

REEVALUATING PREVIOUS CONCEPTS OF “THE NATION”

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Abstract

In my hypothesis the concept of the nation is present, and it could be defined precisely in Széchenyi's work. The aim of my paper is to prove, or to cast way this hypothesis. My statement will be supported by quotes from Széchenyi. In my opinion our image and concept of the Hungarian nation has been made up by nation concepts like these. They come to the forefront more and more. Namely, the analysis of the nation concept of the “greatest Hungarian” could make us more aware of the genealogy of our Hungarian national consciousness.

Keywords: Sociology, politics, Hungarian, Széchenyi, nation, national

According to Gyula Szegfű in *The Széchenyi of Today*, people can carry great significance in time even if their actions do not provide posterity with any practical benefits. The life of a nation is not advanced by material gains; financial gain does not automatically carry a nation forward to new and more splendid heights. This is something which is achieved through the proliferation of thoughts and feelings connected to the community.³³

Even setting aside the practical achievements of Széchenyi (such as the construction of the Chain Bridge, the Academy, regulating the River Tisza, creating steamboat transportation on the Danube river and Lake Balaton for example), his persona still remains so decisive, that it is hard to find anyone similarly significant amongst the generations of Hungarians that followed him.³⁴ What he thought about the Hungarian nation is still something that deeply interests not only historians researching his life work and sociologists but all those who investigate what being Hungarian actually means. The answers to this question are many and controversial, whether it refers to characteristics of intellectual or public life. Indeed, we find radical

³³ SZEKFŰ, Gyula, *A mai Széchenyi*, Bp., Révai, 1935, 23.

³⁴ See, id. at., 23–24

forms of contradicting views merging in every important question relating to the definition of Hungarianness. *The answers are different and the thoughts often arguable.*³⁵ Even the dictionary definition of the word “Hungarian” sounds different and contradictory when uttered by different lips. And yet we must constantly question what being Hungarian actually means. In 1936 it occurred to the people working at the editorial of *Magyar Szemle* to publish a collection of essays on the topic. The idea was put forward by the very same Szekfű Gyula whom I have already mentioned. He believed the goal was “to mark the boundaries beyond with which the so-called Hungarian problem could be dealt with the light-mindedness of fantasy and poetry, but within which it would be possible to get closer to and understand the essence of Hungarianness with the help of objective methods and instruments.”³⁶

But when we are faced with different life works, and the different worlds connected to these, we are forced to acknowledge that the only thing we can get answers to is what being Hungarian and the Hungarian nation itself meant in a given age. This also means that providing an answer to the later question is therefore methodically and contextually possible.

My research essentially starts out from the problem posed by defining national characteristics. In my essay I will analyse and weigh the conceptual basis of the term nation and its connotations. While exploring the question I will demonstrate how Széchenyi used the term of the nation and what he himself meant by it.

In order to answer this, I will take a close look at some of his major works, mainly *Hitel* (Credit), *Világ* (The World) and *Stádium* (The Stage) but I will also turn briefly to some of his other writings. To be able to most appropriately interpret the way Széchenyi used the term in his works I will apply discourse analysis to support my assertions with examples taken from his texts.

I believe that our idea of what it means to be Hungarian, our present state, our knowledge, stems from such concepts of citizenship and that in fact there is a growing focus on these issues in current times. Investigating what “the greatest Hungarian” considered to be the essence of a nation can help us become conscious of the genealogy of how we have come to view being Hungarian today.

At the end of my essay I will analyze the significance of István Széchenyi in current times, in the same way Gyula Szekfű did when he reviewed the works of 'the greatest Hungarian'.

First of all I have to point out that the aim of Széchenyi's works was not to define the concept of the nation or describe it factually:

³⁵ Source: <http://mek.oszk.hu/05000/05049/html/gmbabitsmagyar0001.html>

³⁶ MISKOLCZY, Ambrus, „*Mi a magyar?*”, Századok, 1998, 6. sz.

“Now I wish only to discuss the subjects of money, commerce and economics and therefore these are in general the only topics that shall be touched upon. Whether it shall occur that I mix in anything else, I myself do not know, but it could easily happen...”³⁷

“I have been so bold as to present the public with four short pieces of work in the past five years. All of them were aimed at raising awareness and demonstrating that much improvement is urgently needed in terms of our constitution, our customs and the situation of our middle classes.”³⁸

Such a broad conceptual framework paves the way for possible misunderstandings. Therefore, (and also to prevent the analysis from becoming anachronistic) I must ensure that I do not in any way attribute thoughts to the author which he did not actually express either because he had no intention to or because a certain interpretation of his words was at the time not yet available to him.

I must also keep in mind that the meaning of certain keywords could have altered with time, and so the author might have been using them with a different connotation than would be attributed to them by a reader today.³⁹ Some terms might completely disappear from use or their meaning might change. Jorge Luis Borges refers to the definition constructed by Bertrand Russell which states that the objects of the outside world are none other than radiating circular systems of possible impressions. In connection to this Borges writes that “the same is true of any text, considering the incalculable reflections caused by words.”⁴⁰

The general definition of the concept of the nation.

By narrowing down the investigation of the concept of the nation to but one period - namely the Reform Age - we can eliminate the problems stemming from the shift in the connotation of the word through time. However it does not help us dispose of the threat posed by the confusion surrounding the concept itself which threatens each and every attempt made at investigating a certain notion within a historical context.⁴¹

³⁷ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel*, Bp., Neumann Kht., 2002. Forrás: <http://mek.niif.hu/06100/06132/html/index.htm> 20.02.2012.

³⁸ SZÉCHENYI István, *Stádium*, Bp., Neumann Kht., 2002. Forrás: <http://mek.niif.hu/06100/06135/html/index.htm> 20.02.2012

³⁹ See at Quentin SKINNER, *Jelentés és megértés az eszmetörténetben = A koramodern politikai eszmetörténet Cambridge-i látképe*, Szerk. HORKAY HÖRCHER Ferenc, Pécs, Tanulmány, 1996.

⁴⁰ See Jorge Luis BORGES *válogatott művei II.: Az örökkévalóság története*, Bp., Európa, 1999, 71.

⁴¹ See at Quentin SKINNER, *i. m.*, 17.

The first step therefore would be to establish an ideal version of the concept compared to which we can then reconstruct what the nation meant to the aristocracy in the Reform Age.

Even today there is no standard definition of what a nation actually is.⁴² There are a lot of disagreements, and there have been and still are several theories in connection with the phenomenon. There are but a few words which are used by as many and yet understood by as few as the words nation and nationalism.⁴³ According to a current broad encyclopedic definition a nation entails a politically coherent people capable of forming a power structure.

In the long line of works dealing with the issue of nationalism the volume titled *Ideas in politics: nationalism* without doubt occupies an illustrious place. In its attempt to explain the concept of the nation one can sense the pursuit of the *communis opinio doctorum*. It states that most people have come to accept that the nation is something that belongs in the realms of culture and/or social psychology.

To some who research the concept, the nation is a more or less artificial construction: it is an “imaginary society” (Anderson) which is sovereign yet constrained by limitations. Others consider it to be a vast, anonymous, cultural unit which switches off all mediatory factors (Geller). Still others consider it to be an ethnic group with its own consciousness (Connor). According to the cited authors therefore, the “nation” as the principle of sociocultural organization or a cultural concept must be strictly separated from the state, which is characterized as the autonomous public agency of a given group (Tivey).⁴⁴

From the point of view of the theory of science of course a number of other problems arise. We cannot forget that European history and political science itself differentiates between the objective and subjective versions of nation perception. The subjective (French) concept is pervaded by strong individuality, belonging to the nation; national unity is determined by

⁴² The so called Jürgens-report contained a section according to which there is no standard, generally accepted legal definition of the term nation in Europe. To clarify the problem the ETPK appointed György Frunda Romanian senator to investigate the question, prepare a report and draw up a draft proposal. The ETPK voted on the report and accepted the draft proposal on January 26th 2006. The report took a look at the constitution of 35 states regarding how they defined the nation and how the term was institutionalized. Besides this the General Assembly assessed whether the reevaluation and modernizing of the nation concept where appropriate could help in dealing with how to national minorities and the question of their rights in the 21st century. The Funda-report – contrary to the Jürgens-report – considered the cultural and political approach to the nation equally valuable.

⁴³ See at *Eszmék a politikában: a nacionalizmus*, Szerk. BRETTNER Zoltán, DEÁK Ágnes, Pécs, Tanulmány, 1995.

⁴⁴ See *id.*

personal choices and a sense of strong emotional attachment. In contrast to this, in the spirit of the German concept, the so-called objective concept of the nation is defined by objective traits such as origin of birth, language and history.

The level of awareness of independence shown by members of a nation, their faith in their uniqueness, what they believe about their merit and their sense of belonging, their feelings and self-consciousness all depend on ancestry, historical experience, traditions, independent language and culture. We must keep in mind that I am referring here to the 19th century French and German concepts.

According to another approach, differentiation exists between cultural nations and so-called state nations.⁴⁵ Marxism⁴⁶ for example, understands the nation as historical destiny. It is the historically evolved lasting proximity of humans which presupposes a shared language, public body, economics and culture.

It is not my aim to list here all the existing theories and definitions which were created in connection with this versatile concept. I have merely pointed to some of the existing arguments. And by doing so – prior to the in-depth investigation of the topic – I have also given the essay a general theoretical framework. No single definition of the nation can be the categorical imperative; it is however worth trying to identify the mentioned criteria when looking at the domestic academic approaches to the concept.

Historical, social, and political context.

If Széchenyi stated something intentionally, “it follows that any accurate description of his intended purpose can inevitably only be provided with the use of terms he himself could have used at least in theory to describe and categorize his actions.”⁴⁷

To be able to analyse the statements and works of the author, it is necessary for me to characterize the political and economic context of the

⁴⁵ The definition of “cultural nation” and “political nation” was invented to bridge the gaps in development for in these the whole of the historical progress could be accumulated. The two terms are equal, they express the same middle class based society but at the same time they acknowledge historical differences.

⁴⁶ “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content – here the content goes beyond the phrase.” Karl MARX, *Louis Bonaparte Brumaire tizennyolcadikája = Karl Marx és Friedrich Engels művei*, VIII., Bp., Kossuth, 1962 (Karl Marx és Friedrich Engels művei, 8), 102.

⁴⁷ Quentin SKINNER, *i.m.*, 11.

given age which in this case is the Reform Period. This is important since it provides us with relevant information regarding the limits of the society in which he lived.

It can also help us answer in what form the concept of the idea of nation had emerged in the given period, perhaps thus conveying the reasons for the author's use of the term. The term 'nation' can carry multiple meanings not only from an ideological point of view but also depending on the age in which it was used.

According to the general notion in the Reform Age, the form of nation based on the middle classes did not come into existence by simply abolishing the previous form which had been structured purely on the aristocracy. Instead, by broadening and somewhat reforming the existing framework, the nation came to incorporate a part of society which had previously lacked all rights. The dedicated reformers who wanted to renew the Hungarian society and economy aimed to win the villenage as their ally.⁴⁸ Their ultimate goal was to create a community by expanding the existing set of rights in which as many people as possible could live in freedom and financial security. They believed that the aristocracy-based community would thus have to be replaced by one which encompassed the whole of the nation.

In France, the process in which the different parts of society merged together to form a unified nation had already taken place by the end of the Middle Ages and in Western Europe citizenship and belonging to the nation was something that more or less overlapped. This meant that the nation as such was already understood as a state nation. In Central and Eastern Europe a number of peoples existed within the framework of a given state. The conversion of these groups into one nation and nationalism as the ideology which supported the process can be traced in their culture, most of all in the existence of a shared language community.

We can say therefore that the formation of the Hungarian nation basically carries traits typical of a culture state yet defying it as a single political body is what the uniquely Hungarian approach to the state nation derives from. This peculiarity is also apparent in the way liberal ideologies were only ever able to partially dissolve the tension arising as a result of the process which lead to the development of the nation.

According to István Bibó the basic problem of the historical Hungarian nation was that the language within the historical framework of the

⁴⁸ A villain did not belong to the noble based nation regardless of whether he spoke Hungarian or not. According to the rank oriented approach of the previous centuries every privileged member was a part of the noble based nation regardless of the language that he spoke.

state was only in part Hungarian and the different interests of the small nations were all simultaneously present.⁴⁹

After the expulsion of the Turks the Hungarians would still occupy the same historic territory as before, yet now they lived amongst groups of Germans, Slavs and Romanians who together constituted the majority of the people. Bibó believed the illusion professed by the representatives of different national movements has to be abolished. This is the belief that democratic freedom could possibly create national unity within the borders of Hungary.

This problem was heightened most by the events of the revolution and war of independence of 1848-49 when fighting against the Habsburgs became all the more difficult because the government simply could not establish a joint stance with any of nationalities living in the South and South-Eastern parts of the land. “Therefore Hungary, while fighting for freedom, found itself up against not only the backlash from the European powers but also the discontent of its own nationalities which eventually resulted in the catastrophe of 1849.”⁵⁰

We must add that academic literature distinguishes between three different approaches to Hungarian “nation-building”: The first one is defined as a structure-modernizing one; the second is referred to as the romantic-autopoietic type while the third is regarded as the etathist-position (statism) defending concept.

Széchenyi is considered to represent the first of the three as does, in a slightly different way, what is called the literary “Deák party” marked by the names of Eötvös and Csengery. The central figures of the romantic-autopoietic concept are Kossuth and Petőfi. The third large “nation-building” concept is represented by the Liberal Party of Tisza and the ideologists belonging to this political group.⁵¹

These different approaches will serve as my starting point. Keeping in mind the varied definitions of nation and knowing the political and economic context of the given society we could refer to them as the local focus points: power-knowledge-experience. In the next part of the essay I will try to find substantive similarities or analogous themes in the nation concept used by Széchenyi and those of other authors, while describing exactly how Széchenyi himself used the term.

⁴⁹ BIBÓ, István, *A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága* = B. I., *Válogatott tanulmányok 1945–1949*, II, Bp., Magvető, 1986, 203.

⁵⁰ See id.

⁵¹ KISS Endre, *Über die politische psychologie des stalinismus*, Forrás: <http://www.pointernet.pds.hu/kissendre/politikaelmelet/20041130151050685000000437.htm> 1 2004.12.01

Széchenyi's nation concept.

“Our life is a series of compliances. In other words, it is the school of forgetting.”⁵²

Before I start debating what the nation actually means in the light of the expressions used by Széchenyi, I believe it is important to highlight that in this case too we must reckon with the danger posed by a certain version of "conceptual parochialism" (Skinner). I am referring to the possibility of the analyst reproducing a certain argument by using parts of a text the author had originally constructed with a different intent by arranging these elements into a misleadingly familiar form after stripping them of their original context.

“A thought without its context can be understood only obscurely, if at all.”⁵³ That is why the ideas to be interpreted must be examined within their own textual context, the context of the complete work and the complete life work of Széchenyi. In other words, we must not examine solely the meaning of the words, but also how they were used.⁵⁴ In discourse analysis what is actually spoken must be reconstructed together with what is concealed within the communication. We must also pay attention to the position of the person speaking and to the institutional context of which he is a part.

Széchenyi did not belong to the great retrospective analysts. He accepted the given situation as a starting point and believed that the nation must leave its history behind.

“...a smart man does not look behind his back as often as he does ahead and instead of crying for his lost treasures he glances at and examines that which he has been able to save....(and having gradually become content therewith he strives to obtain more.) And yet still, many do weep for the good old times almost completely forgetting about the present, which is why they are unable to make wise use of it. Yet, excepting the charm of antiquities, nothing can make the times of our ancestors more desirable to us than the very days of our own lives.”⁵⁵ “There is no greater torment than reminiscing over happy days amidst misery we ourselves have caused.”⁵⁶ “And we should not want to summon back to life once again that which has already passed.”⁵⁷

But Széchenyi did not deny the importance of a shared past as a unifying force and one which can therefore contribute to the growth of the nation. He understood that it is a source of courage, one which creates a bond

⁵² Jorge Luis BORGES, *i. m.*, 48.

⁵³ STEIGER Kornél, *Lappangó örökség: Fejezetek a preszókratikus filozófia antik hagyomázásának történetéből*, Bp., Józseveg műhely, 1999, 9.

⁵⁴ Quentin SKINNER, *i. m.*, 18.

⁵⁵ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, *i. m.*

⁵⁶ SZÉCHENYI István, *Stádium...*, *i. m.*

⁵⁷ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, *i. m.*

and helps the rise of the middle classes. In this sense we see certain similarities with the nation concept used by Ernest Renan.

*“...underneath the dust of Visegrád and amongst the old walls of Buda the decor of our nation has already been buried, for the signs of such greatness can only inspire us with hope of the coming of a dawn more splendid.”*⁵⁸

*“...the many dangers, misery borne together, blood spilled for one cause binds together more strongly those who share one destiny, it brings the servant closer to his master, and so, when mankind has become thus more tame, more noble [...] let us once again warm up the heroic spirits of the middle ages but not so that we hunt each other locked away in castles and serve as the greatest obstacle to the rise of the middle classes.”*⁵⁹

It was Ernest Renan who perhaps most vehemently asserted the role of amnesia in the birth of a nation. In his essay titled *What is the nation?* he claims “forgetting, what more, historical misapprehensions are basic factors in the creation of a nation”.⁶⁰

The two nation concepts are also similar in the way they view the past. Renan defined historical events as elements which bind people and help the birth and strengthening of the nation. *“A heroic past, great men, glory (real glory) – these are the basic resources of society upon which the principle of the nation can be built.”* *“National soul: an intellectual principle...the only extreme kind of solidarity of which the sacrifices brought by our ancestors and those which we are ready to make twofold in the future constitute an important component. It assumes the past yet it is mounted in the present...”*⁶¹

Now that we have begun dissecting the role of history, it is worth lingering here for a moment. The dialectics of remembering and forgetting and the determining importance of these have been analyzed most extensively by Friedrich Nietzsche in his work titled *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Nietzsche refers his statements to a given people's, nation's historical consciousness. *“A nation needs history and it also needs the appropriate handling of the events of its history, yet without the ability to forget it is quite impossible to live at all.”*⁶² *“We would serve history only so far as it serves life; but to value its study beyond a certain point mutilates and degrades life: this is a fact, the experiencing of which in*

⁵⁸ See id.

⁵⁹ SZÉCHENYI István, *Stádium...*, i. m.

⁶⁰ Ernest RENAN, *Mi a nemzet?* = *Eszmék a politikában: a nacionalizmus*, Szerk. BRETTNER Zoltán, DEÁK Ágnes, Pécs, Tanulmány, 1995, 171–187.

⁶¹ See id.

⁶² Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *A történelem hasznáról és káráról*, Bp., Akadémiai, 1989, 31.

*connection to the marked symptoms of our time is as necessary today as it might be painful.”*⁶³ *“The fact that life needs the service of history must be as clearly understood as that excessive study of history damages the living.”*⁶⁴

To get somewhat closer to Széchenyi’s definition of the Hungarian identity we should also add to my essay a brief analysis of the conditions in which Széchenyi lived. It is easy to see that doing so is inevitable to fully investigate our initial topic. Besides trying to understand the texts and doctrines themselves we must also draw on the intellectual autobiography if we want to find an answer to what kind of connection exists between what the author said and what we believe he wanted to express with his words.⁶⁵

It is commonly known that his trip to England was what made the biggest impression on Széchenyi. *“He came to love the castles in the English countryside, the existence of order, discipline, rationality, the fact that everybody had rights and obligations, that everybody paid taxes, that there were no bondsmen in England who supported their masters, and that instead, everybody worked for himself, counted and traded for himself.”*⁶⁶ Széchenyi’s first plans for reform were therefore born mainly from his familiarity with the situation in Hungary and his desire to achieve the kind of better circumstances he had experienced abroad.

After returning home⁶⁷ he launched himself into Hungarian public life. Due to his aristocratic upbringing he discarded the views of the gentry, the nationalism of the nobles from the onset. Yet he would also differ in his opinion from his aristocratic peers in the way he believed that the revival of his own class could only be achieved by raising the whole of the people to prosperity.

Although he attacked the aristocracy with passionate words, he did so with the intent to improve his class for he believed that eventually it should lead the nation. *“We, the owners of land, should advance the economy, trade, we should explain the topics better and better, let us teach, let us enlighten each other, and let many of us join forces...!”*⁶⁸ He saw the aristocratic constitution as the biggest obstacle to development and the fact that the basic principles coded in it could not be changed. Rights were the

⁶³ See id. at 27.

⁶⁴ See id. at 37.

⁶⁵ Quentin SKINNER, *i. m.*, 13.

⁶⁶ SZEKFŰ Gyula, *i. m.*, 6.

⁶⁷ Széchenyi consciously prepared for the new life through self-improvement and trips abroad. His journey to England was what had made the biggest impact on him. Making use of his fresh experience and his own reflexions on these he would go on to draw on several of the issues of the Hungarian society in his works.

⁶⁸ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, *i. m.*

privileges of lords, while the bondsmen had to carry the weight of the obligations. Due to the unbridgeable distance between the classes a true nation, and national sentiment, could not be born.

Széchenyi emphasized above all else that the basis of a nation must without doubt be the revival of the economy but that the revival of the economy should not only be based on labour but labour well organized, directed by none other than sense and reason, “*educated brows*”. He believed “*work well organized, in other words, intellect, is the keystone of the national economy.*”

“... *the Almighty has granted us the chance to live in a century in which it is not boundless bravery, fired up imagination and physical strength which constitute the lasting corner stones of nations but the virtues of the bourgeois and the enlightened human mind [...] And a dark future will only manifest itself as carmine coloured in the distance if Hungarians evolve to perfection through non-other than intellect used to serve the interests of the public.*”⁶⁹

Besides the economy and well-educated people, Széchenyi also considered national spirit and individual national characteristics to form the basis of the nation. These were considered undeniably important so far as they did not obstruct the possibility for development and bar the course of progress.

He thus clearly committed to the thought that it is wrong to seclude the civilized foreign parts of the world, because doing so condemns the given country to poverty whereas financial growth is the necessary and indispensable condition of freedom. Freedom and property are mutually interdependent:

“*And new is not bad since it is new and could therefore be both good and bad. That which is Hungarian simply because it is Hungarian is not in itself right but can be either right or wrong. Therefore that which is foreign is not to be discarded purely on the basis that it is foreign, since it can either be disposable or acceptable. An old custom is not good simply because it is a custom nor is it something to be honored purely because it is old. It too can equally be either futile and immoral or sacred and wise.*”

“*Whatever we might say, all things progress through some form of borrowing and plagiarism, and everyone chooses a master, a role model, a prefiguration for him or herself even if not consciously.*”

“*The Romans imitated the Greeks, the French the Romans and the Greeks, the English the Greeks and the Spanish. – The Germans imitated all of them, and the nationality, however hidden it might have been, expressed to*

⁶⁹ SZÉCHENYI István, *Világ* = SZEKFŰ Gyula, *A mai Széchenyi*, Bp., Révai, 1935, 188.

some extent characteristics borrowed from others. We Hungarians have imitated the Romans and not so long ago the French, now we are doing the same with the Germans. And thank the Heavens that our uniqueness has not yet reached its peak and that the time of our literature has not yet run out as had that of the Spanish and the Italians while the English, French and the Germans are perhaps past their prime, for life is still ahead of us and not something of the past.”⁷⁰

Herder⁷¹ who is considered to be one of the forerunners of nationalism alongside Rousseau (even though many of his contemporaries had no faith in progress and also refused to consider the preservation of culture purely for the sake of its uniqueness a virtue) also mentioned this as possible courses for progress. It is Herder’s “*instruction*” to first absorb all of that which your own people can provide, because then you will be able to appreciate that which is foreign and be better able to profit from it. Do not imitate the foreigner and do not reject him – says Herder.⁷² As a starting point we can thus establish that Széchenyi considered the already mentioned strong basis (consisting of the Aristocracy, national spirit and uniqueness, educated people and a strong economy) to be vital to even begin to talk about such a thing as a nation.

“Those who plant trees most probably know in advance how they could and will grow if the place where they planted the tree has previously been properly researched. In much the same way the growth, development and life-span of a nation can be somewhat predicted if we investigate with diligence its foundations and morals and the power of our souls grants us to comprehend these - or rather if in trying to understand them the timidness of our physical existence does not hinder the talents of our souls.”⁷³

Széchenyi also emphasised the moral dimension of existing as a nation. He believed that religion, more specifically Christianity, plays the important role of the essential moral basis for the existence of our nation. We must add here that Széchenyi inherited not only a vast estate and an aristocratic title from his ancestors but also a deeply rooted sense of religiousness:

⁷⁰ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, i. m.

⁷¹ The philosopher who was well acquainted with the German and Eastern-European conditions created a theory which influenced not only the following 19th but also the national, nationality movements of the 20th century. It gave significance to culture based on the mother-tongue contrary to that of the suppressive ruling nation. He started the process he termed the awakening of the nation. The stations of which are the reformation of the language, the creation of a general national literary language and parallel to this, the creation of national theater, press and publishing.

⁷² *Eszmék a politikában...*, i. m., 65.

⁷³ SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, i. m.

“[B]ut before man can rise higher and his wealth begin to grow, before the virtues of the middle classes or those of living as a nation can take root, before indeed anything else, it is necessary for a nationality to exist. Without morals the nation shall collapse, whereas the existence of such virtues will help it rise. [...] And we will finally be convinced that the moral good, purified in the clear fountain of Christian faith is indeed today the base which promises the healthiest and longest life for the nation. And we will know that our home land will be happy when this kind of elevated national spirit is reviving our fields. To encourage ourselves to awaken such a spirit is our obligation just as it was the obligation of the cup-bearer of Darius to report each day with great discipline: King, forget not about the Greeks! – So too shall we remember our nationality.”⁷⁴

From the quotation it is also apparent what Széchenyi thought about the national spirit. He believed the national spirit facilitates the process of becoming a nation. This view is no different from the one expressed in the nation concept of Ernest Renan when he says that “the national spirit is an intellectual principle.”⁷⁵

Széchenyi’s concept did differ however with regards to the emphasis placed on the importance of religion. Although Renan did mention this aspect, he did not by far ascribe the same level of importance to it. According to Renan “the national borders are not determined by either language, location, religion or anything else”. This sentence points to the fact that the two concepts also clash in terms of the language aspect.

Given the problems of the age, and Széchenyi’s ambitions, we can establish that the themes defining the nation are all tightly interwoven and necessarily have to coexist. The moral aspect improves the possibility of financial gain, the economic aspect helps cultural development and all of these support political and national rejuvenation. Getting people to become interested in public affairs is the first step in shaking up the life of the nation. Improving the general financial state is essential for the development of the nation since a nation with a weak economy can never truly be free. The basis of a nation is therefore a shared past, which guarantees the unique qualities and spirit of the nation as a force for progress, morals, virtues and widespread education.

What else determines Széchenyi’s concept of the nation?

“A national language is the key part of any healthy nation, for while it exists, the nation shall live under any kind of treacherous circumstances for which there have been many examples. However, should it go numb one

⁷⁴ See id.

⁷⁵ *Eszmék a politikában...*, i. m., 190.

day, in our homeland nothing other shall grow but weeping willows whose branches sadly sweep the earth in memory of things past.”

“...But can a language flourish when the people do not? Language draws in the nation and carries it along.”⁷⁶

“And from the old to the young, from the rich to the poor, from the most outstanding men to the loveliest of our women, all should do what they can for our mother tongue. For with it we can achieve all that is the glory of not only the nation but the whole of mankind, while without it, we can achieve nothing.”⁷⁷

The quotations themselves prove the great importance Széchenyi attributed to the language of the individual national. In the Diet of 1825-27 he declared *“I have nothing to say here. I am not a member of the House of Delegates but I do own land and if there is such an institution which develops the Hungarian language, which helps our residents in their Hungarian education, I will offer it a whole years' funding provided by my estate.”⁷⁸*

„Because, if so, let us devote our last pennies without delay to the ‘masters of language’, in fact let us all become such masters ourselves ...”
“Let the whole World be able to converse in Hungarian and if that be the case one day, our kind shall be saved and glorified.”⁷⁹

“Oh dear, how few of us there are – so they moan – it is impossible to not melt in with the large numbers of Germans and Slavs. Language and nationality therefore must above all else be spread out.”⁸⁰

Széchenyi was working on the Hungarianisation of Pest, which would be the center of the yet to be established national culture. Herder’s modern middle-class bourgeois national program also emphasized the importance of language. His national concept did not depend on state borders but on cultural unity, and culture is primarily transmitted and carried by language. In the case of the peoples where the transformation of the middle classes has not yet

⁷⁶ SZÉCHENYI István, *Napló* = SZEKFŰ Gyula, *A mai Széchenyi*, Bp., Révai, 1935.

⁷⁷ SZÉCHENYI István, *Világ* = SZEKFŰ Gyula, *A mai Széchenyi*, Bp., Révai, 1935, 220.

⁷⁸ The demand to expand the rights connected to the Hungarian language stem from the time of the Hungarian nation’s awakening. The language program surpassed the order based framework of the period and the Conservatives along with the Court in Wien opposed it and supported Latin as the general language. The II. law of the 1844 Diet declared that from then on, in the territory of the Hungarian Kingdome instead of the previous Latin Hungarian would be the official language of legislation, administration, jurisdiction and education. The Hungarian became the state language brought to the surface tensions with other, none Hungarian nationalities.

⁷⁹ SZÉCHENYI István, *A Magyar Akadémia körül 1842* = SZEKFŰ Gyula, *A mai Széchenyi*, Bp., Révai, 1935, 324.

⁸⁰ See id. at. 328.

happened, the evolution of a sense of community is an important stage on the road to the birth of the nation concept.

“The nation can accomplish miracles. When one heart, one goal unites the residents, general freedom is born along with its countless glorious legions of niceties, charms and virtues. A few free souls can connect Mississippi with Columbia and should they wish to, they could evict the grand Niagara from its eternal bed. Something which millions of slaves could never have dreamt of, much less accomplished.”

The only possible form of this kind of conscious equality exists through the shared connection to a shared culture and history. Language, and the various art forms connected to it, are the vehicles of culture. Széchenyi confronted the Herder prophecy⁸¹; his nation concept did not consider the element of fear as something thematic. Instead he often emphasized the importance of experiencing collective success:

“Had we but one outstanding relic which we could show our children and foreigners with the sweet sense of pride. How it would raise our souls if we had before us but one object to which we had contributed for many years with gentle and almost painful sacrifices.”⁸²

We see that in Széchenyi’s opinion creating a nation is not purely a political task:

“I am convinced that the secret to the advancement of the middle classes and development lies within the way we feel for the community.”⁸³

How did Széchenyi define the nation?

I think my essay basically provides an answer to that question as far as that is at all possible using quotations, by examining the topic in a linguistic dimension based on statements made long ago, against the backdrop of the change language itself has undergone since.

Both in the Hungarian and international terminology we are faced with several problems when trying to describe such concepts as “nation” and “nationalism”. The difficulty can be best seen when we think about the impossibility of providing a moral sound translation for the Hungarian words such as “nép” (usually translated as people or folk) and “népies” (usually translated as folkish, vernacular)

⁸¹ Johann Gottfried Herder's predict (1791) One of his related predictions was that the Hungarian nation would disappear and become assimilated by surrounding Slavic peoples; this prophecy caused considerable uproar in Hungary and is widely cited to this day. „,Da sind sie jetzt unter Slawen, Deutschen, Wlachen, und andern Völkern der geringere Teil des Landeseinwohner, und nach Jahrhunderten wird man vielleicht ihre Sprache kaum finden.”

⁸² SZÉCHENYI István, *Hitel...*, i. m.

⁸³ *See id.*

Conclusion

In Széchenyi's case we are liable to idealize. By stripping them of the context of his life and the circumstances of his time we preserve his sentences in the form of maxims. By doing so, and ridding them of all flesh and blood we basically turn valuable observations into nothing more than empty phrases. In my essay I have tried to avoid doing this, and have tried to keep myself from reading any more or any less into what had been put on paper than what was actually meant, while examining the complete body of texts to analyze Széchenyi's use of the concept of the nation.

By reading his works it becomes evident that he considered it vital for the Hungarian nation to be able to stand its ground against the odds posed by its comparably small size and its unfavorable conditions. Today we can say that research into Hungarianness is once again booming. Scientific demand and international analogies both play a part in the emerging studies focusing on the question of what being Hungarian actually means. Related science is becoming a part of the public awareness. We must mention the appearance of foreign institutions such as Hungarian institutes, Hungarian faculties and departments dealing with the topic and the surge in their student numbers. This process coincided with and was also connected to the emergence of new cultural and foreign goals deriving from the transformation of historical Hungary, and the growing internal need for the definition of the Hungarian identity.

In the time that has passed since the collapse of Socialism and our joining the European Union the question of what being Hungarian actually means has reemerged and the need to reassess this topic has become not only timely but also an urgent task. This becomes apparent if we consider for example the political process related to the granting of dual citizenship. In this issue the concept of the nation played a central role, since it all came down to how the Hungarian State defines itself nationally. The debate focused on the kind of national ideologies we should consider as guidelines when approaching the question of Hungarians' living in neighboring countries or in other parts of the World, and whether the Hungarian state should become institutionalized according to a political-cultural or a national-cultural concept and what the legitimate concept of the nation should be.

Currently what we have to understand is that the answers given to all of the questions above are formed exclusively by political interests. However, even if the questions to be answered and the reemerging problems are in fact increasingly of a political nature, those great men among our ancestors can become important too, as they have the power to help us to address contemporary crises with the strength of their words which echo from the past.

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