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ÖDÖN PÓR: FROM SOCIALISM TO FASCISM, FROM HUNGARY TO ITALY¹

1.

Peter Drucker (the Austrian economist turned long-standing management guru in the USA) provided in his memoirs an interesting, if unreliable, recollection of the family of Károly and Mihály Polányi. Amongst others, he mentions one of the Polányi brothers, supposedly called Otto:

Otto, the oldest, born in the early 1870s, became an engineer like his father. And, like his father, he left Hungary while a young man and went to work in Switzerland and Germany. He was apparently a highly skilled machine designer and a good businessman who rose fast. He went to Italy around 1895 and took over a near-bankrupt machinery manufacturer. Otto Pohl – he changed his name from Polanyi – turned the floundering firm around. It became the main supplier of brakes, steering gear, and the like to a new automobile company called Fiat. By 1910 Otto Pohl had become one of Italy's leading industrialists and an exceedingly wealthy man. But he became an ardent Marxist, one of the founders and backers of the socialist newspaper *Avanti*, and the patron and friend of the young editor of the paper, a firebrand, more anarchist than orthodox Marxist, whose name was Benito Mussolini.

In World War I Otto Pol's Socialist hopes came crashing and he began to look for an alternative to class war to build the nonbourgeois society of the future. It was Otto Pol who converted Mussolini – then recovering from near-fatal wounds – to the new vision of class unity based on a corporate state, neither Socialist nor capitalist, a state in which all classes would be held together by common dedication to national virtue and thereby become unbreakably strong like the bundled twigs, the *fascies* of the Romans of glorious Republican antiquity.

Karl Polanyi was reluctant to talk about his brother Otto; the family had broken with him when he espoused fascism. But he once told me that Otto was still alive in the mid-thirties, had long become disenchanted with his brainchild, had grown

¹ I would like to thank professor Gareth Gale (Brunel University) for clarification on aspects of Károly Polányi's correspondence.

contemptuous of Mussolini but was also disavowed by his former protégé and forgotten by him, and had turned into a broken, bitter old man.²

The number of inaccuracies, exaggerations and falsehoods in this passage is difficult to quantify. Judith Szapor has already expressed her surprise that the US publishers should have allowed it to be published in this form.³ This does not mean that Drucker's garbled recollections are entirely useless; indeed, most are based on fact.⁴

"Otto Polanyi" really existed. He was not the brother of Karoly and Mihály, but their cousin. His name was in fact Ödön Pór (which explains how Drucker garbled the name). He was the son of Teréz Pollacsek (Károlyi Polányi's aunt), and was born in 1883. He died in Italy in 1971.⁵

Ödön Pór is not important as a thinker or as a political figure, but he remains a significant one, beyond the fact of being a cousin of the Polányi brothers and of Ervin Szabó. In fact, he is by no means an unknown figure in studies of Hungarian and European Socialism. Maria Luisa Pesante had pointed out in 1981 the significance of his book *Guilds and cooperatives in Italy* (1923).⁶ Edoardo Grendi (one of the founders of Microhistory) had already mentioned Pór (in a somewhat cursory manner) in a study of British Guild Socialism which he published in 1961.⁷

² Peter Drucker, *Adventures of a Bystander*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick 1994 [1978], pp. 128-29.

³ Judith Szapor, *Laura Polanyi 1882–1957: Narratives of a Life*, in "Polanyiana", vol. 6, no. 2 (1997), pp. 43-54.

⁴ Drucker's actual connection to Károly Polányi should also be mentioned. This is discussed in Gareth Dale's work on Károly Polányi, and in Daniel Immerwahr, *Polanyi in the United States: Peter Drucker, Karl Polanyi, and the Midcentury Critique of Economic Society*, in "Journal of the History of Ideas", vol. 70, no. 3 (July 2009), pp. 445-466.

⁵ In a footnote to a letter from Pór to Karl Kautsky (21 April 1904), János Jemnitz gave 1971 as the date of death (*Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie Südosteuropas. Korrespondenz 1883–1938*, edited by Georges Haupt, János Jemnitz and Leo van Rossum, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt–New York 1986, p. 464, n. 1). There is reason to believe that Jemnitz had established contact with Pór by 1963, so it is likely that his information was the most accurate available. In this case, as in others, biographical information on Pór remains approximate.

⁶ Adriana Lay and Maria Luisa Pesante, *Produttori senza democrazia. Lotte operaie, ideologie corporative e sviluppo economico da Giolitti al fascismo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1981, pp. 275-279.

⁷ Edoardo Grendi, *Il socialismo gildista nella storia del laburismo*, in "Rivista storica del Socialismo", n. 12, (1961), p. 1, n. 1.

In Hungary János Jemnitz had already published in 1963 a study of Pór's correspondence with Ervin Szabó,⁸ which Leo Valiani had duly mentioned in his study of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁹

So, while Pór is by no means a major figure, he has regularly attracted a certain degree of attention. His life may be classified under a series of headings: (i) Hungarian Socialism at the beginning of the XXth century; (ii) Italian Socialism and its crisis during the First World War; (iii) Early Fascism (1922–1929); and (iv) Fascism in its phase of consolidation (1929–1940).

2. Pór as a Socialist

After taking a degree in Law at Budapest University, Pór embarked on a career as a journalist. At first he worked for the socialist newspaper *Népszava*, then travelled to Italy, and later to the USA. As Jemnitz pointed out, Pór (unlike other Hungarian socialists operating in the USA) had left Hungary permanently. In 1909 he worked for American socialist newspapers as a European correspondent.¹⁰ Apparently he started working also for Italian Socialist newspapers as early as 1904. He was London correspondent for the Italian Socialist daily *Avanti!* in 1914. He must have settled in Italy before the beginning of the Great War. He does not seem to have had any problems as a citizen of Austria-Hungary after Italy joined the war in 1915.¹¹

Two aspects of Pór's activities stand out in this phase. The first is that he was a Socialist who was part of the Revolutionary Syndicalist tendency, which was highly influential in Italian Socialism at the beginning of the Twentieth Cen-

⁸ János Jemnitz, *The Relations of the American and the Americo-Hungarian Labour Movements as Revealed in the Correspondence of Ervin Szabó*, in "Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae", Vol. 9, No. 1/2 (1963), pp. 179-214. For an introduction to Szabó, see *Socialism and Social Science. Selected Writings of Ervin Szabó*, edited by György Litván and János Bak, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1982. The strength of the connection between Pór and Szabó emerges from the two volumes of *Szabó Ervin Levelezése*, I-II, edited by György Litván and László Szűcs, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1977–1978.

⁹ Leo Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1966, p. 482, n. 32.

¹⁰ Jemnitz, *The Relations*, p. 182.

¹¹ Pór acquired Italian nationality only in 1937 (Pór to Rinaldo Rigola, 7 luglio 1937/XV, Fondo Rigola, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli).

ture, and which to a large extent converged into the Fascist movement.¹² The second important aspect is Pór's connection to British Guild Socialism, which must have originated during his stay in London before 1914, while working as London correspondent for *Avanti!*. As Paul Jackson points out, Pór "became part of *The New Age* network".¹³

By 1913, Benito Mussolini (who by that time had become Editor of *Avanti!*) had already spotted Pór as a useful ally.¹⁴ This explains (and deflates) Drucker's exaggerated claims in his memoirs, but it also confirms the kernel of truth in those claims. It also explains Pór's subsequent attitude towards Fascism, which was not as clear-cut as might have been expected in the circumstances.

Guild Socialism played an unquestionably crucial role in Pór's intellectual and ideological itinerary.¹⁵ In this phase, it provided an intellectual passport to Italian Socialist circles. Most of his Italian writings (up until 1923) were, to a greater or a lesser extent, connected to Guild Socialism.

In the aftermath of the Great War, Pór also displayed a Hungarian side in his activities, in attempting to influence Italian opinion-makers on the issue of

¹² On this tradition, see David D. Roberts, *The syndicalist tradition and Italian fascism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1979; Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves. Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston 1989; Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: an International Perspective*, Scholar Press, Aldershot 1990; and Id., "Second thoughts on revolutionary syndicalism" (1998), available online.

¹³ Paul Jackson, *Great War Modernisms and "The New Age" Magazine*, Bloomsbury, London 2012, p. 60.

¹⁴ See the introductory note to Pór's article, *Il sindacalismo dei "bei gesti"*, in "Avanti!", 21 agosto 1913, p. 1; and the reference to Pór in [B. Mussolini], *Confessioni*, in "Avanti!", 28 agosto 1913, p. 1 (both articles are available online). The relevance of these articles was mentioned in Giano Accame, *Ezra Pound economista. Contro l'usura*, Edizioni Settimo Sigillo, Roma 1995, p. 87.

¹⁵ There is a vast secondary literature concerning Guild Socialism. For a preliminary selection of texts, see *Industrial Democracy in Great Britain*, edited by Ken Coates and Tony Topham, MacGibbon & Kee, London 1968. For the relevance of Guild Socialism in Karoly Polányi's work, see Karl Polanyi, *The Hungarian Writings*, edited by Gareth Dale, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2016; Gareth Dale, "Karl Polanyi in Vienna: Guild Socialism, Austro-marxism, and Duczynska's alternative" (available on Academia.edu); Id., *Karl Polanyi. The Limits of the market*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010; Id., *Karl Polanyi: a Life on the Left*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016; Id., *Reconstructing Karl Polanyi*, Pluto Press, London 2016; and Tim Rogan, *Karl Polanyi at the margins of British Socialism, 1934–1947*, in "Modern Intellectual History", vol. 10, no. 2 (2013), pp. 317–346.

the new Hungarian borders. He established a correspondence with Umberto Zanotti-Bianco, wrote article for his journal *La Voce dei Popoli*.¹⁶

The real turning-point in Pór's itinerary came in 1923, with the publication of *Guilds and Guilds and cooperatives in Italy*. The book was translated by Emily Townshend, and came with an introduction by A.E. (George Russell)¹⁷ and an Appendix by G. D. H. Cole. All three were connected to Guild Socialism and the Co-operative movement. The book itself was published by the Labour Publishing Company.¹⁸

Pesante rightly pointed out that Pór's preface illustrates "the highest point of his ambiguity between Socialism and Fascism". Pór wrote:

Fascism does not stand in the way of constructive revolution – that alone matters in the long run – it even seeks to bring it about. And it is for us of the Labour Movement to point out the way. But we must recognize that...the ideal of Nation and Nation-building is not opposed to our internationalism, but complementary to it....The old methods of the class struggle that are wrecking Society spiritually and institutionally will make place – now, and not in some far away future – for organized and ordered functioning in the public service. And herein we shall only follow the example of revolutionary Russia, where, after a period of confusion, all are being enlisted in the work of Nation-building.¹⁹

Traces of an ideological and political ambiguity may be found already in Pór's earlier work, such as his articles for the Socialist *Critica sociale* in 1916²⁰, and in

¹⁶ See Pór to Zanotti-Bianco, 3 dicembre 1918, and 6 dicembre 1918, in Umberto Zanotti-Bianco, *Carteggio, 1906–1918*, edited by Valeriana Carinci, Laterza, Roma–Bari 1987, pp. 681–684; and Pór to Zanotti-Bianco, 9 gennaio 1919, and 27 maggio 1919, in Zanotti-Bianco, *Carteggio, 1919–1928*, edited by Valeriana Carinci and Antonio Jannaccio, Laterza, Roma–Bari 1989, pp. 3–4, 17–19. See also Francesco Guida, *Il compimento dello Stato nazionale romeno e l'Italia: opinione pubblica e iniziative politico-diplomatiche*, in "Rassegna storica del Risorgimento", vol. 70, n. 4 (1983), pp. 456–457 For the role played by Zanotti-Bianco in this phase, see Valiani, *La dissoluzione* p.

¹⁷ George Russell had a long-standing interest in co-operative movements. See Daniel Mulhall, *George Russell, D. P. Moran and Tom Kettle*, in *The Shaping of Modern Ireland. A Centenary Assessment*, edited by Eugenio Biagini and Daniel Mulhall, Academic Press, Dublin 2016, pp. 124–134.

¹⁸ Odon Por, *Guilds and Guilds and cooperatives in Italy*, The Labour Publishing Company, London 1923.

¹⁹ Por, *Guilds and co-operatives*, p. xviii.

²⁰ Odon Por, *Le nuove funzioni dello stato nella produzione*, in "Critica sociale", nos. 16 and 20, agosto and ottobre 1916; reissued as a pamphlet under the title *Le nuove funzioni dello stato nella produzione. L'imperialismo sociale*, Edizioni Avanti!, Milano 1917.

the book he published immediately after, *Fascism* (once again, same translator and same publisher).²¹ The book was presented (quite accurately) by the magazine *Mask* in the following glowing terms:

FASCISM by Odon Por, Translated by E. Townshend. The Labour Publishing Co. Ltd. 7/6. A small book of over 300 pages on this practical Movement scouted by everyone two to three years ago as "impossible" dangerous or "nonexistent". It is a clear and practical book, showing in what way Labour is closely connected with Fascism: showing also how Fascism possesses what Labour "has not, ...the power of appealing to the imagination of a people, provided imagination has not been utterly condemned as a worthless quality by the people's rulers. There is something about Æ [George Russell] in the volume."²²

The ambiguities of Guild Socialism are well known. There was no shortage of British Guild Socialists who shifted to the radical Right in the 1920s and 1930s. For that matter, as Walter Kendall pointed out, "a quite disproportionate number of the intellectuals who joined the Communist Party [of Great Britain] at its foundations came from the ranks of the Guild Socialist movement".²³ On the other hand, G. D. H. Cole, one of the founders of Guild Socialism, could gradually revert to a relatively moderate Social Democratic position.²⁴ This all goes to prove how the legacy of the movement could be ambiguous, branching out in all directions.

3. *Pór as an early Fascist*

Pór was an open supporter of Fascism from a very early stage, well before the regime consolidated (as it did in 1925, following the crisis created by the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti). On the basis of his earlier writings, it would seem clear that Pór was a genuine convert to Fascism, precisely on the basis of his vision of Fascism as the legitimate successor of Socialism.

²¹ Odon Por, *Fascism*, translated by E. Townshend, The Labour Publishing Company, London 1923.

²² "Mask", vol 10, n. 1, January 1924, p. 37.

²³ Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21. The origins of British Communism*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1969, p. 278.

²⁴ See G. D. H. Cole, Preface to Branko Pribičević, *The shop stewards' movement and workers' control, 1910-1922*, Blackwell, Oxford 1959.

In fact, Pór's attitude to Fascism was more ambiguous, and somehow it remained ambiguous. This emerges clearly from his correspondence with Rinaldo Rigola, the leader of the major Italian Trade Union confederation, the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* for the period 1906–1918.²⁵

Rigola was not a Revolutionary Syndicalist, but in fact a moderate, right-wing Socialist. Following the dissolution of the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* in 1926, Rigola, together with other moderate Socialist leaders of the Confederation, created the Associazione Nazionale Studi-Problemi del Lavoro, which was a legally recognised entity (and therefore considered by Anti-Fascists as a form of collaboration with the Fascist regime).²⁶

These developments were, however, still distant in 1919, the year in which Pór began his correspondence with Rigola (who at that stage was Editor of the journal *I Problemi del lavoro*). Pór was simply looking for outlets for publishing his articles.²⁷ He was still seen by the Italian (pre-Fascist) police as a subversive figure: in 1921 his house was searched, and manuscripts were taken away.²⁸ He was very keen to promote Guild Socialism in Italy; he sometimes published articles under the pseudonym “*un ghildista*”. He was also keen on Taylorism, pointing out that Lenin also shared this view.²⁹

What is striking, in the correspondence of this period, is how measured and limited is Pór's enthusiasm for Fascism. Two days after Mussolini's rise to power, on 24 October 1922, he writes to Rigola, referring only to “this turbulent moment”, seemingly without any particular enthusiasm.³⁰ Months later, on 12 June 1923 he writes again to Rigola:

Yesterday I spoke to a Socialist who right now is obliged to have daily contacts with the Fascists, and he says that they are moving and speedily towards a form of na-

²⁵ The Rigola–Pór correspondence is available at the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milan (*Fondo Rinaldo Rigola, Corrispondenza generale 1891–1944, Ödön Pór 1919–1937*). I would like to thank the staff of the Feltrinelli Foundation for their assistance.

²⁶ See Stefano Merli, *Corporativismo fascista e illusioni riformistiche nei primi anni del regime. L'attività dell'A.N.S. Problemi del lavoro nelle carte di Rinaldo Rigola*, in “*Rivista storica del socialismo*”, vol. 2, no. 5 (marzo 1959), pp. 121–137. The Association was finally dissolved by the Fascist regime in 1941.

²⁷ Pór to Rigola, 11 gennaio 1919.

²⁸ Pór to Rigola, 25 marzo 1921.

²⁹ Pór to Rigola, 12 dicembre 1921.

³⁰ Pór to Rigola, 24 ottobre 1922 (“questo momento burrascoso”).

tional socialism. If only that were so. The methods with which the State intervenes today to sort out the various cooperatives...are extremely important...there are many elements which I have foreseen.³¹

While there is no doubt concerning Pór's genuine sympathies for Fascism, his endorsement of the actual regime is less than overwhelming. In common with many Italian Socialists, he appears to have become a Fascist by conviction. Nevertheless, he seems to have always maintained a certain degree of detachment and scepticism concerning the actual implementation of the Fascist agenda (as he understood it). This also fits in with Drucker's version.

4. Pór as a late Fascist

Following the consolidation of the Fascist regime after 1925, Pór progressively established himself as an expert on labour economics and labour relations (as understood by the emerging Corporatist doctrine).³² He worked for a variety of institutions, including the International Labour Office in Geneva, and the Istituto di Studi Politici Internazionali in Milan.

In 1934, Pór contacted Ezra Pound, and established a connection which he maintained at least until the end of the Second World War. This simple fact provides a recurring presence of Pór in studies on Pound, and especially on Pound's connection to Fascism.³³

It might appear that Pór's overture to Pound was simply an instrumental move to increase his own notoriety. This was not the case, for two basic reasons.

In the first place, Pór and Pound shared a common intellectual background: the intellectual context which not only spawned Guild Socialism, but also a whole series of economic heresies, which Pór and Pound saw as harbingers of Fascist economic and social doctrines: the social Credit system of

³¹ Pór to Rigola, 12 giugno 1923 ("Ho parlato con un socialista che deve ora per forza avere contatti quotidiani coi Fascisti e dice che essi vanno e con passi celeri verso una forma di socialismo nazionale. Magari. Sono importantissimi i metodi con quali [sic] lo Stato interviene oggi per sistemare le varie cooperative...sono molti elementi da me previsti").

³² A partial list of Pór's writings is available in *Bibliografia sindacale corporativa: (1923-1. 1940-18.)*, compiled by Alfredo Gradilone, Istituto nazionale di cultura fascista, Roma 1942.

³³ See, e.g., Niccolò Zapponi, *L'Italia di Ezra Pound*, Bulzoni, Roma 1976; Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; Id., "Pound's Politics and Economics", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, edited by Ira Nadel, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998; Accame, *Ezra Pound economista*.

A. R. Orage, C. H. Douglas, *The New Age* (to which Pound had contributed in 1911–1921) and Silvio Gesell. In 1934, writing to Pound, Pór presented himself as “an old New Age-Orage man...trying to propagate Social Credit here”.³⁴ In a subsequent letter he proclaimed himself “Syndicalist. Guild Socialist. NOT fascist. Free lance”.³⁵

The second aspect was of a more practical nature: Pound was not well integrated into the Fascist establishment (apparently he met Mussolini only once, in 1933).³⁶ Pór may not have had much international notoriety, but he was reasonably well established in the Fascist cultural system. Furthermore, Pound was desperate to be taken seriously as an economist. This was precisely what was not happening. Even Fascist journals, magazines and newspaper were firm in not wanting any of Pound’s writings on economics.³⁷

So, on the basis of these very strong elements, a lasting friendship was established. Pound translated into English one of Pór’s books, *Italy’s Policy of Social Economics 1939–1940* (1941). Pór introduced Pound to Fascists attracted to Pound’s economic doctrines, such as Felice Chilanti.³⁸ In short, it was a typical episode of Fascist dissidence or even “left-wing Fascism”.

Pór continued to produce articles and books until at least 1941. After the war he disappears from the scene. He would have been 62 years old; he lived until 1971. He was apparently unaffected by the Italian racial legislation of 1938: presumably a Hungarian surname, and his Fascist connection protected him from any problems during the years of the Nazi occupation in Italy.

In conclusion, Pór’s ideological itinerary was by no means exceptional in the context of Italian Fascism. It was, indeed, a typical Italian story. Or, to use a fashionable term, it was a transnational story.

³⁴ Pór to Pound, April 1934, quoted in Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*, p. 156.

³⁵ Pór to Pound, 28 March 1935, quoted in Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*, p. 160.

³⁶ Alastair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism, A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism: 1919–1945*, Anthony Blond, London 1971, p. 287.

³⁷ Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*, p. 163; Accame, *Ezra Pound economista*, pp. 68-69.

³⁸ Zapponi, *L’Italia di Ezra Pound*, p. 140.