BOOK REVIEW

Varsa, E. (2021). Protected Children, Regulated Mothers: Gender and the 'Gypsy Question' in State Care in Postwar Hungary, 1949–1956. CEU Press

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This volume emerged from Eszter Varsa's doctoral research and dissertation completed in English for international audiences. It scrutinizes everyday practices of child protection institutions in post-war Stalinist Hungary embedded in the politics and social tensions of the emerging state socialist regime, such as catch-up industrialization, women's rising employment rate and an accompanying restructuring of the relationship between paid work and care work, state intervention in the private realm and an assimilationist policy towards those identified as 'Gypsy', meanwhile providing a comparative international perspective. In this regard, Varsa's book dovetails with ongoing academic discussions of recently renewed political interest in children and parental practices evidenced in the collection of articles in this special issue.

Eszter Varsa's book broadens this discussion with a historical account of children's placement in state care and women's experiences within the context of child protection policies and institutions at the onset of early state socialism between 1949 and 1956. In her account the institution of child protection fulfilled specific regulatory functions in early state socialist Hungary since it was intended not only to influence the behaviour of children but also that of parents, especially mothers. In this regard, Varsa's book demonstrates that intervening in parenting and family life is part of the institutional continuities and change that describe social and cultural transformations across space and time.

Varsa's book, consisting of five chapters, traces three areas of life where the regulatory function of child protection was manifest and caseworkers tried to effect change in the lives of parents and children: parental employment, female sexuality and the work activities and everyday life of children in residential homes. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the historical context of the period between 1949 and 1956 before moving on to a thorough review of the social and institutional background of child protection in this period. The discussion of the early state socialist period is embedded in a historical overview of child protection in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which is a pivotal element of Varsa's *longue-durée* approach. She argues that the system of child protection institutions and children's homes that authorities inherited from the first half of the 20th century, affected the course of change in the field of child protection in state socialist Hungary. For instance, the existence

of a state-wide system of child protection institutions (former state asylums) was unique in comparison to other state socialist countries in East Central Europe, which enabled Hungarian authorities to rely on a network of child protection institutions formerly run by private welfare organizations. The socialist state's response to the so-called 'Gypsy question' can also be understood only in a long-term perspective since preconceptions about Roma's work-shyness and the practice of placing Romani children in state care dated back to the assimilationist policies of Maria Theresia and Joseph II. It is in this context that the rest of the chapter spells out the restructuring of the child protection system in the late 1940s and early 1950s and presents the difficult conditions – overcrowding, lack of personnel, food, health supervision – in child protection institutions.

The second chapter analyses ways children were placed in state care and highlights tensions between women's productive and reproductive responsibilities that appeared with state expectations about women's participation in the labour force during state socialism. As the authorities' wish to increase women's labour force participation was not coupled with an adequate supply of childcare services, employed mothers/parents often actively sought to institutionalize their children to secure their care while they were at work. On the other hand, unemployed mothers' children were placed in state care by the authorities because children were seen to hinder mothers' employment.

Women's marital status and female sexuality were also in the centre of public discussions and policies in post-war Hungary. The third chapter presents conflicting views and tensions about unmarried women and female sexuality that existed between policies based on communist ideology and prevailing social norms. In an international comparative perspective Varsa demonstrates that women's changing social roles as wage earners triggered anxieties about their sexuality and sexual morality. While the Constitution of 1949 and the Family Act of 1952 legally equalised single mothers and illegitimate children and declared that women's rights are equal to men's, pre-war traditional attitudes of stigmatising single mothers prevailed in child protection practices and children's placement in state care often served purposes of regulating their mothers' sexuality. Overall, women's unmarried status in a relationship was seen to aggravate the endangerment of their children and served as means to evaluate motherhood. Varsa's extensive research of case files indicates the gendered nature of these processes as there was only a limited mention of fathers, or fathers' sexual behaviour in these documents.

Whilst focusing on the analysis of Hungarian child protection institutions, Varsa consistently places her discussion in a global comparative context. In the fourth chapter she investigates daily practices of residential homes of the early 1950s in Hungary, which she argues, cannot be understood without paying attention to the long-term and cross-national history of these institutions and the evolution of pedagogical reforms in the early 20th century in Europe. Varsa submits that education for work, which remained part of the daily practice of residential homes for children, can be traced back to two distinct pedagogical schools: reformatory corrective education in work schools in Germany in the early 20th century and Marxist education based on the Soviet pedagogy developed by Anton Semyonovich Makarenko. Both schools believed in the formative power of work for children through which they aimed to educate obedient members of society. The parallel existence of the two pedagogical ideologies manifested in the practice of Hungarian residential schools at the onset of state socialism and shaped the evolution of particular institutional continuities and changes within the system of child protection. While in the context of regular public education (primary schools and kindergartens) the concept of education for work was hardly

translated into practice, in the new residential homes opened for children in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was part of children's daily routine. In Varsa's Foucauldian account, it provided techniques of surveillance and fulfilled disciplinary functions to educate these children to be useful and docile members of a Communist society, albeit education for work practices and rigid daily schedules did not represent a radical break with earlier periods in the fields of progressive and reform pedagogy.

Arguably, the most intriguing piece is the fifth chapter, which discusses the history of the Lóczy infant home and the reform pedagogy of its founder the famous paediatrician Emmi Pikler, embedded in state care practices of the Rákosi regime and the political persecutions of the era. It addresses controversies around the home by examining its progressive pedagogy and professional work in connection with political purges through the cases of two children of persecuted politicians, who were placed in the infant home between 1949 and 1951. Distinctive of Varsa's global long-durée approach, the institutional history of the infant home and Pikler's professional career is not only presented within an international historical context of different reform movements of infant care since the turn of the century but also through the retrospective criticism of the period by the opposition movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Based on the recollections of two mothers in the 1970s and one of the children – an adult by the 1980s and a political figure of the opposition movement interviewed by the author in 2009 – Varsa reveals the way personal recollections joined methodological criticism of the infant home with criticism towards the political system of the Rákosi regime. This negative evaluation of the Lóczy and Emmi Pikler's role in placing persecuted politicians' children into state care, contrasts sharply with the recognition of the highly progressive methods of care applied in the infant home that appear in some of the same interviews. Varsa's central argument is that it was one of the unintended consequences of political purges rather than the particular methodology of infant care developed along progressive and socialist educational principles, that the Lóczy infant home retrospectively became an object of criticism and a negative symbol of the communist regime in the 1980s leading to the closing down of the home in 2011. The history of the Lóczy infant home demonstrates a continuity in theories and methodologies in residential care of children globally as Pikler's methods are being followed in institutes across Europe and the United States. By the time Pikler died in 1984, her philosophy of early childhood care development had acquired international fame and her methods are being followed in institutes across Europe and the United States. Thus, while Varsa acknowledges Pikler's historical collaboration with the Stalinist regime, she distinguishes between Pikler's philosophy of infant care and her politics as a director of a children's home during the late 1940s and the 1950s. As she points out, critical sources of Pikler's behaviour need to be contextualized and her relationship with the communist movement must be further researched.

Varsa's research for this book was based on a variety of written as well as oral sources from multiple locales. These include policy documents issued by various ministries, 630 children's case files documenting the placement of 797 children from three counties' child protection institutions and semi-structured interviews with retired teachers, employees of child protection authorities and former residents of children's homes. Case files included statements from the police, a psychologist, a physician and a school director of the local welfare authorities, which Varsa also analysed semantically in order to gain insights about social norms and conventions that shaped case workers' motivations and actions about requesting state care. In particular, the analysis of the Lóczy infant home was informed by the Oral History Archive of the 1956 Institute and the archives of Capital City Child Protection Centre.

The book fills a gap in the historiography of early state socialism by discussing Stalinism in Hungary in light of social problems – such as employment, housing, financially related difficulties or war-related problems leading to children's placement in state care – rather than political repression of the Rákosi era. Varsa's analysis demonstrates that the array of problems teachers faced in the 1950s were not predominantly connected to the Stalinist politics of the Rákosi regime but rather to the wide variety of social problems that children, their parents and representatives of the institutions of child protection struggled with. One of the major findings of the book is that the institutional system of child protection of early state socialism evolved as a result of spontaneous developments in existing institutional patterns, social norms and conventions inherited from earlier political periods, rather than a critical juncture induced by the new communist state. These sequences of occurrences were just as important in the evolution of state socialism as social engineering. In this regard, Varsa challenges some of the commonly accepted divides in the periodization of 20th century European history by allowing us to see early state socialism through institutional continuities and changes.

Despite her groundbreaking discussion of institutional continuities and change, Varsa's book lacks theoretical references to incremental institutional change, a widely discussed topic in historical institutionalist scholarship. The analysis of continuities in child protection institutions, in the treatment of Romani children, in the conventions about women's sexuality and the 'culture' of education for work could benefit from a review of various modes of incremental institutional change, such as *layering, conversion, drift, displacement* or *exhaustion* (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). For instance, the way the category of 'moral abandonment of a child' became extended to include parents' lack of concerns for their children's health and, in line with communist ideology of being a productive worker in a socialist society, their unemployment contrary to their ability to work would constitute institutional *layering*, a process in which new institutional elements are added to existing ones, thus changing gradually their status and structure. Similarly, the way education for work comprising the tradition of corrective reform pedagogy and Marxist education went through *conversion*, i. e., institutional practices of education for work became redeployed to serve new purposes of educating obedient members of the new socialist state. The rich empirical background of Varsa's research paves the way for further research in this direction, i. e., on the way institutional elements, practices of child protection and family policies continued to live as slightly modified or regaining new meanings across various political regimes in twentieth century Hungary. Any future research in social history, however, should pay tribute to Varsa's meticulous empirical work, her groundbreaking analytical approach and the illustrious selection of archive photos from the free online collection of Fortepan.

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