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Exemplary People in Mexico and Hungary

A Brief Comparative History from the Mexican Perspective

Introduction

Hungary shares with Mexico three characteristics: the paprika, the colours of the flag and the gypsies (Roma), whom Mexicans call ‘Hungarians’ because they play the violin very well! Mexico and Hungary also have great similarities (or, if you will, historical anomalies¹): the loss of more than half of their territory; their accentuated nationalism and the presence of a quasi-perfect dictatorship; expressed in Mexico during decades of the ruling *PRIAN*,² and in today’s unique Hungarian Orbanism.³ From the beginning I shall ask the reader’s indulgence for an ‘outsider’ analysing Hungarian affairs, always complex, interesting and sometimes contradictory.

Hungary’s geographic centrality in Europe has been a factor of prime importance, having been drawn, voluntarily or involuntarily, to all the important historical conflicts that have occurred in the old continent, particularly among its Central European neighbours. Its Christian cultural focus, adopted by King István,⁴ which was multi-ethnic, underpinned political stability starting from the eleventh century AD.

A short list of key events: Islamic expansion into Central Europe during the first centuries of our era included the territory of the Magyars; the adoption of Christianity and Hungarian participation in successive early Crusades; participation in Napoleonic wars and the subordination or ‘adhesion’ to the Austro–Hungarian empire. By 1914, politics controlled by the military together with potent Austrian nationalist cost Hungarians a gratuitous involvement in the First World War. The subsequent loss of too many citizens’ lives plus 70 per cent of its territory. Moreover, as a result of World War II, the Magyar nation falls into the powerful embrace of the Soviet regime, where obliged political and ideological loyalty meant 45 years of its own neo-Stalinist regime.

The country suffered a failed popular-democratic, anti-Soviet uprising in 1956. On 24 October 1956 Comrade Nagy Imre gave his firm line speech as Prime Minister. This unleashed a civic-military revolt that bloodied the streets of Budapest for 14 days. The grave and unnecessary stupidity of Nagy’s assassination, execution two years later, marks

¹ In Thomas S Kuhn’s sense of crisis of an established order and the search for new paradigms.

² During the entire post-revolutionary period (1917–2018), our country enjoyed virtually no genuine political democracy or fairness in terms of electoral competition.

³ The so-called ‘Coronavirus Protection Law’, enacted on 30 March 2020 allows the Prime Minister to rule by decree. From 30 March until 12 May, he issued 124 decrees.

⁴ The reign of Stephen I (1000–1038), Hungary’s first crowned king.

the foundation of the 32 years of Kádár János's style of paternalist socialism (1956–1988), shortly after relabelled as “Real Socialism”, that is, the only form of government really possible and feasible.

From a Goulash socialism to peripheral capitalism

It is important to stress that the socio-political uprisings of 1956 in Budapest and the Prague Spring in 1968 were the last attempts to reform and democratise the Soviet model of socialism, long before Perestroika and Glasnost. ‘It is not the same power conquered than power granted’, a prominent member of the CC of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP 1989–1993), told me once in an interview. It was a stark recognition of the fragile social legitimacy of its institutions.

The break with the old worker-communist regime in 1988–1989, the transition to new forms of political democracy and the rejection of real socialism was rather smooth, although not exempt from political revanchism against the socialists and communists. At the historic Extraordinary Congress (in May 1988), the leaders of the HSWP (MSZMP) supported the transition, abandoning the paternalism of the Kádár era. Afterwards, in the political-social arena, the right and centre-right partisans will prevail and dominate, in part by recovering symbols of medieval Hungary (895–1526) and some imperial and monarchical nostalgia, such as the insertion of King István's crown on the national flag. “God, Fatherland and Hungary” will become semantic battering rams for the new institutionalism.⁵ The new political structure and economic policies will be consistent with a virtual dismantling of the prior, planned economy. An unrestricted opening to foreign investment and companies, with a predominance of Austrian–German and North American firms and capital, surprised not a few.

During the hardship period of regime transition, in October of 1989, the still-in-power socialist party, surprisingly proposed a system in which compromise and deal-making between multiple political parties, an open economy and active political neutrality could be achieved. This project was oriented to build a Swedish-style social democratic model with national reconciliation. Instead, the national conservative new right forces led by the Democratic Forum and Fidesz, rejected these options, and took an opposite course bent on revenge and painful reckoning with the mistakes of the communist past, among others the execution of Imre Nagy in 1958.

Within a few months, the new leadership began a frenzied dismantling of the state-owned sectors, with privatisation, sale or closure of most public companies and agricultural cooperatives. Farewell was declared to state socialism, but without clear prospects for the future.

⁵ The horrifying and gray Museum of Terror in one of the main avenues of Budapest, or the theft of Kádár's body from its grave years ago, are a palpable sample, among many others, not only of the bad taste, but of the new ‘democratic’ *vendetta* and normality of the country.

Also, at the political level radical changes were made in national emblems and symbols, paradoxically adopting 'new' monarchist symbols of national unity. These anachronisms reflect the motley diversity of the democratising 'revolutionary' conservatism already in power in the new Hungary. Today, what the *New York Times* calls the *Deep State* has taken shape, led by the Baltic States and the Visegrád (V4) group, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Defending the establishment

Viktor Orbán, *animal politikón*⁶ (*zoon politikon*), is a cunning pragmatist and skilful manipulator. Leader of Fidesz, now in its fourth term in Government. He became a true driver and visible head of the internal national power bloc formed during the last three decades. We can establish a simile with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish PM, although without his popular origins. Orbán is the prototype of the tough opportunist and careerist politician who comes from the bourgeois *intelligentsia* and promotes contradictory, seemingly schizophrenic policies, that do not sync with or adapt to the pragmatic and indolent realism of Hungarian culture and society. On the one hand, Fidesz defends an extreme nationalism and insularity (albeit within the European Community),⁷ and on the other, Orbán delivers investment options on a silver platter to foreign capital in today's key sectors of the economy.

Like all pacts forged by imperial covenants, the Trianon Treaty (Versailles, June 1920) imposed on a defeated Hungary after the Great War, cast a dark shadow that nowadays few Hungarians can applaud. In short, Hungary lost a large part of its territory 100 years ago, a traumatic event whose consequences are felt to this day. And while the alliance with Hitler's Germany led to Hungary regaining part of those lost regions, they had to be relinquished shortly thereafter, finding itself on the losing side in the Second World War. The recent controversy over a new memorial is a good reflection of this nostalgic sorrow. Paradoxically, during the communist regime the nation state was consolidated and not an inch of Hungarian territory was lost (nor gained).

The old Hungarian regime was constrained and limited in both political and economic terms by the unfortunate authoritarian Stalinist type of 'really existing socialism'. On the contrary, today's regime and model is limited and subordinated by the needs of capitalist accumulation, global monopolies and quick profits, although with greater political spaces for the participation of society, a system that clearly provides the greatest benefits and opportunities for minorities. Orbán's peculiarity is that he has participated in both regimes, with the advantages and disadvantages that this implies in terms of his origin of political *nomenclature* and careerism.

⁶ *Zoon Logon ekon*, as Aristotle pointed out.

⁷ The Brexit is a very close example, questioned by the return to nationalism, and above all, the opposition to what is foreign, together with the anti-immigration position, of a deeply discriminatory nature.

Some facts

In a few years, Hungary went from an economy of ‘austerity and scarcity’ to one of relative abundance, but with greater social differentiation. In the 1970s and 1980s Hungary, along with East Germany, was the country with the best living conditions within the Soviet bloc. It was the closest thing to a Western welfare state, but with limited political-democratic freedoms and very low civil society involvement. However, during the first years of transition, until joining the European Union (2004), social indicators suggest key socio-economic difficulties. After the crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s (until 1995), Hungary yielded an inflation rate of 20 per cent, and an external debt close to USD \$20 billion.

In 2010, Hungarians paid some of the highest prices in Europe for utilities, thanks to a lack of domestic energy resources as well as monopolies. In order to ease the financial burden on Hungarian families, the government undertook a gradual cut in public utility costs. By the end of 2014, Hungarian families were paying 25 per cent less for energy than in 2010. According to ‘Family First’ and ‘Procreation or Extinguish’ campaigns – with clear objectives of combating demographic aging – the Orbán Government has implemented several policies intended to raise birthrates and reduce the number of abortions and divorces.

According to new KSH (Hungarian Central Statistical Office) figures from December 2017 to February 2018, the number of people with a job rose by more than 750,000 compared to 2010. The unemployment rate now stands at 3.8 per cent, which places Hungary as the country with the fourth lowest unemployment rate within the EU.

Nevertheless, the so-called ‘urbanomics strategies’ seemingly are not working well anymore. For instance, at the end of 2018 external debt had reached more than 102 billion euros, and Hungary Current Account recorded a deficit of USD \$48.1mn in March 2020.

The newest Social Progress Index (SPI) reports that out of 163 countries assessed worldwide, the United States, Brazil and Hungary are the only ones in which people are worse off than when the index began in 2011. Hungary ranks in the SPI 40 out of 163 countries analysed, and 39/163 in GDP *per capita*.⁸

Amongst the highest scores for SPI indicators in Hungary were sanitation, nutrition, basic medical care, shelter and knowledge. At the lower end were indicators such as social inclusiveness, health and access to advanced education, and rather low were political rights and access to information and communications.⁹

Final remarks

The current leaderships of the Visegrád group are not strongly *sympathetic* with the EU and Brussels-based European initiatives. Adversity and instability have not been

⁸ Social Progress Index, s. a.

⁹ Ibid.

uncommon. Paradoxically, even joining the European Union is still making the current regime and many citizens uncomfortable.

During the last two decades, Viktor Orbán became a true *conduttore* of the new power bloc that emerged from the transition in the 1990s. The legitimate aspiration of a social democratic regime linked to a welfare state remains alive in people's minds. Within the EU, Hungary is not respected for its policies such as the construction of walls against immigrants, an overt National-Christian chauvinism, its opposition to fundamental EU values in its overhaul of the country's judiciary and an alleged failure to respect freedom of expression, of religion and equal treatment under the law.

In October 2019, the centre left candidate Gergely Karácsony, won a key election with the support of various opposition parties, including the Greens, which joined together to defeat Fidesz. This could mean the beginning of the end of the authoritarian paternal regime of Orbanism. Gergely Karácsony did not simply win the post of mayor of Budapest, with a clear majority in the city's council, but the opposition coalition also made gains nationwide, winning in 10 out of 23 major cities. This important win represents the first major electoral blow to Mr. Orbán since he swept to power in 2010.

Wishful thinking?

Those of us who have witnessed the events since the late 1980s, may think Hungary is living a kind of 'revival' of the period of authoritarian paternalism *à la János Kádár*. There are not many differences with Viktor Orbán's governing style. The first one with a social-communist left-wing profile, the second with popular-nationalist policies on the conservative side. Paradoxes of life and history? Maybe. But they are being repeated today as an involuntary and unpromising comedy of political and economic realism.

Perhaps a refreshing return to the central thinking of the socialists of the 1990s, among others, Rezső Nyers, János Kádár, Gyula Horn, Miklós Németh, Attila Ágh, is in order. It would be advisable to resume the alternative program outlined in the 1990s by the reformists of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), committed to a social democratic welfare state, with clear objectives based on a program focused on: the preservation of a predominant public sector in the economy, joint ventures, social benefits, full employment and decent pensions, the rejection of NATO bellicosity, an autonomous policy of cooperation and greater closeness with the countries of the post-Soviet space and the members of the non-aligned countries. In times of two severe crises, that of 'Covid-19' and its 'economic corollary' on top of imminent climate change, similar policies could unify much of the political class. Our fear is that such proposals would be very irritating to the European capitalist elites and to the new Magyar *nomenclature* itself.

Finally, in our country, Mexico, the very complicated scenarios presented in 2020, after almost forty years of the application of the neoliberal model and of corruption *in extremis*, the results are a dramatically impoverished people, thinner state structure almost to the point of liquidating its infrastructure, depleted and plundered national

wealth. The neoliberal policies imposed brutally aggravated social inequality. The Covid-19 has come to further complicate things and to strain the political and social relations of the country. Today new alternatives of a progressive nature and of a *welfare state* are being tried out, in order of helping to get out of the crisis.

Joy, sense of humour, the bonhomie of good living, good cuisine, fine Pálinka and Tequila, as well as folkloric disrespect in the face of death, could be other generous cultural characteristics that our two peoples, Hungarians and Mexicans, uncannily have in common.

Literature

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