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Lord Acton's Attempt to Reconcile Catholic Thinking with Nineteenth-Century British Political Liberalism

Theses of doctoral dissertation (PhD)

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## 1. Preliminaries

In this research, I wanted to look more closely at the intersection of classical political liberalism and Roman Catholic thinking. At the beginning of my work, I was looking for authors who were committed to both areas of thought and who were keen to reconcile liberalism and Catholicism. Because I was trying to explore the topic at its origin, I thought it would be good to examine it in the 19th century. With these points in mind, over time I began to study more closely the views of Tocqueville and Acton. Finally, I chose the work of John Acton (1834-1902) because I had the impression that it would be difficult at this time to find another author whose work has a greater sense of firm commitment to political liberalism and Roman Catholicism. His personality carried some sort of consistently moral, and therefore, convulsive trait. A honest adherence to known truth did not allow him to sacrifice any of the conclusions of the Catholic conviction centered around the concepts of liberty, person, and conscience, or the liberal moral stance seeking to limit political power and accept all risks of political freedom. This character made Acton a thinker who was too liberal for Catholics and too Catholic for liberals, but this character also obligated him to accept this division and incomprehension with strict consistency.

As a student of the Doctoral School of Political Theory, I did not want to deal with theological or philosophical, but primarily political issues. In Acton's oeuvre, this is particularly about the question of what political freedom is and the proposed limitation of political power.

Lord Acton was an English Catholic peer. The roots of his family go back to Southern Italy and Bavaria, and Catholicism appeared in the English family as early as the 18th century. Acton, because of the influence of his stepfather, Lord Granville, came close to the Whig Party and in time played a less successful political role in the Party. He went to Munich at a young age, where he became a student and friend of Ignaz von Döllinger, a Catholic priest who left the Catholic Church after the First Vatican Council (1869-70). With Döllinger, he took part in ecclesiastical disputes about Papal infallibility, and after returning from the Continent, accepting the resulting financial difficulties as well, devoted his life to the study of history. He worked out the history of political freedom, though he never wrote a single monograph on the subject. Finally, in 1895, he became a *Regius Professor* of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, graduating as a scientist at a university, which rejected him at a young age precisely because of his Catholic faith. His lifework has argued over a wide horizon, at the same time enforcing aspects of history, political theory, Catholic theology, and philosophy. He firmly

believed that preserving political freedom was a prerequisite for personal, free conscience. This meant for Acton the need to limit political power for precisely this freedom.

## 2. Methodology

In my work, I wanted to examine Lord Acton's historiography and political thinking within the disciplinary framework of history of political ideas, looking for how and with what success and at what cost to try to reconcile Catholic teaching with 19th-century British liberal political thinking.

Acton was more than a qualified scholar. His research was driven by ideas and commitments, behind which some of the effects were gently felt. I wanted to present his oeuvre by exposing his most important ideas while revealing their origins and the influences behind them. Without wishing to touch upon the great debates on methodological issues, I tried to follow Cambridge's history of political ideas and concepts that emerged from the intellectual history, and my aspirations are best understood in these directions. While Cambridge's political philosophy, most marked by the names of John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and John Dunn, emphasized the diachronic nature of the interpretation, seeking to "present the texts as they appear to the author or contemporary reader"<sup>1</sup>, the conceptual history method sought to reconstruct "the appropriate linguistic movements ... in which historical experiences and hopes were expressed", taking into account, as broadly as possible, the conceptual and social history aspects<sup>2</sup>.

I wrote my work in Hungarian and I wanted to address the Hungarian audience of political thinking. When designing the structure of my dissertation I often followed the structure of large foreign language monographs. I did not want to update the observed oeuvre or place it in the context of current social and political debates.

## 3. Results

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<sup>1</sup> POCOCK, John, *Languages and their Implications*, in Uő, *Politics, Language and Time: Essay on Political Thought and History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989, 6.

<sup>2</sup> KOSELLECK, Reinhart, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution. Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848*, Klett-Cotta in Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München 1989, 17. Vö. HAMPSHER-MONK, Iain, *Bezsédaktusok, politikai nyelvek vagy fogalomtörténet?* in Molnár Attila Károly – Nagy Ágoston – Papp Milán, (szerk.) *Fogalomtörténet Kosselleck után. A politikai nyelv kutatásának kortárs módszertana és gyakorlata*, Nemzeti Köszolgálati Egyetem – Molnár Tamás Kutatóközpont, Budapest 2016, 46-47.

1. My most important goal was to present Acton's oeuvre in Hungarian, with particular regard to the interpretation of political freedom, responding, as far as possible, to the ideas of the predominantly English-language literature and the prevailing directions of interpretation.
2. In Acton's values, I considered his position in favour of liberalism to be important. First, its position is serious from the point of view of political theory. My goal was to show how exciting mixture of the canon and the insights he gained from contemporary liberalism and the tradition of antique and Catholic political thinking Acton's position was. Lord Acton's oeuvre and his ethically consistent adherence to liberalism highlighted the value of the liberal component of political thinking.

At the same time, Acton Whig's commitment made it almost impossible for him to understand other points of view on certain political and social debates. His prejudices prevented him from exploring the errors of liberalism, for he considered the Whig ideal to be uncritically followed. In his argument, he subordinated everything to the need to refrain from centralizing political power. This led him to strange conclusions, such as criticizing Edmund Burke's stance on the French Revolution or accepting General Robert Lee's arguments in defence of the Confederacy and even of slavery. We must see that the moral interpretation of politics has often prevented from shadowing historical presenting of the bad political problems.

3. From his point of view, I wanted to emphasize the interpretation of freedom of conscience that makes our moral decisions possible, and for which Acton has championed so fiercely. The distinguished expert on nineteenth-century liberalism, Gertude Himmelfarb, who recently passed away on December 30, 2019, wrote perhaps the best monograph on Lord Acton. She considered him a pessimistic thinker, because Acton firmly believed in the existence of the personal evil, but also of the personal God<sup>3</sup>. The first refers to the imperfection of man, while the second refers to the importance of the power of conscience. Acton knew that the lack of perfection (that is personal evil) and political freedom (which is the place of judgment in conscience) go hand in hand: the person must remain free despite the increased possibility of error because of his freedom, what is to say the ultimate home of conscience. "Nothing is more wonderful than the art of freedom, but there is nothing harder than a school of freedom"<sup>4</sup> – wrote Tocqueville. Freedom is a playing field, a space of conscience, where one makes moral decisions himself and where others cannot decide. Somehow, in this playing field, one must refrain from making definitive statements, solutions that are believed to be perfect. Tocqueville

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<sup>3</sup> Vö. HIMMELFARB, Gertrude, *Lord Acton. A Study on Conscience and Politics*, ICS Press, San Francisco 1993, 240-41.

<sup>4</sup> TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2010, 258.

sincerely professed this when he wrote, "Whoever seeks in liberty anything other than liberty itself is born for servitude"<sup>5</sup>. This is how Acton defined political freedom:

*By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion. The State is competent to assign duties and draw the line between good and evil only in its immediate sphere. Beyond the limits of things necessary for its well-being, it can only give indirect help to fight the battle of life by promoting the influences which prevail against temptation – religion, education and the distribution of wealth<sup>6</sup>.*

Acton's oeuvre reflects an individualist approach in which the freedoms for which nineteenth-century liberals fought belong to a broad area of conscience that cannot be limited by outside power.

4. The point of view of the Catholic thinker is very prominent in Acton's thinking. After the French Revolution, the notion that Catholics have nothing to do with liberals, since they have only harmed the Catholic Church, has become commonplace. However, Catholic liberals like Acton have pointed out that the argument for political freedom and for limiting political power has deep Christian roots. That is why it later became the basis of approaches such as the principle of subsidiarity Pope Pius XI or the idea of religious freedom in Vatican Council II. The Catholic Church, in the political sense - in the words of Carl Schmitt - is a *complexio oppositorum*, a coincidence of contradictions: it is able to engage with each political mindset, including liberalism, without jeopardizing its own identity<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, the political freedom concept that emerges from Acton's work touches the Catholic concept of society at many points. „Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority”<sup>8</sup> – wrote Acton for the Anglican theologian, Mandell Creighton. Similarly, Tocqueville said when he discussed the position of American Catholics in *Democracy in America* that a Church would be successful in a democracy if it insisted on gaining influence through authority rather than power. Acton freaked out at a Church, which, even by dogmatizing the papal infallibility, sought to exert its influence by

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<sup>5</sup> TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, 151.

<sup>6</sup> ACTON, John Edward, *The History of Freedom in Antiquity*, in Fears, J. Rufus, (ed.) *Selected Writings of Lord Acton I*, Liberty Found, Indianapolis 1985., 7.

<sup>7</sup> Vö. SCHMITT, Carl, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*, Verlag von Jakob Hegner, Hellenrau 1923, 15.

<sup>8</sup> ACTON, John Edward, *Letter to Mandell Creighton April 5, 1887*, in *Selected Writings of Lord Acton II*., 383.

gaining political power, and this conviction bound him most to Lamennais. He found it looking forward, that „The ancient connection of catholicism with the powers of the world, with state patronage and political privilege, is fast falling asunder all over Europe”<sup>9</sup>.

In his view, the intrinsic power of faith enables independence and political freedom to be properly exercised: "Nations that do not possess the power of religion to self-rule and autonomy are unprepared for freedom"<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, Acton's notion of a Church without political power is far from realistic, and he mistakenly linked the papal infallibility dogma to the Church's aspirations for political influence, fundamentally misinterpreting it.

5. I found it important to point out Acton's other conclusion regarding the Catholic Church that, because of its supranational nature, the Rome-based Western Church may be able to counterbalance centralized political power in general, even if it is not its most important function, and even if we have not always succeeded in this profession. This approach emphasizes the need for the old covenant between the Catholic Church and constitutionalism, often traced back by Acton to the *Magna Carta*. This is perhaps what István Bibó called the moral infiltration of power and the influence of Christian-inspired European social organizing and tapping society<sup>11</sup>. However, Acton expects, that the Catholic Church must be a kind of constitutional counterbalance to centralized political power, need a politically strong Church that is in conflict with the need to keep the Church away from political power.

In the life of John Acton, he was only partially a recognized thinker. He was respected in the academic circles for his immense knowledge, and Gladstone, who was a friend of his own, recommended him to Queen Victoria as the most literate man of his time. However, there was no accepted person on the political front. At the time of his active political activity, he was barely able to balance political interests and compromises because of his moral convictions, which was by many people from Lord Granville unhappy with his political role. Catholics also looked at him with suspicion, as his principles removed him from the mainstream of Catholic thought and sent him to a marginal minority. He lived in silence, consistently deepening his moral and political principles in his writings. Perhaps he could have spoken of himself in the

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<sup>9</sup> ACTON, John Edward, *On the Roman Question*, in *Selected Writings* III., 356.

<sup>10</sup> ACTON, John Edward, *The Heralds of the Revolution*, in Acton, John Edward, *Lectures on the French Revolution.*, Batoche Book, Kitchener 1999, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Vö. BIBÓ István, *Az európai társadalomfejlődés értelme*, in Uő, *Válogatott tanulmányok* III. 1971–1979, Magvető Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1986, 24.

words of John Lukacs: “I was happily living my unhappy life, which is still better than living unhappily my happy life”<sup>12</sup>.

#### 4. List of Publications Concerning the Subject Matter of the Dissertation

- GÁJER László, *A politikai szabadság filozófiájának katolikus megközelítése Lord Acton történelemfilozófiájában*, in *Teológia* LII (2018/3-4.) 113-122.
- GÁJER László, *Lord Acton: a whig történetírás példája*, in *Kommentár* (2018/1) 26-38.
- GÁJER László, *Lord Acton és az I. Vatikáni Zsinat*, in *Kommentár* (2017/1) 116-117.
- GÁJER László, *Lord Acton morális állásfoglalása a pápai hatalomról*, in *ELPIS Filozófiatudományi folyóirat*, X (2017/1) 9-22.
- GÁJER László, *Nationality, National Identity and the Catholic Church in the 19th Century*, in Czakowska, Helena – Kucinski, Mariusz, (ed.) *Człowiek – Tożsamość – Poznanie*, KPSW, Bydgoszcz 2019, 29-33.
- GÁJER László, *19th Century Catholic Thinkers and the Question of Faith (Lamennais, Tocqueville, Acton)*, in Mezei Balázs – Jani Anna, (ed.) *Fides et Ratio im Kontext: Theologische und Philosophische Annäherungen*, megjelenés alatt

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<sup>12</sup> LUKACS, John, *Last Rites*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009, 202.