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Competing Frameworks of Interpreting Modernity in East Central Europe

An Introduction

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Interwar East Central Europe remains somewhat of an enigma for historians and historical sociologists of ideologies, political practices and modernity in general. Seven decades of research have produced numerous competing interpretations and characterizations, creating a situation in which we might feel more at ease discussing the historiography of the subject matter than the subject matter itself. This is partly because of the natural barriers the region presents to researchers. Numerous and diverse local languages, frequent ruptures of political evolution, intersecting outside influences operating on multiple levels from the directly political to the cultural: interwar histories of East Central Europe have not proven a simple task to tackle. Nothing demonstrates this better than the fact that the referent object of "East Central Europe" still bears re-definition both in terms of geography and historical trajectory. In the present case, this regional appellation refers, geographically, to the Eastern 'arc' of Europe's semi-periphery, running from the Baltics to Greece. Conceptually the central question which the present and subsequent thematic units in *Historical Studies on Central Europe* are looking to investigate aims at a better understanding of regional responses to challenges of modernity and modernization.

In interpreting the relationship between East Central Europe and modernity, no other term has had such a persistent influence on shaping the discourse as the notion of backwardness. A powerful metaphor, it evoked a paradigmatic or at least 'normal' variant of modernity from which the region had somehow deviated.[1] Backwardness, however, also implied belatedness, the elusive promise of catching up—in sum, it preserved the idea of modernity in the singular, with deviation

1 Janos, "The Politics of Backwardness."

becoming a malfunction to be corrected.[2] Even in discussions of backwardness which remained pessimistic about the chances of overcoming historical underdevelopment, the perspective of a single modernity-cum-deviations proved sustainable, contributing to the resilience of the term.[3]

The alternative to positing a single, core meaning of modernity has surfaced in multiple research projects rooted in various disciplines—but no other formulation has proven more successful than the framework proposed by S. N. Eisenstadt in 2000, allowing for the conceptualization of 'multiple modernities.' In his famous essay, Eisenstadt reduced the shared meaning of all 'modernities' to belief in "a conception of the future characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency."[4] This opened a window to conceiving of various political, economic and cultural patterns of development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as representing distinct, and even more importantly, divergent alternatives of navigating modernity.

With regard to its applicability to East Central Europe, especially during the interwar period, the problems inherent in the multiple modernities thesis are quickly brought to light. Eisenstadt distinguished between a liberal, a socialist/communist, a fascist and a national socialist paradigm of (re)constructing modernity, while in the past two decades his concepts tended to be used increasingly in contexts where identifying alternatives to a Eurocentric perspective represented an important goal for authors.[5] Neither of these directions appears particularly productive for the research dilemmas associated with the topic of this collection of papers. Even if one were to disregard the criticism from authors who consider technological and other 'unifying' factors of modernity more determinative than those supporting the distinction among the multiple varieties of modernity, the problem of trying to make sense of hybrid regimes, rapid changes in political systems and representations would remain.[6] Eisenstadt's ideological variants simply fail to capture the mixed and often transitional character of rebuilding society, developing the economy and transforming the ways politics was conducted during the interwar period in the region. Additionally, Eurocentrism is not a research flaw from which analyses of East Central Europe would need to distance themselves: the goal, for most, would after all include situating the semiperiphery in histories of Europe and doing so without being relegated to the role of representing locally (mis)adapted variants of innovations and transfers from the 'core countries.'[7]

2 For a concise, yet sophisticated narrative in this mode, see: Berend, "What is Central and Eastern Europe," esp. 401–4.

3 Chirot, "Causes and Consequences," 1–11; Brenner, "Economic Backwardness."

4 Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," 3, 7.

5 Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," 10–1; Schmidt, "Multiple Modernities?" 2887–9.

6 Fitzpatrick, "Introduction."

7 Stokes, "The Social Origins," 210–1.

It is therefore perhaps better to survey characteristics—challenges and outcomes—of modernity across the region during the interwar years, choosing to 'shop around' for more meso-level theories and situate those in their historical contexts. In this respect, the metaphor of the 'gardening state' as proposed by Zygmunt Bauman (and used in numerous broader contexts since) offers a productive vista towards making sense of the increased interest in the well-being of populations—linking physiological and mental dimensions of this concern.[8] Practices in totalitarian and democratic states could be meaningfully compared in this respect, and the various hybrid regimes of interwar East Central Europe fit very well into this framework.[9] Mandatory prenuptial medical examinations within a broader framework of all-encompassing pronatalism, physical education with or without an overt militaristic dimension, measuring access to nutrients, and so on—all of these concerns represent typical instances of interwar biopolitics in the region, beyond some of the better researched and more extreme aspects such as eugenic initiatives.[10] In the present introductory collection of papers, Lucija Balikić's essay offers at least two important caveats to this discussion.[11] It highlights how preoccupation with physical fitness and training could be part of a modernizing project rooted in liberal nationalism, with the Sokol movement, however, gradually becoming hybridized itself and reflecting the political transformations around it (as Yugoslav parliamentarism was replaced by the king's autocratic rule in 1929). In the end, the Yugoslav Sokol movement chose to support the royal dictatorship out of modernizing—not to say: modernist considerations, yielding an ideological construct that resists easy categorizing: emulation of more advanced, Western nations was to be achieved by transcending the badly copied political system and replacing it with a royal regime that would be better able to guide the backward society toward enlightened modernity.

Discounting Czechoslovakia, proponents of the liberal project of modernity/modernization represented, however, the minority across the region for the better part of the era. A uniquely successful alternative vision was that of corporatism, with some of its success perhaps due to the vagueness of the term. This lack of specific meaning was due to the multiple ideological lineages that contributed to interwar corporatism: molding (first and foremost) politicized reform or Neo-Catholic thinking, as well as German *Ordoliberalism*, fascist ideas and multiple local traditions of interest representation, a corporate reconstitution of state and society could be made to fit a wide variety of programs united by the quest for re-establishing a social

8 Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 91–2; Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 20–1.

9 Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden*.

10 Griffin, "Tunnel Visions," esp. 435–6, and 446–8; for a more broadly empirical account on the modernism-eugenic linkage see: Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*.

11 Balikić, "Depoliticizing the Modern Nation."

order without the scars caused by liberal 'individualism' and 'greed', and by Marxist class politics. Corporatism could be fused with one or more national ideological legacies, yielding various incarnations often with considerable differences between them.[12] In a single country, multiple varieties of corporatist reform could be vying for eminence especially during the 1930s with proponents cooperating or opposing each other depending on the specific context. In Romania, noted economist and politician Mihail Manoilescu, representing a strongly nationalist and partly agrarian variation of corporatism could balance between belonging to the establishment and support for the fascist Iron Guard during the 1930s.[13] Both the authoritarian 'mainstream' Right and Codreanu's radical movement was receptive to and was in fact developing corporatist ideologies that seemed to bridge the gap separating societal self-organization and societal control, and offering, according to various proponents, a successful third way between weak liberal democracy and dictatorship. Similarly, Hungarian domestic politics in the 1930s remained enthralled by various corporatist ideas: from former 'white officer' turned Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös's quasi-fascist vision of societal reorganization in the early 1930s to Neo-Catholic projects culminating in the 1940 draft constitution by PM Pál Teleki, corporatism never ceased to function as a buzzword, of which only its anti-parliamentary and anti-liberal dimensions remained fairly clear and constant.[14]

Aleksandar Stojanović's present paper tackles a special case within the broader current of corporatist political design: briefly surveying interwar predecessors, his contribution focuses on a 1942 attempt during World War II to propose a corporatist constitution for occupied Serbia, one that would demonstrate ideological proximity to the occupiers while also being exclusively rooted—in its formulation—in Serbian political and social tradition.[15] Building on the idea of the *zadruga*, the extended family-based cooperative from the Serbian agrarian tradition, the constitutional proposal eliminated any measure of real societal control over politics and especially over the executive—much like it had happened in corporatist Austria and as it had been proposed by one of Teleki's collaborators in designing a Hungarian corporatist constitution in 1939–1940. Even an 'outlier' case, such as that of wartime Serbia, offers multiple points of meaningful comparison in the broader region, attesting to the importance of including the study of corporatist thought high on the list of research priorities for interpreting developments roughly summarized under

12 For an early synthesis see: Luebbert, "Social Foundations." For recent, well-known investigations—focusing, less, however, on the non-authoritarian linkages, Pinto, "Fascism, Corporatism."

13 Rizescu, "Corporatism in Inerwar Romania," 117–8.

14 Romsics, "Reform a keresztény nacionalizmus."

15 Stojanović, "The Concept of the Serbian Peasant Cooperative State."

the notion of the rise of 'illiberal subjectivities' during the first half of the twentieth century. Incidentally, as with Balikić's paper, the subject matter permits comparison with other European mesoregions and countries: both physical culture/education and corporatism represented pan-continental phenomena which call for a careful stock-taking of shared and case-specific characteristics.

The third paper in the present collection further highlights the importance of historical intersections, of transnational history for interpreting developments in the region. Dávid Turbucz's contribution surveys two, related dimensions of the leader cult around the person of Miklós Horthy, Regent of Hungary during the interwar period.[16] He analyzes both the appropriation of religious symbolism for a secular religion around the Regent and the participation of churches in his cult as a leader and savior of Hungary. The two represent—from the point of view of the history of ideologies—opposing trends. As Emilio Gentile has highlighted, totalitarian regimes draw on religious imaginaries to appropriate structures from societally embedded universes of meaning and partially construct their leader cults in quasi-religious terms.[17] At the same time, the full co-optation of churches and the delegation to these spiritual elites of the task of disseminating the cult of the leader characterizes a more traditional paradigm of politics. As Turbucz demonstrates, the two dimensions co-existed in Hungary and in the cult around Horthy specifically. Neither Gentile's fascism-based interpretation nor Juan Linz's distinction of authoritarian regimes (more pluralistic and traditional, less focused on ideology and mobilization than fascist ones) seems to capture his subject matter in itself.[18] East Central Europe is revealed, in this instance, as a region of hybridized forms, where transnational influences and local practices coalesce around successful techniques of political representation, reinforcing their societal impact.

The present collection of studies suggests, in the last end, that phenomena we associate with 'modernity' in East Central Europe do not represent a separate category that could stand in as an instance of multiple modernities. This does not infirm or confirm Eisenstadt's proposition, nor those of his critics: the region does not appear anywhere in this literature on its own right. Furthermore, the earlier approach of viewing the 'lands in between' through the lens of backwardness appears misleading, as well. Some idea of backwardness was very much acknowledged, across the political spectrum, in most countries of the region, yet overcoming backwardness ceased to be tied in with adopting 'Western' or 'European' blueprints. A case not treated in the present volume is that of Bulgaria—but existing research largely confirms the comparability of many ideological developments there with

16 Turbucz, "Nation Building and Religion."

17 Gentile, "The Sacralization of Politics."

18 Linz, "The Religious Use of Politics."

those unfolding in other countries of the region. The shift towards the vilification of 'external interference' reflects the disillusionment with liberal patterns of reform and, as Maya Kosseva and her co-authors have argued, political imaginaries of the interwar period tended to resolve the tension between backwardness and the desired return to tradition by 'inventing' a tradition which at the same time seemed to offer superior responses to the acknowledged pressures and challenges of modernity as well.[19] More generally, similar logics have been explored in various works (co-)written by Balázs Trencsényi, who has defined the underlying turn to the irrational and to communitarian political imaginaries as crucial for understanding the ideological fermentation of East Central European modernities.[20]

Taken together, the above should allow for an assessment of the difficulties implicit in (re)considering the region's interwar history in the light of modernity and strategies for modernization. The homogenizing approaches which reduced core regional trends to representing the gradual spread of fascism, and in which Western 'bourgeois' and Eastern 'socialist' scholarship mirrored each other in the 1950s and 1960s, have been thoroughly revised by several generations of newer research.[21] Perhaps no single concept has contributed more to the revisionist drive in histories of East Central Europe than Linz's notion of authoritarian regimes.[22] More recent research, often about the subject matters discussed in these papers, has, however, problematized the Linzian paradigm, as well. Too many phenomena suggest the adoption of novel political technologies, social visions and biopolitical agendas in the region to simply fit these regimes into the category of authoritarianism which, for Linz, stands as the traditionalist, non-totalitarian counter-concept to fascism.[23]

The unease regarding the authoritarian–totalitarian dichotomy mirrors concerns from other regions, arguably also on the European semi-periphery—or at least not counted among 'core' countries. Stanley Payne points out that an important lesson for Francisco Franco was the fall of the dictator of the pre-republican period, Miguel Primo de Rivera, who refused to consider the exigencies of modern mass politics. The failure of Primo, who revived nineteenth-century political practices and, despite his military background, built a bureaucratic-authoritarian system,

19 Kosseva et al. "European Dilemmas," 89.

20 Trencsényi, *The Politics of 'National Character',* 12–4, and passim., in the subsequent case studies contained in the volume.

21 See: Mosse, "The Genesis of Fascism," and a late instance demonstrating the longevity of the approach: Barany, "The Dragon's Teeth." For an early revisionist work, see: Weber, "Fascism and some Harbingers," esp. 746–7.

22 For a systematic restatement, see: Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

23 Miley, "Franquism as Authoritarianism."

pushed Franco towards becoming more aware of the role of societal structures and ideology in stabilising modern political systems. Simultaneously, he integrated the fascist movement of the *Falange*, was to some extent fascistised as public figure himself,[24] and in the end formed a bridge between Christian conservatives, monarchist groups and fascists. Similar trends can be brought forth with regard to the royal dictatorships (Yugoslavia and Romania) in the East Central European region, and also in the case of Miklós Horthy. While the latter was perhaps less conscious as a politician, the cult builders around him created the image of a traditionalist authoritarian leader (not reliant on a mass movement or paramilitary organization), yet who at once retained charismatic leadership elements akin to the political imaginaries of the conservative revolutionaries and fascists.[25]

It will remain an important task for histories of East Central Europe to identify strong traditional currents that had the power to modulate ideational transfers—during the interwar period and beyond. In Poland, to be explored in the future on these pages, Catholicism could have served as a natural basis for an authoritarian order, as it did Portugal, except it could not be wielded against the chief opponents of Marshall Józef Piłsudski's *Sanacja* [Healing] regime. Despite this lack, Piłsudskian politics served a similar function to Horthy's: it occupied symbolic and social 'ground' from other, more radical communitarian movements of domestic of international origin. This is why Stanislav Andreski called the *Sanacja* government a 'pseudo-fascist' regime created in Poland between the two world wars in the face of 'semi-fascism.'[26] Other examples of modernizing, but in many ways traditionalist political regimes 'occupying' and 'filling' political space can easily be found in the wider region. Both the attempted royal dictatorship in Romania and even the authoritarian shifts in the Baltic countries, especially in Lithuania, such as the regime of Antanas Smetona, have sought to contain their own far-right opposition by introducing various integrative, syncretic political representations and practices.[27]

With modernity and the pressures of modernization widely acknowledged, and receiving numerous impulses and wholesale ideological transfers from laboratories of sociopolitical innovation in 'core countries', politicians and intellectuals, especially those hailing from the establishment of their respective countries, were aware of the need to adapt. With foreign imports often masked as the rediscovery of domestic tradition and thus bridging the backwardness vs. autochthonous development divide, painstaking research is required into histories of social movements

24 The exact extent of this is debatable, but the existence of a general trend is itself sufficient to support the parallels presented here. Payne, "Franco, the Spanish Falange."

25 Turbucz, *A Horthy-kultusz*, 140–5.

26 Andreski, *Wars, Revolutions, Dictatorships*, 69–72.

27 Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 66–7.

and ideologies with the goal of overcoming the 'fascist or authoritarian' dichotomy.[28] Understanding and putting to use the ideas of the theories of fascistization and parafascism are likely to prove productive in this regard,[29] but so will a renewed focus on transformations of liberal/parliamentary legacies, as well, which seem to have received less attention of late. In this latter respect, the diverse studies collected in a recent volume edited by Sabrina Ramet prove a much-needed addition to our perspective.[30] The current, initial selection of studies also includes one contribution investigating the hybridized afterlife of liberal legacies under the conditions of interwar modernity, which is very much in keeping with the ambitions of these papers published here and in forthcoming issues: to continue building nuanced representations of a complex regional past. This will serve to inform historians of all specializations about dynamics of transfer and adaptation, transnational learning and the genesis of regional, often hybridized patterns.

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28 Kallis, "The Fascist Effect," 13–4.

29 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, 130–1; Kallis, "The Fascist Effect," 36–7; Kallis, "Fascism, Parafascism and Fascistization"; Eatwell, "Introduction."

30 Ramet, ed., *Interwar East Central Europe*.

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