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The political cultures of Europe in historical context

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Abstract

The article focuses on historical roots of diversity of political cultures in Europe from macro-regional, social, as well as religious perspectives. As historian the author indicates that arguments used in contemporary discussions are usually weakened by the lack of historical knowledge of historical differentiation. According to him it is important to focus on four basic elements: attitude to the state and state authorities, quest for participation, responsibility towards the state as representative of the society, and readiness to accept consensual decisions and the attitude towards using the power as a component of political struggle.

Key words: *political culture, diversity, Europe, state, nation, geography, religion, elites, modernisation*

There is no doubt that Europe is a continent with a strong memory and with deep historical roots. For this reason, all attempts to start a new era with the “year Zero” – 1789, 1917 – failed. Even the most radical innovations included a strong impact of the past. Since Europe is also a continent composed of many different states, regions and lands, the past and the collective memory received different faces in different countries. If we try to analyze the political cultures of Europe, these two interconnected European specificities have to be considered.

Nevertheless, trying to find historical roots of political cultures, we must be aware that we are constructing a connection which was never verbalized or perceived in the historical situations we are looking at. Europeans who lived, let us say, in the 18th-19th centuries, did not anticipate that the posterity would regard them as makers or predecessors of different political cultures.

The relationship is even more complicated. All constructions of the past, all search of historical roots of present structures has to include two interconnected levels corresponding to two forms of ties between the past and present:

- the past survives “unconsciously”, until the present time through the family tradition, institutions, novels, the way of expressing meanings and defining key terms (like for ex. the nation, society, equality etc.)
- the past is verbalized in narratives, like the “collective memory”, the construct of national history and of its specificities, presented by scientific history, school education, or by constructed traditions.

At both levels, we have to search for factors which influenced the formation of political

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cultures in different countries.

In this contribution, I prefer a selective procedure concentrated on some typical elements of political culture:

- attitude to the state and state authorities,
- quest for participation,
- responsibility towards the state as representative of the society,
- readiness to accept consensual decisions and the attitude towards using the power as a component of political struggle.

Since the central aspect of my considerations has to be historical background, all these four elements have to be considered from the point of view of their historical context, which eventually differed from that we can observe in present societies. The tension between historical context and the present imperative of political correctness helps us, may be, to understand also the – sometimes hidden, non-verbalized – surviving differentiation of political cultures.

The search for factors of historically conditioned differences has to distinguish between two basic perspectives:

- The supranational perspective defines differences regarding the different past of European macro-regions. These differences depended on great general changes and patterns of behavior under conditions of premodern society, which survived also into the modern times.
- The national perspective, concerning differences in the formation of individual states and nations. Political cultures were also influenced by circumstances under which the modern nation and nation-state was formed.

1. Macro-regional perspective

Various parts of our continent lived during the centuries under specific conditions which represented some kind of their “common fate” and influenced their standard of living, cultural stereotypes of their elites and offered data for constructed traditions. This differentiation of European macro-regions started with the Early Middle Ages after the break down of the Ancient Roman Empire and continued at the cultural level with the split of Christianity and at the economic level with the differentiation of the “core” and “periphery”.

1.1. May be, the oldest but still frequently used criterion of regional differentiation is connected with the “Limes Romanus” which divided the Early medieval Europe into two parts according to the presence or absence of the Roman heritage. The “noble” Roman heritage concerned the present “Western” Europe and the western Mediterranean. This was important until the end of the Franconian Empire in the 9th century. Nevertheless, during the later following centuries of continuous historical development, feudal system – as new “synthesis” – emerged and it is hardly possible to find any important difference in political systems of feudal kingdoms and their cultural life inside and outside of the former Limes in nowadays Central Europe. On the other side, there is only one region, where the continuity with the heritage of Ancient Roman Empire was kept: the European part of the Eastern Roman Empire – later called Byzantine Empire.

More important was the Limes at the level of “collective memory”: with the age of

humanism and esp. during the 19th century, the stereotype of higher developed, more civilized people at the territory inside of the Limes, i.e. at the territory of the Ancient Roman Empire, opposed to “barbarians”, was supported above all in France, England, Spain and Italy. This argument was, however, used also in the opposite: in the eyes of early German nationalists, the Ancient Rome was regarded as an incorporation of cultural degeneration and political despotism, i.e. as a contradiction of modern political culture, while the Germanic tribes living outside of the Limes were regarded as predecessors or even pioneers of democracy and equality. Both interpretations were integrated during the 19th century in some kind of compromise: the ideology of superior Western civilization was based on and defined through the construct of heritage, which incorporated a “synthesis” of Roman civilization and German principles of equality and freedom – all this as an opposite to the “underdeveloped” East. Let us hope that, being liberated from the shadow of nationalism, the practical importance of this inside-outside limes division is in our days limited to the frequency of tourism from the North towards South.

1.2. The ideology of Western superiority could use also another historical difference rooted in Middle Ages which may be more relevant for the modern diversity of political cultures than the discourse about Limes. It was the difference between Latin and Greek Church, which ended in the break (schisma) between the Western and Eastern Churches in the 11th century with its consequence in the establishment of the Orthodox and Catholic (Latin) civilizations.

What does this confessional break mean for the diversity of political cultures? Above all, the Orthodox civilization, originally represented by the autocratic system of the Byzantine Empire, did not know and did not acquire the system of political participation, as it was realized in the system of Estates in the Western world. More important was, as already M. Weber observed, that the Eastern civilization did not accept the system of autonomous urban communities and the principle of free urban burgess. It was thisstrata, where the roots modern principles of participation and equality were born and where, later on, ideas of civil society found their most important social support.

Very famous is the eastern phenomenon of “caesaropapism”, i.e. the principle that the secular ruler (Emperor) is automatically the Head of the Church. This prevented the cruel struggles for power between the secular and religious institutions, which we know in Western civilization, but also annihilated a very important potential corrective of a legitimated opposition against the state power. Even though we have only indirect indication, there exists a majority consensus regarding the dualism in the Latin West, of the secular and spiritual power as an important component that influenced, in a transformed configuration, also the modern political culture.

The further difference results, may be, from the fact that the Ortodox Church refused the scholastic theology, which was developed in the Western church and preferred the irrational hesychasm. This limited and hindered the development towards rationality and higher education and indirectly also weakened the need for change and innovation which could be demonstrated both in the development of Arts. The different view of criticism and ability of regeneration was in the Latin Church represented by the Reformation and also by the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

1.3. Naturally, we have also to take into account the differentiation inside the Latin Church

– so as it happened through the Reformation. The struggle for and against Reformation was not limited to religious matters, it was an important political struggle for power. Since it was mostly discussed in publicity, the Reformation discourse, followed by the ideology of religious wars, offered for the first time some kind of groundwork for printed political culture. The meaning of this division was by far not limited to confession, it concerned also basic changes in the authority and legitimacy of the state and the ruling classes. Reformation offered not only a new definition of the relation between man and God, but also between man and the state, between man and secular authority. In this connection, we have to distinguish the Lutheran loyal and disciplined approach to the state and the Calvinist approach, allowing and recommending the opposition against the unjust state and ruler. Important nucleus of participation was included esp. in the Presbyterian system of elected representation.

Sometimes, the Reformation is regarded as the only factor of starting modernization, but this is a rather one-sided view. The Catholic answer to the challenge of Reformation, as it was expressed in the so called Catholic reformation (and Counter-Reformation) brought also several elements of modernity. Nevertheless, it formed the relationship to state and participation in a different way: was it only an unimportant accident that the road toward political modernization proceeded in Catholic countries, like Spain, France, Poland and Italy, with a strong share and influence of violent revolutions? Also the Enlightenment, according to Gellner, differed in catholic France and in protestant Prussia, above all in its impact on politics.

1.4. Rather important differences could be observed (and explained), if we perceive the “common geographic experience” of macro-regions, like Western, Northern Europe, Mediterranean or South-Eastern and Central Europe. Such a common experience was, for ex., to Western Europe – i.e. the Atlantic belt – the oversea and colonial expansion. This expansion had only an indirect impact on Central Europe, to which much important were religious wars and the defense against the Ottoman expansion, which decided the fate of Balkans for many centuries and created, consequently, a region with specific historical experience. If we identify Eastern Europe with Russia, we observe a successful expansion towards the East (Siberia), and originally unsuccessful, later nevertheless successful expansion towards the West (Baltics) and South (Black Sea). What did this mean for the specificity of political cultures? There is no doubt that the state-organized expansions offered opportunity for advancement to a large part of middle and upper classes and that this strengthened the position of state authorities. The defense against the Ottoman aggression demonstrated also the irreplaceable role of the state, but opened the opportunity for advancement to only few ones.

1. 5. The growing intensity of commercial ties and long-distance trade brought into contact countries at different level of economy. During the 16th-17th centuries, some kind of “European system” emerged, in which the Trade and production in Central and Eastern part of Europe was increasingly controlled by Western capital. As a result of this, three zones can be distinguished: European core (England, Netherlands), semi-periphery (Central Europe, Spain, Italy) and periphery (Eastern, South-Eastern and partially Northern Europe). Even though the concrete size of these three zones changed with the time (for ex. Western Germany becoming a part of the core during the 19th century), the consequences for political cultures are remarkable and have to be studied more explicitly.

2. The diversity of national political cultures

The second important criterion of historical roots of political cultures is characterized by the social, political and cultural circumstances in which the establishment of various national political cultures proceeded. This connection between nation-formation and differentiation of political cultures seems to me to be underestimated in the present reflections of political cultures. In this case, the basic unit of difference is not the macro-region, but the country, the state, the nation, and the basic unit of time are not centuries, like in the case of macro-regions, but decades, above all during the 19th century.

The political culture is per definitionem connected with the state and civil society. This phenomenon, nevertheless, did not fall from the heaven, but is a result of a long development, full of conflicts and tensions – both between different social strata and classes, and between the “civic” and “ethnic” understanding of the state. At least, almost all European states today are national states, ethno-national in so far that they have only one official state-language.

Already this banal statement includes an important difference in terms, namely the way of understanding the term nation. If you speak today in English about the nation, you immediately imagine the state: state interests are naturally synonymous with national interest etc. If you use the same terms in German, Finnish or Czech, you speak about two entities, which can exist independently from each other. The interest of the German nation was not necessarily identical with the interest of the German speaking Bavarian state, the interest of Czech nation was until 1918 by far not the same as that of Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This difference in terms indicates the basic difference in the understanding of the state and in the way, how modern European states were formed. We distinguish two basic roots, two types of the formation of these states:

1. The basis of the nation-formation was the modernization of the pre-existing state which developed from the Early Modern “state-nation” (usually with continuous development since Middle Ages) with its own national printed language and culture and its “national” elites. This meant that the state was since the beginning understood and presented as synonymous with the nation, all or almost all citizens of the state were members of a nation identified with “their” state. The people regarded the elites as members of the same social community - the nation. Laws and decrees given by the state-representation were understood as national ones. This connection prepared favorable conditions for a political culture based on a positive acceptance of the state and its institutions by the population: “We are the state”. Examples: France, Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, Swiss, England.
2. The second, very different path toward the modern nation started under conditions of a non-dominant ethnic group or “ethnie” (A.Smith) living at the territory of a multiethnic Empire. The nation-forming occurred “from below”, in opposition to the existing Early-Modern state and its system of values and elites. The new nation-to be tried to achieve all attributes of a fully-fledged nation, its emerging national elites did not accept the ruling state elites, started a national movement, demanding cultural and political equality with the ruling state-nation. As a result of this, members of this new emerging nations did not identify

themselves with the state, they inclined to be suspicious (and sometimes even rebellious) toward its institutions and decrees. They were not trained in respectful loyalty toward the values of civil society, so far they were represented by the “hostile” state. This attitude survived spontaneously also into the period, when the fully-fledged nation eventually achieved its independence, i.e. the nation-state. Examples: Czechs, Croatians, Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Baltic countries, Finns, Irish, Ukrainians etc.

Expressed in the terms of numbers, the majority of the present nation-states followed the path from the non-dominant ethnic group, the way of national movements. The stereotypes of a “hostile” or at least “suspicious” state survive very often, without being verbalized, until the present time among its ordinary citizens and makes it hard to identify them with the state.

So, we distinguish two different features in the European political culture, or two types in the relationship toward the state:

- “We are the state”, “the state belongs to us, citizens”, its prosperity is also our prosperity.
- There is a difference between the state and the society: “we are a civil society and have to be careful towards the state and its demands.”

Explaining all these differences, we have to stress one – already marginally mentioned – connection. The modern state which developed from the Early Modern state-nation was ruled by elites which existed continuously, completing themselves from their own ranks since the pre-modern period, in spite of revolutions and administration reforms. In the second case, new emerging nations created their new elites, some of them from “below”. This difference keeps in the minds of the population until today a different attitudes toward the elites on the one side and to the working people on the other.

Since the social structure of the “ethnie” usually did not include higher classes (and also its middle class was not very numerous), its members were – under conditions of liberal constitution – strongly underrepresented among the members of parliament, compared with the rich members of the ruling nation. The very logical reaction to this situation was that the call for democratization of the electoral system emerged among the leadership of national movement, in order to allow an adequate political participation for its members. This call was sooner or later accompanied by some kind of a spontaneous “plebeian” egalitarianism, which idealized the “people” and produced an auto-stereotype of being inborn democrats.

3. Social criterion of differentiation

The third criterion of differentiation is the social one. We have to study the concrete social condition of the emergence of the modern state and its institutions. They were namely very different in various cases and these differences cannot be reduced to regional affiliation and also not to the type of nation-formation. Generally, we know four types of social background:

1. the aristocracy as the decisive factor of modernization and state-nation formation (Hungary, Poland partially also England, Sweden, Spain),
2. the bourgeoisie (burghers) as the decisive, usually revolutionary factor (France, Norway, Netherlands),

3. the small bourgeois, the old urban middle class (craftsman, shopkeepers) as the most important social basis for the nation-state formation (Czechs),
4. the peasants and the intellectuals coming from the village as the leader of the nation-state forming (Finland, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia).

These differences made an impact to the social background of educated elites. Comparative research of university students in the 19th century demonstrates that the national elites were recruited in England almost exclusively from the families of landlords, higher officers, priests and urban bourgeoisie, while in Norway the high officers and rich merchants were the most important. On the other side, almost half part of Czech academic elites recruited originally from urban lower middle classes (craftsmen, shopkeepers) and peasants, followed by sons from lower strata of clerks and employees. Only later on, the participation of free professions and clerks increased. Almost all Lithuanian and Estonian elites came from peasantry and eventually also village teachers. Even though in various German lands, the situation differed, the common feature in all lands during the 19th century, is the extremely low percentage of sons from the ranks of “alter Mittelstand” (i.e. craftsmen and peasants).

What sense gives this typology? The presence of aristocracy at the top of the new forming nations and states created favorable conditions for the transmission of older, pre-modern values into the modern political culture. Sometimes, this could become a very positive component of the new political culture. The presence of urban entrepreneurial middle-classes strengthened liberal features of emerging national society.

The absence of aristocracy at the top of national society influenced also some differences in the forms of political culture of the new emerging nation states manifested some “plebeian” and provincial features, compared with that of the aristocratic or bourgeois political cultures. The level of behavior and manners, the knowledge of foreign languages, the sense of state representation – all this seems to be different according to the social background of the leading elites of modern states

4. National struggle

Typological differences in the way of nation formation were influenced also by the forms of national struggle through which national goals had to be achieved. Beside of very peaceful movements, which preferred compromises and negotiations, like the Finnish, Slovak, Croatian, Catalan, we know national movements using force as a legitimated part of their national struggle. This was not only the case of Balkans, but also of Ireland and Poland.

5. Religion

The last criterion of typology is the religion, which could play this role in a twofold position: firstly, as one of forming factors of political culture, secondly as an expression (/or substitute) of national interests. In the first case, it could be asked, in how far the political culture was also under conditions of the “secularized” 19th century formed by the confessional specificity. As it was already mentioned, Calvinism developed different principles and ideals of social relations and political behavior than Lutheranism – and they both differed from Catholic countries. Also in this connection, we could ask, as we already did in the analysis of macro-regional differences, if the correlation between high level of revolutionary potential

and Catholicism was only an accident or has something to do with the religion (or reaction against it).

In the second case, religion played a national integrating role there, where the “national enemy” was defined by another religion than was that of national movement: so in the Irish struggle against Britain, in the struggle of Christian Balkan peoples against the Islamic Ottoman rule, in the struggle of Catholic Poles against Protestant Prussia on one side and Orthodox Russia on the other. Sometimes, the religious argument could strengthen the national movement, if the ruling elites were liberal, like in the case of clerical majority in Flemish movement against liberal francophons in Belgium, or the catholic Slovene agitation against German speaking liberals. In such cases, religion played at the same time a disintegrating role in national movements which included also a liberal wing themselves. Very strong was this role of religious split in the Slovak case, where the Lutheran minority supported the construct of one Czechoslovak nation, while the Catholic majority stressed Slovak specificity.

The meaning of all these reflexions is to find out (in a future research?), in how far national cultures were influenced by the strong participation of religious or confessional arguments in national movements. Hypothetically, liberal political culture had its difficulties there, where the nation formation was strongly supported by the Catholic church.

And in the contrary, there are not only differences, but also important common features of what we call European political cultures. These common features become relevant, if we try to define these cultures in opposition to non-European cultures, like for example the Chinese or the Muslim ones. Only through this perspective, we can understand and analyze the importance of the Christian roots of Europe – a topic discussed so very much in connection with the project of European constitution. To avoid misunderstandings: it seems to me that the European specificity cannot be placed into an immediate connection with Christianity as its product, but in the contrary, it has to be understood as a product of the process of secularization in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. as a reaction against the pre-modern, traditional concept of religious legitimacy. Naturally, this reaction was necessarily different in European case in comparison, for example with the Kemalist (Young-Turkish) secularizing reaction against the Islamic Ottoman system. To analyze this problem remains, however, outside of my competence.

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It was not my task to prepare a list of concrete stereotypes and prejudices that result from what I have said about the territorial and social historical roots of differences between political cultures in Europe. I hope that there are more qualified teams, who could do it. It was also not my intention to enter into discussions led by political scientists and anthropologists about cultural theories, about the importance of grid-group scheme etc. As historian, I am only qualified to indicate that arguments used in these discussions are usually weakened by the lack of historical knowledge historical differentiation. For this reason, the aim of this contribution is very modest and tries to argue on two points:

Firstly, to notify that before we start to denunciate “wrong” and “bad” features of political cultures or to glorify “good” ones, we have to know more about different historical roots of various national political cultures.

Secondly, to attract the political scientist’s attention to the circumstance that differ-

ences of political cultures cannot be regarded through an exclusively presentist perspective, because they possess also a historical dimension. Naturally, this dimension has to be put into cultural context and researched in a more qualified way than it was done in this contribution.

In other words, most of generalizations formulated above have to be understood as hypothetical (or provoking) reflections about possibilities of further research. Even if such a research would disprove many of these conclusions, the provoking mission of my reflections would be fulfilled.

Bibliographical note

The remarks formulated as conclusion of my contribution explain, why it would give little sense to present at this place as a “bibliographical note” titles written by important anthropologists, political scientists etc., but offering only very limited inspiration to a historian. For this reason, I prefer, to present some titles on historical roots of European identity and its differentiation, which inspired me and where the interested reader can find more information presented at a higher theoretical level than that of my contribution.

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