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The Illiberal Polypore State and Its Science Policy

by **Andrea Pető**

Tucker Carlson, the face of the pro-Trump US media, visited Hungary for a considerable fee as he charges USD 70 000 for one public appearance.¹ Even he, a very experienced US media personality, confessed about this overseas summer trip that “This is by far the weirdest thing I’ve ever done”. Among the “weird things” were several trips in a Hungarian state military helicopter and while his interview with Viktor Orbán was fully available on *Fox News*, the Prime Minister’s Office omitted two sections of the transcript from the written version prepared for journalists.² How they imagined that they can trick journalists in the era of internet access is unclear, but it is clear that the two omissions, later retweeted after the *New York Times* journalist’s Twitter post, speaks volumes about the new far right and its modus operandi. In the first omitted quote, Carlson complained that Xi Jinping, who according to him is notorious as he had many of his political opponents killed, is not called a totalitarian gangster as Orbán is by President Biden. The other omitted quote was when Orbán in his response questioned whether Joe Biden, who does not speak Hungarian, can possibly know anything about Hungary. There is nothing

new in the certain media outlets omitting or changing content to suit their own temporary interests. What is new is that it illustrates precisely this total disregard for values but a strong will to power. How to explain this assemblage of values and communication tactics? In order to respond to this, I analyze a rarely analyzed field of illiberal politics, namely science policy, in order to present a new theoretical framework which can be applied to other policy fields.

Case study. The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)

The institution which invited Carlson was the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), founded in 1996 in Budapest by András Tombor, one of the FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) oligarchs, during the left-liberal government. As a founding member of FIDESZ, Tombor was deeply disappointed by his party’s 1994 electoral loss to the former communist party, MSZP; therefore, he decided to use the wealth he had accumulated during the first FIDESZ government to prepare for the next election. His idea was to copy the very successful educational system of colleges of advanced studies. These



Werner Patzelt was hired by Mathias Corvinus Collegium, after a controversy with his faculty in Dresden. PHOTO: MCC.HU

small tertiary institutions were set up in the 1930s by founders of Hungarian sociography and writers who exposed the misery of the Hungarian peasantry, creating institutionalized channels to social mobility for a select talented few. These institutions received government support in the late 1930s, when social differences were increasingly addressed by the far right.³ The colleges at first bore their founder's name, but after 1945 Györfly Colleges were renamed People's Colleges and continued to train a new elite according to the ethos of the new leftist culture of egalitarian knowledge production. This latter aim necessarily conflicted with the country's Stalinization and was banned in 1949. It was no accident that the revival of these colleges was only possible because of funding and political support from Júlia Rajk, the widow of the first victim of the show trials in Hungary in 1956.⁴ During the Kádár regime these colleges were affiliated with different universities to train future elites from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The founders of FIDESZ, who had also come from the provinces to study law at ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University) in Budapest, were trained in the Specialized College named after István Bibó (1911–1979), a legendary legal scholar and minister during the 1956 revolution. During the Kádár regime, the Specialized College offered affordable accommodation, meals, a generous stipend, and extra tuition. Tombor invested in this educational enterprise, having learned from his own experience that the institutional systems of a previous political order often serve as cradles of a new political system training a new elite. His investment was well spent, as in 1999, during the first

FIDESZ administration (1998–2002), the government donated the lavish former headquarters of the Workers' Militia (*munkásőrség*), founded in 1956, to MCC in the Buda Hills. Since that moment, MCC has received millions in donations from various foreign donors, including the German Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.⁵

Today, none of the 16 young or at most middle-aged all-male faculty listed on MCC's flashy webpage has produced any considerable academic publication or earned distinction, or even reached an h-index higher than 1.⁶ This list of faculty, with its very low level of academic authorization, is even more peculiar than the situation during Communism, when teaching in these colleges of advanced studies was an honor and only the *crème de la crème* were invited to teach there. Now, as part of the internationalization of this institution, MCC not only invited Carlson but also has hired former Technical University Dresden faculty Werner Patzelt, who lost his position because of his close connection to PEGIDA.⁷ After 1989 and the neoliberalization and impoverishment of the state educational system, this system of specialized colleges was considered a haven for intellectual work.⁸ The colleges had little chance of attracting lavish financing, but they radiated intellectual excellence and elitism, which for a while counterbalanced material poverty with prestige and academic authority. However, by 2020 MCC was receiving exactly as much state financial support as the whole of Hungarian higher education and with an endowment rivaling that of the University of Oxford.⁹ The MCC is just one example of the institutions that make up today's Hungarian illiberal scientific landscape, which at first glance look like scholarly institutions but in fact do not operate as such. MCC started as a small, elite educational institution and was transformed into the flagship of illiberal science policy. Using MCC as an example, this article aims to unpack why and how illiberal governments are setting up these institutions, and what constitutes their novel relationship to science.

Previous Explanations. The Emergence of Illiberal States

In the past decade, political scientists, sociologists, and economists have mapped and analyzed the emergence of illiberal states, focusing especially on how illiberal states managed to curtail media freedoms, normalize corruption, eliminate free markets and competition, replace personnel in the legal system, and rewrite constitutions and electoral laws.¹⁰ But even though policymakers were

warned as early as 2016 that “the legal protection of the right to academic freedom in Europe appears to be in a state of ‘ill health’,”¹¹ little attention has been paid to science policy in illiberal states. The lack of attention is partly due to specificities of science policy elaborated below.

First, as science policy is a national competency, the analytical frameworks are connected to the national frame. The national framing of research very often prevents researchers who track and analyze transnational policy transfer from controlling the humanities/social sciences in Brazil, Russia, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, France, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia.¹² Therefore human rights watchdog organizations like Freedom House monitor developments and publish reports relating to academic freedom, defined as freedom for teaching and research, autonomy, shared governance, and employment protection.¹³ Missing from this list is academic authorization, which in fact is a constitutive element of academic freedom. These three present fields of academic freedom are difficult to measure and sometimes overlap with other issues. Thus, science policy does not rank high among the preferred topics handled by various human rights watchdog organizations, and violations of human rights in fields like the media or the economy are more likely to be featured prominently than very complicated cases that look individual but produce results that actually show how institutions work.

Second, science policy is also international. Internationalization of higher education is usually portrayed as a positive development and a necessary teleological process. When joined to neoliberal marketization, however, internationalization allows illiberal regimes to extend their influence and transfer their practices to liberal democracies.¹⁴

Science and academic research are very similar to Covid, in the sense that it is a transnational activity. No matter that one keeps the national environment controlled, if not the spread from the outside is controlled as there are several interactions. The basis of science is trust in standards: if a result is flawed then it might take millions of research money to correct that mistake. A

recent article uncovered that the plagiarized works by Elena Ceausescu (the wife to Nicolae Ceausescu) is still quoted as the research were not done by the person who was listed as the author.¹⁵ What happens in Hungarian academy also concern Europe and the world. Different European countries are hosting and sending Hungarian researchers and students in different frameworks: Erasmus, CEEPUS, and Hungary also sends researchers and students to abroad. The knowledge they are

bringing in cannot be trusted as the quality control is nonfunctional. The fraud system infects the higher education system of other countries as they are unprepared for this type of fraud as the results cannot be trusted. That will cause millions of euros in the higher education and research.

Science policy has been discussed as a site where different illiberal polices are manifest, but not as a separate field.¹⁶ The rapid spread of illiberal science policies, such as closing accredited study programs and research institutions, privatizing higher education, appointing university leaders based on their loyalty

to the government, ignoring quality assurance, etc. demands not only reaction but also critical analysis.

In this article I claim that science policy, as a national competency with an international character, is especially suited to spearhead illiberalization efforts because it offers something no other policy field can offer: academic authorization. Via academic authorization, science policy secures the legitimacy of all other illiberal states’ activities. Illiberal politicians and oligarchs like Tombor recognized the importance of educational institutions as sites of knowledge production and transfer, training of loyal supporters, academic authorization, and dissemination of ideas abroad. Illiberal spin doctors have similarly acknowledged that the academic authority granted by these organizations is necessary not only to legitimize their ideological agenda, but more importantly, to secure employment for loyal supporters who will train further loyal supporters, who will then take over existing educational and research institutions. In their communications, evidence-based policymaking has been the basis of governance. Illiberal politics also refer to surveys and research conducted by experts, with the difference that

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CEU, Central European University, is now seated in Vienna. Here the port to CEU in Budapest, before the move (2008).
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the surveys do not meet academic standards and boast neither authorization from academic institutions nor measurable scientific achievements.¹⁷

This process of illiberal takeover of (neo)liberal academia is portrayed as an ideological struggle between ideological opponents. A similar example though vice versa is what happened to East Germany's ideologically driven communist academia when it was taken over by (neo)liberal West German academics. To reach their planned hegemonic position, illiberal Hungarian actors applied several strategies that differed from those used during West German academia's takeover of East German academia after 1989. Back then in united Germany, "integration through cooperation" was the process applied in a paradigm change in which the social definition of academic credentials was a consideration.¹⁸ Hungary's illiberal transformation started as early as 2011 and supposedly served to enhance efficiency when the Higher Education Act gave the minister in charge of higher education the right to appoint university rectors. The chancellor system implemented in 2015 relies on chancellors appointed by the Prime Minister who are responsible for administration, finance, and management. The rectors are responsible for academic issues. It also created new, five-members executive boards that may veto most substantial financial and administrative decisions at universities.¹⁹

Very recently, four disturbing and interrelated events took place in Hungary. First, the Hungarian state nationalized and centralized the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) following the

Russian model of institutional reform. The leadership of HAS had 54 minutes to review the proposal.²⁰ Second, it forced the Central European University into political exile from one European Union country to another.²¹ Third, the Hungarian government proposed a decree that deleted an accredited, well-performing two-year MA program in gender studies with consistently high enrollment and excellent placement records from the accredited study list.²² Fourth, the largest universities and all their assets have been transferred to private foundations. Not only have they lost their autonomy, but appointments in these institutions no longer follow the previous procedure regulated by the Hungarian Accreditation Committee. Now that the universities have transformed their institutional structure, everything depends on the rector, who is deployed by the government and appointed to different academic positions. Previous academic credentials are not needed or valued and have even raised suspicions of disloyalty. However, given recent acts in Hungary and elsewhere – like closing the Institute of Philosophy in Belgrade and the European University in St. Petersburg, or appointing Erdogan's friend as president of Bogazici University – analysis of science policy in the illiberal states is imperative.²³

Previous Analytical Frames. The Science Policy of Illiberal Regimes

As I argue in this article, there are several misleading approaches to understanding these fundamentally new developments in the science policy of illiberal regimes.

The first approach considers the science policy of illiberal states as a mere temporary institutional backlash,



The Budapest seat of HAS (Hungarian Academy of Science) on the bank of Danube.
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

easily reverted by good policies and institution building.²⁴ This argument is based on belief that returning to a business-as-usual situation is possible. I will argue that the institutional transformation is so profound that a simple reversion to the “good old times” is impossible. The recent privatization in Hungary requires a two-thirds majority of MPs’ votes, a requirement which can only be changed by laws, so the divided opposition is unlikely to get electoral support any time soon. More importantly, there are no “good old times” of science policy to return to because the neoliberalization of the academic landscape has already fundamentally changed scientific knowledge production and communication. Over-bureaucratized neoliberal universities and their impact factor-driven, conveyor belt-style mass teaching is suitable for many things, but they are no longer able to produce responsible, critical thinkers.²⁵ I will argue later that this problematic development is ruthlessly exploited by illiberal forces that are hacking the quality assurance system on the one hand while delegitimizing the quality assurance system itself by labeling it an ideological institution aiming to import foreign influence to oppress “real patriots” on the other.

The second explanatory frame simply resorts to historical analogies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, along with the warmed-over authoritarian paradigm for explaining illiberal science policy.²⁶ This approach centers mainly on the relationship between the state and the researchers, which allegedly explains the impact of the state’s punitive measures regarding self-censorship and the conformity of researchers, as

well as state’s deleterious impact on the quality of scientific work. The gravity of such punitive measures varies from Turkey to Hungary. Scholars are being jailed in Turkey, but nobody has even been fired yet in Hungary. Lessons learned from these examples discourage any form of organized resistance. As a political consequence, the explanatory framework based on historical analogy creates in the

individual a feeling of hopelessness against an overpowering state that is meanwhile shifting responsibility for resistance onto individuals. Another danger arises from the use of the argument of historical path dependency and location of illiberal policies in the “East” alone, thus Orientalizing the countries of the East as the only problematic countries and denying that this is a global phenomenon. The phenomenon as such is appropriating and hijacking academic authority in nearly every country but given the variance among countries, the hijacking itself also differs, depending on what strategy the state actors apply. In Russia, the whole academic system has been taken over, from recruitment of academics to censorship of educational content to personal processes of awarding degrees.²⁷

The third unsatisfying explanatory framework advocates for scientific objectivity and places science outside the realm of politics. This approach relies on the individual morality of scientists – who according to this framework work in ivory towers – and regards illiberal science policies as ordinary arrangements that will pass eventually. Such was the attitude toward colleges of advanced studies as privileged spaces of intellectual work. The false assumption that “real” science is objective and has its own rules outside everyday political struggles originates from the positivism of the 19th-century hope of drawing a line between the good “real” science and the bad “troll” science.²⁸ This approach positions “real” science outside of market forces and thereby paved the way to the illiberal takeover, which ruthlessly applied the concept of “situated knowledges”²⁹ wherein “science is a contestable text and a power field” by

which to discredit previous institutions and results of knowledge production.

The three assumptions discussed so far are based on the false premise that illiberal states have *not* implemented a science policy distinct from that of the mainstream or previous authoritarian regimes. The problem with these approaches is that they cannot explain the long-term impact that science policy has had on academic authority: if the state supports the “troll science” with taxpayers’ money and all its quality assurance institutions are based on institutions and systems of academic authority, “troll science” becomes “real science.”

I argue that another explanatory framework – the illiberal polypore state – is needed to recognize the global danger illiberal states pose to science via changes in academic authorization processes.

Illiberal polypore science policy³⁰ is hard to recognize as something new because it is hard to differentiate illiberal actors’ vocabulary from that of neoliberal science policy. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, other European countries hoped to resolve the structural crisis by applying increasingly absurd solutions to Hungary’s so-called unorthodox policies. This shows how dangerously quickly national cases can set examples for other countries. Science institutions and actors are globally connected, so transfers between them happen quicker than before. Measures introduced by illiberal states, such as the imposition of direct control over universities’ finances, deletion of previously accredited study programs, or invention of new disciplines were first tested in Hungarian laboratories and now are in use in other countries.³¹

A New Analytical Framework: Polypore Science

George Mosse, in his oft-quoted *Masses and Man*, described fascism as an “amoeba-like absorption of ideas from the mainstream of popular thought and culture, countered by the urge towards activism and taming,” along with a ruthless dismantling of the liberal parliamentary order.³² Here he was referring to the inadequate political response to radicalization of the mainstream in interwar Europe. For the past decade, political sci-

entists have at great length discussed terminology that helps us understand recent developments in countries as different as Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Brazil, the US, and Turkey: mafia state, hybrid state, autocratic legalism, constitutional authoritarianism, etc.³³ Like Weronika Grzebalska, we call these states *illiberal polypore states*, based on their common modus operandi.³⁴ The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but more polypores. Unlike political scientists who admire the effectiveness of these states,³⁵ we argue that polypore states do not have original ideas; rather, they take the ideas of others and use them for their own purpose: self-maintenance. Past authoritarian regimes took over existing scientific institutions and transformed them into explicitly ideological institutions such as research institutes of Communist

Party history or race hygiene. By contrast, polypore institutions mask themselves as “real” institutions, i.e. as “one of them.”

Scrutiny of the political framework of the illiberal polypore state helps boost our understanding of how awareness of threats can alter university education and scientific work. Hungary’s FIDESZ-KDNP (Christian Democratic Party) government has recently established a novel state form; i.e. a new quality of governance that is dangerous because it attempts to dismantle the notion that research and education are public goods and human rights.

The institutional system should mitigate this illiberal threat by protecting educators and researchers who are exercising their human rights to do science while creating public goods.

I argue against perceiving illiberalism as a revival of authoritarianism and in favor of seeing it as a new form of governance founded on and instrumentalizing previous democratic concepts and institutions – one that can be better understood by going beyond routine comparative analyses of political systems along the East-West divide to instead trace gradual sociopolitical developments in these countries and position them in the context of broader global processes. Post-communist democracies have their own sociohistorical legacies, and the fact that illiberal tendencies extend throughout Europe suggests that they should rather be viewed as local symptoms of

“Not since 1945 have scientists in European academic culture been threatened, e.g. listed as enemies of the nation on the front pages of newspapers or physically attacked at an academic conference.”

structural failures of the European (neo)liberal democratic project.

In terms of its *modus operandi*, an illiberal regime can best be understood as a polypore state: a parasitic organism that feeds on its host's vital resources while also contributing to its decay, producing only a fully dependent state structure in return. On the one hand, illiberal "polyporism" involves exploitation and appropriation of various aspects of the European liberal democratic project, e.g. institutions, procedures, concepts, and funding opportunities. On the other hand, polyporism involves the illiberal regime's divestiture of resources from those it regards as beneficiaries of the "corrupt liberal post-communist system" – i.e. the already existing human rights and civil society sector – in order to transfer those resources to its own base, securing and enlarging it. Moreover, unlike Mosse's amoeba, which has an existence and economy of its own, the polypore usually attacks already damaged trees; hence, illiberal forces typically rise to power in the context of weak state institutions, weak and divided progressive parties and a failing liberal democratic project. In the case of science policy, an already weakened and underfunded higher education and research infrastructure is easy prey for illiberal forces. The polypore state incorporates far-right extremism to legitimize and maintain the very existence of the polypore, whose only source of livelihood is the life energy and ideas that stem from the tree under attack. Therefore, it is in the polypore's vital interest to keep the tree alive by using its resources and structures – institutions of academic authorization among them. These institutions see keeping the tree alive as an entry ticket to EU funding. This EU funding does not come from traditional research funding schemes like the ERC (European Research Council), where Hungarian researchers are not competitive, but rather from other funds like the Structural Fund. In the case of science policy, the illiberal polypore institution uses vocabulary appropriated from neoliberal science policy up to a certain and controlled limit to describe its endeavors, thereby legitimizing its own existence while using the available resources to develop its own clientele and network.

The above-mentioned article by Grzebalska and Petó defines three functional characteristics of the polypore state: the establishment of parallel institutions, familism, and a security discourse, all of them gendered. The illiberal FIDESZ government regularly presents policy-related questions as security questions. According to its rhetoric, a vigilant government will defeat the threats

posed by the EU, the UN, migrants, gender studies professionals, George Soros, etc. The security discourse also affects narratives concerning science policies. It has become routine to call enemies "enemies of the nation" and to personally intimidate scientists who disagree with government policies.³⁶ In its public discourse, the state securitizes all possible aspects of life and policy areas, e.g. portraying gender studies and critical intellectuals as threats.³⁷

Members of the scientific professions were totally unprepared for the vicious personal attacks that have become the new normal in illiberal states. Not since 1945 have scientists in European academic culture been threatened, e.g. listed as enemies of the nation on the front pages of newspapers or physically attacked at an academic conference. No longer is this the case, it seems. Scientists nowadays have found themselves subject to physical, psychological, and financial attacks.³⁸ Government-sponsored newspapers habitually publish lists naming academics as enemies of the nation. Scholars have been singled out for "public targeted harassment" that the police refuse to investigate.³⁹ This creates a dangerous climate, not just because it is in harmony with the functioning of the polypore state but also because it diverts attention and energy from really important matters and delegitimizes academic actors.

A second functional characteristic is the ideology of *familism*, "a complex term which refers to a special *social condition* (or set of social conditions) and also to a particular *ideology* (though not of course in a strictly political sense).⁴⁰ State policies support only men from selected, mostly middle-class families – not women, which also means that state policies consciously ignore the value of gender equality. This disregard presents serious consequences for science policies as far as women's participation is concerned. Anti-gender studies movements and hate speech have appeared, aiming to challenge the political and scientific legitimacy of gender equality and science. It is no surprise that the newly privatized Hungarian higher education was declared "gender ideology-free".⁴¹

The third functional characteristic, and the one most relevant to academic knowledge production, is the founding and funding of new research and teaching institutions bearing the same profile as the already existing ones, as seen in the introductory case of the MCC. This direct intervention is creating a new phenomenon: polypore science.

The difficulty lies in understanding the rise of illiberal science policy in Hungary, as it is a twofold case study in both polypore government control/state capture, and neoliberal marketization of higher education. In the European context, the main actors used to be state-financed actors. Now, however, the neoliberalization of academia has opened scientific knowledge production up to corporations, which are interested solely in their own profit,⁴² as is also true of illiberal actors. This combination of state capture and profit-making for the few also makes for a unique, deeply influential situation with long-lasting consequences for the creation, protection, and transfer of academic authority.

Conclusions

Following the developments in Hungary and elsewhere, the take-over of science in illiberal states happened without considerable resistance except the mass demonstration supporting CEU in Hungary with 80 000 participants.⁴³ At the moment, “educated acquiescence” offers more benefits than resistance does.⁴⁴ There is the question of the existence – or rather, non-existence – of the institutional mechanisms that help mostly young and middle-aged academics who refuse to collaborate and instead resist the existential pressure of impoverishment and lack of research and travel grants. The institutional system for helping scholars at political risk is based on a model developed during the Second World War. It relies on the assumption that the period of exile from academia will only last a few years and that scholars will then return to their countries to continue their work. This will not be the case with polypore academia because of the fundamental transformation of institutional and evaluation systems. This lost generation of scholars – or, as they have been called since the Open Society Institute and Central European University left Hungary, the “left-behind academics” – will not produce books or journal articles. In the long run they cannot get access to resources because the polypore state swallows them all. If they emigrate, their access to academic jobs in the notoriously difficult academic job market will apply only in exceptional circumstances. Therefore, the crucial question is what the representatives of polypore institutions will meet with: appeasement in the European context once they bring lavish financial state support into the proposed cooperation, or rejection and despair. If the latter is the case, then the polypore will quite possibly infect other institutions with its Machiavellian approach to values and morals sooner rather than later. That is

why mapping the *modus operandi* (parallel institutions, familism, and securitization) of science policy in illiberal states is helpful: it explains why and how these institutions mask political authority as academic authority. The process leaves no space for independence and free thinking, even though at first sight the academic institutions and authorization system look like those in any other country. But once the essence and content of academic research are removed, these institutions present the onlooker with only hollow copies of academic institutions – like those shown in the case of the MCC, which operates under academic authorization that is neither academic nor authorization. This is an important lesson for higher educational institutions in Europe and it is not a surprise that Carlson called his visit to Hungary his “weirdest experience”. ●

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