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## Democracy and Populism. The Constitution of the Political Community in Early Post-War Hungary<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

It is a commonplace in contemporary scholarly debate on populism that the extreme ambiguity of the term makes any attempt of a clear-cut definition difficult. At the same time, the growing number of publications in the field points to the public significance of the problem called “populism”. What makes populism a hot issue in scholarly discourse, despite the “unsuccessful” attempts to seize a complex and contradictory social phenomenon, is that it deeply touches the problem of democracy. In other words, the debate on populism, to a large extent, is about democracy. It is however the relationship of populism to democracy which is discussed in the literature, with an explicit focus on the former. The question is usually put as “Is populism a threat or a corrective to democracy?”, and the typical answer is formulated in the “populism vs. democracy” paradigm (e.g. Taggart 2000, Mény & Surel 2002), even if Ernesto Laclau’s opposite view is referenced, whereby populism is a possible way for political life to be structured (Laclau 2005). Whatever the answer to the question of populism’s relation to democracy might be, the focus is on populism’s effect on democracy, while the problem of democracy *per se*, if treated at all, remains secondary.

The introductory work of Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser is exemplary in this regard. The authors argue that populism can work as either a threat or a corrective

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to democracy, and that the relation between the two is debated among the experts; they contend, however, that “it is not far-fetched to suggest that the conventional position is that populism constitutes an intrinsic danger to democracy” (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 79). They solve the problem stemming from the ambiguity of populism by differentiating between democracy (the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule) and liberal democracy (the same combination together with the institutional protection of fundamental rights). They can thus declare that “populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with liberal democracy, the dominant model of the contemporary world” (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 81). When dealing with populism, their argument remains deliberately and explicitly within the context of liberal democracy. The theoretical model developed by the authors does allow a certain role for populism in the process of democratization, but only in the transition from “full authoritarianism” to “competitive authoritarianism”. In the long run, populism’s effect on “real” – that is, liberal – democracy is, in their view, undoubtedly negative. Mudde and Kaltwasser thus actually reproduce the ambiguity of populism as both democratic and antidemocratic, since they do not deal with the possibility of populism’s corrective relation to (non-liberal) democracy (a possibility which, after all, arises logically from their definition).

This article argues that it is instructive to engage in the problematization of democracy in the discussion about populism’s democratic or antidemocratic nature (Moffitt 2016). This extension of the object might contribute to solve the ambiguity seemingly inherent in populism. I propose a sociological case study; its historical context enables this operation: the public debate on democracy in early post-war Hungary. First, the transitional period after the end of World War II and before the communist takeover in Hungary lacked one single idea of democracy that could have been normatively imposed. The discourse analyzed here addressed precisely the normative principles of the definition of democracy. Instead of addressing the question of whether or not the political system was democratic in Hungary between 1945 and 1949,<sup>2</sup> I will thus analyze the principles of legitimacy in the public debate on democracy. This sociological historical reconstruction serves critical purposes by confronting currently prevailing conceptions of populism and democracy. In the (eventually failed) post-war democratic utopia the central problem was self-constitution – that is, the legitimate demarcation of the political community. The definitional struggles over democracy reached far beyond the correct meaning of the term: they discursively demarcated the *demos* in relation to the antidemocratic population, tracing the border between “democratic” and “antidemocratic”. In this sense, the democracy-utopia that stands out from the different normative statements on what the political system should be in the country is characterized by the reflexivity towards its own boundaries. Consequently, democracy constituted the political problem *par excellence* of the period, which traced the borders of the less and less autonomous public sphere after the war (Zombory 2015). In other words, democracy was not just one topic among others publicly discussed; political issues were problematized in the context of

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2 On the history of the so-called coalition period, see Borhi 2004, Palasik 2011. For an overview of the Hungarian historiography on the (anti)democratic nature of early post-war Hungary, see Völgyesi 2011.

democracy.<sup>3</sup> The following study is a discourse analysis of the public focusing on different sources such as political programs, manifestos of political parties, public lectures, and press debates.<sup>4</sup> It applies, on the one hand, a prospective perspective (Lotman 1990) when focusing on the views and acts of the post-war historical actors; on the other, it reconstructs the political imagery of the period by the methodology of conceptual history (Koselleck 1985). The reconstruction of the discursive field about democracy, focusing on the principles of the legitimate constitution of the political community, aims to explore how the institutional process of democratization was conceived in the post-catastrophic period.<sup>5</sup>

A second particularity of the historical context is that there existed in Hungary a socially and historically embedded populist movement [*népi mozgalom*], which played an important role in post-war political life.<sup>6</sup> To cross-fertilize the discourse analysis with the history of the populist movement in Hungary, I will deal with the positions of its representative figures in the field of the debate. With regards to this history, it is worth remarking that the great political moment of Hungarian populists came at the end of the war, and only lasted until the communist takeover.<sup>7</sup> The party of the populists, the National Peasant Party [*Nemzeti Parasztpárt, NPP*], took part in the coalition, which made them a powerful political agent, since they had access to political decision making at different levels and spheres of administration. At the same time, the NPP gained only 6.87% at the general and free elections in 1945, and could not considerably increase its constituency before the annihilation of the limited

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- 3 From this perspective, it is beside the point whether or not the communists acted on the command of the Soviet Union; or if they really meant what they said or if they were cynical. Since they did not follow the politics of immediate and violent takeover, that is, proletarian revolution, they had to publicly legitimize their claims.
  - 4 The publication of press products was certainly restricted in the defeated Axis country but the ideological landscape in the public was nevertheless quite diverse under the aegis of the Soviet led Allied Control Commission. Until at least 1947, there was no direct and exclusive communist control on the press. See Vince 2016: 255-364.
  - 5 The establishment of the courts of political justice well exemplifies the institutionalization of the democracy-discourse: the so-called people's courts not only were legitimized by the relationship between the conception of the historical catastrophe and the democracy-utopia, but also the same discourse defined the constitution and operation of the councils of people's courts (Zombory 2017b). In other words, the term "discourse" applied here is not opposed to those of "practice" and "institution".
  - 6 The agrarian movement of the populists originates in literature, with the publications of the so-called populist authors in the early 1930s. The second half of the decade was marked by the appearance of several seminal publications of popular sociology. Political organization came only with the third wave of the movement, in the second half of the 1930. Though the National Peasant Party was officially formed in 1939, as a political force it was only organized in late 1944. On the populist movement in Hungary, see Papp 2012; on the National Peasant Party, see Tóth 1972.
  - 7 Leading figures of the populists were quite passive during the war years. Imre Kovács was an exception, as he took active part in the otherwise small and weak Hungarian resistance movement. Probably due to his role, the party in late 1944 was included in the antifascist coalition, the Hungarian National Front for Independence, which later formed the nonelected provisional government. Since the same five parties, the populists included, got into the parliament according to their support in the general elections, based on universal suffrage, in November 1945, the same coalition continued to exercise political power. In order of number of mandates in the parliament, they were: the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKgP), the one and only right-wing force, with an absolute majority; the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP); the Social Democratic Party (SzDP); the National Peasant Party (NPP); and the Civic Democratic Party (PDP). The civic democrats were excluded from the political elite soon after, which reduced the coalition to four parties.

multiparty system. Beyond the institutionalization of the Cold War and the increasing communist pressure on domestic politics, the relative failure of the populists is to be found in the features of the political system as a whole: the coalition government realized several objectives of the populist movement (one of the first measures of the new regime, for example, was the land reform in March 1945, a long-requested populist claim). New political institutions, such as people's courts or the new public education were established in sharp opposition to the former antidemocratic elite. Also, the political forces of the coalition in many respects were as "populist" as the Peasant Party.<sup>8</sup> Simply put, it was the democratic utopia, seemingly commonly shared by the political forces, that took the wind out of the populists' sail.

The following argument is divided into two parts. From a historical sociological perspective, the first maps out the discursive field in which different positions were taken in the debate about democracy and explore the positions of leading political representatives of the populist movement. The second part of the paper will discuss the populists' position in the redefinition of the ethnoscape: their standpoint towards the "Jewish question" and the "German question", the two disappearing social categories in relation to which the movement articulated its program before the war.

## 1. Constituting the *demos*

"'Democracy': in this word, there is all that constitutes the fate of Hungarian society after the catastrophe" – says the foreword to the volume of the same title, published in 1945 (Erdei *et. al.* 1945). The book comprises the public lectures of leading politicians and scholars on democracy, organized by the University of Péter Pázmány in Budapest, 1945. The program happened to be a huge success, which drove the university to publish the material – and shows the almost extreme public interest in what democracy meant to people. As the above-cited sentence demonstrates, democracy appeared as a question of fate for Hungarian society, a matter of life-and-death in the social history of the nation. This question was, however, open-ended. The quotation marks refer to the normative uncertainty and semantic multiplicity of the idea of democracy. One of the most important characteristics of the public debate on democracy was the lack of a uniform meaning, or at least a commonly shared normative reference basis. Politicians, scholars and intellectuals found the model of democracy in different historical and geographical contexts: reference points often mentioned were the French Revolution, England and the USA, and the Soviet Union or, in a negative sense, the Weimar Republic.

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8 Certainly, one has to take into account the historicity of populism itself. The agrarian populism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was in many respects different from today's populist movements: it favored social modernization and represented class interests (primarily the lower-class peasants and the agrarian laborers). Instead of underlying similarities between old and new populist movements (anti-elitism and diverse political ideology), this paper aims to emphasize the importance of taking into account the historical transformation of politics at large. After all, not only the populist movement was class based and modernizationist in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Moreover, there was no considerable democratic tradition in Hungarian history to which it would have been possible to relate.<sup>9</sup> As a result, every agent struggled to monopolize the definition of democracy in an instable and open discursive field. To give a striking example, in a pastoral letter entitled “On the Crimes of New Paganism, on True Democracy and Freedom,” even the Church declared that Catholic believers can practice democratic rights the best because “they took the principles of true democracy from the Gospel” (*A katolikus püspökök pásztorlevele*, 1945).

The question of democracy was future-oriented, arising “after the catastrophe” (Zombory 2017a): post-war political actors situated themselves in a transitional period, between the political and moral failure of Hungary during the war, and a fully established democracy. They perceived the problems of the present as those of democracy, and attributed them to the effects of the past, the consequences of the recent historical catastrophe. The destruction of the war was one aspect of the conception of the catastrophe. Even in December 1946, Zoltán Tildy (FKgP), president of the republic emphasized the significance of the “country-building work” in his talk “Our National Tasks”: among these, he mentioned the cleanup of the ruins and the rectification of shortages caused by the war and destruction (Tildy 1947). However, the recent catastrophe affected not only the material world, but also the moral life of the country. As Tildy put it in the first issue of the periodical *Demokrácia*, “The past, which we must overcome quickly and definitively, left not only terrible ruins and material destruction, but also intellectual chaos, blindness, an obsolete outlook on life, and sick, anti-democratic social attitudes” (Tildy 1945).

Not surprisingly, the future goal of post-war reconstruction was at the core of the programs of the political forces. And the national task of reconstruction was conceived as the complete establishment of democracy. Let us examine the stands of the coalition parties. A 1945 Smallholders’ Party booklet stated, under the chapter “Our most important and urgent tasks”, that “Hungary received the biggest blow of its history in this war. We know that it will take a long time to definitively abolish the traces of this blow, and we can create the peaceful situation of democratic times. Politically our first task is to brush aside the reactionary elements of public life and carry out the exemplary and severe punishment of war criminals” (Nagy 1945: 29). The author, Ferenc Nagy, General Secretary of the Smallholders Party, explained the formation of the party in 1930 as follows: “the people of the land had been excluded from the government of the country, and a politically, economically and socially reactionary and anti-popular regime began” (Nagy 1945: 5). A resolution of the Hungarian Communist Party’s national meeting in May 1945, entitled “Struggle for reconstruction,” declared, “With the annihilation of the fascist barbarism, and the restitution of peace, it is the task of reconstruction that comes to the fore. The reconstruction is the crucial test of the young Hungarian democracy; all the strength

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9 More precisely, the political movement of the Hungarian Octobrists that is, the representatives of the 1918 civic revolution, were divided following the end of the Second World War, partly in emigration, and could not organize themselves politically (Litván 2005). Though references were frequent to the civic revolution of 1848, and the preparation of its centenary played an important role in the post-war system, one could not rely on a more-or-less continual cultural heritage of Hungarian democracy. This had important consequences on the project of national rebirth of the new political-cultural elite (cf. the antifascist humanism of the “Other Germany” in the very same period (Agocs 2017)).

of the nation must be focused on this. [...] One of the most important preconditions for realizing the program of reconstruction is to finally begin in full force the struggle against fascism and the Arrow Cross remnants” (Rákosi és Szabó 1979: 82-83). The action program of the social democrats, adopted at their annual congress in August 1945, formulates the same relation between democracy and reconstruction:

“Today for democracy and reconstruction of the country. These two are one. The reconstruction of the country is only possible in the pure atmosphere of democracy, and only the merciless struggle against reaction can assure the success of reconstruction. And vice-versa: without reconstruction, there is no, because there cannot be, democracy” (Rákosi és Szabó 1979: 104).

For the social democrats, the goal, socialism, was the question of tomorrow. In May 1945, in *Szabad Szó*, the daily newspaper of the National Peasant Party, President Péter Veres formulated the stakes of reconstruction: “if we do not put our full strength into reconstruction, [...] then we’ll again be left behind. We’ll lag behind, we’ll waste away, and we will follow the same backward formula as the old Hungary, here among the fresh, fighting, believing and active peoples of East-Central Europe” (Veres 1945a).

This quick overview of the coalition’s political palette helps us draw the discursive field from a historical sociological perspective. The historical experience of the actors was of a post-catastrophic transitional period, which would finally provide the opportunity to construct democracy. As the horizon of expectation, democracy was closely intertwined with the post-war reconstruction. The historical catastrophe, as a space of experience, appeared as the cause of the present political problems. Thus, the effort to establish a democratic system through material and mental reconstruction required the elimination of the remnants of the past. This “regime of historicity” (Hartog 2015) relied on a concept of history as a unidirectional flow of events, a progress of civilization, in relation to which the position of a society could be gauged.

The most important feature of the post-war discursive field was the democracy paradox: the nation constituted both the subject and the object of political action aiming to reconstruct the country. On the one hand, the problem arose as the necessary restriction of the political community: how to establish democracy without risking that the people vote for the anti-democratic ancient regime? On the other hand, the subject of politics also arose as a problem. Who constitutes the political subject that realizes the demarcation of the political community? In other words, how can democracy be practiced by a people that have been so far deprived of political agency? The debate on democracy was about the boundaries of the *demos*. On the one hand, early post-war politics was driven by the demand to exclude those representing the old regime from the possibility of political agency, a demand supported by the space of experience of the actors. On the other, the politics of constituting the *demos* was driven by the demand to include the previously suppressed people into the nation – that is, the political community – making them a political subject; this demand of “liberating the people” was supported by the horizon of expectations for democracy. Thus, the democracy paradox had its proper temporality. The continuity with the former regime, the “remnants of the past”, was targeted by the concepts of fascism and/or reaction. The former meant the return of the past, the latter the return to the past (lagging behind). One aspect of the democracy debate thus concerned the principles of political

exclusion: who should be deprived of political rights and how. The discontinuity with the previous social and political regime was conceived by the future-oriented concept of “revolution”, the key concept of making the people the political subject. All legitimate political forces applied the concept of revolution (though, as will be shown later, with different meanings): the idea of necessary social change was an inherent aspect of the post-war democratic utopia.

The asymmetric counter-concepts of revolution and reaction (fascism) served as the two poles of the discursive field, structuring the positions taken by the actors. Let us first see how the political forces, the party of the populists in particular, positioned themselves in relation to the question of revolution.

### 1.1 The inclusion of the people: Liberation in non-revolutionary times

What was called the liberation of the people was a common program of the coalition parties, each representing a distinct social category: two represented the peasantry, when two others parties represented the workers. It was consensual in the political space that some degree of social change was inevitable for the successful establishment of democracy. Put another way, the politics of the coalition period considered the simple implementation of democratic institutions, the liberation of the people from above, as insufficient for democratization. As Péter Veres put it in his lecture at the University of Budapest, “from servants, the poor, the ragged ones there will never be human community, even if everybody will have voting rights and however strictly regulated equality before the law will be. [...] In civic democracy, only the wealthy man is the really free man” (Veres 1945b).

What differentiated the political standpoints was, on the one hand, the conception of revolution. While on the right of the political field the term meant the radical and temporary change in history, on the left it referred to the reallocation of resources. The two extreme positions in this matter were taken by the smallholders and the communists. While the Smallholders’ Party as a whole was deeply engaged in social change to facilitate the democratic rule of the peasantry, its right wing argued for catching up with the West by introducing a liberal civic democracy, leaving intact the existing social relations. At the other extreme, the communists were completely silent about a proletarian revolution in Hungary, even though they stressed the need for social change by way of struggling against the fascist and reactionary forces. Therefore, the public position of the communists converged with the social democrats’ stand, which urged the necessary establishment of democracy in the transition to socialism. On the other hand, it was debated whether or not revolution was taking place in Hungary in the given historical situation and to what extent. What was problematized was that the social transformation began as a result of the war and an occupying foreign army and not as a consequence of popular action. A characteristic formulation in the period was that what had happened was an “unfinished revolution”. Different strategies were suggested for solving the contradiction stemming from the lack of a full-scale revolution and its necessity. One addressed the need for economic (or social) democracy, that is, organized institutionalization that would attain what the missing revolution would have achieved: the reallocation of resources. It was not



enough to assure political equality by giving rights to the people; the economic life too had to be democratized.

For the populists, revolution was a historically necessary precondition of democracy. In his lecture entitled “Popular Democracy”,<sup>10</sup> given at the Péter Pázmány University in 1945, Ferenc Erdei, vice president of the NPP, differentiated between types of democracies in a historical materialist manner: while liberal democracy used to be a particular “social system” of the capitalist 19th century, in the present, popular democracy was historically appropriate. Therefore, it was anachronistic and useless to compare the Hungarian situation to the model of classical liberal democracy. He emphasized that liberal relations – that is, equal chances in politics, economics and justice – would result in the continual subordination of the peasantry and the working class, who were still in a disadvantageous situation. The ultimate goal was, however, the liberation of the people, identified with these two social strata. Erdei defined popular democracy as the political method of the liberation of the people which is characterized by the continual struggle against the still existing power relations of the former feudal-fascist regime. In this fight, the breach of laws and rights was not only allowed but inevitable. Erdei finished his lecture with the depiction of the next phase of democratic transformation, consolidation. In his view, not only was the concept of the people identical with the two social categories that were previously the most subordinated, but revolution and democracy were also synonyms (Erdei 1945).

The populist standpoint was that even though social transformation was remarkable in contemporary Hungary, revolution, the necessary precondition of democracy, was lacking. In his seminal essay in *Válasz*, the periodical of the populists (edited by the acclaimed popular author Gyula Illyés), Imre Kovács, vice-president of the NPP, argued in November 1946 that in every country, democracy was the outcome of struggle: either by votes or on barricades. Kovács wrote about the desired and necessary social transformation as “our liberation [that] takes place as a change of nation [*nemzetváltás*]”. During this process, “the gentry [*úri*] nation steps down from the scene and into its place are coming the peasants and workers, beside whom, as always, we call on the progressive intellectuals. We are part of the most touching and most exciting process: the people becoming a nation!” Getting peasants and workers onto the political stage, the “other nation” that had previously been subordinated for centuries, meant for Kovács a profound transformation not only in terms of institutions but also mentality: “The people: passivity. The nation: readiness. While the first is instinctive, the second conscious; the first is governed, the second governs itself”. In this regard, Kovács held, the peasants and the workers will compose the best fusion since they will counterbalance each other’s extremities. The problem, observed Kovács, was that Hungary lacked such revolution. “In Hungary, it was neither by progress, nor by revolution, but through war operations that democracy was born. Progress was not possible, and revolution was hindered by international agreement:

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10 Before the communist campaign on “popular democracy” one year later, the term was diversely used in various political positions, meaning the rule of the popular classes. Since the 1930s, in the populists’ vocabulary the concept had referred to a sort of “peasant democracy”. For the traditional left, popular democracy meant rather “workers’ democracy” (the concept was popular and popularized internationally by the Republican Zone during the Spanish Civil War, see Seidman 2018). In 1945, even the smallholders used the term.



whether we wanted to or not, we had to become democrats”. Consequently, democracy as a political system was not chosen: “we have become democrats without being democrats” (Kovács 1992, pp.174-189).

István Bibó, a good friend of Erdei, who joined the NPP in May 1945, published his essay about the crisis of democracy in October in the new periodical *Valóság*, edited by Zoltán Szabó, an important member of the populist movement. Unlike other populists, Bibó had had the possibility to study at western European universities and this western-based education had its impact on his thinking, which had a strong international, even universalist perspective. For Bibó, revolution was a necessary precondition of democracy: from a social-psychological perspective, he characterized democracy as “a spiritual liberation from the psychological pressure of divine, hereditary, or supernatural political powers” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 121). As a universal historical necessity, this liberation is only possible through revolution, by which the people become aware of the fact that the authority of the leaders is based on their consent. “This kind of revolution is not limited to certain periods of social or economic development; social and economic transformation may take place without noticeable political upheavals, but the revolution of human dignity must take place at some moment – regardless of the stage of social or economic development – in order for democracy to emerge” (Bibó 1991 [1945]: 121). Bibó argued that one aspect of the crisis of democracy in contemporary Hungary manifested in the confusion about the interpretation of democracy and the necessity of revolution. Like Kovács, he observed in the country only a semi-revolution: “Can we talk about revolution, when the people [...] experienced not their own strength in bringing about the changes, but that of outside forces which they consider elemental in nature? Hardly!” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 124). Bibó proposed a peculiar solution to the problem arising from the tension between the necessity of revolution and the “completely non-revolutionary nature of the times”. He held that the hysterical atmosphere of the public, too much change seen by the right while too little by the left, should be calmed down by the careful but clear-cut separation of the social domains of change and consolidation. He called this method, situated between universal revolution and political agreement, “limited and planned revolution”.

The populist position on the problem of the inclusion of the people into the political community was similar to that of the other political forces and the system as a whole. They agreed that it was only through revolutionary change that the people, the peasantry and the working class could be uplifted and made into a political subject. Under the given historical circumstances, they didn’t see enough revolution, and urged the completion of the revolutionary progress triggered by the war (the most important element of which was for them the land reform).

## 1.2 The exclusion of antidemocratic elements: The struggle against fascism and reaction

Since antidemocratic ideas were identified as the “remnants of the past”, the (temporary) restriction of the political community was legitimized by the necessary avoidance of the return of/to the past. In general, post-war political parties in Hungary did not consider fascism as a real danger for the present. However, the communists

continually and forcefully applied this label, and as a discursive form of “never again”, it was subject to public debate. As Béla Zsolt, a writer and politician of the liberal civic radical movement, provocatively put it (Zsolt 1945a), paraphrasing László Németh’s idea of the “third side”<sup>11</sup>: “Is it then a democracy, if the Papuans are given the secret ballot and the right to electioneering, and due to the election and the electioneering, the national sovereignty decides, with the great majority of votes, that cannibalism is a democratically confirmed program?”. Declaring that “white cannibalism” could freely rage for 12 years in the middle of Europe, Zsolt considered the avoidance of cannibalism ever again more important than having a formal democracy. Negative references to the Weimar Republic, here as a “formal democracy” giving birth to fascism, were common in every coalition party.

Among the populists, the problem of fascism was not central in the struggle against the “remnants of the past”. Concerning the demarcation of the *demos*, they considered the fight against reaction acute. For them, as for the other political forces, the exclusion of social elements from voting rights and the political community because of their reactionary nature was legitimate. What they criticized was the method of the struggle against reaction. In a 1946 article in *Szabad Szó*, Imre Kovács criticized the confusion around the notion of reaction.

He differentiated between those reactionaries who react to certain actions in politics from those who “want to restore the old world”:

“Something is wrong with the fight against reaction. [...] There are actions that trigger reaction and one cannot put under the same umbrella every utterance that does not match with the ideas and programs of one or another party. The most serious cause of the current crisis in Hungarian democracy is the overgeneralization of the accusation of reaction, the unfortunate critical position which blames on the reaction even the impotency, the stagnation, and the pullulating Panamas and corruption” (Kovács 1992 [1946b]: 147).

As a solution, Kovács proposed concretizing the reaction, to accurately define who is reactionary, and to join forces for the peasantry and the workers in the struggle against reaction.

István Bibó also proposed clarifying the fight against the “burdens of the past”. His central argument was that the struggles against fascism and reaction must be separated. Fascism was not the primary problem for Bibó, he thought that “for a long time it would not appear in organizational or ideological units” (Bibó 1986 [1946b]: 302). For him, the presence of fascism appeared as the question of criminal responsibility. He defined fascism as “an active, aggressive attitude, which in its final, fully developed, twisted form manifests itself as a concerted criminal attack on both the past and the future of Europe” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 101). Consequently, he considered the war crimes trials (Zinner 1985, Nánási 2011) and the verification committees (Zinner 1985) as legitimate and appropriate institutional instruments of the struggle

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11 One of the most influential intellectuals of the populist movement, author László Németh explained the concept of the “third way” at the 1943 Balatonszárszó meeting as follows: “Let’s say that in New Guinea there’s a party that supports New Guinea belonging to the English. Another believes that New Guinea can prosper only under the Dutch. And now someone stands up and asks: Can’t New Guinea belong to the Papuans? That’s the third way” (in Esbenshade 2014: 178). In earlier popular-urbanist debates Németh and Zsolt emblematically represented the opposite sides, respectively. On the debates see Esbenshade 2014.

against fascism. The problem with this democratic fight for Bibó lay in its failure to provide clear criteria of moral judgement, based on which anyone could assess others and their own past acts: “As for the People’s Courts, they should be dealing with actual, accountable crimes, not the typical and conventional manifestations of politically narrow minds that ruled this country for 25 years” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 110). Put another way, judgements of war crimes trials should institutionally inscribe what past acts qualified as fascism. Bibó found the “close relationship” between fascism and reaction problematic:

“Fascism is the amalgam of distorted traditionalism and distorted revolution, of reaction and a distorted left” (Bibó 1986 [1946a]: 108). Its alliance with reaction comes from the fact that “fascists – among other things – attack things of which reactionaries are afraid” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 102).

This is why “sizable segments of the middle class, the intelligentsia, the petit bourgeoisie, and even the proletariat responded to certain slogans of fascism, without becoming genuine fascists themselves” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 107). The crisis of the struggle against fascism, which Bibó attributed to the communist tactics confusing the concepts of fascism and reaction, means that these masses were criminalized by the people’s jurisdiction, leading to their (temporary) exclusion from democracy. They were thus lost for the nation, Bibó held, because of the lack of the public sentiment necessary to admit a forgivable mistake, clearly differentiated from criminal responsibility, for involving these people in democracy.

Bibó saw the problem of reaction as more complicated, being less visible than fascism, and, being rather a condition than an intention, less accountable, not graspable by criminal means. Like Imre Kovács, he held that “the major drawback of this method of fighting reactionaries is that it is unable to make a distinction between the limited circle of genuine reactionaries and those elements of consolidation who are turned into reactionaries by their fear of the struggle itself” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 103). These elements which, according to Bibó, provided much of the Smallholders Party's voting power, are characterized by the need for consolidation due to the loss of security they enjoyed in the former gentry society. These masses must not be overcome, Bibó said, but included into the *demos* by associating to democracy not only the idea of radical transformation, but also of stability and order. He believed that giving a clear definition of the social domains of consolidation and stability, and separating them from the democratic-revolutionary transformation, would contribute to the inclusion of the “consolidation elements” into democracy. Reaction “in the strictest sense of the word”, by contrast, means “fatal petrification, the return of the unhealthy power relationships of the old days” (Bibó 1991[1945]: 126), against which Bibó considered the fight necessary by a conscious revolutionary reform policy, that is, by finishing the semi-revolution.

While in the autumn of 1945 the key issue of democratization for Bibó was the inclusion of “consolidation elements”, a year later, before the announced municipal government elections, he focused on the exclusion of reactionaries. He included under reaction all the social groups that saw in the loss of the old gentry middle class of Hungary the death of a beautiful, orderly and good world, and the beginning of a hopeless and anarchic state in democratic transformation. The current problem for Bibó

was that in 1945 the Smallholders' Party gained 57% of the votes with the support of the reactionary voters (on the basis of a survey, Bibó estimated the reactionary share at 30%). Thus, he considered the Smallholders' Party's absolute majority fictitious. That is, though the party held the absolute majority of the votes, it did not really represent the absolute majority of the *demos*. Bibó concluded that simply letting the smallholders win the municipal elections would be disastrous, a "catastrophe politics". The new catastrophe would be that "the whole election would be counter-revolutionary, and the whole process would take the form of a gentlemanly restoration" (Bibó 1986 [1946b]: 319). Bibó had several propositions to prevent the reoccurrence of the historical catastrophe. With the communist idea to restrict voting rights, he only had technical problems (that it is hard to identify who is reactionary). For Bibó, the solution would have been to exclude the political representation of reactionaries from the Smallholders' Party. One of Bibó's propositions was to allow the parties to the right of the smallholders to take part in the election, to take the "hostile votes against democracy" away from the Smallholders Party. With the possibility of institutional political representation, the right wing would have of course been strengthened; Bibó would have compensated for this by giving legitimate guaranties of the priority to the coalition parties, although temporarily. The new right-wing parties would thus have started from a legitimate competitive disadvantage in the elections. He also suggested that the "real" voting rates realized at the municipal elections should be enforced on the national level; that is, that the smallholders would lose parliamentary mandates according to their results at the municipal elections. This would have ended the fictitious majority of the party on the national level. The core of Bibó's strategy was, however, a comprehensive reform that would have created a democratic framework in public administration in which the people could experience and practice the freedom and responsibility of self-determination. The reform proposal of the peasant party, written by Bibó and Erdei, published in the summer of 1946 in *Szabad Szó (A magyar közigazgatás reformja 1946)*, was never realized.

In sum, populists, like other democratic critics of the fight against reaction, did not question the legitimacy of political exclusion, and called for improving its efficiency. What explains this is the fact that in the transitional historical situation, the political elite, in order to establish a democratic political system, aimed to (temporarily) restrict politics to the democrats. It is in this context that the communist party's campaign for popular democracy, launched that summer, should be interpreted. The concept of popular democracy had been used before, mainly by the smallholders but also by the populists (Erdei 1945). It meant "real" democracy – that is, the rule of the people, in opposition to the former parliamentary system, in which the peasantry and the working class had been excluded and suppressed. This meaning of the term was radically transformed by the campaign of the Hungarian Communist Party, which targeted the reactionary elements sneaking back to politics by way of the Smallholders' Party (Rákosi 1946; Révai 1946a, 1946b). Popular democracy now meant the fight against "right-wing reaction" and the peaceful – that is, non-violent and gradual – transition to socialism. The campaign of the communists triggered the debate between the proponents of civic and popular democracy, thus between the FKgP (e.g. Hám 1946) and the MKP, respectively.

## 2. Positions in the ethnoscape: The Jewish and the German question

One can contend that the political position of the populists in the democracy debate did not considerably differ from the other political forces' standpoints. In other words, basic claims of the populists were embraced by public political consensus. This does not mean, however, that the strategies of the political forces in taking this position were identical. What marks the populists in post-war politics is the way they connected the issues of modernization, social justice, and ethnic identity. This was a continuing feature before, during and after the war. I will now briefly discuss the continuity of the popular tradition after the "historical catastrophe" in relation to the redefinition of the ethnoscape. Historically, the two outstanding changes in this regard were undoubtedly the destruction of the Jews of the Hungarian countryside in 1944, and the forced relocation of half of the population with German origin between 1946 and 1948. Both the abolishment of the anti-Jewish laws and decrees of the previous regime and the legal withdrawal of the civic rights of ethnic Germans arose as problems of democratization in post-war Hungary.

The two ethnic categories of Jews and Germans (or, pejoratively, Swabians) were at the heart of the populists' self-identity from the beginning. In their eyes, they represented the two social categories of the foreign elite (of capitalist modernization), in opposition to the exploited Hungarian peasantry. Despite the historical changes of 1945, the basic attitude of the populist movement remained critical towards both groups precisely because they had always construed the acute questions of Hungarian society in relation to the social injustice of capitalism in ethnic terms. They did not, or could not, come to terms with key elements of the populist tradition of the interwar period: the critique of assimilation and the ethnic framing of social injustice.

As a salient feature of early post-war politics in Hungary, the decades-long debate on the so-called Jewish question continued in the public even after the tragic year of 1944 (Karády 2016). One aspect of the controversy addressed precisely the legitimacy of the Jewish question in democracy. The answer of the populists was positive. As a matter of fact, it was an acknowledged populist author, József Darvas, vice president of NPP, whose piece in the communist daily newspaper reanimated the polemics as early as March 1945 (Darvas 1945a). In an article entitled "For an Honest Voice on the Jewish Question", Darvas made the case for the continued existence of the Jewish question which he sharply distinguished from antisemitism. He argued that the honest discussion of the former will prevent the growth of the latter, a notable enemy of democracy. By honest discussion, Darvas meant the critique of "both sides": a minor part of the Jews overemphasizing Jewish suffering as a sort of a new privilege, and a minor part of the Hungarian people, infected by the previous fascist propaganda, who did not dare anymore to pronounce the word "Jew" but whose minds were still haunted by the myths of "Jewish revenge" and "Jewish power". In his view, "both sides" applied racial differentiation, which he equally refused as unacceptable. Darvas's "honest words", repeated in several public forums, such as the press of the Jewish communities (*Őszinte beszélgetés* 1945) or the NPP's first assembly in August (Darvas 1945b), triggered a public debate in which Darvas and the Peasant Party was blamed for (new) antisemitism. The critiques condemned that Darvas applied the same racial classification as the anti-Jewish laws or the Arrow Cross rule in the

past (Hámori 1945; Parragi 1945; Zsolt 1945b). The SzDP even adopted a resolution that officially condemned the voice of Darvas and Kovács at the NPP's assembly, which was, from the socialist point of view, the same voice ruling in 1944 (Elítélő határozat, 1945). In his comrade's and party's defense, Imre Kovács repeated the same argument. He stated that only the "foreign elements of Hungarian society" had been anti-Semitic, the Hungarian people had gotten on well with the Jews. However, he continued, now the Jews collectively blamed the Hungarians as a whole for what had happened to them, and this was the cause of new antisemitism. Kovács went even further when he said: "The Jewry has occupied such positions in the police, the public administration and the economy, from which it makes its dislike felt toward the Hungarians" (Kovács 1945c). The editorial of the FKgP's daily newspaper pointed to the fact that because of the deportations, the number of Jews significantly decreased, which makes it hard to speak about Jewish occupation (Változott helyzet 1945). The Hungarian Communist Party, remaining completely silent about the fact that Darvas actually triggered the controversy in its daily, condemned Darvas for adding fuel to the still glimmering fire of antisemitism in the Hungarian people by publicly raising the Jewish question (Tintahal taktika 1945). In general, the leftist standpoint identified the Jewish question with antisemitism, considering it an anachronistic and dangerous maneuver in order to obscure the acute problems of society (Betlen 1945, Schiffer 1946).

In 1946, the debate on the Jewish question continued with the same pattern between Péter Veres and Béla Zsolt, in line with the land reform, about the right of former Jewish owners, whose property had been confiscated, to get the land back (Veres served as president of the council responsible for the realization of the land reform). Zsolt spoke of Veres as a fascist threat to democracy who denies the restitution of the land to former Jewish owners and attributes an unwritten anti-Jewish law to him according to which in Hungary Jews could not own land. Veres referred to the rules of the land reform which did not treat the case of former Jewish owners as a problem of restitution and therefore identified Zsolt's position as Jewish. The last major contribution of the populists to the post-war discussion of the Jewish question before the communist takeover was István Bibó's essay "The Jewish question in Hungary after 1944" published in 1948 in *Válasz* (Bibó 1991[1948]). For its honest and near-heroic attempt to confront the question of responsibility for what is called today the Holocaust, Bibó's highly acclaimed argument in many respects seems to contradict the populists' discursive strategy of the earlier debates. Bibó saw two typical positions in earlier post-war discussions of the Jewish question, both unsatisfactory: the declaration that the majority of the Hungarian people remained unaffected by antisemitism, and that the fight against new antisemitism was a fundamental task of democracy. Bibó argued that the chance for taking responsibility collectively, in the name of the nation was not anymore possible four years after the catastrophe, so the only solution remained to confront the past individually, by an honest search of the soul. Bibó's essay served as a great example for that. At the same time, Bibó shared the key presuppositions that had previously marked the populists' discourse: the legitimacy of the Jewish question in post-war Hungary, its distinction from "new antisemitism", the belief that the discussion of the former prevents the latter, and the treatment of the problem as a socially ill relation of two sides, Hungarians and Jews, conceived as distinctive historical entities with their



distinct historical experiences.<sup>12</sup> Bibó remained essentially critical of assimilation, because of the assumed particularities of both the Hungarian and the Jewish society (Gyáni 2011).

The so-called Swabian question did not have such a “prestigious” tradition in post-war Hungary as compared to the Jewish question. The retribution against the Hungarian German population was highly legitimate and supported not only nationally but also on the international scene. Furthermore, Hungary strove to appear as moderate in the given circumstances, since it did not want to compromise the situation of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia, exposed to the “exchange of population” with the Slovaks in Hungary. Minor conflicts occurred, mainly over the legitimacy of the application of the collective guilt principle, and over the criteria of definition by which the scope of the population affected would be established. In general, it was the collective guilt principle that was institutionalized between 1944 and 1949 (Zombory 2016). In January 1946, when the expulsions began, only 26 intellectuals expressed their opposition in a public declaration in the daily *Magyar Nemzet*, on 18 January 1946. Even Béla Zsolt, who considered forced repopulation as a genuine fascist heritage, thus irreconcilable with democracy, argued that those who fell under the scope of the relocation decree were undoubtedly guilty of fascism and merited punishment. He opposed the application of the collective guilt principle, and warned against making the Swabians a scapegoat, and thus shifting the responsibility from the shoulders of Hungarian perpetrators (Zsolt 1946).

The populists were coherently anti-German from the beginning, so it is not surprising that they wholeheartedly supported the idea of German relocation after the war (Erdei as minister of the interior of the provisional government took an active part in the expulsions’ realization).<sup>13</sup> For the populists, beyond an instrument of retribution, forced relocation of the Germans from Hungary remained a social question connected to the distribution of the land. Maybe this explains why the populists’ voice in the national anti-German choir, together with that of the communists, was the loudest after the war. Imre Kovács, who numerous times attacked the hold of the centuries-old “German domination” on the Hungarian people, in his article in the populists’ daily newspaper attributed the war destruction to the Germans and their Hungarian ally, the Swabians. “There is no hope that the two peoples could get along peacefully with each other. One of them must go, and there is no question which one that is ... Swabians don’t merit mercy... Let them get out of here! – as they came: with one pack on their back” (Kovács 1945a). Kovács repeatedly explained in public that one of the crucial tests of democracy is to reckon with the hold of the German impact on the Hungarian people (Kovács 1945b, 1946b).

In sum, the position of the populist movement in relation to the ethnoscape in post-war Hungary was marked by the continuity of the way it problematized Hungarian

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12 In his comments on Gyula Borbándi’s *The Hungarian Populism*, Bibó theoretically distinguished antisemitism from the “sense of ethnic distinctiveness in relation to Jews”, the treatment of Jews as a distinct ethnic group that can be associated with both malignity and benevolence (Bibó 1978[1986]). However, it is hard to think of postulating a social problem as “Jewish”, or vice versa, the “Jewish” as a social problem, as an example of neutral ethnic differentiation.

13 On the internal and international resettlement of Hungarian Germans, see Tóth 1993.



society. They adopted a basically ethnic formulation of social inequalities inherited from influential interwar authors such as Dezső Szabó and László Németh: they believed that the central subject of modernization should be the essential national category, the peasantry, which had gotten stuck because the role of modernization was assumed by the foreign categories of Jews and Germans. As a consequence, the populists remained anti-assimilationists after the war while distinguishing the supposedly value-free ethnic differentiation from (new) antisemitism.

## Conclusion

This article proposed to reconsider the relation between populism and democracy by opening the debate on democracy's relation to populism. Instead of assessing populist politics in whatever historical context according to the currently prevailing normative democracy-idea, it argued for problematizing the idea of democracy not as a given but as historical process of continual redefinition. The primary aim was to call attention for a necessary historicization of the democracy-idea itself when treating the problem of contemporary populism. A historical case study was presented here as an example when the reflexivity with regards to democracy's boundaries and on democracy's nature as a whole composed a political context in which the particular populist claims lost significance since they were posed in the context of the political system. The public debate on democracy in early post-war Hungary has been conceptualized above as the process of (eventually failed) democratic self-constitution in which the political problem *par excellence* was the demarcation of the political community. In the public debate on democracy, participants addressed the question of the legitimacy of drawing the boundaries of the *demos*. Because of the specificities of the historical context and the "post-catastrophic" temporality experienced by the actors, questions of reflexive democratization stemmed from the ideas of the liberation of the people through revolutionary social transformation and the political exclusion of antidemocratic elements of society, perceived as representing the former regime. The discursive field of politics was structured by two features. One of them was the awareness of the political, social, and moral failure of the former regime. Contemporaries perceived the topical questions of their present as resulting from the historical catastrophe. Therefore, their politics were driven by the need to avoid the repetition of the catastrophic past. On the other hand, the definition of the polity's boundaries meant the inclusion of those social categories, which were before deprived of political agency.

Even though the few early post-war transitional years happened to be a great historical moment for the Hungarian populist movement, its members could not benefit from it as they were part of the political elite. In general, the position of the populists was not distinctive in the limited sphere of politics. It differed in how they assessed the two reference points of politics: the revolution and the struggle against fascism and reaction. Another distinctive feature of the populists was their ethnic view of social injustice, and their essentially critical attitude towards assimilation of the Jews and the Germans, conceived in the populist tradition as the foreign agents of capitalist modernization in sharp opposition to the Hungarian people.

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