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**Viktor Orbán's politics of knowledge,
intellectuals, and institutions
in the light of Gramsci's ideas**



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An instructive case

Iván Szelényi, a well-known Hungarian sociologist – born in Budapest in 1938, one of the most influential Hungarian social scientists since the 1960s and 1970s, and later a scholar who built a distinguished international career – returned to Hungary after four decades abroad, following his retirement in 2014. Not long after his moving back home to Budapest, he received an invitation from the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, for a private, one-on-one meeting. In the prime minister's office, Orbán posed the following question to him:

«Professor, have you ever thought of writing a sequel to your book *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power?*» the prime minister asked. «Oh,» I replied, «that was never entirely accurate, and after the regime change [of 1989–1990], even if the intelligentsia had had class power ambitions, those disappeared from the agenda». «Not at all», Orbán answered. «If anything, I disappointed the Hungarian intelligentsia when, in 1998, during my first government, I did not help the former dissident intellectuals into class power»¹.

Szelényi received this question from the Hungarian prime minister after having spent nearly forty years teaching and conducting research at some of the finest sociology departments in Australia and the United States (Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide; University of Wisconsin, Madison; City University of New York; University of California, Los Angeles; Yale University, New Haven; and New York University, Abu Dhabi). Yet in Hungary, most people do not know him primarily for his successful international academic career. Rather, they know him for the book in question (*The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*²), which he wrote clandestinely with George Konrád in 1973-1974 in a village near Budapest, and for which neither author could continue to work as a social researcher in state-socialist Hungary due to its subversive content.

In that book, they argued that, following the post-World War II nationalization of the wealth owned by the capitalist class and the landed aristocracy, state socialism did not produce a classless society. Instead, a distinctly new power structure had consolidated. Power had been seized by the leading functionaries of the communist party-state, the ruling bureaucratic estate, which at the time followed a Stalinist orientation. Yet after Stalin's death in 1953, and following the 1956 Hungarian revolution, as well as from the early 1960s onward, reform communists sought to reestablish their legitimacy. To do so, they needed intellectuals – economists, engineers, scientists and researchers, and humanist intellectuals such as artists, writers, journalists, and media workers – whose expertise and ideological work could help persuade the Hungarian people, the working classes (both industrial workers and peasants), to accept social and economic reforms. The slogan of the era was the reform or humanization

¹ Szelényi, 2016, pp. 45-46.

² Konrád & Szelényi, 1979.

of socialism, a theme closely resembling the «socialism with a human face» associated with the Prague Spring of 1968. Writing in the mid-1970s, Konrád and Szelényi argued that this opening of opportunity set the intelligentsia on a path toward merging with the party-state's ruling bureaucratic estate and thereby becoming a new ruling class. Hence the book's title: it describes the intelligentsia as it is on the road to class power – a process the authors foresaw but that ultimately did not unfold exactly as predicted.

Why, then, did the prime minister ask the sociologist whether he would write a sequel of the book? Viktor Orbán had already become convinced during the 1990s – and at the latest, after his first government's electoral defeat in 2002 – that he was fundamentally incompatible with the post-1989 liberal intelligentsia. The prime minister may have believed that a sequel to the book would recount the victory of the Orbán regime, and Orbán personally, over the liberal intelligentsia, which had rejected him and his politics from the beginning of the 1990s. So Orbán openly expressed his intention to use Szelényi's *oeuvre*, famous book, and intellectual authority as a political tool for legitimizing his regime. Of course, this sequel was never written by him. Szelényi was and remained a representative of critical sociology, as a follower of Max Weber, Karl Marx, and the famous Hungarian social scientists, Karl Mannheim and Karl Polányi, similar to the students of Georg Lukács, the representatives of the so-called Budapest School of philosophy. Later, however, instead of Szelényi, one of Orbán's organic intellectuals, Márton Békés, wrote this sequel in a book, just as Orbán had wished³.

As a critical scholar, as a (self-)reflexive sociologist of intellectuals and power, Szelényi explained the historical and social background of this case with remarkable clarity in an interview much later:

During the Kádár era [in Hungary], from the 1970s and 1980s onward, the intelligentsia was distinctly liberal and concentrated in Budapest. In contrast, the *Fidesz* party had a tense relationship with this milieu from the very beginning, because the party's founders were mostly first-generation intellectual boys from the provinces who did not feel at home among the liberal intelligentsia in Budapest. It is no coincidence that many outstanding liberal intellectuals became *persona non grata* in Orbán's eyes. They therefore seek to dismantle this Budapest bubble and replace it with a so-called national-patriotic intelligentsia. They attract those intellectuals who come from similar backgrounds and who find the intelligentsia in Budapest just as alien as Orbán and his companions once did⁴.

Szelényi also stated with precision why and how this has been happening in recent years:

If the [Orbán regime] does not have, or has only a narrow circle of, intellectuals, it simply produces its own. There are various methods for this. The deliberate production of its own intelligentsia is taking place, for example, in universities and colleges

³ Békés, 2022.

⁴ Szelényi, 2023.

for advanced studies. For some, being part of the «national intelligentsia» is a mark of distinction, and many are willing to be loyal to the regime in order to obtain it⁵.

Transforming knowledge through the replacement of the intelligentsia

In 2026, Viktor Orbán will have served as Hungary's prime minister for twenty years. Although he has been politically active since the mid-1980s – four decades – he spent roughly half of this period in opposition (between 1986 and 1998, and again between 2002 and 2010). During his first term in office (1998–2002) he offered only a preview of his political ambitions. Since 2010, however, he has governed continuously – by 2026, for sixteen uninterrupted years – with exceptionally strong authority, commanding a two-thirds, constitution-amending majority in the Hungarian National Assembly. Such a timespan – two decades in government – provides ample perspective for assessing his politics of knowledge, intellectuals, and institutions, as well as his views on knowledge and power, and his struggle against interpretations critical of him and against an intelligentsia independent of his regime.

Orbán, who was and still is a great admirer of Silvio Berlusconi, is the most influential Hungarian politician since the regime change of 1989–1990. Yet what is interesting here is not Orbán as a person or an individual, but as a political leader and the architect of the Orbán regime. Borrowing Antonio Gramsci's terminology⁶, Orbán simultaneously leads and represents a «political bloc» (his party, *Fidesz*, together with its ally, the *Christian Democratic People's Party*), a «social bloc» (a broad base of supporters and voters drawn from the political unification of various social groups), and a «historical bloc» (which, through the articulation of elements of the economic base and the ideological-cultural superstructure, possesses material-productive resources, an extensive institutional network, and distinctive intellectual-ideological components). Moreover, since the European «migration crisis» of 2015, Orbán has become an actor of European politics (as an ally of Matteo Salvini among others), and later, with Donald J. Trump's first election victory in 2016, global politics as well. There can be no doubt that Orbán has become one of the key figures in the illiberal international «historical bloc» in recent years.

The issue of this section is «war on knowledge». Yet it would be inaccurate to claim that Orbán's politics of knowledge is characterized by a general hostility toward knowledge as such. His aim is not to defeat or abolish knowledge per se, but rather to replace previously dominant forms of knowledge – to displace the knowledge that had been authoritative before. This also implies replacing the previous *carriers* of knowledge, the intellectuals. The instrument for achieving this transformation is the restructuring of the institutions responsible for the production and dissemination of knowledge. Orbán regards knowledge as inseparable from social, political, and power relations. He recognizes neither an autonomous intelligentsia nor independent knowledge. He conducts politics

⁵ Szelényi, 2023.

⁶ Gramsci, 1971.

against autonomous knowledge production and dissemination, and against an intelligentsia not dependent on him – against interpretations and intellectuals critical of him. His war is thus directed against the political and social adversaries of the Orbán regime (and *their* knowledge).

As a young man, Viktor Orbán was strongly influenced by Antonio Gramsci. In his thesis as a law student, he used Gramsci's writings to examine how the Polish movement, *Solidarity*, organized civil society against the Polish communist party-state during the 1980s⁷. Later, in his political practice, he repeatedly referred to Gramsci. The logic of his political maneuvers becomes more intelligible if one employs a Gramscian interpretive framework. For this reason, I argue that Orbán's politics of knowledge, intellectuals, and institutions is best understood when situated within the conceptual constellation of Gramsci's thought⁸.

It is essential to note, however, that Orbán borrows only Gramsci's methods, not his ultimate political goals. Characteristically, Orbán learned from Gramsci only a mode of political practice – a technique of power, the instruments of hegemony building – not the substantive direction or ideological content of Gramsci's politics. Gramsci, as is well known, was first a socialist and then a communist journalist, organizer, politician, ideologue, and theorist, who never deviated from the path of historical materialism. Although he renewed and expanded the Marxism of his time – resisting the economism, mechanical determinism, and reductionist materialism of the Second International – he remained throughout his life a steadfast follower of Marx, and a committed anti-capitalist and anti-fascist⁹. None of this applies to Orbán. Over the past forty years, he has been a consistently right-wing – more precisely, new-right – nationalist, anti-Marxist, and anti-communist politician, and during the last decade and a half he has built an illiberal, radical-right, authoritarian populist regime in Hungary¹⁰. In terms of political content, there is virtually nothing in common between Gramsci's and Orbán's politics.

Orbán's politics consistently strives for domination. His goal is to construct a political regime anchored in a stable «historical bloc» in the Gramscian sense, one that exercises durable rule – that is, one that achieves «hegemony». In Hungarian politics, from the outset of his career, he sought to build his counter-hegemony first against the forces of pre-1989 state socialism, and later against the post-1989 post-state-socialist liberal-neoliberal forces. After the regime change in 1989, a liberal-neoliberal hegemony emerged, which also determined the politics of knowledge, the intelligentsia, and institutions. In the

⁷ In the thesis, Orbán primarily used Gramsci's distinction between civil society and political society, as well as his theory of hegemony, with the aim of mapping out how state socialist societies were organized in the 1980s, with particular reference to Poland (Orbán, 1987). To this end, he read the Hungarian translation of Gramsci's *The New Prince* (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 123–276), which he later, in 2023, described in an interview as «a genuine left-wing book about power». Orbán did not publish his thesis but made it available online.

⁸ Gramsci, 1971; Rogers, 2020.

⁹ Davidson, 2008.

¹⁰ Rogers, 2020.

world of research, science, academia, and universities, this meant that the production of market-oriented, directly usable knowledge came to the fore, the training of professionals became preferable to the intelligentsia, and class-based access to the knowledge thus produced and disseminated became more pronounced. After 2010, the Orbán regime shaped these efforts in its own image. This is the scale of bloc-formation and hegemonic struggle in the Hungarian context. On the global scale, and from the perspective of Giovanni Arrighi¹¹ – who reinterpreted Gramsci’s ideas as systemic cycles of accumulation and hegemonic transitions – we may say that these decades (from roughly the 1980s to about 2008) correspond to the era of the United States’ hegemony, and within it, to the period of financialization and neoliberal globalization. The global economic crisis of 2008, however, destabilized the liberal-neoliberal historical bloc and its hegemony both in Hungary and worldwide¹². In the 2000s – and especially after 2008 – Orbán’s principal political objective became the struggle to bring about a hegemonic transition¹³. The instrument for achieving this was the replacement of the intelligentsia that had produced and reproduced dominant interpretations, along with the transformation of the institutional structures that generated and maintained hegemonic knowledge. In the struggles for hegemony – and especially for establishing a new hegemony – Orbán required new institutions, a new intelligentsia, and new knowledge¹⁴.

Intellectuals as carriers of knowledge

Following Gramsci, we may regard as the intelligentsia those social groups whose primary function is to produce, reproduce, distribute, cultivate, and disseminate knowledge, thereby occupying a determinate position within the overall system of social relations¹⁵.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935 in the prisons of Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime, Antonio Gramsci first and foremost emphasized that every human being is an intellectual, every human being is a philosopher; yet he drew an important distinction by stressing that far from everyone is given the opportunity to perform intellectual functions in society¹⁶. Through the division of labor and the class structure, vast numbers of people are deprived of the chance to develop their inherent capacities and assume intellectual functions in social life¹⁷.

¹¹ Arrighi, 2000; Arrighi & Silver 2001; Arrighi, 1994/2010.

¹² Crouch, 2011; Streeck, 2013/2014; Fabry, 2019.

¹³ Bohle, 2006; Scheiring, 2020.

¹⁴ Orbán has not written a book summarizing his views in Hungarian or English, but several critical and appreciative analyses of his political thinking are available in English. The three most important books critical of him are: Lendvai, 2017; Scheiring, 2020; Kovács & Trencsényi, 2019. The two most characteristic books that justify his policy were written by his organic intellectuals: Békés, 2022; G. Fodor, 2024.

¹⁵ Gramsci, 1971, p. 5, 8.

¹⁶ Gramsci, 1971, p. 9, 323.

¹⁷ Gramsci, 1971, p. 9.

Gramsci primarily distinguished between two characteristic types of intellectuals: the traditional and the organic¹⁸. Traditional intellectuals are typically linked to earlier epochs and social orders (the Church, the old universities, the academies, and the artistic elite). They tend to imagine themselves as the inheritors of timeless knowledge, characterized by an *esprit de corps* that casts them as independent and autonomous guards of universal values. Characteristically, they consider themselves detached from the structure of society (its class relations) as well as from relations of power. For Gramsci, all this is an illusion: in reality, this stratum of intellectuals is a remnant of the hegemonic structure of an earlier historical bloc¹⁹.

By contrast, organic intellectuals always emerge from a rising or newly ascendant social group (typically a class), forming that group's intellectual stratum. They are organic because they arise from within the group (class) itself and remain closely connected to it as a structural element: they articulate its interests. The members of this organic intelligentsia are not necessarily classical intellectuals (university professors, writers, or members of elite artistic circles); rather, they are the offspring of their ascending class – organizers, activists, journalists, politicians (party cadres), and movement leaders. Their task is to forge and consolidate their class's political unity; they are therefore integrated, committed, and politically active thinkers, actors, and agitators of their class²⁰.

First, Orbán has made significant efforts to absorb and incorporate segments of the traditional intelligentsia. Those segments of the traditional intelligentsia most willing to accept this arrangement tended to be the ones already inclined toward conservative, traditionalist, right-wing, or nationalist. Alongside this strategy – and increasingly at the expense of the traditional intelligentsia – Orbán and his regime have also invested substantial effort and significant resources in cultivating a new, younger, loyal organic intelligentsia. In this process, certain institutions became key: they served, on the one hand, to absorb compliant segments of the traditional intelligentsia and marginalize those unwilling to cooperate or those who resisted; and, on the other hand, to educate, appoint, and promote a new, loyal, and committed organic intelligentsia by providing positions, avenues for advancement, and the resources required to found and operate these institutions.

Gramsci's words accurately express Orbán's politics of intellectuals:

One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer «ideologically» the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals²¹.

¹⁸ Gramsci, 1971, pp. 5-10.

¹⁹ Gramsci, 1971, pp. 6-8.

²⁰ Gramsci, 1971, p. 6, 10.

²¹ Gramsci, 1971, p. 10.

Orbán on the road to hegemony

From this perspective, Orbán's efforts to build his regime can be divided into three distinct periods. (Within the present scope, I do not address the first decade and a half – from the mid-to-late 1980s through the mid-to-late 1990s – during which Orbán's political organization, Fidesz, was a liberal human-rights party and a market-oriented neoliberal formation.) The analysis below presents the remaining three periods in greater detail:

1. 1998-2002: Supporting the right-wing traditional intelligentsia during the first term in office
2. 2002-2010: Building counter-hegemony from the opposition
3. 2010-2026: Orbán regime – building hegemony in government with a constitution-making majority

1. 1998-2002: Supporting the right-wing traditional intelligentsia during the first term in office

In 1995, Orbán Viktor's party (*Fidesz*) reorganized itself, and after a protracted political struggle, it came to power in 1998 in coalition with two other right-wing parties by defeating the government composed by the political coalition of the post-state-socialist left and the liberal party. At this time, Orbán's primary effort was to bring the right-wing of the traditional intelligentsia under their political umbrella. Although the party's leadership – composed largely of young politicians in their thirties – considered themselves organic intellectuals, they also required the support of the older, more established figures of the traditional right-wing, national-conservative, Christian intelligentsia. During these years, the party and its leadership assembled around themselves a group of historians, literary scholars, jurists, conservative academics and publicists, as well as figures connected to Hungary's «popular-national» cultural tradition. That is, they relied on an already existing, socially esteemed segment of the traditional intelligentsia, which now politically aligned itself with this emerging social and political bloc. Parallel to this, Orbán and his party undertook institutional and symbolic efforts – among them the strengthening of a modern conservative press, the ideological reorientation of cultural institutions, and the elevation of intellectuals loyal to the right. The objective was to weaken the post-1989 liberal-left hegemony, albeit still through the leverage of the traditional intelligentsia.

This attempt achieved only partial success. At the end of Orbán's first term, in 2002, his party lost the national election after an exceptionally fierce contest. The political coalition of the post-state-socialist left and the liberal party returned to government.

2. 2002-2010: Building counter-hegemony from the opposition

The political defeat of 2002 made it clear to Orbán that a new strategy was required: he needed not only the support of the traditional intelligentsia, but also to cultivate a new, loyal and organic intellectual stratum. One method was the

post-election creation of the «*civic circles*», a nationwide movement that signaled the beginning of an opposition-based recruitment of organic intellectuals. Through this initiative – by reorganizing and mobilizing civil society – local opinion leaders, community figures, and activists performing intellectual functions were incorporated into his political community. So, the *Civic Circles Movement* was less an academic-intellectual project than a mobilizational effort aimed at producing a new generation of organic intellectuals – at a time when Orbán and Fidesz did not yet command state power.

The 2002 defeat also demonstrated that the media sphere, the cultural-institutional landscape, the academic-research sector, and the NGO world could not be «won» through administrative measures or direct political intervention. A protracted struggle – a «war of position» in terms of Gramsci – was required. Thus, Orbán escalated the culture war. At the level of institution-building, the party opened its membership to the civic circles in 2003, and reinforced Orbán's leadership. Shortly thereafter, new think tanks and media communities were established; new analytical and research institutes, radio and television stations²², news portals, blogs, and publishing houses emerged; and new forms of political journalism were introduced. This strategy activated the middle class by strengthening a right-wing national–populist–Christian identity and political loyalty. The development of a new cultural vocabulary accompanied this process, with key terms such as «left-liberal media dominance», the pursuit of «media balance», and the «culture war» gaining traction.

Although this strategy did not secure victory in the 2006 election, the global financial crisis of 2008 and the domestic political breakdown sealed the fate of Orbán's opponents. In 2010, Orbán and his party achieved a sweeping electoral triumph.

3. 2010-2026: Orbán regime – building hegemony in government with a constitution-making majority

Since 2010, Viktor Orbán and his party have been able to govern with a constitutional majority and a two-thirds mandate. Accordingly, after 2010, his politics of knowledge and intelligentsia, which had been initiated earlier, became systematic and radicalized. This was made possible by the convergence of the strongest political and historical bloc with full control over the state apparatus. Thus began the construction of the Orbán regime, characterized by rapid, breakthrough-style measures reminiscent of a «war of maneuver» in some fields, and slower, incremental «war of position» in others²³. Its most frequently discussed dimension has been the dismantling of parliamentary democracy and the curtailment of liberal constitutionalism – an authoritarian turn marked by autocratization and increasingly pronounced populist features. What emerged was a semi-peripheral regime of power and capital accumulation that self-

²² The establishment of two right-wing private TV stations proved to be crucial. *HírTV* (*NewsTV*) was launched in 2003, followed by *EchoTV* in 2005.

²³ Gramsci, 1971; Nagy & Szarvas, 2021.

describes as an «illiberal democracy» and as the «System of National Cooperation»²⁴.

Within this emerging regime, the traditional intelligentsia became further polarized. The right-wing, conservative, national-Christian segment largely gained positions and was absorbed. Among traditional artistic intellectuals, organizations such as the *Hungarian Academy of Arts* have played a decisive role²⁵. The remaining segments of the traditional intelligentsia either adapted to political expectations (in which case the regime co-opted them) or resisted (in which case they were marginalized or removed from their positions). This process is visible in the politicization of elite positions, and the stigmatization of liberal and left cultural elites. As cultural, educational, scientific, and media institutions came under state (or party-proximate) control, the liberal and left-leaning wings of the traditional intelligentsia experienced direct assault. From their perspective, a genuine war on knowledge was unfolding – one that appeared as destructive cultural warfare, scapegoating, witch-hunting, and an assault on universal cultural values. Yet despite their justified grievances, what has actually taken place is not the abolition of knowledge per se but rather its replacement – made clear by the cultivation of a new organic intelligentsia.

A new generation of younger organic intellectuals has taken over the regime's key institutions. Their formative years fell during the cultural warfare era of the 1990s and 2000s, a period they experienced as young right-wingers, and thus their personal, cultural, and network ties bind them closely to Orbán and his regime. Their political loyalty guides their work, and their influence derives less from academic or professional merit than from their role in supporting and building the regime. They have occupied the state-owned media (public service broadcasting), which – interpreting public-service norms through a highly partisan lens – has become a governmental propaganda apparatus. They have also taken control of the nominally independent but informally regime-linked private media sector: the acquired outlets were consolidated into two major, ostensibly independent but effectively government-aligned media conglomerates (*Medianworks Hungary Ltd.* is the one and the *Central European Press and Media Foundation* is the other).

The regime nationalized and reorganized the public education system, expanded the influence of the churches on it²⁶, and created new «talent-cultivation» pathways and loyal institutions (e.g., *Matthias Corvinus Collegium*). State universities were kept underfunded, then transferred – under the promise of increased resources – to public foundations whose boards were filled with individuals loyal to the Orbán regime. New analytical and research institutes and think tanks were founded, supported, strengthened, and in many cases substantially capitalized. The institutional network of public culture – literature, fine arts, music, opera, theatre, film production and distribution, museums,

²⁴ Kovács & Trencsényi, 2019.

²⁵ Nagy, 2023, 2024a, 2024b.

²⁶ Neumann & Mészáros, 2019.

public collections, civic cultivation and so on – underwent radical restructuring²⁷.

Several symbolic battles have taken place in the cultural war of the past decade and a half. One such battle was the 2016 acquisition and closure of *Népszabadság*, the largest-circulation opposition daily. (Its predecessor had been the principal newspaper of the former state-socialist party, so its closure symbolized the regime's break with the state-socialist past and its liberal-left legacy.) This was accompanied by the pro-government takeover of Hungary's county-level regional press. Preceding these developments was the transformation of *Origo* (origo.hu), one of the most-visited independent news portals, into a government propaganda outlet (2013–2016), followed by the effective capture of *Index* (index.hu), the other major news portal, in 2020. Another major symbolic battle was the expulsion of *Central European University (CEU)* from Budapest, forcing the relocation of its main campus to Vienna. Founded after the 1989–1990 transition by George Soros, *CEU* represented for the Orbán regime everything it opposed politically, and it became a central symbol of that opposition – just as Soros himself, the Hungarian-born billionaire hedge-fund manager, became the regime's primary political adversary (if not a public enemy). A third symbolic battle was the takeover and reorganization of the *University of Theatre and Film Arts*. By securing control of Hungary's principal training institution for theatre and film, the Orbán regime confronted the traditional intelligentsia of these fields while simultaneously reorienting the reproduction and training of their future organic intellectuals.

Building a historical bloc with state power and private means – not merely cultural hegemony

All of these measures fit coherently into the broader strategy of building a right-wing, national, conservative, Christian historical bloc, atop which Viktor Orbán sought to build his hegemony. A defining feature of the past decade and a half is that Orbán's regime has not limited itself to establishing positions within civil society through a war of position; rather, armed with the extensive powers obtained in 2010 – namely, a constitutional, two-thirds supermajority – it radically reshaped political society as well. Whereas Gramsci's recommendations concerning a war of position aimed at preparing the ground for the conquest of state power²⁸, the Hungarian case illustrates something different: the Orbán regime's hegemonic project was constructed while already in full possession of state power. State institutions thus became instruments of coercion, while Orbán's institutions in the civil society served the functioning of consensus building machinery.

The interpretation of reality, however, takes place within the walls of these institutions, just as does the reproduction of the organic intellectuals. Knowledge, skills, expertise, interpretations, meanings, and identities are produced, mediated, generated, and disseminated in and through these institution-

²⁷ Szarvas, 2023.

²⁸ Gramsci, 1971, pp. 206–239.

al settings. Hegemony-building is an exercise in institution-building, which in turn requires a loyal intelligentsia. Orbán and the architects of his regime recognized that building a new hegemony required new institutions, new interpretations, and new forms of knowledge – and that all of this, in turn, required a new, organic intelligentsia.

It is essential to emphasize that this process of hegemony-building unfolded not only within the institutional terrain of culture, but also on the material foundations of production and reproduction, within the very structure of the Hungarian economy. This was not solely a matter of *cultural* hegemony (within the superstructures and cultural institutions); it also involved the transformation of the economic base of society²⁹. The Orbán regime provided enormous impetus to internal capital accumulation – channeling state resources into favored companies and entrepreneurs closely aligned with the government, who in turn were tasked with financing the regime’s institutions and hegemonic project. For instance, the regime’s institutions need financial resources, real estate and buildings; these must be purchased and renovated – providing work for the construction industry. Capital, financing, and credit are also necessary, thereby activating the banking sector and financial institutions in Hungary. Hegemony-building also requires private equity funds, corporate networks, ownership structures, and loyal owners. All this is deeply economic – that is, a matter of property relations – not merely cultural and not solely political. In this manner, not only state authority and state-owned assets became available for hegemony building, but also a network of government-, and indeed Orbán-aligned business actors who could deploy their accumulated capital for political, cultural, and social purposes. Orbán thus constructed a veritable historical bloc across its entire vertical axis: from the material foundations, through the institutions, to the ideological and intellectual spheres of the superstructure.

As regards the content and form of knowledge: the Orbán regime’s politics of knowledge targets the independence and autonomy of knowledge production, reproduction, distribution, cultivation, and dissemination. Knowledge that aligns with the hegemonic orientation of the regime is supported, generously funded, and institutionally reinforced; knowledge that diverges from it is attacked, marginalized, or deprived of resources. For example, a number of research institutes and archives that were considered critical of the Orbán regime were shut down after 2010, while several research institutes were established that produce and disseminate knowledge favorable to the legitimacy of the Orbán regime. Among the institutes affected by funding cuts or administrative restrictions are the Lukács Archive, which preserves the legacy of Georg Lukács (it was closed in 2016), and the 1956 Institute, which also conducted research on the legacy of the 1956 Hungarian revolution (and which was dissolved in 2019). The Orbán regime is thus doing everything in its power to shape the content and form of knowledge. The ideological orientation can be summarized as right-wing, national, conservative, Christian, traditionalist, sov-

²⁹ Davidson, 2008.

ereignist, anti-globalist, anti-liberal, anti-socialist, and anti-communist, as well as anti-migration, and «anti-gender». The reshaping of the cultural canon – across literature, historical interpretation, national memory, politics of history and memory, the renaming of public spaces, and public art – fits fully into this direction.

How does all this relate to Gramsci's goals and ideas? The substantive content of the Orbán regime has nothing to do with Gramsci. Orbán's ideas resemble far more closely the regime that imprisoned Gramsci and condemned him to a slow death. The ideological goals of the Orbán regime are much closer to Mussolini's fascist regime – though without the use of open and politically motivated physical violence deployed by twentieth-century fascists. Nevertheless, in the Orbán regime there is still committed and tolerated too much violence with irresponsible decisions, only it is not politically motivated open physical violence, but slow and hidden violence that was built into the material, institutional, and intellectual processes of social reproduction.

The decline of the Orbán regime: dominance without hegemony

Since 2010, the opposition to the Orbán regime has repeatedly attempted to bring about a change in government, to break Orbán's hegemony, and to overthrow his regime – thus far without success. Since February 2024, however, the regime has faced a political challenge unprecedented in the past decade and a half. Characteristically, one of the regime's organic intellectuals turned against it, rebelled against Orbán, and organized an opposition movement and a new party, and tries to build a counter-hegemony. Péter Magyar, a lawyer born in 1981, was for many years a supporter and a loyal cadre of the Orbán regime. His ties were not solely institutional but also personal, as he was married to one of Orbán's ministers. Whether he will succeed as Orbán's challenger will likely become clear in the spring of 2026.

What is certain, however, is that the hegemony of the Orbán regime has begun to erode in recent years. It has been battered by economic crisis – the Covid-19 downturn (2020-2022), the Russian war in Ukraine (2022-), the drying up of European Union funds for Hungary, and a long series of poor governmental decisions. Moreover, the regime's systematic effort to replace knowledge, intelligentsia, and transform institutions has generated deep grievances that a potent political counterforce can now organize and mobilize. Orbán repeatedly speaks in the name of «Hungary», «the Hungarian nation», «the Hungarian people», and «the Hungarian families». Yet, he is supported by a highly organized historical bloc that is not identical with Hungary nor with Hungarian society. In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent to many that the historical bloc behind the Orbán regime does not elevate Hungary but exploits it and feeds off it. Hegemony is declining, and the raw domination – and the machinery that sustains it – has become increasingly visible.

Intellectuals who have not submitted to the Orbán regime can also play an important role in this investigative work. Through their work of uncovering the reality (whether they are researchers, academics, artists, journalists, or intel-

lectuals in other fields, especially the humanities), they have contributed and can continue to contribute to ensuring that no one confuses the historical block of the Orbán regime with the freedom and prosperity of Hungarian society. It is particularly interesting that the Orbán regime identifies the real threat primarily as coming from opposition challenges in the digital sphere, where it perceived a relatively weak point. The regime's response to this was to establish «digital civic circles» – modeled on civic circles, a good two decades later. This indicates not only the decline of the regime, but also a distortion in its perception of reality and problems.

The political challenge confronting the Orbán regime is also symbolic: a man named Péter Magyar (in a literal translation: Peter Hungarian), now challenges Viktor Orbán, who persistently attempts to speak in the name of «the Hungarian people».

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– Viktor Orbán’s politics of knowledge, intellectuals, and institutions in the light of Gramsci’s ideas

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán’s politics of knowledge, intellectuals, and institutions. It surveys the ways in which, over recent decades, he has sought to replace established knowledge and its carriers – the intelligentsia – through the radical restructuring of various institutions responsible for the production and dissemination of knowledge. The study focuses mainly on the consolidation of the Orbán regime between 2010 and 2026, but the analysis begins in the 1990s to unfold the historical process. The article interprets Orbán’s politics through the conceptual lens of Antonio Gramsci. Orbán has consciously reshaped Hungary’s traditional and organic intellectuals and has simultaneously organized a historical bloc to achieve his primary goal: hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Politics of knowledge; Politics of intellectuals; Orbán regime; Antonio Gramsci; Hungary

SOMMARIO

La politica della conoscenza, degli intellettuali e delle istituzioni di Viktor Orbán’s alla luce delle idee di Antonio Gramsci. Questo articolo analizza la politica del primo ministro ungherese Viktor Orbán in materia di conoscenza, intellettuali e istituzioni. Esamina come, negli ultimi decenni, egli abbia cercato di sostituire la conoscenza consolidata e i suoi portatori – l’intelligenza – attraverso una radicale ristrutturazione delle istituzioni responsabili della produzione e della diffusione del sapere. Lo studio si concentra principalmente sul consolidamento del regime di Orbán tra il 2010 e il 2026, ma l’analisi prende avvio dagli anni Novanta per ricostruire l’intero processo storico. L’articolo interpreta la politica di Orbán attraverso la lente concettuale di Antonio Gramsci. Orbán ha consapevolmente rimodellato le figure degli intellettuali tradizionali e organici in Ungheria, costruendo al contempo un blocco storico funzionale al perseguimento del suo obiettivo principale: l’egemonia.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Politica della conoscenza; Politica degli intellettuali; Regime di Orbán; Antonio Gramsci; Ungheria