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Progress or National Suicide: the Single-Child Family in Hungarian Political Thought, 1840-1945

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The carnage of the Great War and the relatively slow population growth in its aftermath placed the issue of contraception and family planning in the forefront of public discussions in most European states.[1] In Hungary, the debate focused on the origins and the effects of the *egyke* on individual peasant communities, and the nation. Between the wars, the term *egyke* both described a spoiled and overprotected child and denoted a form of family planning that allowed the survival of only one offspring. Beside these meanings, however, the contemporaries used this phrase as a metaphor. For some, the *egyke* symbolized the survival and continuing strength of feudal political and social structures. For others, the *egyke* embodied what they considered the negative features of modern civilization such as increasing secularization, women's emancipation and the spread of bourgeois values and urban lifestyle. Still others viewed family planning through the prism of modern racism: they perceived falling birth rates as the sign of the biological exhaustion of the Hungarian nation, the end of European supremacy and the decline of the white race.

How the *egyke* came to incorporate so many contradictory messages is the subject of this paper, which has been conceived as a contribution both to Hungarian demographic and intellectual history. In the first part, I outline the historical origins of the *egyke* debate. In the second part, building on the works of Rudolf Andorka, Ildikó Vasary and others, I explore the merits and the weaknesses of the *egyke* as an anthropological concept. In the third part, I look at the *egyke* as a cluster of literary techniques employed by a group of talented writers and committed

humanitarians seeking to convince the wider public about the necessity of social and political reforms. Finally, after exploring the literary models and philosophical ideas that gave birth to the concept of the single-child family, I examine the outcome of the debate. Why did the discourse on the single-child family fail to lead to any improvement in the social and political status of peasants? What kind of role, if any, did the *egyke* debate play in the polarization of Hungarian intellectual life between the wars?

The Controversy over Contraception before 1914

The discourse on the spread of contraception among peasants had its roots in nineteenth-century Hungarian intellectual history. Already in the 1840s, M. Hölbling, the Chief Physician of Baranya county in Transdanubia, noticed that Hungarian peasant women in the Ormánság, an agrarian region situated in the southwestern corner of the country, tended to give birth to only one child. Hölbling explained this strange custom by the vanity of Hungarian women, who allegedly paid more attention to the preservation of their youthful figures than they cared about the well-being and future of their families. Beside female narcissism, Hölbling added, the poverty of the rural population and fear of social decline also contributed to the spread of the *egyke* among Hungarian Calvinist peasants. The custom produced disastrous results: the *egyke* led to the complete extinction of hundreds of Hungarian peasant families in the Ormánság. Their lands, Hölbling warned his readers, were taken over by German settlers, who slowly changed the ethnic makeup of this once purely Hungarian region.[2]

While the public generally ignored Hölbling's writings in the mid-nineteenth century, it began to take a greater interest in the spread of contraception among peasants from the 1880s on. With growing public interest in social questions, the number of publications increased rapidly in the decades before the outbreak of the First World War. The most important contributor to the debate at the turn of the century was the sociologist and social reformer, Dezső Buday, who, for the first time, used church records analyzed with the help of modern statistics to demonstrate the harmful effects of contraception on the peasant population. Buday compared three notoriously *egyke* regions, such as the predominantly Calvinist and Hungarian Ormánság, the mainly Catholic

and German Mecsekalja, the religiously and ethnically mixed area around the town of Mohács in southern Hungary and proved that the practice of family limitation had nothing to do with religion or ethnicity. He reasoned that because only France failed to increase her population in the nineteenth century as compared to the rest of Europe, French soldiers must have introduced the custom of the single-child family in Hungary during the Napoleonic wars. However, this alien custom, Buday continued, could take root in Hungary because the circumstances favoured it. The lack of available land, the practice of partible inheritance, the fear of social decline as the result of the fragmentation of peasant farms, the underdevelopment of the commercial sector, substandard living conditions, the low cultural level of the agrarian population and peasants' growing appreciation of comfort all contributed, in Buday's opinion, to the development of the system of single-child family.[3]

Even though Buday's books and articles were well researched and passionately argued, they failed to achieve the desired results. Preoccupied with constitutional issues, public opinion in Hungary hardly took notice of the growing literature on family limitation among peasants. The problem of the *egyke*, even more than the mass emigration of peasants, remained a marginal political and intellectual issue in Hungary before 1914.

The *Egyke* Debate between the Wars

All this changed, however, after the First World War. The human and material losses of the military conflict, the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the mutilation of the Hungarian nation by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 put the problem of declining birthrates in certain parts of the country into a different perspective. According to Ildikó Vasary, over 280 books, pamphlets, novels and newspaper articles were written on the subject between the wars.[4] The composition of the participants in the debate also changed. While pastors, doctors and social workers had almost completely monopolized the discourse before 1914, prominent writers, politicians and social scientists dominated the debate on contraception in the interwar period.[5] The turning point in this regard came with János Kodolányi's memorandum, *Lying Kills*, which he addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister, Károly Huszár, in 1927.[6] At the prompting of his friend, Protestant pastor and art historian Lajos Fülep, another important writer, Gyula Illyés also visited the Ormánság and

wrote a passionate article on the phenomenon of the single-child family in the celebrated journal, *Nyugat* (the West) in 1933.[7] Other famous writers, such as the nationally known poet and translator of European classics Mihály Babits, soon followed suit.[8] In 1935, a group of students and young scholars from the disciplines of demography, history, ethnography and music spent a few weeks in the village of Kemse in Baranya County. They described their experience in a short but highly influential book.[9] Finally, in 1941, a doctor and amateur sociologist, János Hídvégi, wrote the first truly comprehensive work on the custom of the single-child family. In his book, he summarized previous research and examined the phenomenon from the perspective of modern social hygiene.[10]

Even though no commentator blamed the spread of contraception among peasants on a single factor, writers did not ascribe the same importance to each cause. While Conservatives emphasized moral decline among peasants as the root cause of the *egyke* system, people on both ends of the political spectrum held material and structural causes responsible for the declining birthrates. Besides condemning modernity, which allegedly fostered the desire among peasants for a more comfortable life, some Catholic intellectuals used the issue to discredit Protestantism. Antal Pezenhoffer, for example, argued that Protestantism, by undermining true religious and patriotic sentiments among peasants and by reinforcing capitalist greed, was indirectly responsible for the introduction of the *egyke* in the Hungarian countryside. Drawing the obvious conclusion from his diagnosis, Pezenhoffer concluded that Protestants should take advantage of the Pope's generosity and apply for membership in the Catholic Church in order to prevent greater catastrophes.[11]

Kunó Klebelsberg, the Minister of Education in the late 1920s and 1930s, also ascribed some responsibility for the spread of the custom of single-child family both to Protestantism and to the underdevelopment of infrastructure in rural communities. However, his main targets were women, who, Klebelsberg believed, played a vanguard role in spreading urban values and degenerate lifestyles in the countryside. Klebelsberg divided women into two groups. Mothers who have given birth to at least three children, he contended, deserve our greatest respect. However, women who do not take motherhood seriously represent a danger to society, he continued, and therefore they should be treated as enemies. Women have to take motherhood more seriously, otherwise, Klebelsberg warned his readers, the Hungarian race will soon disappear from the Carpathian basin.[12]

Protestant intellectuals rejected the charge that their faith had anything to do with the spread of custom of the single-child family. If the *egyke* has its roots in declining morality, Lajos Simon argued, then the greedy and narrow-minded elite are fully responsible. By preserving the *latifundia* (thus depriving peasants of the land they needed to succeed in the new capitalist economy), the Hungarian elite short-changed the ex-serfs in 1848; the same group of people have kept the rural communities in the state of medieval backwardness ever since. Simon accepted the oft-repeated argument that the custom of the single-child family distorted peasants' morality. However, Simon, unlike his Conservative counterparts, perceived peasants' selfishness as a product rather than the cause of the *egyke*. Peasants were only victims and the elite alone should take full responsibility for the falling fertility rates in Hungarian villages.[13]

While most writers condemned selfishness as either the major or a minor cause of the *egyke*, at least one author viewed egotism in a more favourable light. Elemér Simontsits, an amateur sociologist, argued that the laws of the jungle had historically determined family planning. In earlier periods, the size and structure of the average family, like the human population at large, reflected the expansion and contraction of natural resources. Parents who did not possess enough resources did not hesitate to kill their infants, especially in the times of crisis. Nature, especially human nature was cruel, Simontsits argued, but cruelty was not without a function: it ensured the survival of the human race. Egotism came to defy the laws of nature only in the modern age. Modern man no longer uses contraception and infanticide because he cannot feed his family but only because he wants more comfort. Simontsits also had a pessimistic outlook on the future. Since they reflect both man's eternal nature and his more recent obsession with comfort, he argued, falling birthrates cannot be reversed. Although some states may attempt to change the course of history, their efforts will inevitably fail because laws and regulations cannot change the nature of modern man.[14]

The doctor János Hídvégi, who had worked for years in the Ormánság, was the first scientist who examined the spread of contraception among peasants in both national and international contexts. While most writers limited their attention to peasants, Hídvégi examined both the rural and urban manifestation of the same custom. He listed a number of factors such as the human and material losses of the Great War, the end of overseas migration, the rise of the national liberation movement in the Third World, urbanization, the success of feminism and widespread

unemployment that, in his opinion, led to a decline in fertility rates in most European states after 1918. Important as these factors were, he argued, they do not explain the widespread use of contraception in modern society. The *egyke* was the product of liberalism and predatory capitalism, both of which originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was a manifestation of neo-Malthusianism, that is "the philosophy of easy life," which has created an "unheroic" type of individual both incapable and unwilling to accept the responsibilities of raising large families.

Recognizing that birthrates had actually increased in most places since the advent of capitalism, Hídvégi had a hard time explaining why this extreme form of family limitation was practised only in a few regions in Hungary. In an attempt to square the circle, he combined economic arguments with notions borrowed from the fields of eugenics and social hygiene. Showing susceptibility to racist theories, he argued that the Hungarian nation was composed of the Turanian and Eastern Baltic races. The Turanian race, Hídvégi contended, was susceptible to certain illnesses such as goiter. The isolation of the Turanian race in certain regions such as the Ormánság exacerbated exiting health problems, by preventing it from intermarrying with other groups. Living amidst rivers and swamps, the Turanian race in the Ormánság also developed immunity against malaria by constantly exhibiting its symptoms, such as lethargy and a lack of sexual appetite. Thus inherited and acquired characteristics, combined with inadequate diet, especially the lack of vitamins, disturbed the normal functioning of sexual hormones and lowered birthrates among peasants in the region.[15]

Hídvégi's work enjoyed great popularity among the Populists, who played an important role in the cultural and political life of interwar Hungary. The Populists were social scientists, writers and artists who drew their inspiration from folk culture and, at the same time, sought to improve the social and political status of peasants. Politically, Hungarian populism was a complex phenomenon: even though most Populists saw themselves as members of the political Left, they also borrowed many ideas from the Conservatives and the extreme Right. With a few notable exceptions, the Populists rejected the ideological rigidity and totalitarian political practices of the Soviet and Hungarian communist parties. They wanted to create a state that, in contrast to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' would ensure social justice without, however, destroying parliamentary democracy and abrogating civil rights. Unlike the Communists

and Social Democrats, the Populists saw themselves as nationalists who considered the support of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states as one of their priorities. Like most Hungarians in the interwar period, the Populists advocated the revision of Hungary's borders. Unlike the extreme nationalists both inside and outside of the government, however, the Populists wanted peaceful revision and only to the extent that the new frontiers would more closely correspond to the existing ethnic lines. Some, especially in the face of the Nazi threat in the 1930s, supported close cooperation between, and even the federation of, the small states of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe. While many Populists harboured prejudices against ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Jews, they sought to assimilate rather than exclude them. Significantly, the Populists, with a few notable exceptions, fought against racial discrimination in the late 1930s and early 1940s.[16]

In regards to the origins of the custom of the single-child family, the Populists, like most Conservatives, blamed the *egyke* on the 1848 Revolution. Unlike the Conservatives, however, the Populists did not regret the passing of feudalism. The *egyke* spread, they argued, not because peasants were liberated but because liberation was not accompanied by a more equitable distribution of the land. The remnants of the feudal past survived in the form of the large estates, which prevented the expansion of small family farms. Since Hungarian customs demanded the equal division of the land among children, peasants in many places began limiting the size of their family in order to avert the fragmentation of their land. Already a serious issue before 1914, the *egyke* became a pressing concern after the Great War. The lost war, the end of migration to North America and the slow recovery of industrial production at home exacerbated existing tensions in the countryside. High tensions, Populist writers continued, should have normally produced a major political upheaval, a kind of peasant war not seen since the Dózsa uprising in the early sixteenth century. Modern Hungarian peasants, however, were no longer in the position to openly challenge the power of the elite. The new capitalist economy, combined with the excessive power of the modern state, as demonstrated by the defeat of the revolution in 1918, had broken the back of the Hungarian peasantry. Exhausted by centuries of struggle and controlled and manipulated by the modern state, the only rebellion that peasants were still capable of waging was a "silent revolution." According to the Populist writer Imre Kovács, "the silent revolution" of peasants in the interwar period took four forms: some continued to head for the

Americas; others found consolation and peace among the members of revivalist religious sects; still others escaped into right-wing political fanaticism. Finally, some peasants chose to limit the size of their families drastically not only to preserve the integrity of their farms but also to hasten the destruction of the peasant way of life by eliminating its human carriers.[17]

The spread of the custom of the single-child family was particularly dangerous, the Populists continued, because it produced cultural changes that, within a few generations, brought entire communities to the verge of destruction. The introduction of the *egyke* increased the power of women, especially that of the mothers-in-law (*szülék*), who replaced patriarchy with a matriarchal system in their villages. The Populists writers portrayed the *szülék* as heartless and quarrelsome old women, who tortured young wives both to avenge their past suffering at the hands of their own mothers-in-law and to put the daughters-in-law in their place. The *szülék* owed their power, at least in part, to tradition. In Hungarian peasant households, Populists writers argued, the power of the *szülék* almost equalled that of their husbands. While the young wives worked in the fields, their mothers-in-law remained at home to cook and to look after farm animals and small children. If the daughters-in-law became pregnant, it was the mothers-in-law who customarily decided the fate of the fetus. Aging and overburdened by work, the *szülék* were naturally opposed to large families, especially when a second or third child threatened the integrity of the family farm. Supported by other elderly women, who made public opinion in the villages, the mothers-in-law could easily force the new wives to undergo abortion. The husbands usually took the side of their mothers; they abused and frequently expelled their wives if they dared to oppose the *szülék*'s decision.[18]

The custom of the single-child family not only preserved the power of the *szülék* but it also benefited younger women at the expense of their husbands. Since property in Hungarian villages was distributed equally among children irrespective of their gender and age, Populist writers argued, single girls were groomed from an early age to become the future managers of their households. Spoiled as children by their parents, girls grew into willful and promiscuous young adults. Since there were not enough available unmarried men in the *egyke* communities, young women were often forced to import their husbands from the neighbouring villages. However, these outsiders could never become the masters of their households. Their native wives not only made all the

important decisions, but, as a sign of their excessive power, often cheated on and physically abused their husbands. As if the low status of important men was not a big enough scandal, the custom of the single-child family also reduced the status of men born in the *egyke* villages. Dominated by their mothers and sisters as children, boys in the *egyke* communities failed to develop a strong interest in the opposite sex. Many of them became homosexuals or had no sexual desire of any kind. These "perverts"and "weaklings" created a culture far inferior to the male culture of healthy peasant communities. Instead of cultivating their land, men in the *egyke* villages switched to less masculine occupations, such as petty trade, which required less stamina, dedication and physical strength but promised quicker returns. Laziness went hand-in-hand with greed and cowardice: bachelors and adult men in the *egyke* villages would never engage in brawls or draw out their knives to defend their honour. In short, men in these communities were a pitiable lot, a shame to their gender and social group.

Child-rearing practices in the *egyke* villages further contributed to gender inequality and the distortion of peasant culture. In a frequently cited example, a boy's parents would not let him play with his friends lest he ruins his expensive clothing or they would beat him up. Overprotection prevented the peasant boy from committing the mischiefs necessary to test the boundaries of the adult world and his own evolving character. Because, as a child, he spent too much time with his parents and grandparents, the *egyke* never learned the virtues of sharing, renunciation and the love of struggle. Thus the overprotected and precocious *egyke* grew into a cynical and selfish young adult. Not equipped to compete successfully with healthier men, he soon lost his property and found himself on the margin of society. Thus, the introduction of the custom of the single-child family ultimately proved self-defeating; it could not prevent, but rather hastened the destruction of peasant farms.[19]

The process of "degeneration," Populist writers continued, manifested itself in every aspect of village life. The once hard-working and frugal peasants gave themselves over to ostentation and excessive consumption. While men spent their days in the tavern, women gorged themselves on cakes and sweets at the local cafés. Farmers, whose parents and grandparents had lived in small but tasteful huts constructed in traditional style, now built huge gaudy mansions in order to impress their neighbours and fellow villagers. Peasants in the *egyke* villages abandoned traditional culture; in a very short time, they lost their traditional dances,

songs, proverbs, fairy tales and ballads. The citizens of *egyke* communities neglected their civic responsibilities: the used every trick in the book to avoid paying local taxes necessary for the smooth operation of the local administration and the maintenance of roads and public buildings. To avoid paying Church taxes, many people left the established churches to become Unitarian or Baptist or they abandoned the Christian faith altogether. People in these communities had no respect for priests, teachers and any other authority figures. In such communities, class arrogance was particularly acute; it manifested itself even in the Reformed Church, where pews were assigned to families on the basis of their property. Social prejudices went hand-in-hand with a lack of respect for the elderly. Old people in such communities could not enter the sanctuary to attend church services, but were forced to sit outside the church on a bench placed at main entrance. They were extremely shy and felt a constant need to apologize for being alive.[20]

By the mid-1930s, at least among people who cared about the fate of the peasantry, the Populists' image of the egyke village became generally accepted. Contemporaries continued to disagree, however, not only on the causes of the *egyke*, but also on the solution to what they perceived as a very serious social problem. With a few notable exceptions, Conservatives meticulously avoided the question of land reform: instead of a more equitable division of agricultural land, they advocated increased bureaucratic control of the rural population. They believed that improved midwife training and the employment of better doctors, more dedicated priests, pastors and teachers, combined with enhanced discipline in schools and the removal of spinsters and bachelors from teaching positions, would suffice to reverse the demographic decline. The Populists generally accepted the Conservatives recommendations but wanted more comprehensive reforms. Some supported the introduction of primogeniture to prevent the further division of family farms. Others wanted to set the normal family size at four children per couple; each child would inherit one fourth; if there were only one or two heirs, the rest of the land would revert to the state. All sought some form of land reform that would give the peasant more land and remove the iron ring of *latifundia* around peasant farms. The Populists also advocated the creation of cooperatives both to produce and sell agricultural products and to build small but comfortable houses for young peasant families. They wanted cheap long-term loans for farmers, especially those with large families, better trained and dedicated doctors and nurses, well-equipped regional hospitals, health

insurance for peasants and agricultural labourers and the creation of a tax system favourable to large families. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, some Populists came to accept racist ideas, such as the redistribution of the *latifundia* on the basis of racial purity and family size. They hoped that these measures would stop the influx of peasants into the cities and eradicate the custom of the single-child family with all its negative effects from Hungarian soil.[21]

The *Egyke* in Modern Scientific Discourse

The Russian occupation of Hungary at the end of the Second World War put the issue of contraception among peasant in a very different perspective. After the Communist takeover of power in 1947, the Populist writers were either silenced or expelled from the country or gave up their views in exchange for political power in the new Communist state. The destruction of the large estates in the second half of the 1940s and then collectivization and increasing mechanization of Hungarian agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s pushed the issue of the single-child family into the background. Only in the early 1970s did demographers like Rudolf Andorka begin to raise anew the question of family limitation among peasants. Using family reconstruction methods and household structural analysis, as developed by English and French social scientists, Andorka examined demographic changes in two villages in the Ormánság and one in the nearby region of Sárköz.[22] While Andorka paid his respect to the Populist writers, he also challenged their conclusions on two important points. Since peasants had started using contraception as early as the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, Andorka argued, the roots of the single-child family should not be sought in the omissions of the 1848 revolution. Second, the extreme form of family planning could be called a "system" only with reservation. While fertility rates in the *egyke* villages were certainly lower than in most parts of the country, Andorka contended, most women continued to give birth to two or more children. While in most families only one or two children reached maturity, one could still find large households with as many as six or eight children even in these communities.[23]

Building in part on Andorka's works, in the late 1980s Ildikó Vasary took an even closer look at the concept of the single-child family. In a well researched and argued article, she challenged the Populists'

contention that the absence of primogeniture played a major role in the fragmentation of peasant farms and the origins of the custom of the single-child family. She argued that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the equal division of land among peasant children did not necessarily retard population growth. On the contrary, by expanding marriage opportunities, partible inheritance fuelled the demographic revolution in Eastern Europe. In any case, Vasary continued, inheritance systems should be seen as "limits and opportunities rather than determinants for strategies and goals." Even though Vasary accepted the Populists' thesis on the impact of the survival of large estates on peasant farms, she also argued that the continuing existence of the *latifundia* was only one of the many factors that pushed peasants to limit the size of their families. Besides the survival of large estates, Vasary argued, the peasants' attitudes to modernization, the villages' proximity to the closest city, the state of local infrastructure, changing agricultural techniques and the presence or absence of employment opportunities in the industrial and commercial sectors influenced demographic patterns.[24]

Andorka and Vasary raised important questions about the usefulness of the concept of the *egyke* in modern demographic research. However, their critique failed to expose other contradictions in the Populists' argument and explain these contradictions in the context of Hungarian cultural and political history. The first contradiction concerns the Populists' view of modernization in general and the spread of individualism among peasants in *egyke* communities in particular. The Populists noted, and decried, the growth of individualism in Hungarian villages. At the same time, they argued that public opinion was stronger in the *egyke* villages than elsewhere. Similarly, contemporaries drew attention to the declining power, and increasing neglect, of the elderly in these communities. However, this argument collided with their earlier statements about assertive mothers-in-law and the power of elderly women in setting community standards and dominating public opinion. Moreover, Populist and fascists writers who accepted anthropological theories failed to explain why environmental and racial factors worked differently on men and women: why the custom of the single-child family increased promiscuity among women but lowered sexual appetite among men. Although many noticed that sexual license was a general feature of their age, they still liked to overemphasize the role that the custom of the single-child family had allegedly played in the destruction of women's morality.[25] In the same vein, contemporaries attributed the increased power of women to

the excessive use of contraception rather than to more general trends such as the impact of the Great War on peasant families and communities.

My own research into the social history of Nagyrév, a hamlet in the region of Tiszazug, which became infamous after the discovery of a murder epidemic in 1929, suggests that the model of the *egyke* community, as established by contemporary intellectuals, did not necessarily correspond to local circumstances. For example, here was no matriarchy in Nagyrév.[26] Men, especially older men, continued to make the most important decisions both in their families and in their community. Inheritance in the village was passed down in the male line, even though equal division of land among all children (including girls) became increasingly common in the interwar period. Patrilocality remained the rule, despite the relatively high number of imported husbands. Church records clearly demonstrate that local parents continued to neglect their children. Mortality rates both among infants and older children remained high: frequent accidents such as drowning prove that parents were far from overprotective. Local people told me that strict discipline reinforced by physical punishments for the slightest mistakes continued to characterize child-raising practices of peasant families irrespective of their size. Therefore, we should not confuse the single child with the "spoiled brat" whom we encounter in the works of the Populist writers. In short, the village must have looked very different from the image that contemporaries had of the *egyke* communities between the wars.[27]

The Sources of the *Egyke* as a Cultural Concept

The image of the *egyke* community has to do, first and foremost, with the professional and political agendas of their proponents and with contemporary ideas about changing gender and social relations and only secondarily with actual circumstances. The weaknesses of the *egyke* as an anthropological/sociological concept speak volumes about the Populists' lack of training in these disciplines. The historian Gyula Borbándi has noted that the Populist writers, with the possible exception of the sociologist Ferenc Erdei and the agrarian expert Mátyás Matolcsy, knew very little about contemporary sociology. Perhaps the majority never read the pioneering works of Émile Durkheim.[28] What they did read, like the works of the founder of family sociology in France in the nineteenth century, Frédéric Le Play, was considered as a passe by most Western sociologists by the

1920s. Ironically, Le Play was first introduced to the Hungarian readers by neo-conservative agrarians, who wanted to preserve rather than destroy the *latifundia*. The authoritarian and anti-egalitarian messages implicit in Le Play's idealization of the pre-industrial stem family (*famille souche*)[29] appealed to the Hungarian neo-conservatives, who disliked both international capitalism and parliamentary democracy. The first monographs on rural life appeared in the conservative *Magyar Gazdák Szemléje* (Hungarian Farmers' Review) and *Erdélyi Gazda* (Transylvanian Farmer) at the turn of the century.[30] The Populists adapted not only the neo-conservatives' methods but also retained many of Le Play's ideas. Like Le Play, they continued to valorize patriarchy until its image lost any connection to its historical manifestations but still provided an important vantage point from which the weaknesses of the capitalist economic and social order could be observed and criticized.

While Le Play continued to assert a strong influence on both the Conservatives and the Populists, the key elements in the image of the single-child family, like degeneration and matriarchy, did not come sociology. Novelists like János Kodolányi borrowed them from contemporary philosophy and literature. The notion of degeneration was most likely a German import. George Mosse tells us that it was originally a medical term: physicians used it to describe patients who departed from the so-called normal human type. They diagnosed the causes of degeneration in shattered nerves, inheritable diseases and lewd lifestyle and sexual excesses. Ironically, it was a Liberal physician, Max Nordau, who first applied this medical term to social and cultural phenomena. In his famous book *Degeneration* (1892), Nordau condemned both the social and the artistic manifestations of decadence because they violated the principles of bourgeois culture: harmony, respectability, self-discipline and natural laws. Nordau's book must have touched a nerve in German society, because, by the outbreak of the First World War, all major political parties incorporated the fight against decadence in their program.[31]

By the early twentieth century, many intellectuals, especially those who sympathized with the political Right, came to see liberated women as both the manifestations and symbols of decadence. In Vienna, the young Jewish philosopher, Otto Weininger, went a step further: he infused anti-women sentiments with racism. Working under the influence of Freud, Weininger acknowledged that female and male did not exist in pure forms and that everyone possessed both male and female qualities. Unlike Freud, however, Weininger sharply distinguished between the male and female

characteristics, assigning positive qualities only to men. People, like the Jews, in whom the female elements dominate, Weininger argued, always remain children; both are, by nature, irrational, potentially anti-social and prisoners of their own sexuality. The more male characteristics dominate, Weininger continued, the less the person cares about sex. True men are rational and care little about sex because they are preoccupied with the higher aspects of life such as politics, science, commerce and religion. Men alone possess a highly developed moral sense, while women and Jews have only sexual passion. While the Romantics at least acknowledged that women also had positive qualities such as charm, sensitivity and motherly love, Weininger perceived only negative traits. Women, he believed, were irrational, capricious and hysterical; like Jews, they could never progress beyond their present state.[32]

By the 1920s, the notion of degeneration, tied to the presumably unchangeable character of women and the negative effects of matriarchy, came to permeate public debates on human progress. In Germany, the rejection of matriarchy formed the basis of Gerhart Hauptmann's widely acclaimed novel, the *Island of the Great Mothers*. In this novel, first published in 1925, the great German naturalist writer tells the story of a group of female travellers stranded on a tropical island. Left to their own devices, the mainly upper-class European women were not only able to survive but they also created a harmonious society free of the exploitations and injustices of the old patriarchal order. Convinced that men posed a mortal threat to this perfect world, the leaders made gender segregation the most important law on the island. In order to avoid future complications, they sent all school-aged male children to a remote part of the island. There, under the supervision of their father, the only surviving male from the shipwreck, the boys grew into skilful artisans and fearless warriors. They also established a society that was the exact opposite of the female utopia: reason rather than faith, competition rather than compassion and dynamism rather than stagnation formed its main features. Incensed by the women's desire to use them as sex-slaves, men finally revolted against their mothers and destroyed matriarchy on the island.[33]

While many of the keys elements of the image of the *egyke* community are originally of foreign origin, it was nowhere so fully developed as in Hungary. Moreover, at least some of the imported concepts, such as the notion of decadence, had taken deep roots in Hungary long before the spread of contraception in the countryside became a national issue. At the turn of the century, Hungarian intellectu-

als, like Endre Ady and Gyula Krúdy exulted decadent lifestyle as part of both their protest against bourgeois hypocrisy and their discovery of the libido. It is true, however, that, even before 1914, the majority of Hungarian intellectuals tended to interpret the same notion very differently: they denounced decadence as both unhealthy and unpatriotic.[34] By the early 1920s, this negative interpretation of decadence had clearly won the day. After the war, a national consensus emerged on the nature of decadence (it became seen as a serious social illness and a barrier to national revival) and on the need to combat every form of degeneration. However, disagreements soon emerged on the issues of how the revival of the nation and the regaining of country's historical borders should be accomplished and what forms a national revival and the fight against decadence should take. The proto-fascist elements, mainly young officers who had participated in the White Terror, wanted to rebuild Hungary on the basis of wartime experience. They saw themselves as a new elite: they believed that the war had cleansed them of everything bourgeois, sentimental and feminine and that the new society should be based on wartime values such as merit, character, virility and courage rather than inherited wealth, empty titles, egotism and sexual perversion. The Populists shared the proto-fascists' dislike of the bourgeoisie and its decadence culture. However, they were also keenly aware of the negative aspects and ultimate futility of war. Like the proto-fascists, the Populists also wanted to rebuild the country but not on the basis of lessons learned during the Great War but on the basis of traditional peasant values. It was in this context of national emergency that the image of the *egyke* community emerged and came to dominate public discourse. The Populists and many Conservatives believed that much more than the fate of individuals and their villages was at stake: the spread of contraception in the countryside posed a mortal threat to the survival of the nation.

The paranoia about racial suicide explain in part the gap between the Populists image of *egyke* villages and real circumstances. The key elements of this image were borrowed from sociology, contemporary literature and philosophy. At the same time, the speed with which the new concept became generally accepted speak volumes both about the Populist writers' talent and their view on modern science and politics. Dénes Némedi argues that the Populists adopted "sociography" as their favourite genre because they disliked positivist science, characterized by overspecialization and the use of scientific jargons.[35] The Populists' shift from sociology to sociography and to naturalist novels disclosed their desire to

re-politicize intellectual life. The Populists wanted to reconnect culture with politics; they wanted to use art and science to solve the nation's most pressing social and political problems. The Populists also denied that art and science were transnational enterprises. Nations not individuals create culture, they argued. National cultures express the aspirations, embody the talent and vitality and serve the interests of an ethnic group. Some, like the writer László Németh, went so far as to advocate the creation of a new branch of science, which would combine the various branches of knowledge into an organic whole. He called this new science *hungarológia* or the "science of Hungarianess." The goal of *hungarológia*, Németh argued, was to discover, spread, preserve and strengthen true Hungarian values. *Hungarológia* would make Hungarians conscious of their national character; it would help them preserve their unique culture in the rapidly changing modern world.[36] While many Populists doubted the viability of *hungarológia*, with very few exceptions, they all believed that certain branches of social science, art and literatures, such as sociography, ethnography, folk music and naturalist novels, played a greater role in the preservation of the nation than the ideologically less loaded natural sciences. These genres were very important, the Populist argued, because they linked urban intellectuals to the repository of all national values, the peasants. Writing about peasants and their social problems was a political deed of the highest order, they believed, since the future of the nation depended on the welfare of this social group. Researching the lives of, and writing about, peasants would lead to the creation a new elite, knowledgeable, deeply rooted in the Hungarian soil and fully committed to the program of national rejuvenation.[37]

Besides the Populists' view on the relationship between culture and politics, the position of intellectuals in Hungarian society also influenced the great outpour of sociographies in the interwar period. The conservative and liberal sections of the Hungarian elite and middle class were never able to overcome the memories of the democratic and communist revolutions. Always quick to equate reform with revolution, the Horthy regime, from its establishment in 1921 until the end of the Second World War, deliberately followed an authoritarian path. Since it relied mainly on the bureaucracy, the clergy and the army for political support, the Horthy regime paid little attention to the traditionally anti-government Hungarian intelligentsia. Constantly frustrated by the government's disregard for their political advice, reform-minded intellectuals turned to journalism, easily assessable types of literature and popular

social science both to vent their frustration against the regime and to create a political forum for themselves. Thus sociography and realist novels came to function as a substitute for party politics for the progressive intelligentsia in Hungary between the wars.

The image of the *egyke* became generally accepted because the Populists were talented writers and dedicated social reformers. They were the masters of what Thomas W. Laqueur described as "the humanitarian narrative." According to Laqueur, humanitarian narrative, as a product of the empiricist revolution of the eighteenth century, relied on detail as a sign of truth. By describing in great detail the suffering of others, it sought to create a "reality effect," which in turn called forth "sympathetic passions" in the readers. Humanitarian narrative, Laqueur argues, exposed the cause of the specific wrong and recommended specific action as both possible and morally imperative. In this updated version of ancient tragedy, the readers were invited not only to feel for the suffering of the protagonists but also to take part in their liberation. Thus, unlike the ancient tragedy, the humanitarian narrative was able to "bridge the gulf between facts, compassion and action" by compelling the readers to push for specific social reforms.[38]

Laqueur described the realist novel, autopsy, clinical report and parliamentary inquiry as belonging into the genre of the humanitarian narrative. It is my contention here that the Populist discourse on the single-child family contains all the basic elements of the humanitarian narrative. For example, the graphic details of degeneration served to shake comfortable readers out of their complacency. The authors' outrage was to engender compassion for subjects of so much mistreatment and to turn passive readers into active participants in social reforms. The discourse exposed the alleged cause of social disease (the survival of the large estates) and offered concrete remedies in the forms of land reforms and improvements in infrastructure.

The Debate's Outcome

The conscious use of literary strategies and the almost complete monopolization of humanitarian narrative turned the Populist writers into the most potent force in Hungarian literature in the late 1930s and early 1940s. However, their success came with a price. Whereas the humanitarian narrative attracted impressionable high school and university

students, it created discomfort among other sections of the educated middle classes and the elite. The liberal and socialist sections of the urban, and predominantly Jewish, intelligentsia came to resent and increasingly felt threatened by the Populists' appeal to instinct and nationalist sentiments. It comes as no surprise that these 'urbanites' rather than Conservatives were the first to notice the logical inconsistencies in the Populists' analysis of the single-child family. They dismissed the Populists' works as unscientific and the whole discourse on declining birthrate as a product of post-war nationalist paranoia.[39] Thus the debate on the single-child family contributed to the increasing polarization of the regime's opposition into 'urbanist' and 'Populist' factions. Mutual suspicions fed by derogative remarks, personal animosities and the tendency of intellectuals to exaggerate real differences in opinion and style made cooperation between the two groups on social and political issues difficult.[40]

The Populists' appeal to compassion was best suited to gain followers among the half-converted and among people who had no direct interests in the maintenance of the large estates and the political status quo. However, the humanitarian narrative was unlikely to find recruits among the more conservative sections of the middle class and the elite. Instead of gaining more converts, the moralizing tone and quasi-revolutionary rhetoric of many Populist writers tended to alienate the more influential sections of the middle classes and the elite. Ironically, however, the Populists writers needed both the middle class and the elite to realize their plans. Lacking strong political support among peasants, in the 1930s the Populists tried to convince the government about the necessity of land reform. The founding of the National Peasant Party (Nemzeti Parasztpárt) in 1939 signalled a change in strategy: it showed that the Populists realized that reform from above, or at least in the form they had envisioned it, was an illusion. It also showed that at least some Populists recognized that they had to organize themselves politically if they had wanted to achieve more than literary success. However, the old problems remained: the majority of the Populist writers could not make up their mind whether they were politicians or writers and whether they should establish a political party or remain members of a loosely organized movement. Many continued to ignore the call of party politics altogether and showed only a perennial interest in political affairs. Thus it comes as no surprise that the National Peasant Party remained an insignificant political force during the Second World War. The failure of the party to

become popular among peasants and to introduce reform on their behalf contrasted sharply with the continuing high esteem that Populist writers enjoyed among the members of the educated middle class. Ironically, their success as writers presupposed the failure, or at least came at the expense, of agrarian reforms. Thus the failure of land reform before 1945 should not be exclusively attributed to the strength of conservative forces in Hungary: it was also the results of the misplaced efforts and political inexperience of their Populist opponents.

NOTES

I would like to thank my friend, Dr. Szilárd Borbély, for helping me to locate some of the contemporary articles and books that I used in researching this study.

[1] See Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. 19–21; Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[2] M. Hölbling, *Baranya Vármegyének orvosi helyirata* [Medical survey of Baranya County] (Pécs, 1845). Cited by Ildikó Vasary, "The sin of Transdanubia: the one-child system in rural Hungary," *Continuity and Change* 4 (1989): 434, 464.

[3] See Dezső Buday, *Az egyke Baranya vármegyében* [The system of single-child family in Baranya County] (Budapest: Taizs, 1909), 165; also Dezső Buday, "Az egyke," in *A szociológia első magyar műhelye* [The first workshop of Hungarian sociology], ed. György Litván and László Szőcs (Budapest: Gondolat, 1973), Vol. 2, 136–151. Cited by Rudolf Andorka, "Az ormánsági születéskorlátozás története" [History of family limitation in the Ormánság], *Valóság* 6 (1975): 60.

[4] For a short survey of the contemporary literature on the *egyke* see, Andorka, "Az ormánysági születéskorlátozás," 53-54; Vasary, "The sin of Transdanubia," 431–434.

[5] Pastors and doctors continued to play an important role in the debate. Many of the participants such as the academic eminence Lajos Fülep and the sociologist Géza Kiss were Protestant pastors. Lajos Fülep served in Zengővárkony, a small village in the Ormánság. His articles on the single-child family, which he published in the liberal-conservative daily, *Pesti Napló*, reached a nation-wide audience in 1929. Géza Kiss worked as a Calvinist pastor in the

village of Kákics in the same region. In his passionately written book, Kiss examined the demographic evolution of forty-five villages over two centuries. See the interviews with Lajos Fülep in *Pesti Napló*, November 10, 17, 26, December 4 and 15.

[6] See János Kodolányi, "Hazugság Öl: memorandum Huszár Károlyhoz, a Képviselöház alelnökéhez" [The lying kills...], in *Baranyai Utazás* [Travel in Baranya county], ed. János Kodolányi and János Kodolányi, Jr. (Budapest: Magvető, 1963). As a child, János Kodolányi spent some time among peasants in the Ormánság. He remained a keen observer of peasants' lives and wrote several novels on the topic of single-child family between the wars.

[7] See Gyula Illyés, "Pusztulás. Útirajz" [Devastation: travelling notes], *Nyugat* 17–18 (1933): 189–205.

[8] Mihály Babits, "Elfogy a magyarság" [Hungarians are disappearing], *Nyugat* 19 (1933): 270.

[9] Péter Elek, ed., *Elsüllyedt falu a Dumántúlon, Kemse község élete* [A vanished village in Transdanubia: the story of Kemse] (Budapest: Sylveszter, 1936).

[10] János Hidvégi, *Hulló Magyarság* [Vanishing Hungarians] (Budapest: Athéneum, 1941).

[11] Antal Pezenhoffer, *A demográfiai viszonyok befolyása a nép szaporodására* [The impact of demographic relations on the increase of the population] (Budapest: Athéneum, 1922), esp. 243–247.

[12] Kunó Klebelsberg, "A tiszazug" [Tiszazug] *Pesti Napló*, August 25, 1929.

[13] Lajos Simon, "Az egyke és az erkölcs" [The system of the single-child family and morality), *Református Élet* 34-35 (1934): 261–263.

[14] Elemér Simontsits, *Az egyke demologiája* [The demology of the system of the single-child family] (Budapest: published by the author, 1936), esp. 37–60, 99–110, 158–164.

[15] Hidvégi, *Hulló Magyarság*, esp. 85–110.

[16] See Dénes Némedi, "Remarks on the Role of Peasants in Hungarian Ideology," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (1995): 67–75; Gyula Borbándi, *Der ungarische Populismus* (Mainz: v. Hase & Koehler Verlag, 1976), esp. 132–143, 226–232, 496–508.

[17] See Gyula Illyés, *Magyarok: Naplójegyzetek* [*The Hungarians: travel notes*] (Budapest: Nyugat, 1940), Vol. I, 11–43, 62–67, 71–94, 146–150; Péter Elek *et al.*, *Elsüllyedt falu*, pp. 38–39; Ferenc Erdei, *A magyar paraszttársadalom* [Hungarian peasant society] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1978), 177; Imre Kovács, *A néma forradalom* [The silent revolution] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1937).

[18] In a short story, Kodolányi vividly describes the sufferings of a young wife who refuses to abort at the hands of the village midwife because she is afraid that she would lose her life in the process. During a heated exchange of

words with her mother-in-law, who tells her in uncertain terms that she does not want more children in the household, she brings up the old woman's unsavoury past. Angered by his wife's disrespect for his mother, the young husband knocks his wife down. Her mother-in-law, supported by other old women, including the heroine's mother, carries out the abortion on the half-conscious wife, who dies in the process. The short story discloses the heartlessness of old peasant women, who, during the wake, talk about the virtues of the departed and the health of farm animals in the same breath. See János Kodolányi, "Sötétség" [Darkness]. It was originally published in the literary journal, *Nyugat* in 1922. In János Kodolányi, *Fellázadt gépek* [Machines unbounded] (Budapest: Magvető, 1961), 5–33.

[19] Kodolányi, " Hazugság öl," 20–22.

[20] *Ibid.*, 16–18. Kodolányi wrote two more works that dealt with the same topic: *Földindulás* [Earthquake] and the *Testament*. On Kodolányi's life, see Tibor Tüskés, *Kodolányi János*, 2nd ed., (Pécs: Pro Patria Kiadó, 1999).

[21] Hidvégi, *Hulló Magyarság*, 110-136.

[22] Andorka cites Edward A. Wrigley and M. Fleury as his models: E. A Wrigley, *An Introduction to English Historical Demography* (London, 1960); and M. Fleury and L. Henry, *Nouveau manuel de dépouillement et exploitation de l'état civil ancien* (Paris, 1965). See Andorka, "Az ormánsági születéskorlátozás," 59.

[23] Rudolf Andorka, "Születésszabályozás az Ormánságban a 18. század vége óta" [The history of contraception in the Ormánság since the end of the eighteenth century] *Demográfia* 1-2 (1970): 73-85; Andorka, "Az ormánsági születéskorlátozás," esp. 50–51.

[24] Vasary, "The sin of Transdanubia," 429–468.

[27] Contemporary writers such as Zoltán Szabó noted, for example, that in the northern part of the county the new sexual mores subverted traditional forms of entertainment such as spinning bees and village balls, which, contrary to their original functions, became veritable hotbeds of promiscuity. The situation was the most serious in villages close to the capital, Szabó argued, where parents regally pressured their children into prostitution at an early age. See Szabó, *A tardi helyzet* [The situation in Tard] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1937), 179–181; *Cifra nyomorúság* [Gaudy Misery] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1938), 103–104.

[26] According to the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, a "society may be called patriarchal when descent is patrilineal (i.e. the children belong to the group of the father), marriage is patrilocal (i.e. the wife removes to the local group of the husband), inheritance (of property) and succession (to rank) are in male line, and the family is patripotestal (i. e. the authority over the members of the family is in the hands of the father or his male relatives). On the other hand, a society can be called matriarchal when descent, inheritance and succession are in the female line, marriage is matrilocal (the husband removing to the home of his wife), and when the authority over the children is wielded by the mother's

relatives." See A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, " The Mother's Brother in South Africa," in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society,* ed. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952), 22.

[27] Béla Bodó, *Tiszazug: Social History of a Mass Epidemic* (New York: East European Monographs – Columbia University Press, 2002). Interview with Mária Gunya, maiden name, Mária Balogh, on 21 May, 1998.

[28] Borbándi, *Der ungarische Populismus*, p. 126.

[29] Historians have long refuted Le Play's arguments. They have shown that family patters changed little during industrialization and that the peaceful and inherently stable patriarchal family never existed. For a good introduction to Le Play's work see Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder, *The European Family: Patriarchy to Partnership from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 24–27.

[30] On the impact of Le Play on Hungarian neo-conservatives see Péter P. Tóth, "A hazai agrár- és faluszociológiai kutatások 1900–1945 között" [Sociological research in agriculture and village life between 1900 and 1945), in *Agrárszociológiai írások Magyarországon 1900–1945* [Works in Agrarian Sociology in Hungary 1900–1945] ed. Péter P. Tóth (Budapest: Kossuth, 1984), 11–12, 24.

[31] George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: H. Fertig, 1999), 25–26, 186.

[32] See Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Vienna: W. Braumüller, 1903), esp. 106–107. On Weininger see, among others, Allan Janik, *Essays on Wittgenstein and Weininger* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985); Nancy A. Harrowitz and Barbara Hyams eds., *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); and Hans Kohn, *Karl Kraus, Otto Schnitzler, Otto Weininger: aus dem jüdischem Wien der Jahrhundertwende* (Tübingen, 1962). For a good summary of Weininger's argument, see George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: H. Fertig, 1985), 145.

[33] Gerhard Hauptmann, *Die Insel der grossen Mutter* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1994).

[34] See John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture* (New York: Weindenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 160-168.

[35] Like sociology, sociography sought to disclose the structural causes of social injustices. Although the sociographer also used statistical information, his techniques resembled more those of travel writers and journalists than those of the sociologist. While the sociologist usually preferred statistical models, the sociographer tended to grasp reality intuitively by drawing his conclusions from individual examples. He couched his message in a passionate and politically charged language rather than in the more abstract and detached jargons of the sociologist and ethnographer. All these features brought the sociography closer to literature than to social science.

[36] Németh's position in the Populist movement in rather ambiguous. Often he denied that he was a Populist at all. However, he maintained close ties with the leading members of the movement and shared both their positive ideas and social ethnic prejudices. I thank Professor György Bisztray for drawing my attention to the difficult relations between Németh and other Populist writers. Németh borrowed many of his ideas from German conservative and fascist writers and scientists, such as Philipp Lenard and Johannes Stark, who sought to create an 'Aryan' science in the 1920s and 1930s. See Alan D. Beyerchen, *Scientists under Hitler: Politics and the Physics Community in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 79–140.

[37] Dénes Némedi, *A népi sociográfia 1930-1938* [The populist sociography 1930-1938] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1985), 17–18, 42–45, 51–52, 116–121, 124–132.

[38] Thomas W. Laqueur, "Bodies, Detail, and the Humanitarian Narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkerley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–205.

[39] See Robert Braun, "Pusztul-e a magyarság" [Are Hungarians dying out?] *Századunk* 8–10 (1933): 252–256.

[40] On the quarrel between 'urbanists' and Populists see Némedi, *A népi szociográfia*, 93–103.