

Theses for doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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**Tradition or renewal?**

*The change(s) in the mentality of the nobility from the dissolution of the feudal estate system to the present day, in the light of family histories from Heves and Tiszafüred*

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The age of modernisation is the birth of modern civil society. However, the society of the new Hungarian civilien nation was far from unified. In its structure, values and identity, it retained remnants of the feudal society, which - unlike Western European societies - had a strong influence on the lifestyle, habits and mentality of the emerging social middle class.

The focal points of research vary on the social gentility. The majority of historians understand social transformation as the birth of modern citizenship. A new society emerged. It was not the same as the one before modernisation, but was predominantly bourgeois in its language, customs and values. However, for a long time afterwards, patterns of social behaviour continued to shape the mentality of the new social middle class. The result was a civilisation that followed the noble model.

The social transformation of half a century of modernisation is an attempt to put an end to the aristocratic past. The aim of my research is to explore and analyse the social processes, individual and group patterns of behaviour that contributed to the revaluation of the values and patterns of behaviour of the nobility during the period of modernisation, i.e. the emergence of a new composition of the noble collective.

After the dissolution of the feudal estate system, nobility as such was no longer a privilege or liberty, but more like a kind of circle of respectable gentility. Over time, the gentlemanlike lifestyle became linked to the noble past. Founded on the memories of a believed or real noble past as well as the same sense of nobility that created the modern community of gentlemen. The success of its cohesion lay in the depth of adaptation of its members whether they were able to assimilate the social prestige and historical patina of the earlier historical common nobility, which had preserved and marked the nation.

Before modernisation, the nobility held all the elite positions. Conferments served as a permanent means of elite formation, creating reciprocity between those who granted privileges and the ones who received them. The existence of a loyal elite was a prerequisite for a successful monarchy, government or state power. Rankings have also occurred in the age of modernisation, but the conditions and the nature of the merit required have changed. Granting nobility is no longer seen as a means of producing elites in this era. Promotions served as a kind of high state honour. The distinction did not in itself ensure elite status, but it did ensure the possibility of elite status. After the promotion, it was up to the individual to decide whether his mentality and values matched those of the noble-like cult community. If the answer was in the affirmative, the person granted to the rank realised his status in law, but if the answer was in the negative, the certificate of merit remained merely an honourable state

decoration. Therefore, to belong to this identity-based community was to choose their values. As a consequence, their functioning was much more dynamic and free than in the period of the feudal estate system.

The fragmentation of the nobility was not passed on to the period of modernisation. The legal and property privileges that had caused the fragmentation of the period of the feudal estate system disappeared after the introduction of free market conditions and civil law. However, the common past and national consciousness, the similar mentality, were not dependent on law and economy, and thus survived the end of the feudal estate system. They provided the cohesion of the new identity-based community. However, this new noble formation can no longer be regarded as a pre-modern noble society, since the individual will could act prevailed in the composition of the collective.

The method of my research is based on network theory. The study in a system of networks offers the possibility to see historical actors as a dynamic collective with living and changing relationships and interests. The social structure that emerges as a result of action and choice is thus processual rather than static, and individuals are not forced into constructed rigid categories.

In my research, I consider the actors of the feudal noble society as a cultural community organized by the same norms in the era of modernization, characterized by a gradual fading of the past. The lack of social and geographical connections with the past and the traumas of the 20th century have turned this cultural community into a community of fate. According to the results of my research the dissolution of the nobility is a linear process that has had cyclical attempts to return.