Part 1: Summer notes about reforms and ‘raison d'état’

Part 1

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The term "reform" has re-entered the political lexicon of numerous post-Socialist states. For the Hungarian government since 2006, it has meant raising taxes and "slimming down" the State; for the opposition, "reform" means "the restoration of moral order" or "lustration". The inflation of use - and misuse - of the term calls for an enquiry into its origins, as well as those of "revolution", reform's next-of-kin. In the first instalment of this two-part essay, Csaba Gombár explains that for an eastern European studying at Berkeley in the late 1960s, the countercultural "revolution" was hard to take seriously. This was because an equally strong sense of "revolution" was emergent at the time: the technological revolution and attendant consumerism. While consumption remains a dominant indicator in measuring the relative "progress" of eastern and western European nations, technological development is no longer seen as "progress" as in the Enlightenment understanding of the term.

What is this essay about?

It is my intention to write about the concept of reform, its historical manifestation by way of a belief in progress, the way in which reform is perceived in Hungary and, in part, my recollections of my own experiences in this regard. To start with, I have no desire to wring my hands over any mistakes that I may commit; nor am I about to kow-tow to every author, living or dead, whom I shall cite, knowingly or not, because so much am I in accord with them that I suppose their thoughts are my own; nor shall I hypocritically express gratitude to those of my critics - you know who you are! [1] - who have rebuked me for a string of errors. Needless to say, of course, without them I would not have got as far as I have done.
To designate my subject, let it suffice to say that when I began cogitating on these lines in the early summer of 2006, the daily press was suddenly filled, like a dam burst, with a flood of official government disclosures about reforms that were deemed at the time to be in the wind. I had no wish to disregard this ruffling of the political surface; indeed, it only made me even more curious about how we look upon reform these days. In this way I arrived at the following assertions that I shall seek to elaborate and refine:

- Due to revolutions that were supposed to make up for the historical backwardness of Europe’s eastern half, but without exception have been accounted failures, reforms – or, to be emotional: REFORM – have generally been considered revolutionary at the very outset and failed for that reason.

- From the Enlightenment onwards, concepts of revolution and reform have been sustained by a belief in progress, because that is the point from which Progress increasingly supplanted the idea of Providence; and it is with the waning of a belief in progress that the belief that sustains revolutions and reforms becomes groggy and gives way.

- In the meantime, the conceptual pillars on which the belief in progress rests have been erected, and we have splendid ideas of progress; in what follows I shall use the expressions “idea of progress” and “belief in progress” interchangeably due to growing doubts about modernity.

- Reforms are always implemented by a state administration, while revolutions flare up against an existing political regime. But a state’s policies are never comprised of reforms or revolutions alone; equally, one cannot speak about the politics of modernity without reference to revolution and reform.

- One can only expect good (i.e. salutary for a country as a whole) coming of reforms (when it is time for reform) that are purposeful and planned; reform stands somewhere between piddling affairs and not changing everything, and that in turn is not so much a definition as a matter of raison d’état, or national interest.

- If reform is a purposeful and planned process, then its aim is not a direct function of the deficiencies and problems to which I have just adverted; spotting the cupboard is bare does not take the place of setting out the purpose of a reform.

Setting off from my impressions of the current political scene, I shall deal first – somewhat to my surprise – with the issue of revolution, on account of the rootedness of reform and revolution in a belief in progress. I shall go on to detail the significance of a belief in progress, then only after a fair number of subjective detours shall I turn to the matter of reform and conditions as they are in Hungary. Along the way I shall draw on my memories, be argumentative, shall make a few quotations and tell a story or two with little regard for formal constraints. It so happened, many decades ago, that in the very first article I wrote to come under serious debate – one in which I was striving to understand the nature of political power – I noted that 99% of the contents of what I had written derived from the pens of others. One person present made the peevish remark that if that was the case, then why was he being made to listen to the talk. All I had wanted to do was display a fitting modesty. It has continued to bother me ever since not
to acknowledge, indeed to fail to name, the person in question when I still recollect whose thoughts I am quoting. On the one hand, I find the resort to formal quotation that had gained ever greater ground in scholarly publications by the end of the last century boring and futile; on the other, I lack the blitheness, typical of postmodernist writing, which takes the use of quoted texts as self-explanatory.

Since I have brought up the term postmodern, I am well aware that I am in danger of falling into a conceptual trap. Slavoj Zizek has described an amusing but typical case:

> A few months ago, in the course of a discussion about art, I was asked to offer an interpretation of a painting that I had just seen for the very first time in my life. Since nothing else came to mind, I weighed in with a bluff that ran on roughly the following lines: “The frame of the picture that we have before us is not the true frame; another, invisible frame also exists which arises out of the picture’s structure and frames our perceptions. The two frames are not overlapping but are separated by an invisible fissure. The chief content is not revealed via its visible parts; its place lies in its translocation; more specifically, in the very dislocation of the two frames, in the fissure that separates them. I wonder if, in our postmodern folly, we are still capable of detecting the traces of that fissure? It may be that it is not just the interpretation of a picture which is hanging on this question; it may be that we are losing a crucial dimension of our humanity if we lose the capacity to recognize this fissure.” To my great surprise, this brief flight of fancy proved incredibly successful; many of the contributions that succeeded mine made reference to ‘the gap between the two frames’, elevating it to an established expression. That saddened me. I was obliged to perceive the effectiveness of an absence not only of trickery but of a radical differentiation. [2]

Saddening rather than amusing? Even bluffers all too often find themselves the victims of self-deception due to the intellectual climate around them, the absurdity of our mundane exaggerations and clumsiness, our own inadequacies. We are now so constantly the targets of bluffers who spring up from the fields of art, politics or, come to that, academe that it is no longer worth being saddened by it. One would, though, like to see clearly.

**Introduction**

Hungary, and the cause of reforms there, is falling on hard times right now. Most Hungarians shudder at the very mention of the word reform.

In the spring of 2006, a new government was formed as a result of the quadrennial general election in the country. This all took place behind tightly closed doors, with even those people who at other times are so well informed having not the faintest idea about the subject of the talks about coalition but more notably, for a prolonged period, not even the slightest crumb of information about the steps that the government was going to take in the immediate future. Given that politically active groupings are enveloped by – implanted in – a broad swath of the political chattering class, supportively critical or critically supportive groups were left with nothing to chew on and, for weeks on end, could only resort to guesswork.
There is no precise demarcation between activists and chatterers, to be sure, but in that strange period even those who had, so far, been in a job, and used to a certain degree of political manoeuvring, were left scope only for chattering about politics. Since a necessity for major change had already been in the air during the election campaign, the months-long absence of daily political news hit upon a subject to chatter about in the want of democracy. With a view to appointing his government and defining his policy, the prime minister-designate secluded himself in a property at Balatonöszöd, the outcome of which was summed up by a typical flash of vernacular wit from one of Hungary’s greatest writers: “Whether tha’ eats it or not, that’s all tha’s getting.” [3]

In the course of verbal interpretation of the numerical data from what, for government purposes, were expedient soundings of public opinion, it was stated that there was a willingness for reform. Finally, the prime minister got round to breaking the silence and announced the essence of the changes that had been hammered out within the closed circle: budgetary corrections (for which read: cuts and still more cuts), plus reforms – “reform of the state”, even an “age of reform”. Except that these expressions, too, merely boiled down, when the speaker was compelled to clarify them, to further economic constraints. Now that same public opinion no longer resembled what it had been weeks before. The chattering class which normally muffles political activists like a soft eiderdown, inwardly within any given party, suddenly turned into a prickly blanket. Not only did the government come under attack from the opposition, but even its own gassy corona launched into huffy and uncomprehending criticism. The object of that criticism or incomprehension was the sheer number of reforms that were announced, their underlying tenor and extent, the readiness for and speed of change, the personal conditions for implementing them – any reform at all, that is.

Reform in itself – “reform as such”, THE REFORM, in other words – is an old, recurrent theme, having been a focus of politics in Hungary, at the centre of the country’s political cataclysms, since the first third of the nineteenth century – whether because, on the one hand, it seemed imminent or, on the other, it failed to come about.

Given those two centuries as a subject for the discourse of dabblers in politics, the conceptual freight of reform as a watchword is taken as read despite the fact that it has long been nothing more than a well-worn, flat pebble. Perhaps sensing something of the sort, the prime minister, in order to give force to what he had to say when the propaganda for reform was renewed, hit upon the idea of asserting that it was not just a matter of Hungary embarking on the reform of a thing or two, but there would be wholesale reform of the state apparatus; indeed, nothing less than a national reform. That was the point at which I felt it necessary to bend down to examine that well-worn, flat pebble a little more closely. What, precisely, do we Hungarians – do I – understand by the word “reform”?

During the socialist era in eastern Europe, the word reform was for decades paired with revolution – just like good and evil. According to official state ideology, the communists were the goodies, revolutionaries who were in constant strife with the reform-minded Social Democrats who had chosen the wrong road of seeking accommodation with capitalism. We may not speak or think about revolution nowadays, but in the interwar period, when the influence of Communist parties was in the ascendant, exerting an enduring influence on leftwing thinking, the relationship between the two was as
alternatives. Lying behind this, as an indigestible feature of leftist thinking in the history of every single European nation, was the contraposition of Romantic, liberal and national revolutionaries with their conservative adversaries. As a result, the Communists, as builders of barricades, were the vehicles of Romanticism; the Social Democrats, with their tendency to dismantle barricades, were the vehicles of the reflected light of liberalism; while the conservatives assumed the role of guardians of the national ideal. It is worth bearing this in mind in trying to understand the use of the word “reform”. In older times, at least two centuries ago, thinking about and implementing reforms were always strongly influenced by, alongside any ameliorative goal, the intention of seeking to make the outbreak of revolution avoidable. [4] Even though the old Social Democrat reformers lived in another age and were seeking something quite different – unlike the reformers of present-day eastern Europe they were seeking anything but a capitalist market economy – their revolution-averse sentiments and endeavours were comparable.

In light of what has been said so far, I shall attempt to settle in my own mind what the word reform means. The phrase “settle in my own mind” indicates that, along with opinions expressed by others, either in writing or orally, I shall be resorting primarily – as on other occasions, incidentally – to introspection in order to give answers to questions that I have posed myself, such as: What did I mean by, and how did I use, this or that term 15 or 25 years ago? What would I do in this or that situation? I shall not seek to add argumentation to introspection, merely to draw on what emerges.

Several questions are likely to occur to the reader. One is whether I shall be writing about myself rather than about reform; whether what I shall have to say applies to Hungary specifically, or concerns reform in general and in the abstract; and whether it involves the issue of revolution and the moods or passions that surround such situations.

Naturally, I am writing with reference to myself, to the extent that I am able to recollect today the thoughts and feelings that I used to entertain about reform and revolution, as well as what I was able to make of the thoughts and feelings of others. The reason I do so is that, in my opinion, substantial changes have taken place in this sphere over recent decades, so I would like to understand others as well as myself. I shall strive to employ words in a judicious manner, weighing up the sense of the various concepts as they relate to one another. I know that I hope I was doing that decades before; but as I see it today, in striving to comprehend things and their relations back then – with my own active participation – bucket loads of garbage flowed through my head. Then I read, annotated and committed to memory a truly depressing amount of fourth- and fifth-rate theories and dead-end platitudes, so what guarantee is there that the same is not happening now?

An understanding of our circumstances requires us to clarify the concepts, but in the process of clarification one needs to apply a sober measure and realise that ever-deeper and ever more structured clarification in the end debouches into a free-floating, navel-gazing conceptual poetry. I consider, however, that public discourse in Hungary is more confused than it need be due to the relative paucity of more or less clear-cut concepts that are available in the Hungarian language. Public speakers and writers need far more heart-searching if they are to face the sloppy usages, the ill-informed terminology of their own texts. I am well aware that it is not possible to clarify literally everything; indeed, it is not possible to clarify anything once and for all. However, practicalities, or the practice of thinking, should not mean that descriptions and comprehension have no need for
comprehensive hypotheses and clear notions; merely that it not always possible, or even necessary, to employ them in practice. The Hungarian language is in need of more properly elaborated terms; an everyday language that is more analytical than the one in use today is required, but that does not mean all Hungarian speakers need to define their terms before they say anything. To illustrate that, let me call on an example related by physicist Freeman Dyson from which it can be seen how an English train conductor came to a decision that was free of any theoretical considerations, in line with his nation’s empiricism. Dyson recalled in an article that when he was a boy people who travelled on trains with dogs in England had to pay for a dog ticket. The question arose whether he needed to buy a dog ticket when he was travelling with a tortoise. The answer given by the conductor was: “Cats is dogs and rabbits is dogs, but tortoises is insects and travel free according.” There was a comeback to this, however, in that a letter from a reader reminded Dyson that this witty response had already featured in print back in 1869, in a cartoon in the English satirical weekly *Punch*. Dyson thanked the reader for the response and suggested that there were two possibilities. The likelier one was that, as is often the case with old age, he had heard of the story and at some point it had simply become assimilated in his memory as an experience of his own. However, it was also possible that the conductor on the train knew about the cartoon and said what he was supposed to say according to the script. [5] So much for memory, an analytical language of public discourse and a nation’s intellectual character.

**Palm-trees, hummingbirds, tear gas: Revolution at Berkeley**

Times change, and so do I. I remember thirty-odd years ago, when we eastern Europeans who held scholarships at the University of California were trying to get a line on the USA of the day, and how frivolous, juvenile and superficial we thought American students were about the way they employed the term revolution. Everything was revolutionary, from streaking in the buff and Berkeley’s “free speech movement” (which placed implicit trust, as its does these days even in Hungary, in the psychologically and politically liberating effect of talking dirty) all the way through to the latest soft drink brand to hit the market, or the changes in habits on summer vacations. In short, any change that could be taken to be of any significance could be labelled “revolutionary”, and – I can’t deny it – that came over as somewhat sacrilegious in our eyes, or at the very least it aroused mixed feelings.

It would be more proper to stick to speaking about myself: with the fading of Marxism in Hungary at that time, and under the influence of the growing demands for reform, the aura of the concept of revolution was already strongly on the wane. To me, the perpetual revolutionising seemed to be nothing more than an untutored, shallow and misleading use of the term. I may not have actually deified the historical significance of revolution, but I felt that it was incommensurable, given its theoretical heft, its bloody reality, its indelible imprint and widespread ramifications, to term the sparkling effect of a toothpaste, or a change in fashion for the cut of spring frocks, as being revolutionary. So, while I attributed a decisively large social significance to what we designate by the term “revolution”, my American contemporaries treated it as a mere word that a speaker could use in whatever way he pleased.

At that time I lived close to the Berkeley campus, with my apartment having a southwest-
facing balcony with a glimpse of the San Francisco Bay, except the view was impeded by a large palm-tree that had hummingbirds hovering among its leaves. To arrive in the USA from Hungary in the 1960s meant coming face to face with startling wealth and democracy. Americans often politely enquired about the “cultural shock” that this represented to someone from eastern Europe – and bear in mind, this was not just anywhere in the USA, but California, indeed the hippie paradise of Berkeley. One knew about relativities, and not just in theory. A Moscow food store boasting the name “Produkti” would, more often than not, have bare shelves, and even the most basic produce was lacking; the emptiness of the shop’s name conformed with what was on offer. Compared with that, the sales stock of shops in Hungary in those days represented a veritable cornucopia to anyone arriving from the USSR, but from an American viewpoint the difference was negligible. The first time that I went out to buy salt and bread in Berkeley I was almost unnerved by the selection on offer (and that was in the days before fresh French- and Italian-style breads were everyday items). Wallowing in a sea of impressions like that as I was, the word revolution somehow had a false ring about it. Though, as best we knew, it was not poverty that revolutionised societies; the last straw for the mutiny that broke out on the battleship Potemkin in 1905, at least in Eisenstein’s emblematic film, and thus the essential condition for revolution, was the maggots-infested meat served up to the sailors. The meat served up at Berkeley was not infested with maggots. There is no need to trawl through all the big hypotheses about revolution, to weigh up the arguments and counter-arguments of historians and diverse thinkers on the subject of the great French and Russian revolutions and their offspring: they had a huge historical impact and the literature is huge. As for the side-effects, people are urged, as with adverts for over-the-counter medicines, to seek the advice of their doctor or pharmacist. In the case of revolutions, the ancillary effects have been horrendous, and it seems that authoritative groups of people are utterly aware of that, and not just in the better-off parts of the globe, but almost everywhere. The only places from which one gets snippets of news about revolutionary demands and movements are, to take one example, the unfortunate Nepals of the world. And were it not for the fame of its Gurkhas and sherpas in the richer countries, we would not have heard even that much about Buddha’s native land, which is now an officially Hindu kingdom of 26 million inhabitants. The dying echoes of the word revolution are heard from Nepal, formerly a favoured haunt of the hippies, and then, of course, distant Latin America, with its own revolutionary theology and its Indians arming themselves in the defiles of the Andes. But even the window-display revolutionary character of the state ideologies of a Castro and a Bolivian Sanchez de Lozada and Morales now seem inexpressibly remote from us in comparison to the football-mad, soap-opera-fanatical, lambada-ing South America that crops up every now and again on the TV screen. If there are still revolutionary hotspots on Earth, in the eyes of those who live in tolerable, war-free zones – those who, having extricated themselves from their reproving history now stroll in the seemingly endless lowlands of the market economy – revolution can now only be equated with misfortune and absurdity.

That was not the reason why I, in what was to me magical Berkeley, was averse to selling out the concept of revolution for small change; I had other notions about revolution: storm petrels, barricades, class war, martyrdom and the rest. For all the “revolutionary government of workers and peasants”, “workaday revolutionism”, “Lenin’s little lamps” and a hundred other off-key parrot phrases, the Romantic notions of revolution did not change within me even as my faith was on the ebb. Of course, the various types of
merchandise, like advertising jingles to boost the sales of “revolutionary new product”, did tend to degrade what I felt to be the significance of the concept, but then those were just advertising jingles. At the same time, the way the protests against the Vietnam war, the shocking and also uplifting events associated with the civil rights movement, the student revolts of 1968 were kept alive in California and throughout the USA were truly world-wide in importance. [6] For those who took part - and this can be traced in American society to this day – it was maybe even of revolutionary importance at that. Every now and again, the fumes of tear gas would be wafted into my room past the leaves of the palm-tree, for there was the occasional real clash between students and hippies with the police and National Guard reinforcements. Every time President Nixon announced a fresh bombing campaign on North Vietnam, he would have barely reached the end of his statement before one heard the wails of riot-police sirens and the popping of tear gas grenades in Berkeley.

This all unfolded in an extremely colourful setting, so that even the sight of police batons delivering batteries of blows or the choking reek of coughing gas was unable to inveigle me into feeling I was in the middle of a revolution. To my eyes, it was more tomfoolery than drama; what with the chanting of Hare Krishna sectarians, the police, students flaunting their naked backsides to the world’s press, hippies ripping up the asphalt carpet of the car parks to allow the earth – indeed Earth - to breathe, the use of mind-expanding drugs and propaganda for commune life, it made for an astoundingly kaleidoscopic craziness, but I did not consider it to be a revolution. Was that because I did not see an “ironclad working class”? Because I did not see the Communist Party as the incarnation of a proletariat awakened to consciousness of itself, as an “organic intelligentsia” of that class? (Though the Communist Party did crop up in the primaries for the presidential election: its candidate was a switchperson, which was the politically correct designation, fought for by the feminist movement, for a switchman, which is to say an individual who operates railway points, as I read buried somewhere in the back pages of the newspaper – an item counting for no more than a brief mention.) My friend, Lóránt Czigány, likewise merely shrugged it off: having taken an active part in Hungary’s 1956 revolution, he was, at the period I am recounting, a British citizen lecturing on Hungarian literature at UCLA; in his dark suit and tie, he stood out ostentatiously in a setting where ragged jeans and army-surplus garments were the rule. Compared with his 1956 Hungarian experiences, what was happening in Berkeley then was a mere frolic in the sun. [7] As ever, we eastern Europeans (to switch back to the plural) were able to look on events with a superiority born of suffering and a fond belief that we knew better.

What was happening before our eyes at Berkeley was not just another incident in the daily grind of democracy but also a manifestation of the still vital revolutionary traditions of the 1776 Declaration of Independence, the rebellion against the British Empire, and American republicanism. In the sociological equivalent of the original, astronomical sense of the term revolution, which is to say a complete orbital turn of a celestial body around another, a “turning back” or “return” to the current of the old, exalted, great times when the people had not yet been wrongfully deprived of its rights. This time round as a carnival spectacular, at that point in the crushing of despotism, or what seemed like that, when a revolution, in its initial, non-violent stages catches up many innocent, well-meaning, youthful souls. [8] Nevertheless, in the carnival throng on the public places of the United States of those days, the gaze of a bubbling and seething minority of society was trained on great causes - not because they used grand words like contestation or
establishment, or because they called the police, being the embodiments of state power, “pigs” (a man in a wheelchair in front of the main entrance to California’s state senate in Sacramento, protesting about the man who was then the state’s governor but later became the country’s president, smilingly held up a sign saying “Reagan, you Bastard!”). These manifestations, jaw-droppingly novel as they were to us, were in fact quite normal signs of freedom of speech in a democracy; but in the wake of the 1968 student unrest, the hippies, the students and, not least, their teachers still clung to the belief that the social climate that they found so repugnant could be radically changed, and that hard on the heels of their challenge to the institutions of the repressive capitalist state a better world, altered in its structures, would emerge. It didn’t. The social structures that were underpinned by the state did not change, despite the fact that our tastes and leisure activities have been transformed thanks to the cultural rebellion of the student generations of those times. What gave weight to the fact that students at Berkeley and elsewhere were constantly provoking the police and university authorities had nothing to do with smoking pot or taking other drugs, but the stands they made against the Vietnam war and racial discrimination. What did actually happen on the basis of those stands, right up to and including the resignation of the American president then in office, vindicated the articles of revolutionary faith that I had not properly recognised at the time. For me, the experiences of Hungary during the 1960s indicated that only reforms could alter a state of affairs that was oppressive in relation not just to California but to what should be feasible in our own terms. That marked the start of a lengthy period of frustrated thrashing about, along with all its attendant foolishnesses. The belief that Hungary was condemned to progress – right then via reform – was essentially just as much an article of faith, and in that regard hardly differed from revolutionary beliefs. If there was a credo, then we too believed in the absurd. To believe, living as we did in eastern Europe within the Soviet empire’s sphere of influence, that our lives would be radically changed by a reform that was known as the “new economic mechanism” was no less a leap in faith, albeit of a different kind, than a belief in a proletarian revolution had once been.

In Berkeley, though, I read a lot of literature on sociology, and this was when it began to dawn on me that the credo which leads to revolutions and reforms is no ordinary faith but one that is “spiritual in nature”, as Thorstein Veblen had observed a century before. Technical innovations are manifested in the range of useful and pleasurable technological devices and, over time, make everyday life better for a significant proportion of society. Those innovations would be desirable in peripheral countries as well, but there they represented the conspicuous consumption of the upper class alone, as guaranteed by the extremely high price ticket they carried. Consumption in the reference countries presents as an international demonstration effect, and the acquisition of such desirable goods causes distortions in the national economies of the countries that emulate them. Regardless of the position that any country may occupy, élite strata the whole world over strive to acquire the gizmos and consumer goods that happen to be most in fashion, in the same way that they feel obliged to equip their state or private armies with the most modern weapons, cost what they may. Emulation of models along these lines – and this has increasingly characterised countries of the periphery for getting on for two hundred years now – means more than just “sizing-up rates of backwardness”, as László Vekerdi dismissively calls the phenomenon, but sets off ever-starker internal exploitation as the importation of consumer and military goods grows at the expense of investment. But “conspicuous consumption” – to use another term that Veblen coined – in relation to the
given state of a country on the periphery can also sets off “competitive emulation” in the lower strata of society. Flush toilets were installed at Count István Széchenyi’s country mansion at Nagycenk, in western Hungary, earlier than in the Burg, which was the emperor’s main residence in Vienna – as Hungarians are fond of quoting. But then this is precisely the kind of international demonstration effect that triggers competitive emulation, and just as for much of the nineteenth century Great Britain set the example for progressive Hungarian aristocrats, so their consumption set the model for the Hungarian gentry to follow. Meanwhile, in the upper ranks of society spending habits are established that the lower classes increasingly come to regard is a “decent living”: “[those standards] over time become so deeply ingrained that falling short of them will be perceived as an experience of a ‘spiritual nature’.”

This last assessment, like some of the foregoing line of thought, has been taken from a recent book by Andrew C. Janos, who for several decades now has been occupied at Berkeley with issues of progress and backwardness in eastern Europe. After assessing numerous theoretical explanations, and as a summary of the empirical data that have been collected by himself and others, he has come to the conclusion that the various countries of this region, differing as they do from one another in the degree and scope of the pulsation, over the course of the last 200 years have not fundamentally been able to alter the place they occupy on Europe’s great gradient. [9] It is customary to add that the growth in consumption triggered by the tractive force of luxury goods and fashion, indeed growth in consumption as such, is an illusory development (cf. Hungarian Communist dictator Mátyás Rákosi’s admonishment about the goose that lays the golden egg, though the country’s liberal economists have also striven to convince people of the same thing). The countries that endeavour to emulate the trend-setting front-rank countries lack the economic power for the mass production of fashionable consumer goods, and thus for the mass adoption of the living standards enjoyed by the latter. Above all, they have no chance of eliminating that backwardness, because the higher the imports of the desired innovations in the periphery, the bigger the economic return to, and competitive advantage enjoyed by, the core countries. Every now and again, such countries seek to break out of this vicious circle through reforms or revolution. To date, however, they have not managed to do so.

Development does take place, of course. What we know about mankind indicates that with the advances made over the last millennia, the last few centuries in particular, life has become a good deal more comfortable for very many people. (Naturally, there is no consensus about precisely what indices are appropriate for a quantitative, historical or geographic comparison of the better life, development or progress; the less so the more we – myself included – avow a belief in progress in place of an idea of progress professed as a scientific objectification.) However, the aforementioned demand for progress that germinated 200 years ago in the countries of the periphery does not consist merely of seeking and achieving an amelioration of conditions but, at least as much, of catching up with the countries that are held up as exemplary. That is the bit which does not usually succeed. The man in the Budapest or Bucharest street would like to live in the same manner as a Viennese or Bolognese citizen, because that is “decent living”, but he generally lacks the means to do so. It is not simply that we are badly off (because we almost invariably think of ourselves as being badly off), but on top of that, we are being deprived of something. As a result of this sense of relative deprivation we are constantly inclined to reach for the device of revolution or the subversive power of large-scale reform.
Belief in progress

As Europe expanded eastward as far as Russia, from the latter half of the eighteenth century on, so too did the Enlightenment and Europe’s belief in progress – sometimes by revolution, at other times by reform. Before the Enlightenment, the very concepts of revolution and reform held no sense, or rather they meant something different from what they have come to mean over the last 200 years. History, of course, is chock-a-block with periods of turmoil, rebellions, uprisings, peasant wars, diverse religious, millenarian, salvational and chiliastic mass movements that culminated in bloodshed, and the like, but it is only since the Enlightenment in Europe that we can reckon with movements in which a belief in progress is a fundamental article of earthly improvement.

Numerous theories of progress were founded on an interest in natural sciences, with its attendant fever of discovery, which spread almost like wildfire from the mid-sixteenth century on, the Enlightenment era’s faith in progress, and the jarring consequences of the industrial revolution. Of course, there have always been people who were sceptical about progress, but in truth it was the evolving ideas about progress (linear, wave-form, cyclical, periodically stalling to rally forces, affecting different segments of society at variable rates, etc.) that stimulated, by way of reaction, the great pessimistic theories of degeneration and regression. By the end of the nineteenth century, the world was linked together not only by railways, undersea telegraph cables, scheduled steamship services and supranational bodies (from a global postal service to a permanent court of international justice), but also by the ideas of many pessimistic thinkers about humanity’s end and an unstoppable, cosmically projected decline. Yet this did not in the least shake the belief in progress that was propagated from Europe – not until the industrial-scale slaughter of WWI, that is. This was the first great challenge to be encountered by the belief in progress that emanated from the Enlightenment. The war ushered in huge social changes, states became in many respects more self-enclosed, their political borders becoming military in character, with barely penetrable demarcation lines, and with the break-up of empires the number of nation-states grew ever greater. All that was a direct consequence of WWI, which in itself is a sign that the world does not change only through reforms or revolutions, but also under the influence of wars. Even a society, with its almost imperceptible, assiduous industry and industrialisation, and a daily round unruffled by reform let alone revolution, can be capable of great change if state policy is adaptable enough to permit this. That, however, is less commonly the case than war; in other words, there is much more that is subject to change in politics, besides reform and revolution, and it is war, first and foremost, that tends to cause crucial shifts.

Though war, which some would regard as the twentieth century’s distinguishing feature, [10] has by now become largely overlooked by political science as a result of what are, so far, six decades of peace (along with the assumption that war cannot be waged between democratic states), it still has an immense capacity to alter society. The mere possibility or threat of war acts on the life of societies in manifold ways. There can be no dispute about war being incompatible with a belief in progress – if it is being directed against us personally, that is, for it is not unknown for believers in progress to assess the extension of their own ideals by war on others, in the name of Enlightenment, freedom or democracy, as being a liberation from bondage. For the survivors of wars, however, a tranquil life is the last thing they are given. Things need to be changed, if for no other reason than to prevent renewed war. The truly grandiose covenant of a belief in progress is that everlasting global peace is conceivable. The human imagination is said to be
boundless, but pipe dreams like that did not exist prior to the Enlightenment.

One can read in history books about the Neolithic revolution in agriculture, or the economic reform undertaken in early fifteenth century Hungary by Filippo Scolari (or Pipo of Ozora as he is often referred to) during the reign of King Sigismund, and suchlike, but when they are pressed into service to illuminate ancient events the terms have no more than metaphorical force - much the same as when our teacher of history of philosophy called the Cynics of ancient Greece the hippies and hooligans of antiquity. With reform and revolution having attained such great significance since the Enlightenment, they have become convenient for giving a sense of the weight (though not the nature) of major changes that took place in the distant past. It is only with the Enlightenment that we have been able to extrapolate development in one form or another into a history that is informed by scholarship, as opposed to memory: “Just as the world today is prey to nation-states,” Marshall Sahlins wrote half a century go, “so it was to tribal peoples several thousand years ago. The spread of modern civilisation is reminiscent of an evolutionary process: the rise of the developed model then the emergence of variants that, like a magic spell, displace the primitive types [...] Thanks to Neolithic agriculture and animal breeding, the tribal peoples acquired rule over a major part of the world; the hunter-gatherer way of life suddenly sank to a peripheral strategy.”

[11] Right up to the end of the Middle Ages there was no discussion of any kind about development as we understand it today, based on our anthropological and historical knowledge. Aaron Gurevich summed up the time perspective of the ages that preceded modernity thus:

The circumstance that time in agrarian societies is regulated by natural cycles meant not only that man depended on the periodic changes of season, but also that this determined the particular structure of his awareness. There is no development in nature, or at least it remained hidden to the members of this society. All they saw in nature was constant repetition, a rhythmic cycle whose tyrannical grip they were incapable of surmounting, so it was obvious that this rhythmic cycle should be at the centre of medieval man’s spiritual life. It was not change but repetition that was the definitive aspect of this consciousness and behaviour. The unique event that had never happened before was in itself of no value; every happening earned true reality only in the light of continuous repetition and tradition. [12]

Equally, the time perspective of the Middle Ages was complex in the sense that the other world existed in a finite and oddly “material” time as compared with the immutability of Biblical time:

The characteristic pictorial appearance of the medieval concept of time moved from east to west, a rope frayed by daily coiling up and untying [...] Time decayed, just as the world did. It did not bring along with it the advancement of mankind [...] A pessimistic perception of the present was widespread in the Middle Ages: the best and happiest days of human existence were already long gone, and the world was proceeding in moral decline towards its end. [13]
The Enlightenment reversed this perspective, and by directing of society’s gaze to the future in the spirit of a belief in progress, it depicts the world as an open-ended, on-going adventure. The modern idea of progress, and a fundamental belief in progress, thus bestowed a new, widely shared sense on reform and revolution. The very fact and the social possibility of the scientifically revealed nature of development fuels these concepts in much the same way as a locomotive’s boiler does the steam pressure that drives the pistons. During the nineteenth century, Darwin’s theory of evolution, along with the post-haste changes that occurred in the natural and social sciences more generally, each and every one, were harbingers, or systematic projections, of the great changes that were to bring growth and betterment in the name of modernisation. This was a prolonged process that, to pin it down more precisely, ran from roughly the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In political life the variously defined and organised forces of progress and conservatism strained against one another accordingly. A modernisation driven by the idea of progress, which flew in the face of the religiously sanctioned feudal society and which, with hindsight, we can call the age of modernity. Through industrial revolution and colonisation, this age led to the rise of Europe, indeed of the whole Atlantic region, that would unbalance the world and perhaps only now, with the rise of China and India, and to great consternation, has perhaps started to tip it back onto a globally more even keel. [14]

Half a century ago, the expression “revolutionary progress” had a very profound tenor in Hungary, and to more than a few people at that. In the middle of the twentieth century, Europe – and the world in turn – was ready for change. Whether that was by revolution or reform, many people wanted to change and be changed, and in a profound, structural sense at that: to advance with the age. It is strange to read now the recollections of Matthew Parris – the former Conservative Party MP and, for over a decade, parliamentary sketch writer for The Times – of his childhood in the period immediately after the second world war, which he spent in South Africa and the then British colonies of Cyprus Rhodesia, and Jamaica: “Modern people did modern things. We had modern expectations in the 1950s. We believed in electricity, almost as a creed: Dad would have nothing to do with gas. We believed in science and we believed in nylon. The very word “science” sanctified the supposed fact or argument upon which is bestowed, as, in a previous age, a religious benediction might have done. Later I had for years on my bedroom wall a poster distributed by the Colonial Office of Information with colour photograph of all Britain’s new nuclear-power stations, including Dounreay, waves smashing against the beach as its bright dome beckoned us toward a smokeless, coal-less future.” [15] As one can see, a faith in progress was not confined to eastern Europe; it was not just under the say-so of party-state directives that people were hoodwinked into transforming nature, and hence society too, of course. The historical steamroller of modernisation flattened virtually everybody, irrespective of ideology and political convictions, into its own dimension.

Does nothing last forever? By the end of the twentieth century, ever more doubts had arisen about the idea of progress and against a linearly progressive view of history and the world. The area in which this was most evident was the growth of environmentalism, but one may also point to the successful campaign waged for multiculturalism, the equivalence of diverse cultures, which put the discipline of anthropology on the day-to-day political agenda. After all, if there is not – and, even if only as a moral imperative, cannot be – an evolutionary sequence from a so-called primitive culture to a so-called
high culture (given that it is politically incorrect to use the term “primitive” to refer to any culture, and hence the people that practises it), this automatically brings the whole idea of a universal development into question. The reason this is important here is that we, living in what is said to be a postmodern era, need to be clear that to criticise modernity is, at one and the same time, to criticise progress and dampen belief in progress – so much, then, for the fires of revolution and reform! Of course, one still hears a lot of talk about reforms: in the eastern half of Europe in particular we constantly hear the word, to no small degree in the form of calls directed from the centres of the global economy. This is explained, on the one hand, as being due to our historical problem of catching-up, and on the other, what is accepted, if only out of habit, as being a natural (but, in its absence, politically demanded) constant, unbroken and accelerating, technologically based economic growth. The terms “progress”, “development” and “growth” may be conceptually equivalent, but as belief in progress wanes for many people, the question arises as to what is the purpose of so many economists, and of all the talk by politicians who fall back on the economists’ words about what is supposed to be sustainable growth?

With the upsetting of faith in progress, the illuminating power of terms like “progress”, “development”, “growth” and similar categories was also upset and became the object of renewed ideological criticism. Suffice it to say here that the anti-Darwinist believers in “intelligent design” [16] have now taken up cudgels in even the columns of Hungary’s quality papers (to the extent that these still exist). The fact that during the last third of the twentieth century, belief in progress – and along with it Marxism, with its disregard for economics and its morally-grounded spectres – lost its validity has numerous unsettling consequences. As Péter Somlai has pointed out:

What can be regarded as most critical is the sharp distinction which has arisen between, on the one hand, the new sociological thinking and the “Zeitgeist”, and on the other, between the processes of economic growth and technological development that are going on in the countries of the developed world. The latter bear witness that a similar postmodern transformation has taken place in technological developments, in investment decisions and in other areas of the economy […] as in attitudes to history and other areas of the social sciences. Progress has retained its validity in the world of production or transport […] Nor has a new era commenced in either production or lifestyle […] “Growth” still maintains its position as the key dimension in assessments of economic performance. [17]

In the debased world of our sciences and knowledge, the sciences that interpret society consider that the idea of progress that has been accepted as their foundation since the Enlightenment is largely invalid – excepting the liberal mainstream of economics, which continues to adopt the viewpoint of unbroken growth in describing each state policy that is placed under its microscope, and in any given case to trick it out with advice or pooh-pooh it. Of course, there is such a thing as unbroken growth in one undoubted and paradoxical sense, and that is a consequence of scientific results which act as a motor of progress or growth. If, like the ancient Greeks, we consider what we know as comprising the inner contents of a globe, and the entire surface of the crust of that globe is in contact with the unknown, then any growth in knowledge is necessarily attended by a
perception of ever-growing ignorance. In this area growth does, indeed, seem to be unbroken and boundless; growth in knowledge is paired with boundless growth in knowing ignorance. This recognition, which has been operative since the time of Socrates (or at least we Europeans tie it to his person and age), goes hand in hand with the piling up and technological application of scientific results.

We are also aware, however, that this has not been a linear pattern of growth; there have also been periods of slackening and backsliding. Mankind hit upon the use of written records in several places (can there ever have been a more momentous leap forward than that?), and then completely forgot about it following various cataclysms. A heliocentric cosmography was worked out only to be unlearned and having to be rediscovered one and a half millennia later. [18] The history of science and technology is littered with such examples, with cases of techno-scientific amnesia occurring even in modern times: mass production based on standardised components was introduced for the manufacture of cannon and handguns at the time of the French revolution, but it was then overlooked for decades until it was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century by Samuel Colt for his rotating-breech revolver and by Isaac Singer for his chain-stitch sewing machines. [19] That has not been the rule, however, since the industrial revolution; the rule has been continual growth and the political tension of the demands that drive this. Arnold Toynbee was still able to write as late as 1965: “The assumption that technology will continue to maintain its current development at the present pace ad infinitum is undoubtedly groundless... the gallop that is characteristic of our times may come to a close later on; at present, though, there is no sign of its slackening... and as long as this revolutionary technological change is in progress it will bring in its wake revolutionary changes in society, just as in our time.” [20]

In the same article, Toynbee makes it clear that naturally it lies within humanity’s power to put a stop to this development, and even to contrive a technological decline. In other words, it seems technological development that is the product of human minds and hands may be halted by human decisions: that is, indeed, propounded as a political goal by a segment of the environmentalist and green party lobby. Given that this might result in a step backwards to a seemingly bucolic condition, there is next to no chance of such a halt. On that point, Toynbee makes reference to Mahatma Gandhi’s experiences. In order to spare India from the deleterious influence of mechanised and rapidly mechanising Western civilisation, Gandhi advocated a return to the use of simple tools, and he took up use of the spinning wheel to set a personal example: “This was the sole spectacular failure of Gandhi’s life. The Indian people were simply unwilling to follow his initiative on this technological issue,” Toynbee wrote forty years ago. India today, following on China’s heels – and dispensing with the imagery of ambling, cantering or galloping – has changed up into top gear.”

With the stoking up of competition that accompanies unlimited growth in the economic sphere, it may be that there are limits due to the potential for the exhaustion of natural resources. This has been a topic of heated debate for decades now, though it still remains to be seen what the outcome will be. What is far less in doubt, in the climate of the present day, is that belief in progress, and with it the pace of revolutions and reforms, has diminished. Problems and glaring contradictions abound, but the conviction that we can overcome these by revolutionary or evolutionary means is nothing like it was 50 or 100 years ago. Revolutions call for ardent belief, and even reforms for a political flicker;
the critique of modernity, by contrast, comes down to little more than a shrug of the shoulders and a forced grin, on the understanding that eventually everything will be placed in ironically intended quotation marks. Including revolution, of course.

Before saying anything about losing sight of revolution in the wake of the curious, but perhaps understandable, operation of social amnesia, I should point out that in my discussions with those helpful reviewers who offered comments on this article during its preparation I have been strongly urged to think twice about what I am saying. I should concede that human life would have no sense without progress. If the reform measures that Hungary’s government proposed in 2006 are not to my liking, I ought not to seek to buttress my objections by confusing reform with revolution, and I ought not to be putting forward, on that pretext, philosophical conjectures which allow no room for movement and cast doubt on even the advance of time. Nor should I try, for purposes of reaching a safe haven, to dissuade others from extricating themselves from distressingly awful circumstances, from a situation that they find is intolerable, along the path of progress. [21] Above all, I should not misunderstand, by flourishing the historio-philosophical concept of progress, what little I consider to have understood from my own life. [22]

What can I say to that, this far into the my essay, if what had emerged so far is that, in my view, the world does not change? That humanity has not got past one to two; that today we know no more about ourselves and about the world than we did two hundred or even two thousand years ago? And as a result, that even twentieth-century proletarians, to take one example, did not live in far more comfortable and sanitary conditions than did princes in the Renaissance era, as Elemér Hankiss has put it in one of his books? [23] I can only assert that the belief in progress that has sustained revolutions and reforms is now stumbling and tottering, and moreover specifically in respect of the principles of progress that burnish a belief in progress and of the reasoning employed in the social sciences. Granted, not everywhere and not for everyone, but very perceptibly so in Europe and hence Hungary as well. There is no argument about the dizzying pace of the natural sciences and technology or economic growth, but there certainly is on the point of whether or not we perceive this today as progress in the same way that we did fifty or a hundred year ago. Added to that – and even going far beyond Europe’s frontiers – is the thought that ever more people, relatively speaking, are deriving barely anything of the benefits and goods of technological innovation and economic growth. In another respect, though, fewer and fewer people, relatively speaking, understand or are capable of understanding how the innovations that are all around us in our everyday life actually operate – at least in comparison with the way that the principle of the steam engine was comprehensible on the basis of everyday experiences connected with boiling water – and instead of the lighthouse of science they choose the short-cut illumination of occultism. [24]

Part 2: The second part of this essay is also available online.

Footnotes

1. With the constructive support of Vilmos Csányi, Elemér Hankiss, Péter Kende, László Lengyel, Ignác Romsics and Ákos Szilágyi, and naturally the help of around another two dozen writers and opponents -- a group of us who are known as the "Corridor" group have published ten volumes of essays to date. Besides them, my thanks also to Julia Sípos and
Péter Somlai for having read through a first draft of this article and offered critical comments on it.


3. Péter Esterházy, "A tizenhatos mélyén [In the depths of the penalty area]," Élet és Irodalom, 6 June 2006.

4. Its legal dethroning as a republic took place during the course of Hungary's 1848-49 revolution and war of independence, writes Barna Mezey: "In the eyes of the political élite of Hungary's Reform Era, one of the most valuable features of the transition was that the creation of the civil state and legal system adumbrated by the April laws proceeded without rebellion and within a constitutional framework, with scrupulous respect for consultation with and legislation by the Diets of the old Estates" (Barna Mezey: "Az első magyar köztársaság; 1849 respublikája [The first Hungarian republic: the republic of 1849]." in: István Feitl, editor, Köztársaság a modern kori történelem fényében; [The republic in the light of modern history]. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2007., p. 191).


6. "Hindsight shows '1968' to be one of the waves of modernity, organic parts of which include emancipation of women and knowledge-based society, civil initiative and environmental awareness, tolerance to others and responsibility for causes that are far removed from us. At the same time, though, this was accompanied by the intrusion of relativism into the world of the open society and also, as its Janus face, fundamentalism." Quoted from an article by Ralf Dahrendorf, "The temptations of lack of freedom: intellectuals in the balance," that appeared in Hungarian translation in the journal 2000 for December 2006.


8. The revolution's joyful, carnivalesque moments, replete as they are with the intoxicating and expectant sense of liberation, the pull of the crowd's mood of living through the experience of finding one another, remains forever memorable for those who experienced it, whereas social outsiders witness it uncomprehendingly and with a sinking feeling of alarm. In a letter that the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna wrote to her spouse, Tsar Nicholas II, in 1917 -- not unlike the situation appraisal enshrined in the famous remark of "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche" (Let them eat cake) attributed to Marie Antoinette -- she saw only hooligans in the young people who were swarming through the streets of St Petersburg and was of the opinion that if only the weather were a good deal colder, the demonstrators would be huddling indoors. In October 2006, around the time of the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian revolution, under the sway of street antics that, although eventually tipping over into pure farce, were alarming enough to start with, law-
abiding Budapesters prayed that the weather would turn rawer and soak the rowdy elements.


10. In the hefty tome that he published in 2006, Niall Ferguson argues that the twentieth century, with its world wars, was the century in which people died in the greatest number -- maybe not in absolute, but certainly in relative terms. The decline of the West became not just a grim prophecy but an accomplished fact. Cf. *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred*; London: Allen Lane, 2006.

11. Translated from the Hungarian by Tim Wilkinson, originals unidentified.


13. Ibid.

14. It is far from sure that even this is the case. See the essay by Yue-Jianyong: “Békés felemelkedés -- realitás vagy vágyalom [Peaceful advance -- reality or wish],” in a Hungarian translation, and with an introductory commentary, by Péter Polonyi, *Kül-Világ*, no. 3-4, 2006.


16. The controversy stirred up by this topic originated in the USA. It may say a lot that a trawl of the Internet for information on the term "intelligent design" by the Google search engine (mid-June 2007) yielded 92.2 million hits, as compared with, say, 84.4 million hits for "democracy" or 47 million for "the war on terror", which of course takes in, for instance, the now five years old war and post-war struggles in Iraq.


18. The heliocentric cosmography of antiquity -- when the Pythagoreans too studied the heavens long and hard -- was, like Democritos' atomist theory of matter, purely a product of speculative efforts and reflection. Fortunately, the idea that a distinction needs to be made between empirical experiences and logical speculations did not occur to mankind millennia before this. The atomist theory or heliocentrism of the Greeks were not cases of natural-scientific prescience but two among many such speculations which happened to "turn out" true, but, lying dormant and cropping up only every now and again, they
served as an inspiration in literate circles for the sciences of the modern age that were
built on those empirical and mathematical foundations. Without the conceptual
storehouse of brilliant flights of fancy that had been accumulated over time and
necessarily disregarded as facts, without the handholds that were supplied by such
images and concepts, it is hard to think how big Science (with a capital S) would have
been able to express itself.


20. Translated from the Hungarian by Tim Wilkinson, source unidentified.

21. For me the questionability of a belief in progress as an argument for my scepticism
about reform did not first arise in 2006, but it nevertheless came as a surprise to me to
find, among the manuscripts of my own unpublished papers, the written version of a talk
that I gave at the founding meeting of the Hungarian Sociological Society -- at that time
(in June 1990) the third incarnation of such a body during the twentieth century. In
discussing democracy's paranormal situation, I apparently made the following assertion:
"If normal equates with more or less accepted norms, then in democracy's case we are
equipped with an institutional system which has grown up over the course of roughly two
hundred years, in parallel with, and organically fused to, modernisation and which moves
within the contradictions of freedom and equality and an institutional system that in
practice has been subject to constant patching-up. As a result, we see standing before us
parliamentarism, a plural party system, a state founded on the rule of law, and a
democratic intermediary scheme that links civil society with the political sphere and
within that, first and foremost, with the public sphere. At the same time, modernisation,
with its grounding on a faith in progress and the notion of unlimited growth, in many
respects -- as we hear from day to day, with very good reason -- has reached its limits,
which is manifested most spectacularly in the subjugation of nature, where the dazzling
successes are increasingly being transformed into striking failures in the horrified
commentaries of global consciousness." It seems, then -- according to the testimony of a
text that was initially typewritten with many mistakes, corrected, and then typed as a fair
copy by a professional lady typist -- that I was already worrying away at belief in progress
a full 17 years ago. This time round, though, I am able to cite my own words of doubt in
progress using the far more advanced and more user-friendly technology of a computer-
based word processor programme. What can I say!

22. See the minutes that were produced of the debate that went on within the "Corridor
Group" over an early version of the present paper, and especially László Lengyel's
comments (25 October 2006, p. 36).

23. I am thinking of his essay on the course taken by European civilisation, originally
published as E. Hankiss: *Proletár reneszáns* [Proletarian Renaissance]. Budapest:
Helikon, 1999.

24. I am drawing here on a line of argument that Márta Fehér used during an interesting
academic exchange to rebut the reasoning advanced by Tibor Vámos in favour of
progress.