should learn from the example of the revolution is that fanatics cannot be trusted, since for them the word “homeland means doctrines and party affiliations” (196). One of the principles underlying *After the Revolution* is that all generalizations are suspect. Indeed, Kemény’s pamphlet can be regarded as an early example of the positivism that characterized the post-revolutionary age.

The critique of dogmatism leads to a reference to Tocqueville’s ideas on the tyranny of the majority. The most serious criticism is directed against those who “started preaching socialism and communism” (204). The focus is on “the legitimacy of property ownership,” and the main issue is formulated in the following manner: “Is the individual the owner of property or is it the state, and the individual an innocent or guilty leaseholder?” (205)

It is not possible to argue that the meaning of the words just quoted is limited to the plans of those who wished to find the common interest of landlords and serfs, for the question asked has a far more general import. What Kemény has in mind are not the Hungarian conditions of 1850 but those that could be expected to exist in the future. What is at stake is not only the feudal but also the capitalist system. The dilemma for the Hungarian author is “whether the party of tenants, the owners of private houses, capitalists, factory owners, industrialists, craftsmen and en-

trepreneurs will lose or win, and in the case of defeat how should the party of factory workers, apprentices, agricultural labourers, small grocers, and the penniless govern?" (205)

At this point it seems necessary to admit that the main body of the argument refers not to the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 but to the possible consequences of all revolutions that "may divide human beings into two classes: the proletariat and the rest" (203). The remark that "our radicalism was quite moderate in a European context" (232) implies that in some countries revolution involved the rise of a communistic movement. Following the lead of Széchenyi, the author of *Hitel* (Credit, 1830), Kemény draws on Bentham's utilitarianism, considering the right to property to be the basis of society. His dismissal of Communism is far from being emotional; in fact, his pamphlet offers the picture of a man walking a fine line by acknowledging a family resemblance or at least some continuity between the ideals of Christianity and Communism: "The origin of Cabet's Icaria can be traced back to the legacy of Bethlehem" (238). What Kemény regards as more attractive than Communism is a system dominated by the bourgeoisie. This, he believes, is not incompatible with constitutional monarchy, as the example of Belgium suggests.

4. Kossuth and the Revolutionary Youth

Although this last assumption contains an explicit critique of Kossuth's decision to cut ties with the Habsburgs, it is an exaggeration to say that the pamphlet is directed against the chief architect of Hungary's 1849 declaration of independence. Kossuth the speaker is praised without any reservations, and the characterization of his political attitude is far from one-sided. The lesson Kemény tries to learn from the fate of the revolution is that extremes may lead to failure. Kossuth had a sharp eye for the internal conditions of Hungary, but he was less at home in the world of international politics. The youth that staged the revolution on March 15, 1848 had other shortcomings: they were inclined to make "plans inspired by French books" (303). This statement may be linked to the reference to Cabet, whose activity was not quite unknown to the circle of Petőfi.

The conclusion is not far-fetched that the sharpest words are directed not against Kossuth but against the young intellectuals associated with Petőfi, who "read much about revolutions and were impatient to re-enact French revolutionary scenes" (308). While Kossuth is criticized for not paying enough attention to the interests of the great powers and the possible isolation of the Hungarian revolution, Petőfi, Vasvári, Irinyi, Irányi, and others are blamed for imitating a foreign model. Such a critique may be based on a somewhat cautious acceptance of the hypothesis formulated by Ferenc Kölcsey in his widely influential essay *Nemzeti hagyományok*

(National Traditions, 1826). The qualification is necessary, for the imitation of the French model is rejected not in general but only because of the multinational character of the Carpathian basin.

5. Liberalism and the Nationalities

One of the key issues of *After the Revolution* is the definition of Central Europe. The two criteria given are tradition and preconception. Neither the Habsburg Empire nor the Carpathian basin are regarded as organic entities. Even a dual monarchy may not have much chance, since “it is beyond doubt that federalism may be more compatible with the conditions of the region than dualism” (258). In view of this statement the argument that *After the Revolution* paved the way for the 1867 Ausgleich is a baseless allegation.

If the principle of national self-determination is in conflict with the existence of multilingual states, Hungarians have to make a distinction between those nationalities that seek to establish an independent state and those with no such aspirations: “In the Austrian Monarchy Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, and the French living in the Banat region are the only nationalities that do not wish to extend the borders of their homeland” (244). It is hardly an accident that Jews are mentioned first, since Kemény played a major role in the preparation of the last law associated with the revolutionary parliament, the law of Jewish emancipation. “Kemény’s healthy and democratic attitude was free of demagoguery, full of understanding and courage,” as the author of a recent book on the Jewish question writes.² Kemény’s assumption is that the nationalities mentioned above could assimilate to the Hungarians, whereas the others can rely on support from other states. The dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy may inspire the other nationalities to join states outside the Carpathians.

It is worth remarking that throughout the pamphlet the term “Hungarian-speaking” is preferred to the word “Hungarian.” Social and national distinctions are also given a perceptive analysis. The author may be right to point out that “if an agricultural labourer was Hungarian, he was inclined to consider himself to be superior to those of his class who were not Hungarian” (217). A contradiction between Liberalism and nationalism is detected: “Nationalism was a Conservative rather than a Liberal trend” (237). Anticipating the message of *A XIX. század uralkodó eszméinek befolyása az álladalomra* (The Influence of the Ruling Ideas of the Nineteenth Century on the State, 1851–54) by József Eötvös, *After the Revolution* gave an interpretation of Hungary between 1825 and 1848 in terms of a conflict between Liberalism and nationalism: “Because of the tension between these two forces, political parties sometimes emphasized nationality at the expense of freedom, sometimes stressed freedom at the expense of the interests of

national identity” (239). The question arises whether it was benevolence or short-sightedness that made Kossuth underestimate this problem. “He took it for granted that liberty was so powerful that if it were given to the other nationalities, they would give up their national aspirations” (240).

6. Revolution and Nationalism

Before the author expands on the revolution, he makes two preliminary comments. First, he summarizes the Hungarian events of the early nineteenth century with the underlying assumption that it is misleading to see a necessary link between these and the revolution of 1848. A special emphasis is placed on Kossuth’s and Széchenyi’s plans concerning the railway system of the country. The comparison is made not with the intention of passing a value judgment. The focus is on the relationship of the Hungarian community to other nationalities.

The second preliminary comment relates to the revolution that broke out in Paris in February 1848. The international background is sketched with the intention of underlining that the European revolutions put the Hungarian nobility in a very difficult situation: instead of a gradual elimination of its rights, it was forced to give them up within a very short time. “The nobility had lost a great deal, yet it responded to the shock with so much courage and was ready to serve the homeland with so much energy and self-sacrifice that one cannot help being respectful of the resignation and common sense with which the Hungarians accepted the extraordinary turn of events” (299).

One of the most important points made by the author of *After the Revolution* is that the end of feudalism brought a major change not only for the Hungarians but also for the other nationalities living in the Carpathian basin. Two of these nationalities are selected as deserving special attention. The reader is reminded that the pamphlet was written “on the threshold of an enormous crisis and an unknown future” (357), and the conclusion is drawn that the Hungarian nation has to make peace with its neighbours: “although it cannot forget the past that verged on a devastating war, it has no racial hatred that could lead to future conflicts” (359).

The message sent to Vienna is a kind of warning. Kossuth’s popularity is compared to that of Ferenc Rákóczi:

Rákóczi died twenty-four years after the Peace Treaty of Szatmár. During those years little was done to improve the conditions of the Hungarian nation. Much less than demanded by the circumstances, the interests and the European status of the ruling dynasty (360).

7. Tentative Conclusions

Zsigmond Kemény is known as the author of highly self-reflexive novels in which all values are questioned. The value structure of his pamphlet *After the Revolution* closely resembles the world of his fiction. It presents the Hungarian events of 1848 as profoundly tragic. “Both our enemies and we made mistakes” (370). Most of the leaders of the revolution walked into some ambush. “They are more or less guilty and more or less innocent... none of them could be called lucky” (371). While the killing of Lamberg is condemned, it is called an exception. The Hungarian revolution is valued on the grounds that it was far less violent than either the French or the English revolution: “since we were less passionate, we committed fewer crimes” (333).

Although it is true that the Hungarian Declaration of Independence is viewed as a vulnerable spot, it would be a distortion to say that the pamphlet is an unambiguous attack on the decision to cut off ties with the Habsburgs. It is pointed out that a) Vienna had made a serious mistake by declaring Jelačić the governor of Hungary, and b) the Hungarian leaders had no opportunity to foresee the international response to the Declaration of Independence.

As the final words of the pamphlet indicate, its author’s intention was “to deconstruct rather than to construct” (373). Suggestions for the future were promised to be made in a sequel. The much longer text called *One More Word about the Revolution* is an attempt to find an answer to the questions asked at the end of the earlier pamphlet.

“We never ceased to love our country, but sometimes we did not serve our cause well” (371). The discrepancy between intention and result is at the basis of the arguments for a multi-party system:

No party is needed if it aims to rule by itself.
Our number has decreased and our conditions have changed; we cannot afford to be fragmented by old animosities (372).

The conclusion drawn from the discontinuities of history is that the survival of a nation depends on two factors: a drastic selection and a full awareness of the legacy of the past: “We must learn to forget and remember” (370).

8. Self-Interpretation

One More Word about the Revolution can be read as a self-interpretation made from a certain distance. The links between the two texts are quite obvious. The earlier reference to *Timon of Athens* is in tune with the later allusion to *Macbeth*.

A quotation from *Hamlet* would not have escaped the attention of the censors. Less conspicuous was the passage reminding the reader of Banquo's warning: although I may be killed by Macbeth, my descendants will be the rulers of the country in the future.

The admiration for the revolution expressed in the second pamphlet is without any qualification. "In our century the Hungarian was the greatest among all the European revolutions" (515). This statement is further supported by the final section of the text, which compares the defeat to the battle of Mohács. A certain defiance marks the tone of the passages that refer to Vienna:

We do have a constitution.
Austria cannot claim to have one. (...)
Hungarians (...) never failed to make a distinction between king and
government. (...) They viewed every coronation as the signing of a
contract based on mutual obligations (404–405).

At the very start it is emphasized that despite its defeat the revolution has created an entirely new situation. Repression, "the illness of despotism" (394) cannot last; "ideas that are suppressed by force will take revenge on those who were winners by force and not by ideas" (392). The revolution was justified insofar as those who preached the preservation of values proved to be the destroyers of the existing values: "Prince Metternich asked Széchenyi not to touch the Hungarian constitution, arguing that if one stone is taken away, the whole may collapse, but it was the Austrian chancellor who eliminated so many arches and columns of that building. In the period prior to 1825 no one proved to be more destructive than the eminent leader of the European Conservatives" (394).

Although the debate between Széchenyi and Kossuth is described in terms of a contrast between reform and revolution, both conceptions are considered to be autonomous, representing a dilemma, since "to step too early or too late on the road of radical changes are both dangerous in the sense that they may lead not only to the failure of a plan but also to the destruction of the country" (384). Kemény agrees with Széchenyi that before 1825 Hungary was comparable to a dead body. Furthermore, he insists that the hypothesis that "society is organic life" (410) cannot imply that revolutions are inorganic. What it means is that Montesquieu was right to point out that no state of government was universally applicable.

Kemény's reading of Montesquieu is radically different from the way Joseph de Maistre had interpreted *De l'Esprit des Lois*. "Like its predecessors, the constitution introduced in 1795 was made for *man*," de Maistre wrote. "No one seems to know what *man* is. I have seen French people, Italians, Russians. Thanks to Montesquieu, I know that *Persians also exist* (qu'on peut être Persan), but *man* I

have never met (...). A constitution made for all nations is not for any nation, it is a mere abstraction.”³

It would be misleading to ascribe such relativism to Kemény. In his 1851 pamphlet man and nation are regarded as abstractions but the relationship between the two is described in terms of a continuity that cannot be neglected. The idea of the diversity of cultures does not imply that all cultures are on the same level of sophistication. Historical changes are thought to be inevitable, despotism and slavery are condemned, and capitalism is considered to be superior to feudalism. The “compelling force of European ideas” (393) and the temporary validity of all goals are taken for granted: “What is mere illusion today may prove to be everyday reality in a hundred years” (403). The only qualification is that progress depends not only on ideals but also on “the nature of the medium” (418). The comparison with the visual arts is quite significant. Titian cannot be translated into Canova. Nations, societies, and even political systems resemble works of art insofar as the existing conditions are transformed by creative activity. Just as one may think of art in terms of the media of art, so one may see a nation in terms of the circumstances that dominate its homeland. In Kemény’s view Montesquieu’s position was not sheer relativism; what the French author suggested was that different political traditions made different political solutions possible, in the same way as painting differed from sculpture. In a work by Titian paint and canvas, in a sculpture by Canova metal or stone as media would disappear, just as material conditions, local circumstances, given conventions may disappear as a result of social practice. Universal laws are not questioned, but progress is viewed as the consequence of so many factors that it needs “a subtle discussion (...) of political conditions and property relations, the demands of liberty and national interests, economic considerations and the structure of the state” (423).

One More Word about the Revolution continues to emphasize the necessity of a multi-party system. At the same time, it draws attention to the weaknesses of the Hungarian parliamentary system by reminding the readers that decisive changes “have been hindered by the partisanship of bureaucrats” (429) and “their meaningless debates” (431). “In our country a large number of messages are often sent on insignificant or merely stylistic matters” (430). Some of these drawbacks are not limited to Hungary but are the consequences of a lack of historical and philosophical insight. These two are largely responsible for the limitations of political culture: “Most parties lack historical awareness and philosophical training” (395). In view of this, parties can be called the manifestations of some necessary evil.

Although economic factors are given a special treatment, the “superstructure” is regarded as the main reason for political changes. Ideological trends are linked to the language reform: “The reform of the language has led to that of literature, the transformation of literature to that of society, the modernization of society to

that of the state” (397). Such a broad and Romantic view of language, the assumption that it was not the consequence but the origin of decisive changes that “French Classicism was defeated by the new school” (397), was in tune with *Geistesgeschichte* scholarship but not with Marxism. National character is regarded as the product of language; Hungarian, Slovak, and Croatian nationalisms are characterized as movements inspired by a language reform.

As every textual interpretation, *One More Word about the Revolution* makes a radical selection of the constituents of the work it comments on. Some of these are given a detailed analysis, whereas others are discussed very briefly. Socialism is not forgotten – in Part 4 the views of Proudhon are refuted – but this time the main emphasis is put on international affairs. The focus is on the future rather than on the past. The fate of Africa, the possible rise of the bourgeoisie in the Far East, and the growing power of North America are considered.

Even the cause of the nationalities is subordinated to the discussion of the desires of the great powers. The author’s deeply historical approach can be seen in his insistence that whatever he may state will prove to be of passing relevance. Even if a hypothesis seems justified in the short term, it will lose its significance in the long run. The prediction that Russia “may separate Central from Western Europe” (468) was more relevant a few decades ago than it seems today. By contrast, the remarks on the situation in the Balkans still have not lost their interest. Kemény foresaw some of the tragic events of the past decade and his remarks on the continuing attraction of Eastern Orthodoxy are still worth attention. “Their faith is as strong as Christianity had been in the West in the early centuries; it still is a driving force in society. In our world faith has been attacked by philosophy, church has been separated from state, and the influence of religion on civil society has diminished” (466).

The concluding section of the later pamphlet consists of three parts and is devoted to the relations between Hungarians and other nationalities. Part one is a warning against any nostalgia for the past: “our country was never more Hungarian in language than it is now” (495). This is followed by the observation that the idea of national independence could not emerge before a late phase in history, which in Central Europe was the age of language reforms. Part three is an attack on “racial hatred” (359).

During the revolution “nationalities made demands that could be compared to Sybil’s books insofar as they asked for a high price if not paid special attention” (535). Four possibilities are considered. The first is linked to “the desire of the nationalities to extend their boundaries on the basis of ethnicity, leave the empire, and join their Slavic and Romanian compatriots” (531). The three other alternatives are federalism, dualism, and the preservation of Hungarian supremacy without forceful assimilation.

The arguments listed in favour of the last of these are defensive. Of course, it is possible to point out that not even the states of Western Europe could be called monolingual. Although the official language was forced on many citizens of France, the revolutionary convention admitted that less than fifty percent of the population had French as their mother tongue. Multilingualism has survived in Great Britain and Spain until our own age. No less true is that a considerable part of the non-Hungarian population supported the revolution in 1848. Reminding the reader that “members of all the nations living in our country fought for the Hungarian cause either as soldiers or as administrators” (496), the author of the pamphlet expressed his hope that “public spirit” would be in favour of the association of “nationalities that are different in language but united in their interests” (497) rather than in favour of the ideas of Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, or Daco-Roman continuity. It is possible to regard this hope as mere illusion but in no way could it be contrasted to Kossuth’s plan. As political thinkers both thought in terms of a community united not by origin but by some agreement. In his second pamphlet Kemény condemned “Magyarization” (546) and “racial intolerance” (547), and compared Jan Kollár, the pan-Slav politician to Ferenc Kazinczy, the organizer of the Hungarian language reform.

In any case, the conclusion Kemény has drawn from events of Kossuth’s revolution that “this nation wished to belong to the West even when its short-term interest suggested some other alternative” (520) is worth remembering today, when Hungary desires to join the European Union.

Notes

1. All page numbers refer to *Változatok a történelemre* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1982).
2. Ambrus Miskolczy, *A zsidóemancipáció Magyarországon 1849-ben: Az 1849-és zsidóemancipációs törvény és ismeretlen iratai* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 1999), 72.
3. Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France* (Genève: Slatkine, 1989), 123–124.

