



Burghers, Intellectuals, and Gentries. The Utopia of Alternative Modernization in the Interwar Hungarian Populist Movement: László Németh, Ferenc Erdei, and István Bibó¹

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Abstract. The paper's aim is a critical reconstruction concerning the ideas of the most renowned representatives of the Hungarian Popular Movement: László Németh, Ferenc Erdei, and István Bibó. It contextualizes the notion of “populism”, which has semantically become overburdened up to now: it means everything and nothing. The Hungarian Populist Movement must be interpreted in the interwar Central-Eastern European and Hungarian contexts. The notion of dual society was a catchword for the abovementioned thinkers; according to its basic tenet, in Hungarian society, there is a symbiosis of modern and premodern segments. The demand for emancipation of the peasantry as a common denominator was frequently connected with the idea of alternative modernization; it was imagined as an autochthonous development different from the Western European models.

Keywords: populism, dual society, burgher, intellectual, gentry, alternative modernization

Introduction

After the Trianon Treaty (1920) resulting in the mutilation of historical Hungary, the aristocracy- and gentry-dominated Hungarian political elites found themselves

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in an uneasy situation (Lendvai 2003: 388). The country had lost two thirds of its territory and half of its population; the political mood of the élites and the masses made impossible other foreign policy than one aiming to reclaim, at least partly, the lost territories. The wounded national consciousness sought solace in irredentism elevated to quasi-religious position. The lessons at elementary schools in the interwar-period Hungary began every morning with the “Hungarian Credo”: I believe in God/ I believe in a Fatherland/ I believe in eternal divine justice/ I believe in Hungary’s resurrection!/Amen (Bíró–Balogh 2007).

Concerning the power relations and Hungary’s geopolitical situation, the revision of the Trianon Treaty was not possible without the support of a major power being interested in the reconfiguration of state borders in Central and Eastern Europe. The ally with Nazi Germany seemed an appropriate means for achieving the fervently hoped aim of revision. The results, at the beginning, seemed to justify this policy: as the consequence of the First and Second Vienna Awards in 1938 and 1940, Hungary had reclaimed some of its former territories from Czechoslovakia and Romania, but in the summer of 1943, at the time of the Szárszó meeting, after the battle of Stalingrad, the German defeat and the potential withdrawal of border revisions with it foreshadowed themselves.

What concerns Hungary’s inner situation in the fields of economy, society, and domestic policy after the trauma of Trianon, we can say – taking the risks of simplification – that the process of modernization that had been accelerated in the period of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy between 1867–1914 came to a stop. At the same time, economic consolidation, in spite of the loss of the major part of economic resources, was successful until the years of the Great Depression, but societal structure had got stymied: feudal and modern social structures coexisted. It was the situation of a “dual society”, as described by the sociologist Ferenc Erdei, whose ideas will be treated in this paper. At the same time, there was a social fermentation during the whole interwar period, and the question of the reforms was on the agenda. Aristocracy- and gentry-bred political elites co-opted strata from the rich peasantry and the petit bourgeois, but the power relations did not change essentially. The political regime of Hungary can be described with the term of “elective or electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler 2006). There was a multi-party system without a real political competition: the challengers of the ruling party did not have a real chance to get political power. Different reform movements, from the right to the left, tried to enter into the political arena and change the petrified political constellation. It was a very symptomatic fact that there was not a secret suffrage in the Hungarian countryside until 1939 – the voters had to cast their votes publicly in the presence of the members of the election committees.

The Hungarian Populist Movement (Borbándi 1976): The Peasantry and the Idea of Hungarian “Sonderweg” to Modernity

The economic depression of 1929–1933 had struck the countryside peasantry stronger than the city dwellers. The Hungarian land reform after the First World War did not put end to the economic and social domination of the large estates, and the majority of the much segmented Hungarian peasantry consisted of small landowners with non-viable farms and landless agrarian workers. Dezső Szabó, one of the most renowned writers of the interwar period and the forefather of the Hungarian Populist Movement, proclaimed the idea of a peasant revolution connected to the idea of a new, second acquisition of the Hungarian Fatherland. (This was a historical allusion to the acquisition of the Carpathian Basin by the Hungarian tribes a thousand years earlier.) Szabó orchestrated his theory in a xenophobic, ethnicist style, fabricating a mythical Manichean history of philosophy in which Hungarian history was presented as a continuous struggle between the ethnically foreign ruling elites: the aristocracy, the high priests of the Catholic Church, in modern times, the bourgeoisie and the “true-born”, ethnically “pure” Hungarian peasantry (Kovács 2007). There was a strange discrepancy between this conception and the post-war reality: the shrunk Hungary, as a consequence of the disaggregation of the former multi-ethnic political unit, the so-called Saint Stephen’s Empire, became an almost ethnically homogeneous country. There were no sizable minorities, except the highly assimilated Hungarian Jewry. So, the theory of Dezső Szabó was an example of scapegoat mechanism; a response of a traumatized community by the shock of the diminution of historical Hungary. Dezső Szabó, similarly to other interwar-period Eastern European populist ideologues, did not reject modernization *in toto*; instead of it, he imagined an alternative modernity compatible with the Hungarian national character (Kovács 2015, Trencsényi 2012); his core idea was an autochthon, third-road modernization.

At the same time, Dezső Szabó and his ethnicist-xenophobic tone meant just one thread in the multi-colored fabric of the Hungarian Popular Movement. It is undeniable that the ethnocentric approach, to some extent, was present in the case of many of its protagonists, but it did not hold true for everybody; there were important exceptions: Zoltán Szabó and István Bibó must be mentioned in this respect. Speaking about populism nowadays, one should mention a methodological problem. This category has semantically been overburdened; instead of categorizing for a phenomenon in the field of history of ideas, it is frequently used for stigmatization: this label is stuck to the forehead of the actual bad guy expelling him/her from the company of decent people (Piccone 1995). Populism itself is undeniably responsible for this confusion:

it embraces different historical phenomena being far away from each other in space and time, from the democratic Jeffersonian-origin agrarian populism in America through the South American variant á la Juan Domingo Peron in Argentina to the Eastern European peasant populism in Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (Canovan 1981: 8–16).

However, for a time, the Hungarian Popular Movement was a political factor emerging in the thirties. It embraced a wide political spectrum and cut across the ideological borders of the political right and left. A common denominator was the idea of the emancipation of peasantry. It is rooted in the so-called sociography movement of well-known Hungarian writers and sociologists who, in their books, called the public attention to the miserable condition of Hungarian peasantry which, for them, was a group of outcasts and the potential resource for an autochthon modernization at the same time (Némedi 1985). The protagonists of the movement represented a new young generation socialized in the post-war Hungary; their first imprints had been got in the troubled atmosphere of the late twenties and the early thirties when a temporary consolidation was replaced by the despairing years of the Great Depression with extremely high unemployment and pauperization. Such authors were under thirty when their books appeared. The specificity of the genre of this sociography was a mixture of empirical sociological approach and a subjective literal tone. The titles of their books were expressive, provoking the attention and conscience of their potential readers. The book of Imre Kovács entitled *Néma forradalom* (Silent Revolution) dealt with the phenomenon of only child concerning the peasants who, by this way, tried to prevent the parceling of the land among their successors. The author depicted the depressed, desperate mood, the fatalistic hopelessness preventing peasants from social activism to improve their conditions. Géza Féja, in his book entitled *Viharsarok* (Corner of Storm) described the peasant life of south-eastern Hungary, which had been a traditional land of peasant revolts in the past, and warned the ruling élites to the possibility of a peasant uprising. Zoltán Szabó's sociography entitled *Cifra nyomorúság* (Ornamented Poverty) dealt with the peasant life of north-eastern Hungary, the so-called "palóc" region, and pointed out that the over-decorated, magnificent folk costume of this region was a symptom of a crisis: a substitute activity in the lack of real chances for upward social mobility. In his work entitled *Parasztok* (Peasants), the talented young sociologist of peasant origin, Ferenc Erdei applied a more scientific sociological method than the above-mentioned sociographers, who were belletrists; he made a comparative analysis of the different historical trajectories of peasantry of European regions, albeit his approach was not without a lyrical, subjective tone, and its language proved the author's literal talents.

Hungarian populism was a multi-colored movement whose representatives, writers, ethnographers, sociographers, and sociologists had a leaning toward

third-road theories based on the idea of *alternative modernization* different from the models realized in the western parts of Europe (Rohkrämer 1999). In Germany, this kind of cultural criticism was connected to the movement of conservative revolution (Mohler 1989, Woods 1996). At the core of these theories was the motif of dual society; in Hungarian society, according to this conception, there is an uneasy and enforced symbiosis between pre-modern, feudal and modern, and capitalistic social structures both on the upper and lower levels of social hierarchy. This phenomenon involved some kind of co-tenancy on the level of social consciousness: modern, bourgeois ethos coexisted with noble-origin gentry mentality and gained domination in public life from state bureaucracy and administration to party politics.

Hungary at Cross-Roads: The Meeting of Szárszó for Hungarian Public Intellectuals in 1943

During the Second World War, Ferenc Erdei entered in a new phase of his intellectual carrier. In the thirties, he belonged to the abovementioned third-road thinkers visioning an autochthon, grassroots modernization based on the initiatives of peasant entrepreneurs. He assumed that such grassroots will provide the required models for a transformation different from the Western European historical development, which will result in a bourgeois society: the peasantry that has lost its historic identity and culture will be transformed into a group of agrarian producers in accordance with the ethos of the capitalist market economy. According to the evidence of his lecture presented at the 1943 Szárszó meeting, he gave up his former intellectual-ideological position (Pintér 1983: 188–209). Dual society, as a referential framework, remained essential in his conception, but, as his lecture proved it, he drew a radically different practical-political conclusion from the theory. Erdei gave a historical-sociological analysis of Hungary of the period between the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 and the Second World War. There was an uneasy co-tenancy of pre-modern and modern social structures; aristocracy, gentry, and peasantry on the one hand, bourgeoisie and working class on the other hand. There was a tacit agreement among the élites: aristocracy and gentry possessed political power, while bourgeoisie possessed the key positions of the modern, capitalist market economy. Erdei's train of thought did not lack a light version of ethnicist approach: he pointed out that capitalist élites in Hungarian capitalism had been recruited from ethnically foreign social groups, but – using typically Marxian categories – he emphasized the interest coalition between the gentry and the bourgeoisie in the maintaining of the feudal-capitalist system based on the exploitation of the peasantry and the working class. As Erdei pointed out, the dual system in the interwar period had

been modernized: the gentry occupied the key positions of state bureaucracy and public service; the capitalist economy had to accept some kind of state control, while the social basis of the system had been broadened by the co-optation of the upper strata of petit bourgeoisie and rich peasantry. In 1943, Erdei did not believe any more in the prospect of a third-road modernization based on peasantry. He became a fellow traveler, a “Mitfahrer” of communists: in the conclusion of his lecture of 1943, he emphasized that the only possible solution would be a political transformation by the agency of the working class. Bourgeois democracy would only be a temporary period on the road leading to socialist democracy.

László Németh, the best known third-road thinker of the interwar period, was the debate partner of Ferenc Erdei during the meeting of Szárszó. Németh was a writer and ideologist, an emblematic figure of the interwar Hungarian Populist Movement. In the ‘20s, he established a one-man journal named *Tanú* (Eyewitness) of which he was the author, editor, and publisher at the same time. This journal had a great influence on the contemporary Hungarian intellectuals. His cultural criticism had been inspired by Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher on the one hand and the German neoconservative Tat-circle on the other hand. The conception of Németh László was an amalgamation of an élite theory, a culture-centered program of national regeneration and cultural criticism (Kovács 2013, Trencsényi 2012: 93–94). Every century, he asserts, has a central idea on which the intellectual and material civilization of the age is based. The 19th century was the age of factory, whose main idea, “gigantomaniac” industrialism, was based on a shallow calculative rationalism on the whole life. One of the main vices of the 19th century was that it had desacralized nature; instead of treating and respecting it as a sacred organic wholeness, this century reckoned nature as an object of exploitation. Human being had been torn out of the nature and became a one-dimensional *homo oeconomicus* seeing nature exclusively as a repository of raw materials, an object waiting for exploitation.

The 20th century, in the historical philosophy of Németh, is the age of garden; this means a return of an earth-bound, human-sized existence aiming at replacing the gigantomania of the 19th century. Németh was a typical third-road thinker: both capitalism and bolshevism were for him the outmoded relics of the 19th century. His option is an interesting utopia mixing earth-bound human existence with a high-cultured elitist way of life; it can be realized in small communities devoted to horticulture and high culture at the same time; in his view, *homo oeconomicus* will be replaced by *homo aesthetico-culturalis*. His utopian essay entitled *Kapások* (Gardeners with Hoes) (1935) described a high-cultured commune, whose dwellers, while working in the garden, are reciting poems of Keats or reading Aeschylus, naturally in Greek language (Németh 1992b). Németh envisioned the “revolution of quality”; the 20th century, in contrast with the 19th century whose leading idea was quantity, is the age of quality including professional-intellectual work and

handicraft. This revolution will put an end to gigantomaniac industrialism; it will represent a human-sized economic and social order, which resacralizes human life and promotes reconciliation with nature.

In his lecture of 1943 in Szárszó, Németh reformulated his third-road modernization utopia (Pintér 1983: 214–226). The antagonism of the exploiting and exploited classes, he argues, will be dissolving in the process of middle-classification in which the classical factory proletariat of the 19th century will disappear. Németh depicted a utopian vision of the emerging society of intellectuals and strongly refused both the Anglo-Saxon capitalism and the Russian bolshevism, both being considered inappropriate models for post-war Hungary.

Clericals, Intellectuals, and Gentries – Utopic and Real Ways to Modernity

“To be a master is a social role in a medieval feudal society based on estates, to be a member of the middle-class is a social role in modern capitalistic class society, while to be an intellectual is a perpetual human role transcending from concrete, restricted, contingent, historical situations” (Bibó 1986: 516).² This quotation is from an essay of István Bibó (1911–1979), who belonged, together with Erdei, to another generation: he was a decade younger than László Németh. Bibó was a political thinker and the bulk of his oeuvre was produced during the war years and mainly after the war, but the Hungarian Populist Movement was one of the first imprints in his intellectual career. His quoted essay, entitled *Értelmiség és szakszerűség* (Intelligentsia and Professionalism) was written in 1947, one of the crisis-laden periods of the Hungarian history in the 20th century. The direct context of the writing was the post-war situation of Hungary; the country was among the losers of the war, and the peace settlement of Paris practically reinforced the Peace Treaty of Trianon of 1919, sanctifying again and for good the decomposition of the historical Greater Hungary. The interwar Hungarian political élite, according to Bibó, was dominated by the gentry, which had traditionally possessed alone the political positions in the arena of the local, county politics, at the county meetings and after the Austrian Hungarian Compromise (1867) occupied the administrative-bureaucratic positions of the new state and became the co-tenant of the aristocracy as a political power holder in the field of national politics.

These developments were strongly criticized not only by the interwar Hungarian populist thinkers as Dezső Szabó and László Németh or Ferenc Erdei but by the conservative historian Gyula Szekfű as well. The latter, in his seminal

2 Translation of the study's author (from Hungarian).

book entitled *Három nemzedék* (Three Generations), introduced the narrative of the history of decline, the *Verfallsgeschichte*, and depicted a gloomy picture about the social-political-cultural consequences of the gentry-dominated public life with preponderant state apparatuses (on Szekfű, see: Dénes 2015). His panacea was a conservative reform reinstating a modernized, streamlined Saint Stephen's Empire. The abovementioned populist thinkers vehemently refused the conservative solution suggested by Szekfű and insisted on the idea of a social revolution which aimed at emancipating peasantry, the overwhelming majority of the population.

What we are interested in is the gentry critique of Hungarian populism and the problem of intelligentsia which is frequently associated with it. This association is at the core of the theory of László Németh, whose history of philosophy is based upon the utopian idea of intellectualization and spiritualization of both the political power and the whole society. In the opinion of Németh, the essence of modern European history is the growing importance of intelligentsia; modern society is dominated by the middle-class, whose number and influence are increasing. The author assumes that the middle-class is built on the features and mentality of the intelligentsia; high culture plays an ever-growing role in the public life of modern nations.

From this hypothesis, Németh deduces the necessity of an elite change. In the early thirties, when he criticizes the gentry-dominated Hungarian political life, he describes the Hungarian gentry – metaphorically speaking – as a rider having a great routine how to ride: he knows when the horse needs spurring and when it needs keeping a tight rein, but he does not know where to ride to (Németh 1992a: 553). According to this metaphor, the gentry own a hollow political routine without the intent and conception of modernization. For Németh, this modernization has to be realized by new élites recruited from the intelligentsia. This conception leads Németh to the elaboration of the utopian conceptualization of the society of intellectuals as presented at the meeting of Szárszó in 1943.

Let us return now to the essay of Bibó, from which I excerpted the above quotation about the difference between the gentry, the middle-class, and the intelligentsia. The title of the essay, *Értelmiség és szakszerűség* (Intelligentsia and Professionalism), reflects not only the impact of the intelligentsia-focused utopia of László Németh, but it adopts the theory of European and Hungarian social development given by his contemporary historian, István Hajnal (1892–1956) (Kovács 2016). Hajnal did not belong to the Hungarian Populist Movement, but his ideas deeply influenced Ferenc Erdei and István Bibó; László Németh respected him as well. Hajnal's original field of research was the history of literacy. For Hajnal, writing – on which literacy is based – is a special kind of communication technology which grows out from the primary – so to speak – nature-given communication technology: it is the skill of speaking based on

the human ability of thinking. Empirical research focusing on paleography was associated with an objectification theory borrowed by Hajnal from German philosophy. Hajnal elaborated a structuralist historiography which is similar to the theory of contemporary French historians of the *Annales Circle* as March Bloch or Fernand Braudel. Human being, from this point of view, possesses an ability which gives to mankind a unique position in the animal kingdom; he/she is able to objectify his/her thoughts in lasting external mental and physical structures, including customs, social institutions, and physical artifacts – tools, machines, towns, etc. This approach by Hajnal is associated with a conservative philosophical anthropology which defines human person as a structure-creating being; in this theory, rationality is a special albeit sophisticated kind of animal instinct of self-preservation.

In his theory, Hajnal amalgamates the Durkheimian sociological approach with the anti-Weberian history of philosophy. The individual is enmeshed in the net of social institutions being reproduced from generation to generation; these institutions set a border for the rational individual actions. There are two kinds of social organizing methods that are rooted in basic human abilities which play role in the genesis of human society: *rational social practices* based upon the individual rationality and *customary social practices* based upon the ability of human being for objectification, i.e. the creation of mental and physical structures from the raw materials of thoughts and physical surroundings.

For Hajnal, medieval Europe is an ideal type of social organization because it is based upon customary social practices that restrict the playground of rational practices which otherwise can disintegrate the fabric of social institutions. This kind of traditionalism is not rigid and does not represent a petrified society; on the contrary, it leaves room for innovations which do not endanger the existence of lower social strata, first of all that of peasantry, constituting the overwhelming majority of medieval society. Landlords and serves were, of course, in an uneven social situation comparing to each other, but there was some kind of mutuality between them warranted by customs; it prescribed obligations and rights for both of them. The landlord could be cruel and inhuman in his personal contacts with his peasants, but the law of custom prevented him to increase their burdens as he would have pleased to do. Medieval society, in the long run, became a mosaic of groups possessing privileges sanctified in written charters. Mutuality, after many centuries of evolutive development, interwove the whole society from the bottom to the top and defined the social existence of both lower and upper strata in their horizontal and vertical social relations. This development vested the clerics, i.e. the possessors of the skill of writing, with extraordinary social importance; they were the managers of social relations. Clerics, in the theory of Hajnal, were the keepers of the small circles of liberty appearing in the form of group privileges (Hajnal 1993: 45). The clerical fulfilled a special social function rooted in his

professional knowledge; he was the possessor of the ability of writing in a world which, in a growing degree, depended upon literacy. So, clerical, the historical prefiguration of modern lay intellectual, being supported by his special skills, became the representative of the society: protected it from the misuses of the political élites. This was not the consequence of personal qualities or that of theological subtleties and the moral elevation of Christian doctrine; Hajnal deduced it from the abovementioned social constellations, first of all from customary social practices.

The key position of the clerical rooted in the professional manner in which he conducted his business. In the theory of Hajnal, the regions of Europe differ from each other in such a degree that they were able to produce social structures based on customary social practices fortified by the virtue of literacy. Social structures gave birth to an intellectual stratum which, due to its professionalism-based independence, enjoyed general social respect and from which the crew of emerging state bureaucracy and public administration was recruited. This stratum became a counterbalance to the traditional political élites, the aristocracy and the gentry.

Following the logic of Hajnal's theory, Bibó considers that Hungary is in a middle position between Western-Europe-based customary social organization and Eastern-Europe-based rational, despotic social organization. (I treated the political philosophy of Bibó in my earlier essay: Kovács 2012). There are segments of an intellectual stratum which developed an ethos based on professionalism and intellectual consciousness but, on the whole, intellectual roles and feudal-origin gentry roles have been intermingled. The turning point in his analysis is the lost independence struggle fought against the Habsburg dynasty in 1848–1849. The failure caused a shock for the Hungarian cultural-political elites: their risk-taking venturesome spirit and initiative ability had evaporated, and they sank in a passive-defensive behavior. In the first half of the 19th century, in the Age of Reforms, there emerged a non-noble-origin intellectual stratum named *honorácior*, which began to merge with the noble-origin gentry intellectuals. This gave a chance to produce a new intellectual stratum apart from the gentry class background and acquired a professional ethos; this stratum would have been devoid of honor-centered privilege-guarding, belligerent pre-modern noble attitude and inclined to give up its distance-keeping social behavior from the lower strata of society.

The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 for Bibó – who, from this respect, shared the aversion of such populist thinkers as Dezső Szabó and László Németh – was a fatal moment of the Fall (on them, see: Dénes 1999). The non-noble origin *honorácior*-intellectuals and the noble-origin gentry intellectuals kept emerging – Bibó argues – but under different conditions; the emerging new intellectual stratum was dominated by gentry mentality. Its new denomination “*úriember*” symbolized this metamorphosis. The term can be translated as “gentleman”, but

in Hungarian it has different connotations than in English. In the late-19th-century Hungary, this term denoted a social type in a cast-like society which jealously guarded its privileges and emphasized its distance from the lower social strata. Its group consciousness had been determined by gentry values and not by the sense of vocation originating in the acquisition of skills gained in higher education at university. Following the theory of his sociologist friend, Ferenc Erdei, who had elaborated the theory of dual society, Bibó emphasized the state dependence of this new intellectual stratum which occupied the positions of state bureaucracy and local administration. After the First World War, gentleman-intellectuals became one of the main components of the so-called *Christian-middle class*: their power became strengthened through positions in ministries, county and town administration, but the gentry mentality was preserved. Bibó, who was working for years in the Ministry of Justice before 1945, tells an anecdote-like story about one of his colleagues. He was an old court secretary, as Bibó remarks, an excellent gentleman and a wrong, incompetent clerk, who once, in his ill-humor, angrily said: “Damn the peasant who invented that a gentleman needs a university diploma for earning his livelihood!” (Bibó 1986: 512).³

Dual Society and Political Hysteria

In his theory, Bibó complemented the structuralist approach of the World War in the short post-bellum period; after the communist takeover of 1949, he lived in an inner emigration without the facilities of publication (on his oeuvre and life, see: Berki 1992, Dénes 2015). His main term for describing the special socio-psychological attitude of our region was *communal-political hysteria*, which is a pathological state of a society. Political hysterias in Central-Eastern Europe can be traced back to structural and socio-psychological causes. This region produced special hybrid dual societies with surviving pre-modern and emerging modern segments: aristocracy, nobility, peasantry on the one hand and bourgeoisie and the working class on the other hand. Collective mentality has been determined by the archaic, military-aggressive attitudes of feudal élites, while nation building has been hindered by imperial political structures and war defeats. In Bibó’s theory, the lack of an autonomous intellectual stratum emancipated from gentry is a structural deformity, a *Sonderweg* comparing to Western-European developmental models.

Bibó focuses his attention on the problems of nation building in Central-Eastern Europe, which run a different historical trajectory than it did in the western parts of the continent. Empires, as multi-ethnic archaic political structures, had distorted this process: nationalism and liberalism turned against each other

3 Translation of the study’s author (from Hungarian).

and gave way to collectivistic, authoritarian political regimes in the 20th century (Dénes (ed.) 2006). State borders and linguistic borders did not coincide; national communities lived here in a paralyzing state of fear from annihilation. For Bibó, the exemplary case of this pathological development is Hungary, the country having lost two-thirds of its territory and half of its population after the First World War. His theory runs parallel in many ways with the idea of Wolfgang Schivelbusch, a German contemporary historian, whose basic notion is the *culture of defeat* (Schivelbusch 2003). The shock of war defeat, Schivelbusch argues, generates pathological symptoms in the collective psyche of modern nations in the age of mass society. Political hysteria as a key notion of the theory of Bibó is, from many respects, similar to the idea of collective neurosis explained by Schivelbusch. The suffered trauma disturbs the inner psychic balance of the community and prevents its perception of reality. Communities are supposed to be pathologically connected to the memory of the shock and unable to recognize and solve their actual problems posed by reality. Communities are thus escaping into a world of fantasy, into a world of false problems and pseudo-solutions.

For the community concerned, the suffered shock is a starting point of collective-political hysteria. This social illness produces different symptoms from scapegoating to sensitiveness towards conspiracy theories. In Bibó's theory, political hysteria is a self-generating process which leads to a vicious circle (Bibó 2015: 44–45). It produces a coherent self-affirmative world view. The starting point is the misperception of reality caused by a pathological fixation to the experience of the bygone shock having disturbed the adequate relation to reality. It is analogous to the idea of pathological object fixation known from the theory of psychoanalysis. Political hysteria creates a pseudo-world: it offers logical responses to the problems arising within the borders of this self-enclosed reality. But the price of this coherence is the loss of touch with the truly existing world and the inability of recognizing and solving the actual and urgent problems of the community.

Conclusions

The interwar Hungarian Populist Movement was rooted in the special intellectual-cultural-political climate of this period. It was a many-colored, loosely organized movement out of which we can outline the figures of Dezső Szabó, László Németh, and István Bibó. Albeit different from each other in many respects, these thinkers can be connected to several common ideas such as the concept of dual society, inclination to third-road theories, and receptiveness to cultural criticism. Their imagined alternative modernization, which was not only a Hungarian peculiarity, was a favorite idea among the third-road theorists in the interwar years of the central-eastern region.

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