



Dance Populism: The Potato Principle and the New Hungarian Dance Craze

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As I approach the meeting place in the 11th district of Budapest, I notice the quiet hum of a string band floating in the street. I know I have arrived at the famous urban dance-house (táncház).¹ It is “The Weaver” (Fonó), one of the many clubs that has become a hotspot of folk dance, or to use a more appropriate term, dance-house enthusiasts all over the nation’s capital.² At the door, I pay a small fee, about US\$3, which is a fraction of theater or rock concert ticket prices. Inside, the entrance hall is filled with people, both men and women wearing T-shirts, most of the latter have donned skirts. I notice that younger women must belong to a dance group; their braided hair, pleated skirts and black practice shoes make them quite uniform. Besides Hungarian, I also hear couples speaking

¹For analysis of Hungarian dance-house music and revival, see Frigyesi (1996), Könczei (2004, 2014), Kürti (2001) and Sándor (2006).

²The Buda Fonó Music Hall (Fonó Budai Zeneház) does not only cater for folk music lovers, it also regularly features jazz and world music. It also publishes CDs, many of which have made it to the top-20 record publishers and Top Label by Womex. For information, see Fonó’s website: <http://webbolt.fono.hu/hu> (last accessed: 25 February 2019).

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K. C. Donahue, P. R. Heck (eds.), *Cycles of Hatred and Rage*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14416-6_8

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English and German, but I also notice few Asians, most probably Japanese.³ At the bar, sweaty clubbers hang around, drinking. I see a big plate full of slices of larded bread sprinkled with paprika, chunks of green pepper and onion.

It is a custom that during breaks enthusiasts gather to learn songs. A teacher in her 40s leads with her husky voice alone filling the hall. They sing several songs, each two to three verses long, all distinctly what may be called Transylvanian. As the band begins to play, everyone flocks into the dancing hall where the air is dusty and the smell should be familiar to anyone who goes to work out in the gym. Around the hall, along the wall, those without partners sit on chairs, talk and some sing. The four-men string band on stage strikes up a wailing melody, about 50 couples embrace in close proximity. I recognize the slow-walking Transylvanian couple's dance, known by all simply as the "Slow of Szék" (*széki lassú*).⁴ Next to the lead violinist stand two women, wearing skirts. Both have long hair and are singing the lines of the dance song. Most dancers are also singing, everyone seems to know the words by heart. A few minutes later, the tempo increases, dancers begin to turn and whirl, faster and faster. The din inside the hall increases considerably, the amplification seems pretty professional. The whole cycle lasts about 40 minutes, but only a short break is allowed. The lead violinist introduces two elderly visitors from Transylvania, Romania. The ladies wear traditional long skirts, white blouses, embroidered vests and both have their head covered with a kerchief. The dancers sit down, many just in front of the stage, and soon the guests sing three to four songs in a row. Finally, the band also joins the women, and the audience is asked to sing along. The whole program ends

³I find it extremely interesting that among all foreigners the Japanese have expressed the most serious interest in Hungarian (Transylvanian) folk dancing, an art they even exported to Hong Kong. In Tokyo there is a dance group specializing in Hungarian dance (for the ensemble's home-page see: <http://www.21-tkt.sakura.ne.jp/tkt/english.html>, last accessed: 25 February 2019). Its name in English is simply Hungarian Folk Dance Ensemble; however, its Hungarian version translates as "Tokyo Kalotaszeg Ensemble". Kalotaszeg is a region not in Hungary but in Central Transylvania, Romania! The reason for this mild confusion will be clarified below.

⁴The story of the discovery of the Hungarian community Szék (Sic, Romania) can be credited to the composer László Lajtha during the early 1940s. For the importance of the settlement and its folklore, see Martin (1981). I have dealt with the other region, Kalotaszeg, and its elevation into the consciousness of the Hungarian dance-house generation (Kürti 2014).

with more dancing until about midnight. Not surprisingly, all dances performed at this iconic dance-house are what known as Transylvanian dances.

A few days later, on March 15, 2018, the grandiose commemoration of the 1848–1849 revolution takes place at the Kossuth Square in front of the parliament in downtown Budapest. As usual, Viktor Orbán speaks about national survival and the necessity of maintaining Hungarian culture in the face of massive migration. Most of the television and radio stations carry his speech. His words as fiery as usual: “They want to take away our country. Not like it was at Trianon hundred years ago, with the stroke of the pen, now they want us to offer our land in a decade or two to others. To strangers arriving from different continents, who do not speak our language, do not respect our culture, laws and way of living, who wish to change ours to theirs. They wish to see descendants of aliens living here, not our descendants, that is not our descendants but someone else’s ...What is sure, that those nations that are unable to stop foreigners at the borders, will be dissolved. Slowly but surely, they will be eliminated.”⁵ Aside from this ostensibly nationalist rhetoric, the entire March 15 state celebration has been peppered with patriotic slogans, poetry, folk music, songs and some regional dances. The events just described took place in the spring of 2018 in Budapest, but they could have easily been taking place 10 or even 20 years ago. How has folk dance achieved such prominence as to appear at state celebrations, what led to its elevation to a national dance? My aim in this chapter is to assess the significance and highlight the socio-political milieu of the dance-house and its concomitant populist culture industry that is in vogue in Hungary.

DANCE-HOUSE: FROM POPULISM TO CULTURE

Dance populism in essence refers to the presence of the political and ideological in dance and dance events with nativist as well as nationalist agendas to support governmental or state directives. Dance-house populism today illustrates the shifts in thinking about the Hungarian nation which occurred within populism from the 1930s to the 1990s.⁶ While some of the populists of the 1930s adopted a liberal and leftist national focus,

⁵The prime minister’s speech can be watched on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NFRx27D9aU> (last accessed: August 12, 2018 25 February 2019).

⁶There is a plethora of literature devoted to the Hungarian inter-war populist movement. For recent analyses, see Bognár (2011) and Papp (2012).

similarly to the American populist and folk movement, in which the liberation of farmers and helping the poor were central concerns, by the 1990s, Hungarian populists turned to the right with xenophobia, Christian fundamentalism and a mythic folkloric vision of the peasantry.⁷ The new Hungarian national dance event is the “táncház”, the predominant dance style is Transylvanian dance. It has not been declared so, yet the “táncház-style” teaching of folk dance received official recognition when in 2011 UNESCO awarded the Register of Best Practices for the “Táncház method, a Hungarian model for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage”.⁸ This closely resembles the American movement in several states to declare square dance as the official state dance. In the 1980s, several attempts were made to designate square dance as the American national dance and thus included in the list of five national symbols together with the rose, the Great Seal, the flag, the national anthem and the bald eagle (Mangin 1995). Since 1995 when 22 states designated square dance as its official state dance, by 2017, 31 states declared so.

Similar to the square dance, which has been connected to high politics, especially for Jimmy Carter, Hungarian dance-house has reached an apex during the past decade.⁹ Not only saturated with reference to national unity, Christian fundamentalist and historic symbols, state celebrations are filled with peasant music and dance (Kürti 2011, 2015, 2018). All these symbolic constituents are standard tropes of national holidays and commemorations since 1990, when aspects of peasant culture have been elevated into the local, regional and national limelight to express nationhood, Hungarianness and national unity. Turning toward the nation’s rural underclass for folkloric material was a long process since the late nineteenth century, when Hungary celebrated its one-thousandth year of statehood in 1896.

For the dance-house is not a novel invention, it is a well-nigh half-century tradition. It follows protocol set in the early 1970s, a time when the Transylvanian “dance-house” (táncház) was established first in

⁷American music populism of the 1930s and 1940s was cemented to radical left-wing ideology (Reuss and Reuss 2000).

⁸See: Proposals for selection in 2011 for the Register of Best Practices (item 9 on the agenda). <https://ich.unesco.org/en/9-best-practices-00408> (last accessed: 25 February 2019). Interestingly, two similar projects submitted to the UNESCO—one by Latvia and the other by Spain, both for transmitting traditional music to the youth—were rejected.

⁹See, for example, the masterly treatment of Jimmy Carter’s populism and square dancing (Patch 2012).

Budapest and later in several Hungarian regional cities. Quite a novel establishment at that time, today having an evening at a dance-house in Budapest or elsewhere in cities all over the country is a familiar form of entertainment for youth and middle-age citizens alike. This form of club venue is especially captivating for those whose fancy is folk music and dance, and especially those whose parents have been educated during the late socialist time in Hungary and have been themselves part of the folkloric revival. The idea of dance-house sprung from the minds of a generation scarred by the moral quagmire of Kádárism socialism. They matured during the post-Cold War period and attempted to disregard the realities of socialist cooperatives and “socialist peasantry” working there. Instead they nostalgically sought to create a framework for times past when peasants were free, happy and tending their flock and all the while singing and dancing at will. During the early 1970s, when criticism of the state collectivization was not tolerated, and when in fact many state cooperatives were performing exceptionally well, looking back at a time immemorial with pure peasant folklore was a daring escapism of the unquestionably dull realities of state socialism.

As the movement matured, a new national Hungarian character, the urban primordial peasant man, has emerged, a masculine character of the dance-house that has remained central ever since. Back in its heyday, the dance-house enthusiast was educated, perhaps with a distant rural background, growing up in a city with a low middle-class or a civil servant occupation. In fact, many of my informants during the 1980s were engineers or menial workers who have slowly but tenaciously transformed themselves into new professionals. Soon, as his new identity as a teacher, dancer, musician or singer was secured, however, he gave up his original profession to become a full-time professional dance-house instructor. Aside from the single female singer of Márta Sebestyén, there were few women in leading positions of the movement, a situation that took a radical turn by the 1990s with more and more women becoming leading singers and musicians.¹⁰ Because most of the urban youth have been recruited from high school and university students, dancers and musicians followed the school calendar and the dance-house was institutionalized accordingly. From September to end of May or early June, teachers led several dance-houses or preferably worked as a semi-professional choreographer for a

¹⁰For a succinct analysis of the masculine-feminine divide in the revival movement, I suggest Lang (2018: 19–73).

local dance group; during the summer, performances and dance-house camps were the order of the day.

Initially, the popularity of the peasantist dance-house was based on two interrelated factors: a genuine social movement with mildly anti-state ideology and a platform for opening civil society. Increasingly, urban youth in their late teens and early 20s were eager to learn about what official education and culture did not offer. A curious amalgam of traditional and modern, dance-house art, including instrumental music, song, dance and folk crafts, has embodied the late 1970s and the 1980s as members of their generation, dance-house artists, helped to raise peasant music to an art form. Involved with its creation and entrusted with its maintenance, they were all agents of a genuine cultural transformation even though many were perhaps less conscious of what this transformation may mean in the long run, where it is going and with what consequences. Nevertheless, they went along with the flow and willingly took risks involved. And the risks were many, especially in the case of traveling to Romania to visit distant village communities where balls and weddings still exuded a sense of traditional community life. But it was not only “travelling back in time” in “remote places”, as many of the dance-house generations exclaimed when I asked them about visiting Transylvania. The unique nature of difference in traditional life is what drew youth from Hungary to Romania.¹¹ Ferenc Sebő, one of the key players in instituting dance-houses in the early 1970s, has not shied away in framing this as follows: “If Europe wants to know its past, it has to turn to us.”¹² Knowing Europe’s past may sound as a smug idea first, but to dance-house fans of the founding period this was an acceptable *raison d’être*. When I asked his violinist colleague, Béla Halmos, back in 1985 about this, he was also adamant: “Isolation, poverty, and political repression for decades, preserved Hungarian culture in Romania, something that you cannot find anywhere in Hungary.” The Sebő-Halmos duo, as they subsequently became known, did not just start with reviving peasant music, they played a combination of protest songs and folk music, a style well known in the 1960s in the US, an art that helped elevate them to national fame.¹³

¹¹ I have discussed earlier “timelessness” and “remoteness” as central concepts with reference to Transylvania (Kürti 2001).

¹² Quoted in Jávorszky (2016).

¹³ For a succinct analysis of the changes in the American folk music scene from the 1930s to the 1960s, see Dean (2011) and Eyerman and Barretta (1996).

More importantly, all those involved with the first two decades of the movement—singers, dancers and musicians—and the first festivals and dance-house camps in the early 1980s, such as the National Dance-house Meeting in 1981 and the Folk Art Camp of the Téká Ensemble in 1984, left an enduring cultural legacy. In this they have fomented temporary communities of contents, goals and sentiments. It was not and never attempted to be a cultural revolution as such, it did not attack either the very foundation of state power or its basic ideological tenets. Yet, by creating possibilities for youth to think alternatively about the past and present, they created a viable generational alternative for cultural expression paralleling socialist internationalism. That legacy, however, has been manifold. On the one hand, by relying on the early twentieth-century folklore and music collections, it represented a progressive social force for it raised concerns about rural life and the waning of traditions. It also juxtaposed peasant culture with that of minority rights in neighboring states, particularly Romania. Negatively, on the other hand, the dance-house has opened new windows for nationalist thinking and an essentialist view of happy Hungarian peasantry, as noted above, dressed always in their Sunday best, singing and dancing merrily any time of the day.

DANCE-HOUSE: FROM CULTURE TO POLITICS

By the late 1980s, one facet was more than obvious: the dance-house movement (*táncház mozgalom*) has signified an urban and elite-led process through which peasantism and Transylvaniam fused into a coherent set of ideas offering cultural memory, authenticity and expression of national heritage. It became an important precursor to post-communist national revival as well as a catalyst for the contestation of nationality issues between Hungary and Romania. After the fall of communism in 1989–1990, the state that was scorned was eliminated. An immediate agenda of the anti-communist governments was to remake the nation anew with much needed ideology and symbols. This alone supports Homi Bhabha's idea when he writes: the "scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture" (1990: 297). Prewar Hungary ostensibly provided the model: for a new state not only a new Constitution but symbols, images and material culture were needed. For example, more than a decade ago, I wrote that as an independent state since 1990, and member of the EU since 2004, Hungary has produced an unprecedented heritage industry and the festivalization of

culture (Kürti 2011: 76–77). In terms of its development, post-socialist dance-house can be best characterized as a unique ethno-national process of peasant revivalism which has helped to shape Hungary’s post-communist heritage industry and cultural policy (i.e., Hungaricum, UNESCO tangible and intangible heritage).¹⁴

The many local, regional and national festivals I have been observing over the past two decades exhibit an essentialized “disneyfication” (Kürti 2011). Peppered with historical and modern flavor, festivals include neo-folkloric venues with an over-emphasis on Hungarian minority music and dance from Transylvania. Recognized worldwide as part of the exciting world music genre today, transnational Hungarian neo-folk music has not—we must admit—been free from overarching regionalist and nationalistic claims of unity and cultural continuity (Kürti 2001). Popular music has always been a contentious art, and recent studies have revealed racist, xenophobic and extreme chauvinistic messages in diverse national styles ranging from Serbian turbo-folk to Baltic neo-paganism and from Hungarian national rock to widespread European white-power music (Dyck 2017; Kronja 2004; Kürti 2012; Strmiska 2005).

While populist politicians today romanticize “the common people”, dance-house elites are convinced that the “real people” are the classic nineteenth- and twentieth-century “peasantry”. In other words, they are the “proper peasants”, whose traditional ways of life have been amply documented in the last 150 years by ethnographers, folklorists and sociologists of different political persuasions. Not unlike the romantic nationalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dance-house leaders espouse the view that the peasantry, and only the peasants, have retained what can be termed “tradition and custom”. Neither destitute industrial workers, nor leftist-liberal intellectuals—many of whom have been Jewish or came from overseas—nor middle-class entrepreneurs can retain centuries-long language, customs and folklore worthy of attention. It is in the revived peasant dance and folk traditions where they find the most crystallized form of definition for national heritage. Thus, notions of peasant folkloric traditions, from embroidery to cooking, from ballads to fancy dancing,

¹⁴The expression Hungaricum in Hungarian refers to a collection of everything the state considers as “valuable” national assets. From the natural environment to tourism, from cultural traditions to food and from technological inventions to sports, there are hundreds of such items on the list of Hungaricums. For the full official list of these, see the home-page: <http://www.hungarikum.hu/en/szakkategoria> (last accessed: August 12, 2018). Naturally, folk dance, music and musical instruments are among them.

have been entangled with forms of historiographical and political representations of a Hungarian nation. In fact, what Homi Bhabha calls the “locality of national culture” is where lies the center of the nationalist polemic concerning peasantry, heritage and its related survival/revival dispute (Bhabha 2004).

And this is where dance-house is a tour de force of dance populism. For the elites, it is not simply just any peasant tradition, but the one existing in Transylvania, Romania, among the Hungarian minority is where the locality of national culture exists. This over-reliance on ethnic co-nationals of Transylvania reaffirms Bhabha’s other statement that “national cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (2004: 8). In my earlier study, *The Remote Borderland: Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination*, I have suggested that what Hungarian populism really entails may be best summed up with the phrase “potato principle”. The notion of peasants as a sack of potatoes originates from Marx, and both Ernest Gellner and Theodor Shanin have relied on this to argue that peasants and their “traditional” culture are overvalued at the expense of industrial or urban populations (Gellner 1983, Shanin 1990). Thus, Shanin’s maxim that “peasants are a mystification” is fitting to the dance-house industry (Shanin 1990: 50–52). What both Gellner and Shanin have in mind is very close to the ways in which populist nationalism has been homogenizing populations in its attempt to fashion a cultural base for a unified national identity. Gellner has of course poignantly stated earlier that “Nationalism usually conquers in the name of a putative folk culture. Its symbolism is drawn from the healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants, of the *Volk*, the *narod* ... it revives, or invents, a local high culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects” (Gellner 1983: 69–70). For his part, Anthony Smith has also realized that Hungarian populist nationalism “seeks inspiration from the communal past, in order to link past, present and future together” (Smith 1979: 144). This reification and homogenizing attempt places the dance-house culture on a tightrope: by highlighting aspects of a mystified peasantry, it truly attempts to connect the national community with a highly skewed notion of the past as exemplified by one particular social stratum, the peasantry.

Such an exclusivist point of view is based not only on singling out “proper peasants”. It excludes other minorities and even vilifies some. Recalling a disastrous event of 2015 will be to the point. Unprecedentedly, Hungary’s celebrated folk band Muzsikás (Musicians) was pressured to withdraw from the popular Jewish culture week in Budapest. What created

quite a major uproar was the participation with the band of the ceramicist and singer Mária Petrás. As wife of a well-known right-wing poet who openly declared his anti-Semitic identity, she had also participated in right-wing events together with her husband.¹⁵ The opposition of the Association of Hungarian Jewish Congregations (MAZSIHISZ) resulted in making the singer a persona non grata at the Dohány Street Synagogue, the location of the band's original performance.¹⁶

What this case amply illustrates is that populism and anti-Semitism are strange bedfellows indeed. While in the early American populist movement no such connection existed, by the 1930s open attacks on the Jews became systematic (Cremoni 1998; Pollack 1962). In Europe, anti-Semitic values based on fundamentalist Christian nationalism have been a pattern rather than the exception (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Wistrich 1993). This has been anchored to the notion that national culture and its essential peasant traditions must not be lost to foreign elements. In the populist mind, peasants and their culture (whatever that entailed) have been continually under attack. Thus the destruction of their life ways is the result of industrialization, urbanization and liberalization of the entire society. In addition to these globalizing forces, a recent threat has emerged: Muslim invasion. All this crystallized into a conspiracy theory where “international economic interest groups”, “urban elites”, “foreigners” and neighboring “nations” appeared as “enemies” of not only the essentialized peasants but in fact the very core of Hungarian national culture. Obviously, this entails a penchant for oversimplifying identity, socio-economic processes and scapegoating just about anyone who is placed outside the nation.

¹⁵The person in question is the writer Kornél Döbrentei whose 2004 nationalistic and anti-Semitic public speech caused outrage. Excerpts from his speeches can be read at: <http://hhrf.org/up/manz/reNET/dobrentei.htm> (last accessed: 25 February 2019). Mária Petrás was born in 1957 in Giosen, Romania, which is considered one of the few so-called Hungarian “csángó” villages of the easternmost part of Romania, known as Moldavia. Earlier I have written about the contested nature of this population. Romanian scholars consider the “csángós” Romanian who were Hungarianized and became Roman Catholic; for Hungarian scholars, they are an archaic Hungarian population who had been Romanianized.

¹⁶Members of the band objected to the anti-Semitic charge, pointing to their interest in Jewish folk music. In fact, Muzsikás did produce a pioneering CD in Hungary of Jewish folk music in 1992 titled after a Hasidic song “The rooster is crowing” (*Szól a kakas már*). The entire album was reproduced for the international market a year later labeled Maramaros: The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania. However, what is interesting is that the original album's subtitle says “Hungarian Jewish music from Transylvania!” After that controversial cancellation, the band was invited to perform in Israel in 2017.

GOVERNMENTAL POPULISM: CULTURAL IMPROVEMENT OR REGRESSION

By the early 1990s, as the dance-house movement was elevated into mainstream popular culture, losing its small and semi-autonomous club atmosphere in the process, new leaders often would adopt an openly populist style in their speeches. In 1990, Antall József, the first freely elected prime minister, spoke about the Hungarian nation that included all Hungarians living in East-Central Europe, referring to himself as being “in spirit the prime minister of 15 million Hungarians”. After Antall’s untimely death, only one follower, József Torgyán, leader of the Independent Smallholder Party, tried to ride on the wave of populism. It soon became clear, however, that he could not match the energy and fieriness of the 35-year-old Viktor Orbán, who in 1998 became the youngest prime minister ever in Hungarian history. Not unlike France’s own Jean-Marie Le Pen, Orbán continually identifies himself as a defender of the integrity of the Hungarian nation composed of “15 million”, assailing those neighboring states which impose strict nationalist rules limiting minority rights and language of Hungarians living there. His tactic has changed drastically after 2002, when his ruling coalition lost the election. He did not disappear from politics; on the contrary, the pugnacious politician traveled the countryside offering flaming lectures and urging locals to organize into “civic circles” (*polgári körök*). The obvious message being: to counter the just wining left-liberal coalition government of Ferenc Gyurcsány.

Often, he appeared in neighboring states, participating in minority celebrations; one of his favored shows has been the “Free University at Tuszányos”, a week-long gathering of Hungarians in the eastern Transylvanian town of Tuszánfdürdő (in official Romanian Băile Tuşnad).¹⁷ Peppering his speeches with references to national revival and homogeneity

¹⁷The week-long program can be viewed at: <http://www.tusvanyos.ro/program/> (last accessed: 25 February 2019). From the beginning—existing well into the early 2000s—the idea was to bring Hungarian and Romanian politicians to a common understanding concerning minority rights and cultural practices. Over the last few years, Romanian speakers have dwindled, and at the moment, none are invited. This can be seen easily from the program of the Tuszányos website which is only in Hungarian; the majority of sponsors of the event are—not surprisingly—from Hungary, including the government and various state and private institutions. Most of the speakers are from the ruling coalition parties of Hungary and its Romanian-Transylvanian minority organizations. As always, evenings are reserved for dance-houses, concerts and theater performances.

and fighting “liberal and left” politicians and “enemies of Hungarians”, his ideas always met with a cheering crowd (Szabó 2007). For the prime minister politics is a constant fight to eliminate the enemies so that Hungarian national interests will prevail. For sure, the slogan “Hungary first” resonates elsewhere, in Poland, Turkey, Russia and in the US as well. In tandem with his rhetoric, Orbán has been emphasizing the need for retaining Christianity as the only value system to preserve traditional family system in Europe. Since 2006, when the Fidesz coalition gained an upper hand in the parliament, new welfare and child policies have been introduced, some with contradictory and questionably results (Szikra 2014). To boost fertility, single-child families are disfavored, two or three children are preferred for married couples. In order to achieve this goal, the right-wing government program has successfully nationalized Christianity, especially its clergy. By forging a new relationship between Roman Catholic as well as Protestant church leaders, the Fidesz-Christian Democratic Party has secured its way to victory: that coalition today parades as the sole guardian of heterosexual families and public morality for the Hungarian nation.

Religious fervor, however, needs a compliant population, at least communities willing to support such government policies. Peasants have long been identified as conservative, religious, family centered and, in line with recent ecological concerns, living their lives in total harmony with nature and animals. In Hungary, however, the process of anti-communism, land restitution and return to the earlier values of nation, religion and family has been the ideal material for populist ideology to approach rural citizens. Relying on the folkloric revival and its institutionalized dance-house culture, political populism has been able to connect with them much stronger than it happened in the 1930s. In contrast to those turbulent years, when progressive and leftist notions were part and parcel of populist demands—for example, land restitution, free education and general well-being of the rural underclass—current governmental rhetoric now also demonizes opponents, enrages EU politicians and manages to manipulate public fear of migrants-cum-terrorists.

In present-day populist discourse, migrants and foreigners are identified as a major threat to national culture. Ingrained in populist mentality is that with the Hungarian nation, its peasant tradition, the entire peasant culture in fact, is rapidly vanishing. The elites of the dance-house industry accept that they are not simply prime movers of their industry but are entrusted with a rescue mission. Saving peasant heritage at the last possible moment, however, is built on an element of contradiction. When Béla

Bartók, Béla Vikár and Zoltán Kodály recorded peasant music at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they too lamented the scarcity of old songs and the waning of peasant culture. Following in their footsteps, László Lajtha sounded a similar death knell: he too rushed to record and notate village bands and musicians. Today, dance-house elites are inheritors of this mentality when, at the same time, many Hungarians, both in Hungary and Romania, firmly hold the view about the resilience of the Hungarian minority despite the political and economic difficulties they are facing. I often heard in Romania from my Hungarian acquaintances the commonly held view that while the Romanian state is only able to celebrate its centennial of statehood, the Szeklers have resided in eastern Transylvania for more than 1000 years.

Such contradiction notwithstanding, the dominant dance-house discourse contains the startling element known as the “final hour” (*utolsó óra*). This idea has been institutionalized by the House of Tradition (Hagyományok Háza) and the founding of the Fonó club in 1995, as I mentioned above. The idea, final hour—although the “last-minute” would have been more apt—has been the brainchild of József Lukács (owner of the famed club Fonó in Buda) and László Kelemen, director of the House of Traditions. Starting in 1997, they embarked upon a “last-minute rescue effort” and in the next four years they contacted instrumentalists and bands in Hungary and outside, brought them to a Budapest studio and recorded their repertoire, about 112 bands and performers in all.¹⁸ The bands then offered master classes, played music at various dance-houses and soon celebrated their new CDs. This way the “far-away” and “exotic” villages in Transylvania continue to mean feverish rescue missions in search of singers, musicians and dancers, all remnants of national treasures.¹⁹ Photographs, clips and sound recording since the 1970s on the internet and various databases attest to these rescue missions. To be sure, the “final hour” mentality is not unique to Hungary. All over Europe, and in fact the world, under the pressures of globalization, industrialization and—lest we not forget—Americanization, local and regional customs have been in a state of flux and disappearing, some more rapidly than

¹⁸The collected material can be accessed in digital format in Folklore Database <http://www.folkloredb.hu/fdb/index.php?page=browse&tttype=11> (last accessed: 25 February 2019).

¹⁹It is telling how the last bagpipe, István Pál for instance, was found and pressured by the Budapest intellectuals to take up piping again (Szabó and Juhász 2013: 20). For more on this, see: Halmos et al. (2012).

others, while new ones take their places. In Great Britain, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, collectors of folk traditions felt the same way as many studies attest (Beiner 2007; Boyes 2010; Goertzen 1997; Ramnarine 2003). Susan Plötz for instance writes: “The purpose of these expeditions was clear: to collect the best examples of traditional folk culture and preserve them for posterity. This was perceived as a rescue operation in the final hour, as the old folkways had no place in modern life” (Österlund-Pötzch 2017: 40). Socialist and post-socialist Eastern European countries prove to be no exceptions (Cooley 2005). What we can all witness in these is not only a “crises of otherness” but increasingly an “emergency anthropology” as suggested by Augé (1994: 91).

I have often wondered, when I see some Hungarian villagers from Transylvania singing, dancing or playing music in one of the Budapest dance-houses, whether they really uphold the view of the “final hour”. Sadly, the youth of the community of Szék in Romania, where the concept of dance-house has been appropriated from, by the 1990s resorted to discos, thereby giving up the traditional local dancing habit.²⁰ A general process of modernization has taken its toll in many rural communities throughout Hungary after World War II, Hungarian ethnic minorities in Romania caught up with modernity somewhat later. This is why the concept “final hour” has easily targeted mostly Hungarian minority cultures in Romania, less so in Slovakia, Serbia or the Ukraine. A village elder I befriended told me “what passed is past, it cannot return.” When I reminded him that in the schools now old-time dancing is taught as part of the curricula, he smilingly added: “The more they teach children, the more they will do it differently. Sameness is shameless. In the past when I was young, I knew only one dance. These kids today learn dozens, but still do not know how to dance even one correctly.” Harsh words, yet they reveal how elderly villagers in Transylvania relate with indignation to the passing of tradition.

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, one of the major questions can continually be debated as to the meaning of tradition to today’s urban middle-class fans in comparison with what traditional

²⁰I have observed and described this modernizing process during my return visits to my earlier fieldwork sites. See my study “The last dance” (Kürti 2004). For a similar account in Hungarian concerning the Szék tradition, see Molnár (2005). The Gulyás brothers, János and Gyula, have produced a three-hour-long documentary about the waning of traditional community life in Szék. See “Széki lassú” (The Slow of Szék), János and Gyula Gulyás, Fórum Film Alapítvány, -MTV, 1993.

village life was all about 50 or 100 years ago. This is one of the reasons why the function of dance-houses and the needs of the dance-house industry are fundamentally incompatible. Originally, during the heyday of the popular youth movement, amateur enthusiasm, not money or exclusive stage performance, was the driving force of the dance-house clubs. Today, the industry feeds on the constant (re)discovery of heritage and a vicious recycling of versions of musical and dance traditions. Bands that do not have their latest CD on the market feel marginalized, and concert series throughout the year is a rule rather than exception for most. Such concerts generally feature guest instrumentalists, singers and dancers whose performances are sold as the “highlight” of the evening. Yet a two-hour concert of dance-house music is a theater event in itself whereas traditionally such music only served to provide musical accompaniment for dancing.

Intellectuals managing the dance-house industry feel they have to correct and standardize everything according to set formulae. Dance-house programs have to have “real” (meaning authentic) villagers to show their art and, of course, novices who have been indoctrinated into the process of preservation must carry on something that never really was. Dance-houses, whether in the capital or in the countryside, have a whole range of staple ingredients. Reproduction of traditional material simply means that children learn basic skills, singing and regional folk dances. Without doubt, “children’s education” caters to both parents and children, the moral being that parents have to feel responsible for teaching their offspring about values and archaic “traditions” of the past. The weight is on their shoulders: they have to pay for the instruction, bring children to classes and hope that sooner or later children will understand the burden of not only carrying but actually saving national culture.

Around the districts of Budapest, during the school-year from September to May, various cultural establishments regularly offer dance-house on weekly basis. However, the populist calendar reaches its apex in summertime and families select one or two such camps for children. Today, such folk dance camps are extremely popular not only in Hungary and Romania but North America as well.²¹ Followers gather in the countryside, spending a week with fellow dance enthusiasts. Today, in Hungary, dance camps are also included in many summer curricula of

²¹I am somewhat more critical about this institution than other scholars are, but those interested in the camp atmosphere might read Hooker (2008).

schools and amateur dance ensembles. It is revealing that while dance-house camps in Hungary have been popular since the late 1980s, in Romania, where institutionalized dance-houses were part of traditional village life before state socialism, and—subsequently—were banned by the authorities, today it flourishes. In the early 2000s there were roughly ten dance-house summer camps in Romania spread across the June-July-August months. By 2018, 57 were advertised in various locations.²² Hungarian youth from all over the neighboring states flock to these camps. It must be obvious by now that the dance-house is a Hungarian national institution. Anchored to it are a good dosage of national pride, traditionalism and populist rhetoric. For decades, if not 100 years, scholars in both Hungary and Romania—even some outsiders—have been concerned with just how “national” this tradition, including instrumental music, songs and dances, may be. Simon Broughton, a British aficionado of world music, has characterized the Transylvanian roots of Hungarian and Romanian music as follows: “The Romanian music of Transylvania is closer to the Hungarian than it is to the Romanian music outside Transylvania. And the Hungarian music of Transylvania sounds much more Romanian than the music of Hungary proper” (1999: 238). Whether citizens of Hungarians or Romanians feel this way today is debatable, the truth is, however, that scholars of both countries are in a never-ending search of their “national” and “traditional” past (Kürti 2002; Quigley 2008, 2014). In Hungary, this nostalgia is fed by the populist dance-house industry. Much more professional than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, dance-house art today plays both the tradition and modernity axis.²³

Dance-house today serves as a reference for politicians and cultural activists to express not only exciting performance practices but overall national concerns of longevity, revival and unity. A state secretary of the Ministry of National Resources expressed at the 40th anniversary of the dance-house that “preservation of national-folk culture provides the only

²² Figures are from the Association of Dance-House <http://tanchaz.hu/index.php/hu/taborok> (last accessed 25 February 2019).

²³ Rock music has been also “nationalized” this way, as many rock operas with historic, mythical and folkloric themes have been staged since the 1980s (Bülgözdi and Réti 2016; Hann 1990, 2016; Kürti 2012).

possibility for the survival of Hungarians.”²⁴ At this festive National Dance-House Meeting occasion, the minister of the Ministry of National Resources ceremoniously offered the UNESCO’s certificate of merit to Márta Sebestyén. Thus, this music and dance populism of the dance-house can be easily fitted and utilized into national or local celebrations and festivals. The internationalization of dance-house, similar to the Balkan popular folk music and dance, has merits as well as disadvantages (Lausevic 2007). Such international elevation to fame, led not only by UNESCO but such illustrious institutions as the American Smithsonian, fuels both the reproduction of revived folk traditions and the new heritage tourism across the world but the intended outcomes are far from that expected.²⁵ This is especially the case when the state appropriates local customs to promote skewed policies and distorted views about present and historic claims. In this, the Hungarian state seems remarkably similar to populist Turkey as a minority group’s heritage is safeguarded as the national culture at the expense of local customs (Aykan 2014).

²⁴ Quoted in “40 éves a táncházmozgalom” (The dance-house movement is 40 years old). *Múlt-kor Történelmi Magazin*, March 30, 2012 (https://mult-kor.hu/20120330_40_eves_a_tanchazmozgalom, last accessed: 25 February 2019).

²⁵ In 2013, Hungarian Heritage: Roots To Revival was a program at the Smithsonian with groups of dancers, musicians and craftspeople invited from Hungary. Naturally, the selection of participants is always the responsibility of the national organizers and not the Smithsonian. This alone assures that those involved with the national pedagogy and management of dancing will privilege artists deemed preferable and suitable to represent the Hungarian “living” tradition. For a similar account concerning UNESCO’s intangible heritage performance, see Taylor (2016). Mentioning the Smithsonian, I need to admit that I too was involved not with the Smithsonian but with Folkways Records in the early 1980s; the collections published by Folkways now are part of the Smithsonian archives. By producing three LPs with the recording house owned by the incredibly astute and friendly Moe Asch (1905–1986), my aim was to provide a glimpse of the state of Hungarian folk music both in the US and in Hungarian communities in Romania as they were practiced at that moment. While I am glad I did the recordings and offer music to a wider scholarly community, dismissal of the LPs was instantaneous. Some critics felt that the music I recorded at weddings among Hungarian villagers in Romania were not “authentic” enough. True, in addition to the well-known string bands favored by folk revival enthusiasts, drum, accordion and saxophone were included among the instruments. In the American-Hungarian musical collection, the so-called new-style popular music and not the “real” old-style songs dominated. This category did not meet the expectations of folk musicians and dance-house organizers. That was in the mid-1980s. Today, dance-house bands often include saxophones and drums; in fact there is a world music saxophone ensemble in Hungary (Dél-alföldi Saxophone Ensemble). In addition, newer-style popular music has been in vogue in the repertoire of dance-house bands, some utilizing accordion music as well. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*.

CONCLUSION: FROM RESISTANCE TO ASSISTANCE

I visited one folk dance camp this summer, and I noted that since the 1980s the system has not changed considerably. The majority of participants were between 16 and 30 years of age; high school and university students made up the majority of participants. Gray-haired participants with children proved that there is a vibrant inter-generational transmission of populist dance and music. Leaders, teachers, singers and musicians more often than not represent the more mature age bracket. Someone I have known since the early 1980s, a regular teacher on demand for offering special classes of Transylvanian dances, just turned 60. "I won't stop, I can't stop," he admits. "My whole life is this. I teach folk dance every week at my regular club, plus I have a contract to teach in one grade school. My daughter is a dance teacher. She just received her BA in folk dance."²⁶ He is right, at the camp he is teaching both morning and afternoon sessions; in addition, he and his long-time partner lead the free dance party evening as well. While regular day at the camp started around 9:30, but since dancing at night generally ended in the wee hours, only die-hards managed to get up early enough for singing, instrumental music or dance lessons. By lunchtime, however, the whole camp awakened, and afternoons were filled with various workshops; some enjoyed weaving, pottery-making, needlework and others took up violin, zither or other instrumental classes. I noticed how young-to-middle-aged men encircled my friend, eager to learn intricate footwork of a Transylvanian man's dance. Women also learned special skills of turning and whirling figures of a difficult couples' dance from my friend's partner. She is an assistant choreographer of a well-known excellent Budapest folkloric dance troupe.

Nationalizing culture, and not only printing and literature as earlier studies would have it, has been an obsession of regimes, cultural workers and state institutions around the world. The history and transformation of Hungarian dance-house, an alternative social movement at first but now a major force of the heritage industry, reveal a great deal about present-day Hungarian politics, national identity and culture. During state communism, the dance-house events, and their surrounding intellectual concerns, were mildly anti-establishmentarian nostalgia, a cultural resistance against

²⁶The Hungarian University of Dance Art (Magyar Táncművészeti Egyetem) offers BA and MA degrees in folk dance performance, teaching and choreographing. The "folk dance artist" MA program started in 2008.

socialist internationalism and Marxist-Leninist sloganeering. From my childhood I remember that on the surface this too exuded populist rhetoric: leaders were talking about socialist workers and peasants, working to eliminate poverty and even surpassing the West, and all the while Soviet revolutionary songs pointed the way to a happy communist future.²⁷ These, however, could not mask the dullness of life and the harsh realities of nationalizing and collectivizing programs, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee the countryside and farming. In this milieu, the intellectual movement led by cosmopolitan and liberal populist writers, artists and folklore enthusiasts offered a safety valve by reinforcing the myth of a bygone era of happy peasants singing about the fields, grazing animals and never-ending love.

Since the fall of communism in Hungary in 1989–1990, messages by right-wing governments have been overloaded with populist references to how and in what ways cultural institutions and the elites must serve the state in its efforts to strengthen national identity and non-communist national revival. As an engineering aspect of cultural life, dance and dancing are no exceptions as both may serve as well as undermine state hegemony. For example, such dance populism rendered the couples' *csárdás*²⁸ and the military-style male "*verbunk*" dances national status in the nineteenth century. At that time, countering Habsburg hegemony and cultural fashions radiating from Vienna was on the minds of both Hungarian aristocrats and middle classes. A total of 100 years later, Transylvanian dancing, its diverse forms and styles notwithstanding, has been accorded the status of Hungarian national dance, symbolizing national unity during the times of major political and economic upheavals. By celebrating an invented populist tradition, this ideology renders a facet of intangible heritage and an artificial community respectable in a political milieu that is fraught with myriad of contradictions. In a way, the elevation of Transylvanian dancing to the pedestal of national dance has created a new dance craze as numerous competitions in Hungarian communities for solo, couple and group dances aptly illustrate. Especially noticeable is the overt masculinization of dancing as eccentric and fancy footwork are judged as the primary essence of Hungarian energy, vigor and manliness.²⁸

²⁷ I have described this culture of Stalinist happiness earlier (Kürti 2013).

²⁸ I think the comparison of the American dance craze of the 1920s and 1930s would not be too far stretched (see, Martin 1994). Obviously this comparison would need a completely separate treatment.

This new populist dance tradition accurately demonstrates the distorted and centrally monitored postmodern “insurgent act of cultural translation” (Bhabha 2004: 7).

I must state firmly that the elevation of Transylvanian dancing as part of professional performances, school curricula and amateur club life is not itself the problem, as it is a vibrant and colorful aspect of leisure activity and dance stage arts. Such folkloristic revivals have been familiar throughout the world, some more powerful and variegated than others. As I describe above, young and old, locals and foreigners, all could enjoy the rush of adrenalin and feel the joy and togetherness at any of the dance-houses today whether in Budapest, regional towns or international folk dance clubs overseas. However, controlling and standardizing dancing and dances by the state, singling out few as the only proper way of artistic expression, seems to have been at best a mediocre state pedagogy and at worst a blind ideological commitment to state directives. Similarly, by declaring the square dance by many states in the US as an official state dance contests the very notion of an anthropological understanding of culture, a constantly changing and dynamic process allowing communities to respond to challenges facing them. Yet, the institutionalized dance-house has become a profound tool for the state to rekindle interest in identity and national revival which raises serious questions about dance populism as forming a systemic and over-valued aspect of state hegemony.

Right-wing populist politics are in vogue these days in the US (Trump), the UK (Brexit) and various European states where populist parties have experienced election fortunes by gaining important seats and votes (Inglehart and Norris 2016). This trajectory plays out in particular ways in the post-socialist world (Serbia, Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Ukraine), where remnants of state socialism are coupled with unbridled capitalism influencing both right and left-wing populists.²⁹ Situated as it is in Hungary at the center of a state-maintaining ideology, populist ideology is quite another matter, however. In power since 2010, and with an overwhelming victory at the 2014 and 2018 national elections, Viktor

²⁹According to a survey conducted by Freedom House, Hungary and Poland have the lowest ranking in Central Europe in the decline of democracy and rule of law since 2007. See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017> (last accessed: 25 February 2019).

Orbán and his ruling Fidesz-Christian Democratic Party have entrenched themselves even more firmly in power. With two-thirds majority in parliament, today's rulers have been able to complement populist ideology with policy by completely controlling the media, education and civil society. Based on Christian fundamentalism, nationalism and anti-immigration campaigns, their messages are replete with references to "peoples' power" and "national unity", both threatened by a massive international conspiracy. Liberals, civil rights activists and non-Christians are all suspects in this and are not only to be condemned but silenced as well. Thus, the collision between the state and both its internal and external enemies has shown its ugly face.

As the Hungarian case aptly illustrates, the past two decades of populist propaganda, especially its more virulent aspects since 2010, have a remarkable successful trajectory. Even some of my neighbors who cannot articulate any sensible definition about nation, migration or civil society repeat bits and pieces from the speeches of the prime minister or what they hear and see on the (official) evening news. In general conversations, mentioning national rejuvenation and condemning the EU or George Soros—both targeting national unity by assisting global migration—are often coupled with worn-out symbols and trappings of the nation-state. Accordingly, national and local celebrations today not only entail singing the national anthem but also reciting patriotic poems and songs—some of which were popular during the inter-war period—the Transylvanian (Szekler) anthem, folk music and dancing from that region together with revived local peasant traditions have become essential constituents of legitimating symbols. It is a startling revelation that in this process a segment of population, known earlier as peasants, has continually been mystified on stage and in politics for both home and overseas consumption. This reworked potato principle captures not the essence of long-disappeared small-scale rural communities and the ways in which their culture, local-level politics and economy supported village life; contrarily, it creates a fantasy world in the service of the state which wants to reeducate and regulate society in general and youth in specific. Hopefully, this populist Disneyland will not lead to total social engineering, a disastrous process Europeans have been all too familiar with during the past century.

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