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**THE MANY MEANINGS OF NEO-FEUDALISM
ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE
ALLUDING PREMODERN SOCIAL STRUCTURES²**

MIT JELENT A NEO-FEUDALIZMUS?

**A PREMODERN TÁRSADALMI STRUKTÚRÁKRA UTALÓ
TUDOMÁNYOS ÉS NYILVÁNOS DISKURZUS ELEMZÉSE**

The essay intends to analyse those strands within Hungarian public discourse which allude – either negatively or positively – medieval hierarchy when discussing present political, social or cultural tendencies. This discourse includes both the critical views of academic sphere towards personal dependencies within capitalism – calling frequently, but not regularly neo-feudalism or feudal-capitalism – and the possible nostalgic sentiments from the side of political rhetoric or publicity towards an ‘ancient régime’. This analysis on neo-feudalism raises the dilemma, whether the binary dichotomy of democracy-authoritarianism could be the adequate axis where Central-Eastern European societies’ ‘transition fatigue’ can be scrutinized? Neo-feudal discourse elucidates another axis of modernization-traditionalism: what is questioned by some elite groups and their supporters is not democracy but modern institutions, whose pivotal role is attempted to be replaced by personal dependency and personalized coordination of society.

Az esszé a magyar közéleti diskurzus azon részeit kívánja elemezni, amelyek – akár negatív, akár pozitív módon – egy középkori hierarchiára utalnak, amikor a jelenlegi politikai, társadalmi vagy kulturális tendenciákat tárgyalják. Ez a diskurzus magába foglalja mind a tudományos szféra kritikus irányultságát a kapitalizmuson belüli személyes függőségekkel szemben – amit aztán sokszor újfeudalizmus, refeudalizáció vagy feudálkapitalizmus címkével illetnek – mind a politikai retorika vagy a nyilvánosság oldalán az esetleges nosztalgikus érzelmeket egy „ősi rezsím” felé. A neo-feudalizmus elemzési fókuszba helyezése felveti a dilemmát: vajon a demokrácia-autoriterizmus bináris dichotómiáján kívül létezik-e egy másik, modernizáció-tradicionálizmus tengely, amin a közép-kelet-európai társadalmak „tranzíciós fáradtságuk” hatására elmozdulhatnak a modernizációból?

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Nostalgic sentiment towards the Middle Ages is utterly not an unknown domain of humanities and social sciences. Since when Enlightenment has radically changed our world and channelled it into the system of rationality, superstitious medieval centuries became an object of a gratifying nostalgia. Romanticism, this grand epoch of the European cultural pathway had been ascending through strong nostalgic sentiments towards the aristocratic moral of chivalry [Tonsor, 1979]. Even societies of the third Millennium, encountering globalism and its uncertainty, are inclined to produce a deep longing for vast ages, unveiled in phenomena like heritage industry [Hewison, 1987]. Most of these nostalgic socio-cultural drifts have not much in common with active cultural or political revisionism: they embody primarily in the fabular summoning of a predeceased age's cultural or moral milieu, attempting to reinvent rather the cultural surface of their presents and not its deep order. Or wishing for even less, only to hold a mirror up to society. Nevertheless, the direct and nostalgic summoning of the *hierarchical* character of extinct medieval societies can also occur, especially outside the high-artistic sphere.

It is critically labelled by humanities and social sciences many times as neo-feudalism, rather as a vivid metaphor, without the claim of creating a systematic ideological construction about it. Its core expression, feudalism became the widely used concept for describing medieval societies thanks, among others, to Tocqueville or Marx [Tocqueville, 2002: 561-571]; [Marx, 1848]. Tocqueville criticized it not just for its unjust but also for its inutility [Tonsor, 1979: 134]. The term neo-feudalism firstly referred to the phenomenon that civic-bourgeois cultural turns – even revolutionary ones – left many frames of feudal social representations untouched. Moreover, modernizing societies dared to seek nostalgic shelter for social life within this medievalist reminiscent. The 19th century England is a frequently raised example for this confluence of past and future-orientedness, where public rituals expressly maintained the image of a late feudal society [Rogers, 2002]. More peculiarly, this neo-feudal and aristocratic attitude appeared even in the 19th century American behavioural patterns and cultural life, as an adventitious ingredient in a society where generally a proudly distinction evolved towards the idle medievalist reminiscent of the old continent. [Tonsor, 1979: 132]: 'Even in America, where the forms of feudalism, establishment in religion and primogeniture, were weak and attenuated, feudalism was a substantial influence upon the development of revolution.' [Howard, 1980]; [Aronstein, 2005: 13-14]

This latter example sheds light on the blurred confine between culture and political discourse, melting easily into each other, where cultural nostalgia seems to be a socio-psychological pillar of maintaining – or on the contrary, transforming – a social order. Accordingly, the phrase 'neo-feudalism' is assumed to cover not just a sheer cultural nostalgia but attached revisionist political agendas as well. Like in the later reception of Julius Evola: the flagrant personality of mid-war Italian anti-progressivity is also labelled a neo-feudal protagonist, whose thoughts remained surprisingly fashionable in various subcultures even in the afterwar period. [Evola, 1995] In his work, Evola speaks about a 'feudal interdependence' and about 'highly personalized relationship of command and obedience'.

Nevertheless, neo-feudalism has not become a comprehensive explanatory term of regimes or epochs, remaining rather a critical metaphor for harmful nostalgia towards the late hierarchic (non-egalitarian) world. Within humanities, one of the first clearest definitions might have given in 1960 in reference to the anti-progressive and anti-egalitarian essayist and philosopher, Thomas Carlyle [Jones, 1960: 187]. Accordingly, his neo-feudalism meant seeking the alternative of dawning mass democracy in a '*very tightly-structured society with a small ruling class at the*

head, whose privileges of sovereignty are linked with the responsibilities of providing for the welfare of the subject masses'. Carlyle's thesis was already labelled in 1956 as neo-feudalism, but without such a clear definition [Slater, 1956: 112].

This definition leads us from past into the present: having discovered the potential universalism of this expression, present-oriented social sciences begun to use the term for labelling all sorts of social structures which are in tune with the above-cited definition, utterly regardless of the fact whether these structures themselves refer to historical predecessors or not. In economics, George Reisman was the first who resurrected feudalism as an ahistorical critic, impeaching the broadening social policy of the US from a conservative perspective, and alleged that redistributive social policy declasses citizens from voters to depend on masses [Reisman, 1961]. The essay criticizes John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society*, Houghton Mifflin, 1958. According to Reisman, Galbraith blatantly argues '*for the institution of a modern brand of Prussian feudalism*'. It is worth mentioning that the expression itself was familiar even before Reisman within social sciences, but it had occurred rather just a slight metaphor, without definitions. For instance, in 1958, Theodore Levitt forewarned of his perceived threat that institutionalized social responsibility of business elite would lead to a newly born feudalism '*with all its paternalistic and autocratic ills*' [Levitt, 1958: 44]. Subsequently, 'neo-feudalism', 'new feudalism' or 're-feudalisation' became a generally utilized – and in overall inconsequent – metaphor against different kind of hierarchical power structures. In 1971, Hugh Seton-Watson used it unexpectedly in reference with the most developed societies, drawing a parallel between seceding Frankish 'territorial magnates' and the 'sectional barons' of post-WWII societies [Seton. Watson, 1971: 13] '*The magnates whose protection is sought hold powers that are not territorial but sectional ... Warring sectional barons may in the long term create a more deadly anarchy than the warring territorial barons of King Stephen's time*'. Immanuel Wallerstein popularized it as a universalistic dystopian prospect for the future, threatening especially autarkic societies, where local hierarchy will be compatible with a high level of technology [Wallerstein, 1996: 162]. Wallerstein raises here an important question and immediately answers it, bridging the two topics which humanities and social sciences concern: '*What would legitimate it (i.e. the neo-feudal economic structure)? Perhaps a return to a belief in natural hierarchies*.' In the new Millennium's globalisation criticism, the expression became a label on the highly developed economic structures, on global behemoths and on an untransparent or politicized network of multinational oligopolies with uncontrolled lobby power, covered by their sounded social responsibility. For instance, Milan Zafirovski's essay entitled '*Neo-Feudalism in America?*' alleges neo-conservatives of representing a proxy-version of feudal past, meanwhile they glorify the lack of feudal order in their history [Zafirovski, 2007].

The manifold exploitation or rather exploitation of this expression has been further continued with its geographical broadening onto South American and African forms of capitalism, but here the more pertinent 'neo patrimonialism' has also occurred. Interestingly enough, even the term 'developmental neo-feudalism' occurred, referring to its accidental social utility in an utterly underdeveloped world [Murray, 2006]; [Kelsall; 2011]; [Huggins, 2017].

Despite the fact that neo-, new- or contemporary feudalism in social sciences tends to refer to rather different phenomena in regions distant from each other, all these definitions have a common point. It lays in their attempt to reveal and depict informal hierarchical structures under modern legislative and juridical circumstances and with the formal dominance of capitalist structures. Its most recent and most active utilization has appeared in relation to post-

Soviet Russia and Ukraine, hoping by economists and social scientist that it can describe the hardly conceptualized socio-economic reality in these countries, mixing formal and informal, transparent and latent norms [Kyrchanov, 2015].

NEO-FEUDALISM, AS A CRITICAL CONCEPT OF PERSONAL DEPENDENCIES WITHIN CAPITALISM

As we have seen, post-modern phrases alluding to feudalism have a two-fold meaning. In humanities, neo-feudal habit covers all the nostalgic sentimentalism – including artistic performances or external formalities – through which modern people can escape back to the perceived orderliness of Middle Ages. In social sciences, they refer metaphorically to a broad variety of ideological strands or existing socio-economic structures that – according to this critical stance – apparently or latently legitimize the innate nature of social and cultural hierarchies, in sharp contrast with / opposition to egalitarianism.

The usage of this term seems to be the most appropriate in the case when both *human nostalgia* and a *social hierarchy* can be detected, interplaying between each other. According to a critical approach, this is the situation in post-crisis Hungary. This approach has been emerged in the second decade of the Millennium, as economic stabilization went hand-in-hand with the rising hegemony of politics above other social sub-systems, coupled with a strong anti-Western and Western-sceptic rhetoric that challenged its solidary and egalitarian principle. The Hungarian public discourse echoes the voices of analysts or just pure public actors who argue over the existence of a latent nostalgia towards pre-modern, hierarchic traditions. An essential emphasize has to be put on the abbreviation of hierarchy because it makes a distinction between neo-feudal nostalgia and between neo-traditionalist pining for other forms of primitive societies.

This critical stand is not unknown in the modern history of Hungary, however, it was significantly unique in its first half of the 20th century. As Attila Pók, one of the internationally renowned researchers of Hungarian radicalism highlighted, ‘*according to radical democrats, both the pre-World War I and the mid-war Hungary has remained an underdeveloped, feudal country*’ [Pók, 1990]. Without any political overtone, Hungarian sociography and micro-historiography also detected the partial survival of feudal traditions, stating that 19th century demolition of pre-modern privileges did not eventuate in the termination of the feudal texture of social life. Rather, on the contrary, it made possible that reminiscent of the withering noble lifestyle percolated to social layers having lower, but neighbouring status. Nobility could turn into citizenry, meanwhile, citizens also could become modern-style noblemen. Even many rural traditions, considering by many as autochthone ones, had dispersed from the unravelling noble way of living, such as the tradition of sumptuous hospitality, gifting or feasts [Paládi-Kovács et al., 2009].

As it was already mentioned above, these observations fit into an interesting universal discourse about the continuous (but transformed) survival of pre-modern and archaic structure within post-revolution civilities; but the relations and proportions seem to be distorted in Hungary. For instance, according to Ulrich Beck, revolution is the most important milestone of social development, turning pre-modern structures into modern; but victorious capitalist citizenry comes to a silence agreement with a pre-modern, patriarchal social network [Beck, 1992]. Thus, circumstances of itched modernization have not been in contradiction with a casually pre-modern style of quotidian/daily coexistence, which latter could ensure the citizen's tranquillity in the rapidly changing world of civic development. ‘*But when were we able to*

experience victorious civic revolutions? In our homeland, feudalism remained always in power, under Franz Joseph, Miklós Horthy or János Kádár, too. All these regimes were feudal-capitalism, even which was attempted to call socialism.' Everything happened in reverse than in the countries scrutinized by Beck: 'here feudalism, remaining landlords in the estate, gave concessions to civic development'. These are already the bitter conclusion of Iván Vitányi from 2012, according to whom the nostalgia towards 'late certainty' as well can get a neo-feudalist overtone in the Central Eastern European region easily since the epochs of civic revolutions and democratic traditions have remained faint and intangible [Vitányi, 2012]. A similar conclusion lays behind the fierce 'accusation' of philosopher Mihály Vajda, whose autobiography in 2017 described the Hungarian society as masses with 'serf mentality', having a peculiar nostalgia towards their late risk-free and responsibility-free submissive position. The philosopher made exception solely with the intellectuals of Jewish origin, or 'with Jewish mentality' [Vajda, 2017: 236-237]. Further to harsh criticism, he partly revised this utterance, stating that he used 'serf mentality' in a purely descriptive manner and with reference to a particular segment of society. *'I do not disdain* (the Hungarian society), just state that this mentality does exist, and it makes extremely difficult for Hungary to integrate into the European cultural value system.³ The internationally renowned author György Spiró in his new satire *Kőbéka* (Stone frog) portrayed a similar atmosphere, using the same phrase 'serf mentality'. It did not receive such a boisterous echo, perhaps because of avoiding hysterical *völkisch*-urbane opposition in his concept and placing the literary message in a broad international context. [Spiró, 2018]: 'I do not write about mafia states, but archaic structures existing multifariously in the modern world; no matter we call them tribal or feudal, they are antithetical to the ideas of enlightenment. In Hungary, the mentality of creating wealth through sack without work is not new; it was common practice in the Horthy-era, under the Arrow Cross Party (Hungarian Nazis) and after the war as well. Similarly, the world of privileges functioned almost permanently, under the gentry's and communists as well; just the privileged ones changed.' Apart from liberal thinkers, conservative critics are liable to conclude the same. András Stumpf, influential conservative columnist summoned also the feudal order in a gloomy essay [Stumpf, 2017]: 'How can we grasp the essence of neo-feudal ethics? According to it, there is an overlord, a superior who feeds his owns, and the duty of the serf is only to be faithful. Not to work well – just to be loyal.'

It is not a coincidence either that Gábor Török, one of the most-engaged political scientist scrutinizes contemporary political phenomena in parallel with the medieval socio-economic structures of the Hungarian Kingdom [Török, 2017a]. As he states, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán with his power-centred and confronting attitude unveiled the politics' earlier hidden internal self, making its eternal personality- and power-centeredness clearly apparent: *'from this point of view, there are more similarities than obvious dissimilarities between Viktor Orbán, King Matthias and an Assyrian ruler'* [Török, 2017b].

³ Conversation with Mihály Vajda in the Hungarian-language Transylvanian Radio 'Marosvásárhelyi Rádió': <http://marosvasarhelyiradio.ro/hirek/emisiuni/rank-sem-jellemzo-hogy-megakarnank-erteni-a-masik-oldalt-vajda-mihaly-interju> (Last accessed: 11 September 2018.)

NOSTALGIC SENTIMENT: A POSSIBLE ROOT OF FEUDAL-CAPITALISM?

Having submerged these deeply emotional texts, a logical question arises: does this perceived nostalgia toward feudal hierarchy really exist? As above-cited texts elucidate on it, feudal habit seems to be a vivid but partly intangible socio-cultural phenomenon which does not tackle the legal system and written norms, and which is not coupled with some obvious political revisionism (e.g. royalism, territorial revisionism); thus, it is easier to circumscribe than to describe academically. Since it concerns a subconscious layer under manifest public awareness, it is difficult to detect through surveys or discourse analysis. Yet, there are domains where attendance of neo-feudal political thinking may be comprehensible: these are (1) the medieval-oriented modernization criticism; (2) the shifting discourse of memory policy from this age's Western-orientation to its order-centeredness; and (3) the outspoken, provocative concordance with above-cited critical voices.

While manifest neo-feudal nostalgia is sporadic, a latent nostalgic trend is far more squarely detectable within a broad range of criticism towards modernization as a whole. Hungarian public discourse has been littered with malicious gibbeting of enlightenment's attainments; however, it is not clear how deeply it impregnates the consciousness of the broad audience. Nevertheless, these utterances are quite symptomatic and significant, whether coming from opinion-leading columnists or from the minister of human resources. Latter, for instance, defined the century-long process of enlightenment as a 'subversion starting with the so-called renaissance', peaking in the French revolution and poisoning the spirit of modern societies with false ideas [Friss, 2018].

Criticism over the Western cultural pathway from enlightenment to emptied mass democracy has a broad and serious international context, from the humanities to social sciences, embodied in such significant oeuvres like that of Oswald Spengler or Jürgen Habermas [Spengler, 1991]; [Habermas, 1989]. Economists and researchers of globalization also warn their audience on the threat of over-rationalized modernization, attracting their attention that Max Weber's idea may lead to the wrong direction [Ritzer, 2011]. These critical reflections offer, if any, typically future-oriented or explicitly utopian organization of society. The future-oriented proposal is put forward, for instance, by above-cited Ulrich Beck who emphasizes the importance of the second phase of enlightenment and modernization, as a kind of correction of the over-rationalized world. Or, as in the concept of Jürgen Habermas, idealistic historical examples are proposed to find in some civic traditions, flourishing right after the victorious bourgeois revolution. From the perspective of these academic works, the distinct speciality of neo-feudal public discourse lays in their past-oriented, traditionalist feature, seeking the way not to the future but back to an 'ancient order'.

The popularity of medieval statehood within the CEE region is rooted in their sudden laming and submerging as early modern period begun; in this gloomy and abject prism, Middle Ages became the golden ages for many nations in the region. This approach had been institutionalized in the cultural memory as well, through textbooks, public spaces or national holidays [Csapody, 2006]. Summoning medieval political events does not imply automatically any kind of nostalgia to feudal structures; however, it minimizes the feeling of cultural distance from this late epoch. This kind of historical sensitivity has not been utilized for anti-egalitarian thoughts while the very predominant narrative constructed on this medievalism was the unambiguous and uninterrupted the orientation to Western civilisation for this epoch's elites and societies. Thus, the whole medieval history was reconstructed as a long-stretched foreshadow of EU integration

struggles. But slowly, a new narrative also emerged which put social 'order' and 'orderliness,' as medieval attainments, in focus. This composes an extremely favouring soil for associations between today's claims for certainty and the perceived pre-modern achievements. During the 2015 migration crisis, it was not difficult to recall the autonomous Hungarian position in the Middle Ages, when the room of Hungarian political manoeuvres was typically broad and loose, and when country has to be defended against Ottomans. *'That all validate the presumption that the underlying power relations has not changed in the past 1000 years.'* [Bogár, 2016]

This outspokenly historicizing and nostalgic conclusion, put down by the radical but already 'mainstream' political thinker László Bogár, brings us to the field of provocative concordance with critical voices that raise attention to the threat of neo-feudal spirit. The bitter criticism of Mihály Vajda was responded, for instance, by a widely-read but anonym radical blogger 'Aristo,' going further in the path of the left-liberal philosopher: the blogger declares that 'serf mentality' does exist and 'it is the natural claim of a lingually homogenous, settled-down nation for the order, which makes life possible' [Aristo, 2018]. Such an outspoken neo-feudal nostalgia was detectable earlier in the political rhetoric of the far-right party, Jobbik as well. The party leader, Gábor Vona compiled a foreword to the Hungarian issue of Julius Evola, stressing that Hungarian young people should 'find the appropriate way to over-demonized principles, like spiritualism, hierarchy, organic approach, monarchy' [Evola, 2012].

As we've seen, a particular element of neo-feudal public discourse is the questioning of the superiority of those European cultural pathways which has led from the Hellenic-Roman civilization through the Renaissance and the enlightenment to the European Union. This 'Western pathway' of civility was the idea of Hungarian elites and intelligentsia in the 19th and 20th century, plastically summarized in a coherent concept by István Bibó. Bibó might have been the most influential thinker during the three-year temporary democracy between Fascism and Communism (1945-1948); and became one of the most influential personalities of dissidents under Communism. The Samizdat memorial book devoted to him in 1979 gathered the possible broadest strands and persons, who became later political rivals; his name was taken by the College of Advanced Studies, a legendary melting pot of young anti-Communists who established later Fidesz; his statue was erected right beside the Parliament [Bibó, 1991]. In his works, Bibó depicted and popularized a historical panorama in which the Western Roman Empire was the first epoch of this Western cultural pathway. According to this narrative, the fall of this empire was not a pure civilization catastrophe, rather a unique historical moment when Roman civility, Christian clergy and traditional German society melted into, creating a society with the ability of gradual or even revolutionary self-renewal [Bibó, 1986: 7-124]. In Bibó's work, this Western pathway is opposed to the Byzantine world, where clergy fulfils magical tasks, and they are also honoured in a magical adoration [Bibó, 1986: 22]: 'Those parts of the Christian narrative which proved to be crucial for the proper organization of human communities, had been hardly realized in the territory of the Eastern Christianity.' In this Eastern tract of Eurasia, basic organizing principles rooted in Asian despotism and sacral kingship of other ages. These thoughts were re-conceptualized by his follower Jenő Szűcs in his renowned essay about 'Europe's three geographical regions,' which became an immanent part of curricula in mayors in history [Szűcs, 1983]. Ideas of Bibó and Szűcs are not unique in a broader European context; Western-Roman cultural heritage (primarily Roman law) is chained with other cultural values like Renaissance and enlightenment in the works of a great variety of thinkers [Smith, 1992]. The opposition of Rome-centered Western Christian world to the neo-Byzantine Russian empire is

also a trope in international relations [Judt, 2005: 174]; [Toynbee, 1947]. Apart from Bibó's deep influence on Hungarian political thinking, the moral imperative of belonging to the Western Christian civilization became a stable narrative form, echoing in the public discourse of the post-Communist era as a banal truism [Glatz, 2001].

Abruptly, the narrative of this Western Roman pathway was challenged during the so-called 2015 migration crisis. Supplemented by such adjacent phenomena like the Brexit or terrorist attacks, chaotic events raised easily the sense of parallel between the EU and the submerging Western Roman Empire. The provocative but legitimate question emerged in a sudden: has the unifying Europe really succeeded in moving forward in history, or just the scenes of an earlier imperial fall will be simply repeated. Several journalists or even academics, as a general quandary or as a reaction to concrete events, brought up this dilemma [Beard, 2015]; [Ferguson, 2015].

Neo-feudal streams of Hungarian public discourse went further and formed a supplementary, collateral narrative, according to which Byzantine world could be a real alternative to this inevitable ruination of civilisation. As a blogger – anonymous but influential, again – conceived it on the *Figyelo.hu*, web-portal of the weekly *Figyelő* [Observer], run by a pro-government network of businesspeople and politicians: *'The new Byzantine may have the duty of protecting the flame in Europe. This time and again, it will be not easy and not without pain. Because we have to sacrifice something for the sake of survival, as always in the history.'* This ominous and relativizing discourse attempts to modify the common conceptual approach towards the abbreviation 'Byzantine' and to seek historical foreshadow of contemporary 'power politics' in the historical East. This was provoked even more legibly through the article of Tamás Fritz, 'new rightist' satellite-activists, written in an article just some days before the 2018 elections: *'Let's not forget: after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the eastern Byzantine Empire defended Christianity for one more millennium against – among others – Islam.'* [Fritz, 2018.] On the occasion of the national holiday of the state foundation in the same year, the weekly *Figyelő* edited by a pro-government think-tank questioned that Saint Stephan – the first king of Hungary, founder of the state – chose West against Byzantine for ideological reasons. Accordingly, Hungary just kept a necessary balance between superpowers of that time, following just a geographical Realpolitik based on the principle of sovereignty and not cutting off ties with Byzantium [Lánczi, 2018: 3].

The new Rome – new Byzantine opposition has become an evolving frame of discourse about the European future, employed by pro-Western public actors as well, just with the adverse indication. Róbert Puzsér, a non-governmental celebrity-author sees the essence of cultural and geographical debates in the same simple question. *'Today's Rome: Brussels. Today's Byzantine: Moscow.'* In his interpretation, today's Rome is unambiguously better than Byzantine, despite the obvious shortcomings of the previous power centre.⁴

⁴ Speech of Róbert Puzsér on the protest against the growing Russian influence in Hungary, 25.04.2017. The Liberal Club of Buda organized also a pre-election debate entitled 'Byzantine or Brussels'. <https://tisztabeszed.hu/liberalis-klub/bizanc-vagy-brusszel> (Last accessed: 13 September 2018.)

RETROTOPIAS SURMOUNT UTOPIAS?

The essay tried to scrutinize those discourses within Hungarian publicity which summon an extinct hierarchical society whether with a critical or with nostalgic sentiment. How they are rooted in social attitudes, could be analysed through surveys; how they may contribute to the creation of a new political attitude, could be elucidated through the analysis of public reactions to those political steps which are regarded as symptomatic neo-feudal ones. Both these strands are out of present essay's scope, which tried to focus just on the evolvement of the public discourse, especially to the interplay between critical and nostalgic utterances. In some cases, the critical debunks make the silhouette of such a medieval-like world sharper. Interestingly enough, critical voices seem to decode the politics' neo-feudal attitudes more clearly, loudly and understandable than nostalgic ones; thus, they can be comprehensible even for those who do not have a sense of 'decoding' politics.

And what is the coding system that makes political and public cases understandable for a broad audience? The historical knowledge is the platform that proved to fulfil this role, providing a lot of prefiguration and possible parallels. Past, at least its imaginary impression in the mind, is a coding system taught and learnt until thoroughly until 18-year old, which is acquainted by practically everybody. It gives an enormous advantage to retrotopian ideas against utopian ones. Future-oriented mindset could produce local success stories and narratives that are convincing thanks to the persons and actions behind them; and it leads us out of the world of debates and discourses.

Apart from the essay's hypothesis and research results, the whole discourse analysis on neo-feudalism raises the dilemma, whether the binary dichotomy of democracy-authoritarianism could be the adequate axis where Central-Eastern European societies' 'transition fatigue' can be scrutinized? Neo-feudal discourse elucidates another axis of modernization-traditionalism: what is questioned by some elite groups and their supporters is not democracy itself but the modern institutions, whose pivotal role is attempted to be replaced by personal dependency, by and personalized coordination of society.

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