

SACRIFICE

From origins of culture
to contemporary life challenges

edited by

Robert Petkovšek and Bojan Žalec

LIT

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**UTILITARIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE
AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE KANTIAN ETHICS
IN THE 19TH CENTURY HISTORY
OF THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL IDEAS.
WHAT CAN BE SACRIFICED?**

Béla Mester, Budapest

The main influential ethical theory of the political discourse of the Hungarian Reform Era (1825–1848) was the *utilitarianism*, from the conservative to the liberal sides of the political spectrum. The main initiator of the reforms, Count Széchenyi has used the discourse of “the agreement of the interests” in his economical writings with a provocative manner, directly influenced by the British utilitarianism of this epoch.¹ It is a symbolic phenomenon that on the portrait of Ferenc Kölcsey, the author of the Hungarian national anthem, painted for the order of the local authority of his homeland, after his death, the poet is characterised by two volumes of the collected works of Jeremy Bentham in his hand.²

In the same time, after the Hungarian debate on Kant (1792–1822), the dominant ethical theory of the academic spheres in Hungary, mainly, but not only on the Protestant side, was the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Connections

- 1 István Széchenyi (1791–1860), “the greatest Hungarian” (of his generation) by a slogan known in his lifetime, has started the series of the reforms by the symbolic act of the speech in the Hungarian Parliament about the initiative of the foundation of the Hungarian Scientific Society (later: Hungarian Academy of Sciences), and has offered his one-year income for this goal, in 1825. He has been familiar with the ideas of the utilitarianism in the time of his journeys in Great Britain in 1815 and 1822, and has introduced its elements into the Hungarian public discourse in his book on the economic reforms entitled *Hitel (Credit)*, published in 1830.
- 2 Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838) as a politician was a member of the Hungarian Parliament in several periods, in the fraction of the national-liberal opposition. His portrait was painted by Anton Einsle (1791–1860), in 1841; it is widespread as copies in lithograph by Franz Eybl (1806–1880), both of them lived in Pest in this time. See: Szvoboda Dománszky 2015, 25. It is symptomatic that after 1848 this reference to this favourite reading of Kölcsey was unusual for the new generation of the Hungarian audience. János Erdélyi (1814–1868), a Hegelian philosopher, and the greatest historiographer of the Hungarian philosophy in this time has mentioned the followings: “I was not surprised if someone from my readers asked with astonishment: what does it mean Bentham’s book on the portrait of Kölcsey in the Museum; how could be painted the most idealist Hungarian poet with this book as his favourite reading” (Erdélyi 1981, 306).

and usages of these controversial theories of ethics are interesting questions of the history of philosophy, and history of political ideas in itself, and as a background of the narratives of the Hungarian history, and history of philosophy. Focussed on the keyword of this volume, *sacrifice*, this topic has twofold significances. On the one hand, in the 1850s, in the framework of the historical and political analysis of the revolution of 1848 as a mythical founding act of the Hungarian nation in the modern meaning of this word, the question of the *sacrificed lives* has emerged. On the other hand, on the theoretical level, the choice between utilitarian and deontological theories as the ethical frames of the interpretation of the crucial narrative of the national history has required the symbolic sacrifice of one of these theories on the altar of the other one. In the analysis of the parallelism of two controversial theories in the same epoch of the same culture, without clear confrontations on academic level, we cannot avoid the influence of the changed, modernised structure of the public sphere.

In the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a new genre has emerged in the philosophical life, entitled *public philosophy*. Its appearance and its connection with a 19th century meaning of *national philosophy* will be discussed in the first part of my paper. The coexistence of utilitarianism and Kantianism in the political discourse of the Hungarian Reform Era is the topic of the second section, the problems of the usage of these frame theories will be detailed in the third one, and a “sacrificed utilitarianism” in the Hungarian reception of John Stuart Mill in the second half of the 19th century is the topic of the fourth and last section of my writing.

Public and National Philosophies in East-Central Europe

In the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the structure of the public sphere of philosophy has changed in East-Central Europe, after the similar changes in the Western countries, but with partly different consequences. The first element of this structural change was the extended role of the *public philosophy* in the intellectual life of this epoch, based on the economical basis of the edition houses of books and periodicals, and the dissemination of the printed materials based on the regular post-service. The existence of the *public philosophy* means a new *public sphere*, what is independent from the network of universities, and other schools depended on the churches, or, on the states. This new public sphere, and the new audience of philosophy linked with it require a new attitude toward the authors. For a classical theoretical reflection of this situation see the twin-terms of Immanuel Kant, namely the *philosophia in sensu scholastico* and *cosmopolitico* on the one hand, and the *private* and *public* usage of the reason, on the other. It is a description of the dichotomy of the personal roles of Professor Kant, as well,

as a worker of the school philosophy by the *private* usage of his mind in his university lectures, and as a cosmopolitan thinker who sends manuscripts written by the *public* usage of his mind, for edition houses, independent ones from the network of universities. Kant's classical formulation offers a good description of the dichotomy of the authors' attitudes and target audiences, but it is not sensitive for the question of the languages of the published works.

In the case of the smaller national cultures of East-Central Europe, for example, in the Hungarian case, the linguistic links of the dichotomy of these authors' attitudes and audiences has appeared more clearly. After the Hungarian debate on Kant, when Kantianism has become dominant, Hungarian philosophy has used the abovementioned Kantian formulation for its self-understanding, applied for a linguistically isolated national culture. The audience of the new public philosophy has extended for the larger strata of the society, but restricted for the inland recipients, because of the Hungarian language of the publications. Between the *world* and *school philosophies*, Hungarian scholars must create the new category of the *national philosophy*, what is universal in its content, but national in its language and audience, connected with the theoretical reflections on the actual political, cultural and economic events of Hungary as a cultural and political community. These intellectual circumstances require a specific role of the *national philosophy* in the national culture, with an emphasis on the ethics and political philosophy amongst the philosophical disciplines. In the Hungarian case, the turn from the cosmopolitan, but elite philosophy, written in Latin, to the more democratic, but internationally restricted philosophy, written in Hungarian, has happened in the middle of the *Debate on Kant*, as it is mirrored by its Latin period focussed on epistemology and its Hungarian period focussed on ethics with a political regard. Based on the abovementioned events of the history of philosophy, after the *Debate on Kant*, the dominant language of philosophy has become Hungarian; its dominant content is Kantian focussed on the ethics.

Utilitarian and Kantian Discourses in the 19th century Hungarian Thought

However, the reception of the Kantianism in Hungary was connected to the Hungarian language of philosophy and to the emergence of the public philosophy; *moral philosophy* in its strict meaning has remained mainly in the realm of the school philosophies; its elements in the *public philosophy* have appeared applied for the politics and anthropology, only. The dominant frame-theory of the Hungarian political discourse, including political philosophy, was the *utilitarianism* in this period. In the specific structure of the *public philosophy*, when both the utilitarianism and the Kantian deontology have appeared in their applications for

politics, Hungarian scholars could avoid the discussion of the controversies of these theories. In this section, it will be discussed the structure of the 19th century Hungarian political argumentation, referred both to Kantian and utilitarian theories, in the same time.

The main task of the 19th century Hungarian political philosophy, in the period of the Reform Era (1825–1848), was the reformulation of the concept of the political community under conditions of modernity, within the framework of the theories what was possible in this epoch. Actually, this theoretical task has had parallelisms in the economic, scientific and cultural life. *Theoretical realisation* of the features of the modern political community, called nation, and the *practical creation* of the new institutional network of the same *body politic* went hand by hand, often managed by the same person. Using the abovementioned example, a theoretical reflection for the native language of the recent philosophy and the support of the development of the Hungarian theoretical vocabulary by the edition of scholar dictionaries are just two faces of the same phenomenon. It is a common intellectual situation of the cultures of East-Central Europe in the period of the “rising of nations”; the speciality of Hungarians, as “the nation of lawyers” is the strong connection of the concept of the nation with the political institutions as a frame, as it has expressed in the distinction between *people* as an *ethnic group* and *nation* as a *body politic*.³ This intellectual milieu has required frame-theories for its intellectual self-understanding able to interpret the reorganisation of a political community from its individuals within a new public sphere. The creation of this new-type public sphere has had the primary importance. All the debates in this epoch about the structure of the periodical press, the development of the Hungarian drama and theatre, the development of the cultural and scientific institutions can be interpreted as cultural and intellectual bases of the same modernisation programme, that of the nation as a body politic. For this nation building process, both the Kantian deontology and utilitarianism could be good enough frame theories. Rational discussions about the *biggest happiness of the biggest number* based on the *utility calculus* and the

3 The difference between the (ethnically) Hungarian people, composed of Hungarian and non-Hungarian citizens, and the Hungarian (political) nation, composed by (ethnically) different members with the same citizenship, has been expressed in the clearest form in this epoch in the work of political philosophy written by Gusztáv Szontagh (1793–1858), a distinguished figure of the Hungarian *public philosophy* in the age of the *national philosophies* in the abovementioned meaning of this expression, and a member of the political “thinking tank” around Count Széchenyi (Szontagh 1843, 163–169).

discussion about our moral obligations as humans and as citizens, by the public usage of our individual reasons practically have the same consequences in the Hungarian political philosophy of this age. Its best example is the argumentation of Gusztáv Szontagh (1843).

The Problem of the *Success in the History* after 1849

Because of the abovementioned circumstances of the intellectual milieu, both the utilitarian and Kantian frame-theory was used together, in the same time, without the formulation of their fundamental controversy, for the self-understanding of a modernised 19th century political community. Both of them were useful because they have offered a solution for the problem of the relationship between the individuals and the political community. The problems of the interpretation has emerged in the moral evaluation of the acts of the nation as a collective entity and the special acts of the politicians whose substance is to transform of the opinions of the others' minds, and to initiate others for a collective act. This requirement has emerged in the reflections on the revolution of 1848, in the 1850s and the 1860s. Both the utilitarian and Kantian theories were unable for this task in their form developed in the first half of the same century, when the personal responsibility was not extended for one's influence for the others' minds, and others' activity. A separate chapter of the memoir of an important figure of the intellectual life of the Reform Era discusses this problem theoretically, in details (Szontagh 1849–1851).⁴ The chapter entitled *Success* discusses the meaning of the *effectiveness* of the collective acts in the frame of philosophy of history, with a regard to the individual responsibility, focussed on the concept of *sacrifice*. Within the frame of the simple relationship between the individual as a citizen and the political community, the problem of the self-sacrifice is not easy, but a solvable question; there are cases when the self-sacrifice for the whole of the community, for the future generation, or just for offering a model for the moral behaviour can be positive. A dilemma has emerged when we evaluate the decisions of a politician, risky for the whole of the political community. However, the majority of the members of the political community agreed with the risky decision, their opinions were influenced by the same politician, and the public opinion of the community as a basis of the same act was not a mechanic aggregate of the indi-

4 Szontagh's memoirs will be published within the framework of the abovementioned research project, soon.

vidual opinions, but an effect of a political process in itself, as well. The problem of the difficult relationship of the individual and collective acts and opinions in the politics, from the point of view of the moral philosophy was not solved in the referred memoir, and in the Hungarian thought of the middle of the 19th century, as well; but the optimistic practical convergence of the utilitarian and Kantian theories in the Hungarian political philosophy has never come back again.

The Sacrificed Utilitarianism after 1867

Under conditions of the abovementioned intellectual climate of the Hungarian philosophy, a new cult of the living classic of the utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill has emerged in the 1860s, just after the Austrian-Hungarian compromise, using the new possibilities of the free press. The reception of Mill was connected with the British and Hungarian politics in this period. It is an important accident that the end of Mill's career as a member of the British Parliament and his election for the foreign membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has happened in the same year.⁵ The first Hungarian translations were made by intellectuals of the Hungarian political emigration in London, after their homecoming. The first ones were, of course, his essay *on liberty* (Mill 1859, 1867a), and his book *on representative government* (Mill 1861, 1867b). The second one had special relevance in the eyes of the Hungarian audience, because of its direct references to the political situation of Hungary. Mill's thought has had achieved primary relevance for the Hungarian public opinion, and in the political ideas. Within a few years, all the important works of Mill was published in Hungarian translations, including several parliamentary speeches, and his inaugural speech as a rector of the Saint Andrews University in Scotland, as rhetorical models for the young politicians (György 1874). The single important work of his, which was not translated until the last decades of the 20th century, is his *Utilitarianism* (Mill, 1861, 1980). Mill's most theoretical work, his *System of Logic* (Mill 1843, 1874–1877), which was far from the politics in its topic, has had a bigger importance for the Hungarian public opinion, which was focussed on the politics, than the core of his ethical theory as a frame of his political ideas, what were very important for

5 Mill was a member of the Parliament in the period 1865–1868, and has been elected for a foreign membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1868. By the evidence of his correspondence, this foreign honour of his philosophical thought was regarded by him as a kind of recompense of the failure in the politics at home, in the new parliamentary elections.

the same public opinion, in the same time. The decline of the European theoretical thought, after Hegel, and before the emergence of neo-Kantianism, at least, in Hungary, was one of the main causes of the *oblivion* of the utilitarianism. The public opinion of the scholars, the former audience of the *public philosophy* has interested in the political theories without their theoretical background; and the first candidate for the role of the frame-theory, *utilitarianism* has been sacrificed.

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Béla Mester

UTILITARIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE KANTIAN ETHICS IN THE 19TH CENTURY HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN POLITICAL IDEAS. WHAT CAN BE SACRIFICED?

The main influential ethical theory of the political discourse of the Hungarian Reform Era (1825–1848) was the utilitarianism. In the same time, after the Hungarian debate on Kant (1792–1822), dominant ethical theory of the academic spheres was the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In the analysis of the parallelism of these two controversial theories, in the first section of this paper will be discussed the historical circumstances, focussed on the appearance of the public and national philosophies in the 19th century East-Central Europe. The usage of the utilitarian and Kantian elements of the Hungarian political discourse of the same epoch is the topic of the second part, and the problems of the application of them for the situation after 1849 will be detailed in the third part. The oblivion of the utilitarian discourse in the Hungarian intellectual life after 1867 will be discussed in the fourth part of this article.

Key words: history of Hungarian philosophy, history of Hungarian political ideas, Hungarian debate on Kant (1792–1822), Kantianism, national philosophy, public philosophy, utilitarianism.

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