GÁBOR KOVÁCS

Rationality and Affectivity in Politics – the Role of Fear and Hysteria in the Political Thought of István Bibó

ABSTRACT: István Bibó's oeuvre deals with the problems of modern politics distorted by emotions and political hysteria. Modern nation, in his theory, is a political problem-solving community. In this respect his approach runs parallel with Karl Popper's theory. The political thought of Bibó is embedded in a philosophy of history whose central notion is fear. The unique historical achievement of European civilization, according to Bibó, is the overcome of fear by the virtue of the institutions of modern political democracy. But democracy is a fragile phenomenon; in some historical constellation it collapses and sinks into the vortex of fear and communal hysteria. These are the main topics my paper deals with.

KEYWORDS: fear • hysteria • problem-solving community • national characterology • deadlock

István Bibó (1911–1979) was one of the most significant Hungarian political thinkers in the 20th century. At the beginning of his intellectual carrier he was dealing with jurisprudence. Between 1935 and 1944 he wrote a series of essays concerned with philosophy of law. These works prefigured the direction he would turn to after the Second World War. In his doctoral thesis of 1935 entitled *Kényszer, jog, szabadság* (*Coercion, Law and Liberty*) investigated, albeit in the terms of the philosophy of law, the relation of power and liberty in human societies. Coercion and liberty, according to the train of thought of his thesis, do not exclude each other; they exist in a complementary relation in every human community. Coercion can not eliminate or destroy liberty completely, because one is under very strict pressure or coerced to do something is not deprived totally from the modicum of liberty which is an inner experience, and a human being never loses the chance of choosing between possibilities, not even under pressure. At the first sight it seems to be a classical stoical approach but Bibó adds to it that law, as social institution, is the „objectification" of liberty and coercion at the same time. Law, on the one hand, is based on the consensus of the given society because

the introduction of a law-system is unimaginable without a preliminary tacit recognition: one can not survive unless some kind of social rules exist ensuring the possibility of peaceful life. Law, on the other hand, is a source of coercion; it involves the presence of political power creating law-abiding people.

Political power, in the theory of Bibó, is some kind of necessary evil for human society. His point of view was deeply influenced by the thought of Saint Augustine, who had emphasized that political power is the consequence of original sin, i.e. human being's first disobedience to God. This tenet became one of the key motifs in the political thought of Bibó.

During the thirties his intellectual position underwent a gradual evolution: he distanced himself from legal philosophy and approached to political theory. The essay entitled *Az európai egyensúlyról és békéről* (*On European Balance and Peace*) [1942–43] meant a second phase in his intellectual development. He placed the Central and Eastern-European history into a European framework giving a central role of the concept of *political hysteria*. The after-war period of 1945–48, until the coming of communist regime, was the climax of his life both as a political thinker and political essayist. He joined the Peasants' Party and was working in the Ministry of Interior as a clerk. During this period his most important essays came to light. These were as follows: *A magyar demokrácia válsága* (*The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy*) [1945], *A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága* (*The Distress of the Eastern European Small States*) [1946], *Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után* (*The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944*) [1948], *Eltorzult magyar alkat, zsákutcás magyar történelem* (*Distorted Hungarian Character the Deadlocks of Hungarian History*) [1948].

In 1949 the Hungarian Communist Party came to power. In the ensuing communist era Bibó was prevented from the opportunity to publish his works. He had to resign from his university tenure held at the University of Szeged. In the last coalition government of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 he was delegated to the position of the state minister. During the period of reprisals in 1957, after the revolution, the court of the Kádár-regime sentenced him to life imprisonment. With an amnesty issued in 1963 he was released from prison. From 1963 onward to his death he was working as a librarian of the Library of the Office for Statistics. In this inner emigration he wrote seminal essays. These are as follows: *A nemzetközi államközösség bénultsága és annak orvosságai* (*The Paralyses of International Institutions and the Remedies*) [1967–70], *Az európai társadalomfejlődés értelme* (*Reflections on the Social Development of Europe*) [1971] István Bibó died in 1979 as an intellectual relegated to the margin but 10 years later, in the period

of political transformation, his name became of a catchword for Hungarian political opposition.

In the following paper I intend to give a cross-section of Bibó's political philosophy concentrating upon his theory of the European political development, that of nation and political hysteria. The refusal of determinism is one of the basic tenets of his thought world. Deterministic philosophies of history, Bibó argues, deprive human beings of the chance of freedom setting up an ultimate goal to which history is inevitably nearing. This is the kind of philosophy which was rejected as historicism by Karl Popper whose trains of thought concerning this topic run parallel with the argumentation of Bibó. There is no law of progress, Bibó asserts, only a chance of progress exists in human history. The realization of this chance depends upon human decisions taken in critical historical moments[1]. The philosophy of history is far away to be a field on which we are entitled to formulate deterministic laws similar to ones of physics. The intellectual position of Bibó, in this question, has been deeply colored by his aversion to the Marxian philosophy of history but the rejection is not confined to this sort of historical philosophy:

> The theoretical model which proposes that world history is a series of class struggles, or the one which claims that it is the implementation of God's plan to save mankind, or the one which ascribes everything to the accumulation of material goods – not one of these can be proved or disproved in and of itself. One may bring up endless examples to support and an equal number to disprove any of them[2].

The theoretical models mentioned above, in Bibó's opinion, were born from the Christian doctrine. Their common denominator is the supposition of a former golden age, an initial idealistic condition at the beginning of humankind's history. These theories are secularized versions of the Christian theology of history; this holds true for Rousseau's myth on natural state or Marx's one on primeval communism. For both, in the train thought of Bibó, the end of history is a quasi-religious condition. Rousseau's perfect liberty or perfect state founded by the "Lawgiver" and Marx's communism are very similar to the Christian concept of salvation; they suppose a final stage of human development which lies beyond history.

Progress, in the meaning of amelioration, is a result of fortuitous coincidence of many factors crystallized in a specific historic constellation.

---

[1] I. Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination*, ed. by K. Nagy, trans. by A. Boros-Kazai, New York 1991, pp. 421–527.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 422.

Human decisions taken in fluid nodal moments of history and resulting in lasting institutions are the vehicles of progress. It is undeniable that Bibó's philosophy of history is a kind of 'grand narrative'. It is a narrative of liberty. Bibó, comparing different civilizations, ranks them according to the 'quantity of liberty' they are able realize for the human beings living in them. Among the human civilizations, according to Bibó, only two were able to produce real progress: the European and Chinese ones. The progress of Chinese civilization arrested; it had run into a dead end. The only civilization which, albeit with painful detours, was able to produce a lasting progress was the European one. From the point of view of Bibó it means that European civilization was the only one which developed the institutions of liberty embodied in modern parliamentarian democracy based on general suffrage and multi-party system, separation of branches of power, basic human, civil and political rights. In European history gradually emerged a «liberty program» embodied in the institutionalized liberties of the individual. It was the remarkable and unique achievement of European civilization. This philosophy of history explained by Bibó has been based on an implicit philosophical anthropology focusing upon the phenomenon of fear. The source of fear is the awareness of death:

> I shall start with the existentialist thesis that man is the only living being aware of its mortality. The appearance of this consciousness is as likely to have caused disequilibrium in human souls as to have brought about wonderful opportunities. I am thinking back to that moment of history, long before even the most primitive human state, when man first must have realized and become conscious of the fact that he would die, and thereby formed a conscious image of his own existence to the degree that – as far as we know – no other living being is able to do. In other words: he ate from the Tree of Knowledge[3].

Here Bibó gives a lay version of the Fall of man well known from the book of Genesis in the Bible. According to his interpretation the Bible gives a very appropriate, albeit mythical, explanation for the basic psychological structure of human being. Fear induced by the awareness of death seeks for and finds objects for itself; at last it must objectify in external entities. For this purpose two kinds of objects expose itself: natural environment and other human beings. Bibó is mostly interested in the latter type of fear because of its consequences upon human societies:

---

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 425

Thus fear appears in a life as a separate external entity. It is on this basis that man consciously realizes the dangers with which the external world threatens him: deadly peril, natural forces, accidents and catastrophes. At the same time, he soon undergoes another significant experience characteristic of communal man, the recognition that the most intense sources of fear are other humans. It is another man that is able to arouse the greatest fear in me. […] If I wish to feel powerful and strong, in spite of the threats poised against me and the fear of death tormenting me, the best method for achieving this appears to be forcing my fellow humans to obey my will. Conversely, being forced to endure the power of others can accentuate my inherent sense of fear. This gives rise to the need for humans to be unencumbered by the coercion of others, to be liberated from fearing the power of others, that is the need to be free. […] It is important to recognize that hoping to escape the sense of fear by seizing power and coercing others is a false method. In other words I am being misled if I attempt to escape my fears by increasing power, coercion, and force over others. Precisely the opposite is true: I can free myself from fear by neither being subject to the oppressive coercion of my fellow humans nor by holding any of them under my oppressive coercion[4].

This fear-theory of Bibó – besides the possible influence of existentialism and Hobbes – has mostly been inspired by the conception of Guglielmo Ferrero who was his professor in Geneve during the years of his scholarship in 1934–35. Tyranny based on coercion as a medicament for the fear of my human fellows is a pseudo-solution which seemed the most plausible instrument for the majority of human civilizations. But the compensation of fear of others by subjugation generates a vicious circle; having fears of others I suppress them with violence, but more the suppression more the amount of mutual fears. The tyrant and the suppressed underling are getting caught in the same trap of horror. To break out of this deadlock is one of the most important but most rare achievements in the history of humankind. European civilization, in this respect, is an exception that proves the rule. It has been able to humanize power by the virtue of principles of democratic legitimacy lessening mutual ontological fear seemed to be irreparable for earlier civilizations[5].

This achievement naturally can't be drawn back to racial causes; the 19th century notion of the civilization of white man is a false explanation

---

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 425–426
[5] To this problem see: G. Kovács, *Can Power Be Humanized? The Notions of Elite and Legitimation in István Bibó's Political Philosophy*, "Studies in East European Thought", 1999, vol. 51, pp. 307–327.

which, besides its life-threatening consequences, doesn't explain anything, Bibó argues, calling the attention to the peculiarities of the European history. The fabric of European civilization has been woven from three threads, or using another metaphor, it's a three-story building. The first thread or the first story is the heritage of antiquity. This consists of two elements; the Greek political thought and political practice and the Roman political sense embodied in the complicated and sophisticated structure of Roman Empire. These elements are labeled by Bibó as the 'Graeco-Roman organizing-administrative practicality' ensuring the archetypical social organizing patterns for the later generations.

It was the 'Greeks' invention that a society can create laws for itself. It was a historic novelty. In Egypt, or in the Empires of Mesopotamia political power was legitimated by a god or gods. The ruler was 'sacrosanctus' i.e. holy and inviolable, and the underlings were not entitled to interfere with the questions concerning political power. Gods were considered as the sources and warranties of the monarch's power. In this political structure the idea of society creating laws or changing laws was simply unimaginable. Naturally there were riots and palace revolts against the rulers but these meant the violation of the world-order prescribed by gods: the order of politics was part of the order of the Universe. Consequently who revolted against the ruler, revolted against gods and committed a blasphemy. The subject could not call the rulers to account for their political activities. The rulers were responsible for their ruling only to gods and not to the society. The most important consequence of this phenomenon was that revolts and uprisings were not imbued with social criticism and the sense of social responsibility, and due to this fact they were able to destroy but were not able to build. There was no an image of a better future and the main consequence of this fact was that revolts and uprisings did not conclude in building up a society with more equitable conditions, but they merely resulted in changing of dynasties or persons. Bibó mentions ancient China as the exception to the rule[6]. Here the great peasant-uprisings blown out against the tyranny were full of the intention to make a better society and they called the emperors and mandarins to account for the unjust and tyrannical political methods. The ruling elite took full responsibility for their activity. It was due, according to Bibó, to the Confucian ethical system[7] which strongly emphasized the governmental responsibility, and considered the ruling over society as a special kind of duty imbuing the whole society with the sense of social

---

6 I. Bibó, *op. cit*, pp. 427–428.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 427.

responsibility. But China arrested in progress and became one of the stagnating civilizations.

The Greeks' most essential invention was to create citizens who elected their political leaders and were able to remove them from their posts if they had not fulfilled their hopes. This kind of political practice theoretically was outlined in Aristotle's political theory which held primary importance concerning to the later political developments of European civilization. The other theoretical contribution of antiquity to European political theory was the achievement of Roman legal sciences and Roman legal scientists who elaborated the t h e o r y o f p e o p l e ' s s o v e r e i g n t y, in which the source of power was the people that had previously transferred it to the emperor. They did not draw the logical conclusion of the theory, because in their argumentation the transfer of sovereignty, if it had happened earlier, could not be undone.

Christian spirituality, in the theory of Bibó, was another important contribution to the h u m a n i z a t i o n o f p o w e r. In this respect Bibó emphasizes the of the personality of Jesus and gestures described in the gospels concerning the social organization of Europe:

> [...] he uttered extraordinary significant, almost unforgettably simple sentences – and made equally unmatched exemplary gestures – concerning the power of gentleness, the vanity of anger and the interrelationship and harmfulness of anger, life-and-death struggle and killing. He had an uncanny ability to find words and gesture which made people – ready to hate, lash out, judge, accuse or perform the many other unfortunate manifestations of human fear – hang down their heads, realizing the futility of such behavior. [...] He spoke of faith as the child-like trust in the hidden potentials of the human soul, and the ability to mobilize these potentials. His most significant observations, however, are those concerning the power of gentleness [...] His gestures (e.g. 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also') are not the gestures of a feeble man: on the contrary they belong among those disarming gestures in the face of which senseless aggression suddenly realizes its own senselessness[8].

Bibó evaluates Christ's behavior as an archetypical one which, in some circumstances, can stop the prevailing of coercion and fear with their devastating effects for human society mainly in the sphere of politics. Jesus awakened the sense of moral responsibility and dutifully moral behavior in his followers. However, it was a necessary but not satisfactory precondition

---

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 432.

for launching a humanized and rational political development. Other theoretical and practical contributions were needed for the success. According to Bibó, the one of the most important theoretical achievements was the tenet of Saint Augustine about the need of moral justification for political power. Political power, for Saint Augustine, is the consequence of the Fall of man which has deformed and weakened human nature. Human beings, after the Fall, are unable to live together without a disciplinary practices of political power. Power-exercising, Bibó emphasizes, becomes a moral duty for the Christian rulers and they can be called to responsibility in case they violate justice prescribed by the divine law.[9] That conception, in the long run, has contributed to the emergence of the medieval social criticism based on biblical grounds.

Saint Augustine's political theory, could influence the medieval political development only because of the specific historical constellations emerged in the European Middle Ages when social and political structures were based on the system of feudal vassalage. The feudal lords and his vassals were bound together with the chains of fealty. The vassals were given a piece of land by their liege lords, but the essence of this relation was a contractual relation between them which imposed them mutual duties. If one of them had violated the rules of this contract, he had committed the vice of infidelity (*infidelitas*), and the contract became invalid. State structures were based on this relationship of reciprocal system of duty and fidelity. In the Early Middle Ages the kings could rule their kingdoms only through the feudal vassalage, lacking money and skilled bureaucracy and a professional army. So the role of Christian church proved indispensable:

> The clergy started (following the Cluniac reforms) to use the spreading of literacy for the organizing of society by writing a multitude of charters and certificates of privilege. It also tried to imbue a great variety – practically all – of social relationship with a sense of professionalism and reciprocity. The theorists among them developed ideal types, such as that of the Good Ruler, the Good Lord, the Good Knight, the Good Burgher, and the Tiller of the Soil. To be sure, the allocation of work and leisure time was inequitable, but the clergy tried to place each into

---

[9] Spread out in his essays, Bibó several times cites the famous thought of Saint Augustine: "Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna, nisi parva regna? quia et ipsa latrocinia quid sunt, nisi parva regna". Aurelius Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, IV, 4. Translation: "What anything else are kingdoms than large companies of brigands if they are lacking any justice? And what anything else are companies of brigands than little kingdoms". The justice of a given kingdom depends on the personal behavior and moral attitude of the ruling political elite of the society.

some reciprocal relationship with the others, tried to define their roles in such manner so that each gave and received something, and organized each of them so that even the lowest-ranking of them retained a modicum of human self-respect[10].

The spreading of literacy instigated by the social needs of the medieval society and made possible by the social practice of the medieval Western clergy transformed the whole structure of European societies, Bibó argues borrowing the idea of István Hajnal, the Hungarian contemporaneous historian, during the Middle Ages. Literacy rationalized the social background of Mediaeval Europe and gave a chance to the rise of entrepreneurial behavior. As a result of spreading literacy the social conditions developed into more calculable than they had been earlier. The progenitor of this development was the mediaeval artisanship. The craftsmen founded guilds based on book-keeping which would have been unimaginable without literacy. Jurists played important roles in this development because they provided the indispensable legal techniques for guilds and trade companies. So, the ultimate moving factor was the work of the everyday life of 'ordinary people' which transformed the society from down to top making social relations more rational. At the end of the Middle Ages, at least in Western Europe, the burgher and craftsmen and their mentalities overrule the feudal nobility and its feudal mentality. Bibó keeps emphasizing, that nobility, and its representative figures, the k i n g and the w a r r i o r represented an aggressive combating life-style. In contrast with them the craftsmen, the burgher led a peaceful creative way of life. The rising of the modernity meant "the triumph of the life-style of men, who create with care"[11] over the feudal nobility, who was living a shiftless life enjoying his power positions.

The Middle Ages, in Bibó's theory, were basically important periods because they created the 'small circles of liberties', i.e. a social system which was based on a multitude of local privileges. In medieval European society horizontal social structures developed to the detriment of vertical ones and this fact gave a chance at the end of the Middle Ages for transformation of the small local liberties into the Liberty of a whole society. It was, no doubt, a long painful process with frequent detours. But it resulted in a society which was built up from down to top and in a rational and calculable manner.

But from the centuries of early modernity onward the different regions of Europe began to develop divergently. Three regions began to outline on the map of Europe: the region of Western Europe; an intermediate region from

[10] I. Bibó, *op. cit*, p. 441.
[11] *Idem*, *Válogatott tanulmányok (Selected Works)*, Budapest 1986 I., vol. 1, p. 310.

the Baltic Sea to Adriatic Sea including the kingdom of Poles, the kingdom of Czechs, and the kingdom of Hungarians and a third region including the countries which were east to the aforementioned three countries.

It is important, concerning the subject of this paper, that Bibó connected the phenomenon of divergent European development to the problems of the European nation-building. The nation, in the thought of Bibó, is a political community, the organic outgrowth of European history. Bibó, with accordance to the principles of his philosophy of history, emphasizes that the development of nations is not subjugated to inevitable historical laws. He is averse to the idea of such laws, which exist independently from individual volitions and action. This tenet is explained against the fatalistic attitude of the Marxist philosophy of history:

> Human development does not always have necessary stages. Society develops only when it takes a step along a rational course, and this does not necessarily happen. There is no natural law which says that human societies must progress from slavery to feudalism, from feudalism to capitalism, and so forth. Mankind has undertaken experiments aimed at the rational development of social organization [...] Wherever there is such an experimentation, it makes sense to talk about social progress, and even of revolutions. [...] Thus we are not talking about necessary developments but about great collective efforts which are undertaken by some cultures and not by others, endeavors that are subject to failure. We lack the luxury of being able to posit as natural law the rules of correct and steady social progress[12].

Contextualizing the theory of Bibó concerning the problem of historical laws and nation as problem-solving community, it justified to assert that, in many respect, it runs parallel to the theory of Karl Popper on historicism and that of closed and open societies. To accept the existence of historical laws, according to Popper, means to commit the vice of historicism. Historicism is the opposition of rationalism. It is based on traditions and emotions instead of being based on a rational approach. Historicism commits the vice of merging together different notions; it eliminates the basic difference between trend and law:

> But it will be said, the existence of trends or tendencies in social change can hardly be questioned: every statician can calculate such trends. [..] But trends are not laws. A statement asserting the existence of a trend is existential, not universal (A universal law, on

[12] *Idem*, *Democracy...* p. 436–437

the other hand, does not assert existence; on the contrary [...] it asserts the impossibility of something or other). And a statement asserting the existence of a trend at a certain time and place would be a singular historical statement, not a universal law[13].

This train of thought is connected with the notions of c l o s e d a n d o p e n s o c i e t i e s . These are the methods by which a community, a nation solves its problems which it has to face. In Popper's explanation o p e n s o c i e t y is such kind of a problem-solving community following rational methods and based on the idea of individuality. In contrast with this, the concept of c l o s e d s o c i e t y means a strategy of communal action rested on collective efforts denying individuality and rationality.

The concept of nation, in the theory of Bibó, is very similar to Popper's idea concerning the two kinds of problem-solving communities. Bibó makes also a distinction between two kinds of strategy a nation may opt for when facing its problems. First strategy is the way of democracy consisting of the complex of the t e c h n i q u e s o f f r e e d o m ensuring room for rational and calculable individual action. Second strategy is the way of tyranny; when collectivism being the dominant factor, suppresses the individuality and makes the individual initiation impossible.

North-Western-Europe, according to Bibó, is an archetype of ongoing and organic development. He points out that in England, the Scandinavian countries and the German Lowlands democracy has grown out from the system of mediaeval privileges in an organic manner. In these countries the "p r o g r a m o f a n a t i o n - b u i l d i n g " and "t h e p r o g r a m o f l i b e r t y " have closely been connected. The sense of belonging to a nation, approaching to the end of the Middle Ages, greatly extended to the whole of the society, and the third estate "took over the national framework". Without the liberation of individuals from the bonds of premodern social, political and mental structures the formation of modern nations would not have taken place:

> There is substantially one requirement for the harmonious and straightforward political development of a modern European community, and it is f o r t h e i n t e r e s t s o f t h e c o m m u n i t y a n d t h e c a u s e o f f r e e d o m t o b e o n e a n d t h e s a m e . In other words, what is needed – at the revolutionary moment when individuals due to great revolutionary upheavals become liberated from the psychological pressure of forces dominating them 'by the grace of God' – is the clear and concrete realization that the liberation

[13] K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London 1957, p. 115.

of i n d i v i d u a l s also means the liberation, opening, and internal enrichment of the e n t i r e c o m m u n i t y [14].

Bibó, albeit does not exclude the necessity of revolutions in some circumstances, prefers evolutionary changes to revolutionary ones. The best method for solving social problems, according to him is the politics of gradual changes, in other words s o c i a l p l a n n i n g. That opinion means another important similarity between Bibó's theory and Popper's approach. What Bibó is speaking about here resembles to the concept of p i e c e m e a l s o c i a l e n g i n e e r i n g explained by Popper. Popper makes an opposition between piecemeal social engineering and utopian engineering. The latter method is a basic characteristic of historicism:

> I shall use the term 'piecemeal social engineering' to describe the practical application of the results of piecemeal technology. [...] Just as the main task of the physical engineer is to design machines and to remodel and service them, the task of piecemeal social engineer is to design social institutions, and to reconstruct and run those already in existence. The term 'social institution' is used here in a very broad sense, to include bodies of a private and of a public character. Thus I shall use it to describe a business, whether it is a small shop or an insurance company, and, likewise a school, or an 'educational system', or a police force, or a Church, or a law court[15].

At this point of the thought-train of my paper it seems to be necessary to outline the Hungarian context for illuminating the peculiarities Bibó's concept of nation. It needs to detour from the main stream of the argumentation for a while. In some historic constellations the idea of nation as a problem-solving community of individuals fades and gives way to the theories of essentialist national characterologies. National characterology was an international phenomenon in Europe after the First World War. Especially German, Spanish and emigrant Russian authors were interested in this topic. We can mention here among others Leo Frobenius, Herman Keyserling, Oswald Spengler, Ortega y Gasset, Salvador de Madariaga and Nikolai Berdyajev. Important intellectual and ideological developments had preceded the emergence of national characterology. In this respect we can mention the crisis of liberalism, the emergence and strengthening of neo-conservatism and appearance of cultural morphology as conspicuous phenomena during the twenties.

[14] I. Bibó, *Democracy...*, p. 41.
[15] K. Popper, *op. cit*, pp. 64–65.

The idea of national characterology was especially popular in the inter-war Hungary which, like other small Eastern European countries, in the 19–20th centuries, had to face the spectre of nation-death, i.e. the threatening of ceasing to exist as a national community. In Hungary the roots of national characterology grew from the climate of the turn of 19–20th centuries. As a starting point I treat three famous books, which strongly influenced the intellectual public mood after the First World War: *Az elsodort falu* (*The Swept Away Village)* by Dezső Szabó, *Három nemzedék* (*Three Generations*) by Gyula Szekfű and the *A vándor és a bujdosó* (*The Wanderer and the Hider*) by Lajos Prohaszka. The authors represented different professions: Dezső Szabó (1879–1945) was a writer, Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955) a historian, Lajos Prohászka (1897–1963) was a philosopher.

In *Az elsodort falu* (*The Swept Away Village)* the author did not produce positive national characterology but he described the characters of the Hungarian national middle class and set the stage for the later national character debate. He strongly emphasized the motif of autochthonous, true-born Hungarian historical development and with it he associated anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism.

Dezső Szabó and Gyula Szekfű occupied different ideological positions: the first was a radical anti-liberal author, the second a conservative anti-liberal historian. Szekfű's starting-point was the enumeration of the so called 'Hungarian national vices'. They had been borrowed from Istvan Széchenyi, the 19th century reformer and thinker. These national vices, according to Szekfű, held back the development of the Hungarian nation. It would not be too advisable to take these "vices" one by one because they were repeated in a boring manner during the national character debate; instead of it more interesting to look at the philosophy of history which emerged from this peculiar starting-point. These vices in, Szekfű's interpretation, had been these of the nobility of the Hungarian nation which later became consummated in the liberal capitalism of 19th century. Liberal capitalism, from the Szekfű's point of view, was the engine of an inorganic historical development in Hungary as well throughout in Europe[16]. The greatest one among the vices, in his opinion, was that the Hungarian political elites had been spoilt by liberalism and lowered the country into party bickering and sterile debates about public law.

Lajos Prohaszka's book, *A vándor és a bújdosó* (*The Wanderer and the Hider*) in its deeper structure was the continuation of the *Három nemzedék* (*Three Generations*). Both works were imbibed with the critique of moder-

---

[16] Gy. Szekfű, *Három nemzedék (Three Generations)*, Budapest 1989, p. 86.

nity denying the progress optimism of the 19th century. These writings, it is not an exaggeration to say, were typical products of the philosophy of crisis of the inter-war period. The starting point of Prohaszka's book had been rooted in the German *Geistesgeschichte*. Every nation has its own spirituality, Prohászka argues, involving a special mode of existence. This spirituality predetermines the behaviour in concrete historical situations. The Hungarian national character is diametrically opposite to the German one[17]. The most typical Hungarian national characteristic is the s e c l u s i o n (*finitizmus*), which means inward looking behaviour and some kind of complacency. This is the root of other national vices, first of all of fruitless party debate and s h o r t - l i v e d e n t h u s i a s m (*szalmaláng*)[18].

Mi a magyar? (*What is the Hungarian?*), which had been edited by Gyula Szekfű and appeared in 1939, did not give too many new ideas to the debate about Hungarian national character; its renowned authors on the one hand rejected the approach of Prohaszka's book and on the other hand emphasized the independence of Hungarian culture from the German one. But these essays did not form a coherent book: they could not provide the basis for national characterology as a new discipline. In the writing of Mihály Babits (1883–1941), who was one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the 20th century entitled *A magyar jellemről* (*On Hungarian Character*) we can find a curious ambivalence. In the first part of his essay, Babits explicated at length why it is almost impossible to create a valid national characterology yet, in the second part he laid down the maxims of his theory for Hungarian national character. In his conception the Hungarian national character is not an eternally existing immutable substance but a changing constellation of different elements evolving during the process of history. He rejected the theory of László Németh, who had constructed the oppositional notions of the "true-born Hungarian" and the "foreigner"[19]. But we can detect that Babits' theory was undergoing modifications during the inter-war period. In an earlier essay published directly after the First World War he had criticized the conservative features of Hungarian character, while in 1939, in the shadow of the nearing Second World War he evaluated this conservatism as the safeguard against devastating totalitarian ideologies[20].

What was the conceptual framework behind national characterologies in the inter-war period? This is undeniably the most interesting question

---

[17] L. Prohászka, *A vándor és a bujdosó (The Wanderer and the Hider)*, Szeged, 1990, p. 84.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 224.
[19] M. Babits, *Esszék, tanulmányok (Essays and Studies)*, Budapest, 1978, pp. 617–618.
[20] *Idem*, *A magyar jellemről (On Hungarian Character)*, [in:] *Mi a magyar? (What is the Hungarian?)*, ed. Gy. Szekfű, Budapest 1939, pp. 84–85.

in this field. There is a common conviction that these theories had been rooted in *Geistesgeschichte*, but this opinion is only partly true. The national characterologies of Lajos Prohászka and Tibor Joó are truly based in this intellectual movement but *Geistesgeschichte* doesn't seem to be a common denominator for all works in this field. It promises to be a much more relevant approach to focus upon the essentialism of this way of thinking; the main concern of these theories is the searching for national essence. This essence sometimes appears as eternal sometimes as changing which takes shape in historical process. As the young Hungarian historian, Balázs Trencsényi points out, Carl Schmitt's theory of political romanticism can be used as a framework of interpretation for national characterology.[21] The basic feature of political romanticism is the s e c u l a r i z e d   o c c a s i o n a l i s m which identifies one phenomenon with the appearance of the other, so individual is just the opportunity for appearance of the community. But the reverse is true: community is the opportunity for appearance of the individual. In traditional t h e o l o g i c a l   o c c a s i o n a l i s m , it is God who appears in worldly phenomena; but in political romanticism the subject of appearance is Humanity or History – respectively we speak on revolutionary or conservative romanticism.

The romantic Ego as a clairvoyant prophet is able to discern the values by which the shrinking national essence can be saved and redefined, and moreover can be formulated as a common value-system for the members of national community. In Szekfű's theory – which aims at the reconstruction of the modernized Greater Historical Hungary – this clairvoyant politician is Count István Széchenyi of the 19th century, in Dezső Szabó's conception – which speaks the narratives of e t h n o p o p u l i s t   n a t i o n a l   c h a r a c - t e r o l o g y and aims at the creation of ethnically homogenized elites and a new conquest of Hungary – the writer-prophet plays this historic role. In these concepts national essence appears in an ambivalent position; it is an ahistorical entity and a subject of historical degeneration at the same time. The norm-giver clairvoyant prophet's or politician's task is to revitalize and actualize this potentially existing national essence. As Gyula Szekfű's intellectual carrier proved there was possibility for passage between afore mentioned theories. In the 1930s Gyula Szekfű took over from the populist tradition had been established by Dezső Szabó the thesis concerning the nation-regenerating potential of peasantry while by introducing the notion

---

[21] B. Trencsényi Balázs, *Az 'alkat diskurzus' és Bibó István politikai publicisztikája (The character discourse and the political journalism, of István Bibó)*, [in:] *Megtalálni a szabadság rendjét*, ed. I. Z. Dénes, Budapest, 2001, pp. 175–207.

of the *neo-baroque* order cautiously criticized the outmoded political structures and outlived political elites of the inter-war Hungary.

Németh László (1901–1975) accepted Dezső Szabó's theory of the relation of value-recognizing writer-prophet and value-accepting society enlarging it with an eschatological dimension of a narrative of degeneration. In his theory, the new elites, who posses the treasures of European contemporaneous culture, are able to elaborate a renewed cultural canon which gives an opportunity for creating new social-political structures based on regenerated Hungarian national character.

The intellectual framework of the above mentioned inter-war national characterologies had been broken up and deconstructed by István Bibó who rejected a holistic approach along with the notion of national essence[22]. His starting-point was not the national essence, but the autonomous individual of Kantian philosophy and the nation as the problem-solving community of these autonomous individuals. Through political action the nation gets some kind of character, but this is not a super individual existing above real human beings. Instead of emotional, irrational, prophetical and essentialist approach Bibó offered a socio-historical one.

<div align="center">❧</div>

In some circumstances nations as problem-solving communities, are unable to cope with the problems facing to them. That's what happened, because of inner and outer causes, to the Central and Eastern European countries in the 19–20th centuries. Bibó, in this respect, deals mainly with Germany and the countries situating in the region stretching from the Baltic Sea to Adriatic Sea[23]. These countries had run into historical deadlocks which concluded in the First and the Second World Wars. The last cause of these deadlocks, in his theory, was the fact that in this region the "p r o g r a m o f l i b e r t y" and the "p r o g r a m o f n a t i o n - b u i l d i n g", which in Bibó's conception are the inseparable elements of European civilization, did not intertwine:

> Democracy and nationalism have shared roots that are deeply interconnected, and any disequilibrium in this interconnection can lead to serious problems. This is what happened in Central and Eastern Europe w h e r e t a k i n g o v e r t h e n a t i o n a l c o m m u n i t i e s a n d

---

[22] Z. I. Dénes, *Eltorzult magyar alkat (Distorted Hungarian Character)*, Budapest 1999.

[23] G. Kovács: *Region of Deformities? The Image of Central-Eastern Europe in the Political Philosophy of István Bibó*, [in:] J. Jurova, M. Jozek, A. Kiepas, P. Machura (eds.), *Central-European Ethos or Local Traditions: Equality, Justice*, Boskovice 2010, pp. 133–140.

liberation of individuals were not connected. On the contrary, the nations of these regions experienced historical periods that seemed to prove that the fall of old political and societal authorities and the thoroughgoing acceptance of democracy expose the national community to serious risks and even catastrophes. Such upheavals gave birth to the most fearsome monstrosity in modern Europe's political development: anti-democratic nationalism[24].

The deadlock of different kinds of anti-democratic nationalism generated communal or political hysteria which, in Bibó's theory, is the extreme case of emotional, irrational politicizing. The notions of deadlock and hysteria lead us back the Bibó's concept of nation as problem-solving community. What happens if a nation is not able to solve the problem that it has to face? This situation for Bibó seems to be very analogous to an individual's situation when he/she is unable to solve his or her problems successfully. Unsolved/unsolvable problems or situations can cause a shock to the individual, who tries to forget the shock and tries to expel this very painful experience to his or her subconscious. The individual who has undergone such an experience builds up a false explanation for his or her failure and follows a strategy of operations which is based on this false explanation. So the individual step by step gets engaged in his/her self-created false world because he/she is unable to face the reality of the existing world and the real-world problems. This type of behavior leads to a catastrophe when the pile of unsolved problems of the really existing world crumbles down and buries under itself the individual. The individual here has lost his/her way and run into a deadlock.

Human societies being problem-solving ones, Bibó argues, are in very similar position to human beings. The fact, that there are similarities between behaviors of communities and individuals gives a possibility for the application of analogy. Similar to an individual a society can produce a hysteria facing problems which seem to be unsolvable. This malady is terrible for a nation, because it distorts its mental and social structures. Bibó enumerates the characteristics of communal hysteria as follows[25]: the nation which has suffered a shock rejects the really existing world and its problems. It is incapable for solving its problems, so it builds up an illusory world in which it can avoid to meet the requirements of the really existing world. In this situation the nation's self-evaluation becomes uncertain and its reactions to the outer world's challenges are unreal and exaggerated.   ∾

[24] I. Bibó, *Democracy...*, pp. 41–42.
[25] *Idem*, *Válogatott (Selected...)*, vol. I, p. 427.

GÁBOR KOVÁCS – pracownik naukowy w Instytucie Filozofii Węgierskiej Akademii Nauk. Ostatnio wydał *Frankensteintől a zöldekig – a gép és kritikusai* (*Od Frankesteina do Zielonych – maszyna i jej krytycy. Studia historii idei*), Budapeszt 2010.

GÁBOR KOVÁCS – is a senior research fellow at Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Recently he has published *Frankensteintől a zöldekig – a gép és kritikusai* (*From Frankenstein to the Greens – the Machine and its Critics. Studies in the History of Ideas*), Budapest 2010.