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**Susan Zimmermann.** *PrÖ¤chtige Armut: FÖ¼rsorge. Kinderschutz und Sozialreform in Budapest; Das 'sozialpolitische Laboratorium' der Doppelmonarchie im Vergleich zu Wien 1873-1914.* Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1997. 475 pp. DM 108.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7995-0470-6.

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## Splendid Poverty

In its broadest terms, this monograph examines the origins in Budapest of the "modern welfare state." While the study encompasses more than four decades, emphasis is placed on the reform impulses of the years immediately before the First World War. During the mayoralty of Istvan Barczy (1906-18), Budapest was widely hailed as a "laboratory of social policy" for its innovative housing and unemployment policies. Through a close study of these reforms, Susan Zimmermann aims to challenge normative models of welfare development and to banish the notion that social modernization in Budapest was somehow "deviant" or "delayed." In this regard, her work can be seen as part of a larger process of the revision of the late Habsburg Monarchy, as well as an important contribution to recent debates on the welfare state. Here Zimmermann leaves little doubt about her own position:

All those, in the West as in the East, who still pay homage to the idols of modernization, and those to whom study of the causes of social needs under capitalist relations seems anachronistic today, should perhaps be a little disturbed from their supposed peace by this look at "splendid poverty." (p. 12)

Readers will undoubtedly draw their own conclusions concerning the lessons of this volume, yet all will welcome its careful research, compelling evidence, and enviable organization.

The first half of the book describes, in fascinating and depressing detail, late-nineteenth-century forms of poor relief and child protection. These measures reflected a liberal faith in laissez-faire policies, in individual responsibility, and in the primacy of private initiatives over public sources of assistance. Four interlocking practices in turn assured that assistance would be available only to a small proportion of the poor. First, relief was strictly limited to people who had established legal residency, and in Budapest this could be a long, difficult process. Second, begging and vagrancy were treated as criminal activities, punishable by arrest, detention, and the forcible return to the village of origin. This practice of expulsion (*der Schub*) was the third pillar of the system, and every year the authorities transported thousands of poor men and women back to their home villages. Ineffective and heartless (expellees were given two slices of bread, but only for journeys of more than 12 hours), mass ex-

pulsions continued through 1914. Last, poor relief was firmly linked to the idea that all able-bodied adults should be able to fend for themselves, and that only those unable to work (the elderly, infirm and children) would be considered for aid. Thus one 47 year-old widow with seven children was denied assistance. Taken together, these practices created a system built not just on paternalism or philanthropy, but on exclusion and repression as well.

One of the many strengths of this book is the connection it makes between poverty and gender. This link was apparent in all areas of social policy and particularly in debates and regulations surrounding prostitution, which was not explicitly forbidden, but regulated by the "moral police." The goal was not to remove all prostitutes from the streets, but to make sure that they were registered, were restricted to certain quarters of the city, and carried health certificates (to protect their middle-class clients). Though contemporaries usually justified these regulations in terms of hygiene or morals, Zimmermann demonstrates that in many respects prostitution was policed in the same way as begging and vagrancy. In this repressive environment, poor, single women were almost invariably suspected of prostitution.

Inadequate even in the best of times, traditional forms of poor relief were overwhelmed by the social problems accompanying Budapest's rapid industrialization and urbanization from the 1890s onward. The municipal authorities at first responded slowly, showing a marked preference for endless politicking, minimal social expenditures, and established methods. Though budgets would grow and reformers would set the tone in the following years, traditional thinking about poverty proved resilient. In 1913 the Hungarian Parliament passed an act which imposed a "labor obligation" on the "work shy"; with this, Zimmermann tells us, "the repressive control of the lower classes and the repressive validation of compulsive wage labor reached a high point." (p. 25) Many people, it was clear, continued to see unemployment as a moral issue best solved by police intervention.

This makes the emergence of the municipal reform movement, the subject of the second half of the book, all the more striking. Under Istvan Barczy, the Lord Mayor of Budapest, budgets soared as the city took over gas and advertising companies, installed sewers and electrical lines, launched a number of profitable enterprises, and built dozens of new schools. Barczy reorganized the municipal administration and proved adept at finding support in an often recalcitrant city council (the complexity of municipal authority – and Zimmermann's mastery of it – is graphically demonstrated in a labyrinthine chart on page 426). Barczy also worked to professionalize the city administration; this not only translated into more sophisticated statistics and social descriptions of the population, but also helped create "islands of reform" within the bureaucracy.

Zimmermann details the genesis, possibilities, and limits of Barczy's reforms in three fields: unemployment, housing, and the protection of children. In the face of widespread hostility and indifference, the municipal reformers achieved symbolic and often substantive breakthroughs in all three areas. In 1913, the municipal government promised assistance to those who were without work, and though outlays were barely enough to carry the estimated 40,000 unemployed through the hardest winter months, this measure represented an important shift in policy and discourse. Increasingly, "unemployed" was viewed as a legal category, and one that could be handled by social insurance. The city's achievement in housing was even more remarkable: between 1909 and 1913 the city built more than 4,000 units of low-income housing in Budapest.[1] This was hardly a solution to the endemic housing shortage and these cramped apartments were not palaces, yet rents were low and they were far better than the slums and "rental barracks" that often housed the working poor. Equally important, the municipal government secured greater rights for renters against their landlords. In the area of child protection, the city was somewhat overshadowed by the state, which had taken the lead with laws in 1898-99 promising assistance to all needy children. To Zimmermann, the state's programs, no matter how well-funded, were more paternalistic than progressive, and showed a notable readiness to involve the police and the courts. The city was not inactive in the protection of children, but here it had to settle for less visible gains.

An important voice in the debate over children belonged to the National League for the Protection of Children (*Orszagos Gyermekvedo Liga*). Founded in 1906 and concerned with the potential "ruin" of children in the proletarian quarters of the city, the League endorsed harsh measures in the name of "protecting" poor children. While Zimmermann's criticism of the League is on the mark, we hear little in this book about the many other charitable, self-help, and philanthropic societies that flourished in turn-of-the-century Budapest. While voluntary associations were no substitute for municipal or state activity, they undoubtedly played a role in shaping local attitudes and policies towards the poor. The motives of these societies may also have been more complex

than Zimmermann would allow, reflecting not simply an impulse towards "social disciplining," but also perhaps anxiety among the middle and upper classes, a new social conscience, or simply a heightened interest in how the other half lived.

In its richness, this book suggests many avenues for future research.[2] The connection between criminality and poverty, and the impact of prisons and similar institutions, need to be explored, as does the role of hospitals and the medical professions in the lives of poor people. The same is true of churches and religious organizations. More work could be done on the relationship between city and countryside, and on the many poor laborers who retained close ties to their home villages. Attention could also be paid to the two very different social groups, Jews and Gypsies, that always loomed large in discussions of urban poverty. There may be more to be said about the reformers themselves. Zimmermann tells us about several – Barczy, Imre Ferenczi, Mor Szalardi in particular –but on the whole they remain a rather faceless lot. Finally, the poor themselves are noticeably absent from this book; an anthropological study of poverty (and one that eschews nostalgia or ennoblement)[3] would make an interesting complement to the present volume.

Was Budapest a "laboratory of social policy" in the years before 1914? How can Budapest be usefully compared to other cities? And what does Budapest's experience tell us about social modernization more generally? These are the questions addressed by Zimmermann in her concluding section, in which she highlights the similarities and differences between Vienna and Budapest. Though brief (Zimmermann and Gerhard Melinz have compared the two cities in depth elsewhere) this section raises important theoretical questions about comparative history.[4] Ultimately, Budapest was unusual in that progressive, and at times radical, reforms were enacted "from above" by a narrowly-elected and often conservative city government, rather than, as was often the case elsewhere, by an active state. It may be, as Zimmermann suggests, that reform in Budapest at times resembled a "Trojan horse" brought into an unsuspecting and unfriendly city.

Notes

[1]. For more on housing, see the work of Gabor Gyani, *Berkaszarnya es nyomortelep* (Budapest: Magveto, 1992) and "Budapest" in M. J. Daunton, *Housing the Workers, 1850-1914* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1990), 149-82.

[2]. Some of the points raised here echo Zoltan Toth's excellent review of Zimmermann's earlier work. See his "The Boundaries of Comparison," *Budapest Review of Books* 3/4 (Winter 1993), 153-57.

[3]. Such is the case with Miklos Letay, *Az Utca Nepe Pest-Budan (1848-1914)* (Budapest: [s.n.], 1993).

[4]. See Melinz and Zimmermann, *Ueber die Grenzen der Armenhilfe: Kommunale und staatliche Sozialpolitik in Wien und Budapest in der Doppelmonarchie* (Vienna and Zurich: Europaverlag, 1991) and *Wien - Prag - Budapest: Bluetezeit der Habsburgmetropolen* (Vienna, 1996), reviewed on HABSBURG: `http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=19881864332388.`





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