

Fiume hosszú árnyéka. A városi modernizáció kritikája a 19. század második felében [Fiume's Long Shadow: Critique of Urban Modernization in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century]. By Veronika Eszik.

Budapest: HUN-REN Bölcsészettudományi-Kutatóközpont
Történettudományi Intézet, 2024. 196 + XV pp.

Gábor Gyáni 

Institute of History, ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, 4 Tóth Kálmán utca,
1097 Budapest, Hungary; gyani.gabor@htk.elte.hu

Lying far from the Hungarian Kingdom and constituting a distinct legal and administrative entity, Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) represented a special urban location in Hungary. From 1779, the City of Fiume enjoyed semi-autonomy within the Habsburg Monarchy and was directly subjected to the Hungarian Crown as a *corpus separatum*, a status which was re-strengthened following the 1867 Compromise. Accordingly, as part of the Hungarian Kingdom Fiume was managed by the governor assigned by the Hungarian prime minister and appointed by Franz Joseph. The governor's post was regularly filled by a Hungarian aristocrat, who usually held a seat in the House of Magnates in Budapest. True, however, there was also some room for the municipal self-government, practiced by the *Rappresentanza* consisting of fifty-six members and elected every six years.

Fiume found itself in an entirely new constellation when the central Hungarian government decided to transform it into a modern international port city, rivaling neighbouring Trieste, also a location engaged in sea transport, but managed by Vienna. That was the reason why, within a few decades, the small fishing town underwent a huge transformation and became the representative Hungarian littoral city along the Adriatic Sea. The enforced modernizing efforts financed and supervised by the Hungarian state resulted in a totally new urban space and, by the turn of the century, fundamentally changed the socio-economic makeup. As a result, the appropriation of the sea embankment for the exclusive purpose of the harbour fit for large sea-going steamships, together with modern metropolitan-type public buildings serving both the commercial and administrative management, doubled the city-space of Fiume. The traditional settlement was thus overshadowed by a new

physical environment, including the railway line and the goods-station, which cut the old town and its dwellers from the sea. Moreover, citizens lost their original sources of income (fishing and sailing) and were thus forced to be proletarianized.

Although Fiume's modernization from above brought about the creation of a genuine modern, metropolitan-type urban fabric and society with entrepreneurs and bourgeois middle classes, reactions from the local population and from neighbouring villages were negative. The swift disappearance of the well-accustomed provincial urban milieu, and the decline of many of the traditional occupations and sources of income generated the locals' hostility towards the outcome of the modernization efforts so much acclaimed by the Hungarian state authorities of the day; the latter, in contrast, considered the transformation of Fiume into a cosmopolitan port city as a clear sign of Hungary's basically successful westernization process.

Veronika Eszik's book discusses the story of how Fiume became a truly modern city due to the efforts of the state, focusing on the details of the many kinds of antimodern sentiments, doctrines, and actions, the entire repertoire of the protest manifestations as an obvious reaction to the modernizing project. Antimodernism may express the negation of a globalizing tendency of city life, which was so evident within Fiume to the detriment of the native population. The counter-narrative articulated against the modernization project tends to emphasize in that instance modernity's harmful effect in terms of values. According to this particular public discourse, Fiume was thus becoming a place of extremes, where the material inequalities and the deep differences in lifestyles experienced in the same urban milieu tended to disrupt the local community's former sense of integrity. Another often repeated accusation targeted at the construction of the new metropolitan Fiume was that the cityscape had lost its original colourful diversity, which was replaced by one-dimensional, monstrous grey blocks of buildings and industrial objects.

The modernization of the urban space also contributed to numerous conflicts manifesting themselves in the everyday use of the town: the sea was thus appropriated by steamships which displaced the traditional sail ships. And this meant that the traditional shipyard was also doomed to soon disappear. Furthermore, due to the fact that the sea embankment was fully occupied by the modern harbour infrastructure that constituted an industrial zone, it became impossible for town-dwellers to access and enjoy it in their leisure time. In addition, the same location was to give home to the new administrative centre of the city. Therefore, the two locations, the commercial-industrial and the representative cityscape, were intermingled with each other. And this abnormal development caused some functional absurdity, something contradicting the imperative of the definite distinctiveness of the two spheres: the location of (industrial) production and the space maintained for leisure time activities and urban representation *per se*.

Since the new commercial-industrial establishments demanded more manpower, the supply of which could only be provided from the outside, commuting emerged as a new phenomenon. It brought about the transitional physical presence of a workers' population arriving from the countryside. This demonstrated the growing metropolitan character of Fiume facing an intense coming-in and going-out move of considerable masses of people. The people involved in this continuous population turnover did not belong to the native populace, and only to the extent of their daily work did they share in the city space.

The tensions and the latent or explicit conflicts engendered by these circumstances were shaped, coloured, or even determined by the unambiguous ethnic diversity of the population living either in Fiume or in the city's close vicinity. The modernizer agent here was the Hungarian state which, however, was a quasi-colonizer in the eyes of the Italian and Croat population of the city, and the Croats of the neighbouring villages. The conflicts arising from the various uses of urban space usually to the detriment of the natives were strongly related to national sentiments and sensitivity. All the wrongs suffered by the natives could be easily interpreted and expressed in the language of nationalism. The enemy might be either the Hungarian national state or the local Italian elite, which cooperated with the former in supporting and enforcing the modernization efforts at transforming the urban space (and economy). According to Eszik, this seems to contradict the well-known thesis held even by the current mainstream history writing of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (including the work of Pieter Judson)¹¹ that loyalty towards the entire empire (the Habsburg House) had an unambiguous attraction among the various peoples of the Monarchy, or that the so-called 'national indifference' was rampant everywhere within the borders mainly of the Cisleithanian part of the empire. Since there was no disagreement with regard to how the rebuilding activity of Fiume should be accomplished, it could remain untouched by the rivalry of the various nation-building endeavours. This, however, does not seem to be a phenomenon characterizing Fiume only, as the author indirectly suggests. As Catherine Horel has recently pointed out, several small or medium-sized towns in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy included in her study also witnessed similar contradictory experiences at the time due especially, and not the least, to the mixed ethnic composition of the settlements concerned.

"The identification with Austria through the diffusion of dynastic Habsburg patriotism was successful but it coexisted with other forms of identity that grew increasingly complex and were a source of conflict."²²

1 Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*.

2 Horel, *Multicultural Cities*, 492.

What are the factors that may explain, at least according to the author, that the plainly social tensions engendered by modernizing the cityscape and the economy could so easily be ethnicized (or nationalized)? Eszik insists that it derived from the lack of an adequate intellectual toolkit for masking conscious and expressible class-like divergences and conflicts caused by the process of modernity amidst the special circumstances of Fiume and its environs. By reading and interpreting the narrative sources (also including fiction) that articulated contemporary public discourse on all these issues, we see that in the absence of a definite bourgeois (proletarian) class consciousness, the available national idiom was to provide both the language and the argumentative force for criticizing and even negating the modernizing capitalist transformation 'enforced' from above and outside. This also points to the awkward position even of the local modernizing (power) elite recruited mainly from Italians. Although the elite aligned itself with the modernization project, it found it difficult to wholly identify with the modernizing Hungarian state as against the non-Hungarian and non-Italian parts of the natives.

The kind of antimodernism appearing within the administrative borders of the city was further cherished by the highly critical attitude of the populace in the nearby villages closely attached to Fiume in their economic and social structures. The telling example is Zengg, whose economy had previously been centred on the prosperous fishing and sails industry and commerce, but was hit hard by the robust modernization of Fiume. The reaction to this challenge by the small Croatia town, populated exclusively by Croats, was to support a political party in the Croat Sabor in Zagreb. In addition, the Commercial and Industrial Chamber of Zengg also participated in the political and ideological struggle against the foreign (Hungarian) modernizing efforts in Fiume. The political party in the Croat Sabor and the Commercial and Industrial Chamber both engaged in strengthening and furthering the vital interests of small-scale industry and commerce that had been the basis of Zengg's economic force up to the late nineteenth century. They elaborated and represented publicly in the Croat political arena a local experience that could guarantee the perspective of another sort of socio-economic modernization available and preferable to the natives of Zengg and to the small neighbouring seaside settlements. Their efforts of this kind were well established and further supported by the fact that Zengg was far from being a sleepy and stagnating urban locality: as an episcopal see, it had an excellent grammar school (*gymnasium*), a prosperous associational and intellectual public life, and there was a great potential for its successful integration in the embourgeoisement of the day. The enhanced and forced modernization of neighbouring Fiume, however, blocked Zengg's way into joining the modernizing forces and caused its subsequent economic decline. Eszik reveals both the political agitation, and the public intellectual discourse pursued locally for the enforcement of an alternative modernization path.

The negative reception of Fiume's 'artificial' modernization urged and sustained by the Hungarian state was also present among the people living in the closely attached villages and belonging to the peasantry. The hostility towards the intrusion of the state into the life of tradition-bound Croat country-dwellers manifested itself through several collective peasant actions at the turn of the century. One of the most notable among them occurred in 1883 which appeared to express the national sentiments of the native peasants. Accordingly, national and often nationalistic Croat history writing tended to interpret them in this way. However, when studying them more closely, it turns out that the national(istic) message of the atrocities committed cannot be held to represent an unambiguous national movement. As Eszik assumes in her journal article she published in English:

"Stresses affecting the peasantry were partly caused by modernizing campaigns, and the struggle to cope with modernization was a social process with a significance comparable to the significance of processes of national awakening and the transition in rural communities to capitalist practice."³³

All these processes were thus 'deeply intertwined.' However, the plainly anti-modern (anticapitalist) movements and discourses frequently appeared in 'a national disguise' both in their vocabulary and symbolism. The contradictory mental characteristics of these movements were justified by the changing and unstable target they chose in their fight against the 'national enemy.' This could be either the Hungarian (Magyar) or the Croat, although the actors involved were always Croat peasants. They actually rebelled against the state that they saw as intruding in their well-accustomed life (through, for example, taxation), which, however, might be Hungarian as well as Croat. The lesson a historian may draw from studying these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occurrences in close connection both with Fiume and its environs, Eszik concludes, is that there was a scale of alternative modernization programs, which on both sides were in close contact with the various and conflicting nation-building activities. The effort of modernizing Fiume constituted and constructed an official Hungarian nationalist image and symbolism on the one hand which, however, was received by those native social forces who suffered great losses as a result of making Fiume an internationally important metropolitan-type urban settlement. The latter, on the other hand, fashioned their resentment, in the form of the then easily available nationalistic rhetoric and idiom, although their final end was not always and simply nation-building per se.

In assessing the outcome of the kind of urban and regional history Eszik makes available in her recent monograph, she successfully meets the expectations set towards an inquiry carried out on a local setting. We demand that a historian

3 Eszik, "Rural Reactions."

should be able to answer the big burning questions of history even when applying the angle of a microlevel study. In her genuinely mental history narrative, the author tries to understand the mind and sentiments of the past actors involved and occupying different statuses and hierarchical positions in the process that Karl Polanyi identified as the 'great transformation' and which culminated, among other things, in modernizing Fiume. That was the author's analytical aim dictating the selection of the source material (including many contemporary narratives of the past public discourse) and the way she attempted to read them by revealing the hidden motives and drives articulated in them. Veronika Eszik's urban history book poses a real challenge to the quite frequently provincial national(istic) mainstream historical scholarship which is so dominant the field, especially in East and Central Europe.

Literature

- Eszik, Veronika. "Rural Reactions to Modernization: Anti-Modernist Features of the 1883 Anti-Hungarian Peasant Uprising in Croatia." *Hungarian Historical Review* 12, no. 1 (2023): 37–65. <https://doi.org/10.38145/2023.1.37>
- Horel, Catherine. *Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire 1880–1914. Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters*. Budapest–Vienna–New York: Central European University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7829/j.ctv2kzv0mg>
- Judson, Pieter M. *The Habsburg Empire. A New History*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.

