

Questioning rural populism

Rural areas are often highlighted as driving the surge in electoral support for populist politics experienced throughout the world (e.g., Scoones et al., 2018). This support is a suggested consequence of rural populations being dispossessed, ‘left-behind’ and ‘surplus’ to neoliberal capital, such that they are without political agency or economic options (e.g., Li, 2010; Vorbrugg, 2019). Indeed, the scale of rural poverty and arising economic dependencies offer partial explanations for the rural support behind many emergent “illiberal paternalisms” (Szombati, 2021). However, there is some danger in reductively seeing people living in rural areas only in terms of shades of “lamentable” dependency and passivity (Ferguson, 2013). Such lenses fail to recognise cross-class recreational and labour interactions, and the ways in which ‘populist’ interlocutors may themselves be familiar with these realities.

In this commentary, I seek to provide an alternative account of rural agency by highlighting the ways in which even the poor participate in resource networks that privilege social and political hierarchies with long histories, and which enact values that are essentially part of a grounded, existing and evolving conservatism. Rural support for ‘populism’ may thus be seen as individual and communal buy-in and embodiment of more traditional or conservative worldviews, rather than uninformed and reactionary political choices. These insights encourage scrutiny to what is identified as ‘populist’ by (usually) external commentators. Too often this act of branding leads to the dismissal of populist views, meaning that underlying ideologies and power relations remain misunderstood, leaving observers no closer to understanding the realities of rural lives and aspirations.

Below, I examine the contemporary making of post-socialist rural areas in Hungary through hunting and land acquisition regimes. Much is made of the present-day hunting ‘fetish’ of the economic and political elite in Hungary. This group includes the wealthiest businessmen, cabinet and advisory members of the current government, which recently spent almost €200 million staging a ‘World Exhibition on Hunting’. Hunting as a pastime of the political class is neither an aberration, nor anything new in the region: modern Hungarian leaders come from a long lineage of hunters dating back to the aristocracy. Hunting has been shared across ideologies, as pre-WWII conservative (Horthy), communist (Rákosi, Kádár) and contemporary conservative leaders all were or are active hunters (Majtényi, 2021). Media and critical commentary have emphasised the lavish, exclusive nature of what many now consider a sport rather than an essential part of land and game management, and the ways in which hunting rights correspond with nepotistically obtained land ownership arrangements, where these are viewed as part of the ‘rewards’ of *Fidesz*/Christian-Democrat party allegiance. These emphases obscure hunting as an important social and economic activity for many living in the countryside, especially young men, which is often pursued separately from politics and political figures. Placing focus solely on those within and linked to the formal state cadre fails to recognise various forms of ‘elitism’ and hierarchy in practice, and how these networks interrelate across time and geographies.

Hunting, due to its persistent societal cachet, historical stability and purchase amongst diverse groups, is an activity through which conservatively-minded individuals connect. More than this, however, its very activity naturalises, embodies and often celebrates core conservative tenets. These include deep-rooted yet contemporary iterations of irredentism and nation-state territorial integrity and perceived threats to these, as well as ideas around a ‘natural’ order in regards to the environment, family and gender. Populism is generally

defined as a ‘thin’ ideology in the sense that it easily lends itself to the political ‘left’ or ‘right’ (Stanley, 2008) as politicians seek to “perform the divide between “the people” and “the elite”” for political gain (Bosworth, 2021, this VF). Hunting challenges this very divide and assumptions around populism’s anti-elitism. The activity assembles both the ‘elite’ and ‘the people’, arguably collapsing any “divide” or indeed valorising hierarchy between them. In many ways, hierarchies remain not only a norm but an aspiration amongst rural communities, as a continuation of ‘my Lord, my liege’ (*Uram-bátyám*) mentalities. While it is well-documented that post-socialist privatisation favoured those who held formal management positions in the socialist regime (for e.g., Windolf, 1998), the ranks of old positions also enjoy a post-socialist afterlife, as they are recognised and demarcated by hunting’s own institutionalisations. For example, older Hunting Association Presidents typically previously held prestigious leadership posts during the socialist regime as managers of cooperative farms or industrial plants; today, they are amply rewarded with game and hunting opportunities. The persistent acceptance of old hierarchies can be built upon and exploited by those in power. At the same time, these beliefs also have a structuring role. Namely, they denote an acceptance of a naturalness of hierarchy, or even of elitism, as inevitable features of any society, with the consequence that privilege is legitimate and may be either inherited or earned.

Tropes of the countryside as static and ‘naturally’ conservative are frequently reproduced through ground-up socio-cultural ‘buy-in’ to these old orders. Diverse family and small business groups benefiting from present-day legal regimes that encourage accumulation and promise long-term title security also help continue to advance these tropes. Conservative aspirations for land privatisation are legally and practically well under way. While these laws have been depicted as resulting in ‘land grabbing’ for a narrow elite with ties to the political class (Gonda, 2019, Bori and Gonda, 2022, this VF), this emphasis elides a concurrent common reality: that the new land laws have deliberately kept land sales local, amongst existing landowners, who then often support and make up Hunting Associations. The Orbán government justified land laws with reference to national sovereignty and localism, which finds meaningful support amongst farmers on the political right and left (Lubarda, 2020). Instances of nepotism or corruption sit *alongside* the everyday workings of family entrepreneurs who have also consolidated their ownership, as hunting territories are also often, but not always, politically aligned or linkable to *Fidesz* politicians and cadres. Denunciation by any political opposition of corruption has (to date) fallen on deaf ears. Corruption is relativised against existential questions around land ownership and livelihoods, as well as being viewed as another inevitability regardless of who rules.

Prevalent and promoted hunting myths by national political leaders normalise irredentism and focus on borders and territory lost in the post-WWI Treaty of Trianon. Rural conservatism cannot be understood without taking the tragedy and trauma of altered borders seriously, and the persistent importance of these questions – even a century later – for rural lives. Irredentism has a particular rural resonance: territories ‘lost’ post-WWI fragmented country towns and areas, essentially removing markets and infrastructures that were vital for education, transport, resource networks, family lives and livelihoods. The loss of these links can explain persistent contemporary socio-economic inequality across Hungary (Horváth, 2015). Blaming the characters and events of history also remains politically expedient, as it outsources responsibility for regional under-development. Through oft-repeated narratives, the myths of hunting and nation-building render Hungary’s borders dating from when it was a kingdom foundational. Some everyday examples include Deputy PM Zsolt Semjén’s statements that “hunting is a Hungarikum” firmly established within

“Hungarian identity [...] since the time of Hunor and Magor” – and through nostalgic reminiscences of ‘lost’ hunting grounds, especially in Transylvania, and the prevalence of ‘Old Hungary’ maps across hunting lodges and government agencies. These expressions of nationalism are also essentially calls for rural repair and justice. They justify calls for the repatriation of territories ceded in 1919, provide sympathetic readings to Admiral Horthy’s motivations during WWII (a common evaluation of Horthy amongst interviewed hunters goes, “he [Horthy] only approved anti-Semitic laws to get Old Hungary back”) and acknowledge the continued differential burdens and uneven development experienced by the (especially eastern) countryside. Hunting’s socio-environmental imaginaries serve the political project of contesting borders that are also held to have caused habitat fragmentation on top of socio-cultural rupture. Most participants in hunting are familiar with and celebrate the histories of when the country and rangelands were “whole” – alluding to the Carpathian basin being entirely within Hungary’s borders – and turn these claims into battle cries that draw in and motivate many.

These insights have significant consequences for geographical scholarship, both for the terms with which rural areas are studied (including any promoted progressive development pathways), as well as the need for critical reflection within the discipline itself. Scholars tend to avoid engagement with right-wing (or simply conservative) views as these are deemed problematic and personally uncomfortable (Pasička, 2019). There is also often a lack of long-term fieldwork and considerable distance between comfort zones and the realities of land management and rural life. However, perspectives that foreground extant rural values and the relationships between local expressions and embodiment are crucial to recalibrate expectations around rural areas’ role in any (electoral, social) change. Further, consideration and advocacy of any ‘emancipatory’ futures need to be grounded within areas’ and peoples’ own terms and possibilities. Without them, they risk no local buy-in. For these reasons, identification of ‘populism’ or populist rhetoric itself requires interrogation as an anthropological phenomenon: such branding usually occurs from a distance, where the label is placed on arguments or values when one is not embedded within them, when there is limited capacity to identify points, origins or depths of resonance with the ‘populist’ claim. Part of the task of critical inquiry then becomes the need to question the power and geography of such labels as they embody perceptions across ideology and space, with attendant material and political consequences.

While the emptying-out of post-socialist countrysides is an empirical reality, potentially leading to a “capitalism without people” (Dzenovska, 2020), rural areas are not simply there for the (electoral) taking. There are important continuities in local economies and social-environmental relations that constitute richness instead of absence. A politics that recognises and foregrounds this richness is already more likely to enjoy electoral favour. The only parties that do so in Hungary today are conservative and far-right political groups, whereby myriad connections have evolved between those in formal state positions from council to national levels and local hunting societies. These linkages produce knowledge about rural resources even from afar, including opportunities for their use and acquisition. These entanglements also influence the composition of rural *and* urban political leadership and the sorts of support they lend each other. Contemporary state-led financial and social development of hunting translates into the support of local institutions that promote, replicate and normalise conservative visions for territory and a social and natural ‘order’, and represent a largely unseen and under-explored resource network that also arguably serves as a conservative bastion in which ideas are debated and acted out.

Populism is often tasked as political performance over substance, where populist claims resonate with their intended audience but are subsequently divorced from formal policy. However, populist policy is ever-thicker in post-socialist regions (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2020), from labour to family support to land acquisition to security and migration laws. This commentary has tried to provoke deeper questioning of whether greater critical focus on existing conservative practices and visions as they relate to resource management networks might not be more productive for understanding rural dynamics and change. Populist claims often represent beliefs that are held, voiced and enacted within rural social and political circles; that is, they are not tropes or a fiction ‘from above’ that are merely used as a part of political strategy, but link to endemic values that translate into desired visions of society, the state and people’s futures. Academically, there is some danger in emphasising new forms of ‘populist ecologies’ over recognising how regimes consolidate power through continuity with older, earlier power systems. In the case of Hungary, current leaders are simply a part of, and re-embedding themselves into, worldviews and politics in which their predecessors were also steeped. Failure to appreciate these continuities and the reasons for their perseverance often misdiagnoses the relations and shared worldviews between a multiplicity of rural classes and across space and time. Such misunderstandings risk leading to problematic and unrealistic development proposals that do not engage rural places on their own terms.

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