

A magyar népi mozgalom története: 1920–1990

[History of the Hungarian Populist Movement: 1920–1990].

By István Papp. Budapest: Jaffa, 2012. 282 pp.*

The so-called “populist movement” (“népi mozgalom”) was one of the most distinctive and important political, social and cultural movements in Hungary in the twentieth century. While one might be hard pressed to find something analogous in the other countries of Europe at the time, several of the strains of the movement nonetheless invite comparisons with tendencies involving groups in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and even the United States. The movement in Hungary, which was brought into being in the 1930s primarily by writers and people passionately interested in social issues, sought to bring an end to the economic and cultural stagnation of village societies, as well as their political and social exclusion. The programs devised by the group were intended to help the peasantry (much of which lived in the eastern part of the country in poverty or even squalor) acquire land, secure a reliable livelihood, and have equal access to education and schooling. The leaders of the movement also saw economic dependence—which was perpetuated primarily by owners of large estates and large industrialists—as something that could be alleviated and indeed eliminated, and this in turn, it was hoped, would have helped further the assertion of the rights of the peasantry. The Hungarian populist movement, which was fundamentally cultural in its origins, in a wider sense strove to address the problems surrounding the modernization of essentially agrarian societies on the periphery of the capitalist global economy, societies that either had fallen behind in or never really undergone the process of industrialization.

Although many writers who were part of the populist movement worked together in various ways with the communist authorities, because of their ambivalent attitudes towards the programs of the communist government and communist politicians and also the roles they played in the 1956 Revolution, until the 1980s the ideas of the movement were rarely part of public discussion in Hungary. Even following the change of regimes in 1989, the intellectual milieu that emerged did not really allow for a politically unbiased critical study of the

* An earlier version of this paper was published in *Múltunk* 58, no. 1 (2013): 283–90. This research was supported by the European Union and the State of Hungary, co-financed by the European Social Fund, within the framework of TÁMOP-4.2.4.A/ 2-11/1-2012-0001 “National Excellence Program.”

movement as part of intellectual and cultural history. In recent years, however, the apparent lack of interest in the populist movement—a lack of interest which has been characteristic of the community of historians in Hungary since the publication of the recently deceased Gyula Borbándi’s seminal work almost three decades ago—seems to be giving way. In 2012, two relevant volumes were published on the subject in Hungarian: a monograph by Bulcsu Bognár entitled *A népies irányzat a két háború között* [The Populist Tendency in the Interwar Period]¹ and the book by István Papp on which I am writing here. As he himself notes, Papp is writing for the wider reading public, but he is also attempting to “rethink and reinterpret the history of the populist movement for the discipline [of history] as well” (p.11). Has he in fact achieved this goal?

The quite lovely pop-art cover of the hardback book aptly symbolizes the variegated nature of the populist movement. The book is divided into eight chapters on the writers of the movement, beginning with the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 and concluding with the first free elections, which were held in 1990. Although the use of 1920 as a starting point instead of 1928 (the year which has come to be accepted as the starting point of the movement in the secondary literature, in part because it bore witness to the publication of two important essays by László Németh) is justified more on political grounds than it is on any considerations concerning the movement itself, it nonetheless provides a good bookend, as it were, for the discussion. The title of the first chapter, however, “A magyar populisták” (“The Hungarian Populists”), is a bit harder to explain, since the chapter deals primarily with historical antecedents and similar trends and movements in the United States, Argentina, Finland, and Russia. More important than the title is the fact that in the pre-history of the movement, the elements that were common in analogous trends across the globe were less emphatic, though clearly regulated markets or plans for the creation of cooperatives were hardly Hungarian inventions. Indeed populisms abroad and the populist movement in Hungary shared numerous shortcomings. Yet however praiseworthy an attempt to situate the Hungarian phenomenon in an international context may be, grouping the movement among (agrarian) populisms (p.34) is debatable at best. The international secondary literature on populism, at least, does not deal with the Hungarian movement at all.²

1 Bognár Bulcsu, *A népies irányzat a két háború között*. Erdei Ferenc és a harmadik út képviselői [The Populist Tendency in the Interwar Period] (Budapest, Loisir, 2012).

2 See, for instance, Ionescu, Ghiță, Gellner, and Ernest, eds., *Populism. Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: n.p., 1981), Pierre-André

Papp often adopts a retrospective glance, and he is prudent to do so. I.E. the chronology of the account is a bit loose, and this makes it more easily readable than it might otherwise have been, but this does not compromise the scholarly nature of the account. The third chapter, “Az alvó népek zörgetése” [“The Rattling of the Sleeping Peoples”], contains significant (if not always accurate) data. The following claim, for instance, is hardly persuasive, at least not in light of recent research: “10 cadastral acres were by no means adequate to ensure a livelihood for a family with three children” (p.64).³ While Papp makes mention several times of the flawed value judgments of the “older” secondary literature, he accepts without qualification the generalization so often made before 1989, according to which, “the elite of the Horthy era (...) showed little interest in the efficient husbandry of manorial estates either.”⁴ However, Papp makes persuasive use of the terminology of political science, clearly demonstrating the capacity of the movement to establish broad coalitions, which also meant the desire and ability to create dialogue with the prevailing authorities.

The fourth chapter, “Néma forradalmárok” [“Mute Revolutionaries”], in which Papp presents the sociographical wave of the mid-1930s, sheds the biases and habits of earlier accounts and offers a genuinely balanced examination of the meeting points of the institutions and figures of power and the populist writers. Papp does not hide behind tired clichés. Rather he dares to utter his views on sensitive questions that for a long time have been glossed over, for instance the work of writer József Darvas (p.109), who joined the communists in the 1950s, or (later) the reputation of László Németh (p.132), who has been accused of anti-Semitism. It is characteristic that while Papp considers Imre Kovács, who was forced to emigrate by the communists after the war, the prototype of the

Taguieff, “Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem,” *Telos* 27, no. 2 (1995): 9–43; Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 2–16; Yves Meny and Yves Surel, eds., *Democracies and Populist Challenge*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Francisco Panizza, *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, (N.P.: Verso, 2005); Koen Ants and Stefan Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 405–24. Christa Deiwiks, “Populism,” *Living Reviews in Democracy* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–9. David Van Reybrouck, *A populizmus védelmében* [In Defense of Populism] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2010); Ernesto Laclau, *A populista ész* [The Populist Mind] (Budapest: Noran Libro, 2011); Marco d’Eramo, “Populism and the New Oligarchy,” *New Left Review* 53, no. 4 (2013): 5–28.

3 See Gábor Gyáni and György Kövér, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig* [The Social History of Hungary from the Reform Era to World War II] (Budapest: Osiris, 2006), 307.

4 See Levente Püski, *Főúri identitás a két világháború közötti Magyarországon: Esterházy Pál herceg = Generációk a történelemben* [Aristocratic Identity in the Interwar Period in Hungary: Prince Pál Esterházy = Generations in History], ed. Gábor Gyáni and Magdolna Lácay (Nyíregyháza: NYF GTTK–HIK TTE, 2008), 167–73.

professional populist politician, he does not ignore the “nadir of his career,” when Kovács campaigned aggressively and with vulgar language in support of the expulsion from Hungary of the German-speaking members of its citizenry (pp.195–96). He also makes the important observation that because of the politicized vetting and the trials that were held by so-called people’s courts, “among the populists there was never any genuine confrontation with the events of the war years or the Holocaust” (p.182).

In the chapter entitled *Az útkeresés stációi* (“The Stations of the Search for a Path”), Papp offers a detailed discussion of one of this fundamental contentions, according to which, in contrast with the earlier concept of decline, during World War II populism began to burgeon with a “vigorous” (p.126), “heretofore unseen” (p.211) fervor, which brought with it the creation of institutions and periodicals, government measures, and polarization. Papp keeps his distance from the mythos of the various ideological systems, but he nonetheless makes bold diagnoses, not trying to hide the political orientations of the populists.

The sixth chapter provides an exemplary examination of the history of the populist movement after 1945, a history which is rife with contradictions. Papp examines the process whereby, with the turn towards a more “popular” form of rule (i.e. the ascension to power of a regime that at least in principle represented the people but which in fact was a precursor to the Stalinization of the country), the term “nép” (“people” or “folk”) both was given a kind of absolute meaning and at the same time simply lost its value and connotations as it was appropriated by the new ruling ideology. This irreparably divided the “populist” camp. Although of the prominent populists who were regarded as right-wing (József Erdélyi, Géza Féja, János Kodolányi, István Sinka), only Erdélyi was brought before the aforementioned people’s courts, the communists forcefully marginalized the group, while at the same time they put populists who were willing to cooperate with them on a pedestal (Ferenc Erdei, Péter Veres, József Darvas). The seventh chapter contains a detailed account of the fate of the populists under the socialist regime, though according to Papp “we cannot really speak of a movement” (p.212) under the dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi. One gets a sense from the book of how a certain group mentality survived among the populists, even if, given the circumstances, life led them down very different paths. This mentality found manifestation in the help they provided for those who were labeled right-wing. At the end of the chapter, Papp offers an interpretation of 1956 as a historical moment at which a third road would have been possible. He then examines the “insights” and “dealings” that followed

the suppression of the uprising. Essentially, this brings his discussion of the history of the populist writers to a close. In his epilogue, Papp characterizes the populist-nationalist movement merely as the “bearer of the populist tradition” (p.245). He faults the successors to the Kádár era first and foremost for their lack of “positive vision” (p.270), since the reformers who gathered around Imre Pozsgay and later won widespread support at Lakitelek (a village to the southeast of Budapest, Lakitelek was the site of several meetings of the emerging opposition parties in the years leading up to the change of regimes in Hungary) were hardly driven by the fervent opposition to the system that had been characteristic of the 1930s.

In the end, Papp essentially achieves the two goals he sets for himself in his prologue. His book, which has been written in a refreshingly effortless style (the complexity of the topic notwithstanding), bears ample testimony to the breadth of his reading and research. He offers balanced assessments, and he does not allow his respect for the populists (which he admits from the outset) to lead him astray. However, since he also intended the book to serve as a contribution to the smaller community of scholars, one cannot pass over without comment the frustratingly short and unstructured bibliography, not to mention the insufficient and sometimes haphazardly-looking footnotes, which are more striking than the occasional typos. It would have been worthwhile to have included an index of names similar to the one found in the work of Borbándi. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that Papp repeatedly uses the Historical Archives of the State Security Services. Thus the reports of the organs of state security provide a great deal of interesting data on the relationship between the populists and the government after 1945. Furthermore, one cannot stress enough the relevance and importance of Papp’s value judgements, which are both moderate and firm. Perhaps in the long-term, such assessments will further the widespread acceptance of a healthier view of the past less encumbered by bias.

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