Annastiina Kallius

LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

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Honoured Custos, Honoured Opponent, dear audience members,

I was in Hungary a month ago, and met with many of those people whose lives you can read about on the pages of my dissertation. A very close friend to many of us fell seriously ill, and, yet again, we gathered in a green garden for a get-together with some food and wine. The mood was subdued, but also filled with a sense of normalcy. Unlike in 2018, the rhythm of life now no longer dominated by cycles of aggressive propaganda. Instead, people discussed visits to maternal health clinics, cancer treatment, and the complex organisation of securing hiking boots for children's class trips.

But, the awareness of living in a non-democratic regime lingered in every conversation. Hardly a single discussion went by without referencing someone who had emigrated or was planning to do so; many among the liberal intelligentsia gathered in that springtime garden worked remotely for organisations in other countries. People often casually remarked that their grassroots democracy work was targeting the long term, and would not, of course, currently challenge the Fidesz regime.

At some point, I sat down with Marcell, who in my dissertation appears as a lecturer at a Budapest-based university. By the early 2020s, Marcell had left academia to work for the Budapest town hall, which since 2019 had become a centre of opposition against Fidesz.

Tonight, he was devastated by the illness of his best friend. The two of them could put up quite the entertaining show in public, he told me—but, in private, their friendship was solemn, serious, and driven by an impossible quest to understand two problems: the problem of violence and the problem of Hungary.

Hungary, Marcell continued, was like living in an ever-evolving puzzle. It was endless in its complexity, and yet somehow so compelling; filled with painful paradoxes and passion that they sought to understand through endless discussions. While they knew that they would never reach a conclusion, they had to try.

In my doctoral dissertation, I approach the puzzle of Hungary through the perspective of knowledge. This perspective reverberates far beyond Hungary, to contexts such as the Nordic countries and the United States where liberalism is in crisis. It is a puzzle that is politically urgent, analytically challenging, and familiar to all of us in this room:

How do we come to know the world around us? What happens when a common ground of truth begins to shake?

These broad questions guided my dissertation. Ethnographically, I follow the liberal milieu in Budapest in 2017 and 2018 through one intellectual family, a high school final-year class, and millennial democracy activists. The chronological chapters culminate with the parliamentary elections in April 2018, when Viktor Orbán secured a third consecutive supermajority. This politically turbulent year

was also the culmination of the retreat of the liberal community into a minority—not just in political terms, but also epistemically.

By epistemic, I mean knowledge, and more specifically, the way reality is represented. These representations are all around us: in the books that we read, in the discussions that we have, and in the pictures that we see. Often, we take for granted that such representations align with our parameters of knowing what is true: in other words, most of us are used to seeing our own truth around us.

I documented an 'epistemic collapse'— when this assumed alignment between truth and its representation is broken; when you see books of fiction in the non-fiction section; when the evening news tells you of a reality you know to be false. Such instances may be hard to take seriously or may even seem comical—but they might also result in the loss of your job or being publicly denigrated.

An epistemic collapse thus refers to a moment when knowledge is no longer stable. It is a productive term that brings into view different, competing systems of knowledge. Thus, it is through the collapse of liberal epistemology that the tentative outline of illiberal epistemology comes into view.

I want to emphasise that there is no post-truth or pre-truth. This is not a question of one system of knowledge replacing another. Rather, coexisting knowledge systems function like a Venn diagram: they might agree on issues of physics and gravity, but disagree on specific questions in politics. This is because they draw on different notions of objectivity.

Ultimately, I argue that, in late 2010s Hungary, competing systems of knowing reality coexisted and competed in what I term in the title the 'politics of knowledge'.

My fieldwork took place in 2017 and 2018, when a shared epistemic anxiety gripped

the Euro-American context. As I am sure many of you can personally testify, liberal elites, researchers, and politicians were filled with anxiety and uncertainty following the Brexit vote and the Trump election and presidency. The topic of the 'rule of law' became a buzzword in European Union institutions.

In Hungary, it was becoming clear that the regime established by the ruling party Fidesz in 2010 was not just a government that could be voted out of power. The liberal elites, who in the 1990s and 2000s had occupied a powerful position, finally came to accept what Viktor Orbán had told them: that the illiberal regime marked a new political era, or in the words of Fidesz, a revolution in the voting booths.

The late 2010s witnessed a further centralisation of economic and administrative power in the hands of Fidesz and a more-entrenched economic integration within the EU single market. In the words of Tamás Gerőcs and Csaba Jelinek (2018), Fidesz established its regime as part of, and not against, the European Union.

Fidesz itself, of course, premises much of its foreign policy on provocation and aggressive rhetoric, emphasising disconnections rather than connections.

The consequences of illiberal ideology are not, however, merely rhetorical. In Hungary, the politics of knowledge meant concrete developments that materially decreased the influence of liberal knowledge institutions and maximised the volume of their state-funded illiberal counterparts.

To name just a few examples, in spring 2017, Fidesz had effectively expelled the Central European University, my liberal-cosmopolitan *alma mater* which trained me in anthropology. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that received funding from abroad were required to register as foreign agents. At the same time,

Fidesz-sponsored research centres and book publishers enjoyed massive funding and visibility.

As I document in my dissertation, state propaganda had become so aggressive that it was impossible to escape. Newspapers, television (TV) shows, gigantic billboards, dramatic TV and radio advertisements, and leaflets and questionnaires distributed to each household created an echo chamber that all told the same story.

According to this story, the Fidesz government finally marked an era of democracy after the rule of corrupt post-communist liberal elites. This new era was labelled the 'System of National Cooperation', *Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*.

The bright future was, the story continues, in danger: the Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist, George Soros, planned to destroy European nation-states by bringing millions of migrants to the continent. Supporting Soros were his liberal mercenaries who worked in undemocratic media outlets and NGOs, and their friends in Brussels who refused to see that the Fidesz regime was what the Hungarian people wanted and represented the dawn of democracy.

I had originally planned a research project on how liberal youth in Budapest imagine Hungary's location in Europe. In autumn 2017, I joined a final-year class in what I call the István Örkény High School, and sat in all of their English, history, and Hungarian literature classes.

My relationship with the students slowly evolved from suspicious looks to small talk, then a fun prom after-party, and, finally, the crucial milestone of chatting on Facebook Messenger. From December onwards, students like Johanna, István, Fanni, Lola, Artúr, and Julian welcomed me in their midst, and we began hanging out.

Through them, I was able to document what it had been like to grow up under illiberalism: they had been 10 years old when Viktor Orbán came to power, and, in April 2018, they would vote for the first time in their lives.

I followed how these youth negotiated complex questions regarding their future choices, the context of the Fidesz regime, and debates with their parents, with whom they shared contradicting ideas of liberalism.

When I told the students of the activism for migrants' rights that I had been involved with since 2011, they shrugged it off as an uninteresting extracurricular activity and instead discussed the latest romantic gossip in the school.

Later, in 2018, when this activism led into an episode where I was listed as a member of George Soros' network on national television, the students found it quite cool. István, for instance, laughed aloud, gave me a high five, and joked that finally he knew why I had money to just hang out with them for a year.

Typical in anthropological research, my focus evolved during the process of participant observation. In winter 2018, I expanded my focus to the liberal milieu at large. This was possible only because, through activism, I had drifted into the edges of the tight web of the Budapest liberal intelligentsia.

In January 2018, the Fidesz regime introduced a plan for a legislative bill called 'Stop Soros', which would criminalise things like 'producing information about migration'. I found myself in the eye of a storm: able to document how a community identified as a target by a new political regime responded to threats against it.

For instance, I ethnographically documented meetings with lawyers discussing whether a prison sentence over a blog post on migration was a realistic fear or pondering if one could be fired from work for participating

in a demonstration. In perhaps the most striking example, Fidesz hired an Israeli private intelligence agency called Black Cube to spy on Marcell's best friend, Nóra.

In this context of authoritarianism, assessing ethics remained a constant challenge. My interlocutors, such as Marcell, did not always make this job any easier: when I asked him whether I could include him in my daily fieldnotes, he shrugged in annoyance and told me to 'do whatever I wanted with that research of mine', and continued to discuss the burning political questions of the day.

I knew that my positionality made it extremely difficult for me to conduct ethical fieldwork among Fidesz supporters. Nevertheless, I was worried about establishing a voyeuristic, one-sided perspective, and began attending public events in Fidesz-community centres.

What I documented brought a certain balance to my material. As I discuss in Chapter 5, much was similar to that in the liberal milieu. During the community events, I found an interconnected fabric of a people gripped with anxiety for the future, democracy, and truth.

Regarding the Fidesz elite in power, however, I witnessed something else: the building of a colossal epistemic infrastructure for producing propaganda that masked economic and administrative power.

To summarise, collecting this material was only possible because of nearly a decade of overlapping work that had led to trusting relationships. As anthropologists have known for a long time, in order to collect in-depth ethnographic data, an anthropologist can never truly be an 'outside' observer.

In autumn 2018, I returned to Helsinki with 275 pages of ethnographic field notes, 40 interview transcripts, and a gigantic collection of newspaper articles, pictures, and screenshots.

These data documented a world of endless relations. I struggled to organise my material into a coherent order until I identified the question that brought it all together: how reality was or was not represented.

In Chapter 2, I identified schismogenesis as a modality of knowledge that cuts across late socialism, liberal democracy, and illiberalism. Famously coined by Gregory Bateson (1935), schismogenesis stands for the creation of difference between social groups that closely interact. When I assessed my material on propaganda in light of the work done by Hungarian scholars such as Balázs Trencsényi (2014), Tamás Hofer (1991), and Éva Kovács (1994), I understood how Fidesz skilfully reproduced a centuries-old antagonism in Hungarian public life.

In Chapter 3, I turned my attention to conspiracy. Max Gluckman's (1963) and Paul Silverstein's (2002) work on gossip and conspiratorial knowledge production helped me to comprehend how my liberal interlocutors also relied on conspiracies—but to make sense of the authoritarian entrenchment. The resulting landscape of omnipresent conspiratorial knowledge shows that any moral charge laid on conspiracies as a 'better' or 'worse' type of knowledge is necessarily political.

In Chapter 4, I was interested in the multiple comparisons people made between illiberalism and previous political eras. I expanded upon the work of Michael Scott (2002) to demonstrate how people rely on comparisons as an epistemic strategy to navigate the changing political context. Furthermore, Marilyn Strathern's (2005) work prompted me to look at the background of the connections and disconnections these comparisons imply.

In Chapter 5, I was interested in truth, and returned to F. G. Bailey's (1991) classical work on coexisting logics: first, truth as

correspondence, which means that the truth-value of a claim is measured in relation to how it represents an external reality, which gradually comes to be known.

In truth as a coherence, on the other hand, truth is already known in its entirety. Whether something counts as a fact is measured hermetically, inwards. These logics of truth do not cancel each other out: instead, they coexist and compete, between communities as well as within them.

Building on this literature, which is now perhaps even timelier, I demonstrate how the illiberal regime's propaganda follows truth as coherence, where the factuality of things depends upon whether they fit the already known narrative of the propaganda. The liberal community, on the other hand, by and large, still expected to see truth as correspondence in the public sphere.

In Chapter 6, I followed how these different truth constellations collapse into a single shared reality. Ethnographically, this chapter follows Fidesz' election victory in April 2018 and events such as the public blacklisting of individuals as agents of George Soros. Why did some respond with fear and others with indignation? I argue that this moment made visible hitherto eclipsed relations when people's various personal relationships to power became relevant.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Make-Believe, I place Hungary in the context of the political economy of the European Union and discuss the future-oriented, revolutionary nature of the Fidesz regime. Combined with strong nationalism, I argue that the regime fulfils what historian Roger Griffin (1993) defined as the 'fascist minimum'—that is, 'palingenetic ultranationalism' or the rebirth of a nation.

In this political project, knowledge is an essential component, as I argue based of

the work of Yael Navaro (2012) and Begoña Aretxaga (2003). The regime places a heavy emphasis on imagination and fantasy in the construction of the political. Following the logic of truth as coherence, whether something fits the political imagination of Fidesz comes to define the very parameters of objectivity.

Thus, my dissertation documents a rare moment, focusing on how people experience the beginning of an era. Together, the analysis of different modalities of knowledge provides the main finding of this dissertation, which seems striking in its obviousness, and yet analytically profound: that the new political regime is also a regime of knowledge.

With this finding, I join scholars such as Alexei Yurchak (2005) and Andreas Glaeser (2010) who examined the change of political eras in East Germany and the Soviet Union in epistemic terms. I further develop this anthropological work by showing how the epistemic collapse brings into view different, coexisting modalities of coming to know the truth.

Ultimately, I provide a tentative outline of illiberal epistemology. It is not against science, but defines objectivity through a prefigured political narrative. In other words, objectivity is sought from internal coherence rather than external correspondence. This finding helps advance anthropological discussions on knowledge and the crisis of liberalism.

So, what happens when a shared ground of truth begins to shake? My dissertation shows that there were different grounds to begin with, because different ways of coming to know the truth coexisted in the first place.

As I stated at the beginning, this puzzle of knowledge is shared across the Euro-American context. What sets Hungary apart, however, is the centralisation of administrative and economic power in the hands of one party in a

way that would not, for the moment, be possible, for instance, in Finland, the United Kingdom or the United States.

But, what is shared is that different ways of coming to know the truth coexist, that political regimes are also epistemic, and, consequently, that the crisis of liberalism in the Euro-American sphere must be understood in epistemic terms.

I now call upon you, Assistant Professor Paolo Heywood, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

ANNASTIINA KALLIUS
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
annastiina.kallius@helsinki.fi

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