"HUNGARIAN-IRISH NATIONAL PARALLELS" AS IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

MÁRTA PINTÉR

Abstract: *In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries leading figures of Hungary's and Ireland's public and cultural life produced texts which show an increased awareness of similarities in their countries. Some decades ago outstanding Hungarian academics began extensive research into this phenomenon, which in turn gave birth to the concept of "Hungarian-Irish parallels." Whereas the validity of this parallel has been firmly established in literary studies, a more recent effort to draw parallels between Hungarian and Irish events indicating development towards sovereign nationhood has been challenged on grounds of historical accuracy.*

My paper examines mid-nineteenth century works by Irish nationalists that include references to Hungary, some of which have been used to prove the veracity of Hungarian-Irish national parallels. While also considering their historical accuracy, I will widen the scope of study by highlighting the ideological aspects of these references. My aim is to show that national parallels are ideological constructions which tend to reveal an effort of elevating one's own nation to the level of another European nation, where the latter is viewed as a model for the former in a given historical moment.

Key words: *Hungary, Ireland, nation, parallels, ideological construction.*

Introduction

At the beginning of his book *Ireland and Hungary. A Study in Parallels* (2001) Thomas Kabdebo states that the Hungarian idea of drawing a national parallel between the two countries originates from Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of a prolonged military campaign (1703-11) to gain independence from the Habsburgs. Although the fight for freedom eventually failed in 1711, at the hight of his success in 1707, Prince Rákóczi dethroned the House of Habsburgs in Hungary. According to Kabdebo (2001, p. 21), in justifying this act Prince Rákóczi drew a parallel between Hungary and Ireland arguing that Hungary's connection with Austria was constitutionally similar to that of Scotland and England, that Austria handled Hungary

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as England treated Ireland, that is, as a "conquered country" without "ever having conquered it."

Actually, this alleged parallel includes some historical inaccuracies. On the one hand, by the early 18th century the English crown had conducted several military conquests of Ireland, for instance, in the Anglo-Norman and the Tudor Times. On the other hand, the Habsburgs did claim that they had conquered Hungary with the liberation of the country from the Turks in the late 17th century. It is stating the obvious that political propaganda routinely relies on highly ideologised and thus simplified versions of reality to create powerful images. Kabdebo does not explore this aspect of Rákóczi's speech, and he does not consider the Prince's reasons for being historically inaccurate either, but he gives the following definition of what he considers a 'valid national parallel':

> Historical veracity of parallels […] does not depend on the minutiae of chronological, social or istituitonal or even economic details but on the similarity of situations. Parallels are drawn by active agents of the historical process who discover similar agents acting in a similar historical process. In that sense parallels are always discovered against not dissimilar backgrounds, in situations fairly akin, such as: 'method of rule,' dependency, 'empire building,' 'colonizing' or 'being colonized.' But, perhaps, the most relevant is the correlation of contexts: emerging nationalism, nationalism in its assertive phase, […] could bring two geographically distant countries into a valid parallel. (Kabdebo, 2001, p. 29)

In his review of Kabdebo's book William O'Reilly (2003) claims that at the core of Kabdebo's effort to construct a narrative thread woven of Hungary's and Ireland's national histories there is a "persuasive version of historical memory." O'Reilly argues that this historical memory leads Kabdebo to over-simplifications and inaccuracies. It is, for instance, an over-simplified version of the Hungarian Revolution in 1848 that he uses "to underscore the similarities with the (largely failed) events in Ireland in that same year." In conclusion, O'Reilly encourages continued research into parallels between Hungary and Ireland but not so much in the field of historical parallels, which he finds strained at best, but rather in the area of literary parallels.

In an approach which I find alternative to Kabdebo's and O'Reilly's, I am going to examine mid-19th century works by Irish nationalists that include references to Hungary, and some of which are relied on by Kabdebo as well. While also considering factual reliability and historical accuracy, I will widen the scope of my study by shedding light on the ideological aspects of these references. My primary aim with this is to demonstrate that these "national parallels" are, in fact, ideological

constructions which reveal an effort of elevating one's own nation to the level of another European nation, viewed as a model in a given historical moment.

Thomas Darcy McGee's Irish-Hungarian parallel in his Narrative of 1848

Kabdebó (2001, pp. 23-25) says that Michael Doheny in *The Felon's Track* (1914) and John Mitchell in his *Jail Journal* (1913) made references to the Hungarian War of Independence.

Although Young Irelander Doheny did not actually write about Hungary in *The Felon's Track*, he was familiar with the Hungarian events because in 1852, in New York, where he fled after the Young Ireland insurrection, he welcomed Lajos Kossuth despite the fact that the Hungarian revolutionary's religious utterances were frowned upon by Catholics, and particularly by Archbishop Hughes of New York, the idol of the poor Irish in that city (O'Donnell, 1986, p. 9). However, the original 1914 edition of Doheny's book, subtitled *History of the Attempted Outbreak in Ireland Embracing the Leading Events in the Irish Struggle from the Year 1843 to the close of 1848,* included in its Appendices Thomas Darcy McGee's narrative of 1848, with some reference to Hungary. McGee was another leading Young Irelander, who escaped to the United States. But, unlike Doheny, who actively participated in the organization of the Fenian movement in America, McGee modified his political views and proceeded to Canada, becoming one of the first statesmen of the dominion and a member of the Government, until, in 1868, he was assassinated by an alleged Fenian for his denunciation of the movement.

Arthur Griffith (1914) explains in the Preface the inclusion of McGee's account of the period between July and September in 1848 by an attempt to improve correctness of information. It is also Arthur Griffith, who over half a century later reflects upon the failed insurrection as follows: "That it could have been successful, few will believe. But […] the insurrection if it grew to respectable dimensions might have forced terms from England" (Griffith, 1914, p. 8). McGee's description also includes an element of regret over wasted opportunities and in justifying his/their choice of the Sligo district for a strategic centre of the uprising, subsequently "abandoned without a blow"; he constructs the following Irish-Hungarian parallel:

> We could not but remember that this was the district chosen by Owen O'Neill after his arrival from Spain in 1645 and that it was here, he 'nursed up' […] the army […] which in Napoleon's opinion, but for the premature death of Owen, would have checkmated Cromwell. The ground once chosen by a great general for its natural capabilities may safely be chosen again, and usually is, as in Hungary for instance. The very posts and battlefields held and fought by Bem

> and Dembinski were the same whereon Huniad and Corvinus, four and five hundred years ago, fought against the Turks and Bosmens. Thus we had the sanction of a great example and the stimulus of an inspiring tradition to point to for the choice of ground. (McGee, 1914/1920, p. 128)

In fact it is strategic consideration or given military situtation rather than "inspiring tradition" which determines the choice of battlefield. In this sense McGee's parallel appears forcefully romantic. But his awareness of certain aspects of Hungarian history is worth noting. For instance, in 1442 János Hunyadi defeated the Turks at Nagyszeben, Transylvania (today Sibiu, Romania), and in March 1849 General Bem carried out a successful siege of this same town as part of his campaign of liberating Transylvania from the occupying Tzarist and Habsburg forces. Also in Transylvania, at a place then called Kenyérmező (now Cámpul Páinii, Romania), King Mátyás's army, led by Generals Báthory, Kinizsi, Brankovich, and joined by Serbian infantry and cavalry units, defeated a Turkish army in 1479.

After this brief look at historical accuracy, let us shift our focus to McGee's purpose for constructing this particular parallel and his reason for selecting these particular elements of Irish and Hungarian history in trying to explain what his compatriots might have considered a military blunder.

In an attempt of self-justification McGee seems to have accomplished an act of elevation: elevating the abortive Young Ireland uprising to the level of what Irish memory cherished as heroic pages of their fights against England. By drawing a parallel with the arrival of a force of Irish exiles from the Spanish Netherlands under the command of Owen Roe O'Neill to strengthen the Confederate Irish Catholic struggle against the Protestant English Parliament in the 1640s (see, e.g., Clarke, 1994, p. 200), McGee formed a ground on which he could integrate the Young Ireland insurrection into the canon of Irish national heroism. However, considering the futility of the event as well as the eventual escape of more organizers to America, there remained little chance that the Irish nation, let alone Europe and the world would ever look upon the Young Ireland insurrection as a remarkable act of national heroism. Therefore, McGee tried to elevate it onto a level where it could be associated with national freedom fights attracting European attention. And the Hungarian War of Independence, particularly with its heroic struggle against the Tzarist military might and its cruel oppression by the Habsburgs, appeared a most powerful option. All the more so since nationalist Ireland – as is reflected, for instance, in John Mitchell's *Jail Journal* – was aware of the Hungarian events.

On the other hand, it was not only the Hungarian Independence War of 1849 that McGee used for his parallel but its alleged precedents in Hungarian history: a propagated version of János Hunyadi's and Mátyás Corvinus's military achievements

in defence of Christian Hungary and of Christian Europe centuries earlier. In other words, McGee used a whole block of Hungarian national historiography and constructed a seemingly parallel block of Irish national history in order to elevate the Irish nationalist cause, with the Young Ireland insurrection included, onto a higher, probably European, level.

This parallel fits into the paradigm of efforts to build national ideology, and this act of elevation also includes an act of borrowing. In Enda O'Doherty's words:

> It is another paradox of nationalism that while the notion of distinction is pivotal (this people or nation is essentially different from that one and therefore should run its own affairs), there is nothing more international than the process of forming national identities. The French historian Anne-Marie Thiesse has written of the IKEA system, a kind of kit of essential or desirable items that furnishes national ideologues with everything they need to build their own, of course distinct, identities. (O'Doherty, 2012).

Thomas Davis's Hungarian-Irish parallel in his *Our National Language* of 1846

Another theme where we can find mid-19th century Irish references to Hungary was national language. The "agent" of this "parallel" was Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45), the leading intellectual of the fledgeling Young Ireland Movement, who, because of his early death in 1845, could not be witness to the European revolutionary wave of 1848.

Throughout the 19th century non-sovereign nations and nationalities increasingly began to underscore their demand and right for political autonomy by emphasizing their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. While loosening political as well as economic dependence on the Habsburgs remained the main objectives, cultural and linguistic sovereignty was also on the agenda of the Hungarian "Age of Reforms" from 1825 to 1848. The success of the Hungarian language movement was proved by the official recognition of Hungarian as a state language in 1844.

Whereas the revival of the Irish language became a central theme of Irish nationalist ideology at the turn of the 20th century, the recovery of the endangered native tongue was not an issue to nationalist Ireland in the first half of the 19th century, that is, to Daniel O'Connell or to most of the Young Irelanders (Pintér, 2008, pp. 189-192). As we know, of all the 1848 leaders Doheny was the only one who could both read and write in Irish (O'Donnell, 1986).

As an exception, Thomas Davis expressed deep concern over the language loss and proposed a programme for the revival of what he called "Ireland's national language." Davis also made references to the status of Hungarian and used the

achievements of the Hungarian language movement as an example which could be used by Irish language revivalists. In his *Our National Language* (1846) Davis contrasts a country which through experiencing language change becomes a real colony with countries which despite the loss of political freedom have preserved their native vernacular. "To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul," says Davis (1846/1998, p. 175) referring to Ireland's advanced Irish-English language-shift. Then he continues with regard to Hungary, where there is "sure hope" because the "speech of the alien [that is German] is nearly expelled" (Davis, 1846/1998, p. 176).

The theoretical foundations of Davis's ideas fit into a pattern of cultural nationalism first articulated by the German philosophers Kant and Herder, John Kelly claims (1998, pp. 5-7). Some of Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744-1803) famous statements, like "Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its forefathers?" (qtd. in Edwards, 1985, p. 24) are echoed by Davis: "A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river" (Davis, 1846/1998, pp. 174-175).

Writing about language and nation Benedict Anderson (1991) makes the observation that print language is what invents nationalism and not a particular language *per se*. In line with this Declan Kiberd (1996, p. 137) claims that "Irish, being largely part of an oral culture, was supplanted by English, the logical medium of newspapers, and of those tracts and literary texts in which Ireland would be invented and imagined." In fact, the importance of the printed version of a national language in shaping national consciousness was already realized by Davis. He emphasised that the absence of at least bilingual, Irish-English newspapers excluded Ireland from an international and European context and made the country a "backwater of England." Among countries set as examples for Ireland Davis (1846/1998, p. 182) referred to the multi-ethnic Hungary of the time, where "Magyar, Slavonic and German" all appear in print despite the very fact that Hungarian is the vernacular language of the majority population.

It is obvious that the position of Hungarian and that of Irish were remarkably different at the time Davis put his ideas to writing. In the early 1840s Irish had approximately 2,700,000 monoglot speakers (Pintér, 2008, p. 169), that is, less than half of the native population, with the upper and urban middle classes almost thoroughly anglicized. This also means that Irish became confined to the oral, non-official communication domains of the native rural people, until even these population groups abandoned it, reducing the proportion of monoglot Irish speakers to less than 1% by the turn of the 20th century.

By contrast, Hungarian had become a fully recognized European language and its path of development in the 19th century was the exact opposite of what was happening to Irish. Whereas it was the means of daily communication for people born Hungarian in all walks of their lives, following its official recognition large population groups of non-Hungarian origin also switched to Hungarian, making even the ethnically mixed towns of Hungary thoroughly Hungarian speaking in two or three generations (Nádasdy, 1999).

Regarding all this, the question arises why Davis used this factually invalid comparison between Hugarian and Irish, and applied the label of "national language" to Irish. Obviously, Davis understood the role of linguistic awakening in the formation of modern national consciousness, as well as the importance of national language in emphasizing the cultural-linguistic sovereignty of dependent nations, aspiring to political sovereignty. To this the Hungarian language movement gave a valid model. But, with respect to the linguistic component of constructing a culturally distinct Irish nation, Davis had to face a paradox: English was the majority language of Ireland and the language of their oppressors. Native Irish was distinct from English but its declining status did not actually entitle it to be a "national language." To resolve this paradox Davis resorted to the Herderian idea of an organic connection between a people and its native tongue, implying that Irish was the national language of Ireland because of its unique way to express Irish thought and imagination:

> The language, which grows up with a people is […] mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way. (Davis, 1846/1998, p. 173)

Davis's approach to the language issue was that of the cultural-linguistic nationalist's, and he viewed the role of language in national development, and a comparison between Irish and Hungarian, from this ideological perspective. Anthony Smith (1991, pp. 11-13) grasps the essence of the Irish phenomenon as follows: geneology and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions play an important role in the formation of a nation even if the ancient language and language revival has failed, like in the case of the Irish.

Furthermore, just like with McGee, with Davis I can also associate an effort to elevate the Irish nation. By setting the successful Hungarian language movement as an example for the Irish, Davis conveyed the message that – despite its critical status – the Irish tongue inherently possessed the potential of becoming a distinct national language, and that the accomplishment of this only depended on the decision of the Irish nation.

Conclusion

As my paper demonstrates the tradition of seeking similarities and parallels between Ireland and Hungary goes back to centuries. My findings also show that "Irish-Hungarian national parallels" do offer ground for social and political research, particularly because attempts at drawing parallels between two countries are always rooted in socio-political realities (see, e.g., Pálffy, 1987). But, as has been proved above, "national parallels," just like "nations," "national histories" or even "national literatures," should be viewed as, to some extent, ideological constructions, aiming to elevate one's own nation, often by means of internationalization, or Europeanization. Consequently, the investigation of international or European tendencies contemporaneous to the construction of the parallels should also be included in the reserach frame because of their importance as motivationg forces for the "agents." I propose this theoretical frame for further research into Irish-Hungarian parallels, made in the past or in the recent past.

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