

# The Elements of Hungarian Humanities Strategy: Participating in National Cultural Heritage as a Social Opportunity

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## *Technical education without humanities culture?*

The policy concepts of the Hungarian government in terms of science, education, economy, and employment have long considered career guidance towards technical professions one of the key issues of Hungarian public and higher education. Motivations behind the concept include the idea that industrialization can be an opening for Hungary, the fact that vigorous industrialization is needed, as well as settling foreign capital in industrial enterprises. This task cannot be accomplished without a technical intelligentsia of high quality. Developing the natural science, technology, and engineering subjects taught in secondary education points in this direction, as does the prioritizing of dual training and dual vocational training. Developing dual training programs is also strongly preferred in higher education and supports the same concept.

Without questioning the importance and fundamental role of engineering sciences and technical education, if we examine and analyze the problem with the pragmatism of technical intellectuals, it quickly becomes clear that excessively and disproportionately privileging engineering and technical qualifications entails just as many dangers as it does benefits.

Previous attempts to describe the education and culture of the Hungarian population have shown that ambitions to orient students towards a career in engineering, prioritizing engineering knowledge, and increasing the number of people with technical qualifications in this environment is an illusion at best until much deeper social phenomena are addressed and the conditions are created where such career guidance can happen. Research in sociology and statistical facts describe a significant proportion of the Hungarian population as disadvantaged, beset by social segregation, and characterized by unfavorable processes of population movement. Beyond poor health, limited access to the modern tools of the social infrastructure, a poor quality of life, and a lack of

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opportunity on the labor market that is passed on from one generation to the next, their disadvantage can also be identified in many components of cultural competency, which are partly the causes and partly the consequences of the above. For significant layers and groups of the society, a lack of education, lack of training in professions that provide real work opportunities, and a complete lack of foreign language knowledge make people extremely vulnerable. A significant proportion has fallen behind so much that they are unable to enter development programs of lifelong learning and retraining. In other words, during their previous schooling they did not acquire either the intellectual core competencies or the ability, attitude, habit, and technology of learning itself.

Setting the goal of orienting students towards a career in engineering, the official preference of engineering knowledge and the large-scale increase of the number of people obtaining technical qualifications is an illusion until these more basic problems are resolved.

Basic lack of competence is a complex issue, and so there is no single, all-encompassing miracle cure for it, either. Components of a lack of competence include functional illiteracy (i.e. the inability to understand a text, to analyze and adapt its content), or in some cases even illiteracy in a stricter sense (lack of basic reading and writing skills), lack of competence in basic arithmetic operations, a lack of knowledge of the physics, chemistry, and biology necessary for everyday life in the immediate neighborhood of one's residence and for working in a modern workplace, limited ability to reflect on the logical nature of cause, effect, and consequence, lack of reflection on the importance of social connections, institutions, preferences, and values, lack of knowledge of situations and alternatives of politics and social policy relevant for the society, a lack of the ability to articulate one's own ambitions and interests among various parameters, etc. This set of problems can obviously only be resolved through multidisciplinary commitment. It is clear that to manage this difficult situation it is not only not the case that technical sciences should be preferred but that the problems perceived and thematized by them as well as the solutions offered are of barely perceptible importance compared to the opportunities provided by the consistent application of the professional norms and procedures of social science and the humanities, and the condition description, diagnosis, and therapy only discoverable through the latter ones. This illustrates it well how opposing and pitting branches and fields of science against each other only requires short-sighted, single-focus thinking, while a professional approach to the connections among different processes can acknowledge that the key to discovering, naming, and resolving the problems can only be done through the collaboration of disciplines with the most wide-ranging scientific perspectives and approaches.

*National cultural heritage as a collective opportunity*

We have concluded that for a large proportion of the Hungarian population becoming technical intellectuals with a secondary or higher education degree is simply impossible without resolving the much deeper issues of competency rooted elsewhere, the resolution of which falls under the competence of social sciences and the humanities. It is worth considering briefly what our conclusion would be if we hypothetically gave up our position and assumed that orientation towards technical professions was indeed possible without a problem, meeting the state's intentions. Let us assume that only the intention and efficient implementation is missing for interest to emerge among the population for natural science and technical professions, otherwise all conditions are met so that after a few years following a career choice decision (in practice the length of the training) a well-trained technical intelligentsia who are able to seamlessly join the industrialization trends of social benefit can start implementing a high-quality technical culture. Let's face it, if we give up on the value added to their training and development by the humanities, without implanting the social identities necessary for social interaction, we can only lose on this. Technical and natural sciences are fundamentally universal in nature, thus they are mostly freely convertible on the international labor market. Those who have such qualifications can freely look for and will likely find a job anywhere in the world. Brain drain is particularly strong in their case, manifested in higher salaries, working conditions reflecting stronger recognition, and a far better quality of life in their free time in many respects. (This is in stark contrast with humanities intellectuals, even the most professional layers of whom are strongly connected to the country and even the region, who can primarily make use of their studies in Hungarian history, literature, and linguistics in Hungary; therefore, a large proportion of those with a qualification in the humanities are tied to their homeland by their degree – of course only if they aspire to a job relevant to their qualification.) If a technical intelligentsia is created by completely eliminating the educational elements linking them to the national cultural heritage, without interiorizing the elements of the general education and wellbeing that belongs to the national identity, as well as its traditions of articulation and the set of topoi that are available for self-expression, why would they be dedicated to the programs that develop the economy and society of the Hungarian national community? How could they be considered people motivated to maximize the social benefits available through them? Their rootlessness will make them individual beneficiaries of globalized routes of ambition; at the same time, it will deprive the social community that had trained them not only of the chance of profit but even the chance of breaking even, and it will

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push the community into a loss of potential, put it at a competitive disadvantage on the market, and make it the victim of global processes.

To bring an example for social processes capable of avoiding such harm from the Central European region: the well-known technical and economic development of the Czech Republic goes back centuries, and it is exceptional in the East-Central European region. This has presumably played a considerable role in establishing the highly consolidated, stable social position of the country today (also compared to the rest of the region), demonstrating the social importance of engineering and technical knowledge and education. At the same time, it is also a historical fact that the Czech people were able to protect their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity in spite of three hundred years (1620–1918) of attempts trying to melt them into the Habsburg empire (which were a lot stronger than those made in Hungary), even though they lacked national sovereignty, and the use of a foreign language was forced onto them. That this was possible for such a long period of time not only in terms of individual life strategies but also on a historical scale, in spite of such pressure, is a good example for the great power a shared culture and historical tradition can have to have held this community, defining itself as one nation, together. This historical example demonstrates the significance of the efforts of all those Czech “humanities intellectuals”: the priests, writers, poets, teachers, historians, and linguists who are primarily to thank for all of this, who safeguarded Czech culture, language, and historical tradition as a value, practiced it in all the registers between high and popular culture, developed it, passed it on, and spread it.<sup>1</sup>

Through the information revolution, the world is relentlessly heading towards globalization at a constantly increasing pace, which means both the increasing geographical mobility of the population, the consistent relativization of inherited values, and in the long run, the loosening of ties to a given country and nation, sometimes completely splitting from it.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, many countries are still consistently trying to counterbalance this process in their educational policy and cultural strategy, or are at least trying to slow it down. To mention a Western European country, where even the term denoting globalization differs from the term used all around the world, and they use the national language equivalent *mondialisation*: for several decades, France has operated a

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<sup>1</sup> Martin J. WEIN, „»Chosen Peoples, Holy Tongues«: Religion, Language, Nationalism and Politics in Bohemia and Moravia in the Seventeenth to Twentieth Centuries”, *Past and Present* 202 (2009): 37–81.

<sup>2</sup> An analysis of these processes in terms of literary history: SZEGEDY-MASZÁK Mihály, „Előszó”, in *A magyar irodalom története: A kezdetektől 1800-ig*, szerk. JANKOVITS László és ORLOVSZKY Géza, munkatársak JENEY Éva és JÓZAN Ildikó, *A magyar irodalom története* 1, (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2007) 11–17.

program popularizing language and culture with complete consistency, based on a thoroughly developed, well-structured strategy, both in the home country and its former colonies, and even in all the countries that show any interest or receptivity towards the French culture and language. This highly complex program is organized and implemented with the help of several modern telecommunication devices and gives continuous access to everything between a basic level aiding language learning and high culture. It is a real, appealing alternative to the mass media impulses that come from many directions, and in many cases it can exert an even stronger influence on its target audience. Technical-technological development is a clear priority for the economic policy of France, and it is of fundamental importance to its role as a leading major power. At the same time, for the time being the conscious safeguarding and even spreading of its linguistic and cultural heritage by efficiently using mass media techniques and the constant emphasis on its importance, in spite of all the current problems in politics, seems to be successful in maintaining strong ties to the homeland and its history and tradition.

This kind of thinking also used to be known in the history of Hungarian cultural policy; it was even a defining characteristic of one of its heydays. Even the moment can be identified when this grand-scale realization was implanted into the thinking of the key person of this cultural policy. Kuno Klebelsberg himself recalled how during his studies in Berlin during the mid-1890s, he was reading out a seminar paper in economics on the economic crisis, and his professor “made the objection to my paper that I was looking for the causes of the difficulties of Hungarian agriculture only in terms of economics, and I did not talk about how high the level of education was among the masses of Hungarian workers”.<sup>3</sup> One of the two leitmotifs defining the entire thinking of the student was formed based on this admonition, that of an ambition to raise general intellectual levels and attain a high level of moral and intellectual culture, beside providing special support for training the elite.

#### *Literature as an opportunity for cultural identity*

The social norms and patterns held by a society are mainly made up of pre-formed macrostructures. The life of a society is deeply imbued in following the traditions that are awaiting use as elements of the available articulation resources. School education makes many standard collections of such resources

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<sup>3</sup> „A legnagyobb álmú magyar kultuszminiszter”, gróf Klebelsberg Kuno, vál., szerk. UJVÁRY Gábor, Magyar örökség 3 (Budapest: Kairosz Kiadó, 2013) 53. For its interpretation: UJVÁRY Gábor, *Tudományszervezés – történetkutatás – forráskritika: Klebelsberg Kuno és a Bécsi Magyar Történelmi Intézet. Historia est magistra vitae? Tanultunk a történelemből?* (Győr: Győr-Moson-Sopron Megye Győri Levéltára, 1996) 24–25.

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available, both in the areas of verbal expression, literature, art, or music, and in several other forms of articulation. The most important of these, with a sweeping impact on the life of a society, is the selection of those larger structures in which the norms, preconceptions, and judgments of a given community, and the elements of the knowledge resources concerning the world, society, and each other are arranged structurally. In the texts of the classics of Hungarian national literature a set of theses, preconceptions, and judgments await interiorization which has been teaching successive generations of the Hungarian population for many decades to think in terms of communal norms, to make communal value judgments, represent communal ideas, and make decisions on keeping or breaking the norms available to the community.

The form of fiction and literary fiction have always embodied communal knowledge, experiences, memories, historical knowledge, and the self-reflection and identity of an entire community. The knowledge of the literary past of a given nation, an intimate relationship with the representative texts of a national literature makes it possible for the members of the community to interiorize these norms; it also provides space for them to build an emotional, affective relationship to these communal ideals. Thus, they go beyond theoretical, factual, and lexical knowledge and make it possible to establish a personal, internal orientation and emotional attitude to them.

Participation in literary and communal ideals plays a role in forming norms, and the members of the community constantly strengthen, practice, refine, or adapt the resources they have thus acquired according to their individual or communal needs. In contrast, the same space will be a non-transparent, incomprehensible, unknown large grey area unregulated by competencies for those who did not have the opportunity to participate in literary experiences. Everyday spoken language activates several presuppositions from the elements of this communal knowledge, many expressions, aphorisms, sayings, or proverbial insights become popular, part of the communal knowledge reserve because prior shared socialization, education, and the interiorization of this cultural heritage makes it possible to experience states, action-based situations, and circumstances undergoing reflection described in literary works, and to trace everyday life, real situations, phenomena, and interactions back to the same group of experiences, to enrich opportunities of articulation from this set of experiences. Narrative, epic, and action-based literary works are pieces that demonstrate situations, intentions, circumstances, and choices between communal and individual norms. They are logical choices on which to base our decisions concerning the perspectives available in our life, to reflect on our getting into situations deemed parallel and analogous through the complex reference system related to them. Lyric poetry is equally suitable for creating communal

experiences, the literature serving to voice personal poetry, self-revelation, and the voices of the soul and personal feelings. It presents an opportunity for the individual integration of personal patterns which result in an organic and meaningful whole that embodies reason, regardless of historical period, social circumstances, and situation. The fictitious world of a lyric work of art also demonstrates what personal preferences, individual ambitions and insights, and patterns seeking solutions stemming from the unique values of a personality can be assembled from the set of norms, ideological elements, the communal patterns of expected/reasonable action, thinking, insight, and experience available to a given community.

Society can efficiently integrate those individuals, draw them into a communal form of existence, make them equal partners in communal interaction who have similar mental and emotional (emotional, affective, and impulsive) experiences, which they can use to make similar insights and considerations in their decisions, either consciously or unwittingly. Literature is the medium that provides keys, codes, names, and forms of approach for the widest possible range of phenomena occurring in the world, history, and society. The community of tradition of national literature is a communal ideal, a tradition, a reserve of competencies that provide the traditional set of opportunities and forms of entering a community. The given community cannot waive this knowledge or integrate new members without it, and without this knowledge, one cannot signal the intention that they wish to lead their life according to the norms of the community, with a real desire for integration.

The humanities research, maintain, and apply this cultural, linguistic, literary, and historical tradition, which unites and upholds. This is why according to all sensible considerations, governmental programs aiming for technical specialization should begin by strongly foregrounding the humanities and social sciences. This needs to be done not only because this is the only way these concepts can become profitable but also because without it these goals are unattainable. The countries where the government does not recognize the role of cultural tradition because it is overwhelmed by the present-day challenges can easily end up winning the battle but losing the war.