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Performing the nation: the Janus-faced populist foundations of illiberalism in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Hungary once represented a school-book case of transition to democracy. Now it offers insights into both contemporary Europe and theories of populism and nationalism. Resisting the traditional linear perspective to transition and a ‘demographic’ view of democracy, this article explores the relationships among democracy, populism and nationalism. This article operationalises performative and post-foundational theory of populism as a logic of articulation to explain Fidesz and the party leader Viktor Orbán’s illiberal measures, dichotomies between them and us, ultimately leading to nationalism and xenophobia. It shows how revolution, ‘illiberalism’ and migrants have served for populist meaning-making and are related to the political polarisation in Hungary. This article enhances the understanding of democracy by discussing the performative features of nation-building, populism and law-making in contemporary politics and finally the ‘Janus-face’ of populism. It sees 1989 as a populist moment of constitution of the foundations of a new era but also of the people central to democracy, and recognises attempts to generate similar moments in the 2010s.

KEYWORDS

Populism; nationalism;
Hungary; polarisation;
Laclau; illiberal democracy

Introduction

During the 2010s, power to the people is called for again all over Europe. ‘People’, or those who represent or constitute them, is declared a legitimate historical actor, and the basis or praxis of liberal democracy is contested. The transition to democracy around 1989 in Central Eastern Europe was hailed and feared by many in the region as a ‘rebirth of the nations’. Hungary was the model case for this smooth transition: liberal democracy with the rule of law was quickly installed, and it was thought that civil society would emerge from the strong dissident traditions. In the seemingly one-directional transition, U-turns (Ágh 2016) have recently begun to occur. The Prime Minister since 2010, Viktor Orbán, called for illiberalism and contested the foundations of the rule of law established in 1989. His third consecutive election victory consolidated power to Fidesz in 2018. While this article offers an outline of political meaning-making in Hungary during 1989–2018, it is mainly a theoretical discussion of the interconnected nationalism, populism and democracy that enhance the understanding of contemporary developments in Europe. This article explores how nationalism and populism with their distinctions and similarities entangle, also with democracy?

This article takes a post-foundational perspective drawing on the political theorist Ernesto Laclau on populism, hegemony and contingent, rhetorical foundations of society (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2014; Marchart 2007), and by extension law-making.¹ Following Laclau (2005), populism is an anti-thesis of institutionalism and a logic of articulation that turns

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people into a historical or universalising political subject. This article's anti-essentialist, immanent reading of Laclau stresses contingency and performativity (see Butler 2015): instead of 'the people' as a nominal reference, any form of 'us' could become that historical subject to represent or constitute a new political actor. New political positions and communities emerge in moments, such as in 1989, when the foundations of society are contested and renewed.

The article has three aims. The overall aim is to discuss a post-foundational theory of populism (Laclau 2005, 2014; Marchart 2007) that enables us to understand the case of Hungary as a process of politics and democracy. Without pre-given foundations of society, 'the people' is a contingent, temporary and fleeting articulation and should be imagined as part of a democratic process (Laclau 2014). 'The people' and 'the nation' are articulated through relationships, political struggle and common demands. Politics too contests existing and generates new structures of meaning or hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The articulations of 'the people' and 'illiberal democracy' generated new structures of meaning and new dichotomies in politics in Hungary.

Second, the article deals with political polarisation: two sides of the political spectrum were generating a 'people' by opposing and demonising each other. The foundations of legitimacy in Hungary became laden with dichotomous populism. The article sheds light on the transformation after 1989 and Viktor Orbán as a key meaning-maker in Hungarian politics. Emerging in the late 1990s, political polarisation explains illiberal constitutional reforms in the 2010s. From the post-foundational perspective, the article argues, contingent and always rearticulated polarisation is a part of (radical) democracy (Mouffe 2005) until it gets sedimented and institutionalised to clientelism and eventually authoritarianism, whereas in 'demography' (socio-economically bound understanding of political democracy in some forms of liberal democracy), polarisation happens through established cleavages.

Third, this article discusses the distinction between nationalism and populism and their fundamental similarity. It explores how populist articulation does not equate nationalism, anti-immigration and anti-EU rhetoric, even if nationalism and populism become entangled. Some scholars (e.g. Müller 2016) locate the danger of populism in de facto nationalism even though these two ought not to be confused (c.f. Palonen 2017; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2017; De Cleen 2017). Yet, there is something similar about nationalism and populism. In political theory, civic nationalism prevails in the constitution and maintenance of political communities necessary for democracy and even the state (Anderson 1983; Smith 1998; Billig 1995; Breuilly 1993), but attention should be drawn to the precise ways in which it entangles with nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Normatively, nationalism is a Janus-faced phenomenon (Nairn 1997), good and bad – necessary and a challenge – for democracy; so is populism (Laclau 2005).

As a theoretical case study, this article offers a deep perspective (Flyvbjerg 2006), shedding light on related contemporary processes in various European countries, and particularly those in East Central Europe. Populist rhetoric's constitutive force evokes attention to performativity and meaning-making in politics (Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016). The method is discourse theoretical where operationalising theoretical concepts into praxis enhances understanding and even explains certain political and historical developments (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Given the rhetoric-performative character of populism and nationalism, a post-foundational discourse-theoretical approach should focus on populist 'moments' rather than on populism or nationalism as such. 'Populist moments' were already present in Laclau's early work on populism, but the under-theorised concept of 'moments', as distinct from elements of a discourse, emerged in Laclau's (1990) work on South Africa. Moments enable us to grasp the significant processes of identification and disidentification as well as challenges to and establishment of new structures of meaning.

The article has the following structure: First, it briefly discusses democratic transition's conceptual basis and outlines the research topic of transitional democracy, nationalism, and populism in Hungary. Second, the theoretical part outlines the post-foundational, rhetoric performative approach, drawing on Laclau's work, and discusses three concepts: nation, populism and polarisation. Third, the more empirical part engages with populist moments in recent Hungarian history

and the discursive production of political difference, at the national articulation in 1989, emergence of polarisation that co-constituted the left and right, the figure of Viktor Orbán. Fourth, in particular, the article discusses three ways of othering that have been used to constitute 'the people' as the Fidesz political community. Fifth, the final sections discuss what can be learned from this case for democracy, transition and the Janus-faced entangled phenomena of nationalism and populism. This includes the post-foundational distinction between (radical) democracy and (institutional liberal democratic) demography; or the articulation of political differences and us-building as a Janus-faced part of democracy not seen as a regime but as a process, and the socio-economic interest based form of democracy.

Linear transition to democracy

In the 1990s and 2000s, Western political scientists and commentators saw the 'return' of the former Soviet-controlled countries 'back' into the Western 'camp' as something already achieved. In 2005, most commentators thought Hungary was on the right track, but concerns about democracy were raised (Korkut 2005, 149). In East Central Europe, legacies of discontent among the masses over governance in their name or interest prevail. In the early 1990s, the British-Hungarian academic George Schöpflin (1993) warned of post-communist legacies that would haunt the region even after the democratic systems and rule of law were instituted. This resonates with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) understanding of revolution as never being a total break.

From the perspective of international politics, Hungary had an already-functioning democratic system – ratified by the international community – becoming a member of NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. The Hungarian case challenges a unidirectional 'transition' or the idea that democratisation would always be progressing towards democracy (c.f. Carothers 2002), yet the linear metaphor is still present (e.g. the 'bumpy road' and 'backsliding' of democracy in Ágh 2013, 2014). As in the 1990s, Hungary was a fast-learning top student among the transitional countries and surprise was felt at the reversal in its assumed linear progression (Ágh 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). For a linear democratisation, subsequent 'u-turns' represent a backsliding anomaly (Kornai 2015; Ágh 2016, 2014). Authoritarianism easily prevails in the age of democratisation (Krajev 2011).

In the 2010s, Ágh (2015) argued that Potemkin democracy is moving towards elected autocracy, echoing competitive authoritarianism. The democratisation process in Hungary is viewed through the consolidation of democracy (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010; cf. Herman 2015), the constitution (Jenne and Mudde 2012) or liberalism (Korkut 2012). While it is necessary to look at the exact ways of 'backsliding', there is no linear process in democratisation in Hungarian politics. Ultimately, the emergence of populism contests and reassesses the foundations of comparative politics (e.g. Aachen and Bartels 2016). Populism is not simply about majority rule (c.f. Krajev 2017) but also articulates contingent bases for difference (Kioupiolis 2016) and democracy. Subsequently, we discuss key concepts of nation, populism and polarisation from a post-foundational perspective.

Nation

The question of who are the people in whose name politicians are ruling is a core question in political theory and praxis. Politicians in a democracy would always re-establish legitimacy of their rule to the people, often conflated with 'the nation' as the legitimate demos. Nationalism in Western Europe emerged as civic nationalism bound by the territory, but nation-state congregation has never been straightforward (e.g. Breuilly 1993). The end of communist rule was for many considered a moment of national unity. The opposition formed a hegemonic front and round-table talks brought a new era, both rule of law and national expression became entangled. For some countries, Hungary and Poland, for example, the 2010s were problematic because those who had been representing the 'foreign rule' were part of the constitutive pact for a new society. For them it was not a mere form that was at stake but substance itself. Instead of affording the place of

legitimacy for law, as in liberal constitutionalism, legitimacy emerges from the people or the nation in the constitutional thinking of Schmitt (2008).

Politically, nationhood is a 19th century project for securing regional power for elites of given origin: the criteria of nationhood emerged and were listed and debated by scholars in nationalism theory. As Anthony D. Smith (1998, 4) has argued, nationalism theory had given in to (post) modernity and its characteristics such as unpredictability, difficulty of pinning down nationalism, historical specificity of nation, social constructionism behind equality and emphasis on social conditions and political processes. From the modern perspective, 'nation' can offer a contingent, contestable and multidimensional basis for political unity, yet from the (pre)modern perspective it is tied to certain institutional dimensions (Smith 1998) or even ethnicity and socio-economic demography.

Indeed, from the post-foundational perspective, nationhood is founded upon the processes of 'imagining' (Anderson 1983). Nation is presented as fixed and eternal, symbolised in everyday or celebrative representations as 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995). Studying the development of democracy, state and building in East Central Europe and the Balkans, scholars have observed how myths of nationhood (Hosking and Schöpflin 1997) offer fantasies of salvation (Tismaneanu 2009). Affective ties generate the appeal and sediment nationalist rhetoric on contingent grounds.

The key to nationalism's Janus face is in the way in which it can generate communities necessary for politics, the basis of *volonté generale*, or even economy (Nairn 1997). Hungary's transitional legitimacy was founded upon independence from Soviet rule and consequently 'nation' became a key signifier in the 1990s. The same chain of reference included economic transition with prospective Western lifestyles, and political liberties. As the parties had to differentiate themselves, they sought to articulate togetherness and community in new ways.

Populism and polarisation

Like nation, 'the people' is symbolised (Panizza 2005; 3; Laclau 2005), staged and performed in 'polemical configuration of ways of acting' (Rancière 2011, 14–15). In this process, people, *plebs* or other 'part' represents 'the whole' and becomes a historical subject (Laclau 2005). It generates contingent and temporary unity between the disparate, otherwise incompatible groups, expresses, and momentarily constitutes, 'us the people'. This could also be constructed mainly through a negation or rejection. Not being fully inclusive, the people, as always, assumes a limit (Butler 2015). Rather than being a substantive ideology, populism contains an empty core (Freeden 2017; Laclau 2014; Stavrakakis 2014).

Following Laclau, this article argues that populism has a particular form: a dichotomy, an emptying-out point of identification and affect, which generate a new form of collective subject or consolidate an old one. Similar to almost any political articulation in populism, these three are emphasised. A political 'us' requires process of linking between groups and demands 'equivalential chains', establishing limits to this chain, and adoption of a unifying symbol for the whole chain (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). New political meanings emerge as fixed perspectives and dominant frames of interpretation get contested. The political 'us' or 'other' at the core of populist articulation often draws on invented terms that generate new shared ground (Laclau 2014, 2005; Palonen and Saresma 2017). Even though populism is an empty form of articulation, it becomes entangled with other things.

Populist moments seem to emerge in a crisis of representation (between rulers and the ruled), which reorders and simplifies political space (Moffitt 2016; Stavrakakis 2014; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). In crisis, something always impedes the full constitution of the national identity (Stavrakakis 2014) but populism provides a fantasy of salvation. Populism brings new political demands to the fore and can give voice to those who did not have it previously. Still, Carlos de la Torre (2010, 200) has highlighted that in Latin America populism appears to call for the people but resorts to unmediated forms of democracy and hierarchical, leader-centred power relations. Articulating a

crisis, with a focus on the leader and the constitutive political frontier, populists maintain the hype necessary for a political identification process. Media scholars have pointed to the populist 'life-cycle': populism can also wear off (Mazzoleni, Steward and Horsefield 2003; Herman 2015). 'Crisis' and even 'revolution' may be used to maintain populist hype.

Populism's Janus-face is its ambiguous relationship to democracy (c.f. Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016; 151; Butler 2015). Following Schmitt's critical reader Chantal Mouffe (2000), when the enemy is defeated it becomes difficult to argue one's own position. The people can also be claimed to be generating the other of the 'us' (Palonen 2009; Butler 2015) as opposed to the 'illegitimate' opposition. Politics and democracy need clearly stated alternatives for people to group around (Mouffe 2005). Just as nationalism often thrives on the limits of 'the nation', populist articulation thrives on a stark division between us and them (c.f. De Cleen 2017) – leaving at least one of these rather undefined. A top-down sedimentation of the dichotomous frontier brings out the negative face of populism (Palonen 2009; Gürhanli 2018). Just as nationalisms may polarize (Egry 2015), populism can be bipolar (Palonen 2009). The articulation of 'the people' or nationhood can happen in a bi-polar manner.

Political polarisation occurs when two political camps defined themselves through the rejection of the other. (Palonen 2009). This duality enabled the different parties or coalitions in Hungarian politics to make their claims in politics without much self-description and fostering of negative portrayal of the other (Palonen 2009; Körösiényi 2013; Cox and Gallai 2013). The constitution of political identities and cleavages through a stark polarisation from the period of the first Fidesz government (1998–2002) to the latest ones (from 2010 potentially to 2022) is coupled with a popular disengagement with politics. In Hungary, left and right was not a traditional cleavage and establishment of two-party politics. Rather than being demographically sedimented, interest-bound or constant demand, polarisation is performative and explainable through populism theory. The following sections analyse the emergence of dichotomies and sedimentation of populist rhetoric in Hungary after 1989.

Performing the nation in Hungary

As argued above, from the post-foundational perspective, society does not pre-exist articulation, and must be somehow articulated through practices as the basis of democracy. The post-1989 events were central in this regard. In Hungary, whoever controls the expressions of nation and the discursive constitution of 'us the people' related to it claims to have a legitimate right to control the state – including the constitution or law-making (Miklóssy in this issue).

Throughout the 1990s, in Hungary, the political contestation over the choice of past, and hence nationhood, was evident (c.f. Nyssönen 1999). Despite particularly left-wing attempts to introduce the rule of law and political rights as the basis of the new era, the Hungarian right has connected parliament and political governance to the nation (Miklóssy 2008). Discussion about the location of the crown of St. Stephen as a symbol of Hungarian statehood and sovereignty represents a prime example (Nyssönen 2008). The Fundamental Law of Hungary (2016) makes several mentions to the past and nationhood, and showcases the illegitimacy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, particularly in Article U. It is a case in point for continued political polarisation (Palonen 2009). The construction of 'nation' through historiography has been a battle: in this narrative, 'the once contested but unitary Hungarian nation was split almost unnoticed into a full-fledged constructive, liberal nationalist, and a full-fledged, organicist, ethnic one' (Egry 2018, 203).

In the first free elections competing visions of imagining 'the people' was at stake. Those with references to the nation became victorious. The 1990 elections were won by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), umbrella of the former national opposition. The Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) was composed largely of dissidents from the former democratic opposition and the reformed Socialists, the former powerholders.

Ethno-nationalism flourished as the first Prime Minister, József Antall, claimed to represent 15 million Hungarians, while the population of the Hungarian state was merely 10 million. Antal referred to the Hungarian diaspora in the neighbouring countries but he did not contest the rule of law or move to irrendentist (calling to return the lost areas) claims for reuniting areas of the pre-WWI Hungary. Contrasting Orbán and Antall, Egedy (2013, 67–68) argues that Antall's 'patrician conservatism' was 'committed to the doctrine of the rule of law and – in keeping with ancient Hungarian constitutional traditions – accepted the legal-civic concept of the nation.' The relationship between the state and the individual formed the basis of identity of the members of the nation. MDF was an umbrella of several opposition groups for whom nation was the universalisable historical actor, or to follow Laclau's theory, the historical subject taking the function of the universal.

In December 1993, before the second free elections, Antall's death generated a crisis on the political right. Crisis was in the air more generally as criticism conquered post-1989 euphoria. The Socialist party won the 1994 general elections and formed a coalition government with the second largest party, the liberal SZDSZ. Many Hungarians considered the coalition with the former rulers as unholy. The Socialists were seen as the particular former oppressors unable to legitimately represent the people or perform the role of the universal subject. The people-making ethos of post-1989 was more in line with the populist political logic, where the government temporarily constitutes the representation of people, than with the tradition of coalitions based on interests or cleavages. Rejection of the coalition generated by the two largest parties opened political space on the right, which still lacked clear leadership. Orbán moved Fidesz to the national-conservative right where they simultaneously retained their radical edge. Criticism of the socialist-liberal government grew, and the 1998 elections brought in a Fidesz-MDF coalition government.

Many liberal intellectuals in Hungary were shocked that 'the party of the youth' sought to keep themselves outside the pre-1989 divisions, and yet exploited the momentum of choosing sides. As a student politician, Orbán gave a historic speech at Imre Nagy's reburial, a highpoint in the '1989 revolution' (Bozóki 2009) or 'negotiated transition'. Nevertheless, leading the party of youth, he sought to articulate a historical subject, undivided 'youth' against the 'old' parties, pact-making dissidents and power-holders. Later, they would seek to constitute the people as a whole through this negation.

In Egedy's distinction, the nation for Fidesz was considered 'the ultimate source of legitimacy', and reinterpreted something 'pre-political' or cultural, and claimed as its 'own exclusive terrain' (Egedy 2013, 71). Populist rhetoric with dichotomy building and constitutive common points of reference were present well before the 2002 elections after which Egedy argues 'plebeian conservatism' was full blown. Fidesz refused 'to concede the electoral defeat of 2002 declaring that "The Mother Country (*Haza*) cannot be in opposition!"' (Péteri 2014). Orbán's claim revealed the idea of exclusive ownership of the nation and the constitutive rhetoric. The universalising logic of the populist articulation prevails in constitution of the historical subject through '*haza*'.

Fidesz cast populist articulation in stone for a universalising historical subjectivity to emerge through identification, through street names and memorials, architecture and urban renewal (Palonen 2013). The capital city, Budapest, was in the hands of socialists and liberals, but the Fidesz government offered funds for the renovation of regional cities with loyal leadership. Populism became entangled with nationalism. The Fidesz-MDF government pushed through a Status Law of 2001 that offered ethnic Hungarians outside the national borders the right to vote in Hungary (Bátory 2009).

Political polarisation from the millennium

By 2000, almost all parties were trying to generate a collective as a historical subject (on liberal Free Democrats see Palonen 2005). Each of these had some notion of the people, a range of demands and a clear political frontier. It became a battle over who represented the political 'us' in 2002. Electoral laws also contributed to the two-party competition.

Confrontational rhetoric is Orbán's trademark. It contributed to the polarisation of the political spectrum into the 'anti-communist-anti-liberal' and the 'anti-nationalist' camps from the transitions tripartite party spectrum. In 1998–2002, Orbán's government articulated a new era and nationhood through films, architecture and exhibitions, and political concepts such as '*polgári*', civic and bourgeois, as a symbol of unity (Fowler 2004). Moving towards an orange '*polgári*' platform disassociated them, at least briefly, from the simple nationalist–non-nationalist dichotomy.

Universalising symbols were competed over as tools for articulating this historical subject: the Socialist party under Péter Medgyessy sought to represent the 'country' and occupy a civic concept of nationalism; they succeeded in the election campaigning in 2002. An ethnic nation of 15 million Hungarians (beyond the borders) for Fidesz and the 10 million Hungarian citizens of the Socialists, and the wearing of the Hungarian national badge, *kokárda*, became divisive symbols. In general, the polarisation was performed through co-constituting rejection: Fidesz was accused of nationalism and the Socialists of communism. Fidesz was viewed as a bunch of neo-feudalist elites and the Socialists as a bunch of neoliberal elites.

The Socialists took a second consecutive victory at the elections in 2006: the system was considered mature by political science standards. Belief in democracy and the legitimacy of the leftist parties were, however, questioned as PM Ferenc Gyurcsányi in 2006 admitted to having been lying day and night, causing the collapse of the belief in democracy. Left-wing voters joined the protest. The emperor was revealed as being naked. It became apparent that as people commonly knew – politicians lie (Palonen 2012). Rubber bullets had been fired into the rioting crowds, but this was denied by the government. The left started to fragment and many former voters fled to the other side.

As the opinion polls predicted victory for Fidesz prior to the elections, Orbán declared a revolution at the polls. Revolution may appear in other contexts as illegitimate, revolution against the oppressors has often a positive tone in Hungary. To mark the change of power, with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, Fidesz engaged in activities familiar from previous revolutionary transformations: the power-holders started rewriting the Constitution, changing memorials and renaming streets. After 2010 the weakened opposition provided little to challenge to Orbán. The left and liberal parties multiplied, even the new Green party split into two. The left-leaning philosophers, the judiciary, the art elites, among many, became the targets of the Fidesz 'revolution'.

Symbolising us and the other: transforming Orbán

Populist political articulation requires a careful balance between the 'us' and the 'other'. In Laclau's theory, the leader often becomes the symbol of unity. In opposition after 2002, Orbán dismissed parliamentarism emphasising the 'pre-political' character of his notion of nationhood, democracy and the people. He left behind the exclusive and future-oriented *polgári* conceptualisation, and went back to articulating *plebs* to represent the *populus* in the classical understanding of populism (Panizza 2005; c.f. Laclau 2005). He transformed his rhetoric: not turning up at the Hungarian Parliament for years but swapping his suit for a checked shirt argued for village parliaments and mobilised support on referenda. The people was articulated through anti-elitism.

Political ideology never seemed vital for Orbán. He appears as a power-seeking 'post-ideological' politician fit for an era where meanings are fast reworked and lines of differentiation shifted. As a youth leader, he had potential for the liberal camp, but he chose the right. Orbán rearticulated the political other by always inventing new dichotomies for political identifications, generating common points through empty signifiers, symbolising particularly the (potentially) oppressive other and thereby 'us'.

Transforming lines of antagonism and adding rhetorical dimensions both to the past and the future in the enemy image offered durability to Orbán's populist rhetoric. The dichotomous

populist logic generated constitutive antagonism: the major claim to power was justified on the illegitimacy of the other (Palonen 2009), particularly referring to the nation in the early 2002, but by 2010 to the failure of the other to govern. After two decades in the limelight as one of the key politicians in the country, in 2010, Orbán became PM again after a historic landslide victory. Next sections introduce three symbols of othering, particularly present in post-2010 Hungary. Through these he managed to avoid bursting the bubble of populist life-cycle (Herkman 2017): rhetoric on revolution and illiberalism that maintained the frontier of polarisation and the move to claim other parties' dichotomous language and attitudes.

Symbols of othering I: revolution

Reading from the post-foundational perspective, the term 'revolution' in Hungary has always had an important role as a key signifier in the discursive constitution of the people. Revolutions themselves carry symbolic value (e.g. Nyssönen 1999; Palonen 2011), and following Laclau and Mouffe (1985) rather than constituting a total break they often carry elements of the previous eras. Hence, rhetoric on revolution in Hungary expresses continuity as much as change (Palonen 2011). It constitutes the people, generates populist moments and challenges the life-cycle or usual wearing out of populism. Once in power, the break from the past regime of governance was enacted and symbolised in many ways. The landslide victory provided Fidesz with a two-third majority in the parliament that enabled constitutional changes. The spirit of the revolution kept an 'enemy' or political other present: this other could be simply 'the past' and former powerholders. To mark the revolution as a sweeping change, symbols were changed: investing in football stadiums and renovating public spaces, launching a new commemorative turn was to finish 'decommunisation' (e.g. Ukraine in Shevel 2016). The new order was symbolised particularly through interwar memory: the parliament legislated upon the commemoration of the traumatic Trianon peace treaty that ended WWI for Hungary (Feischmidt et al. 2014). In 2010, the law on Trianon commemoration day was passed and sparked debate in the community of historians (Kovács 2016). Interwar memorials were restored around the parliament and a memorial to the WWII 'German Occupation' of Hungary was erected in 2014, provoking debate and a counter-memorial. Symbolic acts articulated a dichotomy between 'us' and them could be articulated by the powerholders. They sought to maintain a crisis to defend and constitute the people by rewriting the national past.

Fidesz performatively carried out the devaluation of 1989 as a revolution. Indeed, the term 'negotiated revolution' is paradoxical in many ways. Yet, in Hungary, where the tradition of revolutions was celebrated and their fates mourned, a failed or partial revolution lacked the symbolic value or even legitimacy for bringing a sense of fullness and achievement. Orbán had only a marginal role regarding the negotiation of the new system, and could be regarded as leading 'an outlawed protest movement in the Kádár era' (Szabó 2011). In line with his anti-communist stance, Orbán argued that the powerholders and the system itself are compromised (in a negative understanding) through communism. Fidesz gained a landslide victory in the 2010 elections with a mandate from the people and the necessary two-third majority to implement constitutional changes. The revolution as legislative activity was pursued.

A key area where international and national attention was targeted was freedom of the media and restriction of possibilities of the opposition to mobilise prior to the election period. When internet access was threatened, large demonstrations emerged. Electoral laws were changed to benefit the largest party. In a country marked by extreme politicisation and polarisation, depoliticisation may have appeared to many locals as a citizen-friendly measure – many Hungarians disillusioned with politics and politicians were tired of the constant confrontation that had penetrated social relations and everyday life. Yet, despite the 'revolution at the polls', the connection between parliament and politicians and the citizens did not increase, at least from the citizens' perspective (Ilonszki and Papp 2012).

Symbols of othering II: illiberalism

In summer 2014, months after his second consecutive election victory, Orbán denounced liberal democracy. Illiberal democracy emerged as the name for the new era, it also marked the enemy: liberals. This made clear a confrontation with liberals and the system implemented for the 1990s: liberal democracy. Though weak in content, it had power to generate affective ties and disgust. Even weak enemies can be made discursively present. Fidesz also knew that dichotomous articulation maintains the opposition, and too strong an opposition could challenge their power (Palonen 2009).

Orbán in July 2014 in Băile Tuşnad, Tusznádfürdő, Romania, brought in the concept of ‘illiberal democracy’ to mark the dichotomy between the liberal and populist-national Hungary. It rejected the previous system of 1989–2010 as something rotten. In this view, liberals never had the legitimacy to represent the nation as the people and Western political scientists had imported into the negotiated revolution was a reformist system, not a real break and new truly Hungarian era. Many of the reforms were decidedly ‘illiberal’. The reform of media law and the constitutional reforms strengthened dominance of the strongest political party. The reforms constituted the people through its other.

The political scientist Takis Pappas (2018) argues that populism is democratic but illiberal, whereas authoritarianism is anti-democratic. Yet here anti-liberalism is a performative notion that generates a political polarisation and is operationalised for political gain (Palonen 2009): it is a symbolic-constitutive rejection of the liberal left as illegitimate to rule or participate in (defining ‘real’) democracy.

Illiberalism can be seen in the Hungarian context as a marker for a new era, drawing a distinction between the past and present liberal democracy established at the end of the round-table talks and the Orbán era’s own approach negatively termed. Orbán managed to define the Hungarian and European liberals as the enemy and rearticulate the nation as the basis of legitimacy. For the rule of law, this exclusion that can be revisited in the attitudes to NGOs is revealing: people becomes an exclusive rather than inclusive category.

Symbolic othering III: nationalism and ‘migrants’

During the postcommunist period, competing interpretations of the Hungarian ‘nation’ divided historians into two camps (Egry 2018). Practiced nationalisms multiplied: social anthropologists found fragmented communities with their own national expressions, myths and beliefs (Feischmidt et al. 2014). Official discourse is, however, more solid: a pan-European secularist Christian civilisationalist nationalism has been detected also in Hungary (Brubaker 2017; The Fundamental Law of Hungary 2016). Orbán identified it as the government’s ideology for the third term, sedimented in the ‘Future of Europe’ conference in Budapest 24–25 May 2018, where a keynote speaker was the US president Donald Trump’s former ideologue Steve Bannon.

In the anti-liberal, essentialist, and *völkisch* narrative, Hungarians arrived unchanged in the territory, extending the current borders, and had a role in defending Christian Europe from the Muslim invaders (e.g. Egry 2018; Trenchényi 2011). This narrative and the interwar Christian democratic Europeanist ideals and praxis (Egry 2015: 124, 174, 179) are visible both in the restoration of interwar memorials and discussions on immigration. Alongside illiberalism and migration it offers ideological substance to the strategic exclusion (othering) through which Fidesz generates its position in Hungarian politics.

The wall on the southern border of Hungary blocked the flow of refugees into Hungary and the Schengen area. In 2015, the ‘refugee crisis’ hit Hungary, and Orbán declared early on that Hungary would build a wall against them. Even more significant was the branding of the refugees as an enemy that the government was protecting the people against, hence, constituting the people. Similarly, the opposition to the European Union was set in terms of Orbán as

a European leader defending the interests of the country: any sanctions by the European Union could only be reduced to the line of polarisation between Hungary where the Orbán government protects the Hungarian nation against its enemies. The asylum seekers were predominantly Muslim, which contrasted with the Christian narrative of Hungary but fitted with the idea of Hungary as Europe's fortress. This also left aside the narratives and voice of the Hungarian Jews.

Adopting nationalist ethnicist articulation alongside populism, Fidesz moved to the territory of the anti-elitist nationalist Jobbik, long considered a marginal challenger, and presented in relation to their later-banned paramilitary wing the Hungarian Guard. Jobbik emerged through a populist frame, where nationalism becomes entangled with economics, exploiting rural grievances and anti-Roma discourse. 'In the face of economic decline and unresponsive authorities', transition losers formulate grievances ethnically and activate 'popular anti-Roma sensibilities and created space for the politicization of ethnicity' (Feischmidt and Szombati 2017, 326). When Fidesz occupied the xenophobic nationalist right position, Jobbik presented an increasingly centrist vision (Hytinen and Näre 2017). Jobbik turned away from racist discourse in a top-down process as the party leader Gábor Vona reacted to Orbán's Fidesz adopting their xenophobic rhetoric.

The Fidesz discourse was visible all around the country during the elections spring in 2018. Billboards were filled with government-sponsored adverts with a simple message against immigration: STOP. One of the distrusted personalities was the Jewish-Hungarian millionaire George Soros: the othering meaning-making constituted the national us as distinct from the Soros army or team. Because they were combined in the same signifying chain – to borrow Laclau's term – the insistence on Christian Europe and illiberalism during the election of spring 2018, these attacks on the Jewish claims are easy to interpret as implicitly anti-Semitic. This was in line with the Laclaudian idea of polarisation as bi-polar hegemony (Palonen 2009). Had Fidesz targeted their resentment on the Jobbik, they would have elevated them to the level of equals. However, by adopting their demands, they could claim their political space and rigor.

Democracy and Janus-faced populism

Existing research asks whether populism *is* a threat or corrective to democracy (e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In these questions, democracy often is reduced to a regime. Yet, democracy is processual: the generation of political community at large for the population to participate in elections, and communities to channel votes to different parties has required banal nationalism (Billig 1995), which also sustains a political community. It usually defines populism in substantive terms and not as an empty shell (Freedon 2017). In the negative ontology of populism (Stavrakakis 2014; Laclau 2005), there is the double-bind with democracy (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005): populism is necessary for democracy but pure populism can also be a challenge to it (Gürhanli 2018).

Democratically conceived, nationalism and populism resist essentialisation and sedimentation: the communities and boundaries are both left negotiable (Mouffe 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). While nationalism is always exclusive to those not included in the nation, some exclusion is necessary for 'the people' as a political community to emerge (Butler 2015, 5). From the post-foundational perspective, populism has the potential to include previously excluded groups or identities, address accessibly of complex political phenomena and expose 'dysfunctions of the contemporary democratic systems', even offering alternative influencing tools other than mere voting (Moffitt 2016: 144, 142–149). The articulation of an 'us' with limits resembles any political logic (Arditi 2010), but it crucially brings politics and contingency of us and political demands back to politics. Here, us is not socio-economic or interest-based.

Post-foundational theory insists that a political 'us' does not exist in socio-economic terms before articulation. Traditional liberal democratic analysis sees population separated into demographic groups with pre-existing interest or issues that parties simply pick and represent. Cleavages appear structured through (relatively fixed) socio-economic features. This understanding of politics

should be called 'demographic'. Yet in (radical) 'democracy', political frontiers are articulated as part of political struggle, the making of demands and meanings in politics. In these processes affective ties, identification and articulation of political demands are central (Mouffe 2000, 2005).

This enables the emergence of populist movements that generate new meaning and invent new cleavages that are not sedimented. Populism is Janus-faced in the same manner as nationalism: necessary and evil. Rather, for democracy and the rule of law, it is important to see what gets *entangled with* populism and how these political differences sediment and become decontested through democratic means.

Conclusions

This article has argued that every transformation of power contains populism: constituting political us in an affective process through generation of one or more historical subject with an ambiguous 'us' and political frontiers. Generating political togetherness and even democratic participation, populism is a necessary part of the political process and democracy. In (radical) democracy, political frontiers are not simply demographically formed or sedimented. Related to the above, in a post-foundational, Laclaudian vein, this article sees democracy not as a system but as a process: one where political alliances and frontiers are formed, irrespective of sedimented differences and socio-economic characteristics. Populist articulations have a key role in this.

Going over some of the key populist moments in Hungarian history, this article has noted the way in which frontier-building dichotomies and part-represents-the-whole articulations have been central to Fidesz meaning-making. Orbán initially operationalised 'the youth' as those excluded from the round-table talks that negotiated the new system with rule of law and returned to the same dichotomy in the 2010s, yielding to illiberalism. He maintained the populist hype by rallying against immigrants and the American-Hungarian millionaire Georges Soros. He rearticulated the frontier of polarisation in the early 2000s, when two political communities had co-constituted each other by mutually demonising the other side.

Democracy is challenged when populism institutionalises into a polarised frontier that directs all debate into a simple distinction, or sediments beyond leaders and frontier-building (Palonen 2009). Another study could account for the distinction between populism and clientelistic relations, offering economic advantages to the state and European Union-funded building programmes and sediment the originally rhetorical polarisation in a different manner.

As populism is an empty form, it is central to see what it entangles. The examples of populist rhetoric here were revolution, illiberalism and migration crisis that generate affects, frontier and the abstract political us. Despite problematic contents and relation to the rule of law, they played an important role in the populist logic of political meaning-making for Orbán to draw his support base. In 2018, he seeks to sediment it ideologically more coherently to Interwar-inspired Christian Democracy. Building of political communities is a democratic activity, but sedimenting an exclusive community with moral rights highlights the negative face of populism.

Note

1. Poststructuralist understandings of meanings are explored, emerging through relations or (dis)connections in a non-predetermined way, while post-foundational perspective pays attention to the foundations on which meanings are established, narrated or articulated (Bevir 2010; Marchart 2007).

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