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National Narcissism

*The intersection of the nationalist cult
and gender in Hungary*

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Introduction

This book is not about Hungary, which joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, nor is it about the average Hungarian, who at that date received the well-deserved acknowledgement that the country has truly rejoined the West from which it was so brutally separated by dictatorial regimes. Instead this book is an attempt to expound upon a theory on the nature of nationalism, through a series of sketches focusing on extremist nationalism as it is expressed in Hungary.

Hungary's misfortune in the past has been that a minority ruling the country through dictatorship underpinned by one messianic utopian belief-system or another has determined its citizens' lives. While this book has something to say about the influence of the past, and although its focus on nationalism may seem pessimistic and negative, there is little reason to believe that the cultic beliefs described here will do more (or less) damage in Hungary than they cause in countries elsewhere in the European Union.¹

Nationalism, which exists in every state, is not always a pleasant topic to study. It is difficult for a researcher to approach without offending those who are intensely patriotic, especially if that researcher is not a native of the nation in question. Perhaps this is part of why nationalism in many countries has attracted so little attention in the English speaking world, except after it has proven to be dangerous, or has given rise to conflict.

At the end of the Second World War Munro Chadwick, a fellow of Cambridge's Clare College, published a book on European nationalism. He wrote:

'My purpose is to call attention to the need for more knowledge, not only of national movements – their characteristics and causes, and the ideologies asso-

1 On the role of the extreme right in the European Union, see: Tim Bale, 'Cinderella and Her Ugly Sisters: The Mainstream and Extreme Right in Europe's Bipolarising Party Systems', *West European Politics*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2003), pp. 67-90; and Roger Griffin, 'From slime mould to rhizome: an introduction to the groupuscular right', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 37 (2003), no. 1, pp. 27-50.

ciated with them – but also, and more especially, for more knowledge of the nationalities themselves. I believe that the mistakes made by British policy in the past have been due in the main to the ignorance of foreign peoples, including the non-British peoples within the empire.²

He went on to say:

‘No question in our time has given rise to more unrest in the world than that of nationality. The question abounds in complications which are often difficult to understand. Yet no question of any importance has had less attention paid to it in this country.’³

Since that time a great deal of research has been dedicated to nationalism in the general sense, and yet blank spots still remain, particularly regarding nationalism in individual countries. About right-wing extremism and its impact on democratic consolidation in eastern Europe, a researcher wrote: ‘So far, only a few essays and contributions to edited volumes have addressed the topic; most of the literature is journalistic rather than academic, and country-specific rather than comparative.’⁴ This was echoed by a Hungarian political scientist, who noted: ‘The paucity of empirical data related to extreme right-wing and populist tendencies in this region is striking. While similar tendencies are well documented in western Europe, in central and eastern Europe there is essentially no money for broad-based empirical research.’⁵

Fortunately, the body of empirical research on this topic in Hungary is growing, and much data is published in the most openly available of forums – newspapers – reflecting Hungarians’ own concern with extremism in their country. In this, as in so much else, Hun-

2 H. Munro Chadwick, *The Nationalities of Europe and the Growth of National Ideologies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1945), p. vii.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

4 Michael Minkenberg, ‘The Radical Right in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations’, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2003), pp. 335-362 (335).

5 József Bayer, ‘Jobboldali populizmus és a szélsőjobboldal Kelet-Közép Európában’, *Eszmélet*, no. 55 (Autumn 2002), pp. 69-92 (note, p. 92).

garians show their similarity to their fellows living in countries farther to the west.

The essays in this book offer a theory of nationalism, while also striving to fill a small part of the space neglected by authors writing in English thus far. Those who read this work as indicative of Hungarians' strangeness or radicalism will have missed the point. Hungarians, and the other nations in central and eastern Europe for the most part have proven to be no more radical than their compatriots in western Europe. As an expert on right-wing extremism in Europe has said about the results of fifteen years of comparisons between extremist political parties in the west and east:

'...racist extremist parties are not really a major political force in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, if compared to their "brethren" in Western Europe, they look somewhat pathetic: (far) more extremist, but (far) less successful.'⁶

Theorists of nationalism are commonly divided into two sets of two camps. On one side of the first divide are those who stress the positive sides of nationalist identity, traditionally called patriotism, that can take the form of a civil religion (a term first used by Rousseau) through which individuals venerate the state and the nation, thus gaining a feeling of solidarity with their fellow citizens that encourages them to make personal sacrifices for the common weal. In the opposing camp are those who feel that any form of national attachment – no matter how it is called – inevitably leads to discord and discrimination. In simpler terms, there are those who define patriotism as good, or rather point to the positive effects of the civil religion, while others point out (correctly) that what is 'good' is entirely subjective, and that even extreme nationalists – the most fervent (indeed, fanatical) followers of the civil religion – are convinced that they are acting for the good of their community.⁷

6 Cas Mudde, 'Central and Eastern Europe', in Cas Mudde (ed.), *Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 267-285 (269).

7 John Keane, for instance, implicitly defines nationalism as a (negative) by-product of (positive) national identity that can be minimized. See his 'Nations, Nationalism and the European Citizen', *CSD Perspectives*, no. 2 (Autumn

The second division pits the camps of primordialists versus the constructivists. This division arises out of the debate on the historical origins of nationalism, which I will not discuss in depth here, as nationalism in this book is taken as an existing given in society today.⁸ Primordialists are those who describe the ancient roots of nationalist identities, while constructivists point out that just as nationalism is a relatively new historical phenomenon, national identities and histories have been newly invented, and are in any case imagined in the sense that our belonging to such a disparate, large and abstract communal group as a nation is imagined. Those who search through this book for a position on the primordial or the imagined (constructed) nature of the national community may be disappointed. National identity exists, in a very real sense, for citizens of states everywhere. Whether that identity is solely constructed or arises from earlier forms of group affiliation does not concern me here – indeed, the distinction between the constructivists and primordialists has been overblown. Some nations may well be able to entirely ‘invent’ a nationalist tradition, while others (Hungarians among them) have an ancient tradition of aristocratic patriotism to draw upon in the building of their modern nationalist cults.⁹ Munro Chadwick pointed out that amongst the

1993). For an overview of the debates on civil religion, see: Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion: The intersection of culture, religion and politics* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001). For a short, passionate defense of patriotism, see Yael Tamir, ‘Reflections on Patriotism’, in Daniel Bar-Tal and Ervin Staub (eds.), *Patriotism in the Lives of Individuals and Nations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1997), pp. 23-41. For a critique of theories of positive aspects of patriotism, see: Nenad Mišević, *Nationalism and Beyond: Introducing moral debate about values* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), *passim*.

8 The debate on when nationalism arose is nicely summarized and supplemented by John Breuilly, ‘The State and Nationalism’, in Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (eds.), *Understanding Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 32-52.

9 The distinction between the two ‘schools’ is overblown. For a refreshingly early argument that nationalism may be invented from scratch in some places, and have a venerable, organic historical development in others, see: Luis Díez del Corral, *The Rape of Europe*, translated by H.V. Livermore, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 220-255; and Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and*

Hungarians ‘nationalism of the modern type first showed itself – in 1780 – and it is still at least as strong there as in any other country in Europe.’¹⁰

The histories of the development of nationalist myth are exciting and interesting, but in their own way they can lead to a strange misperception of the beliefs held by the nationalist faithful. Those who believe they can overcome myth by exposing its constructed nature or falsehood misunderstand the nature of faith. To people who faithfully believe, proofs are irrelevant. Faith is neither shaken nor strengthened by proofs of the origins of national traditions.¹¹ Whether the traditions nationalists build on are imaginary or have a venerable history is rather irrelevant to a nationalist’s own view of social reality (and this work focuses on the individual nationalist and his or her faith).

Mythical traditions and histories of origin are common to all known societies. Serious constructivists understand that nationalist tradition borrows from older tradition and myth; but each generation reinvents its own tradition using what has been transmitted to it and forced upon it by circumstance.¹² And no serious primordialist argues

States: An enquiry into the origins of nations and the politics of nationalism (London: Methuen, 1977). For a brilliant demonstration of the invention of tradition, see: Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A study in tradition, myth and drama* (London: Methuen, 1936). One of many works on the historic roots of Hungarian nationalism is Jenő Szűcs, *A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása* (Budapest: Balassi, 1997). On invented traditions and national identities in general, see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalisms* (London: Verso, 1983); and Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The medieval origins of Europe* (Princeton: PUP, 2002). On the venerable roots of nations and nationalism, see: Anthony D. Smith, ‘The Formation of National Identity’, in Henry Harris (ed.), *Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 129-153.

- 10 H. Munro Chadwick, *The Nationalities of Europe*, p. 44. Also see Emil Niederhauser, *The Rise of Nationality in Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Corvina, 1981), pp. 195-208.
- 11 On the irrelevance of proofs, see: Steven Cahn, ‘The Irrelevance of Proof to Religion’ (1969), reprinted in Paul Helm (ed.), *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 357-361.
- 12 Hobsbawm admits, but neglects the use of the old in the construction of new traditions: ‘How far new traditions can thus use old materials, how far they may

that children are encoded with their cultural and ethnic identities and traditions at birth or that they literally receive them through their mother's milk; instead they receive them through their upbringing, their cultural milieu, and their education.¹³ And perceptions of the world differ from person to person, even in the same culture, depending on individual differences in upbringing, education, and individual personalities. Indeed, all social identity is in a sense constructed, so that to say that national identity is constructed is trivial.

For an example of how perceptions differ – if you are British, consider attitudes toward the British Empire. Some of your neighbours may believe that the Empire was a glorious episode in national history with some dark spots, but otherwise a marvellous historical adventure that fills them with patriotic pride. The mother of a family living across the street from you may see the Empire as a shameful episode full of iniquities that has done much to put the world in the dreadful state it is in today. While the father of that same family may admit the iniquities of Empire, but considers it to have brought some good to the world and feels that we cannot know whether the world would have been better off without it. The only common point amongst them is that they 'remember' the empire as part of their nation's history, although (unless they are very old) it is unlikely that any of them had any deep personal experience of it.

Hungarians, who went through a change of system and of historical representation so very recently (a change that continues today), also have a variety of contradictory individual views about their own national history, even about which aspects of it should be remembered, and not just how. A recent survey revealed just how very differently individual Hungarians regard certain aspects of their common history. It measured attitudes toward the commemoration of April 4, the date of the end of the Second World War when the Soviet Army

be forced to invent new languages or devices, or extend the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits, cannot be discussed here.' Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), pp. 1-14 (7).

13 On this point, see short section in: Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution', in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 259-260.

drove the Nazis out of Hungary, but also started what was to be a long occupation of the country. In the war Hungary had been Germany's ally, but at the end of the war when the Hungarian head of state tried to withdraw from the war (after the Soviet Army had entered the country) the Germans had overthrown the Hungarian government, had installed a puppet government headed by Ferenc Szálasi, a Hungarian fascist, and had (along with the Szálasi government) begun the process of rapidly exterminating Hungary's remaining Jewish citizens – that is, those who had escaped the mass deportations the Germans had carried out assisted by previous Hungarian governments. According to the poll Hungarians are roughly equally divided amongst three different historical interpretations of what the Soviet victory meant. Roughly one third of Hungarians see the Soviet victory as 'liberation'. Another third of Hungarians view the Soviet victory as 'occupation', while the last third of Hungarians consider the victory to be both liberation and the beginning of occupation.¹⁴

Such variation in the interpretations of individual historical events occurs because of the difference in upbringing and personal experience amongst individuals from the same nation. If you multiply the differences in interpretations by the potential number of symbolic historic events, along with the limited knowledge each person has of his or her own nation's history, you can get some idea of how difficult it is to make accurate generalizations about national perceptions.¹⁵ This small glimpse into attitudes towards a single historical event (Soviet liberation, or occupation) illustrates the variety of ways in

14 Data from: István Riba, 'Keressük a szót', *HVG*, 7 May 2005.

15 Four studies in particular expose the variety of interpretations of historical events in Hungary, and their changing nature over time: Alice Freifeld, 'The Cult of March 15: Sustaining the Hungarian myth of revolution 1849-1999', in Nancy Wingfield and Maria Bucur (eds.), *Staging the Past: The politics of commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the present* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2001), pp. 245-275; András Gerő, *Képzelt történelem* (Budapest: PolgART, 2004), *passim*; Heino Nyysönen, *The Presence of the Past in Politics: '1956' after 1956 in Hungary* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1999), *passim*; and István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of post-communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), *passim*. Seductively concealed within Rév's text is his own interpretation of Hungarian history, like an egg within an egg.

which individual families and groups transmit differing views of historical events across generations.¹⁶ Young people in their turn re-interpret what they have learned in an ongoing dynamic. Older motifs are transmitted from generation to generation, but they are also reinterpreted by individuals to fit their own individual world views. These views in turn may change over time based on what individuals absorb through popular culture, or learn from history books. Thus, nationalist tradition is invented and reinvented, transmitted and communicated every day – no matter whether its roots are truly ancient, or are of recent provenance. And thus the details of national identity differ from culture to culture and nation to nation depending on the milieu, history and traditions of each nation.

Yet despite all these differences the attitudes associated with nationalism (whether extremist or more banal) are so common that despite individual, cultural and national differences, we all can recognize nationalist attitudes when they are expressed – even (or especially) when they are expressed by a member of a nation other than our own. Allow me another simplistic example: We all notice the similarities between the chanting of *USA-USA-USA* at Olympic events, and (if we are lucky enough to recognize it) the *Ria-Ria-Hungária* favoured by Hungarian fans. We recognize the similarity not only in the form of expression, but also in the attitudes of those chanting. We also recognize that some Americans and some Hungarians are not chanting with their compatriots. We understand those who chant have made decisions as individuals to take up the collective chant, and we can understand what their motivations may be for chanting at that particular moment. The commonality of the emotions, their *ordinariness*, is in fact extraordinary. It appears unexceptional because we recognize the commonality. But this commonality in motivation and expression exists despite the fact that Hungary and the United States are very distant from each other in space, culture, and historical experience. This commonality appears in nations elsewhere even

16 Although dated, the following study underpinned the fact that in Hungary, just as elsewhere, a child's primary political socialization occurs in the family: Ildikó Szabó, *Political Socialization in Hungary: The duality of institutional and non-institutional processes* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 59-78.

though every nation is an individually unique historical and cultural construct. National myth and the cult of nation arise out of individual nations' cultures and histories. Yet we can notice similarities in the myths and cults despite the differences in national histories and cultures. The similarities may be so obvious, that we take them for granted. We take them for granted to such a degree that it is as if we felt that people have a natural need to chant their national slogan at international sporting events.¹⁷

Incidentally, the chant, *Hungária* is not only the Hungarian patriots' pronunciation of the name of their country in Latin (in Hungarian it is *Magyarország*), it is also their name for the female figure who personifies Hungary. In this, as well, Hungarian nationalism shows similarities to that of other countries, while also being unique, for just as Marianne is to France, John Bull to England, and Uncle Sam to the United States, so is *Hungária*'s depiction and treatment unique to Hungary (more on her later).

I believe that an examination of the attitudes and beliefs and expressions of faith by (the small group of) extreme nationalists in Hungary can benefit from a comparative examination of other similar belief systems in other countries. This work represents an attempt to describe, and measure the content of nationalist sentiments held in common by some individuals in Hungary, by comparing them with other similar sentiments elsewhere. This comparison is meant to show that while the external features of Hungarian nationalism may seem strange and foreign to non-Hungarians, they are in fact closely related to nationalist sentiments elsewhere. This exploration of the cultural milieu and individual psychology of national narcissists in Hungary is meant to help us recognize and understand extremist movements and ideas not only in central Europe, but also related forms elsewhere.

17 On sport and nationalism, see: William J. Morgan, 'Sports as the moral discourse of nations', in Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tamburrini (eds.), *Values in Sport: Elitism, nationalism, gender equality, and the scientific manufacture of winners* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000), pp. 59-73; and Alan Birner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: European and North American perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), *passim*.

My argument here is based upon four pillars. First, although each country is unique (and Hungary is certainly unique), the nationalism expressed in Hungary fits within the general pattern of European society and culture, and more generally, within the pattern of human behaviour in modern states worldwide. Second, nationalism here is analyzed as a religion, and as a religion, nationalism can be fruitfully examined using theories of religion to explore the sources its appeal to the nationalist faithful (amongst other things, such an exploration can suggest what needs nationalism might meet for the individual). Third, the purist faith of extreme nationalists is a form of collective narcissism, which – following others – I call *national narcissism*. Fourth, nationalism is not an atavistic remnant of an earlier, less civilized age that is doomed to wither away. Rather, it is my contention that nationalism is a somewhat amorphous, and dynamic belief system that can be (and continuously is) adapted to changes in society, while nationalism also shapes the trajectory of those changes.¹⁸

This study is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of Hungarian nationalist belief systems. Instead I have attempted to highlight specific topics to illustrate the points made above, and have limited the topics of my examination to extreme versions of the faith of nationalist narcissism. Each topic overlaps with the others at certain points, or around certain current themes, and each one of them reflects a belief in the nation, or rather a faith in the superiority of the nation. Each topic is also supplemented with data from surveys carried out amongst Hungarians and Serbs on particular aspects of their national identity.

In some of the specific examples I provide of Hungarian nationalism I have paid particular attention to the role of gender in nationalism. Many others have noticed that nationalist ideology is pervasively bound up with sexuality and gender. This is not because gender issues are more significant to nationalism than to any other field of human thought or society, but rather precisely because gender runs as an often unnoticed (or overlooked, because embarrassing) undercurrent in nationalist thought, *just as* it does elsewhere. The very universality

18 On nationalism as a dynamic, see: George Schöpflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The new politics of Europe* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), p. 168.

and commonness of gendered views ensures that they infuse the most basic aspects of our lives in ways that often go unnoticed. There is scarcely an area of social life in which gender does not play a role, and extreme nationalists, whose cult is based on a common social identity, are perforce compelled to incorporate gender and sexuality into their nationalist beliefs.¹⁹

How this work is organized:

Each chapter can be read as a separate essay independently of the rest of the book. The first chapter is theoretical, and should be skipped by those uninterested in theories of nationalism. It provides a general description of how theories on post-communism and nationalism have shaped external and internal perceptions of nationalism in central and eastern Europe, and expounds upon the four pillars described above. In the first chapter I also describe the logic underlying my approach, and lay out an argument about the benefits to be gained from taking nationalists at their word, and viewing nationalism as a religious system of narcissistic faith in the national collective.

The subsequent chapters are organized around specific themes of Hungarian nationalism. Thus, the second chapter is a discussion of a particular form of imagery related to Greater Hungary and the Trianon Peace Treaty.

This is followed by a chapter (3) providing a brief history of irredentism and the politics of identity in Hungary, and a review of the politics of one political party particularly associated with extremism in Hungary.

Chapter four discusses an extreme and not widespread form of the cult of the nation – belief in the divine and most ancient lineage of

19 For overviews of how infused nationalism is with gender and sexuality, see: Sam Pryke, 'Nationalism and sexuality, what are the issues?', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 4 (1998), no. 4, pp. 529-546; George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and abnormal sexuality in modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), *passim*; and Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate intersections, forbidden frontiers* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), *passim*.

Hungarians. The next chapter, five, gives an overview of Hungarian politics, highlighting the dilemma faced by Hungarian voters through a discussion of a right-wing government's attempt to recreate Hungarian national identity, and why that government, which tried to associate itself with nationalist sentiments, fell.

Chapter six discusses a particularly sensitive aspect of nationalism and gender, where I contrast traditional representations of gender as expressed in a nationalist religious festival with modern sexual morality and expressions of nationalism. This chapter also touches upon how sexuality in nationalism is related to politics of identity, fears of national extinction, and belief in national superiority.

Finally, chapter seven offers speculation on the potential of nationalism to adapt to and work within the European Union.

A note about terminology

I do not intend to take the reader through a Humpty-Dumpty tumble in which terms mean precisely what I want them to, and not what they are commonly understood to mean. However, throughout this book I have used a few general terms in a particular way. For the sake of clarity the reader should keep it in mind that I use the following terms consistently. Thus the term *nation*, as in 'the Hungarian nation', is simply understood here to mean those people who consider themselves to be Hungarian, and who are accepted by other Hungarians as such.²⁰ Nation is not used here in its other sense of also meaning country or state, depending on the intention of the speaker.

Nationalism can here be understood as a form of worship of the nation (a civic religion, if you will) that might also include the deification of the country in which the nation lives. The iconography and prophylactics of national symbols, national heroes, national holidays

20 The term 'Hungarian nation' is thus equivalent to the Hungarian term 'magyar nemzet'. I might have used the term 'Magyar nation', or 'Magyars' in English, as used by many before me. However, the Hungarian language has only one word for 'Hungarian', and I see no reason to make a distinction in English that is not made by the Hungarians themselves.

and nationalist historical narratives embellish this cult.²¹ While this cult does have positive aspects of increasing solidarity and social cohesion in general, for fanatics the cult can degenerate into a form of self-worship that denigrates other nationalities. In this sense, just as racism can be defined as a preference for (or even worship of) one's own race that includes the denigration of other races, extreme nationalism can be seen as a preference for one's own nation that includes the denigration of other nations. Because of the different meanings commonly associated with nationalism, the debate on civic nationalism and patriotism (which I prefer to avoid), and the overuse (indeed, abuse) that has hollowed out the term fascism, I have used the term *national narcissism* for the extremist cult of the nation.

21 This is the sense used by George L. Mosse who wrote of the festivals, rites and symbols of a 'secular religion' in *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political symbolism and mass movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars to the Third Reich* (New York: Meridian, 1975), p. 16.