

THE HUNGARY OF MATTHIAS CORVINUS :
A STATE IN "CENTRAL EUROPE" ON THE THRESHOLD
OF MODERNITY *

In memoriam Jenő Szűcs

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The historical place of Hungary and her neighbours in Europe – that elusive "central Europe" – cannot be established by any objective topographical method. There is no such conceptual radar which could locate this vessel on the ocean of centuries, if, indeed, there is such a ship. Yet, historians, such as Jenő Szűcs, and politicians, especially in these days of the emergence of a "new central Europe," insist – or at least feel – that there is some coherence in the history, tradition, fate and – maybe even, future – of the countries "between West and East." King Matthias I's reign offers a suitable example for sounding out some ideas about the specific character of this region at a major historical junction: between the medieval and the early modern centuries.

To begin with, one may recognize in his reign one of the many recurrent personal unions, mostly short-lived and rarely seen in equally positive terms by the two (or more) countries involved. One may see his attempts at uniting Hungary, Bohemia, Silesia and even Lower Austria as a trial run of the project which was to be accomplished by the only successful dynasty that controlled almost the entire region, the Habsburgs. Of course, he proved to be more a precursor of his immediate successors, the Jagiellos, who, for reasons still somewhat obscure, were unable to build any kind of unity out of the three main kingdoms from the Baltic to the Balkans over which their family held sway at the turn of the fifteenth to sixteenth century. Defenders of Matthias can, however, claim that he might have been the founder of what came to be the Habsburg Empire, had he not died in his early fifties. But dynastic connections rarely make a true unit out of divergent parts, and "central Europe" would be an even less warranted abstraction were it merely for its occasionally common rulers.

One of the most elaborate paradigms, Szűcs's thesis about a middle ("third") region, between the Roman, feudal, Atlantic, commercial-bourgeois West and the Orthodox, serfdom-ridden, autocratic, rural Russia rests on the assumption of an

* This essay is a revised version of a paper presented for discussion about "Central Europe at the Threshold of Modernity: 1490–1492" held on the second meeting of Central European Historians in Bad Homburg in 1989. The dedication is to a friend, who did much to clear away the nationalist debris about Hungary's past. It was he who had suggested that we meet and continue a conversation that started at the Sigismund-Conference in 1987 about the true history of that central Europe which is swirling around in many heads and on newspaper pages but needs some good, realistic, historical founding. So we did in Homburg but, sadly, without him.

early medieval expansion of "westernness" to the central region followed by a gradual loss of the half-digested western social and institutional elements, however, without the region's having fallen prey to open "eastern" domination (save for the, happily past, last forty years). There is no doubt that the Christian-feudal polities that emerged on the eastern borders of the medieval Empire in the eleventh century were very much on their way to be fully incorporated in "Europe" by ca. 1300 A. D.. This can be argued not only from the obvious dynastic links of Angevin and Luxembourg rule in central Europe, but on the basis of social, political, institutional, and even cultural features. True, this expansion of the old, Roman-Carolingian Europe hit many parts of our region too quickly and, therefore, its impact remained in many respects superficial. When the "West" was taking a deep breath before its take-off to modernity, and the "East," that is, Russia, was firmly establishing its autocratic structure, the middle region, although it missed the boat (i. e., the ship across the Atlantic), was already stable enough in its western European veneer (or was it deeper?) to avoid being swallowed ed up by the servile-Byzantine world of Russia. The lands around and east of the Elbe gradually sank into economic backwaters, lost political initiative, and sooner or later their independence as well. Szűcs may have overestimated the "western" characteristics of some of the German lands (the "west-central Europe" of Ferdinand Seibt), but was surely right in diagnosing the malaise of east-central Europe as originating from the still incomplete "westernization" of the region when the tide of eleventh to thirteenth-century Europe ebbed in the sixteenth and seventeenth. The age of Matthias Corvinus is close to that historical fault-line when and where the decisive events in this process took – or did not take – place.

Moreover, we can learn from István Bibó (1911–1979), another great diagnostician of the region's maladies, that memories of those past centuries of westernness grew as the distance to the successful take-off increased. Developed into a false consciousness about past great "Europeanness," they have served to cover up the true problems of backwardness ever since the mid-nineteenth century. Dreams of grandeur were used to veil the misery of the present. The loss of that alleged greatness, always explained by circumstances "beyond the control of the small nations," was presented as an excuse for doing little, if anything, about easily controlled contemporary ills. The historiography of the age of Matthias is a prime example for these features. To review the myths and fanciful images is a prime duty of historians in the region and beyond, if they want to contribute to building a new, perhaps more realistic, future for "central Europe." One may even argue that it is a duty to the memory of the king who died 500 years ago, for he knew much about what could and could not be done with the given resources.

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Hungarian historians have always been fascinated by the reign of King Matthias; this is understandable for it proved to be the last period of international success, internal stability and cultural flourishing of the medieval kingdom of Hungary. Even if the view of a "sudden decline" after the death of the king does not stand up to scrutiny – for it is more likely that long-term changes in economic and military conditions to Hungary's disadvantage led to her final decline – the four decades of Matthias's reign were full of promising beginnings and some obvious advances. This holds true even of

a region where he appeared as conqueror and executor (for clearly ulterior reasons) of papal censure. During his brief and partial rule in Moravia, if I understand correctly, Matthias did introduce some of his innovations in strengthening royal administration against local feudal lords. After the fall of the medieval kingdoms of Hungary and Bohemia, the blame for defeat was easily placed on the shoulders of Matthias' successors and their followers, the more so, as they offered a neat example for the argument about "foreign rulers" as "enemies of the nation," of course, more so in Hungary than in Bohemia. Thus the figure of Matthias grew in retrospect, beginning as early as the late fifteenth century, and even more after Mohács (1526) and the spread of the Reformation, in the age of gradually emerging Hungarian "national" consciousness. It would be worthwhile systematically to follow the growth and transformation of the Matthias-image through the centuries in the context of Hungarian national identity, ideology, scholarship, and politics. However, in the present essay I wish to look only at the differently argued notions of "greatness" that were applied to the state under Matthias in the twentieth century and place them in the context of the "central European" predicament. And since the Corvinus and his policies have been favourite subjects of historico-political essays ever since the sixteenth century, it may not be unsuitable to explore this issue in a perceptual sketch rather than in a fully documented study.

To put it succinctly, the project is to explore, to what extent did the alleged "Renaissance State" or "New Monarchy" of Matthias show the signs of Hungary's being "still with the West" and to what extent did it already betray signs of long-term asynchronisms vis-à-vis western Europe.

That the kingdom of Hungary under Matthias Corvinus should be described as a "Renaissance State" was, as far as I can see, introduced into scholarship by the leading historian of the inter-war period, Gyula (Julius) Szekfű. In an essay-like overview of the period, included in the chapter on King Matthias in his and Bálint Hóman's standard multi-volume Hungarian history, Szekfű described the age under this heading. Szekfű's formulation deserves discussion not only because of the author's great influence, but also because it is indeed tempting to associate the age of Hungarian cultural Renaissance with a "Renaissance State." I shall forego the general, theoretical part of the question, namely, whether medieval and early modern kingdoms can be called states at all and the other problematic one: to what extent in fact was the art of the age of Matthias truly "Renaissance" in character. Others, more competent to judge the artistic production of the later fifteenth century, should decide that. In judging the character of the Corvinian's reign, I shall use two models: Federico Chabod's very rigorous definition of the "Renaissance State" and the generally accepted, though less clearly defined, notion of "New Monarchy".

An attempt to confront Renaissance ideas with day-to-day political practice was undertaken by the Italian historian Chabod in two, closely related papers. Already their title indicates that the topic is controversial: "Was there a Renaissance State?" Even though the author finally replies in the affirmative, there are more questions than answers in his presentations.

Chabod's argument *in nuce* is that neither "national" rhetoric nor claims to uniquely "absolute" power of Renaissance princes qualify as valid criteria for the "Renaissance State." The Italian national verbiage in the chancellery outputs of fourteenth-

and fifteenth-century Milan, Ferrara, Mantua, Florence, or Venice is to be cut down to measure by confronting it with the politics of the individual city states, which were anything but pan-Italian. The "absolutism" of Renaissance princes, so Chabod argues, is to be compared with the status of their forerunners. Medieval rulers, such as the emperor in Italy, claimed to be "absolute," i. e., subject only to God, ever since Roncaglia, if not earlier. (Chabod's argument here is not consistent, for he contrasts imperial theory with Renaissance princely practice; but this is not relevant to our present discussion.)

Hence, according to Chabod, only those elements should count as criteria for what might be termed a "Renaissance State" which were indeed new and unique, namely:

- the emergence of a caste of officers of the state, bureaucrats and civil servants with a certain esprit de corps, overriding the mainly decorative gatherings of estates;
- the establishment of a professional diplomacy with resident envoys also having a group consciousness of their own; and
- in spite of Machiavelli's dislike of it, a mercenary army.

This quite limited but very categorical check-list of criteria does not appear to have been contradicted in the thirty-odd years since its enunciation, therefore, it seems legitimate to use it as a standard of consensus on the Renaissance State.

Szekfű's claim about the Hungarian "Renaissance State" rests on essentially two, in his time widely accepted, criteria: national rhetoric and princely individualism. As we have seen, these were exactly the two aspects which Chabod dismissed as ideologies. Certainly many passages can be cited from writings originating in Matthias Corvinus's chancellery in which the king refers to the special traits of Hungary and the Hungarians, or to his people's historical mission. Szekfű also points to several occasions, beginning with the dismissal of Szilágyi, the young king's uncle, from the regency, when Matthias acted with "typical Renaissance self-reliance." However, if we confront rhetoric and political realities, as Chabod suggested, we end up with a more differentiated view of the state under Matthias Corvinus.

The establishment of a government bureaucracy was surely attempted by Matthias, probably just as vigorously as by Sigismund half a century earlier. However, these royal office-holders never acquired anything of a self-confidence comparable to those Milanese councillors whom Chabod cites telling their ruler, when he asked them to release part of their income for the *sanatio* of the city-state, that they earned their salaries by useful work and not by privilege and did not intend to give up any of it. To be sure, some of the Milanese officials may have bought their position for good money and did not regard it a fief by the grace of their ruler. Venality – a big topic in itself – was, as far as we know, never a feature of Hungarian administrations. The clerks and legal practitioners whose numbers increased under Matthias Corvinus and his Jagiello successors, and whose *relationes* appear ever more frequently on the documents, were different from the old type aristocratic council members, but hardly civil servants in any Renaissance or modern sense. They had usually obtained their positions as retainers (*familiares*) of a great lord, many of whom were in turn the king's *familiares*, and may have managed to hold on to them on the basis of professional experience even after their *domini* left office. However, these medieval-feudal features were less true for the fair number of urban office-holders in the branches of the Chamber and the Treasury.

The role of the estates was, on the other hand, certainly more than decorative, even if we dismiss the diet's significance, for it was frequently manipulated into docility. We still have to grant that considerable power rested with the counties, which, in fact, were strengthened rather than weakened under Matthias Corvinus. Moreover, Matthias seems to have been the father of the emerging new estate of hereditary magnates, if the recent suggestion, that the listing of nineteen *barones naturales* after the *barones ex officio* in the Peace of St Pölten in 1474 was the first formal reference to what would become the estate of magnates, is correct.

Pro secundo: the professional diplomacy. The norm may be too strict in this respect, for a diplomatic corps with resident envoys remained an Italian, and not even general Italian, practice for quite a long time. Matthias's diplomats were, just as those of preceding kings, members of his aristocratic and clerical retinue, frequently entrusted with foreign missions more than once, but no resident envoy from Buda was accredited to any court. True, the biographer of Matthias Corvinus's diplomats was able to list some two dozen men who quite regularly went on foreign missions, a few of them over several decades. In one of his letters, empowering a clerk to represent Hungary in Rome, Matthias uses the expression "when no regular emissary is there," but the text is not very well authenticated, and we do not know anything about a "regular" ambassador. (Actually, as early as in the 1240s kings of Hungary were represented in Rome sometimes for years by the same person.)

Pro tertio: the military. As is well known, King Matthias built up his mercenary army (later called the "Black Troops") with great circumspection, hired and cajoled commanders for it with genuine Renaissance verve. These men made the army, if not the state, into a work of art; no one who saw the troops parading in their famous scorpion-maneuvre at Wiener Neustadt would have doubted that. Size and equipment of the force were certainly a match for the armies of central Europe of the time. It was apparently well combined with traditional troops of banderial or vassal lords and was able to incorporate traditional Hungarian tactics of light cavalry into its operations. The Austrian wars revealed its weakness as well: no successful sieges were conducted, owing to the insufficient artillery and poor technical support. The most recent military history of Hungary points to these shortcomings by styling the relevant chapter an "Attempt at Establishing a Mercenary Army." Hence, even if only a partial and temporary success can be accredited to Matthias's military efforts, they are perhaps the most convincing aspects of his attempts at being a "Renaissance ruler" of the western (Italian, French) model.

In the most popular Anglo-American texts the notion of "New Monarchy" is widespread. Its criteria include, besides Chabod's three (however, they are frequently less sceptical about the national rhetoric), the reception of Roman Law, the increase and new structure of royal finances and, in a more sociological vein, the growing political and social weight of the bourgeoisie (or of the so-called middle class). This ideal type is clearly based on the French model, with a nod towards England and Italy.

Let us apply these criteria to Matthias Corvinus's kingdom. The question of Roman Law is a moot point and has been extensively discussed in Hungarian scholarship. "Reception" in the immediate form, as accepted by legal historians of a past age, cannot be claimed for Hungary to any major extent. However, recent scholars prefer to talk

about a general, methodical influence of the learned laws which needs not necessarily imply straight transfer from the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. In that sense, Matthias Corvinus's attempt to issue a permanent law code (*teste* the preamble of his *Decretum Majus*) and the like can be judged as a definite, albeit limited, influence of Roman legal thinking. There were more doctors of Canon and Civil law in the courts than before, even though some of them, such as Janus Pannonius, the jurist *malgré lui*, may not have been exactly great Canonists or Romanists. Of course, Humanist rhetorical and chancellery practice, which had great masters in Matthias Corvinus's Hungary, itself implies some Roman legal thought. Yet, it would be futile to compare Hungary, with any of the Romanist countries, for her legal system had been based on customary law far into modern times, not least because of the great work of Stephen Werbőczy, a lawyer who was trained in day-to-day court practice and in noble politics with little overt interest in the Civil Code. Legal historians point out that a true departure from custom was not achieved until the late nineteenth century, if then.

The finances of Matthias Corvinus are easier to judge. Recent studies have confirmed, with reservations, earlier assumptions about the riches of the king's treasury. Matthias's income was very impressive in the last years of his life, when all the tax-paying conquests were at his disposal, without the need of continuous warfare for securing these territories. It is likely that in those years the treasury did indeed collect close to a million gold florins, a sum certainly comparable with Burgundian or even French royal income, as far as we know. However, this figure cannot be assumed for more than a few years and may very well have meant a strain on the country's resources that was not sustainable for long. More important, the structure of this income was archaic and feudal just like the royal resources of the early fifteenth century had been.

The overwhelming portion, something like 30–45 %, of all revenue came from the so-called portal *dica*, a direct tax collected from peasant holdings, usually augmented by the "extraordinary" *subsidium* of 1 florin. All indirect revenues from other than the agrarian producers, such as urban taxes, income from mining, levies on Jews, including the minimal income from the royal demesne, do not add up to a quarter of the sum total. The revenue from the salt mines and the salt monopoly remained important with 100,000–150,000 gold florins (i. e., 15–18 %), but this item was allegedly twice that size under Sigismund. Significantly, customs duties were assessed at 30,000–40,000 florins, exactly at the same level as some forty years before. This one-sided distribution of burdens is perhaps one of most ponderous arguments against granting Matthias Corvinus too easily the title of a "new monarch." And, regardless of the appellation, the implicit economic backwardness counsels caution in overrating the chances and success of "modernization."

The question of the bourgeoisie is a controversial one and closely connected with the just-discussed structure of royal income. There can be no doubt that Hungary's urban population was much smaller than that of countries west and north of her, and that these burghers were much poorer and less successful than their south German or Bohemian fellows. However, the numerical, economic, even the entrepreneurial weakness may not in itself be a sufficient argument against the potentials of a bourgeoisie, if we are prepared to take the term in a wider sociological, even a Marxian, frame of reference. Hungarian historians still insist – not without some foundation –

that the revolution of 1848–49 was a bourgeois one even though hardly any capitalist entrepreneur or industrial worker took part in it. Rather, enlightened landowners and the *moyenne* nobility acted in lieu of a bourgeoisie, for both the end of serfdom and national independence. At one point Chabod emphasized that the majority of the councillors and bureaucrats of the Italian city states whom he granted the "Renaissance" title came from those rich noble and landowning families who a few generations earlier held power by heredity and tradition. He does not disqualify the scions of "historical families" who chose the new ways to power instead of the old from being "new bureaucrats" just because they were not burghers.

One may, therefore, argue along these lines that the numerical inferiority of cities and townsmen in Hungary did not pose an absolute barrier to the country's proto-capitalist development. A good many noblemen were very active in commodity production, cattle-export, wine-trade and so on: they could have served as agents of proto-capitalist transformation, just as their late successors in the nineteenth century did. There can be no doubt that a more developed burgher stratum could have supplied more non-feudal personnel for a bureaucratic royal administration or that larger and richer cities might have been homes for a wider-based Renaissance culture. Still, it should be pointed out that the small size of urban population is not sufficient to account for the failures of Hungarian rulers in acquiring a power base other than the great landowning nobility. Different policies of the crown could have made the few royal and episcopal cities into more powerful allies of the king and into centres of new learning and politics. Modern liberal and socialist lamentations about a "lack of bourgeoisie" should be seen in context with Hungarian kings' unwillingness or inability to substantially support urban growth and bourgeois emancipation, if only as far as social and economic conditions would have allowed. Matthias Corvinus was no real exception to this shortcoming, at any rate, not in his Hungarian policies. He did not change royal policies vis-à-vis the towns, even to the extent it was delineated (though not implemented) in Sigismund's famous urban decree of 1405.

There is one more important category for assessing the historical role of late medieval rulers such as Matthias Corvinus, especially current among east European Marxist scholars: the notion of centralization. I believe a few words should be said about this, too. The view of "centralization" of the state as a progressive and positive trait par excellence takes its origin in the anti-feudal critique in such states as France with her near-independent, and Germany with her actually independent, territories. I am not aware of a systematic study of the history of this term in the social and political sciences, but it would be important to do one, beginning with Montesquieu, who popularized it in the discussion of the *thèse royale* and the *thèse nobiliaire* in the context of liberty and privilege. Marx and Engels, as many other nineteenth-century authors, inherited the concept from the Enlightenment and gave it a central place in their historical writings, concerned as they were with the backwardness of decentralized Germany in contrast to centralized France and England.

Decentralization of the feudal type was a crucial issue in France, where the medieval kings' power did not run beyond the royal demesne, and the local parlements retained considerable power almost to the end of the *ancien régime*. This was even more so in Germany, where hundreds of small territories regarded themselves sovereign (and

were confirmed to be in 1648), entitled to tolls, customs, taxes, effectively hindering national unification. To a certain extent the lack of political unity was a problem in east-central Europe as well, for example in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but in quite different terms. Whatever the case may be, it is well founded that progressive thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, those concerned with modernization and capitalist-bourgeois transformation, placed a high value on "centralization." I suspect that the weight of this term in the Marxist-Leninist discourse was increased by Russian historians, who came to see in the "Gathering of Russian Lands" a first crucial epoch of national progress and acclaimed the centralism of Peter the Great as the model for (Stalinist) modernization. In its Soviet-Marxist usage, therefore, the term became to hide the problem of a strong monarchy.

How relevant was the notion of centralization for medieval Hungary, a kingdom that was as unitary as few others in medieval Europe and never seriously challenged by what is called feudal separatism? Surely, the brief interlude of oligarchic separatism around 1300 cannot be construed as a major threat to the kingdom's unity; it was definitely barred by the strong monarchy of the fourteenth-century Angevin kings and the country remained united until 1541, when the fall of Buda to the Ottomans and the split between two elected kings divided it into three parts. Thus, "centralization" in the sense of unification and the reduction of local sovereignties was not an issue in medieval Hungary.

There is, of course, another meaning of centralization *vs* decentralization, the one which had exercised the centralist reformers of the *Vormärz* and of 1848, such as József Eötvös, Ferencz Deák and others: central authority *vs* local administration, privileged jurisdiction and parochial taxation. Surely the doctorinaires of the Reform Age have pointed to a painful anachronism in nineteenth-century Hungary when attacking the petrified legalistic world of semiliterate and arch-conservative county-gentry. But can their critique be transferred to the noble corporations of the counties in the Middle Ages? Without mistaking the "Golden Age" of noble republic, à la sixteenth-century Poland, for true democracy, I believe that a long overdue rethinking of the history of Hungary – one which would be democratic in the sense of municipalism, communalism and other grassroots elements of autonomy which were so strongly emphasized by Szűcs and Bibó – might re-discover some positive elements in the framework of local administration. Of course, this is a big question and goes far beyond the limits of my topic. Yet, in the light of the massive centralism and etatism of recent Hungarian history, features that were not always carriers of enlightened reform and may have something to do with the oft-lamented absence of a genuinely, organically grown "civil society" (down to our own days, when autonomous and self-reliant communities are so sorely missing in Hungarian society), one should at least ponder seriously whether centralization was in itself "A Good Thing."

As far as Matthias Corvinus is concerned, he did little for centralization (of course, in the second meaning of the term, for the first was irrelevant for Hungary), whatever its value *à la longue* may be. He certainly improved the existing institutions of central administration and surely enhanced their efficiency, not only in collecting revenues. But he did not, could not, establish any major new central institutions; and, actually, the one which he reformed from the bottom up, was certainly not a "Renaissance-absolutist"

one, but a very corporative office – the palatinate. As to local authorities, he was well aware of the fact that in the decades preceding his accession, during his father's tenure as governor, it was the counties and their magistrates, supported by the frequently armed assemblies of the noble community, that kept the country from total chaos and anarchy. Central offices and royal courts barely functioned for almost two decades between 1437 and 1458. Yet, in spite of near-civil war conditions, the country was administered somehow, for better or worse; some taxes were collected, robber bands kept in limits, the peace of the land upheld – and all this by the power of the regent Hunyadi in concert with the counties. Matthias Corvinus, correctly, augmented the counties' right to call juridical meetings, to act as vigilantes and administer local justice vis-à-vis the powerful lords, the king's major adversaries. Therefore, it appears that Matthias did not regard centralization at any price as an urgent programme, did not pursue it and, I risk to add, should not be held responsible for having done so.

What does this all add up to? Precisely to that what many levelheaded contemporary historians (and a few from the recent past) have often stated: the kingdom of Hungary in the late fifteenth century was certainly on its way out of an archaic or feudal condition, but far from being close to the most advanced "Renaissance states" of the Italian peninsula. This assessment would, more or less, hold true for the neighbouring regions as well: Bohemia may have been somewhat ahead, Poland certainly a few steps behind; the State of the Teutonic Order in many respects more advanced, but (until the Reformation) encapsuled in its medieval-crusading heritage, while some Austrian territories were perhaps further on the road in agrarian production, but hardly in terms of non-feudal bureaucracy, of which they were to become great champions a century or so later. However, it should also be noted that a strict comparison is possible only with Italy, because according to Chabod's standards no other polity of the time would fully qualify for the title of "Renaissance State." None of the German states, not even France or Spain could have been called thus by all counts of Chabod's reckoning, although the less rigorous category of "new monarchy" may fit the one or the other. Hence, the idealization of "Western Europe" in the last medieval decades is just as wrong as the claim to central Europe's having been equal with the most advanced societies is unfounded.

After this "balance-sheet," let us return to Szűcs's paradigm about the incomplete "Europeanization" in the high Middle Ages and its ebb around the beginning of the early modern centuries. Some of the features noted support this argument. First of all: the failures in urban policies together with the one-sidedness of royal finances (which, admittedly, was a vicious circle, for the urban crafts and trade could not supply much more than they did) point rather to shortcomings that accompanied medieval development almost from the beginning. Hungarian kings founded cities and granted privileges, just as their western counterparts, but regarded them as quick sources of monetary income and profitable reward for landowners. Matthias did not act otherwise. The increasing strength of the lesser noble corporations in the counties went back to the fourteenth century. The great number of freemen who had acquired noble status, a status that was controlled essentially by the nobility itself, based on their oral traditions and county assemblies, limited the crown's mobility in taxation and in military reform. Szűcs argues that, paradoxically, the lack of a full-bloom feudal, contractual system of dependencies implied the weakness of those foundations on which in the western parts of the civil

society of modern times developed. However, on the other hand, neither Matthias, nor his predecessors or successors were able to rally the non-mediated lesser nobles as serious allies of the crown against the aristocracy, for they were bound by retainer-ties to the great landowners or were too poor to have any social, political or military weight. Hence, the possible advantages of the absence of feudal pyramid could not be utilized, thus the lack of contractual and mutual dependencies, able to be transformed into more modern networks, remained a net loss.

One may argue that Matthias' programme for a stronger monarchic state, fully in harmony with parallel developments in the West, if successful, would have given the crown some power to limit the aristocracy's rise and the concomitant decline of the peasants' status. But the clannish cohesion of the old families, in no feudal dependence from the king, frustrated any attempts at change; finally the king himself strengthened the magnates, even if his naming some of them "barons by birth" was nothing but the acknowledgment of reality. Thus, when Atlantic Europe, and to a lesser extent "west-central Europe" in its wake, turned away from the East and offered it (implicitly) but a position of "periphery," east central Europe had neither the political apparatus, nor the urban base, or a free peasant economy that could have responded to the challenge. Self-seeking great landowners accepted the role of suppliers of raw materials, denigrated their tenants to perpetual servitude, and left a financially and politically depleted monarchy with the task of defending the country from mighty enemies.

What does all this leave us, besides some semantic sleight of hand? First of all, it may take us away from trying to establish the place of Matthias Corvinus's reign in the development of Hungary – and, more or less concomitantly, of Hungary's in central Europe – on the basis of chancellery rhetoric and suggest a more down-to-earth analysis. Also, by exploring some hypotheses about such issues as "centralization," we may open up our minds and those of our readers or listeners – if historians still have any – to alternative judgements of the past. And this may not be a merely academic enterprise. It is no news that Hungarian political consciousness is highly historical, more so than that of many other societies. Figures like that of Matthias Corvinus loom large in it. To a great extent due of the tragic discontinuity of Mohács, Matthias Corvinus acquired a larger-than-life cult in the historico-political writings from Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664) to Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky (1886–1944), as the hero of true Hungarian policies, and more recently as a "progressive" king, defeated in his centralizing efforts by egotistical aristocrats. The unrealistic overestimation of Matthias' achievements is closely connected with the "Mohács-complex," according to which the men and women of the last decades of medieval Hungary squandered the "great power status" acquired by the last "national" King. This leads to the unfounded appellation of "new monarchy" or Renaissance state and to the repetition of moralizing judgements in detriment of a realistic evaluation of complex developments in the past or, for that matter, in the present. And such prejudices are the elements from which national *fata morganas* are conjured up and lure people into ideological *culs de sac*, as István Bibó so fittingly called them*.

* Jenő Szűcs's historical essay "Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról" [A sketch on the three historical regions of Europe] was originally written for a *samizdat* memorial volume for István

Bibó in 1980 (later published by Magvető K., Budapest, 1983). It also exists in a very poor and abbreviated English translation (Budapest 1984), a much better French one (*Les trois Europe*, trad. V. Charaire, G. Klaniczay, Ph. Thureau-Dangin, Paris, 1985) and is to be published soon in a good German version (Neue Kritik Verlag, Frankfurt). Gyula Szekfű's essay-chapter is in *Magyar Történet* [Hungarian History] (Budapest, n. d. [c1929–36]) vol. III, pp. 321–411, esp. 332 sqq. Federico Chabod's two papers (1957, 1958) are now available in *Opere* 2 (Torino 1967): *Scritti sul Rinascimento*, pp. 593–623. For the officials and lawyers of Matthias I have relied heavily on Gy. Bónis, *Jogtudó értelmiség a Mohács előtti Magyarországon* [Men Trained in Law in Pre-Mohács Hungary] (Budapest, 1971), and on several studies by A. Kubinyi. On Matthias' diplomats we have V. Frankói, "Mátyás király magyar diplomátái" [Hungarian diplomats of King M.], *Századok* 32–33 (1898–9), passim [eleven parts]. Matthias's role in the birth of the estate of magnates is discussed by E. Fügedi in "The Aristocracy in Medieval Hungary. Theses," in: *Kings, Bishops, Nobles and Burghers in Medieval Hungary* (J. M. Bak, ed., London, 1986) Ch. IV. On the army the most recent works are by Gy. Rázsó, who also wrote a brief English summary as: "The Mercenary Army of Matthias Corvinus," in: J. M. Bak, B. K. Király, eds., *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Medieval and Early Modern Hungary* (Brooklyn 1982), pp. 125–140. The finances of the king are discussed at some length – based on studies by Fügedi and others – in my "Monarchie im Wellental: Materielle Grundlagen des ungarischen Königtums im 15. Jh.," in: R. Schneider, ed., *Spätmittelalterliches Königtum im Europäischen Vergleich* (Sigmaringen 1987), pp. 347–384. A bibliography of historical and political essays on Matthias can be found in the two memorial volumes (*Mátyás Király Emlékkönyv*, Budapest 1940) and elsewhere. The citations from István Bibó refer to his famous essay "Eltorzult magyar alkat, zsákutcs magyar történelem" [Deformations of Hungarian Character, Culs de sac of Hungarian history] of 1948. (Now reprinted in two collected editions of his works, Bern 1981–85, 4 vols., and Budapest, 1986, 3 vols.; English and German translations are under prep.)

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