Part 2: Summer notes about reforms and ‘raison d'état’

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27 August 2007

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 second instalment of this two-part essay, Csaba Gombár notes that the term "revolution" nowadays repels more than it attracts, in part due to the faltering belief in progress, in part due to wariness brought by experience. In liberal circles in Kádár-era Hungary, "reform" was used as a cover for democratic change; now democracy is often seen as a revolutionary anachronism by younger generations of post-socialist states. Be that as it may, concludes Gombár, no political reformer today can bypass the "State": reform is integral to state formation.

Read the first part of Csasba Gombár’s essay “Summer notes about reforms and raison d'état” HERE.

What is it, one asks, that fuels revolutionary ardour, or the belief in progress that underpins reformist impetus? How many people, relatively speaking, believe in progress? Prior to a revolution, and even after it has happened, do people place their trust in progress, and also in its process? Questions like these are superfluous, because they are unanswerable if, used to modern opinion polls, we expect a due differentiation and quantitative demonstrability. Still, however subjective our response may be, it can be stated that in Europe these days very little – virtually no – hope is attached to change of revolutionary character and magnitude.

Towards the consigning of revolution to oblivion
The decline in demand for revolution is a product of several factors. To start with, there are no longer any revolutionary goals. Plenty can be heard about the pains and miseries of the modern capitalist market economy, but even its most radical critics are unable to come up with any alternative. The practical experiences of revolution that one can learn about from history are in many cases so horrendous, that anyone who deliberates on the matter nowadays finds it hard to comprehend how anyone at all could have had any faith in revolutionary goals and methods.

The revolutions that Europe has undergone and that it discusses repeatedly were all violent. Very many people living in today’s civilized Europe find it simply incomprehensible how it could have been possible to cheat people en masse of everything they own, drive them out of their jobs, homes, and country, and behead or hang them in some cases, purely because someone considered them to be the enemies of revolution. Revolutions are bloody and brutal, and of course they always have been alarming for the majority of the human race. However, there has also always been a so-called revolutionary élite, composed of those who were true believers, albeit to different degrees. Such a thing no longer exists today. There may be cultural reasons for the eschewal of revolution as a method for securing progress – it would be nice to believe so. An eschewal of the use of crude, bloody, belligerent force – which in revolutions even decent but misguided prescribers and employers of force consider an unavoidable necessity, something to further the healing of society’s wounds – has become at least as widespread nowadays as it was in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Then along came the First World War. A distaste for the use of force, of course, does not rule out disorders that may be extreme, even in physical terms, at a time of political crisis, because a crowd that has been brought together in the streets by curiosity, boredom, and desperation behaves in unpredictable ways (at the time of writing, in September 2006, I am struck by the disturbances taking place on the streets of Budapest). It may be that an aversion to and disapproval of physical force is just a consequence of there having been, in my opinion, no war in Europe for 60 years. It is true that there has been conflict in the former Yugoslavia, but for many Europeans the Balkans are much more a matter of psychic projection and delimitation than a geographical category. We may have got out of the habit (of making war, that is), but do we really think that we have squared our accounts with it definitively? Or is it the case that we increasingly fear making war?

My guess is that the use of force, and even brute force – not just submitting to it, but causing it – dissuades an overwhelming majority of people from resorting to revolutionary methods, and that such a reaction is seen as self-evident in Europe today. Not just as a political strategy but as a historical judgement. These days, the term revolution is more and more taking on a negative connotation in sociological discourse. It is hardly surprising that there should be a wide variety of interpretations and assessments of the revolutionary events that played out in Hungary in late 1956, and there are a hundred reasons why it does not have particularly positive associations among the younger generations whom people seek to convince. One of those reasons is the very word “revolution” and its cognitive and emotive freight; whatever it is attached to, the word “revolution” increasingly repels rather than attracts.

All this, to my way of thinking, stems from the faltering of belief in progress. If revolution followed from a possibility of progress, coupled with its failure to appear and its
necessity, or from the intolerability of a lack of progress (it all comes to the same thing!), and if, for its proponents, this was what supplied the moral justification, then, if belief in progress wanes, revolution will also be a victim. Even though there was no small measure of learning behind the desire for and the propagation and the salvational interpretation of revolution, the idea of and belief in progress in itself was an abundantly welling spring. It is not possible, however, to proclaim for decades on end, without any consequences, that the children being taught in schools set up to spread knowledge are being “dumbed down”, and that hospitals established and run on the basis of spreading health are making people sicker than they already were. However, that is exactly what one has been hearing for a long time from even the world’s most highly developed countries. During the 1960s, this was no more than unbridled radical exaggeration; but it has since ripened, gradually, into a truism. Decades ago, Aaron Wildavsky, then lecturing at Berkeley, was asking what Americans were afraid of. To start with, he said, it was the food they ate, the beverages they drank, the air they breathed, and so on – all things that were the way they were through the application of, and under the control of, science: “Once the source of safety, science and technology have become sources of risk,” he wrote in an essay co-authored with Mary Douglas. [1] That brings us straight to the social condition that Ulrich Beck terms “risk society”. [2] Science and technology are the motors of progress, but since we now have little faith in progress, with each and every new innovation we obstinately seek out the drawbacks, alongside the advantages. Knowledge of the likely drawbacks, in turn, rouses continuous anxiety, but in order to obtain reassurance we again have recourse to science and technology, thereby creating a circularity out of the sense of risk. And even that diminished confidence is riddled with doubt.

As I write this, the results of scientific research work are being reported on the radio. A study of 25,000 individuals carried out by a Harvard University research team has established with relative certainty that drinking coffee may prevent the development of type II diabetes, which is a major risk factor in affluent US society. The reporter in the studio adds that he hopes the study was not funded by one of the big coffee retailers; and indeed, we have now reached the stage where we feel that science cannot only be mistaken, and cause problems through that error, but can sometimes even be manipulated. Nowadays, the question qui prodest – who profits? - can be posed not just with crimes but with scientific discoveries as well.

Under the influence of common knowledge and public opinion, the word revolution has become freighted both historically and psychologically. It has a whiff of the Jacobin dictatorship, the Russian civil war and, even more, of the partisan struggles that modernity’s extremist political parties wage among themselves or against occupying powers. Whether an organization is called partisan or terrorist is a matter of viewpoint – and a serious one, too. Carl Schmitt has the following to say about this:

The partisan struggles on the political front, and it is precisely the political complexion of his activity that restores the validity of the original meaning of the word, deriving as it does from the word party (Partei). […] In the exceedingly wide-ranging debate relating to the so-called totalitarian state people have not yet truly awoken to the fact that nowadays it is not the state as such but the revolutionary party as such that represents what is, in point of fact, fundamentally the sole totalitarian organization. [3]
In Schmitt’s opinion,

With regard to progress, a modern soldier may personally be of an optimistic or pessimistic disposition. [...] From a weapons technological perspective, every staff officer thinks in an immediately practical and goal-directed fashion. As for war, on the other hand, the viewpoint of geographic location is obvious even from a theoretical point of view. [...] In partisan struggle, a new, complexly structured sphere of action arises. [...] Another, darker dimension, that of depth, is fitted to the surface of the regular, traditional theatre of operations. [...] Today, in an age of submarines equipped with Polaris missiles, everybody can see that both cases – Napoleon’s indignation at the use of Spanish guerrillas and Britain’s disgust at the Germans’ use of submarine warfare – moved on the same intellectual plane, namely one that was expressed in negative value judgements in the face of unforeseen changes of plan.

Guerrilla war, revolution, anarchy – that is what is terrible in our eyes, be it in Peru or Sri Lanka or Palestine or Iraq or any other place in the world. Fewer and fewer people now think that revolution’s engines pull the world forward. In Europe, the fervour of revolutionary romanticism has returned to the nineteenth century. That is how things are now, and it is not worth saying anything more about it.

The transformations that took place in Hungary and the rest of eastern Europe after the Second World War were called revolutionary. There were no armed uprisings or barricades, but the liberating and at the same time occupying Red Army and the USSR’s imperial will and organization created the conditions under which such rapid, forcible, and radical changes could ensure that not a stone of the state, social, economic, or cultural structures of these countries was left standing. For those affected, the extension of Soviet socialism to eastern Europe was, by and large, a revolutionary transformation, even if it did lack a popular uprising. Ten years later, the Hungarian people rose up and launched a war of independence, but those few days, which awakened in many a Romantic sense of revolution, subsequently gave way to a horrendous retribution. Whether they are victorious or defeated, all revolutions concur very much on one thing: the outcome is always horrific reprisals. That, too, may be one reason why revolutionary solutions have lost their allure.

However, looking back at the great realignment that subsequently proved to be such a historical fiasco, I also need to own up to having been a personal beneficiary of what occurred as a revolutionary transformation – and pari passu a belief in progress – in Hungary after the Second World War. In 1953, as a young man volunteering for military service, I was pushed – no doubt on account of my family background – into a college that trained an élite intake for future duties in the officer corps. In 1957, for breaking my oath as a soldier, I was expelled from the Communist Party, which was then in the process of being reorganized, though I avoided prison – basically on account of my family background. In 1959, despite that expulsion, I was accepted as a student in the political élite at the arts faculty of the University of Budapest. I recollect that at some point at the end of the 1950s I argued that categorizing by class origins ought to be dropped for screening of university applicants to the arts faculty, and in response the lecturer –
presumably familiar with my brief but tortuous c.v. – snapped, “Surely you can’t imagine you would have got in, if that were the case!” There is no denying that, at that time, I believed I had been admitted to university on account of my brains; but, indeed, that can hardly have been the reason, sad to say. In 1968, I openly opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia and was on the brink of being dismissed from my post as a university lecturer; my origins must have played a part in deciding that I would not be thrown out on the street but instead shunted into the fairly liberal and, under the circumstances, élite Sociological Institute attached to the party centre. My father had been a worker at the steelworks on Csepel Island and a Communist Party member – the equivalent a patent of nobility that a family would have boasted about and exploited in the old days. In the course of the revolutionary postwar change, while twentieth-century society was breaking up, masses of opportunities were opening up for the underclass to advance. It fell to my share, too, as a member of a genuine or supposed social class; moreover, class affiliations, like skin colour, were heritable, regardless of the individual. Nonsensical as it may seem nowadays – beyond class or estates or strata – we, that is to say my family and I, belonged to the working class, and that is how both we and others saw it. The goal of the revolutionary changes was the advancement of the poor, and the working class in particular.

I don’t wish to feign modesty, however, by suggesting that what happened to me was not totally unmerited, but in the absence of the goals that had been validated by the revolutionary changes it is most unlikely that – assuming I am not grossly mistaken about myself – under my own steam, and being a not particularly career-oriented individual, I would have got ahead in the world and enjoyed good fortune so consistently. The world has changed a lot since then, however. This summer, St Petersburg, the once revolutionary Petrograd, was the host for one of the regular meetings of the G8 group of leaders from the leading powers in the world. Beyond dealing with the issues that were on the agenda – issues that the statesmen of those countries were unable to get to grips with effectively on account of the latest clash between Israel and Lebanon which happened to have erupted just then – the reporters who had trooped into the city from the West endeavoured to give a sketch of the city and Vladimir Putin’s Russia. A reporter for Newsweek managed to elicit the following comment from Katya Stoyanova, a student in her final year at university: “No one I know is interested in climbing up on barricades anymore. To me, the word democrat means crazy, bearded old men who are always against everything.” [4] How typical that is as a confusion of the memory, of the somersaults in interpretations, but also of the failure of revolution and, not least, of reforms.

**Reform per se**

The word reform is an old word which acquired an ecclesiastical meaning during the Reformation in the early sixteenth century to denote the aspiration of the reformed churches; by establishing anew the institutions that were sustaining Christianity, these would be able to uphold the values of the original, true faith. Although the original reformers had their gaze set firmly on the glory of the past, and their goal was the restoration of something, new Churches did emerge in the process.

The connotations of a restoration, a return to an original happy state, a re-formation, are just as much part of the word as “turning round” is in the etymology of revolution.
However, these aspects are linked to a pre-Enlightenment way of looking at time, when the invocation of a past golden age, rather than an orientation to the future, was the critical foundation for an ever-difficult present. Those who played a part in the great French revolution were still happy to don antique costume, even though the preceding Enlightenment (which surpassed it in scope and depth) had already brought about a big turnaround in attitudes to time. People are continually reaching back for historical precedents and examples, but from the age of Enlightenment on it is not just the pace but the direction of the course of time that has changed. It was, indeed, through the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century that the restorative connotation of the word reform was eclipsed; in political parlance it no longer denoted the reinstatement or re-establishment of something, but the transformation, or forming anew, of the institutional framework of social action in the interests of improving its function, with reformers patently wishing for something new. (Under the sway of the Enlightenment, the reforms of criminal law that were introduced during the eighteenth century, ranging from its purposes to the institutions that would meet those aims, engendering major social upheavals, were for the most part very deliberate in their innovation. We, too, can be enlightened on this topic by the seminal works published some forty years ago by Michel Foucault.) The temporal direction of reforms was thus altered by the Enlightenment’s shift to a belief in future progress, and reforms started to be directed at construction, at creating something new, rather than at restitution. The phenomenon is familiar enough, but it has not been sufficiently emphasized. Incidentally, beyond its common meaning, reform – just like revolution as an ideologically distilled, sometimes compatible, at other times opposed, method of progress – is a diverging political aspiration with concepts, theories, and faith-driven creeds of varying intensity. It is possible to pick these out with tweezers and classify them, but what would be the point?

In modern times, then, reform caught on as a method of securing planned progress in an unknown future. The foundation of every reform is a rational construct: an appraisal of the situation, an analysis of the causes of the observed faults, the outlining of a path for attaining a more highly developed, more advanced state. The reform proposals, whether a matter of prison reform or a plan for everlasting peace, would be set down in writing, most of them being worked out in detail and debated. Revolution, by contrast, was something people would fantasize about, conspire, at no small risk, to bring about, but it would be a volcanic phenomenon that virtually never had anything to do with rational planning. While plans for revolution, dogmatic and hazy as they were, would of course reinforce a sense of the intolerability of a given state of affairs, and prove good tinder should there be a spark, revolutions cannot be planned in advance and in social terms they are totally irrational (which is not in any way to deny that revolutionaries are often very highly educated). The turbulence of revolution, dispensing with all rules and caution, sweeps aside like a tornado all obstacles that stand in the way of the fair new order that will ensue. It’s just that one has the tornado to contend with (nor is it certain that the new order will be fair enough).

As for how widely ideas for reform will be debated and accepted, cardinal differences arise in that regard between democratic and non-democratic situations. Reforms have often been carried through successfully in autocratic (i.e. flatly anti-democratic) political settings. Frederick the Great’s reforms of the Prussian army in the eighteenth century were unquestionably a success, while the speed and social pervasiveness that non-democratic reforms can take on is even more evident in the case of the reforms decreed
by Emperor Mutsuhito in 1868, when Japan, within an astonishingly short space of time, transformed its banking and monetary system on the British model, its army, state religion, and legal system on the Prussian model, and its educational system on the French model. Little wonder that this wide-ranging and break-neck modernization is referred to by the term Meiji (i.e. enlightened), though the aim was not to copy the social conditions of the advanced West but to employ Western methods and institutional techniques to preserve what was considered to be quintessentially Japanese. [6]

The specific ring that attaches to the words revolution and reform varies from country to country, depending on the history of the nation-state. It suffices to recall merely the cases of France and England. For many generations, it has been generally accepted by the French state and society at large that 14 July should be celebrated as the anniversary of the outbreak of the French Revolution. England, on the other hand, does not celebrate its own revolutionary events a century and a half before that, in the 1640s, because by the time the fashion for such national celebrations spread, during the nineteenth century, England had become a model country for the way it had piled up one reform on another. The French Revolution may have had its covert admirers in Britain, but public opinion profoundly condemned it, regarding even the very thought of revolution as typical of the old enemy, the French. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sir Humphrey Davy – among his many other achievements, the inventor of a safety lamp for miners – tested the physiological effects of the then fashionable laughing gas, or nitrous oxide, on his poet friends, for which he was severely censured by Edmund Burke. Burke, who was a virulent critic of the French revolution, and revolutions in general, believed that laughing gas caused atheism and rendered people susceptible to sympathize with the French Revolution.

As far as Hungarian political life is concerned, the word reform has had real substance as a concept since the 1830s and 1840s, which are referred to as the Reform era. During this period, no less a project than Hungary’s extricating itself from the feudal society of the Middle Ages and creating – in the face of opposition from Vienna – an enlightened, progressive, industrious, and independent Hungarian nation-state, came to the forefront of political debate, in line with the prevailing thinking of the nineteenth century. Everybody individually may have wanted a little bit of it, albeit different bits and in different ways, but the notoriety attached to “Froggy” revolutions, the unrest sparked by Hungary’s cholera epidemics of the early 1830s, and growing numbers of young hotheads in coffeehouses who immersed themselves in newsprint, forced more and more leading politicians round to the view that almost everything needed root-and-branch change. That is precisely the sort of tinder revolutionaries tend to look for. Already in the Reform era, then later on, in 1968 and around 1989, the word reform in Hungarian tended to denote change on a revolutionary, but non-destructive, scale. Utilitarian, rational, and measured concepts, like reasonable reforms, were nourished by deep-seated, heroic desires that went beyond reforms and never did fit within the sober, practical logical framework of compartmentalized reform proposals. But this, and only this, coupled positive attitudes to mass support both in the Reform era and on two further occasions during the course of the twentieth century. So what about now?

**From where did the reform wind blow?**

Hungary’s officially sanctioned reform of 1968, which was referred to as the new
economic mechanism, had a long preceding history and has been widely documented. [7] From the early 1960s onwards, however, through pressure of circumstances, the word reform became a political buzzword – a shorthand that every politically motivated endeavour tacitly sought to adopt as a guise of professional competence. People would heatedly debate the most diverse economic concepts without even an elementary understanding, comparing their own restricted first-hand experiences with dimly comprehended theoretical assumptions, only for those debates, which were tolerated in a limited public in the interests of economic efficiency, to lead to the conclusion that people wanted everything to be changed.

In my own case, that “everything” comprised the following. By the mid-1960s I was a so-called political co-worker, or associate, on the central committee of the Communist Youth League (KISZ), and in that capacity I considered it to be essential that university students should have a national body, socialist in nature, of course, but independent of the party as such, and everything about it should work differently than in the KISZ; in other words, that unified and centralized youth organizations should undergo a radical reform. Among my tasks was the responsibility for organizing scientific student groups and summer-vacation work camps, as a result of which I spent the whole year going round university towns and also a great many supposedly tucked-away waterworks and agricultural areas. To put it at the mildest, virtually everything everywhere was crying out for change, and the possibility of change crowded under the political umbrella of that word reform. Since I (and I wasn’t the only one) regarded the KISZ as proving-ground of democracy, what could be more natural than to seek for a way of mobilizing university students outside those standardized structures. Needless to say, this did not meet with the views of that body’s leadership, and before long I found myself teaching philosophy at one of the country’s universities. The conviction deepened in me that the teaching of philosophy was in urgent need of reform, which in turn, in the course of our debates, was organically linked to the unavoidable reform of tertiary education as a whole.

In the meantime, I was again obliged to don a military uniform for training as an army reserve officer. In discussions with political officers at what, as I recall, were referred to as open-day functions, I repeatedly urged the need for reform of reserve officer training and reform of the training given to the entire reserve force on account of what many considered were the benighted conditions that prevailed at the time. After one such, not exactly edifying, and far from even-tempered, public appearance, I was called aside by the battalion’s political second-in-command, who indignantly asked, “What would you say, Comrade Gombár, if I were to regard university teaching of philosophy as shit?” My response, although plainly none was expected, was that I would have to agree with him. Then, before any kind of reform process could get under way, my brief but blissful career as a university lecturer was cut short as a result of the Prague Spring. Soon I joined the aforementioned Sociological Institute, which was tinkering around with the links between the state and democracy at a research institute of the Party. That was how it came about that I, without the least bit of even elementary legal training, worked on reform of the Hungarian constitution of those times. This led to an anecdotal (but far from fictitious) scene in which the institute’s director summoned me to reproach me for the fact that he would have to steal back from the in-tray of a certain Comrade Cseterki, secretary to the Presidium, a memorandum in which I had recommended that mention of engine depots and mention of thanks to the Soviet Union be deleted from the preamble to the constitution. It was, incidentally, a memo that he had asked me to give him and that he
had presumably forwarded, along with other proposals.

At the Sociological Institute, which led a cocooned existence under the protection of the authorities, we were seriously working on a democratic overhaul of the council system that saw to local government, the electoral system, and before long, without any order to do so, the political regime as a whole – political reform that was, in point of fact, not feasible under the circumstances of those days. Our institution, like the Co-operative Research Institute, the Mass Media Research Institute, or the Fiscal Research Institute, was reform-orientated to the core and in its research work was guided, for the most part, by democratic values. Among the absurdities of that era, it was seen as natural that, alongside a constant process of learning, and by applying the investigative methods of a body of sociological knowledge that had been picked up haphazardly, we would at one and the same time undertake basic research programmes and strive within the academic milieu for the reform of day-to-day socialism.

In effect, of course, this was, to a large degree, engaging in politics and – on the basis of a belief in progress and in the possibility of reforming the then existing socialism – what was felt to be a moral duty. I would not like this to come across as high-minded, but since there was an element of high-mindedness about it, even at the time, it no doubt reads that way. Still, it is precisely a motivation of that kind – though not divorced from economic rationality – which explains why the magic power and irradiation of economic reform as a political watchword evoked positive sentiments en masse. Of course, everyone at that time would have liked a better life, but the cry of reform that rang out from so many quarters was by no means restricted to a wish for a higher standard of living; it was always more than that, because it also reflected opposition to the veiled promises of independence and freedom in an imperially overshadowed world of the command economy and shortage of freedom.

As for who or what there was opposition to – that alludes to the other bundle of absurdity. Virtually everybody was in opposition, at least to the extent of being a link in the chain, as it was put by poet Gyula Illyés in a phrase that became a watchword. Hungary’s literary and scientific life was in opposition, and opposition was manifested in places ranging from sports grounds to theatres. We also saw through that paradox because we knew from Antonio Gramsci’s writings that if there was no democratic possibility of a plurality of political aspirations, then they would be perverted into sundry artistic and sporting enterprises, becoming ever more unmanageable as times passes. Under those circumstances, in the absence of public political debate, any piffling matter could acquire political significance and in itself stir up excitement that went beyond its significance in itself. For the great majority of Hungarian society, decades of what was effectively numbness passed by, whereas for the intelligentsia that dabbled in politics, a line of poetry, or an apparently outspoken film, would be enough to bring them into a lather of excitement. They were led to, or reminded of, the idea that reform of some kind just might, perhaps, show a way out of the present state, since the conditions were intolerable and “the world had to move on”. It did, indeed, appear to move on; for instance, in the direction of what was called convergence – for a while one of those fashionable notions for how capitalism and socialism could peacefully move towards a common approach – and for that reason it was possible and worthwhile to do something.

In short, I felt most comfortable among those who were dissatisfied with everything and
sought democratic changes under the political cover of reform. Given the conditions in Hungary at the time, that truly meant everything being changed, which (would have) amounted to a totally new world. Among a hundred other platforms there was the team at the Társulás [Alliance] Film Studio, [8] where film people and stray sociology researchers would argue for hours on end under the spell of some reform or other that was unrealizable but still worth fighting for. Each and every one of the films produced there, from strange hybrids of documentary and feature film that hinted at the need for reform of anything from education to agricultural productivity, through to art films, sought changes in the state of the country. They were less passionate in doing so than the revolutionary zeal of the early Soviet filmmakers, to whom the directors, István Dárday at the fore, would in turn pay homage, though in this case under the flag of social reform. From a literary man like Zoltán Bíró and philosopher Zsolt Papp, not forgetting historian István Schlett and jurist Mihály Bihari, through to set designer Mihály Pohárnok and economist László Antal – we all lent our assistance with no less reformist resoluteness and ardour. In these circles, the issue of reform would arise imbued with passion and animated by a faith in progress. Was that the way things were because of the period we lived in, or did it simply spring from our age? But by then we were no longer all that young.

No small number of people worked feverishly, but in the tension of wanting everything, any reforms plans (which, touching though they did on, and comprehending, many things, would be sampled like forbidden fruit) only came across as wishy-washiness, which just fanned the dissatisfaction: the obstacles standing in the way of reform had to be smashed. Others for that very reason – thereby willy-nilly placing themselves in a position of opposing reforms – were fearful of an outpouring of emotions. But what kinds of passions and emotions are fuelling the reforms that are being touted nowadays for them to come to anything?

Instead of a conclusion: on reform as raison d’état

The concept of national interest has been touched on several times. I feel that in the case of reforms this a key idea, for it is usual for reforms to be carried out by agents of the state within a state setting in the national interest. Reforms may come about in supra- and infranational institutions, but reforms at a national level, in the social-historical sense, always comprise a series of measures that are nationwide in scope. National politicians either manage to persuade the population of the importance of implementing reforms or else coerce them in some manner. The motivation and justification for the persuasion or coercion alike are the raison d’état. Commonly glossed as “for the good of the country”, or “in the national interest”, the term raison (denoting ratio, reason, etc.) has tended to be supplanted by the term “interest”, suggesting it has an objective concern in the progress or fate of a matter; for some reason, it lost the connotation of something reasonable or intelligent, a matter that cannot only be comprehended but also put into doubt by a citizen’s or subject’s mind. Everybody has a sense of the implacability that attaches to the word interest in the face of the rational, and in Hungary during the Absolutist era, from the late eighteenth through to the last third of the nineteenth century, when it was referred as “status ratio”, or raison d’état, it still had that implacable ring to it, but under democratic circumstances that can no longer hold. A further aspect of this is that reforms that have been conceived and carried out in the name of raison d’état do not simply lie in the national interest; they are also directed
against specific circumstances that preceded the thought of reform. This hides the state interest in the reforms, what has been referred to as *Staatsklugheit*, “political wisdom” or “statesmanship”, [9] whereby the state corrects itself to the confines of the intellect of the statesmen who happen to be in charge at the time. In that sense, of course, reforms are against the state, which in modern, anti-étatiste times means that reformers tend to avoid the affirmative use of the concept of the state; indeed, they are often reluctant to admit, even to themselves, that they are acting in the state’s interest. They speak about development, progress, a flourishing economy, the welfare of the population that will follow as a consequence, and then, to this end, about the dismantling of the barriers erected by the state which stand in the way of these things. But against what do the reformers – and economists generally – measure that development or advance?

Even in an era of spectacular and unquestionable institutionalization of globalization and interstate integration, it is clear that both parameters – of states of affairs and the plans that take shape for reforming them – are based on data supplied by a state’s statistical offices, and every piece of data, argument, and counter-argument, only has a sense or point within the given state framework. That is no minor matter, for it indicates that the political configuration defined by a state’s borders is a serious reality, even in an age when not only ideas but people, capital, and manpower are flowing ever more freely within integrated interstate structures. But the society in question, in respect of its fundamental parameters, continues to be held together by state institutions, as a result of which renewing reforms relate to these institutions. The reforms, then, revolve around the *raison d’état*, and the aspect of reform directed at common affairs – insofar as it is manifested and has any effect – naturally enough serves to reinforce the state.

In other words, since reforms find shape in rational considerations and plans, and are mild affairs as compared with revolutions; it is never expedient, in a democratic age, to set them up as implacable, objective necessities. When it is a case of the state’s interest, then that cannot be divorced at all from the members of that state, its citizens, and their reasoning. It is almost embarrassing to have to spell it out, but in thinking up reforms and carrying them out it is not feasible to economize on democratic procedures and hence compromises. Anti-state passions and arguments for reform were all very well in a time of autocratic political relations, in directly managed, centrally planned, command economies. But the political wisdom on which the citizens can call, which promises betterment in the standard of life of a country framed by state policy, is not anti-state and does not dwarf the state but builds the state up. It is not something to hide but is worth undertaking. If a reformer, riding on the crest of a verbal wave of reform (almost without exception either in state employment or in the hope of preferment), believes that he is fighting against the state (“overpoliticization”, “politics”, etc.) and for society and its betterment, well, he is wrong. A statesman who is saying “out with us” is a hypocrite: experienced citizens will always see through that game. It is not worth coming forward with any more reforms claiming to be “for the good of the state” that supposedly economize by slimming the state down, because the state, comprising as it does in Hungary the “self-governing” local governments and the state’s citizenry – all of us – does not wish to be smaller, weaker, or less expensive. And anyone who thinks this is just a matter of wording is mistaken. Words, with a bit of luck, are vehicles for concepts, and definition of a reform’s aims is only to be expected from a relatively clear vision of the concepts of a state, reform, and so on. It’s all well and good knowing that a successful reform is a very different kettle of fish from a triumph of the will. A state’s institutions
always stand in need of improvement in order that they be capable of adjusting to constantly changing circumstances. In an ideal case, it is also the goal of bursts of reformist zeal to create institutions that are capable of self-repair, in order to avoid the usual jolting and jarring of reform. [10] (That would not be a cheap business, as indeed everyone admits in principle – though only in principle: it would involve the expenditure of huge sums of money on education and training, rather than merely talking about “educated” minds.) Ideal situations, of course, only exist in an ideal world, so that reforms are probably unavoidable, even if, with the dwindling of belief in progress, organizing support for them may seem almost a hopeless task. That, in turn, means that even more time and money will be needed. To put it another way, reforms and a state that is more efficient and serviceable as a result of reform will naturally call for even more public expenditure – out of raison d’état, in the state’s own interest.

We used to say, employing the expression in a Marxist sense when it was going out of fashion, reforms are dialectical processes. Various reforms of state services are, at one and the same time, both anti-state and in the state’s interest. Thus, reformers are statesmen to the core and at best do not know themselves well enough. Formally speaking, they intervene against the state due to errors that are lurking in the state machinery, but rather than machine breakers they are essentially state builders. Raison d’état is our common sense, even though we may sometimes lose it.

Footnotes


5. I am taking issue here with Ákos Szilágyi, who maintains that the future-directed aspect of revolutions could only be counted as important from the twentieth century and from whose analysis of revolution I have found very instructive (cf. the minutes of the "Corridor" debate).


7. Personal communications by János Mátyás Kovács and László Lengyel.

8. During the 1980s, films were made at this studio by the likes of Gábor Bódy, István Dárday, Györgyi Szalai, Béla Tarr, László Vitézy, and Pál Zolnay.
9. The term seems to have been used first by Immanuel Kant in his essay *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795).

10. An essay by Ignác Romsics entitled "Suomi", written for the "Corridor" series of debates, and with no mention at all of Hungary, concerns this very point.

**Published 27 August 2007**

Original in **Hungarian**
Translation by **Tim Wilkinson**
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