

## Possibilities for a New Social Model?

*Vid Mihelics and Social Policy in the Interwar Era*

**Péter Krisztián Zachar**

**Abstract:** One of the most important terrains of the European search for new ways in politics between the two world wars was the debate on the reorganization and tasks of the state and, within it, of the economy and society. This topic dominated academic discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. The thinkers who sought answers—economists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, and ecclesiastics—could build on the work of early predecessors, reaching back as far as Thomas Aquinas’s “organic view of society,” later embodied in the economic and political theory of Jesuit solidarism. The common feature of the theories that emerged in the interwar period was that they approached the construction of the state not from the point of view of the individual, but from that of social groups. Vid Mihelics, a prominent exponent of these ideas in Hungary, devoted his journalistic, scientific, and political activities to the Hungarian Catholic revival. His interests focused on social issues and related teachings of the Church. His writings sought solutions through the ideas of Christian humanism, which for him was “the inalienable essence of true Europeanism.” His writings can help us better understand how interconnected Hungarian intellectual life was with European trends in the interwar period. Zachar.Peter.Krisztian@uni-nke.hu

**Keywords:** *Hungary, interwar period, Vid Mihelics, Hungarian Catholic revival, Christian humanism, Christian democracy, social policy, Quadragesimo anno*

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When we look at Hungarian political life between the two world wars, we still tend to use simplistic explanations and approaches in historiography. However, research of recent years and decades has made it clear that the Hungarian public life of the Horthy era and the debates about politics, society and economy that unfolded during that time were much more colorful than we might have thought, or than forty years of Marxist historiography sought to make us believe. The period saw the emergence of an active debate on how the consequences of the dismemberment of a thousand-year-old country, the inevitable serious effects of the emerging economic crisis, the



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social tensions of the decades since the turn of the century, and the unsolved issues of nationality and religion could be exploited to build Hungary into a stronger nation, one better equipped to confront the challenges of the new century.<sup>1</sup> The discourse about state reform, especially after the Great Depression of the 1930s in Hungary, was a fascinating intellectual achievement, which, although in line in most respects with ideas prevalent across much of modern Europe, nevertheless, also followed its own individual path. The search for a new model of state and society, based on nontraditional nineteenth-century solutions to replace the liberal system, which was seen as having fallen into crisis and failed, was widespread in Europe at the time. Christian intellectuals who approached the problems neither from a libertarian nor from a Marxist perspective, and especially not from the national socialist extremes, played an extremely important role in this phenomenon. They “strove to elaborate a political concept at the beginning of the 1930s, an ideology they described as being ‘reform Catholic.’ Their concept was based on a realistic analysis of social circumstances of that era, and it was meant to be the Hungarian equivalent of Western Europe’s Christian democratic thought” (Petrás et al. 2017: 10–11).

Particularly after the Great Depression, much more attention was given to these ideas, and the Christian alternative to social justice could be seen as a possible new political direction. For its main representatives, the ultimate goal was the realization of a new society with a human face and an economy based on mutual benefit, and out of all this, a rising Hungarian nation. This circle of scholars drew on the teaching of the Church on social issues and the Jesuit school of solidarity to imagine the country’s reform along new principles of economic and social order (Zachar 2014). For them, this meant that it was not enough to deal superficially with symptoms, such as social tensions or economic and social problems, but that much deeper solutions were needed. Starting with social problems, they argued that the whole system of representation of social and economic interests needed to be rethought; that the decision-making structures in the economic, social, and overarching political realms needed to be reregulated. They saw that the problems emerging from the new, post–World War I order and the Treaty of Trianon were connected to the decades-old structural problems of Hungarian society: the change in the quasi-feudal society structure; the absence of a large middle class and bourgeoisie; the crisis of a newly industrial society afflicted by social injustice and insecurity; the accumulation and distribution of wealth; and, the unimaginable poverty of the Hungarian peasantry. In their view, the liberal state system that had been established could not deliver adequate answers to these questions, and thus needed to be reformed so as to avoid extremist approaches as Hungary lived in the shadow of both communism and national socialism. As one of the main figures of this circle of thinkers, university professor Béla Kovrig, wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this paper does not allow for the elaboration of a detailed background of the scholarship on this front, but for more on this issue, see in particular: Erdei 1980, Kovrig 2011, Tomka 2003, Bódy 2013, Gyáni et al. 2006, Egresi 2008, Hámori 2006, Nagy 2001, Ungváry 2016, Bódy 2019, Cora et al. 2020, and Bódy 2020.

There was then a great need then and there for a systematic ideological version of a theocentric humanism, directed at the social situation of the Hungarian common man. There was an ethos common to many, which was not defined or codified, so it needed to be expanded, specified, and adapted to the concrete, duly motivated, and generally realistic aspirations of the strategically important social segments, and to be logically elaborated and formulated (Kovrig 2019: 354).<sup>2</sup>

One of the most significant figures of twentieth-century Hungarian Catholic public life who tried to contribute to this discussion was Vid Mihelics. The main focus of his work in this period was to disseminate knowledge of international trends in Hungary by summarizing the works of the most relevant conservative European writers; and, on this basis, to outline alternative political paths in Hungary. Mihelics was present in the circle of Christian thinkers on social issues primarily for his journalistic output, but his dedication to reform made him a driving force among these thinkers, which left a strong mark on the development of Hungarian conservative thought.

Vid Mihelics was born just before the turn of the twentieth century in 1899. His thinking was influenced by his Catholic school upbringing even before entering the Cistercian Order and continuing his studies in Zirc and at the University of Budapest. He graduated with a doctorate of arts in 1922, but left the order to study at the Catholic University of Paris. There he was exposed to Christian social theory and turned to socially sensitive public Catholicism and, in the 1930s, to the idea of vocational order. In 1932, he earned the highest level doctoral degree in economics from the University of Budapest with a dissertation titled *International Workers' Protection* (Frenyó 2007). He was secretary of the Hungarian Society for Social Sciences, a member of the Hungarian Social Policy Association, and an elected member of the Szent István Academy.<sup>3</sup>

Among Mihelics's writings published during the 1930s, particularly outstanding were those on countries that sought to implement a new state order by referring to papal encyclicals. He considered Portugal's Estado Novo system and especially the social reforms implemented under the leadership António de Oliveira Salazar particularly relevant to the Hungarian context. Therefore, Mihelics's enthusiastic writings provoked numerous attacks not only from conservative but also from liberal and left-wing thinkers; however, his academic approach also earned him recognition in national debates. Mihelics became one of the most influential figures in the Catholic press as editor of the papers *Új Nemzedék* (New Generation), *Nemzeti Újság* (National Newspaper), and *Katolikus Szemle* (Catholic Review). He was a regular contributor to *Vox Academica*, later as a member of the editorial board of the journal *Korunk Szava* (Word of Our Time); and, in 1935, one of the founders of the influential Christian social-political journal *Új Kor* (New Era) (Frenyó 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article from Hungarian to English are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> The Szent István Academy was founded in 1915 on the proposal of Primate and Archbishop János Csernoch from the Scientific Department of the Szent István Society to promote the Catholic cultivation of the sciences in fields including theology, history, law, political science, linguistics, and the natural sciences. Its first president was Sándor Giesswein.

After 1945, Mihelics played a leading role in the Democratic People's Party (DNP) led by István Barankovics and became a member of parliament. Not only did he present the social theory and political ideas of Christian democracy in recurrent articles in the party's weekly paper, *Hazánk* (Our Homeland), but also worked as the paper's chief editor. He gradually came under the surveillance of the communist authorities, who forced him into retirement from 1948 when he announced that the DNP would cease to operate. He tried to play a role again in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and formulated the new political program of the reestablished DNP, but after the revolution's suppression he was arrested and held in prison for several months. This left a heavy mark on him: he withdrew from the search for a political way out and became more involved in interreligious and intercultural dialogue, in line with the culture of dialogue proclaimed in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*. Thus, Mihelics became one of the editors of *Vigilia* in the 1960s. His articles of the time were essentially about the possibilities of settling the relationship between church and state: ideological incompatibility was not an obstacle to practical agreement. At the same time, the fact cannot be ignored that probably as a condition of his release from prison, he was successfully recruited by the Ministry of the Interior and began to produce reports as an agent on Catholic intellectuals in particular. In 1962 he participated in the first session of the Second Vatican Council as a member of the Hungarian delegation, producing regular reports under the name of Béla Molnár.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, his writings for the public were a sign of the rapprochement that he himself had announced, with humanism as his key word. The depoliticization of the public activities of the churches became a fundamental condition for the dialogue he programmatically advocated, and he sought to defend it until the end of his life (Tabajdi 2016). After two heart attacks, he finally gave his soul back to his creator in 1968.

Vid Mihelics had been thinking in terms of a triple unity: God, the world, and humanity's constant relationship was at the center of his work; he always thought in terms of eternal ideals, but within the context of the Hungarian reality of his time. He sought to integrate Catholic thought and the scientific results of sociology in such a way that the Catholic spirit, positivist science, and rational political tendencies would provide the basis for the rise of Hungary. Perhaps this is the idea that makes Mihelics' insights and thinking relevant today: the arrangement of the relationship between the individual and the community; the creation of a social philosophy centered on the person; and, community and a humane economy, like that of the unification of liberalism, socialist approaches, Catholic social teaching and conservative social ethics. Thus, Vid Mihelics was too left for the right, too right for the left, too socialist for

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<sup>4</sup> This short study is not intended to deal with this very defying problem of Mihelics's late years and the debate, which is so characteristic of the Hungarian past after 1945. In the last phase of his life, Vid Mihelics's activities reflected the processes taking place in Hungarian politics, with all of its limitations and opportunities. These have been previously analyzed (see in particular Frenyó 2002, Tomka 2016, and, Petrás 2020). This study aims to draw attention to the peculiar path that emerged in the previous era and reflect on the alternative Hungarian political approach in the "age of extremes."

the conservative clergy, and too clerical for the socialists. As he wrote in his later works, this is the eternal tragedy of the political tradition of the Gironde<sup>5</sup> of the time, which nevertheless marked out for him the only correct humanist path (Frenyó 2022: 59). On numerous occasions earlier in his career, Vid Mihelics himself not only wrote on social policy issues but also undertook detailed sociographic analyses. Moreover, he sought to present advice and proposals for Hungarian government policy that focused on the betterment of society and the resolution of the contradictions that existed. He did all this not from the ivory tower of academia, but by working in the real world, traveling on a daily basis in rural Hungary. During World War II, at the time of the second government led by Prime Minister Pál Teleki, he worked as a government social policy advisor in Vas and Komárom counties while between 1941 and 1945 he was a press officer for the Ministry of Industry. In 1939, social policy advisors also held a national conference in Pécs, Hungary, to address serious challenges facing Hungarian society in this realm and to propose a major reform program (Esztergár and Somogyi 1940). At the heart of this were the same issues Mihelics had been addressing in his work and that had Christian social scientists had been focusing on for decades.

In Vid Mihelics's view, social policy proposals had to be based on ideas rooted in Christianity. To him, the question of social progress was central to the nation's betterment, and in addition to clearly defining and exposing the problems at stake, his writings included a critique of the existing system of relations under capitalism, as well as a detailed presentation of Christian teaching on both private property and work. In terms of social policy, he was most concerned with defining the scope of state intervention and developing appropriate legal safeguards. In this respect, he sought to provide supportive work for the government of the day. He was able to draw heavily on the Hungarian Christian social tradition in the process of theorizing, while at the same time engaging in debates with contemporary thinkers such as Jenő Kerkai<sup>6</sup>, Béla Kovrig<sup>7</sup>, Zoltán Magyary<sup>8</sup>, Gyula Szekfü<sup>9</sup>, Father László Varga<sup>10</sup>, and later, István Vida<sup>11</sup>, József Freesz,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Girondins were a political group during the French Revolution, influenced by classical liberalism and the concepts of democracy, human rights, and Montesquieu's separation of powers, who advocated a strong central government. With their support for a free market, public education, and constitutional rights to public assistance for the poor, they promoted political equality and opposed the radical course of the revolution, which led to the Reign of Terror.

<sup>6</sup> Jenő Kerkai (1904–1970): Jesuit monk, the founder and main organizer of KALOT (National Association of Catholic Agricultural Youth Associations), one of Hungary's most important ideologists and organizers of the professional (vocational) movements of the period and a founding member of the nation's (Christian) Democratic People's Party.

<sup>7</sup> Béla Kovrig (1900–1962): sociologist, politician, university professor. He was a leading figure in Hungarian Christian social thought. Between 1938 and 1940, he was head of the Social Policy Department of the Prime Minister's Office, and later head of the prime minister's "National Policy Service." He promoted the work of many Christian social movements and acted as an expert for the emerging (Christian) Democratic People's Party from 1944. In 1948 he emigrated from Hungary and settled in the United States.

<sup>8</sup> Zoltán Magyary (1888–1945): the "father" of Hungarian public administration, university professor. From 1910 to 1930 he worked in the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and from 1931, as Government Commissioner

and Sándor Meggyesi<sup>13</sup> (Petrás 2013; Zachar 2016). Based on their interpretations of the papal encyclicals, the rise of corporative state solutions to social problems in Europe, and the new school of Jesuit solidarism, the representatives of this Christian social-political reform were convinced that it was possible to create the right sociopolitical instruments in order to deal with the social and economic crisis and bring about renewal by strengthening the nation at the level of the community. Therefore, they aimed to find new directions against the social alienation of individuals, against the tendencies emerging across much of Europe to brutally suppress individuals and their communities, and the rage of an all-encompassing relativism. One of the possible new solutions, based on the former Jesuit school of economics, included the implementation of a new horizontal occupational representation (called the "vocational order"), and also the solidarity and subsidiarity of interests to create a virtue-based economic policy that put human beings at the center again:

For what is the essence of this vocational order? The restoration of the right order in the relationship between the individual and the community, between small communities and society, between society and the state, so that the masses may once again become a people whose political and economic activity in particular is guided by its natural leaders in the spirit of social justice (Mihelics 1940a: 5).

Searching for a solution, Mihelics made clear the failure of the paths taken so far, which had included libertarian capitalism as well as authoritarian and dictatorial regimes built up by foreign powers. As he saw it, the implementation of the socialist doctrine (national or internationalist) had eliminated from the economy the potent driving force of the entrepreneur's individuality, initiative, and organizational talent, which resulted in a statist approach that hampered independent initiative. This made productive efficiency impossible. On the other hand,

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for Public Administration. He was the most important reformer of public administration during the interwar period.

<sup>9</sup> Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955): Hungarian historian, publicist, university professor, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, researcher of early modern Hungarian history—and one of the main ideologists of the Horthy era.

<sup>10</sup> László Varga SJ (1901–1974): sociologist, Jesuit monk. He was the main protagonist of Jesuit solidarism in Hungary, a prominent representative of the vocation order, leader of the Congregation of Mary, and main driving force in several vocational organizations.

<sup>11</sup> István Vida (1915–1996): lawyer, social politician, one of the leading organizers of Hungary's vocational movements, and a former student of Jenő Kerkai. From 1936 he was the central secretary of the Parish Workers' Department (EMSZO) of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary, and from 1940 the head of office of the Hungarian Social Movements. He was arrested by the far-right Arrow Cross Party. After his release, he found work as a laborer and later emigrated.

<sup>12</sup> József Freesz (1903–1951): Roman Catholic priest and one of the early advocates of modern Christian democracy in Hungary; from 1937 one of the directors of the Parish Workers' Department (EMSZO). Due to his opposition activities, he was persecuted both by the Gestapo after Germany's invasion of Hungary in spring 1944 and, after World War II, once communism took hold, by the country's new state security service, which tortured him to death at its notorious headquarters at Andrásy út 60 in Budapest.

<sup>13</sup> Sándor Meggyesi (1901–1980): teacher, public writer. He was the organizer of the Catholic Youth Association of Slovenská in Upper Hungary (today in Slovakia), and later one of the main organizers of the National Association of Catholic Agrarian Youth Unions (KALOT) and president of the National Association of the Vocational Orders of Hungarian Workers (Hivatásszervezet).

capitalism without limits lacked the moral forces that could preserve the individual and human initiative in the face of extremely rapidly developing technology (Varga 1941: 64). Mihelics, who stood between the two threatening extremes of uncontrolled liberalism and collectivism, argued that Catholic social teaching could point the way forward; this system of thought, he argued,

“creates a proper relationship between the individual and the community. An economic system founded on this precept could work toward the goal of securing material security for all, as per the solution advocated by socialism, while offering the possibility of individual development without prejudice to the community” (Mihelics 1933: 5).

In the search for a way out, Hungary’s Catholic sociologists formulated a clear rejection of revolutionary solutions and dictatorial aspirations, while at the same time harnessing their faith to serve the nation, the common good; to uplift society. As they saw it, the state acts most appropriately when it organizes the economic realm of society—or, rather, the society of those who work in the economy—in a way that independently serves the national common good, in effect administering itself, but on the basis of social justice (Strausz 2011: 109).

The envisioned new state was, therefore, not an adoption of the corporatism prevalent in Europe during this period, nor was it an attempt to recreate in Hungary foreign authoritarian models of the era, such as the Austrian *Ständestaat* or the Portuguese *Estado Novo* (Mihelics 1931). Based on his international experience, Mihelics believed that “many variations of the practical realization of the vocational order are possible,” and that in fact

an ideal form that encompasses the whole of society cannot be built overnight.” Thus, no single model can be singled out as the only good solution, since “no matter how appealing an idea may be in theory, it will be judged by life, whose specific aspects and characteristics are constantly being adjusted and corrected, sometimes even distorted (Mihelich 1940b: 5).

As put by Kovrig, the circle of Christian thinkers who sought social policy solutions for Hungary held that

the aim is not a corporate state, leading to the despotism of an oligarchy of a few, or the autocracy of a small or large group. Not a pseudo-corporatism, which is merely a state economic and labor administration, a bureaucracy of specialized branches! We seek to bring working members of families together in elected self-governing bodies, according to the occupation that is the basis of each family's livelihood (Kovrig 1943: 17).

In line with this, Christian social thinkers, when speaking about the structure and role of the state, clearly presented a strong but limited image of public authority with responsibility for the common good.

The realization of the rule of the professions is intended to relieve the state of its burden by building up the self-activity of society, and to dismantle excessive and unhealthy statist approaches and its unreasonable and costly centralization. This can only be achieved by transferring certain tasks from the present powers of the state to the organizations of vocational orders (Kovrig: 1943:19).

In their view, the state, through its religious division, was nothing more than a public body of social justice operating on the basis of self-government. The state becomes, in effect, a servant of society by enabling the individual to achieve their legitimate individual ends more easily and more fully, while at the same time, the common good was achieved. However, the state, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, could not, in order to maintain the common good and peace, take over tasks and matters that fell to individual citizens or their smaller communities; for otherwise it would turn into a totalitarian regime (Varga 1941: 19–23). All this could be achieved only in the socioeconomic order envisaged by the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, with the equal status of labor and capital, and with the construction of a “society of work.”

In a society structured on the family and the work community, and then on the state, as they saw it, it becomes possible to reconcile individual freedom with the public interest (thus eliminating class struggle), and social responsibility is no longer a private matter but also a public matter through solidarity. Social utility is fundamental to the life of communities, through which various achievements are created and exchanged for the benefit of smaller communities and, through them, individuals. The state, as the guardian of the common good, oversees these processes, and the individual becomes a member of society by recognizing that any work has and will have full value only if the person feels it to be a moral duty to society in addition to their own individual life. This is what the thinkers of the era called “vocation” (Mihelics 1940b). Vocation was also the central concept behind Hungary’s state reform initiatives during the interwar period and in the early years of World War II. Although Prime Minister Pál Teleki, in particular, tried to move in this direction, no actual transformation took place (Hámori 1997). For Teleki, reform of the Hungarian state was a decisive endeavor in several respects: on the one hand, he was able to ward off the attacks of the Hungarian far-right movements, and on the other hand, he was able to halt what he perceived as the misleading directions of liberalism. At the same time, in his view, by restructuring the system of interest representation organizations and social responsibility, Hungary could also resolve the issue of Jewish Hungarians’ place within society as a whole. To this end, Teleki brought in experts e.g., Zoltán Magyary, Béla Kovrig, László Varga SJ, and Sándor Tonelli, all of whom were in favor of vocational orders and the reorganization of the state’s social policy structures (Strausz 2010). As Teleki put it, “The state must gradually educate society to take over these functions, and the state itself must become merely the regulator of this lively social apparatus” (Mihelics 1941b: 5). But at the time, and given the international and domestic context, only the very first steps in this direction could be made.

To sum up the classical doctrines of solidarity, the protagonists of the Christian social reform and the supporters of the ideas of the vocational order expected nothing less than that social justice should become the main regulating principle of the national economy, rather than free competition and the dictatorship of capital. This would lead to a fair distribution of income, and class struggle would be replaced by cooperation between the various occupational sectors, under the guidance and control of state power (Varga 1933: 20–21). In this system, the market

economy would not abandon individual initiative, but gives individuals of exceptional ability the opportunity to develop their talents and at the same time fosters entrepreneurship in society. Fair profit and gain would be not only morally unobjectionable but also indispensable to the economy. The advocates of this approach stressed, however, the dual nature of wealth and the social responsibility that this entails (Zachar 2020).

The thinkers of modern solidarism have made it clear that a human being can only be understood as a social creature, and that human dignity is an inseparable part of personality (Kownacki 1991). For this reason, no human being can be regarded as a mere factor of production, putting themselves on the market and thus subjecting themselves to the mechanism of supply and demand. The most fundamental flaw in the liberal approach is that it treats human labor as a mere commodity, depriving it of its personality and thus, as it were, prioritizing the rights deriving from the contract over the personal rights of the worker. In contrast, the organic view of society, in line with the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas (Frenyó 2017), proposed the creation of voluntary self-governing organizations (by profession), which could become the basic units of a society of solidarity, overcoming the individualist approach and replacing the dreaded class society. On the basis of subsidiarity, these organizations could decide for themselves their approach to key issues (even in the political realm), so that the state would only perform those tasks that such associations of citizens were unable to carry out (Strausz 2010). All professions would be ordered alongside each other in such a way as to each achieve *bonum commune*, the common good. Mihelics was convinced that only this principle of social organization could break down and abolish still prevalent divisions of power based on political, social, and economic privileges, as well as the class-based society's desire to assert its own group interests. In this way, he saw the new vocational order as a highly modern proposal with historical roots and as progress toward a desired, "more perfect society" (Mihelics 1940c: 7).

Mihelics's studies, articles, and numerous other writings reveal him to have been a well-balanced thinker, well-versed in many issues. Mihelics was always willing to let his views be challenged by his contemporaries and to rely on those who shared his thoughts. His work as a consultant for the government gave him the opportunity to influence public opinion; his religious convictions had always led him to advocate public involvement, even though it had not led to clear results in terms of transforming his ideas into practice in the political or social spheres of the 1930s. In his view, Catholic political action was essential if social reforms were to be achieved. That is, those with strong faith could not look only to the future promised to them but had to work within the circumstances of the here and now to create better conditions and reform society in the spirit of Christian charity.

Hungary during this period saw many disparate approaches to Christianity-based social policy, some of which were entangled, some of which were in clear opposition to each other. These ranged from the social democrats' initiatives to that of the so-called "people's movement," not to mention the neoconfessionalization movement within Protestant circles, which sought the reform and the restructuring of the Hungarian state. The Hungarian Catholic reform camp itself, and its

proposals to solve social, economic, and state administrative problems were highly diverse. The call for social reform varied from those advocating a conservative Christian social approach and the vocational order all the way to the French-oriented democrats of the young Catholic intelligentsia, who were connected to the works of historian Gyula Szekfű, and who drew their inspiration from democratic, French Neo-Catholicism. The 1930s saw the launch of new Catholic periodicals, such as *Vigilia*, which became forums for new, socially sensitive democratic approaches. The rise of the new, corporative interpretation of the church's social teaching (vocational order) was followed by increased doubts about it along with a search for a clear distinction and clarification of the fundamental differences between the Christian social approach and fascist corporations or the Austrian authoritarian Ständestaat. They formed a very clear picture of the incompatibility of national socialism, fascism, authoritarian state rule, and Christianity early on and formulated their views in the pages of the leading antifascist daily paper, *Magyar Nemzet* (Petrás 2013): "In principle, Hungarian Catholic thinkers gradually distanced themselves from corporatism, which was an intellectual accomplishment in their own right" (Petrás et al. 2017:20).

This circumstance in particular motivated Mihelics to come up with concrete social policy proposals. In words and headlines, the most important measures included thoughtful public engagement in the following areas: the implementation of job placement through a state agency; the organization of various career guidance institutions; the implementation of productive unemployment care; the establishment of a system of unemployment insurance; and, in particular, the centralization of the issue of adequate wages in line with Christian teachings. He considered the continuous extension of social welfare and, thus, the provision of social benefits in a wide variety of sectors, as a requisite, basic element of the system. He dealt specifically with issues of ensuring secure living conditions and access to health care, regulated work hours, holidays, special protections for women and minors; and, not least, security for families, which he deemed central to social policy.

At the same time, Mihelics also placed an emphasis on the idea of people being provided the conditions requisite to help themselves, and to building coalitions between employers and workers. To this end, as explained above, he considered it essential not only to strengthen trade unions and ground their work in notions of Christian charity, but also to build up trade union representation and enhance their role in the structure of the vocational orders.

For Mihelics, however, the social question was also essentially a cultural one. He attached particular importance to a thorough education of the people, and to the establishment of further (vocational) training and extracurricular education. He saw the institutional system of "folk high schools" (providing adult education)<sup>14</sup> as a sociopolitical tool, which offered a great opportunity

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<sup>14</sup> Folk high schools began to appear in greater numbers in Hungary in the 1920s with the backing of Education Minister Kuno Klebelsberg. From the beginning, the Hungarian folk high school movement had been closely

to bring rural and urban Hungary back into the fold of Christian thought. This was also the spirit behind the institution-building wave of the period: a number of professional (vocational) organizations sprang up in Hungary, with prominent organizers such as Jenő Kerkai, József Freesz, László Varga, Béla Kovrig, Ferenc Mikos<sup>15</sup>, István Vida, and József Közi-Horváth<sup>16</sup> taking up the cause (Petrás 2021, Balogh 1998, Gergely 2008, Kovrig 2019, Vida 1990, Petrás 2015).

The reform work that had begun in Hungary in the realm of social policy won the support of Pope Pius XII, who, in the spirit of his predecessor, welcomed the organizational initiatives in 1939 by giving his blessing to the direction of the work:

Preserve, protect, and perfect the precious values of Hungarian culture, which are characterized by a healthy naturalness combined with true Christianity. Work to build up that social order which, according to the principles of the encyclical of our venerable predecessor, *Quadragesimo anno*, is suited to your circumstances. With the mercy of God and the great patronage of the Great Lady of Hungary, we give you and your whole movement our apostolic blessing (Balogh 1998: 91).

The concept presented by Mihelics, and the Hungarian Christian-social reform movement was in line with the teaching of the Jesuit school of solidarism, well known in the period. It was not anticapitalist, it did not seek a “third way” between a planned economy and a free market economy, nor did it propose a complete dismantling of the state and a fundamental change of the political system. Instead, it called for the reorganization of society on a solid Catholic, ecclesiastical basis, one entailing a shift toward the community principle and away from individualism. It called for the elimination of the social and economic “shadows” of the established system of socioeconomic relations, of private-sector economic selfishness, and of the socially destructive effects of fragmented communities. It did so by advocating for the establishment of self-governing communities (vocational orders) with a wide range of responsibilities grounded in a solid regulatory system.

In the view of Mihelics and other such Christian thinkers, the vocational structure would relieve the state of the burden of social policy and give the communities within society as a whole more room for maneuvering; only as a last resort could the state intervene in the structure of the

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intertwined with Hungarian studies more broadly, since in addition to the transmission of agricultural knowledge, these institutions offered participating young people courses in historical traditions, Christian beliefs, and regional values. From the 1930s onwards, the focus was on reforming a rural society in crisis, providing cultural training for talented peasant youth and economic skills for middle-aged people.

<sup>15</sup> Ferenc Mikos (1899–1954): legal writer, expert in judicial law, judge. With his articles and books he was one of the theoretical founders of the vocational movement in Hungary, initiator and organizer of several conferences on the social question and vocational order.

<sup>16</sup> József Közi-Horváth (1903–1988): Roman Catholic priest, politician, Christian social thinker. The *Actio Catholica* in Hungary. He was the first secretary general of the *Actio Catholica* in Hungary. In 1938, he was one of the organisers of the Saint Stephen's Year and the World Eucharistic Congress. He played an important role in the early days of the (Christian) Democratic People's Party (DNP), but was forced to emigrate in 1948.

economy and society in a subsidiary way, as a guarantee of the common good. In line with this principle of subsidiarity, the state would intervene only to the extent that doing so could be justified, taking into account community aims, and emphasizing a fair division of tasks. The organizational structures of the professions would ensure that they would assume a large part of the state's economic and social policy responsibilities, leaving centralized, state power to concentrate on defending the common good. "The state must be strong, but it must be constrained by morality, the principles of international law, individual freedoms, and personal safeguards, which together are the higher requirements of social cohesion" (Mihelics 1941a: VIII).

Central to Mihelics's vision, then, was persuading society as a whole to settle on a Christian social order that would not just preserve the Hungarian state system but also improve it; this, in an era of extremist ideas—of (as he saw it) unrestrained liberalism, Stalinist bolshevism, Hitler's national socialism, and European authoritarian tendencies. For this circle of thinkers, a new approach to social policy based on a vocational order would yield a society in which subsidiarity and solidarity would effectively counter tendencies toward the omnipotence of the state. Mihelics was among those who, within the diverse internal currents of the Christian camp of social policy thinkers, unequivocally condemned almost all variations of totalitarian power of the time.

Indeed, his approach shows that a devout Catholic, one who drew on the traditions of Church teaching, could also offer solutions to the problems inherent in secular politics in a way that did not seek the total dismantlement of that system. Mihelics had repeatedly pointed out that it was the task of the religious to complement the liberal political system in crisis, to complement parliamentary politics, and thus to give a democratic underpinning to a system based not solely on large political parties and majority voting. Between the two world wars, he was convinced that a new model of state organization could be created that would be one of the best possible mechanisms for implementing modern democracy (Petrás et al. 2017).

Finally, it must be noted that Vid Mihelics's thinking is significant not least because it was clear to him that the social policy defined by the Catholic Church in its various encyclicals was *not* fundamentally a matter of Catholic faith. Such views on society in fact comprised what he viewed as a system of natural law plausibly understandable and acceptable to anyone socialized in the Christian cultural sphere of Western Europe. In sum, Mihelics was convinced that a state social policy based on papal encyclicals could be the most successful model for social renewal as a uniquely humane solution in an age of extremism. He was not prepared to abandon his principles in the face of any external criticism. Indeed, he wrote that because of his position, "the socialists denounced me as reactionary and as clerical, and the reactionaries and the clericals—that is to say, the whole of the Catholic community—as socialist" (Frenyó 2002: 59). Mihelics, to the end, was a thinker faithful to the Church and respectful of and attached to tradition, but one who sought new paths, was drawn by difficult questions on the fringes of mainstream thought, and felt that it was of the utmost importance for Catholicism to find its way amid—to

make its mark on—whatever new socioeconomic circumstances held society in their grip at any given time. Unfortunately, after 1945, this kind of critical thinking could only take place in the more fortunate countries of the West, and not under the terms of the Hungarian dictatorship. But that is another story.

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