Democracy, populism, and the political crisis in Hungary

A response to Thomas von Ahn

György Schöpflin
7 May 2007

In November 2006, Eurozine published an article by Thomas von Ahn analyzing the causes of the demonstrations in Hungary the previous month. Among other things, von Ahn argued that Hungarian opposition (Fidesz) leader Viktor Orbán was operating a populist strategy that sought to undercut parliamentary procedures. Here, György Schöpflin, MEP for Hungary (Fidesz-EPP) responds that von Ahn has uncritically reproduced the spin-doctoring of the Hungarian Left, part of whose tactic is to exaggerate the involvement of the far-Right in the opposition. And in his critique of political instrumentalization of history, Von Ahn is mistaken, argues Schöpflin, in seeking to distinguish between a history that is instrumentalized and a history that is not.

This article is a response to Thomas von Ahn’s “Demokratie oder Straße? Fragile Stabilität in Ungarn”. An English summary of Von Ahn’s article is also available: “Democracy or the street? Fragile stability in Hungary”. Von Ahn responds to Schöpflin: “On the aims of discourse”.

There are serious methodological problems with Thomas von Ahn’s analysis of Hungary’s current political crisis. These problems gravely weaken his central argument that the Hungarian Right – of which I am a member – is teetering on the edge of an anti-democratic, anti-parliamentary strategy.

The primary flaw is that von Ahn fails to recognize the significance of his proposition that Hungarian society is deeply divided – in fact, it is in a state of “cold civil war“. The extraordinarily deep cleavage, unparalleled in Europe after 1945 (though it has some analogies with interwar Austria) is far more than a political phenomenon. It can be described as ontological, and is about qualitatively different and mutually exclusive visions of justice, of good and evil, of the country’s past, and, ultimately, of the “good
life”.

This cleavage is necessarily reflected in the Hungarian media, which cannot, therefore, be treated as providing an objective account of events, but as articulating opposing world-views. The best evidence for this comes from prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány’s “lying speech” (cited by von Ahn), in which he admitted that the government and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) “prepared” the media and “involved” it in its work (this sentence was not noticed by von Ahn). The passage is worth citing at length: “We must try to take these things forward [...] prepare the leaders and publicists of the most influential papers regarding what to expect. To involve them in the process.” (My translation) In other words, the leftwing media in Hungary, about four-fifths of all outlets, have become a transmission belt, doing the government’s bidding. Gyurcsány makes it amply clear that he regards this as quite normal and that “preparing” the media is something that he and his party will continue to do in the future.

What appears in the media cannot be used as a \textit{prima facie} source, but only as evidence of the cleavage. To quote József Debreczeni as an objective analyst of Viktor Orbán, as von Ahn does, is therefore distinctly misleading. Debreczeni was indeed once an adviser to Orbán, but is now a committed critic. Similarly, the output of the think tank \textit{Political Capital} cannot be taken at face value, given its close links to the government coalition. And so on. Thomas von Ahn relies heavily on leftwing news outlets, while ignoring the alternative views coming from the Right, such as \textit{Budapest Analysis} or \textit{Heti Válasz}. Centre-Right analysts such as Tamás Fricz and András Lánzci are also omitted. The implication is that von Ahn’s key analytical points about Viktor Orbán’s strategy being populist and anti-parliamentarian are basically reflections of the discourses of the Hungarian Left.

In consequence, von Ahn misses the deeper causes of the crisis in Hungary and the trap that Hungary’s elites, both Left and Right, have marched into. The first of these causes is the flaw in the institutional design of the Hungarian political system; the second is the long-term consequences of the “soft” regime shift in 1989-90; and the third is the nature of the Hungarian project that the country has been free to pursue since the end of the Soviet occupation.

\textbf{Stability becomes immobility}

Those who designed the Hungarian political system were not persons of Platonic detachment. They were highly motivated actors who wanted to secure maximum power for themselves under the new dispensation. In short, they were the leading elements of the communist nomenklatura. Their interlocutors were the democratic opposition and other leading intellectuals, who were wholly inexperienced in practical politics. The outcome of their deliberations was, as von Ahn notes, a system built around the idea of stability. Over time, however, this stability has come to resemble immobility.

In brief, a Hungarian prime minister with a parliamentary majority is utterly secure in power; there is no way of removing him or her as long as that majority remains in place. This effectively relieves the prime minister of all responsibility towards society; it is for
all practical purposes a semi-democratic system. The excessive concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister – which was the object of the Left’s continuous complaints during Orbán’s tenure – is not hedged about by the series of checks and balances that any democratic system needs to work properly. And in Hungary it does not work – this was the deeper meaning of President László Sólyom’s message (noted by von Ahn) that Hungary was beset by a moral crisis after the publication of the “lying speech”.

The original institutional design included the Constitutional Court, the President, and the possibility to hold referenda as balancing mechanisms. However, faced with the overwhelming power of the parliament, these have proved too weak to establish an equilibrium. Hungary’s democratic system is formally built on popular sovereignty, but in practice it has functioned on the basis of a parliamentary sovereignty that lacks the practice of self-limitation characteristic of, for example, the Westminster parliament. In effect, there are no instruments by which the sovereignty of the people can be validated.

Consequently, the Hungarian political system has become blocked, since the basic democratic infrastructure is damaged or missing. First, a democratic infrastructure must include multiple centres of political, economic, and social power, including institutions that can supervise governmental power and provide information that is supra-party political. Since 2002, many of these have been dismantled by the leftwing government. Second, society has to have the cognitive, semantic, and intellectual capacity to understand the workings of democracy and an intellectual elite, free of political dependence, ready to define and redefine the concepts and discourses through which events can be interpreted. Currently, neither requirement is met in Hungary. Third, an interlocking system of ethical and legal restraints on political power has to be in place, restraints that are accepted by the political actors and involve accountability, transparency, free expression, and feedback between rulers and ruled. In Hungary, such restraints are either very weak or non-existent.

What has actually evolved in practice since the Left won the elections in 2002 is a hybrid system in which the ruling elite relies heavily on communicative techniques to secure its re-election and thereafter pays no attention to public opinion. All criticism, including essential ongoing critique of power, is rejected as, at best, superfluous, but more often as ill-intentioned.

The street as a political institution

From this perspective, von Ahn’s charges that Viktor Orbán has been indulging in “populism” and “extra-parliamentarianism” – the narratives of the Hungarian Left – tell only half the story. “Populism” has become a label to stick on one’s political opponents in order to discredit them. But if one actually tries to define the concept, three possible areas come into question: fiscal irresponsibility; xenophobia; and mobilization of the masses while evading existing institutions in the furtherance of political objectives.

Taking these one by one: Orbán’s record on fiscal responsibility is immeasurably better than the Left’s, even if that record was eroded by promises of expenditure made during the 2006 election campaign that would have been difficult to fund. In fact, it was the leftwing government’s policy of unprecedented overspending that Gyurcsány referred to in his “lying speech”.

Page 3/7
Turning to the xenophobic element of populism, it was the Left (and not Fidesz) that propagated scare stories about 23 million Romanians coming to flood Hungary (2002) or made allegations that Slovaks were planning to plant bombs in Budapest (2006).

As for mass mobilization, this is a part of the standard repertoire of European democracy and is used when the institutional system has become unresponsive to popular aspirations and wishes. For example, in 1983, people demonstrated for months against the *loi Savary* in France, a law which would have nationalized private and church schools, and which eventually had to be withdrawn. Similarly, in 1990, Margaret Thatcher’s poll tax resulted in distinctly violent demonstrations in the UK, and it too had to be withdrawn.

In Hungary, the blocked political system noted above, in which the holders of power disregard or disdain popular aspirations, has turned the street into a political institution. And by the way, is this not an institution that also the European Left has used repeatedly? It cannot be that a street demonstration becomes populist only when used by the political Right.

As von Ahn notes, the demonstrations that began on 17 September 2006 were spontaneous, a gesture of disgust with a prime minister and party whose victory in the spring elections was based on large-scale mendacity. What Fidesz did was to give these demonstrations a political leadership and to seek to channel them into a coherent political objective. It would have been far more dangerous for Hungarian democracy, for the government, and for Fidesz itself if these outbursts had remained spontaneous. Then they would have acquired an inchoate quality in which extremism – the genuine article – would have flourished, making the phenomenon far less manageable.

The Hungarian Left has been desperate to deny the legitimacy of the street as an articulation of the aims of a politically significant section of Hungarian society and has resorted to charges of extra-parliamentary activities and warned of the danger of the “far Right”. Thomas von Ahn repeats this leftist discursive strategy, as does much of the Western press. But it is a long way from the political and sociological reality of a deeply divided society.

**Why Western media focus on the far Right**

The problem of the far Right is one that deserves further assessment. Von Ahn gives a lot of attention to 64 vármegye (64 counties) and *Jobbik*, rather more than they deserve. These rightwing extremist movements are very marginal. In every European country, there is a Far Right that can attract up to five or six per cent of the votes; in Hungary, the far Right gets a good bit less. They may be highly visible with their flag waving and their chanting – TV crews love them for that reason – but while distasteful, they are politically irrelevant.

Why, then, do von Ahn and the Western media give so much attention to such a marginal phenomenon as the far Right in Hungary and elsewhere? The answer would seem to lie somewhere in the lost project of pre-1989 socialism. The collapse of communism meant that the Western Left had to reinvent itself in order to acquire a new purpose. The concentration on the far Right and on the danger of “fascism” emerged as one such
purpose. The wars of Yugoslav succession were used instrumentally to demonstrate the “reality” of this danger, which then allowed the Western Left to locate the far Right safely in post-communist Europe. The ad hoc quality of this construct was illustrated by the reception of the events in the aftermath of the 2006 Slovak elections, which brought the hard-line nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) into the ruling coalition. There was a brief initial flurry of condemnation, but the issue was soon taken off the agenda, not least because SNS was now an ally of the Slovak Left.

The number of rightwing extremists actively involved in the 2006 demonstrations before the parliament in Budapest did not exceed a few hundred; on the two occasions when I was there, there were no more than a couple dozen of them. The great majority of demonstrators were peaceful, some of them with small children - hardly the stuff of a far-Right putsch. In the Hungarian case, the Left actively and determinedly propagates the danger of rightwing extremism as a way of securing support from the European Left, of scaring its own supporters into line, and of maintaining its own intellectual coherence by imagining a seriously dangerous enemy.

The superficially attractive argument that Orbán’s strategy has been to launch a “coloured” revolution in Hungary (which von Ahn considers “improbable”) is flawed. Subsequent events have proved the contrary. Orbán’s position has been very clearly laid out in a series of speeches and interviews published after von Ahn had finished gathering material for his article. What they make clear is the sequence according to which Orbán’s position is constructed. His starting position is that the MSZP won the 2006 elections on the basis of a lie of such proportions as to make that electoral victory illegitimate – not illegal, but illegitimate. The outcome of the local elections demonstrates that the leftwing coalition has lost its popular base and that Hungarian society feels thoroughly betrayed. The vote of confidence that Gyurcsány gained on 6 October 2006 makes the entire Left complicit in the lie, and the non-response to the offer of a government of experts simply intensifies the positions of both sides.

The trap into which the Hungarian political system has fallen affects both Left and Right and, obviously, Hungarian society itself. The Left understands that if it gives way, if early elections are indeed held, it will be wiped out. The fate of the Left in Poland, which barely scraped back into the Sejm after four scandal-ridden years in power in 2005, is taken very seriously in Hungary.

Fidesz, on the other hand, believes that the austerity programme, while needed, cannot be implemented by a discredited figure like Gyurcsány and that to fulfil its duty as a responsible opposition it must sustain pressure on the government, otherwise its own support will crumble. Given the blockage of the political system and the technocratic disdain of the Left ensconced behind its parliamentary majority, there is little more that Fidesz can do. It is powerless within the constraints of the system, even while it knows that its supporters are frustrated and, worse still, will be badly hit by an austerity programme that they do not accept as legitimate. Neither can give way, each is the prisoner of its positions and sustained in this by the other side.

The project of modernity

The Left’s years in power have effectively derailed Fidesz’s project of modernity for
Hungary. The nature of this project has to be seen in the context of Hungary’s unsuccessful twentieth-century history, to some of which von Ahn makes reference. Until 1914, the Hungarian elites had developed a project of modernity that would allow Hungary – nation and society – to compete on equal terms in Europe by constructing both the narratives and the discourses of modernity. The model was certainly flawed – it relied too heavily on Jacobin models of assimilating non-Hungarians without an adequate trade-off in political rights. More seriously, it was handicapped by deep disagreement regarding what model of modernity should be pursued. Despite what universalists believe, there is no single universal model of modernity – French, British, and Dutch models all vary, while sharing a family likeness – and Hungary had to cope with the problems that all late-comers have to face. Central in this context is the problem identified by post-colonial theory: where should the emphasis lie – on constructing one’s own, particularist narratives or borrowing them from the putative single universal “West”? The Treaty of Trianon shattered the modernity project and left Hungary scrabbling for solutions as to what a Hungarian modernity might look like. Communism was a failure and so, for different reasons, was the 1956 revolution. After 1989, when the opportunity for a relaunch of the modernity project opened up, the tension between the universalists and particularists – between those who postulate a single universal modernity and those who want to rely on native discourses – was mapped on to party politics. This is all the more regrettable since the dichotomy is a false one.

The Hungarian Left claims to be the sole agent of universalism, of being European and, indirectly, of being civilized and progressive. It argues stubbornly in favour of individualism and the market, it embraces globalization, and is economically determinist, paying next to no attention to either equality or equity.

At the same time, the Hungarian Right claims to represent the best interests of the Hungarian nation in Europe and describes itself as patriotic and responding to the needs of society. Hence it believes in the state as an instrument of social protection, in solidarity, and in mutual obligation.

These are both discourses of modernity and neither can be regarded as the sole source of what being modern means. At a deeper level, modernity includes both universal and particular narratives of the collective self. But in Hungary this is not accepted, with the result that the conflict has become embedded in politics and constitutes the basis of the “cold civil war” that is tearing both elites and society apart.

By insisting on the validity of both universal and Hungarian resources, Orbán has tried to transcend this divide; an attempt that has been fiercely contested by a Left that defines itself as “Western” and insists on a monopoly on any interpretation of what “Western” means. Hence the attacks on Orbán, unparalleled in any European democracy; hence the demonization of the Right; and hence the insistence that Fidesz belongs to the far Right and therefore is non-European. The fact that the Left strongly believes in this discourse of demonization and energetically propagates it elsewhere in Europe is not a reason for accepting it as an accurate depiction of reality.

Finally, von Ahn’s thesis about the instrumentalization of history in general and of 1956
in particular clearly rests on the assumption that there is “instrumentalized” history (which is unacceptable, undesirable, and morally inferior) and “non-instrumentalized” history (which is the opposite). In other words, that somewhere out there is true, objective history, but elsewhere politicians use and abuse history for their own ends. This distinction is futile. All history is subjective. All history writing involves an element of selection, which necessarily imports bias into the description of the past. So von Ahn’s charges of instrumentalization are about something else; they are about a specific kind of instrumentalization, one of which he disapproves. There is nothing wrong with this. The tone, however, the tenor, and the register of von Ahn’s article imply that his text is free of bias and subjectivity. It is not, but then nor is what I have written.

Published 7 May 2007

Original in English
First published in Eurozine
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/democracy-populism-and-the-political-crisis-in-hungary/)
© György Schöpflin / Eurozine