Ferenc Balázs, Social Reform and the Redemption of Global Modernity in Interwar Transylvania

Zsuzsánna Magdó, PhD candidate in the History Department at the University of Illinois, spoke as part of the Noontime Scholars Lecture series on Tuesday June 18th. Her lecture, entitled “Ferenc Balázs, Social Reform and the Redemption of Global Modernity in Interwar Transylvania”, was based on a new project that looks at the ways in which encounters with colonial regimes of colonial empires. During his travels across East and Southeast Asia and the Middle East, Balázs also ended up personally observing the kibbutz movement in Palestine and other contemporary utopias put into practice by pacifist and anti-colonial intellectuals such as Toyohiko Kagawa in Japan and Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi in colonial India. Additionally, as an avid reader he was a huge fan of Prince Kropotkin’s ideas about the mechanization of agriculture and the Danish N.F.S. Grundtvig’s folk school program. Balázs returned to Transylvania in 1928. With a complex four-year plan inspired by his intellectual trajectory and observations of utopias in practice, he set out in 1930-1934 to reconstruct the village in Transylvania with the broader goal to ultimately find a way to free the rest of the world from the shackles of a global modernity shaped by nationalism, capitalism and colonialism.

Magdó’s lecture explored the concerns, intellectual sources and historical factors behind Balázs’s utopian thought and described his efforts for the rural reconstruction of a Transylvanian micro-region in Greater Romania. Akin to other Hungarians, who after 1920 grew up beyond the boundaries of “rump Hungary,” Balázs had to contend with the crisis of liberal modernity, political and social legacy of the defunct Austro-Hungarian empire and the newly found minority status of Hungarian communities around post-Trianon Hungary. As such he was deeply influenced by turn-of-the-century modernism and the political and social ideas of agrarian socialists, Hungarian radicals and minority intellectuals (in his case, the Transylvanists and the Transylvanian Youth). Yet, as a student at Unitarian seminaries in Oxford and Berkeley and later as a member of the global peace movement, Balázs also circulated through the global pacifist and Protestant missionary networks that were built along and sometimes against the very structural forces of the global modern, which manifested in the 1930s with the Great Depression, the growing intensity of extreme nationalism and the continued public health hazard presented by tuberculosis, the disease that ultimately claimed his life in 1937.

Ultimately, as Magdó established, Balázs failed to conceive of global modernity in a truly alternative sense, being himself seduced by essentialist ideas about national character and Western-centric assumptions about gender, race and civilizational development. His utopia, the four-year plan, was also obstructed by the structural corruptions that his utopia underwent, Balázs provided for Magdó an opportunity to historicize designs of the modern in the east of Europe in the framework of a global modernity shaped by the
forces of imperialism and colonialism. As she argued, Balázs was hardly unique when viewed in the company of numerous prominent individuals from east of Europe who traveled across colonial spaces as scholars, explorers, naval officers, and artists. Although they espoused different political ideas, such subjects like Balázs produced symbolic geographies and socio-political meaning for the consumption of the east European masses. They also deployed their knowledge about both the “West” and the colonial peripheries to shape modernity at home. In this sense, Balázs is part of a larger archive that she calls upon in her new project to replot east European modernities on a broader trans-imperial and trans-colonial grid. This approach provides one opportunity, Magdó argues, to historicize east European entanglements with globalizing colonial regimes while keeping in consideration the region’s extra-coloniality. She thus joins scholars who seek to transgress Cold War divisions of intellectual labor yet wish to remain attentive to the east of Europe’s historically distinct experiences of “Western” hegemony than the ones undergone by former colonies.

Nellie Manis finished her MA at REEEC with a graduate minor in European Union Studies in May 2013. She received a BA in History and a BA in International Studies from Penn State University in 2008. In August she will begin a Fulbright Student grant at the Linguistics University of Nizhnii Novgorod in Russia. In addition to coursework in translation and interpretation, she will research the differences between translation pedagogy in the United States and Russia.