

East and West in Modern Hungarian Politics

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Abstract: More than any other politician in current Hungarian politics, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán refers to “east” and “west” in his public addresses as symbols of antithetical political cultures and cultural value systems. Of course, he is by no means the first Hungarian statesman to do so. From the Middle Ages, references to the Asian origins of the nation were mobilized by chroniclers and statesmen to characterize the national character and Hungary’s place in the European Christian political community. During the Enlightenment, the embracing of a perceived cultural hierarchy between west and east entered the Hungarian public discourse, and from the Reform Era the two intellectual streams shaped modern Hungarian identity discourse equally. This paper describes the national identity discourse that emphasizes the Asian origins of the nation through the lens of what I call “self-Orientalism.” Whereas Orbán’s political addresses can be viewed as a continuation of the self-Orientalizing language, the examination of the ways in which he breaks from the tradition of self-Orientalism teaches even more important lessons about the viability of the reference to the east-west dichotomy in the global political arena.

Keywords: *Identity Discourse, Self-Orientalism, National Origins, Internal and Foreign Politics, Hungary, István Széchenyi, Endre Ady, Viktor Orbán*

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In 2012, as a speaker at the assembly of the *Vállalkozók és Munkáltatók Országos Szövetsége (VOSZ)* (National Alliance of Entrepreneurs and Employers), Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claimed that Hungarians were “half-Asians” who could act united only if social unity was enforced by a central power, which, in his view, “nonetheless, did not exclude consultation, debate, and democracy.” This assumption, he added, “could also be deducted from historical experience” (Index 2012). Though the right wing press hardly reacted to the Prime Minister’s words beyond reporting on the event, Orbán’s comments prompted a wave of protest in the left-wing and liberal Hungarian press. Many not only refused to be characterized as half-Asian, slavish, and lacking individual will, but also rejected the argument that Hungarians



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needed a central power, especially one in Orbán's hands, in order to achieve either social or political goals.¹

By contrast, in an interview to the ATV television channel, which is associated with the left, historian András Gerő argued that neither the derogatory ring to the attribute half-Asian nor its reference to the Asian prehistory of the Hungarian nation was the message that the Prime Minister had wished to deliver. It was a known fact, Gerő added, that the Hungarian nomadic tribes migrated to the Carpathian Basin from Central Asia in the ninth century (Sebestyén 2012). The significance of this argument, in Gerő's opinion, was that Orbán continued an intellectual tradition, which the Reform Era statesman István Széchenyi's 1841 treatise, *A kelet népe* ['The People of the East'], initiated, and which continued through the avant-garde poet Endre Ady's writings. Both "predecessors," he noted, similarly described Hungarians as Asians.²

Though Gerő is indeed correct in suggesting that Orbán's characterization of Hungarians as easterners has important historical precedents, Orbán's reference to the Asian origins of the nation needs some further clarification and elaboration. It is important to note from the outset that the emphasis on the nation's Asian character in political rhetoric relies on the tacit acknowledgement of the nation's Asian origins. Only within the national historical framework, that is by accepting that Hungarians as a people migrated from Asia to Europe, can Orbán's reference to the "true nature" of the Hungarian people be understood, and his assertion of the need for a centralized political culture that "fits" the national character be rationalized. This twofold reference to the eastern-ness of the Hungarians, and thus to its origins and supposed political character, is what actually connects Orbán to the intellectual tradition that Széchenyi and Ady mastered.

¹ For some examples of this response see: "Félázsiai népség a magyar—Orbán szavai kivertek a biztosítékot" ['Hungarians Are a Half-Asian Mob – Orbán's words blew a fuse'] (<http://www.168ora.hu/itthon/felazsiai-nepseg-a-magyar-orban-szavai-kivertek-a-biztositekot-100032.html#sthash.qjVs6sL8.dpuf>); Tóta W. Árpád, "Hajrá, genetikailag alattvalók!" ['Go Genetically Inferior!'] (http://hvg.hu/w/20120726_ugar); Julia Levai, "De Genere Félázsia ['Half-Asian']" (http://www.galamuscsoport.hu/tartalom/cikk/153333_de-genere-felazsia); "Félázsiai népség a magyar [Hungarians are a Half-Asian People']" (<http://www.nepszava.hu/articles/article.php?id=575102>).

² Gerő also mentioned István Bibó's well-known study from 1948 *Eltorzult magyar alkat és zsákutcás magyar történelem* ['Distorted Hungarian Character and Cul-de-sac Hungarian History'] as a continuation of Széchenyi's and Ady's critical voice and their judgment of narrow-minded Hungarian politics. In his study, the social scientist Bibó partially reacted to some of the author László Németh's claims, ones shared by conservative and right-wing commentators, that "foreign" elements in the midst of Hungarians were responsible for a deterioration of the national character that led to the "tragic" events of the twentieth century. Bibó, by contrast, pointed out that in order to better understand Hungary's situation in the present, one must examine the political elite's mistaken views of Hungary's position in Central Europe as a nation state and the erroneous foreign political decisions that they had made since the Compromise in 1867 (Bibó 1948). In Gerő's view, the current Prime Minister followed in the footsteps of these three thinkers, and by referencing the nation's Asian origins, his goal was to justify the need for a strong central government, a type of system that could serve as an alternative to both liberal capitalism and despotism. In Gerő's view, Hungarian history offered examples to both justify and refute Orbán's argument about the need for such a central power.

The examination of Orbán's public addresses during the past twenty-five years demonstrates that, while the reference to the east-west dichotomy in his political addresses has resembled nineteenth- and twentieth-century political rhetoric, he has interpreted the importance of Asian origins in policy formation in a way that is different from his predecessors. In addition, while the reliance on the east-west dichotomy remains a constant element in Orbán's political addresses, the content attributed to the two geographical notions of east and west, and to Hungary's place in Europe as defined by them, has changed over his career. Placing this phenomenon in diachronic comparative context, this paper illuminates the central role that shifting discourses of Asian origins and the east-west dichotomy have played in the arguments of Széchenyi, Ady, and Orbán. As I argue, references to east and west have remained central elements of modern Hungarian political discourse, largely because they have become flexible and dynamic tools in the hands of Hungarian politicians. They are suitable to communicate very different ideas about progress, tradition, nationhood, and Hungary's place in the global community as well as the way Hungarian society should be shaped. It is, therefore, imperative to look beyond the mere recognition of the continuities inherent in an intellectual tradition that persists into the contemporary period, and focus instead on the ruptures and changes within it.

This paper is divided into four parts, with the ultimate aim of examining the changing image of east and west in Széchenyi's, Ady's, and Orbán's rhetoric. In each case, east and west were deployed in response to a very particular set of social, political, and economic conditions, not to mention a particular international order unique to the time in which each of these three figures lived and worked. The first section of this study opens with a short discussion of Széchenyi's predecessors from the medieval period up to the end of the Enlightenment, looking in particular at the ways in which they described Hungary's place in Christian Europe by mobilizing the opposition between east and west. Focusing on Széchenyi's reference to the Hungarians' eastern character, the second section of the paper sheds light on how Széchenyi integrated two earlier intellectual traditions and definitions of east and west. In particular, the paper examines how Széchenyi drew upon the traditional Hungarian historical view of the Asian nomadic forefathers who conquered the Carpathian Basin in the ninth century and then founded the Hungarian kingdom, on the one hand, and the Enlightenment's understanding of the opposition between the developed west and the stagnant east, on the other. As I argue, Széchenyi used the former as a reference to national origins and thus followed in the footsteps of Hungarian medieval chroniclers. Additionally, in compliance with enlightened thinkers, he employed east to signify the past of underdevelopment and the feudal stagnation that the nation needed to leave behind. He pointed to the west and Western Europe as an example of the development he desired for the country.

The third section of the paper emphasizes that, whereas Széchenyi believed optimistically that the Asian character can be transcended in order to build a western-type capitalist country, Ady, just like his enlightened predecessors in Western Europe, used the term Asianness as a symbol of backwardness to characterize peoples who lacked the capacity to evolve. In the fourth section, I discuss Orbán's shifting references to the east-west dichotomy, a discursive process that emerged at the very end of the Cold War and that, by referring to the division between the Soviet block and the capitalist west, at the outset resembled the Enlightenment's understanding of eastern and western political qualities. Orbán's deployment of the notions of east and west has since shifted; recently he has been using these concepts to criticize both European and western financial and political institutions. The paper closes by stressing that the reference to the east-

west dichotomy, regardless of the transformation of the content of the two concepts, remains a constant element of Hungarian political discourse. Such a political discourse describes a "we" that will always remain different from the rest of the surrounding world, thereby reinforcing the insurmountable gap between a symbolic east and a symbolic west.

Precedents

The reference to Hungary's eastern origins dates back to the medieval chroniclers. One of the earliest chronicles, *Gesta Hungarorum*, written in the early 1200s by Anonymus, the royal scribe of unknown name, does not dwell on the Central Asian past of the nation. Anonymus, in fact, considered the advocacy for the pagan Asian past as popular legend, not historical tradition. Similar to other European chroniclers of the period, Anonymous insisted that Hungarians descended from the biblical forefathers Noah and Japhet, a narrative that was irreconcilable with a national history that acknowledged Hungary's heathen and nomadic origins. In sharp contrast to the myth of origins proffered in *Gesta Hungarorum*, Master Simon of Kéza (or Kézai) developed a historically-informed identity discourse in the early 1270s in which he emphasized the Hungarians' eastern origins in order to describe their role in European politics. As the well-known medievalist Jenő Szűcs points out, the transformation indicates that by the end of the thirteenth century, Hungarian chroniclers no longer viewed the Hungarian kingdom as a recently-converted Christian country occupying a marginal position in Christian Europe. According to Szűcs, the "confidence" of being an equal member in the Christian community of Europe is evident in Kézai's discussion of the Hungarian-Hun affinity. Medieval Christianity imagined the Hun leader Attila as "God's scourge," and the Hun invasion as divine punishment for Western Europe's impiety. Kézai shaped the image of marauding Hungarians settling in Christian Europe in the wake of their Hun predecessors, and in doing so thus reinforced the idea that the Hungarians in fact reclaimed land earlier ruled by their relatives (Szűcs 1999: XLIII). By employing this narrative strategy, Kézai was able to resolve the seeming contradiction between eastern past and current western identification by emphasizing that the eastern origins of the Hungarians did not contradict but rather reinforced their inclusion in Europe.

The reference to the eastern origins became a constant element of late medieval and early modern identity discourse, though different authors plotted the cradle of the nation onto different areas of the Central Asian map and offered diverse theories about the early formation of the Hungarian people. Based on the alleged linguistic connection between Magyar and Magog, for example, some believed the ancient homeland of the Hungarians lay behind the Gates of Alexander. According to legend, Alexander the Great shut away the "barbarian" Gog and Magog behind these gates in the Caucasus mountains in order to keep them from attacking the civilized world. (In fact, in one of his poems, Ady claimed symbolically that he was the son of Gog and Magog; see Ady 1905a; see also Dathorne 1994). Others suggested that the ancient homeland of the Hungarians lay where Nimrod's biblical sons Hunor and Magor began their chase of the mythical stag that led them to their new home in the Carpathian Basin. For them, the connection between the names Magor and Magyar was the linguistic "proof" of the genealogical connection. Indeed, one of Kézai's arguments in favor of the Hun connection was the linguistic connection between Hunor and Hun (Rady, Vespémy, and Bak 2010: xiv-xv). Others insisted that the

origins of the Hungarians could be traced to the legendary Scythia.³ Regardless of the differences about the "details," the eastern origins constituted a "positive past" onto which Hungarians based their future, and in particular their participation in the Christian Western world.

The Hungarian chroniclers' attempt to synchronize the nation's Asian past with its European present and future contrasted with Western European attitudes toward Asia. Historian Anthony Padgen believes that European intellectual attitudes toward Asia as the "inferior other" were rooted in the continent's imagined Greek cultural heritage (Padgen 2002: 33-54). However, as true as this may have been, it was during the Enlightenment that Europe and Asia increasingly came to be viewed as two culturally distinctive entities representing opposite qualities. Whereas "western" and "European" were interchangeable notions that defined cultural and technological advancement, the idea of "east" referred to political, social, and economic stagnation and backwardness. The historian László Kontler demonstrates that, at the end of the eighteenth century, enlightened Hungarian authors embraced this world view, and criticized their own country's underdevelopment as a manifestation of its Oriental character. Nonetheless, as Kontler points out, the very same thinkers also resisted any historical construction that may have challenged Hungarians' genealogical connection to the legendary Huns and Scythians (Kontler 2002: 136). Kontler describes this intellectual and political attitude as Scythianism, a concept which "refers to both a theory of national origins and the corporate paradigm of the polity with such origins" (135). Scythianism not only reinforced the medieval understanding of the concept of "noble nation," but also emphasized that Hungary's corporate identity needed to be situated within a narrative of the nation's eastern origins.⁴ Kontler's concept also demonstrates that, at the end of the eighteenth century, Hungarian enlightened thinkers equally embraced the "Hungarian" notion of the east and the Enlightenment's occupation with cultural hierarchies between east and west as a method of classifying different nations. Nonetheless, these very same thinkers found it difficult to reconcile the two intellectual streams.

The intellectual and political elite of the Reform Era eventually found a way to synchronize these two intellectual traditions, and among them Széchenyi was the most effective in his articulation of the significance of the Hungarians' eastern cultural heritage in the modern western world. This understanding shaped the discourse that informed Ady's work at the beginning of the twentieth century, and which Orbán continues today. In my recently-completed doctoral dissertation "Orientalism for the Nation: Jews and Oriental Scholarship in Modern Hungary" (2014), I defined this ever-shifting discourse as self-Orientalism in contrast to, and parallel with, the concept of Orientalism that Edward Said coined in order to describe the western political-scholarly attitude toward the Middle East and Middle Eastern studies. I understand self-Orientalism as a Hungarian national identity discourse, which, in its use of "eastern," describes the national self and not the other. Self-Orientalism relies on both the Asian

³ The renowned eighteenth-century historian Mátyás Bél was one of the most ardent advocates of the Scythian descent. See *Matthiae Belii de vetere litteratura Hunno-Scythica exercitatio* ['Matthias Bel's Exercise of Ancient Hunno-Scythian Literature'] (Pl. V. Lipsiæ, 1718).

⁴ See Szűcs's discussion of the parallel concepts of nationhood (Szűcs 1999). Until the foundation of the modern parliament, only noblemen were considered members of the nation, at least politically.

origins of the nation and the perceived shortcomings or differences of Hungary when compared to the economic and cultural achievements of Western Europe. It is a rhetorical tool to communicate Hungarian difference or uniqueness in Europe while simultaneously describing the basis of membership in the continent's cultural and political life. Said stresses that politicians and scholars created essentialist images of west and east as mirroring notions in a mutually reinforcing effort. In my dissertation, I demonstrated that political and scholarly discourse combined to shape a project of self-Orientalism that was itself anchored in the imagination of the nation's eastern origins. Though this paper sheds only partial light on the political aspects of self-Orientalism (and in doing so disregards the scholarly element), it nonetheless offers a glimpse into the changing phases of the development of the self-Orientalizing discourse.

Széchenyi and the Invention of the Modern Hungarian East

The Reform Era (1825-1848) is one of the most exhaustively studied periods in Hungarian historiography. However, the rhetoric and historical narratives of the age, and with this the discursive practices that emphasized the east-west dichotomy while simultaneously glorifying the Asian prehistory of the nation has attracted little attention from researchers. The historical discussion of the so-called *Kelet népe vita* ['People of the East debate'], which was one of the most stormy public debates not only in the reform Era but in the whole modern history of the country, is one of the most illustrious examples of the scholarly neglect of this phenomenon. The debate was triggered by Széchenyi's book *A kelet népe*, which was published in the summer of 1841. Having begun the writing of the book in February 1841, Széchenyi meant it to be partly a reaction to program of Lajos Kossuth and the Liberals, which he opposed, as well as an attack on the tone and the politics of Kossuth's periodical *Pesti Hírlap* [Pest News], which had been launched in January of the same year. According to Hungarian historians, this debate—one that, in addition to Széchenyi and Kossuth, attracted other politicians and speakers as well—was a watershed in the relations between Széchenyi and the Liberals. It touched upon the most stressing questions of nation formation and the transformation of the feudal country into a modern capitalist state, and essentially summarized the central themes of the Reform Era's politics. At the same time, Széchenyi's book was also central to the emergence of modern Hungarian self-Orientalism, as it introduced the notion of Hungary's eastern origins into modern national identity discourse.

Peter Barany's discussion of the way in which the title of Széchenyi's book was chosen illustrates the close connection between the political debates of the Reform Era and the emergence of modern self-Orientalizing identity discourse. Barany claims that *A kelet népe* was a *cri du cour*, an impassioned call to stop what Széchenyi believed was a political and economic program leading to catastrophe. Though the original title of the book was *Lélekharang* ['Death Knell'], Széchenyi changed the title during the writing process to *A kelet népe* (Barany 1965: 388). He found the emphasis on the eastern origins of the nation to be the most expressive and effective way of pointing out the faults of the Liberals' political program.⁵

⁵ Kossuth himself was well-versed in the work of Western economists, with Friedrich List's *Das Nationale System der Politischen Oeconomie* ['The National System of Political Economy'] exercising a great influence over Kossuth's economic program. List focused on three elements: national well-being, the intertwined development of

In order to understand why Széchenyi considered the stress on the Hungarians' Asian origins and character an effective strategy of refuting the Liberal program, one needs to go back to the study of the political and intellectual debates of the 1820s. Relying on their enlightened predecessors, Hungarian Liberals observed international politics in the first years of the Reform Era through the lens of the supposed east-west dichotomy, thus perceiving an advanced, "civilized," and free west, on the one hand, and a backward and tyrannical east, on the other. For Mihály Vörösmarty and Ferenc Kölcsey, authors of the national anthems *Szózat* [Appeal] and *Himnusz* [Hymn, which is the official anthem of the country], Árpád, the chieftain-forefather of the Hungarians, was an Asian warrior whose historical legacy should be cherished, since under his leadership Hungarians were a strong and free people. The appreciation for national strength and freedom coincided with the ideals of the Enlightenment, which had a deep impact on the works of Hungarian Reform intellectuals. Thus, in their literary and the political works influenced by Western European authors, Hungarian thinkers made a distinction between the Orient as it was related to the glorious Hungarian past and other Oriental sites, which they depicted as qualitatively different from the place of the national cradle in Central Asia.⁶ The Slavic groups and Russia represented these Orients, and Liberals viewed them as the negative opposites of the west and the political self they wished to shape for themselves.

The Liberals' cultural and political attitudes towards Russia and the Slavic groups living in the lands of the Hungarian Crown closely correlated. They believed that, though Germans represented the highest level of civilization within the Habsburg Empire, Hungarians, for historical reasons, had a special civilizing mission in the Carpathian Basin, one that would see them spread western advancement among the overwhelmingly Slavic population in the Kingdom of Hungary. As historian János Gyurgyák argues, the belief in Hungarian cultural supremacy supported the efforts of nation-formation throughout the nineteenth century (Gyurgyák 2007: 30). Russia embodied Oriental despotism in the eyes of Liberals, a perception that was only confirmed for them by the violent suppression of the Polish revolution of 1830. Mirroring the Slovaks and other Slavic groups, whose "political disability" demanded Hungarian political leadership and paternalist hegemony in the Carpathian Basin, Russia's growing might was perceived as an external danger to the western political values that Hungarians represented in their multiethnic kingdom.

Kossuth's work in the Diet at the beginning of the 1830s illustrates the Liberal attitude towards the Slavs, who were seen as culturally inferior and politically backward, and towards Russia, which was viewed as the Northern Colossus. Kossuth was a representative of a northern area of the country in the Diet that had a Slovak majority. Using the argument first articulated by Marx and Engels, namely that the Slovaks were a people without history, and therefore unfit to

agriculture and industry, and the system of protective customs. Contrary to the centrality of the free flow or trade of goods and capital and the well-being of the individual in Marx's model, List's idea was that development lay in a national industry protected from the influx of foreign goods, which halts the growth of a self-sufficient economy. Naturally, the question was connected to that of Hungary's relationship with Austria, about which Széchenyi's and Kossuth's opinions also diverged (see, Gerő 1995: 22).

⁶ Among the several relevant studies on Western European conceptions of "the East" during the Enlightenment, see Larry Wolff (1994) and Ezequiel Adamovsky (2005).

form an independent nation, Kossuth argued that the Slovaks as well as other groups could only benefit from becoming citizens of a free Hungarian state (Deák 1979: 45). Parallel to depreciating Slovakian efforts of nation formation, Kossuth aired anti-Russian arguments in the Hungarian Diet. As a response to Russia's military oppression of the Polish revolution in 1830, Kossuth and other delegates criticized the Habsburg ruler's unwillingness to condemn the Russian military action against "Polish freedom." As Gerő points out, the discussion of the Polish question in the Hungarian Diet offered Kossuth an opportunity to justify the nationalist struggle for self-determination and condemn autocratic measures against it on a more abstract level. Such argumentation, in turn, allowed Kossuth to draw lessons also in connection to the relationship between Hungary and the Habsburg ruler. Eighteen years later, during the 1848-1849 Revolution and War of Independence, Kossuth presented the Hungarian cause also as a symbolic struggle for the universal principles of national freedom. He used the same rhetoric to speak against both the Habsburg and the Russian interventions that brought an end to Hungary's short-lived independence in 1849. As Ferenc Fejtő points out, Kossuth desperately called for help from England and France by reminding them of their universal responsibility to protect states like Hungary, a responsibility that derived from their alleged commitment to democratic principles. As Kossuth argued: "You are repudiating all those who, putting their faith in you, have taken the bloodstained path of liberty." Invoking the symbolic struggle between east and west, Kossuth called in vain to the English and the French to intervene against the Habsburg-Russian coalition (Fejtő 1973: 347). In the Liberal mind, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia remained the embodiment of Oriental despotism, while Hungary continued to be the eastern-most bastion defending the west against Russia's offensive politics.

In contrast to the Liberals, Széchenyi described Hungary as Oriental. Not unlike his contemporaries, Széchenyi shared the idea that the forefathers of the Hungarians were Central Asian warriors. Like Kézai, he believed that Hungarians descended from the mighty Huns. During his travels as a young man, he entered the following note in his diary:

That I am a descendant of the most real kind of Huns is well proven by the fact that even in the Alps of Switzerland or in Italy's lushest valleys and lands I cannot feel and live as warmly, passionately, and devotedly as on my own country's steppes and plains (Széchenyi and Wesselényi 2004: 6).

[Hogy a hunok legvalódiabb fajtájából származhatom, arra az is bizonyíték, hogy a legszebb Alpok közt Svájcban vagy Itália legbujább völgyeiben és tájain nem vagyok képes oly forrón, lelkesen és rajongón érezni és élni, mint hazám pusztáin és síkságain.]

A few years later, this Romanticist and patriotic tone returned in the political treatises that paralleled his philanthropic and entrepreneurial work. As a more mature political activist, he connected the traditional Hungarian identity discourse with the Enlightenment's Eurocentric views on development. Just as his acknowledgement of the beauties of foreign landscapes in his diary did not stop him from longing for his homeland, his admiration of the economic advancement of both England and the United States did not discourage him from envisioning similar industrialization taking place in Hungary. In so doing, he depicted a political map on which Hungary's place was not as unambiguously in the west as the Liberals suggested. In fact,

he did not consider the eastern condition of underdevelopment a dead end from which the country had no chance of advancing toward modernization.

In his 1830 treatise *Hitel* ['Credit'], for example, Széchenyi quoted the Academy poet Dániel Berzsenyi, noting that the glorious times of the nation's history were over: "Oh, the thunderbolt of a different Hungarian arm lighted up/during Attila's bloody battles" [*Oh! más magyar kar mennyköve villogott/Atilla véres harcai közt*] (Berzsenyi 1810). Széchenyi insisted that only Hungarians themselves could make their "Asian race" as great as other European nations; however, in order to do so, Hungarians needed to stop looking back into the past and turn to the building of their future (Széchenyi 1900: 218). By the beginning of the 1840s, when the Liberals became dominant in the ranks of the opposition, Széchenyi's ideas lost popularity, and, in *A kelet népe*, his last treatise before the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence, he articulated the importance of the nation's eastern origins even more strongly in order to convince his audience of the danger in the Liberal program.

His title choice *A kelet népe* targeted what Széchenyi considered to be uncritical westernization. What made his argumentation effective was that he downplayed the negative image of Asia to which the Liberals often referred by opposing it with the positive notion of the Asian origins of the nation. "The Hungarian nation," he wrote, "has no other calling than to represent the characteristics that are hidden in its Asian cradle, and until now it has not matured" [*a magyar népnek nincs csekélyebb hivatása, mint képviselni ... ázsiai bölcsőjében rejtőző, eddigelé sehol ki nem fejlett, sehol érettségre nem virult sajátjátágit*] (Széchenyi 1841: 16). If there were positive characteristics of the nation that were yet to manifest, the Asian nature had little to do with either the actual geographically interpreted or the culturally understood Asia. Thus he demonstrated that his program, while critical of rapid industrialization, could hardly oppose advancement. He repudiated with confidence possible accusations by the Liberals that his program would "pull Europe's developing nation, the Hungarians, back to the wilderness of Asia, stagnant in spiritual development, brute, and lagging behind in everything" [*A durva, mindenben hátra maradt, kivált lelki kifejlésben pangó Ázsiának vadoniba akarnám visszarántani Europa' fejedőző népét a magyart*] (Széchenyi 1841: 20).

In *A kelet népe*, Széchenyi created a dialogue between the Hungarian medieval historical tradition and the Enlightenment theory of hierarchy between the west and the east. His title referred not only to the Hungarian people who, in the ninth century, migrated from the east to settle down in Europe (the Christian west), but also to the Hungarian desire to reach western levels of social, cultural, and economic development almost one thousand years after the foundation of the state. He thus drew a parallel between two westward movements: the nomadic Hungarians' arrival to the Carpathian Basin and their settlement as a movement from the east to the west, and the transition from being eastern to becoming a western, "advanced" nation. In so doing, he connected the two interpretations of the concepts of east and west: that of the Hungarian historical tradition and of the western European Enlightenment. His argument also implied that, just as it was for the nomadic Magyars a millennium earlier, the "people of the east" in the nineteenth century needed to build a future within the given political situation in the Carpathian Basin. This meant, amongst other things, that Hungary needed to be at peace with the German neighbor. Széchenyi also reminded his contemporaries that the other ethnic groups in the region nurtured similar political goals as the Hungarians. Széchenyi was keen to emphasize that any disturbance to the political balance in the Habsburg Empire would provoke protests

from both the other nationalities and Austrian decision makers, and thus cause the Austrians to retaliate and block Hungarian development plans.

By emphasizing the historical migration of Hungarians from the geographical east to the geographical west, on the one hand, and the culturally envisioned transition from the symbolic east to the symbolic west, on the other, Széchenyi laid the foundations of the modern self-Orientalist discourse. He successfully merged the traditional Hungarian theory of origins with the Enlightenment theory of cultural hierarchy. His passionate argumentation, moreover, secured the position of this eclectic interpretation of east and west in the modern national identity discourse. Accordingly, he confirmed anew the traditional association between the notions of "eastern-ness" and "Hungarian-ness." In addition, by contrasting a program that was considerate of the national character with the Liberals' political and economic program of westernization, he labeled his opponents' plans alien to the national character. In so doing, he created the framework for a modern self-Orientalizing discourse which measured and described the content of Hungarian-ness according to a politically and culturally defined east-west continuum.

The notion of "the People of the East" soon became a popular maxim, with many publications, books, treatises, and periodicals borrowing it as a title, a phenomenon that indicates the deep impact that Széchenyi's treatise left on subsequent generations.⁷ In addition to these publications, a myriad of other political, literary, linguistic, and historical studies discussed and reiterated the claim that Hungary's allegiance to Europe could be defined by the nation's Asian origins and Oriental character. The first of the periodicals titled *A kelet népe* was published in Széchenyi's lifetime, in Vienna in 1856. During the interwar period several periodicals, like Cecile Tormay's *Napkelet* ['East'] or Elemér Halmay's revisionist *Kelet népe* ['People of the East'] continued to refer to Széchenyi's ideas as foundational to their conservative views. However, until the turn of the century, the narrative reliance on the east-west dichotomy did not divide the political elite as it did in Széchenyi's time, or as it has throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An exception to this was the very short-lived *Kelet népe* ['People of the East'], published by the Balkanist and Bosnian governor Béni Kállay. Kállay defined the role of his daily as the mouthpiece of the right-wing opposition to the Liberal government. In his view, the Liberal government failed to follow the path that was best suited for "the people of the east," and that Széchenyi described three decades earlier.

⁷ Characteristic of the popularity of the idea of eastern origins is, for example, the Millennial Monument, which was designed in the 1890s but completed only in 1927. It was erected to celebrate the conqueror forefathers and the foundation of the Hungarian Kingdom. It depicts the seven chieftains as horse-mounted warriors and thus commemorates the glorious Asian past that they left behind. It illustrates that the Liberal government felt comfortable celebrating the Kingdom's thousand years of existence and the Asian past of the founding fathers. The Prime Minister officially opened the Festivities in Attila's tent, a reference to the Hun-affinity, and to Kézai's theory. Though scholars had largely refuted this theory by 1896, politicians nonetheless preferred to rely on it. The celebration of the foundation of the country encouraged the revival of the reference to Hungary's Asian origins in political discourse and to positive expressions of the self-Orientalizing idiom. It soon provoked criticism from progressive intellectuals.

Ady and the Criticism of Asian Lore

As Gerő noted, Endre Ady also referred to the Asian character of the nation, but we need to keep in mind that this was in a very different way than Széchenyi and his followers did. Ady publicly attacked the cultivation of the Asian national prehistory, which he perceived as nostalgic historicism and political demagogy. He used the attribute Asian in a negative sense. For example, he publicly condemned a schoolteacher's initiative to commemorate a supposed summit of the leaders of Hungarian conquering tribes that, according to Anonymus's *Gesta Hungarorum*, took place in the village of Pusztaszer in 897. In his "Sírás és panaszkodás" ['Crying and Complaining'], the first part of his famous 1905 "Ismeretlen Korvin-Kódex margójára" ['To the Margins of an Unknown Corvin Codex'], Ady posed to his readers the not-so-rhetorical question: "Are you going against Europe, again, you horse-riding Hungarians" [*Tehát újból Európa ellen mentek, lovas magyarok*]? Continuing in the same rhetorical vein, he added: "You laugh at Time, why would it be otherwise than it was after Svatopluk: you will forge ahead in the holy heart of Asia" [*Az Időre röhögtek, miért legyen másként, mint Svatopluk után: szent Ázsia nevében törtetni fogtok előre*] (Ady 1905b). In contrast to Széchenyi who half a century earlier called for Hungarians to embrace but not to glorify the past in order to better face the future, Ady argued that it was impossible to advance while constantly looking back. It is important to note that Ady became the leading figure of the first generation of the progressive literary periodical *Nyugat* ('West'), first published in 1908. By choosing "West" as the title, the periodical declared progressivism as its program, and thus declared a break from the self-Orientalist nostalgia that Széchenyi's writings had popularized in Hungary in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Orbán and the Changing Image of the East

The current Hungarian prime minister's instrumentalization of the east-west narrative has its roots in a Cold War rhetoric. In his first televised speech given at the reburial of the 1956 prime minister Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989, Viktor Orbán argued that, after 1945, the world was divided between the free, democratic, and capitalist west and the Soviet east, a region where freedom, democracy, and prosperity were denied to the citizenry. According to Orbán's narrative, the oppression which followed in the wake of the 1956 revolution forced Hungary into an "Asian cul-de-sac" [*ázsiai zsákutcába*], one which, in the dying days of communism, the nation would have to find a way out of (Orbán 1989a).

As it is well-known, Imre Nagy's reburial and the concomitant opening of the border with Austria during the very same summer initiated the capitalist transformation of Hungary.⁸ Recognizing the event as the beginning of change, Orbán not only defined the Soviet past as an "Asian dead end," but also described his own political party, Fidesz, as a political force without historical baggage, one that represented the democratic west and thus promised a prosperous future to Hungary.

⁸ In his article about the rituals of the Imre Nagy reburial, Gábor Ittész mentions Orbán's speech as well (see Ittész 2005: 10, fn. 27).

Three months later, as part of the campaign for the first elections, Orbán gave an interview at the legendary NapTV in which he argued that, if his opponents "form a [negative] opinion about [him], then, in fact, they do not criticize either him or Fidesz, but Western European bourgeois democracy" [*Ha az Orbán Viktorról van meg a véleményük, akkor valójában nem Orbán Viktorról és a Fideszről, hanem a nyugat európai polgári demokraciáról van meg a véleményük*] (Orbán 1989b). Quite clearly, in 1989 Orbán entered Hungarian politics and public life as a self-elected representative of Western European political values.

Orbán's identification with the west continued to define his political credo and characterize his speeches and public pronouncements until quite recently. In his 2007 address at Fidesz's October 23 gathering at the Astoria square in Budapest, for example, he reiterated many of the ideas that he had articulated eighteen years earlier. Speaking as the leader of the opposition, he argued that "since its foundation, Hungary has been a western state," and never during its history did it wish "to be part of the east" [*Az államalapítás óta Magyarországnak egy nyugati ország, amely saját jószántából soha nem akart a kelet része lenni*] (Orbán 2007). In order to reinforce the western identity of the country, he invoked the traditional history of origins and reinforced the connection with the forefathers, claiming that "we came here [i.e., to the west] exactly because we did not find our place there [i.e. in the east] any more" [*Éppen azért jöttünk ide, mert ott már nem találtuk a helyünket*]. Remembering the events that occurred fifty-one years earlier, he stated that, in 1956, Hungary had rebelled "against the east." Nagy and the other political leaders and intellectuals protested against the "eastern aggression" and wished to create a "western system" in Hungary. In Orbán's view, the Hungarian revolution in 1956 "fatally wounded the eastern colossus which was about to devour western civilization" [*végzetesen megsebezte az a keleti kolosszust, amely elnyelni készült a nyugati civilizációt*]. Orbán warned his audience that this eastern power, though faded, did not disappear completely and in fact was reorganizing itself and gathering strength again all over Eastern Europe and the Balkans. He referred to the then-governing Hungarian Socialist Party as the enemy of the freedom-loving Hungarian citizenry. The same way as he drew continuity from the conquerors through the 1956 revolutionaries and his own audience, he identified the Socialist government in office as the political descendants of the Soviet elite that suppressed the 1956 revolution.

Since coming to power in the elections of 2010, Orbán has continued to resort to the rhetorical tool of describing east and west as two opposites symbolizing two different political value systems. However, the tables are now turned, perhaps drastically so. Making reference to the east-west dichotomy, Orbán has come to argue that, in his view, instead of the west, Hungary should gravitate to the east. Since 2010, he has revealed a more and more critical attitude toward Western European political and financial institutions. He refused to continue talks with the IMF and his government initiated a new foreign economic policy—the so-called *Keleti nyitás* ['Eastern Opening']⁹—that aims to revitalize Hungarian economics through increased exchanges with Asian partners⁹. In addition, the government has argued that the eastern origins of the

⁹ See "Keleten keresi a kormány a gazdag nagybácsit ['The Government looks for the Rich Uncle in the East']," published by *Index* on November 4, 2012. This article explains that the roots of the new policy reach back to 2010,

Hungarian people has inspired the search for international partners like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, nations who are said to share a common cultural heritage with Hungary. Through narratives and rhetorical flourishes such as these, the government consciously references and reproduces the historical argument that Hungarians were originally an Asian people—a claim that among right-wing voters, and especially among radical ones, is still very popular. Whereas Orbán's reference to Hungarians as half-Asians may seem to fit this discursive direction, Orbán's self-Orientalizing idiom partially broke away from previously professed value-systems, thus opening the doors to a new way of thinking about political relationships within Hungary in particular, and Europe and the world more generally.

As Orbán's self-Orientalism gained a rather illiberal, anti-western edge, Orbán's critics started to use the east-west dichotomy to articulate their disapproval of what they saw as the increased centralization of the state and the abolition of the democratic system of checks and balances. In their eyes, Orbán was about to turn Hungary into an eastern-type autocratic regime.¹⁰ As if to borrow directly from Fidesz's rhetoric in 1989, during the campaign leading up to the 2014 elections, the liberal opposition claimed to represent western democratic values and promised Hungarian voters a future of freedom and economic justice. In their view, Orbán and Fidesz represented a tyrannical Orient, and not only with regard to domestic issues. In their campaign leading up to the elections in April 2014, the opposition was able to integrate criticism of the Russian-Hungarian agreement on the enlargement of the Paks nuclear power plant signed in January of the same year, and was further able to stress their message through commentaries on the deepening Crimean crisis (which broke out at the end of February 2014).¹¹ They warned the Hungarian public that Hungary needed to redouble its political allegiance to the west. They

when Prime Minister Orbán suggested that the center of gravity of world economics shifted toward the east. See also Hidvéghi 2012.

¹⁰ Several commentators noted that the Orbán regime of the early twenty-first century was built on values that diametrically opposed the unconditioned engagement with western democratic ideals that the young Fidesz-founders in the late 1980s professed. Through quotes from a 2007 Orbán address, an exceptionally invested reader of the site <http://444.hu/> instead demonstrated that, as the leader of the opposition, only three years before his reelection as Prime Minister, Orbán was still stressing that Hungarians were in fact a people who identified with the western notion of freedom. Hungarians, thus, could not suffer an eastern type of oppression that, in his view, the governing Socialist party's politics, built on Communist foundations, represented. However, once in power again, his critics could not help noting that it was Orbán who, by turning his back on the west, both in his domestic and foreign politics, embraced eastern political values. As his most recent address in Transylvania indicated, for Orbán, Russia, Turkey, and other "eastern" types of political and economic systems served as an example for future policies. See "Nouvel Observateur: Orbán beszéde radikalizálódik, és Kelet felé fordul" [Nouvel Observateur: Orbán's speech becomes more radical and turns towards east] (http://www.galamuscsoport.hu/tartalom/cikk/165890_nouvel-observateur-orban-beszede-radikalizalodik-es-kelet-fele-fordul) (October 10, 2012); see also the original "Hongrie: Viktor Orban radicalise son discours et se tourne vers l'Est" ["Victor Orban's transforms his discourse into a more radical one and turns to the East"] (<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20121003.AFP0931/hongrie-viktor-orban-radicalise-son-discours-et-se-tourne-vers-l-est.html>)

¹¹ It is only secondary, though not of less importance, that especially in the light of the negative foreign reactions, the opposition strongly condemned Orbán in May 2014 for campaigning for the autonomy of the Sub-Carpathian Hungarian community. See "Orbán magára haragította a lengyel kormányfőt" (May 13, 2014) [Orbán Antagonized

also stressed that the nuclear power plant agreement was both economically and politically disadvantageous to Hungary: it made Hungary economically dependent on Russia and therefore drew the country into the Russian imperial sphere of interest. During the campaign, former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány quoted on several occasions the enlightened poet János Batsányi, who in a poem called upon Hungarians to "Turn your watchful eyes onto Paris!" [*Vigyázó szemetek Párizsra vessétek!*]. As head of the opposition party *Demokratikus Koalíció* ['Democratic Coalition'], Gyurcsány noted that, just as Batsányi refused to consider Baku (the Azerbaijani capital) a role model to imitate, today it should be beyond question that a free and democratic Hungary belonged to the west. Similarly, two days prior to the elections, the leader of the youngest party *Együtt-Párbeszéd Magyarorszáért* ['Together-Dialogue for Hungary'] and former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai stated that the elections were also about making a decision whether the voters wished Hungary to share in Ukraine's fate or remain in part of the western world. "Looking at Ukraine," Bajnai declared, "the Hungarian can see the future of Hungary under Orbán. This is why the elections on April 6 will be more than a 'simple' cast of vote: it will be a referendum about our future. West or East, Austria or Ukraine?" [*Ukrajnára nézve a magyarok egy orbáni Magyarország jövőjét láthatják. Ezért lesz április 6-a „sima” választásnál több: népszavazás a jövőnkéről. Nyugat vagy Kelet, Ausztria vagy Ukrajna*] (Hazafi 2014). By repeatedly emphasizing that only a western orientation and the adherence to European values offered a viable future for Hungary, other opposition leaders reaffirmed Bajnai's words.

Since the April 2014 elections a renewed and even more intensive usage of east-west attributes has characterized the political elite's—and especially re-elected Prime Minister Orbán's—public addresses. Speaking in the shadow of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the western sanctions against Russia, and rejecting the continuing criticism from the left and from Western Europe and the United States, Orbán has expressed explicit doubts about the appropriateness and effectiveness of liberal-democratic values. Stressing that Hungary needs to distance itself from the west, Orbán openly praises the "economic success" of eastern countries like Russia, Turkey, and China (amongst others). At the same time, the government has curiously pledged to defend European values, safeguard the European Union's principles, even against the EU itself, if needed. Similarly, in the occasion of the commemoration of the opening of the borders in 1989, Hungarians could listen to the Prime Minister's televised defense for a search of a special Hungarian way of advancement, one that was neither eastern nor western.

The "transformation" of the "eastern colossus" that is Russia into a viable model of economic success that has been highlighted and even celebrated in Orbán's recent public addresses, is the most visible manifestation of the flexibility and the many possibilities to be had in the continuous reference to the east-west dichotomy. Indeed, despite its centuries-long presence in Hungarian public discussions on national identity and modernization, the actual values attributed to the geographical concepts of east and west have varied according to the

the Polish Head of Government] <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20140513-orban-magara-haragitotta-a-lengyel-kormanyfot-a-karpataljai-autonomia-miatt.html>; "Reagáltak az ukránok Orbán autonómiakijelentésére" [The Ukrainians Reacted to Orbán's Statement about Autonomy] (May 14, 2014) <http://www.hirado.hu/2014/05/14/reagaltak-az-ukranok-orban-autonomiakijelentesere/>; and "Simítják Orbán mondatait" [Orbán's Claims Are Being Smoothened] (May 14, 2014) http://index.hu/kulfold/2014/05/14/kisimitjak_orban_mondatait/.

political context, both international and domestic. The examples of Széchenyi, Ady, and more recently Orbán illustrate that the self-Orientalizing description of Hungarians as Asians or easterners has historically served very different purposes. The power of the east-west dichotomy manifests exactly in these diverse interpretations. Therefore, one must ask not only how but also why a speaker in a given political situation chooses to emphasize the differences between east and west, and why he or she has opted to refer to the Asian origins of the nation. It is especially important to answer these questions since the reference to the east-west dichotomy reproduces an essentialist and nationalist language alien to the ideals of the European institutions. In addition, in the present international context, the description of the conflict between east and west has broader connotations that reach beyond the issue of Hungary's relation to European institutions. Therefore, whoever resorts to this discursive tool must be aware that the opposition between east and west beyond Hungary is interpreted and contextualized within a global political framework.

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