



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Viktor's Defeat: Reflections on Referenda and Civil Societies, in Hungary and elsewhere

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October 4, 2016

One sunny August morning, in the middle of my annual visit to the village of Tázlár, I could not help noticing the blue political posters that had been put up overnight at the boundaries of this small settlement. In the weeks that followed I saw many more in nearby villages and towns and in the capital Budapest. A brochure was distributed to all households in the same colours and format. Each poster asked a short question such as “Did you know that the Paris terror attacks were carried out by immigrants?” “Did you know that Brussels wants to impose upon Hungary a population of illegal immigrants the size of a whole town?” “Did you know that since the beginning of the migrant crisis the harassment of women in Europe has increased dramatically?”



Posters in Tázlár: “Did you know that last year 1.5 million illegal migrants arrived in Europe?”

(Photo: Chris Hann)

The referendum question was “Do you want the European Union to be able to order the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without parliament’s consent?” This was considered by many analysts (inside and outside Hungary) to be highly manipulative and possibly illegal, but the issue touched sensitive nerves in Hungary. When the migrant crisis peaked in the late summer of 2015, the German Chancellor shamed her Hungarian counterpart and claimed the moral high ground with a declaration that those experiencing obstruction (or denied entry by the construction of fences) in Hungary would be welcome in Germany (see my post of 7 September 2015). It seemed to many Hungarians (not all of them supporters of nationalist, anti-immigrant parties) that it was rank hypocrisy on Merkel’s part to claim the credit for *Willkommenskultur* in one moment, and then shortly afterwards call for European solidarity and the imposition of binding quota arrangements on all EU members. As is well known, no progress has been made with the implementation of such a scheme and the proposal is effectively dead. In 2015 the closure of the “Balkan route” and the deal struck with Turkey have combined to reduce the number of migrants travelling north. But with support for his Fidesz party falling even before the last elections of 2014, keeping the “migrant crisis” alive in the public mind enables Viktor Orbán to distract attention from a malfunctioning economy and endless corruption scandals.

The crudity of the government’s agitation drew a variety of political responses. Only the minuscule Liberal Party recommended a “yes” vote. Left-of-centre parties urged a boycott. The most creative critique came from the fringe “Two-Tailed Dog Party”, which urged citizens to spoil their ballot papers. It countered the government’s campaign with posters of its own asking pointed satirical questions such as “Did you know that the average Hungarian is more likely to encounter a UFO than an illegal migrant?” “Did you know that since the start of the migrant crisis Hungary has more blue posters than it has immigrants?”



Copying the format of government posters, a poster of the Two-Tailed Dog Party asks: "Did you know that more than a million people want to go from Hungary to Europe?" The text below the logo reads "A silly answer to a silly question! Spoil your ballot!"

(Photo: Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt)

Orbán pulled out all the stops in the days before the vote but despite even more billboards and a last-minute media crescendo, the proportion of valid votes barely reached 40% (of which over 98% were "no", as anticipated). The Prime Minister will bluster and perhaps change the Constitution again as a demonstration of his power, but he emerges from this referendum a significantly weakened politician, at least temporarily. He clearly failed to mobilize large sections of the population outside his own party and the more radical right, especially in the capital and other large cities. What does this undignified episode tell us more generally about the state of Hungarian democracy and about the pros and cons of calling a referendum in a pluralist political society?

Many commentators in countries such as Germany (journalists and politicians but also academics) have presented graphic images of Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy" in recent years. It is sometimes suggested that oppositional parties have been reduced to impotence and the media silenced. This referendum result and the campaign which led up to it show these representations to be too extreme. Funded largely through donations online, the alternative posters of the satire party raised laughs throughout the social media, even if they never appeared in public space in villages like Tázlár. The government's saturation propaganda generated a defiant suspicion of its intentions, a contrariness that leftist parties were able to exploit. Even in rural Tázlár, where Fidesz is the dominant party, I came across flyers of the Hungarian Socialist Party urging a boycott. In short, the claim that Hungarian democracy is in "acute danger" seems to me exaggerated.¹

Of course, I do not wish to sound complacent. State administration is being politicised at every level and corruption is rampant in the economy. The academic domain is not immune to these trends. Yet so far freedom largely prevails. In the wake of the referendum, on 6th October the Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is organizing a Workshop with a programme diametrically opposed to that of Orbán's government. It is titled "Solidarity with Refugees in European Civil Society".

This title set me thinking. I was privileged to meet Viktor Orbán when he was still a young man, though already a public figure following his outspoken anti-Soviet remarks in the last years of socialism. He was awarded a scholarship (the funding came from George Soros no less) to visit Oxford University to read up on the concept of civil society, which was on the lips of every dissident intellectual at this time. That is where I met him. But Viktor cut short his sojourn amid the dreaming spires of Oxford in order to return home and take charge of Fidesz

preparations for the elections of 1990. The rest is history – but what has happened to Hungarian and European civil society in the last 27 years?

My answer is shaped by my regular visits to Tázlár (and other settlements in the county of Bács-Kiskun, south-east of the capital and bordering Serbia, the principal point of entry for the migrants in 2015). Referendum participation in this mainly agricultural county was 44%, significantly above the national average, and nearly 10% higher than the proportion of valid votes cast in Budapest. Is it surprising that provincial citizens respond more enthusiastically to Orbán's populism?² What have civil society and market economy brought them? The agricultural system that made them prosperous in the last decades of socialism has collapsed. The nominal minimum wage is set at around 350 Euros but the main source of work in much of the countryside is workfare, from which most participants take home the equivalent of 150 Euros monthly. Many young people feel that they have little choice but to move abroad, London being the most favoured destination. When family structures have fragmented, the value of your house has declined drastically, and it is cheaper to buy imported salami and wine in a nearby Tesco supermarket than to produce your own (as most villagers did in the recent past in Tázlár), is it any wonder that politicians discover that they can exploit sentiments of resentment and wounded national pride?

The constellation is not peculiar to Hungary. Viktor Orbán regularly plays on the fact that his policies (including his anti-Muslim tirades) command substantial support elsewhere in Europe – in the west as well as the postsocialist Visegrad Group. I am struck by many similarities to the former Eastern Germany, where I have lived since 1999. It is presumably pure coincidence that Viktor Orbán's referendum coincided with the celebrations and public holiday to mark German reunification. In 2016 the main locus of the public rituals was Dresden, capital of Saxony, a state that is continuously in the news due to right-wing violence against migrants. The political climate here is poisoned by the likes of Pegida and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). In the days before the celebrations a mosque was attacked and several police cars burned. This may have contributed to the fact that German civil society did not flock to Dresden in the numbers expected. The speechmaking was overshadowed by nationalist protesters who had the impudence to chant the slogan of 1989 "wir sind das Volk" and call for the resignation of Angela Merkel.

So is the danger to democracy "acute" in contemporary Eastern Germany? Of course not. Pegida and the AfD are just an embarrassing minority. But the sentiments they express rudely are widely held by the supporters of mainstream parties. Let us recall how carefully German reunification was accomplished in 1989-1990: not through a referendum, but by overwhelming majority votes in two democratically elected parliaments. Would the majorities have been so clear if East Germans had known that, rather than "blooming landscapes", their states would

soon experience the most drastic deindustrialisation ever recorded, causing a massive population exodus and social disruption analogous to that which I have observed in Hungary? After nearly three decades of political unity Germany still has no unified labour market: the *gap* between average wages in the west and the east is more than double the national minimum wage in Hungary.

As an anthropologist I do my research in villages and small towns, where terms like civil society remain unfamiliar. Clearly the ethnic nationalism promoted by leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Dresden-born Frauke Petry in Germany is the opposite of the liberal notion of civil society. But can the liberal elites not try a little harder to analyse what is happening throughout their societies? Instead of relating the rise of xenophobic movements (some commentators are already speaking of a new Fascism) to the structures of European and global political economy, today's elites often end up blaming the victims. This is especially conspicuous in Eastern Germany. Thus the former President of the *Bundestag* Wolfgang Thierse, who identifies himself as an East German, a Social Democrat and a Roman Catholic, calls for more self-criticism. In a radio interview to mark the public holiday, he attributed the greater incidence of right wing violence in the east to the region's relative isolation during the socialist era and explicitly rejected attempts to seek explanations in the new inequalities created by postsocialist transformation. In his view, to go down this road is tantamount to condoning illiberal protest.³

Social scientists are not obliged to respect this taboo. In my commentary at this site in March on the results of the elections in my own state of Saxony-Anhalt I drew attention to the correlation between the rate of unemployment in and around Halle and support for the AfD party. The patterns will not always be so neat; it is not necessarily the immediate individual "losers" who rally most noisily behind populists; but the general correlation between deindustrialisation and neo-nationalism is surely undeniable. It can be identified in many other contexts, including places unaffected by socialism and postsocialism but no less exposed to the polarizing trends of neoliberalism. David Cameron's referendum in the United Kingdom was a gambit that failed even more dramatically than Viktor Orbán's expensive error of judgement in Hungary. BREXIT will have the more far-reaching consequences. It provides another example of how easily this political instrument can backfire for the leader who invokes it.

Conclusions

In contemporary Europe, referenda are an invitation to populists, whether in office or on the margins, to promote policies based on nationalism and racism, with scant regard for evidence or even the rational economic interests of their constituencies. Viktor Orbán and David Cameron lost in very different ways, but the common consequence of their referenda was the perpetuation of a ratchet of nationalist posturing.

When their interlocutors are incited to cast their votes *against* Brussels, or *against* new migrant streams, be they from Poland or Hungary, Libya or Afghanistan, anthropologists should hesitate to join the high-minded elites who moralise around the discredited ideal of civil society. Instead of simply deploring the pathological xenophobia of the provincial Hungarians (or the provincial English and Welsh), we should do a better job of investigating the material and subjective experiences which lie behind it, which render people susceptible to politicians like Viktor.

Notes

¹ This opinion was expressed by my Leipzig colleague, the distinguished historian Stefan Troebst, in a recent radio interview: ↗ <http://www.mdr.de/heute-im-osten/demokratie-osteuropa-interview-stefan-troebst-100.html>

² It is easier for Fidesz as the dominant party to mobilise its supporters in smaller settlements, where local power holders can monitor who has failed to cast a vote. The figure for valid votes cast in Tázlár was 53%.

³ Thierse acknowledges the existence of economic disparities, which lead to *Stimmungsunterschiede* ("differences in mood") between east and west, but finds it politically incorrect to mention these factors when explaining violent protest. I came across this interview in a report in *Der Tagesspiegel* of 2nd October: ↗ <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/frueherer-bundestagspraesident-thierse-sieht-keine-rechtfertigung-fuer-rechte-gewalt-im-osten/14632396.html>