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The roots of Western societal evolution

A concept of Europe by Jenő Szűcs

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Jenő Szűcs wrote his essay entitled *Sketch on the three regions of Europe* in the early 1980s in Hungary. During these years, a historically well-argued opinion emphasising a substantial difference between Central European and Eastern European societies was warmly received in various circles of the political opposition. In a wider European perspective Szűcs used the old “liberty topos” which claims that the history of Europe is no other than the fulfillment of liberty. In his *Sketch*, Szűcs does not only concentrate on questions concerning the Middle Ages in Western Europe. Yet it is this stream of thought which brought a new perspective to explaining European history. His picture of the Middle Ages represents well that there is a way to integrate all typical Western motifs of post-war self-definition into a single theory. Mainly, the “liberty motif”, as a sign of “Europeanism” – in the interpretation of Bibó’s concept, Anglo-saxon Marxists and Weber’s social theory –, developed from medieval concepts of state and society and from an analysis of economic and social structures. Szűcs’s historical aspect was a typical intellectual product of the 1980s: this was the time when a few Central European historians started to outline non-Marxist aspects of social theory and categories of modernisation theories, but concealing them with Marxist terminology.

Keywords: liberty topos, eurocentrism, structure analysis

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1. Introduction

Jenő Szűcs wrote his essay entitled *Sketch on the three regions of Europe* in the early 1980s in Hungary.¹ This essay was meant to appear in *Bibó Emlékkönyv*, a book commemorating István Bibó, edited by the illegal opposition. As a result of the controversial relations of the late Kádár-era, the essay was finally allowed publication in one of the leading Hungarian journals on history, *Történelmi Szemle*. The *Sketch* gained popularity and sparked heated debates because it raised the question of “Central-Europeanism”. Increased interest in the “Central European problem” was present from the late 1970s as a direct consequence of the events taking place in Poland, the birth of the regime’s opposition in Hungary, and the slow weakening of the Soviet Union. During these years, a historically well-argued opinion emphasising a substantial difference between Central European and Eastern European societies was warmly received in various circles of the opposition. Outlining the independent historical development and “occidental” roots of the Central European region indirectly questioned Cold War borders.

2. Some antecedents in historiography

Szűcs’s essay is instructive because of the concepts of “Europeanism” or “occidentalism”. Central-Europeanism and, within this concept, the debates and problems on Hungarian history mostly veiled the deeper aspects of the author’s European historical theory. In a wider European perspective Szűcs improved the old “liberty topos” which claims that the history of our continent is no other than the fulfillment of liberty. Thus he unintentionally lined up with a stream of Western-European self-definition still influential in the post-war era, challenging the almighty class war concept of Vulgar Marxists.² His concepts of Western societal evolution constructively unified Bibó’s thoughts of “small circles of liberty” and the motifs found in contemporary Western historiography and social science. The concept of Western European “original” traits found in the *Sketch* represents the most important elements of post-war Western European self-definition.

¹ See Szűcs (1983). The French translation of the essay appeared two years later with a foreword by Fernand Braudel: Szűcs (1985). In this paper, I used the following edition: Szűcs (1986).

² Between the two world wars bourgeois and Christian humanist historiography came up with an approach which saw European history as the unity of Christianity and liberty. The most prominent advocates of this approach were Christopher Dawson, Gonzague de Reynold and Oscar Halecki. The approach lived on after the Second World War in Western Europe. See for example Dawson (1929; 1932; 1950), Reynold (1934; 1941; 44-57), and Halecki (1950; 1952; 1963).

Although Jenő Szűcs became more and more sceptical towards Marxism by the late 70s, he still accepted many Marxist conclusions in this essay. It is mostly because of his affiliation to Marxism that his *Sketch* primarily examines the movements of economic and social structures, often referring to Anglo-saxon Marxists Perry Anderson³ and Immanuel Wallerstein. At any rate, his approach integrates elements of the liberty topos and Max Weber's concepts to such an extent that he went far beyond the boundaries of "official" Marxist historiography.⁴ At the time he wrote the *Sketch*, Szűcs had been researching the medieval era for decades. The Middle Ages in the West as a centerpiece of his concept was not based on a loose interest in historical and politological theory. In fact, he was aware of the actual debates on certain historical questions and he was acquainted with adequate philological methods to process historic sources.⁵

As a conceptual starting point, Szűcs chose István Hajnal's and István Bibó's theses on European societal development. With reference to these, the *Sketch* is an attempt to rethink and summarize the most important characteristics of occidental societal development. Szűcs assumed that Bibó's concept of the Western model is

³ Perry Anderson is regarded as one of the most influential Anglo-Saxon Marxist historians of the 1970s and 1980s. In his four volume synthesis he attempted to summarize and rethink world history. His independent thoughts and brave conclusions not only made him a great Marxist historian but he also provided important results to other historians. Anderson believed that a "great theory" is possible and thought that he could bring order in a world of complicated correlations by creating a typology, examining their historical function and comparing economic, social and political macrostructures. He tried to incorporate Weber's sociology and post-war historiography in his works in an unbiased way, under the aegis of a "creative Marxism" of some sort, whereas he distanced himself from the Eastern European vulgarisation and schematic generalisation of Marxist philosophy. The analysis of the distinctiveness of European historic evolution became the focus of his attention because he wanted to prove the importance of ancient and medieval antecedents of early modern European expansionism, even though he originated the modern world mostly from the rise of Western European capitalism and absolutism. His definitive theses on European history appear in the medieval and early modern section of his book. The first volume – *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974) – examines the typical features of the ancient and feudal modes of production with a differentiation between Western and Eastern Europe. The second volume – *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974) – discusses the importance of modern European state development and its variations and draws a conclusion on the typical features of European history. Anderson's final conclusion was that the Middle Ages greatly contributed to the gradual manifestation of liberty in Europe. By applying a Marxist structural history Anderson came to the same conclusion as advocates of the European liberty topos (Anderson 1974a; 1974b; 1989).

⁴ Jenő Szűcs interpreted the partial peripherisation of Central Europe with the notions of Wallerstein's world-system theory. He also employed Anderson's historic views and concepts on feudalism and the role of the early modern state. He may have been acquainted with Marc Bloch's works on the Middle Ages as an experienced historian, after examining Anglo-Saxon Marxists (as was told by Academy colleague György Granasztói). He was further influenced by mediaevist Walter Ullmann, an Austrian historian who emigrated to the US in the 1930s and later taught at British universities.

⁵ Szűcs's synthesis on the Middle Ages – *Az utolsó Árpádok* – was methodically close to the Annales circle. In this book Szűcs tried to prove that the typical features of the Western social model also developed in Hungarian society in the course of the 13th century, as it was customary in the "second stage" of the Middle Ages. Thus *Az utolsó Árpádok* is consistent with the *Sketch*, emphasising the Western medieval roots of the Central European region (Szűcs 1993).

looking for the rootlets of “democratic social organisation” and “community building” running deep beneath the surface. Everything Bibó highlights – based on Hajnal’s theories – about the earliest types (traditional, personal and mutual rights and obligations, the balancing structure of the “small circles of liberty” which inhibited the concentration of power and withstood the “brutally utilitarian” methods of unilateral subjugation...), these are all realistic and important elements [...] (Szűcs 1986: 520)

István Hajnal was experimenting with creating a new historiography incorporating sociological points of view in the 1930s. His works on Europe contain a considerable amount of original ideas and they show a great extent of theoretical sensitivity (Hajnal 1936; 1993). The opposing basic notions of his approach are traditionality and rationality. He attributed a “deep organisation” to traditional societies which create artifacts and values, and, as he argues, these societies are always being threatened by the crude and superficial interests of rational capitalism and political powers. Traditional societies, on the other hand, possess greater gravity – China and India are typical examples – but they sharply differ from modern capitalism as well as the expansive flexibility of the politically expansionist empires of the ancient world and those of Islam. According to Hajnal, Western Europe takes a special place among the societies he mentions. The decline of rational ancient capitalism and the fall of the Roman Empire brought along the prevalence of traditionality in the Middle Ages. Yet, as a result of ancient antecedents, the traditional structures of society became more relaxed – tribes and gentes disappeared for example – which entailed, along with “deep organisation”, a greater appreciation of “personal performance”. This means that medieval traditionality in the West was a special and unique social structure which was different from all other structures found in different societies. In the modern age the forces of capitalism threaten all traditional societies with disintegration. As an exception, Western Europe was able to integrate rational interests into the “deep organisation” of its society.⁶

István Hajnal’s picture of Europe represented an individual critique of capitalism which was formulated with the help of a historic sociology of “conservative” orientation. His approach recognizes the unique features of medieval Western European traditionality compared to other societies. His arguments are somewhat schematic when he writes that the political organisational forms of nomadic societies, the expansive flexibility of ancient and Islamic empires and numerous features of European capitalism are forms of “brutally utilitarian”

⁶ Hajnal substantially changed Max Weber’s concept of rationalism. Separating traditionality and rationality, Hajnal formulated a macro-level historical theory where rationality has a negative connotation.

subjugation and only traditional societies can withstand them. According to Hajnal, before rational capitalism Western Europe was a unique example of the co-existing prevalence and balance of traditionality and rationality.

At this point, Bibó picks up the thread. In his study *The sense of European societal evolution* (1971-72) he also focuses on the Middle Ages. Bibó concentrated his research mainly on relations between various social groups, individuals and the governing power (Bibó 1986). While Hajnal approaches the opportunity of social organisation and community building from a defensive traditionality, Bibó emphasises the freedom and autonomy of certain groups against the central power. Hajnal highlights historic and sociological viewpoints and social structures. He thought that with this conceptual framework he would be able to explain the uniqueness of European societal evolution. In contrast to him, Bibó conducted an analysis on ethics, intellectual history and politology. He regards Christianity as a new force coming “externally” into the history of Western Europe. It had a great impact on the principles of social organisation and enabled “small circles of liberty” to come into existence.⁷ Bibó believed that beyond a tradition of legal and institutional mechanisms for protecting subjects, “Europeanism” also meant a collective moral experience leading to the awareness of human dignity, preserved in spite of personal dependence in Western European societies. Christianity impregnated power with ethics to such an extent that it still determines European political reflexes.

3. Szűcs Jenő’s concept of Europe

To Szűcs, Bibó’s “small circles of liberty” came as a key notion in his analysis. He thought that medieval Western Europe incarnated autonomy and legal protection of certain groups in an exceptionally unique way. Yet he did not originate the opportunity of this phenomenon from the religious and ethical effects of Christianity; instead, he proceeded from an analysis of social macrostructures. In this respect his approach is close to that of Hajnal’s, it is only his aspect and terminology which are considerably different.

⁷ Bibó on the role of Western Christianity in social organization and “small circles of liberty”: “This clergy and these monastic orders inherited something from the pragmatism of the Roman spirit, the practical nature of their political organisation and law, but it also inherited, in a simplified form, something from the state and society concept of St Augustine. In this spirit they meant to transform the various power relations in society to functions, tasks and Christian duties. European Christian feudalism was therefore far more than a tight military bondage of loyalty between superiors and subordinates. [...] this institutionalised system which included society on the whole was not merely based on subservience as it included a great deal of liberty – privileges and diets [...]” (Bibó 1986: 34).

According to Szűcs, Western European development after the fall of Rome was not only special because it did not produce another empire rendering Western religious and civilizational unity under a single political centre. Up to this point, the *Sketch* is of the same opinion as Weber.⁸ But Szűcs argues that the ancient societal forms which had once fleshed out the imperial framework disintegrated with a unique radicalism. “The first five hundred years in the history of the West is an unusual take off for a birth of a civilization. It is characterised by disintegration instead of integration. There is an obvious civilizational decline in an era of reagrarization and widespread political anarchy” (Szűcs 1986: 521). In societies outside Europe this special extent of disintegration did not apply, so imperial reflexes always triumphed there. Because of this, political organizations in non-European high cultures always preserved their “top-down” nature.

All these societies had three common features: “the status of the groups in power was determined by a prebendal – as Max Weber puts it – dependence on public revenues”, and “the city was the centre of both civilian and military government [...] therefore as a form of settlement it was a mixed agglomerate of noblemen with local authority, civilian and military authorities, merchants and artisans, and as such, it totally lacked autonomy and legal homogeneity” (Szűcs 1986: 523); and, finally, that there were hardly any legally autonomous social layers between the prebendal elite and the agrarian population. To Szűcs, the theocratic or secular nature of power, the question of a state’s land monopoly and the dominance of civilian or military figures in the governing elite are secondary characteristics. That is because a political and legal structure can stabilize and reproduce the “top-down” quality of social and political lines of force independent from these factors. Contrary to models outside Europe, the novelty of Western society lies in the impossibility of a “top-down” integration

⁸ Weber compared the fall of the Roman empire and the fall of the medieval cities because he was looking for the effects of varying circumstances in withdrawing urban liberties on the evolution of capitalism. In his opinion, “an organized world power swept away urban liberties in the ancient times, and there was no room for political capitalism within an empire” (Weber 1927) Declining urban autonomies and the withering of capitalism appears all throughout the political evolution of the empire. Emperors gradually terminated all forms of tax collecting contracts and tax collectors were made imperial officers. This led to the disappearance of the ancient capitalist entrepreneur. The population gradually lost its mobility and mercenaries were replaced by conscripts. “Certain categories of the population were defined by trade and the categories were then taxed equally. This act strangled ancient capitalism.” (Weber 1927) The late Roman state became a strictly centralised bureaucratic state and there was no place for ancient capitalism which closely adhered to political undertakings. In the strengthening states of late medieval Western Europe the autonomy of the cities was also infringed. Fighting states usually took possession of the cities. “This competition created the best opportunities for the foundation of modern Western capitalism.” (Weber 1927) As the states were engaged in fighting each other for resources, they could not help fostering and nurturing national capitalisms. An alliance between the states and capital led to the strengthening of the bourgeoisie. Weber concluded that capitalism will “prevail ... until the nation state is replaced by an empire” (Weber 1927)

as a result of deep disintegration, where “integrational lines of force started to develop from the bottom [...]” (Szűcs 1986: 525).

This “bottom-up” organization was brought along by Feudalism. The *Sketch* refers to Anderson when it gives an emphasis to the fragmentation of sovereignty and the contractual nature of a feudal lord-vassal relationship.⁹ Anderson also highlights that relations between a feudal lord and a vassal were both subservient and mutual. On the other hand, Szűcs attributes greater importance to medieveal liberties than Anderson.¹⁰ On the whole, Szűcs accepted Anderson’s concept on feudalism, as the conclusion concerning the freedom of social groups and individuals from the centre of power as well as their scope of freedom was easy to integrate with Bibó’s concept about the “small circles of liberty”.¹¹ Anderson’s statements serve as points of orientation in various questions throughout the *Sketch*. His concepts on Germanic-Roman symbiosis and early modern types of absolutism as well as the more general problem of writing a Marxist structural history in a way that its conclusions lead to a version of European liberty definition were all valuable sources for Szűcs.

⁹ Szűcs regarded the 9-10th centuries as a realization of feudal relations and the fragmentation of sovereignty as a starting point of “Western societal evolution”. Therefore he did not think that the Carolingian state was the basis of Western European history (Pirenne) or that it was an ending point of emerging medieval structures (Dopsch). To him, it was the last stage of early medieval Germanic-ancient parallelism and the “imperial model”: “[...] The Carolingian state cannot be regarded as a feudal state, it is more like a civilizational model which tried to integrate inherited and new features, ancient and Frankish institutions: especially slavery and free peasantry. As a third element, feudal relations were being born” (Makkai 1986: 16). “The attempt of the first Carolingians for the political synthesis of ancient-barbarian symbiosis can be interpreted as the single Western attempt to follow the reflexes of other high cultures and integrate the legacies, that is, connect the notion of ‘civilization’ with ‘imperial’ (political) integration. The ‘renewal’ of the Empire in the decades around 800 was nothing else than an attempt to revive imperial tradition, preserved by the Roman church, by depleting the reserves of Frankish institutions. However, reserves were already depleted by then and the temporary framework was swept away from the bottom by a fourth element, feudalism. With this ‘civilization’ and ‘political structure’ got separated permanently in the West” (Szűcs 1986: 524-525).

¹⁰ According to Anderson, “the integration of vassal, benefice and immunity into one complex created the ambiguous compound of contractual mutuality and subordinated dependence [...] the oath of fealty and investiture obliged both parties to respect certain commitments. The ethos of feudal nobility held together ‘honesty’ and ‘loyalty’ in a dynamic tension, which was an alien idea to a citizen of the antiquity who [...] only knew the former, and it was no less strange to a subordinate of Turkish sultanism or a similar despotic rule who only knew the latter” (Anderson 1989: 529). Anderson’s feudalism concept also refers to the presence of elements of liberty in medieval Western Europe but he did not use the notion of *libertas* to such an extent as Jenő Szűcs.

¹¹ Contrary to Szűcs’s interpretation, Hungarian historiography perceives the feudal system as the relation of lord and peasant – that is, the role of the feudal economy in organising production. A typical example of this restrictive interpretation is found in László Makkai’s (1986: 17) feudalism concept. Whether servitium and dominium were the only key concepts of feudal structure – Szűcs argues – “depends on whether we talk about Western Europe before or after the turn of the millennium. If we talk about the latter stage then we have to include ‘libertas’ in the row of social organizers: this is specific to European feudalism. The very essence of vassalage is ‘free service’ and they always emphasised freedom when they established a feudal relation. This emphasis does not only appear in vassalage but also in the subordination of peasantry: The peasant hands over his land ‘libere’, of free will, when he asks protection from a lord. It is not convincing that the lecture explains various phenomena with the inner logic of the evolution of feudal estates [...]” (Jenő Szűcs’s comment on Makkai’s feudalism concept).

However, the concept of feudalism in the Sketch also contains new elements. It attributes key importance to the consequence of a total disintegration of central power in which feudalism “substituted ‘state’ with ‘societal’ relations” (Szűcs 1986: 525) With this fact, Szűcs discovered a medieval antecedent of a modern political thought: the separation of the state and the society. As he writes:

this separation is not an endogeneous feature of human history. Naturally, all of the states are built up on a society, but the gravity that an evolving state should find its legitimation outside the society, present in high cultures for five thousand years, will consequently develop such a structure in which the society will appear as a derivative of the state and not the other way round. (Szűcs 1986: 520)

Empires with a top-down social organization do not separate society and state too clearly. The fall of the Roman Empire and emerging feudalism thereafter was a historical event of utmost importance because it enabled the centre of sovereignty to slip from the governing circles to the hands of the political society as a result of the fragmentation of central power. The bottom-up principles of social organization enabled the society to gradually become a legitimational force of the state – not in a modern sense of course. This is the reason why the first formulations of such concepts as “natural law, social contract, sovereignty, transfer of power and the separation of the branches of power” appeared in medieval universities, “although in a remote and foreign context, anyway, they were not considerably less in the focus of political theory in the ‘great century’ of the Middle Ages, that is the thirteenth, than in the one which was the advent of modern times, that is the eighteenth” (Szűcs 1986: 520). These medieval ideas were interesting and understandable for contemporaries because the problems they dealt with were present in Western European feudal structures.

Szűcs argues in favour of the medieval roots of civil society. Contrary to Bibó, who associated social autonomies and the “small circles of liberty” with the ethical value of human dignity, the *Sketch* employs the typical categories of liberal political philosophies. Szűcs attempted to connect this idea with closely linked concepts of feudalism, disintegration and bottom-up organisational principles and to develop a coherent eurocentric historical approach. When he demonstrates non-European societies he relies neither on the analysis by Hajnal nor on the typology of the Asian mode of production, instead, he employs renewed categories of Weber’s sociology. This is why he regarded the problem of property relations as

secondary, whereas he emphasised the importance of the prebendal system and the lack of urban autonomy in top-down societies. So the *Sketch* writes about societies outside Europe in a similar manner as post-war Western social scientists wrote about “empires”.¹²

Another important element of Szűcs’s concept of the Middle Ages is the question of classical ancient antecedents and ancient-barbarian symbiosis. In the *Sketch* the effects of classical ancient societies on European development is less prominent than in Perry Anderson’s writing or in some cultural historic works on analyzing Christian-ancient syntheses. Anderson took the Germanic-Roman symbiosis, the ancient citizen ideal, the municipal heritage and Roman law – that is, legal and institutional tradition – as living factors throughout the medieval era. Szűcs, on the other hand, emphasised that “the ancient model of autonomous society”, which is Greek polis democracy “vanished with the rise of Hellenistic empires just as the Roman republican idea did in an imperial dead end. It became a mere fiction. These early historical phenomena did not flow directly into the till of European societal evolution” (Szűcs 1986: 521). Keeping such a distance from the ancient influence on the Middle Ages can be traced back to Szűcs’s firm belief that a historical process is determined predominantly by economic and social structures, which belief he held even more consistently than Anderson. While Anderson valued the legal and institutional patterns of the “superstructure”, thus allowing that these forces – although never religious and spiritual forces – may have been forming structures, Szűcs remained within the constraints of economic-social structure analysis – which belongs to the “economic-social base” in Marxism.

Anderson declared the imitation of legal and institutional ancient patterns a significant historical factor in the process of ancient-medieval layering. Szűcs thought that the ancient heritage influenced the development of the Western model primarily by the deep symbiosis between ancient and barbarian social structures. The *Sketch* argues that early medieval societal evolution

came into existence in tension and short term parallelism and fragmented and crushed both state forms. The central power of Germanic kingdoms vanished, and so did the imperial institutional system along with Roman law. [...] Germanic gentes [...] disintegrated just like the remains of the legal society of the Roman populous. [...] Of course this was also an integration of some sort, ancient and barbarian heritage intermixed [...] but this was not an integration of the elements like that of the Islamic world but a more organic merger, so that in the “Dark Centuries” it seemed that

¹² Paradigmatic elaboration of this is found in Eisenstadt (1969).

the elements have interfered with each other to such an extent that they nearly destroyed each other in the process. (Szűcs 1986: 522; 524)¹³

Szűcs's views on ancient-barbarian symbiosis are key because they suggest that the disintegration and fusion of such elements in Western European societies – or rather the unique manner of this fusion – enabled the evolution of a social structure different from barbarian tribal societies as well as ancient social and political structures before the turn of the millennium. According to the *Sketch*, “it is exactly a total disintegration that brought along this strange type of dynamism, which would then change contrasts in the first three centuries of the new millennium”, contrary to the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations. (Szűcs 1986: 522) So this unique manner of Germanic-ancient symbiosis gave way to a vigorous medieval development of agriculture and urban growth which showed capitalistic features from the 14-15th centuries onwards. This leads us to a perception of the Middle Ages as an antecedent of Western modernity in many respects – although Szűcs never stated this directly. The *Sketch* is therefore in accordance with the suppositions of Western historiography and social sciences after the Second World War stating that the late medieval era was a prequel to the modern age.¹⁴

According to Szűcs, in the course of disintegration of early medieval social forms there was only one exception: the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, it was able to strengthen its positions in the turmoil following the fall of the Roman Empire and it also implemented the doctrine of separating the state from the church which went directly against the Byzantine model. This is of key importance because “the separation of spiritual and secular as well as

¹³Szűcs argues that the most important result of Germanic-ancient symbiosis was the disintegration of the tribal structure. This thought also appears in Hajnal's picture of European history. Contrary to Weber, Szűcs does not deduce the disintegration of tribal structures from the universality of the Christian faith but from the long-term transformation and interaction of Roman and barbarian social structures. Szűcs suggests that the final disintegration of tribal structures and the forthcoming feudal relations paved the way to capitalism for 11-13th century Western European societies. *To the disintegration of ancient-barbarian parallelism*: “[...] Roman ‘cosmopolitanism’ and Germanic ‘gentilism’ are opposite phenomena of the late ancient world which became obsolete after a two- or three century long transitional period. While the early medieval transition integrated certain elements, at the same time it destroyed gentilist (tribal) structures. Early romanised barbarian kingdoms were the first to do so, trying to pull down the dualism of Roman and barbarian elements from the top while early feudal relations undermined traditional ethnosocial bonds and organizations from the bottom. [...] In the Mediterranean and Western parts of Europe which were in connection with the ancient world, directly or indirectly, in their genesis, original national frames and ethnosociological forms of prefeudal-barbarian (Germanic) structure vanished during the early Middle Ages (6-9th centuries), just like the Romans did. After intermixing and complicated procedures of disintegration in narrow territorial constraints [...] in the 9-10th centuries greater political, linguistic and cultural entities, nations began to evolve, which were then called ‘gens’ or ‘natio’” (Szűcs 1984: 344-345, 333-334). *Szűcs interpreted these social structures as territorial rather than tribal.*

¹⁴A classic elaboration: Rosenstock-Huessy (1949; 1951).

ideological and political matters was one of those extremely fertile separations of the Western world without which the later 'liberties', social emancipation, nation states, renaissance and reformation would all have been inconceivable" (Szűcs 1986: 524). Contrary to Anderson, the *Sketch* does take the historical role of Christianity into consideration. Szűcs approaches the separation of the church and political power through a general separation of the spiritual and the secular world, claiming that this separation was an important prerequisite of modernity. This approach is close to the viewpoint of modernisation theories – though he characterised separation as a factor promoting liberty –, thus a typical motif of Western post-war self-definition appears in the *Sketch*. Bibó embraced the ethical importance of Christianity. Yet this importance and its influence on social structures gets only a limited scope in Szűcs's work – not unlike in those of Anderson's.

4. Conclusions

In his *Sketch*, Szűcs does not only concentrate on questions concerning the Middle Ages in Western Europe. Yet it is this stream of thought which brought a new perspective to explaining European history. All in all, his picture of the Middle Ages represents well that there is a way to integrate all typical Western motifs of post-war self-definition into one single theory. Firstly, the "liberty motif", as a sign of "Europeanism", developed from medieval concepts of state and society and from a thorough analysis of economic and social structures. Secondly, it also includes the opposite: development of empires, the concepts of top-down societies, originated partly from Weber's works, as well as the separation of spiritual and secular matters found in modernisation theories. Finally, it incorporates the view which regards the first centuries of the new millennium as stages towards a modern age.

Szűcs's historical aspect was a typical intellectual product of the 1980s. Ambitions were still present then in Western social sciences to renew so-called "great theories". Also, this was the time when some Central European historians started to outline Weberian aspects of social theory and categories of modernisation theories, concealing them with a Marxist terminology.

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