The Historical Construction of National Consciousness

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Published by Central European University Press

Gyáni, Gábor, et al.
The Historical Construction of National Consciousness: Selected Writings.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/98213.

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The Three Historical Regions of Europe*

This study is dedicated to István Bibó (1911–1979), who was a political scientist and thinker, not a historian, although history was an essential part of his work. If this study begins with a reference to István Bibó, who died in 1979, draws insight from his work along the way, and ends with a consideration of his conceptual notions, it is not solely a question of propriety; nor is my intention here an in memoriam. Many a scholar has presented an analysis of Hungary’s regional and historical position, but apart from Bibó, there is virtually no one whose entire system of thought would be shaped to such a degree by a conception of this sort. His perspective is provocative enough to draw the interest of historians, especially to understand the relationship of state and society, which also fascinated this scholar of political science and legal theory, as well as of public administration. For the reasons just mentioned this study is the result of a particular context, as other premises might have equally been selected. And as far as its genre is concerned, it is no more (and given the spatial constraints could not have been more) than an outline.

* This text was originally written for the samizdat István Bibó Memorial Volume (Bibó-emlékkönyv, 1980), which could only be published legally after the regime change in 1991. However, Szűcs was offered an official venue to publish his essay already in 1981: “Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról” [The three historical regions of Europe: An outline], Történelmi Szemle, no. 3 (1981): 513–59; and, due to the great interest, soon after it was also published in book format: Jenő Szűcs, Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról [The three historical regions of Europe] (Budapest: Magvető, 1983); and in English: Jenő Szűcs, “The three historical regions of Europe (an outline),” in Történelmi Szemle, no. 3 (1981): 513–59; and, due to the great interest, soon after it was also published in book format: Jenő Szűcs, Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról [The three historical regions of Europe] (Budapest: Magvető, 1983); and in English: Jenő Szűcs, “The three historical regions of Europe (an outline),” in Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988), 191–332. The current translation is a revision of the more complete version published in Acta Historica. The specific conditions of the birth of this text explain the extensive engagement with the oeuvre of István Bibó (imprisoned after the 1956 Revolution and marginalized afterwards, to be rediscovered by opposition circles in the 1970s as a key figure of an alternative, radical democratic political tradition) in the introductory section of the text.

1 If this study begins with a reference to István Bibó, who died in 1979, draws insight from his work along the way, and ends with a consideration of his conceptual notions, it is not solely a question of propriety; nor is my intention here an in memoriam. Many a scholar has presented an analysis of Hungary’s regional and historical position, but apart from Bibó, there is virtually no one whose entire system of thought would be shaped to such a degree by a conception of this sort. His perspective is provocative enough to draw the interest of historians, especially to understand the relationship of state and society, which also fascinated this scholar of political science and legal theory, as well as of public administration. For the reasons just mentioned this study is the result of a particular context, as other premises might have equally been selected. And as far as its genre is concerned, it is no more (and given the spatial constraints could not have been more) than an outline.
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important role over the course of a long period of time, which also help the present to identify political courses of action and set limitations. Unfortunately, Bibó never reached his objective, but the essence of his work lies between a sober definition of limits and a maximalist analysis of the possibilities that present-day reality has to offer: what could or should be done to augment the prospects of a society whose historical and structural limitations have fueled a demand for a revolution and for democratic transformation when history is charged with responding to this demand under non-revolutionary conditions? In terms of long-term opportunities and constraints, István Bibó described Hungarian history as a sequence of three phases. Expressed simply: in the first 500 years after the turn of the millennium this society belonged to the West according to its societal framework, or at any rate close, “with only a difference of degree” and in “a fairly simplified context, with provincial characteristics.” But this tie with the West was broken by historical catastrophes and for more than 400 years it was forced to follow an Eastern European type of development marked by “inertia within the power relations of society,” “deadlocks,” and hopeless attempts to return to the West. These attempts continued until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when they arrived at a strange “impasse.” Bibó believed that in 1945 it was possible to transcend this impasse and to “reunite itself with Western social evolution.” The heart of his work consists in gauging the opportunities and constraints that escaping from a “history of impasses” would entail.2

There is a tragically poignant piece of evidence of the deadly earnestness with which István Bibó took history. In hospital a few days before he died, when illness had already made his speech halting and faint, Bibó held forth on the subject of the Third Estate.3 He became absorbed by some obstinate effort in proving that it was mistaken to make an automatic identification of the notion of the Tiers État


3 The text was published as István Bibó, “A kapitalista liberalizmus és a szocializmus–kommunizmus állítólagos kiegyenlítetlen ellentéte” [The supposedly unbalanced contrast between capitalist liberalism and socialism-communism], in István Bibó, Válogatott tanulmányok, ed. István Bibó, Jr. and Mária Hegedős, vol. 4 (Budapest, 1990), 759–982.
with the bourgeoisie. The Third Estate had in fact been formed originally by “All,” by all who had not shared in the privileges of the nobility. Although the bourgeoisie soon identified the Third Estate with itself (thus making possible the rise of a Fourth Estate and then of a Fifth, composed of those who remained outside the Fourth) certain models originally related to it apply to “All.” The conclusion he came to (although he was overtaken by fatigue and then death) was one he had committed to paper over thirty years before and then twenty-five years before.

He asserted that democracy was not a kind of “bourgeois superstructure” but “the objective technique for exercising freedom,” which socialism might acknowledge (and adapt) just as safely as a type of pen made in the West or the superiority of Morgan’s theory of heredity, despite its being of a “Western type.”

History entails not only structures but also models, and although the internal composition of these models may change, their validity remains and acts through the ages—so István Bibó might have argued in that last study of his. In the following, I shall attempt to reexamine, at least in outline, the changes in the frameworks that have defined the fabric of Hungarian history, in line with Bibó’s studies written more than three decades ago, but also bearing in mind his final message.

Where Do the Inner Boundaries of Europe Lie?

One very pronounced line runs southward across Europe from the lower course of the Elbe-Saale, along the Leitha and the Western perimeters of ancient Pannonia, that is, on the Eastern frontier of the Carolingian Empire around 800 AD. In the previous three centuries, the region to the west of that line had witnessed the natural symbiosis of late ancient Christian and Germanic tribal elements whose first development, if crude and impermanent, was the “renewal” of the Imperium itself. Even at that time the region was often designated as the “West.” Of course, the term Occidens was not originally considered distinct from other parts of Europe, for instance, from “Eastern Europe”—a term that even with hindsight carried little meaning before the turn of the millennium; the concept referred to the ancient “world” that encircled the Mediterranean as distinguished from the Eastern successors of the Orbis Latinus, Byzantium, and Islam, which had conquered its southern half. Many believe that we may only speak of European history as such beginning around 800, when major historical developments shifted northward to Europe prompted by the Arab conquests,
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which robbed the Greco-Roman civilization of the southern territorial expanses stretching from Syria to North Africa and as far as Hispania. The early conception of Europe had been purely geographical.4

Around this time an organic “structure” was beginning to crystallize in its Western realms; it was neither ancient nor German, but a feudal Christian society. In order to characterize this new entity, the region began as early as the death of Charlemagne (814) to appropriate the term *Europe* for itself, albeit wrongfully, as it embodied only one pole of a nascent Europe. Byzantium occupied the other pole, although initially it entertained no European aspirations; in fact, with a center in Asia Minor, it was hardly a European entity in the geographical sense either. Until the turn of the millennium, the empire was resolved to preserve the Eastern heritage of the “Romans” (as they continued to call themselves) from the “Barbarians,” even at the price of territorial losses. It achieved this aim by continually carrying out reforms characteristic of antiquity and by maintaining an exceedingly self-protective rigidity. Thus, the history of Europe after the turn of the millennium was founded on the absorption of the territories in between these two poles and the heterogeneous world that lay still further north. The Occident, which at one time referred merely to the Western extremity of a putative Europe, had become “Western Europe,” and Byzantium had abandoned its defensive immobility. One can speak of the existence of European regions from this point onwards.

A further prominent border was established between these dominant forces, particularly after the Great Schism of 1054. It ran roughly parallel to the above-mentioned border, but situated to its east, and stretched from the region of the Lower Danube to the Eastern Carpathians, advancing northward along the forestland separating the Eastern Slavs from the Western Slavs and Poland from Russia and reaching the Baltic regions by the thirteenth century. As early as the twelfth century, the designation generally used for the region west of this territory was *Europa Occidentalis*; ostensibly the former Elbe-Leitha boundaries had clearly been forgotten. Hardly had *Europa* evolved from a purely geographical notion into a synonym for Christendom—indeed for a social framework and cultural entity—than it was torn in half by Roman and Byzantine pressures. In the Middle Ages there was an ever-increasing tendency to sub-

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sume under Western Europe the zone that stretched from the Elbe to the Carpathian curve and from the Baltic to the Adriatic: that is, the new region which had been annexed to the realm of the former “Carolingian Europe,” including Scandinavia. Is this, in fact, what it became?

Leaving aside for a while the matter of what needs to be proved, let me briefly refer at this early stage to two “border aspects.”

First, let me say that the degree of definition and existence of Europe’s new internal borders after the turn of the millennium might be illustrated by several types of maps other than the one showing dioceses. Examples might be maps showing the dissemination of the Romanesque and Gothic styles of architecture, or of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Moreover, it might be demonstrated by charting, for example, autonomous cities, corporate freedoms, the system of estates, and a series of other structural characteristics which are difficult to depict visually. The eastern limit of all those phenomena, allowing for some seepage beyond, was the eastern border of the Polish and the Hungarian Kingdom, and further north the eastern border area ruled by the Teutonic Knights (later East Prussia), although in such kinds of map the density of points or hatching would certainly diminish strikingly beyond the borders of the old Carolingian Empire. Yet, some thinning out would also be observable from the Rhine eastward. The line of the old Roman limes would show up on Europe’s morphological map, thus presaging right from the start the birth of a “Central Europe” within the notion of the “West.”

The other aspect is a regression. A very sharp line of demarcation, which was in fact to cut Europe into two parts from the point of view of economic and social structure after 1500, divided off the far larger, more easterly part as the scene of the second serfdom. Moreover, Europe in our own times, another 500 years later still, is divided more clearly than ever before into two “camps” almost exactly along that same line (with a slight deviation in Thuringia). It is as if Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt had studied carefully the status quo of the age of Charlemagne on the 1130th anniversary of his death.

My attention, of course, is drawn to the area between those two borderlines (not absolute in either direction), since Hungary is enclosed between them. This area has been termed by an imperfect but nonetheless acceptable and fairly new terminological consensus “East Central Europe.” It may sound paradoxical to say that the considerable surges of history flowing over both borders oblige me to pay far greater attention to the areas to the west and the east of this area than to the area itself.
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The achievements of medieval Europe remained crude and unfinished in the East. The areas to the south and to the east of the Russian territory—the bulk of the territories that would eventually become Russia (which would occupy exactly one half of the entire European landmass)—were neither “Russian” nor “European” until the modern era. They formed a westward wedged extension of the nomadic world and the Eurasian steppe region penetrating into geographical Europe, where several peoples, among them the Hungarians, had crossed over to the Carpathians. But following the turn of the millennium the narrow tip of that wedge yielded, joining the region under discussion. Since the thirteenth century that sizable wedge of land was known as the Mongolian Empire. A succession of events occurred, beginning with the Golden Horde relaxing its clutch (1480), continuing with the Russian conquest of the khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan (in 1552 and 1556) together with the annexation of the territories in Southern Ukraine under Polish rule (1667–86), and concluding with the annihilation of the Crimean Tatar Khanate in 1783. These developments carry no less significance within the panorama of European history than they do for the history of the Russian state, which had constructed (and had simultaneously incorporated into the very notion of Russia) a model of a homogeneous “Eastern Europe” derived from heterogeneous entities that stretched from the White Sea to the Black and Caspian Seas and from the Polish frontier to the Urals. These ongoing developments led to the “internal expansion” of Europe and the impetus of the plough and the formation of towns in early modern times, which, by the Middle Ages, had now reached beyond the Baltics and Carpathians to the aggregations of land around Kiev and Moscow. What was achieved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Dnieper, Don, and Volga region was similar to what “Europeanized” Europe had no doubt accomplished five centuries earlier between the Rhine and the Vistula, Memel, Tisza, and Maros, albeit in a more intensive manner.

When comparing the structural models of European regions, one cannot neglect this final inclusion into the Eastern half of Europe; nor, of course, can one neglect the European penetration of another Asian territory when the Middle Ages was nearing its end. From a southeasterly position, an exceptionally massive wedge entered the body of Europe, affecting the Southeast European region, where the process of “Europeanization” was nearly complete, albeit in a rudimentary form, comparatively speaking. For several centuries to come the whole area was newly designated Rumelia, while the Asia Minor segment of the declining Byzantine Empire, which had been swallowed up long before at the
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What did the original Western model consist of—at least from the perspective of István Bibó? His viewpoint (one of several possible) is founded in a search for the deepest-reaching roots of a “democratically organized society” and the “formation of a political community.” The elements pointed out by Bibó, drawing on the works of István Hajnal, regarding this early phase—such as the custom-

time of the Seljuk advance, was referred to thereafter as Anatolia. Since the protruding tip of the Ottoman Empire terminated in Eastern Europe—more precisely in Hungary—the latter’s new role as a “borderland” became an important factor in the formation of regions, while simultaneously relieving Eastern Europe of that function.

The coordinates of Europe were roughly as follows: the first expansion of the “Barbarian” peoples, having absorbed the heritage of Western Rome, led to the conceptual birth of the “West” (500–800); following the pacification of the new “Barbarians” the first great eastward and northward expansion of the West (1000–1300) extended the frontiers of Europa Occidens to include Northern and East Central Europe. Meanwhile under the rule of Byzantium, which safeguarded Western Roman traditions in the East, a “residual” Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe was formed. Since the latter’s territories would gradually become independent from the European framework over the next half a millennium at the time of Byzantium’s decline at the end of the Middle Ages, it will be disregarded.

Two ventures prompted the arrival of the modern era: one was the second great Western expansion (1500–1640) which, in crossing over the Atlantic, annexed America (and step by step also absorbed Scandinavia); the other was the great expansion of “truncated” Eastern Europe, which brought Eastern Europe to “completion” with the annexation of Siberia, which stretched all the way to the Pacific. East Central Europe became wedged between these two regions, and at the dawn of a modern epoch it perceived with dismay that while Western history had redrawn a border that was thought to have paled, the final (and most oppressive) wave of the invasions of the previous millennium coming from Asia Minor was lapping against its shore; it no longer knew whether it still belonged within the framework of Europa Occidens or whether it had slipped away.

The initial regional territorial arrangements, subsequent shifts, and adaptations to the challenges of history determined the structural frameworks that have defined modern Europe ever since.

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ary, personal, and mutual obligations and rights, and the stabilizing frameworks for the “small circles of freedom” that would prevent concentrations of power and serve as vigorous opposition to “brutally expedient” methods of unilateral subordination—were all real and vital, though such conditions did appear separately in successive medieval frameworks. Yet, the point at issue involves something more all-encompassing; this can be demonstrated by taking a momentary look back to the West at various stages of the Middle Ages.

If one considers concepts such as “natural law,” “social contract,” “popular sovereignty,” the “transfer of power,” or the “separation of powers,” one will usually recall the names of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, and, of course, the French Revolution and its aftermath. To be sure, considerably fewer know that such key issues were first debated a good five centuries earlier in Paris, Bologna, and Oxford, albeit in contexts remote from and alien to those of the modern era. What is more, at the height of the Middle Ages, in the “great century,” the thirteenth, such notions were as much at the heart of political theory as they were in the great century preceding the modern era, i.e., the eighteenth. If one searches for the roots of “social development in the Western sense” (as Bibó put it) or seeks to identify the “original characteristics” of the West (as Marc Bloch would have put it), such a consideration is important since one such characteristic of the West is the structural—and theoretical—separation of “society” from the “state,” or more precisely, a social structure that would make such a theoretical separation feasible.

This kind of separation is not an endogenous feature of human history. Of course, all states are built upon some type of society, but the weight of 5000 years of civilization induces the emerging state to find a justification for itself that is “external” to society, thus creating an operational mechanism in which society appears to be the derivative of the state and not vice versa. For any given societal sector to exist autonomously, independent of the state (even if functionally connected to it) is quite exceptional, the luxury product of history as it were. Such an exceptional case is the Greek polis, conceived as the natural political form of the archetypal autonomous society, the koinonia of free citizens. Another case in point is the Roman res publica, where the power of the populus Romanus was exercised primarily within the framework of public law. But Greek democracy in practice lost its cogency within Hellenistic empires, as the Roman idea of the republic, having become a fictive notion, also found itself in an imperial impasse. These early historical antecedents did not directly contribute to the social development of Europe. Nothing, of course, could be more re-
moved from the medieval West than the notion of democracy; only a handful of Italian city-states flirted with the idea of the republic, and then only in a highly aristocratic fashion. Nevertheless, there existed an organic historical continuity which resulted at last in the emergence of modern Europe. If Western feudalism alone was capable of formulating the concept of *populus seu societas civilis*, it is not because feudalism in the West held itself to be the heir of antiquity and that its philosophy was grounded in Aristotelian premises; in these terms, Byzantium was more faithful to its principles and, for a time, even Islam seemed a wortlier heir. In effect, during the Middle Ages Western scribes dug up Aristotle’s *Politics* in Arabic libraries. But Arab scholars had not known what to make of it, in contrast with his other manuscripts on mathematics, astrology, and medicine. This discrepancy in sensibility can be explained by the fact that whereas the subject of politics was to some degree familiar in the feudal West, the other two civilizations had no common ground with which to link it to their societal structures. At the dawn of the modern era, the archaic form of *civil society* had to be liberated from its “feudal context” in order to apply it to an entirely new state model. Notably, however, this approach was not particularly unusual since historically the model itself and likewise its relationship to the state had already been established. No such thing had occurred in the Byzantine Empire, Islamic world, or China: that is to say, within other cultures which had long boasted of higher “indices of civilization”; nor indeed had such a thing occurred in Kiev.

These parallels are not dictated by a self-serving interest in *Kulturmorphologie*. The nature of Western development can be traced back to its genesis, and understood primarily by contrasting it to other civilizations. What Byzantium protected with an unyielding vigilance was a specifically developed half of an integrative framework that had been abolished formally long before, in 395: it clung to the relics of the Eastern Roman Empire with its traditionally urban civilization and centralized, bureaucratic state structure. In the meantime, Islam exhibited great flexibility in incorporating not only Arab traditions but also the heritages of Persia, Mesopotamia, and of the southern half of the *Orbis Latinus*. Nevertheless, the world of Islam followed the typical ancient developmental models of civilized cultures, integrating urban civilizations of various origins and blending elements of the Persian and Byzantine centralized state structure into its own military and theocratic autocracy. The first 500 years of Western history reveal an utterly uncharacteristic “takeoff” as compared to other rising civilizations: it took place amidst breakdown instead of union, and amidst civilizational decline, re-agrarianization, and mounting political anarchy.
That said, one can also observe a particular kind of integration occurring at the heart of the medieval West: the absorption of ancient and barbarian traditions (which Byzantium had managed to avoid with Pyrrhic victories). But this was not a mere rearticulation of diverse elements as with Islam; indeed, in the Dark Ages it seemed that these elements had gradually become so organically entwined that they neutralized each other.

Today it has become increasingly clear that latent within this state of general deterioration were basic conditions for the dynamics which would soon after reverse the auspices of the West and mark its distinction from the other two successors of Rome. Here it will suffice to refer to three related considerations. Firstly, restricted by agrarian and local infrastructures—in which land was considered the only source of wealth and prestige—the West found itself in a position where it was forced to escape the chronic technological and productive stagnation that represented the bottleneck of every civilization, ancient and contemporary alike. The “agrarian revolution” which occurred during the “Dark Ages” lay the groundwork for the appearance of a new urban culture and created the historical conditions for the internal expansion of the West. This would spawn a demographic explosion which nearly doubled Europe’s population between 1000–1300.

Secondly, the dissolution of “public authority” and of political sovereignty in general were built-in structural conditions that encouraged the establishment of urban culture forming a decidedly Western model, the autonomous city. The absence of centralized states naturally made it impossible to transform budding towns into centers of administrative, military, and economic activity (likewise inexistent at the time), which would have been the circumstances in the dominions of Byzantium and Islam. Enclaved between agrarian economies regulated by different legal and political authorities, Western towns took up elements of sovereignty into their own local entities. They also developed a new economic formula—that of the autonomous urban economy.

The third aspect is the creation of a dense urban network. While the combination of the agrarian revolution and the autonomous town did not generate, until the modern era, metropolises with millions of inhabitants (a handful of

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such urban centers did exist in the Islamic world under the Abbasids, and in China under the Sung Dynasty), but it did create a dense fabric of towns, sparking an intensity of commodity exchange which dominated the economic and social structure in ways that other civilized cultures had never seen.

In recent decades historians have in fact rehabilitated the Dark Ages. As things go, development in the West cannot be measured by any static “civilizational” criteria, even long after the turn of the first millennium. The ruthless pillage of illustrious and gleaming Byzantium in 1204 revealed the chronic insecurity of the crusaders; conversely, the scholars of the “twelfth-century Renaissance,” who drank in the knowledge of antiquity from Cordoba and Sicily thanks to the Arabs, exhibited reverential admiration for the Orientale lumen. The secret of Western development is neither veiled in the “Faustian soul,” as Spengler believed, nor is it learnt from its “cumulative” model, which differs considerably from the “cyclical” patterns of Asian civilizations, as Toynbee taught. It lies, rather, in the display of its distinctive developmental tempo, wherein cumulative change led consistently to structural transformation. From another angle one might say that the frameworks themselves possessed the innate ability to surpass their own self-imposed constraints. How right István Bibó was to identify the Western model with “mobility” and deviation from the Western model with “inertia.” The preliminary conditions for the Western dynamic of assimilation following the turn of the first millennium was the breakdown that preceded it, and herein also lies the condition for the separation of “society” and “state.”

In distant historical eras the term “society” naturally did not refer to “all of the people”; a concept which sub specie historiae is quite recent: barely 200 years old. The character of a civilization and its tempo of development are determined by a number of factors which are deeply ingrained in a society and its economy. The crystallization of new societal forms, however, always directly depends on the functional relationships by which the internal conditions and values define the role of a small social stratum within the political sphere. This political segment of society is not necessarily identical with its “ruling class,” which, as a rule, is itself rather difficult to define very precisely. Historically, the political authority of highly developed cultures was predominantly “top-down.” According to this arrangement it makes little difference whether the legitimacy derived from power is wholly theocratic (as in the Islamic world following the establishment of the caliphate), fundamentally secular (as in Confucian China), or a mixture of the two (as in Byzantium, where ancient and oriental authority was
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combined. It is quite incidental whether the state framework is principally military (as with Islam), predominantly civilian and bureaucratic (as with China), or based upon a balance of the two (as with Byzantium). One common denominator of these developed civilizations is that the situation of the groups directly exercising power, both on regional and state level, is defined by what Max Weber referred to as “prebendal” dependence. Whether the land was fully monopolized by the state (as with Islam) or only partly so (as in Byzantium and China) is of no consequence. A second common feature is that the city would serve as a center of civil and military administrations, the state “tax-levying system,” and the exchange of goods (which is usually closely monitored by the state). This results in a settlement without autonomy and without uniform laws, consisting of an agglomeration of civil servants and military personnel, merchants, artisans, and landowners who exercise their power locally. The third commonality is the scarceness (or complete absence) of “intermediary” actors with independent social or legal standing between public servants and the peasantry, whose legal status varies depending on the local conditions. When such entities do exist, they do not carry much weight.

Of course, these political frameworks are to some extent susceptible to the kind of centrifugal dynamics evidenced by power struggles between various factions of the governing strata: conflicts between the court cliques (consisting, for instance, of clergy, Mandarins, or Praetorian Guards) and regional-level parties, or between civil and military factions. These battles could result in an empire being divided between contending members of a dynasty (Islam) or contribute to the total destruction of the civilization itself (Byzantium). In some cases, successive conflicts, following a spiral pattern, might also lead to the periodic reinforcement of the imperial center (China). In essence, the offshoots of a divided empire would fully retain the original political structure: upheavals generally take the form of court intrigues, palace revolutions, or military coups that do not alter the relationship between the “political segment” of society and the state.

In this respect as well, the West had created an entirely new model. It began with the breakdown beyond recognition and subsequent dissolution of both forms of state in the tension and brief coexistence of which it was originally conceived. Within a period of barely three centuries (sixth to eighth), the sacred authority of the German regna based on retinue was dissolved as definitely as the institutional regime of the Imperium and Roman public law. This dismember-

ment not only occurred within the “state” sphere, as the original “social” frameworks had collapsed as well: the Germanic tribes disintegrated as fully as the socio-legal community of the residual Roman populus. The former, despite their myths of origin, were formations dependent on the power structure of the Migration Age (Heerkönigtum), while the latter, despite every fiction maintained about public law, was derived from the imperial framework of the late Roman period. With the dissolution of state power, political sovereignty itself became a mere illusion; and with social disintegration, all the traditional forces of cohesion disappeared. Initially even the private ownership of land, the supreme crystallizing force, assisted with the political and social disintegration.

Only one institution survived these developments intact: the Church. This is no less significant than the developments themselves. At some point during the power vacuum and chaos that arose, the Western Church was released from the dependence it had assumed since late antiquity during the reign of Constantine the Great (337) when ius sacrum was a branch of ius publicum. Justinian also reproduced this arrangement in Byzantium (532). At the same time, the fall of the Roman Empire had delivered the Roman Church the opportunity to disengage itself from “caesaropapism.” It was St. Augustine who said that “Christian society” (societas fidelium) possessed an identity independent from the existing power relations but it permeated these secular relations by virtue of necessity; they were “thoroughly mixed” (invicem permixta). Pope Gelasius (493) then swiftly converted this idea into actual institutions. The West’s separation of the sacred from secular, the ideological from the political, was particularly fertile; without it future nation-states, future “freedoms,” the theoretical emancipation of “society,” the Renaissance, or the Reformation would never have ensued.7

There was another important separation that occurred if one considers the original structures referred to earlier. The early Carolingians had attempted to forge a political synthesis out of the Ancient-Barbarian symbiosis. This was, in fact, the only effort made by the West to unite its assorted heritages, that is, to connect the notions of “civilization” and “imperial” (or political) integration (following here in the footsteps of most earlier and contemporaneous high cultures). The “renewal” of the Imperium around 800 was an attempt to revive ancient imperial traditions that had been passed on by the Roman Church, draw-

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ing on the vestiges of the Frankish institutions. But these institutional remnants had already been exhausted, and the temporary edifice was destroyed once and for all by a new fourth element that arose from below and which Charlemagne tried to use to balance what was fundamentally an unstable construction: vassalage. Thus in the West it was decided once and for all that “civilization” and “political frameworks” were to remain separate. One should not be misled by the fact that in the West the project of restoring the Imperium Romanorum persevered for another three centuries after 962. In reality, this was hardly more than a delusive policy towards Italy of the German kings. The only visible end result of this policy was the postponement until the nineteenth century of the opportunity to realize a unified German state; incidentally, this facilitated the crystallization of a new regional notion—that of “Central Europe.” This imperial notion entered into a conflict with the demands of the sacerdotium (i.e., the other branch of universalism) and—in line with the propensity of structures to transcend themselves, which was characteristic of the West—ultimately contributed to the creation of its own antithesis by generating the nation-states.

Once reduced to its most basic elements the long-term stability of the West was ensured precisely because “top-down” integration would be impossible. Rather, integration would begin “bottom-up” and in its first phase of development (ninth to eleventh centuries) would follow a distinctively vertical orientation.

The emergence of vassalage was not prompted by noble intentions, but rather by force of circumstance. With the dissolution of central government, entering into a relationship of dependence through a form of “private law” between individuals was the only way to establish security and enhance personal power or prestige. In itself, there was nothing particularly novel about a relationship of dependence between individuals: the German military retinue (comitatus, Gefolgschaft) had been of this nature, as was the late Roman clientela. All prefeudal societies had known this form of dependent relationship, including nomadic ones; it had served as the bonding agent of every feudalistic society from Kievan Rus to Japan. But Western vassalage differed from these cognate frameworks in

8 On the contractual nature of vassalage and feudal ceremony, see Marc Bloch La société féodale: La formation des liens de dépendance (Paris, 1939), 350–53, 357. On the correlations between the feudal province and the law, see Otto Brunner, Land und Herrschaft (Brünn, Munich and Wien, 1942), particularly 114 ff., 186–268.
9 On the “descending” and “ascending” tines of forces of law and government, see Walter Ullmann, Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages (London, 1961). On the strands of contractual thought, see Fritz Kern, Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht im früheren Mittelalter (Leipzig, 1914), 251 ff.
two important ways: on the one hand, it had succeeded in incorporating into its fabric nearly all of the elements of society that had remained free following the social erosion, and on the other, Western vassalage had not established itself beneath the state structure or adjacent to it, but had virtually taken its place, substituting the very notion of state with that of “social” relationships. Western feudalism possessed additional characteristic traits which through the centuries eventually seeped down under the surface of a proper “feudal society.” One such distinguishing feature was the “contractual” nature of vassalage. The commendation ceremony always entailed an allegiance between a more powerful and weaker person; thus, the relationship was, as a matter of course, one that was fundamentally unequal. The “fidelity” was a one-sided obligation assumed by the vassal, but the feudal lord also assumed customary fixed obligations from that moment on. Indeed, the fidelitas itself was conditional upon the more powerful party’s fulfillment of the contractual obligations. If these obligations were not met the charge of felonia, or breach of contract, applied with as much force as it did to an “unfaithful” vassal. Thus, there was a contractual relationship between unequal parties under which both incurred reciprocal obligations. While under particular circumstances this inherent feature of Western vassalage might have been more of a fiction than a reality, the pretense itself still exerted an influence by operating as a norm; in time it affected lower ranks of society by the same token. The relationship of peasant and landlord assumed a contractual nature around 1200, not because this form of agreement already existed in the upper echelons around 900, but because the dynamics of progress and the new variety of integrative dynamic (by this time horizontal) had offered a limited and conditional type of “freedom” at the level of the peasantry. This unparalleled “contractual” acknowledgment of a relationship—however overtly unequal—was an emblematic social “conditioning” (using István Bibó’s term, who used it to denote cognitive reflexes which developed over the ages and were not purely psychological but also determined by social structures).

Another distinctive feature was the maintenance of a person’s human dignity even under subordination. It was a general custom outside of Europe—and in the Russian principalities as well—that the “servant” would bow towards the ground, embrace the hand of the lord, or even fall on his knees, prostrate and kiss repeatedly the hem of the lord’s garment. In the Western homagium ceremony the vassal would genuflect with head erect and place his hands into the clasped hands of his lord, and the new affiliation was finally sealed with a mutual kiss. An age that articulated itself with spectacular gestures and strongly
expressed symbols succeeded in articulating an archetypal relationship that fully strove to translate this symbolism into practice. The impact of these conventions was far-reaching, influencing even the gestures used to express religious devotion. The Church, for instance, borrowed the Western posture for prayer of clasped hands from the vassalage ceremony (the Christians of Ancient Rome had turned to God with outstretched arms). In analogous fashion the Orthodox prevailing custom of prostrating oneself on the ground and covering the feet of saints with kisses was an extension of the demeanor of the “servant.” Naturally, human relations were even more thoroughly permeated by these attitudes. Each peasant revolt in the West was the expression of human dignity flouted by a landlord’s “breach of contract” and the assertion of the right to “freedom.” There was also an ethical dimension to all of this. The “honor” of the individual occupied a central place in the value schema of antiquity, and the “fidelity” of the subordinate was of vital importance in every society bound by dependency frameworks. The two were morphologically exclusive; the knight’s honor and the vassal’s fidelitas only fused naturally under Western feudalism. The constituent role that human dignity played in European political relations was not inherited from antiquity but was derived directly from feudal customs. It was preserved, too, over the course of institutional reforms.

Moreover, the territorial consequence of Western feudalism, a large number of small provinces with their own particular customary law, presented a much more suitable terrain for the development of directly applicable law and for the elaboration of law as “custom” (mos terrae) than would the overly extensive and uniformized political and administrative frameworks crudely dismantled from above. Decentralization was the means through which, at the local level, the “ascending” principles of law and government would ever more prevail over the “descending” mechanisms of enforcement, as Walter Ullmann indicated in his typology of legal history. This also applied within the cultural sphere as a general rule. The profusion of feudal courts, this colorful milieu which nevertheless shared a set of common values, served as a breeding ground as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries for a Christian, but autonomous lay culture, value system, and moral principles. In effect, these courts were also the birthplaces of national literature. Having divested themselves of many affectations and eccentricities, they encouraged the reconciliation between “valor” (virtus) and “temperance” (temperantia), the characteristic trait of the European demeanor.

Once the old formulae had been almost entirely eliminated, the mannered, ceremonious mélange of feudal culture developed its own distinctive new rap-
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port between society and state. In the most fully developed phase of the feudal framework, the state’s fiscal, administrative, military, and judicial functions were divorced entirely from the power of the sovereign. Instead, these functions were distributed among different tiers of society, where each was gradually incorporated into the similarly tiered system of landownership. The doctrine according to which the sovereign power of the monarch was a divine right hovered, bereft of all meaning, over this complex social network, and the same goes for the Augustinian legitimization of power in terms of the “safeguarding of peace and justice” on earth. The power of the king was real insofar as it was exercised not as a sovereign but as a suzerain (a feudal overlord). One might argue that the shreds of sovereignty were absorbed into the newly formed “political” sphere of society, if there were any sense in doing so—for the fragmented new picture no longer resembled any kind of sovereignty—and an exclusively vertical model of feudal society had barely anything in common with a coherent “political society.” It is well understood that territorial status and feudal dependence did not automatically coincide. In the long run this paradox would be highly significant precisely due to its paradoxical nature: the notion of sovereignty had become utterly relativized and its fragments scattered precariously into the sphere of “society”; thus, if they so wished, the great liege lords could still consider themselves a kind of “political society.” And it was in just such an environment that the embryo of the contrat social, destined for so great a future, was conceived.

Like all offspring, the social contract had two parents: feudalism and the Church. The latter was independent of secular power (a situation particular to the West), yet under Pope Gregory VII it did intervene in worldly affairs, and with a more ardent “freedom” than ever before. The social contract was first promoted as a theoretical principle around 1080 in a radical Gregorian treatise. The ruler was said to be bound to the people (populus) by a contract (pactum); but if the sovereign “violated the contract through which he had been elected” it could be annulled and dissent would be justified. One identifiable condition behind this declaration was the division of Christian universalism into two branches. By its own inherent logic this split incited the papacy to argue for the weakening of the emperor’s position by banishing the secular dominion from the sphere of the sacred; as its power was derived from the earthly realm, secular rule was accorded authority merely over the temporal affairs of men. As a result, an irreversible chain of events was triggered: European thought turned again towards antiquity, the realm of politics was extricated from the realm of theology, and remnant “barbarian” notions of power were eliminated for good. The idea that
the “people” constituted the basis of power was extracted from Justinian’s *Institutiones*; initially the argument merely served as a legal stratagem to counter a tyrannical emperor. However, the early theories of state contain no precise notion of a “contract,” though Cicero alludes to a kind of *pactio* between the ruler and the people and the Old Testament also makes mention of a covenant between the elders of Israel and King David in Hebron. A further background condition did not come from antiquity but from feudalism, whose contractual basis had found its way into the sphere of the “state” about 200 years earlier. For example, the Frankish and Aquitanian nobles (high-ranking vassals of Charles the Bald) declared that if the king “took action that diverged from the contract in any matter” (*contra tale pactum*) he would be removed from the throne (856). This idea grew directly out of the feudal *felonia*. The relationship between the king (as suzerain) and his vassals took the form of a pseudo-“constitutional law agreement” as early as the ninth and tenth centuries, just as the oath of allegiance sworn to the king echoed the feudal formula: “I shall be faithful as a man who swears fealty to his liege lord. . . .” Subsequently, within less than two centuries, the notion of the social contract would free itself from its vestments of fealty, just as a “society” had developed that could, in large measure, assert a relationship with the state akin to that of the ancient *populus*; its feudal vestiges, on the other hand, would be shed in the course of time, alongside the emergence of a societal model which would include “every person.”

This process would never have been activated had the West not deposed political sovereignty within its first three centuries and had it not distributed its remains within a social structure that developed vertically “from below” within the next three centuries. Over the course of three more centuries this process gathered momentum because the particularly strong vitality of Western growth during the “second feudal age” (1050–1300) created horizontal forces that perforated the vertical string of dependencies. Initially this was realized through the new integrating forces of society and later through those of the state. Thus, having reaffirmed its purpose, sovereignty was divided between an emerging “political society” and the rulers of monarchies that were once again on the path towards consolidation.

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The structure which had evolved by the turn of the millennium had a basic feature which was historically unmatched; it was broadly universal in terms of its implications for civilization but strictly local with respect to its political relations. The dynamic tension which developed between these polarities produced eruptions of activity which included the Crusades, the reconquest of the Mediterranean Basin, and the expansion of Europe. It also led, inevitably, to the notion that chivalry—which had been “vertically” integrated into feudal relationships—was at the same time a “horizontal” pillar of Christianity. In the ninth and tenth centuries the conviction that alongside secular powers the ecclesiastical hierarchy formed an earthly estate (oratores), an autonomous and institutional unit, and a “mystic body” (corpus mysticum) crystallized. This outlook led to the idea that warriors (bellatores) of this world, irrespective of their political allegiances, were also components of an autonomous entity and “estate” of a similar nature purely by virtue of their societal “function.” The notion of the estate was first propagated by the Church around 1000 and included a tacit acknowledgment that laborers (laboratores) also formed a kind of “functional estate.” The structural condition for this was the absence of centralized state powers that would have managed this “functionality” through the organism of the state. The material condition was generated by urbanization and the agrarian revolution which translated into a sudden increase in living standards and the stature of the knight. This led the knights to believe that as “warriors of Christ” they should be entitled to the same freedom as that enjoyed by “Christ’s mystic body.” The “freedom of the Church” (libertas ecclesiae) had become a critical slogan during the Investiture Controversy and the notion of freedom of the nobility (libertas nobilium) sprouted from the same soil.

But the logical progression of these matters did not conclude here. As mentioned previously, it was the partition of sovereignty in the West that led to its most distinctive feature: urban autonomy and a combination of rights and spheres of influence, which, in other advanced civilizations, would be under the dominion of the state. Meanwhile, during the Dark Ages the idea of the model city of antiquity had not completely fallen into oblivion in Northern Italy; from here it spread towards Flanders in the northwest and then eastward as urban areas gradually expanded. This favored the emergence—from the “functional”
scheme of ideals of the *laboratores*—of a new stratum of burghers rather than a heterogeneous urban “populace,” who realized the new notion of freedom (*libertas civium*). Around 1120 the French abbot Guibert of Nogent remarked indignantly that the whole of Western Christendom echoed the “new and infernal names of the communes...which have been established by servants in defiance of all legal and divine ordinances.” This is an indication that this social framework had fully evolved. It took only two or three generations for the successors of the irate abbot to regard these communes as completely natural—one of the many “freedoms” that existed in the world—and even deriving their existence from natural (that is, divine) law.

No other period between the Roman *res publica* and the French Revolution so loudly and insistently pronounced the motto of freedom as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the West. Even the voice of the peasantry was beginning to be audible in the chorus. First it was the voice of the settlers of newly cultivated lands, and with increasing volume the voices of other peasants; the threat of moving to the urban areas was the weapon they possessed (this served as a model from which positive rights issued). But the efforts of peasants were also supported by arguments relating to the economic vitality of the “second age of feudalism” and ostensibly these were potent enough to persuade or intimidate the landlords of that era. Jointly, these factors naturally extended “freedoms” down to the lowest levels of the social hierarchy; these “freedoms” even constituted an organizing principle of the entire framework, though for the lower echelons it became increasingly clear that the coin of “freedom” bore the word *libertas* on one side only; on the other side the value of freedom was qualified and relativized by a “privileged legal status.” Naturally, some aspects of the notion of freedom were familiar in the feudal systems of other regions as well, even for the rank and file. But it is worth emphasizing that the elimination of servitude and the intermediate statuses—which provided the whole of the peasantry with positive and uniform, if limited, rights that were not only sanctioned through “custom” but also guaranteed through a written contract—was a thoroughly Western trait. The principle that “no tax can be levied unless it be in writing” (1142) spread from northern France to the very limits of *Europa Occiden*.  

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The Development of Western Europe

The notion of the “multiplicity of small spheres of freedom,” which István Bibó rightly identified as the foundation of Western development, was based upon a few critical concepts: unity in plurality meant that over the course of time “freedoms” grew to be a prime organizing principle for the social framework. It eventually became the factor that drew a sharp line between the medieval West and so many other civilizations: the introduction of the notion of “society” as an autonomous entity. While the boundaries between hierarchically divided groups were always determined by a higher authority, the authority did not always precisely correspond to sovereignty. Everywhere legal maxims and customs were imposed in a bottom-up (“ascending”) fashion and this trend intensified with the extension of these “freedoms.” Even in the smallest village, a number of minor laws were applied by the local community, starting with the regulation of land use. Those rights continued to expand to different levels of the social hierarchy to the extent that the rulers themselves could do nothing without the consilium et auxilium of their vassals. It was the sum of these collective rights, legitimized gradually through custom, that were called “freedoms.” One could go into further details here but at this point this can be avoided as the very period in question searched for and eventually found the abstract principles which made it possible to discern the common traits from the multiplicity of local forms.

One may also say that development both in principle and in practice produced social groups that worked more or less autonomously, but it is more expressive to say that the autonomous social existence itself became legitimized in principle.

On the one hand, there were the experiential facts of reality to count on, and on the other the Christian philosophical principle of the “unity of plurality,” combined with the idea of St. Augustine that Christianity itself was a kind of “society” with a dual existence. The two civitates of St. Augustine mean not two “states” but a dual “society” (duas societates hominum quas mystice appellamus civitates duas). According to the concept that became predominant in the ninth and tenth centuries, the society of Christians was “embodied” on Earth by the Church; consequently it was of a corporate nature, the “mystic body” mentioned above. Since the Part reflects (and needs to reflect) the Whole, a kind of “political theology” soon started to sprout from theology, reaching its peak with John of Salisbury’s Policraticus (1159) which interpreted every legally existing human community, including the state itself, as a kind of corpus mysticum politicum and searched for its common working principles. The decisive turn took place when, in twelfth-century Bologna, an exploration of the full texture of Roman law was followed by the birth of
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European jurisprudence, which led to the development of an autochthonous medieval theory of society and the state, free of either theological or classicizing features. The road from theology led through the glossators, canon lawyers, commentators, and through the works of St. Thomas Aquinas to scholasticism, and through the activity of the legists to political publicism. The whole productive period (to which only that between Bodin and Montesquieu can be compared) reached its peak with Marsiglio of Padua’s *Defensor pacis* (1324)—a distillation that shows the nature of a structure in a concentrated form.

Oddly enough it was really beneficial that some thinkers submerged themselves in speculative abstractions which today seem to be strangely hairsplitting, for it would otherwise have been difficult to identify the common denominators of the working principles of the various types of existing communities, villages and towns, provinces and kingdoms, and the universal Church that topped it all. (This quintuple “typology” was the most widespread.) It was precisely that penchant for speculation that assisted the breakthrough: existing elements of reality had to be interpreted in such a way so as to express the definite point in common that then affected reality. For example, could one consider a knight or some subject of a lord to be a “citizen” in the sense of the ancient *civis* or the burgher of the Italian towns, and could their relations be *civis*? Hardly, one should say. But since the thinkers of the age did so, they distinguished certain objective, “structural” elements which then affected the structure itself.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought three new forms of theoretical emancipation to the underpinning “freedoms” that had already been established.

Firstly, groups that were subordinated to various authorities had to be liberated notionally from their unbalanced position of subjection (*populus subditus*). Consequently, a model was devised by which all of the “peoples” (*populus*) deemed legitimate were considered at the same time a corporate (*corpus*) community (*universitas* or *communitas*). These communities were integrated in the great organism of Christian society as autonomous “societies,” each fulfilling a separate public function (*societas publica*). The most radical scholars, such as Baldus de Ubaldis, went as far as acknowledging the legitimacy of any social group of public utility without the authorization or special permission of a higher authority (*sine auctoritate principis, absque licentia superioris*). Contend-

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14 On the several aspects of the “liberation” of the individual, see Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1966).
ing with the higher authority, each autonomous society of this type was to possess a legal or political status (persona ficta or politica, repraesentata) including the “principle of representation” and also concrete communal rights. Undoubtedly, the great scholars of that period considered Christendom as an organism which consisted of societies of varying size and efficiency which, however, operated under identical internal principles.

Secondly, individuals who were subordinate to various powers had to be liberated notionally from their dependent status as subjects (fidelis subditus). This followed logically from the preceding notion of emancipation. By classing real-world relationships into unambiguous normative categories, it became clear that every individual possessed a dual status: aside from being a “subject,” he or she was equally a “member” of a social community (membrum communitatis, societatis) and thus was to be accorded specific communal rights. In sum, the individual formed part of a horizontal legal framework independently of any “vertical” ties of dependency.

Thirdly, man the subject, natural being, and Christian believer also had to be liberated notionally as an Aristotelian “political being” (animal politicum). As such, it would be necessary to disentangle the notion of politics from the realm of ethics, where it had long been consigned by theology. This was not accomplished by legal scholars but by philosophers, who first interpreted politics as ethica publica and then clearly pointed out that man was a political being “by nature” and that—apart from the Christian and “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love—“political virtues” were themselves factors in the formation of community (Aquinas). The word politizare appeared in the common language of the West around 1250. In this era scholars rejected Aristotelian naturalism; by adopting the Neostoic model of the Romans, man’s political status was understood to be more than a “natural” category of being and the polar notions of naturalis-civilis expressed this new conception. Thus, the notion of a societas civilis appeared in the West in the mid-thirteenth century as a synonym for the sort of autonomous society outlined above; it appeared as a facsimile of the ancient populus, which had been understood long ago as a “unity of law and public utility” (unitas iuris et publicae utilitatis), that is, it was viewed within a feudal context as the basic model for a marked “political society” and civilis relationships.\[1\]

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This model needed confronting with reality from two directions. One was from the web of feudal allegiances, where the confrontation depended on power relations. The other direction was from the feudal state. Of course, among the “societies” that existed in principle, there was a place for a category of _communitas regni_, even around 1200, and it was, moreover, the highest in the hierarchy of the earthly communities, although it had hardly any meaning since the monarchical frames themselves were fairly hollow in those days.

The characteristic of Western development was not merely that it generated a structure capable of prompting such thoughts. It extended to the fact that (as in the place of the yet-to-be-discovered elements in Mendeleev’s table) the thinking assigned a place to the “social” pole of the state well in advance and defined in theory the relation of the ruler and the political sector of society before that relation became institutionalized in the form of assemblies of estates around 1300. Curiously enough, practice can more or less be said to have followed theory.

It was not only the making of the jurists, but also of the head of Christianity, who had sought allies in his fight against the emperor among the consolidating monarchies, which remained outside the tension between the _Sacerdotium_ and the _Imperium_. When Pope Innocent III declared the maxim of _rex imperator in regno suo_ in his famous bull of 1202, he gave his blessing in advance to the sovereignty of the nation-states, which in those days were still in the process of formation. The maxim said that the king must be accorded the totality of rights which had been given to the sovereign under Roman law, and which up to then had been vindicated exclusively by the emperor. Paradoxically it was Christ’s vicar on earth who allocated the “plenitude of power” to the kings, at least in principle, while on the other hand he considered all worldly power as owing allegiance to the pope. The highest spiritual authority accorded earthly powers an entirely secular legitimacy, and the universal high power confirmed the nation-states which then swiftly dissolved universalism. A century later, the strongest of those nation-states, that of France, toppled that highest spiritual authority as well, in the person of Boniface VIII. These productive paradoxes, too, were confined as characteristics to the development of Europe.

In reality, of course, monarchies started to grow strong not because they were authorized to do so by the pope (and Roman law had in any case been discovered without papal leave), but because the power sources for state integration had appeared. All this was development: the urbanization as well as the noble estate that grew out of the transformation of feudal law over the heads of the great feudal lords, or the estate of lawyers trained by the Church. The newborn
nation-states were separated by a gap of about 500 years from the imperial and German institutions going amiss in the early stages of the given civilization. They were entirely new morphological formulae. The developments that had raised the French monarchy during the period from Philip Augustus to Philip the Fair (1180–1314) out of its feudal fragmentation are by and large known of.

The Roman law and theory of the state, objects to the abovementioned papal gesture, were merely a manifestation of ambivalence at the most delicate point, despite their profusion, since they had developed from an amalgamation of the republican and imperial principles. The maxim of Ulpian that power had originally been possessed by the people and later transferred to the emperor could lead equally in the direction of “popular sovereignty” and of “absolutism,” depending on what part of the syncretic material was selected and what emphasis was given to it. Certainly, the material had by then enabled sovereignty to be defined, and the changing reality had led to the very posing of the question, since there already existed rulers and social forces whose relationships had to be defined. They were not each other’s derivatives as was the case e.g., with Islam, where the question did not even emerge because the theocratic discretionary power of the caliph and later the emir or sultan was seen as the “realization” of the holy law, the *sharia*, encompassing politics, warfare, taxation, and jurisdiction. The development in the West was from the outset different since the German ruler had already been bound to the “custom” represented by the heads of society, and the Church had already made it accepted in the early Middle Ages that a Christian ruler had a moral duty to realize Augustine’s principle of *pax, iustitia, pietas*: the “tyrant” who acted against those duties could legally be deprived of his throne. But state theory was also imbued deeply with political theology mentioned above, whereby the king was only the “head” of the “mystic body” of state, among whose “parts” he had to maintain harmony. The points still to be cleared up about that ideological structure were the identity in real life of the “members” of the *corpus politicum* on whom the function of the Roman *populus* devolved, and the question of which function: that of the republic or of the Empire?

The clarification took place between 1200 and 1300, on the basis of the axiom that the source of power was the “people.” There was hardly anyone to dispute that, apart from the extreme hypocrites of the papal court. Divine grace presented no great problem either, since it could easily be surmounted by stating that in the last resort power derived naturally from God but through the mediation of the “people” (*mediante populo*). Already for the twelfth century glossa-
tors (some of whom still thought in a doctrinaire way, as if Emperor Justinian still ruled the world) the key problem was whether the people had transferred “all its power” (omne suum imperium) to the ruler or “retained some of it,” as Odofredus and others including the Bolognese majority were already claiming. Moreover, a few in that circle, for instance Hugolinus, made the very radical claim that the king only headed the state as a quasi procurator. But who were “all” of whom the “people” was composed?

The answer as early as the thirteenth century was the civilis societas, the kind of corporate community that could reproduce itself within the framework of the monarchy as well, so long as it existed in a town or a province. But who were the members of this “society”? Of course, it was acknowledged in the period that in a broad sense the people meant “all the people,” but a people for itself was only a naturalis multitude and not a civilis “society.” The key notion in bridging the problem was included in the “representation” principle of corporate theory. A community was persona politica (or repraesentata) in that it was more than the sum total of its members by virtue of its “eternal” identity, and it had gained that attribute since its “qualitative” part, its qualitate and not its pluralitate, “represented,” i.e., embodied it as pars senior. It had in fact become clear before the first assemblies of estates arose that the Church, the nobility, and the burghers, as the elite among the “members” of the corpus politicum, “represented” the communitas of the kingdom before the “head” of the body politic, the ruler.

That idea of pars pro toto was equally as axiomatic, as the idea was widely accepted by the thirteenth century that the people was not merely a historical and theoretical source of power, but in some ways took part in exercising that power. At all events, the term regimen politicum was deserved only by a government in which some sharing of power took place. But how should power be shared? Many left that most difficult question unanswered, satisfying themselves with the thought that sovereignty was shared in some undecided fashion within the body politic. A somewhat more precise answer came out of natural law, which was drawn into that sphere of thought, while retaining some of the “absolutist” elements inherent in ancient theory. Even before 1300 it was argued that an exceptional “case of emergency” (necessitas) might arise, for instance an invasion, a rebellion, or a heresy, when natural law would authorize the ruler (who in such

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cases was the *lex animata* to act in a way absolved from the observance of the laws (*legibus solutus*), i.e., in an absolute way, to levy taxes and declare war, but he could only do so in an emergency and in favor of “public good.” The ancient theory that imperial order was equal to the law was only valid in such a case. Under normal circumstances the guideline was human law (*lex humana*), derived from natural law and invested in the “people,” and as a rule the king himself was subject to the law (*rex sub lege*). The ancient theories of absolutism could be balanced by another principle which had been extracted from the recesses of the codex to become the watchword of feudal “parliamentarianism”: the concerns of all must be approved by all (*quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus approbetur*). The next step was taken by Marsiglio of Padua, who clearly defined the notion of “legislative power” (*legislator humanus*). The ruler, as the administrative head of the state (*administrator rei publicae*), could only act and command by virtue of his authorization from the legislative power; at the same time, the ruler himself was a governing “part” (*pars principans*), in relation to the other “parts” of the state, which were represented in the legislature. The theory contained the germ of what today is called the division of powers.

The structure, whose theoretical development was completed within a single century, began to function practically in the decades around 1300, in the form of assemblies of estates, but for two reasons in not a spectacular way. On the one hand, the workings of the state were restrained rather than promoted by divergent feudal self-interests, and on the other, the whole economic and social structure of the West had gone into a deep and lasting crisis by the time the political mechanism appeared. But one should seek in the Middle Ages neither for any kind of anticipatory ideal of “parliamentarianism” nor for the germ of democracy. Yet, the low level of efficiency of the political mechanism, the selectiveness of the “political society,” and the feudal division of “freedoms” do not detract from the achievement that the models themselves had been formed and proved in the microstructures to be very effective. The medieval “technical revolution” that happened concurrently produced both awkward and inefficient machines and a great many machines that operated well and had been entirely unknown to antiquity. The majority scarcely resemble modern machines at all, but that does not alter the fact that, for instance, the camshaft that operated machines with many tools, or the flywheel that balanced the deviation in the turn of a windmill, were no less than the discoveries of the principles of synchronized control and the centrifugal regulator. Historians of technology see the medieval technical revolution that ended in the fourteenth century as fitting into the
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modern industrial revolution that started in the eighteenth century “almost as completely as the coastlines of the Old World and America.”

Here it is worth drawing attention to yet another important aspect. In the medieval West, the notion of “society” was naturally only able to follow the contours of an already existing structure. Nevertheless, the basic model possessed an inbuilt capacity not only to shrink but also to expand. Once it became a norm in the West that the ruler was answerable to the “people,” this of course did not imply accountability towards the “subjects” in general, nor that he was accountable to the physically present representatives of the estates. The ruler was under the control of the populus, which every legal practitioner knew to be a composite identity and legal entity amounting to more than the sum of its parts—an entity that “never dies” (nunquam moritur). Although this distinction is subtle, it left open certain possibilities, since the model stipulated that the ruler was accountable to “society” in the abstract.

Development Beyond Western Europe

Traditionally, the dispatch of legates to Quedlinburg (973) and the crown sent by Pope Sylvester II to King Stephen (1000) are considered to have placed the Hungarians into the tableau of Christian Europe. Certainly, having realized the dangers and advantages of the expansion of the West (as the Christianized Piasts did with the Poles and the Přemyslids with the Czechs), Prince Géza and King Stephen had thrust Christianity on the Hungarians, as a result of which the name Europa Occidens soon came to cover this expanding area. The notion of the “West” spread along with Latin Christianity: it became a civilizational concept. But for a long while civilization and structure belonged to different coordinates.

For instance, the Rurikids forced the Russians to take Christianity from the opposite pole of Europe, but at the beginning the structure of the state and society in the region of the “new barbarians” showed more internal similarities than Esztergom (or Gniezno or Prague) did to Rome, or the Kiev metropolitan did to Byzantium. Nor did it make much difference whether the institutional models derived from the West or from Byzantium, since the state of Kiev absorbed at least as much influence from the Normans as it did from the Byzantines. The common feature was that the elemental force of the historical change

17 On the technical revolution, see Walter Endrei, A középkor technikai forradalma [The technical revolution in the Middle Ages] (Budapest, 1978) (the quotation is on page 85).
provided the ruling power with an enormous preponderance over the fairly amorphous societies and, in terms of Theodor Mayer’s typology, the states were formations of “retinue character” placed on territorial and institutional bases.\footnote{For the state development typology quoted, see Theodor Mayer, “Die Ausbildung der Grundlagen des modernen deutschen Staates im hohen Mittelalter,” Historische Zeitschrift 159 (1939): 462–64.}

The proto-feudal Slav druzhina or the type of retinue relationship of the Hungarian jobbágy (the Hungarian word originally meant any follower ranging from those of the noblest birth to the warriors of the castles) determined that the power structure should be one of concentric circles around a center of power, as in the western Germanic kingdoms of the sixth and seventh centuries.\footnote{On the typological position of the early Hungarian state, see Jenő Szűcs, “König Stephan in der Sicht der modernen ungarischen Geschichtsforschung,” Südost-Forschungen 31 (1972): 17–40. The parallels in the Merovingian Age have already been pointed out by Péter Váczy, Die erste Epoche des ungarischen Königtaums (Budapest, 1935).} The social structure lent itself to similar analogies: the Church and a narrow stratum of aristocrats by birth were separated from an entirely heterogeneous peasantry (including a significant number of slaves) by a malleable, dissoluble middle stratum of which a significant proportion was attached to the structures of early feudal institutions. If the Roman institutions of the Church and the Carolingian-inspired institutions of the state seemed on the one hand to be slightly more developed, this was amply counterbalanced on the other by the fact that the early Russian state could rely, in the shape of the populous trading centers of Kiev and Novgorod (which served as the meeting points of the Byzantine-Baltic and Arab trade on the route “from the Varangians to the Greeks”), on an urban basis unknown in the West before the reconquest of the Mediterranean.\footnote{On the Russian parallels, see Marc Szefiel, “Aspects of Russian Feudalism,” in Feudalism in History, ed. Rushton Coulborn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).}

In the early centuries the parts of this region were more tightly connected to one another by political and dynastic ties than any single parts of it were either to the West or to Byzantium. At least until about 1200 there appeared to be an autochthonous “Eastern European” feudalism in the making, culturally orientated in two directions, but drawn together by common structural features.\footnote{On the sphere of problems to do with Eastern European “original characteristics,” see László Makkai, “Les Caractères originaux de l’histoire économique et sociale de l’Europe orientale pendant le Moyen Âge,” Acta Historica Academiae Scient. Hung. 16 (1970): 161–87.}

That temporary and uncertain regional formation broke up rapidly in the decades after 1200. The early Kievan state was particularly interesting as it hinted at the possibility of an “original” symbiosis of late antiquity and the Barbarian sphere between the Byzantines and the Russians at the eastern pole of...
Europe, similar to the symbiosis which had grown up in previous centuries in the West between the Romans and the Franks. But that possibility soon vanished, because the expansion of the West (1204) led to the defeat of the exhausted Byzantine Empire, soon followed by the Mongol invasions, which concentrated the burgeoning force of Eurasian nomadism (1223 and 1243), cutting the Russian territory off from the Black Sea and subduing these disintegrated principalities for more than two centuries. As a result, the amorphous Eastern European archetype of feudalism got more or less solidified in this region. At the same time, the wave of “internal expansion” by the West started to spill over the border of the former Carolingian empire with an elemental strength while filling the framework of the “civilization” of Europa Occidens with ever more structural content in the eastern zone. The aggressive side-effects (Drang nach Osten) were mainly typical in the northern parts from the Elbe to the Baltic; in general, the spread of the heavy plough, new systems of cultivation, and urbanization led to a shift eastward of the “freedoms” discussed above, and that shift was an important element in a creative destruction of the early feudal system of state and society. That wave of development first split up and then integrated into new formations the rough fabric of early feudal society, the formation that a recent attempt at typology has called “state serfdom.”

All of what István Bibó listed as the Western “structural features” of medieval Hungary—the formations of the nobility and the autonomous burgher-stratum that appeared alongside the “freedom of the Church,” the concomitant absorption of the condition of servitude, and the homogenization of the peasantry (“the first enfranchisement of the peasant population”), which failed to take place in the more easterly regions—were real and important structural elements produced by the truly explosive transformation that unfolded in scarcely one and a half centuries (1200–1350). Nothing could be more characteristic of the rapidity of the development than parallel events at the two opposite poles of the structure. In the 1270s, the representatives of the Church and the nobility began to assemble, in parallel with the West or even ahead of some Western countries, for the first national “general meetings” and the idea of a communitas
regni began to come to fruition. In the same decade, only with a couple of decades of delay compared to the West, there appeared instances of landlords and peasants making “contractual” agreements before Church bodies exercising notarial functions. All those features very clearly divide the Carpathian Basin (along with the Bohemian Basin and the Polish Plain) from the “autochthonous” Eastern European structures: where the Church was subordinate to the power of the princes; the archaic “serving” nature of the nobility, subject to the princes and boyars, precluded any corporate unity and prevented the forming of an autonomous burgess-stratum (for even where there were elements of autonomy, as in Novgorod and Pskov, the council was dominated by boyars); and the peasantry presented a highly heterogeneous picture that embraced all, from the “free” peasants on the newly cultivated lands, via those at the various degrees of personal dependence, down to the enslaved kholop. There is no need to list other elements here, for Bibó has already highlighted the most important of them. But the question remains as to whether it suffices to speak of “a simpler fabric and a more provincial character” by comparison with the West.

The shift from the Western margin of Eastern Europe in the geographical sense to the Eastern margin of Western Europe in the structural sense was principally marked by the specific temporal contraction and rapidity of development. Social structural elements that developed organically in the West in several stages over almost 500 years (from the ninth to the thirteenth century) through the dismantling of parts of previous achievements and rearrangement of the main points at every stage, appeared in the eastern zone, including Hungary, in a concentrated form, within hardly more than one and a half centuries, parallel with one another. It is hardly surprising that the forms they took were in some places inorganically truncated or raw, in others still unarticulated, rough, or mixed, or in yet others demonstrating here and there various archaic features or differing from their pattern in their proportion to one another. The West undoubtedly served as the “pattern,” even if the decisive transformation cannot be considered a straight imitation, since the internal preconditions had existed in every field before 1200, which was, moreover, the main explanation for the quick pace of the transformation. But one cannot deny that there was an “imitative” element, since readymade forms and models did help to speed up the

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The internal sequence of events. Another specific feature of the medieval “modernization” of the region was that reorganization “from above” was disproportionately more important than at the scenes of the original emergence of these structures. As has been shown above, the characteristic of Western-type feudalism was that its basic elements had arisen spontaneously, from below. The internal principles of organizing “society” were dominant over those of the “state”; the new monarchies were built on elements that already existed, and the activity of reforming them entailed the manipulation, reappraisal, and rearrangement of those elements. The type of “reform ruler” whose activity centered around creating the basic elements of the structure (one might think either of the settlements, reforms concerning the serfs, urban policy, and the introduction of feudal organizing elements or the knightly milieu) was a typically Eastern European phenomenon, examples being Béla IV, Charles Robert, Ottokar II Přemysl, Charles IV, Władysław I Łokietek, or Casimir III.

The specific dual aspect of the Eastern region of Europa Occidens in the Middle Ages derived from the fact that the roots the basic elements of the Western type or structure had taken did not go deep enough. Let us consider vassalage as an example. After the dissolution of the early feudal system of institutions and of the primitive “retinue-like” structure, the elements of vassalage and the Estate system appeared in parallel with each other, whereas in the West they had been products of two successive stages in history. That prevented the kind of deep cultivation by which the deeply stratified structure of vassalage prepared the soil in the West. For instance, the aborted Hungarian version of vassalage, the familiaritas, lacked that deeply rooted institutional system and permanence, as did the fief itself. When Hungarian historians with their traditional “etatist” orientation exult the fact that in the end the unity of the medieval Hungarian state was never split by feudal disruption, they forget about the negative effects. One thing lacking, for instance, was the fertile cultural and legal function of territorialism. Moreover, it followed from the faintness of a chivalrous milieu that Hungarian only became a literary language some three centuries after the Western languages; alongside the comprehensive forms of vassalage there was little room in Hungarian history for an organic, autochthonous knightly culture. But because the “deep cultivation” was absent, a disproportionately wide stratum of nobility

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appeared very early, and having soon gained political self-awareness and autonomy, conquered the inherited regional framework of the early feudal state—the county—while simultaneously blocking the “ascending” process of local legalism, whose framework in the West was the feudal territory. All that had far-reaching consequences on attitudes too. The very word *familiaritas* also refers to an archaic patriarchal relation of some kind. Not only the fief itself and other well-defined systems of institutions and ceremonies were lacking, but also the “reciprocity of unequals,” the emphasized contractual character of the personal bond. While members of this lesser nobility did not throw themselves at the feet of their lords like their Eastern counterparts, they did not perform the symbolic play of the preservation of human dignity in the state of subordination that was performed by their Western counterparts. Their attitude remained somewhere between the two. Possibly they confirmed their agreement over the conditions of subordination by shaking hands, after the “Hungarian fashion,” as this complimentary gesture was already called in the thirteenth century. The relationship asserted itself in principle by the emphatic respect for “humanity and honor,” while in practice it worked rather “downwards” and had much more of the character of “service” than did vassalage in the West, as is reflected by the other term used for the Hungarian quasi-vassal: *serviens*. This intermediate situation between the Western and the Eastern models is fairly apparent, even though it was a few degrees nearer to the Western model than to the Eastern.

Structures of the Western type can be detected everywhere in Hungary, although they were deformed to some degree: either incomplete (as the towns were, for example) or disproportionately overgrown (as was the nobility). The primary deficiency of autonomous towns of the Western type was not caused by the fact that where the formula was “complete” (in the free royal and mining towns) the majority of the population was not ethnically Hungarian, but by the fact that this sector of urbanization became confined to scarcely four dozen towns which rapidly grew up during the wave of development between 1200 and 1350, and it remained small in proportions later on as well.27 Meanwhile the mass basis of urbanization remained a hybrid formation, since the several hundred market towns were “Western” in character but represented a higher degree of peasant “free-

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doms” rather than a lower degree of burgess freedom. On the other hand, it followed from the inorganically fast pace of development that the free lower landowner strata, which had prematurely organized themselves already in the late thirteenth century into a “corporation” of nobility, did not exclude by natural selection the inappropriate elements; those who rose above the peasantry by their privileges but were rendered unsuited to performing the functions of nobility by their “peasant-like” features. Thus, the Hungarian Middle Ages bequeathed to the modern period a mass nobility comprising 4–5 percent of the population (and in Poland’s case around 7–8 percent), as compared with an average of 1 percent in the West. These included the boorish and uneducated lesser nobility imbued with an overall awareness of its privileges and justifiably dubbed by Bibó the “most noxious phenomenon in the development of modern Hungary.” In fact, the only undistorted “Western” element in the Hungarian social structure up to the end of the Middle Ages had been formed by the peasantry, which obtained a unified legal status in the fourteenth century. This was expressed in the peasants’ attempts to prevent themselves being pushed off the periphery of the Western type of structure, defending themselves with their unified awareness of universitas (in 1437) or of being a chosen, “blessed people” (in 1514), at times when they felt the “freedoms” they had obtained were being fundamentally threatened. But the fate of the serfs was decided in the long run by the responses the corpus politicum gave to the subsequent challenges of history.

Hungary’s social formation was again “Western” in the sense that it had, already in the 1270s–1290s and particularly after 1400, clear ideas about the separate, autonomous position of the “political society” within the state, yet deviated from being Western in that its concepts were still one-sided. It never, for instance, crossed the mind of Simon de Montfort in England that he should do other than summon two burgesses from every town when the hour for feudal “parliamentarianism” had come (in 1264), but when that hour came in Hungary (in 1276) it entered no one’s head to invite representatives of the townspeople. Nor did it occur to anyone later: the deputies of the royal towns took part irregularly at the diets, at most as observers. Occasionaly, for mere propaganda purposes, the towns also were referred to as “members of the realm” (membra regni), but there was little meaning behind it, whereas it had become axiomatic

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by the late Middle Ages that the deputies of the nobility were “representatives of the whole body of the realm” (totum corpus regni repraesentantes). For that precise reason it was ultimately a simplified and one-sidedly interpreted digest of the whole complex theoretical fabric outlined above that struck root in Hungary and permanently ruled out any chance even in theory of widening the “pars pro toto” kind of interpretation. Since the political sector of “society” was identical with the nobility, and the nobility in Werbóczian terms embodied, in person, the populus under constitutional law and constituted a “mystical body,” “the members of the Holy Crown,” responsibility by the ruler for the abstract notion of society was ideologically excluded. “Society” as the ruler’s partner consisted exclusively of the concrete totality of the nobility.

So, what structure did Hungarian history originally have? A “sincere history” could scarcely be satisfied with the generalizations or very broad cultural features implied by belonging to Europa Occidens. In terms of regional typology, one thoroughly secondary consideration is “high culture.” Janus Pannonius’s poetry cannot compensate for the raw local color that he himself also thought rather raw and called in the humanist manner “barbarous.” Obviously the overall “constitution” of Hungarian history can principally be perceived in the structures where Bibó also sought it. Yet in terms of the basic elements, one feels there is an argument for applying, even concerning the medieval context, the notion of “East Central Europe” to the entire region. It adopted Western types of models and norms, but in an Eastern European milieu, characterized by a structural modification detectable in almost every aspect. Of course, there were minor differences: Bohemia showed forms rather more “Western” than Hungary while Croatia was rather more archaic, and Poland was in most respects highly similar. Ultimately Hungary’s structure in relation to the West can be discerned by such cut-and-dried figures as that every twentieth to twenty-fifth person in Hungary at the end of the Middle Ages was a nobleman, in contrast to every hundredth Frenchman; at the same time every fortieth to fiftieth person in Hungary was a free city-dweller in contrast to every tenth in France.

Absolutism and the “First Crisis” of Feudalism (1300–1450)

The more fortunate regions of Europe can mark the beginning of modernity with victorious dates such as 1492: the discovery of America. Enrenched in the memory of less fortunate regions are the dates of catastrophes such as the 1526 Battle of Mohács and the advent of the Habsburgs. Russian historians also might
introduce the modern era with triumphant dates such as the “gathering of the Russian lands” or any one of the dates tied to the annexation of the whole of Eastern Europe (1478, 1480, 1502, 1552, and 1556) if they did not insist on treating the modern age as synonymous with the predicament of the change of societal “formations” rather than the synchronic beginning of a new European era.

Such dates are symptomatic of course. Nevertheless, one radical revision in the way historical eras are perceived was recently achieved: in order to comprehend modernity, one must start with the “first crisis” of feudalism (1300–1450). Since European historians initiated a detailed reconstruction of the period and began to consider it in light of the establishment of the early modern world economy (lasting from 1450 to 1640), their results lead us to perceive the crystallizing European regions as responses to the challenges posed by the crisis. As Immanuel Wallenstein’s audacious theoretical attempt at a synthesis was published only recently, no one would fault Bibó for blaming Hungary’s historical structural distortion on catastrophic historical events. But it would be incorrect to begin, as he did, with the great peasant revolt of György Dózsa in 1514, since that calamity was an outcome of circumstances rather than a cause. Nor would it be wise to commence with the accession of the Habsburgs, since posing the question this way would set up a trap from which it would then be difficult to escape. A third group of phenomena has recently come to be perceived in a different light since the presentations at the International Congress of Historical Sciences, held in Rome and Stockholm (1955, 1960), and the Marxist account of Perry Anderson (Lineages of the Absolutist State), which promises a fresh approach, laying emphasis on the morphology of the early modern state system: the “Age of Absolutism.” Societies in different historical regions largely transposed the task of responding to the challenges posed by the crises to their states, while the states themselves mostly reflected the regional opportunities. In this way, the “transposition” to the states made them the most active factors in regional formation, and this extends to the present day.

The medieval model, in which the Western type of relationship between society and state was drawn up, bears a resemblance to the unfinished cathedrals and the torsos of “Gothic Titanism” (Le Goff) that stood for centuries without tower, nave, or façade in the squares of Beauvais, Narbonne, Cologne, Milan, and Siena. Plans for their completion only commenced in the nineteenth century, which bears symbolic undertones, in fact. Both phenomena have a common root: the civilis societas and corpus politicum of the state remained equally torpid for centuries, only suggesting the possible contours of a gigantic apse,
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since a crisis in the whole structure had brought the builders themselves to the brink of ruin after 1300.

Europe was able to escape from its “first crisis” of feudalism because the state either temporarily—or permanently—rose in rank to dominate society. It varied from region to region whether the construction site tasked with completing the gigantic torso of the Middle Ages fulfilled its mission in the nineteenth century, reaching what Marx had articulated in 1875: “Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it; and today, too, the forms of state are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the ‘freedom of the state.’”

The first crisis of feudalism occurred at a time when growth was restrained in almost every direction by the limitations of the framework. In the West, this was the eve of the fourteenth century. In consequence, the “growth crisis” turned into conditions everywhere that reflected a slump, which included agrarian and monetary crises, desertion of villages, a drastic fall in the population, and political anarchy. But there was no force as yet available to radically dismantle the social structure. Expansion of the economic space was needed to surmount the crisis, while the nature of that expansion (or its hopelessness) determined whether feudalism, having already been prolonged in one way or another, would turn into capitalism or continue to survive in the same form. The crisis first affected the most developed and densely populated regions. Around 1300, three-quarters of Europe’s population lived in the West—that is, in one-fifth of the European territory. Afterwards, the first waves of famine (1315–1318), exacerbated by relative overpopulation, brutally exposed various crisis phenomena.


On the distortion of the western structures in the late Middle Ages, see Kenneth Bruce McFarlane, “Bastard Feudalism,” Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 20 (1945): 161–81. The fact that it was the towns that first emerged from the crisis was pointed out in Georges Duby, “Les sociétés médiévales: Une approche d’ensemble,” Annales E.S.C. 16 (1971): 10–42.
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The Eastern regions continued for a good while to maintain an ambivalent growth trend and the crisis finally arrived only a century and a half later, when the West was already beginning to recover from its own.

Ultimately, the **punctum saliens** for recovery in the West was the fact that even before 1300, the whole framework’s center of gravity shifted once and for all to the urban economy. This branch of the economy was the first (as the crisis affected all strata) to recover, partly by intensifying its links with East Central Europe as a region where its market crisis could be resolved and where its need of precious metals could be satisfied. In the long run the regions beyond the Elbe would pay for the West’s recovery. At the same time, the rejuvenation of Western cities forestalled the nobility’s efforts to drive the crisis beneath the *corpus politicum* and force the peasantry to carry the whole burden. The armed retaliation with which the nobility responded to the great peasant revolts of the fourteenth century was to no avail, since the impulse of the economy proved to be stronger; in the process of overcoming the crisis a major accomplishment came to pass: by the end of the Middle Ages the West had relaxed the bonds of serfdom. The regulating principles of the peasant-landlord relationship became rent and land tenure. The nobility’s other reflex to wrestle its way out of the crisis had equally failed. It sought to compensate for a diminished income through “chivalrous banditry” (Postan) and the devastating anarchic style of warfare displayed in the Hundred Years’ War and the Wars of the Roses; in other words, to recover its wealth by disrupting the state mechanism.

Eventually the *corpus politicum* emerged from the crisis through a particular reorganization of its forces. By the end of the Middle Ages the monarchies, relying on the cities (and essentially subjecting the Church), were faced with a nobility whose income had been exhausted and whose social standing and resources had deteriorated through civil war; a nobility that expected the state henceforth both to provide it with offices and military positions and to safeguard its privileges. Within this framework the West found the force it needed for expansion on a far greater scale than the one that followed the turn of the millennium. Through geographical discoveries and colonization, this expansion led to the foundation of a “world economy” in early modern times. Of course, another long century passed between the strengthening of new monarchies such as the France of Louis XI (1461–1483) or the England of Henry VII (1483–1509) and the emergence of absolutism with its threefold solution: preserving what was salvageable from the feudal system, preparing the terrain for capitalism, and developing the framework for the nation-state.
Absolutism and the “First Crisis” of Feudalism (1300–1450)

In fact, the response of East Central Europe to the crisis was organically related to the response in the West. Nonetheless, in terms of the nature of its response, the case of Eastern Europe was more comparable, if for no other reason due to its very emergence. This was the other expansive model based on the project of “gathering the Russian lands,” which was gradually taken over by the Grand Duchy of Moscow (in the fourteenth century) to be turned into a central agenda by Ivan III (1462–1505). This program was a response of the “incomplete” Eastern European feudalism to the late medieval crisis. The crisis displayed symptoms analogous to those of the West: population decline, devastation of villages, decline of cities, demographic decrease, and political anarchy, and the situation was further aggravated by the Tatar occupation. The overall outcome was not only three centuries of Russian expansion (which gave rise to the internal colonization of Eastern Europe); in effect, an immense Eastern appendage tagged on to the edifice, becoming the equivalent, as it were, of the North American appendage of the Occidens. While the conquistadores were expanding the Western world economy to the Indies, after the first expeditions to Siberia (1581–1584) the Cossacks advanced as far as Kamchatka, outlining the possibility of another “world economy.” One can speak about a “Russian world economy” in early modern times insofar as other world economies besides the European one existed (for instance, the Chinese). Each possessed its own center, periphery, and external regions. The parallelism exists not in their relative significance but in their internal structure. It can also be perceived in the growth of the Russian economy, notwithstanding its “painfully sluggish” pace of development (V. O. Kluchevsky), during the decisive sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at a time when general decline was deforming the regions between Russia and the West. Apart from the more obvious contrasts, there were two basic differences that prompted Russia’s confrontation with the West. One was the obstinate preservation in the West of the principle of division. Just as it became obvious after the death of Charlemagne that the imperial frameworks of “civilization” could not be maintained, so it became obvious following the death

of Charles V that the attempt to fuse the “world economy” with the *Imperium* was incompatible with a framework that by this time had stretched over the Atlantic to America. In contrast, the Eastern European model, which extended through Asia to the Pacific, was based on a fusion of these three spheres, thus more akin to the oriental structures. Its “economy” was identical with the imperial framework emerging on the basis of the civilizational conception of the Third Rome (Moscow), until it eventually became the periphery of a European world economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The other fundamental difference was that the Western model was based upon the elimination of serfdom, while the Eastern model was based on its maintenance. A decisive element in Russian expansion was the agrarian colonization of large territories that offered a virtually unlimited space for the mobility of the peasantry. Seeking to profit from this expansion, as well as being in need of setting a brutal and definitive limit to peasant mobility, the Russian nobility was forced under the authority of the state with more intense duress than the Western nobility had experienced through its existential crisis. The dates of the first drastic restrictions, and finally the total abolition of peasant migration and other minimal freedoms (1497 and 1649 respectively), were just as visibly milestones in the development of Russian absolutism as were the dates of territorial expansion (1480 and 1679) mentioned earlier.

What lay between these two zones of expansion was exactly East Central Europe. It was forced into a defensive position not only due to its limited potential for territorial enlargement, nor in response to Ottoman military offensives. The main reason was that it was too much a part of the Western “world economy,” but since the Middle Ages it had served as its periphery, and therefore had a weak infrastructure and economic basis. It was exactly the Western urban economy’s solution to the crisis (the development of an export industry and of capital investments) which after momentary stimulation caused the weakness and permanent stagnation of the very factor which determined the fate of the peasantry in the West: the urban economy. Together with this, the growing urbanization of the West led to a demand for agricultural produce, causing the great estates in the East, which were built up through forced labor, to become partners in an East-West division of labor. Consequently, after 1500 the nobility in this region succeeded in doing what the paralyzed nobility of the West had failed to do after 1300: shift the burden of the crisis on to the peasantry. The legislative omens of the “second serfdom” appeared with remarkable synchronicity in Brandenburg (1494), Poland (1496), Bohemia (1497), Hungary (1492 and
1498), and conspicuously Russia (1497), although their conditions and causal factors were diverse. The great masses of Russian peasantry had never been liberated, in the Western sense, from the “first serfdom,” and the Russian economy did not depend on the West.

After 1500, two common denominators began to obliterate the Eastern border of *Europa Occidens* (which had become more pronounced after 1200) while progressively strengthening the Elbe-Leitha boundary (which after 1200 had begun to fade). One of them consisted in the fact that the nobility had good reason to accept the authority of a strong state, since it was state power that would most effectively see to it that the laws binding the peasantry to the soil would be implemented; without this enforcement the latter would escape or rebel by evoking its “ancient freedoms.” The other was the presence of Eurasian territories in both regions. At the height of its power, the Ottoman Empire pressed forward as far as the region of the Sava and the Danube (and the Pontic zone) and was a far stronger opponent than the Golden Horde of the Dnieper-Don-Volga region, which was in decline. Ottoman conquest was a serious problem for Poland as well as for Hungary and Croatia, for it threatened Poland’s eastern flank in the Ukraine. Despite such common conditions, there was an important disparity. The nobility of this region—in contrast to the Russian nobility—possessed a clearly defined (if one-sided) conception about its societal role that was rooted in its institutional system; the nobility knew that it “represented the country” and the “freedom of the country” within the *corpus politicum* of the state. The more the crisis intensified the power of the nobility over the peasantry, which also negatively affected the urban economy, the more one-sided became their beliefs. This context makes it easier to understand why, in the twilight of the Middle Ages, the nobility in this defensive region hesitated, far more than did those of the two expanding regions, about whether to act in accordance with their own fundamental interests or to insist on their “freedom.” Initially it leaned towards the latter, as evidenced by its rejection of the attempts of monarchs in Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland (in 1471, 1490, and 1492 respectively) to consolidate their rule as they had in the West. Afterward, the principal feature of the region was to be its familiarity with every possible variation.

This, in essence, was the situation in Europe around 1500. As to the outcome, the Age of Absolutism, another important event ought to be considered. Not only did the superstructure of the early modern era’s emerging new state system create a measure of “convergence” out of diversity within Europe, but the established state system also attempted to attain equilibrium with its own in-
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herent forces. The state had begun to regulate the economy and exert dominance over “society,” and had as its means the seventeenth century’s “military revolution” (only seven years of that century saw no major international conflict); as a result, the more the power of the economic base diminished in the East, the more the state apparatus reinforced itself. Finally, a balance of arms corrected their relational disequilibrium, which by the end of the seventeenth century the doctrine of “balance of power” elevated to a theoretical level. Indeed, around 1680, the armies of Frederick II and the Romanovs each numbered about 200,000; this was the same figure as, say, the French army of the Grand Siècle, though they represented a different burden to the treasury and, more importantly, for the national revenue. Armies of this size could only be maintained through “top-down” state control of society and the economy; the more Eastern the polity was, the more brutally and forcefully was this dominance exercised. Similarly, the competitive relationship between state and society, which existed throughout Europe, was most strained in the Eastern regions. While this affiliation would become still further strained, Western societies asserted themselves more and more energetically up until the French Revolution (despite every effort of the state to control them). It was in order to resolve this conflict that the peculiar notions of “enlightened absolutism” and of “revolution from above” (which had appeared long before Stein, Gneisenau, Hardenberg, and others articulated it in Prussia after 1806) were launched. Symptomatically, these phenomena would appear once again in a zone extending to the frontiers of the erstwhile Carolingian Empire.

The absolutist state in the West was a “compensation for the disappearance of serfdom,” while in the East it was a “device for the consolidation of serfdom” (Perry Anderson). Despite the mood of consolidation and “convergence” with which the ruling circles of eighteenth-century Europe complemented their more competitive relationships, this would not mask the fact that diverse regional frameworks resulted in three distinctive relationships between society and state. Two extreme models, equally pronounced, were to be found in the regions in expansion, while variants of these reflected the agonized, desperate efforts of East Central Europe within a zone flanked by uncertain and permeable borders. Today, few would consider the difference between Western and Eastern absolutism in Europe to be that the former retained a balance between the

32 On the “competitive” nature of Eastern European absolutisms, see Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State, 112–120.
nobility and the bourgeoisie, while the latter preserved an austere form of feudalism. In fact, both were feudal. The fundamental difference between them was that Western absolutism would defend the nobility and some elements of feudalism against the corrosive effects of capitalism while at the same time it self-interestedly contributed to its erosion; Eastern absolutism contained no such contradiction, since there were few, if any, corrosive forces at work. Aside from all this, their purpose and function were similar. All absolutist states had close functional and reciprocal ties with the regional form of a “world economy”; they were important agents in its development and its main beneficiaries. On this basis the state would seek to subordinate society, which was its immediate goal, while its long-term endeavor was the reorganization or modernization of society: that is, preparing the groundwork for modernity. The means utilized for such maneuvers were also similar in East and West: development of a bureaucracy and an army, centralization of its administration, homogenization of its subjects, economic protectionism, and a new form of legitimation of power. And yet, despite all of these parallels, every structural element in the East and West models present sharp contrasts due to great differences in the medieval infrastructure of the state-society relationship, as well as in their new economic bases.

The sharp differences materialize in the pace and overall timeframe of development. In the West, the feudal constituents of the medieval corpus politicum relinquished their resistance only gradually and unwillingly, and at the price of frequent rebellions against the ruler with his ever-increasing (but not yet absolute) power. The state therefore only succeeded in coming out on top in the seventeenth century. In France, the clearest terminus post quem of absolutism was the last Estates-General (1614–1615). Only afterwards did the true engineers of absolutism such as Sully, Richelieu, and Colbert gain ground on the basis of Bodin’s plans, which had until then remained but a scrap of paper. Moreover, the most developed areas either abandoned the system early on (as in the Netherlands) or endured through a limited absolutism lasting less than half a century.

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(as in England). In the West, the framework outlived the eighteenth century only in areas where the shifting of the center of the world economy to the Atlantic region and the regional internal reorganization of the West had created a “semi-periphery” of economic and social structures (Spain, Portugal, and Southern Italy). Even if this was exceptional, the medieval *corpus politicum*, which had undergone internal changes, could develop—through a dialectical unity of revolutionary conflicts and organic continuity—into the basis of modern parliamentarianism, as is the case with the Long Parliament of the English Revolution. In England, the Stuarts represented something of an obstacle to the organic transformation of the medieval *civilis societas* into a modern civil society, while in other places the part absolutism played was to facilitate that process. In the West at least, absolutism was a decisive but episodic historical affair, forming one of the dynamic “cumulative” transformations that prepared the terrain for further structural change.35

In the East, however, Russian absolutism served as a framework for cumulative changes down through the centuries.36 It established—albeit somewhat crudely—every basic element of this form of government from the reign of Ivan III to the reign of Ivan IV (1462–1584); including such precociously developed forces as the *oprichnina* of Ivan the Terrible—the “state within a state” terror organization that kept tabs on all opposition and eliminated the refractory boyars, confiscating their lands. Prior to 1905, the only episode to shake the foundations of Russian absolutism over the course of four centuries was the “Time of Troubles” in 1605–1613. After 1613, the Romanovs managed to consolidate the framework to such an extent that Count Stroganov would write in his memorandum to Alexander I: “In all our history, the peasantry was the source of all disturbances, while the nobility never stirred: if the government has any force to


fear and any group to watch, it is the serfs and not any other class.” The weak and short-lived Estates Assembly (zemskiy sobor) was introduced “from above” by a decree of Ivan IV for purely tactical reasons: namely, to win over the nobility of the Western Russian and Ukrainian territories under Polish and Lithuanian control. After the assembly had codified serfdom’s bondage to the soil for eternity (1649) and thus fulfilling its role, it faded into oblivion. An equally clear indenture was drawn up by the Prussians only a few years later (in 1653). In both cases, the nobility renounced its role in the state structure and received in return a guaranteed corvée and the denial of the rights of serfs. Consequently, modern Russian history was marked (as Stroganov had asserted) by the Bolotnikov, Razin, and Pugachov form of peasant uprisings that swept periodically, and with brutal force, over the vast territories of Russia. One of the models of absolutism was a historical episode achieving an integration that transformed the West; the other assumed a durable form of existence that integrated the whole of Eastern Europe.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the instruments of absolutism in both East and West was the establishment of a bureaucracy that would ensure its smooth operation, and an army that would multiply its force. But while the basis of the nobility was common to both, East and West followed two different models. In the West, the state divided the nobility: it offered civil and military positions of authority to one faction while neutralizing the other by guaranteeing its privileges and letting it grumble. The West’s “bureaucratization” of the nobility was most typically accomplished through the sale of offices (the French paulette). In this way, the state achieved three goals with a single policy: it increased revenue, blocked the clientele system of the magnates, and, by buying off one division of the old nobility and turning them into professional office-holders, opened up the path for the bourgeoisie (noblesse de robe) to penetrate the state apparatus. Purchase of office bureaucracy became a form of capital investment and a vehicle of social mobility, while the practice of farming out taxes and other fiscal devices enabled the growing bourgeoisie to be incorporated into the state’s cadre of high-ranking officials. Behind the aristocratic courtly milieu of the “feudal” state the system was shaped by capitalist operating principles, as was the army, whose reorganization also turned into a business “enterprise.” Apart from that, the nobility remained a corporate entity outside of the state sphere. In the East, absolutism began after 1478 when Ivan III created a “service nobility” (pomeschiki) which depended exclusively on the power of the tsar and had an interest in both territorial expansion and con-
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fiscation. The next phase occurred when this new nobility came to predomi-
nate over the old nobility who had possession of free estates (*votchina*). Absolu-
tivism was fully consolidated when Peter the Great merged the two by
extending the principle of service to all of the nobility; in this way he created
a single service nobility of fourteen ranks who were incorporated into the bu-
reaucracy and the army. Thus—after minor reforms under Nicholas I in 1831—
the archaic bond of service sustained the “modernized” absolutist structure all
the way up to the Great Revolution. A nobleman was *eo ipso* either a civil ser-
vant or an army officer; social rank and bureaucratic hierarchy became one. The
West, having turned the whole of the nobility into interested parties, select-
ively incorporated it (along with certain bourgeois elements) within the state,
while the East carried out a kind of “etatization” of the entire nobility.

The West subordinated society to the state; the East etatized it. Everywhere
absolutism strove to homogenize its subjects, and there was no difference in
principle between, for instance, the views of Louis XIV (“*mes peuples*”) and that
of the tsars with respect to the indivisible unity of the people. But in practice the
variety of local autonomies and “freedoms” were never eliminated in the West.
At most they were curtailed or subjected to state control. The particularities of
amalgamated entities and provincial features were a great deal more diverse
under any ancien régime than they were under even the loosest variant of the
modern state. Periodically, the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the peasantry
would organize a united revolt in order to demand the reestablishment of their
respective “freedoms,” as was the case in France from the period of the “wars of
religion” to the *Fronde* (1648–1653). Between these medieval “liberation move-
ments” and the French Revolution some 150 years had elapsed, punctuated reg-
ularly by local peasant movements in response to heavy taxes. This gap can only
partly be explained by the intensification of absolutism. The earlier campaigns,
in effect, had become anachronistic. The new bourgeoisie, enriched by mercan-
tilism, had no need for particular “autonomies.” Centralization was not strong
enough to homogenize the subjects thoroughly, but it was effective enough to
start blurring the relativized traditional “freedoms”; their content, however, be-
came more homogeneous with the rise of the new bourgeoisie. István Bibó aptly
observed that the early modern state “administered by rallying rather than an-
nihilating” the colorful world of traditional and social organisms. Of course,
this only took place in zones where these traditional structures existed. The first
deed of Russian absolutism under the aegis of the unification of Russian lands
was that when Ivan III occupied Novgorod (1478), a city that had enjoyed an ex-
ceptual degree of autonomy: he deported the entire governing strata, the boyars, and the merchants, confiscated their property, and placed the city-state under a governor. The city of Moscow was the model—the center of administration and military power and an agglomeration that included boyars, civil servants, soldiers, merchants, artisans, and agrarian workers, each group individually dependent upon the central power—a circumstance typical of all the cities in the Russian lands. Even the privileged rich merchants (gosti) were chiefly commercial agents of the tsar. In the ensuing centuries, all of the cities in the newly colonized territories adopted this model: from Tsaritsyn to Archangelsk, further on to Ufa, and then towards the East. The feeble remnants of the local boyar self-government (guba) were eliminated by the first Romanovs, who annexed all territories to the central apparatus of the state by organizing them into provinces. One of the productive contradictions of Western absolutism was that its subjects sooner or later began to turn their libertates into a unified liberté within the remaining latitude offered by the state. The direction taken by tsarist absolutism allowed no such dissent, and consequently the notion of “society” as a mass of dependent subjects was established.

Whether it wanted it or not, far and wide the absolutist state became the largest economic “entrepreneur” of the period (as Braudel also pointed out). While the form that Western mercantilism generally took was that of the capitalist enterprise established under state protection, the logic of Russian mercantilism dictated the expansion of the traditional commercial and manufacturing monopolies of the tsar. Under Peter the Great and his successors, this assured state dominance in all of the key industries, especially those of war (shipbuilding and Ural iron mining) and foreign trade. Even during the century when the ancien régime had already turned its back on mercantilism, in France, for instance, the growth of industrial capital was around 60 percent, allowing the bourgeoisie to act as a catalyst of the abovementioned combination of freedoms. At the same time, economic growth in Russia always primarily assisted the state itself. Undeniably, in “competitive” terms this was the only really effective means through which tsarist Russia in its final hours had surpassed France to become the world’s fourth largest steel producer and the fifth in overall industrial production.

“Absolutism” itself is an imprecise term in two ways: it says both too much and too little. Neither in principle nor in practice was the power of any of the Western monarchies limitless or independent from all law (legibus solutus): that is, “absolute” in the true sense of the word. Scholars who treated absolutism such
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as Grotius, Bodin, or Hobbes never effaced “society” from the theoretical schema. The concepts that had accumulated by the High Middle Ages (from natural law to social contract and Roman law) were considered and developed further to create modern versions of the medieval principle of divine grace and the late ancient idea of “irrevocable” transfer of powers. But the “absolute” power of the sovereign over legislation, tax collection, and other domains was not “unrestricted” in principle—but it was “uncontrolled” in practice, which is not the same. On the one hand, the “people” did not control the sovereign pars pro toto as, according to the “contract,” the people transferred the natural rights that were theoretically due to them. On the other hand, there was a principle that was still theoretically upheld according to which (as Bodin put it) the sovereign “had no right to infringe upon natural law” or do anything “without just or reasonable cause.” Nothing that could be turned to the advantage of the society was eliminated from the ideological framework: these were merely consigned to a theoretical “subordination” within the social framework (just as what remained of the “body politic” was condemned, in practice, to passivity); the sovereign’s power limitations were transferred to the moral sphere (which in practice was guaranteed by the survival of those remains). As soon as the conditions were ripe, all these theoretical elements could be used to pull the rug out from under the sovereign in one single move and organize them around the belief in popular sovereignty. It is rather symbolic that Montesquieu (who was, for a time, president of the parliament of Bordeaux) should have been at once a pioneer of modern state theory and a representative of the aristocratic opposition to absolutism.

The legitimization of Russian absolutism followed an entirely different formula. At the behest of Ivan III, around 1480, some monks unearthed manuscripts which included elements of the Byzantine, autocratic mysticism of the state; the mission of the “tsar of all Russians” was to be God’s vicar on earth and connected with this aim was the vision that Moscow was a “third Rome,” whose subjects were to render it “service.” Since there was no institutional or notional tradition of social autonomy apart from the great boyars’ de facto (though less articulated) involvement in the exercise of power, the only remaining sources of opposition were the constantly reemerging movements tending towards profound mysticism within the Orthodox Church. But from the outset they appeared to be in a hopeless situation, as the will of the Church was subservient to that of the state according to the Byzantine model. The Gordian knot was cut by Peter the Great, who created a Holy Synod that ultimately brought the whole of the Eastern Church under complete subjection by the state (1721). Not even in theory did
there remain room left to maneuver for any level of society under the state ideology which had been wrought out of the indissoluble triad of orthodoxy, autocracy, and the Russian people. This ideology oriented the triad towards a single focus: the personal power of the Tsar. From this convergence point radiated the true “faith” together with the sphere of “just” authority towards the “true” unity of the nation. The legitimization of Western absolutism consisted of a declaration of the “legitimacy” of power, while Russian autocracy was content to declare the mystical “truth” of power. Both of them forced their opponents to adhere to the same conceptual framework. While in the West, the rivals of absolutism referred continuously to their liberties and progressively voiced the slogan in the singular instead of the plural (so much so that in the decade preceding the French Revolution the terms “freedom” and “representation” seemingly merged in the parlance of conservatives and radicals), in the East, the opposition, in the vein of the state authority, invoked the one true and total “justice,” never managing to free itself from that magic circle even in the modern era.

The persistence of the divergence between the Eastern and Western models is one of the particularities of development. In a sense, the divergence was accentuated within the framework of “convergence” that was introduced in the eighteenth century. The turning point was marked by the outcome of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1715) and by the reforms of Peter the Great (1689–1725). The war—modernity’s “First World War”—offered a new dimension to the “competitive” relations that had imbued the early modern state within the West, since England and the Netherlands, whose revolutions had eliminated the ideology of absolutism, emerged as the real winners, while the strongest model of absolutism, France, emerged as the real loser. The result was an ossification of French absolutism which shifted the competitive relationship within the model absolutist state to the tension between the state’s retrograde structure and the emancipative forces of society. Enlightenment in the West was the concern of society, not of the state. The Western parable of absolutism was then completed by the French Revolution, after which the state, which had gained ascendancy over a premature and crisis-ridden medieval societas civilis as a result of the expanding world economy, helped to free society-as-“subject” from the crisis; but eventually an elevated société civile gained ascendancy over the crisis-ridden state.

The Eastern parable of absolutism looked quite different. To hold its ground as it competed with the West, the Russian Empire was forced to “open a window” to Europe, renounce its own separate “world economy,” and join the European one. It also made enlightenment the concern of the state by “civilizing” its
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subjects in such a way that they remained subjects (and not *civiles*). That course of modernization was initiated quite deftly by Peter the Great. His reforms (and their continuation, particularly under the reign of Catherine the Great) should be assessed not from the customary standpoint as Russia’s Europeanization but as having accomplished “Eastern-Europeanization” in the sense that his project was vigorously extended in every possible direction. It was Peter the Great who said: “Now we need Europe for a few decades, so that we can effortlessly turn our back on it later.” Therefore, the possibility for movement, while limited and controlled exclusively “from above,” would open up within a framework (and a “nationalized” European region) characterized by its social and political inertia. The result was that the Russian imperial framework would give birth to the Russian nation, just as nations in the West were forged out of absolutism. But convergence concealed a difference in this domain as well. Under the Western model, society freed itself from absolutism as a theoretical trustee of sovereignty, in a way that would allow it to control the state in a concrete manner. Under the Eastern model, the Russian nation remained, both in principle and in practice, a social framework subordinated to the “freedom of the state” (Marx).

East Central Europe

As we have seen, the area that lies between these two regional models crossed the threshold of modernity amidst newly developing “Eastern European” conditions, but with defective “Western-like” structures. Precisely as a result of this duality, the early modern era in this middle region produced a number of variant models instead of one that was cohesive, as if all of the possible combinations and permutations had been under experimentation.

In the northern half of the region, two extreme variants were attempted. This was the area destined by its location to be the first, by way of maritime Baltic trade, to assimilate itself to the industrial and agrarian division of labor in the expanding global economy of Europe, and to do so to the greatest extent in terms of volume. Thus it was the first area to adopt the “second serfdom,” and the one to do so most consistently. During the economic boom (1550–1620), grain was chiefly (and to an increasing degree) shipped to Bruges and Amsterdam from the ports of Stettin (Szczecin), Danzig (Gdańsk), and Königsberg (today Kaliningrad). The ships were sent by the German *Gutswirtschaft* over the Elbe and by the Polish great estates tended by forced labor. The beneficiaries were the nobility of one very large and one very small state. The Polish-Lithua-
nian Union was the largest state formation in sixteenth-century Europe, extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea and from Silesia to the regions of Kiev and Smolensk. The Electorate of Brandenburg was, in early modern times, one of the smallest principalities in the region and one of the least urbanized territories of the Holy Roman Empire, with a feudal structure predominantly determined by the Herrenstand and Ritterstand. It attained some political significance only after the Hohenzollern dynasty had acquired the other pole of their future power, the heritage of the Teutonic knights: East Prussia (1618).

It was precisely because of Baltic prosperity and the surplus baggage of Eastern Europe that the selective “political society” of the Polish nobility set out on an extreme path: by stretching ad absurdum its unilaterally “Western” circumstances inherited from the Middle Ages, it established a kind of noble res publica which was entirely unprecedented in Europe. Relying on the initial strength of the Rzeczpospolita Polska, which organized the Polish-Lithuanian Union into one entity defined by constitutional law (1569), radically rejecting the dynastic principle and subordinating the elected ruler to the Estate Assembly (the Sejm) from which the towns were excluded (1573), the Polish nobility tried to behave as if it were living in an expansive region. This was in fact the case, since by incorporating large areas of White Russia and the Ukrainian territories beyond Volhynia and Podolia, this state was in part responsible for initiating Eastern Europe’s “internal colonization” as far as the Dnieper area. Subsequently, it remained a dominant political agent in the region until the last third of the seventeenth century. In the cultural sphere, these circumstances provided the foundation for the innovation of Copernicus and the Polish renaissance, known as the “Polish Golden Age,” with Cracow as its center. As if it meant to illustrate the contradiction between the models of the West and East, this noble res publica developed an unusual “anti-mercantilist” policy that, in principle, excluded Polish merchants from marketing the grain of Polish landlords, and presented the business to foreign (mainly Dutch) merchants (1565). The attempt to have a “Western type” of noble society running the state on an “anti-absolutist” ideological basis ran into hopeless obstacles in every direction. By the end of the seventeenth century the general economic depression had ruined the manorial

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economy, the urban basis having already been destroyed. The extreme noble “freedom” of feudal parliamentarianism (liberum veto), which bound the ruler hand and foot and paralyzed the state, also excluded the noble state from the “military revolution” of the period. Lacking a well-trained infantry and artillery—or a standing army of any kind—the noble cavalry, hopelessly outdated, suffered an easy defeat at the hands of the Swedish, Prussian, and Russian armies in quick succession. After this, the revenge of the Orthodox peasantry led by the Cossacks resulted in the annexation of Ukraine to Russia under the banner of Khmelnytsky (1648 and 1654). What all of this led up to is well-known: after a series of partitions (in 1772, 1793, and 1795) Poland disappeared from the European map. Its place was taken by three neighboring absolutist powers: Prussia and Russia, which in the meantime had become political actors of European significance, and the Habsburg state. It was emblematic that over the grave of Poland stood the three greatest figures of “enlightened absolutism”: Frederick II, Catherine the Great, and Joseph II. This absurd, overstretched attempt on the part of the nobility in East Central Europe to preserve a medieval “Western” structure when “Eastern European” conditions were more and more predominant resulted in utter failure.

The smallest state formation in the region, the Electorate of Brandenburg, followed an entirely different path. The Hohenzollerns and the Junkers interpreted (although not without initial hostility) the “Eastern European” turn of history in a rather different way. Abandoning the distorted “Western” circumstances they had inherited, they adopted a model of absolutism whose military and bureaucratic structure approximated the Eastern model more closely than that of any other European absolutist state, although they implemented this model with the precision characteristic of the West. Brandenburg-Prussia—due to its methodical expansion northward and eastward (into Pomerania) and westward (into Magdeburg, Altmark, and so on), its systematic obliteration of the estates mechanism, its unswerving attempts to fuse the nobility with the bureaucratic machinery and the army (making the Junkers an exemplary Western variant of the Eastern “service noblemen”), and its effective adaptation of mercantilism—played a significant role in Europe as early as the reign of Frederick I, the Great Elector (1640–1680). His successor and namesake turned the country into a military power and kingdom (1713–1730), after which Frederick the

Great (1740–1786) acquired Silesia and raised the Prussian kingdom to the level of a model absolutist state and a major political force that also proved flexible enough to transpose (under Napoleon’s influence in 1806) the ideas of “revolution from above” into practice. This ended up being a condition for this variant of the East Central European model—whose diametrical opposite, Poland, had disappeared from the map, with its Western part swallowed up by Prussia—to seize the only realistic opportunity to successfully unify Germany, which had existed thus far only as a conglomeration of several hundred territories straddling three great historical regions of Europe. Of course, the success of the Prussian kingdom was ambivalent in comparison with the successes of the two regions on either side of it. Bibó appropriately remarked that somewhere, at some time, and by some means, the region’s countries always had to pay a high price for the distortions of their history. Eventually fascism and its consequences were the currency in which Germany was obliged to pay for having won its unity “from above,” under the stamp of an “Eastern” initiative and by way of internal hindrances and deviations of democracy; that conclusion forms the leitmotif of Bibó’s unpublished study, “The Causes and History of German Hysteria” (A német hisztéria okai és története, 1942–44).

Between these two extremes offered by the region, the domus Austriae generated a hybrid variation. Austrian self-irony might explain the fact the House of Habsburg managed to compress the whole southern part of East Central Europe into a single imperial conglomerate for nearly four centuries with the motto *Tu felix Austria nube*, evoking the successful strategy of dynastic marriages. The consequences might be described with Czech self-irony in the spirit of Švejk. Hungarians, on the other hand, are perhaps less prone to engage in self-ridicule; in order to do so they would have had to acknowledge the paradoxical situation that, on the one hand, Hungarian society genuinely suffered under this historical arrangement, and on the other, its elite contributed, at decisive moments of history, to the maintenance of this framework. As to its origins, neither tactical marital arrangements (1515), national character, a fatal historical catastrophe (1526), nor the alleged grave historical miscalculations or feudal “treachery” can account for it. In the final analysis, what aided the Eastern branch of the House of Habsburg in acquiring the Bohemian and Hungarian kingdoms was the fact that without the transient expansional illusions and prospects of the Poles, the “political society” of this zone was compelled to accept that it lived in a region whose position was “defensive.” Looming in the shadows of the Czech nobility was the region’s most characteristically “West-
ern-style” response to the first crisis of feudalism, Hussitism, whose traditions threatened the entire nobility with upheaval after the tides had turned in the “Eastern European” relationship between peasant and landlord. In contrast, the Hungarian nobility was not only compelled to endure the visceral memory of the nightmarish turn of events of 1514, but also forced to hold itself up after a knife had been thrust into its back by Eastern despotism. But the greater part of the Hungarian nobility was so “Western” that it was utterly incapable of conceiving of a compromise with the Ottoman powers, abandoning its collective political rights and feudal freedoms. Nor was it willing to give up its cultural tradition, broadly conceived, that is to say, its “Christian freedom” (Christiana libertas), as this complex configuration had been referred to since the mid-fifteenth century. Certainly, there was no shortage of political maneuvering. The small Principality of Transylvania, for instance, managed to adapt to a never-ending series of tactical schemes at the mercy—and through the consent—of the Sultan, who also needed just such a remote and diminutive buffer state. This type of mercy was not extended to the rest of Hungary, where in the meantime the House of Habsburg had made its case with the compelling argument that its own experience from the period previous to 1526 demonstrated that the sum of the annual income of the Crown derived from the totality of an independent Hungarian kingdom was only sufficient to cover the annual expenditure for the border fortress defense system in the south “in times of peace”; it was certainly not adequate to fend off the Sultan’s dreaded army of 100,000, which was unparalleled in Europe at the time. Around 1526 and thereafter, the Habsburgs were the only power in a position to alter that imbalance.

The view of history that consoles itself with daydreams is inclined to forget three factors. One is that it was not the Battle of Mohács that ruled out the possibility of a “national monarchy.” By then the Hungarian Kingdom had been obliged on and off for a century and a half to seek wider dynastic frameworks through personal unions, Polish, German, Habsburg, or Bohemian. Even under the great monarchic endeavor of King Matthias, attempts had been made to widen the framework by conquests in the direction of Moravia, Silesia, and Austria. The fact that Buda lay outside the centers of dynastic integration belongs among the lost historical opportunities. But after 1490, Hungarian “polit-

39 On the developments before the Battle of Mohács, an objective and balanced analysis is to be found in Domokos Kosáry, Magyar külpolitika Mohács előtt [Hungarian foreign policy before Mohács] (Budapest, 1978).
ical society” played no small part in the loss of such an opportunity. The second factor likely to be forgotten is that once no other realistic alternative than Vienna remained, the Vienna-Pressburg relation (Buda being out of the question physically too) was for a long time not only legitimate by traditional “Western” standards but also operated more or less in concordance with those standards—including its disorders and the uprisings that tried to correct them and in which there was nothing unique as they belong to the general European tableau of tensions and clashes between absolutism and the estates. The third factor is that the Habsburg dynasty, although it was far from wishing to lay down its life or spill its blood in the cause of the liberation of Hungary, played a significant part in preventing the Ottoman wedge from penetrating more deeply into the country, and even that ambiguous role cost Vienna more than all the revenue it was able to squeeze out from the rest of Hungary. Of course, none of these observations contradict the fact that the series of “bad compromises”—so central to Bibó’s image of history—really did begin in 1526. The real tragedy is that one could scarcely conceive of any “better” compromise or any fuller absolution from the constraints of compromise. The Hungarian (like the Bohemian) nobility lacked the strength of the Polish, but it had far greater strength than the Brandenburg-Prussian. That is why it ended up with a third model: a bad compromise, but one unquestionably Western in character, being confined within the Habsburg dynastic framework.

Over the course of nearly four centuries the unifying framework of the Habsburg dynasty was marked by a unique in-between, indeed ambiguous, position between the Eastern and Western prototypes of the European state system. Although the demarcation lines of the “second serfdom” extended over this new edifice, the agrarian structures of the Austrian hereditary provinces remained fundamentally Western; this led, in two isolated areas (Tyrol and Vorarlberg) to a political consequence that was exceptional even in the West: representatives of the peasantry were incorporated into the provincial body politic. At the same time, the state model was “Eastern” insofar as its “imperial” nature resembled the Russian model. Nevertheless, it was also decidedly different in that centralization of the imperial realm ultimately never reached beyond the stage of a design. Dynastic unity and centralization of military and financial administration was continuously contravened by the traditional autonomy of individual “countries” and provinces alike—more often than not with a force that was unparalleled even in the West. The tempo of development of Habsburg absolutism displayed an obvious similarity to that of the West. The conflicts that erupted
between the ever-strengthening state and the defensive forces of the estates took the form of “religious wars” and resulted in the periodic appearance of “national” slogans. These flare-ups were only subdued after the state’s definite turn towards absolutism in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the first decisive turn took place—in Bohemia at least (1620)—with a truly “Eastern” kind of brutality and continued in Hungary in 1670 with an attempt at a similar showdown. This met with much stiffer resistance than expected and led, within half a century, to a compromise that would naturally have been quite unimaginable in the East, yet had no parallel in the West either. Neither was there any precedent for the course taken by the Austrian hereditary provinces to safeguard the fragmented remains of their regional autonomy, with their political structure based on Estate assemblies and the medieval liberties of the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the peasantry, while nevertheless developing, in tandem, the basis for absolutism in the spirit of an unconditional faith in the dynasty. In the late eighteenth century, at its *punctum saliens*, this semi-Western configuration employed a characteristically Eastern strategy by taking the matter of enlightenment into its own hands instead of the societies of its “peoples,” even though at that point it was considered the last European bastion of papal clericalism. Having completed the program of enlightenment with partial success and partial failure, following the great historical watershed of 1789, similar to Russia, it had become a “prison of nations.” This fundamental fact persisted even after the fiasco of an unsuccessful revolution and the failed revival of a unified empire; again, in a semi-Western way, towards the end of the nineteenth century it turned into a framework for rapid modernization and capitalism. Its inevitable demise was due to the fact that in an age of nationalism it was too late to turn a “prison of nations” into a framework for the free coexistence of its constitutive peoples. The dissolution of this structure was followed by mounting chaos rather than diminished tensions, due exactly to the hybrid nature of this state which had persisted for nearly four centuries. By its very nature, absolutism was quite unsuited for forging modern nations (nation-states or linguistically-defined nations) out of its “peoples,” although in both East and West this was one of the fundamental (if unevenly executed) historical functions of absolutism.

The entire history of the Habsburg Monarchy can be seen as an attempt to keep something which was intrinsically unstable in equilibrium, suspended between the two extreme variants of East Central Europe: the Polish and the Prussian. If we can speak of an enduring core principle in this framework that is ambiguous in every respect—apart from the total supremacy of the dynasty—it
was the House of Habsburg’s introduction within its own imperial frameworks
of a small-scale “East Central European” version of the division of labor that had
characterized the emerging modern world economy. The decisive foreboding of
the things to come had appeared with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), after
which the Habsburgs were driven out of Western Europe politically. This was
reinforced by the repeated failures to establish monopolistic commercial indus-
tries modeled after the West over the course of the next half century, signaling
that the prospects of the Habsburgs to entrench their state within the Western
segment of the world economy were faint. Consequently, the Habsburgs se-
cured a division of labor between Western (industry) and Eastern (agriculture)
economic structures within their own East Central European political frame-
work. The political conditions for this in the hybrid Western sphere were given
because the Habsburg Hausmacht managed to gain the upper hand over its dis-
membered hereditary provinces with relative ease, and in part by virtue of the
fact that this Western dynasty never hesitated to wipe out the entire “political
society” of a country through absolutist means—even transgressing those in the
East. After the Battle of White Mountain (1620), this happened to Bohemia, as
the court deftly selected from among its “countries” the one which, already dur-
during the sixteenth century, had produced twice as much in income and economic
potential as the original Erbländer. By annihilating the cream of the Bohemian
nobility, confiscating more than half of their lands, “excising” the old Bohemian
ruling class, and supplanting it with a cosmopolitan aristocracy who would be
loyal to the dynasty, the Habsburgs secured three important gains.

Firstly, they established a ruthless absolutist government in Bohemia, an-
choring it as a hereditary province. Secondly, the imperial administrative system
and high command acquired high-ranking senior officials which, again, resem-
bled neither the Western variety (with its practice of purchasing offices) nor the
Eastern (consisting of a subservient nobility), but was a third type, which how-
ever lacked the nation-forming ethnic unity common to both. Thirdly, the
Habsburgs secured a territory which they could develop into a complex regional
model featuring a new aristocracy with a subordinate Eastern-type “second serf-
dom” and Western-type state-generated mercantilistic industrialism. Hence, it
was principally in Bohemia, which existed for centuries under a foreign dynasty
(throughout which period the aristocracy remained foreign and the domestic
nobility held no sway) that East Central Europe’s most bourgeois nation would
develop as a product of Habsburg absolutism’s only—accidental and inadver-
tent—nation-building venture. It did not even manage to unite the Öster-
reichische Erbländer into a real “Austrian nation.” Then, more obtrusively and with plenty of clamor, there was another stalwart populace with a very feeble middle class: the Hungarian nation, which existed not so much through the good offices of the Habsburgs as in spite of them. According to the “Habsburg division of labor,” Hungary was cast as an Eastern actor, owing to both its geographical position and its estates system, which was more entrenched than that of Bohemia. The questionable rewards granted to its “political society” proved to be a punishment for the nation itself, whereas in Bohemia the punishment that followed the collapse of its estates turned out to be a reward.

The picture of the “cruel Habsburgs” that has been impressed so deeply into the Hungarian view of history has eclipsed in practice the purpose of that cruelty, by which all conflicts were resolved: the compromise between absolutism and the estates. Once again there was certainly no equivalent European pattern or example of it. Unfortunately, neither the heroic fights and the bloody revenges, nor the conflicts of the Hungarian “long seventeenth century” that began with the Fifteen Years’ War and ended at the Peace of Szatmár (1593–1611), left lasting marks on modern structures, apart from creating a tendency to forget how between 1608 and 1670 there was a good half century of compromises, itself an unprecedented occurrence. The marks instead recall the “division of labor” which in Hungary helped stabilize an early modern “Eastern” type of transformation (that consequently distorted the medieval Western forms further) by leading up to a medieval-style “Western” compromise (which was already anachronistic in terms of early modern Western coordinates).

If one reviews history through Bibó’s eyes, from the point of view of the historical preconditions of the “organization of democratic society,” we have to disregard emotions that in their right place might well be entirely justified, forget the daydreams that in their own place are also entirely pointless, and foreswear the self-contained moralizing that glosses our understanding of history. We need to do this, even though such omissions will always scandalize the subscribers to an emotional, daydreaming, moralizing conception of history. The issue is not whether or not the struggles against the Habsburgs were full of colorful episodes or whether or not those struggles were justified at all. An intelligent view of history makes clear that these issues can easily be separated from the factors that had a role in defining structures in the historical longue durée. Dreams after the event are too frail to connect these two kinds of approach. The dreams begin by saying that the Habsburgs might have been forestalled, for instance by accepting an alleged “proposal” of Suleiman. They continue by stating that there
was an idea of some kind of “national absolutism” at work in the depths of the anti-Habsburg movements. They end by concluding that these movements could have achieved some freedom for the serfs. But since the existence of any “proposal” of any kind around 1526 cannot be proved and the chances for a “better” compromise were altogether unrealistic, the ideas in the mid-seventeenth century and after undoubtedly centered on a monarchical alternative subordinated to a noble republic of the Polish type. Nothing was further from the nobility’s mind than setting the peasantry free from the “second serfdom,” since that was the vital condition for their existence irrespective of whether they lived under a republican (Poland), absolutist (Prussia and Bohemia), or estate dualist framework (Hungary), even if their best representatives, the minority like Ferenc Rákóczi II, really did consider something of the kind and also implemented it with smaller groups since István Bocskay (such as the privileges of the haiduks). Rákóczi sometimes complained bitterly when he came into conflict with outright feudal self-interest. As soon as the battles were over, however, the tender shoots of a wider, more comprehensive concept of social freedom, which had sprung up here and there, were swiftly cut back, at least until the flowering of the Reform Age (1825–1848) and the subsequent “spring of the peoples.” The movements of the Hungarian “long seventeenth century” undoubtedly meant something different and more than the Fronde-type uprisings of the same period, which sometimes had a similarly broad social base, since the alien nature of absolutism could temporarily forge a premature “national” front. That said, the Hungarian movements cannot be compared in their structure, or in their function of forming a modern “national society,” to the Dutch Revolt and War of Independence that shook off the yoke of Spanish absolutism.

After 1526, Hungarian history did not simply come to an “impasse,” as Bibó suggested; it became trapped in a blind alley whose recesses in modern times were in fact mapped out in detail by Bibó with merciless perspicacity. In essence, this deadlock meant that Hungarian history, with its “Western-like” predisposition (albeit weak, deficient, and jaundiced), was pushed by the “Eastern European” historical crisis into an “East Central European” framework that, in principle, prevented the state from effectively overcoming this crisis by following either the purely Western or the Eastern model. The region’s severely defensive position excluded the possibility of a Western type of “national monarchy,” while the existence of the Western-type corpus politicum essentially prevented Russian-style unilateral subordination to any kind of imperial absolutism. The one-sided political society of the nobility, which stubbornly preserved the estate
pole, was occasionally able, with fits and starts, to rally the masses from “be-
neath” the *corpus politicum* behind the banner of “national freedom.” But it was
unable to modernize itself from within. However, it cannot be blamed for this
failure, since, apart from the Netherlands and England, the medieval *civilis soci-
etas* was unable to independently carry out this kind of self-modernization any-
where in Europe. Thus the anachronism remained: while the West set out to-
wards national absolutism and the East towards imperial autocracy, Hungary’s
noble society did not (and could not) imagine any other solution—even in the
face of changing conditions within the imperial framework—than that of stick-
ing with the medieval dualism of royal power and the estates, which finally pro-
duced lasting if normally partial success in the eighteenth century. Political cul-
ture itself became stuck in hopeless anachronism, too. While in the West
popular sovereignty started to emerge from the social contract at the expense of
the power of the sovereign (while nothing valuable developed out of the totality
of autocracy in the East), in Hungary the petrifaction of the idea of the Holy
Crown, inherited from the Middle Ages and summed up by István Werbóczy,
remained the focal point of political thinking and state theory. Quite specifi-
cally, this political society, being influenced by the Enlightenment and the
French Revolution, continued, even at the Diet of 1790–91 (as Ferenc Eckhart
put it so expressively), to hold “Montesquieu and Rousseau in one hand and the
*Tripartitum* in the other”\(^{40}\)—the latter expressing the mystery of the Holy
Crown, whose essence was that only the nobility could be the “members” of the
realm’s mystic “body.” The situation was not exactly as Bibó said when he coun-
terposed the essentially “mendacious construction” of the 1867 *Ausgleich* with
the earlier feudal period whose structure and burdens “could be called, and
moreover called themselves what they were.” First of all, the structure itself was
entangled in twofold lies. The dynasty kept saying that it “was doing good” or
intended to do good to its “peoples” in Hungary, but it was prevented from
doing so by the rebellions, which of course was a pure fabrication, because of the
division of labor mentioned above. On the other hand, the nobility kept com-
plaining about the endless suffering of the “Hungarian nation” in its recrimina-
tions, which as time passed became a twofold lie, because when talking of the
nation the nobility only meant itself (which by European standards had begun
to become an unadulterated lie by then), and because it did not suffer very much

\(^{40}\) The passage is quoted from Ferenc Eckhart, *A szentkorona-észme története* [The history of the idea of the Holy Crown] (Budapest, 1941), 254.
in any case. In spite of all that, as early as the year of the destruction of the Bastille, a noble “national” uprising was brewing against Joseph II, who wanted to free the serfs “from above.” At that time only the narrow intellectual group of the Josephinists were compelled to face the tragic contradiction of modern Hungarian history: the traversing axes of national independence and social progress. The reason why the nobility had, for quite some time, hardly suffered at all was that its compromise with the Habsburgs had left it a practically untrammeled master of its own serfs, and at the same time it had retained the sectors of the state that were its due by the feudal rules of the game. Besides the local, county administration (of which it had remained in possession after 1526 in a normative way) it had been granted an organ of central government with a restricted sphere of influence: the Governing Council.

The Hungarian variant, by contrast with the Polish one, was only capable of a partial success or seeming success since its system of estates was weaker; but since it was stronger than either the Prussian or the Bohemian variant, Hungary excluded itself far more than Prussia or Bohemia from the partial successes of enlightened absolutism, particularly from the benefits of the revolution “from above.” All else from which it excluded itself (a capital city, a modern state apparatus, economic organization, political culture, and so on) has been listed by István Bibó in his work on “The Miseries of East European Small States,” where he remarked that Hungary “had to face the fact that no one had established a modern state and national organization for them, a process that had taken place elsewhere in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”41 Nor had anyone accomplished the forming of a nation. Of course, the feudal Hungarian body politic had lacked the strength to forge a nationalité d’État out of the historical framework of the state as it did not intend to do so and was devoid of the required means. Importantly, even those monarchies which eventually turned out to be “national monarchies” had no such intention, but they possessed the means to achieve this. At the same time, the Hungarian framework had enough strength to maintain the fiction of an estate-based nationalité d’État, while being too much rooted in the estates system to take notice of the birth of linguistic nations behind the fiction and to draw reasonable conclusions from that in good time. The most visible and tragic way in which the partial success and the poor compromise rebounded in the long run was through the national question: in comparison, it was far better to disappear from the map for a century and a half, as

41 “The Miseries of East European Small States,” in Bibó, The Art of Peacemaking, 156.
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Poland did, or to be degraded into a hereditary province for three centuries, as Bohemia was. Few have seen so clearly as István Bibó how dominant a role was played by the fiction of historical Hungary in the false turns made during Hungary’s modern history. Hungarian history had to pay in manifold ways for being forced into the hybrid East Central European model, but the heaviest price was doubtless the necessity to abandon not only the fiction of state-nation, which was anyhow impossible to realize, but also the realities of the linguistic nation.

Apart from notorious historical distortions in the structure of its society and economy, Hungary also paid for its most awkward predicament with the engenderment of a distinctive latent malaise in its social-cognitive framework, which was diagnosed accurately by Bibó. Nevertheless, some of these maladies proved so grave precisely because they did not (as Bibó believed) stem from a relapse that had occurred after the healing processes of the Reform Age and the 1848–49 Revolution, but stemmed from more ancient organic disorders. Was it not a symptom of this malady that the ruling strata of a society—within which every uprising was ultimately aimed at political compromise—should for centuries delude itself into believing that it was forever rebelling and resisting? The delusion was so strong that it still exerts a considerable influence on Hungarians today. Was the juxtaposition of an exaggerated inherited “spirit of domination” (also central to Bibó’s analysis) and the “humility of the serf” not also symptomatic? Another indication of the malady was the particularly unbalanced and depressive contrast of the state of “defiance” and the passivity of nil admirari pointed out by the poet Mihály Babits: the resigned submission that takes for granted that all major decisions are made somewhere “higher up.”

42 The analysis is in Mihály Babits, A magyar jellemről [On the Hungarian character] in Mi a magyar? [What is the Hungarian?], ed. Gyula Székfű (Budapest, 1939), 52.

Yet, the picture is not so hopelessly dark, even though the present sketch intends to do no more than flash some light on the frameworks that were formed during the period of prolonged feudalism, and on the synchronous and asynchronous elements within those frameworks. Moreover, the “Western-like” cor-
rection did not merely occur in cultural history, the instances of which we usually bear in mind. From the point of view of the Hungarian literature, art, and education of the period, the Leitha had never become a border; their orientation was uninfluenced by the Habsburg framework and formed an organic part of *Europa Occidens* by stretching beyond that framework (“in a simpler texture, with a provincial character,” as Bibó put it). But to prove that “high culture” in itself is far from equal to correction, it is enough to recall how nineteenth-century Russian literature, which was maybe the greatest of the age, did not correct Russia’s nineteenth-century structure in the least, while Hungary’s “Eastern European” turn, although distorting the structures, could not eliminate the organizing principles of law and freedom. In that context the issue was not the nobility’s interpretation of those notions or the inflation of them, which was about to rebound since it had by then become anachronistic. It was unable in any case to rebound strongly enough to destroy the structures of the “small circles of freedom” inherited from the Middle Ages entirely. In that respect Habsburg absolutism was no more restrictive than the absolutism of any Western state. Moreover, in the slightly modernized prolongation of medieval dualism of royal power and the estates there was a certain internal logic; for instance, some elements of urban freedom, while being controlled by the state and under the thumb of the county, still went unquestioned. More importantly still (since it concerned more than nine-tenths of the country’s population), not even the peasantry’s circumstances were in full synchronism with Werbőczy’s *Tripartitum*, with the deprivation of civil rights that had followed from the status of *perpetua rusticitas*. That less spectacular, hidden, but stoutly stubborn resistance with which the remains of the peasantry’s “rights and freedoms” stood out at grassroots level in the village communities against the pressure of the “second serfdom” was far more important than the resistance of the nobility wearing its mantle of panther skin. In some ways, the two were also connected in the anti-Habsburg movements which on a lower level preserved the concept of freedoms in such islands as the market towns, the haiduks, and the settler communities. Recent research has shed more and more light on the number of ways in which the peasantry’s mobility and personal and communal rights (“customs”) loosened the grip of the “second serfdom” in Hungary.43 It seems they did so in many

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more places than in the German territories beyond the Elbe or in the Polish or Bohemian lands. Another interesting finding is the chronological fact that the grip became tighter in the eighteenth century, when the consolidated compromise of the ruler and the estates took place.

Of course, while their form had been distorted, the persistence of Western-type frameworks help us to understand a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, the strong estates system of Hungary could prevent the state from implementing reforms “from above” around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to a far greater extent than was the case in Austria, Bohemia, or Prussia. On the other, within scarcely a quarter of a century, the finest of the nobility were capable of a renewal that made them take the matter of reform and then revolution “from below” in hand, inaugurating what was perhaps the most European period in Hungarian history—the “greatest attempt to return to the main track of Western development” (Bibó). Since this was the point from which Bibó was to follow in detail and in such an evocative manner the hopes and impasses of historical development—Hungary’s contorted course within the “East Central European” model, as it were—it seems an appropriate point at which to end this study.

Epilogue

Does anything follow from history? A lot follows from it, but in a form outlined by Bibó like this: “I do not believe in hundred percent necessities in history. I do believe there are within the great outlines a greater or lesser number of opportunities that can either be bungled or directed toward fortunate paths.”

Anyway, these outcomes are rarely unanimous and are far from simply linear. It is enough to think of the reform concept of Istvan Bibó and Ferenc Erdei concerning administration, focusing on the model center of their proposed merger of city and county: the market town of the Great Plain. This was considered an Archimedean point in their plan for a democratization of the state administration from below.44 Was the market town of the Great Plain a “Western” type of formation? From the point of view of its origin, with its communal freedoms and self-government, it was undoubtedly an “East Central European” variant of it;

44 Bibó’s ideas on administrative reform remained mostly in manuscript, e.g., István Bibó, Társadalmi reform és közigazgatás [Social reform and administration] is a lengthy work that examines the historical antecedents, too. A short summary is contained in István Bibó, “A magyar közigazgatásról” [On the Hungarian public administration], Vármi szemle 33 (1947): 285–94.
yet without the special breadth and tolerance of the Sultan’s financial policies it could not have tided itself over the critical early modern period or succeeded in preserving itself. If these peasant towns had not been khass estates (estates of the Sultan’s treasury) but had remained within the early modern, “East Central European” scope of the oppidum, the landlords’ reaction would certainly have been to keep a tight rein on them, as was done in Habsburg Hungary, where there was no analogy to them at all. These potential patterns of modern democratic administration were confined within the borders of Turkish-ruled Hungary, and through them the Ottoman Empire paid some kind of compensation for the economic, cultural, and ethnical destruction it perpetrated. Such paradoxical outcomes occur sometimes. One may also think of the Balkans, where the Ottoman conquest stalled the possibility of autochthonous development for centuries and distorted the structures, but made sure that when Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia were finally liberated in the nineteenth century, their landowner class had long ago been exterminated. Since no hereditary aristocracy could form under the Ottoman system of land tenure, suddenly societies of small peasants emerged out of the Ottoman sea at a time when East Central Europe was still suffering under the latifundia. And if one bears in mind that in all Southeastern Europe only the two more loosely dependent Romanian principalities preserved the strata of boyars and phanariots, experiencing a local variant of the “second serfdom,” then the specific and paradoxical interdependence of history and democratic opportunities can hardly be denied.

The “East Central European” character of Hungarian history is a specific formula, since in a hybrid way it has a dual aspect: on the one hand, its early modern “Eastern European” turn increased the distortions and unbalance of the economic and social structure (and thus the petrification of social and political relations) by comparison with the Western formula; on the other, this turn could not completely erase the “Western” elements of that structure. So it was a formula which triggered (to use Bibó’s key terms) “wrong conditionings,” such as the reproduction of the “spirit of domination” and of the “humility of the serfs,” and likewise the inclination to “false constructions” and to fixing an “order of immobility,” with the “mechanism of fear” overcoming the “mechanism of reason.” At the same time, the same formula contained elements that in lucky cases could be made suitable for “movement towards greater freedom.” In Bibó’s thinking, 1945 was a historical turning point, because it assigned the task of a transformation that had more real chance than any since around 1500, more than any between 1825 and 1849 or in 1918–19, but with the specific feature that the impasse, which
had worsened in the preceding phase of history, meant society itself had not made any preparations for the turn and so did not possess that “irresistible dynamism” which is the basic feature of truly revolutionary situations.

When this task of transformation was assigned, hardly anyone saw so clearly as Bibó the roots of the dual historical heritage or the actual situation with its own specific duality. A leading idea in his whole work is that one side of the duality demanded the revolutionary transformation of the structure, but it could only be valorized by the development of democracy, offered by the other side of the duality. One without the other would bring back the wrong historical conditionings, in one way or another. The theoretical crux of Bibó’s historical and political viewpoint was that revolution and democracy belong together, and that the former in theory is a precondition of the latter. But in the dimensions of Realpolitik, he faced up with analytical responsibility to the fact that while Europe’s two outer regions had produced their own revolutions (the West in the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, the East in the twentieth century) the region between them, including Hungary, had only failed revolutions, partial revolutions, and as partial successes, revolutions “from above.” In 1945 too, the opportunity for revolution and democracy had arrived not “from below” but from outside. Although István Bibó never formulated it like that, the historical dilemma he attempted to solve both on a theoretical level and by practical proposals was how—in a situation which for historical reasons had put forward the need and chance for a “revolution from above” in a socialist variant—to place the processes under the control of democracy “from below” and cause them to develop along that line. The “revolution from above” was a necessity that followed from the “Eastern European” background, while the democracy “from below” was a historical chance presented by the “Western-type” elements: in theory a perfectly consistent “East Central European” model (even though Bibó only used this term in his later writings).

The model had at least three important premises in the coordinates of necessity, non-necessity, and possibility. One of them was the necessity that the socialist revolution was, as Bibó put it, “a great historic endeavor to escape from the impasse of Eastern social development,” and a “further correction and completion” of the process of mankind’s full liberation. The second was that it was unnecessary to place this Eastern demand under the hereditary Eastern European techniques of power and bureaucracy or to “set aside” the Western techniques of freedom, particularly if there existed certain internal historical and structural preconditions for democracy’s objective techniques which were not
superstructural. The third was that the “revolution in human dignity” was an absolute precondition for democracy, because thereby people could experience democracy’s own strength, have a chance to choose and control their leaders and expel them if necessary, and learn by direct experience that public concerns were their concerns as well. For that the chance lay in the institutional and radical establishment of the foundations of a self-governing state administration and of the start of a state structure functioning “upwards from below,” according to Bibó’s reform program. That was how revolution “from above” might have obtained its own line “from below.”

It would be difficult to question the internal historical logic of that model. It is another matter that in retrospect one might be justified to question whether the program of “limited and planned revolution” Bibó drew up in 1945 was sufficient by comparison with the internal requirements. But it was not Bibó’s intention to appear as a theorist who could offer a solution to everything. Whether this program was realistic is made questionable, among many other things, by the fact that, with regard to the country’s political representatives of the time, it was too left-wing and “revolutionary” for the right and too right-wing, too “bourgeois” and “plebeian” for the left. Nor could it become a program for the plebeian party of his own either, and it aroused no reaction from the centrist parties. But even the lack of mass support does not prove unconditionally that it was unrealistic, since support could only have been gauged if the mass base had been more clearly shown by the development of the institutions and the “objective techniques” of democracy. It is unjustified to brand unrealized chances of history as unrealistic solely because they were not realized. One may dispute other things in the program too, and naturally the best partner with whom to do so would have been Istvan Bibó himself, since if there was anything missing from his thinking it was a belief in its own totality. Amidst the completely transformed coordinates, one may say of Bibó’s work that although almost all his concrete proposals have become outdated, his historical and actual analyses have all remained valid, and in the sphere between the two almost all the theoretical concepts developed on a historical basis, although not unrevised, are opportune. His basic position, which he put down several times and meant to serve for a long trend, is also valid and opportune: chances inherent in reality are not necessarily realized—their realization depends on effort and goodwill.

Translated by Julianna Parti, the translation was revised by Christiana Mauro, Gábor Klaniczay, and Balázs Trencsényi