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The Prince and the Savant: Political Change and Social Knowledge in Late Modern Hungary

*Introduction to the Thematic Issue*

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A society that has two elites loses its capability of orientation.

LÁSZLÓ KÖVÉR, President of the Hungarian Parliament, October 2012

... 

The literature of dictatorships: when you can only write someone else’s thoughts, not your own.

SÁNDOR WEÖRES

The set of essays included in the present issue originate from a team of historians and sociologists at a workshop held at the Central European University a year ago.1 The inspiration to come together and discuss the relationship...
between political change and social (scientific) knowledge has its origins in our own times.

Politicians with little understanding and affinity for the democratic rules and norms of the political game often come into conflict with representatives of their country’s artistic and scholarly-scientific communities and/or its fourth estate. The present president of the USA, for example, has been routinely lashing out ever since his inauguration against what he calls “the fake news media” (which means critical investigating journalism that irritates and displeases him because he feels under his own skin their critical edge). Most recently, in connection with the conflict over the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, VA, he has embarked also on the ambitious enterprise of rewriting American history—putting all the weight of the President’s office behind an assessment where the confederate general figures shoulder to shoulder with Thomas A. Jefferson and George Washington (after all, he said, the two latter were also slave owners …) (Shear and Haberman 2017).

What seems to stand in the way of the surge of populist, nationalist, and authoritarian tendencies in America and Europe today is the sustained strong positions of liberal-democratic values and views in society and its public discourses. As Mária Schmidt, Viktor Orbán’s chief ideologue in matters pertinent to history and politics of memory, emphasized as early as in 2000, “Even though we are one nation, within it there are two cultures and two orders of value.” (Schmidt 2006: 71) Viktor Orbán, preparing to reach out for power, in his so-called Kötcse speech of 2009 claimed that the whole pre-2010 era of post-socialism should be seen as an era of the dualistic field of force (duális erőtér), characterized by the thorough antagonism between the values promoted by the FIDESZ-led unified right (a polgári szövetség) and the values represented by the “neoliberal” pole of socialists and liberals (entirely alien, in his opinion, to all “true Magyars”). This antagonistic dualism of the political field, in Orbán’s rendering, also disoriented the cultural and academic elites and resulted in crisis and stagnation—which is why, Orbán argued, the Hungarian electorate was calling for not merely a change of government but for the replacement of the dualistic field of force with a central field of force (centrális erőtér) from where the liberal pole is squeezed out as it has proved to be thoroughly bankrupt. This central field of force will have to be asserted in the norms and criteria according to which the cultural (academic, artistic, and media) elite will be selected. Thus, the antagonistic tension and confusion in the prevalent values of society, characterizing the era of duális erőtér, will yield to a long-term stability and harmony between government and culture (including, of course, scholarship), both focusing on “true national issues.” As Orbán himself put it: “today it is realistically conceivable that in the coming fifteen-twenty years, Hungarian