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Analysis of Jules Verne's Work from a Public Legal Point of View

– With a focus on his novel set in Transylvania²

Abstract

In this brief paper, Jules Verne's work is examined from a perspective of public law, revealing that in his writings – through which he raised fundamental human rights issues – theory of the state and criminal law played a decisive role. Thus, his vision of an ideal world actually balances on the border between reality and imagination, and through his writings he also fought against colonization and slavery. This theme is explored in four of his works with Hungarian connections, including *'Mátyás Sándor'*; but toward the end of his life, his faith in the ideal of building an earthly paradise was somewhat shaken, and his writing style shifted toward crime fiction, as seen in works such as *'The Castle in the Carpathians'*. Nevertheless, the central message of his work still reached its intended audience, for through the popularization of the natural sciences, he effectively proclaimed the construction of a world of goodness to his vast readership. The true secret to his success lay not only in his respect for his (Celtic) ancestors and heritage, and his balanced family life, but also in his ability to blend his religious faith with his interest in the natural sciences throughout his life. This led him to write many outstanding works that present a vision of an ideal society to be realized in the near future. Thus, we can essentially say that through his works, he laid the foundation for the ideal world, the creation of which is also the primary goal of the science of political theory.

Keywords: public law, ideal state and world, fundamental human rights, the unification of science with divine creativity

I. Introduction

“According to UNESCO statistics, after the Bible and the works of Marx and Engels, Verne's novels have been published in the largest number of copies worldwide.”^{3 4} Thus, Jules Verne has been my favourite foreign author my entire life, which is why I decided to evaluate his life and work in this short publication from a public law perspective, which “in a broad sense, the totality of laws governing public life or state affairs.”⁵

Not only because he wrote about the technological advancements (e.g. *'A Journey to the Moon'*) that people of the 20th century would enjoy with almost prophetic foresight, but also because he was often able to place these within a fascinating historical context; Moreover,

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³ Sarudi, Ágnes: 100 éve halt meg Jules Verne [Jules Verne died 100 years ago]. In *Múlt-kor*, March 24 2005. <https://mult-kor.hu/cikk.php?id=9332>

⁴ Published in 148 languages (Author's note).

⁵ Pallas Nagy Lexikon: Public Law. <http://www.kislexikon.hu/kozjog.html>

“in these early science fiction novels, excellent [and] often humorous characters entertain the reader.”⁶

This raises the question: what was his background that allowed him to write his works so compellingly? An even more important question is: what was his purpose in writing these works? Last but not least, Hungarians may also be interested in how this popular author portrayed us in his works. In this study, I intend to analyse the dual profile of Jules Verne (1828–1905) – known less as a lawyer and more as a science fiction writer – not from a literary perspective (since many have already done so), but from the standpoint of (public) law and legal scholarship. This publication aims to answer these questions.

II. Jules Verne's family background and upbringing

Jules Gabriel Verne, a seminal figure in science fiction literature, was born on February 8, 1828, in Nantes, France. The ancestors of this celebrity's Breton bourgeois family were Scots who had settled in France, and this Celtic heritage had an extraordinary influence on his works. Nevertheless, his father, who played an extremely important role in his upbringing, was a renowned lawyer in the city, while his mother came from an aristocratic family that had been in the naval and military professions for generations, which served as major sources of inspiration for his works.

During his law studies, he was associated with literary circles, including Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, and although he earned a law degree in 1851, he never practiced law. Furthermore, the fact that he served as secretary of the Théâtre Lyrique from 1852 onward demonstrates the further strengthening of his ties to literature and theatre. This career path also supports the assertion that “France was one of the birthplaces of the connection between law and literature.”⁷

Thus, based on the foregoing, we can definitively conclude that, given the description of this career, we can speak of a perfect fusion of law and literature, the exploration of which is “one of the main problems of this approach: the relationship between law and justice – or, in the traditional conception: positive law and natural law.”⁸

The next defining moment in his life was the year 1857, when he married a widow with two children. He secured his family's livelihood by using his wife's dowry to purchase a stockbroker's license. This – along with his keen business sense – proves that⁹ did not merely study stock market law in theory but also applied it excellently in practice.

Alongside his work, he continued to write; initially operettas and chansons, but later the scientific and technical innovations of his era increasingly piqued his interest. His vast library served as a backdrop for this, where he jotted down his inspirational ideas on countless index cards, which he later organized by scientific discipline. He conducted all this scientific research without any formal technical training, relying solely on his own diligence, and did so thoroughly that, as a result, “108 plans and inventions are attributed to his name, of which nearly seventy have already been realized.”¹⁰ Perhaps this is why Verne is considered the grandfather of science fiction writers and is presented as one of the first promoters of the natural and technical sciences.

⁶ Hegedüs, Géza: Jules Verne (1828–1905). <https://mek.oszk.hu/01300/01391/html/> és <http://www.literatura.hu/irok/real/verne.html>

⁷ Fekete, Balázs: Presentation on “Law and Literature” at the Institute of Literary Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences <https://mtabtk.videotorium.hu/hu/recordings/17922/jog-es-irodalom-i>

⁸ H. Szilágyi, István: Law and Literature (habilitation lecture) <http://ias.jak.ppke.hu/hir/ias/20101sz/01.pdf>

⁹ In Verne's time, stock exchange law was a new branch of law, then just emerging, that belonged to financial law through public law. There are experts who tend to associate this more with the sphere of private law. (Author's note)

¹⁰ Sarudi: op. cit.

In summary: this multiple – Scottish-French – identity, his wide-ranging interests, and his family background, which provided a secure livelihood, were the fundamental pillars of his success. On the other hand, in his works he was able to combine natural science and technological progress with his divine creativity and his desire for goodness (an intention he also expressed in his religious poems). Throughout his entire career, he excelled at blending the natural and social sciences, a trait that should also characterize the modern person of the 21st century.

Thus, as a believer in the complementary cooperation of religion and science, Verne was convinced that “at some point in history, a new truth must emerge, in which religion and science reconcile with one another and jointly resolve their problems, for only in this way can these two forms of ignorance be eradicated, and only thus can humanity realize the goodness so deeply desired by the original soul.”¹¹

III. Jules Verne was a man who believed in the construction of an ideal world

He gave up his legal practice entirely in 1862 when he signed a twenty-year copyright agreement with the publisher Hetzel, stipulating that “the writer would write two novels a year, which the publisher would publish in the *Extraordinary Voyages* series.”¹² The first work to result from this agreement was the novel *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, which was a huge success in 1863.

From then on until 1875, he wrote highly successful adventure novels that featured inventions far surpassing the scientific level of the time. In these romantic works, he guided his readers from the depths of the oceans, across every continent on Earth, all the way to outer space – even though he had never actually visited any of these places.

In the second half of his career (1875–1905), his focus shifted primarily to the leaders of revolutions and freedom struggles as he imagined them, with the intellectual backdrop remaining his belief in the construction of an ideal world – a concept whose political-theoretical roots can first be traced to Plato. For “Plato’s idealism was not merely epistemological in nature, but also political and ethical [because] in an ideal, conceptual world (the world of ideas) one finds pure and uncorrupted forms of government and morality. What is politically and morally right can therefore be known theoretically and presented to the citizens.”¹³

The best evidence of Verne’s utopian¹⁴ outlook is his work *The Begum’s Fortune*, in which his appointment as a city councillor in Amiens in 1888 may have played a role. For he, too, believed that social ideals could be realized cautiously and step by step, a goal in which the God-given desire of every human soul is revealed.

The points mentioned above also confirm that Verne advocated a timeless set of communal values centred on honour, diligence, and a sense of responsibility toward one’s

¹¹ The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity: Exposition of the Divine Principle, 1996, The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity 10.

¹² Sarudi: op. cit.

¹³ Egresi, Katalin – Pongrácz, Alex – Szigeti, Péter – Takács, Péter: Államelmélet [Theory of the State] (2016): https://jet.sze.hu/images/Tanszéki%20Kiadványok%202017-18/allamelmelet_tk_2017_06_05-1.pdf

¹⁴ Balázs Rigó defined the essence of the concept of utopia as follows: “In our modern language, utopia refers to an ideal, a vision, a happy, ideal state that does not exist anywhere in reality, has not yet been realized in practice, but which we hope will come to pass in the future. In many respects, it resembles the Golden Age imagined by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Utopia literally means ‘no place,’ a form of the word *topos* with the prefix *u-* [...]’ Today we use it functionally, not just in connection with a specific place. It refers to the long-gone Golden Age – a period that, of course, never actually existed – yet in both cases, the idyllic perfection, and the longing for what came after are the defining features.” Balázs Rigó (2016): A 16. század három teoretikusa – Avagy milyen a jó fejedelem? [Three Theorists of the 16th Century – Or What Makes a Good Prince? A Comparative Source Analysis from the Perspective of Humanist Political Theory] p. 124. In *Themis* No. 2, 2016, pp. 116–149.

fellow human beings. The same ideal was articulated in 2013 by Professor Barnabás Lenkovics, former president of the Constitutional Court, when he described the legal framework for a conception of humanity that a contemporary Constitution – standing at the apex of public law and thus the legal system – must embody in this modern age. According to this, he places the “good steward” in a “society based on a new eco-social market economy,” describing him as “a person who works for himself and his family, provides for the necessities of life on his own, and establishes mutually beneficial relationships with members of his community based on cooperation rather than selfishness.”¹⁵

One of the first true embodiments of this ideal man was Jules Verne, through his entire career, his devotional poems, and his novels popularizing science. Thus, Verne’s heroes are often community leaders who make personal sacrifices to establish a new homeland for the destitute.

IV. A Legal Analysis of One of Jules Verne’s Works Related to Historical Hungary

Literary history counts four works by Verne – who, though he loved the Hungarians dearly, never visited our country – that deal with Hungary. The most famous of these is ‘*Mátyás Sándor*’, which has ties to Transylvania (the other three are ‘*The Danube Boatman*’, ‘*The Castle in the Carpathians*’, and ‘*The Secret of Vilmos Storitz*’).

Mátyás Sándor, the altruistic, self-sacrificing leader with the worldview described earlier, is in fact a scholarly soul who applies his knowledge – primarily based on hypnosis – for the public good, thereby peacefully building this new moral world order. First, he establishes a small community in his homeland, and then, at the end of his life, in the Mediterranean Sea, on the equally imaginary island of Antekirtta.

The protagonist of his best-known work among Hungarians is a count by birth who “lived in the Fogaras district of one of Transylvania’s counties, in a medieval castle. It was built on one of the northern foothills of the Eastern Carpathians, which separate Transylvania from Wallachia, and rose with wild pride on this steep mountain range, like some final refugee where the conspirators could hold out until the very last hour.”¹⁶ The quoted lines from the work already hint at the protagonist’s opposition to the political system; thus, it is not surprising that his comrades-in-arms are also descendants of famous Transylvanian families, such as Counts István Báthory and László Szathmáry.

The rest of the work consists of a series of references to the armed conflicts of the time that promoted national independence and civil liberties, such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, followed by a series of battles that advanced the national sovereignty of Italy and Germany. Based on these, the wealthy Transylvanian nobleman intends to spark a new armed struggle for Hungary’s independence.

The writer Géza Hegedüs also sees this as the essence of the story when he writes, in his summary of the work: “The hero is a Hungarian gentleman, a freedom fighter for his homeland – which fell under Austrian oppression after 1849 – who escapes from prison. After his successful escape, he takes revenge for all the wrongs done to him under an assumed name. There is no doubt about the striking similarity of the theme to the plot of Dumas’s famous novel ‘*The Count of Monte Cristo*’. Verne himself dedicated the work to Dumas, acknowledging that he had borrowed the basic elements of the theme from him.”¹⁷ (This is no coincidence, as Dumas himself was a comrade-in-arms of the Italian independence fighter Garibaldi and regarded this adventurous freedom fighter and writer as his true role model.)

¹⁵ Lenkovics, Barnabás: *Ember és tulajdon* [Man and Property]. Dialóg Campus, Budapest-Pécs, 2013, p. 337.

¹⁶ Jules Verne: *Mátyás Sándor*. <http://mek.oszk.hu/03200/03220/03220.pdf>

¹⁷ Hegedüs: op. cit.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the above that the concepts of homeland and nation were always important to this world-renowned writer. In particular, the longest-lasting Hungarian struggle for freedom – whose intellectual and ideological foundation was the 12-point declaration of March 15, 1848¹⁸ – contained fundamental human rights that remain closely tied to public law to this day, such as the prohibition of (religious) discrimination, freedom of the press, and the sharing of public burdens; subsequently, “the revolution successively codified political and civil liberties: freedom of the press (Act XVIII of 1848), freedom of education (Act XIX of 1848), and freedom of religion (Act XX of 1848).”¹⁹

According to the work, written in 1885, *Mátyás Sándor* was an outstanding, compassionate community leader who did not forget about society’s underprivileged, since in the first part of the work it was precisely these people who helped him escape from prison – an act that constitutes a criminal offense under public law.

Thus, with the love of the original heart, he turned toward the poor, including the workers, especially the “labourers of the sea” – the fishermen and sailors – because it was with them that he could first envision the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth as a reality, just as Jesus’s chief disciples, Peter, John, and James were also fishermen by trade.

V. The Aftermath of His Work – Summary

Verne’s faith in science later wavered, as the scientist characters he portrayed often strayed into the realms of self-serving motives and nihilism when they threatened a smaller community or the entire world.

Thus, this body of work by Verne also confirms the part of István H. Szilágyi’s in his habilitation lecture titled “*Law and Literature*,” where he emphasizes that “literary works not only inform us about how the society of a given era views the law and lawyers, but in certain cases also provide a more complete picture of the psychological motives, moral views, and prejudices of the participants in legal proceedings. These considerations attract authors dealing with the psychological and socio-psychological aspects of law – primarily scholars of criminal law and criminology – to this field of research”²⁰ (see *The Danube Boatman*, and the *Castle in the Carpathians*).

Nevertheless, his works served to popularize scientific knowledge and, through divine creativity, to construct an ideal state and world. This was recognized by French society at the time through the Montyon Prize (1867, 1872), the title of Knight of the Legion of Honor of the French Republic (1870), the title of Officer of the Legion of Honor of the French Republic (1892), and the contemporary – posthumous – induction into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame (1999).

Torn between world-changing ideas and universal morality, one of the main goals of the writer’s work was always to expand the reader’s knowledge, while also striving to draw the attention of contemporary scientists to certain unsolved problems. His greatest achievement, however, is undoubtedly that his writings made the natural sciences appealing to adolescents.

In terms of law and literature, Jules Verne clearly belongs to the category of “literary figures with a legal background and lawyers who write.” This validates the following thoughts of Ferenc Horkay Hörcher, who argued that these “individual skills reinforce one another and contribute to the development of a general sensibility, which is precisely the most important

¹⁸ Government of the Republic of Hungary (2012): The History of the 12 Points – March 15. <https://marcius15.kormany.hu/a-12-pont-tortenete-2012>

¹⁹ Kukorelli, István (ed.): Alkotmánytan [Constitutional Law] I, Osiris, Budapest, 2003, p. 55.

²⁰ H. Szilágyi, István: Law and Literature.

benefit of self-education: this takes the form of the ability to choose – in short, taste or practical wisdom.”²¹

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²¹ Horkay Hörcher, Ferenc: Law and Literature in the Christian-Humanist Educational Ideal http://mjat.hu/doc/jog_es_irodalom_szakmai_tagozat2_0.pdf