

Frenyó, Zoltán. ed. 2021. *Konzervatív arcképek* (Conservative Portraits). Budapest: L’Harmattan Kiadó – TIT Kossuth Klub Egyesület. 519 pp.

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Published in 2021, edited by Zoltán Frenyó, the 519-page book *Konzervatív arcképek* (Conservative Portraits) presents portraits of seventy-four well-known and lesser-known conservative thinkers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Compiled from the writings of thirty-seven authors, two-thirds of the work is a brief, concise account of the careers of foreign and one-third of Hungarian thinkers—their works, ideas, influence, as well as related literature—focusing on key moments of their careers. The seventy-four portraits are linked by a leitmotif set out in the foreword by Zoltán Frenyó, which, given its size and importance, is as much of a self-standing treatise as an introduction, inviting the reader on an interesting and exciting theoretical journey.

The protagonist of the book, conservatism, has been written about in many different ways: to this day, conservative thinking and mentality, conservative politics, and conservatism as a definition still pose a barrage of questions for those interested in the subject and for researchers alike. How and where can we locate conservatism? What is its relationship with other currents of thought, religion, and certain political movements? And perhaps most importantly: what *is* conservatism? A general worldview or a specific ideology? Is it a natural mentality or a political movement? Is it an eternal human phenomenon or a recent development? Is it a counterrevolutionary, revolutionary, or antirevolutionary perception? These questions themselves are difficult and controversial, and the possible answers are not necessarily clear-cut, fully acceptable, or reassuring. Zoltán Frenyó seeks to respond to these questions, while noting that “the definition of conservatism cannot be complete, but approaching it is possible [...]”² (7). Let us have a closer look at each question and the tentative answers given by the editor.

1. To what extent is conservatism an ideology? To what extent is it a worldview? The answer is complex and far from clear. Zoltán Frenyó argues that “as soon as an idea appears in society, it inevitably becomes an ideology. True, the question depends both on what is meant by the term ‘ideology’ and on which conservative tendency it happens to be.” (10) Later in the introduction, he expands on the question and concludes that conservatism

becomes a worldview in and of itself by becoming involved in the ideological struggles of the modern age, and then by adhering to the ideologically unaligned, it either became a

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² This and subsequent quotes from the book have been translated by the reviewer.



"moderate" conservatism throughout the twentieth century or in the early nineteenth century it became an authentic ideological 'counter-revolutionary' ideology, then elsewhere, in the nineteenth century in Britain and in the twentieth century in the USA, it became a political tendency of capitalism; and finally, in the twentieth century, it emerged as a "conservative revolution." (17)

2. So, in light of the above, is conservatism a counterrevolutionary, revolutionary, or antirevolutionary perception? According to Zoltán Frenyó's succinct formulation, illustrated by examples,

conservatism is a distinctive system of norms in whose various historical manifestations it is possible to both assert and reject certain principles. Such are, above all, the concepts of counterrevolution and revolution. The political conservatism of the modern era was born in the spirit of counterrevolution in opposition to the French Revolution, while the German movement that emerged from the mire of the Weimar Republic and opposed it was a conservative revolution. (10)

3. Where can the conservative idea be located? What is the relationship between conservatism and liberalism?

Conservatism is in every respect opposed to the idea of liberalism. Conservatism can appreciate those elements of capitalism that promote the well-being of the individual and the community, enrich the national economy, and develop civilization. However, it is most sharply opposed to liberal capitalism, in which the capitalist order has been created and maintains itself, and which is the ideological, political, and economic basis and essence of this system. Accordingly, it criticizes the principles of individualism, the republic, and free competition, as they are problems of the times. (12)

Along these lines of thought, Frenyó argues that in the early premodern period conservatism was a "self-evident reality of the construction of civilization," but that in the modern period the conservative ideal has become, alongside liberalism and socialism, "a forced third ideology," which, in the editor's self-confession, "should in fact be broader than it has hitherto been able to become [...]" In the last two centuries, he writes, only liberalism and socialism have been able to produce political systems, while the "conservative-Christian worldview and the political philosophy that has emerged from it" have remained essentially a doctrine of ideas. (15)

4. How does conservatism relate to religion, and more specifically to Christianity? In this respect, Zoltán Frenyó argues that "they are two separate entities, but it can nevertheless be shown that, although they have significant differences, they overlap strongly. This close interconnection is reflected in their values, their historical and social position, and their political behavior." (22)

Given the above, let us ask: what is conservatism in Frenyó's interpretation? In relation to this volume, what is the common theoretical link that connects these seventy-four thinkers? Conservatism is a comprehensive system of values and social thought that [...] has a worldview, an ideology, and philosophical and political content, image, implications, and consequences. Conservatism is not a philosophical tendency, because it is not itself a philosophical phenomenon and system [...], but it has philosophical

tendencies [...]. And conservatism is a worldview that [...] has given rise to political philosophical tendencies and political movements. (18)

In his extended foreword, Zoltán Frenyó examines conservatism from several angles and tries to provide well-founded, debatable answers to the questions raised. However, he also gives the volume a distinctive, personally charged theoretical topicality, because in addition to encouraging a monographic professional treatment of the history of conservatism, he clearly indicates that "in our changing times, when the fundamental elements of normality are being called into question, we can look upon the system of norms, the world of ideas, the mentality that we call 'conservative' as a guarantor of the preservation of our national existence and our entire civilization." (39) In his preface he does not "spare" liberalism and socialism, but in this volume, in the portrait of Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927), also written by Frenyó, he expresses his commitment and his view of history even more clearly:

The age in which he [Prohászka] worked is an age of two world-shaping forces, both stemming from the same source. These two currents, these movements and systems, are liberalism and socialism, which, for all their partial merit, have destroyed Europe and Hungary. Liberalism absolutizes freedom and individualism, socialism absolutizes equality and collectivism. [...] Both ideologies are internationalist, atheistic and materialist, and thus the sworn enemy of both is the Christian and national principle. (384)

Judging the words above is a matter of temperament and a way of thinking, but it is worth noting that, just as it is not appropriate to speak of conservatism in a patronizing, deterministic, and simplistic way, it is also not appropriate to speak of the above-mentioned ideas in such a manner, certainly not in a country where pre-1848 liberalism was conflated with nationalism. Much of what Hungary's national consciousness is built on today—from the national anthem and the March 15 anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 to Hungary's national colors—can be traced back to this time. Poet Ferenc Kölcsey, with his motto "Homeland and Progress," gave direction to the liberal generation of the reform era by combining these two key words, and among the best of them we find István Széchenyi, Miklós Wesselényi, Lajos Batthyány, Lajos Kossuth, Ferenc Deák, Mihály Vörösmarty, and Sándor Petőfi.

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Starting with the life and work of Edmund Burke, the thinker who has been dubbed "the father of conservatism," the book's second part presents an exciting, thought-provoking, and certainly question-raising chronological panorama of conservative life, unfolding and (further) developing along ecclesiastical and secular lines in Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Hungary.

As it would be an impossible undertaking to briefly describe all fifty-one international and twenty-three—mainly twentieth century—Hungarian portraits, eschewing any claim to comprehensive coverage, I will briefly recall the work of three of the Hungarian conservative writers and thinkers presented in the book.

The first Hungarian conservative figure the book considers is Count Aurél Dessewffy (1808–1842). One of the most influential figures in nineteenth-century Hungarian history, this theoretician was the intellectual father of the conservative response to the liberal challenge of the reform era, and leader of the new conservative political movement that raised the flag at the

1839–40 Diet. As Zsófia Bárány writes in her contribution (“Aurél Dessewffy,” 349–355), the count “believed that liberals who seemed subversive to him should be repressed by political means.” (351) His intellectual legacy led to the creation of the Conservative Party in 1846.

Károly Huszár (1882–1941)—a member of Parliament, former prime minister of Hungary (1919–1920), and one of the founders of Hungary’s Christian Socialist movement—was the subject of a summary by Tibor Klestenitz (“Károly Huszár,” 450–454). Huszár assumed a leading political position during one of the most critical periods in Hungarian history, the “turmoil” following the end of World War I, when the drama surrounding the Treaty of Trianon was taking shape. Klestenitz paints a positive picture of Huszár: “He launched a nationwide campaign to alleviate poverty in Budapest and raised nearly twenty million crowns for the poor with a dinner, which became famous under the slogan Invisible Guest” (451).

Béla Hamvas (1897–1968) was a Kossuth Prize-winning Hungarian writer, philosopher, aesthete, and librarian. Hamvas represented a twentieth-century Hungarian generation that experienced the horrors of World War I at a young age and World War II at an older age. As Nándor Birher concludes (“Béla Hamvas,” 501–508), “Béla Hamvas gave much more to the world than he took from it. When he was younger, he thought he might have something, but a bombing raid destroyed all his possessions and manuscripts. From then on, Hamvas leapt into immortality” (501).

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In conclusion, Zoltán Frenyó’s observation that this book “will be of interest to the educated public, the professional community, and young people in higher education” seems in order. I recommend the book to everyone: not only to those who will agree with the main idea—and agree that those figures selected for inclusion are “witnesses of the struggles of their own time [and] can be guiding examples of the present and forerunners of a future era built on new foundations” (39)—but also to those who think differently about the past, present, and future. Only through a full understanding of where those on the other side of the ideological divides are coming from can a civilized and vital public dialogue develop.