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BOOK REVIEW

We may regret Orbán

ANDREA PETŐ

Orbán: Europe's New Strongman, by Paul Lendvai. Hurst and Co. 273 pp. £20.

On 16 June 1994, Hunter S. Thompson, in *Rolling Stone* magazine, pushed aside the tacit rules of obituary and commemorated President Nixon (who had died a couple of months earlier) with a piece entitled 'He Was a Crook'. With journalistic precision and an obviously weathered hatred, Thompson evoked how Nixon and his team mercilessly took over the Republican party, then the presidency, and 'stomped like a Nazi on all of his enemies and even some of his friends'. Nixon and all those who assisted him with the war crimes and law violations he committed, such as Kissinger, Agnew and Hoover, were called pimps, villains, thieves, and 'hubris-crazed' monsters. The most poignant simile of the piece is the one in which he compares Nixon to a badger. The badger deceives the hunting dog by playing dead, but when the confused dog halts for a moment, the badger takes advantage of this and tears out the neck artery of the dog while hanging off of the dying dog's head with its four claws. What Thompson, the pioneer of so-called 'gonzo journalism', believed in, while writing this passionate attack, is crystal clear: he truly believed in the American system of institutions and in human dignity. In his deep-felt patriotism it seemed to Thompson that Nixon had poisoned the water forever.

According to Thompson, Nixon's successes and later downfall was due to his personal qualities (cruel, suspicious, violent and unscrupulous); and as he was a terrible man, he wrote about him in a terrible style. The choice of the narrative style is the first decision a political biography writer should make. The second is to decide how they should approach the great risk inherent in looking back from the moment of writing on the story of the protagonist and seeing it as a story of accomplishment, a *Bildungsroman* of some sort.

The accomplished Vienna-based veteran journalist of Hungarian origin, Paul Lendvai didn't take a risk with either of these. *Orbans Ungarn* (2016) was originally published in German. The present volume is a translation —presumably by the author, because no translator is indicated—with an additional closing chapter. In the second chapter, in a footnote, Lendvai lists ten Hungarian Orbán biographies, on the basis of which he wrote his in German, sometimes also quoting open access news sources, journals and occasionally his own personal anecdotes. The English volume's footnotes are not accurate, which is an editorial failure: while the so-called 'walk to Canossa' (when Orbán pleaded with Brussels) is, key information about Orbán's personal life is not.

In Lendvai's case the Thompson-dilemma, that is, how to write the biography of someone the author despises, becomes even more complex, since Lendvai had once been an admirer. An important anecdote in the book is the story of a 1993 evening in Vienna when Lendvai, the late Krysztof Michalski (rector of the Vienna-based Institute for Human Sciences), and Orbán had dinner together after the latter's lecture. Then, Lendvai and Michalski felt that they had found a talented politician, a man with a promising future, who could lead Hungary and Central Europe in the right direction. They had a good eye for human qualities, and they were not mistaken. Orbán truly became the most important politician of Central Europe, just not in the way Michalski and Lendvai had anticipated. We can only agree with Lendvai's evaluation of the current Hungarian political situation in the additional closing chapter: I have never, since 1989, seen so bleak a future for

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progressive and liberal change in Hungary, or for Enlightenment values: tolerance, respect for the importance of fair debate, checked and balanced government, objectivity and impartiality in the media, recognition of international independence.

The book describes the process, which entered political terminology as 'Orbánisation'. Experts amply quoted in the volume made many attempts to define it: authoritarian state, mafia state, hybrid regime, populist turn, constitutional dictatorship, illiberal democracy, or the construction of the 'polypore state' (a polypore is a parasitic fungus that feeds on rotting trees, contributing to their decay). Lendvai could not write a *Bildungsroman*; that should have been written in 1993. In 2017 he could only write an *Antibildungsroman*, which follows the process through which, from the leader of a small liberal party, Orbán has become a politician governing with absolute majority—with no real opposition—who is building a new political system. The volume, like an extended newspaper article overstuffed with data, decently takes the reader through the stages of the process, but it does so without asking why all this is happening, or what the underlying reasons are. As in many biographies it seems that the protagonist is an omnipotent actor, and that Hungarian politics has been shaped solely by Orbán's personality. Lendvai thus takes after the Roman imperial historiographic tradition, which explained the empire's development through the interrelationship of personality and power. This biographical approach established the foundations of conservative historiography that focuses on the person rather than structural factors. Lendvai quotes interviews stating that Orbán's absolute will to power moulded his character, that he is untroubled by scruples, and that he is a ruthless chess player of power politics. Thus, Lendvai's work inevitably boosts the image of a successful, popular, larger than life politician, known throughout Europe, against whom there is no social, cultural or political resistance. But, according to the book, there is no alternative to him either. The two glimpses of political hope that Lendvai mentions in the additional chapter of the book have also since failed: the candidacy of the socialist mayor of Szeged led to the collapse of the Hungarian Socialist party (MSZP) while Momentum, the movement collecting signatures for a successful referendum, lost its sponsors, and are unlikely, at the time of writing of this review, to be able to win any seats in Parliament. However, the reasons leading to the construction in post-1989 Hungary of an entirely new type of state built upon a new elite loyal to Orbán regime which, in turn, relies on European Union funds, are not clarified in the book. These cannot be resolved by depicting the personality of a self-made man of humble origins who happened to be in the right place at the right time—as Lendvai illustrates with detailed description. The structural problems of the post-1989 neoliberal turn—invisible for Lendvai, who's committed to liberal values—should also be taken into account. Then, while the author is right to criticise corruption in the communist successor party, the lacklustre Hungarian Socialist party—which he regards as a 'rather disgusting snake pit of old communists and left-wing careerists posing as social democrats'—he fails to demonstrate how this party has occupied the space of critical progressive politics. This was the very space that could have offered an alternative to the 'System of National Cooperation' (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere (NER)*, the name given by Orbán to his regime) that successfully combines now left-wing economic populism with patriotic rhetoric. The author also neglects to mention the weakness of Hungarian conservative politics, which contributed to the advancement of NER-aucrats or NER-niks, just as the weakness of American conservatism contributed to Nixon getting into office. But the analysis of the neoliberal economic, cultural and political order's collapse under the 2008 economic crisis—which has unavoidably turned voters towards what seemed like a viable alternative (despite the fact that with this political decision the majority of voters supported those who were against their own very economic interests)—is also missing from the book.

The third, but by no means smallest, of the challenges a biography author faces is the need to get to know the personality of their protagonist. Before Thompson used the badger to represent Nixon he scrutinised the way this small, fury animal lives. Ledvai

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could have used football metaphors for the same end: if there was one thing that could have helped in the sketching of Orbán's personality it was football. Instead of the disenchanted expert lingo of expensively-clothed technocrats, Orbán offered—via emotions and images one could identify with—the idea of the football-loving ordinary man, with which he won somewhat more than 30 per cent of the voters' hearts and ballots. In the Hungarian voting system, this was enough for a qualified majority, which then led to the establishment of the NER. Despite increasingly common corruption cases and international criticisms, Orbán seems to be retaining this majority—at least this is what was predicted before the election of 8 April when this review was written.

Not much more than a decade has passed since Thompson's legendary obituary in which he wrote: 'Nixon was a professional politician, and I despised everything he stood for—but if he were running for president this year against the evil Bush–Cheney gang, I would happily vote for him.' This shows well that it can always get worse when it comes to the vulnerability of the institutional system of liberal democracy. Reading Lendvai's book, one may come to the conclusion that if his analysis of the present regime is correct, then it might not be too pessimistic to assume there will be a time when we will long for Orbán, a not untalented politician, to be back.

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