



Eurozine Review

The organized upperworld

Osteuropa analyses Hungarian politics in upheaval; the *Dublin Review of Books* says together, small EU-states are strong; *Reset* asks Napolitano what Einaudi would have done; *Le Monde diplomatique* (Oslo) goes deep into debt; *dérive* inspects the foundations of Red Vienna; *Esprit* says home-owning is not the solution to the French housing crisis; and *Studija* urges western art critics to get past Cold War clichés.

Osteuropa 12/2011



Writing in the new issue of *Osteuropa* — entitled "Quo vadis, Hungaria? — András Bozóki explains how, after 1989, the Hungarian political system was founded on consensus and a deep distrust of power: hence the retention of so-called "cardinal laws" — laws alterable only with a two-thirds parliamentary majority — from the socialist-era constitution.

However, formal stability came at a price, writes the political scientist and former culture minister: "The constitution prevented the system from correcting itself. Accordingly, when Fidesz obtained the two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010, Viktor Orbán talked not about a correction but about a revolution." What was originally meant to guarantee democracy now does the opposite: "The new government sees the constitution solely as a technical body of laws that they are able to adapt to whatever their political ideas might be. When they pass a law that turns out to be unconstitutional, they don't adapt the law but change the constitution."

The letter of the law: The new constitution that entered into force on 1 January contradicts European requirements of democracy, constitutionalism and the protection of fundamental rights on several counts, writes [Gábor Halmai](#). It allows the current government to set in stone its economic and social policy on areas including taxation, the pension system and families and marriage, so that any subsequent government possessing only a simple majority will not be able to alter these. Second, the newly defined subject of the constitution — Hungary as national community — allows no place for other nationalities living within the territory of the Hungarian state, while entitling Hungarians living beyond Hungary's borders. Perhaps most starkly anti-democratically, the constitution undermines the independence of regulatory institutions ranging from the national bank to the constitutional court and media, and hence the separation of powers.

The upperworld: Bálint Magyar, former minister of education and co-signatory of the "New Year's appeal" issued by former dissidents, recalls Fidesz's first stint in power from 1998–2002: "[Back then] I called the

Hungarian phenomenon the organized upperworld, where, unlike the oligarchic organizations of Socialists, the power operating within the framework of a network of democratic institutions extended its fields of operation downwards, using Mafia methods and state support. In the organized upperworld, the state is not an instrument of the Mafia, but it is the Mafia itself." Nothing much has changed in the nature of Fidesz, writes Magyar, except that a two-thirds majority now place sole power in a single person: "When [Orbán] speaks about certain decisions not as his own but of the Parliament, he finds it very hard to suppress an ironic smile."

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Dublin Review of Books 20 (2011–2012)



After two decades as the golden child of the EU, in 2008 Ireland was chastened by the impact of the global financial crisis. The combined effect of a property bubble, banking collapse and budget deficit threw Dublin into the arms of Brussels. Now, like other small EU member-states, Ireland needs to be especially smart in responding to the euro crisis,

writes Paul Gillespie in the *Dublin Review of Books*. How coherent has the Irish approach been so far?

The Fine Gael–Labour coalition government has rejected unilateral action and partial default à la Greece, and instead sought to improve the terms of the EU–IMF deal. At the same time, the Irish government opposes the French inter–governmentality approach within the eurozone, preferring deepening of EU across all 27 member states. This is broadly the right strategy, writes Gillespie:

Ireland's interests as a small state are better served by the community method involving the institutions. If the community institutions are to be involved it is essential that strategic alliances are made with similar small states in the coming negotiations to preserve that balance. This will be more difficult within a smaller eurozone system, already tilted towards inter–governmentalist methods of funding and decision–making.

Middle East: Reviewing James Barr's *A Line in the Sand*, an account of French and British power politics in the Middle East from 1915 to 1949, former Irish ambassador to Egypt Richard O'Brien reflects on two momentous events in the history of the region — the secret Sykes–Picot agreement in 1916 that attempted to preserve colonial power and knock emergent Arab nationalism on the head, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in August 2006. The latter, recalls O'Brien, opened up a polarization between ruling elites, who sought to contain and exploit the conflict, and a re–radicalized and populist pan–Arabist opposition. There was also, however, a moderate centre "far removed from extremist Islamist ideology", which questioned Israel's absolute right to aggressive "self–defence":

While these commentators and columnists did not in any way challenge the existence of Israel they sought to promote a process of reflection on how to achieve a totally new accommodation across the region which would prevent any

one country (and not just Israel) from being a continuing source of instability and tension and even of global uncertainty.

More about the *Dublin Review of Books*

Reset 128 (2011)



In *Reset*, Giorgio Napolitano, the Italian president, calls for a reform of the Italian political classes based on the liberal teachings of Luigi Einaudi, president from 1948 to '55 and considered the father of the Italian Republic. In correspondence with *Reset* editor [Giancarlo Bosetti](#), Napolitano endorses Einaudi's creation of a "minimal" and transparent state that — in the face of Catholic and Marxist opposition — opened up to international monetary norms and institutions, encouraged cross-border trade and brought Italy on board the project of European integration.

Napolitano decries what has become the Italian state's increasing interventionism and argues for reform in line with Einaudian principles: "With the sovereign debt crisis affecting Italy and other countries seriously undermining the great and undeniable achievement that was the creation of the euro, it is essential to carry out a thorough and rigorous process of reduction and prioritization of public spending, in line with a programme of de-bureaucratization and reform of institutions and their modus operandi."

Assessing Monti: Mario Monti and his government of technocrats are unlikely to bow down once their job is done, predicts Mauro Calise. If Monti's faction was indeed to become a party, it wouldn't be entirely technocratic and could become tri-partite, holding some attraction for voters of all political colours. But Monti would have to work on his image in order to win the nation's hearts. Having said that, "in a country that let itself be seduced and ruined by a vaudeville star, perhaps there's room for the rejection of the excesses of the leader videns. The return to the citizen sapiens can also be achieved this way."

Carlo Carboni gives Monti a more solemn welcome. His technocratic government "has quickly restored correct etiquette and good manners to the political panorama", he believes, and hopes Monti will act as a watershed. Italy needs "decisive men" who can lead it out of the "financial storm" and recalibrate political behaviour. According to Carboni, Monti is the man for the job.

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Le Monde diplomatique (Oslo) 1/2012



"Debt", shouts the cover of the January issue of the Norwegian edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*, summing up in one word the worries haunting both individuals and whole societies since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. Or actually much longer, according to editor [Remi Nilsen](#). Reading [David Graeber's](#) much discussed book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, he comes to the conclusion that the concept has been at the heart of civilization since the dawn of time. What's more, debt

is "a powerful means of power, perhaps the most powerful of all. Contrary to raw power, debt infiltrates the social field in its entirety." (In 2009, *Mute* published an [article](#) by David Graeber with the same title as his new book.)

Nilsen sees debt at work not only in a broke (and broken?) Europe but also in the Arab spring. The suicide wave that sparked off the revolts in the Arab world "was not about symbolic politics, as it is often described in western media, but desperate acts of young men trapped in bottomless debt".

Indebted man: Sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato also describes debt as a central means of power and the credit–debt relationship as a relation of asymmetric power. He goes even further in his critique of the capitalist system of debt. The long series of financial crises have created a new type of human being, he claims: the indebted man.

The phenomenon of debt cannot be reduced to its economic manifestations. It is the very key to understanding social relations in the neoliberal regime, which commits a triple robbery: it robs us of the already weak political power within the system of representative democracy; it robs us of more and more of those assets that, through hard struggle, have been squeezed out of the system of capitalist accumulation; and, above all, it robs us of the future, i.e. that what makes new opportunities and alternatives possible.

The capitalist system, writes Lazzarato, "reduces that which wants to become to that which is; it reduces the future and its possibilities to today's power relations. The strange feeling of living in a society without time, without options, without any imaginable break — is that not what the indignados condemn? — can mainly be explained through debt."

Also: Morten Harper reads a new book describing how rightwing parties in Germany, Austria and Hungary use comics to get their message out: *Rechtsextrismus, Rassismus und Antisemitismus in Comics*. The full [table of contents](#) of *Le Monde diplomatique* (Oslo) 1/2012

dérive 46 (2011)



In a German–English issue, Austrian journal for urbanism *dérive* focuses on the Viennese model of social housing, which ever since the "Red Vienna" of the 1920s and early 1930s has followed exceptional routes.

Tracing the history of social housing in Vienna, Michael Klein describes how, immediately after World War I, hundreds of thousands of homeless people squatted land; this developed into the cooperative garden–city movement and ultimately into "Red Vienna". By 1934, 63,000 new flats had been built, including the notorious Karl–Marx–Hof. "The understanding of social housing started out as politically motivated — in the sense of an oppositional practice", writes Klein; the modernization approach of post–WWII Vienna, on the other hand, perceived housing "as a means of social engineering and a way to build a new society".

"In retracing the models of social housing a shift in conception emerges", Klein concludes, "one that moves from a political to a governmental and, lastly, to a managerial and economic understanding. The solution turns out to

be a strictly temporary condition. It changes with time and context; yesterday's solutions do not necessarily meet tomorrow's demand. Social housing as a modern undertaking has to account for that."

Alternative economy: In recent years, cities like Berlin and Copenhagen have sold most of their public housing stock, generating real estate markets inaccessible to lower income groups. Vienna, however, opted for an "alternative economy", as [Andreas Rumpfhuber](#) explains:

Vienna did not sell its housing stock: it actually expanded its hold on the real estate market by intelligently liberalizing public housing production. Today, 27 per cent of the housing stock is owned by the municipality and 21 per cent by limited profit housing associations, but indirectly controlled by the city's authority via quality management, land provision and subsidies [...]: half of the housing market is accessed by the municipality.

Yet this practice has its pitfalls, writes Rumpfhuber: "The anachronistic and unbearable attitude of the centralistic model of governance that is in place in Vienna."

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Esprit 1/2012



Esprit provides a wide-ranging survey of the housing situation in France, which Christophe Robert of the Fondation Abbé Pierre, the housing campaign group, sees as a problem emblematic of the wider economic crisis. This problem has insidiously developed over the last decade but even now, in the run-up to the presidential election, is rarely voiced as a major political issue.

Social housing as solution: According to economist Thierry Debrand, the current government sees social housing as being mainly responsible for the present housing crisis. This view is based solely on (usually short-term) economic considerations and ignores the way in which social housing creates and maintains social structures. The real problems, writes Debrand, lie in a failure to adjust to changing needs, in particular those of an aging population, and to the real increase in house prices and rents in relation to earnings. Far from being the problem, social housing can provide the answer because it can stand aside from the unbalanced market created by housing scarcity.

At a time when households are spending ever more on housing, the government is spending less and less on housing support. Debrand differs from the government in not seeing property ownership as a panacea: "It is claimed that, with 58 per cent of householders occupying their own homes, France is chronically and seriously behind other developed nations. The truth is that France is actually quite close to the European average (66 per cent). [...] The European country with the highest proportion of homeowners is actually Romania (98 per cent) whilst at the other end of the scale stands Switzerland. The proportion of property owners is not therefore an indication of a high level of economic development but a social choice."

Mobility: In France, if you wish to be both a homeowner and mobile in employment terms, the only realistic solution is ownership of property in addition to your principal residence, writes Claude Taffin, housing advisor to the World Bank. This may be a realistic solution in Germany and Switzerland but very rarely so in France: "Turning people into property owners can limit their mobility and thus increase the risk of them being unemployed, or making them unable to take on a new job after becoming unemployed."

Also: Kristian Feigelson offers a personal account of the difficulty of finding any kind of assisted housing in Paris, a city that appears to be close to rejecting its own population: "Over 120,000 people, the equivalent of a provincial town, are currently trying to find social housing in Paris."

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Studija 6/2011



In Latvian art magazine *Studija*, Alise Tifentale takes a rather critical view of "Ostalgia", an exhibition at New York's New Museum featuring eastern European and Soviet art since the 1950s. Provoked by *The Economist*, which described "Ostalgia" as an exhibition of "art from nowhere" and "from countries that no longer exist", Tifentale entitles her article "We from nowhere and our art". She strikes a sweeping blow at western critics and curators: the alleged antagonism between East and West that they use as their matrix "appears to have outgrown the reality of the Cold War to become one of the fantasies of the early twenty-first century, turning into Marxist Benjaministic phantasmagoria".

"This means that, for the most part, 'our' late twentieth century art is interesting to 'them' only insofar as its content is based on stereotypes, politicized and familiar signs and stock phrases, which are formally, if vaguely, reminiscent of what is recognized in the West as avant-garde or 'radical'."

The implicit assumption is that the only "globally-acceptable" and artistically fruitful choice an artist in a communist state could have made was to condemn the regime ("or at least treat it ironically"). This has consequences, writes Tifentale. It means, for example, that "western-curated exhibitions of 'our' art almost completely exclude painting, sculpture and printmaking, since these art forms, innocent in themselves, were designated as 'official' by the Soviet regime and used for propaganda".

Also: [Barbara Fässler](#) on whether photography can be considered an instrument of knowledge. (Can it? Well, yes, according to Fässler — but not in any simple way.)

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