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## Staging Crisis: Political Cabarets in the Early 1930s Vienna and Budapest

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### Abstract

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The present paper deals with the social context of political cabarets performed in Vienna and Budapest during the interwar period. These cabarets were staged by the Vienna-based Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe (Socialist Event Group) (1926–1933) and Barátság (Friendship), the official speaking choir of the Hungarian Metalworkers' Federation. Both worked in close collaboration with the Social Democratic Party, engaging in political activities like supporting election campaign. Cabarets also provided Barátság the opportunity to bring in unconventional or sensitive subjects. Besides criticizing the oppressive politics of the conservative Horthy regime, including police violence and anti-Semitic laws, comedy sketches also tackled the structural demeanors of Social Democratic party-institutions. The workers' movement intellectuals who brought these themes onto the agenda of the Hungarian workers' movement followed international trends and took inspiration mainly from Viennese productions, with the discourse adjusted to fit the local socio-economic conditions. For these reasons, examining the archived cabaret sketches of Barátság alongside the Viennese examples does not only help us to better understand the diverging role of political cabarets amongst the Social Democratic scene, but can also reveal how the Social Democratic parties and their membership tried to mitigate the damage suffered during the years of the Great Depression.

Political cabarets within the leading strongholds of the labour movement have been studied extensively, but as with other areas of labour culture history, regions with a significantly weaker industrial working class have seen less grounding research, and even when there is scholarly intent for such investigations, additional discursive steps are often required to better illustrate how the interplay between international influence and local relevance unfolded in an environment where the labour movement only represented a scarce minority in society. Left-wing cultural initiatives, including worker choirs, agitprop performances, and political cabarets followed the predominant international trends but took on a variety of iterations depending on the infrastructure that local left-wing parties could provide. In the Hungarian case, shortly after the Social Democrats staged their first political cabaret in 1930, *Népszava*, the official journal of the MSZDP (Social Democratic Party of Hungary), noted that the creators followed the example of the political cabarets staged in Vienna, although their performances did not meet the artistic quality of the Austrian precedents.<sup>1</sup> The creators clearly had the Viennese productions in mind when

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1 Főpróbán voltam. A Józsefvárosi “Barátság” Kulturgárda politikai kabaréja (I was at the rehearsal. The political cabaret of the Józsefváros-based “Barátság” cultural Guild). In *Népszava*, 28 October 1930, p. 4.

they began experimenting with the cabaret format but in Budapest, they operated under a more oppressive political regime with fewer financial resources. This constellation ultimately suggests that applying a comparative approach when analysing the Hungarian sources would mean that those Austrian examples set the bar for the Hungarian political cabaret scene, whose cultural production was considered better curated, even by the Budapest-based creators' closest allies. Still, discussing the Hungarian context alongside the political cabaret culture of the Viennese contemporaries should not necessarily reproduce dogmatic hierarchies, yet can still provide better insight into the scattered landscape of the interwar political cabaret culture and the divergent history of social conflicts that brought the cabarets to life.

For this end, the analysis here remains comparative only to the extent of examining the structural differences between the Austrian and the Hungarian initiatives, including their institutional backgrounds and access to the audience. Considering that political cabarets fulfilled different purposes in different socio-cultural contexts, direct comparisons would lead to overly generalized conclusions. Therefore, instead of measuring and contrasting the supposed subversive or revolutionary potential of the performances, I seek to identify the underlying structural and strategic differences that functioned as the prime movers behind the divergent cultural productions of the Hungarian and the Viennese groups.

### Historical and methodological contextualization and the Social Democratic scene in the post-monarchy Budapest and Vienna

My analysis is divided into three main parts. The first part provides an introductory overview of the political climate in which the creators of the cabarets operated. The second part examines the performances of the Viennese Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe (Socialist Event Group) (1926–1933), which served as a model for the Budapest-based initiative, paying specific attention to those events that changed the thematic focus of the Viennese cabarets throughout second half of the 1920s. The third part explores the limited occasions between 1930 and 1931 when political cabarets were performed by members of the Budapest-based Barátság (Friendship) speaking choir, further analyzing the structural differences that distinguished Barátság from Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe.

The Austrian sources used in this study were partly published in the creators' own periodical, *Die Politische Bühne* (1932–1933) and in Friedrich Scheu's extensive compilation of the staged pieces.<sup>2</sup> My analysis of the Hungarian context relies primarily on the archived documents of the choir leader of Barátság, Imre Knopp (1905–1942),<sup>3</sup> who preserved many of the performed sketches. Since the political satire of Barátság has never been discussed in a scholarly manner, the present study will follow a somewhat descriptive format in an attempt to provide an introductory thematic compilation of the Austrian as well

2 SCHEU, Friedrich. *Humor als Waffe*. Wien : Europaverlag, 1977.

3 Archival research was performed in the Politikátörténeti Intézet (Institute of Political History), Budapest and the Verein für Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung, VGA (Association of Labour Movement History), Vienna. This paper could not have been realized without the dedicated work of the employees of these two institutions.

as the Hungarian cabarets, with the descriptive sections handled in way that takes the context dependent nature of the sources into account.

When analysing the given source materials, the institutional background and socio-economic conditions should be taken into account on at least two levels. Firstly, such context needs to be examined from a content point of view, covering social issues, and the conflicts of interest that were scrutinised in these performances, and the analysis should also extend to the social status of both the performers and their audiences, as these two aspects often predetermined which inter-group conflicts would be concealed and which exposed on the stage. Secondly, since the creators were operating within the institutional framework of their local Social Democratic party, the cabarets were defined here primarily by the dialectic relationship between different levels of integration—the creators' integration into the party and the party's integration in the hegemonic relations within the state.

Following Gramsci and Szelényi, who both argued that the social position of intellectuals, lacking direct access to economic resources, depends on their coalition-making potential with other social groups, I emphasize that the cabarets interpreted social events in terms of the nature of the coalitions their creators formed with the party and its institutions, therefore it is also important to discuss the ways in which the creators positioned themselves within the infrastructure<sup>4</sup> of the party and how this influenced the content of the cabarets. Additionally, it is also crucial to stress, that the Hungarian and Viennese initiatives were local responses to the very same global events triggered by the Great Depression (1929), and the consequent internal crisis of Social Democratic party institutions.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, content-wise, the performances followed the party program closely, but due to the two countries' differing integration into the hierarchies of global capitalism, seemingly similar initiatives resulted in divergent cultural productions.<sup>6</sup>

The Social Democratic party provided cabaret creators their social and institutional background, both in Budapest and Vienna. After the First World War, with the disintegration of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary and the consequent dissolution of its integral market, the new Hungarian and Austrian states had to re-integrate into the global hierarches as separate, self-contained entities.<sup>7</sup> This happened in such a way that even though industrial workers gained parliamentary representation through local Social Democratic parties in both newly emerging nation states, the national economy of Hungary remained dominated by the agrarian sector, which fell outside the traditional

4 GRAMSCI, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York : International Publishers, 1971; WOLF, Eric R. *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1999, pp. 42-47; SZELÉNYI, Iván – KING, Lawrence Peter. *Theories of the new class: Intellectuals and power*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

5 POLÁNYI, Karl. *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*. Boston : Beacon Press, 2001.

6 On how movement strategies diversify following the spatial diversification of global capitalism, see: ARRIGHI, Giovanni. Marxist century, American century: The making and remaking of the world labour movement. In AMIN, Samir et al. (eds.) *Transforming the Revolution*. New York : Monthly Review Press, 1990, pp. 54-95.

7 BEREND, Iván T. – RÁNKI, György. *Közép-Kelet-Európa gazdasági fejlődése a 19-20. században*. Budapest : Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1969.

domains of Social Democratic organizing. Both the SDAP (Social Democratic Party of Austria) and the MSZDP (Social Democratic Party of Hungary) arose from non-parliamentary labour movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and after the post-First World War labour unrests, both parties gained power. Their victories, however, were soon overturned by conservative regimes.<sup>8</sup>

After the short lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919), led jointly by the Communist and the Social Democratic Party, Miklós Horthy introduced a conservative regime in Hungary, banned the Communist Party, blocked the MSZDP from organizing among civil servants and railway employees and restricted propaganda activities among the agrarian proletariat. In 1929 when the Great Depression hit the country, state control was extended to previously tolerated practices—including the performances of MSZDP affiliated speaking choirs. The Hungarian government also introduced a ban on the founding of new speaking choirs outside of the institutional framework of the MSZDP and the unions. Consequently, the illegal Communist Party of Hungary was formally excluded from this type of political action, and even the Social Democratic choirs faced increasing censorship.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, despite the Austrian government being ruled by the Christian Socialists, Vienna remained under the control of the Social Democrats. At the height of the Great Depression, the SDAP still maintained a leading position in the capital, accelerating the cultural production of their propaganda offices<sup>10</sup> with the Propaganda Centre of Vienna disseminating the scripts of political cabarets among the wider public as a response to the crisis. Consequently, the Austrian political cabarets reached a wider audience and were able to mobilize a wider range of social groups, including urban intellectuals and SDAP sympathizers from rural areas, while *Barátság* in Budapest performed almost exclusively in front of union members and party affiliates.

### **Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe (Socialist Event Group), Vienna (1926–1933)**

The Viennese political cabaret dates back to 1926, when young middle-class intellectuals organized the first performance under the name of *Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe*. At the first event, the focus was on recent cases of excessive financial abuse in the banking sector. The group staged satirical songs criticizing the authorities' inability to either prevent or penalize financial speculation. Global trends of financialization combined with reparation and relief debts led to further social polarization in the post-monarchy nation states, including Austria. To become eligible for loans from the League of Nations, the National Socialist government introduced strict austerity policies, propping up

8 POLÁNYI 2001, pp. 236–237.

9 KÖVÁGÓ, Sarolta. Szavalókórusok a magyar munkásmozgalomban (1926–1933). In *Párt-történeti Közlemények*, 1980, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 92.

10 GRUBER, Helmut. Socialist party culture and the realities of working-class life in Red Vienna. In RABINACH, Anson (ed.) *The Austrian socialist experiment: Social Democracy and Austromarxism, 1918–1934*. Boulder : Westview, 1985, pp. 144–165; and GRUBER, Helmut. *Red Vienna: Experiment in working-class culture, 1919–1934*. New York; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1991.

the struggling banking sector at the expense of the wage-earners.<sup>11</sup> These governmental measures were put on stage in songs such as *Üb immer Bank und Börsenspiel* (Always practice banking and stock market games):

Always practice banking and stock market games,  
then you'll never get into trouble;  
because if you win, you'll earn a lot,  
and if you lose, the federal government will cover it for you.<sup>12</sup>

Besides mocking the financial elites, the cabarets addressed a growing discontent within the youth towards the SDAP and the party leader, Otto Bauer. The sketches criticized the SDAP's moderate politics and Bauer's overly optimistic belief in achieving a democratic turnover in the upcoming elections. 18-year old Victor Weisskopf wrote a sketch set on the anticipated day when the SDAP would finally gain a majority in the national elections, ending the scene with the chant, "What do we do now, what do we do now? Now we pause for a bit. What do we do then, what do we do then? Then we'll just start again from the beginning."<sup>13</sup>

Even if Social Democratic voters credited Bauer, it still remained unclear how the party planned to achieve a peaceful transition to socialism given the worsening economic conditions of the disintegrating global market. Bauer was sitting in the audience with other politicians criticized on the stage and after the performance, according to a participant, Victor Grünbaum (later Gruens), the two sides agreed that the party would provide the institutional background and infrastructure for the cabaret movement and in return, the creators would divert their criticism towards the political enemies of the SDAP. Nevertheless, this supposed tacit deal did not grant Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe the status of a fully formalized SDAP institution.<sup>14</sup> The group had only two paid employees, but with the help of friendly loans, they managed to secure a stable budget for production costs<sup>15</sup> and since then, cabaret tickets were distributed by Die Sozialdemokratische Kunststelle, which took on the centralized dissemination of affordable tickets for SDAP affiliated cultural events, enabling the group to organize regular events with sold-out venues. David Josef Bach, the director of Kunststelle, was also a member of the editorial board of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and the chief editor of *Kunst und Volk*.<sup>16</sup> As such, operating under the umbrella of Kunststelle provided easy access to advertising.

Beyond their general tone, there were striking differences in the social classes of characters portrayed in the Viennese and Hungarian initiatives. While the Hungarian cabarets were darker in general, and focused on conflicts between state representatives (bureaucrats, policemen and politicians) and the industrial working class, the Viennese cabarets targeted those interest groups, including

11 BECKER, Peter – WHEATLEY Natasha (eds.) *Remaking Central Europe: The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2020.

12 SCHEU 1977, p. 42. (The translation of the German sources was proofread by Joël Foramitti.)

13 KREISKY, Bruno. *Erinnerungen: Das Vermächtnis des Jahrhundertpolitikers*. Berlin : Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1986, p. 76.

14 MALHEREK, Joseph. *Free-market socialists: European émigrés who made capitalist culture in America, 1918–1968*. Budapest : Central European University Press, 2022, p. 71.

15 SCHEU 1977, pp. 25–26.

16 PYRAH, Robert. The 'Enemy Within'? The Social Democratic Kunststelle and the State Theatres in Red Vienna. In *Austrian Studies*, 2006, Vol. 14, pp. 143–164.



the social nationalist press, private investors and landlords, that were the most vocal against SDAP policies and the sketches openly advocated for the very same measures these groups questioned, putting a special emphasis on the SDAP's housing program. A sketch from 1928 titled *Öffentliche und private Bautätigkeit* (Public and Private Constructions), does not only elaborate on the social costs of profit-driven private commissions, but gives a detailed description of the layout of a municipal housing unit, contrasting it with the infrastructure of a profit-seeking real estate investment:

How big are the apartments?

ARCHITECT: Oh, they're just small apartments, rooms, closets, anterooms, kitchen-living rooms, toilets.

OWNER: What, you have a toilet inside the apartment? Maybe even a water pipe and maybe an anteroom for the noble ladies and gentlemen!<sup>17</sup>

Between 1923 and 1933, the party built more than 300 apartment buildings in Vienna with the housing program becoming the signature project of the city. Besides providing affordable housing for many, these investments helped the SDAP to further expand the social spheres of its prospective alliances among the Viennese middle-class. Post-war inflation and the plummeting economy hindered the power of the traditional unions that served as a social base for Social Democratic parties. In response to the declining bargaining power of the unions in both the Austrian and the Hungarian cases, Social Democrats started building parallel institutions to strengthen the independence of the party infrastructure from traditional union bureaucracy. In case of the MSZDP, the process meant rather the over-bureaucratization of existing structures, but did not contribute to the mobilization of new alliances.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the Hungarian Social Democrats, the SDAP could use federal revenues and the municipal infrastructure to secure new coalitions with the middle class and the professional elites,<sup>19</sup> building heavily on the social base of the existing Viennese anti-systemic initiatives, such as the settlement movement, which showed as early as 1918 that extensive inter-group collations can be built along the lines of a housing crisis.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, due to the post-war depression and a growing unemployment rate, social policies targeting wage-earning individuals had less visible social impact compared to inter-

17 SCHEU 1977, p. 128.

18 SIPOS Péter. *A szakszervezetek és a Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt, 1890–1930. Értekezések a történelmi tudományok köréből*. Budapest : Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984.

19 Bauer's comments on alliances built during the Republic: "Thus the Republic was neither a bourgeois nor a proletarian republic. In this phase, the Republic was not a class State, that is, not an instrument for the domination of one class over other classes, but the outcome of a compromise between the classes, a result of the balance of class power. Just as the Republic arose in October, 1918, upon the basis of a social contract, a political treaty between the three great parties which represented the three classes of society, so it was only able to survive by means of daily compromises between the classes." CZERWIŃSKA-SCHUPP, Ewa. *Otto Bauer (1881–1938). Thinker and Politician*. Leiden : Brill, 2016, p. 249.

20 Members of the local elites, including the modernist architect Adolf Loos and the SDAP-affiliated political economist Otto Neurath, also supported the settlement movement, which managed to build formalized structures of cooperatives and had its own municipal office from 1921. More on the settlement movement, see: BLAU, Eve. *The architecture of Red Vienna, 1919–1934*. Massachusetts; London : MIT Press, 1999, pp. 88–133; and MCFARLAND, Red – SPITALER, Georg – ZECHNER, Ingo (eds.) *Red Vienna Sourcebook*. New York : Candelman House, 2020, pp. 405–424.

ventions in the redistribution-system on the level of the household. These tendencies proved to the SDAP that social housing could not only serve as a tool to mitigate social polarization, but a comprehensive housing program can also strengthen alliances outside of the traditional working class, especially since many of the prospective tenants were young families of middle-class or rural backgrounds and were not traditionally SDAP voters.<sup>21</sup> For all these reasons, housing became one of the central themes of the cabarets during the 1920s. The creators continued to mock Christian Socialists for trying to undermine the progressive taxation that financed social housing. Characters, like Mr and Mrs Pamsti from the sketch *Der Patentwiener* (1928) were designed to illustrate how private economic interests were combined or sometimes concealed in the public discourse with a nostalgic resentment towards the decline of the traditionalist, bourgeois cultural hegemony in public spaces of the city. Christian Socialist characters not only complained for the loss of rental revenue, but expressed their concerns with school reforms and public services, which they considered morally dubious:

Mr. PAMSTI: ...If we take the money away from the municipality of Vienna, then they won't be able to build more apartments, and if they can't build more apartments, then the tenant protection will have to be abolished, there won't be any fooleries.

Mrs. PAMSTI: And when I take the money away from the municipality of Vienna, then, oh how I will thank God in heaven, they won't be able to build public baths where the shameless Viennese bathe nude, disgusting! Because they don't know that everything is pure to the pure, even without bathing and washing.<sup>22</sup>

In both the Hungarian and Austrian circumstances, political cabarets condensed multiple generational conflicts. The Christian Socialists' supposed conservative prudery and their aversion towards the lifestyles of the Red Vienna youth were targets of constant criticism. These inter-generational tensions arose primarily from the politicized status of the intellectual positions the young creators were aspiring for.<sup>23</sup> The authors of *Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe* joined the Social Democratic youth movement in middle school and pursued professional careers within the institutional network of the municipal infrastructure of Red Vienna. Viktor Grünbaum (later Gruen), who also designed some of the costumes, was an early-career architect and Robert Ehrenzweig, later editor of *Die Politische Bühne*, was a student in the Department of Chemistry and Physics at the University of Vienna and became a regular contributor of a variety of Social Democratic Periodicals.<sup>24</sup> Their carrier aspirations situated them in positions of contender interests against the traditional, Christian Socialist intellectual elites, including representatives of the right-wing media and actors of the Viennese real estate businesses.

21 More on social housing in the Red Vienna period, see: HOLZNER, Mario – HUBERMAN, Michael. All Politics is Local: The Social Housing Experiment of Red Vienna, 1923–1933. In *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2022, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 49–88.

22 SCHEU 1977, p. 134.

23 On the social formation of the positions of the intellectuals, see: SZELÉNYI, Iván – KING, Lawrence Peter. *Theories of the new class: Intellectuals and power*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2004; On the contemporary Hungarian context, see: GAGYI, Ágnes – SZARVAS, Márton. Válság, művészet és politikai aktivizmus ma. A kortárs kulturális mező újrapolitizálódásának társadalmi környezete. In *Eszmélet*, 2016, vol. 28, no. 112, pp. 111–133.

24 SCHEU 1977, pp. 24–28.

Conflicts that were brought to the stage revolved around the SDAP reforms in the Viennese social infrastructure and intra-group rivalries connected to the emergence of a new, SDAP-affiliated intellectual urban elite. In the early years of the Viennese political cabarets (1926–1929), the everyday struggles of the industrial working class remained secondary. If an archetypical worker-character appeared on stage, it was to represent the party program. In December 1927, soon after worker riots culminated in the burning down of the Palace of Justice, Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe staged a sketch in which they discussed the interests of the Austrian capitalist elites in escalating the situation, ending the scene with a worker confronting them with the recent successes of the international workers' movement and reminding the audience that contrary to right-wing militarism, the SDAP set out a peaceful, reformist transition to socialism<sup>25</sup> in the Linzer program (1926).<sup>26</sup>

The struggles of industrial workers came to the fore in 1929, by which time unions were rapidly losing ground and yellow unionism hindered union work, even in the strongholds of profit-intensive metalworking sectors. In 1928, right-wing-leaning workers, backed by the local right-wing organization (Heimatschutz), founded the Unabhängige Gewerkschaft (UG [Independent Trade Union]) in the Donawitz steel milling unit of the Österreichische Alpine Montangesellschaft (ÖAMG). The UG functioned as a yellow union of the ÖAMG, representing corporate interests against SDAP-affiliated trade unions.<sup>27</sup> A year after the establishment of the UG, a former member of the Blaue Blusen (Blue Blouses) agitprop troupe, Jura Soyfer, joined Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe and staged “Hallo, hier Klassenharmonie!” (Hello, Class Harmony Here!) in which the general director, Goldschieber, magically transforms into an average worker overnight because a ghost-couple, Li and Lo, commissioned by the Ghost-King, must fulfil the “wildest” wish spoken aloud on Earth. Through Goldschieber's character, the performance introduced the audience to the challenges of organizing at the site of production and with this sketch, the main site of the struggle shifted from urban conflicts to labour-capital conflicts in industrial sectors. Aside from tackling the excessive nature of capitalist polarization, this performance closely observed the challenges of organizing in a sector dominated by yellow unionism.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, a range of local agitprop and speaking choirs appeared on the Viennese scene<sup>29</sup> and in cooperation with the authors of Die Sozialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe, the Propaganda Centre of Vienna launched a monthly periodical called *Die Politische Bühne* (1932) to supply travelling Rote Spieler (Red Performers) troupes with anti-Nazi and agitative texts and

25 In 1926, SDAP adopted a new program in Linz, which remained official until the party was banned in 1934.

26 SCHEU 1977, pp. 138–139.

27 BRANDNER, Marina. *Diskursverweigerung und Gewalt Dimensionen der Radikalisierung des politischen Klimas in der obersteirischen Industrieregion 1927–1934*. Innsbruck; Wien; Boden : Studien Verlag, 2011, pp. 84–85.

28 SCHEU 1977, pp. 169–174.

29 KARAU, Elisa. “On the Speaking Choir Movement (1927)”. In MCFARLAND – SPITALER – ZECHNER 2020, pp. 510–512.



song materials. Since Rote Spieler troupes took the performances to the countryside where SDAP voters represented a scarce minority, *Die Politische Bühne* engaged less with Viennese politics and primarily published pieces written with the intent to disseminate basic knowledge on the constraints of global capitalism, (*Das Bauvolk der Erde* [The Builders of the Earth]) combined with a direct criticism of Nazism (*Politik im Extrazimmer* [Politics in the Extra Room]). The cabarets staged by Barátság also carry some resemblance to the agitprop format of the Rote Spieler performances. In Budapest, they first performed political cabaret only in 1930, when Die Socialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe became further integrated in the SDAP campaigns and started incorporating agitprop elements. Though, since the sketches staged by Barátság were born out of different intra-group conflicts and the choir operated under different infrastructural conditions, their use of agitprop techniques also differed from that of the Viennese initiatives.

### Political cabarets performed by Barátság speaking choir (1930–1931)

The meagre amount of research that has addressed Hungarian initiatives discusses them in the context of the collective leisure culture of the interwar period, mentioning later events only briefly, such as performances staged in the workers' associations' summer camps. During Horthy's conservative regime (1920–1944), political cabarets were subjected to severe censorship and straightforward bans but summer camps were less threatened by such policing due to their physical distance from the city centre, therefore political comedy was forced to retreat to these locations. Nevertheless in 1930, at the height of the Great Depression, the Budapest-based Barátság speaking choir included political cabarets in its repertoire and staged political cabarets in the centre of the Hungarian capital but their third attempt was banned by the police. Since political cabarets often discussed party politics openly and the creators actively participated in electoral campaigns, they were subject to state censorship in both Budapest and Vienna but in case of Budapest, Barátság had come to expect outright bans so they advertised the events as rehearsals, otherwise the scripts would have to be handed over to the police before the performance<sup>30</sup> and accordingly, performances took place in a semi-legal space.<sup>31</sup>

The majority of the sketches were written by Imre Knopp, who besides being the choir leader of Barátság was a practicing poet. There were some vague thematic correlations with the Viennese cabarets, but Knopp did not translate the scripts from German. Cabarets were expected to reflect the local political

30 From a 1931 report on the ban, "Barátság Choir will only recite two poems because the police have removed 'Political Cabaret' from the programme. The audience's indignation lasted for minutes and then the Friendship Choir closed the evening with Knopp's 'Our Mother' and Zseni Várnai's 'No Work, No Bread.'" *Népszava*, 25 October 1931, p. 2.

31 After her retirement, Anna Oláh, Knopp's widow published a novel based on her partner's, later husband, life which mentions this event: "In the auditorium, R-guardists [Event-guardist] were everywhere, ready to ward off any provocation or disturbance. It was also their duty to disperse the crowd quickly and orderly as soon as the performance was over [...] since 1,500 enthusiastic, excited people were almost the equivalent of a small demonstration." OLÁH, Anna. *Négyzólamú Ének*. Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1983.

milieu, and as a result, topical similarities often led to different narrative arcs. For instance, in the case of the Western tourist trope, the Austrian sketch, titled *Der Patentwiener* introduced a Western tourist character to challenge the urban Christian Socialist elite's hostility toward recent improvements in city infrastructure. Meanwhile, Barátság staged an Australian tourist to criticize the Hungarian state's controversial attempts to catch up with the modern city infrastructure of the core at the expense of the lower classes. In the sketch, a working-class character, Pafcsuga, meets an Australian tourist who was planning to visit the Balkans but got only as far as Hungary. Pafcsuga offers to help him discover the Balkans in the very heart of Budapest, going on to describe the capital city as the main site of unevenness with its representative investments, like the neo-gothic Parliament building and the under-financed social-care system existing side by side with each other:

Pafcsuga (tourguide): This is the St. Rókus hospital.

Stranger (an Australian tourist): And what is it famous for?

Pafcsuga: The Rókus? It is famous for the fact that here the rats chew away the remaining flesh what the visiting American doctors have left on the patient.

Stranger: Brrr! And why didn't they demolish it?

Pafcsuga: The National Committee does not allow it.

Stranger: Why? Is it a national monument?

Pafcsuga: Yes, it is. As you know, it has already entered the public consciousness of the educated West that in the last 1000 years we were the final bastion of the West [...] but there are foreigners who are not satisfied with having seen the place where the two continents actually collide but they want to see exactly where the doorstep of the East is. Well, in these cases we show them the Rókus hospital, because that's how far Europe can reach today, what is inside is already Asia.

[...]

Stranger: Tell me what should I take home as souvenir?

Pafcsuga: Buy half a kilogram hunger-bread, eat it on an empty stomach, and you will never forget Budapest.<sup>32</sup>

Pafcsuga with an internalised, self-colonising tone,<sup>33</sup> describes the result of the parallel processes of modernization in the city centre and rapid urbanization in the outskirts, which involved an increase in low-investment industrial production combined with the influx of cheap rural labour, and a growing number of informal slums.<sup>34</sup> This unevenness was further exacerbated by crisis-driven governmental austerity policies, which included cutbacks on wages in public sector while continuing with state-funded work through representative public investments. Although the economic crisis is not explicitly mentioned in the sketch, the 1930s audience should have understood the implicit references to the consequences of recent governmental measures. This is especially evident

32 Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Guided tour (Idegenvezetés), sketch comedy by Imre Knopp.

33 KIOSSEV, Alexander. Notes of self-colonising cultures. In PEJIC, Bojana – ELLIOTT, David (eds.) *Art and culture in post-communist Europe*. Stockholm : Moderna Museet, 1999, pp. 114–118.

34 GAGYI, Ágnes. Szolidáris gazdaság és kapitalizmus: Az alternatív gazdaság új mozgalmi modelljei globális és magyar környezetben. In *Fordulat*, 2020, no. 27, p. 28.

when Pafcsuga takes his companions to a slum in the 16<sup>th</sup> district, a neighbourhood that became widely known at that time due to significant growth caused by rising unemployment rates during the Great Depression, “I just took them to the Dühöngő Telep (Colony of Fury) [...] there they saw the Balkans. In the evening they left satisfied.”<sup>35</sup>

Contrary to Vienna, where Die Socialistische Veranstaltungsgruppe developed rather independently from other cultural initiatives, in the case of Barátság, political cabarets were considered a side project, which Knopp and the choir members started initially to manage a growing tension within the choir itself, providing the members a platform to talk about their fear of the economic crisis and its social backlash.<sup>36</sup> Knopp himself was of a lower middle-class background and many of the performers came from those working-class households that suffered the most from the frequent lay-offs during the Great Depression. Members of Barátság had been working closely together since 1928, and the cabarets partially emerged from a collective response to witnessing their peers’ financial struggles. Since Barátság was part of the youth club of the metalworkers’ union, performing on the stage of the Metalworkers’ Federation headquarters in Budapest meant that parts of the audience likely belonged to friendly unions. This semi-public setting allowed for a more personal tone and gave the choir the opportunity to stage intervals in which instead of impersonating the usual social archetypes, they put on stage their own private selves and utilized the inner group dynamics of the choir, kindly teasing each other for comic effect:

Knopp: Tell me Feri, do you remember when the three of us sat together?

Marjai: On Tisza Kálmán Square?

Knopp: Yes, there!

Marjai: I remember, of course!

Knopp: Then we swore to each other that we would never leave each other, for better or worse.

Marjai: I remember, first I became unemployed and you couldn’t help me [...] then you got sick and we couldn’t help you.

Knopp: You see and now Vajda is in trouble.

Marjai: What’s wrong with you?

Vajda: Please, one of the songs has been cancelled, would you please sing?

Marjai: Of course, but who will accompany me?

Vajda: Him! [Knopp]

Marjai: Hm! Him?

Knopp: If I’m not good enough, I might send someone down to the police station and call two policemen, if that’s more suitable accompaniment for you.

Marjai: You are still better then.<sup>37</sup>

Barátság was founded as the official speaking choir of the Metalworkers’ Federations’ youth club and followed a unionist agenda. They tended to give

35 “egyszerűen levittem őket a Dühöngő telepre. Ott láttak Balkánt. Este elutaztak megnyugodva.” Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Guided tour (Idegenvezetés).

36 OLÁH 1983.

37 Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: The Four Link.

priority to contemporary Hungarian authors directly involved in the local workers' movement (Árpád Szakasits, Árpád Szélpál, Zoltán Körmendi), and in the repertoire, international and folk poetry was rare.<sup>38</sup> Due to their close links to traditional union culture, the choir framed the productive labour of skilled workers as the primary means of social and economic progress. One of their signature pieces was Knopp's *Munkadal* (Labor song), in which each of the main industrial sectors had a few lines to underline their contribution to broader society:

Female solo: we weep the silk, we sew all the beautiful clothes

Women's choir: the huge wheel is rolling and rolling

Female solo: we can have only rags but no brocade?<sup>39</sup>

Besides the critique of exploitation, precarity and the dangerous labour conditions, following the unionist tradition, the group also tended to somewhat romanticize the social importance of productive labour:

I am the holiest soldier, because on the front line of labour no one can run away [...] and then we who have been only numbers, we are going to rise [...] and when we are there we will build a new world for ourselves (Congress of Suicidals).<sup>40</sup>

In the meantime, the Great Depression created an ambiguous, discursive space in which worker pride and claims for the past promises of catching-up<sup>41</sup> appeared in combination with the everyday experiences of mass-misery and state violence. The first time, when Barátság organized an event around political cabarets they staged a sketch to contrast the pre-crisis socio-economic aspirations of the skilled, urban working-class with the real prospects in the industrial sectors. In this scene, a blue-collar working-class family discusses their growing financial stability at the breakfast table, emphasizing the general prosperity among Social Democratic organizations:

Károly: Buddy, we'll buy the car!

Sándor: (with a smile) Yay! Yay! Yay!

Mother: (Comes in) Boys, what shall we have for breakfast?

Dad: Coffee with cream, Mum!

Károly: (with a grimace) No ham?

Mum: (complaining) The cooperative didn't have any, except Prague ham, and you don't like it because it's greasy, and you know I don't buy ham elsewhere!

Sándor: Well, coffee will be good then!

Károly: Dad, what happened at the party last night?

Father: (puts down the newspaper, Sándor picks it up) Practically nothing, my son! Things are going well now, the membership fees are being paid on time, no one is asking for any financial aid...<sup>42</sup>

In the end, the alarm clock goes off, Sándor, Károly, and their parents must wake up from their dream, return to the everyday reality of their pauperized household, and start the day again.

38 KÖVÁGÓ 1980, p. 90.

39 Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Labor song (excerpt).

40 Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Congress of Suicidals (excerpt).

41 ARRIGHI, Giovanni. The developmentalist illusion: a reconceptualization of the semiperiphery. In WILLIAM, Martin G. (ed.) *Semiperipheral States in the World-Economy*. New York : Greenwood Press, 1990, pp. 11-42.

42 Politikatörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Károly: Öcskös, megvesszük az autót.

The economic recession forced the party and the union leadership to shift their political focus towards unemployment. Barátság also examined the social consequences of unemployment from angles aligned with the MSZDP's main agenda, discussing the precarious situation of those participating in occasional state-organized public work designed to address unemployment and staged street sweepers working during wintertime: "A little snowfall would be nice right now because we need the money for horse meat [...] when the snow stops, the starvation comes."<sup>43</sup>

Besides the issues of famine and the over-policing of a distressed urban society, the choir criticized the bureaucratic obstacles in accessing unemployment benefits:

Unemployed: I thought I'd get my emergency aid right away...

Officer: What specific merit can you present to support your claim?

Unemployed: 21 months of combat service.

Officer: That's not good.

Unemployed: I know. That's not why I was there.

Officer: I meant you can't claim any benefit based on that.<sup>44</sup>

The Rote Spieler performances also addressed poverty, mainly in the context of the rising unemployment rate (see: *Christbaum der Menschheit* [Christmas Tree of Humanity]) but the general tone of Barátság's cabarets compared to those published in *Die Politische Bühne* was darker, and themes such as mass misery, death, the suffering of poorly treated hospital patients and prostitution were more prevalent. Young, working-class members of Barátság were especially affected by the crisis, and their personal struggles might have shifted their interest towards darker themes. However, this tonal difference between the Hungarian and Austrian performances may also stem from the different target audiences of the two initiatives. Viennese political cabarets still enjoyed the support of the city's leadership, therefore did not paint such vivid picture of urban poverty and human suffering, but did become an important agent of the anti-fascist propaganda in Vienna as well as the Austrian countryside.

Rote Spieler troupes travelled to the countryside agitating villagers and consequently, on the stage, they emphasized the importance of inter-class camaraderie between urban and agrarian proletariat (see, for example: *Kampf mit uns!* [Fight with us!]). Barátság, however, performed almost exclusively in front of a select few thousand of the urban working class, therefore caricaturing the countryside did not carry such political risks. The over-accumulation crisis further deepened the existing economic and political polarization of the urban and rural regions. Furthermore, urban centres and rural regions competed for the same state investments and public works programs to contain the surging unemployment rates.<sup>45</sup> In the context of the political cabarets, these

43 Politikátörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5.

44 Politikátörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5.

45 CZIRFUSZ, Márton. Munkanélküliség és az állam tértermelése Magyarországon két



tensions between the villagers and the urban working-class came to the fore in 1931 when in the sketch *We should go to Budapest*, Antal Farkas<sup>46</sup> “bloodily caricatured” the local elites of the villages, “the chief firefighter and the retired propeller captain, the postmaster, the state nursery’s employee and poetess, all united in one spirit: the spirit of drunkenness, stupidity, corruption and hatred of the workers.”<sup>47</sup>

Beyond that, the sketches were mainly set in urban environments—in working class homes, in the street or in offices and other representative places of the state bureaucracy. The economic struggles of the agroproletariat were rarely mentioned.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, besides the rural elites, the urban middle class was also heavily criticized for its ignorance (see: *The Street* [Az utca]), and in some subtle ways, the peasantry also got included in the performances. The choir leader, Knopp, who gained his political socialisation in the countryside and regularly agitated in rural regions, took on the character of Pafcsuga, a well-informed and knowledgeable half-peasant, half-worker who “always knew everything, and [...] pointed out the political anomalies and recent disfranchising state regulations.”<sup>49</sup>

As previously mentioned, cabarets were side-projects for Barátság. As a speaking choir, they worked in close collaboration with trade unions and the Social Democratic Party. They engaged in political activities, performed at campaign events for local elections and promoted the party’s daily newspaper, *Népszava*. The MSZDP expected the choir members of Barátság to attend seminars where they were introduced to the foundational principles of socialism. Invited speakers came from the intellectual elites of the party to give them lectures, and there were also political sessions that the choir members were obliged to attend. The theme of these lectures was connected to the poems the choir performed, and members were also invited to bring in topics of their choice and present their own findings.<sup>50</sup> To ease their understanding of the theoretical texts, members were also encouraged to approach Marxist concepts through classical literature and popular novels. Choir members organized their own informal reading seminars, and some of the novels they read were later dramatized and performed by the group. Knopp’s widow also mentioned in her recollections that Knopp often dramatized popular novels for the choir. Though its script is not included in Knopp’s archived documents,

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válságidőszakban (Unemployment and the production of state space in Hungary in two crisis periods). In *Tér és Társadalom*, 2019, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 177–196.

46 A *Népszava* (People’s Voice) correspondent. *Népszava* was the official journal of the Social Democrats.

47 *Népszava*, 3 March 1931, p. 9.

48 See: Kampf mit uns! In *Die politische Bühne*, July 1932.

49 Politikátörténeti Intézet 867. f O-54.

50 “Choir members participated in a so-called youth day organized by the party. Sándor Szerdahelyi, Illés Mónus, Soma Braun, Tamás Nagy, István Ries, and Sándor Hertzka were the invited speakers. In addition to the Youth Day, they regularly attended social democratic seminars [non-party members of the choir joined the MSZDP in January 1930], where they were introduced to the foundational principles of socialism. There were also special political sessions for choir members. Choir members were obliged to attend these lectures, but could also present their own talk on topics of their choice. The choir sessions focused mainly on the poems they performed...” KÖVÁGÓ 1980, p. 90.

according to her, Knopp used Remarque's novel, *Der Weg zurück* to talk about the Hitler Jugend<sup>51</sup> and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was also repurposed for the cabaret. In one sketch, Robinson and his companion, Friday, discuss in simple terms what happens in the labour market during the over-accumulation crisis. In this sketch, the dispute between Friday and Robinson symbolizes the broader trends emerging between the global proletariat and bourgeoisie. Robinson, who has major surpluses from the last years, decides to restrict production on his island at Friday's expense. Meanwhile, Friday, lacking any land or other form of property, cannot even sustain himself, despite the island's abundant natural resources.<sup>52</sup>

In another Robinson themed sketch, Knopp employs the Robinson's island metaphor to criticize the overcomplicated bureaucracy of the MSZDP.<sup>53</sup> During the 1920s, the Party underwent several structural changes on different levels of its own organisational hierarchy. Firstly, its own assets were deeply entangled with the unions' local and federal institutions, and this network created a mass-base with thousands of workers who became committed to the MSZDP through their union-membership. However, the MSZDP got more deeply involved in parliamentary politics and their politicians' focus from the economic sphere of bargaining shifted even more towards legal and political actions (insurance policies including unemployment, retirement, accident insurance, etc.), at the same time, the bargaining power of unions decreased after the war, which resulted in more confrontations between social democratic leaders and the militant unions. For all these reasons, the MSZDP started developing parallel institutions to assure that the party members were directly linked to the party itself instead of being mediated through their unions, which necessarily led to further bureaucratization.<sup>54</sup>

Secondly, the number of unemployed, less-skilled, young or women workers was also rapidly growing and these groups were more receptive to illegal communist agitation due to their precarious economic positions. Therefore, from the mid-twenties onwards, the party council took repeated action against its internal, communist-led opposition, making a strong effort to crack down on the communist-backed groups led by István Vági. In February 1925, they passed a resolution to exclude Vági's followers from the unions and the party asserted more rigorous control over its members.<sup>55</sup> This double control defined the structural field in which Barátság had to operate. Young workers who made up the majority of the membership were less embedded in the exiting party structure and enjoyed fewer benefits in the labour market. Therefore, according to Knopp's widow Oláh, in the eyes of the older party members, they were often considered a potential threat:

51 Politikátörténeti Intézet 867. f O-54.

52 Politikátörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5.

53 Politikátörténeti Intézet, II. 608 f 3/5: Guided tour (Idegenvezetés).

54 SIPOS 1984, pp. 108-122.

55 SIPOS 1984, p. 83.

As unemployment increased and the situation worsened, the discontented became more vocal and they urged the movement to do something, as a response the older people often made the devastating accusation that anyone who speaks like that is a 'Bolsi' [Bolshevik]! And everyone knew that the ones labelled with this stigma were soon expelled from the ranks of the Social Democratic Party and the trade union.<sup>56</sup>

Oláh also argued that cabarets helped the integration of Barátság in the broader membership of the party. Since the audience knew what risk the performers were facing, they were ready to express their appreciation and support regardless of the internal conflicts between the young and the older members: "The choir saw this [the supportive behaviour of their audience] as a sign of the party organisation's appreciation, that they were important to the 'old people', that they were needed needed, and that the others didn't want them to be subjected to police action."<sup>57</sup>

Oláh's personal accounts may not match the experiences of other participants. Nevertheless, her recollections better highlight the contrast with the Viennese example, where the focus was on mitigating the socio-political crisis, first in Vienna and then in the broader Austrian society. The Hungarian initiative put more emphasis on the internal crisis the choir members' experienced in their own circle. They were coming from the local youth club of the MSZDP, they were trained in a traditional Social Democratic educational system and when they staged the cabaret sketches, they combined traditional union culture with darker, less mainstream themes. The cabarets, just like other agitprop performances, were part of the workers' political education, but these sketches also created a symbolic space where members of Barátság were allowed to talk about their fears and their discontent without further escalating conflicts within the party.

## Conclusion

The Viennese and the Budapest-based initiatives were similar in the sense that they began experimenting with cabarets as a way to manage internal tensions, but the motivation behind these conflicts was entirely different. In case of Austria, cabarets enjoyed the support of the Viennese political and cultural institutions until the fall of the Red Vienna in 1934, and with the growing importance of anti-fascist propaganda, cabarets became even more formalized with the establishment of the *Die Politische Bühne* editorial board. When Barátság performed its cabarets, the MSZDP was not in the situation of being able to include the genre in its mayor propaganda campaigns or provide the creators much support, but they used these semi-legal events to secure the conflict-heavy position of their young members. Such divergent contexts of the Austrian and the Hungarian cases allow for an examination of how the

<sup>56</sup> OLÁH 1980, p. 156.

<sup>57</sup> OLÁH 1980, p. 181.

creators of the political cabarets responded to the given structural conditions, both organisational- and content-wise, and even though the present paper details only a few examples, it may still provide some insight into the methodological challenges that come with the juxtaposition of initiatives implementing similar practices but operating in different hegemonic constellations.

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