

Book Review

Paul Lendvai

Orbán: Hungary's Strongman

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

This review is divided into three main parts. The first describes a general state of worry about the future of our civilization in light of the myriad dangers we face and emphasizes the problem of democratic governance in an age when skepticism seems to tilt toward cynicism. The second deals with a specific case of the kind of authoritarianism that is being embraced wholly through the functioning of formally democratic electoral systems — a possible example of what Sheldon S. Wolin (2017) brilliantly described as “managed democracy” verging on “inverted totalitarianism.” The last offers a brief comment on an enduring theme within *The Innovation Journal*, namely the role of the individual in social relations and, specifically, the time-worn question of whether innovation is a matter of will or circumstance (cf. Glor, 2000).

1.

Jack Alpert is an engineer. In 1978, he started the Stanford Knowledge Integration Lab (SKIL) at Stanford University in “Silicon Valley.” It is now a private research facility which Alpert uses as the base from which to make some of the more pessimistic predictions you are ever likely to hear. This is what he tells people who seek (and pay hefty for) his insights:

It's my belief that you personally will most likely die of starvation or conflict between 2040 and 2075. You will experience a collapse of human civilization, a 90% die-off of humans, a destruction of the ecosystem, a loss of access to mined and drilled resources, and a dark age from which your descendents will not reemerge. If your kids survive to 2100, they will have been cannibals and will live like seventeenth-century serfs — no electricity, no running water, no schools, no medicine, and life will be short, nasty, and brutish.

One disturbing thing about that ominous forecast is that it's actually a little more optimistic than what he used to say. He used to say that our descendents would live like fifth-century post-Roman European peasants, not seventeenth-century serfs. I stand to be corrected, but I suspect the intervening millennium might have brought at least a few improvements for land-bound agricultural workers. Surely life among the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths was a bit rougher than lives lived tending crops or herding sheep in the time of the English Revolution and the Restoration. In any case, although I suspect that the so-called “Dark Ages,” seen only in the rear-view mirror of (post)modernity, may be a bit

underrated, I am also pretty sure that living the peasant life, whether in the fifth, the seventeenth or even the twenty-first century, has seldom been excessively commodious. Peasants (or serfs) have generally lacked indoor plumbing and few have Internet access even today. Rarely have they enjoyed the delights of democracy and an overabundance of human rights. They seldom establish substantial lines of credit I shall return to Alpert shortly.

2.

I write as a North American who is as blind as any other to the fact that there is a thriving, challenging world beyond the reach of our strip malls, supermarkets and superhighways that may well look with curiosity and possibly contempt upon our conceits. As such, I confess to beginning with an admittedly tangential reference to deep pessimism in order to emphasize the point that, Steven Pinker's recent ebullient, joyful and possibly Panglossian celebration of the achievements and ambitions of contemporary society notwithstanding (Pinker, 2017), people in this exaggerated part of the world are today experiencing a great deal of perfectly rational anxiety about what the present betokens and the future portends. We do not self-medicate with "uppers" and "downers" for nothing.

We know that, both in and outside of North America, all manner of upset about religio-ethno-racial conflict is in evidence. "Tribal" bigotries and resentments invade our consciousness with the noise of violence and hatred played out in both major and minor scales. No matter how attractive and distracting the newest "app" for the hottest new communications device may be, there is a frenetic quality to even ordinary lives. There is an unavoidable pong of exterminism in the air.

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| Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed ... The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst. Are full of passionate intensity. |
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- T. S. Eliot

Alpert may be excessively forthright in his gloomy forecasts, but massive overpopulation, ecological catastrophism, imminent pandemics, threats of chemical, biological and thermonuclear war, economic collapse as capitalism finally faces its far-famed internal contradictions, and multiple other sources of potentially cataclysmic devastation — together or separately — can no longer be predismised as the fantasies of paranoids and end-time zealots holding cardboard signs shouting that "the end is nigh." There are real and potentially apocalyptic hazards that will take tremendous feats of intelligent imagination and practical innovation to avoid or at least to ameliorate. Our doom may not be sealed, but neither is our salvation guaranteed.

Of particular importance to those of us who spend our time working in and/or worrying about the public sector, the many sources of desperation and dismay extend to uncertainty about governance and the participants therein including political leaders, the public service, public-private-partnerships, arms-length agencies, tax-supported non-governmental organizations and related elements of civil society. Without some generally accepted means to make authoritative decisions and to coordinate collective action, no society more complex than an only slightly extended family unit — whether nomadic or sedentary — is likely to live long and prosper.

Contemporary societies from the privileged and prosperous Western liberal democracies to the poorest and most oppressive of the developing nations are nothing if not complex. All share to a greater or lesser extent the problems of creating and sustaining effective governance. So, especially in trying times, we find whole electorates drawn to aspirant leaders whose appeal is rooted in negativity, bitterness and sporadic fury against existing institutions and authorities. There are ample examples of people being elected to high office whose main qualification seems to be the willingness and ability to denounce whoever now holds such an office and to promise to sweep the scoundrels out. Whether or not a coherent alternative is presented seems of secondary importance. Emotion, not reason, seems to rule.

3.

In this context, I wish to address the specific issue of what Jürgen Habermas (1975; Plant, 1982) famously called “legitimation crisis.” Put simply, it is the loss of trust in governing institutions, leading to the loss of efficacy of those institutions and a potentially precipitous decline in social mores and norms related to politics and public policy. Good governance now seems to be as much in danger of erosion due to the estrangement and disaffection of large segments of national populations as to the threats of by well-organized, ideologically driven internal dissenters within or by external enemies without the polity.

What if the [there] is no longer a democracy at all? [What if we have] morphed into a new and strange kind of political hybrid, one where economic and state powers are conjoined and virtually unbridled [and] where citizens are submissive?

– Sheldon S. Wolin

Especially in advanced countries, there is much talk of a crisis in democracy simply because citizens have lost faith in their governors and their governments. Feeling abandoned and ignored, they are said to be increasingly open to incoherent, inarticulate and often inaccurate accusations. They are susceptible to “fake news” spread by promoters of a new iteration of “populism.” They vote (when they vote at all) *against* leaders and parties that they think have betrayed them, discounted them or disrespected them, rather than *for* a positive alternative. In their disillusionment, desperation and despair, they are open to extremism. They cheered Donald Trump when he said of his rival: “Lock here up!” They reinforce by negative example, John Stuart Mill’s belief that an engaged, well-informed and rational citizenry is a prerequisite for a well-functioning, stable and progressive democracy and his worry that a disengaged, badly informed and irrational electorate may be its own worst enemy.

The leaders of the new populism speak loudly of being on the side of the “little guy,” of empathizing with the victims of “big government” and the “deep state,” and of being committed to “draining the swamp” of incompetence and corruption among the ruling elites. Those leaders, however, remain relatively silent (or just don’t mean what they say) when discussing the regulation “big business.” Under the cry of “freedom,” they are quite willing to provide corporations with massive tax cuts in the alleged interest of “ordinary people.”

They also rely on claims that national identities and moral values are under attack from decadent and depraved elites, vicious and violent immigrants and racialized, gendered and variously cultural minorities of all sorts. They espouse “conservative” social values tied to national identities and traditional religions. Divisive, resentful, angry, prone to hyperbole and fond of making accusations without providing much in the way of thoughtful and practical policies, the promoters of populist outrage and borderline *revanchism* play directly to people who feel marginalized or left behind. Placing blame on globalization, multiculturalism and pretentious, dissolute intellectuals, these people appeal to racists, religious “fundamentalists,” xenophobes, extreme nationalists and others possessed of aggressively “tribal” mentalities.

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| <p>When stripped down to their essentials, all definitions of democracy rest ultimately on the primacy of electoral choice and the presumptive claim of the majority to rule. The removal of certain political views...calls into question the legitimacy of the entire democratic enterprise.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">– Samuel Isaacharoff</p> |
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Populist rhetoric can, of course, be superficially attractive. The appeal to the interests of the common citizen cannot help but be enticing at a time when overarching bureaucracies (both public and private) exercise visible control over social relations and personal circumstances. It is easy to attribute hegemonic domination to both governments that tax, spend and regulate at home and to multinational financial, commercial, manufacturing, agricultural and resource extraction enterprises that dominate the global economy and manage to manipulate the delivery and sale of goods, services and information in almost every nation. It is also easy (and not always inaccurate) to see the state acting in the interest of multinational and domestic corporate interests, acting as what Marx and Engels (1848) cleverly called “a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” or, in more common parlance, “the executive committee of the ruling class.” Much to the embarrassment and annoyance of Marxists, however, the ideological thrust of populism has generally been not to the left, but to the right of the political spectrum.

Accordingly, while some of us would like to find more inclusive ways to provide open and meaningful public access to the political process beyond the largely ritualized activity of periodically casting a ballot and choosing which political party is to be entrusted with the power to rule over us for the next few years, others react negatively to the entire governmental edifice and corporate apparatus. They make the not unpersuasive claim that the individual citizen is utterly at the mercy of institutional forces that are incomprehensible, impenetrable and all but irresistible. They therefore either disassociate from political life and seek refuge or escape in purely private pursuits, or they sullenly harbour bitterness against “the system” (whatever they conceive it to be) and relate to the political process contemptuously, if at all. They are therefore easily accessible audiences for extremist ideologies, for targeted advertisements on their personal

communications devices, and for demagogues who have the skill to transform popular frustration into political movements aimed at achieving or restoring the people's perceived righteous place in their communities and their countries.

Faced with fraught social, political and economic conditions, we must therefore ask whether we can still adhere to the principle that *some* variation on the theme of democratic governance is qualitatively superior to *any* variation on the theme of dictatorship. Then, if we can agree on that presumption, we must next ask how we can act effectively and responsibly to encourage democracy and to discourage despotism. Finally, we must further consider how we can best arrange politics and governance in the future if we are to maintain democratic values, to survive the hazards of authoritarianism and repression, and to survive and thrive in the face of the existential questions we face. We must ask what are the immediate and imminent obstacles to the kind of governance that can promote a reasonably a happy and a moderately healthy future for ourselves and our progeny. What substantive and procedural innovations in politics and public administration can we undertake in order to preserve, extend and expand the core democratic values that most of us still claim to endorse?

4.

In pondering these problems, we are compelled to start from a rather dark place. Apart from the more or less natural disasters from hurricanes, volcano eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis to more anthropogenic global pandemics, desertification and relentless climate change, the mass slaughters and contrived famines of the previous century should alert us to the foolishness of taking words such as “freedom” and “democracy” for granted. The Great Wars and the lesser conflicts — whether fought among major nation-states (World Wars I and II), their surrogates and proxies (Vietnam, the Middle East), or involving various genocides and civil wars within nation-states (Cambodia, Rwanda) too numerous to catalogue — should disabuse all of us of the notion that our species has achieved a level of civilization adequate either to prevent massive, hideous, state-sponsored violence or to provide the minimal human rights promised under the United Nations' still aspirational *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

The anthropogenic toll of human death and destruction in the twentieth century is a broad indictment of our species, though we should remember that this toll is neither unique nor arguably as horrific as the barely conceivable deaths of 187 million indigenous Americans in the century following the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 (Enrigue, 2018), a feat of genocide all the more remarkable in light of the limited weapons of mass destruction available at the time — cutlasses and disease-infested blankets being chief among them. Nothing else makes a greater claim for the necessity of innovation, and nothing more provokes scepticism that we are up to the task.

The cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy. – Al Smith

What's worse, the opening years of the current century do not betoken the inevitable success that briefly buoyed up liberal democrats in the wake of the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Rather, the advantage that was afforded to the West was quickly squandered and, rather than lead their former adversaries and the so-called “Third World” countries into an era of

universal human rights, flourishing market economies and the bounty of the European Enlightenment in all its forms, the tables were abruptly turned. The window of liberal capitalist opportunity was open, at most, for the decade 1991-2001. Now, what's called a "democratic deficit" has grown, even in the most stable and successful liberal democracies. Alienation, apathy, anomie, addiction and a broad spectrum of anguish and agony from an expansive inventory of mental diseases and disorders provide the basis for cynicism and increasing degrees of generalized resentment afflicting large numbers of citizens.

The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists, or by refining and perfecting that machinery.

– John Dewey

This woeful tale is, of course, most well-publicized in the United States of America where the current president is both the subject of and the putative perpetrator of a constant media-driven frenzy. The USA, as the self-proclaimed "leader of the free world, the "shining city on a hill," and the envy of all right-thinking people is plainly a political culture in disrepair. So, sceptics about human progress can be forgiven for worrying that people such as Jack Alpert may be on to something. The inheritors of the tradition of Edward Gibbon, Oswald Spengler and the sentiments of what's been labeled "declinism" (Gopnik, 2011) are many and persuasively sanguine spirits are not experiencing much encouragement.

The book here under review also embodies a sense of disquiet about democracy. Unlike Alpert and others, however, it offers a well-researched, clear-eyed, well-expressed and well-intentioned cautionary tale, and not a dystopian speculation. It provides the added benefit of directing our attention away from the preoccupation with the current US administration, turning our notice elsewhere and perhaps allowing us to learn something of genuine use.

5.

Fixated, as we in North America are, on the bizarre melodrama-cum-comic opera being played out in the United States, it is hard to see world events through anything other than the "lens" of the presidency of Donald J. Trump. True, we can briefly focus on specific "hot spots" such as Korea or Syria. We can fleetingly agonize over humanitarian crises currently ongoing in Yemen or Gaza. We can fret about the flood of refugees into continental Europe or out of Myanmar. Given sufficient broadcast-worthy images, we can even obsess over an occasional drought, wildfire or volcanic eruption. We do not, however, pay patient, serious and lasting attention to political events and trends in countries that do not directly and dramatically affect us or our material interests or provide striking images for our daily newspapers or nightly television news. We should.

Democracy was once touted as a key advantage for Western Civilization. Together with science, technology and free market economies, it was considered an essential element in the presumptive gift of Western powers to an otherwise backward world. It encouraged change, progress and innovation. It is, however, now under direct attack in theory and in practice. Apart

from worries about the destiny of democracy in countries with longstanding representative governments and visible respect for the rule of law, it is being severely eroded and sometimes reversed in places to which it has been only recently exported, largely by means of colonialism, imperialism or (more softly) globalization. There is a substantial registry of countries into which at least a fragile form democracy has been introduced as part of a “Westernization” or “modernization” process (sometimes with indigenous support and sometimes not), but which are now weakening their already questionable ties to Western values and institutions. They include, but are by no means limited to Turkey and India. They also include a number of Central and Eastern European countries in which democratic traditions have not been a long and secure part of their histories. One such is country is Hungary.

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| Hungary was created as a tribal federation in 895, just fifty years after the death of Charlemagne and the division of the Carolingian Empire, but before the unification of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the creation of England under Æthelstan. |
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Hungary, of course, has a venerable if rather tragic history among European nations going back to the early Middle Ages. It has been the site of enormous cultural clashes and sublime cultural achievements. It is crucial to the history of Central Europe and beyond.

For most North Americans and other non-Europeans, however, Hungary is remote and largely unknown except for a few of its more famous edibles and potables, musical composers Franz Liszt and Béla Bartók, Marxist theorist György Lukács and, perhaps, such contemporary novelists as Péter Esterházy or Magda Szabó. Moreover, those of us who vividly recall the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 are becoming fast dying out. For most people under the age of seventy, it remains an aborted rebellion against Soviet power that is of only antiquarian interest. This is not meant as a slight against the country and its people; it is far more a recognition of the historical, geographic and cultural illiteracy of our time. Our collective ignorance of the world beyond our immediate borders and circumstances is as lamentable as it is obvious. Increasingly implicated in the “global village,” we nonetheless seem not to know much about our neighbours and especially about even their recent history. Indeed, some would say, we are hopelessly indifferent to our own.

Hungary, nonetheless, is a country that should interest us not only because of its rich and celebrated history, but also because of current events. If we look to places where democratic governance is arguably in some jeopardy and to elected leaders who seem inclined toward authoritarian methods — the names of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Narendra Damodardas Modi (to say nothing of Rodrigo Roa Duterte of the Philippines) are commonly mentioned — it is possible to feel concern about the durability of democratic norms everywhere. Even in countries with the longest and most deeply rooted representative institutions, declining voter turnout and increasing suspicion about the electoral process is disconcerting. Since it is our habit to view the politics of entire nations within the narrow view of prominent leaders, Paul Lendvai’s study of the rise of Viktor Mihály Orbán promises to be instructive.

6.

The history of the former Soviet republics and satellites is as diverse as the countries that once made up the USSR and joined the Warsaw Pact (1955) in response to the creation of NATO (1949) and its perceived Cold War threat to Soviet influence in Eastern and Central Europe. Their fate has drawn both on traditions of embattled national solidarity and toxically divisive ethnic legacies such as those that ripped apart “the former Yugoslavia,” produced vicious irredentist hostilities among rival factions centred in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Albania, and introduced appalling euphemisms such as “ethnic cleansing” to our vocabulary.

When the Soviet Union imploded and its satellites gained their independence almost three decades ago, there appeared to be a remarkable window of opportunity for bold, decisive innovation and change. With the supposed end of the Cold War and the brief emergence of a triumphant America as the “last remaining superpower,” hopes were high that a fresh era of peace and possible prosperity in a “new world order” could be achieved. That opportunity, however, was largely wasted or worse.

Though this interpretation is highly contested, it seems that US President George H. W. Bush agreed to an informal *quid pro quo*. In exchange for acceding to German reunification, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev is said to have wrung from the American president an unwritten commitment to limit NATO’s expansion into any real or imagined power vacuum in Eastern Europe. The US, however, soon reneged and much that has transpired since, from a blinking contest in the Baltic to the unpleasantness in Ukraine, can be explained in terms of the dissipation of that original “misunderstanding.” Meanwhile, in each former Soviet republic and newly independent former satellite, the question of what to do with the new-found freedom was, if not exactly “existential,” then at least an essential part of the contest to determine what momentarily seemed to be an open future.

7.

The principal figure in Hungary is Viktor Orbán. A photo reproduced in the April 6, 2018 *New York Times* shows him as he was in 1989 — a bearded 25-year-old student commiserating with the liberal youth group, *Fidesz* (an acronym for “Alliance of Young Democrats”). His posture and his colleagues’ rapt intensity are reminiscent of dissident meetings twenty-years earlier with Mark Rudd at Columbia University in New York or Daniel Cohn-Bendit on the streets of Paris. They resemble earnest *soixante-huitards* a generation removed — intellectually and emotionally committed to personal emancipation and social transformation.

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| Hungary’s leader used fear mongering propaganda to win. As he entrenches his power, the country’s democratic backsliding will get worse. — Zselyke Csaka |
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Lendvai’s book is the first major English-language exploration of Orbán’s career, his rise to power, his government and the consequences they have had both for Hungary and, potentially, for the European Union. Lendvai describes how, to support his political ambitions, Orbán appealed to George Soros, the Hungarian-American billionaire and philanthropist. Soros

financed the young man's studies in the United Kingdom and donated billions of dollars to his homeland for humanitarian and political purposes in line with his "open society" initiative. At the time, Orbán appealed to Soros. He explained (as though Soros needed instruction) that Hungary was about to change from dictatorship to democracy, and that he wanted to help his country to make that transition successfully. To do so, he wanted to study "grass-roots democracy" and to understand how to assist in the "rebirth of civil society." Soros obliged. Orbán went to Oxford.

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| They say that power spoils good politicians. For Orbán that wasn't the case. It was the loss of power that did that. — Jozsef Debreczeni |
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Lendvai explains how Orbán evolved from an anti-communist liberal to a formidable, more sinister presence on the Hungarian political scene. He first won a reputation as an orator and successfully campaigned for a seat in Hungary's parliament in 1990, where he was appointed leader of the Fidesz faction. In 1993, he was named president of the party, replacing its collective leadership and moving it ideologically to the right — no longer a mere vehicle for optimistic student radicalism but already a "people's party." Several baits and switches later, Orbán was able to cobble together a conservative coalition that propelled him into the position of Prime Minister in 1998. Originally anti-clerical, anti-nationalist and a champion of civil society, his tack to the right may have been a matter of a genuinely ideological epiphany or merely an opportunistic grab for influence and eventual control. In either case (and we should not discount the possibility of a combination of both), Lendvai gives a thorough, critical and very persuasive analysis of his subject's path to power and his increasingly secure lock on it.

Orbán's chief weapon, we learn, was handed to him by the Syrian crisis and the desperate humanitarian tragedy that was the ultimate result of Western (French, British and eventually American) actions in a deplorable process that dates back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and has too many cases of betrayal and brutality to be rehearsed even in point form or on a dozen PowerPoint slides. Suffice to say that the entire horror of Near and Middle Eastern power struggles now involving NATO, Russia, aspirant regional leaders Saudi Arabia and Iran and, of course, Israel, plus any number of national, religious and ideological factions have created a metaphorical meteorological mess that even the common phrase, a "perfect storm" fails to capture.

The mass flight of political refugees and economic migrants into Europe, however, gave Orbán the last piece of the necessary puzzle needed to entrench and affirm his primacy in Hungarian politics. He learned from the failure of his first brief time in office. He then assembled a rough coalition of economic oligarchs, corrupt officials, resentful nationalists, dispossessed workers who blamed the European Union for their employment troubles, and religious zealots who feared a Muslim overthrow of traditional Christianity into a populist movement that has not only brought him to power, but has removed many of the fetters on his increasingly autocratic government, a government that has been in power for eight years and, with the landslide victory of April, 2018, is secure in power for four more.

Those seduced by the arts of the biographer will find *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* a fascinating account of a troubling man. Lendvai makes excellent use of documentary evidence and personal interviews to reveal much about this pivotal European politician. Orbán's unapologetic admiration for other "strong men," most notably Donald J. Trump and Vladimir Putin, shows that respect for power not only blurs or crosses ideological lines, but finds a home wherever the devotion to power regardless of ideology is most firmly established.

Orbán started really going wrong when he made his father rich by giving him a quasi-monopoly on road-building materials, which was a big source of wealth. That's when [he] started building a mafia state. It's really when he actually gained power.

– George Soros

Orbán, as the voice of the anti-Brussels' nationalism, is set up to be the scourge of liberalism, understood as the modern ideology of progressive individualism, soft-hearted humanitarianism, representative democracy, and the fastidious respect for minority rights and the rule of law. As he puts it: "By origin I am not a sensitive intellectual. There is in me perhaps a roughness brought up from below. That is no disadvantage as we know that the majority of people are brought up from below." He makes much of his modest origins (though somewhat less modest than he acknowledges) and identifies with outsiders who have as little affection for urbanity as they do for an independent judiciary.

Orbán therefore champions traditional Hungarian life, disdains the soft and unsuccessful liberalism represented by the cultural elites with their pan-European biases, and feeds into the nativism that is a natural reaction to the failure of liberalism to furnish the prosperity and equality that it promised with the fall of the USSR and the purported end of the Cold War.

Located geographically and strategically near the centre of Europe, Viktor Orbán occupies a critical position. He has taken full advantage of his centralized command and effective propaganda machine, the refugee question and a generally growing and prosperous economy to solidify his power and reputation. He has enjoyed the praise of American thought leaders like Steve Bannon, who has expressed his admiration and called Orbán a "hero" and "the most significant guy on the scene right now" (Horowitz, 2018). He has also luxuriated in electoral victory. As the *Washington Post* recently reported, the April, 2018 election was "easily the most consequential since Hungary's post-communist transition" and "represented a victory for the European far right." Campaigning on a nationalist platform, he relied largely on constant, virulent attacks on his former sponsor George Soros, whom he demonized as the embodiment of open borders policies. The result was "a crushing defeat for left-leaning opposition leaders" (McAuley, 2018).

What lies ahead for Hungary and what influence events in Hungary may have for the European Union is, of course, uncertain. One immediate consequence has been the introduction of so-called "Stop Soros" laws (Walker, 2018), followed by the quick announcement reported in the *Vienna International News* (Nolan, 2018) of the impending relocation of the Soros Foundations from Budapest to Berlin.

Orbán... has justified his actions by calling migrants ‘a Trojan horse of terrorism’ and has trumpeted his self-appointed role in defending Christian values.

– Robert Tait, *The Guardian*

Of course, individuals are endlessly entertaining in ways that broad circumstances such as feudalism and capitalism, polytheism and monotheism, idealism and materialism and the like are not. They are more manageable, easier to comprehend and to relate to in their immediacy and concreteness; however, one untreated cut leading to sepsis, one errant van hurtling down a street in Budapest or one assassin’s bullet can remove even the most clever and charismatic of characters and the play will still proceed, briefly distracted but ultimately unimpeded.

9.

As I write, two such characters are Viktor Orbán and Michael Ignatieff. We know who Orbán is, but not everyone may be familiar with Ignatieff. A much-travelled North American public intellectual, he has been an academic with posts at Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and the University of Toronto, an “A-list” television pundit and journalist, a prize-winning author, documentary film maker, a “liberal interventionist” (he supported the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, a controversial human rights theorist (like fellow liberal Alan Dershowitz, he constructed an ethical defence of torture), a Canadian politician who briefly led the Liberal Party of Canada in Opposition to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and, because of apparent arrogance and a shaky grasp of parliamentary politics led it to a humiliating defeat in 2011, Ignatieff is now immersed in a rather serious struggle with Orbán.

The field of political battle is the Central European University in Budapest. On May 5, 2017, Ignatieff was named the fifth president and rector of the institution. His term, should he survive it, runs until August 31, 2021 — roughly parallel to Orbán’s fourth term in office. As matters proceed, a conflict between Ignatieff and Orbán is being expressed mainly as a struggle between “liberal” and “illiberal” versions of democracy with Ignatieff representing the former and Orbán embodying the latter. As matters stand, Orbán is pushing legislation that might force the CEU to close — the first such government-induced closure of a European university since World War II. The reason? CEU was created by Orbán’s old benefactor and now chief adversary, George Soros.

Such highly personalized conflicts are fully understandable. In *Hungary’s Strongman*. Orbán’s story is well-told and is actually quite riveting. In order to understand it fully, however, it is necessary not just to pay attention to character development and plot twists, but to the design of the theatre upon which it all depends.

One of the themes that courses through *The Innovation Journal* is the matter of agency. It has been asked whether innovation is a matter of will or circumstance. It has long been my view that Karl Marx (1852) was right about a number of things, but seldom more perceptive than when he said “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.”

10.

Circumstances create possibilities, but they also circumscribe available choices. Those choices are made individually and collectively, but not from an unlimited range of options. So, individuals have a great deal to do with determining history, but they are also products of that same history and operate wholly within it. So, had Shakespeare not existed, we would still have had Elizabethan theatre. Had Beethoven not existed, we would still have had romantic symphonies. Had Darwin not existed, we would still have learned about evolution. And so on.

The most crucial variable predicting the success of a democratic transition is the self-confidence of the incumbent elites. If they feel able to compete under democratic conditions, they will accept democracy. If they do not, they will not.

– David Frum

Whether the twentieth century would have been greatly, somewhat or just slightly different in the absence of Stalin, Hitler or Mao (or Churchill, Roosevelt or Nehru) is an unanswerable question; I am convinced, however, that we would have experienced totalitarianism and horrific wars — perhaps with even worse outcomes. More importantly, trying to decide the relative importance of “will” and “circumstance” is making what Bertrand Russell called a “category error.” It violates the “theory of logical types.” It is analogous to asking a zoological taxonomist which species mammals belong to — an absurdity because a category cannot be a member of itself. So it is with individuals and circumstances. Circumstances exist on a different logical plane than individuals. They are the stage upon which players strut and fret. They impose limits on playwrights and performers alike.

Coda

The PEW Research Center, one of the most justifiably respected public opinion polling organizations in the world has undertaken a new project (Dimock, 2018). It explains its efforts in these terms:

Around the globe, we are experiencing a confluence of forces — most notably growing political polarization, revived nationalism, fractured media and the ever-accelerating pace of technological change — that are challenging the essential role that trust and facts play in a democratic society. It seems like every week we are seeing fresh evidence that the anchors of democratic governance are under stress. Public confidence in the responsiveness, accountability and effectiveness of elected institutions has been mired at historic lows for more than a decade. The role of evidence and facts in describing public events and shaping policy debates is persistently challenged. And as citizens become their own curators in a saturated and disaggregated information environment, the concept of a shared truth, upon which everyone can agree, appears increasingly elusive.

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