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Orbán's anti-woke pretence

Hungary's PM is portraying his country's anti-democratic shift as 'truly conservative'. This strategy seems to resonate with Western intellectuals

The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) in Hungary made headlines last month by taking control of the prominent book retail-and-publishing company *Libri*, buying up almost all available remaining shares. MCC does not lack resources: the think-tank and elite-education centre of the Hungarian government receives almost as much state funding as all higher education in the country. MCC acquired its minority share in *Libri* in the summer of 2021 and already the company has changed: more books published by MCC Press have appeared on its bookshelves.

We don´t know yet what influence this recent 'business decision' will have on publishing and bookselling in Hungary. But extending the influence of the MCC to yet another domain of previous (relative) independence fits the hegemony-building framework of the regime of Viktor Orbán. 'We must embed the political system in a cultural era,' Orbán said in 2018. This from the man who had, decades earlier, applied in his masters thesis Antonio Gramsci´s ideas about civil society to *Solidarność*, the Polish independent trade union movement. Since 2018, more serious efforts have been undertaken to occupy culture and higher education, in the battle for what Gramsci called 'intellectual and moral leadership'.

Far-reaching impacts

The MCC is however not only a Hungarian business. It recently opened an office in Brussels and bought a large share in private universities in Vienna and Berlin – as proudly reported by the *Hungarian Conservative*. This magazine is one vehicle through which the government addresses an international audience and attempts to brand itself as simply and truly conservative – omitting to advert to the anti-democratic developments in the country on which genuine Hungarian conservatives have been raising the alarm for years.

This branding strategy, though, seems to work. Not only do US Republicans fall into the trap of the Hungarian government's communication machinery – witness the three conferences organised together with the Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest and Dallas. Prominent intellectuals from North America and Western Europe have also been seduced. While some politicians may cynically deem the breaching of democratic norms and institutions not a major problem if done to favour one's own camp, it is harder to explain why some liberal Western scholars – see the MCC's guest lecturers' list – should wholeheartedly support Orbán's regime and see Hungary as the land of freedom.

Next to generous resources (stipends, jobs and visibility), one factor in this successful deception may be another element of the communications strategy of the regime that seeks to obscure its true character and thus broaden its room for manoeuvre in the international arena. It presents itself as a freedom-fighter against what Orbán calls the 'woke virus'.

What escapes the Hungarian government's liberal fans and the agents of the translated liberal authors is that its agenda is broader.

Where MCC fits into this should make some on the liberal left uneasy. The books it publishes in translation are not all right-wing propaganda. Many are by liberal authors who, for instance, defend gays' and lesbians' rights and to some extent even trans rights. They are only against the individualist gender-identity ideology which has become stronger in recent years in the West, in which gender is no longer a set of societal norms that socialise male- and female-born persons into two distinctive life paths but an individual competence, which should override biological sex in every policy field.

Equally, in MCC Brussels' event on 'the EU´s gender obsession', next to some alarmist framings, reasonable arguments were made. The Canadian sociologist Ashley Frawley accurately reconstructed the history of the gender concept in progressive movements, described the recent piggy-backing of the trans issue on causes that have more purchase (like gender equality or gays' and lesbians' rights) and the 'coercive reform' approach of parts of these movements – not believing in convincing people to change policies but changing policies to set a new norm.

The Hungarian linguist Natália Borza – while uncritically embracing the Hungarian government´s narrative about the 'child protection' referendum held last year together with the parliamentary elections – also

made legitimate points, for instance on the change of meaning of the word tolerance into 'unconditional acceptance'. And MCC Brussels' executive director, the British sociologist of Hungarian origin Frank Füredi, noted the contemporary tendencies (including in the gender movement) towards 'adultification of children and infantilisation of adults', eroding the line between children and adults.

These views need to be taken seriously by progressives, and those who raise similar points on the left should not be delegitimised as right-wingers. What, however, escapes the Hungarian government's liberal fans and the agents of the translated liberal authors is that its agenda is broader.

Diverting attention

Not only is it against 'woke' dogmas but also against basic trans rights – security against discrimination, providing the helpful legal fiction of sex change in the documents after medical consultation to the few adults with gender dysphoria for whom this might be the best solution – and against gays' and lesbians' rights. In fact, it treats homosexuality and transgender identities the same way: check out the questions on the 'child protection' referendum.

Moreover, the Hungarian government is not only against the ideological and religion-like character of some views prevalent among the Western left but is actively fuelling the stigmatisation of whole groups of people. After campaigning for years against brown- and black-skinned migrants and refugees, sexual and gender minorities have become its principal scapegoats for all the malaises Hungarians face.

The Hungarian government uses problematic developments to polarise against the 'declining West' and to legitimise undemocratic measures.

In his annual programmatic speech last summer, Orbán even called the current challenges – 'a war, an energy crisis, an economic crisis and wartime inflation' – distractions from the more important matters of 'demography, migration and gender'. With its discourse focused on 'culture wars' in the West, the Hungarian government is, however, seeking to divert attention from issues concerning Hungarian citizens more than drag queens in some Western kindergartens – including record inflation far exceeding that in the wider region.

There are indeed problematic developments — since when are we, leftists and feminists, supposed to defend drag queens sensitising children

towards gender diversity? The Hungarian government, however, uses them to polarise against the 'declining West' and to legitimise undemocratic measures, curtailing academic freedom and (under labels such as 'gender ideologists' or 'wokes') homogenising and vilifying all opponents – opposition parties, intellectuals, feminists and LGBT+ activists, who fairly disagree among themselves on these issues – as enemies of the nation. All this cannot be seen if the current Anglo-American problems of free speech and academic freedom are projected on to Hungary.

The Czech political theorist Ondřej Slačálek has translated for an English-speaking audience the concept of 'metropolitan provincialism' developed by the Czech-Italian philosopher Václav Bělohradský. He applies the term to the United States, but one can obviously add other metropoles: 'It is metropolitan provincialism because it poses local US standards as a paradigm, a source of metrics and rhetoric for the whole world.'

Intellectuals and politicians from North America and Western Europe would be well advised to make an effort to understand the history and politics of East-Central Europe.

In the preface to the Ukrainian translation of *Animal Farm*, George Orwell warned his countrymen in 1947 of the political consequences of such provincialism for anyone unable to recognise the totalitarian practices of the Soviet Union:

'Everything he reads about a country like the USSR is automatically translated into English terms, and he quite innocently accepts the lies of totalitarian propaganda. Up to 1939, and even later, the majority of English people were incapable of assessing the true nature of the Nazi regime in Germany, and now, with the Soviet regime, they are still to a large extent under the same sort of illusion. This has caused great harm to the Socialist movement in England and had serious consequences for English foreign policy. Indeed, in my opinion, nothing has contributed so much to the corruption of the original idea of Socialism as the belief that Russia is a Socialist country and that every act of its rulers must be excused, if not imitated.'

Intellectuals and politicians from North America and Western Europe who are critical of the anti-liberal tendencies of 'woke' and 'cancel culture' would be well advised to look beyond their own contexts and grievances and make an effort to understand the history and politics of East-Central Europe. Then, they might not fall into the trap set by

contemporary autocrats who promise a cure against the ‘woke virus’.

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