

# The Program of Cultural Refinement in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Hungary: the Example of Count Széchenyi and Baron Kemény

Ferenc Hörcher

In an effort to give a historical depth to recent discussions on taste in Aesthetic theory, this paper recovers a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian paradigm. While taste first came to the forefront of philosophical reflection with the Enlightenment and especially with Kant, by now there is a growing literature on the survival of that discourse in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The present author contributed to the research, which tried to show that in Hungary Count István Széchenyi, an influential political reformer, can be regarded as an author, who for socio-political reasons relied heavily on the British discourse of politeness and taste. This paper aims to show that the same discourse lived on and was employed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in socio-political debates. The example is Baron Zsigmond Kemény, an admirer and follower of Széchenyi, who transformed the discourse into a bourgeois political-educational program.<sup>1</sup> | *Keywords: Taste, Politeness, Refinement, István Széchenyi, Zsigmond Kemény, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hungary*

## 1. The Aesthetic and the Political

There has been a renewed interest in taste and politeness in the last twenty years.<sup>2</sup> In the Anglophone world, these notions have been discussed with rising frequency as a result of efforts to approach aesthetic phenomenon more broadly, including much more than the field of the art world. To discuss and possibly theorise such diverse topics as natural or environmental beauty, or popular culture, it is necessary to reassess the categories of judgement and

<sup>1</sup> I would like to extend my thanks to Stephen Patrick for revising the English of this essay and to Andrea Robotka for her help with the text and footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> For this view, see (Klein, 2002).

taste. On the other hand, Continental phenomenology has also seen renewed interest in the existential relevance of aesthetic ‘*Erlebnis*’.<sup>3</sup> An understanding that human life would be much poorer without proper recognition of its aesthetic aspects has played a major role in this. Thirdly, a revival of the Aristotelian understanding of practical philosophy, and discussion of the overlap between politics and aesthetics, or ‘the political and the aesthetic’, as different components of the same field of practical knowledge has also brought taste back into the centre of contemporary discussions of aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

The present paper sets out to add a further dimension to this renaissance of the concept of taste, specifically from a historical perspective, based on recent findings of the history of political thought in Hungary. We usually associate the notion of taste with the age of Kant, meaning the Enlightenment before, up to, and including him. In an earlier, Hungarian language book of mine, I provided an overview of the paradigm of taste from 1650–1800 in Europe, and in particular in Britain, France and Germany. (Hörcher, 2013) This paper, however, is concerned with the period following that golden age in taste, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the major authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British novel, from Jane Austen to George Eliot, the notion has a recurring relevance, but with heavy moral, political and sometimes even religious overtones. (Garson, 2007)<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that this is the age of the middle classes, an age of philistine and hypocritical culture, as pointed out by cultural critics from Marx, through Nietzsche, to Bernard Shaw.

Yet one can find another perspective on it, particularly if we include what were (and continue to be) regarded as the peripheries of Europe in the discussion. I would like to introduce a political discourse in Central Europe, that of Count István Széchenyi and Baron Zsigmond Kemény, two Hungarian aristocrats, before and after the revolution of 1848. Neither of them was satisfied with the traditional role assigned to aristocrats by the conventions of their political community, and therefore both of them searched for an opportunity to play their role in a more authentic and socially more fruitful manner. I will argue that Count Széchenyi’s reform program can be interpreted as a latter-day reframing of the discourse of politeness. This discourse had a long history in Europe, and was a dominant ‘ideology’ in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially among the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment, as has been pointed out by authors such as J.G.A. Pocock, Peter Jones and Nicholas Phillipson. This discourse can also be found in late 18<sup>th</sup> Hungarian political thought, as József Takács has illustrated.<sup>6</sup> (Takács, 2007) Together with Kálmán Tóth, I have previously demonstrated that it persisted into the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as

<sup>3</sup> References to this influence can be found in the aesthetic works of the late Sir Roger Scruton.

<sup>4</sup> A landmark achievement in this direction was the work of Hannah Arendt, in particular in her unfinished work applying the insights of her theory of aesthetic judgement to the field of politics.

<sup>5</sup> The publisher describes this work as follows: *Moral Taste* is a study of the ideological work done by the equation of good taste and moral refinement in a selection of nineteenth-century writings.

<sup>6</sup> Authors who have researched the use of this language in 18th-19th century Hungarian literature include Attila Debreczeni, Gergely Fóris and Piroska Balogh.

translations of the texts of Scottish authors show. (Hörcher and Tóth, 2018) With other authors in a collected volume about Széchenyi's by now classical breakthrough work, *Credit (Hitel, 1830)* I argued that it continued to be present in Széchenyi's thought in the early 1830s. (Hörcher, 2014)

In this study, however, I will take one further step by arguing that the notions of politeness and refinement supplied the intellectual resources of one of the major discourses in Hungarian political debate not only in the Age of Reform (1825–1849) but also up to the Settlement with Austria in 1867, and in its later interpretation. While Széchenyi's social program of polishing and refinement, to spread culture and encourage the general civilising process or *Bildung* across the whole social spectrum was received sympathetically by sections of the opposition, the revolution swept away all such efforts towards piecemeal and step-by-step reforms. His program was reframed by Zsigmond Kemény, his younger contemporary and admirer, who in longer pamphlets and in a series of shorter journalistic articles very successfully built up an interpretation of Széchenyi's work (both his publications and his institution-building) as the basis of an alternative to the politicised discourse on independence and national freedom. In this way, he played a major role in preparing the public sphere to accept the terms of the Settlement with Austria.

In this short essay, I will first suggest an interpretation of Széchenyi in terms of the discourse of cultural refinement, as a programme of reforming both the institutional framework of the cultural life of the country and the role and function of culture in public life and interpersonal relationships. To do so, I will draw on the findings of a recent publication by Máté Bodrogi (2011). This will be followed by an account of the reinterpretation of his achievements by his younger contemporary, Baron Kemény following the crushing of the revolution of 1848, and of his appropriation of it for his own program of cultural awakening in the context of neo-absolutism. Here I will refer to a recent research publication by György Eisemann (2020). I will argue that the language they both made use of entailed a genuine reinvention of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Scottish discourse of taste, refinement and politeness, in the context of nation-building and civil progress, in order to counterbalance the language of constitutional grievances and the pathetic rhetoric of a realistically unachievable national independence.

## **2. The National Reform Program of Cultural Refinement: Count István Széchenyi**

Count Széchenyi was only a few years younger than Lord Byron. Both of them were in the public eye during the Napoleonic wars, which they understood as an aristocratic eccentricity. Byron remained stuck in that paradigm, and went to his romantic death near to the battlefield in Missolonghi, in Greece in 1824. Count Széchenyi found his true mission as the awakener of his nation, when he stepped forward in the assembly hall of the Diet to offer a year's income from his estates for the cause of founding a national academy of sciences. Széchenyi was able to shed the role of the aristocratic cavalier, adopting instead another

role: that of the polite gentleman, as described in John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University* (1852/1858). Like the Biblical good Samaritan, Newman's gentleman is "tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd". As this example shows, the term 'polite gentleman' was clearly applicable to the Victorian gentleman.

The above claim is rather generalised. Now I would like to make use of it in a more specific and better-defined context. The historian Henrik Marczali claimed that Széchenyi's father had himself been a 'true gentleman'. It is from this family heritage that the son inherited this figure of the gentleman. Playing the British-style gentleman became second nature to Széchenyi. His mission was to show by his own personal example that taste and polite manners were helpful forces in a piecemeal transformation of the social structure. István Széchenyi, a one-time soldier was, unlike Byron, able to make the giant leap from the way of life of the easy-going aristocrat, dressed in the uniform of an officer of the army, to that of the public celebrity and independent political actor in the elegant overcoat of a supporter of culture. His life's work from that time onwards was to convince his compatriots that the way ahead was not through a confrontation with the court in Vienna, but through challenging it in the field of economy and culture, and this vision was shared among an ever-widening circle of the population of the country.

Széchenyi's first literary breakthrough was *Hitel (Credit)*, a non-fictional book about the concept of credit that had two divergent meanings in contemporary Hungarian. On the one hand it was a technical term in the discourse of national economy, referring to the financier's trust towards the creditor. But it was also used to convey the idea of a kind of social cement or cohesion within a particular community, that is, the concurrence of expectations and outcomes of actions, laying the foundations of reliability. Such social cohesion was a rare thing in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungary. When Széchenyi pointed out that the country badly lacked the capital of social trust, his terminology once again referred to a more general notion, which could be labelled social intercourse. All his energies as a social organiser were used to encourage this social intercourse not only within and among the various (political, economic and cultural) elites, but also for a widening circle of the civil society. His major innovations usually followed British examples, and included the introduction of horse races in the capital and the foundation of the National Casino, which served as a meeting place for the aristocracy. He also participated in the foundation of the Commercial Bank, once again supporting the development of economic interaction. Through his work as royal commissioner responsible for river regulation along the Danube and the Tisza, or his support of steam navigation, and most famously, his determination to build the Chain Bridge between the two shores of the Danube, between Pest and Buda, he aspired to achieve the overall aim of bringing closer together the members, groups and institutions of civil society, and thus, through social exchange, to achieve the polishing of manners, language, art and the mind.

His written analysis of civilian improvement followed the best traditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century language of politeness. To demonstrate this, it is worth examining the use he makes of the concept of *ízlés* (taste) in his book on credit.

“We should not call it unpatriotic, if someone likes the cover of a foreign book better than a Hungarian one. We should look at it as the improvement of a better taste, and we should produce even more proper ones.” (Széchenyi, 1830) Széchenyi’s advice assumes that the improvement of taste is a generally acknowledged value. This is clearly a sign that a public discussion of taste must have taken place by that time in Hungary. From this quote it is also evident that there were tensions between aesthetic judgement and the support for national industry. Széchenyi wished to overcome this false value preference, in order to reassert the autonomous value of the judgement of taste. However, his most relevant point seems to be an implicit encouragement that the political community should improve its common sense of taste, because this will presumably result in a more civilised state of communal affairs.

True judgement of Raphael’s pictures can be made only by a perfect painter or by someone who cannot paint, but whose soul is healthy and intact. Only the perfect experts or the people can judge Mozart’s, (and) Rossini’s divine languages. Only one who trusts her pure natural or all-roundedly cultivated mind, and accustoms it to operation, in other words judgement, in order to avoid making it dependent on another one’s, in the difficult moments of life, only that person can make his own way in the full sense of the word. (Ibid)

This is typical of the, long and complex sentences of Széchenyi, and it illustrates his well-developed concept of the operation and use of aesthetic judgement in human life. This concept was composed of several elements. One is the Rousseauist-Romantic claim, that beside perfect experts of taste (i.e. the professional judge in David Hume’s essay *Of the Standard of Taste*) a simple, un-poisoned spirit (of an individual or a community) can also judge properly. A further point to consider here is that a healthy soul is in any case a requirement for sound aesthetic judgement. However, the most important message is that to live a full and responsible life, one needs to acquire the capacity to judge correctly, and this judgement is both an aesthetic choice and a moral one – a point that is very similar to the teaching of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish discourse of taste. It is also bound up with the notion of the fully developed personality that is present in Schiller’s views of aesthetic education, as well as in the concept of *Bildung* in early 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy generally.

Finally, a third quote from Széchenyi’s *Hitel* highlights the continuity of his thought with the discourse of taste. “If we should take over more from others, especially in taste, the arts, fine art and customs, than the number of cases they would like to imitate us, we had better rejoice, rather than mourn, and we should envy no one. They are old, we are young.” (Ibid) This is basically a clear-headed recognition of the belatedness of the country, weighed in cultural terms. As a theory of history, however, it is not far from stadial historiography, as practiced by Rousseau, Buffon and the Scots. This held that peoples have their ages, just as humans do. With the passing of time, as habits and customs and laws and institutions develop ‘naturally’ as a result of their practices, they become more cultured just as individuals’ minds become more cultivated. The main point of Széchenyi’s message is

that there is a need for a general program of cultural refinement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, both on the individual and the communal level.

### 3. Aesthetic Education as a Bourgeois Political Program: Baron Zsigmond Kemény

If Széchenyi embodied the program of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Victorian) gentleman, the popularisation of that ideology was thanks to Zsigmond Kemény, perhaps the most influential journalist of the period – after Lajos Kossuth himself, the leader of the opposition. The term journalist, however, does not do justice to the manifold interests and activities of Kemény. His most important public persona was that of an original novelist. As a journalist, he prepared the ground for the fiction-writer, by writing articles on the role and function of art and culture in polite society. In doing so, he was following the well-established tradition of the moral weeklies, inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup> century British and German context. He was also recognised as an influential politician, who was initially close to Széchenyi's position, and later an adjutant of Ferenc Deák, the spiritus rector of Hungarian politics after 1849, and the originator and main negotiator of the idea of the Settlement with the Crown. Kemény expertly played all three of his different public roles of journalist, novel-writer and politician.

His main concern, largely borrowed from Addison, was the following: for people to live a decent and civilised life, what is required is self-improvement: an activity which aims at learning about the outside world, together with gaining deeper insights into one's inner realm, in order to fully exploit one's potential; in other words, conversing and trading, and reading and writing. By engaging in intellectual activity, the individual becomes accustomed to refining her mind in discussions with others.<sup>7</sup> This will in turn lead to improvements in one's personal intellectual apparatus, which will help the person's social progress and ultimately allow the community to flourish.

Yet to achieve success in conversation and trade one needs to rely on others. Kemény's program in this respect closely followed Széchenyi's idea of building social trust. They both searched for a way out of the political impasse of the country. They wanted to strengthen social ties through interactions, institutions and culture, generally, including academia, a national theatre, opera, exhibitions, etc. Their conviction was that by self-cultivation one arrives indirectly at a state of a more cohesive social structure.

Kemény's fears about the way the uneducated mass of voters can be manipulated in a newly established democracy resembles Tocqueville's and Mill's dictum of the dangers of the tyranny of the majority. The irrationality of the choices of the masses was a concern of Kemény from an early stage, as can be seen in his journal publication, *Korteskedés és ellenszerei (Canvassing and its countermedicines, 1844)*, while the blindness of popular enthusiasm is

<sup>7</sup> In fact, a crucial issue was to win over a female readership, as they were often excluded from the educational system, and certainly were not involved in political discussions.

a recurring topic of his historical novels. Kemény, the journalist and the novel writer, was paving the way for Kemény, the politician, by demonstrating that without cultural reform programs the calls for widening political participation had no chance.

I would argue that Kemény's worldview (especially after 1849) can be labelled as cultural conservatism, emphasising the dangers of political participation and populist political manipulation. He criticised both the abstract rationalism born in the Enlightenment and the enthusiasm and irrationality of fundamentalist religious belief. Behind his criticism of revolution and enthusiasm lies a concept of the balance of power and his idea of moderation, two concepts which were already present in the philosophical discussions of ancient Athens. Balance and moderation are, of course, aesthetic categories, but he also employed them in his social-historical and geo-political reflections.

The final section of the paper examines the way Kemény analyses taste (more precisely what he calls "the taste of beauty"). In his series of journal articles entitled *Life and Literature* (*Élet és irodalom*), this is a recurring phrase. He describes novel writing, for example, in the following way:

we may require from it (the novel) that it offer us beside the joy of our taste of beauty something more as a result, something that we might call (a) worldview, philosophical idea, social judgement, an artistic representation of existing condition, or a sketch of the age, or a yet unresolved moral or governmental problem, or a yet unrecognized momentum of a passion, or a haven to which suffering humanity can escape, a sea, on which we fight, a place of rest, which we have left to get the results of the struggle... future, present, past. (Kemény, 1971)

While clearly somewhat emotive and pathetic, this is not an empty shell of rhetoric, nor is it overly sentimental or excessively ornate. Rather it is the panegyric of novel writing, as he himself practised it, and an effort to show how life and literature are connected in his view. For him, fiction is not simply a flight of fancy. It is not art for its own sake, even if it needs to appeal to our sense of taste and of beauty. It can do much more than that, through enchantment. As Kemény saw it, novels are vehicles to help us reflect and learn by reading them – in other words, they have a cognitive function, an idea familiar from thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum.

The whole series of articles, collected under the title of *Life and Literature*, aims to establish this connection – to teach readers of journals to also read novels and to show them how. He compares novels to plays, arguing that instead of simply telling a story the novel should also give us a hint of real life along with "always dynamic and developing sentiments, emotions, passions and deeds". All in all, he regards the novel as a medium which helps people learn about human nature, saving cost and time to the enquirer, and to do so in an enjoyable way. However, it can only convey such knowledge about worldviews and philosophical ideas, in its modelling of crisis situations, if it remains true to historical resources. (Bényei, 2003) Kemény's general point is in line with the general aims of the classical novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Britain, France or

Russia, including the famous *Sentimental Education* (1869) by Flaubert. The novel provides the connection between life and culture (as in Balzac), or, for that matter, life and the taste of beauty. Here is one example of how he connects the two in his discussion of his portrait of Széchenyi's achievements: "every venture which was initiated by the work of Széchenyi aimed at the friction, ripening, concentration of ideas, and almost without exception, to the revival of fortune, spirit and taste of beauty in Budapest." (Kemény, 1970, p. 189)<sup>8</sup>

Kemény suggests that Count Széchenyi's program was not simply a cultural program, but also a program of social improvement. Kemény thus acknowledges Széchenyi's original intention to connect aesthetic and socio-political value.

## Conclusion

Our aim was to show that the 18<sup>th</sup> century discourse on taste was also a source of normative power organising society and preserving political order in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungary. Two prime examples of this discourse can be found in Count István Széchenyi and Baron Zsigmond Kemény. The first of them, Széchenyi, a politician, published non-fiction works arguing for a nation-wide cultural revival to achieve social cohesion and develop human interactions within society, enriching both individuals and minor communities. The second, Kemény, published articles to educate a readership for novels, which served as vehicles of sentimental education, again with a view to enhancing social interconnectedness. The two of them, I argued, represented a vision of social reform and a view of the social impact of cultural refinement which was different from the mainstream discourse of national freedom in terms of conflict. Their proposal was a program to rethink the role and function of beauty and a refined sense of beauty in the interest of an enriched public life.

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful for this quote to Zsófia Kucserka (2017, pp. 96–97).

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Ferenc Hörcher  
 Research Professor  
 University of Public Service, Research Institute for Politics and Government  
 H-1083 Budapest, Ludovika tér 2.  
[horcher.ferenc@uni-nke.hu](mailto:horcher.ferenc@uni-nke.hu)  
 Senior Fellow  
 Institute of Philosophy, Budapest  
 H-1097 Budapest, Tóth Kálmán u. 4.  
[horcher.ferenc@abtk.hu](mailto:horcher.ferenc@abtk.hu)