

Utopias in the Hungarian Republic of Councils

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In regard to the first question (namely, the political, intellectual, and cultural significance and legacy of the 1919 Hungarian Republic of Councils), in this brief commentary I will discuss the Republic of Councils as a system that operated to foster utopias (although, according to those shaping public opinion at the time, this was realised only much later), and look at it in its political and cultural context.

Both before and after the establishment of the Republic of Councils, political groups participating in the dictatorship published works on the kind of world order they intended to create in the long term. The Hungarian Social Democrats had published August Bebel's book *Woman and Socialism* in several Hungarian-language editions prior to March 21, 1919; during the tenure of the Republic of Councils this work was put in print by the new, united party's book publishing office. The book postulated, among other things, that the tools of production, the means of transportation, and land would be under social ownership. In the ideal economic-societal system to come, the conditions of life would be equal for everybody. According to Bebel, the new society would be built upon "international solidarity": people of the world would unite and do their utmost to spread the new social system to every corner of the world.¹ The most important communist notions about the ideal world order of the future, similar in many respects to those of Bebel, could already be found in Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin's *The Programme of the Communists (Bolsheviks)*, which had also been published several times in Hungarian by the Party of Communists in Hungary before the Republic of Councils came into being, while during the dictatorship of the proletariat it was published by one of the groups of the Commissariat of Public Education. Bukharin illustrated the state of affairs to be achieved thus: "In the end the entire world must become one single workers' factory, in which the whole of humanity will work for itself in the largest possible workshops with the best machinery and with no employers or capitalists to realise one single, strictly

elaborated, calculated, and measured plan.”² The leading intellectuals of the Republic of Councils must have drawn great inspiration not only from the details, but also from the whole far-reaching visions for the future contained in these foreign works, helping them formulate their own versions of the theme.

Probably the most significant of these works was the vision outlined in the supplements to the *Néptanítók Lapja* (Journal of elementary teachers), in the series of lessons on universal and Hungarian history, published by the Commissariat of Public Education. The People’s Commissar of Public Education ordered teachers to use these during their teaching. The teaching material said the following about the future ideal world order: there will be no “wealthy,” nor hungry poor, because the fruits of common labour will be shared equally; class division will come to an end. There will be no robbers, nor thieves, since if they cannot profit from stealing, they will not take the property of others. There will be no misery and sin in the world, nor will there be poor and uneducated people, because in the communist society every skill of every person will be needed. In the new social order, every child will be educated in the same way and turned into a cultured person in uniform schools. Up to now even the talentless children of the rich graduated from academic institutions, while the most outstanding intellectual skills were lost if a child had no means to study. Everyone will begin a career in accordance with their abilities and thus everyone will find a place suitable for them, where they can best use their skills for the common good of all their fellow men and women in the future “society.”³

Descriptions of the ideal world order of various lengths also appeared in newspaper articles, leaflets, and placards regarded as official organs, and indeed in a utopian state novel published in several parts in *Néptanítók Lapja*, which portrayed a communist Hungary in the distant future of 2020. Based on works of this type it can be concluded that the opinion makers of the dictatorship had a utopian vision of the future and tried to mediate it with various types of material aimed at the target groups of their propaganda. In some illustrations of the future, some of the components were more detailed than others, obviously depending on which target group the authors primarily intended to address, and, accordingly, where their writings would be published. Hence, in the teaching material cited earlier, roughly half of the texts discussing the ideal conditions to come dealt with the education and training of the new generations; their purpose may have been to bring the presented

system closer to schoolchildren and make it more comprehensible by including details of learning they were personally familiar with.

The Hungarian Republic of Councils as a dictatorship of the proletariat was defined and presented in the works of its leading thinkers as a political system operating temporarily in the process of building the ideal world order. This is clearly demonstrated by Section 1 of the Constitution passed in June 1919, which stipulated that “The dictatorship of the proletariat is merely a tool to eliminate all manner of exploitation and every kind of class rule, and to prepare the classless social order in which the chief tool of class rule, state power, will cease to exist.”⁴ How long this transitional period would last was addressed by Karl Radek in his *The Development of Socialism from Science to Reality*, published in Hungarian as a brochure before March 21, 1919 by the Party of Communists in Hungary and during the Council Republic by the united party: “*The socialist revolution is a long process because it begins with the dethronement of the capitalist class and only ends with the complete transformation of the capitalist economy into a workers’ community. This process will take at least a generation in every state and this is the period of time necessary for the dictatorship of the proletariat.*”⁵ There can be little doubt that this view influenced Jenő Varga when he spoke of “socialist self-awareness” in the future at the Councils’ General Session in June 1919, stating that it would be realised “by the next generation, in the era of complete communism.”⁶

The function of utopias at that time was to urge people to create a new world, better than the one before it, while they could also be used to legitimise the radical measures of those who controlled the dictatorship, including the use of terror. According to this logic, such means were necessary to create the ideal conditions aspired to. In an article titled “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” published in the March 22 issue of *Vörös Újság* (Red News), the leading newspaper of the Republic of Councils, the author wrote, “It is necessary that the working class create order with an iron fist. But this dictatorship will only be a transitional period. This will be followed by a period of prosperity and complete freedom for everybody. However, until then we will have to use the tools of power.”⁷ Taking all of this into consideration, I believe that the study of depictions of an ideal world order that can be regarded as official during the tenure of the Hungarian Republic of Councils contributes not only to the understanding of the ideology, propaganda, and political system of the dictatorship, but also to the demonstration of certain attributes of the utopias.

NOTES

1. Ágost Bebel, *A nő és a szocializmus* [Woman and socialism], trans. Béla Somogyi (Budapest: Népszava, 1918), 499.
2. Nikoláj Bucharin, *A kommunisták (bolsevikiek) programja* [The programme of the Communists (Bolsheviks)], trans. Endre Rudnyánszky, The Library of Communism (Budapest: Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja, 1919), 15.
3. Vilma Bresztovszky, *Bevezető leckék a történelem tanításához* [Introductory lessons for the teaching of history], Appendix to *Néptanítók Lapja*, no. 17 (1919): 7.
4. “A Magyarországi Szocialista Szövetséges Tanácsköztársaság alkotmánya” [The constitution of the Federal Socialist Republic of Councils of Hungary], *Tanácsköztársaság* 1, no. 78 (June 28, 1919): 1.
5. Karl Radek, *A szocializmus fejlődése a tudománytól a valóságig* [The development of socialism from science to reality], trans. László F. Boross, The Library of Communism (Budapest: Magyarországi Szocialista Párt, 1919), 21.
6. A Tanácsok Országos Gyűlésének (1919 június 14–1919 június 23) naplója [The minutes of the General Session of Councils (June 14–23, 1919)] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1919), 30.
7. “A proletárság diktatúrája” [The dictatorship of the proletariat], *Vörös Újság* 2, no. 38 (March 22, 1919): 3.