

# RETREAT AND PREPARATION: THE PRELUDE TO HUNGARY'S AGE OF REFORM

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The functioning of a civil society allows for a variety of possibilities. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enlightened literature and the few journals reached only a small segment of the Hungarian population. Correspondence, a significant part of civil society, compensated for what was missing. The acceptance of free thought and pluralism by the elite prepared the way for their eventual acceptance by a growing number of individuals during the Age of Reform.

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Much ink has been spilled on analyzing the relationship between history and sociology. This certainly is not the place to delve into this subject in all its intricate details, but historians should definitely be gratified by sociology's contribution to the study of history. I am thinking of the concept of civil society, an old idea which gained particular currency in the 1980s, primarily though not exclusively by sociologists, denoting the brave resistance offered to tyranny in the Soviet Bloc. This resistance was done by groups extolling the ideas of freedom, autonomy, and pluralism. To use the language of sociology, the aim of these groups was "the revitalization of the public sphere."<sup>1</sup>

In Jan Kubik's phrase, this endeavor had a "tremendous emotional and public appeal to people living under authoritarian or (post)totalitarian regimes."<sup>2</sup> This statement was truer in certain countries, such as Poland, at the peak of Solidarity's popularity, and less true in others, such as Hungary or Czechoslovakia, where the resistance was limited to small groups of intellectuals. But in either case, civil society offered a new conceptual frame of reference, "the idea of institutional and ideological pluralism," in Ernest Gellner's words.<sup>3</sup> Or, as Andrew Arato formulated it, as dictatorships were transformed first in Eastern Europe, and then in Latin America, "the concept of civil society became a focal point of orientation."<sup>4</sup> These and other sociologists' focus of attention, for the most part, has been either

on the present or the future, and thus their application of an ideological bias to civil society is fully understandable. For instance, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato excluded market economy from their definition of civil society because of their belief that “it represents a great danger to social solidarity.” Victor Perez-Diaz repudiated such thinking, attributing it to those purist sociologists – he called them minimalists – who would exclude the economic markets from the definition of civil society, thereby reducing it to an “empty shell.”<sup>5</sup>

Historians on the other hand, when discussing civil society, see the topic from a historical perspective when they narrate and analyze those past periods that witnessed the opening up of various public spheres in absolutist regimes. This statement is not meant to disparage the critical contribution by sociologists, but it hopes to establish a definite vantage point, from which one may criticize certain sociologists’ tendency to generalize in ways that is not being supported by historical evidence. At the same time, historians drawing general conclusions from their own area of particular expertise is equally incorrect. In both cases one gets a skewered view of what in fact represents a broad spectrum of possibilities.

This is so because defining the terrain between individuals and groups on the one hand and the state on the other lends itself to a bewildering variety of explanations and nuances that tend to negate subjective summary statements. Especially, when the concept is applied to the past, what attributes belonged to a certain civil society and what the exact nature of relationship between it and the state was depended to a considerable extent on particular past circumstances. Naturally, each scholar evaluates these circumstances differently, but they must do so within a framework of historical veracity. For instance, the sociologist Ernest Gellner was wrong claiming that in both the English Civil War and the American War of Independence society triumphed over the state, because societies in both instances were split in their respective loyalties. Equally wrong was the historian Robert Morns in defining civil society on the basis of his expertise in British history, describing its main features as those of the rule of law, derived from Parliament, trial by jury, and the spread of market economy.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to a near-consensus among sociologists, positing the state as separate from if not antagonistic to civil society, a nuanced historical judgement would state when that was indeed the case and when it was not, or when it was something in-between. For example, Laura Engelstein correctly described eighteenth century Russian society as having “a lively public life” with printing presses, debating societies, literary salons, theaters, and Masonic lodges, yet, “fatally dependent on the autocrat’s good will.” And Robert Morris was right in pointing out that in the 1830s, the British government did offer subsidies to a limited number of associations. Klaus Tenfelde wrote about the severe restrictions associations suffered in most German states during the first half of the nineteenth century, but Ian McNeely was able to show another and brighter side of the same social and politi-

cal environment at the very same time through his depiction of how the so-called "Intelligenzblätter" were able to reinvigorate German small town life, leading to public participation and civic improvements.<sup>7</sup> The building blocks of civil societies, newspapers, clubs, associations, organizations of various kinds should be seen as situated along a spectrum that has historically embraced oppression at one end of the spectrum and co-operation at the other, with all kinds of situations existing in between these two extremes.

All this is not to say that a sociologist's study of civil society, if he or she deals with the past, or a historian's, should be reduced to the marshalling of supporting evidence, without, at the same time, being mindful of the big picture. In turn, this big picture of interplay between state and society would remain woefully deficient without the specificity of its details. It should be noted that there are many sociologists and historians who have successfully negotiated this balancing act.

The classic historical case of the emergence of a civil society in an absolutist state is eighteenth century France. The literature of this period is enormous, and it is not the aim of this paper to dive into it in any detail. Sufficient to say that royal absolutism there was progressively incapable and sometimes unwilling to impose total conformity. Behind the façade of universal compliance, supposedly enforced by censorship and assorted penalties, punishment of violators was capricious and never too harsh; at times the authorities looked the other way. Inefficiency on their part was infused by their sense of futility. After all, they faced a growing proliferation of journals, books, libraries, theaters, salons, cafes, academies, clubs, and masonic lodges. According to Roger Chartier, all of these generated the kind of publicity that turned them into arbiters of aesthetic judgement, cutting into the monopoly of opinion-making by the traditional authorities. Chartier also emphasized the importance of reading in this newly formed public sphere, to the point of entitling a chapter in his book, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, "Do Books Make Revolutions?" He documented the growth in both the ownership and the size of libraries, and he also traced the transformation of the content in several books from the religious to the secular, frequently with incendiary potential.<sup>8</sup>

Alexis De Tocqueville remarked that French literary life in the Ancien Regime did prepare Frenchmen for eventual political action. The historian Dena Goodman strongly reinforced this remark. According to Goodman, Diderot, particularly his *Supplement Voyage de Bouganville*, succeeded in making the discernible reader into "an agent responsible for political change. A new critical readership, in Goldman's judgement, would break with the traditional "common way of thinking." Goodman quotes to great effect Louis Sebastian Mecier, who, in the 9<sup>th</sup> volume of his *Tableau de Paris*, published in the 1780s, wrote the following, "A nation that can read, carries within it a particular happy strength which can defy or confound despotism."<sup>9</sup>

Correspondence was an equally if not more significant activity, completely central to many lives. In Márta Mezei's formulation, the eighteenth century was the century of letters, as those letters aided in the marking and shaping of the evolving public sphere. To Daniel Roche, the exchange of letters transformed the community of dispersed and separated individuals into a coherent whole. "The philosophers," wrote Dena Goodman, "increasingly and creatively used letters to bridge the gap between the private circles they gathered in and the public arena they sought to conquer." But the number of letters exceeded the number of philosophers, creating a "vibrant epistolary network." By no means were only philosophical matters broached, but every possible other subjects as well, "practical matters, ordinary concerns, travel, relationships, love affairs, etc." "Correspondence," remarked Roche, "played an equalizing role between various parts of the country."<sup>10</sup>

My emphasis on reading and especially on correspondence points to their enormous significance in Hungary at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was not yet so pronounced in the late 1770s, 1780s, and during the first half of the 1790s, when a lively and dynamic literary and political life thrived in Hungary. Unlike in France however, in much less developed Hungary, enlightened literature and the few journals reached only a relatively small segment of the population. On the other hand, while politics in France was possible only in a clandestine fashion for the most part, in Hungary, political activities in the counties and at the national diets were guaranteed by the country's constitution, bearing the grudging consent of the Habsburg rulers themselves, with the exception of Joseph II who was forcefully opposed to it. Associations flourished, including the Freemasons, at least until 1785, when Joseph II curtailed their activities. In 1790 alone, 53 printing presses in Hungary and Transylvania issued 832 publications, and the Diet of 1790/1791 made a momentous decision in setting up nine committees, charged with making recommendations on a whole host of hitherto neglected economic and other issues.<sup>11</sup>

The tempo of activities was already slowing down after the ascension to the throne in 1792 of King Francis I, whose narrow views, archconservatism, and mediocrity had cast a dark shadow over Hungary. The Martinovics conspiracy of 1794 and the public execution of its leaders in 1795 put the finishing touches to the most visible manifestations of the previously thriving civil society. The Court did not only fear domestic dissent but the continuing threat by the French as well. The end of the terror in France did nothing to assuage fears, as it was assumed that the heirs of Robespierre were just as dangerous as he was. Even after the defeat of the Martinovics conspiracy, the minister of police, Johann Anton Perggen, warned Francis about continuing dangers, which, he claimed, could be checked only by "unremitting vigilance by the police," and that alone "could preserve the Monarchy." Baron Johann Thugut, in charge of foreign affairs, vehemently opposed the

Treaty of Basel of 1795 between France and Prussia, saying that “even now the French are sowing the seeds of discontent, insubordination, unbelief, and false freedom everywhere.”<sup>12</sup>

The repercussions in Hungary were severe. The conspirators were dead or in jail, so the aim became to extirpate the assumed intellectual and spiritual breeding ground of defiance, and that in turn meant a war against the printed word, even if the threat was deemed potential rather than actual. The young Palatine, Archduke Joseph, much admired later as moderate and statesmanlike, advised the King at that time, on June 18, 1798, to dissolve all reading circles, because “many novels and other books, if not read carefully, or are misunderstood, could lead to the ruin of traditions and to the spread of evil principles.” The King obliged and all reading circles were dissolved on June 26, 1798. By 1800, the number of printing presses was reduced to 39 and the number of publications to 488. The police grew into the most important governmental organ, censorship stifled free thought, most associations, such as the Freemasons, were banned, and the ubiquitous presence of police informers spread distrust. In 1803, a newly formed committee retroactively banned 2,500 books which had been published earlier, including works by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller. By 1812, the country was left with only two Hungarian language newspapers. The poet Mihály Vitéz Csokonai’s lament from 1798 says it all, “We barely woke up from our lazy slumber, and we are back going through it again,” he wrote and then added the following, “All of our efforts and industriousness are gone. Each year, barely one or two worthwhile book is being published.”<sup>13</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe the deterioration of the country’s intellectual life to Vienna alone. The bulk of the nobility too became frightened of France and of all what they thought that country was standing for. The Diet of 1796 was brief, and unlike past diets, it was devoid of controversies. Although manifestly reluctant to take the field against the French, the delegates’ willingness to comply with the Court’s request for recruits and food stuff, gives credibility to the verbal effusions by the personalis, József Nagy Felsőbüki, who, apart from the obligatory expressions of loyalty to the Crown, vowed to defend “the holy constitution” against forces of “perpetual turbulence and every form of impiety.”<sup>14</sup>

The change in the *Zeitgeist* touched members involved in the political-cultural-intellectual ferment of the past years differently. A tiny minority refused to buckle under. Pál Czindery in Somogy county gave such an incendiary speech at the eve of the 1796 Diet that his position as his county’s delegate to the Diet was suspended. At later diets, during the first decade of the nineteenth century, speeches by Count József Dessewffy, Baron Miklós Vay, and Pál Felsőbüki Nagy caused consternation in Vienna, the latter among his fellow delegates as well by his strong support for not only national but social progress. His stand was exceptional in this regard, and in general, the defense of the constitution was interpreted by the vast

majority of noblemen at the time in phrases that echoed their deep-seated and tradition-bound commitment to legal-constitutional precedents. There were many fighters for past causes who decided to withdraw into private lives with their respective families and circles of close friends.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that in Hungary, suffering under absolutist practices that ranged from the outrightly oppressive through the mildly annoying, autonomous political institutions were allowed to operate, proves the point made earlier that the functioning of a civil society allows for a variety of possibilities. The mention of legislatures is either absent or sporadic in the literature on civil society, and indeed, in the example used on Ancien Regime France, legislatures did not exist. Another objection may bring up the fact that the county assemblies and diets in Hungary were extremely restrictive in their membership. True, but so were the salons in France. In all their exclusive and predictable character, these conservative institutions were conduits of an amalgam of loyalty to the King and perseverance in maintaining the country's constitutional independence that entailed the preservation of the nobility's privileges and their rights of consultation on a wide variety of issues. In this sense they reflected the relationship of an important segment of society to the state, the focal point in every civil society.

Although the above description may suggest uniform patterns of beliefs and attitudes, this was not entirely true. Many threads tied the writer Ferenc Kazinczy to the social and political milieu of the counties. He congratulated Farkas Cserey on becoming a delegate to the Diet in Transylvania by saying that "there is nothing more beautiful in the country than representing the people and speaking before the nation." But while praising certain nobles in Csanád County as highly intelligent and cultured, he castigated many others, mostly younger nobles, as childish and immature, and he derided the hypocrisy of his fellow nobles, who as speakers lamented the sad state of tax-paying serfs while in no county were steps taken to hinder their merciless exploitation. Yet, in one instance, again relayed by Kazinczy, in a session in Szatmár County with a near-unanimous resistance against theaters as threats to morality and religion, a young nobleman, János Ötvös, did stand up and did defend theaters as "the best schools for refinement."<sup>16</sup>

Even within the traditionalist-conservative framework of the diets, there were occasional progressive rumblings. I already mentioned Pál Felsőbüki Nagy, who at the 1807 Diet took up the then hopeless cause of improving the lot of serfs. Earlier, at the 1802 Diet, the personalis, András Semsey, warned the delegates not to rush into innovations, but telling them at the same time that clinging to the old without modifications would be both damaging and dangerous.<sup>17</sup> Some of the modifications suggested earlier, then, and later included insisting on the publication of the proceedings, a blow to secrecy, perceiving the preservation of forests as public duty, transferring wills from churches to county offices, supporting commerce, and promoting the Magyar language without forcing it on non-Magyars.

Another visible manifestation of civil society was the regular getting together of like-minded people, mostly in Pest-Buda. These meetings were primarily social and therefore beyond the purview of the police, but in the privacy of homes discussions could be freewheeling. István Kultsár, Ferenc Karacs, and Mihály Vitkovics were the best-known and most popular hosts. The range of discussions was broad, usually serious but not always; at times it was interlaced with a great deal of joking and hearty laughter. "I have literary evenings at my home," wrote Vitkovics, a wealthy lawyer, writer, and poet, to Ferenc Kölcsey in 1820. "We are planning many plans for the plans to be planned. What we are gaining by this is that at least our winter evenings pass quickly." To Kölcsey, all joking aside, these evenings generated new ideas and made him see and judge "how our literary life stands at this moment."<sup>18</sup> Anna Fábry and Anna Szalai described the liveliness of the intense interactions, friendships, and rivalries in this group. These interactions were not always friendly, as sharp debates, primarily on language reform, erupted among the writers. Virtual hatred raged between Miklós Révai and Ferenc Verseggy and between their respective camps.<sup>19</sup>

Another even more extensive and potentially more powerful and more significant part of civil society, correspondence, was invisible. Márta Mezei did not say so, but she did describe correspondence as a form of publicity with a mediating function, similar to associations, salons, and cafes. In Hungary, during this period, these were largely absent, and consequently, correspondence filled the void, compensating for what was missing, and in fact creating a thriving public sphere. Because correspondence offered so many opportunities for expression, the themes and problems discussed in letters encompassed the entire range of possible topics in politics, culture, morality, and culture, as well as in private affairs. Correspondence could carry an equalizing function, as shared interests and aims for instance connected the proud noble Ferenc Kazinczy to János Kis who was born into a family of serfs. Correspondence also evaded the imposition that the authorities placed on the literate population with restrictions of all kinds, censorship above all. Correspondence represented the triumph of freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas. It is no surprise then, that people grasped at these opportunities. It became customary for recipients of letters to show them to others, and some letters were copied and circulated.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from the above, that letters were mirrors not only into the hearts and minds of individuals, but they also reflected, to a considerable extent, the concerns of the literate segment of society, mostly but not exclusively nobles. In this sense, correspondence became an integral and critical part of civil society.

Ferenc Kazinczy stood at the very center of this epistolary network. The 22 volumes of his collected correspondence, each between 4 and 500 pages long, are truly monumental and they do offer an all-embracing portrait of the age. Kazinczy carried on an exchange of letters with practically anyone who could put pen to

paper, provided he, or less often she, was able to express himself or herself with some style and with ideas at hand. The range of topics discussed in these letters was truly astonishing, running from the most mundane through the most lofty philosophical. If something interested Kazinczy, he copied the same text innumerable times to several of his friends. From a distance of nearly two centuries, it is endearing to peer into his and his friends' private lives, to learn about their love and concern for their respective families as well as for each other.

Life was most precarious for all of them, so news about their babies' births and their wives' or children's or friends' sicknesses carried an additional emotional weight hardly imaginable in our own times. Love then was more intense for them, because any relationship, though not necessarily their underlying love, could end suddenly. This intensity then seeped into their discussion of public affairs, because just as these correspondents were mindful of their own mortality, so they were keenly aware of the finite time they might have to put their own imprint on furthering the common good in the country, their principal mission in life. No one expressed this better than Kazinczy himself "I am a great friend of publicity," he wrote to Farkas Cserey in 1808, "and I would like to see that everybody who reads, listens, experiences... serve the common good. If one thought is transmitted from one head into another, it can catch fire." Writing to the same friend in 1810, Kazinczy's words were inspired, "We have to show examples so the nation will learn. If in Transylvania (where Farkas Cserey was from) ten persons will appreciate that, I won."<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, it is this dimension which makes this and related correspondence part of a civil society, which mere idle chatter would not. Their odds of succeeding in educating their nation seemed slim at the time. Most of those who read at all, were reading calendars or poetry with heroic themes or sentimental novels, nothing taxing. The novels were the soap operas of their times and suspense was not necessarily absent from them. In one well-known novel, *Erbia*, one could apparently never know which one of the dead would rise up and exactly when. Some read these novels in churches if the sermons were getting too long.<sup>22</sup> No less person than the professor of aesthetics at the University in Pest, Lajos Schedius himself, declared in the foreword of a popular book, translated from French, that "funny and entertaining texts have a much greater resonance among readers than the didactic musings of serious writers."<sup>23</sup>

The serious writers were generally quite incensed. Kazinczy wrote about "illiterate readers" and "our dreadful public." János Kis wrote a popular book so to entice some of the calendar readers; "we should not totally neglect them," he wrote to Kazinczy somewhat sheepishly. Some of those were the common people in the countryside, but they could not hope to reach them either. "The peasants think," wrote Kazinczy in 1814, "that the landowner who reads cannot really be a landowner. But he who smokes a pipe from morning till night or hunts or plays

cards is.” Kölcsey sounded a similar note when he wrote in the same year that “if the common people are laughing at us because we are doing what we are doing rather than worrying about our wealth, so be it, that just enhances the bonds between us.”<sup>24</sup>

No doubt, this determined small band of correspondents was made up of isolated individuals who felt beleaguered and occasionally despondent by the indifference surrounding them. At the same time, their sense of mission, burning harder in some than in others, kept them going. Part of it had to do with their love of pen, paper, and books. They were voracious readers who discussed and rated among themselves all the writers, poets, and philosophers, whose books they could buy or borrow. “It is dangerous to lend a rare book to anyone,” wrote Kazinczy in 1803, with the implication that the lender may never get it back. In another letter, Kazinczy remarked, “without books and paper my life would be very sad.”<sup>25</sup>

Their educational mission was not political, it could not be and not only because of Habsburg oppression. Kazinczy, the onetime minor participant in the Martinovics conspiracy, who had spent several years in jail, did not repress the memories of his youth; he wanted the story of his incarceration be published in a Viennese journal in 1810, and he remembered kindly of some of his old comrades, especially those who were his fellow Masons. His thinking however had become much more moderate. Looking back at his youthful writings in 1803, he considered them, with few exceptions, tasteless and incorrect. “I have to rectify my errors,” he wrote. Writing about Napoleon in 1805, he remarked, “I think of him as a great and good man who will give religion and morality to that frivolous nation. If it would be up to us, I rather live under a good ruler than under a republican government, where one would be constantly afraid of a conflagration or bloodshed by the guillotine.”<sup>26</sup>

As this quote shows, although at the center of his and his friends’ mission was not political but cultural renewal, it was impossible to remain a-political during the turbulent times of the Napoleonic wars, the financial crisis in 1811, and the period of restoration following Napoleon’s demise. To that end, Kazinczy and his friends made their choice, and that choice was conservatism, at times straightforwardly so, at other times with certain qualifications. To them, Hungary’s “ancient constitution” was the anchor that kept the country intact and distant from mortal danger. “We are the chosen children of Providence,” wrote Kazinczy in 1806, “who were sitting at the edge of danger with our happy constitution about to be destroyed ... but thanks to Providence we are still standing.” When it appeared to him mistakenly that the monarchs, restoring Europe in 1815, were praising constitutional government, he boasted about Hungary as a happy and prosperous country even without commerce because it did have a constitution. In other letters however, he made it clear that his support for it was not without certain nuances. In a 1812 letter to Miklós Cserey, Kazinzy conceded that the love of county was

not always identical with what the *Corpus Iuris* and *Werbóczy* demanded, but still, it was important to hold on to them for support. Cserey, in his response, fundamentally agreed with Kazinczy, calling the road on which the “ancient Laws” were built “bumpy” and “uneven,” but necessary because the “finite human reason needs some anchor that would not betray us.” Then he added, “Believe me I am no enemy of every innovation. It is good to innovate but we must be wary of doing so because we should not get into something much worse.”<sup>27</sup>

For his stand, Kazinczy was often written out of Hungary’s Pantheon, reserved for progressives alone. That to me is a serious mistake, because he and his friends should not be condemned for having been transitional figures in a transitional age. The most advanced Hungarian thinker of this period, Gergely Berzeviczy, a sharp critic of Hungary’s constitution and someone whom Kazinczy attacked ferociously, entertained ideas, the emancipation of serfs for instance, that, apart from their intrinsic merits, were too advanced, anachronistic for early nineteenth century Hungary.

What counted a great deal more, in my opinion, was a drive, spearheaded by Kazinczy, that introduced and reinforced new ways of thinking and attitudes. There was then still a wide-spread strong belief that life stood essentially still, and that treasured values and institutions in society carried the kind of permanence that negated the need for changes. Certainly, lip-service was paid to the necessity of accepting some changes, but this was usually, an empty and meaningless nod to the forces of modernity, whose existence inside and particularly outside the country’s borders was hard to ignore. Miklós Cserey claimed to Kazinczy in 1812 that he was no enemy of innovations, but then he added the following, “I do not see anything good in the changes applied to our ancient laws during the past 200 years.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, Kazinczy had faith in a dynamic view of life, as he expressed it in an 1811 letter, “Mankind goes ahead and not backwards, although some whining people do not wish to see what they are forced to see and keep yelling that everything was better in the past than now. Just let them yell.” “A fine future is in store for my country,” he wrote in 1814, “and I am sorry that I will not see the budding of our flowers. But I will die gladly, knowing that my country will be happier than in the past.” He referred to foreign examples, “Goethe, my favorite among German writers, does he write now in the same way as people wrote 40–50 years ago?” Kazinczy and a good number of his friends believed in a general European trend of progress that Hungarians had to join if they hoped to survive as a nation. In several letters they used the analogy of going forward or else. Those who opposed cultural changes were, in the words of Farkas Cserey, “an ugly breed of darkness.” Kazinczy compared them to an architectural student, who rather than going to Rome or Paris to study, decides to draw drafts of “Asiatic huts” by the Don river.<sup>29</sup>

The future to him and his friends was certainly vague in a social or political sense, as the new they were promoting had to do primarily with a better use of language, and higher quality literature and theater. Still, their breaking down the stranglehold on the sense of permanence was helping to mould a new mindset among their contemporaries, preparing the way for others to eventually break down social and political taboos. "Not every eye sees even if it is open," Kazinczy wrote to István Kultsár in 1815, referring to a certain Pál Almásy, who refused to read anything printed after his leaving school a long time ago. If one wishes to summarize Kazinczy's platform, one could say it was to convince people to see and read what they could see and read usefully and improve.<sup>30</sup>

Even if the political contours of a future Hungary were not clear to Kazinczy or his friends, it was going to be a tolerant and refined country. Kazinczy, the Calvinist, was married to a Catholic and proudly took his Catholic daughter to the local bishop for confirmation. He much rather corresponded with an enlightened Catholic than with a retrograde Calvinist. He also had kind words for the Jews, who, he thought, were unjustly oppressed and humiliated.<sup>31</sup> Crudeness was another attribute Kazinczy and his friends abhorred. To Kazinczy, being old-fashioned and crude were the same thing, and he associated both with his archenemies in Debrecen. Although not from Debrecen, the poet, Dániel Berzsenyi, was rather crude himself, and the sophisticated Budapest literati were flabbergasted over the difference between his crude manners and elegant poetry. Berzsenyi sensed their condescension and avoided going there again. Nevertheless, he decided to trim his mustache, a symbol of provincialism if uncouth, and asked Kazinczy's advice whether to cut it off completely.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Kazinczy and several of his friends were passionate believers and practitioners of free speech and the right to dissent. The latter was challenged by many because the prevailing sense of permanence was tied to the fundamental principles of harmony and Christian morality. To attack someone in writing was perceived by the opponents as a violation of those principles. This battle was critical because intellectual freedom and the idea of pluralism were at stake. The opposition, at least in the Kazinczy circle, often resembled the ambivalence about innovations, that is, dissent was not opposed in principle, but it was circumscribed in order to blunt its rough edges. The writer, József Péteri Takáts for instance acknowledged the necessity of reviews, but wanted them to enhance scholarship rather than diminish the writers themselves. Kazinczy himself wavered between this and a more straightforward position. He once welcomed the vicious attacks against him, saying that controversy called the readers' attention to the subject matter, and he claimed that German literature reached its flowering only after sharp controversies. But generally, when it came to evaluating his own reviewing activities, he was more circumspect. "Without reviews we will not advance," he

wrote to Kölcsey in 1810,” if a few writers take that amiss, we should ignore them. If the review is brave but modest, no one should object to it.” Kazinczy surely did not think so, but his advise to reviewers was far from clear. “It is one thing to tell the truth freely and bravely,” he wrote in 1806, “and another thing to stab someone. To do the first is a sacred duty, while one should never do the second” Gábor Döbrentei’s letter to Kazinczy in 1814 shows how widespread this balancing act between modernity and tradition was. “The tone of the reviews should be humane but not harsh, “wrote Döbrentei, “and the admonition should be served up with amiability so the recipient should not be scared off from doing things better.”<sup>33</sup>

Only one friend, Ferenc Kölcsey, was implacable in his reviews, giving no quarter to anyone whose standards did not measure up to his own, even if he was the popular poet, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz. “We have to strike and use the whip,” he wrote to Kazinczy in 1816, “to shake up our public from its distressing indolence. So we are making enemies? But our cause is just.” Later that year, in another letter to Kazinczy, Kölcsey expressed his frustration for not being in Pest or elsewhere where he could have easy access to books, because, in that case, “I would mete out lashes the likes of which not even a Roman lord would have done to his slaves.”<sup>34</sup> This debate, with all its caveats, reinforced the spirit of intellectual inquiry and did end up promoting pluralism. Kazinczy was quite adamant in opposing Debrecen, a town that to him represented backwardness and old-fashioned obscurantism, and in one of his frequent tirades against that town, he inadvertently gave voice to an ideal of pluralism. In an 1806 letter, Kazinczy castigated Debrecen for seeing and hearing everything in a certain way without even imagining that others may see or hear things differently.<sup>35</sup>

This elite’s activities then carry an immense significance. The idea of free thought is inseparable from the idea of pluralism, and their gradual reception prepared the way for their eventual acceptance by a growing number of individuals, to the point that free thought and pluralism were to become the hallmarks of Hungary’s Age of Reform. For that, modern Hungary owes genuine gratitude to Kazinczy and his friends.

### Notes

1. Andrew Arato, *Civil Society, Constitution, and Legitimacy* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 44.
2. Jan Kubik, “Between the State and Networks of »Cousins«: The Role of Civil Society and Noncivil Associations in the Democratization of Poland” in Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord, eds, *Civil Society Before Democracy* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 182.
3. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Hamish&Hamilton, 1994), 3.

4. Andrew Arato, *Civil Society, Constitution, and Legitimacy*, 44.
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