

**THE IMPACT OF RULING IDEAS
OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES
UPON THE STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES
OF MODERN STATES***

PÉTER TAKÁCS

Department of Jurisprudence and Theory of State

Telephon number: (36-1) 411-6507

e-mail: tuddh@ajk.elte.hu

This lecture was about the influence of certain ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries upon the modern state. We can term these ideas ‘ruling’ or ‘politically dominant’ ideas. The title of my lecture might have reminded many you of a classical, and one of the most important books in Hungarian political science, published one hundred and fifty years ago. It is entitled *Der Einfluß der herrschenden Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts auf den Staat* – which could be translated into English as *The impact of ruling ideas of the 19th century upon the state*. It was published by József Eötvös, a well-known Hungarian statesman and scholar; he scrutinized the influence that *has been made*, and *could be made*, by three ideas – namely: liberty, equality and nationality – on the development of modern state.

Since my research project was heavily influenced by this book, at the very beginning of my lecture I indicated the relationship of my theory to that of, let me say with some conceit, my predecessor. My point has, undoubtedly, corresponded to, and was in accord with Eötvös' consideration that some ideas made decisive impact on the structure and activities of modern states in a definite period of European social and political history (namely after the French revolution).

* This is the English summary of a so-called habilitation-lecture [*Habilitationsvorträge*], delivered at the Faculty of Law, University of Eötvös Loránd, Budapest, in Hungarian (March 4, 2004). According to the habilitation-rules of the University the lecturer should summarize and recapitulate the main theses of a lecture held in Hungarian in a language of international scientific communication, eg. in English, German or French, etc. In editing the text of this recapitulation I tried to preserve both the character of this special type of presentation (namely the summary), and the style of the spoken language.

My attitude towards this classical theory is, however, somehow ambivalent. On the one hand I accepted his view, firstly, on the political role of certain concepts [*Begriff*] and values, secondly on the relationship between interest and ideas [*Idee*], and thirdly, even on *the inner logic and structure* of ideas. On the other hand, however, I think, firstly, that it is more sensible and useful to speak of certain *systems* of ideas, secondly, to analyse the *way of thinking* and argumentation characteristic of representatives of these systems, and finally, to give a general overview of the practical influence of these ideas on the institutional structure and activities of state. So, in spite of the agreement of the basic ideas and some coincidence of thoughts, I did not strive for continuing, extending or expanding Eötvös' theory in the sense of surveying the developments of the last one and half centuries. So I did not want to expand his theory, but rather to build up my own, make use of this classical work as inspiration.

In this lecture I examined and discussed four dominant systems of ideas – namely liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and nationalism. I tried to show that they have profound and enormous effects in modern political arrangements, including the state. What we call 'liberal state', 'conservative political order', 'communist state', 'welfare state', and 'national state' – so all the forms of state orders – were *inspired, initiated, and built up* on the basis of these ideas.

As parts of this discussion I have touched on five topics. Firstly, I tried to determine and circumscribe the *concept* of the ruling ideas or systems of ideas [*der Begriff der herrschenden Idee*]; to fix and specify their scope and nature; and to mark them off from the different kinds of other intellectual traditions. Secondly, I made efforts to explore the *way of thinking, values, and argumentation* characteristic of representatives of these systems (relying extensively on the so called sociology of knowledge, initiated by Karl Mannheim, another Hungarian scholar). Thirdly, I have dwelt upon the different views of and approaches to political and state activities in the liberal, conservative, socialist and nationalist mind (this difference I have called the 'different perception' of state). Fourthly, I examined the considered visions of a well-ordered state [the 'ideal state'], expounded by scholarly representatives of the ideas under discussion. And fifthly and finally, I said a few words on the *institutional structure* and processes of the modern European state, pointing out the practical effect of liberal, conservative, socialist and nationalist movements of the last two centuries.

The 'ruling ideas'

How can we understand this very special term, used generally only in Hungarian state theory and political science? As far as I know there is no proper equivalent to it either in the German or English languages. In translation the German – instead of using Eötvös' phrase [*herrschende Idee*] – would probably circumscribe this phrase, for example, with the words „*Ideensystem als Bezugsrahmen der Politik*”, and the English would say that a ruling idea is somehow a „*politically dominant value and thought*”.

In my view this term may be conceived and understood as certain thoughts and intellectual phenomena, (i) which *summarise* and *express* in a compressed form certain – real and contingent – *principles* of modern social and political organizations; (ii) which might be regarded as *systems of values*; (iii) which could be *models* for *identification* both for individuals and groups; (iv) which provide and supply *patterns* for social activities and understanding of social and political life (in this respect they could serve as patterns for understanding, interpreting and theorising the modern state); (v) and finally, which afford different *viewpoints* and possible approaches for scientific analysis of the modern state. In this respect they are starting points for building up theories of states.

One of the most important theses of my lecture is that ruling ideas exerted their influence *in four different fields* of political life and state activity. I termed this influence 'institutionalization', or objectivation, whereas the British would say that these ideas have taken shape and material substance in four different forms, or they would say that these ideas are *organised, established* and *consolidated* in four different ways: (a) they form political practice; (b) they shape perception of state and political processes, and in this way they play an important role in constructing scientific theories of state; (c) they result in ideologies (which is their most widely acknowledged and sometimes misunderstood role); and finally (d) they are expressed in political projects (e.g. in plans of public administration, criminal law reforms, and so on).

When I stated that explication the scope and nature of these ideas is indispensable for the evaluation of the main tendencies and development of the modern state in the last centuries, by this I did not say – and I would not go as far as to say – that the modern state could be, or should be analysed exhaustively or exclusively in this conceptual framework, namely in the conceptual framework afforded by these systems of ideas. There are many other conceptual frameworks and approaches improved and applied by modern state theory. E.g. the relation of law and state could be grasped far more exhaustively and profoundly in terms of the *Reine Rechtslehre* (*pure theory of law*) initiated by Hans Kelsen. But it has nothing to do with the fact that the conceptual framework afforded by these systems *may be, and can be* useful for the general *scientific* analysis of state.

So, ruling ideas can be regarded, at the same time, *both* value systems *and* a conceptual framework for scientific analysis. This means that a theory of state, explicated within this framework, can be an immaculate scientific theory, even though it gives only a partial description of its subject. This point raises some important questions that need some elucidation.

One of them can be formulated in the following way: in what sense can we say that these theories of state (namely: theories explicated and expounded in the conceptual framework offered by ruling ideas) are *scientific* theories *if* their descriptions are unavoidably *partial* in the sense that they give partial analyses and interpretations or explanations of their subject. In this respect I have emphasised that a partial scientific description of a subject is not, or is not necessarily tantamount to partiality in the sense of *bias* (as it frequently happens in the field of political ideologies). As a result of this, I have proposed treating these theories as parts of a whole, analysing them in their mutual relations, and considering their merits in the light of each other. I have called this method a *synoptic* approach.

The second problem is connected to the relationship between social science and ideology. This problem I resolved – or at least hope to – by saying that the difference between science and ideology is, in many ways, a *functional* (and not *substantial*) difference. The *same utterance* might be part of a scientific statement in one context and with one meaning, and part of an ideology, in another context with another meaning.

Ways of thinking and different perceptions of state

As to the second and third parts of my lecture I have examined and analysed the typical intellectual inclinations of various authors *towards the validity of certain truths*, and in this respect I stated that liberal and socialist theories are *universalistic* in that they suppose: certain truths (concerning state affairs) may have universal validity, based on the *unity of human nature* (in case of liberalism), or based on *historical necessity* (in case of some socialist theories). These theories can be distinguished, furthermore, on the basis of their inclination *towards individualism*, since liberals assert moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collective; whereas all others assert an axiological, historical or moral primacy of certain collectives against the claims of individual rights. And finally, liberalism, seems to be *meliorist* in its affirmation of the improbability of all political arrangements, including arrangement of state affairs; socialism and nationalism seem to be *perfectionist* in supposing that social and state arrangements can be brought up to complete and absolute perfection, whereas conservatism seems to be neither meliorist, nor perfectionist; but

it is rather *sceptic* as far as improbability of political and state arrangements are concerned. For this reason conservative politics is sometimes called ‘politics of imperfection’, as the title of Anthony Quinton's book suggests.

In the case of perceptions of state, I tried to show that liberal theories of state are – basically – *theories of institutions*, in that they usually focus on the institutional structure of modern states; conservative theories – basically, but not exceptionally – analyse the *operation* of institutional frameworks; socialist and nationalist theories are – in the first place – interested in the *power structure* behind the façade of institutions, and they are very sensitive towards the real and possible violence supposed to be against their interests.

Conceptions of the ‘ideal state’

In this lecture, unfortunately, I did not have the time to explore the problems of an ideal state, but enumerated them in short: these are the liberal ‘minimal’ and ‘limited and neutral’ state; the conservative ‘personal state’ (creating the 19th century's so-called organic conception of state), and finally – the socialist ‘welfare state’ and so-called ‘soviet state’. I managed, however, to say something about the nation-state.

I distinguished five meanings of nation-state elaborated partly by nationalist authors, partly by others. The first meaning is the *ethnically homogeneous* state. This concept served as an ideal for nationalist politicians for one hundred years. In the second half of the 20th century, however, nationalism turned toward ethnical heterogeneity, expressed partly in institutional structures, such as ‘regional state’, partly in ideals such as patterns of multiculturalism. The second meaning of nation-state, I discerned, is the *territorial state*, which means that territorial principles work as political principles. There is third meaning, or rather concept, of nation-state, which I would call *nation-state in the economic sense*. This means that the political principles and institutional arrangements of state activity are anchored *in* economic necessities. A fourth, possible, meaning of the concept is connected to the *principle of legitimation*. In this case state is *not an institution*, but an axiological *relationship*, based on the mutual recognition of citizens, and recognition of superiors by citizens. And finally we have a *politically understood* nation-state, which unites ‘people and nation’ (or the *Volk und Nation*). Both the French and the German interpretation of this state leans to democratic ideals (and this is the reason I call it ‘political’), but in different ways. At the core of the German concept there is something „*völkisch*”, or „*volknationale*” – in the sense of common culture and origin – and democracy means that the people [*Volk*] are united by one person, and his unity is expressed by his will. The French concept, on the other hand, is based on the

idea that ‘people’ may become a ‘nation’, not on the basis of common origin, but on the common features of citizen status, e.g. on the basis of sharing the same rights.

In conclusion, I raised the usual and customary question concerning the influence of these ideas in our days. Do they have, even now, similar influence as they had a hundred years ago? My answer is: certainly not.

After the totalitarian experience of 20th century Europe we are doubtful and sceptical about the radical and extreme forms of political movements, and with them, about the ideas that lie behind them. Consequently ruling ideas became much more moderate in their nature and confined in their scope. They do not *fight*, but simply *compete* with each other. Their force has surely decreased, but I would not say that it has completely diminished. We do not like to admit that our judgements are – in many cases and in many respects – under the influence of these ideas. So in my view we live in the age of ‘ruling ideas’ started with the French revolution, and the only thing we can say – with some confidence – that we may be witness to the end of this age.