

TARTALOM

TANULMÁNYOK

Anna Loutfi: Patriarchal legalist utopia in late nineteenth century Hungary. A discussion of processes of “national selection” at work in the 1877 law on guardianship	5
Faragó Tamás: Szolga- és cselédnépesség a történeti Magyarországon a számok tükrében az első világháború előtt	23
Elter András: Járványhalandóság, házasodás és piacodosás Dunabogdányban a 19. században	49
Pozsgai Péter: II. József népszámlálása Abaúj és Torna megyében I. A forrásközlés, a forráskritika és a feldolgozás szempontjai	83
Sohajda Ferenc: Zala megye népesedéstörténetének irodalma. Hangsúlyok, hiányok, hipotézisek	157
Veres Valér: A 16–18. századi Bihar vármegye történeti demográfiai irodalmának kritikai elemzése	181
Őri Péter: Pest-Pilis-Solt vármegye történeti demográfiai irodalmának összefoglalása. Eredmények, lehetséges kutatási irányok	193

ISMERTETÉSEK

Az 1715. évi országos összeírás. DVD Rom. Budapest 2004. Magyar Országos Levéltár – Arcanum Adatbázis Kft. (Faragó Tamás)	243
Turai Tünde: <i>Az életút végén. Szilágyborzási öregek társadalmi helyzetének vizsgálata.</i> Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, Kolozsvár 2004. (Buskó Tibor László)	247
Christophe Duhamelle – Jürgen Schlumbohm (szerk.): <i>Eheschließungen im Europa des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts. Muster und Strategien.</i> (Házasságkötések a 18. és 19. századi Európában. Minták és stratégiák.) 2003, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Göttingen (Pakot Levente)	255
Deborah Oxley: 'The seat of death and terror': urbanization, stunting, and smallpox („A halál és rettegés székhelye.” Urbanizáció, növekedési hátrány, himlő.). <i>Economic History Review</i> , LVI, 4 (2003), 623–656. (Elter András).....	262
SZERZŐK JEGYZÉKE	273

**PATRIARCHAL LEGALIST UTOPIA IN LATE
NINETEENTH CENTURY HUNGARY.
A DISCUSSION OF PROCESSES OF “NATIONAL SELECTION”
AT WORK IN THE 1877 LAW ON GUARDIANSHIP**

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Some Thoughts on the Concept of Utopia

For many of us, the concept of “utopia” brings to mind the political visions of dissident groups, whose common dreams of a better future form part of what Immanuel Wallerstein would call the “anti-systemic” movements against capitalism, against militarism, against patriarchy, against modernity.¹ Perhaps because of the importance they have had (and still have) for anti-systemic thought and practice, utopian visions are rarely explored as *systemic* realities – i.e. integral aspects of existing world historical systems. Instead sociological tradition, following in the footsteps of Frederick Engels and Karl Mannheim, has identified utopian thought with reactions against, and subversions of, systemic reality.²

Here I shall explore one aspect of *systemic* utopianism with reference to nineteenth century legal thought and legal systems. Nothing symbolises more powerfully the force of nineteenth century utopian aspirations than the universalist drive towards codification of the civil law that pushed across Europe and, eventually, across the whole world, described by Csaba Varga as a heady ideology of the new: a radical movement of “philosophers undertaking to create a new world out of the void; when philosophical rationalism, a world outlook arranged in mathematical order, the doctrine of natural law and its axiomatic conception combined to construct a unified system of views that could provide the ideology underlying the emerging theory of codification.”³

¹ For an overview of the “anti-systemic movements” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*. The New Press (New York 1998): 1–33.

² Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian* (1880); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1928).

³ Csaba Varga, *Codification as a Socio-Historical Phenomenon*. Akadémiai Kiadó (Budapest 1991): 99, 14.

Patriarchal Legalist Utopia

An incredible amount of energy, the work of whole lifetimes, went into drafting legal codes that (it was hoped) could smooth out the contradictions of modernity. Codifiers were not dreamers and they were certainly not radicals in today's sense of the word; for the most part they were conservative legislators in state employ working to maintain and strengthen existing administrations: i.e. they were part of the system, not against it. What was innovative (and utopian) about the code-makers was their faith that certain contradictions threatening to destabilise state structures could be countered by regulation based upon a universal system of basic rules. *All* human activity could be regulated and, through regulation, stabilised and made productive for the modern state (the very messy and often tedious details of an early code such as the 1794 *Prussian Landrecht* and the clearer, more abstract style of the French and Austrian civil codes indicate the extent to which this tendency had to be modified by codifiers in the interests of clarity).⁵

One particularly tricky area of legal regulation was women's activity (recognised in social reform circles as "the Woman Question"). Since women's work in industrial or industrialising states could be classified as both productive and reproductive, women's labour could be located both inside and outside domestic spaces and it was not imagined that women could fill both functions simultaneously without serious social repercussions. The concern of Frederick Engels that industry was bad for women and the family, and his stark image of women delivering their babies "in the factory among the machinery" presented in *The Condition of the Working Class of England* (1844), was an image haunting law-makers and social dissenters alike in industrial and industrialising states.⁶ But "the Woman Question" was addressed as a basic problem by law makers long before it became a pressing social issue in transnational feminist and social democratic movements. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, codifiers and legal commentators in England, Prussia, France and Austria created the basic ground plans for four national legal systems, all of which took steps (of differing degrees) towards removing marriage from church jurisdiction and placing it in state control.⁷ A movement was underway to create an

⁵ In the words of Franz Wieacker: "The lawmaker's belief that it is possible to find an absolutely correct legal solution (in a given historical situation) made him presumptuous enough to try to provide immutable prescriptions for all possible contingencies." See Wieacker, *A History of Private Law in Europe*. (Oxford 1995): 265.

⁶ F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In *Marx & Engels, Collected Works*, Vol 4 (New York 1975): 452.

⁷ The ground plans were: the Prussian *Landrecht* (1794); the French *Code civil de francais* (1804); the Austrian *bürgerliche Gesetzbuch* (1811) and the rules underpinning English *Common Law*. English law differed from continental civil systems in that it was never codified and, as grand narrative would have it, was supposedly less subject to radical reform than

function: that of maintaining the strict division of labour between husbands and wives and thereby ensuring the healthy reproduction of the national labour force. Immanuel Wallerstein notes: “what occurred in the nineteenth century was something new. It represented a serious attempt to exclude women from what would be defined arbitrarily as income-producing work. The housewife was placed in tandem with the male breadwinner of the single-wage family.”⁹

In the nineteenth century, *anti-systemic* utopians (including those who considered themselves to be critics of utopian ideas such as Frederick Engels) hoped for the “withering away” of the family as well as the state; reproductive activity within the family was regarded as a bar to the construction of productive social roles for women.¹⁰ Systemic utopians on the other hand (such as codifiers and legislators of law in the nineteenth century industrial nations) hoped to strengthen the family as an important national institution by making marriage the legal basis of the national family and bringing marriage (and the family) under state control. The legal collaboration that they imagined between states and husbands – restricting married women’s mobility, their waged activities and their financial and emotional independence – I call patriarchal legalist utopia.¹¹ As the “answer” to one of the most destabilising problems of modern times, patriarchal legalist utopianism was designed to have a stabilising function. It is in this stabilising function that laws regulating the family, emerging in different forms across the nineteenth century’s industrial and industrialising world, must be contextualised for the purposes of analysis.

Patriarchal Legalist Utopia through the “Ideological Sieve” of Hungarian Family Law

[T]he nationalist paradigm ... supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of modernity but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.¹²

If, in the early nineteenth century, dominant nations had produced patriarchal utopian laws, two questions arise regarding Hungarian law. First, were patriarchal utopian laws considered desirable models for the Hungarian state in

⁹ Wallerstein, *Utopistics*: 23.

¹⁰ See Wendy Z. Goldman, “The origins of the Bolshevik vision: Love unfettered, women free”, in *Women, the State and Revolution. Soviet Family Policy and Social Life 1917–1936*. Cambridge University Press (1993): 1–58.

¹¹ Ursula Vogel refers to the “intermediary power” of the husband “between the state and his wife”. Vogel, “The state and the making of gender”: 37.

¹² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press (Princeton 1993): 121.

“Western law” – of codified models (reflecting the coherence and stability of Western nation statehood).¹⁶

In answer to the second question regarding legal transplantation processes, we should refrain from concluding that just because Western law was idealised as a set of models in Hungarian judicial culture, it was therefore “received” without any defined selection process. Across nineteenth century Europe, the premises of codified law regarding the legal and financial dependence of married women and their subordination in the marital home were gradually undermined by economic uncertainties and social instabilities, leading law reformers to consider strengthening “the family” by increasing women’s legal independence: protecting poor women from “incompetent, lazy or unprincipled husbands” – as English legislators claimed to be doing with the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 – and protecting upper class women and families from bankruptcy, a phenomenon which was described by the future Hungarian Justice Minister in 1877 as caused by “market forces” and the “personal immorality” of male heads of households.¹⁷ The second half of the nineteenth century saw a series of concerted campaigns against codified law led by women’s organisations and law reformers on behalf of married women.¹⁸ This is an important consideration when evaluating the impact of legal currents in family law

¹⁶ In 1885 a leading Hungarian legal scholar of family law, Mihály Herczegh, stated that more than any other branch of law, family and inheritance law reflected “most faithfully” the national character and the organic development of a national legal system. This discourse characterises nineteenth century scholarship in Hungarian family law. See Herczegh, *Magyar családi és öröklési jog*. (Budapest 1885): iii & 144. György Jancsó’s *Hungarian Marital Property Law* is typical of nineteenth century scholarship on family law, analysing the “dominant legal systems” of Western European nations in order to set out a distinct “Hungarian legal system”. See Jancsó, *Magyar Házassági Vagyonjog* (Budapest 1888): v–vii & 1–45.

¹⁷ For an account of concerns that working class men were ruining families in England see Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England*. Princeton University Press (Princeton 1993): 77. For the similar concerns of Dezső Szilágyi (opposition MP, later Hungarian Minister of Justice) regarding *property-owning* men see the debate in the Lower House of the Hungarian parliament over the bill on guardianship law: parliamentary sitting of June 15, 1877. Vol XI (1875–1878): 102.

¹⁸ In Imperial Germany of the 1890s, where a new civil code was being prepared, the German *League of Progressive Women’s Associations* attacked the assumptions of the Prussian legal system regarding married women. Organised protest against the civil law codes began in the 1830s in England and France. See Irene Stoehr, “Housework and motherhood: debates and policies in the women’s movement in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic”, in G. Bock & P. Thane, *Maternity and Gender Policies. Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s–1950s*. Routledge (London / New York 1991): 213–232; also Karen Offen & Susan Groag Bell (eds), *Women, the Family, and Freedom. The Debate in Documents. Vol 1, 1750–1880*. Stanford University Press (1983): 143–161; Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th Century* (New York 1984): 104; Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law*: 17.

families of the elite.²¹ We must bear in mind that by the late 1870s, although the recently unified capital of Budapest had begun an important social, economic, political and cultural role in the general nation-building project – absorbing large numbers of migrants from the surrounding regions of the country throughout the late nineteenth century and facilitating general integration of the population – the capital’s law-makers were not yet attempting to define “normative” laws for the nation (this trend would take off in the 1880s, in the years running up to the promulgation of the Hungarian civil marriage law).²²

The presence of these conditions makes the 1877 law on guardianship an interesting “case study” for analysing transnational legal developments in the nineteenth century, helping to identify contradictions that set up the early natural law codes of Europe as models for Hungary, while at the same time undermining them as inadequate bases for the future development of Hungarian family law. By way of illustrating the more significant aspects of the 1877 law I have chosen to tabulate legal definitions of the most important terms pertaining to gendered authority within the family in nineteenth century “Hungarian” law, before and after 1877 (see Tables 1, 2 & 3 below). The key terms are “paternal authority” (*atyai hatalom*), “parental authority” (*szülői hatalom*), “natural and legal guardianship” (*természetes és törvényes gyámság*) and “statutory guardianship” (*gyámság*).

²¹ The law’s basic objective was to define legal authorities within the family and within the state administration deemed competent to dispose of the property of legal minors and orphans. The Hungarian Prime-Minister and Minister of the Interior, Kálmán Tisza, outlined the law’s basic objectives and drew attention to the legislative reluctance to deal with the private institution of the family in his 1876 justification of the original bill. See the Documents of the Lower House 1875–1878 (Vol 10): 404–405.

²² On the relation between national development and the capital see György Ránki, “The Role of Budapest in Hungary’s Economic Development”, in Ránki (ed), *Hungary and European Civilization*, Akadémiai Kiadó (Budapest 1989): 163–180. My understanding of the term “normative” law is here based on the definition by John Eekelaar, who defines law as “normative” when it serves to spread norms “throughout a society viewed as actually or potentially an integrated whole”. See Eekelaar, “Family Law and Social Control”, in Eekelaar & Bell (eds), *Oxford Essays in Jurisprudence III*, Clarendon Press (Oxford 1987): 125–144, here 126.

2. Legal Definitions of Gendered Authority in the 1876 Bill on Guardianship Law

	Father	Mother
<p>Draft bill on guardianship law, submitted to the Lower House on November 14, 1876 by Hungarian Interior Minister, Kálmán Tisza.</p>	<p><u>Parental authority (<i>szülői hatalom</i>):</u> Authority to bring up and discipline the child; to claim the child back from the illegal custody of another party. Included within the framework of the father's parental authority is:</p> <p>(i) The <i>duty</i> (as head of the household) to act as <u>natural and legal guardian (<i>természetes és törvényes gyám</i>)</u> – i.e. to administrate property on behalf of the child;</p> <p>(ii) The authority to exclude the mother from holding the position of natural and legal guardian;</p> <p>(iii) The authority to appoint a <u>statutory guardian (<i>gyám</i>)</u>.*</p> <p>* Women may not be appointed as statutory guardians.</p>	<p><u>Parental authority (<i>szülői hatalom</i>):</u> In the absence of a legal and natural father, the authority to bring up and discipline the child; to claim the child back from the illegal custody of another party. Included within the mother's parental authority is:</p> <p>(i) The <i>right</i> to act as <u>natural and legal guardian (<i>természetes és törvényes gyám</i>)</u> in the absence of the father, unless the father excludes the mother from holding this position.*</p> <p>* This right may be extended to grandparents.</p>

A brief glance at the tables is enough to see that the 1877 law brought with it increased legal specification and an expansion of the conceptual frameworks in which both “paternal” and “parental” authority were embedded. Table 3 shows that in 1877 paternal authority became more independent than other forms of authority within the family regarding the financial and legal arrangements of minors. All forms of family authority were explicitly subordinated to paternal authority regarding the basic well-being of, and provision for, minors. On the other hand, the 1877 law emphasised joint forms of parental authority in the area of supervision and discipline of minors within the family home.²³

Tables 1 and 2 suggest forces of change pulling a legal construction of “the family” based on women’s legal and financial incapacity and a subordinated “place” in the marital home into shape. But in Hungary, where no national system of law provided a hierarchical framework for conceptualising male superiority over women *in marriage*, legal constructions of the family such as the 1876 bill on guardianship, which focussed on the rights and duties of “parents” and dispensed with the category of “paternal authority”, were fuzzy regarding differences between paternal and maternal legal status and between male-headed and female-headed households. What we see in Table 3 is the “correction” of this tendency. If we refer to the parliamentary discussion that took place over the bill it becomes apparent that the “model” codes were significant factors influencing the process of clarification. Some of the more heated parts of this long debate (March 14 – July 3, 1877) were caused by confusion over the bill’s (vague) definitions of “parental authority”, “paternal authority” and “guardian” – resulting in a bombardment of questions and need for clarification on the part of the opposition. “What is meant by ‘paternal authority?’” demanded Dezső Szilágyi, “for it must be clearly defined.”

“Through this law ‘paternal authority’ will be dispensed with and ‘parental authority’ will enter in its place; ‘parental authority’ is defined in such a way that we do not find the paternal entitlements which are in place today. What will happen to these entitlements?”²⁴

Szilágyi was clearly worried that the bill might dissolve the increasingly exclusive relationship between *male* heads of households and specific spheres of financial and legal activity. Count Albert Apponyi, whose complaint that the bill would grant paternal forms of authority to mothers of illegitimate children and who called the attention of the House to the specific gender order laid out

²³ 1877: XX. 26. §. stipulated that mothers had no parental authority while the father practiced paternal authority over the children; 1877: XX. 10. §. made discipline in the home (*házi fegyelem*) and supervision of minors (*felügyelet*) the exceptions to this rule, granting authority in these respects to both parents equally.

²⁴ Parliamentary sitting of May 3, 1877. Minutes of the Lower House, Vol X (1875–1878): 376, 360.

Yet in the late nineteenth century, in the absence of a codified legal system, it was also (theoretically) possible to justify the equality of the sexes on the basis of both historical continuity and progress. Addressing the Lower House during discussion of the guardianship bill Pál Mandel turned the equality of male and female authority within the family into a critique of codification and, again, a celebration of Hungarian national tradition and progress.

What has been 'paternal authority' up until now will become 'parental authority'; the mother will have some paternal authority as well. Since in our legislation the mother, the Hungarian housewife, is revered, I have no theoretical objection to this. I approve the equality of father and mother.²⁹

What is striking about Mandel's speech is the fictional equality he claims exists in the asymmetrical gender relation contained in the 1876 bill on guardianship. Following the line of reasoning we find that the nation-building agenda served by Teleszky's patriarchalism is served here by Mandel's "feminism". By filtering the bill through the "ideological sieve" of national progress, Mandel's rhetoric exploits new transnational currents emphasising women's rights in law in order to subvert the idea of the Western legal model, attacking codification in order to promote Hungarian national development as something unique – perhaps even more progressive than Western states! For Mandel Hungarian legal tradition was not, as for Teleszky, one based on paternal authority within the family, but one based on gender equality. "Codification processes ignore centuries of legal development and customary law ... and wish to simply dispense with our organically developed institution of the equality of the mother [*az anya egyenjogúsága*]."³⁰

Conclusion

In Hungary of the 1870s "the family" was about to become the target of national and transnational civil legal codification processes. But two obstacles hindered this process, one at a transnational level, the second at a local level. Transnationally, family law had reached a crossroads – located between married women's dependence and independence. This meant that a specific direction for Hungarian family law was not clearly provided by Western legal models. Locally, family law could not be codified while the nation building project was still "incomplete". In spite of these obstacles however, the 1877 law's patriarchal division of labour between men and women within the family was a

(German) Historical School. See R. C. Van Caenegem, *An Historical Introduction to Private Law*. Cambridge University Press (1992): 142.

²⁹ Parliamentary sitting of May 1, 1877. Minutes of the Lower House, Vol X (1875–1878): 331.

³⁰ Minutes for the sittings of May 1 and 3. Ibid: 332.

**PATRIARCHÁLIS TÖRVÉNYHOZÓI UTÓPIA MAGYARORSZÁGON
A 19. SZÁZAD VÉGÉN. A "NEMZETI KIVÁLASZTÁS" FOLYAMA-
TÁRÓL VALÓ VITA MŰKÖDÉS KÖZBEN AZ 1877. ÉVI GYÁMSÁGI
TÖRVÉNY PÉLDÁJÁN**

Összefoglalás

Milyen társadalomképük volt azoknak a férfiaknak, akik felelősek voltak a törvények kialakításáért és kodifikációjáért az újkori Európában? Miért írhatók le azok a társadalmak utópiaként, amelyek a szemük előtt lebegtek? Miben különböztek a kelet-európai utópiák a nyugat-európaiaktól? A szerző Partha Chatterjee³¹ érveléséből kölcsönözve feltételezi, hogy a törvényhozás tervezeteit a család utópikus felfogására alapozták, a családdéra, amelyet a nemzeti stabilitás alapjának és a társadalmi folytonosság eszközének tekintettek, és amelyet szembeállítottak a családon kívüli, változó, modernizálódó és instabil világgal. A munka nemek szerinti megosztása a házasság intézményén keresztül működött. A családok az egy keresős modellt testesítették meg: a férfiak voltak a kenyérkeresők és a feleségek pedig a háziasszonyok. Ez a felfogás „patriarchális utópia,” mivel különböző szerepeket tart fenn a férfiaknak és nőknek a nemzetállam szolgálatában oly módon, hogy felértékeli és tekintéllyel ruházza fel a férfiszerepet. A tanulmány a patriarchális törvényhozói utópiákat vizsgálja az 1877. évi „nem teljes” és kétértelműen patriarchális magyar családjogi törvény megalkotása kapcsán, amikor új törvényt hoztak a gyámságról. Magyarországon a nyugat-európai patriarchális törvényhozói utópia felfogásához való alkalmazkodás nehézségekbe ütközött, mivel 1867 után Európa-szerte változott a jogelmélet. Elmozdulás következett be, amelynek során a hangsúly a szülői (azaz apai és férji) hatalomról és tekintélyről a házasságban élő nők nagyobb függetlenségére, a gyermek érdekeire és az állam esetleges szerepére helyeződött át, amely tényezők új alternatívát jelentettek a szülői (apai) hatalommal szemben. A magyar jogi diskurzusok a következő problémát jelenítették meg: egyszerre kellett volna alkalmazniuk az új jogi paradigmát és a nyugati nemzetállamok már megszilárdult patriarchális jogi alapelveit. A következmény: a férfi kenyérkereső történeti jogi modellje összekapcsolódott a stabil nemzetállam modern utópikus felfogásával. A „Nyugat-Európán kívüli” régiók jogviszonyainak elemzése felhívja a figyelmet a nemzet mint stabil kormányzati ideál gyengeségére és egyszersmind annak patriarchális vonásaira.

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1993.