

Zimmermann, Susan: *Divide, Provide and Rule. An Integrative History of Poverty Policy, Social Policy, and Social Reform in Hungary under the Habsburg Monarchy*. Budapest: Central European University Press 2012. ISBN: 9786155053191; 171 S.

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Susan Zimmermann's most recent book is an organic outgrowth of her earlier work on social policy and social reform, especially her *Prächtige Armut*<sup>1</sup>. In *Divide, Provide, and Rule*, however, the author goes a few steps further in her pursuit to enrich our understanding of what she calls an „integrative history“ of needs-related policies in fin-de-siècle Hungary in several important respects.

First, the book successfully completes the task it sets itself in bringing together three seemingly distinct policy areas, poor relief, social reform and social policy (including labour protection and social insurance), into a complex and persuasive narrative. Second, bringing in new material, Zimmermann expands her area of analysis to the entire territory of historic Hungary. Although the leading role of the capital city Budapest is duly acknowledged and occupies an important place in the analysis, several other urban centres, smaller towns and rural areas of historic Hungary play an important role in her analysis. Third, Zimmermann pays particular attention to diverse groups that were increasingly marginalized and left out by the state's need-related policies: especially the poor and the homeless who were considered fit for work, women servants and women working at home, prostitutes, and the Roma. This approach certainly increases our awareness of just how limited precisely those policies actually were on the ground, and how much they reflected the *Zeitgeist* of the fin de siècle. Additionally, Zimmermann shows that the agency of the labour movement, supported by, but not identical to the Social Democratic Party, played a fundamental role in the establishment of new state social policies through organised protest. And finally, the book places Hungarian developments into a broader

context by drawing comparisons with parallel phenomena in Austria, Germany, Britain and Ireland, as well as integrating the history of need-related policies into an international context of the signing of laws and conventions that further influenced national legislation Europe-wide.

The book is lucidly written and meticulously researched, and its structure is clear and straightforward. The short introduction is followed by three large chapters, „Poverty Policy“ (roughly from 1848 to 1914), „Social Reform and State Intervention from 1898 to 1914“ and „State Social Policy“ (again, roughly from 1848 to 1914). Zimmermann comes back to the main points of her argument in a short, analytical and persuasive conclusion.

The chapter „Poverty Policy“ begins by enumerating traditional, private and public approaches to poor relief in the context of Neo-absolutism that left little room for manoeuvre for specific Hungarian developments. It then proceeds with analysing how the legal foundations for state poor relief policy were laid from the 1860s onwards. The analysis culminates in a closer look at poor relief as a two-side policy that, on the one hand, provided select social groups with much-needed welfare but that, on the other hand, was a severely restrictive mechanism that further marginalized and often physically removed other groups that were deemed undeserving or to have offended public order – complete with an entire relocation transport system by rail. The principle of municipal responsibility for poor relief, combined with the complexity, inefficiency and absurdity of the relocation system in practice meant that large sections of the poor were denied relief for longer periods of time, if not altogether. With this context in mind, many will find it astonishing how the leading actors on the Hungarian scene, along with their colleagues elsewhere, believed up to the last days preceding the war that their policies would succeed in eliminating poverty as a phenomenon, without having understood the undercurrent mechanisms of market economy and Hungarian legislative and social structures that, in some cases, only served

<sup>1</sup> Susan Zimmermann, *Prächtige Armut. Fürsorge, Kinderschutz und Sozialreform in Budapest, Sigmaringen 1997*.

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to further entrench the existing problems.

The following chapter, „Social Reform and State Intervention from 1898 to 1914“ analyses, in turn, the three distinct areas where the state intervention was most innovative and pronounced: child protection, housing policy and unemployment and labour market policy. In child protection policies, the Hungarian authorities introduced a number of far-reaching innovations that diverted from the old-school strategies of poor relief. Going against the principle of minimising costs, especially in the support of children's homes, the assistance for emigration communities, the provision of supplementary support for those families which would have otherwise had to hand their children over to state care and the institution of professional guardianship are examples of such innovative thinking. Restricted to the traditional principles of poor relief policy, however, these innovations were unsuccessful as preventive measures and, in the context of widespread poverty, turned the entire system of child protection into a „bottomless pit“ (p. 56). Reform-oriented intervention in the housing policy, especially in Budapest but also in Temesvár, Nadyvárad and Sopron, was similarly exemplary and included tax relief for social housing, municipally-owned housing outside the metropolitan administrative area, giving preference to small apartments when it came to new housing projects, and restrictions on the maximum rent in response to rent strikes. However, an even more innovative system of housing provision for agricultural workers enjoyed only very limited success due to the dominance of the interests of industry and property owners in the representative bodies in both urban and rural areas. Finally, in the area of unemployment and labour market policy, a public system of labour exchanges and unemployment insurance remained limited to the local level and only widened the gap between those who benefited from these innovations and those who did not.

The final chapter, „State Social Policy“, is divided into large sub-chapters on labour protection and social insurance/workplace-related social policy. A comprehensive survey of the earlier developments of labour protection from 1848 onwards is offered, in which

a clear distinction is drawn between those for whom was provided (such as established male worker professions employed in large industrial enterprises) and the marginalised and the excluded (children, juveniles and women). The function and the efficiency of the industrial inspectorate remained limited even for the privileged groups, while the labour protection for women was conceived and understood, from the very outset, as an extension of the state's care for patriarchal family relations. Finally, analysis of non-industrial, largely agricultural workers is provided. The analysis of social insurance and workplace-related social policy begins in the 1880s with the legal and institutional origins of these policies. Further on, the establishment of social insurance is examined by comparing the cases of male and female workers and those employed in agriculture. Zimmermann explains how, in the context of the „minimalist“ poverty policy and limited agricultural and labour insurance, as well as a lack of a comprehensive system of relief on the national level, the comparatively more successful areas of child protection and Budapest unemployment relief had to constantly protect themselves from „the miserly of all kind“ that came knocking at their door (p. 143). Unresolved areas of responsibility for hospital care between the national State Fund and insurance companies led, on average, to the state delegating its responsibilities for most of the problem areas to the insurance companies, thereby leaving to them the burden of dealing with the most problematic cases.

Divide, Provide, and Rule is well formulated and very informative for a book of 154 pages (excluding the bibliography, a short index and illustrations). Yet precisely because the author decided to remove all the detail marginal to the main argument, the text is very condensed. More importantly, and especially in the light of Zimmermann's emphasis on the agency of the needy groups, many readers might want for more of such voices to be heard. For example, the book begins with an insightful account of the living conditions of a foster family in the town of Hernád in 1913, part of the state-run child protection system, from which we learn not only about the conditions in the family's home, but also about the

attitude of the authorities towards such families (p. 1; see also the story of Katalin Kovács trial in Magyaratád, pp. 43-44). More of such stories would have made the book livelier and even more persuasive. Similarly, a more systematic comparison of Hungary with other, non-Western parts of the continent that were undergoing similar transformation at the time, such as, for example, the Russian and the Ottoman empires, would have placed the book even better in the broader European context.

Such shortcomings, however, are minor in comparison with the merits of the book. This is an excellent piece of historical scholarship that combines approaches in legal, political, social and gender history. Its argument is clear, persuasive and is supported by evidence gleaned from an impressive amount of primary material. Its language and style are witty, lucid and accurate. It will be read with interest by scholars of Hungarian history, Habsburg history, gender history, the history of the European welfare state, as well as specifically of poor relief, social reform, social policy and the labour movement.

HistLit 2013-4-060 / Markian Prokopovych über Zimmermann, Susan: *Divide, Provide and Rule. An Integrative History of Poverty Policy, Social Policy, and Social Reform in Hungary under the Habsburg Monarchy*. Budapest 2012, in: H-Soz-Kult 23.10.2013.