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Current Comment: The Illiberal Academic Authority. An Oxymoron?

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The emergence of illiberal science policy also raises serious questions about the European scientific authorization process as the rapid spread of illiberal science policies, such as closing accredited study programs and research institutions, privatizing higher education, appointing university leaders based on their loyalty to the government, ignoring quality assurance, etc. demand not only a reaction but also critical analysis. The article applies the theoretical framework of the polypore state (Grzebalska, Pető) to tackle the difficulty lies in understanding the rise of illiberal science policy in Hungary, as it is a twofold case study in both polypore government control/state capture, and neoliberal marketization of higher education.

The rapid spread of illiberal science policies, such as closing accredited study programs and research institutions, privatizing higher education, appointing university leaders based on their loyalty to the government, ignoring quality assurance, etc. demands not only a reaction but also critical analysis.¹ In this paper I claim that science policy, as a national competency with an international character, is especially suited to spearhead illiberalization efforts because it offers something no other policy field can offer: academic authorization. Via academic authorization, science policy secures the legitimacy of all other illiberal states' activities. Illiberal politicians and oligarchs alike recognized the importance of educational institutions as sites of knowledge production and transfer, training of loyal supporters, academic authorization, and dissemination of ideas abroad. Illiberal spin doctors have similarly acknowledged that the academic authority granted by these organizations is necessary not only to legitimize their ideological agenda, but more importantly to secure employment for the loyal supporters who will train further loyal supporters, who then will take over the already existing educational and research institutions. In their communications, evidence-based policymaking has been the basis of governance. Illiberal politicians also refer to surveys and research conducted by experts, with the difference that the surveys do not meet academic standards and boast neither authorization from academic institutions nor measurable scientific achievements.²

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¹ Eslen-Ziya 2020; Furstenberg et al. 2020; Pető 2019a; Pető 2020.

² In the case of Russia and queer studies, see Moss 2021, on 17–36.

Previous discussion in so far are based on the false premise that illiberal states have *not* implemented a science policy distinct from that of the mainstream or previous authoritarian regimes which cannot explain the long-term impact that science policy has had on academic authority. I argue that another explanatory framework – the illiberal polypore state – is needed to recognize the global danger illiberal states pose to science via changes in academic authorization processes. Illiberal polypore science policy is hard to recognize as something new because it is hard to differentiate illiberal actors' vocabulary from that of neoliberal science policy. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, other European countries hoped to resolve the structural crisis by applying increasingly absurd solutions to Hungary's so-called unorthodox policies. This shows how dangerously quickly national cases can set examples for other countries. Science institutions and actors are globally connected, so transfers between them happen quicker than before. Measures introduced by illiberal states, such as the imposition of direct control over universities' finances, deletion of previously accredited study programs, or invention of new disciplines were first tested in Hungarian laboratories and now are in use in other countries.³

1. Illiberal Polypore Science: A New Analytical Framework

George Mosse, in his oft-quoted *Masses and Man*, described fascism as an “amoeba-like absorption of ideas from the mainstream of popular thought and culture, countered by the urge towards activism and taming,” along with a ruthless dismantling of the liberal parliamentary order.⁴ Here he was referring to the inadequate political response to radicalization of the mainstream in the interwar Europe. For the past decade, political scientists have at great length discussed terminology that helps us understand recent developments in countries as different as Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Brazil, the US, and Turkey: mafia state, hybrid state, autocratic legalism, constitutional authoritarianism, etc.⁵ Together with Weronika Grzebalska, we call these states “illiberal polypore”, based on their common *modus operandi*.⁶ The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but more polypores. Unlike political scientists who admire the effectiveness of these states,⁷ we argue that polypore states do not have original ideas; rather, they take the ideas of others and use them for their own purpose: self-maintenance. Polypore institutions mask themselves as “real” institutions, i.e., as “one of them” but they are fundamentally different. The one most relevant to academic knowledge production, is the founding and funding of new research and

³ Pető and Vasali 2014.

⁴ Mosse 1980.

⁵ Bogaards 2009; Scheppele 2018.

⁶ Pető 2019b; Grzebalska and Pető 2018, on 164–172.

⁷ Krastev 2018.

teaching institutions bearing the same profile as the already existing ones. This direct intervention is creating a new phenomenon: polypore science.

In terms of its *modus operandi*, an illiberal regime can best be understood as a polypore state: a parasitic organism that feeds on its host's vital resources while also contributing to its decay, producing only a fully dependent state structure in return. On the one hand, illiberal "polyporism" involves exploitation and appropriation of various aspects of the European liberal democratic project, e.g., institutions, procedures, concepts, and funding opportunities. On the other hand, polyporism involves the illiberal regime's divestiture of resources from those it regards as beneficiaries of the "corrupt liberal post-communist system" – i.e., the already existing human rights and civil society sector – in order to transfer those resources to its own base, securing and enlarging it. Moreover, unlike Mosse's amoeba, which has an existence and economy of its own, the polypore usually attacks already damaged trees; hence, illiberal forces typically rise to power in the context of weak state institutions, weak and divided progressive parties and a failing liberal democratic project. In the case of science policy, an already weakened and underfunded higher education and research infrastructure controlled its easy prey for illiberal forces. The polypore state incorporates far-right extremism to legitimize and maintain the very existence of the polypore, whose only source of livelihood is the life energy and ideas that stem from the tree under attack. Therefore, it is in the polypore's vital interest to keep the tree alive using by use its resources and structures – institutions of academic authorization among them. In the case of science policy, the illiberal polypore institution uses vocabulary appropriated from neoliberal science policy up to a certain and controlled limit to describe its endeavors, thereby legitimizing its own existence while using the available resources to develop its own clientele and network.

The difficulty lies in understanding the rise of illiberal science policy in Hungary, as it is a twofold case study in both polypore government control/state capture, and neoliberal marketization of higher education. In the European context, the main actors used to be state-financed actors. Now, however, the neoliberalization of academia has opened scientific knowledge production up to corporations, which are interested solely in their own profit,⁸ as is also true of illiberal actors. This combination of state capture and profit-making for the few also makes for a unique, deeply influential situation with long-lasting consequences for the creation, protection, and transfer of academic authority.

2. Modus Operandi of Illiberal Academic Authorization

The rise of polypore science institutions can be explained in several ways, all connected to unmet expectations after 1989.

Since 1990, public funding has been withdrawn from Hungarian higher education and research institutes, creating underpaid and therefore full-time

⁸ Rizvi 2016.

researchers at several universities who are unable to participate in research, having necessarily lagged behind counterparts with very different institutional and financial backgrounds. Scientists, scientific researchers, and academicians have suffered constant frustration due to the failure to integrate Hungarian and Eastern European science into academia in general, let alone into the European academic system, prompting them to find other survival strategies. But although the much-anticipated economic revival and improved financial situation expected after 1989 were not achieved, it seemed possible to acquire domestic quality assurance and research resources, if not the competitive European resources for academic research. That led, on the one hand, to the rise of the self-colonizing discourse of catching up with the imagined “West” together with uncritical copying policies and programs,⁹ but on the other hand to the appropriation of post-colonial arguments spread by illiberal forces presenting geopolitical inequalities as colonialism that can be defeated by “patriotic fights”.¹⁰

The other failed expectation concerned the assumed direct connection between higher educational degree and respectable lifestyle. Higher education, and especially Hungarian higher education, is the most isolated and least socially mobile education in the world and contributes the least to social mobility.¹¹ This means that although first-generation intellectuals in Hungarian higher education make great personal or even familial financial sacrifices, they cannot build the career they hoped for due to the hierarchical, feudal character of higher education.

These failed expectations have structural consequences. Unlike Estonia or the Czech Republic, Hungary has so far opted not to transform its higher education and quality assurance system to a full neoliberal metric evaluation system, to leave room for individual and informal bargaining in matters of academic evaluation.¹² This closedness has contributed to the popularity of polypore institutions, where the expectation is clear and transparent: unquestionable loyalty to the tribe. At the same time these polypore institutions are spaces for “educated acquiescence,” which Perry defined as a deal in which scholars’ political compliance buys from the state an “attractive package of privileges and benefits (social prestige, political influence, material goods, and the like) for successful recipients of higher education – where the criteria for success are also defined by the state”.¹³

A polypore institution uses a double strategy, emptying the previous institutional structure of academic work while also establishing its own network of institutions at the same time. This policy includes not just the funding of new institutions but also takes resources from other institutions with similar profiles to eliminate them, just like the polypore fungus takes the resources of the tree.

⁹ Gagyi 2016, on 349–372.

¹⁰ Chandra 2015, on 563–573.

¹¹ Radó 2007, on 3–40.

¹² Hungaricus 2007.

¹³ Perry 2020, on 2.

3. Founding Parallel Institutions

In the past decade, these illiberal polypore countries have founded several new colleges of advanced studies, research institutions, museums, and universities with the same profiles as the already existing museums and universities. In the field of historiography alone, for example, the Hungarian state has created and funded six new historical research institutes since the early 2010s, including the Veritas Institute, the Committee of National Remembrance (NEB), the Clio Institute, the Research Institute and Archives for the History of Regime Change (RETÖRKI), the Institute for Hungarian Studies, and the Rubicon Institute. These institutes simulate quality assurance by functioning without adherence to generally accepted scientific standards. In a survey taken before COVID hit, public opinion still trusted scientists more than doctors and teachers.¹⁴ Since their main goal is to influence public history, they primarily publish online journals. But parallel institutions are not just tools of the cultural war: they are also present in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and other fields, where reliable pro-government scientists are offered well-paid employment and, more importantly, keep other scientists at bay, having learned very quickly that they can be replaced at any moment. The double strategy of founding parallel institutions while also undermining the legitimacy of already existing institutions signals that academic credentials gained in academic authorization systems are no longer valued now that anybody can be awarded professorship.

Polypore and state institutions with the same profile differ, in that the available state funding for the polypore institutions seems limitless, now that funds from other state institutions are being pumped into the state-financed polypore institutions, leading to those state-funded institutions' further impoverishment. Due to lack of research or travel funds, the faculties working there are unable to establish international contacts, which further intensifies their isolation and provincialization. Another obvious difference emerges in funding practices: faculty members of polypore institutions earn at least twice as much as state-funded faculty and furthermore have access to research and travel grants from their institutions.¹⁵ The abundance of national funding replaces EU/outside funding even as it renders it obsolete and suspicious.

In polypore academia, loyalty to the in-group secures access to funding, and unlike European research grants, this funding is available, secure, abundant, and easily obtained. The only precondition is that the proposed research should be compatible with the aims of the state, i. e., securitizing discourse and supporting the ideology of familism – not only in social sciences and humanities but also in STEM. The Hungarian Minister for Technology and Innovation altered a list of recipients of research grants – suggested by a

¹⁴ Ipsos: Global Trust in Professions 2020, online: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-09/global-trust-in-professions-ipsos-trustworthiness-index.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3XCVDbxmhjg5ZZ0y1vxIYrd6y8fkvfmBpj1jPMYulyRYtjuvFvtU0HMwg> (accessed 31 October 2021).

¹⁵ Miklósi 2020.

professional body he himself had appointed – to include loyal supporters who had not made it onto the original list.¹⁶

Another difference between these polypore institutions and the previously existing institutions is that at the former institutions, academic authority stems not from institutionalized quality assurance but from formal and informal performances of loyalty to the governing party. The lack of quality control in these polypore institutions has also led to attacks on existing systems and institutions of academic quality control in general in countries whose governments are appointing politically reliable commissars as leaders and members of quality assurance institutions.

A further characteristic of polypore science policy is its non-transparent hiring process in which only political loyalty counts. This policy also connects to the re-masculinization of science (male networks, familialism etc.) and the masculinization of the profession. The recently appointed faculty consists solely of young, very ambitious men who are well connected to the elderly men spearheading these developments, who are looking for young men who look very much like themselves, only 25 years younger.¹⁷

4. Hacking Existing Institutions

The illiberal state also systematically destroys any other existing mechanisms of scientific evaluation, turning emptied institutions into performative formalities, rendering them mere simulacra of the original institutions. The polypore not only creates parallel institutions, but also weakens already existing infrastructure and discredits its activities. That strategy explains the attacks on the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which awards the title of Doctor of Academy of Sciences (DSc) – until recently a requisite for professorship.¹⁸ Now, state universities are busy deleting this requirement from their bylaws on promotion criteria. The personnel of these polypore institutions are recruited via informal personal channels and networks, not via academic job announcements. At universities that have recently been privatized (including Corvinus University, Miskolc University, MOME, Pécs, Debrecen and Szeged), the promotion process does not even require mandatory purview by an independent accreditation body.

While the polypore state hacks quality assurance via accreditation committees, it also mimics the neoliberalized scientific evaluation system of indices. Due to recent modifications in the Collection of Hungarian Scientific Works (MTMT, Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára), where all Hungarian academics must upload their published work along with citations, publication in a Q1 journal is only worth as much as a publication in any of the Hungarian scientific journals. The same is happening in Poland: during the recent modification of the evaluation system, international, peer reviewed English

¹⁶ Csurgó 2020.

¹⁷ Barna and Pető 2021, on 427–438.

¹⁸ Kenesei 2013.

language journals were replaced with local, Polish journals whose profiles and, of course, editorial boards are pro-government.¹⁹

During the hacking of the quality assurance system, the previous consensus on publishing in English in scientific journals was also questioned, signaling a change in scientific orientation: instead of the global North, it now rather tends to the East, to Russia and China. The official requirements for an appointment to a professorship specify only that academics should have publications in foreign languages and experience in teaching abroad. Forgoing the requirement to publish in English means that these polypore academics are publishing in self-published English-language journals in Central Asia, Russia, Iran, or China, and teaching in Hungarian at universities lavishly supported by the Hungarian government in neighboring countries with Hungarian minorities. It is important to stress that these journals, like *Arc és álarc*, *Századvég*, and *Kommentár* differ from the system of “predatory” journals that are simply shady business enterprises.²⁰ Meanwhile, the polypore journals financed with taxpayers’ money are publishing the work of closed circles based on political loyalty without any quality control, while still claiming the same academic authority as other, rigorous journals.

5. Consequences

At this point, the most important consequence is the new academic system’s influence on the choice of topics and academic questions raised, which points to a return of self-censorship in the selection of research topics, participation in public discussion, or even a Facebook post.²¹

Syllabi are controlled, and video surveillance systems are being installed in classrooms. An interesting example of an adaptation strategy can be observed among gender studies scholars who are now continuing their same research under the umbrella of “family studies” instead of gender studies. Ministers of science in illiberal states are even taking the liberty of creating new disciplines like family studies, which is replacing gender studies in Hungary, or Poland’s jettisoning of anthropology in favor of the study of culture and religion, thus demonstrating the impact of polypore science policy on science.²²

In this article I am connecting the *modus operandi* of the illiberal polypore state to its redefinition of science, arguing that the transformation of science is as important a part of its agenda as any other policy area. Using Gramsci’s concept of the struggle for “cultural hegemony” I argued that illiberal state

¹⁹ Palus 2019.

²⁰ <https://www.hamvasintezet.hu/megjelent-a-hamvas-intezet-folyoiratanak-uj-szama-2/>, <https://szazadvég.hu/hu/tudomanyos-publikaciok>, and <http://www.kommentar.info.hu/archivum/2006/2> (accessed 10 September 2021).

²¹ Felix 2020, on 1–22.

²² Bothwell 2020.

science policy fundamentally transforms academic authorization on the national and also on the international level.²³

The emergence of illiberal science policy also raises serious questions about European scientific authorization process. The united European evaluation system has failed to meet the challenge posed by illiberal states which transformed academic authorization system to an oxymoron. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the Hungarian Accreditation Committee obtained its European license (ENQA, European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) only after CEU was forced into exile and the two-year master's program in gender studies was stricken from the accredited study list.²⁴

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²³ Gramsci 1971; Laclau and Mouffe 1985.

²⁴ Sikeresen zárult a magyar felsőoktatás akreditációja (Successfully fended the accreditation of the Hungarian Higher Education); <https://hook.hu/hu/felsooktatas/sikeresen-zarult-a-magyar-felsooktatasi-akkreditacios-bizottsag-nemzetkozi-akkreditacioja> (accessed 10 September 2021).

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