

MODERN SOCIOLOGY AND MODERN ART IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY HUNGARY

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It is very difficult to notice when the crisis of a society, of a political system or regime begins. After the collapse, or when the crisis reaches its climax in some other form, newly emerging politicians loudly declare that as early as... (and they name some very early date) they had already known what would happen but they had not been in a position to present these views to the wider public. The more reliable observers of the state of affairs are very often social scientists, writers and artists whose works, for those who have the eye and ear to understand the message, are warnings, reports on the vulnerable spots of their society. Those examining the body of the Hungarian society at the beginning of this century could easily discover the major illnesses: both those arising from the country's constitutional position within the Habsburg Monarchy and those rooted in the internal social tensions (e.g. the miserable living conditions of large sections of the peasantry, the question of national minorities, urban poverty, etc.).

This paper gives a short survey of the mutual relationship of two most outspoken and radical critics of the early twentieth century Hungarian political system: the group of young sociologists associated with the review of the symbolic title *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century) and the representatives of modern arts and literature (the group of creative artists around the review *Nyugat* [West], modern painters and musicians).

The major question to be met in this respect is quite obvious: is the emergence of modern social sciences, the appearance of the elements of contemporary British, French, German, American social and political thought a parallel process with the breakthrough of modern arts and literature in early twentieth century Hungary? Can we speak of some kind of "modernisation" of Hungarian intellectual, cultural life in which modern social sciences and modern arts are two sources feeding the – not very wide – river of the modernisation of Hungarian cultural life? Are sociologists and modern writers and artists mutually loyal, natural allies; are they independent of each other – or perhaps even rivals?

During the late 1890s arts and literature were natural fields of interest for the young law students at Budapest's Pázmány Péter University who showed more interest in recent trends in the philosophy of law than in the antiquated Hungarian civil law and in 1899 decided to launch a review dedicated to their sociological interests. The one or two hundred people who joined together in 1901 in the Society for Social Science shared the interests of the editors of this review, *Huszadik Század*. Divergent as their educations, social backgrounds, political ideas might have been, what bound them together was a conviction that behind day-to-day politics the general laws of social development operated and the recognition of these was a precondition of successful politics to any purpose. In the embryonic phase Hungarian sociology – that the new review and society wished to help come into being – was more a bid to rise above politics than to identify itself with a particular political trend. Trying to cure the illnesses that gnawed at the body of Hungarian society with the medicine of modern sociology (first of all Spencer, but also modern French and American sociology and historical materialism) was what they considered to be their main task. They hoped that this would be the fastest and least painful treatment which would help backward Hungary to recover, to catch up with Western Europe. Quite naively, but most sincerely, they believed that modern sociology would be able to rise above national, social, political bias and prejudices. Within a few years they had to realize that this was a vain hope. Not only did they have to struggle bitterly against the accusation of being aliens, even traitors to the national interests but they were split by internal conflicts of opinion as well. The differentiation led to a final parting of the ways in 1906 which made the review *Huszadik Század*, and the Society of Social Science the fora of a quite homogeneous ideology. This can perhaps be best described as radical democracy – though most experts on the topic prefer the term “bourgeois radicalism”. For most external observers this ideology with its emphatic demand of universal, equal suffrage and radical measures in the field of social policy, with its most outspoken attacks on the feudal elements of Hungarian agriculture was more or less identified with socialism; sociology and socialism often being taken for synonyms. This was, of course, a fatal misunderstanding – in spite of their occasional cooperation, socialists and radicals represented basically different reform-programs for Hungary.

Most people in this circle were well-educated, widely-read intellectuals who carefully followed the developments in the world of arts and literature, not only in Hungary but abroad (mainly in France) as well. The leading figure among them was Oszkár Jászi whose first major work (published in 1904) dealt with the problems of the interrelationship of art and morals. His most

important concern was the social function of arts which does not at all mean that he would have subordinated aesthetic values to the social message. In the early 1900s when the new Hungarian review proudly bearing the name of the twentieth century and the Society of Social Science made tremendous efforts to import all the values that West-European and American social sciences had accumulated during the previous decades, they also introduced scholars who had espoused sociological views in aesthetics: Allen Grant, Guyau, Ernst Grosse. Especially the aesthetically well-trained Oszkár Jászi and the later municipal politician, Ödön Wildner wrote analyses of what they considered to be the most significant works of contemporary world literature: Emile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, Lev Tolstoy. First of all Zola was respected as one who (according to the critic of *Huszadik Század*) "helped the scientific world-view gain ground in the world of aesthetic feeling."¹ Very different authors of very different backgrounds, such as Zola, Ibsen, Gorky, G. B. Shaw (his critic in a historical materialist manner is, by the way, Karl Polányi – this is Polányi's first printed article)², Strindberg, Anatole France were generally presented and praised as critical analysts of social reality. In their approach to world-literature the authors of *Huszadik Század* showed limited interest for what was really modern: the decadent *fin de siècle* French, German, English literature which was opening up new avenues to the secrets of the individual, of the human soul. In neighbouring Vienna a new generation of artists was working under the impact of impressionism, *art nouveau*, new romanticism (Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Mahler, Klimt). *Huszadik Század* did not take note of them. The world of unsolved conflicts, resignation, passivity was far away from them. An understanding of these trends was to begin only after 1906–1908 – after the publication of Ady's pioneering *Új versek* (New Poems) and the launching of the review which dedicated itself to integrating Hungary into the main stream of world-literature, *Nyugat*. And here we have arrived at the major issue of this paper: the relationship between Ady and modern Hungarian literature and the circle around the review *Huszadik Század*.

A journalist colleague of Endre Ady wrote in his memoirs that when *Huszadik Század* started, complimentary copies were sent to the editorial offices of most Hungarian newspapers.³ They were generally thrown, together with other advertisements, into the waste-paper basket which is where Endre Ady, in the editorial office of *Nagyvárad Napló*, picked out a copy. When his colleague also opened the green-covered review, Ady warned him: "Put it down, please! Don't read it or you will be unhappy for ever – it writes about very serious cases!" In Nagyvárad Ady was a good friend of Bódog Somló, the respected professor of the philosophy of law who had a decisive role in shaping the intellectual profile of *Huszadik Század* during the first years of its

publication. Ady and Jászi mutually respected each other; Ady on several occasions called Jászi “his leader” and dedicated a poem to him.⁴ One of the very first serious reviews of Ady’s *New Poems* was published in *Huszadik Század* by Lajos Hatvany who pointed out that Ady’s poetry had proved: “one could be at the same time as modern as Dehmel and as Hungarian as Arany”.⁵ It was also the *Huszadik Század* which gave forum to György Lukács’ analysis of Ady’s poetry – the most understanding contemporary evaluation of Ady’s significance.⁶ (He called Ady’s poetry the war-song, the trumpet, the rallying cry – the flag around which everything “progressive” can be rallied once it comes to fighting.) Jászi kept referring to Ady as “our poet”; Ady reviewed Jászi’s most important pre-1918 scholarly product.⁷ For Ady, Jászi’s book was the greatest, most daring and most Hungarian deed of the last decades. Jászi gave new content to the, in Ady’s terms, corrupted concept of Hungarian liberty by working out a well-grounded, long-term project for the transformation of Hungary. In his last will Jászi requested that the following lines of Ady on him be written on his grave-stone: “As his ways widened into a river, they attracted the haphazard tiny little streams of honest Hungarian intellectuals.”⁸ The good personal and political relationship of these two outstanding personalities of early 20th century Hungarian intellectual life is, of course, not identical with the relationship between the circle of sociologists around *Huszadik Század* and the various branches of modern art and literature. To illustrate the latter I should like to refer to the debate organized by the Society for Social Science in 1912 on the relationship between literature and society.⁹ In his introductory lecture, Ignotus, the respected editor of *Nyugat* pointed out that the emergence of modern literature and political radicalism were parallel processes in Hungary. Some shocking new ideas of modern literature were close to political radicalism – and what brought political radicalism and modern literature even closer to each other was the vehement attacks by conservatives. Political radicalism thus put also the slogan of poetic freedom on its flag. However, continues Ignotus’ argumentation, radical sociologists and politicians were bound to be disappointed by the behaviour of “liberated” literature. Writers and poets, instead of devoting their creative energies to the service of radicalism, dealt with “games of rhymes” and “the hen of radicalism that with so much courage drove away the hawk from over their heads saw in astonishment that those whom it considered as its chicks... were just conceited ducklings displaying themselves on the waters of *l’art pour l’art*”.¹⁰ But immediately after this comparison Ignotus defends modern *l’art pour l’art* writers as, he argues, unrestricted freedom is an absolutely necessary precondition for the very existence of any art. Art can have, and it really has, a political use, but only if it is allowed to exist. As the

deepest-working determinants of politics and art are very similar in the human mind – real *l'art pour l'art* is after all not possible. This approach permeates the whole discussion. A really poetic explanation of the seeming detachment of modern literature from radicalism, and politics in general, was given by Mihály Babits with a beautiful metaphor: “I believe that the poets who... retire from the disturbances of the political revolution are in fact... like huge clouds hanging from mountains bearing future lightning. They are lonely, withdrawn from parties and organizations, but still the leader is often among them. Lambs go in groups – the shepherd is alone but he has got his flute.”¹¹

The fine arts represent a far less important field of interest than literature for the members of the circle around *Huszadik Század*. Some 20–25 articles on painting in the forty volumes of the review are devoted to the social status and conflicts of artists and much less to the problems of aesthetic qualities. The artwriters of the review (first of all Lajos Fülep, the great creative artist Károly Kernstok, Géza Lengyel), of course, discover the parallels between the aspirations of the radical sociologists and the motivations of artists who initiated the splits in the world of Hungarian painting in 1908–1912 (the conflicts within the circle of Hungarian Impressionists and Naturalists; the formation of the group of The Eight). The break with an impressionistic world view, giving way to rationalism went well in accordance with the main profile of *Huszadik Század*. At the 1911 exhibition of The Eight two “literary evenings” were organized with the participation of Ady, Ignotus, Kosztolányi and Jászi – but there was no cooperation of any kind. The extremist radicalism of the activists (Kassák, *A Tett, Ma*), the other new striking phenomenon in the world of fine arts in Hungary during the later 1910s pointed in directions which were very alien to the “bourgeois radicals”.

More had happened in Hungarian music-life during the first dozen years of the 20th century than during two previous centuries – argues Zoltán Horváth, the author of the comprehensive work which first gave a fair and proper evaluation of the achievements of the “second Hungarian reform-generation”.¹² *Huszadik Század* showed little of these changes. Its limited interest in music is similarly motivated as its understanding of literature and the fine arts: Valéria Dienes, Antal Molnár, Géza Csáth deal with the social role and function of music though some of their articles shed light on some psychological aspect of music as well. It is in this context that Géza Csáth takes note of the publication of a collection of folk-songs by Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók in *Huszadik Század* in 1907.¹³

The new avenues opened up by *Huszadik Század* in the social sciences and politics, by the group of The Eight in the world of fine arts, by the new

Hungarian Music Association and Bartók and Kodály in music were, indeed parallel efforts. Many contemporary sources (letters, memoirs) show personal connections, mutual appreciation; but even more evidence proves that – to use Ady’s wonderful metaphor – the little streams of honest Hungarian intellectuals towards Jászi and his *Huszdik Század* did not add up to a fast-flowing river which would have been able to sweep away bastions of conservatism. I believe that the recollections of Ödön Márffy show a realistic picture of the mutual relationship of the various branches of modern Hungarian culture: “In November 1912 Bartók came to see the exhibition of The Eight. Berény invited Ady. They had not met before though by this time Bartók had already set some of Ady’s poems to music. I introduced them to each other. Ady did not know much about music – he was satisfied with gipsy-music. Bartók did not know much about painting. They just shook hands and exchanged some polite words... Ady instinctively respected Bartók – he was fully aware of who Bartók was. They spoke little – just kept looking at each other.”¹⁴

The parallel (but not joint) efforts, aspirations add up to an attempt at the modernization of Hungarian cultural life and at the same time give a true picture of the crisis phenomena of their social, political and cultural environment. The representatives of modern social sciences and the key figures of modern art and literature were reliable observers, often cogent analysts of numerous problems – but not at all the makers of the crisis of early 20th century Hungary.

Notes

The best introduction in English to these problems is John Lukács, *Budapest, 1900. A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture* (New York, 1988).

1. Oszkár Jászi, “Zola, mint szociológus” (Zola as a Sociologist), *Huszdik Század*, 1907, II, p. 478.
2. *Huszdik Század*, 1907, I, pp. 66–71.
3. The colleague was Dezső Szűts. His recollections are quoted in Miklós Kovalovszky: *Emlékezések Ady Endréről* (Memories of Endre Ady) II, (Budapest, 1971), p. 469.
4. Cf. Erzsébet Vezér, “Ady és a radikálisok” (Ady and the Radicals), *Irodalomtörténet*, 1977, 4, pp. 814–821. and Erzsébet Vezér, *Ady Endre* (Budapest, 1977), p. 171.
5. Pál Górn, “Ady Új versek című kötetéről” (On Ady’s New Poems), *Huszdik Század*, 1906, I, p. 353.
6. György Lukács, “Új magyar líra” (New Hungarian Lyrics), *Huszdik Század*, 1909, II, pp. 268–292.
7. *A nemzeti államok kialakulása és a nemzetiségi kérdés* (The Formation of Nation States and the Nationality Question) (Budapest, 1912). Ady’s review in *Nyugat* 1912, I, pp. 835–837.

8. Ady's words cited from his review of Jászi's book mentioned in Note 7.
9. Published in *Huszadik Század*, 1912, I, pp. 666–680; 797–807; II, pp. 309–326.
10. *Huszadik Század*, 1912 (I), p. 668.
11. *Huszadik Század*, 1912 (I), p. 807.
12. Zoltán Horváth, *Magyar századforduló* (Hungarian Turn of the Century), (Budapest, 1961).
13. Géza Csáth, "Jegyzetek a zeneművészet fejlődéséhez" (Notes on the Study of the Evolution of Music), *Huszadik Század*, 1907, II, p. 592.
14. Quoted in Lajos Németh, ed., *Magyar művészet* (Hungarian Art) 1890–1919, Vol. I. (Budapest, 1981), p. 557.