
BOOK REVIEW

Szűcs, Z. G. (2023). *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes: A Realist Interpretation*. Manchester University Press

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Gábor Zoltán Szűcs's latest book is a remarkable work. This is of course not surprising for a scholar who has already brought numerous noteworthy works to the table. Szűcs has edited several multi-authored volumes and authored two monographs. One of the latter (Szűcs, 2010) has been highly acclaimed in Hungarian political science,¹ while the other (Szűcs, 2017) has tended to receive positive feedback only from a rather narrow domestic professional circle.² *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes* has all the qualities to become a major resonant work, even a resounding success with a much wider international audience.

Like all books, this book might be read in many different ways, from many different perspectives. In this review, three reading perspectives that seem relevant are used. First, I attempt to place and evaluate the work in the context of the author's academic work (1), second, in the context of domestic political science (2), and third, in the context of international political science (3).

(1) In the course of his academic career, which has now spanned two decades, Szűcs has brought out more than a hundred publications. However, there has been a perceptible turnaround in his prolific output. Earlier analyses of a history of political thought or a political discourse theory approach were gradually being relegated to the background. At the same time, normative political theory increasingly came to the fore and then, especially in the last five years, became the exclusive focus of his publishing activity.³ This new creative era has already been marked by prestigious journal articles (Szűcs, 2019; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2022; 2023). *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes* can be understood as a synthesis and elaboration of and a further reflection on the findings of his shorter political

¹ The book was awarded the Aurél Kolnai Prize for the best political science publication of the year.

² Gábor Illés' book review deserves special mention here (Illés, 2019).

³ In a very personal preface-like text (Acknowledgments) at the very beginning of the book, the author explicitly justifies the turn of events in his scientific work. "Living in and studying a post-truth world made me realize that it is much less intellectually fruitful to ask how to do things with words than to ask how to do things with things," he writes.

theory writings.⁴ Or, in other words, it is an extended and further developed version of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological repertoire outlined in those papers, with an intensive application to the study of a particular topic. Yet it is a work that offers a number of novelties, a work that stands on its own merits, and which, regardless of its predecessors, should in its own right be of interest to the reader.

As this is a comprehensive, summarising, synthesising work on a subject of great importance both to the public and, it is felt, to the author personally, and as it is the culmination of a creative period spanning several years, the question arises: is this 'The' *Magnum Opus*? It is by no means easy to answer this question. If we consider the book's scientific value, its intellectual strength, its conceptual clarity and the quality of its argumentation, we can only conclude that it is an outstanding work. But, as I have already mentioned, the author's previous monographs are also of considerable scientific significance. Moreover, given Szűcs's productivity, it can be assumed that the work under review here will be followed by further monographs in the not too distant future. It follows that, placing this volume in the context of his oeuvre, it can best be said to be one of his *magnum opuses* (or *magna opera*).

By playing with words, more precisely with the meaning of the term '*magnum*', we can try to answer the question in quantitative terms. The book is no larger in scope than his earlier two works. The length of the monograph – 180 pages including the Introduction and Conclusion – is not conspicuously great, but rather reasonable, appropriate and proportionate to the subject matter. This means that it provides exactly enough space for the train of thought. The text does not become overcrowded with insufficiently developed statements. But at the same time it does not remain too airy; there are no argumentative gaps or blanks. The exposition is sufficiently tight, and the content perfectly fills the space allotted to it. The 'greatness' of the work is therefore certainly not to be sought in the number of pages or statements per page, but rather in the originality, coherence and plausibility of the concept.

Adding another layer to the meaning of the term *magnum opus*, we can speak of the work's execution – its form, which testifies to a high level of textual construction. It is striking how deliberately the text (and the argument itself) is structured. As a reader, one can almost feel that the volume is as well composed as a fine piece of music. The body text of the book is divided into two major sections of roughly seventy pages. Each part contains three chapters of 20–25 pages. There is a clear, definite arc to the way the ideas are expressed. The train of thought moves from a discussion of problems of a theoretical level, purpose and nature (Part I), to a discussion of practical political-ethical issues (Part II). Chapter 1 gives an overview of contemporary realist political theory and puts in the conceptual framework for the later political-ethical inquiry. Chapter 2 offers a definition of illiberal regimes that is deemed workable (it does so, among others, by limiting the scope of the term) and applies an idiosyncratic neo-Aristotelian regime theoretical framework. Chapter 3 attempts to formulate the most valid questions of everyday political-ethical experiences of living in illiberal regimes. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 concentrate on three main groups of political actors (elected officials, non-elected public actors, citizens), as they

⁴ This connection is explicitly addressed and reflected in the Acknowledgments section of the book.

illustrate, analyse and model the political-ethical challenges in illiberal regimes through schematised yet realistic practical examples. From the first reading, it is immediately apparent that the structural units of the text are closely interlinked. The high level of professional mastery is also evident in the fact that the text does not become redundant or pleonastic, despite the frequent use of rhetorical procedures (anticipation/foreshadowing, retrospection/recursion, repetition) which ensure the strong coherence and consistency of the argument.

Going beyond the difficult question of the *magnum opus*, the point of comparison with his previous monograph (Szűcs, 2017) can still be made in the context of the author's academic work. *A Politika Lelke* (The Soul of Politics) is a relevant point of reference because it is representative of the new era of political theory-oriented research in terms of its thematic focus, its literature base and its approach.⁵ It may be noted that, as in his second book six years earlier, Szűcs has engaged in a productive and in-depth dialogue with ancient thinkers in his new *Political Ethics*. However, it is as if the number, weight and significance of the ancient Greek authors within the text and their influence on the thought process has been somewhat diminished in comparison with that of modern (e.g. Weber) and specifically contemporary scholars (primarily Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, and Bernard Williams, and to a lesser extent Raymond Geuss, Enzo Rossi, Judith Shklar and Matt Sleat). Aristotle, whose 'updated' and further developed regime typology is prominent in the book, is of course an exception. In addition, it seems as if Szűcs no longer conceives of theorizing (from his own moderate-liberal realist point of view) as a tragic, futile attempt, despite its necessity. He seems to enter into it with more courage, more enthusiasm, and less scepticism/dubious self-reflexivity than in the earlier work (though still with a perceptible degree of it). And last but not least, the new monograph is hardly concerned at all with the analysis of fictional discourses that has long been a defining feature of his research. Fiction or fictionality is present in the pages of the most recent book only in illustrations of the political-ethical challenges of people living in illiberal regimes. The author does this through fictional (or semi-fictional?) case studies, through fictional (semi-fictional?) but exemplary stories of fictional (semi-fictional?) people with fictional/initial names (Governor Delta, Policy Expert Aleph, Civil Activist Ha etc.).

(2) Let us now turn to the second reading perspective, situating and evaluating the work in the context of Hungarian political science. Although the book is not (at least in a direct or dedicated way) about Hungary and not written in Hungarian (it was not even published by a Hungarian publisher), it is clearly a product and a significant achievement of contemporary Hungarian political science. Since Hungarian political science has recently undergone a profound transformation, becoming essentially bilingual and internationally embedded, the above-mentioned peculiarities of the work might be considered as part of the normal course of business. This is fully compatible with the fact that the author himself was socialised in and is still active in the domestic academic milieu. His book is not only stimulated intellectually by authors, forums, works and concepts that are representative of the international scene, but also by specific domestic impulses, experiences,

⁵ Since my impressions as a reader coincide with those of the reviewer, and since I find his formulations particularly apt, I will base my analysis on the main points of Gábor Illés' book review (see Illés, 2019).

theoretical propositions and debates. Moreover, since it has become quite common in Hungarian political science for researchers not only to communicate in English with their foreign colleagues in an international context, but also to read and discuss each other's works in English, it seems reasonable to assume that one of the primary target groups of the book is Hungarian scholars. Let us see what Szűcs's work has to offer to the domestic professional community.

In Szűcs's current volume (as in the previous normative political theory writings), due to disciplinary and genre standards, the status of the literature is quite different from the way it is treated in mainstream empirical political science. The use of the literature is not limited to a list providing an overview, nor is it merely a prelude for the primary empirical findings but is in fact an integral part of the narrative. Since the argument is developed in the form of a dialogue with several thinkers at several key points in the text, it is not only the concepts, assumptions and typologies that the author adopts from them that are important, but also with whom he engages in dialogue. The researcher's own judgement of who he or she considers to be intellectually sufficiently influential and inspiring, and the researcher's decision with whom to enter into dialogue, is itself a kind of scientific contribution. In Szűcs's previous writings on political theory in Hungarian (as in his previous monograph), the acts of translation, familiarisation and adaptation have been the most prominent in relation to authors found worthy of common reflection. In the case of his new work, however, we can already talk about canon creation – or at least canon re-creation, canon remodification.

It is striking to what extent the theoretical canon of *Political Ethics* is different from the canon embraced by the majority of the self-defined realist scholars (political scientists, researchers, philosophers, analysts, thinkers) in the country. Weber is not at all central in this canon; the work of Machiavelli and Schumpeter appears only as marginal mentions; Hobbes is best used as a brand name to identify the ideas and trends inspired by him (e.g. Hobbesian problem, Hobbesian concerns, Hobbesian terms, Hobbesian reasons, Hobbesian undertone, Hobbesian political outlook); and Carl Schmitt, a favourite author of so many domestic political scientists, is not given any role, does not feature in the book at all. It is rare to encounter – especially in today's Hungarian context – such a characteristically and consistently *a-Schmittian* (or Schmitt-free), and at the same time clearly realist, conception of political theory. And that, frankly, is in itself refreshing and invigorating. In the canon developed by Szűcs, the protagonists are quite different. Among the ancient Greek authors, Aristotle and Thucydides are the most prominent, while among the thinkers of contemporary political theory, moderate-liberal realists such as Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, and Bernard Williams. The influence and authority of Renaissance, early modern, modern and twentieth century thinkers is much less. One of the major contributions of the volume to the domestic political science discourse is to demonstrate that, instead of the established, well-known, even worn-out names, it is possible to say valid things about the deeper drivers of the real functioning of politics in a theoretically nuanced and sophisticated way, drawing on a very different authorial base.

But, and this is not really surprising, from (neo)Aristotelian starting points and the notions of contemporary moderate-liberal realist authors, a quite different conception of public life can be derived than from the theses of Hobbes or Schmitt. In this way, the creation of an alternative canon also means that the volume offers the domestic audience a

distinctive conceptualisation of politics. An open, flexible, and close-to-life conceptualisation based primarily on the terms of *circumstances of politics* (and responses to them), *political rule* and *political regime* (as ethical and structural contexts for political action), *political agency*, and the *ethical seriousness* that pervades the drama of politics. An important feature of this interpretation of politics is that it does not inherently include a component of conflict. Untangling the concepts of politics and conflict is a very important step, because for a large part of the domestic professional community, the close link between the two seems to be the *sine qua non* of realist political thought. Indeed, to take the thesis forward is an almost subversive gesture from an academic point of view. Szűcs does not see the concept of ‘politics as (playing) hardball’ as something that a realist should accept, as a constant, periodically recurring, and regime-neutral phenomenon that follows from the inherent nature of politics. For the author of *Political Ethics*, this is not the important, definitive, identity-forming insight of the realist school, but the distinctive logic of *illiberal regimes*, which is embedded in the contextual framework and becomes an almost obligatory pattern of behaviour for the actors of such regimes.

The former statement leads us on to a discussion of the further input that the book provides to the intellectual work of Hungarian political science. Indeed, Szűcs’s new monograph indirectly contributes to the long-running regime debate in the domestic community, offering a sufficiently specific but not endemic theoretical framework to facilitate deeper understanding and explanation. The volume, as I have already mentioned, is not specifically and primarily about Hungary. However, since it treats the country as a typical example of illiberal regimes, the author’s interpretative framework developed for a somewhat broader range of political regimes is also applicable to Hungary. The analysis offers a seemingly paradoxical, yet overall nuanced, plausible and elegant solution to the debate around the question of ‘democracy or autocracy’, in order to approach it from a new perspective and, in a sense, to transcend it. In line with neo-Aristotelian regime theory, Szűcs describes illiberal regimes (including Hungary) as mixed political systems with multiple operating principles, which, although they have elitist (aristocratic or oligarchic) patterns, can be described as *tyrannical democracies*.

In these regimes ‘political power should be ascribed to those who earn it through political competition’ (aristocratic/competitive principle); ‘political competition is predominantly (but by no means exclusively) conducted through electoral politics’ (additional aristocratic – or electoral – principle); ‘those who have larger economic resources’ have ‘larger informal political influence’ (oligarchic principle) (74–75). However, the relationship between the two other principles that give the regime its name and allow it to be classified is complex and not entirely symmetrical. According to the author, the democratic (or egalitarian) principle in these regimes is mainly (or only) to be found in the fact that ‘the final source of political authority is the support of the larger number’ (74). While, at the same time, the tyrannical principle defines the political-ethical operational framework of the regime much more strongly and much more profoundly. In fact, that is what imposes and/or creates the actual political-ethical context for the actual actions of political actors. This tyrannical – or self-preservative – principle implies that ‘political self-preservation generally does not allow political competitors to play nice or strictly by the book’ (75.) This is how ‘hardball politics’ becomes a fundamental, everyday experience for ‘hundreds of millions of people’ living in illiberal regimes. And this is how the perception,

insight, understanding, interpretation, treatment and coping with the ‘ethics for playing hardball’ becomes a practical challenge for political actors (elected officials, MPs, mayors, policy experts, journalists, political commentators, political advisors, civil servants, civil activists and citizens) and a theoretical challenge for political scientists living in illiberal regimes. Acknowledging the author’s ambition, we can say that Szűcs perceives, undertakes, and in his monograph carries out this scholarly task, filling an important hiatus in the Hungarian political science discourse.

However, his study not only sets an example for his colleagues in terms of shifting the thematic focus and assuming the special scholarly responsibility that arises from the specific political-ethical context, but also presents innovative methodological practices. His analysis, which is essentially phenomenological in character but with a certain critical-genealogical edge, brilliantly bridges the gap between the claims that move at the level of high abstractions, theoretical generalisations and typologies, and the everyday experiences and problems of ordinary people.

(3) And, to briefly highlight the third reading perspective, let us look at what *Political Ethics* has to offer an international political science audience. On the one hand, everything that it offers to the domestic political science community, and in some respects even more. A specific, authentic analysis from an insider’s perspective, legitimated and validated not only by lived experience, by the position of ‘eyewitness’, but also by a high level of theoretical preparation and professional knowledge. A monograph that discusses its subject in a personal and non-self-colonising way, with a convincingly elegant Englishness, in a style that is both analytical and disciplined, and also smooth and enjoyable. It also provides feedback and critical reflection on a number of internationally established concepts, theories, interpretive schemes and measurement systems (e.g. the problematic nature of certain assumptions in comparative political science, the one-dimensional/scalar conception of political regimes, the conceptualisation and operationalisation problems of the V-dem project, or the explanatory power of ambition theory). And, last but by no means least, a serious and weighty alternative, one might say rival, concept to the notion of plebiscitary leader democracy articulated in Körösesnyei and his co-author’s book (Körösesnyei et al., 2020).

I have one serious problem with the book, however. It really could be longer.

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