



The public uselessness of the Enlightenment: reflections on Hungary in

June 2013

Workshop “*Quels usages publics des Lumières?*”

EHESS/ENS, 20-21 June 2013

László Kontler ©

kontler@ceu.edu

Unlike most other contributions to this exciting workshop, this one is not an academic paper. Rather, it is a set of reflections by a concerned citizen of a country in which – to refer to the session in which it is presented – “cosmopolitanism” has a bad press today. The very title sounds like a provocation, but it is not one. “The Enlightenment” as historians (including, for the present purposes, historians of philosophy, literature, art, science, and so forth) know it, is utterly irrelevant for the thinking and the discourse of those who determine the thrust of reflection about the *res publica* in Hungary – by and large, Central and Eastern Europe – today. If any uses are made of it, the tone and tenor of these is overwhelmingly dismissive or directly hostile. To be sure, there are historical reasons for this. In this region, modern political identities were formed in the crucible of “national awakenings,” whose emancipatory endeavours, commitment to the improvement of vernacular cultures and the progress of the material conditions of “common life” owed a great deal to the Enlightenment, but which predominantly defined themselves in opposition to an imperial regime (of the Habsburgs) which (in its better moments) also resorted to principles and practices deeply anchored in the Enlightenment. Nation, which became the primary focus of loyalty, and Enlightenment were thus thrown from the outset into a highly ambivalent relationship, and even in cases when values associated with the former could have been easily derived from the latter, such transparencies were conveniently forgotten. Enlightenment and its partial contributions to the program of nation-building lapsed into relative insignificance. To the extent that it retained some resilience, it has become a bad word and the “constitutive other” of nation.

Significantly, this was the status Enlightenment was assigned in a very recent (May 2013) lecture by the distinguished British philosopher Roger Scruton at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Scruton, known on account of his committed conservatism as well as his passionate interest in the affairs of Central Europe and his sympathy with the nations of the region derived from their status under Soviet dominance and state socialism, is one of relatively few high-brow European intellectuals willing to lend their names to legitimizing the current Hungarian establishment – small wonder that he received an enthusiastic official welcome and that the event was widely publicized. Speaking about “European values” and the “nation state,” Scruton drew a sharp distinction between the Enlightenment and the national idea. He lamented that the European Union, its ideology and its practice have become permeated with a relentless drive towards over-bureaucratization and unitary regulation on purportedly rational grounds, and argued that such principles and procedures – deriving from the Enlightenment – have a tendency both to detach European institutions from European citizens, and to obliterate more deep-seated sources of European civilization. Among the latter, inevitably, Christianity and the nation were mentioned and commended by Scruton as ideas (entities, endeavours, projects) based on an ethos of sacrifice, capable of generating loyalties, consolidating belongings, building communities and mobilizing their members to act for common purposes. He identified these cements of the nation state and the tradition of the nation state itself as the chief distinguishing feature of European civilization, and extolled “Hungarians” (i.e. the government of Hungary) for defying the decrepit union by enshrining Christianity in their new constitution and daring to stand up against international organizations (including, but not confined to the EU). In Scruton’s assessment, “Hungary” (i.e. the Hungarian government) set an example for others to follow by asserting their national peculiarity in the face of “Enlightenment” homogeneity.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was represented at Scruton’s lecture only by his colleagues in the cabinet, but the contents could have been music to his ears. A few weeks earlier, he had spoken much in the same vein, maybe with less sophistication but greater concentration. His long-standing ambivalence about the European Union and Hungary’s relationship with it is probably familiar to this audience (“there is life outside the EU”, he said shortly after Hungary’s accession in 2004; more recently, he drew parallels between the ways “Brussels” is now making claims towards Hungary and those formerly employed to bring it to compliance by “Vienna and Moscow”). But now he inserted his Euro-scepticism into an interpretative frame (which one might call historical-philosophical, if it were not too lofty in

the given context), whose cornerstone is almost explicitly anti-Enlightenment. Europe, Orbán suggested, has lost its firm anchorage in the traditional values which have been the cement that might still hold it together. It has fallen victim to an “aggressive ideology of progressivism”. On another occasion, but not unrelated, he said that while Europe’s population is merely 8 percent of all humanity, it still provides 20-25 percent of the global GDP and 50 percent of all social welfare expenditure worldwide, but at the cost of incurring over one billion EUR per day of increase in national debt, a situation that surely cannot be maintained for long. As an alternative that might still rescue those European nations that are willing to hear the voice of the times, Orbán proposed the example of the Orient, where an ethos of labour and discipline arising from ancient traditions is still appreciated as the foundation of the social order.

At this point I cannot resist the temptation to share a recollection from the optimistic autumn of 1989. Disembarking the regular flight of MALÉV, the still existing Hungarian national airline company, at Heathrow, two holders of the one-year postgraduate fellowship of the Soros Foundation, threw their luggage in the boot of the coach to Oxford. “What are your plans for the year”, one of them asked, already in the seat. “I’ll finish the Hungarian edition of Burke’s *Reflections*, and then I’ll see”, his companion replied. “Burke?”, the first one raised his eyebrow. “You should have done Tom Paine instead”, he reprimanded.

The Burke guy was me, and the Paine guy was Hungary’s current prime minister. Somehow, I must admit, he was quite right. At that moment it would have been an irrelevant attempt to explain that Burke was not the kind of narrow-minded and stale figure lamenting the fall of an untenable system, which he was represented to us (if at all) in textbooks under state socialism, but an Enlightenment thinker relevant for (any) modern conservatism. The ideas of Paine – which were not very original, but irresistibly engaging in their self-evident simplicity – seemed to speak to the times much more pertinently: it was the inalienable rights of all to the safety of life and property, assembly, expression etc. that we needed, and not the obligations arising from the idea that society is the community of “the living, the dead, and those yet to be born.”

One year later we had Burke, and not much later also Paine in Hungarian. Up to about 1790, these two men had rubbed shoulders in London coffee houses; in the Hungary of the 1990s they would hardly have wished to have coffee together. What is more, it was increasingly difficult to see who was who. On the eve of the elections of 1998 my erstwhile travel companion and I stumbled upon one another in the lobby of a Budapest cinema. “Will

your conservatism anthology be in print by the time of the elections? It would be very important for me,” he said. I appreciated, but did not quite understand what political benefit he expected to reap from the availability of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century classics, from Henry St John Viscount Bolingbroke to Benjamin Disraeli. I had little illusion, but at least hoped that none from Joseph De Maistre. In any case, I can take no responsibility for the outcome of the elections of 1998 (which he won): the collection was only published in 2000. More importantly, the issue here is not that the radical, agnostic human rights fundamentalist of 1989 became a centre-right champion of law-and-order by 1998 (at the latest), and soon after that an authoritarian Christian fundamentalist (if we are to believe his own public pronouncements). Rather, what is at stake is Hungary’s progress towards the less attractive ones among the alternatives offered by European enlightened modernity.

There are many entirely upright fellow Hungarians who would not at all mind losing whatever Enlightenment stands for. Their vision of the Enlightenment, however, derives from the analyses of it as the “fatal conceit” of man’s capacity to bring the created universe under rational control in a hubristic, unscrupulous and ultimately self-destructive triumphal march. (This vision, remarkably, has been shared by adherents of Frankfurt school critical Marxists as well as emblematic conservative critics of modernity: Horkheimer and Adorno on the one hand and Leo Strauss on the other.) “Self-conceited intolerance”, “visceral anti-clericalism”, “overestimation of the potentials of reason” and a profusion of other similar sins are categorically blamed on “the Enlightenment”. In this discourse, the term – with the definite article and capital letter – is synonymous with the excesses associated with self-styled apostles of progress and the “instrumentalization of reason”, which purportedly bears the responsibility for the horrors committed by twentieth-century extremist regimes. The provocative and potentially dangerous intellectual arrogance of the latter-day (“liberal”) heirs of this tradition, so we are told, has been a permanent threat to the return to political pluralism after 1989, a threat which had to be averted at any cost. To be sure, the costs are quite severe: they include – randomly – centralized control over information (to the extent this is possible in the Facebook age) and parts of the economic and business sector, social dialogue confined to predictably docile partners, clientelism and favouritism, the de-secularization of much of public and the desiccation of higher education, the announcement of “labour-based” (presumably as against welfare-based and knowledge-based) society, the propagation and assertion of an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent state as a remedy to all of the shortcomings of previous governments and, indeed, society.

Strangely, several elements in this amalgam closely resemble the “sins” commonly associated with the Enlightenment. Let us pick one of the fields mentioned. Recently, Hungary’s secretary of state for higher education (and former rector of the country’s leading university) has unequivocally asserted that it is the engineering-technological and natural sciences that create “value,” as a reason for the redistribution of resources in higher education and research to the disadvantage of the social sciences and the humanities. One would believe that a government committed to the preservation and cultivation of “traditional values” thinks differently. Several genuinely pro-government intellectuals have expressed dismay over the tendency which has been visible over the past two years, and has only received a blatantly explicit underpinning from the recent pronouncement of the state secretary. They ought to consider that Mr. Orbán knows all too well who his companions were in developing a critical public sphere at universities and more widely in the late 1980s. They included many students of law and economics, quite a few in sociology, history, philosophy, etc. Not too many future engineers, physicists and doctors. The rhetoric of the regime is based on having been authorized by electors in 2010 to execute the “real change” unachieved in and after 1989. In fact, in order to avoid the return of the situation in 1989, it is willing to take the kind of strictly utilitarian and instrumental view of “knowledge production” usually blamed on “the Enlightenment.”

Most citizens willing to reveal their sympathies still seem to be ready to pay the costs whose rather incomplete list was offered above in order to steer Hungary away from the slippery slope of the “relativism” supposedly arising from the – according to them – disingenuous propagation and pursuit of (multi-)cultural tolerance, universal human rights, global-cosmopolitan communicative openness, and a secular state solely assigned with the task of ensuring the safety and well-being of citizens but not that of moral guidance and supervision. The fact that the denigrated “liberals” embracing these principles also tend to derive them from “the Enlightenment” contributes to its lapse into insignificance as a shared heritage and a potential platform for minimal political, intellectual and ideological consensus. It is symptomatic that on the eve of Hungary’s assumption of the EU presidency in January 2011 (ironically, under the most anti-Europeanist cabinet we have had since 1990), a leading voice in the European People’s Party (to which the Hungarian government parties belong) did not hesitate to emphasize the deep rootedness of the European Union and present-day European values in the Enlightenment. For the said reasons, and probably many more, such acknowledgements are entirely absent on the conservative side of the Hungarian political

spectrum. In the following, I want to argue that this is a pity and would be fortunate to change.

Academic students of the Enlightenment have long known, but perhaps not been successful enough in advertising more broadly, that Enlightenment was not only a set of rational abstractions and purportedly universal truths about physical and human nature, and the subversion of traditional beliefs and practices that failed to stand the test when measured by such truths. We have known quite well that enlightened rationality as an ideal type may have been uncompromising, cold calculation, but as social and cultural practice it was near-synonymous with a sobriety and moderation thoroughly based in the empirical, and while it did not shy away from “criticism”, as a social and human programme its aims were harmony and happiness. In setting such aims, its representatives often defined their outlook in explicit contradistinction to the previous age of instability and destruction: an age of endemic religious and civil warfare, in which the extremist predispositions that undermined peace on the domestic scene – “enthusiasm” and “superstition” – also left their mark on the character of international conflict. The “progress” which many of “the enlightened” had in mind is to be understood from the angle of their brooding over the preconditions of superseding this state of affairs. By and large, they were optimistic about the chances of progress, yet not for a moment devoid of the anxiety of regress. In an age when, especially in the eastern half of Europe, coping with the legacy of twentieth-century extremisms, is still a very much unfinished agenda, one wonders why the practices invented by the Enlightenment – not as the shibboleth current in today’s popular perceptions, but as the lived experience of the eighteenth century – for mastering analogous situations are expelled from the range of potentially relevant and useful traditions. Provocative iconoclasts as the *encyclopédistes* were, the smallest common denominator between them and their very diverse public across France and Europe was the endeavour to collect, systematize and publish the stock of knowledge available about man’s natural, social and moral environment, so as to facilitate the possibly widest discussion on the best ways of improving the conditions of human life in that environment. Christian and national fundamentalists accuse enlightened liberals with undermining loyalty to Burke’s “little platoon” – the familial, local community, cemented by sentiment and solidarity. They are wrong: Enlightenment was very largely about sentiment and solidarity, forged exactly amidst informed and reasoned exchanges about the stakes and requirements of “improvement” taking place in local life worlds.

To be sure, this was envisaged as a learning process of fragile and fallible, perhaps forever imperfect creatures, for whom “daring to know” – Kantian *sapere aude*: taking the risky responsibility of personal decision-making, without guidance from any superior authority – was a thrilling exercise of overcoming self-imposed “minority”. It is highly apposite to pause for a second at the German expression of *Unmündigkeit*, literally “mouthlessness:” the un-human condition of a human being unable to articulate independent views for lack of ability, ambition or opportunity. It is a widespread but false assumption among critics of this idea of Enlightenment that the emancipation of personal opinions and the publication of such opinions without the hazard of retaliation would be the hotbed of seamless moral relativism. Such opinions are shaped and shared within the frame of the public use of reason, in a broad and open space of communication, with mutual control exercised by each participant, and the interference of public authority only being justified (and necessary) in case some of the publicized views constituted a threat to general safety (but certainly not on the basis of the ideological preferences of those who happen to be the wielders of public authority at the given moment on whatever grounds of legitimacy).

The enlightened commitment to the cause of public safety (in this world – not unrespectful, but irrespective of the next) has brought us to the shape in which Enlightenment first and most visibly made itself known in the eastern Habsburg lands. On its arrival, Enlightenment very much looked like foreign (“*labanc*” – to use the terminology of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century anti-Habsburg rebellions) deceit aimed at undermining staunch *kuruc* loyalties to the nation and its historic rights. Whether we like it or not, among the offspring of this deceit were emblematic figures of the Hungarian national awakening and age of *Vormärz* reforms. Its progenitors were aristocratic politician-bureaucrats in the environment of Empress Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II; its most eminent tutors included people like Joseph von Sonnenfels, the first professor of political and cameralist sciences (roughly, public administration and political economy) at the University of Vienna. *Polizey- und Kameralwissenschaften* constituted a quintessentially enlightened, empirical and purpose-oriented discipline, with the aim of training a bureaucratic elite of appropriate professional ethos, allegiance and expertise for an empire whose legitimacy was derived not from its “lawfulness” but its “rationality”, the latter being defined in terms of its capacity to guarantee the “safety and convenience” of citizens. According to Sonnenfels’ treatises and textbooks the development of this capacity depended on meeting two conditions. First, all inhabitants of the country were to become immediate partners of the state through

abolishing the distinction by estate that separated them, while preserving the opportunity of voluntary association. Second, the state administration was to be capable of ordering all areas of life that had a potential bearing on the realization of “safety and convenience”, and of acquiring data of sufficient “statistical” detail and accuracy (n.b.: *Staatistik* = state science!) about the resources necessary to achieve such goals. Otherwise, it would be hardly possible to avert hazards of grain scarcity, polluted waters and air, disorderly building sites, improper storage of toxic medicaments, stray dogs, or libel ...

This bureaucratic Enlightenment, with its administrative gaze on the state – whose preoccupation was not with sovereignty and the distribution and exchange of rights and obligations, but the governance or “right disposition” of “things” (pace Foucault, pace Guillaume de la Perrière): population, territory and resources – was certainly not without risks. Whenever the enlightened ruler met conservative resistance (but also when he thought that the genies unleashed ought to be squeezed back to the bottle), and especially when the latter became the worry for an unenlightened successor, the function of *Polizey* changed: from an authority whose function was “ordering”, its theoretical logic and practical mechanisms assumed the character of the police at work in surveillance, discipline and punishment, known to us from bad dreams and even worse experience, which, however, is falsely represented by enemies of the Enlightenment as its immanent and unavoidable tendency.

The Enlightenment *wie es eigentlich gewesen* has bequeathed to us a rich and variegated legacy, available for the full spectrum of European patriots (even) in eastern Europe as building blocks for a modern community and identity. In Hungary, the balance is fairly disillusioning. From Burke we’ve got the infatuation with national-historic symbols, without the sensitivity for selecting traditions meaningful for the present in a responsible manner. From Paine, we have got all the populist arrogance and sham revolutionary rhetoric, together with a political manner of procedure questioning the commitment to the defense and cultivation of fundamental democratic rights. From Sonnenfels, we’ve got the pervasive attention of the state, vindicating the knowledge of the “categorical imperative” – without the endeavour of maintaining a genuine partnership with the subjects elevated to the status of emancipated citizens, and the ideological neutrality of the state. As far as the Enlightenment endeavour at community building through practices nurturing solidarity, mutual respect and open discussion among persons who have emerged from their “self-incurred minority,” it fully awaits to be rediscovered. What we see instead is attempts at consolidating the nation’s

esprit de corps by cultivating the legacy of an introverted understanding of national peculiarity and announcing a war of liberty against invented enemies. We also see social, cultural and educational policies one might associate with a disciplinary and tutelary state, built on conclusions from the perceived failure of modernity: policies blocking access for the under-privileged to cultural goods and denying them opportunities of mobility through education, and proposing to integrate them through employment in public works projects while keeping them in a state of permanent *Unmündigkeit*.

The wrong choices on each of the really significant particulars. I would personally much prefer the other way round.

Publié sur le site de l'Atelier international des usages publics du passé le 5 juillet 2015.