Ratio Civilis: The Central European Experience of the Early Modern City

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Citizens and magistrates of early modern cities experienced radical changes in a comparatively short span of time. Huizinga in his famous *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) noted that the glorious mediaeval culture which gave birth to the phenomenon of the European city went through a process of slow decline in its last centuries. After the first world war, in a time of total disillusion and the final loss of European innocence, Huizinga meant to show the opposite side of the coin of the culture of the Renaissance to the one presented by Burckhardt's more optimistic narrative of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) in an earlier, more self-confident moment of European history. From our point, it might be the case that perhaps Huizinga and Burckhardt were both right. The late mediaeval–early modern period experienced a radical transformation due to the decline of earlier views and the birth of shockingly new visions of human life and the cosmos. Science and the arts both returned to the classical tradition and invented something unparalleled at the same time. In economic life, the novelties included the birth of long-distance trade, new methods of banking in finance, and technological innovation in industry. In society, it meant among other changes, demographic explosions and disasters in a short span of time, sharp social conflicts as a result of a bourgeoning middle class, while in politics it led to civil and continent-wide wars based on new dynastic demands and fresh denominational debates, and the intrusion of the Ottoman Empire into South-East Europe, among others. In culture, the period witnessed both the flourishing of Christian humanism and the rise of the Reformation in its Lutheran and Calvinist versions as well, resulting in social unrest, civil wars, and the Thirty Years' War.

Huizinga's and Burckhardt's different perceptions are usually associated with a North–South conflict in the early modern period.[1] Although the fierce debate between these two paradigms is by now over for the most part, it is noteworthy for us for two reasons. First, because the dichotomy behind the debate constructed

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[1] Harry Jansen. 2016. Rethinking Burckhardt and Huizinga. A Transformation of Temporal Images. *History of Historiography, International Review* 70(2): 95–112.

a southern and a northern version of early modern transformation. It not only left out the Western (Atlantic) direction of the transformation but left the Eastern and much of the Central European developments in total darkness. Secondly, both Burckhardt and Huizinga focused on the cultural dimension of the debate, which led them more to a courtly and less to an urban context. Of course, a key element of Burckhardt's story is Florence, which had a long history of republican government; yet his interest in artistic production brought into the picture the famous Italian secular (princely) and religious (mainly the papal) courts as sponsors as they had the capacity to cover the costs of the luxury of high culture. Huizinga himself was an admirer of the urban culture of his homeland, as he illustrates it in his book on the golden age of the Dutch Republic.[2] Yet in the centre of his opus magnum we find the Burgundian Court and not the Dutch seaports and famous urban centres. This way, his story suggests that the mediaeval period was more favourable to the feudal, courtly way of politics, and he seems to underestimate the urban developments in the background.

What if we try to redraw this map of cultural history and concentrate on the early modern European city? The three papers the reader finds below deal with the Central European, East-Central European region, more particularly with the Hungarian Kingdom and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Early Modern Period (16th–18th centuries), in connection with civic (in other word, burghers') education.[3] They are edited versions of talks given at the conference organized around the topic of the early modern intellectual history of the city at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It was entitled *'Ratio Civilis'. The Transformation of Urban Political Cultures in the Age of the Reformation*. It was organized by Ferenc Hörcher and Ádám Smrcz with the intention to bring together a select group of multidisciplinary researchers who are interested in the specific political culture characterizing urban centres, as it can be reconstructed by the different methods of intellectual and cultural history as well as of the history of political thought.

The Latin term 'ratio civilis' in the title refers to the specific frame of mind which determined the way of thinking of urban magistrates in the era as witnessed by those who were ready to put down their political ideas and experiences in written form as well.

Fortunately, by now, we have got some interesting new research into the late mediaeval–early modern past of Central Europe. We have got, for example, the Forum on Early Modern Central Europe at the School of Slavonic and East

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2   Johan Huizinga: *Dutch civilisation in the seventeenth century*, originally published in 1941.

3   For an earlier account of the present author of early modern civic education, see Ferenc Hörcher. 2017. Dramatic Mimesis and Civic Education in Aristotle, Cicero and Renaissance Humanism. *Aisthesis: Pratische Lingauggi e saperi dell'estetico rivista online del seminario permanente di estetica* 10(1): 87–96.

European Studies in London.[4] Or think about the research into this period and region at the Central European University, especially the work of Balázs Trencsényi.[5] Also, we have got some new interesting research, especially on urban development in the region in the Early Modern Period. In this respect, we have the work of András Kubinyi, György Granasztói, and, by now, also of Katalin Szende. This is, of course, a very subjective draft of the new results of Early Modern Central European urban research as it can be seen from the perspective of someone working in Budapest, Hungary. The guest editor's admittedly partial perspective explains why two of the three papers will concentrate on the Hungarian Kingdom. These papers are the works of Hungarian postdoctoral researchers, engaged in the historical study of some of the early modern urban centres. The third one is a different topic, though closely connected to the Hungarian Kingdom. After all, the early modern Poland evoked in it had close historical – political, economic, and cultural – contacts with the Hungarian Kingdom. The idea offered in that paper is itself closely connected to the topic of the other two articles.

Let me shortly describe the merits of the three papers one by one. Barnabás Guitman takes a closer look at 16th-century Bártfa (Bardejov) in Upper Hungary, present-day Slovakia. His hero is Leonhard Stöckel (1510–1560), but Dr Guitman's article is not about his specific activity as schoolmaster of the city after his return from his study trip in Wittenberg. Rather, the author asks how religion, education, and politics are interrelated in this thriving city during and after the Reformation. In the meantime, often as side remarks, he formulates some strong claims. One of them is that 'The cities of the Hungarian Kingdom had broad political and ecclesiastical autonomy compared to other European towns.' Also, he rightly stresses the fact that the city alliance of Upper Hungary had a real political relevance in the age when, after the defeat in the Battle of Mohács (1526) of the Hungarian king by the Turkish invaders and the fall of Buda (1541), the country was divided into three independent parts.[6] However, perhaps nothing was as important in this respect as the impact of the German-language reformation of the local government, the church government taking over the authority of the

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4   This research was established there by the late László Péter, and now it has been taken over by Martyn Rady and Thomas Lorman. I worked together with this research group to edit: Ferenc Hörcher–Thomas Lorman: *A History of the Hungarian Constitution: Law, Government and Political Culture in Central Europe.* London, I. B. Tauris, 2019. There is a long chapter in this volume on the mediaeval and early modern history of the Hungarian Kingdom.

5   See especially Balázs Trencsényi's thesis: *Patriotism, Elect Nation, and Reason of State: Patterns of Community and the 'Political Languages Of Hungarian Nationhood' in the Early Modern Period.* Budapest, Central European University, 1998; Balázs Trencsényi–Márton Zászkaliczky, eds, *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe.* Leiden: Brill, 2010.

6   For an overview of this specific topic, see Gábor Kiss Farkas: Humanist Ethics and Urban Patriotism in Upper Hungary at the Turn of 15th–16th centuries (Valantine Eck's De reipublicae administratione). In: Balázs Trencsényi–Márton Zászkaliczky, eds: *Whose Love of Which Country?* 131–149.

city council. As a follower of Melanchton's direction, Stöckel took his share of the community responsibilities, but he also made time for publishing his ideas in print. Relying on one of his writings, published posthumously, Guitman tries to find out why he argues so vehemently for the political importance of education.[7] As we can read in a letter written by him to one of the nearby cities (also partner to the urban alliance mentioned above), he was convinced that governability rests on the sciences.[8] Guitman also refers to the regulations of the school, which might have been written by or under the influence of Stöckel.[9] As he points out, the regulation is also inspired by Melanchton's principles.

Stöckel proves to be a good humanist as well as a pious Lutheran. The connection he establishes between *prudentia* and *eloquentia* is crucial for an understanding of the character formation of the early modern citizen in the protestant tradition. If you cannot formulate your thoughts clearly, you will not be able to make the right judgement in difficult cases, either morally or politically. Yet Stöckel is not a modern liberal: he is aware of the risks of the existence of a too wide pool of citizens thinking clearly as well as fully participating in the affairs of the political community. In this respect – when he talks about the duty of the magistrates to take control of the publishers of secular literature –, his view of local government is far from being democratic as he thinks that power should not be distributed on an equal basis. As schoolmaster, he was responsible for the well-ordered ideas of all his pupils, and as his students had different talents he was far from being a liberal teacher, either. Also, as schoolmaster, he had to take good care of the religious education of the children (and their families), and in this age of religious struggles his enthusiasm led to harsh control of citizen activity – as was the case in Calvin's Geneva. He had to provide the ideological basis for the fight against the Turks as well. His literary heritage proves that he was a man of strong ideas and strong discipline and that his Melanchtonian principles were mixed with his ideas of heavy-handed leadership of both the religious community and the secular civitas.

If Bártfa had its own experience of how to combine Reformation theology, autonomous politics, and humanist schooling, the same is true of Sopron, a city in the western part of the country. The fact that the city was much closer to Vienna, however, makes its story less straightforward than Bártfa's one was. The essay by Dr Kálmán Tóth tries to show the particular turns of this history in the Early

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7   Leonardus Steckelius: Annotationes Locorum communium doctrinae Christianae Philippi Melanchtonis. Basileae: Oporinus. In: Philip Melanchton: *Loci Communes Theologici*. Basileae: Oporinus, 1561.

8   See Daniel Škoviera. 1976. Epistulae Leonardi Stöckel. Zbornik Filozofickej Fakulty Univerzity Komenského Graecolitana et Orientalia 7–8(01): 265–359, 322.

9   Leges Scholae Bartphensis. The 18th-century text is available in the following modern edition: István Mészáros. 1981. *XVI. századi városi iskoláink és a „studia humanitatis"*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Modern Period. Relying on the school history of the Lutheran lycée of Sopron by Sámuel Németh, Tóth reaffirms Guitman's claim above that 'during the 16th and 17th centuries secular and clerical governance were not exactly separated from each other' (author's transl.).[10] Tóth calls his readers' attention to the fact that Sopron was the city in Hungary which was first and with the greatest intensity affected by the Reformation. Although the parish priests and with their lead the parish schools made their best to oppose the new wave of religious teaching, first the inhabitants and somewhat later the Council of Sopron had a majority supporting Luther's theses. It is more surprising that Sopron had the first Lutheran lycée, organized not by an aristocratic patron but by the city council itself. They, of course, did it along the Lutheran principles of education, which expected the secular authority to be active on this field as well. These principles were transmitted from Wittenberg to Sopron through the work of reformation humanists such as the schoolmaster of the famous Goldberg School in Silesia, Valentin Trotzendorf, and Johan Sturm from Strasbourg. The school, whose building was constructed in 1557, worked as a boarding school as well, which allowed students to come from settlements outside of Sopron to study at the lycée and learn a new way of life besides the particular disciplines they were taught.

However, as I mentioned, Sopron's progress was not straightforward. From the 1580s, the Counter-Reformation gained momentum here. The town council had to present themselves in Vienna, and they were ordered to send away the pastors, who took care of the school as well. And yet, as Tóth points out, under the active leadership of the charismatic Sopron magistrate, Christoph Lackner, the town gathered new energies to manage its own affairs along the lines its inhabitants wanted to see. Lackner negotiated successfully with Vienna, and in 1622 even a Diet took place in the town.

Still the struggle was not over yet. After his death, the school of the Jesuits and the Lutheran Latin school had a real competition for the souls of the pupils and their families. Yet it was only as a result of the forceful reorganization of the town council, in accordance with the Peace of Vienna, electing members from both confessions, that the Counter-Reformation could make the breakthrough. It resulted in the closing down of the Lutheran public institutions, including the school. When the Lutherans could once again open their school, it was not run by the town any more but by the church itself. Yet the Lutheran school survived the new era as well, educating a number of the best minds of the country in the coming decades.

Whereas in the first two articles two examples of the early modern *urbs* of the Hungarian kingdom were presented, the last one is about the Polish nobility's effort to establish a *civitas* on the national level. While the Hungarian cities

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10   Sámuel Németh. 2007. *A soproni evangélikus líceum történetének egy százada 1681–1781.* Sopron, Berzsenyi Dániel Evangélikus (Líceum) Gimnázium, Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium, p. 13.

had German-speaking populations, who had – as it were – a natural inclination towards the Lutheran spiritual movement, the third story is about a country dominated by the Catholic denomination. Relying on an idea taken from Lefebvre, the main point of the author of the paper, Iwona Barwycka-Tylek, is that the Polish nobility's republic could be imagined as a *civitas*, a political community, usually associated with the town.[11] After all, from 1573, they had a right to choose their king freely, and the *Nihil novi act* (1505) and the *Henrician Articles* – which functioned as a Bill of Rights – further ensured the rights of each member of the assembly. The last document also gave them the possibility of 'legalized rebellion'. All these rights and privileges of the nobility lead Barwycka-Tylek to argue that Poland was transformed into a special kind of 'democracy of nobles' in the Early Modern Period.

Of course, Poland had proper towns as well, with both *urbs* and *civitas*, such as the famous Hansa town of Danzig or Gdansk. The inhabitants were here, too, mostly German speaking, and, just like in Hungary, they were not trusted by the nobility – all the more so since the difference between the nobility and the townspeople was not simply social and ethnic but also religious. It is true that for some time Protestantism touched the soul of the members of the nobility, leading to the *Sandomierz Agreement* in 1570, with provisions of mutual tolerance. It is also true – as pointed out by the paper – that leading members of the curch hierarchy, including the Archbishop of Gniezno and the Primate of Poland, were in favour of tolerance. When, however, the nobility secured its legal superiority over king and church, 'Polish nobles were more than happy to re-convert to Catholicism'.[12] As a result, the internal conflict between the burghers of real cities and the noble *szlachta* thus became prominent on three different levels: socially, ethnically, and religiously as well. Poland, in this respect, remains a counter-example of the early modern Central European urban experience.

The difference in the religious views of members of the Catholic Polish nobility and Protestant city dwellers was also reflected in their respective political ideologies. While the cities' wealth was based on the discipline and talent of its individual burghers, and therefore urban ideology respected the burghers' particular personal interests, the ideology of the noble republic was securely founded on the common good, irrespective of individual interests. The difference was there in schooling as well. When the Counter-Reformation wave reached the nobility, their youth did not attend the famous Protestant schools abroad anymore but Catholic ones such as that of Padua. As a result, the constitution of Venice was the ideal they promoted. And yet Venice was a place of unashamed private interest – so, its Polish admirers thought they have to correct the imperfection of both the real and the ideologically constrained Venice, returning to the Ciceronian

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11   Henri Lefebvre. 1996. *Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
12   Barwicka-Tylek, see below.

Roman concept of perfect virtue. Although the Polish state-city's bold initiative to surpass the famous ideology of the Venetian city-state was not successful, it is nevertheless remarkable as yet another Central European effort to support the survival of the urban ideology after the birth of the centralized early modern state.[13]

Taken together, the three examples of urban thinking in Hungary and Poland show that a research into early Central European urban ideology is well worth and promises further results both for historians and theorists of politics.

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13   For an account of early modern Italian urban developments and their ideological background, see Ferenc Hörcher. 2016. The Renaissance of Political Realism in Early Modern Europe: Giovanni Botero and the Discourse of 'Reason of State'. *Krakowskie studia z historii panstwa i prawa* 9(2): 187–210.