
Book Review:

András Körösényi, Gábor Illés and Attila Gyulai (2020) *The Orbán Regime. Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making*. London/New York: Routledge. 202 pages.

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Since 2010, Viktor Orbán has opened up a new era of Hungarian politics, which is – regarding the degree, scope, and speed of change – almost unique among the old and new democracies after 1989. During the last decade, we have experienced a significant rise in the scholarly and political interest in Hungarian politics, and the need to develop appropriate approaches and theoretical frameworks to grasp these robust changes and describe the characteristics of the new political system. As a result, an important debate about the regime has emerged among Hungarian researchers in the last few years. Some scholars perceive the new political regime as still being a (non-liberal) democracy (Csizmadia, 2017; 2019) or leader democracy (Körösényi, 2015; 2017), while labels and terms like ‘simulated democracy’ (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2012), ‘hybridisation’ (Gyulai, 2017), ‘hybrid regime’ and ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Böcskei & Hajdú, 2019; Csillag & Szelényi, 2015; Filippov, 2018; Scheiring, 2019; Szűcs, 2018) have also been used. Other authors describe the Hungarian system straightforwardly as an (electoral) autocracy (Ágh, 2015; Antal, 2019; Kis, 2019; Kornai, 2015; Unger, 2018; Szilágyi, 2014).

However, the motivation of András Körösényi, Gábor Illés, and Attila Gyulai was not only to respond with well-founded answers to the question of the nature of the regime, or to provide the first comprehensive and theoretically substantiated political science account of the Orbán regime in English. In the seminal book *The Orbán Regime: Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making*, the authors argue that contemporary political trends not only change democracy, but add up to a different type of political authority that calls for new concepts, just like their proposed concept of Weberian *plebiscitary leader democracy* (PLD). Hence, ‘describing the Orbán regime as an empirical example of PLD may have wider significance [for] understanding some contemporary trends, both in the Eastern-Central-European region and in Western democracies as well’ (p. 14).

Indeed, the authors use a refurbished conceptual frame of PLD that is inspired by political changes in liberal democracies from the 1980s to the present day (Green, 2010; Körösényi, 2005a; Pakulski & Körösényi, 2012). These ‘Millennial trends’ include processes like de-alignment, growing electoral volatility, citizen disengagement, a decline in party membership and alignment, the waning of party government, the growing legitimacy-

related problems of representative democracies, the spread of non-majoritarian institutions, the mediatization of politics, growing personalization and populist rhetoric, and radical or unconventional policy changes. These phenomena, according to the authors, have changed the nature of modern representative democracies and ‘undermined the structural base of party democracy that characterized the twentieth century’ (p. 8). In other words, we are witnessing an epochal shift in the logic and functioning of contemporary democracies (and politics in general), captured in phrases such as the ‘hollowing’ of Western democracy (Mair, 2013) and the labels ‘audience democracy’ (Manin, 1997), ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch, 2004), ‘leader democracy’ (Köröseyi, 2005a), and ‘ocular democracy’ (Green, 2010). The authors claim that the concept of PLD could provide an ‘adequate analytical framework for an account of this new era and its emerging regime’ (p. 19).

However, one thing must be made clear at the outset: Köröseyi, Illés, and Gyulai revolt against the mainstream approaches that claim to provide a radical change of perspective. Namely, PLD offers an alternative to the widely used discourses of populism and hybridization to explain the Hungarian case and other recent processes in democracies and autocracies. However, the two rival concepts are not treated in the same way. Populism, given that it provides only partial answers to questions about regime-level change – in the form of demagoguery (Weber, 1978), rhetoric, discourse, and a populist style (Moffitt, 2016) of politics and leader-citizen communication – is incorporated into the theory of PLD as one of its six main features. By contrast, there is no mercy for the hybrid regime concept, which is, in the eyes of the authors, derived from the mainstream approach about (idealized) liberal democracies and is therefore a (new) manifestation of classical liberal democratic theory that faces the same challenges as its antecedent. As a result, it could be said that the approach of Köröseyi and his fellow authors poses a serious challenge to the whole liberal democratic paradigm, thus the importance of this book is further enhanced by its revolutionary perspective. Consequently, according to their implicit arguments, the liberal democratic paradigm (and its newer manifestation, hybrid regime discourse, with the regime classification paradigm) is unsuitable for framing new global trends in politics and describing puzzling regimes such as those of Orbán’s Hungary. Hence, the authors argue, it has lost its explanatory power and relevance, ultimately questioning its right to exist; on the other hand, this justifies a paradigmatic shift and opens the door to new concepts and approaches such as PLD.

According to the authors, problems with hybrid regime literature and the underlying conceptual framework of the liberal democratic paradigm have various dimensions. First, there is the issue of the normative bias and unreflective praise for the one-dimensional and teleological view of liberal democracy, which neglects the fact that the democratic and liberal pillars of liberal democracy cannot be combined without tension. Moreover, focusing on liberal democratic ideals, the hybrid regime literature examines the ‘lack and violations of certain features’ instead of ‘concrete existing characteristics’ (p. 5). Second, thanks to the universal need for classification, the mainstream paradigm cannot explain endogenous factors such as autocratic tendencies in the internal logic of democracy. In addition, the authors argue, there are other problems with the hybrid (and liberal democratic) paradigm, such as the fact that it has become more method oriented than problem oriented – or too static, by focusing on structures instead of actors (i.e. on agency and on political leaders), and inherently features an imperfect explanation of legitimacy.

However, it should be noted here that the authors' description of the liberal democratic approach is slightly simplified, since nowadays almost no one claims that liberal democracy works without internal tensions or certain trade-offs, especially in the light of an emerging populism. Instead, even liberal democracy apologists speak about the distinction between electoral and liberal democracy; namely, the relative lack or presence of liberal components and majoritarian-democratic aspects (thinking here of the democracy indices of Freedom House, or V-Dem), or talk about the spread of 'illiberal democracies' (Zakaria, 1997), or of the 'growing tensions between democracy and liberalism' and the rise of populism as 'an outcome not of the failures but of the successes of post-communist liberalism' (Krastev, 2007: 58). In fact, liberal democracy is mostly understood as a fragile equilibrium involving the co-existence of liberal and democratic logics (Abts & Rummens, 2007), with an inherent duality and paradoxical tension (Canovan, 1999; 2002; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mouffe 2000). It is able to disrupt the fragile balance both in the direction of the radicalization of liberal-constitutional and democratic-populist logics (Lefort, 1986; 1988). In the same way, the mainstream literature on populism talks explicitly about 'structural tensions within liberal democracy upon which populists can feed' (Mudde, 2004: 563), defining populism as 'democratic illiberalism' (Pappas, 2016), which is an 'illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 116). Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, similarly to the heavily criticized (for its normative dimension) liberal democratic approach, the authors also seek to demonstrate some (albeit modest) normative potential of PLD, which will be discussed in detail later.

To sum up, Körösényi and his co-authors' main critique addresses the idealization of liberal democracy, which conceals its internal contradictions. This means that they go beyond the paradigm of liberal democracy, using the concept of democracy in a minimal and formal sense, understood as the passive approval of charismatic leaders instead of the active self-government of the people (with accountable leaders). With the conceptual framework of PLD (Körösényi, 2019), the authors seek to offer a more sophisticated, realistic, and empirically useful analysis of the legitimacy of regimes than the mainstream approach. Hence, they intend not only to 'unfold how the PLD regime came into existence in the specific Hungarian context,' but to 'demonstrate that the role of agency can be more crucial than political scientists usually assume,' and especially to 'present the Hungarian case as a paradigmatic case of a new regime type' (p. 14), thereby opening the door to the international horizon of empirical research. However, this book addresses the case of the last decade of Hungarian politics through the lens of the conceptual framework of plebiscitary leader democracy. Its approach is thus a qualitative case study that has the aim of facilitating an analysis of the complex phenomena of regime-building in its specific context, by way of 'agency-centred constructivism' or interpretivism. The Hungarian case is seen as an important variant of PLD, because of its empirical clarity, and it could be not just the first case but a pioneer in turning into PLD among the countries of the EU. Therefore, the authors regard Hungary as a 'natural laboratory for PLD,' and consider it essential to obtain 'important insights into tendencies in contemporary democracies in Europe and elsewhere' (e.g. Turkey, Venezuela, the Philippines, USA, UK, France, and Italy) (p. 13).

The structure of the book fits these ambitious aims well, as it is divided into six chapters that build upon each other in terms of the division of politics, polity, and policy aspects. First, the authors present a detailed outline of their theory – namely, a reconstruction of

the Weberian PLD concept as an authority and regime type. This reconstruction is the fruit of long years of intensive theoretical work by all three authors, especially András Körösényi, who has been dealing with the issues of the applicability and refurbishing of Weber's classical framework in today's political reality for almost two decades (Körösényi, 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2009a; 2009b; 2017; 2019; Pakulski & Körösényi, 2012). In this respect, the early outlines of PLD had already been prepared when Viktor Orbán came to power in 2010, so one might even say – if the approach of PLD is accepted – that Körösényi somehow foresaw the forthcoming radical changes even before 2010. However, over the years, the theory of PLD has been expanded and corrected, thanks to the systematic empirical analysis of contemporary circumstances. For example, Körösényi and his co-authors do not follow precisely the earlier approach of Pakulski and Körösényi (2012) because of its over-optimistic assumptions regarding the normative potential (accountability) of leader democracy.

Following Weber's concept of Führerdemokratie (Weber, 1978: 266–268), the authors define PLD as a mixed type of authority that is democratic in form, but authoritarian in substance, which means it consists of a combination of charismatic and legal-rational authority, in which charisma is routinized through regular elections. In contrast to genuine charismatic authority, in the case of PLD, 'charismatic legitimacy is approved "in advance"; it is not [the] prior deeds or performance of the leader that manifest his charisma, but the trust of the people expressed at elections' (p. 22). The latter institution is interpreted by the authors as a source of democratic legitimacy, regardless of the possibly unfair nature of these elections and political competition in general. Therefore, the concept of democracy of the authors fits with Schumpeterian minimalist traditions, since 'PLD cannot be understood as self-rule or self-government of the people,' but instead as formal 'approval or rejection of the incumbent or other candidates' (p. 23), thus only as giving consent to be ruled through elections. In this approach, 'the function of elections is limited to authoriz[ing] rulers and legitimiz[ing] their rule and the political regime; therefore, the responsiveness and accountability of leaders are rather limited, if they exist at all' (p. 24).

There are six major traits of the PLD regime as an ideal-type that contrast with 'leaderless' (liberal) democracy. *Charismatic leadership*, which includes heroism, vision, and personal responsibility. *Demagogy and populism*, understood as rhetoric and political communication, which is 'less sophisticated, more emotional, more aesthetic, and often accompanied by polarising rhetoric, enemy-construction, "bad manners" (Moffitt, 2016), and identity politics' (p. 33), in contrast to open (liberal democratic) political discourse. The *plebiscitary and top-down nature of representation and democracy* is another factor, which diminishes the role of the representative and other intermediate institutions, and replaces the imperative mandate by a more or less free mandate (blank-check authorization). A state of *permanent crisis and crisis narrative* becomes the normal state of politics and legitimizes revolutionary or radical politics and public policy. *Radical or revolutionary public policy and politics* means that in PLD politics enjoys primacy over legal rule, bureaucratic regulations, and social norms, while rulership becomes arbitrary. *Patrimonial or prebendal wield[ing] of power* is another factor, which includes particularistic decisions based on personal connections and the ruler's discretion. After this chapter, the authors unfold their case study on the Orbán regime, systematically examining its dimensions of politics, polity, and policy.

Körösenyi, Illés and Gyulai think the Schmittian concept of political (Schmitt, 2007) with its antagonistic conflicts and the view of the primacy of politics, understood as a sharply conflictual and barely limitable activity, are able to 'grasp the very logic of the Orbán regime' (p. 67). They argue that primacy of politics mean 'ruling the moment' and following the political interests of the day. Orbán as a leader shapes individual preferences and the whole political space through constructing identities, setting the political agenda, and manipulating the dimension of citizens' judgements with the means and techniques of discourse, heresthetics, and the media. In the eyes of the authors, the role of leadership is similar to that adopted by the figure of the Schmittian sovereign 'who does not conform to frameworks already given to him, but, based [on] political decisions, invents them' (p. 68). Therefore, the concept of populism is incorporated into PLD as a performative power that instead of expressing social identities aims at constituting them. Moffitt's (2016) view of populism as political style 'bad manners' can serve as a manifestation of charisma in PLD, and can play a crucial role in maintaining the charismatic bond between the leader and their followers. This requires the ability of a leader to construct and tell stories to their followers that are linked together in an overarching narrative or populist myth about the struggle between the heroic leader and the villains, that 'hovers over the political agenda as an umbrella concept, absorbing and [...] neutralising most individual issues' (p. 55). However, these wars must end with victory to make the charismatic leader fit for the next conflict, which is never the last, hence 'victory and redemption are always partial – a final one, breaking the cycle, would mean that the charismatic saviour is no longer needed' (p. 69).

In the next two chapters, the formal and informal sides of the polity dimensions of the Orbán regime are explored – these remain in a position subordinate to the logic of politics. The authors first focus on constitutional and other institutional changes, and then on the elite-creation and power-wielding of the Orbán regime. Using a modified concept of Skowronek's (1997), the reconstruction of the polity is described as 'order-shattering' (destruction of previously established arrangements), 'order-affirming' (endorsing some common values and constitutional traditions), and 'order-creating' (the process of putting into place the new settlement). The authors conclude that Orbán's reconstruction of the polity 'has been voluntarist, and this voluntarism has consisted of the will to maintain the capacity to act' (p. 88), and the desire to establish a stable polity, even if there were to be a change of government.

These formal aspects of reconstruction of polity have been supplemented by a series of informal changes since 2010. In order to analyze this side of the reconstruction of polity, the authors supplement their approach with Schabert's (1989) concept of 'monocracy' or 'princely rule,' and Mazzuca's (2010) differentiation between the access to and the exercise of power dimensions. On the micro-level, there is a personal, one-man-rule logic that transforms the formal frameworks of the polity into informal ones on the basis of personal loyalty. This is supplemented with macro-level of reconstructions in various dimensions of state-society relationship – namely, the tools of clientelism and prebendalism, and the massive elite change in the spheres of economy, media, and culture, where 'positions, property, and the resulting authority and influence are only derived from those of Orbán' (p. 110).

In contrast to the developmentalist approach and concepts like the 'post-socialist accumulative state' (Scheiring, 2019) or 'embedded neoliberalism' (Bohle & Greskovits, 2018),

as in the case of polity, the authors emphasize the subordinated nature of policy-making (examined in fields of economic, social, and educational policies) to certain political logics. Their concept of *bricolage* refers to the lack of a coherent policy program or paradigm of the Orbán regime, which is instead a ‘blend of pragmatism and innovation, and an alternative to paradigmatic thinking in policy-making’ (p. 134), driven by an electoral, international institutional, and clientelist logic. This is supplemented by the quasi-ideology of *realism*, with its core concepts of survival, stability, sovereignty, strength, and national interest. This can host diverse ideological content, from full-fledged ideologies, and flexibly adapt to changing circumstances.

The wide-ranging applicability of this important book’s theoretical panopticon depends largely on the distinction between antagonistic and agonistic conflicts (Mouffe, 2000; 2005). PLD is a combination of rational-legal and charismatic authority, in which conflictual politics ‘might be different from Mouffean agonism and closer to Schmittian antagonism or enmity’ (p. 51). Therefore, the authors argue, just as Schmittian antagonism could be tamed into agonism by which politics becomes limited (due to traditions and constitutional and institutional constraints), PLD may vary between ‘moderate’ and ‘extreme’ versions. The leaders of such hard and soft cases, and the depth and intensity of the presence of PLD’s traits, can create an international empirical perspective on regimes ranging from Putin’s Russia to Macron’s France, Trump’s USA, or Kurz’s Austria. However, this perspective may have unintended consequences for the authors’ conception. Namely, exactly because PLD is an ideal-type, its diminished form (‘moderate PLD’) could have a reduced level of explanatory power, opening the door to other, more relevant theories. Therefore, using the whole framework of PLD in consolidated liberal democracies could inflate the original concept. After all, Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, and Sebastian Kurz do not own or control the USA, France, and Austria as political regimes like Putin, Erdogan and Orbán do their countries. The question for PLD’s framework is, if agonistic (and not antagonistic) political conflicts are dominant – more so than would be compatible with liberal democracy –, may a country in any way be considered a PLD, or, in contrast, would it remain a liberal democratic regime with a potentially populist or autocratic (in the terms of the authors: charismatic) politician? In other words, there is considerable doubt regarding how to identify where PLD as a regime exactly begins and ends, and how to respond to this question of borders.

Another interesting question is the normative merits of PLD and its authorization-based view of representation, which has already been widely debated in Hungarian political science (G. Fodor, 2006; Köröseyi, 2005b; 2007; 2008; 2017; Meszerics, 2008; Szilágyi, 2015; Unger, 2018). The authors reject normative (unrealistic) assumptions of the theories of liberal democracy, and – following, *inter alia*, Machiavelli, Weber, and Schmitt – advocate a pessimistic or realistic view of politics. Despite this, Köröseyi and his co-authors do not give up on demonstrating some normative qualities of PLD, and hence classify it as a democratic system. First, according to the authors, PLD provides a peaceful method for leadership selection and authorization, and solving the associated conflicts, which is compatible with the minimalist concept of democracy provided by Schumpeter and Przeworski. Second, PLD generates a kind of legitimization of rule and the political regime; and, third, it endows the people with a veto power to ‘reject [...] rulers and/or their particular public policy measure[s]’ (p. 180).

However, serious questions and dilemmas arise here. First, the peaceful selection and authorization of the rulers of a regime does not qualify a system as a democracy, since this situation may be identified in many cases and periods of hereditary or elective monarchies and in other autocracies like the Holy Roman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the late Kádár era in Hungary. Moreover, all regimes have their own mechanisms of legitimizing their rule and political regime, including even with certain forms of elections (we think here of imperial prince-electors, or the institution of parliament). Additionally, violent incidents and serious irregularities may occur in a PLD, proving that the peaceful resolution of conflicts is not always a feature of one, like in the case of Erdogan's Turkey or Putin's Russia, and occasionally even Orbán's Hungary. Moreover, there is the issue of elections as a means of selection, which could be seen as the Achilles' heel of the normative merit of PLD. In the eyes of the authors, elections in a PLD are only 'plebiscitary acts of acclamation,' contributing to 'establishing relations between voters and leaders and creat[ing] the authorisation to lead,' and citizens have only 'a negative power, namely the power of approval or rejection of rulers, which they can apply through elections and referendums' (pp. 142, 152). This equivalence of acclamation (as manipulated authorization, or passive consent) and democratic elections is not obvious, not to mention the fact that this view is fairly blind, deaf, and mute to the unfair nature of political competition which, for example, can empower a leader to constitute 'proper' social identities and help win important elections. Consequently, there is potential to classify (electoral) autocracies as (leader) democracies, which exercise their power behind institutions of formally multi-party elections and a democratic façade, and create, systematically, an uneven playing field for political contestation. Therefore, as in the cases of similar autocratic regimes, the very existence of the de facto citizen (veto) power regarding the rejection of rulers is questionable in PLD.

In addition, the claim that PLD regimes (or those of electoral autocracies) provide a peaceful process of selection and change of rulers in which people have at least a real negative veto power is theoretically unfalsifiable and very subjective. The limited extent of political competition exists for the autocratic reason of monopolizing and preserving political power – and a regime with these goals generates uncertainty in terms of the consequences of elections and the possibility of leader or political change. In contrast to the situation in democratic regimes, this uncertainty is vital in autocratic regimes, thus elections cannot be seen as an indicator of the latter's democratic normative values. In these regimes, sometimes people have real veto power and sometimes they do not, so regime change is sometimes an option via peaceful elections, and at other times it is not. And, most importantly, the truth of this is revealed only *retrospectively*, hence we cannot use the formal existence of elections as *present* evidence of democratic control, even in cases when the opposition can achieve sometimes only partial (typically local and municipal) electoral victories. Therefore, elections and other 'formal representative institutions make for lovely decorations in the shop windows of authoritarian regimes' (Schedler, 2013: 69), which could be true in the case of PLD as well. Consequently, given that the real political control of citizens and the accountability of leaders and other normative merits are highly questionable in the case of PLD as a model of democracy, we must face the fundamental question why should we regard PLD as a genuine form of modern democracy at all? And,

similarly, could such a model exist without indisputable normative power and values as part of democratic theory?

The above-mentioned are only a few examples of the similar dilemmas, thought-provoking statements, and approaches of the book. Besides providing an overarching and systematically developed view of contemporary politics, and giving a detailed description of the Orbán regime's *modus operandi*, the greatest virtue of the book is its provocative nature – in a good sense. The authors' revolt against mainstream approaches and theories could encourage a form of self-reflection and renewal that is able to launch exciting discussions about not only the political system of Hungary, but about many important trends in our political world.

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