



Getting Europe's Right Wrong

By Erik D'Amato
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THE RULING FIDESZ PARTY of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán won two-thirds of the seats in Parliament in 2010, upsetting the consensus that Hungary and seven other former communist countries would usher in an era of peace and unity when they entered the European Union in a continent-wide wave of liberal “EUphoria” on May 1, 2004.

Thanks to controversy magnets like Orbán and now-defeated French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, the European far right has been the focus of a great deal of journalism over the past few years. And the growing affinity between some on the Anglo-American establishment right and their harder-edged continental cousins will guarantee a flow of scholarly and popular books probing the nature, origins, and prospects of this phenomenon. The only question is which of them will be valuable.

For the most part, the journalism hasn't been. After anti-government riots swept Budapest in 2006 and the Magyar Gárda began drilling on town squares, Hungary-based journalists and political analysts like me were inundated with requests from foreign writers keen for connections in this suddenly interesting country. By the time Orbán returned to power in 2010, a place from which one couldn't sell a story a few years earlier became the go-to spot for every journo wanting to write about the rise of the right. And all of them seemed to end up filing slight variations on exactly the same story — roughly, “It's 1938 in Europe again!”

Two new books on the rise of illiberalism try to fill in the gaps. Ellen Hinsey's *Mastering the Past: Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe and the Rise of Illiberalism* is a nuanced, multi-country, book-length version of this 1938-redux approach.

Hinsey, a writer, essayist, poet, and translator, has a solid factual grasp of the subject matter. She had been reporting on the rise of rightist politics in the region for years. The original material in the book, however, is limited to a series of get-togethers with various left-of-center intellectuals, such as the Polish sociologist Rafal Pankowski and the leading midcentury emigrée Hungarian Marxist philosopher Ágnes Heller. Both have many interesting things to say. Pankowski, for instance, reminds us that Polish national identity is bound up with the memory of the state's multiethnic, multi-religious past — a memory that sits in tension with purely ethnic notions of nationalism. But as enlightening as these conversations are, they do tend to present one side of the story.

The book's sections on Hungary rehash much of the reporting surrounding the first years after Orbán's return to power in 2010, notably the controversies surrounding a rewriting of the country's constitution, the enactment of a media law, and attempts to take control of various independent state bodies. Little, however, is said of the ultimate outcome of Orbán's six years of dominance, and the real-world impact of this sort of illiberal power-seizing and institution-tinkering.

One reason may be that the worst fears of 2010 to 2012 haven't really been borne out. No doubt, there are many problems in today's Hungary that go beyond mere political preference, especially with regard to official corruption, the state's use of its vast commercial power to limit opposition voices in the traditional media, and cultural battles that endanger institutions like Central European University. Still, the country remains far more free and prosperous than it was under communist rule, when its current leaders were coming of age.

Likewise, the book doesn't really put the institutional challenges facing countries like Hungary into the context of an EU which itself has seen enormous shortfalls in the areas of democratic accountability. For all the detail on what the Orbán government has done since 2010, Hinsey seems less interested in exploring the questions of why Hungarian voters have twice returned it to power, and why Hungary's liberals have so conspicuously failed to unite in opposition to it. If the topic is the sweeping away via popular vote of liberal governments and institutions, shouldn't she have had at least one get-together with someone amenable to the sweeping? This kind of cocooning invariably hinders the ability of writers and other analysts to make useful political assessments or predictions. There is something ironic about a book on "illiberalism" in which one of two main points of view on the matter is so meticulously airbrushed out.

Far-Right Politics in Europe by Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg (Harvard University Press) is a very different and somewhat more rewarding book, not least because of the refreshing difficulty the reader is likely to have teasing out the authors' own politics. Camus heads something called the "Observatory of Radical Politics" at the Socialist-affiliated Fondation Jean Jaurès, and Lebourg is a prolific writer and researcher currently associated with George Washington University. While both are men of the left, it is clearly a more complicated story than that. This is especially the case for Camus, who is associated with the "souverainiste," nationalist left of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, and is also a Catholic convert to Judaism.

On the other hand, the authors may have simply not found space for their own biases in a book that tells readers everything they'd ever want to know about the European far right and more, going all the way back to its beginnings in, naturally, France. ("To understand the far right in Europe as it now exists, we must in fact begin with French history.")

Starting on September 11, 1789, when the hardest of royalist die-hards sat not only to the right of the president of the Constituent Assembly but outside of the hall, we are given an Almanach de Gotha-like introduction to every branch and twig of the greater family tree of the continental far right. We learn, for example, about the dueling far-right movements of interwar Latvia, including the neopagan Pērkonkrusts ("Thunder Cross"), which sought to resurrect the ancient Baltic religion Dievturība, and an ultraright French Catholic group that in the 1960s decided to rechristen itself with the intentionally acronym-resistant handle Office International des Oeuvres de Formations Civiques et d'Action Doctrinale selon le Droit Naturel et Chrétien ("International Office for the Works of Civic Organizations and Doctrinal Action Consistent with Natural and Christian Law").

While there wasn't anything new for me about the Hungarian right, many right-wing Hungarians might be shocked to discover that the Party of Slovenian People contested the 2014 European parliamentary elections on a platform including a claim on a chunk of southwest Hungary.

Given the ultimate gravity of the topic, Camus and Lebourg are correct in playing it straight, even when writing about far-right groups so goofily marginal and sectarian they bring to mind the Monty Python gag about the Judean People's Front and the People's Front of Judea. But they take some things too seriously, notably the international confabs of fringe movements, such as a meeting in Malmö in 1951 of the neo-fascist European Social Movement, which brought together 60 delegates from across Western Europe "as well as Baltic émigrés."

At best, such Odessa File-like scenes present a Chekhov's gun problem, as the attempts to forge a European-wide network of far-right groups didn't amount to anything beyond a bit of ideological cross-pollination. (Compare these to the Kremlin-orchestrated series of takeovers detailed in Anne Applebaum's chilling Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956.)

At worst, these distractions stand in the way of what should be the central lesson of the book: that the far right in Europe is above all defined by its heterogeneity, decentralism, and ideological adaptability. This fundamental adaptability is hinted at early on by the author's reminder that the French far right didn't seize the mantle of extreme nationalism until the 1880s, and thus "the first ideological belief to migrate from left to right was nationalism."

Of course, there are a few standard features found in most every model of far-right movement or thought. In addition to the nationalism appropriated from the left, a degree of ethnocentrism, ethnic separatism, or opposition to mass immigration is often in the mix. And while Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party was strongly neoliberal when it entered government in 2000 and put the European far right on the map, such parties now tend to be just as strongly opposed to the "Washington Consensus" of free trade and fiscal sobriety. From there on, it's downhill for anyone who might have picked up the book looking for a pithy definition of what constitutes "far right" in Europe.

Religion? As the neo-pagan interwar Latvians, the Nazis, and many contemporary far-right groups demonstrate, being far right doesn't mean traditional, Franco-style clericalism or an alliance with churches of any sort. Anti-Semitism or homophobia? Some of the most successful far-right movements in Western Europe run explicitly on platforms of protecting gays and Jewish communities from illiberal Muslim migrants, while out east, LGBTQ- and Jew-baiting are what bring in the crowds.

Russia's far right is preoccupied with geopolitics and the promise of an Orthodox Russia reclaiming its destiny as a "Third Rome" with dominion over much of Eurasia. Hungary's far right has at times also been preoccupied with Russian Eurasianist dreams, when it isn't similarly dreaming of a "greater Hungary," including all the territory taken from it after World War I (including a sliver of Slovenia) or a "Turanian Alliance" linking Hungary with Central Asia, where the original, pre-Christian Magyars rode in from. To the extent militarism is a factor, it often runs counter to stereotype; many far-right European groups are as reflexively "anti-war" as their Socialist or Green counterparts. And speaking of the Greens, no one is greener than a Hungarian right-winger. For years, I unnerved Western visitors to Budapest by telling them that opposition to GMOs is one of the two great passions of the local far right — the other being a love of folk dancing.

While it would be a stretch to call any of these people hippies, the folk-dancing-and-farmers-market side of the far right is prominent among the few strands of common DNA that Camus and Lebourg are able to isolate. Among them are a "persistent desire on their part to build an 'organic,' holistic society, where inequalities are a function of a hierarchy considered to be legitimate," as opposed to "atomized post-modern societies, where the rules of the market turn human beings into commodities/consumers and exert an influence even in the realm of ethics and individual modes of behavior."

A final layer of complexity — and one which Camus and Lebourg largely skirt — is presented by populist/nationalist parties like Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), which aren't quite far right but do possess actual governing power, as well as nominally left figures like Czech President Miloš Zeman, a boozy, pro-Moscow Socialist who may be even more politically incorrect than Orbán (and who is also primed to be reelected next year).

Given all this, book titles and discussions of European politics are increasingly replacing "far right" with the more generic "authoritarian populism" and (in Hinsey's case) "illiberalism."

If there needs to be such a catchall, "illiberalism" would seem the best, but only to the extent that it can be appropriated by those who, like Orbán, oppose what they see as an economic and cultural hegemon that threatens to liquidate Europe's ancient nations, leaving behind a sterile wasteland of identical coffee outlets. A noisy celebration of diversity might well follow, and readers on this fascinating and crucially important topic will be better served if those covering it were a bit more diverse themselves

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