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Paul Lendvai. *Hungary: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 288 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70322-2; ISBN 978-0-231-80092-1.

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Hungary's Postcommunist Travails

This book makes disturbing reading. Tracing the evolution of Hungarian politics since the end of communism, the highly experienced Austrian journalist and author Paul Lendvai provides a picture of repeated governmental failure to overcome economic difficulties and democratic deficit, culminating in the problematic course since 2010 of the ruling Fidesz Party, led by Viktor Orbán. Lendvai, a Hungarian-born refugee from the suppressed revolution of 1956, has used his insider-outsider position and late communist Hungary's relatively liberal reputation to interview all Hungarian leaders from János Kádár onwards extensively, with the exception, it seems, of Orbán. His account is a succinct chronological portrait of their spells in power starting from Kádár's last years, with two chapters on "The Roots of Hungarian Anti-Semitism" and "The Roma and Jews–Targets of the Extreme Right" placed respectively towards the beginning and end of the book. Lendvai does not set theoretical or methodological agendas but his theme is captured in a judgment he takes from the political scientist Ferenc Mislivetz: that Hungary is organizationally a democracy, but without democrats. The implicit explanation of this phenomenon lies in Lendvai's rhetorical question: "How was it possible to rebuild everything within a system with people who had lived for two generations under a dictatorship" (p. 7)? Ringing clear throughout the book is the author's scathing anger at the betrayal of the liberal hopes of 1989 by those who in a time of crisis have exploited "the same deeply rooted virus of nationalist prejudices" he sees Hungary sharing with Serb, Slovak, and Romanian neighbors. Lendvai wonders how they will react to blatant rhetoric directed against the Trianon treaty which divided up historic Hungary in 1919 (p. 230).

Certainly, the story told is often strange from the standpoint of conventional Western politics. Leaders emerge as it were from nowhere, like the first postcommunist prime minister, József Antall, who had played no part in opposition politics until a few months before becoming head of the Hungarian Democratic Forum; or the socialist premiers Péter Megyessy and Ferenc Gyurcsány, both economically engaged till shortly before shooting to preeminence. The center-right Hungarian Democratic Forum and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, the chief forces in the 1990 election, both disappear from parliament after that of 2010. Above all, Orbán, the fresh-faced leader of Fidesz, bearing the democratic hopes of youthful idealism in 1989, transmutes into a right-wing nationalist who on his return to power in 2010 sets about entrenching what various figures cited by Lendvai call an authoritarian, even de facto, one-party state: degutting the independence of the media, judiciary, and Constitutional Court, filling key public positions with party stalwarts, and entrenching all this in a new constitution and legislation requiring a two-thirds majority to be reversed. Orbán, the principal orchestrator of this scenario, is persuasively presented not as a conservative but rather as a radical and power-hungry opportunist. The opportunity was provided, Lendvai argues, by a Hungarian trait to indulge cozy notions of an important past which has obstructed coming to terms both with the "unfortunate inheritance of Trianon" and with other "nations" who have faced "similar tragedies … and injuries to national pride" (pp. 231-232). Here the chapters on anti-semitism and attitudes to the Roma make their mark.

This is a powerful presentation from someone with a journalist's sense of immediacy. It has some of the defects of its virtues. Lendvai offers a view of politics through pen-portraits of politicians, accompanied by somewhat breathless summaries of major political crises, economic policies, and corruption scandals. His personal contacts with the leaders concerned do not on the whole yield the unexpected but reflect chiefly his own assessment of his interlocutors' personalities. Interpretation and judgment are generally mediated through Hungar-

ian and other intellectuals he cites in ways which offer a helpful digest of Hungarian liberal opinion and testify to a wide range of reference. Two citations suggest his own historical perspective: one on "the timeless relevance" of Hans Kohn's "warnings" on the unpredictability of history (p. 86), the other Alexis de Tocqueville's caution against taking "the end of an act for the end of the play" (p. 194). While the rhetorical question cited above, on the communist experience, doubtless goes to the heart of the matter, his book does not delve deeper into the forms this legacy took, in terms of social or psychological structures. Lendvai does make plain that for all the condemnation of Orbán, Hungary's economic difficulties were primarily the responsibility of the preceding socialist-liberal coalition regimes–their failure to carry out the necessary economic reforms, the inability of the socialists to recast themselves as a modern social democratic party, and that of the liberals to overcome their internal squabbles. The economic issues are not analyzed as such but appear in repeated digests of statistics, though Lendvai is plainly on the side of marketization. The conflict between prime ministers and their finance ministers is one of the most interesting features of the personality-oriented approach. Little flesh is put on the bones of the Socialist Party difficulties and none on those of the liberals. We are told only the irony of the "liberal" socialist Gyurcsány's responsibility for the demise of the liberals: it "may be considered a macabre footnote in the never-ending story of the atrophy of the incessantly squabbling liberal elite" (p. 169).

The word "macabre" illustrates Lendai's trenchant style. He speaks of "the revolting snake-pit of the old communists and left-wing careerists pretending to be social democrats" (p. 168); socialists and liberals had "fallen into the morass of corruption and scandal" (p. 164). Sometimes these denunciations clash with the tone of the more concrete judgments. For all his alarmist phrases Lendvai notes that the state of Hungarian civic society is not as dire as in Belarus or Ukraine. Though he does evoke the shadow of the 1930s, particularly in the deplorable anti-semitism of the Jobbik Party to the right of Fidesz (with echoes in Fidesz itself), he stops short of equating the present with that past. There is a tendency to journalistic hype, however, in his assessments. Thus Antall is "one of the most talented politicians and accomplished tacticians in Hungarian history" (p. 37), presumably on the strength of his silky rise to power and co-optation of the liberal Free Democrats, though everything else reported of him suggests an imposing presence and confidence but little more. Impressions are often revised or heavily qualified. Kádár's communist successor, Károly Grósz, strikes him in their first three-hour meeting as the "new strong man … the refulgent showman, who exuded unbridled energy," but he turned out to "lack vision and was not a strong leader" (pp. 16-17). Gyurcsány is "gifted and dynamic," "perhaps the greatest political talent in the post-communist history of the Hungarian left," but he is rebuked for "failure to distinguish the significant from the trivial … chronic lack of strength to curb his impulsive temperament … tendency to rhetorical sleights of hand," and for "fail[ing] abysmally" with regard to his own party and through "rash acts and gaffes" of destroying his liberal allies (pp. 133, 139, 168, 169). All these points may be compatible, as different facets of a lived reality that a skilled journalist can catch better than historians or political scientists with more impersonal agendas. But the sharp, highly colored juxtapositions contrast not only with more conventional academic style but with that of Lendvai's own monographs on, for example, the Hungarian revolution of 1956 or the working of the communist-era press. Thus the present *cri de coeur* all the more vividly evokes liberal disillusion and the current cultural war in Hungary, the more poignant in view of this country's twentieth-century experience. How far the "international community" will respond to illiberal aspects of the Fidesz program, and whether its main impact takes the form of moral pressure or the disciplines of the IMF and EU, to which Viktor Orbán's populist economic policies have put his country in hock, will reveal much about the meaning of the "international community" in the contemporary world.

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