Book Review

Tibor Valuch. 2020. *Die ungarische Gesellschaft im Wandel. Soziale Veränderungen in Ungarn 1989–2019*, Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet (Studia Hungarica 55). 355 pp., ISBN: 978-3-7917-3078-3 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-7917-7248-6 (eBook), € 34.95 / € 27.99

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0051>

Die ungarische Gesellschaft im Wandel (Social change in Hungarian society) follows, from a methodological perspective, classic approaches of social history. It refers to official statistics, numerous sociological studies and surveys, and many “qualitative” sources as well. For his analysis, *Tibor Valuch*, Professor of History at Eger University, chose the model of “system transformation”, as distinct from the *Wende* (German for “turning point”) used to describe the events of 1989/1990, which to him seemed closely connected to the political sphere (26). In the case of Hungary, long-term perspectives appear more appropriate, given the specific path of transformation since the late Kádár era. Connections between the shortcomings of the phase of transformation and the current state of the government and society are evident to many: In 2009, on the eve of “illiberal democracy”, 72% of Hungarians believed their standard of living had declined since the end of communism. However, Valuch stresses that the system change had already entered its “final chapter” by the late 1990s, while the crises of the 2000s largely contributed to the failure of “structural modernisation” (15, 20–1).

Following a classic model of social history, Valuch begins his book with demographics. Initially, immigration to Hungary in the 1990s, i.e., of Hungarians from neighbouring countries, but also of Chinese citizens, of refugees from Yugoslavia and Croatia, and of several other groups (40, 85), involved significantly larger numbers than those emigrating from Hungary. Natural reproduction, however, continued to decline, despite the reduction in the abortion rate (43). Of course, declining birth rates and ageing societies are common all over in Europe but, by European Union (EU) standards, the high mortality in Hungary is still remarkable. Valuch explains this with psychological burdens, unhealthy lifestyles, and ineffective and corrupt structures in the healthcare sector (50–1).

One chapter and several maps demonstrate the meaning of spatial disparities. Due to the collapse of socialist heavy industry, the north and east of the country were greatly affected by population loss, as were many rural areas (63, 66). Foreign investment and the expanding service sector was concentrated in the central area

on the Budapest-Vienna axis, western Hungary, larger cities, including their surrounding areas (72–5), and some medium sized and smaller cities. The number of cities grew rapidly: from 96 in 1980 to 346 in 2018 (71), reflecting the increased impact of local power structures and municipalities (67). In Budapest, social differentiation and segregation are reflected in the emergence of slums (76), city building (80), suburbanisation or the reorientation of some groups towards the city centre, with each of these developments occurring in single districts, but all at the same time. Emigration, especially of the better educated, only increased with EU membership and the 2008 crisis, with Germany as the prime destination (86–7).

Hungary's ethnic diversity became more visible after the fall of communism, with more people identifying with the historically marginalised nationalities ("minorities"). According to the census, all groups grew in number, especially—in contrast to Romania—the number of Germans, which increased from 11,310 in 1980 to 131,951 in 2011 (91). On the other hand, the demographic trend of the Hungarian minority communities in the Carpathian Basin during this time was "clearly negative" (106). Hungary's nationalities experienced similar downward trends in 2011–2016, at least in some cases. A specific section of the book is devoted to the Jewish community, and a second on the Roma and the dimensions of their social deprivation.

In his analysis of social stratification, Valuch begins with the "rapid growth of income disparities" starting already with the "shadow economy" and the "bourgeoisification without rule of law" of the late Kádár era (111–2), before the "intellectualisation of work" (117) and the improved levels of education among the young (119) after 1990 had an impact. There was significant growth of the petty bourgeoisie, while a revival of traditional peasantry, as it was imagined in the 1980s, hardly took place. In 2000, Valuch still designates 50% of the male labour force as working class (136–7), and considers that, since then, social mobility has declined even further. The growth in average real income, which reached 20% in the 1989–2006 period, has slowed down (134; 2018: 640 euros net), despite the fact that the number of employed today is slightly higher than in 1990 (due to job programmes and migration, 126). Finally, Valuch presents various models of social stratification for Hungary, and discusses the difficulties of adapting these to the dynamics of system change and comparing them historically.

The author then takes a closer look at individual social groups and their characteristics and development since 1990. In the first subsection, he draws on extensive social research on the "elites" (153)—2–3% of society (141, 148) at that time. Apart from the elites, Valuch classifies the "wealthy" as a further distinct group. He categorises different subgroups of elites in politics, business and culture, and discusses the thesis of Iván Szelényi, that the continuity of elites in

economics was among the strongest after 1990 (154). Since that time, strengthening the middle class has often been on the political agenda, but with limited success (188). Among the characteristics of the very heterogeneous middle class, Valuch draws attention to the discrepancies between social position and real living conditions. For example, he describes new forms of “extended families” that do not live under one roof, but whose lives largely revolve around providing for children or elderly parents (192–3).

Valuch’s sketch of political developments is given less space in the book. This follows his methodological approach, but it seems is also in keeping with a widespread sentiment in society. Starting by looking back at the 1980s, Valuch observes that in Hungary, most protests were centred around quite specific issues, such as the status of Hungarians in neighbouring countries, environmental threats or the Soviet invasion of 1956 (202–1), but could not be unequivocally referred to as a political mass mobilisation. Many see the current situation as having emerged from a speech given by prime minister Gyurcsány in 2006 at a closed parliamentary group meeting in Balatonöszöd (Öszöd speech). Gyurcsány stated outright that the public had been lied to and given false data.¹ A secret recording of the speech was broadcast on the radio, which ultimately led to his resignation in 2009 and the electoral victory of the League of Young Democrats (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, Fidesz) in the 1980s, a leading force of the democratic opposition movement, and the coalition with the Christian Democratic People’s Party (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, KDNP) (207, 218). One weakness here is that there is no in-depth analysis of the election results according to regional strongholds or structural data, i.e. the Fidesz-KDNP party alliance often performed poorly in Budapest, but in the 2000s its strongholds could not really be described as the “regions left behind.”

In respect of the “change of values”, a summary of studies since the early 1980s primarily shows the increasing orientation towards material goods, parallel to the ever-growing number of families in precarious living conditions (222). On the other hand, in 2009 about 80% believed that it was impossible to become wealthy honestly, and over 70% considered it necessary to break the rules to be successful (228). A subchapter is devoted to “Historical Consciousness and National Consciousness”. In this section, the author points out that neither the right nor the left have roots in genuinely democratic traditions and modern ideas (237), while national populism largely coexists with a rose-tinted view of the former dictatorship in society (238–9). The religious revival during the regime change had comparably little impact in Hungary (240).

¹ “Excerpts: Hungarian ‘Lies’ Speech.” 19 September 2006. *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5359546.stm> (accessed 23 September 2021).

Valuch goes as far as to describe the 2000s as a “domestic political cold war” (205) between the opinion camps, while the changes in government posts over the past 30 years rarely brought substantial changes in the field of social politics. However, the shift of functions to the municipalities, which was initially forced, created severe disparities, which led to a renationalisation of health and pension funds; and in 2010 only a small portion of these could be funded from premium payments (253). Valuch provides a vivid description of the conditions and living conditions on the fringes of society—poverty, unemployment, homelessness, suicide, drugs and crime. Remarkably, the level of education of the homeless is not significantly below average (270), which indicates that a potentially large share of the homeless population comes from the middle class.

Topics such as foreign policy, the role of China or constitutional developments are not dealt with in this book. However, it clearly demonstrates that the authoritarian government politics in today’s Hungary cannot be explained by structural patterns that diverge from other countries of East Central Europe—they therefore all seem to be equally vulnerable. Additionally, from the perspective of contemporary historians, two further aspects might be interesting subjects of comparative research. First, Valuch’s term of “bourgeoisification without rule of law” during the 1980s shines a critical light on aspects and social disadvantages of the “Goulash Communism” that was once accorded so much goodwill by observers. Moreover, the book increases the readers’ awareness of the dimensions of the social and economic crises during the 2000s, which are apparently still underestimated. In East Central Europe, in particular, these crises were all too often attributed to the communist heritage, or, interpreted in an overly simplistic manner, as late shortcomings of the system transformation.